The life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, gentleman

Laurence Sterne

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THE
LIFE AND OPINIONS
OF
TRISTRAM SHANDY,
GENTLEMAN

by Laurence Sterne

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Laurence Sterne

Ταράσσει τοὺς Ἀνθρώπους οὐ τὰ Πράγματα, Ἀλλὰ τὰ περὶ τῶν Πραγμάτων Δόγματα.

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE M r. P I T T.

S I R,

NEVER poor Wight of a Dedicator had less hopes from his Dedication, than I have from this of mine; for it is written in a bye corner of the kingdom, and in a retir'd thatch'd house, where I live in a constant endeavour to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth; being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles,——but much more so, when he laughs, it adds something to this Fragment of Life.

I humbly beg, Sir, that you will honour this book, by taking it—(not

under your Protection,—it must protect itself, but)—into the country with you; where, if I am ever told, it has made you smile; or can conceive it has beguiled you of one moment's pain—I shall think myself as happy as a minister of state;——perhaps much happier than any one (one only excepted) that I have read or heard of.

_I am, GREAT SIR,
(and, what is more to your Honour)
I am, GOOD SIR,
Your Well-wisher, and
most humble Fellow-subject_,

THE AUTHOR.

THE
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TRISTRAM SHANDY, Gent.

CHAP. I

I WISH either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;—and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn

from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost;—Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,—I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that in which the reader is likely to see me.—Believe me, good folks, this is not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think it;—you have all, I dare say, heard of the animal spirits, as how they are transfused from father to son, &c. &c.—and a great deal to that purpose:—Well, you may take my word, that nine parts in ten of a man's sense or his nonsense, his successes and miscarriages in this world depend upon their motions and activity, and the different tracks and trains you put them into, so that when they are once set a-going, whether right or wrong, 'tis not a half-penny matter,—away they go cluttering like hey-go mad; and by treading the same steps over and over again, they presently make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk, which, when they are once used to, the Devil himself sometimes shall not be able to drive them off it.

Pray my Dear, quoth my mother, _have you not forgot to wind up the clock?—Good G—!_ cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time,——_Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?_ Pray, what was your father saying?————Nothing.

C H A P. II

———Then, positively, there is nothing in the question that I can see, either good or bad.——Then, let me tell you, Sir, it was a very

unseasonable question at least,—because it scattered and dispersed the animal spirits, whose business it was to have escorted and gone hand in hand with the _HOMUNCULUS_, and conducted him safe to the place destined for his reception.

The HOMUNCULUS, Sir, in however low and ludicrous a light he may appear, in this age of levity, to the eye of folly or prejudice;—to the eye of reason in scientific research, he stands confess'd—a BEING guarded and circumscribed with rights.——The minutest philosophers, who by the bye, have the most enlarged understandings, (their souls being inversely as their enquiries) shew us incontestably, that the HOMUNCULUS is created by the same hand,—engender'd in the same course of nature,—endow'd with the same loco-motive powers and faculties with us:—That he consists as we do, of skin, hair, fat, flesh, veins, arteries, ligaments, nerves, cartilages, bones, marrow, brains, glands, genitals, humours, and articulations;—is a Being of as much activity,—and in all senses of the word, as much and as truly our fellow-creature as my Lord Chancellor of _England._—He may be benefitted,—he may be injured,—he may obtain redress; in a word, he has all the claims and rights of humanity, which _Tully, Puffendorf_, or the best ethick writers allow to arise out of that state and relation.

Now, dear Sir, what if any accident had befallen him in his way alone!—or that through 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;—his own animal spirits ruffled beyond description,—and that in this sad disorder'd state of nerves, he had lain down a prey to sudden starts, or a series of melancholy dreams and fancies, for nine long, long months

together.—I tremble to think what a foundation had been laid for a thousand weaknesses both of body and mind, which no skill of the physician or the philosopher could ever afterwards have set thoroughly to rights.

C H A P. III

TO my uncle Mr. _Toby Shandy_ do I stand indebted for the preceding anecdote, to whom my father, who was an excellent natural philosopher, and much given to close reasoning upon the smallest matters, had oft, and heavily complained of the injury; but once more particularly, as my uncle _Toby_ well remember'd, upon his observing a most unaccountable obliquity, (as he call'd it) in my manner of setting up my top, and justifying the principles upon which I had done it,—the old gentleman shook his head, and in a tone more expressive by half of sorrow than reproach,—he said his heart all along foreboded, and he saw it verified in this, and from a thousand other observations he had made upon me, That I should neither think nor act like any other man's child:—_But alas!_ continued he, shaking his head a second time, and wiping away a tear which was trickling down his cheeks, _My Tristram's misfortunes began nine months before ever he came into the world._

—My mother, who was sitting by, look'd up, but she knew no more than her backside what my father meant,—but my uncle, Mr. _Toby Shandy_, who had been often informed of the affair,—understood him very well.

C H A P. IV

I KNOW there are readers in the world, as well as many other good people in it, who are no readers at all,—who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of every thing which concerns you.

It is in pure compliance with this humour of theirs, and from a backwardness in my nature to disappoint any one soul living, that I have been so very particular already. As my life and opinions are likely to make some noise in the world, and, if I conjecture right, will take in all ranks, professions, and denominations of men whatever,—be no less read than the _Pilgrim's Progress_ itself—and in the end, prove the very thing which _Montaigne_ dreaded his Essays should turn out, that is, a book for a parlour-window;—I find it necessary to consult every one a little in his turn; and therefore must beg pardon for going on a little farther in the same way: For which cause, right glad I am, that I have begun the history of myself in the way I have done; and that I am able to go on, tracing every thing in it, as _Horace_ says, _ab Ovo._

Horace, I know, does not recommend this fashion altogether: But that gentleman is speaking only of an epic poem or a tragedy;—(I forget which,) besides, if it was not so, I should beg Mr. _Horace's_ pardon;—for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man's rules that ever lived.

To such however as do not choose to go so far back into these things, I can give no better advice than that they skip over the remaining part of this chapter; for I declare before-hand, 'tis wrote only for the curious and inquisitive.

————————Shut the door.———————— I was begot in the night

betwixt the first _Sunday_ and the first _Monday_ in the month of _March_, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighteen. I am positive I was.—But how I came to be so very particular in my account of a thing which happened before I was born, is owing to another small anecdote known only in our own family, but now made publick for the better clearing up this point.

My father, you must know, who was originally a _Turkey_ merchant, but had left off business for some years, in order to retire to, and die upon, his paternal estate in the county of ——, was, I believe, one of the most regular men in every thing he did, whether ’twas matter of business, or matter of amusement, that ever lived. As a small specimen of this extreme exactness of his, to which he was in truth a slave, he had made it a rule for many years of his life,—on the first _Sunday-night_ of every month throughout the whole year,—as certain as ever the _Sunday-night_ came,—to wind up a large house-clock, which we had standing on the back-stairs head, with his own hands:—And being somewhere between fifty and sixty years of age at the time I have been speaking of,—he had likewise gradually brought some other little family concernments to the same period, in order, as he would often say to my uncle _Toby_, to get them all out of the way at one time, and be no more plagued and pestered with them the rest of the month.

It was attended but with one misfortune, which, in a great measure, fell upon myself, and the effects of which I fear I shall carry with me to my grave; namely, that from an unhappy association of ideas, which have no connection in nature, it so fell out at length, that my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up,——but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popped into her head—_&

vice versa:_——Which strange combination of ideas, the sagacious _Locke_, who certainly understood the nature of these things better than most men, affirms to have produced more wry actions than all other sources of prejudice whatsoever.

But this by the bye.

Now it appears by a memorandum in my father's pocket-book, which now lies upon the table, "That on _Lady-day_, which was on the 25th of the same month in which I date my geniture,——my father set upon his journey to _London_, with my eldest brother _Bobby_, to fix him at _Westminster_ school;" and, as it appears from the same authority, "That he did not get down to his wife and family till the _second week_ in _May_ following,"—it brings the thing almost to a certainty. However, what follows in the beginning of the next chapter, puts it beyond all possibility of a doubt.

———But pray, Sir, What was your father doing all _December, January_, and _February?_——Why, Madam,—he was all that time afflicted with a Sciatica.

C H A P. V

ON the fifth day of _November_, 1718, which to the æra fixed on, was as near nine kalendar months as any husband could in reason have expected,—was I _Tristram Shandy_, Gentleman, brought forth into this scurvy and disastrous world of ours.—I wish I had been born in the Moon, or in any of the planets, (except _Jupiter_ or _Saturn_, because I never could bear cold weather) for it could not well have fared worse with me in any of them (though I will not answer for

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