

**Laurence Sterne**  
**The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy**  
(1759-67)

(Part I of II)  
(...in the spirit and the style of...)

‘It is, in short, the most diverting book I ever read.’ Someone – my wife, it may be, I forget – forgetfulness being the chosen weapon of the middle-aged – but let us suppose for the moment that it is indeed my wife – it will move the narrative forward somewhat – asks me what Laurence Sterne’s book is about. We find ourselves all unknowing in the grounds of the old lunatic asylum, which had a life more recently as a university campus and is now – lest the buildings end their days troubled by the brooding twin spirits of their past – undergoing a transfiguration into an elegant Care Home. Our conversation, such as it is, concerns *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*.

‘It is, Madam,’ I advise my companion as we stop to listen to the activities of a desultory woodpecker – ‘about not a lot.’

There ensues a long and awkward pause, long enough for a cool marital silence to set in. The woodpecker abates his noise in trepidation. My answer, so given with an air of great authority, is scarcely considered sufficient.

I hurriedly refer my partner in life to the words written by Sterne himself at the closing page of the ninth and final volume – he had proposed twenty – life proved too short – there was another book to write – *A Sentimental Journey* – also too short – in short, Time outdistanced him. His short summary alone remains :

“L—d! said my mother, what is all this story about? –

A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick – And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard.”

The story questioned by Mistress Shandy was indeed about a cow led by Obadiah upon a ‘*pop-visit*’ to a bull. Where the cock came from – you need not ask – it is another story altogether, one to which we might return later, if we are spared. Sterne’s own summary is – in the nature of things – misleading – an author is rarely permitted to write the words he planned. It is – of course – a book about the winding of clocks, about injuries to the groin, the naming of children, about obstetrical instruments, knots, noses, critics and the very low cut of pockets on coats at the latter end of Queen Anne’s reign; and so forth. We might add that there is more than one digression – if I might be permitted to list them: on the matter of knots and squirts, of ravelins and half-moons and counterscarps and demi-bastions, on the tightness (or otherwise) of breeches --

‘Do not digress, Sir,’ insists my wife, or that woman, or troubled spirit, who, accompanying me on my wanderings, is eager to gain some knowledge of the Shandean world. ‘Does the book at least have a hero? A heroine? And a villain? Whose side is it on?’

All questions, honoured reader, which aim straight at the heart of the matter – it is only to be expected of a woman whose intelligence and practicality far exceeds my own. But how am I to explain nicely the unavoidable fact that – it has no heroes, it has no villains, it has no morality? It contains merely members of the human race with all their foibles. And whose side it is on cannot readily be answered – it is hard to determine whether it is even on the side of the author, who – despite his stated animosity towards digressions and interruptions –

finds himself dragged willy-nilly down side-lanes and interrupted by insistent characters at every turn. Take, Madam, the closing words of the seventh volume :

‘I go on straight forwards, without digression or parenthesis, in my uncle Toby’s amours –  
I began thus –’

Ending with a beginning, Sterne then occupies the first several chapters of the eighth volume with several false-starts tilting at the questions of Love and Cuckoldom, and a lengthy and detailed aside concerning Widow Wadman’s night-shifts, the length thereof, and the corking-pins thereto which hold her in. But then - having got as far as Chapter 19 in the new volume - noticeable progress has at last having been made - he is interrupted in his exposition to permit Uncle Toby’s servant Trim to attempt to tell ‘*The Story of the king of Bohemia and his seven castles*’, which story is itself interrupted several times before it can get off the ground – and is never completed, due to other digressions on uncle Toby’s groin - a matter of the greatest interest to the Widow Wadham, a digression which is never concluded, consequent upon an argument as to whether a wound to the knee (being Trim’s case) is more painful than one to the groin. Our author returns to Uncle Toby’s amours only in the ninth volume at a point -

‘So, Sir,’ my fair companion interrupts with some show of impatience, ‘Mr. Sterne cannot bear to be interrupted? Why then -?’

I interrupt her objection.

‘Sometimes it is an affair of Life and Death,’ I advise. With that explanation, she falls silent. Life and Death are no small matters to the mother of my children. I pursue my advantage. ‘Mr. Sterne writes, for example, that Death comes calling and interrupts him just as he is in the middle of telling the story of a nun who fancied herself to be a shell-fish and of the monk who was damned for eating a mussel. “Did ever so grave a personage get into so vile a scrape?” remarks Death in wonderment, before retiring.’

There is a silence. I gaze gravely at my feet upon the path.

‘Does even *Fifty Shades of Grey* contain such bawdiness?’ scolds my wife.

I express my confidence on that score, but since neither of us has read that illustrious work, it is a fruitless argument.

‘And this book,’ she proceeds without diversion, in a manner which reminds me positively of the hobby-horsical method of Uncle Toby, ‘is there much more in it of matters of -----?’ She terminated her sentences with a series of dashes, for a lady does not like to talk of certain affairs. Far better that, than to talk outright of \*\*\* and \*\*\*\*\*.

‘Ah!’ I exclaim with an enthusiasm which – had I but once paused to think - was a shade too ardent for the occasion, ‘there is a story of copulation interrupted by the monthly winding of the clock, another story of a man with an admirably elongated nose, and there is the unfortunate incident of the sash-window which fell down upon the infant Master Tristram’s pride-and-joy when the maid Susannah persuaded him to piss out of the embrasure, the lead-weights which should have supported it having been requisitioned to cast additional field-pieces for the re-enactment of the Siege of Namur in Uncle Toby’s back garden.’

My wife, like any woman who hears of the misfortunes of small boys, is concerned. ‘And did poor Tristram ever recover?’

‘That is an injury from which a man rarely recovers,’ I advise her knowledgeably.

‘It affected him all his life, then?’

'I cannot tell,' I confess. 'For, after nine volumes, Mr. Sterne has barely been able to bring Tristram into infancy, let alone the remainder of his life. Life is - as I believe I stated once before - too short.'

'It has at least, this book, a plot? It has a plot, Sir, tell me that !'

I shake my head regretfully. 'Not the least sign of one. It does not require one.'

'Let us take this other path,' says my wife, breathing heavily.

We direct our weekly promenade sharply to the right. I propose another argument. 'Mr. Sterne's book,' I indicate, the while ticking off the points of my defence on my left-hand glove - for it is a cold morning and numb fingers will not help in the case, 'is a book where the process of writing is kept in full view. There are blank pages, to mark a quiet gap in events. There are chapters that are only one sentence long. There are squiggly lines -'

'Squiggly lines, Sir?' snorts my wife, disentangling her umbrella from an overhanging branch.

I proceed regardless - 'which illustrate how the story is proceeding - that is, rather at random. There are marbled book covers placed bang in the middle of the third volume. Two pages are entirely black representing, alas, poor Yorick's grave.'

My companion repeats her earlier snort.

'This, Madam,' I point out, 'in a book over two hundred and fifty years old.'

'Age is no excuse, Sir. If it were, we would have no need of Care Homes.'

I fall silent, pondering that irrefutable train of logic.

The silence lasts longer than I might have wished. I must bring my polemic to a close. 'With asterisks and dashes does Sterne cover our ears, leaving us with no option but to read the thus-starred rude words and fully take cognisance of the bawdy significance.'

'Ah!' exclaims my wife in triumph, 'and there we have it. *Fifty Shades of Grey* again !'

'Madam,' I protest, 'I am no bawd, and I have loved this book for almost forty years, since I first opened its covers.'

She says nothing.

'Almost exactly as long as I have loved you, since I first opened - '

My wife taps me on the wrist and bids me be quiet - she proposes that we take a turn through the woods once more.

'By the bye,' I observe in due course, 'the bull was in no way equal to the employment which had been thrust upon him.'

**Laurence Sterne**  
**The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy**  
(1759-67)

(Part II of II)

Put simply, this is the most entertaining book written in English in the last two centuries and a half. I refer to Laurence Sterne's pseudo-autobiographical *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, a book of considerable length which barely charts the life of the eponymous hero beyond his infancy. Sterne, early on, suggests the work will run to twenty volumes; in the event, he completed nine. Even if it had gone the distance, it is unlikely we would have learned much about Tristram beyond his early schooling. But what's to complain about? We are given several hundred pages of gentle humour, satire, digressions and discreetly-concealed bawdiness. There is enough in there to refresh your spirits, should you feel tired of the tackiness of Western civilisation and seek shelter from the brutality of life in general.

It has no heroes. It has no villains. It promotes no morality. It happily disregards conventions for printed texts. It deals a lot with noses. It has no plot to speak of – unless you consider the heated wooing of an oblivious Uncle Toby by the Widow Wadman to be a plot: that particular strand of the narrative never actually leads very far. And all of that, in a book written in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is nothing short of a miracle. To be sure, Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau in France were liberating both the spirit and the form of writing, but they also had philosophical axes to grind, and did so with relish in their prose works. Sterne had only the foibles of humanity and the accidents of daily life to present, and he did so with great skill. Tristram's father and mother, Uncle Toby, the parson Yorick, Dr Slop, Trim and Susannah – all watch over the gestation and infancy of young Tristram like benevolent, clumsy, naïve gods. There is something almost Olympian in the majesty of their concerns, mistakes and distractions.

The Shandean universe is one beset by unfortunate accidents. The conception of Tristram himself is marked by a *coitus interruptus* when Tristram's mother suddenly reminds her husband that he has not wound the clock, a task that would be due at that precise time each month. This inattention to the task in hand is deemed by Tristram to have saddled him with poor luck for life. The sequence continues on the day of his birth. His entry into the world is attended by a feuding midwife and an interfering doctor, and the latter manages to break the infant's nose with his new-fangled forceps. The fates not being content with that, a baptism is hurriedly arranged from fear that the new-born will not survive: the boy is given the name Tristram – the one name of all possible names which his father would not have had for his son; but, while the father is struggling to get into his breeches, he makes the mistake of consigning the desired name 'Trismegistus' to the faulty memory of Susannah the maid for transmission down the passage to the parson.

There is no plot, but there are many stories. But the charm – and entertaining irrelevance - of those stories is enhanced further by Sterne's mastery of the written word.

He is the master of the non-sequitur. A chapter will end with a throwaway line by one of the characters, or by the author himself, one which serves to neutralise any heightened emotions or gravity that might have been accumulated before. The reader is obliged to read on to find out whether the non-sequitur really is such, when it may in fact be the start of some other story.

Sterne is the master of the digression and interruption. There is barely a single chapter that goes by without some monstrous divergence from the matter under consideration. The whole book is a long, apparently rambling conversation – largely one-sided, admittedly – between Sterne and the reader. The author frequently rails against digressions, finding pages enough to do so. There is barely a single story which is terminated within twenty pages of its being started. In the lengthy story narrated by his supposed authority on noses, Slawkenbergius ('pile of tripe'), there is a desperate letter from a fair maiden to her absent swain, which terminates thus: '*You will arrive but to see me expire. 'Tis a bitter draught, Diego, but oh! 'tis embittered still more by dying un—.* She could proceed no further. Slawkenbergius supposes the word intended was unconvinced, but her strength would not enable her to finish the letter.'

From that last example, it may be supposed that Sterne was also master of the discreet rude joke. There are many more of that sort in there – for those who wish to find them.

And then there is Sterne's playfulness with the printed form. There is one volume of the nine which terminates contradictorily with the words '*I began thus –*'. There are chapters which comprise only a single sentence – twenty or thirty words. Chapter 1 of Volume 4 appears some twenty pages in from the start. There is a 'chapter on chapters', '*which I hold to be the best chapter in my whole work.*' There are chapters which have nothing at all in them – pages of restful silence. There is a chapter of ten pages which is completely missing. There are two pages covered entirely in black ink, representing Yorick's grave. Another pair of pages represent a marbled book cover. Lines and squiggles abound, as Sterne illustrates the way in which his narrative is taking the long way round. The '*Preface*', when the author at last finds a quiet gap in the story, is a third of way into the book.

All the way through the work, Sterne discusses the act of writing, laying bare his thoughts and intentions in constructing the text. At the end of one chapter, he writes: '*Dr Slop...was just beginning to return the compliment...when the door hastily opening in the next chapter but one – put an end to the affair.*' Not a mere interruption, but one from '*the next chapter but one...*'! Or how about the following interruption to himself: '*I have fifty things to let you know first...a hundred difficulties to clear up... A cow broke in (to-morrow morning) to my uncle Toby's fortifications...*'

And all of this Postmodernist stuff in the 18<sup>th</sup> century?

Sterne just buttonholes us and keeps us listening. He makes no assumptions about us, and asks that we make any no judgements about him. The conversation is deceptively easy-going, meandering, and surprisingly full of humanity.

The book is, in short, an attic full of dusty and delightful family treasures (and incidentally contains one of the longest curses to be found anywhere, extending over three pages, with a Latin parallel text). Those who have not read this – I demand that you try it. Those who have read it – read it again. It is a novel which I am pleased to read every couple of years, without ever tiring of it.

In his fourth volume, our author laments that he has spent a full year writing and has only reached the first day of Tristram's life: '*It must follow that the more I write, the more I shall have to write and consequently the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read.*' And who could ask more of a book?