



THE CREATOR OF TRISTRAM SHANDY

A discussion by T. A. Jackson of Laurence Sterne, one of Britain's "big four" pioneer novelists, and the times in which he lived. A writer who reflected his country.

Recently a Laurence Sterne Exhibition was held in Moscow—at approximately the same time that the British Broadcasting Company was serializing Tolstoy's "War and Peace." The two events had a common significance: the eagerness of two peoples, allies in a world struggle, to know more of each other's culture. For as the name Tolstoy signifies, the world over, the great traditions of Russian literature, so is Laurence Sterne regarded as one of the most distinctively English of all British writers.—The Editors.

BY COMMON CONSENT, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett and Sterne constitute a Big Four. Between them they opened a new epoch in English literature, the era of prose fiction, of the novel. It is as one of a group of outstanding innovators that Sterne can best be understood; and the phenomenon of the group itself is best understood in turn when it is noted that their period of productivity was also the formative period in which developed the economic and technological movement which, when in full flood, became apparent to all as the Industrial Revolution.

That is to say: theirs was the period in which production by simple manufacture culminated, and began to pass over into the modern machine industry, the factory system, and the age of steam.

Do the Big Four show any prescience of this? They do not. Why should they? But they are acutely aware of something we can recognize (while they could not) as a concomitant phenomenon, the attainment of an era of apparent equilibrium and finality.

TO USE an analogy: as a great wave is about to break upon the shore, there is an instant in which the reared up mass of water hangs poised in seemingly stable equilibrium. For that instant it seems as if all impetus has been expended, all conflict has been resolved, and finality has been achieved. It is the illusion of an instant only, but for that instant the illusion is complete and compelling.

Just such an instant in the wave-progression of England's history is summed up and reflected, in the work of the Big Four, and by none of them more vividly than by Laurence Sterne.

It is a stable England they depict; one in which no surface froth and scurry prevents us from seeing and examining every detail at leisure. The wave is never so clear and translucent as in the instant before it breaks, and the England of *Tristram Shandy* and of *Tom Jones* stands out in similar clarity. We seem to be able to distinguish every tree and flower, every sheep and cow in the meadow, let alone every character and oddity in the village.

THAT is the secret, as well as the abiding charm of the little world of Shandy Hall and its vicinity. It is a little England in itself, compact and self contained: an England in which every character is distinct to the point of oddity, but with the English oddity of normality carried to excess.

Walter Shandy ("my father") is an oddity when in his armchair, with an apparatus of mock learning, he seeks to reduce everything conceivable to rule and system. Out of his armchair he is as shrewd and competent in practical affairs as one could wish. He is, like Mr. Pickwick, a merchant successfully retired. His wall fruits are a source of legitimate pride. Even his bull is as good a bull as ever, if it were only given a fair chance. Mrs. Shandy, his wife ("my mother") is an oddity, likewise, but only through excess of wifely normality; only through her placidly non-understanding willingness to assent to anything and everything her husband chooses to say. When it comes to doing she knows better than to listen to anything contrary to the dictates of her native common sense.

Uncle Toby is odd enough when he bestrides his hobby-horse, but even then he is only doing the normal thing more thoroughly than it is usual to do it. What is

more normal than for a military officer, retired, to take a professional interest in the campaigns in which he can no longer play a part? Who can doubt that during his period of service he was as competent as a company commander as he was shrewd, honest, and kindly as a man? So it is with Corporal Trim, with the maids Susannah and Bridget in their respective kitchens, with Dr. Slop, Parson Yorick, and Widow Wadman over the way. Each is an oddity, but only through excess of normality. Thus the oddity of each is cancelled out by and cancels the oddity of all the rest, yielding the result of a normal functioning community in which the variety of each is a function of the practical normality and community of the whole.

In short, Shandy Hall is England, and England only a larger Shandy Hall.

TO US this has its poignancy: for Shandy Hall, despite its self-perpetuating stability, was doomed soon to pass away.

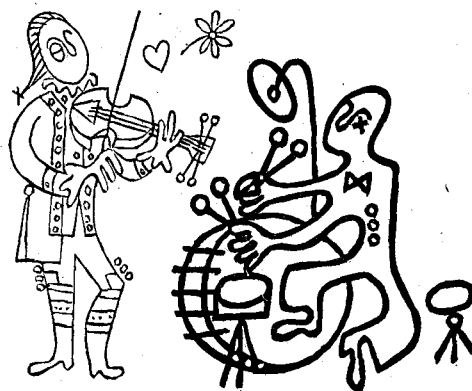
Smollett was the last of the Big Four to die; and when he died, in 1771, the preliminary rumblings of the American Declaration of Independence could already be detected. Three years earlier Sterne had made his last "sentimental" journey in France, without detecting anything to indicate that the titanic upheaval of revolution lay only a score of years ahead. And Sterne was not the only one deceived by the surface appearance of assured calm.

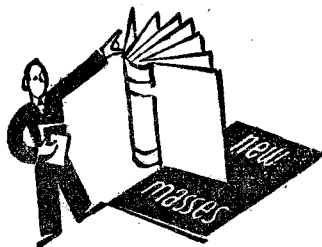
At the opening of the era Swift, seeing not the slightest hope for the drastic alterations he yearned for, burst both his heart and his brain in an explosion of savage indignation. Voltaire, more philosophically, accepted the fact that stabilization had come—possibly to endure interminably—with a grimace, a shrug, and an ambiguous slogan: "We must cultivate our garden." *Tristram Shandy* which began in the year in which *Candide* appeared (1759), concludes, as *Candide* does, with a sting in its tail—only in Sterne's case it was more a fire-cracker than a sting:

"Lord!" said my mother, "what is all this story about?"

"A Cock and a Bull," said Yorick, "and one of the best of its kind I ever heard."

Because the period was one in which history seemed to have come to a halt, it was ideally the period in which all the pre-





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vious development was summed up and brought to fruition. Returning to England from a trip to the Continent, Sterne notes with a new awareness that England is a land of medium-sized dwellings. There are no vast palaces, and no vast aggregations of squalid hovels either. No one is embarrassingly rich; few, if any, are distressingly poor. Virtually every man has a moderate competence: sufficient to justify keeping a hobby-horse in its stable, and ensuring leisure in which to ride it.

Since the clamor and urgency of events had died away, men were set free to see each other, astride their respective hobbies, and rejoice in the seeing. Or, as sturdy Will Hazlitt put it: "It was seen to be high time that the people, as well as being represented in Parliament, should also be represented in books."

THE process of which this was the conclusion began with the great geographical discoveries on the eve of the sixteenth century.

At that date England still formed part of the organic totality of European polity: the system which had its twin peaks in the Empire and the Papacy. The discoveries themselves; the taking of Constantinople by the Turks which largely occasioned the discoveries; the Renaissance; the Reformation; the commercial and manufacturing developments which resulted from all these stimuli; all together resulted in a destruction of the old unity and the creation of an entirely new alignment.

By the time the impetus had been exhausted England had gone through "prolonged struggles, through a whole historic process, transforming circumstances and men." It had experienced three revolutions, the Reformation, the Revolution of 1640-49, the (Whig) Revolution of 1688—and a whole string of wars, civil and foreign. When, at last, the Englishman had time (and breath) to spare to notice and remark upon it, a new England faced an altered world in an entirely new relation.

England in 1500 was geographically separated from Europe, but in all other respects it was part of it. In 1720-60 such a view would have seemed preposterous.

To English eyes, in 1720-60, the Continent seemed a dreary expanse inhabited exclusively by incomprehensible "foreigners." Despite a much wider disparity of externals, the Englishman felt more at home with the inhabitants of the Indies, the Spice Islands, or Far Cathay—with whom he could conduct a mutually profitable trade, than with these Continentals nearer to hand. And since intercourse with the Continent was constantly being interrupted by perennial wars with the King of France and his allies, the Englishman accepted his isolation as a thing fore-doomed, and, in its way, a compliment to his self-reliant independence. Englishmen's minds turned inward to contemplate and find diversion in

the infinite variety of the little world of England itself.

The preoccupation of the Big Four, and their great successors, Scott, Jane Austen, Dickens and Thackeray with "characters"—not to say *character* itself—is an aspect of the English national consciousness of difference and separation in general. It is something quite other than ignorant smugness and self-satisfaction. It is an historically-begotten product of the fact that time and again Englishmen have been forced, willy-nilly, to take into their own hands the solution of their own destinies. Time and again they have had to fight half the world—"one down, t'other come on"—and not a few of their own kings and governments into the bargain. It was that, or—decimation and enslavement.

Sterne was not only an Englishman of his period, even though he chanced to be born in Ireland ("are kittens pints of ale if they're born in a pub?")—he was by descent, by education, and domicile a Yorkshireman. And Yorkshire, then as now, was the most English county in England. It is also the county in which whimsicality and eccentricity is most highly relished, and most successfully combined with shrewd competence in practical affairs. It explains much in Sterne if we remember that the Yorkshireman, even more than the Englishman in general, can afford to be sentimental to extravagance, since his native horse sense guards him against being imposed upon.

That likewise gives the clue to the Yorkshireman's (and the Englishman's) distinctive conception of heroism as no more than homeliness and horse sense persisted in despite difficulty and discouragement.



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Uncle Toby is unquestionably a comic character; but he has the right to be comic, because he is not only one of the kindest and quietest souls alive, but also a *hero*.

We might miss this aspect of Captain Shandy were it not that in moments of surprise or abstraction he invariably whistles *Lilliburlero*—the *Marseillaise* of the English Revolution of 1688. By this we are not only reminded that Captain Shandy played a manful part in that revolution, and the wars resulting. We are minded also that Englishmen in general, today, as in 1760, won the right to be *individuals* by their obstinate steadfastness through three revolutions and a whole historical succession of wars and vicissitudes.

WHEN the citizens of London, during the blitz period of 1940-41 made their way in their hundreds of thousands day after day, by enforced deviations of route and over unexpected obstacles, to reach their places of work—or the spots where those work places had been—at their customary hours, they may not have whistled *Lilliburlero*, but they were *heroic* in the true, Uncle Toby, English tradition.

And that brings us within sight of the solution we are seeking, the reason for the spontaneous discovery in England and in the Soviet Union of close affinities in their respective national literatures.

The same geographical discoveries which set in train the historical process which effected, temporarily, England's separation from Europe had a concomitant effect in Russia of the reverse order. As England forged ahead, economically, socially, and politically, Russia, as a result of the divergence of world trade from land routes to the sea, suffered a setback, followed by disintegration and retrogression, economic and political.

As England drew away from Europe in the west, Russia was as effectively left behind by Europe in the east. In each case a gap resulted, producing a sense of isolation; which, in turn, threw each nation back upon the cultivation of its own intellectual and moral resources.

The result was inevitable. When in the fullness of time the gap in each case developed its own negation, and Britain and the Soviet Union found themselves allies in the newest phase of the Liberation War of Humanity, each was ripe for recognizing the parallelism of their respective histories, and of the literatures in which those histories find expression. Looked at thus it is seen to be the most natural thing in the world that Moscow should discover, and rejoice in, so *English* an English writer as Laurence Sterne, while London discovers, with equal delight, so *Russian* a Russian writer as Tolstoy.

After all, just as there is a parallel between *Lilliburlero* and the *Marseillaise*, so there is between both and the *Internationale*. And certainly no two nations were



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