

Aesthetic Cognition

Feeling the Emotions of Others

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Abstract How did eighteenth-century British authors encounter, and respond to, this question: are we able to feel the emotions of other people? How did the dominance of empirical epistemology shape their responses? During this period, the ideas of the aesthetic, and then realism, were developed on the explicit model of scientific or experimental knowledge by Dryden, Addison, Fielding, and Johnson. The key to this analogy was the notion that both kinds of knowledge are virtual products of mental operations that abstract from the actual sense impressions that are, for empiricism, the foundation of all knowledge. The major difference between the scientific understanding and the aesthetic and realist imagination lies in the degree of distance each takes from the senses. The distance taken by the imagination is comparatively moderate, as can be seen in the fact that the virtual images that are its product still reflect the appearance of the actual nature from which they are abstracted. The distance taken by scientific understanding is far greater, producing not recognisable images of nature but fully abstracted concepts or numbers. Our knowledge of what other people feel comes not from any sensible connection we have to them, but from our imagination of what we might feel were we in the same circumstances as they are. This is especially evident in the response we have to artistic representations of others. But our imaginations mediate between us and others in all knowledge we have of the mental states of others; and although concepts are not produced by this knowledge, it is nonetheless a cognitive operation.

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The aim of this essay is to describe how eighteenth-century British authors encountered, and responded to, the following question: are we able to feel the emotions of other people? This question, like many others, became explicit in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the influence of the emergence and authority of the new philosophy's empirical epistemology. In the past (to generalise), our access to the feelings of others was tacitly assumed to be entailed in being human. Adam Smith's celebrated answer to this question on the first page of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) makes clear the nature of the problem that had been created by the influence of empirical epistemology:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. (Raphael, Macfie 1982, 9)

According to empirical epistemology, all knowledge is a function of experience, which is to say of our sense impressions. We have no immediate knowledge of others because we do not share their bodies. Our empirical knowledge of others – in this case our sympathy with them – is based on our powers of imagination, by which, at one remove from their experience, we compare what they must feel and what we would feel were we under the same sensible conditions.

By mid-century, Smith's recourse to the imagination as a faculty of knowledge had become the established means of describing the operation of what contemporaries called 'moral knowledge', our cognition of human subjects, as distinct from 'natural knowledge', the cognition of nonhuman objects. This distinction and its terminology became explicit when attempts were made to transfer the procedures of scientific method, which had proved so tantalising in its promise, from the acquisition of natural knowledge to that moral knowledge. I will return to this moment. But I will begin with a prior moment, when the cognition of human subjects was first confronted by the new standards of empirical epistemology. The context in which this problem emerged was that of drama and its reception, and it was the ground from which grew the answer to the question with which I began: how are we able to feel the emotions of other people? This is also how the ideas of the aesthetic, and then realism, came to be formulated, long before those terms themselves were invented.¹

1 Scientific Method

In John Dryden's dialogic essay *Of Dramatic Poesy* (1667), the debate begins with a powerful panegyric to the new philosophy as superior to both ancient science and modern poetry. In the words of one of the speakers, Crites,

Is it not evident in these last hundred years (when the study of philosophy has been the business of all the virtuosi in Christendom) that

¹ The aesthetic is the general category. 'Realism', a sub-category of the aesthetic, was formulated in order to specify the ideas entailed in the aesthetic to what had by then emerged as the dominant modern form of narrative, the novel.

almost a new nature has been revealed to us? that more errors of the school have been detected, more useful experiments in philosophy have been made, more noble secrets in optics, medicine, anatomy, astronomy discovered, than in all those credulous and dotting ages from Aristotle to us? so true it is, that nothing spreads more fast than science, when rightly and generally cultivated. (Watson 1962, 26)

In 1765, Samuel Johnson explicitly endorsed a quantitative measure by which to judge the value of a literary author, testifying to the extraordinary prestige that the model of scientific cognition had attained over the past century: “To works [...] of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientific, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem” (Sherbo 1968, 59). Midway between these two literary-critical milestones, Joseph Addison added his own critical milestone in 1712 by setting out to understand if the arts, and particularly literature, can be said to afford us knowledge, and if so how that knowledge might be described. His procedure was to incorporate the model of scientific cognition within his analysis by explicitly comparing what he called the pleasures of the imagination with the pleasures of the understanding.

The comparison was challenging. The new philosophy required a standard of empirical demonstrability that dictated an inductive method of inquiry that, in the words of Francis Bacon (*The new Organon*, 1620), “derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, [...] opening and laying out [...] a road for the human understanding direct from the sense, by a course of experiment orderly conducted and well built up”. Bacon describes the “gradual and unbroken ascent” of inductive progress: “[W]hat is founded on nature grows and increases; while what is founded on opinion varies but increases not”. Therefore scientific knowledge is “continually thriving and growing” (Ellis, Spedding 1905, 261, 280 and 274: Aphorisms nn. 19, 82 and 77). The *Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns* that preoccupied the latter half of the seventeenth century also entailed a quarrel of scientific and poetic cognition. Proponents of the new philosophy focused their attention on formulating the rudiments of experimental method, which could not function in the case of poetry because of its basic difference from scientific knowledge. In the words of Bernard le Bovier Fontenelle in 1688: “if the moderns are able to improve continually on the ancients, the fields in which they are working must be of a kind that allows progress”. Eloquence and poetry, he continues, “depend for their effect primarily on the liveliness of the

imagination”, which “has no need of a long sequence of experiments”.² But science “depend[s] upon precision of thought which improves with extreme slowness, and is always improving”³ (Elledge-Schier 1970, 362).

In 1667, Thomas Sprat wrote of the members of the Royal Society: “Those, to whom the Conduct of the *Experiment* is committed, [...] after they have perform’d the *Trial*, [...] bring all the *History* of its *Process* back again to the Test. Then comes in the second great Work of the *Assembly*; which is to *judge* and *resolve* upon the Matter of *Fact*” (Sprat 1667, 99). Echoing Bacon’s personification of nature in *New Organon*, Sprat continues: “In this part of their Employment, they us’d to take an exact View of the Repetition of the whole Course of the *Experiment*; here they observ’d all the *Chances*, and the *Regularities* of the Proceeding; what *Nature* does willingly, what constrain’d; what with its own Power, what by the succours of Art” (99). The personification of nature aims to express the central function of experiment, the separation of artificial variables from the natural constant. This requires the repetition of experiments under varying conditions of time, place and personnel. According to Robert Hooke, master experimentalist of the Royal Society, “it were very desirable that both Observations and Experiments should be divers times repeated, and that at several Seasons and with several Circumstances, both of the Mind and Persons, Times, Place, Instruments and Materials” (Waller 1705, 61-2). These are the “ways by which Nature may be trac’d, by which we may be able to find out the material Efficient and Instrumental Causes of divers Effects, not too far removed beyond the reach of our Senses” (61-2). And, as William Wotton emphasised, controlling for variables also required the precision of quantitative measure rather than qualitative distinctions: “*Mathematical* and *Physical Sciences* [...] are Things which have no Dependence upon the Opinions of Men for their Truth; they will admit of fixed and undisputed *Mediums* of Comparison and Judgment: [...] [I]t may be always debated, who have been the best Orators, or who the best Poets; yet it cannot always be a Matter of Controversie, who have been the best *Geometers, Arithmeticians, Astronomers, Musicians, Anatomists, Chymists, Botanists*, or the like [...] The Thing contended for [...] is, the *Knowledge of Nature* [...] In order to this, it will be necessary, (1.) To find out all the several Affections and Properties of Quantity, abstractedly considered; [...] (2.) To collect great Numbers of Observations, and

2 Translated by Hughes as “experiences.” In French *expérience* means both experience and experiment; Fontenelle appears to refer to the latter.

3 “[A]fin que les modernes puissent toujours enchérir sur les anciens, il faut que les choses soient d’une espèce à le permettre. L’éloquence et la poésie [...] dépendent principalement de la vivacité de l’imagination; [...] et la vivacité de l’imagination n’a pas besoin d’une longue suite d’expériences [...] Mais [les sciences] dépendent de la justesse du raisonnement, qui se perfectionne avec une extrême lenteur, et se perfectionne toujours”.

to make a vast Variety of Experiments upon all sorts of Natural Bodies". Mathematicians make "every Conclusion depend upon such a Chain of Premises already proved, that if one link were broke, the whole Chain fell in Pieces" (Wotton 1694, 78-9 and 340).

2 Dramatic Method: The Two Unities

Continuous progress; quantification; experiment; repetition; controlling for variables. These essential features of scientific cognition had no apparent methodological equivalents in artistic cognition. Could the imaginative arts even be said to be a mode of knowledge? More optimistically, was there a general principle underlying and justifying experimental method that might be put into practice by other means? Addison does not ask this question in so many words. But in aligning and comparing the poetic imagination and scientific understanding, he recurs to the basic premise, and paradox, of Baconian theory: first, the knowledge of nature must proceed through sense experience; second, the knowledge of nature must be abstracted, distanced, and generalised from the multiple and variable circumstances of time, place and person under which it is impressed upon the senses. In dramatic theory, one means of emulating the success of science was ready to hand in the neoclassical dogma of the three unities – not in the doctrine itself but in its refutation, which in turn generated a positive insight into the power of abstraction from sense experience peculiar to the arts.

English drama was thought by some to be inferior both to ancient and to modern French drama because it failed to observe the two unities of time and place.⁴ Dryden accepts the challenge in *Of Dramatic Poesy*. In the view of Crites, English drama is formally flawed because it tends not to maintain the rule that the amount of time and the extent of space undertaken to perform a given play are quantitatively speaking "as near as can be" to the duration and the dimensions that are represented within that play (Watson 1962, 28). It is not clear whether the literalism of this rule owes to the influence of French critical dogmatism, to the new philosophy's perceived threat to the epistemological vulnerability of theatrical illusionism, or to some mixture of causes. In Dryden's essay, it is clear that the danger of forgoing the two unities is the loss of credibility. If the dramatic representation is to be credible to its spectators, their theatrical experience must be as close as possible to that of the characters: representation aspires to spatio-temporal presence.

Dryden's response to this rule is that it misconceives the nature of artistic representation and the kind of belief it requires: "For what is more

4 Aristotle's third unity, that of action, was uncontroversial; most commentators recognised that it was important and that Aristotle had affirmed it.

ridiculous,” says another speaker, Lisideius, “than to represent an army with a drum and five men behind it, all which the hero of the other side is to drive in before him; or to see a duel fought, and one slain with two or three thrusts of the foils, which we know are so blunted that we might give a man an hour to kill another in good earnest with them[?]” (Watson 1962, 51) In replying to Lisideius, Neander acutely addresses this more general level of the argument: “For why may not our imagination as well suffer itself to be deluded with the probability of it as with any other thing in the play? For my part, I can with as great ease persuade myself that the blows which are struck are given in good earnest, as I can that they who strike them are kings or princes, or those persons which they represent” (62). In other words, artistic representation calls for a species of belief in what imitates empirical actuality but is manifestly not, in those immediate terms, actual. In fact its credibility depends not on the illusion of spatio-temporal presence but on something like its opposite.

In the eighteenth century, Dryden’s justification of dramatic belief is followed most famously by Addison, Burke and Johnson, and the equivalent justification of narrative belief by Fielding and Sterne. Most of these arguments are made in reference to the standard of scientific cognition – and even, in the case of the latter two, in more or less explicit refutation of the dramatic doctrine of the two unities. But only Addison is inspired to explicitly compare the artistic or ‘aesthetic’ imagination with scientific understanding, and he thereby enables us to recognise the aesthetic mode of dependence on, and abstraction from, the senses that is analogous to, but distinct from, the experimental mode developed by the new philosophy. This suggests two aspects of their proximity. First, the imagination and the understanding are not fundamentally different operations, but occupy different positions on the same continuum. Second, the imagination and the understanding are comparable in their capacity to produce pleasure. The reciprocal implication is that if the operations of the understanding are pleasurable, the operations of the imagination are cognitive. By this means the aesthetic imagination becomes intelligible as a kind of knowledge.

3 Dramatic Method: The Aesthetic

In *Spectator* no. 411 (21 June 1712), Addison writes: “[t]he Pleasures of the Imagination, taken in their full Extent, are not so gross as those of Sense, nor so refined as those of the Understanding”. That is, the imagination mediates between the senses and the understanding, and its pleasures are less “refined” or detached than those of the understanding because its distance from the senses is not as extreme. The fully abstracted pleasures of the understanding, Addison writes, are finally “more preferable” than those of the imagination “because they are founded on some new Knowl-

edge or Improvement in the Mind of Man”, reasons that recall the norms of demonstrable truth and incremental progress emphasised by Bacon and his followers. But although less refined because more embedded in the realm of the senses, the pleasures of the imagination have their own proper virtues: they are “as great and as transporting as the other. A beautiful Prospect delights the Soul, as much as a Demonstration”. Such views “are more obvious, and more easie to be acquired” and “do not require such a Bent of Thought as is necessary to our more serious Employments”, which demand “too violent a Labour of the Brain” (Bond 1965, 537-9).⁵ From this account we might extrapolate the contrasting forms in which the respective products of the two faculties are expressed. Whereas the imagination produces images that provide a virtual resemblance of the actual object, the greater intensity of the refining process through which the understanding puts its object is evident in the greater abstraction of its end-product, concepts or numbers.

According to Addison, however, the imaginative refining process has its own intensity. Over the course of his *Spectator* papers on the pleasures of the imagination, Addison describes the most extended conditions of refinement or detachment from the spatio-temporal presence of the senses of which the imagination is capable. This entails four degrees of detachment: vision detached from the other senses; the virtual imagination detached from actual sight; the representational from the visual imagination; and literate description from the other media of representation.⁶ The key to the superiority of the reading experience over other modes of representation lies not only in its greater refinement of sense impressions, but also in the self-conscious activity of comparison that the distance afforded by reading enables. As Addison writes in nos. 416 and 418 (June 27, 30, 1712), this is “a new Principle of Pleasure, which is nothing else but the Action of the Mind, which *compares* the Ideas that arise from Words, with the Ideas that arise from the Objects themselves” (Bond 1965, 566-7; Addison’s italics). This new principle of pleasure, entailed in the comparison of ideas created by different media, is cognitive. It offers an opportunity to advance from a singular view of the world – one produced either by the ideas of it that derive from our sense perceptions or by the ideas of it that derive from the virtuality of descriptive language – to a comparative view of their simultaneity. Indeed, it is the detachment enabled by literate description that opens up a distance, and thereby posits a difference, between description and perception. One effect of this is a

5 Addison appears to have borrowed from Glanvill (Glanvill 1665, b2v-3r) and Sprat (Sprat 1667, 344) the contrast between the pleasures of the senses and those “innocent Pleasures” such “as a wise Man would not blush to take”, but to have transferred them from the understanding (that is, experiment) to the imagination (Bond 1965, 539).

6 I give a fuller account of this analysis in McKeon 2005, 366-8.

reflexive dialectic between the immediacy of the words on the page and a sense of their mediating function.

By juxtaposing the imagination and the understanding in this way Addison goes some distance toward meeting the challenge to the arts posed by the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns and its incipient separation out of the arts and the sciences. The challenge is met by theorising the imagination as an aesthetic and therefore an empirical faculty, based in sense experience but abstracted from it in a fashion both like and unlike the abstraction peculiar to the understanding. Like the understanding, the imagination is produced by sense impressions. Unlike the understanding, its detachment from the senses stops, as it were, halfway, producing an epistemological effect of reflexivity that has less cognitive power, but, because of its relative proximity to the senses, a greater representational force.

Addison's analysis allows him to restate Neander's defense of drama in a more positive register. Not only is a close approximation to actual time and place unneeded to maintain the belief of the dramatic spectator; it is detrimental to the kind of knowledge that is appropriate to drama. The emotions that are raised by the imagination are very different from the passions that are embedded in immediately sensible experience. The imaginative mediation of sense experience possesses its own system of refinement that filters out the brute materiality of the senses and purifies their emotional heft. Like Dryden, Addison demonstrates this in the case of drama, which seeks not to reflect time and place, but to control for them. The dramatic imagination abstracts far enough from the naturalness of sense impressions to exceed the illusion of nature's concrete presence that is sought by the naïve empiricism of the two unities, but not so far as to sacrifice, as scientific experiment does, nature's figural image.

This analysis explains why the debate over the kind of belief we invest in drama is so important, why Addison prefers the secondary or representational pleasures of the imagination to its primary or empirical pleasures, and why he prefers the experience of reading a play to that of watching its performance. In both cases, the superior pleasure that is enabled by taking a comparatively greater distance on nature is afforded by the doubled state of mind entailed in aesthetic cognition and its comparison of the sensible object and the imaginative image. In other words, the greatest pleasure of the imagination depends not just on the fact of artistic representation but on our consciousness of that fact, which grounds our reflexive awareness of both the artistic representation and the sensible object it evokes.

3.1 Narrative Method: The Claim to Historicity

So the germ of aesthetic cognition and its answer to the question of how, under the aegis of empirical epistemology, we can feel the emotions of others, can be found in debates about dramatic credibility. Aesthetic reflexivity, what Addison calls a “new principle of pleasure”, is crucial to the second stage of narrative as well as to dramatic development, and defines the epistemology of the new novel genre. As the aesthetic evolution of drama begins in rejecting the naïve empiricism of the two unities, so the aesthetic evolution of narrative begins with the rejection of the naïve empirical claim to historicity. The claim to historicity amounts to the pretence that the fictional characters and events one reads about have an actual existence – in its own way asserting, like the dramatic doctrine of the two unities, the transparency and immediacy of the experience that narrative narrates. By the same token, what replaces the narrative claim to historicity is, as in the dramatic aesthetic, the recognition that the greatest pleasure results from an experience not of immediacy but of mediacy, a detachment from the presence and pleasures of the senses sufficient to foreground and compare the difference between them and the pleasures of representation. This experience of difference is the precondition for the reader’s experience of engagement with what is represented, in particular for the psychological identification with characters, which depends on the recognition of their difference from ourselves. And the experience of difference is created by the self-conscious reference, on the level of narrative content, to the formal method and framework that are responsible for the version of reality we read.

3.2 Narrative Method: Realism

What Dryden and Addison achieve for the dramatic aesthetic is paralleled by Henry Fielding’s achievement for narrative realism. The parallel is deepened by our sense that Fielding has modelled his liberation of narrative from the demands of the claim to historicity on the precedent of drama and its liberation from the demands of the two unities. In the “Matter Prefatory in Praise of *Biography*” at the beginning of Book III of his *Joseph Andrews* (1742), Fielding distinguishes between a trivial and a profound understanding of history. Most historians, he writes, are so preoccupied with getting right – by quantitative measure, if possible – the empirical facts of time and place that they may as well be called ‘Chorographers’ and ‘Topographers’. Fielding sees himself as a ‘Biographer’ because he is concerned instead with the faithful representation of what Aristotle calls the unity of action and Fielding calls “the Actions and Characters of Men”. He gives the term ‘fact’ a twist by applying it to this purely qualitative

component of historical narration: “the Facts we deliver may be relied on, tho’ we often mistake the Age and Country wherein they happened” (Brooks-Davies, Keymer 1999, 162).

But as in scientific experiment, empirical quantification – of little importance in assessing an individual datum of experience – becomes crucial in the process of abstraction that for Fielding is the means by which character is best represented: “I question not but several of my Readers will know the Lawyer in the Stage-Coach, the Moment they hear his Voice. [...] I describe not Men, but Manners; not an Individual, but a Species. Perhaps it will be answered, Are not the Characters then taken from Life? To which I answer in the Affirmative; nay, I believe I might aver, that I have writ little more than I have seen. The Lawyer is not only alive, but hath been so these 4000 Years” (Brooks-Davies, Keymer 1999, 164-6). By proclaiming that he has represented not an individual but a species – a generalised composite of many individuals – Fielding not only rejects the naïve claim to historicity (which is no better than basing his representation on a single sense impression), but also replaces that claim by the implication that his abstracted lawyer, divested of extraneous variables, represents a characterological constant: the general type of the lawyer species.

So Book III, chapter I of *Joseph Andrews* exemplifies the self-conscious engagement in reflexive reference that enables the reader’s detachment from the representation, and thereby the pleasure available to her in comparing the actual lawyers she has known with Fielding’s virtual lawyer. But it is only the most explicit and extended of the novel’s frequent narratorial intrusions into the text, which, by drawing attention to its process of representation in the very act of doing it, ensure that the conditions for this pleasure are continuously available to the reader of *Joseph Andrews*. Not long after this chapter, Fielding’s narrator tacitly invites the reader to anticipate the climax of the plot by deploying some of the most familiar conventions of family romance – baby-stealing gypsies, the tell-tale birthmark – then begins his narration of the following day by personifying morning as a “beautiful young Lady” who “rose from her Bed [...] with a Countenance blooming with fresh Youth and Sprightliness, like Miss _____” – at which point a note directs us to the bottom of the page, where we read: “*Whoever the Reader pleases*” (Brooks-Davies, Keymer 1999, 196). Elsewhere I have described the novelistic replacement of the claim to historicity by realism as preserving but reconceiving the crucial quality of particularity, its concreteness, by abstracting it from the variable of actuality. This reconception is fundamental not only to the emergence of the novel but also to a number of other cultural developments: the affirmation of satire over libel; the ingenious construction of the law of obscene libel; debates on the two unities; and the theorisation of discursive pedagogy (McKeon 2005, 108-9, and 292; see also 95-9; 313-16; 368-76; 451-4, 479-80, 493-4).

I have awarded to Fielding the honour of first having formulated the theory of aesthetic or realist cognition. But what about *Pamela*? In the second edition (published only three months after the first), Richardson's revised paratexts show his ambivalence about the utility of having claimed historicity in the first edition (Keymer, Wakely 2001, 3-4, and 506-7). Yet we can already sense his scepticism about the naïve empiricism of the claim to historicity even before he compromises his role as Pamela's editor in this fashion. Up to and beyond her abduction to his Lincolnshire estate, Mr. B continues to see Pamela as a romancer – that is, as at best deluded and at worst a liar – because he has been judging her letters against not only his own self-interest but also his conviction of what has actually transpired (Keymer, Wakely 2001, 32, 69, and 93). But after spying on Pamela's artless sorting of her clothing into three bundles, Mr. B reports to her that “tho' I am not pleased with all you said [...] yet you have mov'd me more to admire you than before” – so much so that his feelings now make him, “as I tell you, love you to Extravagance”. This broaches the peculiar pleasure of the doubled state of aesthetic cognition, which compares the actuality of what he has perceived to the virtuality of his emotion-infused perspective, which Mr. B is aware has something to do with the fact that he is “quite overcome with your charming manner of Writing” (Keymer, Wakely 2001, 84). Experiencing the authenticity of Pamela's self-representation in his detached role as her reader, Mr. B discovers the grounds for his sympathetic identification with her.

The consummation of Mr. B's powers of aesthetic cognition comes later, after his desire for sexual intercourse with Pamela has been displaced by his desire for discursive intercourse with her – a displacement marked by Mrs. Jewkes' memorable demand that he stop “dilly-dallying” (Keymer, Wakely 2001, 203). Once he is able to read the third parcel of Pamela's writing – closely linked to her clothing by parallel parcelization and by the fact that she must “all undress me in a manner to untack them” – Mr. B experiences a profound conjunction of empirically actual and emotionally virtual perspectives. Pamela already has protested against his need to read her account of matters that he himself has just witnessed, assuming that it is her empirical accuracy that is at issue: “[A]ll that they contain you know, as well as I”, she says, “But I don't know, said he, the light you put Things in”. In what feels like a parody of maintaining the two unities, Mr. B. proceeds to read Pamela's account of her close encounter with suicide at the same time that he slowly walks along the path of her description, pausing at each stage to experience the overlay of physical actuality by virtual narration: “Why this, said he, my Girl, is a very moving Tale. [...] And when he came to my Reasonings, about throwing myself into the Water, he said, Walk gently before; and seem'd so moved, that he turn'd away his Face from me. [...] O my dear Girl! You have touch'd me sensibly with your mournful Relation, and your sweet Reflections upon it” (235, and 239-41).

In the paratexts to the second edition of *Pamela*, Richardson includes an account of a seven-year-old boy's response to hearing read aloud these same passages that Mr. B reads as he traverses the physical setting to which they refer. They have a remarkable affective 'Power' over the boy, from whom is heard "a Succession of heart-heaving Sobs; [...] his little Sides swell'd, as if they wou'd burst, [... and] his Eyes were quite lost, in his Tears". He "is perhaps the youngest of *Pamela's Converts*" (Keymer, Wakely 2001, 515). Here the physical actuality with which emotional response to Pamela's story is correlated is not the narrated setting but the responsive body, a somatic medium that may elevate psychological identification to its highest pitch.

For the reformed Mr. B, the content of Pamela's writings is no longer limited to the representation of what happened that may be factually false; it also contains the emotional truth of its formal representation, how it happened from Pamela's perspective. And Mr. B's sympathetic mode of reading provides us actual readers with a model for the aesthetic approach we too might bring to the putatively factual narrative we are reading. A century later, 'realism' came to designate the specifically narrative mode of the aesthetic, and what it designates is not 'the real' but something we are pleased to read as though it were real, a story that is not history but comparable to history, faithful not to this or that actuality but to the abstracted virtuality of the kinds of experience we tend to have. At this level, it is of no consequence if Mr. B or Pamela ever had a real existence. And in this sense, novels are experiments that capture the concrete experience of the senses not by reproducing it in all its actual particularity but by controlling for the variables of time, place, and persons so as to reveal, as Hooke phrased it about laboratory experiments, "the ways by which Nature may be trac'd, [...] not too far removed beyond the reach of our Senses" (quoted above).

In *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767), Laurence Sterne picks up Fielding's realist reflexivity and runs with it so far as totally to subsume the pleasures of the senses within those of the imagination and content within form - or so it might seem. It is probably more accurate to say that Sterne adapts representational reflexivity to the genre of the novel even more intricately and rigorously than Fielding does. And like Fielding, Sterne evinces an inclusive idea of the aesthetic by explicitly alluding to the dramatic controversies over the two unities. So when Tristram supposes the reader will accuse him of violating "the unity [...] of time" we are made to understand that Sterne's choice to perform in narrative not drama transforms the disparity between the actual, empirical time of representation and the virtual time that is represented (Anderson 1980, 74). For, on the one hand, the time taken to represent *Tristram Shandy* is an indeterminate interplay of two temporalities, the period of writing and the period of reading. On the other, Tristram works so hard to represent this interplay with accuracy

and precision that it becomes the major portion of the representation itself, reflexively and exhaustively thematizing form as content and leaving no room for half of what Sterne's title-page announces will be the substance of this novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*.

As a matter of fact, we do get Sterne's 'Life' as well as his 'Opinions'. But the content or plot of *Tristram Shandy* is so implicated within its formal mode of narration that it takes some work on our part to see that Sterne's form, which might be described as enacting the failure of the narrative line, is coextensive with his story, the failure of the Shandy family line to reproduce itself owing to Tristram's overdetermined infertility, a story whose implacable narration also is responsible for the non-linear infertility of Sterne's form. But on another level, *Tristram Shandy* is formally more fertile than any novel had been, because in attending to the mental activity of its narrator and its putative readers it represents in unprecedentedly comprehensive terms its own process of representation. The mental activity we experience in coming to terms with this mode of narration is nothing if not cognitive, and the emotions it produces in us are as startlingly powerful as are those exchanged by Walter and Uncle Toby in their wordless reciprocity of good feeling.

We may be tempted to take Sterne's strategy as strictly negative, a parody of empiricism that reduces it to absurdity. But Sterne no less than Fielding is clearing the ground for a positive view of novelistic realism. As a matter of fact, he is a Lockean empiricist not only in jest but also in earnest, as he claims at one point to his reader: "Pray, Sir, in all the reading which you have ever read, did you ever read such a book as *Locke's Essay upon the Human Understanding*? [...] It is a history.--A history! of who? what? where? when? Don't hurry yourself.--It is a history-book, Sir, [...] of what passes in a man's own mind" (Anderson 1980, 61). Scepticism, the motor of empiricism, validates the trajectory of Tristram's inquiry downward and inward, into the mental interiority that is the next frontier of reflexive narration.

4 Coda

Earlier in this essay I anticipated the moment when philosophers formally undertook the challenge of applying the procedures of knowing objects to the project of knowing human subjects. In the second sentence of his *Essay* (1689), Locke announces his ambition in the terms of Tristram's inquiry: "The Understanding, like the Eye, whilst it makes us see, and perceive all other Things, takes no notice of it self: And it requires Art and Pains to set it at a distance, and make it its own Object" (Nidditch, 1979, I, 1, §1, 43). Locke is in no doubt regarding the difficulty of his enterprise, in which the cardinal principle of understanding, the division of the subject from the

object of knowledge, would seem to come up against the reflexive interplay entailed in making the understanding 'its own Object'. Two decades before *Tristram Shandy* begins to be published, Hume takes up Locke's problem with a good deal more skepticism about the ultimate viability of the project.

On its title-page, Hume announces that his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) is "[a]n attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects". But in its Introduction he warns that "[m]oral philosophy has, indeed, this peculiar disadvantage, which is not found in natural, that in collecting its experiments, it cannot make them purposely, with premeditation" because "'tis evident this reflection and premeditation would so disturb the operation of my natural principles, as must render it impossible to form any just conclusion from the phaenomenon" (Selby-Bigge, Nidditch 1978, XI and XVIII-XIX). In the empiricism of philosophical inquiry, reflexivity is a problem because it threatens to compromise the full degree of distance required by the understanding to disembodied the nature of the thing itself, in this case the human mind and its operations, as an abstract concept. In the empiricism of the aesthetic, however, reflexivity marks the crucially lesser distance that the imagination takes on its object, signifying that what is being represented is not only the constancy and invariability of the mental operations by which we seek to know that object, but also, as abstract figuration rather than full abstraction, the formal process of its representation. In the aesthetic, the arts discover a mode of experiment, peculiarly their own, whose aim is an empirical removal from sensible actuality to imaginative virtuality that bears with it the evidence of that removal.

However, Hume pursues so relentlessly the problem he has uncovered in the experimentalism of moral philosophy that it infects the experimentalism of natural philosophy as well. There is no empirical basis, he finds, for our knowledge of the world that lies beyond us. What we take to be the constancy of the natural object once experiment has abstracted away all variables is really the constancy and invariability of the mental operations by which we seek to know that object. Hume famously compares our empirical experience of external objects to the experience of a dramatic spectator: "The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations" (Selby-Bigge, Nidditch 1978, I, pt. 4, sec. VI, 255). The difference is that in empirical experience we never leave the theatre because there is no outside that is accessible to this inside. Addison's distinction between the work of the understanding and that of the imagination disappears. The proper term for all empirical knowledge, Hume asserts, is not understanding but imagination: "Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chace our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those percep-

tions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produc'd" (Selby-Bigge, Nidditch 1978, I, pt. 2, sec. VI, 67-8). Elsewhere Hume paraphrases 'the understanding' as "the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination" (Selby-Bigge, Nidditch 1978, I, pt. 4, sec. VII, 267). Knowledge is a reflexive act of self-knowledge. Where previous authors have tried to vindicate the arts as an aesthetic, hence empirical way of knowing, Hume radically reverses the process of accommodation by finding that all empirical knowledge is an act of the imagination.

This is not, of course, where Hume leaves his own practice as a moral philosopher, nor does natural philosophy – science – find itself painted into Hume's radically sceptical corner. If anything, Hume's stringent logic in the first book of his *Treatise* may have drawn attention to the need to understand more precisely the difference, in degree of distance from the realm of sense experience, that distinguishes scientific from aesthetic experimentalism. And although posterity will become fascinated by the notion of realism, the proximity of scientific and aesthetic cognition, so fruitful over the course of the eighteenth century, will begin to dissolve thereafter and be replaced by the modern conviction in the conceptual division of knowledge that was a mere byproduct of the temporal Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns.

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