

4. The Anti-Novel

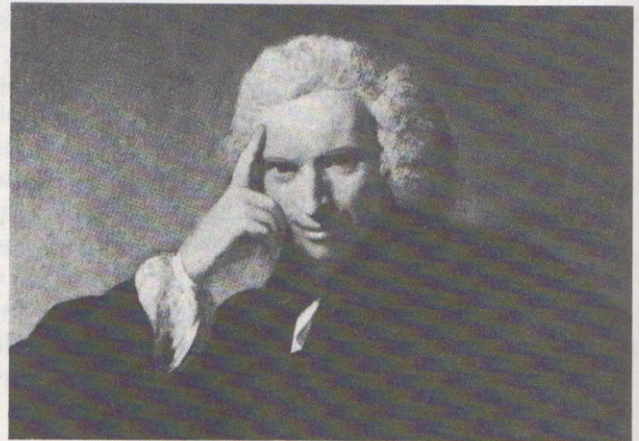
The last great novelist in the 18th-century tradition was Laurence Sterne.

Laurence Sterne

(1713-1768)

Sterne was born in Ireland, in 1713, the son of an English army officer, who constantly moved from garrison to garrison together with all his family. He was only eighteen, and almost penniless, when his father died in consequence of the wound received in a duel, but he was able to go to Cambridge through the good offices of a relative. After graduating he took Holy Orders, an easy enough way to make a living, and became Vicar at Sutton-on-the-Forest, in Yorkshire. In 1741 he married Elizabeth Lumley, who brought him some money, bore him a daughter, whom he adored, made him unhappy for about twenty years, and eventually became insane.

As a clergyman, Sterne was a bit particular. Besides being involved in frequent amorous escapades, together with some friends he formed a group called "The Demoniacs", which used to meet at Skelton Castle, a curious house on the border of the Cleveland Moors, (belonging to a friend of Sterne's, who called it "Crazy Castle"), where they indulged in moderate revelry. Hoping to recover from tuberculosis, in 1762, accompanied by his wife and daughter, he settled in Toulouse, in Southern France, and returned to England only in 1767, after making a seven-month tour of France and Italy in 1765. When back in London, he fell in love with Mrs. Eliza Draper and, in the same year, he parted from his wife and, much to his regret, from his daughter, too. He died of pleurisy in 1768.



195. Laurence Sterne

works

Sterne began writing when he was already forty-five, but his first work, a satirical Swift-style pamphlet on rivalry within the Church, was soon suppressed. He, however, realized that his real vocation as a writer was for comic-satiric narrative, and it is in this field that he produced his best books, i.e.:

- **The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman** (1760-1767), his masterpiece.
- **A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy** (1768), describing his adventures during the tour he took in 1765. The work was eventually translated into Italian by Foscolo.
- **The Journal to Eliza** (published posthumously in 1775), a diary recording, under the fictitious name of Yorick, his love for Eliza Draper, and written after Eliza left England to join her husband in India.

Tristram Shandy

plot

It is virtually impossible to summarize the nine volumes which constitute Sterne's masterpiece. We can only attempt to point out the very few incidents dealt with in each one of the volumes.

vols. I – II – III (1760-1761), in spite of many digressions concerning Uncle Toby and "hobbyhorses", are mainly concerned with the circumstances that attended Tristram's birth, including the way in which the child was conceived. Vol. III, moreover, contains the Preface to the book, which the author finds time to write while everybody is busy with Tristram's birth.

vol. IV (1761) includes a learned discussion on noses (caused by the fact that Dr. Slop, the obstetrician, while tending Mrs. Shandy during her labour, mistook the infant's hip for its head, and flattened its nose with his forceps). It also tells how the child was baptized Tristram by mistake instead of "Trismegistus".

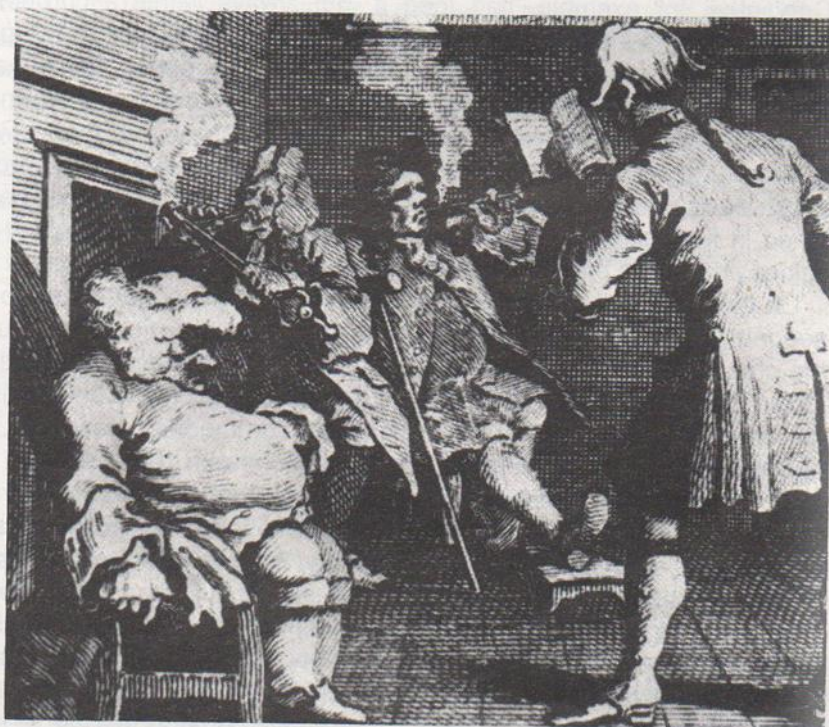
vol. V (1761) contains the various characters' reactions to the death of Tristram's brother, Bobby. It also contains the famous "TRISTRAM-POEDIA", i.e. a pseudo-scientific educational system conceived by Tristram's father for his son.

vol. VI (1761) is mainly devoted to battles and to the amorous disappointments of Uncle Toby. It also includes the "breeching" of Tristram, as he is no longer a child but a young boy, who must wear trousers.

vols. VII – VIII (1765) abandon the narrative in order to describe the author's travels in France and narrate the story of the King of Bohemia.

vol. IX (1767) is mainly devoted to the love affair between Uncle Toby and the Widow Wadman.

This sequence of apparently absurd and incoherent incidents [1] is narrated, in the first person singular, by Tristram himself who, ranging from the past to the present, remembers particular events of his life and such people as his mother, his father Walter, his Uncle Toby, his uncle's servant Corporal Trim and Yorick, the Parson, each of whom, in one way or another, all determined the course of his life. The result is a "rambling and eccentric patchwork of anecdotes, digressions, reflections, jests, parodies and dialogues" [2] such as had never been written before in English literature.



196. A detail from the frontispiece to *Tristram Shandy* (by W. Hogarth, 1697-1764)

[1] See page 377 where Sterne himself draws 5 irregular lines as diagrams to describe how the first five books of his novel are constructed.

[2] D. Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*, London, 1975.

features

old elements

As Frederick R. Karl points out [1], Sterne's novel, or "antinovel", as it is usually referred to owing to its anomalous features, derives from the fusion of a new technique applied to old elements.

The *old* elements are:

- 1 – the picaresque form, seen in:
 - a) the patchwork of episodes and the apparently limitless length of the novel (new volumes could easily have been added if Sterne had lived longer);
 - b) the prevailing sense of chance that dominates the work.
- 2 – the mock-heroic treatment of certain subjects (e.g. the mock-epic birth of Tristram);
- 3 – the cast of characters, both high and low;
- 4 – the conventional biographical structure declared in the title itself of the novel.

new technique

The *new technique*, instead, is based on:

- 1 – the association of ideas;
- 2 – a new sense of time.

Sterne was not the first to use the "association of ideas" technique: Cervantes, for example, had tried it, but always within a chronological sequence of hours and days. What, instead, was really new in Sterne was the attempt to set this association within time sequences which were no longer ruled by the clock, but by each individual consciousness. In other words, he anticipated, two centuries in advance, the future theory worked out by Bergson (see page 807) of what he called "*la durée*", according to which each person lives moments and experiences that cannot be measured in fixed periods of time, since the mind has its own time and space values apart from the conventional ones established by the external world.

On the basis of this theory, what is important is no longer a chronological sequence of adventures or events (typical of the realistic novel), but what the character feels and thinks, not facts, but the emotional implications of facts. That's why Sterne used the first-person narration and based his book on an overlapping of memories that the protagonist describes in an apparently illogical succession of progressions and regressions.

That is why great attention was paid to what Sterne called the characters' *hobbyhorses*, or rather idiosyncrasies, obsessions or ruling passions. Everyone of importance in the book has, in fact, his "hobbyhorse" (Mr. Shandy, for example, is interested in names, Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim in strategy, logistics, miniature fortifications, etc.), as a "hobbyhorse" is not determined by any outer reality but by an inexplicable inner drive.

The new relationship between "association of ideas" and "time" is set up by Sterne in the very opening pages of his book, as we can see in the following passages.

[1] F.R. Karl, *A Reader's Guide to the Development of the English Novel in the 18th Century*, London, 1974.

baffling
content

baffling
form and
eccentric
layout

109. *He leaned forwards!*

5. ——— ——— ——— ——— —he's gone! said my uncle *Toby*, —Where
——Who? cried my father, ——My nephew, said my uncle *Toby*.
——What—without leave—without money— without governor? cried
my father in amazement. No: —— he is dead, my dear brother, quoth
10. my uncle *Toby*. —Without being ill? cried my father again. —I dare say
not, said my uncle *Toby*, in a low voice, and fetching a deep sigh from
the bottom of his heart, he has been ill enough, poor lad! I'll answer for
him—for he is dead.

1. Mr. Shandy riceve la triste notizia della morte di suo figlio Bobby per mezzo di una lettera consegnata al fratello Toby.

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