

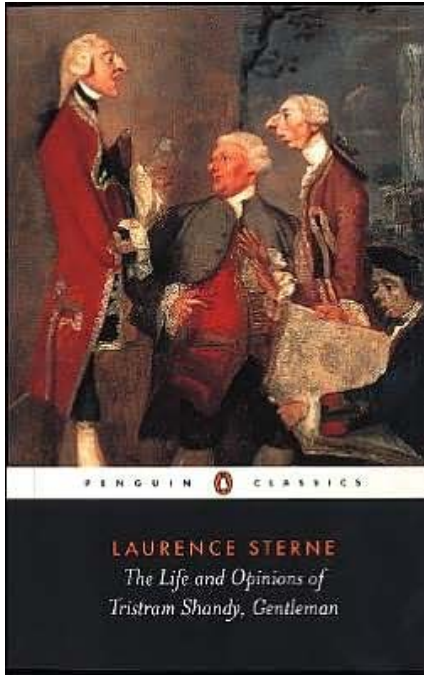
The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman (1759)

By Laurence Sterne

and film, **Tristram Shandy**, (2005)

Directed by Michael Winterbottom

Review by Stephen Carter, 2011



This is a piece of learned tripe from the eighteenth century. I have it on good authority, the author himself. On page 253, book IV, chapter 10 Sterne concludes his chapter on the subject of chapters thus;

So much for my chapter upon chapters, which I hold to be the best chapter in my whole work; and take my word, whoever reads it, is full well as employed, as in picking straws.

Very clever of the rascal to tell you that once you are halfway into his book. Tristram Shandy (a common, shorter variant of the title) is a part of a grand tradition of cheeky, perverse, mildly ribald literature, which flourished in Britain at the time leading up to the American Revolution. Laurence Sterne, Jonathon Swift, and Henry Fielding produced biting, satirical writing lampooning the politics, religion, pedagogical, and literary conceits of the day, as well as human nature in general. If you can get past the antique style of writing, such as a propensity for very long sentences, and untranslated passages in Greek, Latin, and medieval French, some

of it is very funny.

Sterne is also aware of the continuity of a fantasist literary lineage with frequent references to Voltaire, Cervantes, and Rabelais (as rendered into English by the mighty Bishop Urquhart.) The impulse of all of these authors, to one degree or another, is to compose and issue an erudite form of the Bronx cheer for the benefit of the world. As if to say, Yes indeed Mr. Speaker of the House, what you say is all very well and of the utmost gravity, but it isn't worth a goose's fart, is it? Some of us just have a genetic need to do this. We are the people this book is for. It is a great comfort to us.

Laurence Sterne, and Jonathon Swift, both Irish, and Bishop Urquhart, Scottish were all Anglican clergymen. They found sex and bodily functions not so much salacious and prurient, as ridiculous and hilarious.

Tristram Shandy is purportedly an autobiography. He begins at the beginning, the moment of his conception, a moment which was unfortunately marred, because it was at that precise moment that his mother ejaculated to his father, "Pray, my dear, have you not forgotten to wind up the clock?" This, according to the eighteenth century philosophical and physiological understandings of



the day, caused a disruption and dispersal of the animal spirits, and irreparable harm to the prospects and fortunes of the incipient homunculus. Having commenced in such an auspicious manner, we eventually arrive at the hour of his birth or delivery by forceps, but not until Book III, chapter 27, page 191. The forceps delivery conducted by the alarming Doctor Slop, crushes the infant, Tristram's nose, and by "nose" Mr. Sterne is at great pains to explain to you, he means nose. There is however an extraordinary amount of innuendo to suggest that he means some other protuberant appendage of the body. This then is the second catastrophe to beset the author, the third being the mistaken christening with the name of Tristram. His father had intended to christen the boy with the name Trismegistus Shandy but the chambermaid could not remember it and the sexton wrote down Tristram.

The fact that it takes nearly 200 pages, or a years worthy of writing, we are told, just to get our author born, does not escape him. He realizes that if he continues at this rate, he will continually fall behind in his endeavor and never catch up with himself. If it takes him 365 days to report up to his first day of life, he finds that he will just live 364 times faster than he can possibly write, and the more he writes, the more we shall have to read.

Will this be good for your worship's eyes?, he wonders.

All of this silliness is leavened by typographical invention, and literary shenanigans. In addition to the above-mentioned pages in church Latin or French, there is a metaphorical page in the middle of the book which is marbled. There is another page which is completely black to commemorate the death of Parson Yorick, and a page of wonderful ink squiggles which are intended to reproduce the dramatic form and trajectories of the preceding chapters in the book. And then there is the chapter which is completely missing (chapter 24 of book IV], and the chapter which is one sentence, and the chapter which gives a slow motion, frame by frame account of how his father rose from a grief stricken swoon upon a couch. These modern seeming features have lead to it becoming something of a cult novel, according to Italo Calvino, "the undoubted progenitor of all avant-garde novels of our century." Some of these chicaneries are omitted or truncated in modern editions, and if anyone would like to donate about \$8,000 we could procure a 1759, first edition set of vellum bound, duodecimi, in nine volumes. Duodecimi are very small books (being one twelfth the size of the printers sheet), and this was originally what was meant by the divisions of Book I through Book IX. Modern editions stick it all into one binding, and where's the fun in that?

Now there is also a movie, Tristram Shandy, recently released based on this book. It is not very good, although it captures the very few narrative events of the book well enough in the period costume sections. The trouble is, it attempts to convey the marvelous digressions and typographical chicanerie, by doing a sort of reality TV glimpse into the lives of the modern day actors, supposedly off-camera. That part, which is most of the film, is pretty wretched, and to top it off they steal all of their music from Fellini films, the scores of Nino Rota. Since I am a great fan of Fellini and Rota I did not appreciate this pillaging to lesser effect.

Also the film has little or nothing to say on the subject of hobbyhorses, which readers of the book will consider a very grievous omission.

No review of The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman would be complete without mention of dear Uncle Toby and his right-hand, man servant, Corporal Trim. Together they fought in the siege of Namur, Flanders, and it was there that Toby received a wound in his ahem... well his.... if you must know, his groin. Throughout Uncle Toby's lengthy convalescence it was necessary for him to explain to his many visitors and well-wishers exactly where and how he received his injury. As the science of fortification was at its height in this historic period, and

Namur was defended not only with the usual ramparts, and parapets but also with ditches, counterscarps, glacis, lunettes, bastions, and ravelins etc., the explanations as to the exact location of his wounding inevitably became a quagmire of technical jargon leaving nobody the wiser, and even Uncle Toby somewhat puzzled. It was Corporal Trim who proposed the solution in the construction of a scale model replica of the fortifications on the bowling green, and this became for Trim and Toby an overweening passion, a monomania, an obsession, in short a hobbyhorse.

How, you might ask, can the author fill so many pages with so little action? When Mrs Shandy goes into labor, Mr. Shandy and Uncle Toby retire into the library to smoke a pipe. There by the fireside we become acquainted with the foibles, eccentricities, and hobbyhorses of the Shandy family.

“-and so long as a man rides his Hobby-Horse peaceably and quietly along the King’s highway, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him, pray, Sir, what have you or I to do with it? *De gustibus non est disputandum*;- that is, there is no disputing against hobbyhorses; and for my part, I seldom do....”

You may have guessed that old books are a hobbyhorse of mine. It gets more complicated. Laurence Sterne also wrote *A Sentimental Journey*, which is a travel journal of his trip into France and Italy. In that book several complete descriptions of eighteenth century Italian marionette performances are to be found. This makes a convergence, a veritable cavalcade of my very own hobbyhorses, a stampede almost, necessitating many more additional pages ... but, perhaps we better stop here. Let’s get back to picking straws.