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The Winged Skull

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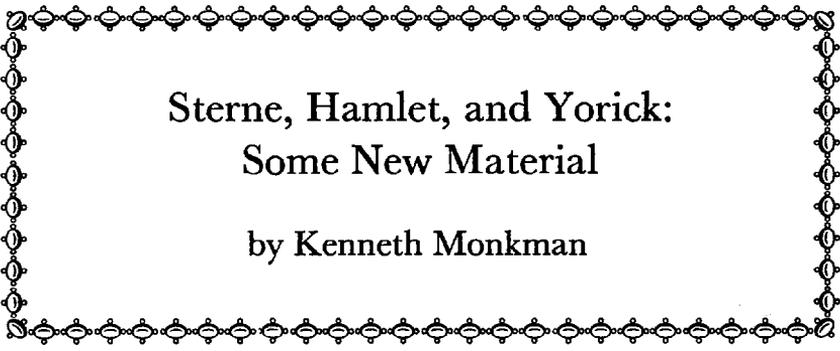
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Sterne, Hamlet, and Yorick: Some New Material

by Kenneth Monkman

When I read, in modern studies of Sterne, lists of the writers who have influenced him and helped to form his style, I am surprised to find that one name is seldom mentioned. I mean that of Shakespeare. Possibly he is overlooked because his influence is taken for granted upon all English writers of any stature who came after him, always excepting George Bernard Shaw. But I suggest that there are closer links between Sterne and Shakespeare than can be simply taken for granted, and that a detailed study of the way Shakespeare's words and thinking are woven into the texture of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*, and indeed into everything Sterne wrote, might well prove rewarding.

I don't propose to make that study here. But I hope to show briefly that Sterne did have a special relationship with Shakespeare, and one moreover which he was well aware of long before Tristram was begotten and born.

Most of all, and most clearly, that relationship seems to me to have been with *Hamlet*. I don't refer simply to the obvious matter of Sterne's adoption of the name of Yorick, deep though that might be said to go. Time and again in his writings there are echoes, and more than echoes, of Shakespeare's most devious, most heteroclitical, most variously-discussed play. When Dr Slop enters the back-parlour after his fall in the mud, he appears, we are told, "*unwiped, unappointed, unanealed*" (II, 10, p. 107), an echo, this, which Sterne instantly picks up and amplifies: "He stood like *Hamlet's* ghost, motionless and speechless, for a full minute and a half. . . ." Again, Walter Shandy and Uncle Toby's discourse on Time and Eternity "was a discourse devoutly to be wished for" (III, 19, p. 191); and Walter, amid his researches into the mechanical disadvantages of childbirth, breaks out

Honorary Secretary of the Laurence Sterne Trust

"Angels and Ministers of grace defend us! . . .—can any soul withstand this shock?" (II, 19, p. 151), an apostrophe which springs to Tristram's lips a few chapters later as he writes his Author's Preface: "Angels and ministers of grace defend us! What a dismal thing would it have been to have governed a kingdom, to have fought a battle, . . . or got a child, . . . with so *plentiful a lack* of wit and judgment about us!" (III, 20, p. 196)—Hamlet, incidentally, here dragging in Falstaff.

In *The Journal to Eliza*, on 13 May 1767, Sterne writes that he has invitations to dine with "7 or 8 of our Grandees . . . before I leave Town," adding, "[I] shall go like a Lamb to the Slaughter—'Man delights not me—nor Woman'" (*Letters*, p. 339). Later that month he scribbles from his sick-bed at Coxwold that he is "so emaciated, and unlike what I was, I could scarce be angry with thee Eliza, if thou Couldst not remember me, did heaven send me across thy way." Again he picks up the echo and amplifies it: "Alas! poor Yorick!—'remember thee! Pale Ghost—remember thee—whilst Memory holds a seat in this distracted World—Remember thee,—Yes, from the Table of her Memory, shall just Eliza wipe away all trivial men—& leave a throne for Yorick—'" (p. 346).

Three years earlier, on the point of beginning volumes seven and eight of *Tristram*, he writes to Mrs Montagu: "I am going to write a world of Nonsense—if possible like a man of *Sense*—but there is the *Rub*" (p. 216).

In *A Sentimental Journey*, it is Polonius who pops into Yorick's head as he approaches his interview with the Count, and that leads, of course, to the long scene where the Count takes him to be Shakespeare's Yorick in person.

Nor, I think, should we forget how both Hamlet and Sterne play with the idea of the hobby-horse.

I am sure that other parallels and examples could be cited of direct quotation and misquotation (for Sterne, as he admits in Volume IV of *Tristram*, is in the habit of quoting from memory) to demonstrate that Sterne knew his *Hamlet* intimately, and that this perhaps greatest tragi-comedy ever written was never far from his mind. I would go further and suggest that it may even have colored his view of life, and that its ever-tormentingly mysterious mixture of wit, humor, emotion, death, its jesting beside an open grave, its essential gaiety, in Yeats's fine phrase, "transcending the dread," may have had a special fascination for Sterne who, all his adult life, loved laughter but knew

that death was at his heels; and that it may have helped to make *Tristram Shandy* the deeply compelling and magical mixture it also is.

Let me quote the words of one English critic: "It has a taste of its own, an all-pervading relish which we recognize even in its smallest fragments, and which, once tasted, we recur to. When we want that taste, no other book will do instead. It may turn out in the end that the thing is not a complete success. This compelling quality in it may exist with some radical defect. But I doubt if we shall ever be able to say . . . that it is 'most certainly' a failure." That critic is C. S. Lewis and he was writing not about *Tristram Shandy* but about *Hamlet*. It is perhaps not altogether a coincidence that no play, and today very few books, have been so much argued about, and held up in so many conflicting lights, by so many critics, as these two. It was Oscar Wilde, I think, who once said: "the central problem in *Hamlet*"—dare I mention in this company that he might almost have added, "and in *Tristram Shandy* too"—"is whether or not the critics are mad."

I want now to put back the clock more than a dozen years from the first appearance of *Tristram*, to 1746 and 1747, years of some self-doubt and depression among Englishmen following the shock of the '45 rebellion. I am going to read you two letters printed in those years in a York newspaper of which I most fortunately and somewhat frighteningly possess the only known complete file for that period. And I am going to suggest that those pieces were written by Laurence Sterne.

But at this point I ought to make a small digression. The newspaper is the *York Journal*, or, as it soon renamed itself, *The Protestant York Courant*, set up in November 1745 to support the Whig cause in York and district against the pro-Tory *York Courant* published by Caesar Ward. In the sale-catalogue of books issued by Messrs. Todd & Sotheran soon after Sterne's death, and containing his library, is listed a file of this newspaper which Professor L. P. Curtis, in his *The Politicks of Laurence Sterne*, took to be Sterne's own copy. I can now reveal, alas, that it was not his copy, for what is clearly the same file, covering exactly the same dates, is the one now in my collection, and it is clear from contemporary manuscript markings that the papers were originally delivered to the Rev. George Goundrill, Vicar of Sproatley, a parish in the East Riding of Yorkshire, who died within a few weeks of Sterne in 1768. So his library must have been lumped with Sterne's in the catalogue. I give this warning to those who may

feel tempted, as indeed one or two writers already have been, to conclude that because a book is listed in what has come to be called Sterne's sale-catalogue it necessarily was in his library.

Back now to the summer of 1746 when one of the things the citizens of York were worried about was that, although the rebellion had been crushed, far too many papists, non-jurors, and Jacobites, they felt, still lived within the walls, where they were an irritating reminder of the very narrow escape the city had just had from occupation, if not worse, by Prince Charles Edward's forces. A reminder, too, that if it should all happen again, there was an active fifth column in their midst. In that situation, on 1 July, a long letter appeared on the front page of the *Protestant York Courant* purporting to be written by a local shopkeeper who signed himself "A Commoner."

This remarkably articulate shopkeeper begins by reminding his fellow citizens that in the recent rebellion "it was the Hand of Popery which labour'd to destroy us"; therefore it "puzzles me much; that whilst We rejoice so much at the Victory which has been determin'd in our Favour . . . we should, at the same Time, within our own City, argue in the Favour, should caress, should take within our Bosoms some of those very People, whose Principles, whose Religion and Riches, have been the Means of forming this unnatural Rebellion. . . ." "Of this Truth," he goes on,

there is certain and undoubted Proof, and this *WE* have had daily Opportunities of observing from their Behaviour amongst us. How did every Misfortune we met with convey Life and Chearfulness into their Hearts and Looks? This they were so far from endeavouring to conceal, that they triumph'd in it. How did every Success obtained by our Arms cast a Damp and Sullenness upon them? This, perhaps, they might *endeavour*, but they could *not* conceal. At *Cope's* unfortunate Defeat they *exulted*; at the Affair of *Falkirk* they almost ventur'd to *triumph*.

But *Culloden* was a Stroke they could never recover; the News of it made them shrink and tremble; the Run-away Highlanders could hardly be seized with a greater Panick; and now, like *Yorick's* Skull, they are quite Chop-fallen. Where be their Gibes? their Gambols? their Songs? their Flashes of Merriment? Not one now to mock their own Grinning.—These are the People that triumphed in our Misfortunes, that repine and languish at

our Happiness; these are they whom many of my Fellow Citizens are imprudent enough to defend and caress, whose Residence amongst us they wish, and endeavour to promote.—*O! they are civil, good-natured Folks, they are quiet and harmless Subjects—they are People of Quality and Condition, they come on Purpose to live at Ease, and spend their Money amongst us, to make us a rich and flourishing City.* 'Tis well if they who argue thus speak from Experience; if I was a Papist or Jacobite, perhaps I might talk in the same Stile; but as I have the *Misfortune* to be a Protestant, and a loyal Subject to the King, I can say, with much Truth, that for the twenty Years in which I have been in Business, I have not, during all that Space of Time, taken the Value of five Shillings of their Money. . . .

After a good deal more in the same vein, he adds,

Where then is the Reasonableness of caressing such People, of inviting them to stay amongst us? We cannot wish them to be here without expecting to starve ourselves, whilst our Rivals in Trade prosper: For as long as they do remain amongst us, so long as we are crowded with *Rapparees* and *Priests*, we can never expect to see our own Trades flourish, or our own neighbouring Gentry (from whom is our natural Support) live amongst us as they formerly did, and would again, if we were free from such *destructive Inmates*. For who, that could avoid it, would chuse to come into bad and dangerous Company? Who, that has any where else to live, would suffer himself to be coop'd up in the same Town with Papists and———Their late behaviour will explain my Meaning.

Therefore, my Fellow Citizens, instead of wishing them to live amongst us, let us earnestly wish them to retire from us; like their Friend Cardinal *Wolsey*, let us wish a long Farewel to all their Greatness, if they please, for ever. For this I will venture to say, that as our City has never flourished since they abounded in it, so will it never flourish while they do abound.

There is not space here to dissect the style of this militant Whig "shopkeeper" who quotes readily from *Hamlet* (from the Yorick scene, moreover) and *King Henry VIII* and who rides his Grub-street hack with much more pace and assurance than any local tradesman ever could. Even less is there time to set him against the vast and, for the most part, dull canvas of mid-eighteenth-century provincial jour-

nalism when few editors reached further than for a pot of paste, scissors, and a pile of the latest London papers.

All I can do here is to draw attention, in what is clearly no more than a hurriedly-written piece of *ad hoc* Protestant propaganda, to the devices whereby a rigid style is in process of being loosened: the non-essential italics (even capital italics) for rhetorical emphasis, the non-syntactical dash (in one case an exaggeratedly long one), and the sudden jump of "voices" as the writer switches from attacker to apologist without a word of warning: "*O! they are civil, good-natured Folks. . . .*," etc. To one who has spent countless hours in the past thirty years exploring the back streets of eighteenth-century literature, these things stand out perhaps the more, especially in a provincial context.

One small piece of external evidence pointing to Sterne I might also mention. The writer of the letter was seemingly anxious, as we know Sterne was, to cut a figure in the wider world; for soon after it appeared in the *Protestant York Courant* he sent a cutting of it to the *Gentleman's Magazine* in London. The *Magazine* did not reprint it. Whereupon the letter-writer, seizing upon a small peg that happened to present itself in the news at the end of the year, sent a second cutting, with a covering note; and this time the *Magazine* did print it, in the Supplement for 1746. One is reminded of the persistence and ingenuity which Sterne later employed to push the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandys* southwards to London.

We now jump to 1747, a year in which, it might be mentioned, *Hamlet* was performed at the Theatre in the Mint Yard, York, in April, and made some local stir, the part of the Prince being performed "by a Gentleman from London who never appeared here before." During the summer that followed, there was a sharp and humiliating setback for the Protestant allied forces in the Low Countries, when the Dutch defenders of the besieged key town of Bergen-op-Zoom suddenly pulled out and the place fell to the French. Some time later, on the third of November, another unusual letter led the front page of the *Protestant York Courant*. A very unusual letter indeed. "Sir," it begins:

As I may possibly become a Correspondent of yours, it will not be amiss to give you some Account of Myself, and let you know what I am, and what you may expect from me.

Know then, I am what the World calls an *Old Batchelor*, and I have call'd myself *One* these many Years, and am now the less out of Countenance, when I come to receive that Appellation from others, or find myself treated with those little Marks of Disdain, or rather Vengeance, which rapacious Widows or disappointed Maids often throw in our Way.

In Religion I am a hearty Protestant; and, I can honestly say, I hate no Man upon Earth, for differing from me in Points merely religious; nay, I pity even the Papist when I consider him as nurs'd up in Bigotry and Nonsense, and from his Cradle made the Dupe of a few artful Hypocrites.—But when I see his avowed Enmity to both our Civil and Religious Constitution, when I consider that savage Zeal, which makes him hate and exterminate all without the Pales of his Church, all who do not measure their Faith by his Standard;—I think him a dangerous Creature, and heartily blame and condemn him.

As for Protestants, of every Denomination, I look on them with the Benevolence of a Brother, as embarked in the same glorious Cause, and asserting the sacred Rights of Conscience, in Opposition to the Roguery of Priests and Tyranny of Princes.

As for my Political Principles, I have the highest Opinion of the Constitution of my Country, and think it very safe in the Hands of our present Governors.

I do not know whether I should go on with my Picture, thus far I look tolerably well; however, I'll be so sincere as to confess to you, I have some Oddities, which I believe are common enough to those who have not known the Discipline of a married State.—However, my Friends allow them to be very pardonable, as in my most violent Moods I never go beyond the Snapping of a Pipe, or the skimming my Hat and Wig across the Room.

As I have a warm Affection for my Country, I never hear any ill News from Abroad, but it costs me a Pipe or two, and the storming *Bergen-op-Zoom*, cost me no less than three Glasses and a China Cup, which were unluckily overturn'd by my Hat which I had tossed from me in my Wrath.

I imagine I make a queer Figure enough, as I march and countermarch hastily across my Room, make a sudden Halt, and perhaps stand in a musing Posture for some Time, and at last

begin of exclaiming against the mighty Disturbers of this World, like *Virgil's* Sybil,

*Non vultus non color unus,
Sed pectus anhelum
Et rabie fera corda tument.*

I here send you my *Reverie* upon the storming of *Bergen*.

Well! ambitious Tyrant,—Well dost thou inherit the Vices of thy Ancestors, who for a Succession of Ages were the common Disturbers of the Peace of *Europe*; whose Glory was placed, in being Absolute at Home, and Terrible Abroad,—who were still forging Chains for the Nations around them, or riveting these [*sic*] on their own Slaves still closer.

To be Lord of All!—for this thou violatest the sacred Ties of Kings, and art now, contrary to the Laws of Nations, invading a free and happy People; and, without once declaring War, dost thou ravage their Country, sack their Cities, and give the Inhabitants to the Sword, or to Violation.

Hear O Heavens, give Ear O Earth! are these the Glories of the Lords of lower World, this their Honour to spoil the Creation?

But know, ambitious Mortal, thou who wastes the World, and defaces the Works of God, thou who troubles the Earth, and fills it with Complainings, know the Measure of thy Iniquity is full, and the Day of Vengeance is approaching, when thou shalt curse thy own Ambition, and those false Honours thou hast built on the Ruins of Millions of thy Kind.

—The Day is at Hand, when the injured, supported with the Nations of *Europe*, equally alarmed for their own Liberties, shall call thee to a severe Account.—Remember thy haughty Grandfather and tremble.—Dearly did he answer for his perjured Conquests.—He whom his Flatterers impiously called the *Immortal*, the *All-powerful*, was sufficiently convinced how vain it was for Man to arrogate such Titles.—The same Providence still governs the World, and the supreme God, when thou art ripe for Destruction, shall send forth his Instruments to blast thy Pride, and teach such lawless Tyrants, that not Man, or his Imperious Will, but Justice, Truth and Liberty shall reign and prevail on the Earth.

Thus it is that I give Vent to an honest Passion for Liberty and

my Country, and should be glad to raise the same just Abhorrence of Tyranny and Oppression in the Breast of my Countrymen.

I shall now and then send you half a Sheet of Thoughts, so long as I find you engaged in the true Interests of Liberty and your Country:—As I am in the Humour I shall fill it with Religion or Politicks, Love or Poetry, or any Thing I imagine may be either entertaining or useful to your Readers.

I think you will agree that neither the “reverie,” as it is called, nor the persona of an “old batchelor” come off too well, and I suspect that the letter-writer thought so too, for despite the half-promise in his final paragraph, no further pieces in the same vein appeared in the succeeding months. Indeed, if the author was who I think he was, and if we remember our calendar of dates, this old bachelor was very soon deeply immersed in distractions of a distinctly unbachelor-like nature. The letter, you remember, appeared on November the 3rd. On December the 1st, Lydia Sterne was born. “We shall have a rare month of it,” as Walter Shandy put it after Tristram’s birth; “we shall have a devilish month of it, brother *Toby*, said my father, setting his arms a-kimbo, and shaking his head; fire, water, women, wind—brother *Toby*!” (IV, 16, pp. 291–292). To the family men in my audience I need say no more.

I don’t myself think there can be any doubt that the author of this second letter was a recognizable Laurence Sterne. Again, there is no time here to go deeply into comparisons, but let me draw your attention to just a few brief parallels with known writings of his.

This self-confessedly odd, pipe-snapping, hat-tossing, wig-skimming letter-writer tells us: “I imagine I make a queer figure enough, as I march and countermarch hastily across my Room, make a sudden Halt, and perhaps stand in a musing Posture for some Time . . .” Now for *Tristram Shandy*: “Yorick, with his usual carelessness of heart, would . . . answer with a pshaw!—and if the subject was started in the fields,—with a hop, skip, and a jump, at the end of it . . .” (I, 12, p. 28).

Or take the moment when Tristram in his study throws a fair sheet of writing into the fire instead of the foul one: “Instantly I snatch’d off my wig, and threw it perpendicularly, with all imaginable violence, up to the top of the room—indeed I caught it as it fell—but there was

an end of the matter; nor do I think any thing else in *Nature*, would have given such immediate ease: She, dear Goddess, by an instantaneous impulse, in all *provoking cases*, determines us to a sally of this or that member—or else she thrusts us into this or that place, or posture of body, we know not why——” (IV, 17, p. 293).

If, in form, the first half of the letter owes something to “the great Addison,” to whom Sterne paid tribute more than once in *Tristram*, in content I suggest it looks forward to the Romantics, even to Rousseau. As for the curiously free “reverie,”* for all its strong Biblical echoes it seems to break new ground, though it is tempting to see in it a hint taken from Locke’s definition of 1690: “When Ideas float in our mind, without any Reflection or regard of the Understanding, it is that which the French call *Resvery*; our language has scarce a name for it.”

I quote again now from the “reverie,” addressed to Louis the Fifteenth: “Know, ambitious Mortal, thou who wastes the World, and defaces the Works of God, thou who troubles the Earth, and fills it with Complainings, know the Measure of thy Iniquity is full, and the Day of Vengeance is approaching, when thou shalt curse thy own Ambition, and those false Honours thou hast built on the Ruin of Millions of thy Kind.” Now a passage from one of Sterne’s earlier sermons, *The Ways of Providence justified to Man*:

Go then,—proud man!—and when thy head turns giddy with opinions of thy own wisdom, that thou wouldst correct the measures of the Almighty,—go then,—take a full view of thyself in this glass;—consider thy own faculties,—how narrow and imperfect;—how much they are chequered with truth and falsehood;—how little arrives at thy knowledge, and how darkly and confusedly thou discernest even that little. . . . (*Works*, V, ii, pp. 367–368)

And now, for further comparison, a passage from a letter written in the last year of Sterne’s life:

O Woman! to what purpose hast thou exercised this power over me? or, to answer what end in nature, was I led by so mysterious a path to know you,—to love You,—and fruitlessly to lament and sigh that I can only send my spirit after you, as I have done this

* It is worth recalling here that the *Fragment inédit* first published by Paul Stapfer in his *Laurence Sterne* (Paris, 1870) from a manuscript said to have been written by Sterne in his Sutton days twice describes itself as a “reverie.”

night to my Cordelia—poor! spotless Shade! the world at least is so merciful as not to be jealous of our Intercourse—I can paint thee blessed Spirit all-generous and kind as hers I write to—I can lie besides thy grave, and drop tears of tenderness upon the Turf w^{ch} covers thee, and not one passenger turn his head aside to remark or envy me— (*Letters*, p. 361)

The reference to Cordelia is, of course, to the imaginary nun with whom in 1767, sick as he was and distraught by the absence of Eliza, Sterne was wont to commune among the ruins of Byland Abbey, just across the fields from Shandy Hall; and indeed I cannot but feel that the reverie of 1747 contains foreshadowings of that final summer.

I believe, in these two letters made public here for the first time since the 1740's—more vividly in the second one—we have evidence that Sterne's pen was not altogether idle in the long preparatory years at Sutton. Two of his many pens, I should say. For we must never forget that *Tristram Shandy* was the successful fusion of a number of Laurence Sternes who during it developed still further to become the Yorick of *A Sentimental Journey*. That process of development began many years before *Tristram*; and if it seems difficult, even distasteful, to square the two letters with the later writings, I suggest that, instead, they should be set beside the already acknowledged earlier ones. You will find hack-journalism just as aggressively bigoted in the *York Gazetteer* of 1741, and Protestant propaganda as rampantly anti-Papistical in some of the earlier sermons.

In the mid-1740's, Sterne was still far from fusing his many styles—and once again I stress *many*—into the one we instantly recognize today. He was still far from achieving that intimate rapport with a sympathetic reader in which, speaking as one of them, I think he excels all other writers. But in the second letter at least, with its moments of whim and impulse and its sudden confession, "I do not know whether I should go on with my Picture," he was, within the accepted contemporary form of a letter to a newspaper, already on the way to establishing considerable rapport with an editor. Note also, incidentally, that use of a painting metaphor. "Books, painting, fiddling, and shooting were my amusements [at Sutton]," Sterne has told us (*Letters*, p. 4).

When the brilliant, mischievous idea of combining the parson's gown with cap-and-bells and putting on the mask of Yorick first came

to him, we do not know. The prompting for it was not far to seek—and not only in Shakespeare. A late uncle of mine, born and bred in York in the last century, once told me he could remember old people who pronounced the name of the place “Yorik.” When *Tristram Shandy* came out, the name of one of its central characters must surely have rung a familiar bell in the ears of local readers.

I have only one word to add. I have not yet given you the name with which the second letter was signed. It was not “An Old Bachelor.” Perhaps some of you have jumped to it already. It was of course—“Hamlet.”

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