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LAURENCE STERNE

A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

THROUGH FRANCE AND ITALY

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G. W. Spence

Laurence ~...~

A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY THROUGH FRANCE AND ITALY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

'Le moral, c'est le travelling'
– Jean-Luc Godard

LAURENCE STERNE is a distinctly 'modern' novelist. He has the freedom, the total originality, the sense of a man creating the form from scratch and for himself, that we now expect of any serious artist. He has, too, the modernist's apparent indifference to rules, as though aesthetic formalities were, in the final analysis, boring, and the only vindication of a work of art were the immediacy with which it expresses the personality of its creator. Casualness, in short, was his declared artistic principle:

> ... of all the several ways of beginning a book which are now in practice throughout the known world, I am confident my own way of doing it is the best – I'm sure it is the most religious – for I begin with writing the first sentence – and trusting to Almighty God for the second. [*Tristram Shandy*, VIII, 2.]

Obviously, he wasn't anything like as haphazard as he wished to appear. We know from his manuscripts that he wrote and meticulously rewrote, crowding the margins with changes and alternatives, in order to give his prose precisely that casual, dashed-off air, the surface flicker of a sensibility in motion.* Yet the effect he achieved with all his effort was of a fined-down disregard for art.

He was also the first modernist in the way in which he cut the novel clear from the constrictions of traditional narrative, setting it free into the realm of personality, into almost a kind of proto-expressionism. Granted, he took his method largely from the picaresque novel; his masters were Rabelais and Cervantes. Yet the picaresque is essentially the

*See *The Life and Times of Laurence Sterne* by Wilbur I. Cross, New Haven, third edition, 1929, pp. 471–7.

form for obsessional story-tellers: one tale leads compulsively to another, as though the fate of the narrator of the *Arabian Nights* hung over every picaresque author's head. In comparison, Sterne seems not much interested in stories. Occasionally he digresses into narrative, but mostly he simply digresses, as yet another fascinating and seemingly urgent side-issue crosses his mind. And these digressions, like his two novels themselves, are substantially without plots. The whole rickety substance is supported and validated simply by the flow of talk, talk, talk. It reads like a picaresque novel transformed into abstract art.

There is a belief, which Sterne himself encouraged, that he learned this method from John Locke and his theory of the association of ideas.* It seems to me equally possible that it was merely part of his Irish inheritance. Though his father, Ensign Roger Sterne, was English – an amiable Army failure descended from a long line of tough and successful Yorkshire churchmen – his mother had Irish connexions. (She, too, was an apparent disaster: a nagging wife and an indifferent, rapacious mother, she was the stepdaughter of a camp sutler to whom Roger Sterne owed money.) Laurence himself was born in Dublin and spent the early part of his childhood billeted on occasional Irish relatives. Although most of his schooldays and the rest of his life were spent in Yorkshire – with intermittent forays on London and the continent – his work is controlled by that compulsive talkativeness you find undiluted only in an Irish barroom virtuoso. And he recreated the novel in that image, evolving a style of pure talk, of controlled inconsequentiality, irrelevance and continual interruption. This was a form both new and not immediately usable. So, although his influence was enormous in his day, it bypassed the nineteenth century, when the novel became more settled and staid in its ways. His lineal descendants are the heroes of Samuel Beckett's fiction, with their endless 'quaqua'.

* See *Tristram Shandy's World* by John Traugott, Berkeley, 1954.

Given this lack of plot or even moral purpose, either improving or scurrilous, you are left for connexions and artistic control simply with a personal tone of voice, the flow of casual, intimate, highly idiosyncratic conversation. Even *Tristram Shandy*'s extraordinary gallery of eccentrics – Uncle Toby, My Father, My Mother, Trim, Dr Slop, Yorick, the Widow Wadman – have very little substance of their own; they rely on the author's amused, vague tenderness to make sense of their lives. They are less characters in their own right than obsessions held together by his indulgence.

This is still more marked in *A Sentimental Journey*, where the people are described hardly at all. It is perhaps the most bodiless novel ever written. Though incident is piled on incident, none really amounts to much, and the book relies for its effect entirely on Sterne's ability to buttonhole his readers. For that he had an unprecedented genius. He was master of some curious sleight of tone which sucks you at once into the most intimate and private workings of his mind. He had, as another Irishman, W. B. Yeats, said of a third, George Moore, 'the terrible gift of intimacy'.

Maybe this gift was so unfalteringly his throughout his literary career because he began so late and was spared a hesitant apprenticeship. His first effort, a pamphlet called *A Political Romance*, was not published until the beginning of 1759, when he was already in his mid-forties; *Tristram Shandy* began to appear at the end of the same year. By the time he came to *A Sentimental Journey*, nine years later, his intimacy with the audience was instinctive and assured. Indeed, the novel is elaborately that of a famous man. Sterne writes as though from a certain height of success; he is knowingly a public personality, a fashionable figure on the literary landscape, confident and rather delighted by the exposure. The incident with the Count de B**** – who suddenly realizes that the shabby charmer who is begging his help in obtaining a passport is in fact a famous author – and the description of how he rode the circuit of

smart Parisian parties are done with the evident relish of a man who enjoyed his fame.

Yet clearly something more is involved than naïve pleasure in his success and his distance from his Yorkshire parsonage and half-mad wife. By 1768, Sterne's fame, his novels and his personality were, to an unusual degree, all of a piece. He had wholly entered the Shandean world he himself had created. The first-person narrator is himself a character from the earlier novel: he is Yorick, parson and friend of the Shandys, whom Sterne had prematurely killed off in the first volume – mourning his decease with two pages of solid black – and then resurrected whenever convenient, thanks to a time-scheme which leaps years between lines and extends seconds through whole paragraphs. Granted, the personalities of Sterne and Yorick were inextricably entwined well before the final novel: Sterne called himself Yorick in his letters and even published his sermons under that name. But by the time he came to *A Sentimental Journey* the name was something more than a semi-private joke to draw the initiated reader into the author's elite circle. Instead, it seemed to sum up a whole nexus of Sterne's preoccupations: with wit and melancholy and death. Yorick the jester was also Yorick the death's head, and Sterne, who had spat blood with increasing seriousness since his undergraduate days at Cambridge, was knowingly a dying man when he began the *Journey*. So perhaps it gave him a soothing illusion of immortality to identify so completely with a character in his own work; more probably, it allowed enough free air to circulate between himself and his situation, so that his wit had space in which to manoeuvre.

There were also certain practical advantages. In part, Sterne wrote this last novel to clear, or at least to redefine, his name. As a writer his reputation was, by then, vast and international, but as a parson it had suffered correspondingly. His difficulty was that, like most compulsive talkers, he could never resist the jokey, bawdy possibilities of

whatever turned up along the way in his monologues. His fellow clerics objected accordingly: his work was altogether too smutty, too obsessed, too unseemly for a man of the church. So one purpose of *A Sentimental Journey* was to prove his innocence. His letters at the time ring with the theme. He wrote to his daughter that the design of the book was 'to teach us to love the world and our fellow creatures better than we do – so it runs most upon those gentle passions and affections, which aid so much to it'. To another, slightly older, young woman it was the same story:

> ... I have something else for you, which I am fabricating at a great rate, and that is my Journey, which shall make you cry as much as ever it made me laugh – or I'll give up the Business of sentimental writing – and write to the Body.

It was even the same to his diplomat friend, Sir George Macartney, though the tone was a little cooler: 'I shall', he wrote, 'have the honour of presenting to you a couple of as clean brats as ever chaste brain conceived'.

Sterne had always written from his nerve-ends, with a quivering, edgy liveliness; the new novel was to show that this was genuinely the product of an intensity of emotion, not of mere nerviness. On the surface, there was something almost didactic in its purpose: it would teach people how to react, show them that the simplest incident – an innocent exchange with a mendicant monk, a peasant with his dead donkey – swarmed with high feeling. It would show them that the value of travelling was not in stunning adventures or strenuous sightseeing or exquisite views exquisitely rendered back into prose; it was, instead, in the traveller's receptiveness to feelings, and the flair and subtlety with which he expressed them.

Admittedly, Sterne was cashing in on a fad. Almost twenty years before, a Lady Bradshage had written querulously to Richardson:

> What, in your opinion, is the meaning of the word *sentimental,* so much in vogue among the polite ... Everything

clever and agreeable is comprehended in that word ... I am frequently astonished to hear such a one is a *sentimental* man; we were a *sentimental* party; I have been taking a *sentimental* walk ...

Sterne took this London fad and made it into an international obsession. The word was adopted into French and German because of his novel. There were circles of Sterne addicts in Germany who studied the master, cultivated exquisite feelings and, after the manner of Yorick and the friar, presented each other with little horn snuff-boxes, promising, according to Professor Cross, 'to cultivate Yorick's gentleness, content with fortune, and pity and pardon for all human errors'. No doubt it was excessive; certainly, all this stood Sterne in peculiarly bad stead with the Victorians: he was credited with all the morbid sensibility and snobbish high feeling they loathed. In *The English Humourists* Thackeray attacked him as a supreme hypocrite, flailing him for his combination of sentimentality and prurience.

To be disliked by Thackeray is, admittedly, a fair recommendation. Even so, Sterne has never quite escaped the charge of playing up his sensitivity. Even his defenders imply that he overdid things and, in his concern not to appear bawdy, went too far the other way, ending as a dandified tear-jerker. This seems to me to disregard the whole strategy of the novel: every exquisite moment is promptly undercut either by irony or by deliberate absurdity. Consider, for example, the much abused episode of the peasant lamenting his dead donkey. It was a kind of eighteenth-century death of Little Nell, energetically wept over at the time and strenuously savaged later. Neither the admirers nor the detractors seem to have got the point. Sterne ends the passage by drawing the inevitable moral:

Shame on the world! said I to myself – Did we love each other, as this poor soul but loved his ass – 'twould be something. —

The next chapter begins immediately:

> The concern which the poor fellow's story threw me into, required some attention; the postillion paid not the least to it, but set off upon the *pavé* in a full gallop.
>
> The thirstiest soul in the most sandy desert of Arabia could not have wished more for a cup of cold water, than mine did for grave and quiet movements; and I should have had a high opinion of the postillion, had he but stolen off with me in something like a pensive pace. — On the contrary, as the mourner finished his lamentation, the fellow gave an unfeeling lash to each of his beasts, and set off clattering like a thousand devils.

So instead of being able to lie back and soak in his feelings, Yorick is promptly embroiled in a shouting match with the postillion. Only when his nerves are so thoroughly jangled that he needs the release of a hard gallop does the coachman slow to a walking pace. The whole thing is a paradigm of frustration, and a joke at his own expense.

This, I think, is the rule for the novel, not the exception. The more elegantly sentimental the narrator's responses, the more absurd the after-effects. It is Sterne's particular strength as a comic writer that no matter how wholeheartedly he pursues high feeling, unredeemed reality keeps breaking in. So whatever the immediate propagandist issues for his contemporaries – for or against the sentimental education – it seems to me now to be genuinely impossible to read him as anything except a supreme, and supremely consistent, ironist.

Perhaps that is the least that can be expected of an eighteenth-century wit. Yet Sterne's irony, like most other elements of his writing, has a distinctly modern taste to it. The incident with the beautiful Grisset, for example. Yorick, strolling in Paris, is more or less lost; 'more or less' since he doesn't bother to ask the way until he can find someone attractive enough to be worth asking. Finally, he sees the beautiful Grisset working in her shop; together they go through an elaborate ritual of question and answer, she

giving him directions, he repeating them to her, she repeating them back to him; he leaves, forgets the directions in a few paces, and returns; at length they settle down to an intimate tête-à-tête in her shop. It is like the mating dance of two tropical birds. Finally, by the way of elegant compliment, he takes her wrist and feels her pulse:

I had counted twenty pulsations, and was going on fast towards the fortieth, when her husband coming unexpectedly from the back parlour into the shop, put me a little out in my reckoning. — 'Twas nobody but her husband, she said – so I began a fresh score — Monsieur is so good, quoth she, as he passed us by, as to give himself the trouble of feeling my pulse — The husband took off his hat, and making me a bow, said, I did him too much honour – and having said that, he put on his hat and walked out.

The beautifully poised and pausing rhythm of the prose, by which Sterne passes off an outrageous situation as though it were utterly normal, is the essence of his art. It is also the essence of the modern 'cool' style, the art of controlled and detached delinquency. Yet this is not a quality which has yet been expressed with any great subtlety in prose. And this is the crux of the matter when calling Sterne a modernist: if there is a close contemporary equivalent to his work it is not to be found in any novelist; it is, instead, in the films of the French director, Jean-Luc Godard.

What Sterne and Godard have in common is a style and an obsession, or rather, a style to cope with an obsession. By style I mean something beyond their elegance and wit and detachment. Instead, it is the ability to maintain all those qualities whilst not leaving anything out, whilst refusing a narrow, exclusive focus. The novelist's sensibility and the director's camera are so alive, so eclectic, that when they move down a street the whole casual scene is drawn into the action:

I walked up gravely to the window in my dusty black coat, and looking through the glass saw all the world in yellow, blue, and green, running at the ring of pleasure.

And the action itself is casual. The plot in Godard's movies may be marginally tighter than in Sterne's novels, but it is rarely more important. What matters are the incidents that proliferate along the route, and the way in which they are handled.

Hence casualness and unprejudiced receptivity become an artistic procedure. And this, in a way, is a delinquent aesthetic: the artist creates a work at the same time as he comments, implicitly but nihilistically, on the art-form and the whole choosy business of art. Neither Sterne nor Godard seems to believe in anything beyond what is there, present to the senses, at the moment. Questioned by a pompous interviewer on the morality of his films, Godard replied, 'Le moral, c'est le travelling'. He was implying, to say the least, that morality is strictly empirical, since 'le travelling' is a technical film-maker's term to describe the movement of the camera; morality, that is, is to be picked up and discarded again, as you go along. Sterne has precisely the same unrehearsed attitude to what occurs. So both are delinquent to the extent of, first, being unconcerned with any preordained moral order and, second, in their seemingly delighted assumption that, beneath all the elegance, their protagonists are interested only in gratifying their momentary impulses – though without unnecessary viciousness; the wit of both is essentially gentle. In their worlds everyone, elegantly, sadly, in one way or another, is on the make.

This, I think, is the basic assumption behind all Sterne's ambiguities. For example, the intense, finger-tip flirtation between Yorick and Madame de R****'s 'fair *fille de chambre*' in the chapter called 'The Temptation'. The narrator returns to his hotel to find her waiting; in that curious, typical, slow-motion narrative, where every slight gesture can endure for whole lines, he takes her back up to his room and then, little by little, leads her from the desk, to the door, to the bed, where they sit exchanging quivering civilities:

A strap had given way in her walk, and the buckle of her shoe was just falling off – See, said the *fille de chambre,* holding up her foot — I could not for my soul but fasten the buckle in return, and putting in the strap – and lifting up the other foot with it, when I had done, to see both were right – in doing it too suddenly – it unavoidably threw the fair *fille de chambre* off her center – and then ——

THE CONQUEST

YES — and then — Ye whose clay-cold heads and lukewarm hearts can argue down or mask your passions, tell me, what trespass is it that man should have them? or how his spirit stands answerable to the father of spirits, but for his conduct under them?

If nature has so wove her web of kindness, that some threads of love and desire are entangled with the piece, must the whole web be rent in drawing them out? — Whip me such stoics, great governor of nature! said I to myself — Wherever thy providence shall place me for the trials of my virtue – whatever is my danger – whatever is my situation – *let me feel the movements which rise out of it, and which belong to me as a man, and if I govern them as a good one, I will trust the issues to thy justice* — for thou hast made us, and not we ourselves.

As I finished my address, I raised the fair *fille de chambre* up by the hand, and led her out of the room — she stood by me till I locked the door and put the key in my pocket – *and then* – the victory being quite decisive – and not till then, I pressed my lips to her cheek, and, taking her by the hand again, led her safe to the gate of the hotel.

This is *double entendre* raised to high art. The lines I have italicized could as easily describe the act of making love as the reasons for abstaining from it. So who is conquered in 'The Conquest': Yorick or 'the fair *fille de chambre*'? Sterne avers that it is the former, but the whole passage seems to point the other way.

It was presumably this kind of moral punning that Coleridge objected to in his *Literary Remains*:

With regard to Sterne, and the charge of licentiousness which presses so seriously upon his character as a writer, I would