

Sean Silver's Spice of Shandeism

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Sean Silver's *The Mind is a Collection: Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought* calls on us to rethink the very form of the academic monograph. In fact, calling it "a monograph" feels somehow like a slight. For it is much more than this: a website, a museum, a sequence of thirty-three images, and above all an ecology of one author's thoughts, whose arrayed series of six cases offers its own mediated "collection" within which we as readers are invited to think—as though called to Milton's bed or to Pope's grotto. This is a monograph for a digital age; in its invitation to "move quickly through some sections, seek out the ones of most interest to you, skip others altogether" (x), one finds codex transformed to hypertext.

There is something both intriguing and suspicious about this endeavor. I find myself concurring wholeheartedly with Jonathan Lamb's description of it as "Latour with a spice of Shandeism." Coming from Lamb, a prominent Shandean, this is no doubt a compliment; certainly to me it is the greatest compliment one could offer a book. But just as *Tristram Shandy* itself has been oft copied but never truly imitated, one wonders if *The Mind is a Collection* is a model of scholarship or, rather, something more ephemeral. During its own day, *Tristram Shandy* spawned a variety of responses, most of them measured and cryptic. David Hume wrote of it: "The best Book that has been written by an Englishman these thirty years... is *Tristram Shandy*, bad as it is."¹ Dr. Johnson said, more famously, "Nothing odd will do long. '*Tristram Shandy*' did not last." One wonders similarly if the oddness of *The Mind is a Collection* is its ultimate undoing. Is its oddness a gimmick?

I will give here the same answer that I gave to this question as we were discussing it as a committee. I don't know if it is a gimmick, but even if it is, it is made worthwhile by the seriousness of its subject matter and by the breadth of its erudition. Many single images remain fixed in my mind from this book: William Hay's bladder stone (152), Robert Hooke's Brobdingnagian period (115), the skeleton of Jonathan Wild, displayed in all of its uncanniness (261), just to name a few. But what I will remember most is the odd, digressive—one can only call it Shandean—movement from one idea to another. Consider Case 5, on "Conception," which wanders from Sterne's blank page in *Tristram Shandy* to William Hunter's obstetric experiments to a miniature painting of Raphael's Galatea and then back to both Hunter and Sterne, via Joshua Reynolds's portraits of them. There is something satisfying about confronting Sterne again, on page 224, leering at us as we read the concluding page of the chapter. It is the satisfaction of knowing that we have ended a discussion of *Tristram Shandy* in the only way imaginable: that is, back where we started.

Nevertheless, despite these plaudits, I would like to ask Sean here to address a question that nagged at me as I read the book. Sean's conclusion moves forward in time to consider how newer cognitive models have reshaped the metaphor of the collection. But I wish for Sean to move backward in time and to reassure me that a similar book could not have been written about the ecology of thought in the early modern period. It

¹ *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis Perry Curtis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 218.

may be significant that “Locke was a bibliophile, Addison a coin collector, Bacon an architect of libraries, Hooke a laboratory technician” (viii), to quote Sean’s argument; but Erasmus was a typesetter, Martin Luther came from a family of miners, and Shakespeare probably worked as a glover in his father’s leather shop. Surely these ecologies are just as significant. In fact, I am tempted to say that they are more significant—that the sense of the ecology of craft was even stronger in earlier, preindustrial periods.

For example, the idea of words inscribed on skin is a common one in Shakespeare’s plays. Thus, Act III, scene i, of *The Comedy of Errors* finds Dromio of Ephesus in the process of being beaten by his master:

Say what you will, sir, but I know what I know.
That you beat me at the mart I have your hand to show;
If the skin were parchment and the blows you gave were ink,
Your own handwriting would tell you what I think.

Here, Shakespeare gathers together a number of ideas: the Scriptural concept of the word made flesh (from the Gospel of John), a poststructuralist sense of the illegibility of the body in pain, and a Derridean notion of the authenticity associated with handwriting. But all of these are subordinated to two metaphors: of skin as parchment and of violent blows as ink, both of which surely spring from the ecology of John Shakespeare’s leather shop. When Dromio concludes, “Your own handwriting would tell you what I think,” one senses a signature that extends from Dromio to William Shakespeare to John Shakespeare.

Sterne’s model of the mind, after all, may or may not descend from Locke, depending on whom you ask (not much, if you ask me). But it undoubtedly does descend from the early modern writers whom Sterne revered: Montaigne, Cervantes, Burton, and Shakespeare. Within *The Mind is a Collection*, Sterne’s blank page leads laterally to a discussion of William Hunter’s obstetrics. But it might have led backward to a discussion of Sterne’s own black page, which casts a pall over the first volume of *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne here channels not Locke, nor Hunter, nor Reynolds, but Shakespeare, whom he quotes twice, as though to underscore the importance of the connection within Tristram’s mind: “Alas, poor YORICK!” This is a Silverian scene of ecological thought, concentrating on the collection of objects that inspire Tristram’s memory of his dead friend Yorick: the churchyard, the marble slab, and the inscribed epitaph (rendered visually within the book in order to call attention to its status as an object). But it is surrounded by and only understood through Shakespeare’s own ecology of thought: namely, the scene of Hamlet in the graveyard, where an arrangement of bones—let us say a “collection” of *memento mori*—inspires the young prince to a profound meditation on loss.

Surely the Enlightenment period, that is, did not hold the monopoly on the idea of ecology. Surely the Enlightenment did not hold the monopoly on collections, or metaphors of collection. And, despite what we might teach, surely the Enlightenment did not hold the monopoly on thought, mentation, or even so-called “Enlightenment.”