

STERNE & *TRISTRAM SHANDY*: CRITICS' COMMENTS

Howard Anderson:

“The episodes that Tristram recounts in his own life and in those of his relatives and acquaintances characteristically dramatize confrontations between expectation and realization in which the former is constantly disappointed... in a continuing series of events designed to show that life, and specifically other men and women defy human assumptions about them. These repeated examples warn the wary, but as is immediately apparent to the reader of *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne is not content with the possibility that his reader will fully comprehend the follies and dangers attendant on applying old generalizations to new specifics merely through observation of examples. Personal experience is a surer teacher, and he makes certain that we will have sufficient instances of our own imaginative failures to supplement the lessons of the Shandean household.”

Sigurd Burckhardt:

“Engines and devices pervade the whole novel; they are second only to sex in supplying the metaphorical substance, and even sex appears a good deal of the time in the metaphor of the engines and mechanics of war. The flying chariot of Stevinus, the forceps of Dr. Slop, the bridge for Tristram’s nose, the closely related bridge which Trim and Bridget demolish—these are some of the numerous progeny of *la petite canulle*.... Every one of Tristram’s misfortunes is attributable to a misplaced faith in the efficacy of mechanical devices; most obviously his name and his nose, less directly his disturbed geniture (the result of the mechanical order of various little “family concernments”) and his circumcision (the effect of trust in sash windows and of the enthusiasm for engines of war).”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1832):

In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne achieved “the novelty of an individual peculiarity together with the interest of a something that belongs to our common nature.”

E.M. Forster:

“There is a charmed stagnation about the whole epic—the more the characters do the less gets done, the less they have to say the more they talk, the harder they think the softer they get, facts have an unholy tendency to unwind and trip up the past instead of begetting the future, as in well-conducted books.... Obviously a god is hidden in *Tristram Shandy* and his name is Muddle, and some readers cannot accept him.”

Blodwick Hartley:

“It has been recognized for a long time that *Tristram Shandy* is in one sense a long monologue or, in another, a dialogue between the narrator and a complex of readers or hearers... It is no secret that a large part of the suspense and, therefore, the attraction of the novel lies in our wondering not merely what the narrator is going to do next but also into what role he is going to trick the reader—whose sex, status, and point of view are changeable at the narrator’s whim.”

D.W. Jefferson:

“In his discourse on hobbyhorses (I, 24), Sterne puts forward a theory of characterization, the point of which is that when a man becomes deeply attached to a favorite occupation, his character gradually takes on a shape and coloring derived from the materials belonging to that occupation.”

Samuel Johnson (1776):

“Nothing odd will do long. *Tristram Shandy* did not last.”

John Langhorne (1762):

“Had we not then a right to complain, if a person, by profession obliged to discountenance indecency, and

expressly commanded by those pure and divine doctrines he teaches, to avoid it, ought we not to have censured such a one, if he introduced obscenity as wit, and encouraged the depravity of young and unfledged vice, by libidinous ideas and indecent allusions?"

F.R. Leavis:

Leavis disparages the novel as "irresponsible (and nasty) trifling."

Benjamin H. Lehman:

"First of all, *Tristram Shandy*, although it is comedy, is a serious work, and it is serious throughout."

Lehman comments that the characters are lonely, "being locked up in their own individualities."

Alan Dugald McKillop:

"In spite of overriding obsessions, human ends are infinitely various, but we may say that in *Shandy* the ends are sexual satisfaction, the riding of hobbyhorses, and the full expression of ideas and sentiments. All these entail endless perplexities and an infinity of unfinished business. It is characteristic of Sterne that he is constantly reading sexual meanings into equivocal utterances, and thus attesting man's insistent and unsatisfied interest in the theme. As Professor Work remarks, sexual impotence "hovers like a dubious halo over the head of every Shandy male, including the bull."

A.A. Mendilow:

"There is in *Tristram Shandy* a threefold development: the characters as they evolve; the author as he works out his conception; and the reader whom Sterne is educating to understand fiction aright."

Martin Price:

"What matters for Sterne is the shift of attention from the embodied work to the energy of the artist, from the formed ... to the forming, from the creation to the immanent creator. It is this concern, I think, that accounts for the double interest in the artifice of art and the process of artistic creation."

Sir Walter Scott (1834):

"Uncle Toby and his father squire, the most delightful characters in the work, or perhaps in any other, are drawn with such a pleasing force and discrimination, that they more than entitle the author to a free pardon for his literary speculations, his indecorum, and his affectation..."

Victor Shklovsky:

"The first impression of a reader who picks up *Tristram Shandy* is that the novel is chaos. The action is interrupted constantly; the author continually retreats or jumps ahead; the basic story, which is hard to find in the first place, is constantly interrupted by lengthy digressions concerning such odd topics as the effect of a nose or a name on [sic] character, or conversations about fortifications.

"The book seems to begin in the tone of an autobiography, but then it strays to a description of the hero's birth, which is protracted through the intrusion of all sorts of material. The book turns into the description of a single day....

"But when one begins to examine the structure of the book, one sees, first of all, that this disorder is intentional, that the work possesses its own poetics. It is all according to law, like a painting by Picasso."

William Makepeace Thackeray (1853):

"Some of that dreary *double entendre* may be attributed to freer times and manners than ours, but not all. The foul satyr's eyes leer out of the leaves constantly..."

Ian Watt:

"... through imaginative play we learn about ourselves."