

17 The Reader in the Text

How could you, Madam, be so inattentive in reading the last chapter? I told you in it, *That my mother was not a papist*. – Papist! You told me no such thing, Sir. Madam, I beg leave to repeat it over again, That I told you as plain, at least as words, by direct inference, could tell you such a thing. – Then, Sir, I must have miss'd a page. – No, Madam, – you have not missed a word. – Then I was asleep, Sir. – My pride, Madam, cannot allow you that refuge. – Then, I declare, I know nothing at all about the matter. – That, Madam, is the very fault I lay to your charge; and as a punishment for it, I do insist upon it, that you immediately turn back, that is, as soon as you get to the next full stop, and read the whole chapter over again.

I have imposed this penance upon the lady, neither out of wantonness or cruelty, but from the best of motives; and therefore shall make her no apology for it when she returns back: – 'Tis to rebuke a vicious taste which has crept into thousands besides herself, – of reading straight forwards, more in quest of the adventures, than of the deep erudition and knowledge which a book of this cast, if read over as it should be, would infallibly impart with them.

LAURENCE STERNE *The Life and Opinions of
Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759–67)

EVERY NOVEL must have a narrator, however impersonal, but not necessarily a narratee. The narratee is any evocation of, or surrogate for, the reader of the novel within the text itself. This can be as casual as the Victorian novelist's familiar apostrophe, "Dear reader," or as elaborate as the frame of Kipling's "Mrs

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Bathurst", discussed earlier (Section 7), in which the "I" narrator is also the narratee of a story told by three other characters who themselves are constantly swapping the two roles. Italo Calvino begins his *If on a winter's night a traveller* by exhorting his reader to get into a receptive mood: "Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room." But a narratee, however constituted, is always a rhetorical device, a means of controlling and complicating the responses of the real reader who remains outside the text.

Laurence Sterne, narrating under the light disguise of Tristram Shandy, plays all kinds of games with the narrator–narratee relationship. Rather like a music-hall comedian who plants stoges in the audience, and integrates their heckling into his act, he sometimes personifies his reader as a Lady or a Gentleman whom he interrogates, teases, criticizes and flatters, for the entertainment and instruction of the rest of us.

Tristram Shandy is a highly idiosyncratic novel whose eponymous narrator undertakes to relate his life from the moment of his conception to adulthood, but never gets beyond his fifth year because the attempt to describe and explain every incident faithfully and exhaustively leads him into endless digression. Everything is connected with other things that occurred before or after or in another place. Genuinely, but hopelessly, Tristram struggles to preserve chronological order. In Chapter XIX, still hopelessly bogged down in his pre-natal history, he alludes to the ironic fate of his father, who abominated the name "Tristram" above all others, but lived to see his son inadvertently christened with it, and declares: "if it was not necessary I should be born before I was christened, I would this moment give the reader an account of it."

This is the sentence (he reveals after the passage I have extracted) that should have given his Lady reader the clue to his mother's religious allegiance, for "Had my mother, Madam, been a Papist, that consequence did not follow." The reason being that, according to a document which Tristram reprints (in the original French) in his text, some learned theologians of the Sorbonne had recently approved the idea of conditionally baptizing infants endangered by a

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difficult birth, *in utero*, by means of a "squirt". In a Roman Catholic country, therefore, it is possible to be christened before one is born.

Bating Roman Catholics (he was himself an Anglican vicar) and indulging in nudge-nudge humour about the private parts are features of Sterne's writing that are sometimes held against him, but you would have to be a very dour reader not to be disarmed by the wit and elegance of his repartee with "Madam" (his liveliness much enhanced by Sterne's free and idiosyncratic punctuation) and his aside to "the reader". For the real function of this digression is to define and defend his own art. The Lady is sent off to re-read the preceding chapter, "to rebuke a vicious taste . . . of reading straight forwards, more in quest of the adventures, than of the deep erudition and knowledge which a book of this cast, if read over as it should be, would infallibly impart . . ."

No wonder *Tristram Shandy* has been a favourite book of experimental novelists and theorists of the novel in our own century. As I indicated in the preceding section, modernist and postmodernist novelists have also sought to wean readers from the simple pleasures of story by disrupting and rearranging the chain of temporality and causality on which it traditionally depended. Sterne anticipated Joyce and Virginia Woolf in letting the vagaries of the human mind determine the shape and direction of the narrative. And one of the slogans of modernist poetics is "Spatial Form", which means giving unity to a literary work by a pattern of interconnected motifs that can only be perceived by "reading over" (i.e., re-reading) the text in the manner recommended by Tristram. His dialogue with his readers spatializes the temporal nature of the reading experience in a still more radical way. The novel is figured as a room in which we, as readers, are closeted with the narrator. Before giving the intimate details of his conception, for instance, he declares that "'tis wrote only for the curious and inquisitive," and invites those readers not interested in such descriptions to skip over it, saying:

"_____ Shut the door _____"

slyly confident that we will choose to remain with him.

In the passage cited, one of our number, the Lady, is sent off to re-read the preceding chapter "as soon as you get to the next full stop" (a neat, and characteristic, reminder of the nature of the reading process). We who, as it were, remain with the author are made to feel privileged by his confidence, and tacitly invited to distance ourselves from the imperceptive reader and the "vicious taste which has crept into thousands besides herself", of reading a novel just for the story. Being at this point as much in the dark as she is about the reference to Roman Catholicism, we cannot put up much resistance to the author's defence of his method.