CHAPTER XV

4. The Art of Sterne — (F) Conversational Style

(a) Writing and conversation:

Sterne succeeds in drawing his readers intimately into his world of creation, by another device — namely, by the conversational quality of his art. The great Johnson saw little relationship between writing and conversation. He considered the 'graces of writing and conversation' to be of different kinds. By conversation, of course, he meant common parlance, or what he calls 'extemporary talk', in which a man's spleen or personal idiosyncrasies may spoil the discourse. Composition, on the other hand, requires a 'more accurate method and more laboured beauties'. This stress on the strictness of form obviously reveals Dr. Johnson's classicist sympathies. Steele, however, thought differently; he believed that

"a mark of a good writer will fall in with the character of a good companion. The good writer makes his reader better pleased with himself, and the agreeable man makes his friends enjoy themselves, rather than him, while he is in their company".

Sterne would rather agree with Steele than with Dr. Johnson.

"Writing" — said he — "when properly managed (as you may, be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation. As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all;— so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good-breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself".

For the conversational quality of Sterne's style, we
may trace his affinity with the Renaissance authors, Rabelais and Montaigne, whom he read and admired (as is evident from his references to them in his work). Rabelais wrote his comic masterpiece, Gargantua and Pantagruel, in the tone of an intimate conversation with his readers, whom he addresses as 'Your worships', or 'Gentlemen', or in similar terms. Sterne - as we shall see - uses this trick of writing more variously and more frequently. Rabelais takes his readers into confidence, and speaks to them about himself and his work; for instance, as he closes the first Book of Pantagruel (the second Book of Gargantua and Pantagruel), he says -

"Here will I make an end of the First Book. My head aches a little, and I perceive that the registers of my brain are somewhat jumbled and disordered with the septembral juice. You shall have the rest of the story at Frankfurt mart next coming ... Good night, gentlemen ... If you say to me, 'Master, it would seem that you were not very wise in writing to us these flimflam stories, and pleasant fooleries': I answer you, that you are not much wiser, in spending your time in reading them. Nevertheless, if you read them to make yourselves merry, as in manner of pastime I wrote them, you and I both are far more worthy of pardon than a great rabble of squint-minded fellows, counterfeit saints, demure lookers, hypocrites ...".8

The fourth Book of G. and P. begins with this address to readers -

"Good people, God save and keep you! Where are you? I can't see you: stay - I'll saddle my nose with spectacles - oh, oh! 'twill be fair anon, I see you. Well, you have had a good vintage, they say ... You, your wives, children, friends, and families are in as good case as hearts can wish".9

This manner of informal, comic conversation is sustained throughout G. and P.

Montaigne believed that language should not be pedantic and heavy, but free, easy and conversational.
Montaigne's essays are distinguished by the quality of free and intimate discursiveness. He calls them his conversations with friends -

"Most of those that converse with me, speak like unto these essays".11

Montaigne's influence is felt in the English prose of the 17th and 18th centuries. The literature of the Elizabethan age had been marked by elegance and decoration. The Elizabethans - as Sutherland puts it - had 'an almost childlike delight in the flowers of the rhetoric'. In the 17th century, in the wake of Montaigne, we find the emergence of a simpler prose. The growth of population, increase of literacy, greater socio-political consciousness (awakened by the two Revolutions - one towards the middle, and the other near the close, of the 17th century) - all helped in breaking the aristocracy of the quill. Bunyan is not an isolated example. We have Hobbes, Dryden, Locke, later Hume, Adam Smith and others, all belonging to the same tradition of simplicity and freedom from rhetorical finery. Dryden recommended to 'a young poet' and critic (William Walsh) a style which was 'easy and natural' and 'fit for dialogue'. Addison and Steele commended, and themselves wrote, the familiar and conversational style. Addison preferred 'homely language' to the 'sound and energy of expression'. Steele vigorously pleads for 'sincerity and plainness' of speech. So Hume -

"It is with books, as with women, ... a certain plainness of manner and of dress is more engaging than that glare of paint and airs and apparel, which may dazzle the eye but reaches not the affections".16
Hume condemns 'too much ornament' in composition, and pleads for a 'just mixture of simplicity and refinement in writing'; he believes that 'the excess of refinement' is even worse than that of simplicity. The decline of scholasticism (see Chap. II) also helped in this process of simplification of speech. Lord Chesterfield advised his son to 'wear' his learning 'like your watch, in a private pocket', and not to 'pull it out and strike it merely to show you have one'. He said that while language should be refined, 'a stiff and formal accuracy, especially what the women call hard words' should be avoided, in favour of 'plain ones as expressive'. Bunyan, Defoe, Swift, Richardson, Goldsmith - all avoided ornamentation. So did Fielding, though in a lesser degree; for his classical sympathies and mock-heroic style (in T.J.) somewhat obtrude on his simplicity. But while these authors used, more or less, what may be called the expressions of 'common men' and 'common life', which were so highly commended by that master of English prose style, Jonathan Swift, they lack the free, almost irresponsively gay, comic spirit of Sterne - an advantage which our author skilfully used to build a pleasing tete-a-tete with his readers.

(b) Character of Sterne's conversational quality:

(i) Friendly addresses. Tristram Shandy is full of friendly addresses to the reader and critic. These addresses are both comic and serious. Mostly they are comic. His forms of address are as interesting as they are varied. They are interposed in the story in a subtle and natural manner. They occur mostly in the 'Opinions' of the narrator. He variously
addresses his readers as 'your worships', 'your reverences', 'your worships and reverences', 'your reverences and worships', 'your worships and your reverences', 'your reverences and your worships', 'an' please your worships', 'an' please your reverences', 'may it please your worships', 'may it please your reverences', 'may it please your worships and reverences', 'may it please your reverences and worships', and so on. The playful permutations and combinations with 'worships' and 'reverences' are interesting to note. There are other addresses, too, like 'your honour', 'your worship', 'your honours and reverences', 'Gentle reader', 'my unlearned reader' (whom he advises to "read, read, read", for understanding his reference to 'Tickletoy's mare'), 'my dear creatures', 'dear sir', 'sir', 'sirs', 'my dear sirs', and so on. Such addresses are really informal, though they have a mock air of formality. There is no end of his tricks to establish his kinship with his readers.

He may imagine his readers as his woman-friends, calling them 'your ladyships'. The address 'Madam' is frequent. One interesting example may be given—

"- How could you, Madam, be so inattentive in reading the last chapter? I told you in it, That my mother was not a papist. - Papist! You told me no such thing, Sir. - Madam, I beg leave to repeat it over again, that I told you as plain, at least, as words, by direct inference, could tell you such a thing. - Then, Sir, I must have missed a page. - No, Madam, - you have not missed a word. - Then I was asleep, Sir. - My pride, Madam, cannot allow you that refuge. - Then, I declare, I know nothing at all about the matter. - That, Madam, is the very fault I lay to your charge ...".24

Sometimes, in the same paragraph (as in the last paragraph of Chap. 8 in Book III), he may address his reader both as 'Madam' and 'Sirs'. It is as if the author is conversing confi-
dentially with several members of a mixed company.

This attitude is in sharp contrast to the pedantic vein, in which Fielding addresses his readers. He treats them as his 'subjects', to whom he is giving his 'laws' of construction. Fielding's Preface to Joseph Andrews and the opening chapter of each Book in Tom Jones are learned lectures at his readers and critics. This frequent formal appearance as author, or, directing his readers to properly understand his work - his theme as well as technique, obtrudes on our enjoyment of the work itself. And sometimes, Fielding's conceit, or expression of it, makes this obtrusion a little oppressive. Here is a typical example -

"First, then, we warn thee not too hastily to condemn any of the incidents in this our history as impertinent and foreign to our main design, because thou dost not immediately conceive in what manner such incident may conduce to that design. This work may, indeed, be considered as a great creation of our own; and for a little reptile of a critic to presume to find fault with any of its parts, without knowing the manner in which the whole is connected, and before he comes to the final catastrophe, is a most presumptuous absurdity".27

Sterne, on the other hand, while treating his readers and critics to his fare, tells them -

"Gentlemen, I kiss your hands, I protest no company could give me half the pleasure, - by my soul I am glad to see you - I beg only you will make no strangers of yourselves, but sit down without any ceremony, and fall on heartily".28

Like a pleasing conversationalist, Sterne at once talks to, and enjoys, his readers and critics. In his musical chapter, the narrator talks to his reader, whom he imagines to be listening to his music (playing on the fiddle). At another place, he discusses his writing plan with his readers in an informal chat.
with them -

"Come! cheer up, my lads; I'll shew you land - for when we have tugged through that chapter, the book shall not be opened again this twelvemonth. - Huzza!"

The comic spirit, in which Sterne makes his friendly addresses to his readers, is sometimes mixed up with a tone of seriousness; as where he pleads the innocence and festivity of in his wit, and a tone of gentle persuasiveness requests his reader to believe that in the hobby-horses of the Shandy brothers he is not vilifying, or ridiculing, anybody -

(i.e., T.S.)

"If 'tis/wrote against any thing, - 'tis wrote, an' please your worships, against the spleen!"

(ii) Comic transformation. We have said that the narrator's personality, in T.S., is felt throughout, but is never obtrusive (see ante, pp. 377). This is because it undergoes something like a magical transformation as a comic figure in the story itself. While opening his Book VI, for example, with his usual zest, the author engages in this friendly chat with his reader -

"- We'll not stop two moments, my dear Sir, - only, as we have got through these five volumes, (do, Sir, sit down upon a set - they are better than nothing) let us just look back upon the country we have passed through. - What a wilderness has it been! and what a mercy that we have not both of us been lost, or devoured by wild beasts in it! Did you think the world itself, Sir, had contained such a number of Jack Asses? - How they viewed and reviewed us as we passed over the rivulet at the bottom of that little valley! - and when we climbed over that hill, and were just getting out of sight - good God! what a braying did they all set up together!"

The informal talk with his reader is enlivened by a comic thrust at his unkind critics. The author imagines his reader go-
ing along with him in his journey across hills and forests -
the venturesome world of letters. He imagines his critics as
'Jack Asses' braying at them (author and his reader). With a
confident assumption of his reader's sympathy, he laughs his
x critics to scorn. They 'bray' as he goes along, and he hugely
enjoys it. He points them out to his companion reader, and asks a local shepherd -

"Prithee, shepherd! who keeps all those Jack Asses?"32

Then he turns to the 'Jack Asses' themselves -

"Bray, bray - bray, bray on, - the world is deeply
your debtor; - louder still - that's nothing:- in
good sooth, you are ill-used".32

By his talks with his reader, the shepherd, and the 'Jack Ass-
es' by turns, Sterne effects his complete identification with
his world of creation. By such tricks, narrator Tristram be-
comes himself a figure in the dream-world he creates.

Sometimes he plants himself direct in the company
of his characters. The Shandy brothers and Dr. Slop talk about
the use of the doctor's scientific instrument, in the presence
of maid Susannah. Uncle Toby mentions the possibility of the
damage to the child's brain by it, but Dr. Slop says that he
could as well take the foetus out by the feet. Susannah's sen-
se of delicacy being hurt, she says - "Not you". But the infi-
nitely curious Walter Shandy wishes the doctor to do so, and
Uncle Toby adds - "Pray do". And then, narrator Tristram (who
was not born yet) joins the conversation and asks Susannah -

"- And pray, good woman, after all, will you take
upon you to say, it may not be the child's hip,
as well as the child's head?"34

Sometimes the narrator would participate in the action as
a jester, and refer to his 'cap and bells'. Once, appearing to
miss his 'fool's cap', he asks his 'Madam'-reader to find it
out for him -

"I fear you sit upon it, Madam - 'tis under the cu­
shion - I'll put it on -".36

The 'Madam' replies -

"Bless me! you have had it upon your head this half
hour".36

This comic fooling serves to give an edge to the conversational
quality of Sterne's art.

(c) Simplicity, raciness, colloquialisms:

Sterne ridicules, through the grandiloquent Walter
Shandy, all decorations of speech

"proceeding from period to period, by metaphor and
allusion, and striking the fancy ... with the en­
tertainment and pleasantry of his(i.e., Walter Sh­
andy's) pictures and images".37

Mr. Shandy, in his inspired harangue on his son's death, would
remember

"Not a period in Socrates's oration which closed
with a shorter word than transmigration, or anni­
hilation,- ...".38

Elsewhere, Sterne, speaking of sleep and its blessedness, says
that he is 'no dab at your fine sayings' on the subject. In th­
is connection, he commends Cervantes and Montaigne for their
qualities of fine simplicity and naturalness of speech. He li­
kes Cervantes, because his language

"speaks warmer to my heart and affections, than all
the dissertations squeezed out of the heads of the
learned together upon the subject".40

Here we have the clue to Sterne's style - namely, in its
heart-warming quality, its appeal to the 'heart and affections'. He believed that the language which appeals to the heart is at once simple and sincere. He commends Trim's simple speech on the death of Bobby, for its freedom from ornamentations and its direct, natural appeal to the heart. His own sermons, too, are distinguished by this quality (see ante, Chap. VII, pp. 133, 138-41).

Sterne's speech derives its raciness from this simple, heart-warming quality, which combines spontaneity with vigour of expression. This is evident both in his comic and pathetic scenes. The ridiculous Dr. Slop is introduced thus -

"Imagine to yourself a little squat, uncourtly figure of a Doctor Slop, of about four feet and a half perpendicular height, ... Imagine such a one ... coming slowly along, foot by foot, waddling through the dirt upon the vertebrae of a little diminutive pony, of a pretty colour - but of strength, - alack! - scarce able to have made an amble of it, under such a fardel, had the roads been in an ambling condition. - They were not. - Imagine to yourself, Obadiah mounted upon a strong monster of a coach-horse, pricked into a full gallop, and making all practicable speed the adverse way".42

Dr. Slop and Obadiah clash, at the turn of the road -

"Obadiah and his coach-horse turned the corner, rapid, furious, - pop, - full upon him! ... What could Dr. Slop do? - he crossed himself ... the doctor, Sir, was a Papist. - ... in crossing himself he let go his whip, - and in attempting to save his whip betwixt his knee and his saddle's skirt, as it slipped, he lost his stirrup, - in losing which he lost his seat; - and in the multitude of all those losses ... the unfortunate doctor lost his presence of mind".43

Dr. Slop falls down and is splashed in the mud - And in that condition, 'with all the majesty of mud' about him, he is led by Obadiah into the Shandy parlour. The comic element in the episode of Slop's fall gains effect from the raciness and the
easy grace of the language. This natural vigour of speech is
revealed in equal felicity in Sterne's 'sentimental' scenes.
The arrival of the sick Le Fever at the village inn is des-
cribed thus —

"He (Toby) was one evening sitting thus at his su-
pper, when the landlord of a little inn in the
village came into the parlour, with an empty ph-
ial in his hand, to beg a glass or two of sack;
'Tis for a poor gentleman, — I think, of the army,
said the landlord, who has been taken ill at my
house four days ago, and has never held up his
head since, or had a desire to taste any thing,
till just now, that he has a fancy for a glass of
sack and a thin toast, — I think, says he, taking
his hand from his forehead, it would comfort me.—
— If I could neither beg, borrow, or buy such a
thing — added the landlord, — I would almost steal
it for the poor gentleman, he is so ill. — I hope
in God he will still mend, continued he, — we are
all of us concerned for him.
Thou art a good-natured soul, I will answer for
thee, cried my uncle Toby; and thou shalt drink
the poor gentleman's health in a glass of sack thy-
self, — and take a couple of bottles with my serv-
icie, and tell him he is heartily welcome to them,
and to a dozen more if they will do him good".45

Sterne's simple grace of speech is also marked in his occa-
sional use of colloquialisms and typical phrases of lively
conversation. Obadiah and his horse — as we have mentioned
already —

"turned the corner, rapid, furious, — pop, — full
upon him (Slop)!"46

The use of the word 'dab' (colloq. for 'an adept' or expert)
has already been referred to (p. 272, ante). Sterne often uses
the colloquial 'noddle' for the head, for its pleasing comic
sound. Parson Yorick in the novel rates his sermons in col-
loquial terms. He prefers the colloquial 'So, so' to the lea-
red 'moderato'. The author's ironical comment here is sig-
nificant —
"... the moderato's are five times better than the so... so's;— show ten times more knowledge of the human heart;— have seventy times more wit and spirit in them; ..."\textsuperscript{49}

Sterne's interjections, too, are of actual speech. The slow progress of the London waggon, dragged up by 'eight heavy beasts' makes Tristram say (referring to the horses) —

"...but your betters draw the same way — and something of everybody's! — O rare!"\textsuperscript{50}

He wishes all such imitative writers and scholars were put up 'in a good farcical house, large enough to hold — aye — and sublimate them'. Such expressions, as 'O rare!', 'aye!', 'O my God!', '-L(ord)- help me!', 'Bless us!', 'just heaven!', 'but oh!', interposed in the midst of his narration, make us feel that the author is not just writing for his reader, but talking straight to him.

Conclusion:

Sterne's speech is simple, but subtle; it is racy and is distinguished by the quality of spontaneity. His talks with his reader are full of life, and have the naturalness of conversation of a gay humorist. Traill found Sterne lacking in 'style', and called him 'a bad and careless writer' for his 'digressions, his asides, and his fooleries in general', which bring in (according to Traill) a 'jerkiness of manner'. By style, Traill obviously meant a formal elegance, conforming to the set rules of writing. He goes further to observe that

"if we can hardly describe Sterne's style as being in the literary sense a style at all, it has a very distinct colloquial character of its own ... Chaotic as it is in the syntactical sense, it is a perfectly clear vehicle for the conveyance of thought ... his language is so full of life and colour,
his tone so animated and vivacious, that we forget we are reading and not listening".58

Here Traill lands himself into a contradiction. If a writer's language is 'a perfectly clear vehicle for the conveyance of thought', one wonders how he can be called 'a bad and careless writer'. Indeed, if a writer's language perfectly expresses his thought, his individuality, and if by the vivacity and animation of his speech he can put his readers in direct contact with his ideas, making the medium of language seem to vanish— as Sterne has done, he can be said to have achieved the highest distinction in style.