Some of Sterne's great contemporaries did not rate his *Tristram Shandy* very high; they denied it any permanent significance. Samuel Richardson, while he admired the characterization of parson Yorick, Uncle Toby and Trim, and admitted that

"there is a subject for mirth, and some affecting strokes'1

in *T.S.*, believed that the novel had not

"intrinsic merit sufficient to prevent its sinking, when no longer upheld by the short-lived breath of fashion".2

Dr. Johnson thought no better of Sterne's work.

"Nothing odd will do long. *Tristram Shandy* did not last"3

- he said in 1776, that is, eight years after the death of Sterne. It is as if to mock such views that our author recorded in the novel itself his confident hope that his *T.S.* would

"swim down the gutter of Time"4.

To-day - two centuries after him - we cannot say that his hope was misconceived.

For there are certain vital, enduring elements in his work. This permanent significance has both technical and thematic aspects. In the matter of technique, Sterne's novel has a particular significance to-day. In an age, when the narration of events or adventures was all-important, Sterne daringly showed the unimportance of physical events and the greater importance of 'Opinions'. In this, Sterne was far
ahead of his time, and a fore-runner of the modern novelist. The modern novel is a novel of ideas, with a personal, subjective sense of reality. In the stream of consciousness novel, the concept of personality has undergone a complete change. Personality in the modern novel is identified not by its external symbols or actions, but by the inner flux of experience, by what Hulme calls 'the stream of inner life', as distinguished from its 'definite crystallised shapes on the surface'. The modern novelist

"leaves the level where things are crystallised out into these definite shapes, and diving down into the inner flux comes back with a new shape which he endeavours to fix".  

Following Locke, Sterne conceived the human personality in terms of sense-perception in the continuing consciousness (see ante, Chap. X, pp. 178-9, Chap. XI, pp. 209-15). To Sterne, therefore, subjective experience is more important than objective happening. About a hundred years after Sterne, Meredith reminded us that

"the brainstuff of fiction is internal history".  

Sterne had said - it may be remembered - that to understand his novel one must thoroughly know Locke, whose Essay, Sterne pointed out, was "a history-book ... of what passes in a man's own mind". The test of the highest creative power, in fiction, is now admitted to be in the delineation of the interior life of an individual character. Not the so-called development of the character through a chronological sequence of events, but the revelation of his, or her, inner being that exists in a perpetual flux and flows back and forth in time, is important in the modern novel. It was not possible, of course, for
Sterne to achieve what the moderns have done in the exploration of consciousness in its deeper levels (as, for example, in the pre-speech level of Molly Bloom's consciousness, as she lies down on bed preparing to sleep). Sterne's technique is much too simple for that. His tracing of the flow of consciousness is rationally organized. The texture of subjective experience, in Sterne, is not complicated (see ante, Chap. X, pp. 202-3). And he is always, however humorously, explaining his departure from tradition - which tradition he cannot abjure either completely. Even so, Sterne's technique - his subjective exploration of reality, his emphasis on the inner law of being rather than on a chain of superficial events, his awareness and partial use of thought-time, his individualism - is a significant pointer to the direction of the moderns.

The distinctive quality of Sterne's craftsmanship is clearly seen in his characterization. The Shandy world is a comparatively idle, inactive world. In Sterne's world there is almost a complete absence of social adventure, which absence is not recompensed either by a total absorption into the psychic life. For Uncle Toby and his Trim have their bowling-green, where they stage their toy-wars, and Dr. Slop has his ridiculous encounters with servant Obadiah and maid Susannah; and we have also the grand march of Toby and Trim to widow Wadman's on their amorous campaigns - Toby in his 'tarnished gold-laced hat and huge cockade of flimsy taffeta', and corporal Trim in his 'regimental coat' and 'Montero-cap' marching 'three paces distant from his master'. Much of the charm of the novel derives from these little, miniature incidents. We cannot say, therefore, that Sterne's characters are entirely isolated from
action. But even then, they do but little. The Shandy world is, on the whole, a still world — physically speaking. The creaking door-hinge in the parlour was left unrepaired for ten years when Tristram was born, while

"there was not a subject in the world upon which my father was so eloquent, as upon that of door-hinges".14

The 'bend-sinister' on the Shandy coach, which had been originally drawn by mistake and which Walter Shandy rightly regarded as a 'vile mark of illegitimacy upon the door of his own', was 'never to be mended'. With all this blessed inaction, the Shandy world casts a spell on us. Wherein lies this charm? To this, Sterne himself provides a clue, in his novel.

Tristram comes to Montreuil — a town which looks 'better in the map'). But it has one thing 'very handsome' — namely, Janatone, the inn-keeper's daughter. And this is not because she is beautiful, for we are told little about her physical appearance. She is an object of supreme interest, because she is a living human being, glowing with the sensation of her existence; and so — Tristram says —

"... he who measures thee, Janatone, must do it now — thou carriest the principles of change within thy frame".17

The 'sentimental traveller' feels the pulse of the Grisset, to see

"if it is the same blood which comes from the heart, which descends to the extremes".18

And then, as she is selling gloves to him, her looks bespeak the same flow of feelings, and her mental state, wherein lies her true being. How different are such experiences from Tom
Jones's amorous encounters with women. In the latter, the emphasis is on the sexual-romantic attachment in the man-woman relationship; in the former, on the revelation of the inner being — the being that exists in the perpetual flow of sensation and feeling. The Shandy world is dear to us for this very reason. David Hume once said of Rousseau, of his (Rousseau's) extreme sensibility —

"He is like a man who were stript not only of his clothes but of his skin ...".20

The comparison between the unpopular and solitary Rousseau and the eminently likable creations of Sterne will be improper; but there is an interesting similarity. We see the Shandy world, as Rousseau's friend (Hume) saw him, almost stripped of their clothes and skin, throbbing with sensation and feelings — their delicate, and instinctive physical movements keeping neat tune with their mental movements all the while. We love the Shandy world, because through our experience of this world we feel our inner being more warmly and more intensely.

Sterne's craftsmanship has yet another claim to distinction. Almost alone of the novelists of his age, he stressed imagination as a vital and wholesome principle of apprehending life. He regarded the imaginative faculty as higher than reason. Resort to imagination — he tells us — is not

"walking in a vain shadow, nor does man disquiet himself in vain by it — he oftener does so in trusting the issue of his commotions to reason only".21

Sterne not only sought, and found, occasional solace in imagination, he conceived it (imagination) also as a creative principle in art. He does not describe scenes, characters, ideas,
by elaboration of details, but 'renders' them in images of music and painting, by suggestion, by his predominant appeal to feeling (see Chap. XVI on Impressionism). Sterne is England's first impressionist in fiction.

The thematic significance of Sterne's work has no less importance than his technique and his artistry. Sterne's philosophy is not built on any system of speculative thought, or on any original or great ideas. Indeed, he did not have much faith in philosophical systems; for sometimes they tend to overshoot their mark, and then, instead of advancing life, they sit as a dead load on it. Walter Shandy is an extreme case of such a philosopher;

"he was systematical, and like all systematic reasoners, he would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture every thing in nature, to support his hypothesis". 22

Walter is accordingly held up to ridicule, because the vital currents of life, based on feeling, are choked in him. Sterne was interested more in life than in ideas about it. Sterne loved life as an artist loves beauty. Critics, like Dr. Johnson in the 18th century and Thackeray in the 19th, not only did not consider the humanistic significance of Sterne's work, they ignored Sterne's chief claim to distinction - namely, his artistic response to life. Johnson, for example, who observes life as a moralist, turns the contemplation of death into a virtue -

"The great incentive to virtue is the reflection that we must die". 23

Sterne, on the other hand, observing life as an artist, as an aesthete, finds virtue in the thrill of momentary existence.
The inn-keeper's daughter, Janatone, - as we have mentioned p.352, also already((see ante/Chap.XVI, p.339) - is of capital interest to Sterne, because she lives in the sensation of fleeting existence, and so must be 'measured' in terms of this ever-flowing sensation. The sick Tristram, even as he flies from Death, plays with the idea of dying -

"I will lead him a dance he little thinks of - for I will gallop, ... without looking once behind me, to the banks of the Garonne; and if I hear him clattering at my heels - I'll scamper away to mount Vesuvius - from thence to Joppa, and from Joppa to the world's end; where, if he follows me, I pray God he may break his neck."25

This love of life comes from his love of humanity. Sterne was a Christian, and a clergyman. But his concern for humanity was greater than his concern for religion. He conceived religion in terms of an expansion of the human spirit in happiness(see ante, Chap.VII, pp.134-7). Sterne is one of the few who have thought in terms of the entire mankind(see ante, Chap.VIII, pp.151-9). While relating the pitiable condition of Lazarus in his sermon, The Rich Man and Lazarus, Sterne enlarges the humanistic significance of the story. In a bold, modernistic spirit, he comes very near questioning the divine order, which denies to such/part of mankind, while a small section of it(mankind) roll in wealth and ill-gotten ease. He sees in the gap between these two worlds a danger to religion and to human life -

"Is it for thy Glory, O God! that so large a shade of misery should be spread across thy works?"26

His abiding faith in the truth and justice of God's dispensation, of course, triumphs over this flicker of a doubt.
But Sterne's over-riding considerations of humanity are a constant, and inspiring, reminder to us, that humanity is higher than religion, life than any theory. Sterne does not deny the body, the truth of the sense. He is tolerant of human frailties, because he loves mankind. Sterne's humanism reaches universal proportions, where he views man in loving relationship not only with other human beings, but with the entire sentient creation (see ante, Chap. VIII, pp. 156-9). Life expands in joy, in love, as it contracts in sorrow and in hate. Uncle Toby could not bring himself even to hurt the fly that disturbed him; for — as he himself put it —

"This world surely is wide enough to hold both thee and me". 27

Tristram, out on his travels in France, holds loving converse not only with whomever he comes across on the road — 'a drum-maker', 28 'all kinds of beggars, pilgrims, fiddlers, friars', and so on, but also with the ass that strayed to his hotel door at Lyons, and with the mule who carried him on the road betwixt Nismes and Lunel'. Sterne invests every living - man, bird or beast - with a personality. All are aglow with the same life — life that exists in feeling and sensation. Even the animal's mental states and moods are studied with a loving zeal — as in the case of the Lyons ass, or of the two mules who drew the carriage of the Abbess of Andouillet and Margarite. There is a universal moral principle, that of 'sympathy', which is innate in man, and which governs and binds all creation (see ante, Chap. II, pp. 36-7). Sterne's work is a vigorous and constant reminder to us, that the destiny of man, who is 'so great, so
exalted and godlike a Being, lies in keeping this vital
principle of existence alive in us.

THE END