

Laurence Sterne

(1713-1768)

Biography

Laurence Sterne was born on 24 November 1713 in Clonmel (Ireland), the son of an English Army officer. In 1724 he was sent to school in Halifax, far from his family. In 1727 his father was moved to Gibraltar and then to Jamaica, where he died. In 1733 Sterne was admitted at Jesus College in Cambridge. After obtaining a Bachelor of Arts, he entered the Anglican Church thanks to the help of his uncle Jacques. In 1741, one year after receiving his Master of Arts, he got married. The first two volumes of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* were published anonymously in 1759. In 1760 he moved to London, where he entered the most popular cultural clubs. Volumes III to VI of *Tristram Shandy* were published in 1761; in the same year, Sterne started a long journey in France due to his poor health.

In 1765 volumes VII and VIII were published and Sterne started another journey to Europe, when he also visited Italy. Volume IX, the final volume of *Tristram Shandy*, was printed between 1768 and 1769. In 1768 Sterne met Elizabeth Draper, the Eliza of *Journal to Eliza*. The two volumes of *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* were also published in the same year. On 18 March 1768, Laurence Sterne died of tuberculosis and was then buried in Coxwold.

Anti-novel

As a reaction to the linearity of the Enlightenment, Sterne's main novel is a kaleidoscope of experimental techniques:

- **Loose plot.** Unlike previous novelists Sterne does not follow a chronological order, but subordinates reality to the wanderings of the mind.
- **Interpolations.** They continuously interrupt the main story with another story as if they were windows open on the text, which thus becomes a primitive hypertext.
- **Reader/narrator interplay.** The narrator is a first person omniscient one, who is however disorganised and incapable/unwilling to follow a rational causality. He sets up an intimate relationship with the readers (narratees) leaving them free to fill in the gaps in the narration, spurring them to take up an active role.

Stream of consciousness

It is the fluid presentation of the character's thoughts and sensations based on the free association of ideas and memories, sometimes blurring together. For John Locke, mental life proceeds through a stream/flow of thoughts which cannot be controlled.

Sterne makes a wide use of this device as he bases most of *Tristram Shandy* on the protagonist's 'opinions' and mental life.

Sentimentalism

The novelist pays attention to the characters' feelings: they live according to sentiments which, in line with the philosophy of the times, means they live according to the true human identity.

Irony

Sterne investigates the clash appearance/reality not with a tragic tone but rather with a humorous one, which leads him to self-mocking irony and acceptance of his own failures.

The devices he uses are:

- **verbal irony:** to say something implying the contrary;
- **dramatic/behavioural irony:** to say something when someone is unaware of its real meaning;
- **situational irony:** events disrupting expectations.

He also keeps ironical detachment when manipulating the conventions of the traditional novel.

Time

The time dimension in *Tristram Shandy* is freely altered. He plays with the following conventions:

- **narrative time:** it is the time of writing including both the narrator's thoughts and the act of writing.
- **reader's time:** it is the time actually necessary to read a book.
- **digressions:** they are never-ending and they interrupt the traditional chronology by repeatedly delaying climaxes, truth, self-knowledge as well as the End.

Main works

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman (1759-1766)

Tristram Shandy was published in nine volumes and is often thought of as the autobiography of the protagonist, but it is not because Tristram is only born in Volume IV, is 'breached' (wears trousers for the first time) in Volume VI, then disappears, thus leaving room to Uncle Toby, Walter Shandy (his father) and Corporal Trim. The focus of the narration shifts from the external events of common life to the 'opinions' and inner life of the protagonist. Paradoxically, most of his considerations deal with events of the time before his birth. In short, the content of the novel (**what**) is not as important as the way (**how**) it is told. The form is characterised by a labyrinthine structure which mocks the link cause/effect, the linearity of the traditional plot, the chronological development, the need of verisimilitude, the superimposing/ordering role of the narrator, the heroic dimension of the protagonist. This questioning of conventional rules is also made clear in his practical use of the book as an object: black and blank pages, squiggly graphs, marbled pages, stars are typographical devices Sterne uses not only for fun but also for a critique of fictional rules. The final result is an apparent chaos which subverts all the values of the Enlightenment and above all the literary conventions of the time. This is Sterne's way to find a subjective, alternative harmony, by yielding to the uncontrollable and the chaotic. In the end the main digressions in *Tristram Shandy* are meaningful as they help him to put off and overcome death.

A Sentimental Journey (1768)

This book, which recalls Sterne's personal experience, is different from the travel books of the time since it is not so much focused on the habits of the people he visits, but rather on human nature itself. The work is both Augustan – because it aims at reaching unity in the diversity – and Pre-romantic, for the importance attributed to feelings. The main character, the unheroic Yorick, who symbolically recalls Hamlet's madness, starts his journey as a quest, pushed by an inner force that makes him sympathise with the simple people he meets and cry with them. The death of the author left the book unfinished. Ugo Foscolo translated and published it in 1805.