Sterne and Ireland

by Diego Sorba

"It was in this parish during our stay that I had that wonderful escape of falling through a mill-race whilst the mill was going and of being taken out unhurt. The story is incredible, but known for its truth in this part of Ireland, where hundreds of people flocked to see me."

Sterne: Irish, British, Anglo-Irish, or what?

Apart from the above-mentioned rather extraordinary episode of 1720, when on a visit with his father at the parsonage house in Annamoe (Co. Wicklow), the presence of Ireland in both Sterne’s major works and personal memories of childhood is inconsistent enough to certify the absolute fortuitousness and relative significance of his birth over Irish soil. (1)

As a matter of fact, after he was sent to a grammar-school in Northern England (Laurence was about ten years old then), Sterne’s biographical data do not report future visits to Ireland of a to-be country parson who will definitely prove to feel completely at home in his ancestors’ Yorkshire first and in London’s literary and mundane society later, after rising to fame as a writer.

These facts might therefore suffice for confirming the legitimate suspicion that

"To call Sterne an Irishman is the mere pedantry of birth registration". (2)

Contrary to such a drastic deduction, the idea of Sterne as Irishman – if not as a long-term citizen or resident, at least as a young boy who would become imbued with the native genius loci – has also been developed, particularly by critic A. N. Jeffares in his study on Anglo-Irish literature:

"What he [Sterne] had gained from growing up in Ireland was the common heritage of many Anglo-Irish writers; genteel poverty, rich relatives, and talk as the cheapest means of entertainment. Mock-seriousness, serious mockery, the strain runs from Swift to Shaw, from Sterne to Joyce, even gentle Goldsmith shared this capacity for self-mockery”. (3)

Swift, Sterne and the tradition of comic literature

So therefore, shall the Sternean critic really commit him/herself to defending the somewhat fragile notion that the author of Tristram Shandy is to be considered the product of his own birthplace, as under the influence, or spell, of a sort of Irish gene and, consequently, ambience? Or, conversely, shall he/she try to vindicate at all costs his actual Britishness as an inspirational trademark and unquestionable, however unspecified, asset?

Without a doubt, falling in the facile trap of making distinctions between Sterne’s two possible national characters is indeed a much less fruitful occupation than studying his writings as a consequence of the culture of his time and as a continuation of a precise centuries-long literary tradition, that of comic and satire, in a particular context which happens to be England between 1720 and 1770 approximately.

Having acknowledged this, it might (or might not) be a coincidence that the two 18th-century major comic writers in the English language – Sterne and Swift – had a connection, however different in terms of duration and importance, with Ireland, or Anglo-Ireland (that is, the one related to the Church of England, as Swift’s, who was Dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin, or the one connected to both Anglicanism and the Kingdom, represented by the British Army, as Sterne’s family history demonstrates).

But still this would be too risky an observation. Thus, much beyond all this debate about identity, the following statement by G.B. Shaw, another Irish-born writer who maintained a turbulent and ambiguous relationship with both his native land and chosen place of residence, might turn out to be the best starting point in order to explain Sterne’s own particular creative "statelessness", that unique state of being that belongs to true outsiders:
"When I say that I am an Irishman I mean that I was born in Ireland, and that my native language is the English of Swift and not the unspeakable jargon of the mid-nineteenth century newspapers". (4)

If we must recognize such a peculiarity as "the English of Swift", we can definitely also acknowledge the existence of an "English of Sterne" (and centuries later, also that "of Shaw", "of Joyce", "of Beckett", etc., for that matter). Language is what makes Sterne truly extraordinary, and the vis comica and creativeness he shares with Swift is not just a fatal coincidence (although nothing more than that, in terms of birthplaces), but the true milestone of 18th-century English comic writing.

In this perspective, Sterne too could not stand "the unspeakable jargon" and the "unbearable" structure of mid-eighteenth century official English novels, and thus opted for a freer language and form, revolutionary and utterly modern. Knowing that language is certainly to be considered as one of the most complex and challenging, however "cheap", means of entertainment available to humanity, Sterne-Yorick is proud to acknowledge that no doubt his story may well be defined as surrealistic or foolish, but surely nobody could ever possibly dare to complain about it not having been told beautifully and in a most unforgettable way. (5)

Sterne's influence on modern Irish writers

In conclusion, what is important to underline here is the consistent fact that Sterne's influence has left a deep mark, under the shape of a sort of retroactive heritage based principally upon language experimentation, on many modern writers, and that a significant number of them happen to be Irish (understandably, or accidentally so, hair-splitting identity-hunters would say).

As Terry Eagleton has duly pointed out,

"The Irish novel from Sterne to O'Brien is typically recursive and diffuse, launching one random narrative only to abort it, for some equally gratuitous tale, ringing pedantically ingenious variations on the same meagre clutch of plot elements. Anglo-Irish literature begins with one of the world's greatest anti-novels ['Tristram Shandy'], and achieves its apotheosis in a couple of others". (6)

If readers all over the world have by now become familiar with Leopold Bloom's peregrinations and digressions in Joyce's Ulysses, for example, they are probably much less acquainted with that other "couple of" Sternesque 20th-century Irish novels. In this respect, Flann O'Brien's incipit of At Swim-Two-Birds evidently draws on Sterne's authoritative examples concerning the art of destructurizing the plot, and is hopefully the best example to enhance a further look at some modern Irish authors who can be closely associated to Sterne in this section's Net Resources.

Flann O'Brien, At Swim-Two-Birds (1939)

HAVING placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression. I reflected on the subject of my spare-time literary activities. One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings.

Examples of three separate openings - the first:
The Pooka MacPhellimey, a member of the devil class, sat in his hut in the middle of a firwood meditating on the nature of numerals and segregating in his mind the odd ones from the even. He was seated at his diptych or ancient two-leaved writing-table with inner sides waxed. His rough long-nailed fingers toyed with a snuff-box of perfect rotundity and through a gap in his teeth he whistled a civil cavatina. He was a courtly man and received honour by reason of the generous treatment he gave his wife, one of the Corrigans of Carlow.

The second opening:
There was nothing unusual in the appearance of Mr John Furriskey but actually he had one distinction that is rarely encountered - he was born at the age of twenty-five and entered the world with a memory but without personal experience to account for it. His teeth were well formed but stained by tobacco, with two molars filled and a cavity threatened in the left canine. His knowledge of physics was moderate and extended to Boyle's Law and the Parallelogram of Forces.

The third opening:
Finn Mac Cool was a legendary hero of old Ireland. Though not mentally robust, he was a man of superb physique and development. Each of his thighs was as thick as a horse's belly, narrowing to a calf as thick as the belly of a foal. Three fifties of fosterlings could engage with handball against the wideness of his backside, which was large enough to halt the march of men through a mountain-pass. [...]
(1) "Few of his contemporaries were aware that Laurence Sterne had been born in Ireland. Though the memoir written for Lydia draws attention to the fact, Sterne only mentioned his Irish background in one letter; denying at length a report that he had ‘ridiculed my Irish friends at Bath’ in 1765, he concluded: ‘Besides, I am myself of their own country: - My father was a considerable time on duty with his regiment in Ireland; and my mother gave me to the world when she was there’ " (ROSS, Ian Campbell, Laurence Sterne: A Life, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 436, n. 35).


(4) SHAW, G. B., preface to John Bull’s Other Island (1904).

(5) "I--d! said my mother, what is all this story about? – A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick – And one of the best of its kind I ever heard" (Tristram Shandy, Vol. IX, Ch. XXXII).