

LOCKEAN SENTIMENTALIST LAURENCE STERNE (1713-1768)



Dr. Johnson is a guilt-haunted Christian who fills his life with good works; the Reverend Laurence Sterne is a sentimental Christian and a laughing philosopher. Sending his works to his illicit beloved, he explains, “The sermons came all hot from the heart.... The others [the nine books of *Tristram Shandy*] came from the head.”

Some of Sterne’s early letters are cloyingly sentimental effusions to Elizabeth Lumley, whom he goes on to marry; others concern quarrels with his uncle, the Reverend Jacques Sterne, and with his mother, whom he finds difficult and untruthful. Ecclesiastical business and work on his own, and his friends’ farms also have a place. Writing near the end of his life, he remembers its turning point: “Curse on farming (said I) I will try if the pen will not succeed better than the spade.” With the publication in December 1759 of the first two volumes of his great novel, this obscure Yorkshire vicar becomes, at the age of forty-six, a famous author.

In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne writes fiction in a new mode—too odd, says Dr. Johnson, to last, though he acknowledges the author is no dullard. Abrupt transitions, frequent digressions, and playful ways of addressing the reader are accompanied by lively dialogue. His favourite punctuation mark is the dash. Taking his cue from Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Sterne plays with the way in which our consciousness leaps from thought to thought not logically but as ideas have happened to become associated with each other in our minds, and he raises awareness of the difference between time as the clock measures it and time as we experience it. His narrative implicitly comments on the often untraceable chains of cause and effect in our lives, and he luxuriates in the bawdy allusion and the *double entendre* to emphasize how, like it or not, we are sexual animals. To cap it all, he presents life thus portrayed as a humorous spectacle.

Although Sterne writes to his Parisian banker Robert Foly of “the volume I am now fabricating for the laughing part of the world,” he elsewhere drops hints that its philosophical foundation is little understood: “in using the [walking] stick,” he tells his American admirer Dr. John Eustace, “every one will take the handle which suits his convenience. In *Tristram Shandy* the handle is taken which suits their passions, their ignorance or their sensibility.” Another aspect of the book embodies Sterne’s response to human goodness, which is most clearly seen in the portrayal of Tristram’s loving and lovable Uncle Toby: “so much am I delighted with my uncle Toby’s imaginary character,” he informs a lady, “that I am become an enthusiast.” (In the language of the eighteenth century, enthusiasm signifies going, in a greater or lesser degree, beyond the bounds of reason.)

Despite the widespread applause, puritanical moralists disapprove of the sexual content of the novel and denounce its author as unworthy of his church. Mr. Fothergill, he tells an unidentified correspondent, repeatedly counsels him, “Get your preferment first, Lory! and then write and welcome.” “But suppose,” he reasons with his friend, “preferment is long a-coming – and, for aught I know, I may not be preferred till the resurrection of the just – and am all that time in labour, how must I bear my pains?” He notes that “Swift has said a hundred things I durst not say, unless I was dean of St. Patrick’s.” When William Warburton, the scholarly Bishop of Gloucester, urges him to avoid indecency, he responds, “I may find it very hard, in writing such a book as *Tristram Shandy*, to mutilate everything in it down to the prudish humour of every particular. I will, however, do my best – though laugh, my Lord, I will, and as loud as I can too.”

Inevitably, the reader of *Tristram Shandy* who turns to the letters will ask, “Does the Shandean style appear there?” In a minority of them it does. Thus Sterne begins a letter to the great actor David Garrick:

Dear Sir, – ‘Twas for all the world like a cut across my finger with a sharp penknife. I saw the blood – gave it a suck, – wrapt it up – and thought no more about it.

But there is more goes to the healing of a wound than this comes to: – a wound (unless ‘tis a wound not worth talking of, but by the bye mine is) must give you some pain after. – Nature will take her own way with it – it must ferment – it must digest.

The wound has been inflicted by the rumour that Sterne intends to ridicule Bishop Warburton by portraying him as Tristram’s tutor.

Sterne delights many friends and acquaintances, both old and new, by playing the humorist in company as well as on paper. He later writes

to Garrick from Paris, “I Shandy it away fifty times more than I was ever wont, talk more nonsense than ever you heard me talk in your days—and to all sorts of people.”

The popularity of the first instalment of his novel brings Sterne to London, where he relishes being lionised, even by the bishops, and despite his friend Fothergill’s fears, he is presented with the living of Coxwold by Lord Fauconberg. Writing back to people in Yorkshire, he enthuses to the singer Catherine Fourmantel, his current inamorata, over his round of visits in the capital, and he informs the squire Stephen Croft of changes in government and of the fierce controversy over whether to abandon Britain’s alliance with Prussia, which seems on the verge of defeat in the Seven Years War. On his return, after hobnobbing with the noble and the famous, he finds it hard at first to adjust to the quiet of his new Yorkshire parish. To his friend John Hall-Stevenson, he suggests, “I should have walked about the streets of York ten days, as a proper medium to have passed through, before I entered upon my rest.” Hall-Stevenson is a fellow humorist and author whose pleasure it is to make merry with like-minded companions in his mediaeval home, Skelton Castle. The building has the nickname Crazy Castle, derived from the owner’s book *Crazy Tales*, and Sterne often writes to Hall-Stevenson of his desire to be there once again.

Contentment seems to prevail for about a year in the Coxwold cottage soon known as Shandy Hall. Sterne, however, suffers from consumption—he often spits blood—and he obtains leave to travel to France for his health; his wife and daughter are to follow later. In Paris, where he arrives in January 1762, he rejoices to find he is as much of a lion as in London, and he composes delightful letters to his wife, Lord Fauconberg, and David Garrick. He writes of the great men who welcome him, of how “the whole city of Paris is *bewitch’d* with the comic opera,” and of the vigorous campaign to eject the Jesuits from France—a campaign which preoccupies Parisians more than their country’s fortune in the current Seven Years War. In one letter to his wife, he pictures the tragic fire that has destroyed the great fair of St. Germain depriving hundreds of people, many of them skilled craftsmen, of their property and livelihood: “I could have found in my heart,” he exclaims, “to have cried over the perishable and uncertain tenure of every good in this life.” The same letter shows the Reverend Laurence Sterne’s professional fascination with the preaching of the theologian Denis-Xavier Clément, which he finds,

most excellent indeed! his matter solid, and to the purpose; his manner, more than theatrical, and greater, both in his action and delivery, than Madame Clairon, who, you must know, is the Garrick of the stage here; he has infinite variety, and keeps up the

attention by it wonderfully; his pulpit, oblong, with three seats in it, into which he occasionally casts himself; goes on, then rises, by a gradation of four steps, each of which he profits by, as his discourse inclines him; in short 'tis a stage, and the variety of his tones would make you imagine there were no less than five or six actors on it together.

By April, physicians advise Sterne that he needs to spend a winter further south to strengthen his lungs, and his wife writes that their daughter, Lydia, requires a similar sojourn as her asthma worsens. He takes a house in Toulouse and sends Mrs. Sterne instructions for travel which paint a picture of the journey facing her and Lydia almost as vivid as the pictures of the market and the preacher in Paris:

For God's sake rise early and gallop away in the cool—and always see that you have not forgot your baggage in changing post-chaises—You will find good tea upon the road from York to Dover—only bring a little to carry you from Calais to Paris—give the Custom-House officers what I told you—at Calais give more, if you have much Scotch snuff.

Although he is soon enjoying “the prettiest situation in Toulouse, with near two acres of garden” and a well furnished house, Sterne finds life in the south of France very different from life in Paris, and writes to Hall-Stevenson, “Oh! how I envy you all at Crazy Castle!” After the society of *philosophes*, he complains of “the eternal platitude of the [provincial] French characters—little variety, no originality” and associates mainly with other British expatriates. By October 1763, he announces, “I shall set out in February for England, where my heart has been fled these six months.” His wife and daughter are to remain in Toulouse.

Back at Coxwold, Sterne struggles to finish volumes seven and eight of *Tristram Shandy* in the face of alarming encroachments on his time by church business, negotiations on the enclosure of Stillington Common, and irresistible temptations: “There is no sitting, and cudgeling one's brains whilst the sun shines bright,” he confesses to Hall-Stevenson on 4 September 1764, and by the end of the month he has taken a three-week excursion to the coastal resort of Scarborough. In mid-November, he complains, “I have been *Miss-ridden* this last week by a couple of romping girls (*bien mises et comme il faut*) who might as well have been in the house with me (tho' perhaps not, my retreat here is too quiet for them) but they have taken up all my time, and have given my judgment and fancy more airings than they wanted.” This statement Hall-Stevenson is left to interpret as he wishes.

For a long time, Laurence and Elizabeth Sterne have endured an uneasy marriage. Laurence's clerical vocation does not prevent his affections from straying to a succession of attractive women whose presence in his life leaves traces in his correspondence. To Catherine Fourmantel he writes in 1760, "God will open a door when we shall sometime be much more together, and enjoy our desires without fear or interruption." Four years later, he confides to Hall-Stevenson from Paris:

I have been for eight weeks smitten with the tenderest passion that ever tender wight underwent. I wish, dear cousin, thou couldst conceive (perhaps thou can'st without my wishing it) how deliciously I canter'd away with it the first month, two up, two down, always upon my hanches along the streets from my hôtel to hers, at first, once — then twice, then three times a day, till at length I was within an ace of setting up my hobby horse in her stable for good an all.

Next year, he teases Lady Warkworth for making him into "a dish clout of a soul" and asks,

Would not any man in his senses run diametrically from you — and as far as his legs would carry him, rather than thus causelessly, foolishly, and foolhardily expose himself afresh — and afresh, where his heart and his reason tells him he shall be sure to come off loser, if not totally undone?

In spite of his inconstancy and what is said by witnesses to be their frequent quarrels, the feelings of Sterne and his wife to each other remain ambivalent: a strong undercurrent of affection seems to survive beneath their feuding. His claim in 1761, made to the famous bluestocking Mrs. Montagu, a cousin of Elizabeth, that their disputes are over is to prove wishful thinking, but he always ensures that his wife is well provided for. When he sails to France at the beginning of 1762, he leaves prudent advice for her in case he should die — it includes the caution not to give their daughter so much on her marriage that she would forfeit her own independence. A letter already quoted shows him eager to share with her some of his experience of Paris, and there is no reason to doubt his assertion there, "I send to Mr. Foley's every mail-day, to inquire for a letter from you; and if I do not get one in a post or two, I shall be greatly surprised and disappointed." When he is about to go back alone to England, he writes to Robert Foley:

My wife returns to Toulouse and purposes to spend the summer at Bagnieres—I on the contrary go and visit my wife the church in Yorkshire.— We all live the longer—at least the happier,— for having things our own way.— This is my conjugal maxim—I own 'tis not the best of maxims—but I maintain 'tis not the worst.

If this reflects the unsteady affection that Sterne maintains for his wife, there is no doubt that he nourishes a rooted love for their daughter. When the two women arrive in France, he writes of Lydia, “I wish she may ever remain a child of Nature—I hate children of art.” On the point of returning to England, he declares, “except a tear at parting with my little slut, I shall be in high spirits.” Back in his own country, he takes care to write to her giving advice on her reading and adding:

I hope you have not forgot my last request, to make no friendships with the French-women—not that I think ill of them all, but sometimes women of the best principles are the most *insinuating*—nay I am so jealous of you that I should be miserable were I to see you had the least grain of coquetry in your composition.

The English winters continue to aggravate Sterne's complaint—his lungs still bleed intermittently—and in 1765, after publishing the seventh and eighth volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, he announces his intention to “seek a kindlier climate,” for “This plaguy cough of mine seems to gain ground, and will bring me to my grave in spite of me—but while I have strength to run away from it I will.” He sets off for Naples, and a series of letters to the Paris banker Isaac Panchaud gives descriptions of his pleasing and unpleasing experiences as he is imprisoned by floods, received with honours, delighted by spring-like weather on the plains of Lombardy, and depressed by heavy snow in the Appenines. The climate of Naples he does find helpful, and he treats Hall-Stevenson to a brief account of the entertainments at its Carnival. Subsequently he tells the same friend,

Never man has been such a wild-goose chase after a wife as I have been—after having sought her in five or six different towns, I found her at last in *Franche-Comté*—Poor woman! she was very cordial, &c. and begs to stay another year or so—my Lydia pleases me much—I found her greatly improved in everything I wish'd her.

Back in England again by June 1766, Sterne works on the ninth volume of *Tristram Shandy*. Hearing, however, that his wife is ill, he decides in

September that if she grows worse he will return to the Continent to comfort her and Lydia. When a fever defeats his hope of completing a tenth volume of *Tristram*, he leaves for London in January 1767 to publish the ninth, and sends Lord Fauconberg accounts of the crippling blizzard that make the journey only just possible and of a London paralyzed by snow four inches deep. "It has," he complains, "set in now with the most intense cold. I could scarce lay in bed for it, and this morning more snow again." A few days later, he reports, "It was so intensely cold on Sunday, that there were few either at the church or court, but last night it thaw'd; the concert at Soho top full—and was (this is for the ladies) the best assembly and the best concert I ever had the honour to be at."

Sterne is still of as amorous a disposition as ever; a passage in a letter to a friend may give some insight into his susceptibility. Pleased that his correspondent is in love, he writes:

I myself must ever have some dulcinea in my head—it harmonises the soul—and in those cases I first endeavour to make the lady believe so, or rather I begin first to make myself believe that I am in love—but I carry on my affairs quite in the French way, sentimentally,—‘*l’amour*’ (say they) ‘*n’est rien sans sentiment.*’

Early in 1767, after his wintry journey to London, Sterne conceives there a passion which leads to a dramatic portion of his correspondence. With his wife and daughter still in France, he falls in love with an aspiring young bluestocking named Eliza Draper. She has two young children in boarding school and a husband working in India. When a "busy fool" tittle tattles to his wife about his attentions to Mrs. Draper, he writes to Lydia that "'tis true I have a friendship for her, but not to infatuation." To Eliza herself, he declares in the following month, "I will live for thee, and my Lydia," and he is obsessed enough to praise her volubly when he dines with Lord Bathurst.

To his distress, Sterne is not permitted to enjoy his beloved's presence for more than a few weeks. Her husband orders her to join him in India; probably he fears she is piling up debts. Because she is sickly at the time, Sterne imagines that her husband will be willing to rescind his command, and he is besotted enough to propose,

I will send for my wife and daughter, and they shall carry you, in pursuit of health, to Montpellier, the wells of Bancois, the Spa, or whither thou wilt... We shall fish upon the banks of Arno, and lose ourselves in the sweet labyrinths of its vallies.

In the same letter, he informs Eliza that he expects soon to be widower, and that should her husband die, he hopes to marry her. He dubs her, “my wife elect!”

After Eliza’s departure, Sterne has the comfort of talking about her with Anne and William James, a London couple who are her and his close friends and for whom he has an intense admiration. One of his letters refers to lessons in painting that he gives to Mrs. James. At this time, he begins a daily journal to be sent to Eliza in instalments. A lengthy portion of this gushing document – much inferior to his letters – was apparently not sent and survives.

With his return in May to Coxwold, where he works on a new book, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, his health temporarily improves. He is soon proclaiming to a friend:

I am as happy as a prince, at Coxwold – and I wish you could see in how princely a manner I live – ’tis a land of plenty. I sit down alone to venison, fish and wild fowl, or a couple of fowls or ducks, with curds, and strawberries, and cream, and all the simple plenty which a rich valley ... can produce.

His luscious diet is complemented by daily rides in his post-chaise, and though he refers to his “love-sick heart,” he admits he is “in high spirits.”

A letter extant in draft form tells of Sterne’s excursions to the neighbourhood ruins of Byland Abbey, where he indulges in imaginary conversations about Eliza with the spirits of long dead nuns. Disturbingly, the draft seems to have been originally addressed to a Countess and subsequently adjusted to be sent to Mrs. Draper. This suggests that at some level Sterne’s daydreams of a blissful life with Eliza that figure in his Journal may be in effect part of a play he is creating with himself as its main audience.

On the last day of June 1767, Sterne informs a friend:

I ought now to be busy from sun rise to sun set, for I have a book to write – a wife to receive – an estate to sell – a parish to superintend, and, what is worst of all, a disquieted heart to reason with.

The wife who is soon to visit, he tells the Jameses, “takes back sixteen hundred pds into France with her – and will do me the honour likewise to strip me of every thing I have – except Eliza’s picture.” As sometimes happens when an event is dreaded, the reality proves much less terrible than it seemed in prospect. He is enraptured with his elegant daughter and enthuses to Isaac Panchard:

my Lydia seems transported with the sight of me. — Nature, dear P, breathes in all her composition; and except a little vivacity — which is a fault in the world we live in — I am fully content with her mother's care of her.

His wife agrees to a moderate settlement, and of Lydia he writes to the Jameses that “she is all heaven could give me in a daughter,” but he has to add that “her mother loves France — and this dear part of me must be torn from my arms, to follow her mother.”

Time, the reunion with his family, or both seem to make Sterne's obsession with Eliza fade, and in November we find him counselling a friend who suffers from an infatuation with a woman he can never win to make his addresses elsewhere: “time,” he assures him, “will wear off an attachment which has taken so deep a root in your heart.”

Sterne's real trouble at this time is not persecution by his wife, but the frequent recurrence of his illness. At one point it attacks his genitals, and the doctors diagnose venereal disease. Sterne denies it, insisting he has had no sexual contact, even with his wife, for fifteen years; his disclaimer is often disbelieved, but the correct diagnosis appears to be “tuberculosis of the fibrocaceous type,” which can attack many parts of the body. Fortunately, he is well enough at the turn of the year to return to London for the publication of *A Sentimental Journey*. For a few weeks at the beginning of 1768, he is again lionised and enjoying visiting Mr. and Mrs. James, but he soon finds himself bedridden and on the verge of death. Realising this, he hopes he will be among those who have died with a jest on their lips. In case Lydia should lose her mother, too, he commends her to the care not of Eliza, as his wife fears he will, but of the worthy Jameses. He dies on 18 March 1768.

How sincere, one may wonder, are the religious beliefs of this inconstant man who is a minister of the Church and publishes four volumes of sermons, and what is his philosophy of life? We have already seen that in 1760 he assures Catherine Fourmandel that God will open a door for them to be together. In 1767, two of his letters to Eliza embody prayers to God to protect her, and one of these closes with the repetition of his “fervent ejaculation, ‘that we may be happy, and meet again; if not in this world, in the next.’” Having instructed his wife and daughter how to manage their first journey to France, he continues, “Now, my dears, once more pluck up your spirits — trust in God — in me — and in yourselves.” Six months before he dies, he tells a friend:

my *Sentimental Journey* will, I dare say, convince you that my feelings are from the heart, and that that heart is not of the worst of molds — praised be God for my sensibility! Though it has

often made me wretched, yet I would not exchange it for all the pleasures the grossest sensualist ever felt.

The purpose of *A Sentimental Journey* is, he tells Mrs. James, “to teach us to love the world and our fellow creatures better than we do – so it runs most upon those gentler passions and affections, which aid so much to it.” And it is upon the benevolent feelings of the human heart that the Reverend Mr. Sterne likes to preach. His religion is genuine although of a dilute, untheological kind.

Beyond this simple creed, Sterne sometimes counsels that we must seek our happiness within our own minds. He tells Robert Foley that “we must be happy within – and then few things without us make much difference – This is my Shandean philosophy.” That he tries, at least intermittently, to live by this conviction, although his sensibility can make him wretched, is confirmed by his comment on life at Coxwold after his return from the delights of Italy:

What a difference of scene here! But with a disposition to be happy, 'tis neither this place, nor t'other that renders us the reverse. – In short each man's happiness depends upon himself – he is a fool if he does not enjoy it.

Writing to his black admirer Ignatius Sancho, the ailing author elaborates on the cast of mind necessary to put this demanding belief into practice:

But I am a resigned being, Sancho, and take health and sickness as I do light and darkness, or the vicissitudes of seasons – that is, just as it pleases GOD to send them – and accommodate myself to their periodical returns, as well as I can – only taking care, whatever befalls me in this silly world – not to lose my temper at it. – This I believe, friend Sancho, to be the truest philosophy – for this we must be indebted to ourselves, but not to our fortunes.

In his masterpiece *Tristram Shandy*, the laughing intellect and the sentimental heart of Sterne work together harmoniously, but in his correspondence, as in his life, they can sit uneasily side by side. In his letters, while he can describe scenes and circumstances with a novelist's skill, more pervasive is his emotional engagement with them. Tossed to and fro between high spirits and discomfiting fears, he relies on humour and self-dependence to save him from foundering.