




Spring 2016

Balance in Tristram Shandy: Laurence Sterne through Friedrich Schiller's Eyes

Peter W. Rosenberger '16, Gettysburg College

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Rosenberger, Peter W., "Balance in Tristram Shandy: Laurence Sterne through Friedrich Schiller's Eyes" (2016). *Student Publications*. 549.

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Abstract

Many critics of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* see the novel's narrative elements and structure as a form of narrative play, which reject Enlightenment systems of understanding. In this paper, through the philosophy of Friedrich Schiller, I will argue that the novel's narrative structure is best understood as a balance of aesthetic impulses. For most scholars, to understand the narrative form, digressions, philosophy of knowledge, and/or history in *Tristram Shandy*, one must understand how the novel subverts the categorization and systematization of Enlightenment thinking. The patterns of subversion in the text lend themselves to arguments that characterize the novel as one of narrative play. This is understandable, but it ultimately does not do justice to the complexity of the novel. To address this complexity, I turn to Friedrich Schiller, a German poet and philosopher. I argue that the text enacts Schiller's aesthetic framework by synthesizing the competing impulses he describes in his aesthetic philosophy. *Tristram Shandy* does not seek the order and systems of Locke and the Enlightenment, nor the overwhelming feeling of the Romantics' sublimity; instead, *Tristram Shandy*, setting a precedent for Schiller's philosophy, seeks the most beautiful aesthetic goal, balance.

Keywords

Tristram Shandy, narrative form, narrative, Friedrich Schiller, balance

Disciplines

Comparative Philosophy | English Language and Literature | Literature in English, British Isles

Comments

Written as a Senior Thesis in the English Department.

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Peter Rosenberger

Professor Joanne Myers

ENG 402

5 May 2016

Balance in *Tristram Shandy*: Laurence Sterne Through Schiller's Eyes

Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* has been written about extensively because of the multiplicity of opinions and theories put forward by the text itself and the characters within the text. Much of the scholarship about *Tristram Shandy* sets the text against the Enlightenment philosophies, especially those of John Locke, that were prominent influences on the thought of the period in which Sterne wrote the novel. Some of the most foundation Enlightenment ideas about literature, knowledge, freedom, and time find opposition in *Tristram Shandy*. The scholarship on *Tristram Shandy* covers a wide range of topics—reflecting the number of philosophical complications in *Tristram Shandy*—but in much of the criticism, the same chief concern can be found. Whether the scholar is addressing narrative form and digressions or philosophy of knowledge or politics and history, the key to understanding the topic is understanding how the novel subverts the categorization and systematization that characterized much of the thought of the Enlightenment.

In “Complete Systems and *Tristram Shandy*,” Marcus Walsh argues that *Tristram Shandy* works to complicate the Enlightenment goal of categorizing and taxonomizing knowledge into neat systems of understanding. Walsh uses Walter Shandy to exemplify this complication. According to Walsh, Walter's mode of thinking counters the text of *Tristram Shandy* as a whole because of its encyclopedic nature. Walsh states, “the proper business of a cyclopedia [is] to be complete” (18). The encyclopedias that Walter loves are defined by their completeness. The

entire purpose of their creation is to provide a complete reference point for any given topic, but, in practice, they often fail to provide Walter with the information he needs. Walter would want *Tristram Shandy* to serve as a complete account of Tristram's life, but the digressions in the text and Tristram's penchant for aposiopesis deny the text any completeness. *Tristram Shandy's* anti-systemic bent also applies to the politics of Sterne's time.

In an essay on the politics of *Tristram Shandy*, John Havard states, "the multiple, competing frames of reference that Sterne goes out of his way to introduce into the untidily organized world of *Tristram Shandy*" serve as a rejection of the "presumption that the history of England through the ages (and subsequently world history) represents the inevitable triumph of progress and freedom, secured by the progress from constitutional government into parliamentary and eventually democratic rule" (Havard 587). According to Havard, the tension between the past and the present that plays out in the interrupted narration of *Tristram Shandy* directly connects to the shifting political landscape of the mid-eighteenth century. Havard argues that the text subverts the understanding of linear, progressive political freedom emerging in the mid-eighteenth century. Tristram does not feel obligated to tell his stories in a linear, chronological way, and he often finds himself caught between past and present. Tristram looks to the past for some force to anchor his story, but despite his clinging to the past, the present moment remains as uncertain as ever.

Many critics, in the face of reading *Tristram Shandy* as a rejection of systems of understanding, will describe the novel as one of play. In "Genre and *Tristram Shandy*: The Novel of Quickness," Toby Olshin focuses on the simultaneity of digression and progression in the novel to frame his argument that the text operates outside of time. This position parallels the political understanding Havard argues for in relation to the structure of the narrative and its

digressions. The simultaneity of digression and progression that Olshin describes is helpful for understanding the different, more complicated view of history and time provided in *Tristram Shandy*, described by Havard.

Most importantly in Olshin's work, the nonlinear form of *Tristram Shandy* is seen as Sterne "playing with" time, which serves as a model for understanding the other subversive elements of the text. The play of Sterne and Tristram gives the text its unconventional delivery, and this play is what ultimately makes *Tristram Shandy* a philosophical text as well as a literary text. The novel very purposefully orients itself in opposition to Enlightenment ideals. Although play is not a bad way to understand the operation of the text's narrative, seeing the play as merely a subversion of systematic thought does not do justice to the complexity of the novel. In order to illuminate the complexity of the text's narrative form and philosophy, I turn to Friedrich Schiller, a German poet and philosopher, who also set himself against the ideals of Enlightenment thinking.

In response to the failure of the French Revolution and a growing fear of the isolating effects of Enlightenment ideals, Friedrich Schiller wrote *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* in 1794. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* was written thirty years after *Tristram Shandy*, so Schiller's ideas did not prefigure any of Sterne's, but reading *Tristram Shandy* with Schiller in mind illuminates the text's narrative form and the philosophical positions it takes. Written in a series of letters, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* responded directly to the work of German Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant and provided both an aesthetic and a political philosophy. Writing at the end of the Enlightenment, Schiller had a perspective that Sterne did not, but both were skeptical of the philosophical tendencies of the Enlightenment. In *On the Aesthetic*

Education of Man, Schiller distinguishes between two distinct impulses that drive human behavior: formal and sensuous drives.

According to Schiller, the formal drive is the impulse to categorize and structure experience using one's intellectual faculties. The object of the formal drive is "shape, [...] a concept which includes all formal qualities of things and all their relations to the intellectual faculties" (Schiller 76). Reason is the instrument of the formal drive, and when one orders, categorizes, and defines objects and experiences, one is enacting the formal drive. The other side of the spectrum of human activity, for Schiller, is that of sensuous drives. Sensuous drives are the impulses that arise from the pursuit of pleasure. They drive the decisions that are made because of feeling. The object of the sensuous drive is "life [...] which expresses all material being and all that is immediately present in the senses" (Schiller 76). When one acts to procure sensual pleasure in the material world, one is enacting the sensuous drive. The sensuous drive is at one end of the spectrum, and the formal drive is at the other.

It is helpful to understand the poles being described in more directly literary terms. As I have said, the formal drive captures the modes of categorizing and taxonomizing thought that characterize Enlightenment philosophies. These philosophies were coming to prominence in Sterne's time, and he worked to problematize them as they emerged. Schiller, at the end of the Enlightenment, was fed up with hyper-formal philosophies, but he was also hesitant about the philosophies that were emerging in response to the Enlightenment. According to Schiller, philosophies that prioritized the sensuous drive as the governing principle also did not suffice. Many of the thinkers and artists writing during Schiller's time jumped from the logic and reason of the Enlightenment directly into the passion and sublimity of Romanticism—and an overreliance on sensuousness. Schiller, on the other hand, argues that the two drives must be

balanced. Understanding the play in *Tristram Shandy* to be the balance of the formal and the sensuous drives illuminates both the philosophy and the art of the text.

This balancing act provides a new framework for understanding what Sterne accomplishes in *Tristram Shandy*. The balancing of the formal and sensuous drives can be seen as a form of play—Schiller even calls it the “play drive,” but it is a distinct form of play, categorically different than the play characterized by other analyses of *Tristram Shandy*. It is not that the text’s play merely subverts systematic thinking in order to condemn the formal drive altogether. I argue that the text enacts Schiller’s aesthetic framework by synthesizing these competing impulses.

Starting at the very beginning of the text, Sterne gives us some ideas about how these competing impulses will be weaved together in the course of the novel. The start of the novel is the story of Tristram’s conception, and one might expect a passionate story about the love of Tristram’s parents, but instead, Tristram’s mother interrupts Tristram’s conception to ask Walter about the winding of the clock on the wall (Sterne 2). The issue of time in the novel is very important because of the novel’s nonlinear form, and during the moments of Tristram’s conception, his mother interrupts his father to ask if the clock is showing the right time. Her concern about the clock and time, the most important structure that exists for creating order in experience, denies Tristram a natural conception and sets the course of his unfortunate life.

The clearest views of *Tristram Shandy* as a philosophical text come when the text steps away from the narrative and reflects on its strangeness and narrative form. The text is aware that it is not merely telling a story, and Sterne even employs moments of clear self-reflection to illuminate the oddities and subversions within the text. One of the best examples of this comes in “The Author’s Preface” of Volume Three, which fittingly appears after Chapter Twenty.

The preface appears deep in Volume Three and opens a dialogue with John Locke directly. In “The Author’s Preface,” Sterne is interacting quite plainly with the “formal drive” philosophy of Locke, which is at one end of Schiller’s spectrum. The preface opens with a reference to Locke’s distinction between wit and judgment. In a footnote, the editor describes Locke’s position on wit and judgment, which comes from *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: Locke “considers judgment—the capacity to distinguish one thing from another—the useful function; wit—which notices similarities even where they are not obvious” (Anderson 140). What is most important about this distinction for Locke is that “he considers [wit] at best amusing, at worst destructively misleading (a doctrine with dangerous implications for literature)” (Anderson 140). Locke fears that literature that employs wit will undo the work that judgment does to categorize and order thoughts and experience. The rationality of judgment is seen as the most important function for guiding human activity. Schiller would see this position as over far too reliant on the formal drive, and the text agrees with him.

In the preface, Sterne sets up his account of wit and judgment by describing places with different amounts of wit and judgment. The places represent what happens when wit and judgment are not properly balanced. The picture that Sterne paints of a world where wit and judgment are unbalanced is not a pretty one. “Within the narrow compass of his cave,” Sterne writes, “the spirits are compressed almost to nothing,—and where the passions of a man, with every thing which belongs to them, are as frigid as the zone itself” (142). This place is frozen and barren, and the life of those inhabiting that world is equally desolate. The alternative, where wit and judgment are balanced, is much nicer.

In this alternate universe, a place that is a “warmer and more luxuriant island [...] where humors run high,” the “glimmerings (as it were) of wit” are balanced “with a comfortable

provision of good plain *household* judgment” (Sterne 143). If there was “more of either the one or the other, it would destroy the proper ballance betwixt them” and reduce the world to the barren, desolate condition described earlier (143). Sterne stresses the importance of this balance even further: “The *height* of our wit and the *depth* of our judgment, you see, are exactly proportioned to the length and breadth of our necessities” (143). The people’s needs are perfectly accounted for because the balance of wit and judgment is maintained.

Locke’s understanding of judgment connects directly to Schiller’s formulation of the formal drive. In the passages laid out above, judgment is to be balanced with wit, so what is the connection between the wit that Locke and Sterne refer to and the spectrum that Schiller constructs in *Aesthetic Education*? Unfortunately, it is not as simple as a calling the wit of Locke and Sterne the same thing as the sensuousness of Schiller. When it comes to understanding wit as a countering idea to judgment, referring to the Oxford English Dictionary will be helpful. The specific version of “wit” that opposes judgment is defined in the OED as the “quickness of intellect or liveliness of fancy” (“wit,” n.). Wit is characterized by imagination and an ability to associate cleverly. For Tristram, those clever associations are often the only way to tell stories of passion. It is not that wit, for Tristram, is the same things as sensuousness, but wit, or imaginative association, allows for narrative digressions that make room for passion to enter the narrative. This room would not be made if it were not for the power of wit. This is clear in another moment from the preface in Volume Three.

Sterne sees the project of impassioned art to be one set against judgment’s pure dividing and categorizing: “What confusion!—what mistakes!—fiddlers and painters judging by their eyes and ears,—admirable!—trusting to the passions excited in an air sung, or a story painted to the heart,—instead of measuring them by a quadrant” (144). These musicians and painters allow

for their senses, their passions, to pour into their stories as opposed to merely “measuring them by a quadrant.” The artists’ ability to channel their senses through their art is seen as a form of confusion, but this confusion is a beautiful thing, according to Tristram. When the artists are not “measuring [their stories] by a quadrant” and they employ wit to allow for feeling to enter their art, the balance of wit and judgment best serves its purpose. Sterne does not believe the formal drive can sufficiently capture lived experience, and he wants wit to balance judgment by channeling sense experience into the foreground of expression.

A final moment at the end of the preface brings the philosophical import of the section home. Sterne writes,

I hate set dissertations,—and above all things in the world, ‘tis one of the silliest things in one of them, to darken your hypothesis by placing a number of tall, opake words, one before another, in a right line, betwixt your own and your reader’s conception,—when in all likelihood, if you had looked about, you might have seen something standing, or hanging up, which would have cleared the point at once. (Sterne 145)

This passage foreshadows later sections that directly deal with the linearity of narrative, and, again, the message is clear. Looking to the world and allowing information from the senses to affect how stories are told will enliven art, even if the cost is some of the linearity and completeness of traditional narrative. There is a moment at the end of Volume Three that furthers this point.

In Chapter Forty-Two, after a long discussion of noses and the many writings on the subject, Tristram describes how he and his father appreciate Hafen Slawkenbergius, a preeminent writer on noses, for very different reasons. Walter loves the work of Slawkenbergius because it

is “an institute of all that was necessary to be known of noses” (Sterne 175). Tristram, on the other hand, thinks that the “best [...] most amusing part of *Hafen Slawkenbergius* is his tales” (Sterne 175). Tristram recognizes that the tales might not be as useful as the encyclopedic parts of Slawkenbergius’s work, but this is the very reason he values the tales. In Chapters Thirty-One through Forty-One, the narrative provides a complex mediation on the topic of noses. There is even a chapter ventriloquizing Locke on the subject! This portion of the text would please Walter and enacts the impulses of the formal drive. Those chapters lead into the text’s distinction between Walter and Tristram when it comes to Slawkenbergius, and from there, in the beginning of Volume Four, Tristram writes an account of two of Slawkenbergius’s tales. In the tales, Diego’s nose sends the city of Strasburg into a frenzy. Tristram wants to take the time to show the passions of the people of Strasburg. In Tristram’s delivery of the tales of Slawkenbergius, the text provides a moment of passion to balance what would have been an otherwise dry taxonomy of Slawkenbergius.

The marbled page in Volume Three also serves to balance the formal impulse with an experience of the senses (Sterne 165-166). I would argue that the black page in Volume One serves a similar function (23-24). These bizarre elements of *Tristram Shandy* are often seen as a way of poking fun at readers for seeking out and demanding meaning from every part of a text. They break the narrative away from its structure, and they provide a purely visual experience for readers. This is a wildly unconventional move for a novel, and in these moments, the text requires readers to experience the narrative in an unusual way. In fact, the novel invites readers to merely experience these parts of the narrative. Readers might not accept this invitation, and they might overanalyze—a theme Sterne plays with throughout *Tristram Shandy*, but at least, these elements offer the possibility for a sensuous experience of the text. Later on in the text,

after Volume Three, Sterne's balancing act plays out over longer, more sweeping storylines. A good example of this difference in the later sections of the text occurs in the arc of Volumes Seven and Eight.

In the first chapter of Volume Eight, Sterne delivers his famous cabbage planter scene. This chapter is the preface to Tristram's telling of the story of the Widow Wadman's pursuit of Toby, and it is one of the "metanarrative" moments in the text in which Tristram directly comments on his narration and his narrative choices. Tristram references Toby's amours at the end of Volume Six but spends all of Volume Seven describing his travels as he tries to escape Death. He does not get around to telling the story of Toby's amours until Volume Eight, which is why he feels the need to explain the digression of Volume Seven and the digressive form of the whole text.

Tristram recognizes that he is not telling his story in the traditional way. In the first, short chapter of Volume Eight, Tristram boldly says, "I defy the best cabbage planter [...] to go on coolly, critically, and canonically, planting his cabbages one by one, in straight lines, and stoical distances, especially if slits in petticoats are unsew'd up" (Sterne 380). Cabbage planters are narrators, and Tristram sets himself apart from the narrators who tell their stories "in straight lines." Tristram purposefully chooses to break from tradition by telling his story without rational sequence. Tristram clearly is not convinced that the linear telling of a narrative successfully captures experience. Telling the story in the traditional way would prohibit him from fully engaging with the parts of his story that have to do with "slits in petticoats." The "slits in petticoats" line from the passage quoted above refers to the end of Volume Seven, in which Tristram dances with Nannette, who has a torn skirt. Although Nannette does not mind it, the slit in her petticoat is too much for Tristram. Despite how flustered her torn skirt makes him, he

envisions spending the rest of his life dancing the night away with Nannette. This part of the narrative, like Slawkenbergius's tales, would go untold if Tristram abided by the traditional laws of narration, those governed by an overreliance on the formal drive, which send the text, at all costs, toward completion.

Throughout the novel, Tristram promises to tell certain stories, but he almost never immediately follows through on those promises. The amours of Toby and Mrs. Wadman exemplify this form of delayed follow-through. The text does not have one predetermined story to deliver, and Tristram's willingness to break from the direction of the narrative to deliver a digression that concludes with a story of passion shows that the organizing structures of the novel—the stories that the narrator promises to deliver—can and should be interrupted by the narrator's passions.

Tristram believes that by "straddling out, or sidling into some bastardly digression," his narrative style more successfully tells the story. Tristram recognizes that his narrative digressions reject traditions of storytelling—he calls them "bastardly," after all, but he is convinced that his mode of telling does more justice to what he has experienced. He succeeds where conventional narrators fail because he engages with the passions that exist alongside the other stories unfolding around him, the stories that he plans to tell.

Traditional narration, the planting of cabbages in straight lines, might have more efficiently told the narrative of Toby and Wadman, but the assumption of narrative success as directly proportional to narrative efficiency is the understanding of narrative that *Tristram Shandy* rejects. It might be easier to consume the story packaged in the traditional narrative form, but what is lost is the passion that we get from the digressive form Tristram employs. In this moment, Tristram chooses passion over linear narrative structure, and he is adamant that his

methods are superior. What is complicated about this section is that, despite Tristram's feelings about the superiority of the narrative form he employs, the section that follows the cabbage planter scene is a relatively linear one. Tristram finally gets around to telling the story of Toby and Wadman's relationship, which balances the passion of the connection between Tristram and Nannette.

In the telling of the amours of Toby and Wadman, Tristram portrays their connection by using the language of a military campaign. The systems of tactical war become the mode of narration, and Toby and Wadman pursue each other like enemies on a battlefield. The description of the amours of Toby and Wadman is such a stark contrast from the description of Tristram's connection with Nannette in Volume Seven. According to the narration, Toby and Wadman engage in a battle, while Tristram and Nannette dance. The former is portrayed as a connection of planning and strategy, while the latter is a connection of passion and organicity. But neither of the connections is successful. A gross misunderstanding between Toby and Wadman ends their connection, and Tristram floats away from Nannette and returns to his travels. By showing these connections, the text moves between formal impulses and sensuous impulses respectively, but the text does not affirm one or the other by granting one completion and leaving the other unfinished. Instead, the text delivers both of the narratives, in their opposing modes, separately but to the same ends. There is even a digression implanted into the amours of Toby and Wadman that furthers this point.

In the midst of the militaristic romance of Toby and Wadman, Corporal Trim tells the story of the time he fell in love with the Beguine nun who tended to him after he injured his knee in battle. In this moment, Tristram allows for this digression told by Trim to interfere with the completion of Toby and Wadman's narrative. Over Chapters Twenty through Twenty-Two,

Trim describes how he fell more in love with the nun the longer she tended to his injury. Her touch was overwhelmingly pleasurable to Trim, and just as his story is building to a sexual climax, Toby interrupts him, and Tristram returns to telling the amours of Toby and Wadman. This digression, and its failure to reach completion, is a microcosm of the form of *Tristram Shandy*. In this narrative movement, like the movement between Tristram and Nannette and Toby and Wadman, the text chooses to provide both formality and sensuousness in balance.

There are the stories that Tristram says he is going to tell, and although he does tell a number of those stories, he also makes room the digressions like the ones fleshed out in the sections above. If he were operating conventionally, those digressions would be left out to efficiently tell a narrative to completion. *Tristram Shandy* is an account of Tristram's life; it is his autobiography, but it is nearly impossible to pick out a dominant narrative thread. Much of the assessment of *Tristram Shandy* surrounds the text's digressions, and Tristram is clear when he is embarking on a digression, but there is not one narrative thread from which these digressions pull away. Olshin is right to point out how the text both digresses and progresses, but the framework that Schiller's aesthetics provides gives an account of why Sterne employs the specific narrative structure of *Tristram Shandy*. An expressive mode ruled by judgment is the norm—and Sterne does not do away with that mode entirely, but without the speed and imagination of associative wit, the text would not have the passion that enlivens it and makes it amusing. The text has a finite number of pages, but ultimately, no true completion is reached.

In the Twenty-sixth Letter of *Aesthetic Education*, Schiller describes how the formal and sensuous drives carry over into communication and human connection. When one searches for humanity and connection only in the world of self-reflection and thought, no common ground between people can be created. On the other hand, when one searches for humanity and

connection only in the outside world of materiality and sense, one misses out on the important order that introspection gives experience (Schiller 124-131). For Schiller, this balance is also a balance of communication. Only trying to communicate inwardly is an overreliance on the formal drive, and only trying to communicate outwardly is an overreliance on the sensuous drive. For Schiller, our ability to commune with ourselves and with others grants us our freedom by giving us a true inter-subjectivity. Schiller's aesthetic utopia is a universe where we make art that balances our communication with ourselves and with each other. It allows for a sphere of intersection where we honor both our own necessities and the necessities of those around us, as Tristram might put it. *Tristram Shandy* does not seek the order and systems of Locke and the Enlightenment, nor the overwhelming feeling of the Romantics' sublimity; instead, *Tristram Shandy*, setting a precedent for Schiller's philosophy, seeks the most beautiful goal, balance.

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