CHAPTER XIV


Sterne wrote no plays; but there is ample evidence of his keen interest in dramatic production. In London, he made friends with David Garrick, and was a frequenter to the theatre. Garrick gave him 'an order for the liberty of his Boxes, and of every part of his House for the whole season'. From London, Sterne writes to Lord Fauconberg of the theatrical atmosphere of the great city. At Paris he goes to see the performance of the well-known French actress, Mademoiselle Clairon, and declares her 'extremely great', wishing that Garrick had 'one or two like her' in England. At Toulouse, with his English friends, he rehearses a play

"we are to act here this Christmas holidays", 4

He says also of his own acting in some English plays —

"(we) are now busy in making dresses and preparing some of our best comedies ... The next week, with a grand orchestra - we play the Busy Body, and the Journey to London the week after ...".5

We do not know whether he took part in plays; but we notice ample affinity between dramatic production and Sterne's work.

(a) Sterne's art and dramatic technique:

Sterne calls his novel 'this drama', - and elsewhere - 'a work of ... dramatic cast'. A drama vivifies a situation and ideas by presenting the characters in articulate body movements before the spectators. Its distinguishing feature is
visual representation. The dramatic method, instead of reporting a scene, renders it, by bringing to life the actual moment. Thus the Shandy brothers, coming down the stairs, are presented in every minute detail of physical movements; their conversation, or the fact of their coming down, is not just reported. We see Walter Shandy's 'turning himself about upon the first landing', his 'setting his foot upon the first step from the landing' and 'drawing his leg back and turning to my uncle Toby'; we see him "taking the same step over again from the landing, and calling to Susannah, whom he saw passing by the foot of the stairs with a huge pin-cushion in her hand"; we see him 'looking over the ballusters' down to Susannah who was 'out of hearing', and then 'crossing the landing in order to set his back against the wall while saying a word to brother Toby. This detailed presentation of posture has no thematic significance, but is of capital importance in a work of 'dramatic cast'.

Sterne equates his art of writing to dramatic or stage representation. He thinks of Garrick's acting for stressing his own artistic freedom and the imaginative quality of his art. He also uses terms of stage technique to explain his own technique of writing. Thus, as he proposes to shift his uncle Toby from the scene of the bowling-green to a new one, namely, that of amours with widow Wadman, the author says—

"...we 'll snuff the candles bright,—sweep the stage with a new broom,—draw up the curtain, and exhibit my uncle Toby dressed in a new character". He conceives his device of digressiveness in the novel in the
image of dropping the curtain on a stage; and as the digression ends he lifts the curtain. Thus, as he breaks the Shandean discourse on the new obstetrical science, to digress on the character of Walter Shandy (so that he could better explain Walter's preference for the new scientific instrument of Dr. Slop),

"I have dropped the curtain over this scene (i.e., the scene of the conversation) for a minute, - to remind you of one thing, - and to inform you of another ... When these two things are done, - the curtain shall be drawn up again, and my uncle Toby, my father, and Dr. Slop shall go on with their discourse, without any more interruptions". 15

The name metaphor of dropping the curtain is used for introducing the digression on the Shandy brothers' talks during their descent along the steps ("drop the curtain, Shandy" - the narrator tells himself); after five chapters of the digression, the repeats his image of the curtain;

"And how did you manage it? - You dropped a curtain at the stair-foot". 17

Similarly, just after introducing the bowling-green early in the novel, the author drops the curtain on it ("At present the scene must drop"), to lift it later in the story.

Sterne sets his scenes, too, in terms of stage representation. He presents the scene of Maria (in S.J.) as a stage scene. He builds up the physical situation of Maria in detail instead of directly analysing her mental state. Maria is sitting under a poplar, at a little opening in the road leading to a thicket; her elbow is in her lap and her head leans on one side within her hand; there is a small brook running at the foot of the tree (poplar). Maria is in white; a 'pale green ribband' falls across her shoulder to the waist, tying her
pipe at the end; and her hair hangs loose. Her only companion, dog Sylvio, is tied by a string to her girdle; and as Maria talks to her dog in sorrow, tears trickles down her cheeks. Maria has become a stage character. In T.S. the scene of Tristram's journey from London in a post-chaise driven by 'those two m..ttlesome tits, and that madcap of a position' recalls the vividness of actuality. The Shandy brothers standing side by side, reconciled after a little misunderstanding, reminds the author of the Brutus-Cassius scene. The dramatic quality of Sterne's art is very finely revealed in the interesting scene of the Queen's court at Navarre, where the ladies' sense of delicacy is hurt at the utterance of the word 'Whiskers', while they, in their hearts, hugely enjoy the sensation of a forbidden feeling—

"Ha, ha! he, hee! cried La Guyol and La Sabatier, looking close at each other's prints (i.e., the impression of feelings on their countenances) — Ho, ho! cried La Battareille, and Maronette, doing the same:—Whist! cried one — st, st,— said a second — hush, quoth a third — poo, poo, replied a fourth — grahamercy! cried the lady Carnavallet;--.... La Foscuse drew her bodkin from the knot of her hair, and having traced the outline of a small whisker, with the blunt end of it, upon one side of her upper lip, put it into La Rebours' hand — La Rebours shook her head. The Lady Baussiere coughed thrice into the inside of her muff — La Guyol smiled — Ty, said the Lady Baussiere. The queen of Navarre touched her eye with the tip of her forefinger — as much as to say, I understand you all". 24

It is a veritable scene on the stage. We appear to see the characters with their appropriate gestures; we are attuned to their moods; we seem to hear their half-uttered words, and participate in their secret joy of an ' unholy' sensation.

Sterne has something of a theatrical producer's
'finesse' in stage-setting. As the Notary (of The Fragment in S.S.) enters the room of the poor bed-ridden man, the room is presented before us with his scenic precision of a stage production; it was

"a large chamber dismantled of everything but a long military pike, a breast-plate, a rusty old sword, and bandoleer, hung up equidistant in four different places against the wall".25

The Notary sits down upon the chair by 'a little table with a taper burning' by the side of the bed, on which -- we are told -- the poor man lay supporting his head upon his hand. The Notary pulls out his 'inkhorn' and some papers from his pocket, and

"dipping his pen in his ink, and leaning his breast over the table", 26 prepares to record the poor gentleman's 'last will and testament'.

As the poor man finishes his brief introduction and is about to tell his sad story, the Notary is shown as holding up 'the point of his pen betwixt the taper and his eye'. Sterne had a wonderful eye for detail. The stray beggar whom the 'sentimental/standing at the gate of his Paris hotel, sees on the road is 'a tall figure of a philosophic, serious, adust look'; he passes and repasses 'sedately' along the street with 'a dark drab-coloured coat, waistcoat, and breeches' and 'a small cane under his arm'. Our traveller notices also that the beggar is

"making a turn of about sixty paces on each side of the gate of the hotel" 27,

and that in half an hour

"he had made a dozen turns backwards and forwards".27

These minute little details of physical position are not of much significance for the story, but they are vital to the
dramatic imagination of the author.

One device of dramatic art consists in creating sudden and unexpected turns in a situation. Sterne exploits this device very skilfully in the scene where the tragic news of her son's (Booby's) death breaks upon the unfortunate Mrs. Shandy. She entered the parlour to protest to her husband, that he had one more child than she knew of. (From outside the room she had overheard him saying -

"I have three desolate children", and

and did not know he was only quoting from Socrates). And then, by a cruel irony of fate, the comic situation is suddenly turned into a tragic one for her; for she is told immediately (in reply to her protest) that he has but one less. Sterne imparts to his scene a psychological intensity by a subtle application of the dramatic device of reversal.

(b) Dramatic presentation of ideas, feelings:

An important aspect of Sterne's dramatic technique is revealed in his presentation of ideas and feelings. His own speeding through his Volumes (of T.S.) he describes in the comic image of reckless riding -

"What a rate have I gone on at, curvetting and frisking it away, two up and two down for four volumes together, without looking once behind; or even on one side of me, to see whom I trod upon! – I'll tread upon no one – quoth I to myself when I mounted – I'll take a good rattling gallop; but I'll not hurt the poorest jack-ass upon the road. - So off I set – up one lane – down another, through this turnpike – over that, as if the arch-jockey of jockeys had got behind me." 29

His disregard of the set rules is his full gallop 'among the
scaffolding of the undertaking critics! The idea of the dam-
ge to his reputation is represented by the knocking of his brains —

"he'll knock his brains out against some of their posts" 29

Sterne's genius thus frequently concretises an idea. The dama-
ge caused to the new-born's brain by the pressure of the sci-
ettific instrument is conceived in terms of 'the fine network of the intellectual web ... rent and torn to a thousand tatters'. Mental derangement is the wearing out of the traces of the bra-

("...could the traces be ever worn out of her brain ...")

The idea of health and vigour is expressed by the simple Trim's striking the end of his stick perpendicularly upon the floor, and that of the transitoriness of existence by the sudden dro-
ping of his hat upon the ground. There are thousands of ways of dropping a hat — the author tells us — but Trim dropped it in such a manner as would exactly express 'the sentiment of morality';

"his hand seemed to vanish from under it, — it fell dead, — the corporal's eye fixed upon it, as upon a corpse," 33

The 'sentimental traveller', visualises the miseries of confin-
Uement, by taking 'a single captive'; then having "shut him up in his dungeon" he looks "through the twilight of his grated door to take his picture". He lets us see the wasted appear-
Uance of the captive, his (captive's) straw bed with 'a little calender of small sticks ... at the head', the chains of his legs (the author refers to the sound of the chains too), his
little movements. The idea of captivity is presented in concrete terms, in visual images, as on the stage. The fast-perishing moment is visualised for us by the lock of 'my dear Jenny', which greys even as she twists it for toilet.

"Time wastes too fast ... everything presses on - whilst thou art twisting that lock, - see! it grows grey".36

Even his mode of thinking is conceived by Sterne in concrete terms. To Locke, ideas are the objects of thinking, Sterne likewise conceives of ideas as objects distinct from the consciousness which apprehends them. In his humorous vein he says of his

"half starting out of my chair ... (and) catching the idea, even sometimes before it half way reaches me".38

It is interesting to note, that Coleridge, too, referred to images in his mind rising up before him as substances.39

In Sterne, feelings of the heart, too, like ideas, are presented in concrete terms. The 'sentimental traveller's compassion for poor Maria is 'the oil and wine' poured into her wounds. Sterne dramatises this feeling of compassion in a most beautiful manner in the Le Fever scene in T.S. During an animated conversation with Trim, the ever-benign Toby cannot bring himself to believe that Le Fever would die.

"... - do what we can for him, said Trim, maintaining his point; - the poor soul will die: - He shall not die, by G-, cried my uncle Toby".41

And then come the significant lines ---

"The Accusing Spirit, which flew up to heaven's chancery with the oath, blushed as he gave it in; - and the Recording Angel, as he wrote it down, dropped a tear upon the word, and blotted it out for ever".42
Sir Leslie Stephen criticised this scene as impious and inartistic. The Angel, according to him,

"seems to introduce an unpleasant air, as of 18th century politeness; we fancy that he would have welcomed a Lord Chesterfield to the celestial mansions with a faultless bow and a dexterous compliment; and somehow he appears to my imagination at least, appareled in the strical gauze and spangles, rather than in the genuine angelic costume". 43

The criticism is not fair to Sterne. Leslie Stephen has here failed to notice the real artistic quality of the scene. By a visible symbol, Sterne has driven home to us the intensity and the sacredness of Toby's humanistic feeling. Uncle Toby's overwhelming passion of love and sympathy has not been described to us in the so-called sentimental manner, but has been presented before us dramatically.

(c) Physical gestures:

Sterne's dramatic quality is revealed very clearly in the physical gestures of his characters. Such gestures have both dramatic and psychological significance, as Watkins has pointed out. Watkins observes that while in the latter they portray mental states, in the former they exist more or less as instinctive gesticulation. But these two aspects cannot be mutually exclusive; in other words, gesticulation may be an automatic reflection of an inner idea. In any case, the characters of Sterne are distinguished by their stance and gesture, as much as by their ideas or action.

These 'dramatic' gestures exist in a wide variety; and their distinctiveness lies in their presentation in minute detail. This is how Walter Shandy prepares to come downstairs
on receipt of the news of his son's accident by the window-sash--

"My father put on his spectacles - looked, - took them off, - put them into the case - all in less than a statuteable minute; and without opening his lips, turned about and walked precipitately down stairs." 45

Dramatic posturing is seen in frequent clapping of hands for joy. We find traveller Tristram, the 'sentimental traveller' 46 and his valet La Fleur - all doing it on various occasions. Tristram, while reading the sermon on Conscience, must set himself to the appropriate posture, which is presented in all its minutiae by the author. Even such a minor matter as shutting a book assumes a dramatic significance to Sterne -

"...my father shut the book, - not as if he resolved to read no more of it, for it he kept his fore-finger in the chapter: - nor pettishly, - for he shut the book slowly; his thumb resting, when he had done it, upon the upper-side of the cover, as his three fingers supported the lower side of it, without the least compressive violence." 48

Sterne is no less skilled in recording the fine details of facial expression. As he presents the begging monk, the author refers to his eyes, which had

"that sort of fire ... in them, which seemed more temper'd by courtesy than years". 49

The French chevalier, hawking his 'pates', had 'a sedate look, something approaching to gravity'. Even an animal's face assumes a dramatic significance to Sterne. Tristram, during his communion with the ass at Lyons, frames his (ass's) responses 'from the etchings of his (i.e., ass's) countenance'.

We cannot thus agree with Tompkins, when he dismisses Sterne's presentation of the physical minutiae of his characters as a mere 'cult of the trifle', an 'elaboration of the unimportant'.

Our understanding of this 'dramatic' technique of...
Sterne may save us from many misdirected criticisms of the author. Thackeray's indictment of Sterne for the Dead Ass scene in *S.J.* has already been referred to and discussed (see *ante*, Chap.XIII, p.247). The fact of a man's mourning (and shedding tears) for his dead donkey, who had been unto him a faithful friend and companion, might repel the Victorian satirist; but it was not at odds with Sterne's sense of life. We should remember that Sterne was a 'sentimental traveller', who was 'altogether of a different cast' from others, and who addressed himself to the sentiments of love and pity. We should remember also, that Sterne's humanity embraced all creation (Chap.VIII — Sterne's Humanity), and that tears, which — as Thackeray has said elsewhere —

"are the alma of gentle spirits, and may be counted, as sure they may, among the sweetest of life's charities", 54

had a more serious meaning in Sterne's age of sensibility (see *ante*, Chap.XIII — Sentimentalism). Sentiment apart, the Dead Ass scene is also distinguished by its artistic quality. The scene is an apt illustration of Sterne's dramatic technique of writing. The scene of mourning, as its chief figure sits on the stone bench at the door of the Nampont hotel, is remarkable for the delineation of little details of his physical movement and of stage-setting. On one side of the mourner are placed 'the ass's pannel and its bridle'. He takes up the bridle and the panel from time to time, then lays them down, looks at them and shakes his head. He then takes the crumb of bread (his ass's share) out of his bag, "as if to eat it". 55
He

"held it for some time in his hand, then laid it
upon the bit of his ass's bridle, looked wistfully
at the little arrangement he had made, and then
gave a sigh". 56

A number of people collect close round him, drawn by the 'simp-
plicity of his grief'. The mourner exists for us not merely in
his sentiment of humanity, but in another very important sense,
that is, as a 'dramatic' character with his appropriate stance
and gesture.

The physical gestures in Sterne are instinctive, and
not brought about by any deliberate will of the characters.
They are determined by Nature;

"She, dear Goddess, by an instantaneous impulse in
all provoking cases, determines us to a sally of
this or that member - or else she thrusts us into
this or that place, posture of body, we know not
why". 57

This gesturing, being instinctive and brought about by Nature,
cannot always be explained rationally. It is one of the 'ri-
ddles and mysteries', amongst which we live.

Sometimes, as it happens with stage acting, the tone
of voice of Sterne's 'dramatis personae' becomes meaningful.
As Trim tells the story of his poor brother Tom to his master
Toby, he finds his energy and voice failing him after a time.
His attempt to recapture his full voice and vigour is indicat-
ed in his

"giving a stout hem! to rally back the retreating
spirits, and aiding nature at the same time with
his left arm - a-kimbo on one side, and with his
right a little extended ..." 58

Elsewhere, as Trim pares to tell the story of the King of

......
Bohemia, we are told, he

"hemmed twice, to find in what key his story would
best go". 59

By thus adroitly exploiting some of the devices of
dramatic technique, Sterne brings to his scenes the vividness
of actuality, invests his ideas with the effect of the spoken
word, and thus succeeds in drawing his readers more intimately
into the world of his creation.