Tristram Shandy: An Original and Profound English Novel of the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

Although *Tristram Shandy* holds a place among the English novels, it is hard to call it an eighteen century novel. Nevertheless, Sterne's novel shares with much other eighteenth-century English prose two important formal elements, the publicly oriented narrator and the conversational style. *Tristram Shandy* is a typical eighteenth-century work, first, in its being told by a self-conscious narrator who is publicly and socially oriented. A further way in which Sterne's novel is in keeping with its time is the wonderfully conversational style – one proper, of course, to the narrators' public and social orientations. However, the present paper proves that the author has employed these common devices of the century in two crucially different ways which make the novel as unconventional as always.

Key words: anti-novel, anti-hero, 'order in disorder', innovation, style

Laurence Sterne is considered to be an unconventional writer who has attracted the most diverse opinions from both his readers and literary critics. His mostly appreciated work is the novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, a nine volume work published during a period of ten years (1759-1769). While it was criticized for its boring structure, bawdy tales and ludicrous dialogue, *Tristram Shandy* is appreciated for its wit, satire, fun, pathos and humanism. Twentieth century critics have added appraisals for its musical structure, digressive art, and subversive post-modernist techniques.

The character's faith has been as strange and whimsical as the novel itself. After arousing such a great stir with its first issue, the novel has been both praised and cursed; in time it became less and less read and being as incomprehensible as before it gradually sank into oblivion or was only brought up as one of the eighteenth century curiosities. The reasons that led to such an adverse faith are pretty easy to guess: the apparently chaotic structure of the novel, the elaborated and willingly pretentious style, the graphic eccentricity, the obscure allusions and the tough humor, all contribute to the novel's lack in universal reading and comprehension.

Although *Tristram Shandy* holds a place among the English novels, it is hard to call it a novel. As a reaction against the writings of Richardson, Fielding and Smollett, Sterne does not set out to tell a story. His predecessors related a series of incidents with a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the writings of some (especially Smollett) the incidents were not always connected, yet there was a story being told. In *Tristram Shandy*, however, we have no such things. The title itself is misleading because Tristram Shandy actually is born about the middle of the book and he is a baby whose life and especially opinions are of no interest to the reader.

Tristram Shandy is a curiosity, a predecessor of Absurdism in literature, proving that Sterne has no regard for the laws of the novel. He begins his story, so to speak, in *medias res* and about the middle of the first volume decides to write a preface, thus having no interest in the chronology of events. Events that take place at one time are related before or after others that took place after them. The novel turns out to be eccentric, characterized by irrationality and absurdity.

Moreover, in his novel Sterne revolted against the rationalism of the earlier periods of the Enlightenment. He thought that the most important thing in literature was to record and represent the inner life of men, the psychological states which are forever changing. At the basis of his novel lies the desire to represent the emotional state of man and thus the writer excludes logic. In a nutshell, we learn next to nothing about the actual life of the hero. In this respect his book is a parody of the novels of the eighteenth century which presented the logical evolution of the hero's life from his birth to his grave.

With Sterne's work the great period of the development of the English realistic novel comes to an end. He ought to be remembered for the vivid creations of characters, his gift of delicate pathos and pervasive sentimentality, his charming digressions, his fantastic humor, and last but not least his colorful and vitalized language. Sterne is the author of the most original and profound English novel of the eighteenth century – *Tristram Shandy*.

Although attacked on moral and literary grounds by some for deliberate incoherence and its sexual humor, this novel was an instant and stunning success and made Sterne a literary celebrity and a notable forerunner of the Modern English novel. Despite the fact that Sterne was influenced by older satirist such as Rabelais, Cervantes and Swift, *Tristram Shandy* is loosely based on John Locke's theory of the association of ideas. Characters are thus presented by means of their emotions and impressions rather than through external incidents, and because no two characters have the same associations, comic confusions abound when communication is attempted.

Tristram Shandy certainly does not satisfy the usual expectations as to how a novel should be organized, but that is because it is not the usual sort of novel. "The tendency among critics has been to comment on its structural oddities without first discovering to what literary kind it belongs and what its author was trying to do." (Jefferson 227) This remark comes in an essay where D. W. Jefferson tries to show that the novel has a traditional form and a thematic pattern, even if perfect fidelity to an artistic scheme would be too much to claim for Sterne.

The phrase 'order in disorder' is applicable to the external structure of *Tristram Shandy*. On the element of disorder it is unnecessary to dwell: it is this which strikes one most on a first reading. Sterne took pleasure in destroying the normal order of things and in creating an exaggerated appearance of disorder, but only to link up the pieces in another and more interesting way.

Moreover, *Tristram Shandy* may well be considered an anti-novel (Brînzeu 73): "the overlapping between the author, narrator, and main character […] creates confusion as to the identity of the author." Tristram, the main character in Sterne's novel, comes to speak about his own family as if *they were fictional inventions, depending on his authorial decisions*. Meanwhile, Sterne, as Shandy, becomes a character, penetrating into the world of his own creations. To this complex situation, the mystification caused by *the undoublement of the author as Parson Yorick* has to be added. It is not only Shandy, who is the alter-ego of Sterne, but also Yorick, whose ironic portrait is drawn by Tristram, *the interpolated narrator*. Having two hypostases, the presence of the author is no longer unique and reliable, it is multiplied in a post-modernist fashion.

In addition to this, this book can be considered an anti-novel for numerous other reasons. The most suggestive ones are: the dislocations of time, the numerous digressions and semantic experiments (puns, ambiguities, compound and foreign words), the long list of different items, the retaking of a known story, the unexpected points of view, and the shifts from one mode to another and from one language to another. Not only does Tristram stretch his chronological coverage to its extreme possibilities, he also disrupts it internally by presenting events in the wrong order, interrupting one anecdote with others or with essayistic digressions, and scrambling the beginnings, middles, and ends of his sequences.

Sterne and the Literary Innovations of the Eighteenth Century England

Critics have commonly noted that, in Britain, the emergence of realistic fiction was soon paralleled by a tendency to create parody, and the novel gave rise to the *anti-novel*. Parody is one of the factors of generic innovation, as the classic example of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* shows, and conscious play with the conventions of various literary traditions can be identified in all major novels of the eighteenth century. As novelistic conventions began to crystallize, the new consciousness of the possibilities of fiction came to be inscribed in the works themselves.

This tendency found its most radical expression in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which explores in a highly modern way the relationship between life and literature, between reality and literary fiction. Its parody of all the existing conventions of novel-writing results in *self-parody*, testing thereby the virtues and limits of realism. Sterne's masterpiece inquires not only into what a novel can do but also into what it cannot do, being, as R. Alter (1975, 39) suggests, "the first novel about the crisis of the novel."

With Sterne, the novel changes significantly its focus: it is no longer a faithful transcription of "life and adventures," no longer the "history" of a character's evolution under the influence of external events, or a chronicle of manners. *Tristram Shandy* is not so much about "events" as it is about *opinions*, the "adventures" of the mind, about the flux of consciousness in its sinuous and often surprising movement. It reflects in its form and themes the change from a rational view of reality as governed by intelligible principles of order (as the empirical rationalist philosophies of the time conceived of it), to an increasing sense of its elusiveness and problematic nature, and the growing interest in human subjectivity, in the life of feelings and imagination. "Sterne's novel marks crossroads between the Age of Reason and the Age of Feeling, and many of its aspects herald Romanticism" (Macsiniuc 218).

Furthermore, *Tristram Shandy* is a typical eighteenth-century work, first, in its being told by a self-conscious narrator who is publicly and socially oriented. Tristram faces polite society just as Mr. Spectator, Lamuel Gulliver and Mr. Rambler do; and he feels the same need to regulate his discourse so that he may provide society with entertainment and instruction. Many of the public narrators in eighteenth-century prose works are didactic and satiric ploys, masks rather than characters. Addison, for instance, used Mr. Spectator to get the detachment and anonymity his teachings required; and Swift used the Grub Street hack in *A Tale of a Tub* to sharpen and enrich his attack on pedantry and on arrogant ignorance (Piper 15). Sterne has, likewise, used Tristram for his satiric purposes, variously employing him to attack pedantry, prudery, false gravity and crabbed selfishness. Moreover, Tristram also shares a use of novelistic character, as a second use that eighteenth-century literature often found for its public narrators. Piper considers that, like Moll Flanders and Roderick Random, Tristram suffers a complex of human feelings and entanglements and is thus capable of attracting human sympathy: Tristram tells society the story of his and his family's unfortunate life.

A further way in which Sterne's novels are in keeping with their time is their wonderfully conversational style – one proper, of course, to their narrators' public and social orientations. The eighteenth century was the great age of English conversation.

> In this age John Wilkes was able to talk away his hideous face in half an hour, and Samuel Johnson, by the sheer brilliance of his address, could make the most elegant London companies endure his unleanliness, his twitches, and his general bearishness. (Piper 16)

The age's conversational brilliance permeated its prose; indeed, James Sutherland describes eighteenth-century English prose as "a development from the conversation of English gentleman" (Sutherland 79). Sutherland has referred to Addison and Swift as his examples, but Sterne's style is, if anything, more conversational than theirs. Sterne's chief stylistic intention, according to Wilbur Cross, was "to present the illusion of his natural speech with all its easy flow, warmth and color" (46). That he achieved this intention, we have the testimony of many of his readers. Virginia Woolf, for instance, has written that Sterne's sentences seem to "fall from the lips of a brilliant talker" (98).

Therefore, Sterne's novel shares with much other eighteenth-century English prose two important formal elements, the publicly oriented narrator and the conversational style. However, the author has employed these common devices of the century in two crucially different ways. Tristram Shandy, gentleman, the narrator of Sterne's novel, is held continuously before a microcosmic, mixed-company audience, a society of ladies and gentleman, who attend the unfolding of Tristram's discourse with unsteady interest and with varying degrees of approval; they even interrupt Tristram when he bores, disturbs or confuses them. Tristram must constantly concern himself with their interest and understanding, and, due to it, his fluid communication is fraught with problems and perils: he may at any moment lose their attention by dwelling on a Shandy peculiarity or offend their sensibilities with an item of Shandy privacy. This is especially true since the life story he must tell is in large part "tediously peculiar and hopelessly obscene" (Piper 16). As narrator, Tristram is

> the giddy and flexible entertainer, always dynamically involved with his audience and his material, in danger every moment of losing the sympathy of the one and his control over the other, constantly striving to find a method for making each odd item of his life a source of general entertainment and instruction. (Piper 17)

Finally, it would help the reader to keep in mind three distinct categories into which to divide the various episodes of *Tristram Shandy*. Firstly, there are the events surrounding the conception, birth and upbringing of Tristram, events that take place between 1718 and 1723 at Shandy Hall. Secondly, there are the events on the Bowling Green and those relating to the courtship of Uncle Toby and the widow Wadman, which take place between 1695 and 1714. Given Sterne's digressive structure, however, these earlier events can be – and are – chronicled by Tristram simultaneously with his own life. Thirdly, there is the adult Tristram as author-in-his-study, the self-conscious narrator who comments upon his book as he writes it, and upon himself in the act of writing. These events take place between 1759 and 1766, the actual years of composition. Sterne is always quite aware of the games he is playing with the interweaving of these three time schemes, and he is always capable of complicating issues still further by introducing, digressively, an episode quite distinct from any other of the three categories.

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