

COLLISION

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A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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ABSTRACT

The aesthetic experience of Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinion of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is not reducible to an interpretation of plot or a linear critical analysis on the level of structure. Instead, it is thematized around a particular paradox of “double chronology” of autobiography, which continues the unfolding of the text yet simultaneously disrupts it. As such, *Tristram Shandy*’s lack of plot is a secondary phenomenon to the textual game of detour and digression it plays. This essay is less concerned with providing a closed argument and much more concerned with opening up inquiry into time and the aesthetics of reading with brief recourse to Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Overall, I hope to indicate how *Tristram Shandy* provides a space wherein the pleasure of reading itself is disclosed.

KEYWORDS

Laurence Sterne, narratology, reading, time, hermeneutics

The Pleasure of Reading: Playing Games with Time in *Tristram Shandy*

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This essay proposes an investigation of the specific aesthetic experience of reading encountered in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. This experience is one of *pleasure*, but it is not encountered in the plot of the narrative, since the logic that motivates *Tristram Shandy* is one whose reliance on interruption, digression, preoccupation, and so on moves the narrative forward. In other words, taken merely as a work of fictional autobiography, there is no plot to offer a decisive aesthetic moment. In fact, speaking of a plot for *Tristram Shandy* beyond anything other than a general sequence of events is misleading. It disobeys a chronological linearity, for the "plot" turns on the distracted recall of the narrator rather than a more deliberate narrative organization. Therefore there is an experience of pleasure located within the larger logic of *narrative* that this novel offers wherein the act of reading itself becomes the source of the aesthetic experience rather than what is offered in and through the plot. In this sense, the form of *time* that reading retrieves from the narrative is a clue to the source of aesthetic

pleasure in *Tristram Shandy*. Playfulness, and more importantly *playfulness with time*, inaugurates the aesthetic experience of the pleasure of reading.

By “aesthetic pleasure”, I do not mean, following the English Romantics, an emotional response to a work of art; nor do I mean a critical conceptual response achieved by a reader through engaging a work from a detached and intellectual distance à la Kant. Similarly, the value of the text is not found in a moral or didactic explanation alone. Instead, the form of pleasure I wish to explore is best expressed by Anne Sheppard in her book *Aesthetics*, where she defines aesthetic pleasure as “a desire to continue or repeat the experience.”¹ The experience of aesthetic pleasure specific to *Tristram Shandy* derives from its games with time, which calls the reader to seek out an intellectual cause for said response. The experience is disquieting, however; there is no innate or particular textual datum by which this emotional response could be determined as its cause beyond this moment of response into which the reader is drawn. The plot of *Tristram Shandy* does not follow an arc along a linear progression of events. There are events and actions, but they are connected by the fancy of the narrator rather than a larger organizing *telos*. The response to the call then is a sundering moment whose indeterminacy unsettles the reader into making a renewed emotional response, and so the reception begins anew as the narrative turns. The result is the continuous ungrounding of the possibility for a final or concise conceptualization of the reader’s experience of reading the text, as opposed to pinpointing a particular moral or intellectual stance with which *Tristram Shandy* challenges the reader. In short, the novel continuously gives cause for the reader to ask him or herself “Why am I reading this?”

I contend that the mechanism upon which this textual back-and-forth turns is Sterne’s playfulness with time over and above formal considerations of plot. By “time” I mean the relation between the text’s internal temporality – the unfolding of the narrative – and temporal conditions external to the text – the way in which time passes for the reader during the act of reading. The sense of play does not stem from either sense of time considered alone but rather from both in tandem. Part of my aim then is to draw out the manner in which this occurs, in hope of launching a broader discussion about a work of art, its interpreter, and the temporalities that both inhabit. However, my primary aim here is to show how *Tristram Shandy* presents such a possibility in its starkest and most pleasurable sense. Reading such a novel makes time most accessible, but ironically this accessibility is a product of time’s inscrutability.²

The Life and Opinion of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman turns on the narration of a "life" by means of an "opinion," one which is in turn tempered by and manifested within lived experience. Shandy continuously makes recourse to digression: in order to tell the story, he must also leave the story to the side. At each moment of disruption, the next movement of the narrative is disclosed. The only regularity present is the one by which one scene or another is disrupted by the narrative as it turns to the next. In other words, Sterne's strategy of plot is a strategy of detour.

This regularity points toward some degree of narrative intention: there is an identifiable structure at work, even when that structure expresses a rupture of narrative structure itself. Of course, the *author's* motives, which *driving* underlie the narrative and plot strategies, are only ever provisionally available for analysis. However, in the inaugural words of the story, the *narrator* expresses a desire for a rational ordering for his life rather than the "logic" of sequential accidents bound in common to a single agent according to which the rest of the narrative seems to follow. "I wish either my father or my mother ... had minded what they were about when they begot me ... I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me."³ From the beginning, *Tristram Shandy* contains a plot that challenges the concept of emplotment itself.

At the outset, Shandy disrupts the possibility for a concise delivery of a life story from beginning to end. Rather, the reader receives a life emplotted according to the whim of the narrator, which colors the anticipation of an ordered progression through this life. From the moment of his conception, an eye for logic or structure is contingent on the ongoing events of life itself. Plot, according to Aristotle, is the *mimesis* of an action. And through text, plot is achieved by the ascription of an action to an agent through the "imitation" of life in language.⁴ So what is imitated in the plot of *Tristram Shandy* is a life reduced to a narrative object and mediated through the subjective viewpoint of "the middle" of the story – the lived time of the present in which it is being written. If Shandy writes the *totality* of his life story, up to and including the moments in which he is writing, then the full figure of his identity may be received by the reader. His opinion, or subjective self-reflection through narration, would then be fully commensurate with the totality of his lived experience. In other words, if Shandy were to succeed in writing the totality of his life story, then the time relayed within his story would be the same form of time encountered by the reader as the time of the narration itself. The novel would succeed then in being both a "life" and an "opinion"

as well as delivering both over to the reader. But the more he narrates, the more time passes between the “now” of narration and the “then” being relayed through the narrative. There is a continuous discontinuity or time lag between Shandy as the narrator and Shandy as the subject of narration.

This betrays a particular concept of time at work in *Tristram Shandy* that is exemplary of a paradox found in all autobiographical literature, fictional or otherwise. On the one hand, there is the time of the narration: the time of the unfolding of the narrative through the narrating *action* of a narrator. On the other hand, there is the time of the narrative, which is disclosed and thereby structured by the time of narration but remains phenomenally distinct since there is no point at which they ever emerge within the same moment. Paul Ricoeur notes in *Time and Narrative* that the “double chronology” of narrative becomes a coherent concept when one notices “the remarkable property narrative possesses of being split into utterance [*énonciation*] and statement [*énoncé*],” whereupon reading is the act of “grasping together” the two.⁵ A narrative is thus irreducibly split into its material status as a text (i.e., its “utterance”) and its content (i.e., its “statement”).⁶ This bifurcated world is precisely that which is experienced by the reader.

Shandy bemoans the impossibility of autobiography frequently. Early on in the first volume, he provides a helpful summation:

there are archives at every stage to be look'd into, and rolls, records, documents, and endless genealogies, which justice ever and anon calls him back to stay the reading of: — In short, there is no end of it; — for my own part, I declare I have been at it these six weeks, making all the speed I possibly could, — and am not yet born: — I have just been able, and that's all, to tell you *when* it happen'd, but not *how*; — so that you see the thing is yet far from being accomplished.⁷

Shandy's desire to set out and write one's story in its entirety from the absolute beginning is consistently interrupted at every moment of reflection by the seemingly impossible epistemic burden of truth and documentation. But at no point does this burden seem to make Shandy's project an impossible one. More specifically, its impossibility is always concealed for Shandy by the act itself. The incommensurability of truth and documentation is doubled by the incommensurable structure of life and writing: Shandy could never make the leading event of his

autobiography fully coincident with the event of writing it. Similarly, the reader could never make the time of the text the time of its reception one and the same. What frustrates the reader of *Tristram Shandy* is precisely what frustrates the eponymous character – time plays games with the reader inasmuch as reading inaugurates a game played with time, but this is nevertheless a necessary condition for its reception in the first place.

This is the heart of aesthetic experience and *Tristram Shandy*: the discontinuous and insistent disruption of the reader's interpretive efforts is also the necessary condition for its reception. The aesthetic experience *is* the rupture of continuity and identifiable meaning for the reader. Later, Shandy begins to relate his father Walter's idle hobby of researching the science of noses, but insists to the reader that he or she delay judgment carried away by the imagination, which is the devil's work. Rather, one must withhold it in view of a certain virtue:

Read, read, read, read, my unlearned reader! read ... for without *much reading*, by which your reverence knows, I mean *much knowledge*, you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unravel the many opinions, transactions and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one.⁸

Shandy offers the source of aesthetic experience within reading: if the reader does not continue, then he or she will not "penetrate" the text, and quite playfully, the immediately following page contains the printed image of a marble surface. But the call to read here is to pass through the blackened page: placing a judgment on the text (either on Walter's pseudoscientific interests or on a page covered by a black space) is precisely what ends reading and thus the temporal games upon which the narrative turns. The satisfaction of certain knowledge that the world claims stands in opposition to the work of reading *Tristram Shandy*, but since the call to "penetrate" the text is what motivates its reading, and this activity is met with the impenetrable nexus of digression, this virtue is ambiguous.

So the virtue called for in the text itself is ambiguous as soon as the source of its aesthetic experience is brought to the fore. It is better to allow oneself to be taken up by the game and let it remain in play than to terminate it with the certitude of judgment. *Tristram Shandy* is then a

novel about the ambiguity of interpretation, and more specifically the *pleasure* of ambiguous interpretations, which challenge the reader to play an interpretive game with them. But playing the game that *Tristram Shandy* offers does not reveal a hermeneutic “key” to answering the challenge and uncovering its aesthetic experience since this is what precisely what it hides away. The frustration of reading *Tristram Shandy* is its aesthetic experience, and so even the reader is participating in its games. This is echoed later when Shandy recalls watching his father do his research with his uncle Toby: “he had got out his penknife, and was trying experiments upon the sentence, to see if he could not scratch some better sense into it.”⁹ The moment he believes he has encountered the meaning of the sentence, he has destroyed it: “I’ve done it, — said my father, snapping his fingers. — See, my dear brother *Toby*, how I have mended the sense. — But you have marr’d a word, replied my uncle *Toby*.”¹⁰ The act of interpretation changes the subject of interpretation. Attempting to identify meaning beyond the “dark veil” and blackened page of text is to deny the challenge to play its game and find pleasure in engaging in the play.

When one reads *Tristram Shandy*, one becomes complicit in its games, surrendering to what Gadamer calls “the mode of being of the work of art itself.”¹¹ Specifically, the condition for an aesthetic experience in reading *Tristram Shandy* is that one read it as a novel in spite of the insistent resistance to such categorization revealed in the act of reading. It is the very impossibility of totalizing a life story into which the reader must buy if he or she wishes to buy into the games *Tristram Shandy* plays. In other words, the reader enters into a peculiar intersubjective relationship with *Shandy*, a relationship that finds an analogy in Gadamer’s notion of “play.” For Gadamer, play “fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play.”¹² He assumes the “*primacy of play over the consciousness of the player ... without goal or purpose but also without effort.*”¹³ Of course, there is still a *seriousness* in the form of a fidelity to the text here: in reading, one must take *seriously* the possibility for making “the play wholly play.”¹⁴ In the context of *Shandy*, the primacy of the play at work in the narrative calls the reader to surrender to the interrupting folds and warps of the narrative, at the heart of which is the “double time” that results from the “self-presentation” of both a life and an opinion.¹⁵ The aesthetic pleasure found here is borne of a concern for the play of language with time, which *takes* time to unfold but in doing so *makes* more time for itself. This oscillation between creation and expenditure opens the space in which the play takes place.

Theories of aesthetic interpretation that reckon with temporality can find fruitful results when the manner in which the time of the interpreter's aesthetic experience is considered in conjunction with that of the work itself. Indeed, a work whose structure subverts movements toward conclusive interpretations is still an aesthetic experience. Resistant interpretation is still interpretation. This is not a new claim, but it gains significance when one considers the manner in which the activity of the interpreter is coincident with the activity of the work, which the interpreter engenders by engaging the work in the first place. Ricoeur agrees that a *game* is played both within the narrative and between the narrative and the reader. He affirms that "we may call the relation between the time of narrating and the narrated time in the narrative itself a 'game with time'" that "has as its stake the temporal experience (*Zeiterlebnis*) intended by the narrative."¹⁶ As we have seen, there is a time that is primary to reading itself and that is "'codetermined' by the relation and the tension between the two times of the narrative and by the 'laws of form' that result from them."¹⁷ In *Shandy*, these "laws of form," according to which the text plays its game, are the text's digressions from "logical" narrative structures. *Tristram Shandy* is an example of the extreme limits of the temporal unity of a narrative. As Ricoeur states, such a narrative requires "a view of time that has no possible overview, no overall internal cohesiveness."¹⁸ *Tristram Shandy* takes this view to its outermost limit and induces one to lose oneself with pleasure in this game. Time both emerges and is subverted in *Tristram Shandy's* deliberate disunity; and this impossible movement towards complete conceptualization is precisely where one finds the pleasure of reading, which in turn feeds the desire to continue along such an impassable path. Indeed, *Tristram Shandy* teaches one to take seriously the manner in which time runs circles in and around interpretive consciousness.

This seriousness of time's play suggests a possible pedagogical function for *Tristram Shandy's* games with time. The entire novel can be construed as a chronologized sequence of detours and digressions that is nonetheless pleasurable because it offers a challenge to read and in doing so learn about oneself as a reader. Reading itself is a pleasure, and *Tristram Shandy* is a text that calls upon one to become a better reader. And if the effort to decipher such a text can be pleasurable, other time-consuming forms of interpretation, including research, analysis, and philosophizing, can also be sources of pleasure.

• Notes •

- 1 Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics: an Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 64.
- 2 Ricoeur's "inscrutability" is one of the major temporal aporias that Ricoeur reckons with in *Time and Narrative*. See *Time and Narrative* Vol. 1, part 1.
- 3 Lawrence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (London: Penguin Classics, 1977), 5.
- 4 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 31.
- 5 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume 2*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 61, 79.
- 6 Unfortunately, a more detailed exploration of double chronology in terms of speech acts is beyond the scope of this essay. My aim in raising the concept here is to highlight narrative's inherently dualistic nature.
- 7 Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 35, Sterne's emphasis.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 203-204, Sterne's emphasis.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 207.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 208, Sterne's emphasis.
- 11 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 102.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 103.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 103.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 16 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 2*, 80. For a detailed discussion of this concept, see Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).
- 17 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative 2*, 80-81.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 81.

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