

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman

Critical Introduction

In many ways and for various reasons *Tristram Shandy* is one of the great books of prose fiction. In its humor, universality, and insight into humanity it reminds one of Petronius, Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, and Joyce. In its concern with motives and with the psychology of the individual, in the writer's approach to the problems of novel writing, it makes great sense to the twentieth-century reader.

Perhaps the key to the enjoyment of *Tristram Shandy* is Literalness. If we believe everything we are told in the book, understand it in the way we are told to understand it, we will not become angry and frustrated the way most readers have for the past 200 years. The secret is not to bring usual attitudes or traditional judgments to the book, but rather to surrender to the writer. As the author himself says,

I would go fifty miles on foot, for I have not a horse worth riding on, to kiss the hand of that man whose generous heart will give up the reins of his imagination into his author's hands, be pleased he knows not why, and cares not wherefore.

There is great good fun in *Tristram Shandy*, but it comes from being in harmony with the author rather than from being contrary and rebellious. Most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers loved the tender, sentimental passages in the book, but they disliked the fun. They lost their tempers at the many calculated twistings and turnings of the story, at the many jokes (bawdy and shaggy-dog types) in short, they disliked the author because he didn't write the kind of book they wanted. Many twentieth-century readers have felt the same.

There are certain problems in reading this novel, but they present a kind of complexity that can be pleasurable for the modern reader. The problems are these: the identity of the author, the point of the story, and many, many digressions from the apparent story.

The Identity of the Author. The full title of this book is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. In spite of this very explicit title, most people have taken for granted that it is really the story of Laurence Sterne, the author of the book. Sterne complained that the world considered him more Shandean than he actually was, and conversely the world has considered *Tristram Shandy* more Sternean than it actually is. In most people's minds, author and book have inter-penetrated to such an extent that one is considered an extension of the other. Nothing but confusion is gained from this idea about the book: if we think that we're sometimes reading autobiography, sometimes fiction, and sometimes a blend of the two, we cannot help but be uncertain and nervous about it.

The fullest and deepest meaning is gotten from the book only by assuming that Sterne created a fictional character named Tristram Shandy and that he made him a writer. He gave him a mind that knows of all the happenings in the book, and this mind is independent of the artist Sterne's mind. It is an artistic mind, somewhat like Sterne's, and it is a lucid and consistent one in spite of all the inconsistencies it shows. For the purposes of the reader, it is the mind of an individual named Tristram Shandy, not Laurence Sterne.

The thoughts and the opinions of Tristram Shandy, however much they may coincide with what we know of Laurence Sterne, belong primarily to the man who is the legitimate

offspring of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Shandy and the nephew of Captain Toby Shandy. One could even say that Sterne created no other characters. Tristram, once his mind has been set in motion, creates the rest of the individuals who people his world, meaning that all of them come through to the reader through the unfolding of Tristram's consciousness. This creation by Tristram is one of the most important of the dynamic processes of the novel. Sterne writes about a man who is writing a book, and this man presents for the reader's inspection the people who had significance in his life; all of their stories are told to us directly or indirectly by this man. His life is tied up with theirs before he is born because he is presented to us as remembering this relationship. Thus, the first point to be taken literally in the title is that the author *within* the *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is Tristram Shandy. Whenever the term "author" is used hereafter, it will refer to Tristram and not to Laurence Sterne.

The Point of the Story. About 10 years before the publication of *Tristram Shandy* (1759), Henry Fielding published his *History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749). *Tom Jones* has always been the archetype of the "well-made novel," and for many readers and critics *Tristram Shandy* suffers by comparison with it. *Tom Jones* presents the "life and adventures" of its hero; everything happens in an orderly, progressive way. The hero appears as an infant in the third chapter, and the major part of the book deals with his adventures as a young man. But there is no such orderliness in *Tristram Shandy*: Tristram is born a third of the way through the book, and the last 45 chapters of the book (many of them short) deal with the events that took place five years before his birth. The stories of Mr. and Mrs. Shandy, of Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim, of Uncle Toby and the Widow Wadman, and the story of Tristram's childhood and young manhood itself, are all picked up, dropped, and picked up again and again. The author unhesitatingly tells the end of a story first, then the beginning, and then the middle; sometimes he tells the beginning and then drops it for a hundred pages. He manipulates the years and the events; he places, displaces, and replaces the people of his family (including himself) as he likes, taking them from the context of their actions and putting them back according to the way they figure in his reflections about them. Their stories give way for his opinions—the opinions of an author at work—and they are picked up according to his will and inserted into the pattern of his history as illustrations of his opinions. Everything, individuals and events, moves in direct response to the controlling consciousness of the author. He makes them move or he makes them stop in their tracks in mid-sentence; and when he thinks that it is time to go back to them, they start moving and they finish their sentence. The affairs of the lovable Shandy family and the goings-on at Shandy Hall are given to us piecemeal and topsy-turvy: now we see them, now we don't; we see them here, and suddenly we see them there.

But one person we always see and hear, no matter what happens to the Shandy family story, is Tristram, whose "life and opinions" continue unbroken. Whether or not anyone else is present, he is in *every* scene by means of his "my uncle Toby," "my father," "my mother." His presence is not merely a storyteller's point of view; writing of the components of his life at a distance as a mature man and as a writer he has the advantages of a mature man's outlook. Only he is alive at the time of writing; all time others have been long dead. The fact that he is able to conjure them up in all their vividness and move them backward and forward in "time" without impairing that vividness, demonstrates and proves the reality and depth of the character that Sterne created for him: he belongs to the Shandy family and he is also a clever writer. The Shandy ménages are important, but they are not more important than the thoughts they give rise to in the mind of this clever writer. And when these thoughts provoke a stream of thought which does not concern army Shandy other

than Tristram the writer, goodbye to the Shandys for a while. And the Shandys whom the writer bids goodbye to every so often include even *little* Tristram himself; the writer is willing to tell (with a calculated attempt to frustrate the reader) about his own conception, his birth, his childhood accidents, his first breeches, and a couple of trips to the Continent, but nothing else. It is *big* Tristram he is concerned with, and the opinions (i.e., ideas, fancies, prejudices, caprices) of this Tristram. He himself is the subject of his book, and his inner life and his opinions are the material that interests him most. So, the next point to be taken literally in the title is that the book is about the life and *opinions* of Tristram Shandy just as it says. The title is a clue to Sterne's intentions. Tristram views his life through the medium of his opinions, and his opinions control the presentation of his reminiscences.

The Digressions. The solution to the problem of the digressions follows from the above discussion of the problems of the identity of the author and the point of the story. Writing about his own life and his opinions, the author, Tristram, frees himself from the standard "life and adventures" approach. He is introspective about himself and his background and equally about the techniques of the book he is writing. He is the narrator of the "story," but he is also the conscious artist who is concerned with his ideas, with the ordering and significance of those ideas, and with the impact of those ideas both upon himself as artist and upon his "public." The digressions of *Tristram Shandy* are of two distinct types: the first take the reader from the immediate part of the story to antecedent or subsequent events that supposedly clarify or amplify the story; the second take the reader from the immediate story to the private views of the author, either on that story or on completely diverse subjects. But all of these digressions finally have unity in the creative consciousness of Tristram. No matter how digressive he may get, his constant effort tells us regularly is aimed at the harmonizing of these digressions with the "main work"; and no matter how vague the connection is between "digression" and "story," he always finally brings the two together. In the meantime, how do you organize opinions? Unlike straight-line adventures, they resist coming to attention and forming orderly ranks. Further, how many opinions can fit into the book? As someone once said, ". . . the fragments of the narrative have the appearance of interruptions to digressions!" But this is Tristram's book, and that's the form he gave to it. We finally understand all about Tristram Shandy not only or primarily from the events of his life his "story" but from the book whose very structure reflects his mind and his character. Tristram says near the end of the book, "All I wish is, that it may be a lesson to the world, 'to let people tell their stories in their own way.'" The best thing of all, in reading his book, is to take his advice.