INTRODUCTION

Though one of the most interesting and original authors of all time, Laurence Sterne has been more neglected than read, more easily condemned than appreciated. The prejudice against him started in his life-time, but deepened in the next century with Thackeray. Dr. Johnson and Goldsmith intensely disliked him. Dr. Johnson called a lady 'a dunce', because she happened to praise Sterne's writings to him. Goldsmith charged \textit{Tristram Shandy} though he did not name it - with 'pertness' and 'bawdy'. But when, during a conversation, he described Sterne (who was not there) as 'a very dull fellow', Dr. Johnson corrected him, saying "Why, no, Sir". Horace Walpole doubted the sincerity of Sterne's sentiments; "A dead ass was more important to him than a living mother". He also found T.S. 'a very insipid and tedious performance'. In the next century, Sir Walter Scott dismissed the charges of indecency against Sterne; but he believed that Sterne, in his novel, sinned against taste, if not against morals. Like many others, Scott, too, saw in Sterne's novel an 'eccentricity in composition' and no substantial theme. In Scott's time, however, there were competent, though fragmentary, critical notices of Sterne by Hazlitt and Coleridge. Hazlitt noted Sterne's excellence in characterization, and Coleridge first pointed out, among other things, the true nature of Sterne's humoristic genius.

The Victorian age was very hard on Sterne. Thackeray flayed him for his so-called indecency and insincerity. He charges Sterne's novel with 'a latent corruption - a hint, as of an impure presence'.
Walter Bagehot and Leslie Stephen, in their essays on Sterne, more or less take Thackeray's line, though their tone is less bitter. Bagehot called T.S. 'an indecent novel', and Stephen described Sterne as 'a consummate sneak' and noted in his work a lack of 'purpose'. The celebrated French historian of English literature, H.A. Taine, with all his critical insight, finds Sterne 'a sickly and eccentric humorist' who has 'neither sequence nor plan' in his work. Of full books on Sterne in the last century may be mentioned Percy Fitzgerald's *Laurence Sterne* (2 Vols., 1896) and H.D. Traill's *Sterne* (1889). The former is purely biographical, the latter mainly so. Traill's occasional criticism shares the Victorian prejudice against Sterne. Thus he was echoing Thackeray when he said — "The unclean spirit pursues him (Sterne) everywhere". Traill calls the scene of the Visitation Dinner preluded by the ludicrous episode of the hot chestnut (T.S., IV, 27-9) a 'painfully elaborated piece of low comedy', whereas it really provides an apt illustration of the humoristic genius of Sterne — as we shall see. The Victorians reveal little awareness of the true nature of Sterne's sentiment and humour, or of his theme and technique. The free-spirited Sterne who defied tradition and shook his 'cap and bells' at it, easily lent himself to misunderstanding too, particularly in an age, which in its liberalism valued tradition and order.

It was early in the 20th century that a full-scale beginning was made, with W.L. Cross's *Life and Times of Laurence Sterne* (1909, also 1925), to properly understand Sterne. Cross's book is chiefly of biographical interest, but is interspersed with useful criticism of Sterne's work. The same is true of Walter Sichel's *Sterne* (1910) — with the difference that Cross's biography is more
objective. They were followed, years later, by others—such as, Thomas Yoseloff (Laurence Sterne, A Fellow of Infinite Jest, 1948) Willard Connely (Laurence Sterne as Yorick, 1958), Margaret R.B. Shaw (Laurence Sterne, 1957). These books are all biographies, having little critical interest in them; their usefulness lies in helping us understand the man Sterne better. Our knowledge of Sterne the man has been greatly advanced by L.P. Curtis’s edition of Sterne’s Letters (1935), in which, Curtis puts in brief explanatory biographical notes about the author. R. Brimley Johnson had earlier edited a selection of Sterne’s letters (1927).

For Sterne criticism, the 20th century has been more fruitful in short essays. Herbert Read, taking the cue from Coleridge whom he quotes, points out the true nature of Sterne’s humour as a device of equating the high and the low. Read also noted the ‘psychological’ continuity in Sterne’s novel. Read’s essay, however, is limited in scope; it does not—nor is it meant to—take up the important specific problems relating to the theme and technique of T.S. Theodore Baird traces a temporal sequence amidst the apparently confusing time-scheme in the novel (P.M.L.A., Vol.LI, Sept. 1936). Dorothy Van Ghent’s The English Novel: Form and Function (1956) has a chapter on Tristram Shandy, in which she ably analyzes the structural technique of the novel. She refers to the unimportance of action and to the ‘psychological’ unity in T.S., to the nature of Sterne’s humoristic genius. In all this, she follows Sir Herbert Read, whom she mentions too in her essay. Ghent’s criticism, however, at places tends to be over-fine, and to ‘sail off into abstractions’ (to use a phrase of her own), rather than being objective. Thus, in Sterne’s
occasional pleading - or feigning - of difficulties in the adjustment of chronology and thought-time - as in the scene of the Shandy brothers' coming down the stairs and talking endlessly (T.S., IV, 9-13), she reads more meaning than is there. At the end of this scene, the author, in Ghent's words, "desperately appeals to the critic to step in and get Uncle Toby and Mr. Shandy off the stairs for him"; for, as long as the Shandy brothers will be in talking mood his chapter would never end, and his story would not progress. Ghent then goes on to say - "Obviously, what has been presented to us in this bit of fantasy is the incongruity between the clock-time which it will take to get the two conversationalists down the stairs, and the atemporal time - the 'timeless time' - of the imagination, where the words of Toby and Mr. Shandy echo in their plentitude, where their stances and gestures are traced in precise images (as a leg is lifted, or a foot withdrawn from the step), and where also the resonances of related spirits (such as Chance and Chapters and critics) intertwine freely with the conversation of Toby and Walter; and we are made aware of the paradox of which Sterne is so acutely aware, and which he uses as a selective principle and as a structural control: the paradox of man's existence both in time and out of time - his existence in the time of the clock, and his existence in the apparent timelessness of consciousness". But, Sterne's cries of authorial distress are not so much illustrations of 'time-fantasy', as his comic tricks of establishing easy kinship with his readers, with whom he engages in a dialogue, about his theme and technique, throughout the novel. Our humorist author employs such tricks
to cajole his readers into accepting his departure from the convention of strict conformity to chronology. Of other short essays on Sterne, may be mentioned Peter Quennell's 'Laurence Sterne' in *Four Portraitraits* (1945, 1946 2nd imp.), B.H. Lehman's 'Of Time, Personality, and the Author' in *Studies in the Comic* (1941), Dr. John Laird's 'Shandean Philosophy' in his *Philosophical Incursions into English Literature* (1946), W.B.C. Watkins's account of Sterne in his *Perilous Balance* (1939), R.D.S. Putney's 'Laurence Sterne, Apostle of Laughter' in *Eighteenth Century English Literature — Modern Essays in Criticism* (ed. J.L. Clifford, 1960, 2nd printing), D. W. Jefferson's 'Tristram Shandy and its Tradition' in *From Dryden to Johnson* (1957). They help greatly in rehabilitating Sterne from the early prejudice against him. That this prejudice, however, has not all died out in our time can be seen from F.R. Leavis's curt dismissal of Sterne, in a footnote, as 'irresponsible', 'nasty', 'trifling', in his *Great Tradition* (1948), and from Desmond MacCarthy's less unkind view of him as a whimsical parson and humanist.

While these short essays on Sterne contain criticism, mostly appreciative, of one aspect of Sterne or other, and are useful in their own ways, they do not — nor are intended to — present a full and fairly comprehensive view of Sterne's authorship. The emphasis on one aspect may, again, sometimes tend to ignoring, and even misreading, another. Thus, Dr. Laird in his 'excursion' into 'Shandean Philosophy', says that "if Sterne had a sentimental philosophy of goodwill to his fellow-creatures, it was unexcogitated philosophy which he was content to leave unexcogitated". While Sterne held feeling above reason, his
'sentimental* philosophy was not just 'unexcogitated' as Dr. Laird makes out; it had an important rational basis. We can trace this basis of Sterne's 'sentimentalism' in the moral philosophy of his age; and we have to do this if we are to understand fully the nature of Sterne's humanity and his theme in the novel. While tracing Lockean influence on Sterne, Dr. Laird, again, sees in Walter Shandy's educational philosophy Sterne's 'serious attempt' to improve upon Locke; for Locke was not, as Walter Shandy is, enamoured of scholastic education. Locke considered emphasis on grammar foolish. "Languages", he said, "were made not by rules or by art, but by accident and the common use of the people... Right reasoning is founded on something else than the predicaments and predicables, and does not consist in talking in mode and figure itself". And Walter's system of education — as he himself says to parson Yorick — "entirely depends ... upon the auxiliary verbs". Dr. Laird seems to ignore Sterne's humanistic theme in the novel working through the ridicule of scholasticism in Walter Shandy. Mr. Putney, on the other hand, while stressing the comic purpose of Sterne, does scant justice to his 'sentimental' philosophy. To him, Sterne is chiefly the 'Apostle of Laughter', and he (Sterne) "did not subscribe to the philosophical cult of feeling". Such one-sided attitudes are misleading. Sterne was at once an 'apostle of laughter' and a sound 'sentimental' philosopher. His comic and humanistic aims cannot be separated; they are inter-related.

Of bigger critical works on Sterne, we have John Traugott's Tristram Shandy's World (1954). Traugott uses all his dialectical skill in expounding the 'philosophical rhetoric' (Traugott
obviously uses the term 'rhetoric' in the common accepted sense of the art of impressive speaking or writing) of Sterne. It is a useful work, revealing a fine insight into Sterne's mind. Traugott, however, regards Sterne as 'a rhetorician and not a novelist'. He says further - "A critic looking at Sterne as a chapter in his history of the novel will find him a sad case of arrested development". Now, if we do not look upon T.S. as a novel and Sterne as an artist of the novel, we miss much of the book. Traugott's metaphysical preoccupation leads him to ignore not only the peculiar positive technique of T.S., but also, in a way, the basic humanistic 'motif' of the novel.

Sterne's sermons form the subject of L.V.D.H. Hammond's study, Laurence Sterne's 'Sermons of Mr. Yorick' (1946). Hammond takes great pains to trace the indebtedness of Sterne to other writers, in his sermons. There is, however, no detailed analysis of the theme of the sermons. (In his last chapter, V, Hammond refers in general terms to the liberal Christianity of Sterne). He has not much to say also on the art of the sermons.

Thus, while a few books and some essays have been written on Sterne, and some of them are useful in their own ways, there has been no systematic critical examination of Sterne's work (Tristram Shandy, Sentimental Journey and the Sermons) as a whole. The present study aims to do this. Laurence Sterne regarded himself as a 'moral' writer. He called his T.S. 'a moral work, more read than understood'. The gay humour of T.S. seems to obscure its 'moral' motive. Sterne was, above all, a humanist. There has been no book, or essay, to the knowledge of the present writer, which gives a detailed analysis of the theme of T.S., or S.J., or his
Sermons, and - what is more important - traces Sterne's theme in the novel to the moral thought of his age. The present writer has sought to do this, and thereby trace a unity in all his work - namely, T.S., S.J., and the Sermons. We can see in them, for example, the same stress on feeling and insistence on the active principle of the heart, the same emphasis on humanity and on the spirit of joy. As regards his art, Sterne could be, of course, less free in the Sermons than in his secular work, for the simple reason that his Sermons, though issued under the name of Mr. Yorick, the gay parson of the novel, offer little scope for the shooting of his festive wit. Yet some of the important artistic qualities found in his T.S. and S.J. may be noted in the Sermons too, - namely, his pictorial presentation of an idea, psychological approach to character, his dramatized appeal to sentiment, and so on.

This study, therefore, aims to present a more comprehensive and faithful picture of Sterne's work than exists at present. We owe this to Sterne, the creator of the wonderful Shandy world and the high-priest of humanism in his age.

The broad plan of the present work is as follows. The work has been divided into five Sections. Section 1, The Period, which has three chapters, provides the background to Sterne's thought and his art as a novelist. Section 2 deals with the author's Personality (chap. IV). Section 3 takes up the Philosophy of his Work; it deals with the theme of T.S. (ch. V), S.J. (ch. VI) and the Sermons (ch. VII), and with the related themes of Sterne's Humanity (ch. VIII), of Love and Happiness (ch. IX). Section 4, The Art of Sterne, takes up the Technique of T.S. (ch. I), Sterne's
Art of Characterization (ch. XI), his Humour (ch. XII), Sentimentalism (ch. XIII), the Dramatic Quality of his Art (ch. XIV), his Conversational Style (ch. XV) and Impressionism (ch. XVI). Section 5 concludes the work with a discussion on the Permanent Significance of Sterne's work.