

## 7.6

### The popularisation of the new medical theories in the eighteenth century: the novels of Laurence Sterne

- (i) Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey and Other Writings*, ed. Tom Keymer (London, Everyman/J. M. Dent, 1994), pp. 95–9.
- (ii) Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 117–19.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the literary genre of the novel was enjoying widespread commercial success, particularly among the burgeoning middle classes of Georgian England. In particular, novels of ‘sentiment’, which charted and celebrated the deep feeling of the storyteller for the distress of those less fortunate than themselves, became best-sellers. In their analysis of subtle emotions, novelists increasingly drew on recent physiological debates on the function and diseases of the nerves, which they then made available to a wide audience.

Having spent an itinerant childhood in Ireland and England, Laurence Sterne (1713–68) studied at Jesus College, Cambridge, before embarking on a clerical career in Yorkshire. In our first extract, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, first published in 1768, Sterne both built on, and satirised, the literary convention of the sentimental novel. The book itself recounts the feelings and emotions of the novel’s main character, Yorick, during his travels abroad, in particular his encounter in France with a young woman named Maria, who loses her mind after being abandoned by her lover. Despite the satirical tone of Sterne’s language, contemporary readers saw in Maria an icon of sentimental distress and she became an influential model for later romantic female characters. The second extract is from the work that made Sterne’s name as an author, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. In the passage here, Sterne satirises the thoughts of Shandy’s father on the risks which a badly supervised delivery can cause to a baby’s intelligence. By engaging in detail with philosophical and physiological debates about the location of the soul and the anatomy of the nerves, Sterne was here poking fun at the way in which novel medical

ideas had become popular topics of conversation among the ‘chattering classes’ of fashionable society. At the same time, however, he was heavily reliant on his own readers’ knowledge of, and familiarity with, these debates if they were fully to appreciate the humour of the discussion.

(i)

I have but a few small pages left of this to crowd it into – and half of these must be taken up with the poor Maria my friend, Mr. Shandy, met with near Moulines.

The story he had told of that disorder’d maid affect’d me not a little in the reading; but when I got within the neighbourhood where she lived, it returned so strong into my mind, that I could not resist an impulse which prompted me to go half a league out of the road to the village where her parents dwelt to enquire after her.

’Tis going, I own, like the Knight of the Woeful Countenance,<sup>19</sup> in quest of melancholy adventures – but I know not how it is, but I am never so perfectly conscious of the existence of a soul within me, as when I am entangled in them.

The old mother came to the door, her looks told me the story before she open’d her mouth – She had lost her husband; he had died, she said, of anguish, for the loss of Maria’s senses about a month before. – She had feared at first, she added, that it would have plunder’d her poor girl of what little understanding was left – but, on the contrary, it had brought her more to herself – still she could not rest – her poor daughter, she said, crying, was wandering somewhere about the road –

– Why does my pulse beat languid as I write this? and what made La Fleur,<sup>20</sup> whose heart seem’d only to be tuned to joy, to pass the back of his hand twice across his eyes, as the woman stood and told it? I beckon’d to the postilion to turn back into the road.

When we had got within half a league of Moulines, at a little opening in the road leading to a thicket, I discovered poor Maria sitting under a poplar – she was sitting with her elbow in her lap, and her head leaning on one side within her hand – a small brook ran at the foot of the tree.

<sup>19</sup> A reference to Don Quixote, the doleful knight whose adventures and suffering form the basis of Cervantes’ great novel.

<sup>20</sup> Yorick’s travelling companion.

[. . .]

. . . I look'd in Maria's eyes, and saw she was thinking more of her father than of her lover or her little goat; for as she utter'd them the tears trickled down her cheeks.

I sat down close by her; and Maria let me wipe them away as they fell with my handkerchief. – I then steep'd it in my own – and then in hers – and then in mine – and then I wip'd hers again – and as I did it, I felt such undescribable emotions within me, as I am sure could not be accounted for from any combinations of matter and motion.

I am positive I have a soul; nor can all the books with which materialists have pester'd the world ever convince me of the contrary.

[. . .]

There was nothing from which I had painted out for myself so joyous a riot of the affections, as in this journey in the vintage, through this part of France; but pressing through this gate of sorrow to it, my sufferings had totally unfitted me: in every scene of festivity I saw Maria in the back-ground of the piece, sitting pensive under her poplar; and I had got almost to Lyons before I was able to cast a shade across her –

– Dear sensibility! source inexhausted of all that's precious in our joys, or costly in our sorrows! thou chainest thy martyr down upon his bed of straw – and 'tis thou who lifts him up to HEAVEN – eternal fountain of our feelings! – 'tis here I trace thee – and this is thy divinity which stirs within me – not, that in some sad and sickening moments, "*my soul shrinks back upon herself, and startles at destruction*"<sup>21</sup> – mere pomp of words! but that I feel some generous joys and generous cares beyond myself – all comes from thee, great – great SENSORIUM of the world! which vibrates, if a hair of our heads but falls upon the ground,<sup>22</sup> in the remotest desert of thy creation. – Touch'd with thee, Eugenius draws my curtain<sup>23</sup> when I languish – hears my tale of symptoms, and blames the weather for the disorder of his nerves. Thou giv'st a portion of it sometimes to the roughest peasant who traverses the bleakest mountains – he finds the lacerated lamb of another's flock – This moment I beheld him leaning with his head against his crook, with piteous inclination looking down upon it – Oh! had I come one moment sooner! – it bleeds to death – his gentle heart bleeds with it –

<sup>21</sup> The quotation is taken from Joseph Addison's tragedy, *Cato* (1713).

<sup>22</sup> 1 Samuel 14:45.

<sup>23</sup> Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* 1.12.

Peace to thee, generous swain! – I see thou walkest off with anguish – but thy joys shall balance it – for happy is thy cottage – and happy is the sharer of it – and happy are the lambs which sport about you.

(ii)

Now, as it was plain to my father, that all souls were by nature equal, – and that the great difference between the most acute and the most obtuse understanding, – was from no original sharpness or bluntness of one thinking substance above or below another, – but arose merely from the lucky or unlucky organization of the body, in that part where the soul principally took up her residence, – he had made it the subject of his enquiry to find out the identical place.

Now, from the best accounts he had been able to get of this matter, he was satisfied it could not be where *Des Cartes* had fixed it, upon the top of the *pineal* gland of the brain; which, as he philosophised, form'd a cushion for her about the size of a marrow pea; – tho', to speak the truth, as so many nerves did terminate all in that one place, – 'twas no bad conjecture; – and my father had certainly fallen with that great philosopher plumb into the center of the mistake, had it not been for my uncle *Toby*, who rescued him out of it, by a story he told him of a *Walloon* Officer at the battle of *Landen*, who had one part of his brain shot away by a musket-ball, – and another part of it taken out after by a *French* surgeon; and, after all, recovered, and did his duty very well without it.

If death, said my father, reasoning with himself, is nothing but the separation of the soul from the body; – and if it is true that people can walk about and do their business without brains, – then certes<sup>24</sup> the soul does not inhabit there. Q. E. D.

As for that certain very thin, subtle, and very fragrant juice which *Coglionissimo Borri*, the great *Milaneze* physician, affirms, in a letter to *Bartholine*,<sup>25</sup> to have discovered in the cellulæ of the occipital parts of the cerebellum, and which he likewise affirms to be the principal seat of the reasonable soul (for, you must know, in these latter and more enlightened ages, there are two souls in every man living, – the one

<sup>24</sup> Assuredly.

<sup>25</sup> Guiseppe Francesco Borri (1627–95) was an Italian alchemist and empiric who wrote a letter to the Danish physician and anatomist Thomas Bartholinus (1616–80) which was subsequently published as *De cerebri ortu et usu medico* (*On the origin of the brain and its medical function*) in 1669. The use of the epithet *coglionissimo* to describe Borri is best translated as 'most complete fool', from the Italian word, *coglione* or testicle.

according to the great *Metheglingius*,<sup>26</sup> being called the *Animus*, the other the *Anima*); – as for this opinion, I say, of *Borri*, – my father could never subscribe to it by any means; the very idea of so noble, so refined, so immaterial, and so exalted a being as the *Anima*, or even the *Animus*,<sup>27</sup> taking up her residence, and sitting dabbling, like a tad-pole, all day long, both summer and winter, in a puddle, – or in a liquid of any kind, how thick or thin soever, he would say, shock'd his imagination; he would scarce give the doctrine a hearing.

What, therefore, seem'd the least liable to objections of any, was, that the chief sensorium, or head-quarters of the soul, and to which place all intelligences were referred, and from whence all her mandates were issued, – was in, or near, the cerebellum, – or rather some-where about the *medulla oblongata*, wherein it was generally agreed by *Dutch* anatomists, that all the minute nerves from all the organs of the seven senses centered, like streets and winding alleys, into a square.

So far there was nothing singular in my father's opinion, – he had the best of philosophers, of all ages and climates, to go along with him. – But here he took a road of his own, setting up another *Shandean* hypothesis upon these corner-stones they had laid for him; – and which said hypothesis equally stood its ground; whether the subtilty and fineness of the soul depended upon the temperature and clearness of the said liquor, or of the finer net-work and texture in the cerebellum itself; which opinion he favoured.

He maintained, that next to the due care to be taken in the act of propagation of each individual, which required all the thought in the world, as it laid the foundation of this incomprehensible contexture in which wit, memory, fancy, eloquence, and what is usually meant by the name of good natural parts, do consist; – that next to this and his Christian-name, which were the two original and most efficacious causes of all; – that the third cause, or rather what logicians call the *Causa sine quâ non*,<sup>28</sup> and without which all that was done was of no manner of significance, – was the preservation of this delicate and fine-spun web, from the havock which was generally made in it by the violent compression and crush which the head was made to undergo, by the non-sensical method of bringing us into the world by that part foremost.

<sup>26</sup> A name made up by the author. Metheglin was a type of mead, and some have suggested as a result that Sterne may be referring to the celebrated English physician, Richard Mead (1673–1754).

<sup>27</sup> *Anima* refers to the principle of life and sense, i.e. the faculty governing vital motion; *animus* is the seat of reason or intelligence.

<sup>28</sup> Literally, 'the cause without which nothing'; i.e. the indispensable first cause.