



Essay: *Listerine: The Life and Opinions of Laurence Sterne*
by John Wesley Harding
from *Post Road 5*

Selected by Rebecca Donner, author of *Sunset Terrace*.

Reading John Wesley Harding's gleefully digressive examination of Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy -- that masterpiece of gleeful digression -- made me go deliriously cross-eyed. Harding's frisky prose is replete with naughty allusions, knotty propositions, extravagant associations, interpolations, song-snippets, lists, footnotes, false-starts, end-runs and all manner of shameless boasting. For the record, I am thinking of getting a tattoo in the shape of Harding's spermatozoan eating its own tail. – RD.

Laurence Sterne was an Eighteenth Century rock star. His career-path was the blueprint for any indie band today. In his home town, far away from the commercial center of the industry, he pressed his first release himself; then, after he had hyped it relentlessly, liberally quoting phoney good reviews, he managed to sell it to a major label honcho, Dodsley, who had built his reputation on acts like classic rocker Pope and straight-edge Stafford revivalist Johnson. Then Sterne went on tour to London, did a bunch of in-stores where he appeared in character. He slept around. He went on a successful European Tour. Before the public tired of his first incarnation, he had smoothly segued into another; he kept them guessing ever after. He courted controversy wherever he could and refused to delineate between himself and his

fictional alter egos, allowing truth and lies to mingle. He made a lot of money and died, alone and practically broke. His corpse was stolen from its grave.

I am a man of fancies. I collect Powell and Pressburger memorabilia. I hoard old books of ballads. I am sadly attached to an English football team, Arsenal. I own too many Bob Dylan CDs and books, though nowadays I rarely supplement the collection. But Laurence Sterne is my hobbyhorse.

“So long as a man rides his Hobby-Horse peaceably and quietly along the King’s High-way, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him.—pray, Sir, what have either you or I to do with it?” But I have agreed to write this essay and therefore that has to change. So here’s a crop, here’s the stirrup and Here Comes The Groom.

The Life And Opinions Of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman was published serially, in nine volumes, between 1760 and 1767. It caused a huge scandal and was a great success. The book begins, famously, as the narrator tells the story of his own conception. I shan’t spoil it for you, but, at the crucial moment, his father is interrupted ...

Hold on. Before I get on with this, let me say in my own defence, for I hear the scholars carping already, that a lot of my reference materials—an entire shelf full of Sterne books, not to mention every regional ballad book, my entire vinyl collection &c—are the victims of a recent move to Brooklyn, and therefore *not to hand*. I brought the best and most valuable items with me, naturally, but I am hoping that the others are in a locker in a self-storage facility in Seattle, exactly where I left them. Of course, they could be for sale on a rug on the side of a rainy street. Alternatively, they could be where I left them, but underwater. Storage lockers, I shudder! Nothing can make a person feel less permanent.

Philosophers and psychologists agree. Almost as much has been said about storage lockers as about the mind itself—and isn't the mind, in fact, a kind of storage locker housing, at a cost, memories to which the owner wished he had better access? When you require a particular item, who's to say that it isn't buried under many other items you don't need, obscured from view? Or that you haven't lost the key (or forgotten the access code—for storage lockers move with the times) so long ago did you store it away? And that reminds me that I don't even remember when I first read *Tristram Shandy*.

My father might have been partly responsible. He gave me an antique edition of *A Sentimental Journey*, Sterne's other "novel." When? We can't quite remember but it was some time ago. Why? Perhaps it was something to do with Cambridge.ⁱ He remembers that he bought it at Lewis & Harris in Trim Street, Bath, which is as good a name for a street as any, as any Sterne Fancier will tell you.ⁱⁱ

There is more to be said about self-storage and I shall say it shortly but I have quite forgotten my books, which are still locked up in a self-storage facility in Washington.ⁱⁱⁱ The

ⁱ Laurence Sterne and I have very little in common. However, we both went to Jesus College, Cambridge—coincidentally, exactly 250 years apart.

ⁱⁱ Trim is Uncle Toby's manservant. And while we're about it: Walter Shandy is Tristram's pedantic and hobby-horsical father; Uncle Toby, his sympathetic war veteran uncle, now left impotently playing with toy soldiers in the back garden as he tries to understand how he received his groin injury; Widow Wadman, the woman who thinks she might be able to seduce him. Incidentally, I looked up Lewis & Harris on the internet to see if they still existed but couldn't find them, although I did find out that Lewis and Harris is the largest and northernmost island of the Outer Hebrides in Scotland.

ⁱⁱⁱ Self Storage is, technically, the term applied to facilities that offer do-it-yourself, month-to-month storage space rental. They are also sometimes referred to as "Mini Storage," or, incorrectly as "Mini Warehouses." Self Storage differs greatly from warehousing because it is a landlord/tenant relationship. Forty-five states have established laws defining this relationship (though I don't know about the other five.) If anyone is interested in learning more about Self-Storage, then I recommend The "Self-Storage Handbook," published by Jerkov, Inc. It is the only statistical abstract of the Self-Storage Industry. In its pages, you'll find many tables with information about saturation levels, occupancy rates, population and income trends, and more. You'll also find a number of pro forma financial statements.

inconvenience of this filing system is the reason that I might botch a quote here and there (since memory, on which I must rely, is itself little better than a storage locker as we have seen) or even steal entirely from someone else's work and forget to credit them—if I do, however, remember that Sterne did it first and often. And when he attacked plagiarism in literature, of which he himself had been accused, he plagiarized his comments entirely from Burton's *The Anatomy Of Melancholy*. So forgive the odd mistake, why don't you? I could have got the books I needed out of the library, I suppose, but I've had a lot of work on. I'm a musician, not an essayist, dear sir. I have:

Songs to write

Samples to steal

Guitars to string

Loops to copy

Lyrics to edit

Recordings to mix

Demos to hear

I could be taking drugs or getting head from a groupie, but instead I have decided to do the most rock'n'roll thing of all and write an essay on Laurence Sterne, while I am making plans for my next album, the working title of which is *The Man With No Shadow*. You will be able to buy this from my web site (www.wesweb.net, which now takes credit cards) not to mention from any record store which deserves the name.

The above is not merely flagrant self-promotion by the way, but also a heartfelt tribute to Laurence Sterne's flagrant self-promotion. Like mine, Sterne's self-promotion brazenly extends into the actual text. The purpose of some of the most notable interruptions to *Tristram Shandy*, and it is a novel of interruptions rather than plot, seems to be solely to promote other works which Sterne, always sensitive to public reaction and a master of self-marketing, was ready to put on sale.

The first of the major interruptions is a sermon, read by Corporal Trim. The sermon is written by Parson Yorick, Sterne's fictional alter ego, and only turns up at all because it falls out of Uncle Toby's copy of the works of Stevinus, the engineer, when Trim gives the book a shake ("letting the leaves fall down, as he bent the covers back..."), much as Yorick's Sermon itself is unattached to, and falls out of the book *Tristram Shandy*. It was, of course, a sermon that Sterne had preached himself a few years earlier. "I can not conceive how it is possible... for such a thing as a sermon to have got into my Stevinus," says Uncle Toby. And well might he not understand, when it is in there for reasons entirely outside his world. (I can't take the time right now to explain these characters in depth—I think you should go off and read the novel first. I'll be here when you get back. It will take about a week if you read the notes with care too.)

Trim reads the sermon at great length (how long were you away? I feel that I could have created an entire universe!), and then Tristram, the narrator, declares: "In case the character of Parson *Yorick* and this sample of his sermons is liked, –that there are now in the possession of the *Shandy* family, as many as will make a handsome volume, at the world's service, – and much good may they do it."

The ploy worked. Sterne's *Sermons Of Yorick* came out in seven volumes over the next nine years, and the first volume had a list of 650 subscribers, a roll call of the

contemporary legislators of taste. The sermons may even have been more popular than *Tristram Shandy* (I should have figures to hand. We'll leave it at that).

Other works, however, which Sterne had in mind as possible spin-offs from the text of *Tristram Shandy*, never surfaced. He tries the hard sell on Slawkenbergius's Tales (one of which is the long and silliest digression in the book): "If this specimen... and the exquisiteness of his moral should please the world—translated shall a couple of volumes be." But Shandy's translation never made it to publication. Nor did Walter Shandy's *Tristrapaedia* ("you shall read the chapter at your leisure, (if you chuse it) as soon as ever the *Tristrapaedia* is published") or his *Life Of Socrates*, or even Sterne's own audacious plans to turn his novel into a play, as a vehicle for none other than the most famous actor of the age:

O Garrick! What a rich scene of this would thy exquisite powers make! And how gladly would I write such another to avail myself of thy immortality, and secure my own behind it.

I have tried this trick myself. This is from a new song called *For An Actress*:

So thank me when you're holding your oscar
I'll never sell your story to the press
Though sometimes when I'm feeling broke and hopeless
I'm tempted by the money, I'll confess
And I wish you very well with your career
Just as I wished you very well in bed
And if you ever need some soundtrack music
I write that shit standing on my head.

It has had limited success for me, thus far. Worked like a charm for Sterne however.

Fifteen minutes ago, or that's how long it seems,^{iv} I promised you some more thoughts on storage lockers. But for now let me quote this:

Employ yourself in improving yourself
by other men's writings,
so that you shall gain easily
what others have laboured hard for.

Socrates

This is taken from the most recent copy of The Self Storage Association Newsletter, in the Off The Shelf section of "News and Views."^v Walter Shandy, that devoted collector of trivia, would have agreed.

The Life And Opinions Of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman was published serially, in nine volumes, between 1760 and 1767. It caused a huge scandal and was a great success. It did many things that novels hadn't done before, and a few things that none have bothered to do since. Its author, Laurence Sterne, was a congenitally sickly curate. The first pair of volumes

^{iv} I admit that I wrote the section you have just read later than the bit you're reading now, and have subsequently repositioned it by the genius of editing — and you can tell it was my own genius because otherwise I wouldn't have known a single thing about it.

^v I have to get on with this essay, but for further storage locker wisdom, I'd like to send you to: <http://www.selfstorage.org>, the homepage of The Self-Storage Association.

was published when he was 46 years old. The book is full of many typographical eccentricities.

An Itemised List:

Marbled Page (III,xxxvi – “motly emblem of my work”)

Black Page (I, xii – mourns the death of Yorick)

Empty Chapters (IX, xviii, xix)

Blank Page (VI, xxxviii)

Ten Missing Pages, Torn Out Chapter (IV,xxiv)

Official Beginning of Book (IV,xxxii)

Chapter ends in a comma (II, xiv)

Major Interruptions (eg. The Sermon – II, xvii. Ernulfus’ Curse – III, xi. and Slawkenbergius’s Tale – (IV, i).)

Amusing Squiggles (VI, xl; IX, iv)

Advice to skip a chapter (I, iv)

The sale of the dedication to the book (I, ix)

These bits of Pre-Postmodernism are built on the foundation of a very strong and sympathetically observed group of characters (the members of the Shandy family and the people who have dealings with them). It is these two opposing facets of the book that have kept it alive and admired for so long. Put simply, in the 19th century, the content ensured the fame of the book, and in the 20th, it was the form.

In the 21st century, you can go on eBay and find a single by a rock group from 1973 called Tristram Shandy. They are a hairy looking bunch, and I didn’t buy it despite the fact

that the b-side was called “Hunky Funky Woman,” perhaps a sly reference to the Widow Wadman. However, the fact that the band existed was recorded in the notable “Annual Volume devoted to Laurence Sterne and His Works” *The Shandean* Vol 11 (p.152) and I felt it counted as my first important (and unattributed, but there’s a certain dignity in that) contribution to Sterne studies.

Though I wouldn’t meet the \$10 reserve for this single, this morning on eBay, I bid successfully for the first continental version of “Yorick’s Letters To Eliza.” Published in 1776, these are Sterne’s love letters to the object of his obsessive sentimental affection Eliza Draper, who was sailing home to India and her husband. He was never to see her again. The lister of the item had called the lot “Rare Letters From Yorick to Eliza 1776” and described it as “Written in Olde English this book is in good condition for its age. Part 2 Sternes (sic) Letters to his friends on various occasions to which is added his history of a watch coat.” Sterne’s name, spelled correctly, appeared nowhere in the listing—these grammatical computer searches are punctilious. Therefore, very few people saw the book, unless, like me, they were searching, with hobby-horsical thoroughness, for “Yorick”—which generally finds you nothing more than a “Yorick Like Skull—VERY REAL.”

By the way, I note that you can now look up my email address on eBay. To save you the effort, I shall give it to you right here: jwh@armory.com. Your mail can sit in my inbox, perchance to be included in *The Publick’s Letters to JWH*, right alongside letters from the teenage girl who has some pictures to show me, the person who thinks I need some new printer ink cartridges, the man who thinks I have so much trouble with debt that I want to create a new credit profile and, my most regular unanswered correspondent, the woman who thinks that my penis is too small.

I will put my newly acquired *Journal To Eliza* (by any other name) between my Italian first edition of *Tristram Shandy*, all 11 volumes of *The Shandean* (1989-2000), the 1775 copy of *Letters From Yorick To Eliza* (one of the most beautiful books I've ever seen) and, best of all, my nine volume first edition of *Tristram Shandy*.

As you know, this means that in a small study in my well-appointed apartment somewhere in Brooklyn—I can't be too specific for obvious reasons—I can look at Laurence Sterne's actual handwriting whenever I want. What? You didn't know that? Then I suggest that you go back and read the last paragraph again. I clearly stated that I had Sterne's handwriting here. You didn't notice? I thought that any informed reader would probably know that *any true first edition of Tristram Shandy is signed by Sterne in Vols V, VII and IX*. The first four volumes had been so successful and had spawned so many bootlegs and imitations that by Vol V, Sterne took the unlikely step of sitting at the printers and signing every single copy.^{vi} Like my last record, *The Confessions Of St.Ace*, an unsigned copy is rarer than a signed one.

Once you have a man's signature once, do you really need it again, let alone a third time? If you are an autograph collector, you do.^{vii} I received this letter not two minutes ago via my fan club account. It pinged before me and was hard to ignore, so timely were its contents:

^{vi} On the first pages of Chapters One of Vols V and VII: "L.Sterne." He had more ink in VII but gave the "t" a larger flourish in V. My Vol IX is, unusually, signature free.

^{vii} Autographs are fascinating. Autograph hounds even more so. The autograph says: I am a celebrity and I once wrote my name on this piece of paper that you are now looking at. I have signed this piece of paper to authenticate the fact that I have signed this piece of paper. My hand was here. I admit to owning a few autographs myself, some even outside the covers of books: Noddy Holder of Slade (the first autograph I ever got), James Brown ('It's a Man's World!'), David Seaman ('Safe Hands'), Cliff Richard, J.D.Salinger, Rin Tin Tin (pawprint)...

We are two of your biggest fans. Can you please send us two autographed photos, one for each of us? It would mean so much to us if we can have the autograph of our true hero, idol, role model, and inspiration. We will cherish the autograph because we know it will be from our favourite person in the world! Thanks for your time and we hope to me you live (sic) some day.

They want to me me? This one I received yesterday:

Mr Harding - Hello. So wonderful to finally make contact with you. I wanted to drop you a note to let you know who much I have admired you for quite some time. I think the work you do is fantastic and the world would be better off with more positive roles models such as yourself. I hear that some famous people often send their fans signed photographs and I was wondering if you'd be kind enough to send me one. I realise that being a huge celebrity is bound to keep you busy but I'm not looking for anything special. Just your signature without any inscription on a photograph would be fine. I would be very thankful if you would send the photo to me at.

The faux naivety of “I hear that some famous people often send their fans...”! And the “yes, this item is going straight to eBay” charm of “Just your signature without any inscription on a photograph would be fine!” And what is this “role model” nonsense?

One weekend about a year ago, I received about twenty emails, all of which had a similarly peculiar tone—an unctuous tone better suited to a letter to a TV star than little old me, sitting here in my towelling dressing gown thinking about doing the washing up. It was as

if they'd all been written by the same person, and that that person had never really heard any of my music. They were generic, full of how long the writer had been trying to get in touch with me—and any fool can get in touch with me just by going to my web site, or, now, reading this essay. So, I began politely asking people where they had got my email address. One honest soul in Florida told me, frankly, that my name had been added to the list of “successful new addresses” at Stararchive.com with a note next to it that said something along the lines of “address tested, free signed photo sent within three days.” (Translation: “Take advantage of this sucker whether you’ve heard of him or not!”) And YES, there I am on their web site, between Ty Hardin and Tonya Harding (not somewhere you’d want to be under ANY circumstances). Here is my “address history” as reported by Stararchive.com:

Type: Success

Sent: 1/1/1999, Rcvd: 5/1/2000

Tester's comment: “Talk about diligent! A few days after I e-mailed Wes, he hand-wrote me a letter from San Francisco saying that he'd get right on it. About six months later, he sent me a postcard from Paris, apologising for the delay, but explaining that he was waiting for new PR photos. Almost a year later, he finally sent me a very nice personally inscribed 8x10!”

This might have been a bona fide fan, for even I, in my friendliness, wouldn't bother to send a postcard from Paris, unless I thought the person really wanted my autograph pretty badly. And what do you get for being thoughtful?

Type: Success

Sent: 2/28/2000, Rcvd: 3/16/2000

Tester's comment: "received 8x10 colour performance still, signed."

By this time, I now note from my report card, I had wised up. The next entry is a disappointed and rather terse:

Type: Success

Sent: 3/13/2001, Rcvd: 3/14/2001

Tester's comment: "Must send via postal mail."

Now the comment by my name reads:

"For an autograph, a SASE must be sent to this address. No autographs will be sent out from an email approach."

Here's one really good one before I get back to the body of this essay, which I feel I have been unfairly ignoring. (However, the essay has progressed in my absence. Autographs will turn out to have much to do with the subject itself and the wheels of scholarship have not been spinning but turning all along. We are involved in something, like *Tristram Shandy*, both digressive and progressive.) But I would be unfair not to let you read this one:

Dear Mr. Harding, I just wanted to send you this quick note to tell you I admire your impervious dedication and tremendous strive that you display in the spotlight. I'm not only a big fan, but I appreciate the work you put in and the success you have encountered. Keep up the good work. Would it be possible for you to send an autograph? I appreciate the time you have taken to read this E-mail. Have a good day.

The last time I asked for somebody’s autograph was when I was staying at Shandy Hall, Sterne’s vicarage in Coxwold, Yorkshire. It is now owned by the Laurence Sterne Trust and houses the most incredible collection of Sterneiana. In the lovely gardens, there is a converted building, Wolfson Cottage, where you can stay. Yes, *you* can actually stay there. I actually stayed there during the 1998 World Cup.^{viii} I was on holiday with a woman—no, I am not married—she might have been my sister! My mother!—anyway, it’s the 21st century when a man can holiday with whom he chooses or who chooses him—and we walked along the valley, past the ruins of Byland Abbey (where Sterne said he saw Cordelia’s Grave) and ate some tremendous pub food (which included Black Pudding with Ginger Crème Fraiche, and they weren’t serving that in 1760). “I’m as happy as a prince in this rich valley underneath the Hambleton Hills,” wrote Sterne in 17something-or-other, let’s say 55. I could check this fact, but I’m writing in such a hurry, that I have no time to recollect or look. I remember that we were having such a Shandean time of it while we were there, that Shelley Jackson (for it was she! Coincidentally, the author of *The Melancholy Of Anatomy*, released in April 2002 by Anchor Books) saw a bottle of Listerine by the bedside and misread it as a bottle of “L.Sterne,” which it is if you blur your i’s.

In Shandy Hall, I was able to sit for some time, and entirely unmonitored, in what was (and still is) Sterne’s study. Guided tours go round once or twice a week, but sightseers are only allowed to peer into the study. I was surrounded by many first editions of all Sterne’s books, all signed, doubtless in volume 9 too.^{ix} I was surrounded by thousands of his

^{viii} I am informed that the Sterne tourist trade might be down because of people’s UNFOUNDED fear of Foot And Mouth disease. Tourists all! Go to Shandy Hall! Don’t be put off by Word of Foot and Mouth!

^{ix} See footnote vi.

autographs and even, loose versions of his signature cut from title pages, tipped out (it's the opposite of "tipped in") of various copies of *Tristram Shandy*, which now, because of some antique dealer's GREED and STUPIDITY, have a small signature sized piece of paper cut out of the title page.

That day, I made a cold phone call, from a cold phone booth, and visited the house of Nic Jones, legendary English folk musician. Nic Jones had a car crash in 1981 and has been recovering ever since. Of the five albums he made before his accident, four are entirely unavailable, due to the GREED and STUPIDITY of the man who now, supposedly, owns the copyright. I hadn't even *seen* a copy of his first album *Ballads and Songs*. On that visit, Nic gave me one, and, of course, I asked him to sign it. (I admired his "impervious dedication and tremendous strive," so what else could I do?) Later on that year, in Seattle, I made *Trad Arr Jones*, an album of my versions of Nic Jones' arrangements of folk songs.

If that idea pleases the publick, they (you) can buy that album for \$15 from my web page (www.wesweb.net) which still takes credit cards. And if that *anecdote* pleases the publick, then I will shortly make available a small collection of my anecdotes in a thin volume published by Small Beer Press entitled *Anecdotes of John Wesley Harding*—it's hardly going to win the Booker Prize, though it would be nice to be nominated. Ah, but I was talking about Sterne's self-promotion.

Making *Tristram Shandy* an overnight sensation took some time. Ten months earlier, Sterne had been refused by a London publisher as too great a risk, so he had the first two volumes printed in York (the true first edition) at his own cost, with the London publisher's assistance. Copies in hand, Sterne then dictated a letter to his mistress, who signed it as her own words

and sent it to her influential friend, Garrick (“There are two volumes just published here, which have made a great noise, and have had a prodigious run...it has a great character as a witty smart book.”) Sterne sent copies to Garrick, who was at the height of his fame, and the book began to make its way in London. By the time Sterne arrived in the Capital, the copies he had sent ahead were entirely sold out, and Dodsley, the publisher, made him an offer for a new edition and the next two volumes. Sterne was a star. He had gone straight to number one.

If Sterne’s overnight fame had happened today:

- Shandy-O-Poly (“Oh, I’ve landed on Shandy Hall again!” RENT!)
- *The Life And Opinions Of Harry Potter, Schoolboy* (a masterpiece of cross-marketing)
- “Uncle Toby” series Toy Soldiers (pewter, sold through Skymall magazines)
- Monogrammed Yorick dog collar
- Free collectable plastic “character statuettes” with every Kid’s McMeal
- CD of songs “inspired by” the book *Tristram Shandy*
- Pokeshan trading cards
- Laurence Sterne on Howard Stern (‘C’mon, Larry, the sentimental stuff is just a cover for the real action, right?’)

As it was, the book was so successful that it gave its name to a card game, a soup, and a dance. There were bootleg editions of existing volumes, spurious editions of future volumes that Sterne had yet to write, and responses to the book in the form of parodies, “admonitory lyric epistles,” and out and out put-downs of Sterne and his work. But in 1760, there was no higher proof of real fame than to be the subject of a broadside ballad, and there was more than one written about *Tristram Shandy*. I wish Nic Jones had recorded one so I could have put it

on Trad Arr Jones, but he didn't, so it will be up to me to revive these forgotten masterpieces.

Here's a verse of the ballad "Tristram Shandy":

He tells you too ma'am in the act of coition
His mother had chanced all the sport to have spoiled
For she interrupted the midst of fruition
With questions none would have asked but a child
Just when his strong motion
Was pouring the lotion
That would all the sorrows of life have beguiled
She asked him a question so odd
And said while she tickled his codd
My dear have you wound up the clock.

It shows a fairly close reading of the text.^x

^x Oh, another verse, if you insist. That was the third and this is the sixth:

Then when your husband lies over your belly, ma'am
Take special care and mind what you're about
Or else you may stop up his river of jelly, ma'am
How then shall the homunculus paddle out
O humour his motion
And suck in the potion
His mettlesome squirt shall whitewash you each bout
And when he in amorous Pinn
At love's door gives the conjugal knock
Rise up and at once let him in
Nor think about winding the clock.

It wasn't just the book, but Sterne himself that was a sensation. And he did his utmost to confuse himself with his creation. For 46 years, Sterne had staked his hopes on kindness at the hands of others, in his placement at college or in his preferments in the church. But with *Tristram Shandy* he took his future into his own hands. Robert Zimmerman became Bob Dylan, and perhaps even has trouble remembering who Robert Zimmerman was. So Laurence Sterne became Yorick and Shandy. He understood that, having staked the book on his own character, he was as much the subject as the Shandy family, and he was therefore prepared to enter London society in whichever guise he thought best suited the occasion, sometimes the bawdy Tristram, or sometimes the kindly, sentimental country parson. He was a walking commercial for his own novels and "Shandied it" through London Society. In a letter to his girlfriend of the time, he mentions Reynolds' portrait of him and adds: "so I shall make the most of myself, & sell both inside & out." Unlike other contemporary novelists who liked to opine in their own character for a chapter here and there before returning to the labyrinthine plot, Sterne made his own character the entire novel; he made himself, and his thoughts, the star. As if to say: "I am the novel. Read me."

Sterne understood the demands of the market place, and in an age where Gray still thought it more dignified to sign over his own royalties to his publisher and a few years before Swift had declined, as a Dean, to profit from his own works, Sterne was ready to bargain with his publishers and make large show of his profits. He had sold two volumes of his sermons before the third volume of Shandy was released—he had just happened to bring them to London with him. He actively intrigued for Hogarth (it had worked with Garrick, after all), the greatest artist of the day, to do engravings for the second edition of Volume I (in which he was entirely successful, for both the artist and the writer had a keen eye for commerce) at a time when very few contemporary novels were illustrated. He finally dedicated the book to

less significant a figure than Pitt, the Prime Minister. His ambitions were huge and his marketing strategies, I can't think of a better term for them, clever and new. He would have been all over the internet. He'd have been writing his own reviews on Amazon before the book even came out.

Sterne played with identity in a very modern way—in the character of Yorick, he charmed women with sentiment; in the character of Shandy, he shocked Samuel Johnson by showing him an indecent picture at a dinner; in the guise of a young woman, he hyped his own success. He encouraged people to muddle Sterne the vicar with Yorick the parson, Sterne the writer with Shandy the writer—at times in the book he forgets that Shandy isn't a parson, so thin is the line between himself and his character. In an age when arguments about plagiarism and authorship were rife, his 'novel' was a compendium of other people's thoughts and writing, mostly uncredited. Sterne wrote two novels but, remarkably, his name appears not once in the collected eleven volumes of both books. *Tristram Shandy* was written by "Shandy" himself and *A Sentimental Journey* was written by "Mr. Yorick." But when it comes time to prove his authorship of the volumes, the signature "L. Sterne" sits in these books and says: I wrote this, not the bootleggers or the parodists or the balladeers, but me, Laurence Sterne. Self-promoted, self-released, Sterne toyed with identity and made the reader wonder, "who is the author?" He was who you wanted him to be. And when the sales dipped, he became someone else.

In case I am making Sterne sound like a chancer, he was. But there are many reasons to love him. As Christopher Ricks says: "Sterne's greatness is not simply that he wrote a novel about writing a novel; his triumph is due to the fact that (unlike most of his imitators) he gave as much genius to his invented world (the characters of Mr. Shandy and Toby) as to the theme of

inventing it.”^{xi} He also gave as much genius to the characterization, on and off the page, of the inventor himself, his greatest invention of all. The three things are evenly balanced, and this has assured the novel’s relevance from 1767 to me, here, now. The novel has seemed modern in one way or another ever since the day it was written.^{xii}

This has made it the victim of many a critics’ own hobbyhorse. Depending on whom you believe, it is either finished or it is unfinished; it is a Boswellian intimate biography, a “musical novel,” “the last classical narrative,” either crypto-feminist or misogynist, a “futuristic poem in an extra-rational language,” it is a direct precursor to Modernism placing Sterne as a prophet and the creator of the stream of consciousness novel, or an early work of Romanticism; it is firmly in the tradition of Learned Wit or an exercise of rhetoric in a Post-Lockean world, and either in the mainstream of the conservative, moralistic, augustan tradition, or the start of the ironic novel. Or it isn’t, in fact, a novel at all.^{xiii} Like Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* is whatever the reader wants it to be.

^{xi} Christopher Ricks’ excellent introduction to the Penguin Classic edition of *Tristram Shandy*.

^{xii} The 18th Century ecclesiastic Archdeacon William Paley, when asked what his three favorite things in life were, answered: “Baked potatoes in their jackets, blowing hot air into your shoes with a pair of bellows in winter, and reading *Tristram Shandy*.”

^{xiii} And did Sterne even think it was a novel? He quotes and cites Burton and Montaigne but never Fielding, Richardson or Smollett. It is definitely time for me to say something original, in a critical vein, about *Tristram Shandy*. However, fearing that I will be unable to do so, I have decided to quote someone else saying something original. It happens to be one of my favourite bits of Shandean criticism. Jeffrey Williams’ “Narrative of Narrative (*Tristram Shandy*)” published in MLN 105 (1990): 1032-45: “*Tristram Shandy* is a narrative of narrative. The so-called narrative intrusions and comments actually form a linear narrative whose subject is the composing of a narrative.” “This sequence could then be given: E (C (Ca, A, Aa)- C (A, B)- C (A, B)- C (B, Cd)- Cs- C (Cs, A, B)- D (Dd)- B- B). The plot(s) could be reductively summarized: E (C-C-C-C-Cs-C-D-B-B), factoring out the level of narration. From these notations, we should be able to see that the overall shape of the novel is fairly simple.”

Time and a word-count are snapping at our heels. I am going to start an earlier paragraph again from the beginning. I left a point suspendu but it has been trop suspendu.

Tristram Shandy begins, famously, as the narrator, tells the story of his own conception. Again, I shan't spoil it for you, but, at the crucial moment of his conception, his father is interrupted by his mother with dire results. (One of the charming things about the book is that it is almost impossible to explain what happens in it.) Tristram is doomed from birth due to this screwed-up insemination. The "homunculus," the fully formed miniature human that the eighteenth century "animunculists" believed was found in sperm, is dispersed haphazardly on his path to "the place destined for his reception," rather than being escorted in safety by his father's animal spirits.

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;...and that in this sad disorder'd state of nerves, he had laid down a prey to sudden starts, or a series of melancholy dreams and fancies for nine long, long months together.

It is also the book itself that is being shot haphazardly into the world, at the hands of a writer who is very much unlike Fielding's prescient all-seeing all-knowing narrator. Sterne, in the guise of Shandy, doesn't know quite where to begin the story of his life and keeps on interrupting himself, and his own animal spirits, as the book repeatedly fails to get going. He doesn't know where to start, or how to continue. A few pages later, Shandy confirms that he was born on 5th November 1718 and:

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.

The homunculus is the “little gentleman” and Shandy is the “small hero”—both entering the world, doomed by their authors. Immediately the narrative enlists a literal, and figurative, midwife. After conception, small hero and novel must be born.

Sterne’s breadth of useless knowledge is quite fantastic. Learned, punctilious, and arcane discourses litter the book. There is a moment in Tom Stoppard’s most recent play *The Invention of Love*, which I can’t find in the script that I bought (\$12 that I spent especially so I could quote it accurately to you people, demanding audience that you are) where A.E.Housman says to someone or someone says to him that, though useless knowledge is the most important kind of knowledge (and you may have noticed that I am paraphrasing), useful knowledge is good too, though for the faint-hearted.

Although he makes mock as he revels in the trivia and the absurd paradoxes, nothing is too obscure to merit consideration for Sterne (or Walter Shandy). The book is a huge compendium of quack belief and, at times, a freak show of human oddities past and present. (Wonder at the glass people who live on Mercury! Marvel at the baby who can speak Latin at the age of four months!) It also functions as a knowing satire on contemporary characters and issues: the argument “Midwife vs. Male Doctor” takes up whole chapters. Whether a child may be baptised before birth is another knotty issue, the excuse for a lengthy dinner conversation (during which a male character gets a hot chestnut dropped down his trousers). The Doctors of the Sorbonne, it turns out, have decreed that baptism can be administered

before the baby is born, by injection into the mother: “par le moyen d’une petite canaille.– Anglice, a squirt.” And the chapter concludes that perhaps it can be done *after* marriage, but *before* the child is even conceived (think about this carefully) “par le moyen d’une petite canulle, and, sans faire aucun tort a le pere.” I can’t translate that, as it makes me wince.

The small gentlemanly heroes (Tristram/Homunculus) are both brought into life by a different squirt (the doomed squirt). “Are children bought into the world with a squirt?” Toby asks at one point, and a few pages later, Shandy/Sterne refers to the “rash jerks, and hare-brained squirts” of his pen... “spurting (his) ink” over his tables and his books. The Pen is, one might say, mightier than the penis, but they both spew forth unexpectedly.^{xiv}

Such double meanings pervade *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne can hold two focuses at once—one finds oneself in the middle of a metaphor that turns out to be the subject, or a completely new subject that, with the deft turn of a corner, becomes a remark on a narrative thread one had entirely forgotten. As in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*^{xv}, there is both a text, and a commentary upon the text by a narrator who is not what he claims to be and believes things that may make him technically insane. (Sterne himself was no more insane than Nabokov,^{xvi} although his wife did think she was the Queen Of Bohemia.)

We find the truly Shandean at the meeting place of the arcane and the bawdy. There are long disquisitions on buttonholes and noses, things that he finds it “morally impossible”

^{xiv} I am thinking of getting a tattoo in the shape depicted in Vol IX, iv. It depicts the flourish of Corporal Trim’s stick (which “seems to resemble eighteenth-century illustrations of the motions of a spermatozoon” – from the notes to the Florida edition of *Shandy* written by editors who, appropriately, have chosen it as the cover for all five volumes of the complete Sterne thus far published.)

^{xv} It was only during this reading that I found mention in *Tristram Shandy* of “Nova Zembla.” In *Pale Fire*, Zembla is the name of the kingdom of which the professor believes himself to be exiled royalty.

^{xvi} The author of *Lolita* was, however, unable to listen to music with pleasure.

that the reader should understand. It was this feigned delicacy that Thackeray found “bad” and “wicked”: “There is not a page in Sterne’s writing but has something that were better away, a latent corruption—a hint, as of an impure presence.” Sterne pretended that he was hiding the bawdiness while actually revelling in it.^{xvii} And the man was a *vicar* for goodness sake!

The seduction of the reader is indeed his prime concern. Yet, right next to this naughtiness can be a moment of genuine delicacy, because, for Sterne, there were no rules. The Shandean tone was not an arch postmodern joke but an act of liberation, or at least, something he was inventing as he went along. This is what Nietzsche and Goethe admired in him. Sterne says, “(I) shall confine myself neither to [Horace’s] rules, nor to any man’s rules that ever lived.”

The Shandean tone was ignored by English Literature for 150 years while it turned to the solid moral certainties of the Nineteenth century novel.^{xviii} After his death, Sterne’s

^{xvii} He teases us with his own indiscretions – because the novel is, after all, all about him. He had staked the novel on his own character and he omitted very little – much in the way that modern art dares you to equate the artist with the person depicted in the art – even his astonishing addiction to seduction and adultery. Perhaps the reader thinks that Jenny, to whom he refers, is his mistress: “Is it not impossible but that my dear, dear *Jenny!* Tender as the appellation is, may be my child.... Nor is there any thing unnatural or extravagant in the supposition, that my dear *Jenny* may be my friend.---Friend!– My friend.– Surely, Madam, a friendship between the two sexes may subsist, and be supported without----Fy! Mr. *Shandy*:-- Without any thing, Madam, but that tender and delicious sentiment, which ever mixes in friendship, where there is a difference of sex.”

^{xviii} And that’s a very long 19th Century. The 19th century may have lasted until James Joyce wrote to a friend, describing *Finnigan’s Wake*: “I am trying to build many planes of narrative within a single aesthetic purpose. Did you ever read Laurence Sterne?” Sometimes the Shandean Tone even pops up in the popular song of today:

“I’d love to get inside your head
And let’s be blunt
There are other words
That rhyme as well”

(‘Too Much into Nothing’ by John Wesley Harding, from *The Confessions Of St.Ace*, Mammoth, 2001. Printed by kind permission of me. As the commentator notes in “Notes Towards A Clarification Of The Confessions Of St.Ace”: “(I) can only have my suspicions that one of the

unfinished *A Sentimental Journey* (written by Yorick, of course, not by the depraved Shandy) became his pre-eminent work, better suited to the times, and *Tristram Shandy* with its trickery and wickedness, was put on the back burner, forgotten in favor of the sentiment that would finally find its apotheosis in the death of Little Nell some years later. Today, the sentiment of the unfinished Journey seems rather embarrassing, but the truth is that the book is neither entirely sincere and sentimental nor a parody of Sentimentalism (both have been claimed). Its style is inclusive and allows one to laugh and to feel, and the tone is entirely, incredibly, ambiguous. The genius is that it can be read both as sincere and as a clever parody of the excesses of such sincerity. Can I even think of anything to compare it to? It is Sterne's ability to pull the audience this way and that that is so astonishing. He was able to invent and destroy at the same time. A modern equivalent might be the tone of the Randy Newman songs where he gets to have his cake and eat it too (or leave his hat on and take it off), like "You Can Leave Your Hat On." His most popular songs are first person character studies of various deviants: racists, rapists and assorted bigots. This is unusual in rock music, where the audience basically wants the 'I' of the song to be the 'I' of the singer. I blame the few singers who had both interesting personal lives and were good writers, Bob Dylan included.

"Sincerity is the enemy of art"—I think Oscar Wilde said that. Or if he didn't, he should have.

Once I was on a singer-songwriter panel (and please may I not make that mistake too often in the future, unless there's someone I really want to meet on the panel, an autograph I need, as it were) and, after a number of my co-panellists had said how the song they were going to sing was about their girlfriend who beat them up, or a boy they broke up with in high

words that 'rhyme(s) as well' is bed. Also suggested have been: shed ('I'd like to get inside your shed' is highly believable), homestead, and less likely, Samoyed." But the commentator, Dick Sharpely, might have missed the point entirely — what if the rhyme was 'blunt' rather than 'bed'?)

school, I said that I made most of my songs up, that I prioritized the imagination. I sang “Miss Fortune,” which is about a boy found in a ditch by a rich man. He is brought up as a girl and inherits a fortune.^{xix} The first line is:

I was born with a coathanger in my mouth....^{xx}

I love this song and I love to sing it. At the end of the song, a co-panellist said, rather sneeringly: “Well, that didn’t mean anything to you at all, did it?” And that’s the problem. It didn’t happen to me but that doesn’t mean that it doesn’t mean anything to me. And if it had happened to me would it make it any more interesting?^{xxi} “My Way” didn’t *happen* to Sinatra. He didn’t even write it, but people believed it when he sang it, and that’s showbusiness. (Writing your own song is a comparatively recent thing anyway. Blame Bob Dylan for that too.)

A song doesn’t have to pretend not to be a work of artifice to move me, and might move me quite as much if it makes me aware that it is. With regard to books, people are still sometimes suspicious of those postmodern tricksters who draw attention to the fictionality of the story or the reality of the book that the reader is holding, and look back nostalgically to a past when stories were told more straightforwardly. Yet here at the very dawn of the novel is *Tristram Shandy*, an astonishingly successful book that is entirely self-conscious and playful

^{xix} Shortly to become a novel. No, it really is. I added this footnote later and hope it doesn’t mess up the numbering of the others. For a very funny tale of misnumbered footnotes, see Jonathan Coe’s novel *The House Of Sleep*.

^{xx} from *Awake*, Appleseed Recordings, 2001

^{xxi} I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve died in my songs. It has yet to happen in real life (at time of writing).

with regards to its bookishness. I don't think I've ever read a book that makes you quite so aware that you are reading an actual book, literally and physically—it suggests that, if you're weary, you sit down on a pile of them (“do, Sir, sit down upon a set, they are better than nothing”), that if you are bored, you skip a few pages; it defies you to notice that some pages have literally been removed (torn out by the angry author). The typographical eccentricities remind the reader that he is a reader, and that her experience is unique and entirely different from any other reader's experience. In the case of the marbled page, because marbling is not an exact science, every single copy of the book is actually different because no two marblings can be alike. (You can imagine asking a publisher to do this today in the first edition of your first book. “Hey, that's a great idea!” your editor would say to you, “but we have an even better idea—how about we *don't* do it!”)

When I sat down, my intention was to write a good essay; and “as far as the tenuity of my understanding would allow, a wise one.” But I have run out of time. In *Tristram Shandy* too, time is the enemy. Sterne himself is dogged by the ill-health that will eventually kill him, and to which he makes constant reference. Life goes by too quickly for Tristram to write it all down, particularly as he has started by having to go so far backwards: how will he ever catch up? Even his father's *Tristrapaedia*, the book that will educate his son, mirrors this problem. Tristram grows too fast for his father's pen (which “was a little retrograde”) to catch up. There is much play on the concept of digression and narrative time: “It is about an hour and a half's tolerable good reading since my Uncle Toby rung the bell...so that no-one can say, with

reason, that I have not allowed Obadiah time enough, poetically speaking, and considering the emergency too, both to go and come.”^{xxiii} Actual dates litter the pages as Sterne writes:

Vol I, xviii – March 9, 1759

Vol I, lxxi – March 26, 1759 (between 9 and 10 in the morning)

Vol V, xvii – August 10, 1761

(This Essay – August 10, 2001 just after noon)

Vol IX, i – August 12, 1766

Death of Sterne: March 18, 1768. *A Sentimental Journey Through France And Italy*. By *Mr. Yorick* was published three weeks before Sterne’s death. When Sterne died, he lifted up his right arm as if defending himself from a blow, and said “Now it is come.” His body was dug up and sold for dissection, and it was only when Sterne’s face was recognised by students, on a slab at a university, that his remains were returned for reburial. A relative of Mrs. Sterne’s went to Sterne’s rooms and took charge of his personal effects and papers, most of which he destroyed. His daughter Lydia misedited his letters, inserting her own name instead of Eliza Draper’s in some of the sentimental love letters that Sterne wrote to his girlfriend weeks before he died. Even after his death, his identity and his remains continued to shift.

The death of Le Fever in *Tristram Shandy*:

^{xxiii} See Vol II, viii - one of my favourite chapters.

Nature instantly ebbed again,- the film returned to its place,- the pulse fluttered-stopped-went on-throbbled-stopped again-moved-stopped-shall I go on?-No.

John Wesley Harding, Gentleman Musician, is just about to release his ninth album and finish his first novel. His real name is Wesley Stace.