The only people whom Laurence Sterne did not get on with were other writers. Not that his universal good nature was in the least competitive, but he had an involuntary knack of suborning their confidence in themselves and spoiling their image. Even Dr. Johnson withdrew when the author of The Sermons of Mr. Yorick held forth at one of Joshua Reynolds’s parties, nominally because of his impropriety, but actually, one suspects, because the Johnsonian style was insensibly rebuked by Sterne’s genius. This is one of the many glimpses that Arthur Cash provides in the second volume of his superlative life.*

It is at once very easy and very difficult to imagine the scene. Touchy literary men who expect to dominate a gathering are found in every age, and will not forgive any rival who shows them at a disadvantage. But if Johnson’s memory is to be trusted, Sterne’s conduct on this occasion would certainly now seem to us rather odd. He had just received permission from Lord and Lady Spencer to dedicate to them “The Story of Le Fever,” that sentimental little masterpiece in Tristram Shandy in which Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim take into their care a dying French officer and his son. A manuscript preserved at Spenser House endorsed in Lord Spencer’s hand “The Story of Le Fever, sent to me by Sterne before it was published.” Sterne had just come from the Spencers’ to Reynolds’s house, and there he pulled the dedication out of his pocket, and, as Johnson says, “sponte suâ, for nobody desired him,” began to read it out loud to the assembled company. Johnson sourly observed that it was “not English,” whereupon Sterne pulled from his other pocket “a drawing too indecently gross to have delighted even in a brothel.” This “attempt at merriment” from a clergyman of the Church of England was too much for Johnson, who left in disgust; and Reynolds took good care afterward not to invite Sterne if Johnson was to be present. One suspects that the merry cleric was deliberately teasing the good doctor.

Yet the episode is more significant than it appears. Sterne was an archetype of the eighteenth century, Johnson was not. Although his father had been only a half-pay ensign in a marching regiment, Sterne had connections with the aristocracy—his great-grandfather had been Archbishop of York—and it was the most natural thing in the world for him to exercise his wits in high life, and expect from lords and ladies benefits, financial and otherwise, in return for the entertainment. Jealous of his independence Johnson distrusted the aristocracy, upheld the dignity of authors, was a pillar of the new middle-class morals and proprieties. He belonged to the world of Richardson, even to the later world of Jane Austen, rather than to the happily spontaneous and unregenerate old eighteenth century championed by Sterne.

Every detailed page of Cash’s excellent biography makes the point more clear. When he observed that Tristram Shandy “did not last” Johnson was expressing a half-truth. What did not

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* The first volume, Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years, was published in 1975.
last was the age that produced *Tristram Shandy*. It is probably still true that those who see no point in Sterne belong, as it were, to the perenniially new generation of serious-minded persons, from Dr. Johnson to Dr. Leavis, who turn their backs on the frivolity and irresponsibility of a past age. Sterne’s devotees, on the other hand, are natural denizens of the eighteenth century and its witty, ribald, self-confident ways. One of Sterne’s most devoted admirers was old Lord Bathurst, who had been the friend and patron of all the great Augustan writers. Sterne afterward recalled Bathurst’s kindness when he first met him in 1760:

This nobleman is an old friend of mine—You know he was always the protector of men of wit and genius; and has had those of the last century, Addison, Steele, Pope, Swift, Prior, etc. etc. always at his table.—The manner in which his notice began of me, was as singular as it was polite.—He came up to me, one day, as I was at the Princess of Wales’s court. “I want to know you, Mr. Sterne; but it is fit you should know, also, who it is that wishes this pleasure. You have heard,” continued he, “of an old Lord Bathurst, of whom your Popes, and Swifts, have sung and spoken so much: I have lived my life with geniuses of that cast; but have survived them; and, despairing ever to find their equals, it is some years since I have closed my accounts, and shut up my books, with thoughts of never opening them again: but you have kindled a desire in me of opening them once more before I die; which I now do; so go home and dine with me.”

Running on as he does Sterne nonetheless involuntarily makes it clear, in such a passage, of the extent to which *Tristram Shandy*, and the world he created in it, was less of an innovation than a survival.

Writers like Smollett felt the same, and Sterne returned the compliment, though good-naturedly, caricaturing “Smelfungus” in *A Sentimental Journey*. Sterne’s friendship with the Bluestocking group, led by Elizabeth Montagu, a distant cousin of his wife’s, also suffered from a misunderstanding based upon apparent novelty and the manners of a past age. Studious, learned, animated, a great reader—she would make her reputation with her *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare*—Elizabeth Montagu was friendly and well-disposed to Sterne, who cultivated her favors as much as he could. He embarked on a flirtation with her friend and fellow Bluestocking, Elizabeth Vesey, a lively Anglo-Irish woman known as “the Sylph” because, in the words of a friend, she belonged to “a race of air rather than of earth,” but who was married to a decidedly earthy character with the interesting first name of Agmondesham, who detested his wife’s assemblies and spent his time gambling and whoring.

But both ladies ceased to appreciate Sterne, as Cash explains. Like Bishop Warburton, that upright and learned figure who had first taken up Sterne with enthusiastic kindness but dropped him hastily on realizing how much harm Parson Yorick might do to the new image of the Church, the ladies shared the new unspoken, perhaps only half-understood assumption that authors had the duty to spread the gospel of middle-class virtue, the good news that honesty, duty and chastity were not only possible, but immediately rewarding. The new millennium would be one of sentimental fiction. And here they made their mistake about Sterne. Moved by the sweetness in his story, they did not fully recognize that he was a subversive who delighted in being naughty and believed that people were most lovable when their imperfections showed. They would eventually withdraw from him.

For Sterne the new sentimentality was in many ways the old Georgian licentiousness writ large, though with more warmth and lightness, more elegance and spontaneity. But the Bluestockings
saw the danger and were quick to sheer off. There was nothing feminist about Tristram Shandy, which was much closer to Tom Jones than to the new novel of sentiment with which Sterne was to become, almost accidentally, identified. Eminently fashion conscious, Sterne was prepared to identify with the new rage for feeling just as, during his time in France, he reveled in the company of the free-thinking Encyclopédistes, especially d’Holbach and Diderot, who, as Cash dryly remarks, “made free use of the existing social structure to lead a comfortable life while carrying out their subversive activity.” Diderot was under the protection of the crown as a member of the French Academy, and he was shortly to write, in imitation of Tristram Shandy, his novel Jacques le fataliste. Both books would be a decisive influence in the future of the European novel and the fashion for fiction without a story, beginning and ending in anecdotal wit and conversation. Shandy Hall and its denizens, their humors and obsessions, generate a novel without the need for any extraneous narrative.

On Cash’s cover and frontispiece is a delightful picture, showing Sterne in his most congenial milieu, an uproarious eighteenth-century wine and oyster party. It is a caricature group by John Hamilton Mortimer, an accomplished artist in the genre, with Sterne carousing at the artists’ club in the company of John Ireland, the watchmaker and biographer of Hogarth, and Dr. Arne, the musician and composer, whose sister Susannah wrote “Rule Britannia.” (Sheridan memorably described Arne’s eyes as “two oysters on an oval plate of stewed beetroot.”) Sterne, a lanky six-footer in a fashionable apple-green coat, has opened his shirt front to disclose a heart-shaped locket containing the picture of his “sentimental” ladylove, Mrs. Eliza Draper. His expressive face is split in an enchanting grin, and the picture has more animation and gives more sense of Parson Yorick, in his habit as he lived, than even the famous study by Reynolds in the National Portrait Gallery, which Cash reproduced in his first volume. He acknowledges that the attributions in this picture group, including that of Sterne himself, remain conjectural, but they certainly carry conviction.

Painted in the late 1760s, the picture gives a vivid impression of that boisterous high point in the fortunes of England, which, with the accession of George III and the subsequent loss of the American colonies, were never to be quite the same again. Seventeen fifty-nine had been the annus mirabilis of the Seven Years’ War against France; Canada and India had been conquered and America protected; audiences at every play and public entertainment used to burst into “Rule Britannia” at the drop of a hat. All this is somehow immanent in the picture group of Sterne and his cronies, just as it was in the gaiety and fizzing high spirits of Tristram Shandy itself.

It was also a civilized and a truly international age, before the French Revolution and the nationalist Napoleonic Era. Though England had been at war with France for years English visitors could come and go freely in France and on the Continent, with only the mild inconvenience of having to obtain a passport, as related in the early part of A Sentimental Journey. The first volume of Cash’s biography describes his time as a student, his struggle for Church preferment, and his unlucky marriage. The Later Years opens with Sterne’s breakthrough into fame and success as an author, and his preferment, through the good offices of Lord Fauconberg, to the living of Cox-wold near York, with a parsonage—still surviving, now a museum—which Sterne delighted in, and which his friends were to dub “Shandy Hall.”

Sterne had the right temperament for success and happiness, although it was certainly true, as he wrote to his most valued patron, Lord Rockingham, that “every word” of the first hilarious volumes of his novel had been written

in affliction; & under a constant uneasiness of mind. Cervantes wrote his humorous Satyr in a prison—& Scarron his, in pain & Anguish—such Philosophers as will account for every thing, may explain this for me.
Sterne’s life itself provides an explanation, as Cash says. “Trapped in an unhappy marriage and a disintegrating body, he sought laughter as an anodyne to pain, wherever he could find it.” Given his temperament Sterne’s marriage could not have been all that unhappy, although there is plenty of testimony to the exasperating and lowering qualities of his wife Elizabeth, as of his daughter Lydia, who evidently took after her mother. Yet Sterne in his own way was fond of both of them, doting on Lydia’s pleasure in the “poney” he gave her, and arranging the details of travel and ménage with care and affection when they traveled in France and finally settled in Toulouse.

Sterne was equally affectionate and loyal toward his mistress, Catherine Fourmantel, a singer of Huguenot extraction whom he met in the Assembly Rooms at York. During his period of fame and celebrity in London she came to join him there. Sterne was not like Leigh Hunt, caricatured in Dickens’s portrait of Harold Skimpole, a careless butterfly sort of man, abounding in fine feelings, who loved his fellow men and let them pick up the pieces. “Sentiment” in Sterne’s time had not, as it were, gone that far. His good nature had no irresponsibility about it, and he ministered and gave himself to wife, daughter, mistress, friends, and lovers with genuine tenderness and concern; sitting, for instance, at the bedside in France of the dying George Oswald, a casual acquaintance who had no sort of claim upon him, looking after him in his last days, and arranging his affairs after his death. From obscure correspondence and chance references, for Sterne’s life is by no means well documented, Cash has ferreted out a number of such cases, and their accumulated effect adds a significant dimension to the picture we have of Sterne the man.

Tuberculosis had of course dogged him since he had been an undergraduate at Cambridge, where he had once woken up to find he had “filled the bedclothes with blood.” Like D.H. Lawrence he survived not so much by willpower as by sheer vividness of being, saving himself by incessant laughter and entertainment as Lawrence did by letter writing and travel. In neither case could it last, but while the candle burned at both ends and in the middle it burned brightly. There is also in Sterne something of Pushkin’s verbal and temperamental exuberance. The Russian author delighted in him (though he read him in French) and, in his brilliant little play The Stone Guest, produced a Don Juan figure with a marked resemblance both to himself and to Sterne—a brightly and innocently genial lover who keeps the affection of all his conquests and meets his fate in a new access of tenderness. Puritanical critics used to disapprove of Sterne’s “nasty philandering,” as they did of the constant sexual innuendoes in his writing: smut, like promiscuity, can be, and generally is, both disagreeable and boring. But there are shining exceptions and Sterne is emphatically one of them, witness the famous joke that begins Tristram Shandy, when Tristram is being inefficiently begotten by his father, to whom his mother observes, “Pray, my dear, did you remember to wind the clock?”

He said so himself; and that may be one of the reasons his detractors disliked him. Cash tells the story of how he once asked a Yorkshire lady if she had read Tristram Shandy.

“I have not, Mr. Sterne,” was the answer, “and, to be plain with you, I am informed it is not proper for female perusal.”—My dear good lady,” replied the author, “do not be gulled by such stories; the book is like your young heir there, (pointing to a child of three years old, who was rolling on the carpet in his white tunics) he shews at times a good deal that is usually concealed, but it is all in perfect innocence!”

That would not win over Sterne’s more fastidious detractors, and indeed there is only a hair’s breadth of difference, in Sterne’s prose, between a true innocence and a false one. We must get used to the tone, and as with certain other writers—Virginia Woolf is one—listen to a voice rather than attending to written sentences.
Johnson may have had this in his mind when he said of Sterne’s writing that “nothing odd will do for long,” unconscious of the ironic fact that his own speaking tone would be immortalized in Boswell’s recollections. Sterne wrote as if he were talking; Johnson talked as he wrote. Sterne’s method was to draw humorous attention to the provisional nature of human experience, Tristram’s nonexperiences, as he finds he is living 365 times faster than he is writing—“I shall never overtake myself”—making it impossible for what literature knows as his “life” ever to get going. As Jean-Jacques Mayoux pointed out in “Variations on the Time-sense in Tristram Shandy,” an essay in his book *Winged Skull*, both Tristram and his Uncle Toby exist in order to continue existing: the misadventures that befall Tristram, from his conception onward, being paralleled by Uncle Toby’s quest for health and recovery from his wound. I think Sterne might well have had Pope’s famous line in mind when he invokes the absence of anything but trifles “to help me through this long disease, my life.” Sterne intuited better than any writer the essential egoism of existence. When the sad news arrives at Shandy Hall that Tristram’s brother Bobby is dead, the “foolish fat scullion” speaks for us all when she says: “So am not I.”

Sterne’s own death was an easy one, for his disintegrated lungs brought on the usually euphoric condition of oxygen starvation. Shortly before his death, a fellow parson from Yorkshire called at his London lodgings and passed two girls who were going down the stairs laughing. Sterne told him that if he had come a bit earlier he would have found as many as thirteen at the party. Nor had jest yet finished with Yorick, for his grave was broken into and the corpse stolen by medical students, who spirited it away to Cambridge for dissection. The students had probably never heard of Sterne, but at Cambridge his features were recognized by a professor, who had the body conveyed discreetly back to the London cemetery.

Cash has unearthed many new facts not only about this Shandean episode but about the future careers of Sterne’s lady friend, Eliza Draper, who returned to her husband in India, and those of his wife and daughter. They went back to France, “making enemies till the last,” and were soon wrangling over the proceeds of Yorick’s “sermons,” which reveal Sterne’s basic theological orthodoxy rather than his wit. “The quietest man in the world,” as Sterne described himself in a letter, was spared “the ingratitude and unquiet spirit of a restless unreasonable Wife whom neither gentleness nor generosity can conquer.” Lydia married a Frenchman, Jean-Baptiste Medalle, four years younger than herself, whose father was principally intent on getting all Sterne’s literary capital for her dowry. She also had a go at forging her father’s letters for sale. Tuberculosis must have become well entrenched in the family, for Sterne’s two poor little grandsons were both dead in a few years, as was their grandmother, while Lydia herself only lived to the age of thirty-two. Her husband long survived her, and although he remarried, always proudly identified himself as the “son-in-law of Sterne, the author of the famous Sentimental Journey.”