Interrupting the Illusion in the Closet: Literary Tableaux of Contemplation in Henry Fielding's Novel *Tom Jones*

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Abstract

The tableau, an art form originating from theatres and the visual arts, is also a literary phenomenon. Literary tableaux are short scenic interruptions or pictorial compositions arresting the narrative flow and serving as highlighted moments where time stands still. Either they are scenes of intense emotion, or they occur at a crucial point in the plot.

This paper distinguishes between two modes of writing that are at work in literary tableaux, which I will call absorption and contemplation. Absorption is a mode of writing and reading related to formal realism. In his theory about tableaux, Denis Diderot advocates for a realist art and literature that can create the illusion of a close relationship between the work of art and the reader/beholder. Focusing on the 18th-century English writer Henry Fielding, this paper provides a close reading of selected scenes from the novel Tom Jones*, arguing that Fielding created his own tableaux of contemplation. These instances are metafictional moments in which the narrator interrupts the narrative to converse with the reader about an event or a character in the novel. Often, they contain references to classical art and are a mix of epic, tragic and comic elements. Fielding's tableaux explicitly present their own fictionality, consulting with the reader about the difference between art and life.*

Keywords*: tableau, absorption, contemplation, Fielding, Diderot, Richardson*

When one reads Henry Fielding's novels, one can see that Fielding is primarily a man of the theatre, which is why some parts of his prose are conceptualized as dramatic scenes. Fielding (1707-1754) was a prolific dramatist, but he also published novels, such as *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and His Friend, Mr Abraham Adams* in 1742 and *The Life and Death of Jonathan Wild, the Great* in 1743. At the time they were published, the novel as a genre was in its infancy, and Fielding is, therefore, credited as one of the founders of the modern English novel, alongside Defoe and Richardson.

Fielding has attracted a lot of scholarly attention, but only few literary scholars have chosen to focus on his literary tableaux. Peter

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Voogd and Andrew Wright, among others, are notable exceptions. There are examples of tableaux throughout Fielding's oeuvre, for example the scene describing the flirtation between Tom Smirk and Laetitia in *Jonathan Wild* (*Miscellanies vol. 3,* 1743: 59-62) or the scene in which Joseph Andrews declines Lady Booby's advances (*Joseph Andrews*, 1999: 79). In this paper, however, emphasis is laid on selected scenes from the novel considered by many to be Fielding's masterpiece, namely *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), a comic narrative chronicling the vigorous, impulsive, and kind-hearted young foundling Tom Jones and his adventures, obstacles, romantic involvements, and entanglements.

Although tableaux originate from the theatre and from the visual arts, it is argued here that Fielding created his own kind of literary tableaux, which I will call tableaux of contemplation.

In French, a tableau is simply a picture, but it can also denote a scene, group, chart, or table. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "a group of models or motionless figures representing a scene from a story or from history." In its original form, it was often a theatrical re-enactment of a biblical scene.

Tableaux can be traced back to the Middle Ages, where they were part of religious and popular traditions. The passion of Christ was often dramatized, thereby teaching the gospel to the illiterate without heavy dogmatic. Dramatizations of biblical stories were a popular form of Christian education. They contained living pantomime and living tableaux – actors standing still to form an iconic memorable scene. It was important that the tableau and the depicted characters be instantly recognizable, via costumes, gestures, facial expressions, or physical positioning. The plays created unforgettable impressions and heartfelt reactions from the audience. They persist today, especially in countries with a strong Catholic tradition and culture, such as Poland, Spain, and the Philippines. (Povlsen, Andersen (ed.) 2001: 7-9. See also Helas 1999: 51-62).

In the Renaissance, tableaux were adapted to a new art form and were developed in new ways, e.g. as opulent theatrical installations at the royal houses or as pompous scenes included in operas and tragedies at the theatres. The material was borrowed not only from the Christian tradition, but historic figures and memorable scenes and characters from Greek mythology were also increasingly reinterpreted and incorporated in the plays.

In the 18th century, a new and sophisticated art of gestures and pantomimes was developed, and, in this context, an increased interest in tableaux arose. They were soon regarded as works of art in their own right. In art and literature, they were described by prominent artists and critics such as Denis Diderot, J. J. Rousseau and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

What has drawn many critics' attention is that a tableau is a framed, dense aesthetic unit. It crosses medial boundaries and can be found in drama, paintings, and literature. Furthermore, a literary tableau challenges the rigid boundaries among the arts – as proposed by the German dramatist G. E. Lessing in *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* – and the traditional conception that visual arts such as painting and sculpture represent a frozen moment, a singular point in time, whereas drama, poetry, epics and novels represent action and a sequence of events. A tableau is a highlighted scene of crucial significance in which every detail from the scene is described. It represents the illusion of time standing still and the impossible task of creating flux and arrested movement at the same time.

In his theory on tableaux, the French writer and philosopher Denis Diderot (1713–1784) advocates for literary and aesthetic representations which can show the inner recesses of the mind, finding truth, and establishing a close relationship between the work of art and the reader. Literary representations should be so mimetically convincing that the reader believes in the illusion of an unmediated presence.

A tableau should serve as a vehicle for absorption, according to Diderot, who argues that a tableau, whether it be a painting or a scene in a novel, should affect the reader, bring the reader to tears or move him/her emotionally. When beholding absorptive paintings by Jean Baptiste Prince or Greuze, for instance, Diderot finds himself already in the picture and the "tableau mouvant" in front of him uniting with the moving picture within his own soul. (Diderot 1965: 64.)

Reading Samuel Richardson's novels, Diderot experiences the same effect. In his text *Éloge de Richardson*, he describes how his soul is in constant agitation. He finds that the literary description is real and convincing to such a degree that he feels he is truly present in the novel. "*Combien cette lecture m'affectea delicieusement!*" he writes, remarking how delightfully affected he is by reading Richardson (1959*:* 31). In other words, Diderot identifies and empathizes with Richardson's

characters in such a way that he is brought to tears. The tearful reading is meant to have a positive cathartic effect.

In Richardson's novels, the characters are not on display and there is no sense of theatricalized spectacle in the writing. In contrast, his novels ooze of secrecy. This is clear in *Pamela – or Virtue Rewarded*, the epistolary novel about the young maidservant Pamela who is subject to sexual misconduct by her employer, Mr B.

> …just now, as I was in my closet, opening the parcel I had hid under the rose-bush, to see if it was damaged by lying so long, Mrs Jewkes came upon me by surprise, and laid her hands upon it; for she had been looking through the key-hole, it seems. I know not what I shall do! For now, he will see all my private thoughts of him, and all my secrets, as I may say." (Richardson 1991: 199).

Pamela's secret communication with her parents and her private thoughts about the sexually aggressive Mr B are in danger of being exposed by the ruthless housekeeper Mrs Jewkes. As a reader, one is eavesdropping and peeping through the keyhole, and the characters carry on without knowing they are being watched. The narrator is almost invisible, since the novel is written as an exchange of letters primarily between Pamela and her parents. Reading Richardson, one is deeply absorbed in Pamela's private world, almost like a voyeur. The scene quoted above can be read as a tableau – a decisive moment, a specific positioning, Pamela in the closet and Mrs Jewkes behind the keyhole, and a short standstill in the narrative.

A sublime aesthetic experience awaits the reader/beholder. The absorptive work of art elevates the ideal. The absorptive literature grips the soul, points towards an indescribable alterity – a peek into a new, unknown world, a glimpse of what is happening behind closed doors, what is hiding in the closet or under the rosebush, and what you will find when you try to penetrate the depths of the psyche.

Don't look in the closet

An obvious comparison to Fielding would be the description of Master Blifil, Tom Jones' main opponent. Fielding's narrator says, "it would be an ill office in us to pay a visit to the inmost recesses of his mind, as some scandalous people search into the most secret affairs of their friends, and often pry into their closets and cupboards, only to discover their poverty and meanness to the world." (*Tom Jones,* IV, 103)

This is indicative of Fielding's attitude towards writing. He was staunchly opposed to any kind of psychological absorption. There are plenty of closets and cupboards and secrets uncovered in Richardson's novels, but Fielding prefers to have it all out in the open. Fielding does not take the reader on a journey of absorption and sublimity. His tableaux contain climax and anti-climax at the same time, they are mock-heroic and steeped in irony. Fielding's tableaux serve as an intellectual dialogue between narrator and reader, questioning literature's capacity to fully represent reality.

The art of contemplation is filled with appeals to the intellect, highlighting the discrepancy between ideal and real, keeping the work of art and the character descriptions at a critical distance, though a noisy narrator is always ready to disturb the reader. "By drawing attention to the fictionality of his narratives, Fielding highlights the fact that the real world is a lot less just than the conclusion of his novels would suggest" writes the British literary critic Terry Eagleton, adding that the happy end in the novel contrasts the likely crueller outcome in a real world. The plot in *Tom Jones* can be seen as providential pattern showing what a just and better world could look like. (Eagleton 2013: 60)

Ian Watt, a very influential literary theorist in the critical debate about realism in literature, distinguishes between "realism of presentation" and "realism of assessment" (1985: 331). Watt clearly favours the realism of presentation, whereas Fielding's prose is full of assessment. The narrator has many opinions and side comments about the characters, thereby preventing the reader from being absorbed into the fictional world.

In the following, I will quote at length a scene from *Tom Jones* that, according to the narrator, counts as "one of the most bloody battles, or rather duels that were ever recorded in domestic history" and describes Mrs Partridge attacking her husband because she erroneously suspects him of having an affair and the maidservant of carrying his child:

> As fair Grimalkin […] flies like lightning on her prey, and, with envenomed wrath, bites, scratches, mumbles, and tears the little animal. Not with less fury did Mrs Partridge fly on the poor pedagogue. Her tongue, teeth, and hands, fell all upon him at once. His wig was in an instant torn from his head, his shirt from his back, and from his face descended five streams of blood, denoting the number of claws with which nature had unhappily armed the enemy. Mr

> Partridge acted for some time on the defensive only; indeed he attempted only to guard his face with his hands; but as he found that his antagonist abated nothing of her rage, he thought he might, at least, endeavour to disarm her, or rather to confine her arms; in doing which her cap fell off in the struggle, and her hair being too short to reach her shoulders, erected itself on her head; her stays likewise, which were laced through one single hole at the bottom, burst open; and her breasts, which were much more redundant than her hair, hung down below her middle; her face was likewise marked with the blood of her husband: her teeth gnashed with rage; and fire, such as sparkles from a smith's forge, darted from her eyes. So that, altogether, this Amazonian heroine might have been an object of terror to a much bolder man than Mr Partridge. He had, at length, the good fortune, by getting possession of her arms, to render those weapons which she wore at the ends of her fingers useless; which she no sooner perceived, than the softness of her sex prevailed over her rage, and she presently dissolved in tears. (Fielding 1992: 46 f)

The scene is typical of Henry Fielding's writing, mixing the lofty epic prose with humour and satire, and everyday persons with mythology and classic ideals. At the beginning of the scene, one expects something dramatic, or tragic, but then the affective reading is punctured with irony and humour. Fielding's writing is full of *bathos*, a rhetorical anti-climax, a sudden element of something trivial or vulgar in the middle of an otherwise elevated style (Battestin 2000: 227-229).

The clash between a tragic, pompous style and elements of trivial everyday life can be seen in the reference to Grimalkin. As soon as Mrs Partridge begins to think her husband is cheating on her with Miss Jenny Jones, the maidservant, she attacks her husband in a manner comparable to Grimalkin, a cat creature that stems from old Scottish lore and is associated with wickedness and sorcery. It also refers to the three witches in the opening scene of Shakespeare's drama *Macbeth* invoking the evil power of Graymalkin (Ringler, Jr. 1979: 113-126).

Mrs Partridge is thus compared to a terrifying and destructive cat creature, and she receives the epithet "Amazonian heroine," as well. The reference to the female warrior in Greek mythology is deeply ironic, however. Although "her teeth gnashed with rage," her husband soon manages to disarm her and soothe her, and consequently she is dissolved into tears.

The narrator describes the depth of Mrs Partridge's rage and despair, and the violent scene creates affect in the reader. But the text

speaks more to the intellect than to the heart qua intertextual references and ironic comments from the narrator.

The quote shows a typical characterization in Fielding's novels. If one hopes to delve into a character's psyche, one will be disappointed. The characters in Fielding's novels do not invite the reader to observe their inner psychological processes; it is rather the author/narrator that keeps them under strict command. They are on display, all visible on the scene, all transparent, and there are no hidden secrets or surprising inner realities to discover. Or, as the British literary theorist Terry Eagleton writes, "truth for Fielding is a result of rational, objective, comparative judgement. It is a public affair, not a question of private sentiment. It is out in the open, not secreted in the depths of the human subject." (2013: 55)

Whereas Diderot and Richardson regard private sentiment and exploration of the depths of the human subject as the ideal purpose of literature, it is a source of satire for Fielding, as it is plain to see in the rendering of Mrs Partridge's irrational behaviour.

The quote above about the Partridge domestic fight is preceded by the following assessment: "Nothing can be so quick and sudden as the operations of the mind, especially when hope, or fear, or jealousy, to which the two others are but journeymen, set it to work." (Fielding 1992: 46) Although there is reference to "the operations of the mind," Mrs Partridge is described as a woman acting solely and animally on her impulses and instincts. And that is exactly Fielding's point: the idea that literature can point to the inner recesses of the mind and create art out of that is absurd. Fielding does not believe in a literature of absorption, or the ideal that literature can mirror reality. On the contrary, Fielding mocks the literary notion of mimetic immediacy and plays with the reader's expectations.

The scene, I would argue, is a literary tableau typical of Fielding: a moment of intense emotion, an extraordinary event, and an intertextual reference to the Classics. With the reference to Grimalkin, the reader expects that something uncanny, evil and sinister is about to happen. But in a typical Fieldingesque fashion, the reader is in for a surprise, as the tragic gravitas is substituted with bawdy humour.

Another illustrative example of a tableau by Fielding is the scene in which the servant brings the message to Squire Western that his daughter, Miss Sophia Western, is missing.

> "O, Shakespear! [sic] had I thy pen! O, Hogarth! had I thy pencil! then would I draw the picture of the poor serving-man, who, with pale countenance, staring eyes, chattering teeth, faultering tongue, and trembling limbs,
> *(E'en such a man, so faint, so spiritless, So dull, so dead in look, so woe-begone, Drew Priam's curtains in the dead of night, And would have told him, half his Troy was burn'd)*
> entered the room, and declared—That Madam Sophia was not to be found. "Not to be found!" cries the squire, starting from his chair; "Zounds and d—nation! Blood and fury! Where, when, how, what—Not to be found! Where?" (42)

This is an intensified moment, a standstill, where the servant is on the threshold of delivering a shocking message to Sophia's father, Squire Western. The reader already knows the squire to be an incredibly loud, choleric (and most often drunk) character, who is prone to throw tantrums. The quote inside the quote is from Shakespeare's play *Henry IV*, in which Morton conveys the message to the Earl of Northumberland that his son is dead. Although the reference to this tragic scene would normally signify gravitas and a sombre setting, in this context it serves as a comic contrast to the squire, thereby interrupting the reader from being immersed in a fictitious unmediated universe, pointing out the logical difference between fiction and a present reality which does not resemble a classic Golden Age at all.

Squire Western subsequently ventures out to find his missing daughter:

> The squire himself now sallied forth, and began to roar forth the name of Sophia as loudly, and in as hoarse a voice, as whilome did Hercules that of Hylas; and, as the poet tells us that the whole shore echoed back the name of that beautiful youth, so did the house, the garden, and all the neighbouring fields resound nothing but the name of Sophia, in the hoarse voices of the men, and in the shrill pipes of the women (43).

In his theory of neoclassical art, Lessing (2018: 5) subscribes to the ideal that works of art should convey "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur," borrowing the German Hellenist Winckelmann's famous phrase (1991: 4). In classical art, depictions of screaming or wide-open mouths are not acceptable. Lesssing commends the sculptural representation of the priest of Troy, Laokoon, who even in his death throes does not scream terribly but merely expresses an anguished sigh. Laokoon's display of

stoic magnitude amidst his sufferings touches the beholder's soul, remarks Lessing.

Quite the opposite is the case with the "hoarse voices" and "shrill pipes" of Squire Western's search party. Again, the reader is presented with a comic tableau that puts the classic ideals and the earthbound characters into sharp relief; in it, the loud-mouthed and boorish squire is ironically compared to the Greek hero Hercules searching for his lost lover Hylas.

The representations of Squire Western and Mrs Partridge can appear simple and one-dimensional to contemporary readers. The description of the servant above is comparable to a rushed stage direction. It is true that Fielding is more interested in describing types than in-depth psychological portraits. What lacks in character description is outweighed by the sophisticated interaction between narrator and reader. The narrator wishes he had Shakespeare's pen or Hogarth's pencil, thus calling into question literature's ability to represent reality on its own, or to represent the unrepresentable, and thus appealing to the sister arts, drama and painting, for help. Interestingly, the novel is in conversation with artists, philosophers, and fictitious characters across time and medial boundaries concerning representation.

There is an interdisciplinary play at work in Fielding's novels, a special form of narrating in which there is an explicit contrast between story and description, and between interruption and continuation. Contemporary readers are well aware of the "show it, don't tell it" dictum, pervasive in narratological theory. This technique is based on a notion that the author and the narrator should be as quiet as possible, writing with an abundance of naturalistic detail and bringing the reader and the characters in the novel together as closely as possible. But, in Fielding's case, it is the complete opposite. In contrast to other realist writers of the 18th century, like Samuel Richardson, reading Fielding one is very much aware of the author's presence. His novels are full of descriptions and conversations with the reader, and the narrator often underlines the deep divide between reality and fiction.

Another illustrative example is at the beginning of *Tom Jones*, where the reader is introduced to the estate of Squire Allworthy. After a detailed description of the view from the squire's house looking out on a grove and a valley, one is immersed in the scene and the

"remarkably serene" morning, but then, suddenly, the narrative is interrupted by the comment:

> Reader, take care. I have unadvisedly led thee to the top of as high a hill as Mr Allworthy's, and how to get thee down without breaking thy neck, I do not well know. However, let us e'en venture to slide down together; for Miss Bridget rings her bell, and Mr Allworthy is summoned to breakfast, where I must attend, and, if you please, shall be glad of your company. (Fielding 1992: 9)

This sophisticated intermezzo breaks the mimetic impulse and rekindles it at the same time. It pokes fun at the ambitions of absorptive realism, but at the same time creates the double illusion that the reader is in the scene and about to join Squire Allworthy and his sister Bridget for breakfast. If you are too affectively absorbed in the fiction, you might risk "breaking thy neck," the narrator warns the reader.

In short, the narrator is annoyingly present in Fielding's tableaux and metafictional digressions, eager to puncture the illusion of an unmediated close relationship between the reader and the work of art. The tableaux serve as frozen metalevel moments, halting the narrative flow and creating opportunity for the narrator to engage in intellectual conversation with the reader about the relationship between art and life.

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