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A Story Painted to the Heart? *Tristram Shandy*
and Sentimentalism Reconsidered[†]

Sterne's sentimentalism has been, at best, of marginal interest to our own century. Yet, we need not seek to install Sterne's contemporaries as the final arbiters of *Tristram Shandy's* 'meanings' to feel the shock of the

1. See C. H. G. Macafee, 'The obstetrical aspects of *Tristram Shandy*', *Ulster Medical Journal* 19 (1950): 15, 20-1; A. H. Cash, 'The birth of *Tristram Shandy*', in R. F. Brissenden (ed.), *Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, pp. 133-54 (1968); and R. Erickson, *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex and Fate in Eighteenth-century Fiction* (Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne), New York: AMS Press (1986), ch. 39.
 2. In this I agree with Christopher Ricks; see his 'Introduction' in G. Petrie (ed.), *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Harmondsworth: Penguin (1967), especially pp. 24-7.
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discrepancy between our own philosophically and formally sophisticated 'novelist', and the writer who was celebrated, in one poetic tribute of 1768, as the bidder of the 'gushing tear' from the 'full sympathising heart'.¹ If Sterne's flirtations with Locke, his interest in epistemological questions and in problems of communication appear to render *Tristram Shandy's* concerns both 'modern' and universal, then his sentimentalism remains stubbornly time bound. Consequently, perhaps because no other aspect of Sterne's culture is so likely to embarrass us with its disturbing otherness, *Tristram Shandy's* engagement with the complex of ideas, discourses and conventions of sentimentalism has only rarely been treated in terms that genuinely attempt to take account of its historical specificity.

Instead, the tendency has been to 'explain' hastily, or excuse, Sterne's lapses into sentiment before moving on to more productive enquiries. Thus, it has become something of a critical commonplace that the 'Story of Le Fever', the Maria episode, the increased focus on Uncle Toby in the later volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, and the writing of *A Sentimental Journey* offer evidence of Sterne's willingness to, as Gardner D. Stout puts it, 'cater to the public taste in working this sentimental vein' (*ASJ*, p. 10). Somewhere in the background here, there appears to lurk the still-potent myth that the vogue for literary sentimentalism was substantially fuelled by the debased tastes of a host of Lydia Languishes. Accordingly, Rufus Putney's influential treatment of *A Sentimental Journey* and *Tristram Shandy* presents us with a Sterne who duped his readers into believing 'that the comedy he must write was the pathos they wished to read.'² A Sterne, that is, as knowing, and with as much distaste for sentiment, as many of his twentieth-century commentators.

Although Sterne's practical awareness of the economic realities of his publishing career makes it quite possible that he might have been willing to sacrifice his own preference for wit in the interests of a readership hungry for pathos, only a very partial reading of the 'amours' of Toby and Mrs. Wadman could conclude that bawdy has been eclipsed by pathos and sentiment. However stung Sterne might have been by the strictures of the reviewers, the later volumes of *Tristram Shandy* continue to present the same mixture of robust comedy, satirical wit and pathos that characterises the early instalments. Rather than being an aberration of Sterne's sickly final years, tearful scenes of brotherly affection, the pathetic and affective representation of death or deathbed scenes, and the portrayal of Toby as a good-natured man are consistent features of *Tristram Shandy*. Before we too readily dismiss *Tristram Shandy's* scenes of pathos as obviously ironic, we might at least pause to consider an 'epitaph' that Sterne wrote for Mrs. James in 1767:

Columns, and labour'd urns but vainly shew,
An idle scene of decorated woe.
The sweet companion, and the friend sincere,
Need no mechanic help to force the tear.

1. 'On the Death of Yorick', dated 25 March 1768, *London Magazine*, 37 (June 1768), p. 323. Quoted in Sterne: *The Critical Heritage*, ed. A. B. Howes (London: RKP, 1974), p. 204.

2. Rufus Putney, 'Laurence Sterne: Apostle of Laughter', *Eighteenth-Century Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. J. L. Clifford (Oxford: OUP, 1959), p. 282.

In heart felt numbers, never meant to shine
 'Twill flow eternal o'er a hearse like thine;
 'Twill flow, whilst gentle goodness has one friend,
 Or kindred tempers have a tear to lend. (*Letters*, p. 308)

To acknowledge that *Tristram Shandy's* early readers may not have been simply wrong or naïve to take the pathos and scenes of sympathy seriously does not, of course, magically illuminate the significance of the text's sentimental elements. Not only is the very concept of 'sentimentalism' notoriously overdetermined, but the task of assessing the significance of its place in *Tristram Shandy* is made doubly difficult by the complexity of its genealogy. Recent studies of sentiment and sensibility have done much to lay to rest the notion that literary 'sentimentalism' can be neatly 'explained' by a mere reference to Shaftesbury or to R. S. Crane's account of the Latitudinarian tradition.³ Even so, a convincing understanding of the type and functions of sentiment in *Tristram Shandy* has been hampered by the rather reductive explanatory models that have most often been brought to bear on Sterne. Typically, critics have either sought to rehabilitate potential mawkishness by vaguely associating *Tristram Shandy* with mid-century moral philosophy, or have assumed simply that Sterne is clearly a satirist of an apparently monolithic entity called 'sentimentalism'. In both cases, little significant light is shed on *Tristram Shandy* or on a cultural phenomenon that is figured as largely homogeneous. More troubling still, however, is that in spite of Sterne's role as a Church of England man, and in spite of the fact that the first instalment of the *Sermons of Mr. Yorick* ran to more lifetime editions than *Tristram Shandy*, so little effort has been made to comprehend its pathos and sentiment from the perspective of Anglican theology and pulpit rhetoric. Thus we have ignored not only the most obvious, but also what is surely the most fruitful context for comprehending the nature of sentimentalism in *Tristram Shandy*.

Sterne's comment in the preface to the *Sermons* that 'the sermons turn chiefly upon philanthropy' (*Sermons*, p. 2) is open to considerable misunderstanding, but should remind us of the centrality of the Anglican clergy in their society's urgent and ubiquitous debates about the nature of man. Nevertheless, in spite of the influence of Crane's consideration of the Latitudinarian contribution to the construction of the 'Man of Feeling' as an idealised type, the majority of even the most insightful recent discussions of sentimentalism either ignore Anglicanism altogether or fail to move beyond many of Crane's mistaken assumptions. Far from endorsing the naïvely optimistic view of the fundamental goodness of human nature that is often attributed to them, Sterne and his fellow Anglicans, throughout the long eighteenth century, recommended the social virtues in a way that was both tough-minded and 'sentimental' (to the extent that Anglican sermons aimed simultaneously to address the heads and

3. R. S. Crane, 'Suggestions Toward the Genealogy of the "Man of Feeling"', *ELH*, 1 (1934), pp. 205–30. For important recent approaches see, for example, R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (London: Macmillan, 1974); Donald Greene, 'Latitudinarianism and Sensibility: The Genealogy of the Man of Feeling Reconsidered', *MP*, 75 (1977), pp. 159–83; John K. Sheriff, *The Good-Natured Man: The Evolution of a Moral Ideal, 1660–1800* (U. of Alabama P., 1982); Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986); John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1992).

the hearts of their auditors). Thus John Norris of Bemerton, writing half a century before the publication of Hume's *Treatise*, considers the importance of 'sympathy' in terms quite typical of post-Restoration Anglican discourses:

Nor is this Affection ['Pitifulness and Compassion'] less Useful than Reasonable. The condition of Man in this World is such, as makes it as necessary for him to be pitiful, as to be a sociable Creature. Man cannot subsist without the Guardianship and Protection of Society; nor is Society any Security without this Affection. [...] Then only may we expect Happiness and Defence from Society, when there is the same Sympathy in the Politick as there is in the Natural Body, when there is a mutual correspondency and Communication of Parts, like the Sympathetick Answer of one Lute to another.⁴

The musical metaphor is, of course, common to secular and religious writings alike, but for our purposes the explicitly political and practical nature of Norris' conception of 'sympathy' is particularly noteworthy. The political import of 'sympathy' is, perhaps, given an extra edge in a sermon published within two years of the Glorious Revolution. However, throughout the next century, the Anglican insistence on the importance of pity, sympathy and philanthropy had as much to do with the effort to stir and cajole congregations into the kind of 'right' belief and 'right' behaviour that would most conduce to society's 'Happiness and Defence' as it did with the recommendation of certain virtues for their own sake. This is not to question the sincerity of the Anglican effort, nor to underestimate the doctrinal importance of, and the anti-stoical and anti-Hobbesian impulse behind, the endorsement of 'Pitifulness and Compassion'. Rather, it is to argue that when the Anglican clergy discoursed on good nature and fellow feeling they were exhorting moral reform and not complacently celebrating the autonomy of naturally benevolent humanity.⁵ The divines were no more able to close the gap between the ideal and the reality of sociability, virtue and compassion than the moral philosophers or 'literary' sentimentalists. But where this gap often registers itself in unresolved contradictions in much secular sentimentalism, the Anglican model was at least able to provide clearer answers in the form of orthodox teachings about the nature of fallen humankind.

In his recent study of Latitudinarian theology, W. M. Spellman argues that one of the key strategies of Anglican practical divinity was to attempt 'to bring sinners to heaven by building on the remnants of God's image in man here on earth, to encourage them in the direction of Christian perfection.' Following the approach adopted by many of the Renaissance humanists, the 'Anglicans turned from the medieval concentration on the contemplative and insisted instead that man's justification depended largely on his behaviour in this life.' That this position amounted neither to Pelagianism nor to Arminianism is made abundantly clear in the rest

4. John Norris, 'Discourse the Fifth', *Christian Blessedness: Or Discourses upon the Beatitudes of our Lord & Saviour Jesus Christ* (London, 1690), p. 140.

5. See W. M. Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660-1700* (Athens and London: U. of Georgia P., 1993); Gerard Reedy, *The Bible and Reason: Anglicans and Scripture in Late Seventeenth-Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), and 'Interpreting Tillotson', *HTR*, 86 (1993), pp. 81-103.

humane one' (TS, 5.405) [220]. For a reading of the story as parodic and satirical to hold water we surely have to credit Sterne with an extraordinary penchant for deception and practical jokes—a penchant which shows little sign of surfacing elsewhere. Not content with dedicating the story to Lady Spencer, Sterne went so far as to send the Spencers a manuscript copy in advance of the publication of volumes 5 and 6—before the reviewers had singled out the episode for its special qualities (LY, p. 108, n. 1).⁴ Add to this Sterne's clear pride that Garrick and Lady Dacre had found 'sublime' the image of the recording angel blotting out with a tear the 'sin' of Toby's oath (*Letters*, p. 150), and it becomes very difficult indeed to support the suggestion that Sterne's intentions here are ironic. For no other passage or episode in *Tristram Shandy* do we have so many indications of Sterne's own position, but no critic, to my knowledge, has let these details impinge upon their discovery of irony in the scene.

To be sure, the facts cited above might just offer evidence of Sterne's cunning plan to dupe both his friends and his general readers. In this instance at least, perhaps for obvious reasons, no one has posited such a conspiracy on Sterne's part, but the tone and manner of 'The Story of LE FEVER concluded' have, seemingly, been enough to convince *Tristram Shandy's* modern commentators that irony rather than pathos informs the whole episode. Yet, given that the narrative of Le Fever offers a rare instance when Toby's philanthropy is presented as active and hence productive, we need at least to ask at what or whom Sterne's putative irony is directed. If at the literary sentimentalists, which writers might Sterne be satirising? If at 'sentimentalism', whose version is he attacking—the divines', the moral philosophers' or perhaps even his own unguarded effusions? That we do not have convincing answers to any of these questions might in itself suggest that we may have been looking in the wrong directions.

In the fifth of Norris' *Practical Discourses*, 'The Importance of A Religious Life considered from the happy Conclusion of it', Sterne found this passage:

When I shall lie faint and languishing upon my Dying Bed, with my Friends all sad about me, and my Blood and Spirits waxing cold and slow within; when I begin to reckon my Life not by the Striking of the Clock, but by the throbbing of my Pulse, every stroke of which beats a Surrender to the Pale Conqueror, in this great Ebb of Nature, when the Stream of Life runs low [. . .] and the wheel at the Cistern can hardly turn round its Circle, it will then be no Pleasure or Comfort to my departing Soul to reflect upon the great Estate that I have got, upon the Family and Name that I have raised [. . .] only the Conscience of having done well, will then refresh me, and yield me Peace and Consolation.⁵

That, in the first sentence of the concluding chapter of Le Fever's story, Sterne turned to Norris and not Ecclesiastes for his own 'and hardly could the wheel at the cistern turn round its circle' (TS, 6.10.511 [272]), is made clear by the slight but identical departure of both writers from the

4. Arthur H. Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years* (London: Routledge, 1986) [Editor].

5. Norris, *Practical Discourses*, pp. 165–66.

biblical text. What is more significant is the closeness with which Sterne keeps to Norris' wording and imagery for his own representation of Le Fever's last moments:

The blood and spirits of *Le Fever*, which were waxing cold and slow within him, and were retreating to their last citadel, the heart,—rallied back,—the film forsook his eyes for a moment,—he looked up [wist]fully in my uncle *Toby's* face,—then cast a look upon his boy,—and that *ligament*, fine as it was,—was never broken.—Nature instantly ebb'd again,—the film returned to its place,—the pulse fluttered—stopp'd—went on—throb'd—stopp'd again—moved—stopp'd—shall I go on?—No. (TS, 6.10. 512–13) [272–73]⁶

In effect, what Sterne offers is a typographically dramatised version of Norris' deathbed scene, perhaps bespeaking his efforts to compensate for the loss of the intonation, pauses and emphases of pulpit delivery.

None of Sterne's contemporaries, familiar with pulpit oratory in which death was regularly and pathetically evoked for moral ends, would, I think, have been surprised by Sterne's debt to Norris here. But the modern critical consensus that Sterne's concern is to parody the sentimental tone means that we need to explore the implications of the borrowing more thoroughly. Because of the nature of the verbal echoes, it seems unlikely that Sterne would have expected even readers familiar with Norris to detect the 'theft'—although we might recall that Norris is one of the three divines whom Sterne considered as a source for Homenas' plagiarisms in the 'Rabelaisian Fragment'.⁷ Nor does this seem to be an example of Barthes' conception of intertextuality, in which Norris' words fortuitously find their way into *Tristram Shandy* as it intersects with the 'innumerable centres of culture'.⁸ Rather, it is probable that Sterne turned to the commonplace book which served him in the composition of his sermons and his fiction. In all likelihood, Norris' deathbed scene was included amongst a host of entries on mortality—entries which Sterne would have found particularly useful when preparing funeral sermons.⁹

If, therefore, Sterne is parodying the language of 'sentimentalism' in the final chapter of the *Le Fever* episode then we must surely conclude that Norris, and the Anglican discourse of which he is a part, are amongst the

6. I have altered the first edition's 'wishfully' to 'wistfully' because the rediscovered manuscript of the *Le Fever* episode suggests that the former was a compositor's misreading. See Melvyn New, 'A Manuscript of the *Le Fever* Episode in *Tristram Shandy*', *The Scriblerian*, 23 (Spring 1991), pp. 165–74.

7. Melvyn New, ed., 'Sterne's Rabelaisian Fragment: A Text from the Holograph Manuscript', *PMLA*, 87 (1972), p. 1089. Lansing Van der Heyden Hammond notes that the 'existence of resemblances between Norris and Sterne was first pointed out in a communication to the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1800: "I was astonished to find, on looking into Sterne's *Sermons the other day*, whole passages copied from those of John Norris. [...] Perhaps some of your correspondents could point out the parallel passages in Sterne and Norris"' (*Laurence Sterne's 'Sermons of Mr. Yorick'* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1948), pp. 85–86. New has uncovered some important borrowings from Norris in the sermons and offers a fascinating discussion of the relationship in 'The Odd Couple: Laurence Sterne and John Norris of Bemerton', *PQ*, 75 (1996), pp. 361–85. I am grateful to Mel for urging me to read Norris in 1993.

8. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in Stephen Heath, ed., *Image, Music, Text* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977), p. 146.

9. No such commonplace book has been found, but both Cash and New have concluded that Sterne almost certainly used one in the composition of his sermons and as he worked on *Tristram Shandy* (see LY, p. 73 and *Sermons/Notes*, pp. 10–11).

primary targets of the parody. If satire is part of Sterne's purpose here, then it is also remarkable that he deliberately selected such a relatively arcane 'source' text, and thus made it very unlikely that his readers would detect any semblance of irony. Of course, it remains possible that the phrases and images from Norris were lodged somewhere in Sterne's memory and simply surfaced in *Tristram Shandy* by accident. But from what we know of Sterne's use of Norris in the sermons and elsewhere in *Tristram Shandy*, it surely makes more sense to see the borrowing as further confirmation of the real consonances between *Tristram Shandy's* pathetic rhetoric and that commonly deployed by the Anglican church. While writing fiction afforded Sterne considerably more scope than the pulpit called for, he seems to have made no fundamental distinction between the ethical concerns of his fiction and his sermons. The tendency of Sterne's modern critics at least to imply such a distinction by ignoring the context provided by the sermons, has meant that Sterne's sentimentalism, perhaps more than any other aspect of *Tristram Shandy*, has been consistently misunderstood.

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Sentiment is clearly not the *sine qua non* in Sterne, but our understanding of the eighteenth-century *Tristram Shandy* will remain incomplete unless we take account of the place of pathos and sentimental attitudes among its complex of concerns. When, in the 'Author's Preface,' Tristram imagines the utopia in which wit and judgment play an equal role, he encapsulates a position that is fundamental to Sterne's moral and satiric stance throughout *Tristram Shandy*: 'What confusion!—what mistakes!—fiddlers and painters judging by their eyes and ears,—admirable!—trusting to the passions excited in an air sung, or a story painted to the heart,—instead of measuring them by a quadrant' (*TS*, 3.preface.233) [126]. That quadrant wielders of different kinds are the consistent butts of *Tristram Shandy's* satire has been accepted by most of Sterne's critics, but the essentialist faith in art addressed to the passions has proved of less interest. Such essentialism, however, partakes of the widespread cultural response to politeness, commercialism and 'worldliness' and as such is neither insignificant nor naïve.¹ At the same time, Anglicanism was under threat from secular rationalisms and the new enthusiasm alike. Faced with such threats, Sterne clings, somewhat desperately, to some 'simple' Christian truths. Yet, for all the force with which Sterne has *Tristram* recommend songs and stories addressed 'to the heart', the limits of the prebendary's trust in the passions are evident in the very particular kinds of 'sentimental' stories that he 'paints' in *Tristram Shandy*—stories that simultaneously sanction, and are sanctioned by, the truths of the 'religion of the heart'.

1. For interesting discussions of this phenomenon, see Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, p. 2 and passim; Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford: OUP, 1992), and John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 117ff and passim.