

A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy

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What is so great about Laurence Sterne? This thin book I bought many years ago as a teenager, having no idea who he was. I must have read it, but it must not have made any deeper impression on me, as nothing rings the bell as I reread it more than forty years later. It has its charms, but those are the charms of an old etching or gravure, a sentimental charm as a matter of fact, of a past era irretrievably gone. In many ways reading the book is like reading a cartoon. It is flat and superficial, as it is meant to be; and mildly clever, as it is definitely set out to be. Are we supposed to be charmed? His contemporaries were. He came on the literary scene rather late in his life, and he seems to have made a splashing success, becoming a celebrity, something he obviously greatly enjoyed. This book itself could only have been written (and published) as a celebration of personal celebrity. Gossip, name recognition, and the deference that come with both, constitute the basis for it.

So what happens? Not very much. This cannot be leveled as a criticism, because after all, this is intentional. Sterne sets sail for Calais, perhaps not the most propitious of times, as France and England are at war. But in those days, unlike today, this would at worst provide only some annoying inconveniences. Could it be that Sterne is in a hurry. His life is running to its end suffering as he is from consumption. Still as an older man, he has no compunctions making the court to younger, sexy ladies (although the adjective 'sexy' would hardly have been in use at the time, as opposed to its meaning) that comes his way, although he has just left another lover of his (and there is an old bothersome wife somewhere too). The 18th century was supposedly a century of license, especially sexual, to which the prudery of the subsequent was seen as a reaction (although the story is far more complicated), and thus the reader may expect some revelations of an explicit and titillating nature, only to have them dashed (maybe less out of common decorum, as not to antagonize his lady for whom he was ostensibly pining). It is auto-biographical of course, it takes a lot of imagination to write something which is not, but that does not mean that one cannot take great liberties as to details, on the contrary; and this willful confusion of genres, fiction and autobiography, of which novels are sprung, is of course played with whimsically and earnestly. This weaving of fiction with metafiction is what many consider the greatness of Sterne, not to say his very genius, which may have been ignored during the 19th century, but taken up with a vengeance in the 20th. It makes him a modern writer, and being one hundred and fifty years ahead of his time, also a genius. How easy is it not to become a genius, his life and works seem to imply, and this kind of remark is quite Sternish by the way.

So Sterne, or Yorick, which he prefers to refer to himself as, thus making a meta-fictional allusion to his major work, to which his name is inextricably attached, soon finds himself in Paris, with a letter of recommendation to a woman, and a new valet, French and charming to boot. He spends the time taking the pulses of young shop-ladies, almost

seducing a young maid, who happens to be the maid of honor to the lady he never seems to get around calling upon. He makes the acquaintance with some marquises and counts, has his missing passport taking care of (to be a celebrity means to be part of a charmed circle, to which the usual complications of life do not apply) and then when he gets sufficiently bored he takes off for Italy. He does not seem to reach that second part of his short novel instead he is caught up in a risqué situation involving one chamber, two ladies, two beds, and an extra one, and so the narrator of course. And so the book ends before it really seems to have gathered momentum to continue. Maybe a still-born attempt, surviving so to speak, as a pickled specimen in a glass jar. Had there been not the case of his *Tristram Shandy*, and the celebrity this work endowed him with, would this slight, if charming piece, ever been reprinted? It is charming though, its charm being that of a jaundiced print, hiding below piles and piles of dusty remnants in an Old Print Shop.

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