Sterne’s Great Game

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Laurence Sterne: A Life
by Ian Campbell Ross
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The cover of Ian Campbell Ross’s admirable biography displays a picture wholly in keeping with its subject. A clerical gentleman, long-nosed and lank of form, attired in decorous black coat and breeches and a neat gray tie-wig, is amiably confronting the skeletal form of Death, who raises an outsize hourglass on high in one bony hand while in the other he grasps a businesslike scythe with an all-too-meaningful gesture. One hand held gracefully to his breast the parson makes his bow, his sharp civil features enwreathed in the most disarming of smiles.

The Reverend Laurence Sterne, who died in 1768 of tuberculosis at the age of fifty-four, was for years well accustomed to confronting and outfacing his grim adversary. He died a few years after the artist Thomas Patch painted his portrait of Tristram Shandy’s author in courtly conversation with Death. It now hangs in the hall of Jesus College, Cambridge, where Sterne studied and took his degree. The painter has caught the authentic Shandean touch of the unstated joke, which Sterne himself involuntarily but fittingly achieved after his own funeral. According to what seems a well-authenticated story—although how can we be sure of the truth of any anecdote or Irish Bull in which this mercurial author had a hand, even posthumously?—his remains were exhumed by body snatchers, ending up in the medical faculty of his old university, where they were recognized (or so the story goes) and secretly reinterred in the elusive writer’s London grave.

A life so faithfully prepared to imitate its own fictions might well seem an ideal subject for biography. Sterne was not the same man as his hero Tristram Shandy, but the resemblance was close enough for the adjective “Shandean” soon to be used for both the author and his characters. And yet there have been so few books on Sterne’s life and work that in any way match or even cherish with real pleasure the sympathy and sentiment of the original. A life of Sterne, like Sterne’s own life of Tristram, should ideally be Shandean in feeling and response, although a life even of Sterne is bound to conform as well to today’s sober requirements of scholarship and fact. Ian Campbell Ross has managed to do both things beautifully, and has produced what must be the most readable as it is certainly the most sympathetic and perceptive biography to date.

The life of Tristram Shandy, Sterne’s alter ego, is handicapped from the moment of its conception, as will be remembered, by comic misfortune. Or rather by misfortune which becomes comic by virtue of Sterne’s art: it is an art that refuses to allow the traditional distinction between itself and life, and is equally able, through some alchemy of its own, to give sentiment as well as elegance to sexual jests, and to make sentiment and feeling themselves subject to the knowing snigger of shared pleasure. Sterne’s world is genuinely innocent—indeed its innocence is what eighteenth-century readers used to refer to as its ruling passion. And Sterne’s particular
style of innocence has never been successfully imitated, although the writer who perhaps comes closest to it is Sterne’s fellow countryman James Joyce. Sterne’s is not a false or an injured innocence either, but rather one so transparent that the reader, until he becomes accustomed to the Shandean sensibility, hardly knows how to take it.

The joke—about how Tristram was conceived—that opens the book is not really a joke at all but a means of indoctrinating the reader with that same Shandean sensibility. This is not so much a sly as a comfortable process, giving the reader a kind of reassurance, while at the same time pleasuring him with the strangeness of a new and delightful world. Indeed the Russian formalists who spoke of art as essentially a way of “making it strange” might almost have had Sterne in mind. Certainly Tolstoy, who uses the technique in his own crafty way whenever he can, was a great admirer of Tristram Shandy. “Making it strange” and making it Shandean can come to really much the same thing.

For the Shandean, like the “strange” in the formalist vocabulary, is also the familiar, and a brilliant way of rejoining the comfort of familiarity. When, at a crucial moment of lovemaking, the woman who is soon to become Tristram’s mother says to his father, “Pray my dear, did you remember to wind up the clock?” the inwardness of the opening joke is precisely its comfortableness. This is how things are in life, and thank goodness that they are, although Tristram’s father may feel justifiably exasperated by the interruption, while the consequences for Tristram, although unspecific, are, it is to be inferred, both hazardous and incalculably far-reaching. Because of the incident the “homunculus” engendered by Tristram’s parents becomes, as it were, the first Shandy, at least in the literary sense.

But of course, and as has often been pointed out, there is much more to the joke than that. Sterne had read Locke at Cambridge, and his theory of the association of ideas in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* must had made a strong if perhaps unconscious appeal. Her husband’s preliminaries enter the mind of Mrs. Shandy in a confused image of the mechanical world and its operation, which she does not distinguish from that of the natural one.

Moreover, the next misfortune that overtakes poor Tristram has a brutal simplicity about it which, so to speak, winds up this preliminary chapter of accidents: a careless nursemaid allows the window sash to fall heavily upon a particularly sensitive portion of the baby’s anatomy. With his apparently artless cunning Sterne persuades us to enter into the feelings of Mr. Shandy, his wife, and his baby son, without actually denying us the crude satisfaction of a snigger and an unfeeling guffaw. We are sensibly aware, nonetheless, exactly what it is like to be these people, this family; we are not appreciating them from a distance, as we do with most successful characters in literature, and from the detached superiority of our own beings.

This achievement by Sterne of what might be styled a perfect balance of sentiment not only distinguishes him from other practitioners of the cult of the sentimental that grew up in the latter part of the eighteenth century, largely owing to the success of *Tristram Shandy*, but remains the most durable and indeed the most hypnotic feature of his peculiar charm as a writer. By no means all of his contemporaries succumbed to that charm. Dr. Johnson, most notably, did not; Oliver Goldsmith, whom one might have expected to understand and approve, did not, possibly out of jealousy. Parson Primrose of *The Vicar of Wakefield* was in some sense a rival to Parson Sterne and his various alter egos, and that novel appeared in 1766, two years before Sterne died. By then “sentiment” was a fait accompli, but still Sterne’s model was like no other.

The balance he keeps is beautifully illustrated by the moment in *Tristram Shandy* when news arrives of the death of Bobby, Tristram’s brother. Sterne is not going to let such an opportunity go unexploited, but the character whose first and last appearance steals the show is a fat, slovenly scullery maid, so idle as to be all but useless in the household, but retained by Tristram’s
father out of an absent-minded sense of charity. While the servants, like their betters, are in tears over the sad news, for young Master Bobby had been the idol of the household, the maid seems not to have understood what has happened. When they try to make her grasp the sad fact that young Master Bobby is dead, she ponders heavily for a minute, and then bursts out in triumph—“So am not I!”

Sensibility and sentiment appear to receive a sharp blow. But not really. The maid’s reaction is both natural and personal: the rest of the family are quite conscious of it themselves, in their own ways and in the privacy of their own beings. But there is no deliberate contrast in the strategy of the scene, no drawing of our attention to the significance of the moment. As in all the best of Sterne’s touches the moment speaks for itself as if absently and without emphasis. Such are the two halves of the true coin of sentiment, and they unobtrusively complement each other.

Son of an army officer who never rose above the rank of lieutenant, Sterne spent his childhood in camps and barracks, where he acquired a fondness for the military life, and all its variety of friendly and reminiscent Uncle Tobys, that never left him. Army atmosphere was indeed more congenial to him than that of the Church, but since his great-grandfather, surprisingly enough, had been archbishop of York, while his uncle became a powerful and in some quarters much disliked archdeacon of the same diocese, the most sensible course for his future, as well as the one most likely to lead to preferment and at least moderate riches, seemed clearly marked out.

But nothing was made easy for him. He never cared for his foolish and improvident mother, nor she for him, and when after her husband’s death her poverty and extravagance landed her in a debtors’ prison, Sterne, by that time married and with a child on the way, was either unable or merely reluctant to come to her aid. His wife, Elizabeth, detested her mother-in-law, and helped persuade her husband, himself far from unwilling, to leave the matter of his mother’s rescue to other and more distant relatives.

After *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* made him famous, Sterne’s neglect of his parent offered a good topic for caustic eighteenth-century wit. Horace Walpole put it with his usual elegant malice, referring to the moment in *A Sentimental Journey* when the author and traveler tearfully apostrophizes the corpse of a donkey, killed by overwork. Walpole had heard the tale that a subscription was raised to liberate Sterne’s mother, for “her son had too much sentiment to have any feeling. A dead ass was more important to him than a living mother.”

Byron, whose feelings about his mother were much the same as Sterne’s, was to add his own comment, typically claiming the honesty needed to depict himself in the unflinching way that he implied Sterne had been too sentimentally hypocritical to do. “I am as bad as that dog Sterne, who preferred whining over a dead ass to relieving a living mother; villain—hypocrite—slave—sycophant! but I am no better.”

Well, to put the French proverb the other way around, *Qui s’accuse s’excuse*, and Sterne is much too subtle, and in his own way too sensible and discerning, to try doing that. Despite Walpole’s comment, Sterne was never lacking in either feeling or sentiment, even when his style and temperament as a writer set out to exploit them both. His life and his writing in any case converge: in *Tristram Shandy* Tristram’s mother never addresses a word to her son, or he to her, and what was true of the character was just as true of the creator.

Ian Campbell Ross observes very accurately that Byron is closer to Sterne than his moralizing Victorian critics. He goes on:

Throughout his fiction Sterne constantly apostrophizes his readers, challenging or slyly nudging us into complicity with him. So often, however, the reader Sterne would ad-
dress—as with Byron, Baudelaire, or Eliot after him—is the “hypocrite lecteur—mon semblable.” Few writers have articulated better than Sterne the connection between selflessness and selfishness as spurs to human action.... The Yorick of *A Sentimental Journey* who whines over a dead ass is the Yorick whose vaunted benevolence so often derives elsewhere from motives in which altruistic sensibility and the selfish desire for sexual gratification remain uneasily entwined.

For Sterne, not even the best actions are untouched by human fallibility. The Widow Wadman’s compassion for the pain Uncle Toby suffers from his groin injury is inseparable from her anxieties for her own future sexual gratification.... Unlike the Recording Angel, Sterne’s critics have rarely dropped a tear such as might blot out his faults; more often they have acted as the Accusing Spirit—and have not even blushed.

As a clergyman Sterne was, within limits and in contrast to many of his calling at that time, conscientious and dutiful in parish affairs and a preacher who could always draw an audience. He was not infrequently asked to preach in the august Minster at York, where his sermon on “The Abuses of Conscience” was widely admired, and soon published. There he had a fee of a pound for preaching when the dean did not feel like doing so, and in spite of his success the congregation often varied greatly in size. The manuscript, now lost, of his sermon “Our Conversation in Heaven” (a significant title when we think of the wonderful and uninterrupted monologues of *Tristram Shandy*) bore the note by Sterne, “Made for All Saints and preach’d on that Day 1750 for the Dean.—Present: one Bellows Blower, three Singing Men, one Vicar and one Residentiary.—Memorandum: Dined with Duke Humphrey.” Campbell Ross makes it clear that to dine with Duke Humphrey was a way of saying that one went hungry and got no dinner at all, so Sterne’s modest success as parson and preacher was not bringing in much in the way of solid cash.

That state of affairs would soon change, however, at least as far as dinner went, for although he was to have periodical financial crises all his life, within a few years he would not be “dining with Duke Humphrey” in York but with the cream of fashionable society in literary London.

Campbell Ross has some searching and mildly quizzical pages about his subject’s attitude toward his calling, and toward questions of belief in general. One would not expect Parson Yorick or Tristram Shandy or Sterne himself to put his cards on the table and aver the first principles of his faith in as downright a manner as did Dr. Johnson. Far from it; as much in religion as in daily experience sentiment is what matters, and Sterne’s attitude could be said to anticipate, although always in his own charmingly equivocal way, what a perplexed Victorian, Tennyson, was to write during the next century in the verses of his elegy *In Memoriam*: “The heart/Stood up and answered: I have felt.” Just what is felt must, by implication, be a matter of lesser importance.

And yet in the age of skepticism, and of Hume, Leibniz, and Voltaire, even Sterne as a clergyman had moments when he was prepared to put his cards on the table. One of the best features of Campbell Ross’s biography is the emphasis he lays on this much less fashionable side of Sterne’s achievement as a writer. The Shandean style can harden into its own sort of firmness and precision when Sterne in a sermon is writing at his best, even though, as his biographer remarks, Sterne’s attempt to save appearances can sound all too like Pope’s pious hope that “whatever is, is right,” if the great directing Mind of All decrees it, or like the mindless optimism so brilliantly mocked by Voltaire in *Candide*. Nonetheless, in these short sermons we can still hear the voice of Yorick and Tristram:

> The wisest projects are overthrown,—and the most hopeful means are blasted, and time
and chance happens to all;—You must call in the deity to untye this knot,—for though at
sundry times—sundry events fall out,—which we, who look no further than the events
themselves, call chance, because they fall out quite contrary both to our intentions and
our hopes,—though at the same time, in respect of God’s providence over-ruling in
these events; it were profane to call them chance, for they are pure designation, and
though invisible, are still the regular dispensations of the superintending power of that
Almighty being, from whom all the laws and powers of nature are derived.

There is something here of the lively although not mocking evasiveness never absent in
Sterne’s prose. He has a happy air of artless innocence as he invokes the powers, so simple and
reassuring, in which a wise skepticism can take comfort. It is the same kind of happy innocence
that made it natural, and indeed inevitable, for him to begin writing “A Life” not from the mo-
ment of birth but from the moment of conception, for so many significant and indeed decisive
events can occur between conception and birth, as every rational being must concede.

Susceptible at every moment to the charms of women, Sterne was hardly the sort of man likely
to settle down to being a model husband and father. Nor did he. Sentiment is, after all, an affair
of the moment—that is its chief charm, virtue, and consolation—and Sterne’s not quite artless
approach to seduction could never be quite like that portrayed by his near contemporary Cho-
derlos de Laclos in Les Liaisons dangereuses. The real point and pleasure of sex for Sterne is
admirably conveyed in his encounter with a pretty young glovemaker in a Paris shop. While she
is measuring his wrist he suggests she should feel his pulse. The glovemaker complies, which
encourages Sterne to beg the favor of feeling her pulse, and when her husband steps in unex-
pectedly from the back of the shop and is told what is going on, he bows and only remarks dryly
that “Monsieur does me too much honor.”

On becoming a prebendary at York, Sterne married Elizabeth Lumley, a well-connected young
woman, by whom he had five children, only one, a daughter Lydia, surviving. Sterne’s qualifi-
cations as a family man were not impressive, as his writings might suggest; but he retained a
lively affection for his daughter and, at least in some degree, for what proved to be a witless
wife as well, taking them with him in 1762 when in search of health he left England for the
south of France. Even in wartime—there was no nonsense in those days about the internment
of “enemy aliens”—it was cheaper to live in France than in England, and the success of the first
six volumes of Tristram Shandy had made it possible for the Sterne family to reside in Tou-
louse in modest comfort. But the lure of London and his success there among the writers and
wits drew him back, with the excuse of seeing the last volumes of Tristram through the press.
Returning then to France, where his family were now settled permanently, he undertook the
continental journey which was to provide him with the material for A Sentimental Journey
Through France and Italy.

It was his last journey. The final volume of Tristram appeared in 1767, and at the same mo-
ment Sterne, with all of a consumptive’s feverish and eager hopes for a new prospect of life,
met and fell in love with Elizabeth Draper, the young wife of an East India Company official.
After she had to set sail for the east with her husband, Sterne began his Journal to Eliza, send-
ing her a first installment which was lost on the way, while the remainder lay undisturbed until
it was rediscovered and published in 1851. Eliza offered a perfect example of how to conduct a
sentimental love affair, with the participants suitably separated. But Sterne carries the tech-
nique too far; the journal seems too calculatingly lachrymose, in contrast to the brisk and lively
love passages in A Sentimental Journey, where the tender emotion is invoked and extolled
with all the sparkling equivocation of the author at his sentimental best.

Eliza Draper was by no means the first of the young ladies with whom Sterne fell sentimentally
in love. His best-chronicled flirtation was with Catherine Fourmantel, a singer from the Lon-
don world who happened to be staying in York. Sterne probably made use of her as “my dear Jenny” of \textit{Tristram Shandy}, for not so much love itself as writing about love was, after all, his
chief delight, his joy and consolation, and the more ill he became the more he depended on it.
His letters to Eliza Draper show how good he was, as Campbell Ross says, “at giving highly
studied writing the appearance of complete spontaneity.” And his bawdy language was as stud-
ied as his sentiment, although it always sounds as if he could produce the odd jest wholly off
the top of his head, as in his Shandean response to a society lady who gushingly inquired how
old he was. Sterne solemnly raised four fingers, implying that he knew quite well what question
was really running in the lady’s mind, \textit{viz.}, how effective could he be in bed?

\textbf{S}terne’s reputation has continued to grow, although until the twentieth century he always re-
mained something of a specialized taste. In the Victorian age his bawdy could only be enjoyed
in private and among male cronies, while many women who were quite prepared to surrender
themselves to Dickens’s tear-jerkers distrusted a writer who, as one of them said, always held a
cambric handkerchief in his hand in case of meeting, and making use of, some affecting scene
or moment. Dr. Leavis, once the lawgiver of England’s Cambridge School of English Literature
and something of a puritan to boot, disliked Sterne’s “sniggers” and his sexual innuendo as
much as the sentimental technique of which they formed part, but Leavis’s wholesale rejection
of Sterne found few takers elsewhere.

On the contrary, as Campbell Ross well demonstrates, Sterne very soon became the writer’s
writer par excellence. \textit{Tristram Shandy} first inspired Diderot’s lively but more pretentious and
ponderous successor \textit{Jacques le Fataliste}. Ugo Foscolo in Italy, Jean Paul in Germany, and
Pushkin in Russia all paid Sterne the sincerest compliment a fellow writer can give, while in
1819 Byron wrote of his own unfinished and unfinishable \textit{Don Juan}, “I mean it for a poetical
\textit{Tristram Shandy}.” All these writers saw dazzling possibilities in Sterne’s genius which they
could themselves exploit, while even the most literate of Sterne’s own countrymen were still apt
not to see further than the tiresome and affected side of Shandyism, for an uncritical cult of the
Shandyesque in any age can soon become irritating, although the best of Sterne cannot really
be imitated or parodied, even by himself.

His biographer makes a wise judgment about the far-reaching influences of the Shandean
spirit. For the great Germans it was a solemn, almost a metaphysical matter. For Nietzsche, as
for Goethe, Sterne was essentially a liberated and liberating spirit. Karl Marx might even have
held him up as an early prophet of anticapitalism. Belinsky and the Russian social critics, who
saw the novel as a vehicle for educational and propaganda purposes, cared not for Sterne; but
Pushkin and Gogol loved him, and Tolstoy was characteristically two-faced, disapproving of
him for a lack of moral seriousness while greatly enjoying Parson Yorick in private. Joyce of
course, and Virginia Woolf too, sought his inspiration in breaking away from what had become
the accepted conventions of the nineteenth-century classic novel.

Modernism too comes with time to have its conventions; a modernist like Italo Calvino can
justly claim Sterne as the free spirit who nonetheless fathered the predictable orthodoxies of
the modern avant-garde novel. Sterne, who vowed not to put himself under “any man’s rules
who ever lived,” would have been entertained by the paradox; and would have been made still
more happy by the praise of another modernist, Milan Kundera, who, as Campbell Ross com-
ments, acknowledged Sterne as the writer who taught the world to see the novel as a “great
game.” No doubt the genius of the novel form is to metamorphose itself afresh in every genera-
tion, both as a game and as a sober, convention-regulated way of showing us how we should
live now, or how in fact we do live now. These twin forms, like children of Proteus, still contrast
or combine in every new generation of the novel.

\textbf{SOURCE:} HTTP://WWW.NYBOOKS.COM/ARTICLES/2002/10/24/STERNES-GREAT-GAME