DID STERNE COMPLETE TRISTRAM SHANDY?

WAYNE BOOTH

Until recently, nearly everyone has assumed that Tristram Shandy is a careless, haphazard book, with little or no deliberate structure. Sterne’s contemporaries established the tradition by praising or blaming the book in terms of its oddity and the eccentricity of its author. Goldsmith, for example, said that the book “had no other merit upon earth than nine hundred and ninety-five breaks, seventy-two ha ha’s, three good things, and a garter,” and, speaking indirectly of Sterne himself, whom he clearly confused with Tristram, he said: “in one page the author [makes] . . . them [the readers] a low bow, and in the next [pulls] . . . them by the nose; he must talk in riddles, and then send them to bed to dream of the solution.”  

In the nineteenth century, even those critics who liked Sterne’s works perpetuated the standard opinion about the book as a whole; as Bagehot said, Tristram Shandy is “a book without plan or order,” whose greatest defect is “the fantastic disorder of the form.” And even today it is fairly common to read fresh statements of the old judgment. There are, of course, many seemingly valid reasons for this belief that Sterne produced a “salmagundi of odds and ends recklessly compounded.”

Tristram Shandy, the narrator, says that he never revises, that he has no control over his pen, that whatever pops into his head goes into his book; and the book reads, from page to page, as if his statements about it were certainly true. Digression upon digression, afterthoughts, delays, apologies—if, with all this, the reader is bombarded with claims that all is chaos, he can hardly believe otherwise.

Perhaps even more responsible for the traditional criticism of the work is the history of its composition and publication, coupled with Sterne’s statements about his writing methods and future intentions. It was published in five parts over a period of more than seven years. Some of the later volumes contain materials that Sterne could not have known when he began to write, and thus could not have planned to put into his book. What is more, the narrator repeatedly tells us that he intends to go on publishing two volumes a year until death overtakes him, or “for the next forty years,” and Sterne repeated this claim in letters and conversations outside the work. Yet his fifth instalment consisted of only one volume, the ninth, and within a few months after its publication Sterne died. If, as he said, he really saw the possibility of eighty volumes or more and if he wrote everything into his book that came to mind, it would be foolish to claim that the result is anything other than a hodge-podge.

Some recent critics have discovered, however, that Sterne planned at least large parts of the book with more care than his public attitude would suggest. Perhaps the best summary of this tendency to discover method in Sterne’s mad-