

**Classic Novels:  
Meeting the Challenge  
of Great Literature**

**Parts I–III**

**Professor Arnold Weinstein**



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Born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1940, Arnold Weinstein attended public schools before going to Princeton University for his college education (B.A. in Romance Languages, 1962, magna cum laude). He spent a year studying French literature at the Université de Paris (1960–1961) and a year after college at the Freie Universität Berlin, studying German literature. His graduate work was done at Harvard University (M.A. in Comparative Literature, 1964; Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, 1968), including a year as a Fulbright Scholar at the Université de Lyon in 1966–1967.

Professor Weinstein's professional career has taken place almost entirely at Brown University, where he has gone from Assistant Professor to his current position as Edna and Richard Salomon Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature. He won the Workman Award for Excellence in Teaching in the Humanities in 1995. He has also won a number of prestigious fellowships, including a Fulbright Fellowship in American literature at Stockholm University in 1983 and research fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1998 (in the area of literature and medicine) and in 2007 (in the area of Scandinavian literature). In 1996, he was named Professeur Invité in American literature at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris.

Professor Weinstein's publications include the following: *Vision and Response in Modern Literature* (Cornell University Press, 1974), *Fictions of the Self: 1550–1800* (Princeton University Press, 1981), *The Fiction of Relationship* (Princeton University Press, 1988), *Nobody's Home: Speech, Self and Place in American Fiction from Hawthorne to DeLillo* (Oxford University Press, 1993), *A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches Us About Life* (Random House, 2003), and *Recovering Your Story: Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Morrison* (Random House, 2006). He has just completed *Northern Arts: The Breakthrough of Scandinavian Literature and Art from Ibsen to Bergman*, to be published by Princeton University Press in 2008. His latest project is *Literature and the Phases of Life: Growing Up and Growing Old*, under contract with Random House, with an expected completion date of 2009.

In addition to his career in teaching and writing, Professor Weinstein has produced a number of courses for The Teaching Company, including *The Soul and the City: Art, Literature and Urban Life*; *Drama, Poetry and Narrative: Understanding Literature and Life*; *20<sup>th</sup>-Century American Fiction*; and *American Literary Classics*.

## Lecture Three

### Sterne—*Tristram Shandy*

**Scope:** *Tristram Shandy* is the oddest narrative in English literature: a story that goes nowhere, an endless number of learned references, an obsession with digressions, and a hodgepodge where plot disappears. Sterne's book has been linked to an old tradition of erudite allusions, but it has also been seen as a prodigious forerunner of the narrative experiments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Like *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, *Tristram Shandy* points to a world of ruins and dead authority, therefore reimagining and reconceiving the very notion of *doing*. Its self-awareness as construct, its wordplay, its shaggy-dog stories, its interest in private whim and pornographic suggestion, its concern with metaphor and analogy, all point toward a new kind of literature in which words acquire a kind of autonomy and suggestive power never before seen. The reader is king.

### Outline

- I. *Tristram Shandy* (1760-1767), written by Laurence Sterne (1713–1768), is the oddest narrative in English literature, and it makes us realize how maddeningly free and inventive a “story” might be. As we come to that realization, we might also wonder how much freer our own thinking could be, and we begin to see the extent to which we are imprisoned by conventions of thought, language, and logic.
  - A. At first, we note the overwhelming presence of learned references in this text: Latin, Greek, Dutch, biblical, and more.
    1. The modern reader sees here a world of ruins, of ancient “authority” that no longer resonates or is even readable today. One senses a parallel with T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, a picture of 20<sup>th</sup>-century life filled with dead references.
    2. But soon we realize that Sterne himself is mocking these learned traditions, even turning baptism itself into wordplay.
    3. Sterne is obsessed with rules and the breaking of rules and delights in poking fun at those who practice strict adherence. He invokes the example of critics watching the famous Shakespearean actor Garrick; they are so concerned with whether Garrick follows the rules of drama that they miss the essence of his performance.
    4. If the old traditions do not bind, what does? Sterne suggests that we are condemned to our own inner conscience (in modern terms, consciousness) as the only compass available. But this inner law is highly unreliable.
  - B. *Tristram Shandy* is Sterne’s unforgettable and delicious response to this quandary, a work of art that both uses and breaks the rules, a work of art filled with references to long-dead authorities. It celebrates individual consciousness and subjectivity. The great 18<sup>th</sup>-century critic Samuel Johnson said of *Tristram Shandy*, “Anything that odd won’t last long.” Can this novel be read today?
    1. The first major obstacle we confront is the fact that writing about life is endlessly expansive; entire chapters could be written about one’s birth or first hours of existence. Sterne gives us background, foreground, and a host of other grounds, while scarcely moving forward with the life story of his hero, Tristram.
    2. Such a technique is given the inadequate term *digression*, inadequate because it implies that one’s goal is to go straight forward. That, Sterne tells us, is fine if you’re a muleteer but not if you’re telling a story.
    3. In *not* moving forward, in writing a digressive text, Sterne shifts the center of attention from the presumed plot of his story to the reader.
    4. One origin for this kind of writing is Sterne’s interest in the philosopher John Locke and his notion of *free association*—the idea that the mind works metaphorically, traveling from one idea to another without necessarily any logical connection.
    5. As we can imagine, such a model of associative thinking makes logic and even conversation difficult. Sterne labels this behavior “hobbyhorse,” suggesting that this child’s toy represents the odd, capricious way in which we think.
  - C. This model of thinking leads to a view of life as largely private and solipsistic.

1. If we almost always operate by free association, with no common universal logic to govern our thinking, then we almost always need a translator or decoder in our dealings with others.
  2. This situation is hospitable to individual obsessions. Sterne's characters speak *past* each other, and the reader is left to decide whether his or her own conversation follows that same model.
  3. This view of life and the way the mind works also suggests that we are, in some sense, locked out of the minds of others. Sterne wishes he could use Momus's glass to view the soul of others and see how thoughts are formed.
  4. Without such a device, Sterne seems to suggest that the best way to know others is to pay attention to their particular obsessions, their free associative patterns, and so on.
  5. Such a model of associative thinking enables a narrative performance like no other. Sterne enjoys leaving his characters in mid-speech, in mid-air, while he goes on to other topics, other moments in time, and other places in space. It is the power of *writing* that makes this possible.
- II. The stunning mobility of Sterne's *manner* is to be contrasted with the deterministic and coercive conditions that shackle the life of his characters, particularly the protagonist, Tristram.
- A. The book's first sentence tells us that even the hero's conception was interrupted by an instance of associative logic.
    1. The book suggests that biological creatures are subject to terrible pressures, any one of which can cause lasting damage. In Tristram's case, his conception was interrupted, he was pulled from the birth canal by forceps, he was given the wrong name, and he was nearly castrated as an infant. From this perspective, he is destined to be a cosmic loser.
    2. We see here the book's interest in contrasting the kinds of freedom we have versus the determinism to which we are subject.
  - B. Sterne's digressions show an interest in trying to emancipate the power of language, suggesting meanings beyond a dictionary's definitions.
    1. The chapter entitled "The Promontory of Noses" is a prime example of Sterne's use of double entendre.
    2. Another, nearly pornographic, chapter tells the story of the "fair Beguine" nursing the character Trim after a knee injury.
    3. These are both instances of associative, even projective, thinking, which like pornography, is more concerned with imagining nakedness than with showing it outright.
  - C. In this way, Sterne creates something beyond the words themselves, and this creation is particularly important because the lives in the book are so coerced.
    1. Sterne himself tells us that he wants to work a miracle through language.
    2. Double entendre is one way to do that. The passage about the white bear illustrates another: Sterne uses grammatical structure to show us all the ways it might be possible to think about a white bear.
  - D. The celebration of thinking and language comes to a marvelous conclusion late in the book in the recounting of the courtship between Uncle Toby and the Widow Wadman.
    1. Uncle Toby has been wounded in a war and the widow wonders whether he has been left impotent.
    2. She finally asks him, "Where were you wounded?" Uncle Toby, thinking about the site in Belgium where he received the wound and the maps he has drawn of the battle, tells the Widow Wadman, "You shall see the very place. You shall put your finger on it."
    3. That place is neither the trenches in Belgium, nor the maps, nor Toby's groin. It is the place where these characters live—the place that literature and thinking and language and imagination make possible. The mind generates its own free place, and that is the territory of literature.
  - E. *Tristram Shandy* is punctuated by a narrator who has a vile cough, as indeed, Sterne himself did. One of the late chapters is about death tracking Sterne, and we begin to realize that therein lies the dialectic of the book—the coercive conditions of a physical body, which will die, and the freedom of the mind, which can play forever.

**Essential Reading:**

Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Wolfgang Iser, *Laurence Sterne: Tristram Shandy*.

Thomas Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel*.

Melvyn New, *Tristram Shandy: A Book for Free Spirits*.

Ian Campbell Ross, *Laurence Sterne: A Life*.

Arnold Weinstein, *Fictions of the Self: 1550–1800*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. *Tristram Shandy* goes as far as it can to expose the “wiring” and the artifice that undergird what we think of as a story. Does this teach us anything valuable about how we make sense of our arrangements or how we represent our experience? Do you find Sterne’s manner engaging or frustrating?
2. Sterne prides himself on the unusual bond being generated between his book and his reader. Do you think that the pyrotechnics of *Tristram Shandy* make for a more personal and intimate reading experience?