

The Strangest Novels in World Literature

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Abstract

This paper would like to present a telling specimen of the Strangest Novels. To name things, Farrell's A Girl in the Head, published in 1967, exposes its own literary devices. The twentieth century novel shows **stylized** pages that are made to parallel the elaborations of a mind that revels in its own deviations.

Farrell's A Girl in the Head is a well-crafted novel. It shows Farrell discovering his style. His comic sense in this novel heralds what he is going to do with it in his more mature historical novels.

The Farrellian novel echoes Tristram Shandy, an eighteenth Century novel. The latter, the most openly self-conscious in its 'baring' of novelistic devices, not only exposes the devices of fiction but also defamiliarises time.

Sterne's is an exceedingly funny novel despite the fact that its author has been accused of plagiarism. Victor Shklovsky, a Russian formalist declares in his famous study Russian Formalist Criticism that "Tristram Shandy is the most typical novel in world Literature."

Key words : A Girl in the Head ,_Tristram Shandy , Russian Formalist Criticism

1. Thematic Burden.

A Girl in the Head

Boris, the central figure in **A Girl in the Head**, is an alienated figure who likes to express the irrationality and the meaninglessness of the state of affairs in an arbitrary world.

He confesses **“that hope is a lie, that life is a sordid charade”** (A Girl, 20). He also circularly admits that **‘life [is]meaningless detail, rapidly receding into a mass of meaningless details’** (A Girl, 26) and at the height of his despair, he comes to the bitter conclusion that **“the whole thing was utterly futile”** (A Girl, 166). Human life is, thus, conceived as absurd, the world as meaningless and incoherent. As an alienated figure, Boris makes no attempt to impose form or order either on his life or on the world in which he lives.

Boris sees his environmental surroundings as empty and disorderly : **“ It was as if he were the last living person, alone in the emptiness and chaos”** (70-71).

The Surrealist marshalling of random images becomes a device of style in A Girl. A jumble of things greet Boris at the “Maidenhair Central” when he impulsively alights from a train.” His eyes rested for a moment on a diminutive shrub dying slowly in the sunlight at the end of the platform.”(p.13) **Circularity** for the alienated soul involves purposeless repetitiveness and a sense of boredom: **“And this was the very thing that nobody appeared to understand , that everything went in circles and not in straight lines (55).**

Boris’s encounter (p.10) with a “...dazzling sunflower recalls Blake. (2) .

Boris is aware that he has no control over his destiny which is shown to be determined by forces beyond his control. “Fate, Boris was thinking bitterly, **“Fate , why should I have to spend my unique life in this long graveyard by the sea ? ... And yet here I am... drifting slowly towards another heart attack in Maidenhair”**. p.(124)

In a passage where comic irony pervades, the character’s helpless image is shown at the very opening page of a Girl:

Boris suffered a mild heart attack while carrying a parcel of potatoes up along flight of stone steps . He dropped the parcel and sat down abruptly. He saw the potatoes bouncing and rolling away down the steps, their skins gleaming in the sunlight. Then he became unconscious for a moment or two.

Subsequently he was discovered, a stretcher was summoned and he was conveyed to a near-by hospital. Meanwhile someone collected up the potatoes and arranged them around his recumbent body, rather as if he had been a side of beef on its way to the oven (7-8).

Drabble sees the character's sense of powerlessness in terms of "the gaping distance between their expressed intentions and the actual course of events" (4).

The way Boris reacts to his surroundings testifies to his being bewildered. Reflecting on the crisis of man, he suggests that a momentary personal whim or mistake could change the course of one's life. Speaking of a youngman producing a knife and stabbing a policeman, he isolates the fatal moment for our inspection:

It happened at five minutes to one .At four minutes to one .the young man had become a murderer. One forward thrust of his hand had changed his entire life. p. (111).

The **main narrative stream** in A Girl is in the third person while Boris's autobiographical account is in the first person admitted by Boris to a tape– recoder , the latter appears in italicised print. It also employs the technical device of a photograph album Boris flicks through. Boris is shown commenting on personal old photographs .

Tristram Shandy

Lawence Sterne's (1713-1768) The life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Gentleman, to give the book its more formal title, is a novel if it can be called a novel, of a unique Kind, a novel which has perplexed and given delight to readers for nearly 200 years.

Seldon, who regards Trestram Shandy a special case, highlights its 'literariness':

It is the most 'literary' of all novels in the sense that it is the most openly self- conscious in its 'baring' of novelistic devices. Indeed one could say that the novel's subject is its own devices.(5)

Here is a typical passage:

I will not finish that sentence till I have made an observation upon the strange state of affairs between the reader and myself, just as things stand at present-an observation never applicable before to any one biographical writer since the creation of the world, but to myself-and therefore, for the very novelty of it alone, it must be worth your worships attending to.

I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve-month; and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my fourth volume – and no farther than to my first day's life-'its demonstrative that I have three hundred and sixty-four days more life to write just now, than when I first set out; so that instead of advancing, as a common writer, in my work with what I have been doing at it- on the contrary, I am just thrown so many volumes back.

(From **The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy**)Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1983,p.228))

Bering a special case, the interpretation of Tristram Shandy must be different from other novels. In a relevant sense, Russian formalists and New Critics “insist that the interpretation of a work of art must evolve from the work's structure.” (6) This only means that in a critical evaluation of Tristram Shandy, the writer's life and historical realities do not count.

Singularly enough, we hear more of the nominal hero, Tristram, before he is born than we do after. Certainly **Tristram Shandy** is a book that awakens more than imagination, Shklovsky, a Russian formalist, believes that literary devices defamiliarise our perception of reality. Sterne destabilises the sequential pattern of chapters and preliminaries by transposing them, leaving some of them blank, to be filled by the reader.

Tristram Shandy perhaps the strangest novel in English Literature, starts with a disengaging sentence:

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.

Two pages later, he announces his birth at night : “I was begot in the night, betwixt the first *Sunday*, and the first Monday, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eight.”

Then, in Chapter V, he refines things: “On the fifth day of November, 1718... was Tristram Shandy Gentleman, brought forth into this...disastrous world of ours ...”

In Tristram Shandy, Sterne has produced a remarkably eccentric novel which breaks all the narrative rules and even that of language. Any movement of the story is being hindered through incredible digressions.

2. Stylized Realities

A Girl in the Head shows two stylized instances covering almost six pages. The way these instances bulges or shrinks is quite arresting. In their contents they are quite supportive of a character who lives at the bitter edge of a tormenting life.

The **stylized** pages 41-44 speak of Boris ' being through the mill " i . e crushed and of being "a small lump of weeping object" .We see him raving about things, remembering the hand of a black man, a stranger, on his mother's shoulders and the "acid-faced, heartless French nurse bursting into tears and bringing him an ice cream. He is then shown recounting his own miseries:

Running away from school, stealing carrots
from fields , apples from trees, begging lifts
along roadside, freezing in ditches and returning
to Munich where he finds out that his mother
is gone.

Then we have **stylised** pages (117 ff.) that revolve on Flower, Boris's wife. Boris is revealed talking about her motionlessness and downcast eyes, about the serpentine progress of their conversation. The word serpentine is physically rendered in print . He talks of the couple being snared together. She knows nothing , he said, beyond the walls of her existence. Their loneliness brought them together. Boris is shown as learning eventually that they are victims of forces beyond their control.

The stylized occurrences abound in Sterne's Tristram Shandy. The book is certainly odd. At the end of chapter 12 of the first Volume, the reader having followed Parson Yorick to his tomb /tu:m/ and read its Shakespearean epitaph [Alas, poor Yorick] is confronted by a page whose recto (any right – hand page of a book) verso/verso: sðu/ (any left hand page of a book) type area are each a rectangle of solid black (pp.41-42) . Is this the monumental marble , or the dark night of death or nescience/'nesiðns/=absence of knowledge) or nonentity /non'entðti/ (-thing that does not exist or exist in imagination)? He interrupts his short chapter of 36 of Volume III (pp.178-179) to repeat an odd sentence: "In the early edition a marble page was inserted here" (pp.178-179).

Ch .29 of Volume Four is entirely omitted (PP.243-244) and ch.5 of the same Volume consists of a shortish sentence (p.215). Chapter 18 and 19of Volume IX (Nine) are left blank (pp.470-471).

A 'Dedication To the Right Honourable John' starts Volume Five [V] (p.263) where Lawrence Sterne announces himself as "Lord John's humble servant."

Chapter 33 of the same Volume (Volume VII-six) finds itself in extricable difficulties and has to be begun again as Ch.34 (p352) . Chapter (38) of the same Volume, Volume VI (Six) is mostly a blank page on which the reader is invited to supply an ideal description of the widow wadman (p. 357) Ch. 39 (Volume Six – VI) is enclosed between dashes , followed by stars that have the semblance of a sentence or paragraph –Lord have mercy upon me, -said my father to himself-

Then we have chapter 40 in the same Volume- Volume Six – [VI] - where the implied author suggests that he is beginning to get into his work and that “by the help of a vegetable diet...I shall be able to go on with my uncle Toby’s story, and my own, in a tolerable straight line.” Then he gives a number of twisted lines and diagrams (p. 359).

Chapter 13 of Volume VIII [Eight] announces at its beginning this strange precept:

“Love is certainly, at least, alphabetically speaking one of the most’.

Then he gives us a vertical column of adjectives that have negative import and that are alphabetically arranged, with a capital letter starting each of them. The column meaningfully, ends with the word **Ridiculous** /ridkulʊs/

Volume Nine (p.451) opens with a ‘Dedication to a Great Man” where the author makes us aware of his presence:

I am THE AUTHOR

In chapter 4 (Volume Nine) (in the sentence: “whilst a man is free-cried the corporal, giving a flourish with his stick thus-” is embedded in a snake- like drawing (p.457).

Chapters 18 and 19 of Volume Nine are left out (pp.470-471).

Chapter 25 is shown in cardinal number whereas the chapter that deviously follows it is strangely enough realized in ordinal number (pp. 478-479”). as **The Eighteenth Chapter**

In this way, the devices of the novel are ‘laid bare’. This concept/’konsept/(Laying bare the device) is used by Shklovsky to refer to Sterne’s practice of presenting devices without any realistic ‘motivation’: they are presented purely/pjuʃli/ as devices:

3. Conclusion

It is quite obvious that Farrell is experimenting in **A Girl In the Head**. At the time, he is being influenced by existentialist writers such as Camus and Sartre. He seems to be practising to be free, to opt for the Sartrean *authentic choice*. In his later and more mature historical novels, he seems to be more interested in his thematic burden than in the form of his narrative act. We feel his comic irony in this book, an impressive aspect that will be fully developed, later, in his historical trilogy: Troubles, The Siege of Krishnapur and The Singapore Grip

In Tristram Shandy, the chaotic appearance of things and the odd narrative acts and thoughts serve to draw our attention as readers. The strangeness of the narrator's difficult situation is appealing in the sense of the narrator's almost shocking frankness.

The narrator seems to hide nothing, to expose everything and in an arresting sense, to isolate "the strange state of affairs" for our inspection. *Defamilisation* of time, quite typical of fiction, seems to be operative in Tristram Shandy. At a narrative point, the narrator announces that "instead of advancing as a common writer ... I am just thrown so many volumes back." It is this act of 'baring' novelistic devices and of defamilising time that contributes to the "literariness" of Tristram Shandy.

4. Notes

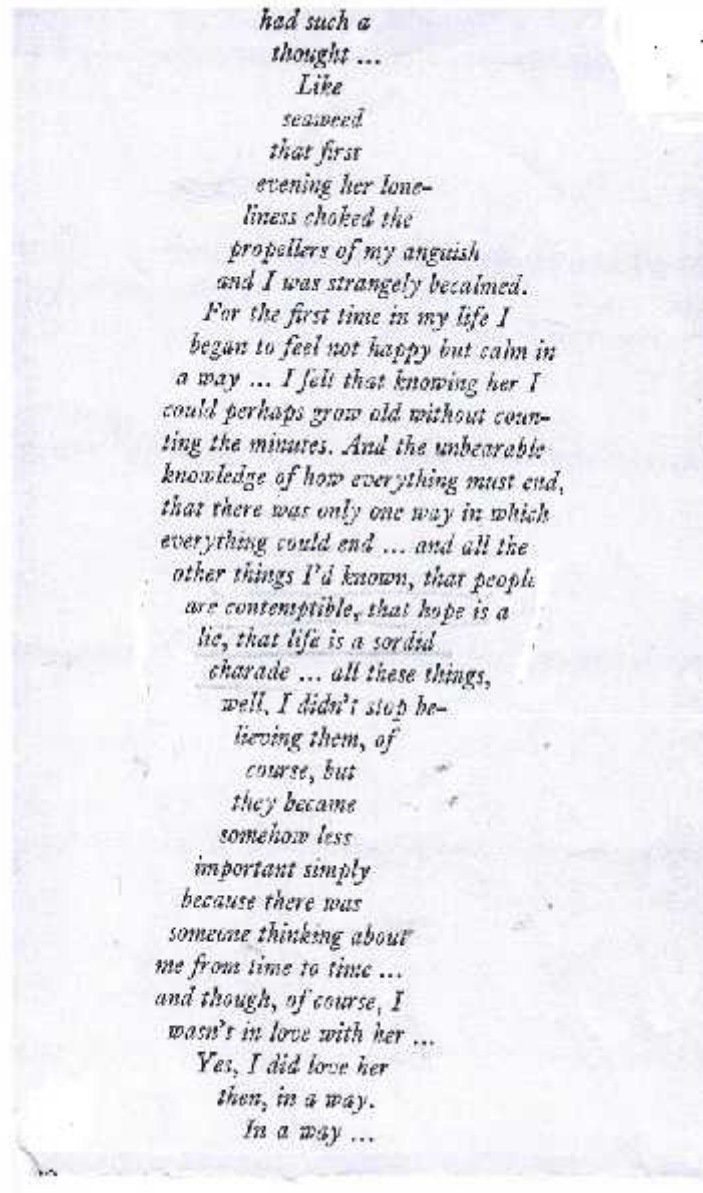
1. Shklovesky, Pp.25-57.
2. Sampson, p. 97.
3. Bergson, p. 58.
4. Drabble, p. 164.
5. Selden, p. 38.
6. Bressler, p. 343.

5. **Bibliography**

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6. Representative Samples of stylized Pages

A Girl in the Head



(p.42) Boris reflecting on his childhood.

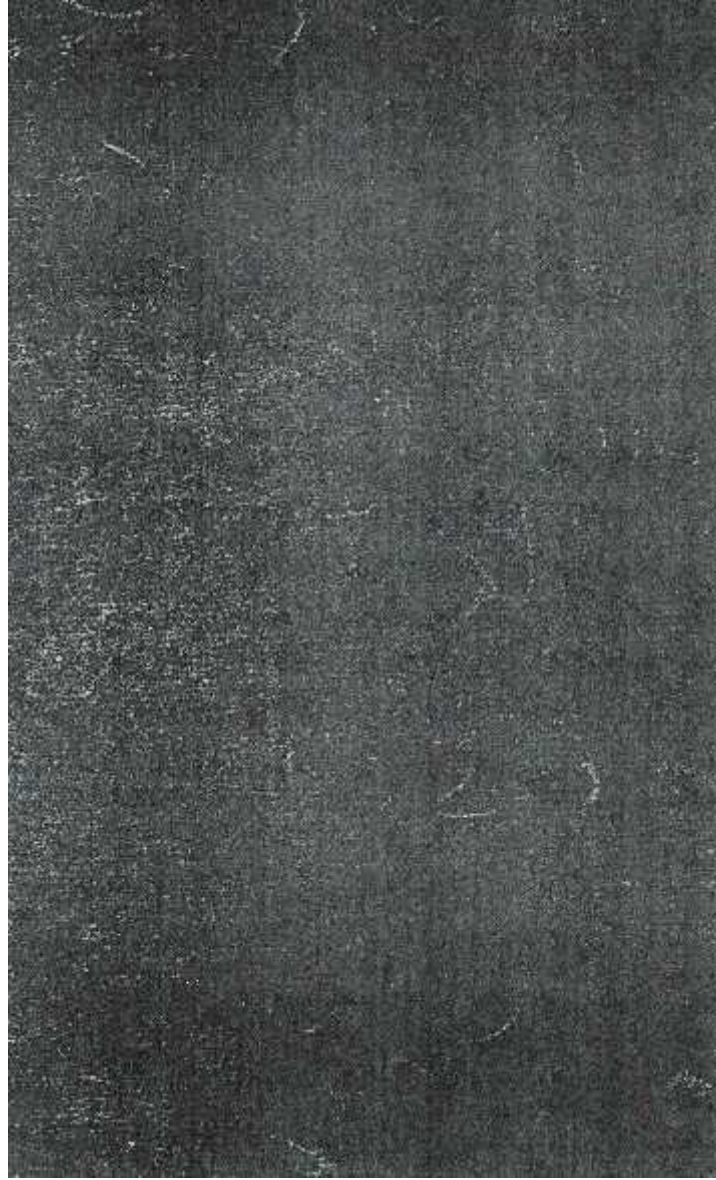
sorry for me. I remember her there
in that gloomy seldom-used room that
smelled of furniture polish and fruit,
sitting motionless with downcast eyes
and an expression of vague distress
on her face. I can't remember
that she said anything but
I could see her doing
her best to modi-
fy that ex-
pression
to suit
the
ser-
pen-
tine
pro-
gress
of
our
conversation
while the men
chuckled and the
old ladies giggled
and I could see the
shadows of our flying
words gliding over her
features and vanishing
into a loneliness that
was perfectly unaware of
itself. 'I'm not much good
at talking,' she admitted to
me timidly a day or two later.
Yes, she was so defenceless and /
shy, so bewildered by the world

(p.118) On this page, Boris shows the *serpentine* progress of the conversation between him and Flower, his wife.

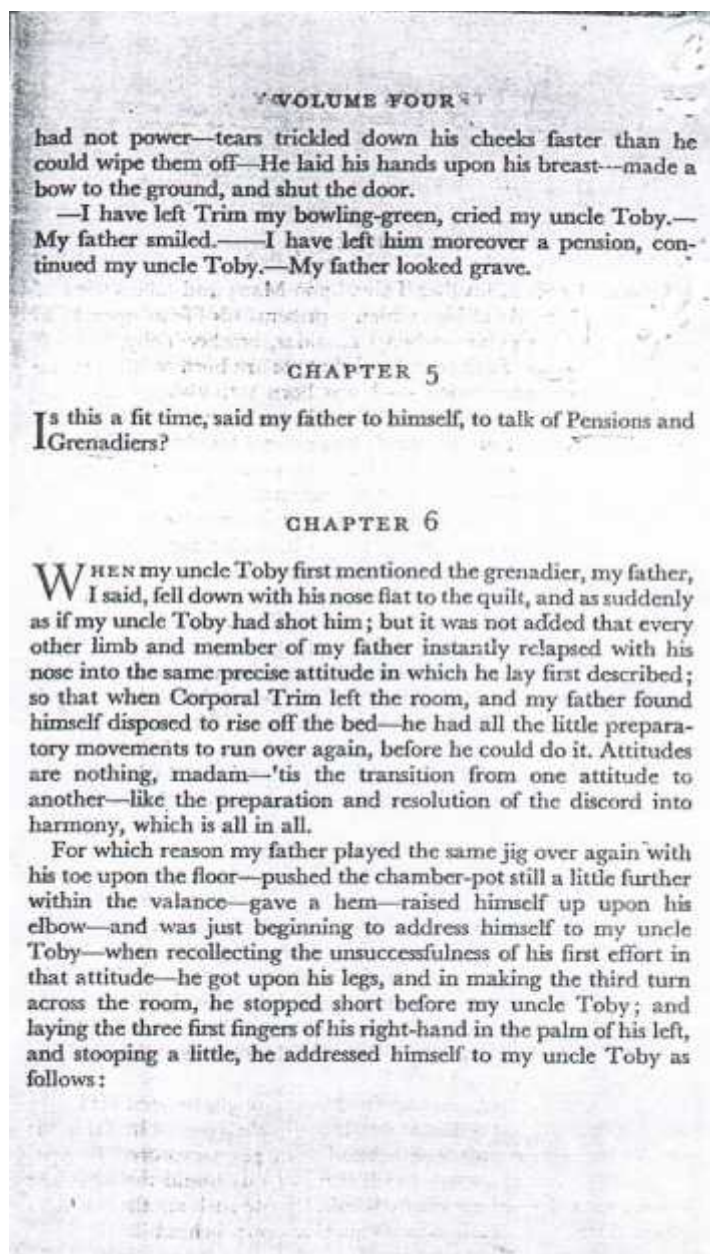
*too surprised to call out to her
and there was a man's arm on her
shoulder and her face was half
turned towards his in that
square of gloom that I was
trying to penetrate with my
astounded eyes ... The man
must have been looking in
my direction and he must
have seen the child
dragged by in the
stream of passing
people but he
didn't know
me of course
and merely
went on
chatting
calmly to
my mother or
listening calmly
to what she was
saying about the
excellence of the
Weisswurst and mustard
or the beauty of his carpets
and all that without knowing
that a small tramp of agony in
short trousers was being hauled
along outside and though I
should have looked at the
man's face to see whether
my mother was with someone
who looked kind and what
sort of person could be*

(p.120) On this page, Boris announces that “hope is a lie, that life is a sordid charade.”

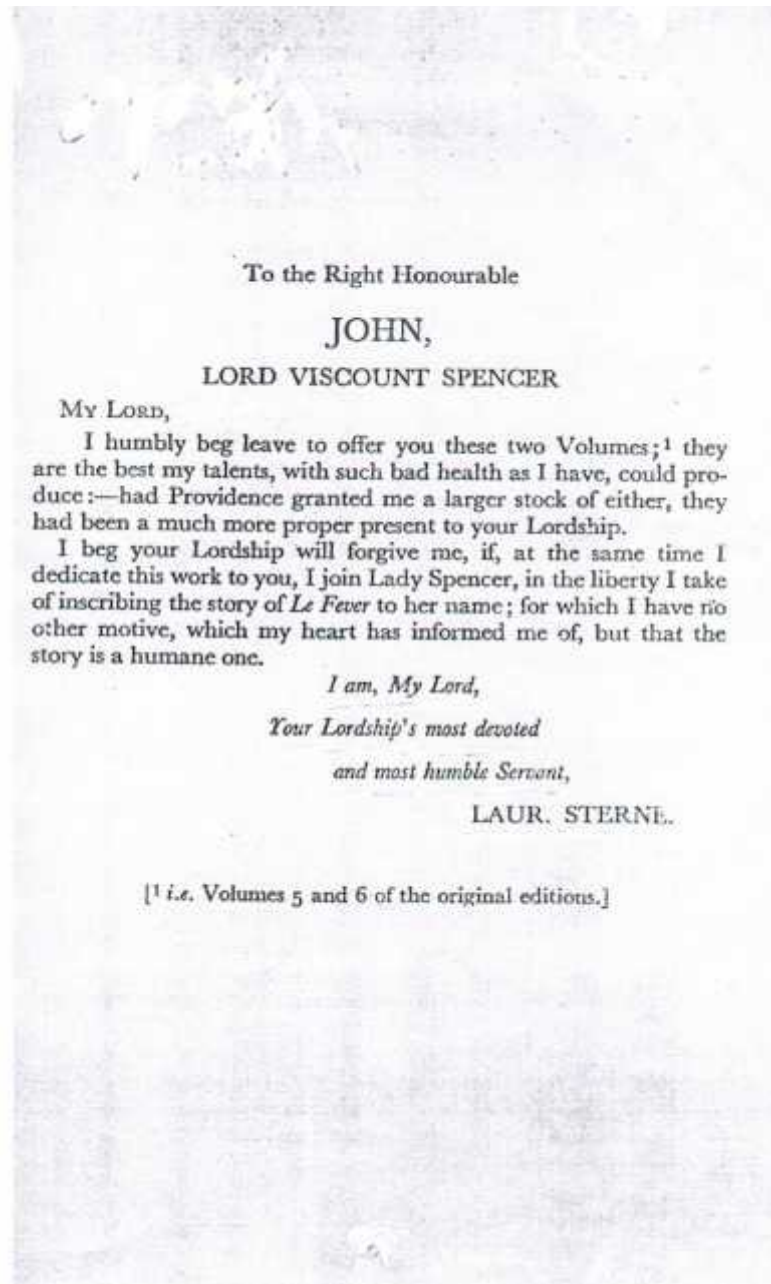
Tristram Shandy



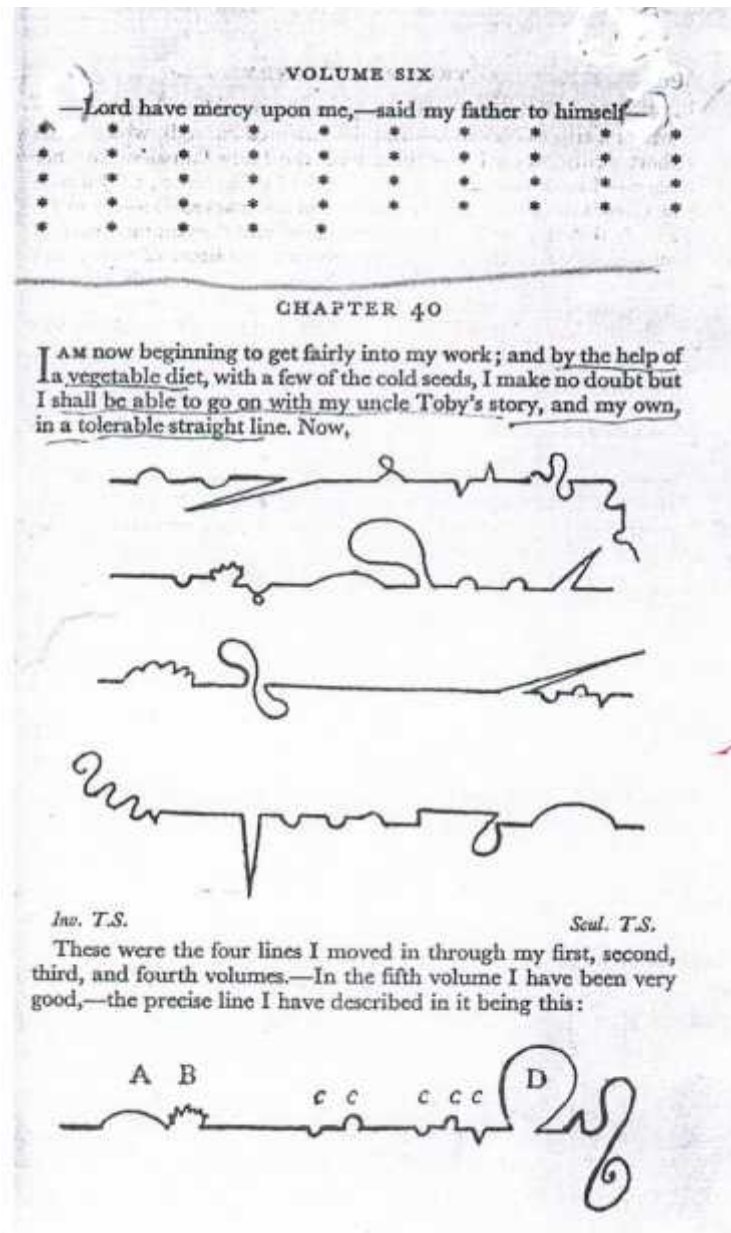
Black page: Is it the dark night of death ,of nescience or nonentity?



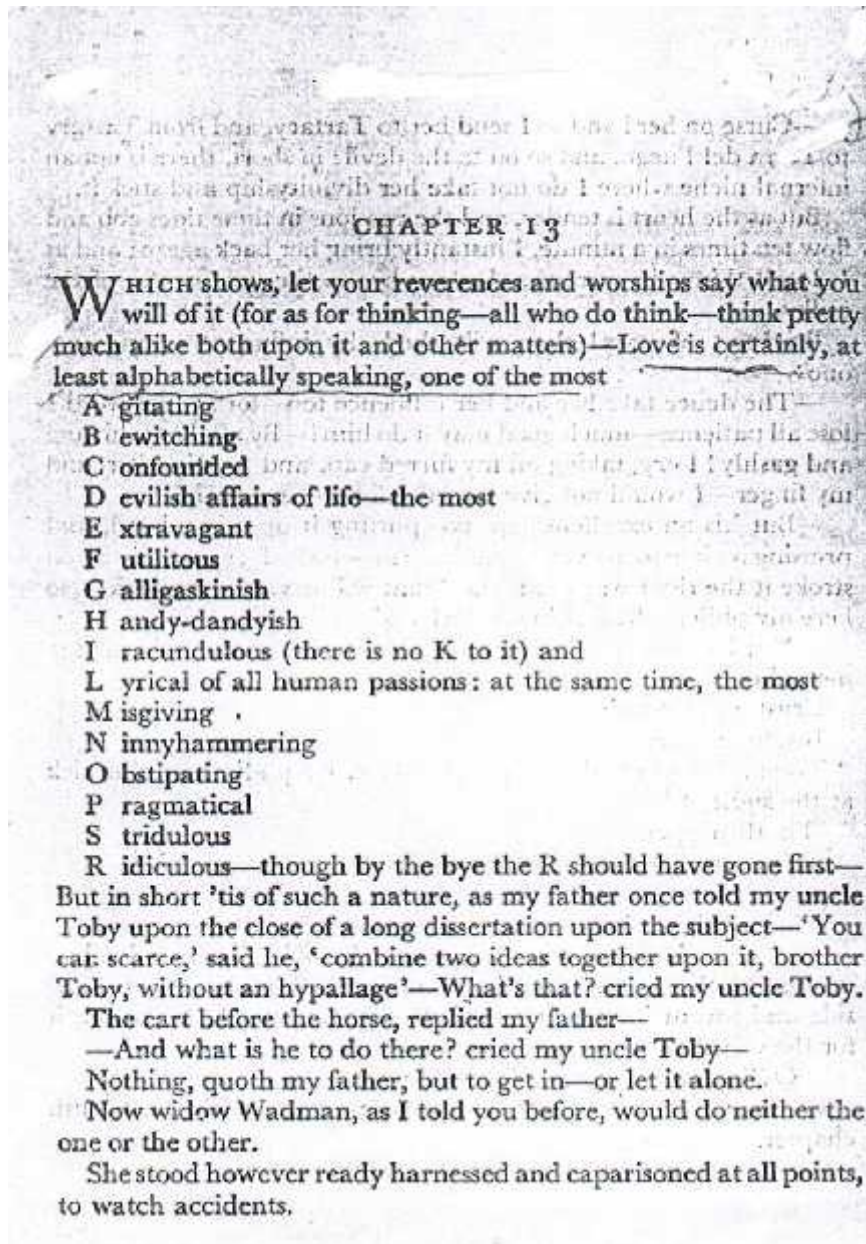
Chapter (5) of Volume IV consists of a shortish sentence



A “ Dedication To the Right Honourable John” signed by “ the most devoted and the most humble servant” Laur. Sterne.



Sterne announces that “by the help of a vegetable diet”, he will get into work and will be able to continue his uncle’s story. Then twisted lines and diagrams are being given.



A vertical column of capitalised adjectives speaking of love and having negative import (== meaning) ending with Ridiculous

A Dedication to
A GREAT MAN

HAVING, *a priori*, intended to dedicate *The Amours of my Uncle Toby* to Mr. ***—I see more reasons, *a posteriori*, for doing it to Lord *****.

I should lament from my soul, if this exposed me to the jealousy of their Reverences; because *a posteriori*, in Court-Latin, signifies the kissing hands for preferment—or any thing else—in order to get it.

My opinion of Lord ***** is neither better nor worse, than it was of Mr. ***. Honours, like impressions upon coin, may give an ideal and local value to a bit of base metal; but Gold and Silver will pass all the world over without any other recommendation than their own weight.

The same good-will that made me think of offering up half an hour's amusement to Mr. *** when out of place—operates more forcibly at present, as half an hour's amusement will be more servicable and refreshing after labour and sorrow, than after a philosophical repast.

Nothing is so perfectly amusement as a total change of ideas; no ideas are so totally different as those of Ministers, and innocent Lovers: for which reason, when I come to talk of Statesmen and Patriots, and set such marks upon them as will prevent confusion and mistakes concerning them for the future—I propose to dedicate that Volume to some gentle Shepherd,

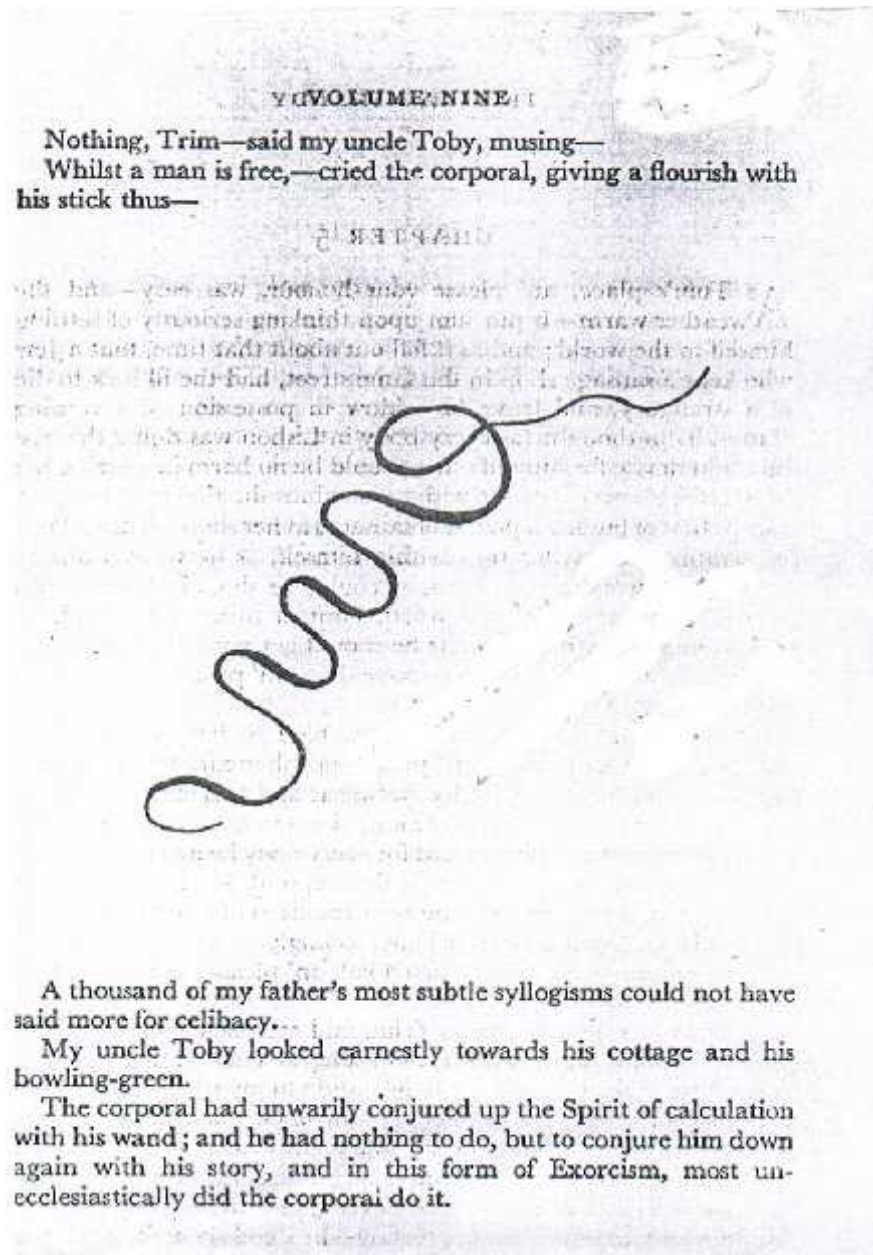
Whose thoughts proud Science never taught to stray,
Far as the Statesman's walk or Patriot-way;
Yet simple Nature to his hopes had given
Out of a cloud-capp'd head a humbler heaven;
Some untam'd World in depths of wood embraced—
Some happier Island in the watry-waste—
And where admitted to that equal sky,
His faithful Dog should bear him company.

In a word, by thus introducing an entire new set of objects to his Imagination, I shall unavoidably give a *Diversio* to his passionate and love-sick Contemplations. In the mean time,

I am

THE AUTHOR

A prosaic “Dedication to a Great Man” containing stars within and poetic lines, ending in Sterne announcing himself the author of the book I am THE AUTHOR



Part of chapter 4 (Volume Nine) is embedded in a snake-like drawing.

اغرب روايات القرن العشرين

أ.د. عزيز يوسف المطليبي*

المستخلص

يرغب البحث في أن يقدم عينة منبئة عن اغرب الروايات . فاذا ماسمينا الاشياء، فان رواية فارل فتاة في الذاكرة، التي نشرت عام 1967، تفصح عن ذات وسائلها الادبية . رواية القرن العشرين هذه تكشف عن صفحات مؤسلبية [= لها اسلوب معين] يجعلها فارل موازية لتعبيرات ذهن يستمتع بانحرافاته. رواية فارل فتاة في الذاكرة هي رواية تمتاز بحسن الصنعة. وهي تظهر فارل وهويكتشف اسلوبه. ويستشرف احساسه الكوميدي في هذه الرواية ماسيفعل بهذا الاحساس في رواياته التاريخية الأكثر نضجاً.

هذه الرواية الفارلية هي صدى لترستم شاندي، رواية القرن الثامن عشر. فهذه الرواية، وهي الأكثر روايات وعياً لذاتها في الافصاح عن وسائلها الروائية، لاتفصح عن وسائلها الروائية حسب وانما تعرب الزمن.

رواية ستيرن هي رواية فكهة كثيراً على الرغم من إتهام المؤلف بالسرقة الادبية. ويصرح فكتور شكولفسكي، وهو ناقد روسي شكلائي، في دراسته الشهرة النقد الشكلائي الروسي، يصرح قائلاً: إن ترستم شاندي هي أكثر روايات العالم إنموذجية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فتاة في الذاكرة ، ترستم شاندي ، النقد الشكلائي الروسي

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