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OTHER COLORS

ESSAYS AND A STORY

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Foreword to *Tristram Shandy*: Everyone Should Have an Uncle Like This

Prelude

We'd all like an uncle like Tristram Shandy, an uncle who is always telling tales and losing his way inside them, even as he numbly pulls us in with his jokes, word games, indiscretions, follies, quirks, obsessions, and hilarious affectations; who, despite his cunning, culture, and worldliness, is still a mischievous child at heart. Whenever this uncle has gone on for too long or strayed beyond the limit, our father or our aunt will say, "Enough! You're frightening the children; you're making them sick!" Although it's not just the children who have been hanging on every word and are now addicted to this uncle's meandering tales, it's the grown-ups too. Because once we've grown accustomed to this uncle's voice, we want to hear it all the time.

There are many other stages in life when we become attached to a voice, to the words of a storyteller. In crowded offices, in the army, at school, and at reunions, we recognize these special people first from the color of their voices. Sometimes we grow so accustomed to hearing them that when we wish to speak to them it is not because we're curious to know what they have to say but simply because we long to hear their voices again. We depend on this uncle as we might a busybody neighbor, or the sort of actor who can make an audience laugh the moment he walks onstage, before he's even opened his mouth. In Turkey, uncles like this remind us, too, of our favorite columnists, who can make stories out of whatever happens to them. In real life, whenever we have accustomed ourselves to this sort of voice—this sort of storyteller—what we most long for is to hear our own thoughts expressed, our own experiences, but in the storyteller's voice and from his unique point of view. It's much the

same with a relative who lives upstairs and sees you every day, or an army buddy with whom you share all your waking hours: Your need for his voice is so great it is almost as if the world and life itself would not exist without it. We should all have uncles like this.

But you run into an uncle like Laurence Sterne only once in forty years. When I was little, my own uncle amused us, with not literary but mathematical riddles. As reluctant as I was to put myself to an unwelcome test, I still wanted to prove how bright I was, and in this frenzy I would struggle to find an answer. But there was something else going on too: My uncle had a very beautiful wife. When I was five I would often go to visit my aunt, whose beauty could not be dulled by my grandmother's old furniture, tulle curtains, and dusty ornaments. Forty years on, my aunt still reminds me of my visits. Her sons, both of them, have, God bless them, become dentists, with practices in Nişantaşı. When I was leaving the older brother's practice one day, I discovered that the building's front door was locked from the outside. I stood there watching, savoring the aftertaste of cloves, as a striped cat squeezed through a gap in the grillwork and went into the grocery store across the street. The grocery store into which the cat had gone still sold the best *mezes* in Nişantaşı, most especially the stuffed dolmas.

Getting off the Subject

What I did in that last paragraph is what is known as getting off the subject. Tristram Shandy weaves together his story with digressions and, because it's something we all do, we have felt no need to give it a new name in the language we use every day. In the book—*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*—we never get around to the life and opinions of Tristram Shandy. Only at the end do we hear of Tristram's birth, and then he disappears from the scene before anyone takes much notice of him. Sterne's hero acts as if he could talk forever about the history of the world into which he was born, his father's views on birth, and life in general. But he never rests on one subject for long. He's like a happy monkey, swinging from one branch to the next, never stopping, leaping from subject to subject, always moving forward.

Most of the time the reader is left with the impression that Sterne has no idea where his story is going. But there are illustrious critics, like Victor Shklovsky, who have set out to prove that certain clues in the text, along with the book's narrative structure, indicate that Sterne planned his

novel with the utmost care. So let us look at what our storyteller says on this subject, in the second section of the eighth book: Today there exist on this earth several ways of beginning a book, and I am certain that the path I've chosen is the best of these—at least it is the one closest to religion—because what I do is to write the first sentence and leave the second to God the All-knowing

The entire story follows the same logic, forever digressing—so often that we could say the book's very subject is digression. But had Sterne ever guessed that someone like me might be able to pin him down on this, he would have changed the subject at once.

So What's the Subject?

When novelists get off the subject we get bored. That's our complaint, after all, whenever we're bored with a novel, we say it got off the subject. But there are many reasons why a novel may cease to amuse. Long descriptions of nature make some readers yawn; some become bored because there is not enough sex, and others because there is too much; some are annoyed by minimalists and some by authors who go into too much detail about confused family backgrounds. What makes a novel compelling is not the presence or absence of the above-mentioned qualities, it is the novelist's skill and style. In other words, a novel can be about anything. That's what sort of book *Tristram Shandy* is: a book about anything.

Let us not forget that this "anything" follows a defined logic. It may well be that a writer can put everything and anything into a novel, but even so, we readers are quick to grow bored and lose patience whenever the author strays from the subject, takes too long to say what he has to say, or includes needless detail (Impatience is an important concept in *Tristram Shandy*; Sterne was fond of saying that he wrote to stave off boredom) What makes it possible for Sterne to write about anything and everything (and what it is that piques our interest despite the unusual narrative shape) is the strange voice I described earlier. This book is a miscellany of outlandish tales and tongue-in-cheek sermons—one minute we are hearing of Uncle Toby's adventures and the next we are watching Tristram's father wind his grandfather clock of a Sunday—and as the still-unborn Tristram Shandy slowly merges with Sterne the novelist, we learn of everything that happened to be going on in the author's mind when he set out to relate Tristram's story.

So Tell Us the Author's Story

Laurence Sterne was the son of an impoverished noncommissioned officer. He was born in Ireland in 1713 and spent his early years with his family in various garrison towns in Ireland and England. After the age of ten he never again returned to Ireland. When he was eighteen, his father died, impoverishing the family further, but with the help of a distant relative who hoped the boy might find a position in the church, he went on to study theology and classics at Cambridge. Upon graduating, he entered the Church of England, rising quickly through the ranks with the help of certain distinguished clerics to whom he was related. At the age of twenty-eight he married Elisabeth Lumley; of their children, only their daughter Lydia survived. Until he published *Tristram Shandy* in 1760 at the age of forty-seven, nothing of note happened in Sterne's life, apart from his wife's melancholia.

Be it Anglican or Sunni in origin, a cleric's tale naturally contains a clear moral code that derives from scripture. So the tales clerics tell have a purpose, the sort of purpose our own moralist and socially responsible critics want to find in literature. We listen to Imam Nurullah Efendi's Friday sermon because he has an aim, a moral lesson to impart; his skill, his tears, his ability to move and scare us, his voice, and his powers of narration are of secondary importance. This is what makes Sterne so startlingly fresh and original: Although he was a cleric, he invented a form that one might call "the story with no purpose." He does not write toward a particular end, or to teach a lesson, but just for the pleasure of telling a story. What's more, he engages in this modern passion knowingly; to have no purpose is not a failing but a purpose in and of itself. That is what separates him from a man who is just prattling on. This despite the fact that there is, in his voice and his demeanor, a great deal that brings to mind empty gossip.

Needless to say, Sterne—living as he did in a society unaccustomed to clerics who wrote novels for no purpose and sent them to London to be published and read widely—provoked both anger and envy. He was attacked by those who did not appreciate his playful wit and by the sort of angry, jealous busybodies who are always too numerous; he was denounced for writing pornography, for writing too trivially for a cleric, for writing a novel that made no sense, for mocking religion, and for using bad grammar, broken sentences, and made-up words of uncertain meaning.

As the attacks continued, he also had to grapple with domestic prob-

lems and failing health (he contracted tuberculosis at an advanced age). But his wit remained as sharp as ever, and he never stopped making fun of things. Sterne was only too happy for it to be known that he was racing off to London when his books began to sell well, following up his first success with new volumes, and forging “sentimental attachments” with women. Because Sterne (as strange as it may sound in a country like Turkey, with its religious conservatives, traditionalists, nationalists who cannot take a joke, and joyless Jacobins) would have been pleased for it to be known that there were readers clever enough to appreciate *Tristram Shandy* and writers who were influenced by him.

So All Right, Then, What Is the Subject of Tristram Shandy?

Let me make it clear that if you are already feeling impatient, and asking yourself when this introduction will end, you will never find the patience to finish the book itself. In response to your insistent pleas, I now offer a breakdown of the chapters in the first book:

1. The narrator, speaking from a place somewhere between the author and Tristram himself, describes the sad circumstances of his birth.
2. The author talks about the Homunculus—the little Man—that is, the replica of the sperm responsible for his conception.
3. We discover that the story that will appear in the next chapter was told to the author by Uncle Toby.
4. I am very pleased with the way I have begun my story, the author says, and he goes on to tell us about the night he was conceived.
5. The author informs us that he was born on the fifth of November, 1718
6. The author warns the reader, If I play games along the way and if from time to time I don a clown suit—even if it has bells on its toes—don't fly off and leave me
7. The difficulties encountered by a vicar and his wife in their search for a midwife.

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8. He acquaints us with his Hobby-Horses—Depending on my fancy, I sometimes play the violin and sometimes paint—and provides a dedication
9. An explanation of this dedication.
10. A return to the midwife story.
11. An introduction to Mr. Yorick, who takes his name from the jester whose skull Shakespeare examines.
12. Yorick's jokes and his sorry end.
13. Yet another return to the midwife story.
14. In which the author explains why he has not reached the end of the story and keeps turning off onto side roads: a digression about a digression.
15. The author's mother's wedding certificate and its story.
16. His father's return from London.
17. His father's wishes upon returning to the house.
18. Preparations for birth in the provinces and various reflections
19. His father's hatred of the name Tristram and his various philosophical obsessions.
20. The author scolds his inattentive readers—something that the author of this introduction has himself done on occasion. Of course this does not imply that he is an attentive author
21. We approach the birth, though the digressions continue in abundance.
22. The author's reflections on his mode of narration: If it necessary to summarize it in a single word, my creation leans to digression, while also facing forward—and both at the same time.

23. I am inclined to begin this chapter with nonsense, and I am not inclined to impede my imagination. On pastimes.

24. On Uncle Toby as a pastime.

25. The groin wound suffered by Uncle Toby in the war and the boast with which the first book ends: If the reader has not been able to guess a single thing about any of these goings-on, the responsibility largely rests with me, because I am possessed of such a temperament that if I thought you could entertain the smallest idea or hypothesis as to what you might find on the next page, I would rip the page out of my book.

So What Is the Subject Then?

The subject is the impossibility of ever getting to the point, the center, the heart of the story: hence the disorder, the slipshod narration, and the easy pursuit of any distraction, any new thought, any pretext for digression—for if Sterne is fascinated with events of little import and with the very logic of digression (and let us remember how determined our author is to keep the reader from guessing what will happen on the next page), if he is only too willing to engage with those who complain that the beginning and the end are meaningless, that the meaning of the middle is obscure, and that the whole is both taxing to the brain and full of pointless excess—it is because that is the point. In its subject as in its shape, *Tristram Shandy* exactly reflects real life

So You're Saying What, That This Is What Life Is Like?

Especially when it is asked in anger, this question is the novelist's best friend, and I would go so far as to suggest that novelists write their books with the express purpose of provoking it. Novels are only as valuable as the questions they raise about the shape and nature of life. Great novelists (and there are only a few) stay in our thoughts not because they quiz their heroes on this question directly, or engage their narrators in discussions with those who think like them, but because, as they go about describing life's petty and extraordinary details, and its problems large and small, they evoke these questions in their structure, their language, their atmosphere, their voice and tone. Until reading a particular novel, we've had our own ideas about life—ideas confirmed by ordinary novels

(romantic melodramas that are assumed to evoke the true feeling of love, political melodramas in which complaints masquerade as politics, and all those tales that have for the last thousand years been telling us over and over that the good people who once populated the earth have been replaced with evil-minded mercenaries)—but in a great novel, the author offers us a new way of understanding life

On first inspection, *Tristram Shandy* is hard to read, as books that defy our fundamental views of life and writing so often are. We get angry and rail against them. We say, "Nothing made sense, I gave up in the middle." The most brilliant readers will make the same complaint as those with simple tastes: "It's unreadable, because life's not like that," they both say. But while the birdbrained reader boasts of having understood nothing and condemns the book for defying his narrow rules (much was written about Sterne's narrative confusion, his immorality, and his refusal to abide by the rules of grammar), the reader of refined sensibilities feels more uneasy. Behind the smoke and noise of his anger, there is the knowledge that great literature is what gives man his understanding of his place in the scheme of things, and so, reminding himself that writing is one of the deepest and most wondrously strange of human activities, he picks up the book again in a moment of solitude.

Books like this touch on truths that natural readers will always find—and that literary poseurs will never understand. Even as they quarrel with the book's strange wilderness, intelligent readers who happen on its treasures and its moments of brilliance will recognize the foundations of true literature in a way that joyless legislators of literary law never can do. But the recognition can never be presumed. Even the brilliant wit Samuel Johnson allowed his schoolmasterly side to prevail when speaking about the novel in your hands: Impatiently grasping for words, he declared, "Nothing strange lasts. *Tristram Shandy* will never last." It is an honor and a pleasure to be writing the foreword for the Turkish translation of *Tristram Shandy* two hundred and forty years after it was first published.

So What Has This Book Taught Me?

As I am forever reminding myself (and I apologize for reminding you too), I live in a poor country where it is the habit to read great books not for pleasure but for their utility, and where the literate are conditioned to serve those less fortunate; this being my lot, I have found an easy but deceptive way of endearing books to readers, which begins by pointing

out how books will improve them. For example: Like all great novels, *Tristram Shandy* is rich with the stuff of life—its rituals, states of mind, and refinements. Thus, *War and Peace* gives us the details of the Battle of Borodino and *Moby-Dick* offers an encyclopedic account of whaling, while *Tristram Shandy* offers invaluable insights into the life and times of a boy born in Ireland in the eighteenth century who went on to become an English vicar. In addition, *Tristram Shandy* is a leading exemplar of “scholarly wit” or “philosophical humor,” along with Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (which we can even write in Turkish as *Don Kişot*, this term having entered our vocabulary), and Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. The encyclopedic knowledge that impatient readers call digression, the sweeping philosophical statements, the extravagant shows of erudition, the studies of character and the human soul—yes, they are all here in this book, but they are balanced by the fine wit and mock solemnity that Sterne brings to these grave subjects and by a hero whose adventures mock, overturn, and cast doubt on those very philosophical assertions. These great, encyclopedic, magnificent books are before all else books about books, and they show us that a deep and fundamental knowledge of life only comes from reading books and then writing new books that contradict them. The first example of this sort of philosophical novel, narrated by a hero whose life has been poisoned by dreams garnered from books, was *Don Quixote*, himself a victim of chivalric romances; the last of them (and possibly literature’s first realist novel) was *Madame Bovary*, in which the heroine, having been poisoned by romantic novels and failed to find what she was seeking in love, chooses to poison herself further.

The “realist” scene at the end of the novel (in which Emma Bovary succumbs not to a book but to a deadly drug) had a huge effect on literature the world over; this overdose of “realism” was to poison Turkish literature too, by condemning it to a superficial reality. Living as we did on the periphery of Europe and believing Europe to be the source of all truth, we remained convinced that this kind of flat realism was the only way forward; so much so that sixty-five years later, when *Ulysses* was first published, we were still busy forgetting our own literary traditions—ignoring our ways of writing and feeling. We forgot that the realist novel was not a homegrown tradition but a narrative form we had recently imported from the West in the example of Flaubert, who came in person to Istanbul in 1850. Today, we are saddled with a new generation of narrow-minded, humorless, nationalist critics, come to denounce any narrative not superficially realist as “alien to our traditions.” Had books

like *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and *Tristram Shandy* been translated earlier, they might have exercised an influence on our small literary world, and the puny Turkish novel might have been more receptive to the complexities of our lives. (By now you ought to have learned not to get angry at Orhan, who has given his life to this cause, when he utters such things.) As for *Ulysses*, this novel did the most to save the world from superficial realism. Emerging from the birdcage of realism, the puny Turkish novel should spread the wings of its own traditions and its own dreams and fly!

O reader who, having learned so much from the foreword alone, is seized by love and joy! Now let me whisper in your ear what is most useful in this book, what it has to teach you. Listen carefully, and don't try to pass it off as your own idea in six years' time.

So Here It Is, the Fundamental Lesson This Book Teaches

The logic behind all great legends, religions, and philosophies is to teach us the great and fundamental truths. Let us call such an exercise a *grand narrative*, for it takes the form of a detailed story and is more literary than is commonly thought. In the literary novel, there are many ways to draw people's daily lives and adventures into these grand narratives. They present us with characters whose minds are set on an essence, a quest, a point in the distance. We may judge a character overly consumed by carnal pleasures or the pursuit of money to be one-dimensional, a caricature, but the character who lives in the service of this grand narrative (for love, national pride, or a political ideal) basks in its glory and so never seems one-dimensional. Don Quixote is not a caricature but a rounded person. But what *Tristram Shandy* tells us is that whatever a person's aims and personality, and however stable his character, his mind and his life will be much more untidy.

In other words, it doesn't matter if we believe in a grand narrative or indeed in its shadow; both are too clearly delineated to convey the shape of reality. Our lives do not have a center, a single focal point; what goes on inside our heads is too chaotic for us ever to achieve such focus. Life's like that too: Like *Tristram*, we spend our lives jumping from one subject to another, telling stories, following our fancies, and saying *If only* to ourselves, whatever happens to come into our heads. We are forever open to—disposed to—distraction, and our thoughts wander; we will stop a story midway to launch into a joke, and in so doing we reflect the surprises and coincidences of life in ways that a grand narrative never

can. Though we live mostly in the moment, struggling to protect ourselves, struggling to stay on our feet, there arrives a time—perhaps as we lie dying or, as in the case of this novel, as we await the moment of our birth—when we ask ourselves what life means; rather than assume the grand shapes suggested by religion, philosophies, and legend, our thoughts will reflect the shape of this book.

Summary: Life does not resemble that which is narrated in great novels, it resembles the shape of that book in your hands.

But beware: Life doesn't resemble the book itself, just its shape. Because this book cannot bring any story to a conclusion and cannot, in fact, make sense.

Finale

Life has no meaning, only this shape

We knew that already, so why did Sterne have to write a six-hundred-page book to prove it? If that's what you're asking, my answer is this:

All great novels open your eyes to things you already knew but could not accept, simply because no great novel had yet opened your eyes to them.