VINTAGE

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman

Laurence Sterne

Contents

About the Author

Laurence Sterne was born in 1713, the younger son of a land-owning Yorkshire family. He studied at Jesus College, Cambridge and was ordained in 1738. Sterne's dramas were mostly personal, including bitter quarrels with his wife and uncle, and some high profile affairs. The publication of the first two volumes of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* in 1759 made him famous throughout Europe. He went on to complete the remaining volumes over the next seven years. Sterne died in 1768 of tuberculosis, a condition that had dogged him for many years.

ALSO BY LAURENCE STERNE

A Sentimental Journey

LAURENCE STERNE

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Tom McCarthy

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INTRODUCTION: ON BALLS AND PLANES

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I

Alex Trocchi urged aspiring writers to go off and spend a year playing pinball. I always thought this was very good advice; but I could never explain, even to myself, *why* it made such sense, until—

But this is a digression. Which, here (where? in this library in which I'm writing, or the sofa, bed or train you're reading on? or in the context of the contract that binds me to Vintage, you to Sterne, and all of us to some 'place' of literary history? or maybe *here* can designate, more vaguely and more dauntingly, the constellations of ideas and propositions, counter-intuitions, paradoxes, spatio-temporal conundrums, and so forth, that billow out, like so much ontic devilry, from Sterne's Pandora's box-like novel. We'll see …) —which, 'here' (then), makes it a good place to start. *Tristram Shandy* is, of course, a book about digressions, a book *of* digressions—interruptions, divagations and departures, side-tracks and reroutings and just plain delays. As generation after generation of amused, bewildered or frustrated critics have pointed out, its eponymous protagonist, its supposed 'hero', can't even get himself born until one-third of the way through; his naming takes us to the halfway point; and as for actually *doing* anything, or even being available, on-stage, in case the right conditions for such doing should present themselves—forget it.

The only section of the novel in which Tristram does appear and play an active role is one huge, volume-long intermission, an entirely (even by the standards of this

book) out-of-sequence travelogue in which the narrative digresses from its own digressive self, both taking and describing what, in modern parlance, we would call a road-trip. Maybe *that's* the proper place for us to start, or restart. Doesn't Sterne suggest as much by planting, at that volume's outset, a road sign, recycled from Pliny, that reads: *Non enim excursus hic eius*—'For this is no excursion from it'—*sed opus ipsum est*—'but it is the thing itself'?

II

So, off we go. In Volume VII, Tristram, suddenly middle-aged and on the run from Death, has hightailed it from England to the Continent. He travels to the South of France in rickety, defective *chaises*, along post-roads—highways built principally for information's (rather than people's) conveyance. The roads are tolled; French law requires the traveller to downpay for each relay-stage just prior to covering it. When Tristram changes plan and covers a stage by river, he still finds himself obliged to fork out to the king's coffers for the land-route he has pre-announced but left untravelled—an affront that causes him to cry, with fantastically disingenuous indignation: '*Bon Dieu!* what, pay for the way I go! and for the way I do not go!'

Things get worse. Tristram realises that he has left his 'remarks', his notes (for he is fully conscious of his journey's literary end), inside a pocket in the lining of the broken carriage that he's just sold to a salvage-man or 'vamping chaise-undertaker' (this morbid phrasing of professional title, you can be sure, is Sterne's own); racing to this vamper's house, he finds the scrolls knotted *en papillotes* in the man's wife's hair. More knots appear—in other women's hair, or in their clothes—as do more slits in fabric. There's an analepsis (within the larger prolepsis) to a trip Tristram made previously to the same region with his father and his uncle, whose remembering *as* he passes through the spot

again gives rise to a self-conscious moment of narrative accretion, as when fabric folds and doubles on itself—which doubling is itself redoubled by a cutaway to Tristram-the-author sitting at a desk writing the whole experience up. The challenge that this last activity presents concerns him deeply: How, he asks a little later as he crosses Languedoc's rich plains, can writers transform landscape into language without being left with 'a large plain upon their hands, which they know not what to do with?' It can be done, Tristram tells us—but not here: he'll publish his 'PLAIN STORIES' elsewhere, at some future date. (He won't; Yorick will, and they'll be anything but plain).

A host of other incidents occur, and we should pay them all attention—the more so, the more trivial or disconnected they initially appear. For my money, the volume's most striking episode is a non-event: Tristram's aborted pilgrimage to Lyons Cathedral, to observe the movements of Lippius's famous clock. He has a mind unsuited to appreciation of mechanical movement, he tells us (equally disingenuously), before diverting our attention to a story of the paths and circuits 'round, and round, and round the world' on which fate's cogs and levers lead two doomed lovers. Arriving at the cathedral where the clock is housed, he is informed that it is 'all out of joints, and had not gone for some years'. Never mind, he reasons: 'I shall be able to give the world a better account of the clock in its decay, than I could have done in its flourishing condition—' Do we receive this account? Of course not.

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'All out of joints': the words that Tristram mangles here are Hamlet's, and they also concern time. His revamping of them sends us right back to the start of Volume I, in which his parents' coitus, his own moment of conception, is knocked off-course by his mother's enquiry as to whether

his father has remembered to wind up the family clock. Nor is her off-topic veering a one-way phenomenon: through ‘an unhappy association of ideas’ derived from Walter’s custom of fixing the house’s timepieces on the same day as he attends to ‘some other little family concernments’, Elizabeth (*née* Mollineux—her very name suggests cogged and conjoining mechanisms) habitually substitutes clocks for sex *and* sex for clocks, setting in place a two-way channel of association, a looping mental circuit of departure and return, part of a psychic orrery whose rules dictate that, whichever spot on a given orbit she’s supposed to occupy, she’ll actually be at the far point of that orbit’s ellipse.

I like to think that Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons had this episode in his mind when writing the scene in their graphic masterpiece *The Watchmen* in which sex takes place on a bed across which watch parts have lain seconds earlier. But that’s a digression too. For Tristram the ‘HOMUNCULUS’, whose adult incarnation wishes—retroactively and vainly (and once more, of course, disingenuously too)—that conception had resulted in ‘the production of a rational Being’, the ‘scatter[ing] and ‘dispers[al]’ that this untimely outbreak of mental Copernicanism brings about proves fatal: the very sperm that might have produced such a being has been zapped, its DNA all scrambled, from the start; from this point on, all fixed points will be set in perpetual (and what’s worse, *relative*) motion; all straight paths twisted and unravelled and reknotted into a freeway-junctionery of intersections, overlaps and loopings. Tristram’s thoughts will be not ratiocinated but (to borrow a term from Deleuze) rhizomatic; all his attempts to grapple with a given subject will be breached by endless detours through whole hosts of other subjects, histories, epistemologies; his entire life, far from progressing from one concrete event (and its interpretation) to the next, will consist of a sidereal slide through clusters of associations; Shandean time is metonymic, rather than metronomic, time.

As for the hero, so for the whole book: *Tristram Shandy* is a road-trip that goes everywhere and nowhere, in which vehicles as fast as Stevinus's legendary wind-powered land-yacht move alongside ones as slow as Yorick's dopey nag (not only *alongside*, but also, somehow, *at the same speed as*), across wormholed terrain that at one moment sends you on a four-year journey from Flanders to Yorkshire while two minutes, thirteen and three-fifths seconds simultaneously elapse, and, at the next one, bogs you down ('the country thereabouts being nothing but a deep clay') in quagmires that keep two characters frozen in mid-gesture for ten chapters. Tristram's 'proper' name, his intended one of *Trismegistus*, carries implicitly, through its derivation from the mythic Hermes Trismegistus, an allusion to the god of routes and wayfarers; also of messages—for roads are always post-roads, just as narrative, like man himself, is (as Sterne reminds us constantly) a 'vehicle'. And none of these will ever move in a straight line: 'Could a historiographer drive on his history, as a muleteer drives on his mule,—straight forward …' Tristram muses wistfully; 'but the thing is, morally speaking, impossible: For, if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with that or that party as he goes along …' Typographically, lines give over to wandering graphemes that recall musical notation, or Paul Klee's characterisation of drawing as 'taking a line for a walk' (a line that, like a dog, must meander off to sniff behind each hedge, piss on each lamp-post and chase after every tail, its own included); structurally, they give over to a series of 'adventitious parts' with 'intersections' so 'involved … one wheel within another' that 'the machinery of my work' becomes 'a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too'.

IV

All that would be fine; we would have a complex, but manageable, book, a Newtonian (or even, *avant-la-lettre*, Einsteinean) novel in which thoughts and events, well calibrated, counterbalance one another, held together by a narrative force-field that confers equilibrium on the whole. We *would*, were it not for one thing: error. Walter knows this all too well. He dreams of such a novel—dreams of life *as* such a novel. 'To come at the exact weight of things in the scientific steel-yard, the fulcrum, he would say, should be almost invisible … Knowledge, like matter, he would affirm, was divisible *in infinitum*;—that the grains and scruples were as much a part of it, as the gravitation of the whole world.' Yet when error worms its way into this system, 'no matter where it fell,—whether in a fraction,—or a pound,—'twas alike fatal to truth, and she was kept down at the bottom of her well, as inevitably by a mistake in the dust of a butterfly's wing,—as in the disk of the sun, the moon, and all the stars of heaven put together'.

Error is everywhere in *Tristram Shandy*; it's the most glitch-ridden book imaginable—it's *all* glitch. Everything gets lost or misdirected; every action generates unwanted consequences. For the system-elaborating Walter, Tristram represents no more or less than the disaster zone in which all systems are undone; in the travails Sterne heaps with almost sadistic pleasure on the boy, Walter sees 'my system turned topside-turvy', the 'fine network of the intellectual web' that he feels is man's due get 'rent and torn'. 'Unhappy Tristram! child of wrath! child of decrepitude! interruption! mistake! and discontent! What one misfortune or disaster in the book of embryotic evils, that could unmechanize thy frame, or entangle thy filaments! which has not fallen upon thy head …' Tristram may be more prone to catastrophe than most; but, as with all literary

heroes who stand at the extreme end of some scale or other, we soon come to realise that, far from being exceptional, he is in fact simply *more* normal than everybody else (Freud would say the same of neurotics and even psychotics). The evil that befalls Tristram is a general one: as Walter wailingly acknowledges, all heads, every 'seat of the understanding', must pass through a wrongly shaped crack in order to be brought into the world. Don't underestimate the role of gender here: within the Shandean universe, system is male, error is female. It's the gap, the slit, the tear, that breaks into and interrupts that universe's carefully elaborated structure, the unmeasurable delay that, like Penelope confounding all her suitors, unravels its finely woven fabric. Error is universal, and all men are Tristrams.

And yet Sterne is too wise to take at face value the conventional misogyny of this formulation. Walter's system may be elaborate, but its own fulcrum, its 'treasury' and 'canon's prayer book', resides in the many tomes of Hafen Slawkenbergius—a made-up polymath whose name means 'Chamberpot Pile of Offal': Walter, Sterne informs us through the cover of a Germano-Latin compound, is full of shit. And even if he weren't, a more essential problem undermines all system-building—an inherent, rather than external (as is error), one. In an aside that, naturally, isn't an aside at all, Tristram muses that, all fruits in 'this great harvest of our learning' having ripened over centuries and now nearing that apex at which *all* will be known:

> When that happens, it is to be hoped, it will put an end to all kind of writings whatsoever;—the want of all kind of writing will put an end to all kind of reading;—and that in time, *As war begets poverty; poverty, peace*,—must, in course, put an end to all kind of knowledge,—and then—we shall have to begin all over again; or, in other words, be exactly where we started.

Here, Sterne seems to anticipate Hegel's Total System—and its collapse. Rather than lead in a straight upward line towards pure Spirit, the path Tristram envisages for thought and history (or history-as-thought and thought-as-history) twists round in a Viconian *ricorso*, as progress gives way to repetition.

Error from without; error from within. Even the hero's name is wrong. In her transit from the hallway to the bedroom, Susannah tongue-ties *Trismegistus* into a garble of *Tris*-somethings from which the curate extracts *Tristram.* This one, we could say, is a meta-error, a recursive one: Susannah, playing the role of Hermes, has lost Hermes himself in the post, in the 'delivery'. Message-relay is overtaken by a melancholia, a *tristesse*, that eats at it from the inside, twists it from its path. To put it in the thermo-cybernetic language that one of Sterne's obvious descendants, Thomas Pynchon, would attach to his creation Tristero (*Trisheros* and *Tiriseroe*, incidentally, are associates or variants of *Trismegistus*), information is beset with entropy. This, perhaps, is why Aunt Dinah looms so large and awkwardly within the Shandy family memory: she, like her biblical counterpart, and like all the other contents of this novel's *post-chaises*, got screwed *en route*. If the spectre of illegitimacy hovers, invisible and unspoken, over the Shandy family, the one surface on which it does write itself out large and fully legible is that of the family coach, across whose side the bungling painter has flipped *bend-dexter* into *bend-sinister* (once more, a drawn line gone AWOL). Narrative, in this book, is a vehicle, and, conversely, all vehicles denote narrative (as surely as clocks denote sex and vice versa): what's *really* illegitimate is not so much Tristram (although this is possible) as the narrative itself. Tristram's continental *chaise*, let's not forget, breaks down completely: having started out avowing his intent 'to come at the first springs of the events I tell', Tristram ends up stranded at the wayside, the broken springs of the carriage

shock-absorbers strewn out all around him. We have Klee's wandering line in mind already; but perhaps an even better template twentieth-century visual art could lend our understanding of this book might be Ed Ruscha's *Royal Road Test*, in which the parts of a typewriter that has been flung from a speeding car are repeatedly photographed scattered about the tarmac. Ruscha's choice of brand (Royal was a leading typewriter manufacturer) is not coincidental, any more than Sterne's mention of the regal nature of Tristram's relay-stage creditor in Volume VII is superfluous. All roads are post-roads, and all post-roads are the king's; but, in Sterne as much as Ruscha, what we witness, again and again, is a certain form of royalty or 'sovereignty'—of the self, of writing—being taken apart, un-jointed.

'I shall be able to give the world a better account of the clock in its decay, than I could have done in its flourishing condition—' The entire text of *Tristram Shandy* is, in effect, that account. Reading it, we encounter, even at the level of the sentence, mechanisms collapsing into each another, a kind of literary autophagia. Take the passage in which Walter, having had his previous discourse interrupted by the breaking of his pipe (an instance of *Apesiopesis*, Tristram helpfully informs us), tries to explain to Toby another rhetorical device, ANALOGY, the context of their dialogue implicitly linking both these tropes with female sexual anatomy—when:

> a devil of a rap at the door snapped my father's definition (like his tobacco pipe) in two,—and, at the same time, crushed the head of as notable and curious a dissertation as ever was engendered in the womb of speculation.

Tristram's head is, at this very minute, being crushed in its passage from the womb. Action becomes figure; figure becomes object; object becomes correlative to action, all at

once. Or the passage in which Toby's removal of his handkerchief from his coat pocket leads into a digression on the action's ergonomics, whose 'transverse zigzaggery' recalls in Toby's mind the angles of the ramparts of Namur, which in turn leads Sterne into a digression on reviewers (in order to preemptively defend himself against attacks from these brought on by this last digression), and the body/soul divide (and here the craft of tailoring, whence the sequence took off, re-embeds itself as a conceit), and then blood circulation, which, like circulating blood itself, flows back round to the spot it left a microsecond—or eternity—ago. Nothing—and everything—has happened. More importantly, Trocchi's hermetic counsel starts to make sense, as we observe the exhilarating spectacle of language turning into a pinball machine, with buffers firing off to other buffers, ramps leading from one level to the next and counter-ramps plunging two levels down, holes swallowing balls up and shooting them out elsewhere as lights flash, bells *ping!* and the whole contraption shifts into multi-ball mode. We watch this with exhilaration, and with vertigo as well—because we know, like Walter and like Tristram too, that gravity, or Death, will make all balls come crashing down eventually.

V

Comedy, as Bergson (whose ideas of *durée* are so perfectly foreshadowed by Sterne's own) tells us, consists of the transformation of unique or 'natural' life into mechanisms that engender repetition. For Baudelaire, it turns around the pratfall or the simple act of falling—that is, around gravity, and, by extension, the grave towards which all things fall. For Paul de Man, it resides in an awareness of inauthenticity whose consequences, ultimately, are anything but funny. 'The moment the innocence or authenticity of our sense of being in the world is put into question,' he writes, 'a far from harmless process gets underway. It may start as a casual bit

of play with a stray loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture of the self is unravelled and comes apart.'

The pertinence of these conjectures to this book of mechanisms, repetitions and unravellings, this book whose last word goes to the namesake and descendant of Hamlet's death's-head comedian Yorick ('he had,' Sterne tells us of his pastor, 'an invincible dislike and opposition in his nature to gravity;—not to gravity as such;—for where gravity was wanted, he would be the most grave or serious of mortal men for days and weeks together …') – this goes without saying. But what of comedy's close-neighbour, nonsense? For Deleuze, who has already lent us his rhizomes, *non-sens* should be understood in its most literal sense of 'not-direction'; that is, as lacking any singular direction—or, as Sterne would put it, driven (or riven) by contrary pulls and motions. Clearly, the definition is equally pertinent here. Even in terms of the word's common usage, there are sequences of *Tristram Shandy* that are utterly nonsensical, that wouldn't be out of place in Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear. In the long, parable-like tales of noses and of whiskers, for example, it becomes less and less clear what *nose* or *whisker* might actually *mean.* The very word is (as Sterne puts it) 'ruined'; its own use has 'given it a wound'; like Tristram's head, 'not the better for passing through all these defiles', it is defiled. And this defiling leads to general semantic entropy:

> Does not all the world know, said the curate d'Estella at the conclusion of his work, that Noses ran the same fate some centuries ago in most parts of Europe, which Whiskers have now done in the kingdom of Navarre?—The evil indeed spread no further then—but have not beds and bolsters, and nightcaps and chamber-pots stood upon the brink of destruction ever since? Are not trouse, and placket-

> holes, and pump-handles—and spigots and faucets, in danger still from the same association?

Joyce, another obvious heir to Tristram's woes, will write in (and of) *Finnegans Wake*:

> In the Nichtian glossery which purverys aprioric roots for aposteorious tongues this is not language in any sinse of the world and one might as fairly go and kish his sprogues as fail to certify whether the wartrophy eluded at some lives earlier was that somethink like a jug, to what, a coctable

Sterne's book, too, is a Nichtian glossery, in which language's power to designate objects, to represent the world, becomes increasingly eroded. Its author may heap scorn on theologians who debate whether or not a child can be baptised before even the tiniest part of him has emerged from the womb; but this masks his genuine concern about the possibility (or otherwise) of naming *tout court*. How, and at what point, he wonders, should an orator pull from beneath his cloak the object of his oratory, be this 'a scar, an axe, a sword, a pink'd doublet, a rusty helmet, a pound and a half of pot-ashes in an urn, or a three-halfpenny pickle pot'—or, indeed, a baby? Keep the last of these concealed for too long and 'it must certainly have beshit the orator's mantle'. Things and events, like babies or even foetuses, need to receive the sacrament of language, to be rendered clean and visible by it. Would for biographers that we lived on Mercury, whose heat would just turn everything into 'one fine transparent body of clear glass'! But, alas, we live on Earth, and Earth is made of mud. The countryside around Shandy Hall must be rivalled only by Dickens's Thames Estuary as the muddiest landscape in all literature: a 'mire', an 'explosion of mud', a 'majesty of mud', 'a vortex of mud and water'. Yorick's sermon on Conscience spends ten days

buried in mud; learned men are pictured ‘rolling one over the other’ in it …

VI

Plain tales, tales of mud. How do you write about a life, redeem a murky, tangled event-landscape into clarity and truth? Uncle Toby, in his own, untutored manner, dedicates his life to just this question. Having been wounded in the groin within the ravelins and ditches, trenches, dykes and counterscarps of Namur, then mired down all over again in his attempts to tell of it (‘by Heaven; his life was put in jeopardy by words’), he ends up representing the whole muddy episode not in language, but in mud itself. His bowling-garden being full of nature’s ‘kindliest compost… with just so *much* clay in it, as to retain the form of angles and indentings,—and so *little* of it too, as not to cling to the spade’, he has his man Trim sculpt it, first into a scale model of Namur’s citadel, then into one of every fortified, besieged town that he can find a map of. This is his mute, looping, spring-like answer to the straight line of conventional wisdom: willed repetition in the form of re-enactment. Just as Ballard’s anti-hero Vaughan will, two hundred years later, restage car crashes (first his own and then everyone else’s, until the hybrid or generic car crash becomes elevated to the status of a universal situation), Toby restages battles. This gives him ‘intense pleasure’ even as it replays a scene of immense and ongoing pain. In doing so, it illustrates to a *t*—and once again *avant la lettre*—Freud’s theory of trauma, which is also linked to repetition. And if Pynchon’s Tristero might—maybe—owe something to Tristram’s lost name, then his Slothrop (*his* name, let’s note, is bookended by *Slop*), whose groin has also been indelibly marked by projectiles and their parabolas, must *surely* be Toby’s bastard descendant.

Is Toby simply marked, or has he been castrated? This is what Widow Wadman wants to know. The former, Trim assures the widow's servant Bridget, as she 'hold[s] the palm of her left hand parallel to the plane of the horizon, and slid[es] the fingers of the other over it, in a way which could not have been done, had there been the least wart or protuberance'—but in the battlefield of public rumour, it's the latter. And his re-enactments themselves cause the ur-episode of pubic wounding to spring back into action all over again, replaying itself this time on Tristram's body. The sash window through which Tristam unwisely urinates (like Mercury's putative Momus-glass, a vitreous lens through which the world might be viewed clearly—first posited, then brought crashing down) falls on his penis because Trim has commandeered its weights and pullies for the garden's model cannons. Rumour also has it that Tristram has been castrated; in fact, he ends up merely circumcised (a fulfilment-by-typo of his earlier wish to become 'a being guarded and circumscribed with rights')—but, as with Toby, rumour's knife cuts off the whole caboodle; and, for good measure, Sterne's pen slices in with a litany of variants on cuts and cutting as Trim, making a circumcising gesture, recalls members of Cutts's regiment getting 'all cut to pieces'. Circumscription becomes circumcision becomes castration.

For Freud, the symbolic castration cut into the body by the circumcising ritual represents the male child's passage into the symbolic order. Lacan takes this further: for him, castration is this order's secret truth. Sterne is a Lacanian, right down to the level of typography: cuts or omissions, in the form of dashes, form the basic building block of every page. If castration is the symbolic order's truth, then it is also that of writing, 'wounded' or 'cock-and-bull' language that, unable to inseminate the world with meaning, can do no more than reinscribe this truth recursively. Tristram himself adds the chapter on weights and sashes to his

father's *Tristapedia*, filling in for what's been cut from it with an account of cutting—his own—itself.

VII

As Plato founded his Republic on the exclusion of poets, F.R. Leavis built the system of his Great Tradition on the relegation of *Tristram Shandy* to a footnote, its dismissal as 'irresponsible' and 'trifling'. I could counter (after noting the irony that no one under forty will have heard of F.R. Leavis, let alone have read his now largely out-of-print books) by claiming that Sterne's novel is in fact the cornerstone of all serious (though that would be the wrong word) literature that followed, right down to the present day (which Yorick's skull is David Foster Wallace really digging up in *Infinite Jest*, for example?), or some such. The assertion might not be *wrong*, but I feel that it would miss the point. In a way, conservatives like Leavis are right: *Tristram Shandy* is, and will continue to be, the unravelling of any systematic or linear account of literature we might come up with. It is more than just an instance of great writing; it's a *mise-en-scène* of writing's very condition: joyous, anguished, vertiginous and ultra-paradoxical—and that of life: a gap, or slit, or pocket in which spinning bodies, held up, despite all odds, in a miasma of impossibility, careen for an indefinite interval across a tilted plane before heading to the floor. *Ker-thunk.*

Tom McCarthy, June 2013

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
MR. PITT.

SIR,

NEVER poor Wight of a Dedicator had less hopes from his Dedication, than I have from this of mine; for it is written in a bye corner of the kingdom, and in a retir'd thatch'd house, where I live in a constant endeavour to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth; being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles,—but much more so, when he laughs, it adds something to this Fragment of Life.

I humbly beg, Sir, that you will honour this book, by taking it —(not under your Protection,—it must protect itself, but)— into the country with you; where, if I am ever told, it has made you smile, or can conceive it has beguiled you of one moment's pain—I shall think myself as happy as a minister of state;—perhaps much happier than any one (one only excepted) that I have read or heard of.

I am, GREAT SIR,
(and what is more to your Honour)
I am, GOOD SIR,
Your Well-wisher, and
most humble Fellow-subject,
THE AUTHOR.

VOLUME I

THE

LIFE AND OPINIONS

OF

TRISTRAM SHANDY, GENTLEMAN

Ταράσσει τοὺς Ἀνθρώπους οὐ τὰ Πράγματα,
Ἀλλὰ τὰ περὶ τῶν Πραγμάτων, Δόγματα.

THE LIFE AND OPINIONS OF TRISTRAM SHANDY, GENT.

CHAPTER I.

I WISH either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;—and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost;—Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,—I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that in which the reader is likely to see me.—Believe me, good folks, this is not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think it;—you have all, I dare say, heard of the animal spirits, as how they are transfused from father to son, &c. &c.—and a great deal to that purpose:—Well, you may take my word, that nine parts in ten of a man's sense or his nonsense, his successes and miscarriages in this world, depend upon their motions and activity, and the different tracts and trains you put them into, so that when

they are once set a-going, whether right or wrong, ’tis not a halfpenny matter,—away they go cluttering like hey-go mad; and by treading the same steps over and over again, they presently make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk, which, when they are once used to, the Devil himself sometimes shall not be able to drive them off it. *Pray, my Dear*, quoth my mother, *have you not forgot to wind up the clock?—Good G—!* cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time,—*Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?* Pray, what was your father saying?—Nothing.

CHAPTER II.

—Then, positively, there is nothing in the question that I can see, either good or bad.—Then, let me tell you, Sir, it was a very unseasonable question at least,—because it scattered and dispersed the animal spirits, whose business it was to have escorted and gone hand in hand with the *HOMUNCULUS*, and conducted him safe to the place destined for his reception.

The HOMUNCULUS, Sir, in however low and ludicrous a light he may appear, in this age of levity, to the eye of folly or prejudice;—to the eye of reason in scientifick research, he stands confess’d—a BEING guarded and circumscribed with rights.—–The minutest philosophers, who, by the bye, have the most enlarged understandings, (their souls being inversely as their enquiries) shew us incontestably, that the HOMUNCULUS is created by the same hand,—engender’d in the same course of nature,—endow’d with the same loco-motive powers and faculties with us:—That he consists as we do, of skin, hair, fat, flesh, veins, arteries, ligaments, nerves, cartilages, bones, marrow, brains, glands, genitals, humours, and articulations;—is a Being of as much activity,—and, in all senses of the word, as much and as truly our

fellow-creature as my Lord Chancellor of *England*.—He may be benefited,—he may be injured,—he may obtain redress;—in a word, he has all the claims and rights of humanity, which *Tully, Puffendorf*, or the best ethick writers allow to arise out of that state and relation.

Now, dear Sir, what if any accident had befallen him in his way alone!—or that, thro' terror of it, natural to so young a traveller, my little gentleman had got to his journey's end miserably spent;—his muscular strength and virility worn down to a thread;—his own animal spirits ruffled beyond description,—and that in this sad disorder'd state of nerves, he had lain down a prey to sudden starts, or a series of melancholy dreams and fancies, for nine long, long months together.—I tremble to think what a foundation had been laid for a thousand weaknesses both of body and mind, which no skill of the physician or the philosopher could ever afterwards have set thoroughly to rights.

CHAPTER III.

TO my uncle Mr. *Toby Shandy* do I stand indebted for the preceding anecdote, to whom my father, who was an excellent natural philosopher, and much given to close reasoning upon the smallest matters, had oft, and heavily complained of the injury; but once more particularly, as my uncle *Toby* well remember'd, upon his observing a most unaccountable obliquity, (as he call'd it) in my manner of setting up my top, and justifying the principles upon which I had done it,—the old gentleman shook his head, and in a tone more expressive by half of sorrow than reproach, he said his heart all along foreboded, and he saw it verified in this, and from a thousand other observations he had made upon me, That I should neither think nor act like any other man's child:—*But alas!* continued he, shaking his head a second time, and wiping away a tear which was trickling

down his cheeks, *My Tristram’s misfortunes began nine months before ever he came into the world.*
—My mother, who was sitting by, look’d up,—but she knew no more than her backside what my father meant,—but my uncle, Mr. *Toby Shandy*, who had been often informed of the affair,—understood him very well.

CHAPTER IV.

I KNOW there are readers in the world, as well as many other good people in it, who are no readers at all,—who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of every thing which concerns you. It is in pure compliance with this humour of theirs, and from a backwardness in my nature to disappoint any one soul living, that I have been so very particular already. As my life and opinions are likely to make some noise in the world, and, if I conjecture right, will take in all ranks, professions, and denominations of men whatever,—be no less read than the *Pilgrim’s Progress* itself—and in the end, prove the very thing which *Montaigne* dreaded his Essays should turn out, that is, a book for a parlour-window;—I find it necessary to consult every one a little in his turn; and therefore must beg pardon for going on a little farther in the same way: For which cause, right glad I am, that I have begun the history of myself in the way I have done; and that I am able to go on, tracing every thing in it, as *Horace* says, *ab Ovo. Horace*, I know, does not recommend this fashion altogether: But that gentleman is speaking only of an epic poem or a tragedy;—(I forget which,)—besides, if it was not so, I should beg Mr. *Horace*’s pardon;—for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man’s rules that ever lived. To such, however, as do not choose to go so far back into these things, I can give no better advice, than that they skip over the remaining

part of this chapter; for I declare before-hand, ’tis wrote only for the curious & inquisitive.

——————————— Shut the door. ———————————

I was begot in the night, betwixt the first *Sunday* and the first *Monday* in the month of *March*, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighteen. I am positive I was.—But how I came to be so very particular in my account of a thing which happened before I was born, is owing to another small anecdote known only in our own family, but now made publick for the better clearing up this point.

My father, you must know, who was originally a *Turkey* merchant, but had left off business for some years, in order to retire to, and die upon, his paternal estate in the county of——, was, I believe, one of the most regular men in every thing he did, whether ’twas matter of business, or matter of amusement, that ever lived. As a small specimen of this extreme exactness of his, to which he was in truth a slave,—he had made it a rule for many years of his life,—on the first *Sunday-night* of every month throughout the whole year,—as certain as ever the *Sunday-night* came,—to wind up a large house-clock, which we had standing on the back-stairs head, with his own hands:—And being somewhere between fifty and sixty years of age at the time I have been speaking of,—he had likewise gradually brought some other little family concernments to the same period, in order, as he would often say to my uncle *Toby*, to get them all out of the way at one time, and be no more plagued and pestered with them the rest of the month.

It was attended but with one misfortune, which, in a great measure, fell upon myself, and the effects of which I fear I shall carry with me to my grave; namely, that from an unhappy association of ideas, which have no connection in nature, it so fell out at length, that my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up,—but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popped into her head—*& vice versâ:*—Which strange combination of ideas, the

sagacious *Locke*, who certainly understood the nature of these things better than most men, affirms to have produced more wry actions than all other sources of prejudice whatsoever.

But this by the bye.

Now it appears by a memorandum in my father's pocket-book, which now lies upon the table, 'That on *Lady-day*, which was on the 25th of the same month in which I date my geniture,—my father set out upon his journey to *London*, with my eldest brother *Bobby*, to fix him at *Westminster* School;' and, as it appears from the same authority, 'That he did not get down to his wife and family till the *second week* in *May* following,'—it brings the thing almost to a certainty. However, what follows in the beginning of the next chapter, puts it beyond all possibility of doubt.

—But pray, Sir, What was your father doing all *December*—*January*, and *February?*—Why, Madam,—he was all that time afflicted with a Sciatica.

CHAPTER V.

ON the fifth day of *November*, 1718, which to the æra fixed on, was as near nine kalendar months as any husband could in reason have expected,—was I *Tristram Shandy*, Gentleman, brought forth into this scurvy and disasterous world of ours.—I wish I had been born in the Moon, or in any of the planets, (except *Jupiter* or *Saturn*, because I never could bear cold weather) for it could not well have fared worse with me in any of them (though I will not answer for *Venus*) than it has in this vile, dirty planet of ours,—which, o' my conscience, with reverence be it spoken, I take to be made up of the shreds and clippings of the rest;—not but the planet is well enough, provided a man could be born in it to a great title or to a great estate; or could any how contrive to be called up to publick charges, & employments of dignity or power;—but that is not my case;—and

therefore every man will speak of the fair as his own market has gone in it;—for which cause I affirm it over again to be one of the vilest worlds that ever was made;—for I can truly say, that from the first hour I drew my breath in it, to this, that I can now scarce draw it at all, for an asthma I got in scating against the wind in *Flanders*;—I have been the continual sport of what the world calls Fortune; and though I will not wrong her by saying, She has ever made me feel the weight of any great or signal evil;—yet with all the good temper in the world, I affirm it of her, that in every stage of my life, and at every turn and corner where she could get fairly at me, the ungracious duchess has pelted me with a set of as pitiful misadventures and cross accidents as ever small HERO sustained.

CHAPTER VI.

IN the beginning of the last chapter, I informed you exactly *when* I was born; but I did not inform you *how. No*, that particular was reserved entirely for a chapter by itself;—besides, Sir, as you and I are in a manner perfect strangers to each other, it would not have been proper to have let you into too many circumstances relating to myself all at once.—You must have a little patience. I have undertaken, you see, to write not only my life, but my opinions also; hoping and expecting that your knowledge of my character, and of what kind of a mortal I am, by the one, would give you a better relish for the other: As you proceed farther with me, the slight acquaintance, which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship.—*O diem præclarum!*—then nothing which has touched me will be thought trifling in its nature, or tedious in its telling. Therefore, my dear friend and companion, if you should think me somewhat sparing of my narrative on my first setting out—bear with me,—and let me go on, and tell my story my own way:—Or, if I should