

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
March 4, 2014

Hosts: Jay and Toby Siegel

Novel: *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, by Laurence Sterne

Papers: Biographical: Anne Ogan

Critical: Carol Fox

On a cold but otherwise calm evening in early March, seventeen members of The Novel Club gathered at the home of Jay and Toby Siegel. Members enjoyed the generous spread of refreshments for Fat Tuesday during the opening social period. President Leon Gabinet called the meeting to order at 8:15. In opening, Leon announced Carolyn Morgan's birthday, and congratulations were conveyed. Carolyn's son John was introduced as our only guest for the evening. Minutes from last month's meeting, prepared by Anne Ogan, were delivered by Carol Fox and approved as read. No committee reports were delivered. Ham Emmons mentioned that many people are not sending him papers to be posted on the website, and requested that people begin to do so, as able.

A scheduling problem has arisen about next month's meeting. A requested trade of assignments did not work out, so Catherine LaCroix offered to provide the site for April; arrangements for refreshments will be worked out. The remainder of the season will proceed as originally scheduled. The annual business meeting will be held April 27, again at the home of Jay and Toby Siegel.

Anne Ogan delivered the biographical paper.

Anne's paper began with the observation that "if the measure of the man is the company he keeps, Sterne would rank high" since his connections include many of the best-known figures of his time—Joshua Reynolds, William Hogarth, Diderot, deSade, Smollet, Hume, Walpole, Goldsmith, and Samuel Johnson. Sterne's early family life was not particularly promising. His father was the second surviving son of a third son, which led ultimately to financially straitened circumstances. Laurence, born in 1713, and his one surviving sibling (of six children born to his parents) were essentially raised by uncles and cousins, at least to the extent of supplementing Laurence's scholarship to Cambridge, where he earned a first degree and later a Master of Arts. The first symptoms of Laurence's long battle with tuberculosis presented during his Cambridge years. His career choices were limited, and he ended up more or less by default as a clergyman. He was not religious, but made his living by preaching—and publishing sermons while it served his purposes. His marriage was an expeditious and not a particularly happy one. He and his wife had one

daughter who died in infancy and another (given the same name, Lydia) who survived and to whom Laurence was devoted for the rest of his life.

Sterne seemed to take his role as a preacher seriously, writing good sermons and working on behalf of unfortunate parishioners. The publication of the first volumes of *Tristram Shandy* in 1759 changed his life for the better, as it solved his money problems. He was “keenly commercial,” and manipulated publication of later volumes as well as of his sermons, so that financial success was his lot from then on. He thrived on the attention (both positive and negative) that his work attracted. He engaged in activities of “genteel fashion” and in the later part of his life was some mix of moralist and debauchee. He died, presumably of tuberculosis, at age 55 in 1768.

Carol Fox delivered the critical paper.

Critical opinion of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* has varied widely over its history. Scholars have conceded that the book “gives the impression of being haphazardly constructed,” but at the same time opine that the narrator is a “witty, satirical, outrageous, digressive raconteur” from whom many later novelists of later centuries have “learned their craft.”

Sterne composed this work over a period of more than seven years and published the nine volumes in six installments. The last volume was published shortly before Sterne’s death, and critical debate continues as to whether the final installment is a “genuine conclusion” or rather a “terminal interruption” resulting from the author’s death. Relatedly, critics continue to discuss the extent to which “the work as a whole was composed according to a preconceived plan” or rather made up in response to events and critical reactions from one installment to the next.

Contemporaries of Sterne were not uniformly impressed by *Tristram Shandy*, and yet it stirred up a high degree of popular interest especially early in its publication. Some contemporary critics complained that the work presented “no meaning at all,” but the reading public expressed enough interest to make Sterne an international celebrity and to make his book “the pocket companion of the nation.”

The largest explosion of critical interest in *Tristram Shandy* came with the twentieth century’s increased focus on psychological content over plot arrangement, as for example in the works of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and more recently, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and others. Benjamin H. Lehman wrote in the mid-20th century that Sterne’s achievement could be fully appreciated only by later readers “made aware by *The Magic Mountain*, *Ulysses*, and *The Remembrance of Things Past*.” Lehman further noted that important elements of Sterne’s work invoked philosophic laughter and served the

important function of the jester in Elizabethan tragedy, as well as emphasizing the importance of psychological time in contrast to the chronological time which dominates earlier novel structures.

Discussion was launched by President Gabinet's introduction of questions supplied by Carol Fox, with credit to internet sources.

1. Does haphazardness or authorial design predominate in *Tristram Shandy*?

One reader noted that on second reading it seems that the novel's haphazardness reflects the writer's own life experience. It seems that 18c novelists were grappling with how to present real human life as it is, NOT in a formulaic way. Thus, Sterne's self-reflective remarks, his writing about writing, reflect his life—and the time—at which the novel has not yet “grown up.” Some members noted that other 18c picaresque novels were more linear and cohesive. Sterne did seem to deliberately innovate, and try to do something different—which he did, with a vengeance!

The subject of Sterne's alleged “plagiarism” was raised, and called typical of his work. Where Sterne uses unattributed quotes, he assumes all educated readers will recognize them, so such usage is not a flaw. In this regard, Sterne sets a pattern which is picked up by much later writers (Stein, Joyce, etc.). In contrast, pedants like Walter Shandy are mocked by Sterne's presentation of them.

One reader expressed gladness for having read the book second time, because it couldn't have been appreciated otherwise. Another noted that the book seemed more conversational than literary, and wondered how much of the text arose from drunken conversations with Sterne's literate friends

2. *Tristram* suffers a series of early accidents that might be fairly trivial by any standard except his father's. To what extent do Walter Shandy's theoretical obsessions contribute to his son's misfortunes?

It was noted that Walter writes about education but never educates his own child—he's a great arguer but is often wrong, and thus common sense is presented as more favorable than letting a “hobby horse” take over with the resultant loss of sound relationships to other individuals.

3. What is the effect of *Tristram*'s frequent direct addresses to his audience? Do we sense a relationship between the narrator and the author?

Consensus was that we do sense such a relationship--that Sterne is speaking for himself. Approval was expressed of the narrator's direct addresses being aimed at a variety of different audience members, thus distinguishing among different readers; the addresses to audience seem to show the thoughts of an author as he writes. For example, the narrator's saying “if you don't remember

[a certain feature]..., go back and read the chapter again—NOW did you find it?...[etc]...” give hints of leading to 20c stream-of-consciousness writing.

4. How does the seventh volume (travels through Europe) relate to the rest of the book? Could it have been omitted?

One reader averred that this volume certainly could be omitted, because he did omit it in his own reading and did not feel a loss. Since the travel described took place AFTER Sterne had the success of the first four volumes, that gave him the freedom and means to indulge in the “grand tour.” Readers raised the follow-up question of whether any one of Sterne’s volumes could be omitted, and therefore whether the question in itself betrays a misunderstanding of the work. If the volumes are not necessary to each other, does that suggest a lack of structural integrity, or rather a different kind of structure?

5. Do you think Sterne intended to end the novel with the ninth volume? Why or why not?

This question stimulated various observations as to what keep Sterne going in the creation of *Tristram Shandy*, with one reader concluding that the whole work was essentially an extended game.

In closing, readers raise questions of why this work was so popular in its time, with suggestions ranging from its bawdiness to its fitting in with the eighteenth-century tradition of learned wit, to the foresights it offers on later psychological and stream-of-consciousness approaches to literature, which resonate with some readers as more reflective of the way life really seems to ordinary people—as a sort on continuous internal monologue. With the observation that we will see more of this in the novel coming up for next month, the meeting adjourned at approximately 9:40. Conversation and socializing continued over a final visit to the refreshment tables.