Discovering Determinacy in Shandy: A Readerly and Writerly Goose Chase

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In 1760, a group of clockmakers gathered in London to write an essay censuring Laurence Sterne and his most recent serialization of *Tristram Shandy*. Published on 9 May 1760, “The Clockmakers Outcry Against the Author of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*” called Laurence Sterne’s novel both “a mere wild-goose chase” [sic] and “an *ignis fatuus*” (Extracts 67), the Latin term for the flickering, ghostly light that lingers over swampland, “popularly called *Will-o’-the-wisp* [and] *Jack-a-lantern*” (OED). Despite the mission of these passionate clockmakers, which aimed to disparage Sterne and his increasingly famous novel, *Tristram Shandy*—and presumably Sterne himself—would relish the appropriateness of this intended slander, as the novel’s entire enterprise rests on the idea that the reader should find finite meaning both out of reach (like a wild goose), and yet strangely illuminating (like an *ignis fatuus*). The mere suggestion of the wild-goose chase evokes the image of two figures: the elusive goose and its pursuer, whomever or whatever that may be. In the case of *Shandy*, readers need not look far to find a textual representation of this proverbial duo, as they themselves fill the shoes of the pursuer, seeking some semblance of finite meaning in both mere words at the sentence level and a purpose of the overall narrative. Likewise, the phosphorescent, shimmering light of an *ignis fatuus* highlights not only the frustratingly unsteady structure of *Shandy*, but also the mysterious existence of an underlying explanation—a method-to-the-madness, so to speak.
That these clockmakers would unknowingly provide such an apt (and positive) description of *Shandy* while attempting to denounce it underscores the true spirit of the novel, and particularly the significance that Tristram attaches to “the unsteady uses of words” (Sterne 2: 93). The clockmakers represent a larger group of readers in the eighteenth century and today; but more importantly, their criticism conveys the way in which *Shandy* has been deemed fallible for the exact reasons that make it wonderful.

In *Shandy*, Sterne pits his readers against his narrator, Tristram, who unmistakably questions readerly habits and advocates a specific system of readerly participation by which readers ought to abide. It would seem, then, that through their accordance with Tristram’s instruction, readers have the capacity to exclude themselves from the clutches of Tristram’s satire; however, it is through this exact same accordance that readers become targets of Sterne’s satire, as he pits himself against Tristram as well. Indeed, Tristram instructs his readers to resist becoming part of a wild-goose chase, but Tristram too unknowingly becomes embroiled in his very own wild-goose chase—a chase which undermines his suggested system of readerly participation and which elicits Sterne’s satirical view of both readerly and writerly inclinations.

Before proceeding with Tristram’s beliefs on the nature of reading, his exemplary metaphor concerning those beliefs, and Sterne’s use of Tristram to satirize the reader, several essential topics and terms must be fully established: the role of reader-response theory in this study; the difference among the terms “ambiguity,” “determinacy,” and “indeterminacy;” the difference between Sterne (the author) and Tristram (the first-person narrator); and the influence of John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* on *Shandy*. To begin, in “Tristram *Shandy* and the Epistemology of the Hobby-Horse,” Luigi Cazzato writes that “what the reading of *Tristram Shandy* demanded was the suspension of the suspension of disbelief… the suspension
of the new belief in fiction and its rational attempt to textualize the world of experience and sensations” (217, author’s italics). Indeed, Cazzato explains that Shandy, contrary to the other great novels that preceded it in the eighteenth century (such as Robinson Crusoe), sent the increasingly popular novelistic form into disarray, pointing out the pretenses of textualizing truth and real-world experience. To invoke a term commonly associated with this narrative design, Shandy acknowledges an “indeterminacy” of meaning, not only within itself and the earlier novels of the eighteenth century, but also within any other written text, spoken language, or performed gesture—really in every single form of human interaction and communication. Having said that, in Shandy Sterne directs the attention of his readers to the interpretive gap that lies between the intended meaning of one’s utterance and everyone else’s interpretation of that utterance; in doing so, Sterne displays the vast difference between real-life experience and its representation (textual or other). But Sterne, unlike others whom this essay will address in due course, does so with the intention of producing comedy and expelling the notion that this interpretive gap is something humanity can or even ought to overcome. Overall, the term “indeterminacy” stems from a fairly new means of looking at a text, popularized by the formation and proliferation of reader-response theory and the likes of theorists such as Wolfgang Iser, who developed an entire book on Shandy as a model form of support for reader-response theory.

In Laurence Sterne: Tristram Shandy, Iser begins where Sterne begins in the first pages of Shandy, in which Tristram relates the story of his conception. This beginning, says Iser, is one among a litany of other beginnings in Shandy that actually never constitute a true start (others are Bobby’s death and the delayed preface, for instance), as they have as much to do with end results as the start that leads to end results (Laurence 3-10). Hence, Tristram imputes his
subsequent woes and his eventual demise to the conditions of his conception, and as Iser writes, "in seeking the condition of his beginnings, Tristram is forced to recognize the impossibility of ever finding them" (Laurence 5). Tristram conveys, for example, that his writing will never truly catch up with his life, when he writes, "It must follow, an' please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write" (Sterne 4: 302). Beginnings, among other narrative norms, become as elusive for Tristram as the wild goose does for its pursuer, so much so that Sterne entitles his novel, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, to imbue it with an overarching ambivalence from the title page forward, as "The opinions to be expressed on life are ideas which can never cover what they are meant to embrace" (Laurence 10). Tristram, however aware of the implausibility of writing his life, does exhibit other writerly inclinations that do indeed lead to his own wild-goose chase.

Accordingly, just as text cannot perfectly convey the meaning of true, real-life experience, so too is it impossible for text to perfectly convey a writer's exact feelings or opinions about that true, real-life experience. Iser elaborates on this theory in a chapter entitled "Interaction Between Text and Reader" in Readers and Reading:

We may conclude that the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text, and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with its actualization but must be situated somewhere between the two. ("Interaction" 20-21)

Therefore, both the text itself and readerly interaction with the text open pathways to diverse interpretations or a multiplicity of meaning that lingers in an interpretive gap between the text and its reader. This gap, though open to a number of possibilities, does demonstrate some
restriction on the meaning a reader internalizes, which has resulted in counter-arguments by firm advocates for the determinacy of meaning, such as E.D. Hirsch and Meyer Abrams.

Reader-response theorists insist, however, that the interpretive gap does not represent an infinite void that cannot be filled in with legitimate interpretations; Stanley Fish asserts, for instance, that “while a literary text is distinguished by its openness to a number of readings, it is not open to any and all readings” (Doing 70-71), such that readers could not claim an outlandish interpretation of Shandy without any clear textual evidence. Readers, in fact, react according to controlling patterns and contexts that shape their internalization and production of meaning. Some advocates of determinacy, like Hirsch and Abrams, display anxiety over and disagree with this idea of indeterminacy, claiming that the very patterns that reader-response critics acknowledge undermine their explanation of indeterminacy, even further claiming that a phrase in a vacuum devoid of context has the capacity to convey fixed, determinate meaning. In response to these advocates of determinacy, Fish writes,

> Sentences emerge only in situations, and within those situations, the normative meaning of an utterance will always be obvious or at least accessible, although within another situation that same utterance, no longer the same, will have another normative meaning that will be no less obvious or accessible... This does not mean that there is no way to distinguish between the meanings an utterance will have in different situations, but that the discrimination will already have been made by virtue of our being in a situation (we are never not in one). (Is There 307-308)

In Shandy, then, readers’ interpretations of the word “nose” are contingent on the surrounding context in which the word resides, such that Slawkenbergius’s nose in his eponymous tale, which
“made such rousing work in the fancies of the four great dignitaries” (Sterne 4: 255), may be interpreted differently than Toby’s nose, which a fly “buzzed about” (Sterne 2: 115) earlier in the novel. The context surrounding each of the previous examples affects readers’ interpretations in such a way that interpreting both noses as another name for, let us say an “elephant,” would be both foolish and remote from the controlling patterns and constraints that the term “indeterminacy” invokes. However, once realized that the term “nose” bears more than a single meaning in the novel, the context of the novel changes and the initial interpretations of each nose—if reread—may change as well. Ultimately, Fish explains to the advocates of determinacy that no matter how a sentence is written or spoken, it can never be uninfluenced by its context.

Additionally, an indeterminacy of meaning may seemingly, at surface level, refer to the inherent opacity of all great literature; thus, Gerald Graff’s discussion of the difference between “ambiguity” and “indeterminacy” bears tremendous weight in the discussion of Shandy, for the two terms often appear indistinguishable from one another. Whereas the term “ambiguity” carries with it the notion of rhetorical mastery, of the genius that lies beneath the surface of prose and that conjures up multiple interpretations, Graff asserts that the term “indeterminacy” carries with it the notion that textual, linguistic art is undermined by its own inability to convey unfahtering, permanent meaning—that textual, linguistic art is paradoxically the butt of its own joke (Graff 165). In respect to Shandy, the second of these terms holds more relevance in that the novel exhibits an unyielding awareness of its incapacity to convey determinate meaning; Shandy takes readers on a metalinguistic journey into the realms of both narrative self-reflexivity and rhetoricty—narrative and rhetoric thus become the subjects of Shandy’s narrative and rhetoric. Ultimately, of the indeterminacy inherent in textual and linguistic media, or as Graff calls it, the “self-deceit allegedly built into language,” Graff writes that “The most interesting
and plausible instances... would seem to be those in which the desire to transcend the condition of language is an explicit preoccupation of the text, as opposed to a theme that is attributed to the text on the ground that it is present in all language” (175). Even though *Shandy* explicitly attempts to “transcend the condition of language,” this explicitness raises an important question: Is the attempt at transcendence the motive of Sterne, of Tristram, or of both?

Iser offers a preliminary answer to this question in *Laurence Sterne: Tristram Shandy*, writing that “The implied author shades into the narrator who thus speaks with two voices – not because he describes his life and expresses his views on it, but because all his utterances are permeated with the knowledge that life exceeds its depiction and can, as it were, only be theatrically staged” (*Laurence* 10). In *Shandy*, Sterne’s own authorial voice filters through Tristram’s voice, but they are not the same. Sterne and Tristram’s voices align in some cases—as seen in their philosophy of reading and their indeterminate view of language—but it is Tristram alone who attempts to “transcend the nature of language,” and who displays an uneasiness about the very indeterminacy in which he appears to believe. Through Tristram’s voice, Sterne openly mocks the fruitlessness of Tristram’s attempt at transcendence. Sterne expresses the belief that all of the opinions and stories of Tristram’s narrative do not, in fact, mirror the opinions and stories of Tristram’s life, thus creating a correspondence between Sterne and his narrator. Tristram, though cognizant of the void between his imagination and reality, seeks to write his entire life-story, and even after realizing the impossibility of such a profound task, maintains the writing of his life-story in such a way that he hopes to fill as much of the interpretive gap as possible.

Much like Sterne, Tristram seemingly knows that it would be impossible to write a story in which readers could suspend their hobby-horses and solely regard the text as if it were
constructed in a vacuum: "The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is
to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as
yourself" (Sterne 2: 111). Whereas Sterne knows that readers, regardless of how he tells them to
read, will use their imaginations and deviate from his story to ponder their own hobby-horses
(and essentially their own lives), Tristram emphasizes the same relationship, but does so with an
anxiety over indeterminacy that draws forth Sterne's own authorial voice. At one point, for
instance, Tristram lays the groundwork for readerly participation, yet he intervenes to control the
majority of the scene:

   Let the reader imagine then, that Dr. Slop has told his tale—and in what words,
and with what aggravations, his fancy chooses;—Let him suppose, that Obadiah
has told his tale also, and with such rueful looks of affected concern, as he thinks
best will contrast the two figures as they stand by each other.—Let him imagine,
that my father has stepped up stairs to see my mother.—And, to conclude this
work of imagination,—let him imagine the doctor washed,—rubbed down, and
condoled,—felicitated,—got into a pair of Obadiah's pumps, stepping forwards
towards the door, upon the very point of entering upon action. (Sterne 2: 112)

Immediately after suggesting that readers take the reins and control some of the story, Tristram
suggests the way in which his readers should imagine the story, virtually writing the scene
exactly as he normally would although with less detail, even after instructing the reader to
actively imagine it unfold. Readers are to imagine Dr. Slop's account of his collision with
Obadiah (and vice versa) as if they are constructing a new addition through the eyes of each
character, but only within the parameters that Tristram has given. Thus, readers are given two
options: they can either stop reading and construct their own scene, or read on with the
information Tristram has already provided. Having said that, both cases will produce similar results, for they will both move on to realize that Slop's green bays bag has been left at the scene of the accident—thus eliciting an important truth in this particular subplot. Even though Tristram instructs readers to take advantage of these imaginative opportunities, he sandwiches his instruction between two halves of a suspenseful scene—indeed, one of the only cohesive sequences in the first two volumes of the novel. Ultimately, although Tristram invites readers to actively participate in the story, he simultaneously tempts them to disregard their own imagination and to continue reading, filling in more of the interpretive gap and revealing a discrepancy between the technique of his narrative control and the indeterminacy that he incessantly emphasizes.

Sterne and Tristram, then, share an awareness of indeterminacy, but their differing opinions of indeterminacy create several significant contradictions in the text. Through these contradictions, Sterne uses Tristram to model one specific writerly attitude that corresponds with that of the readerly wild-goose chase: he not only uses Tristram to ridicule readers as they search for determinate meaning within the text, but he also knowingly puts Tristram into a similar chase as the pursuer of a full representation of his own life. Unlike Sterne, Tristram "is so confident of the power of novelistic representation that he can even tell the story of his pre-life" (Cazzato 219). Tristram’s role as the subjective, first-person narrator and writer of his own life-story undermines the very determinacy which he so desperately, albeit unknowingly, tries to convey throughout his narrative. Therefore, in Shandy Sterne uses a first-person narrator because, as Iser explains, "an omniscient narrator is out of the question, for this would be in direct conflict with the unfathomableness of subjectivity" (Laurence 56). Although Tristram attempts to satirize readerly inclinations and habits (which will be discussed in due course), Sterne’s
implied, authorial voice reveals itself through Tristram's contradictions and thus debunks Tristram's instruction (and satire) of readers who follow Tristram as their guide to determinacy. This revelation pits Tristram against his own creator, Sterne, who illustrates that indeterminacy produces as much amusement for him as it does anxiety for Tristram.

Tristram, however passionate about the dynamic, textual relationship with which he stimulates his readers, communicates his narrative (and opinions) with blank pages, missing pages, marble pages, black pages, crosses, asterisks, diagrams, pointing fingers, squiggly lines, a large nose, diagrams, blotted out words, large letters, and so on—all of which demonstrate the limitations of language and encourage readerly participation, simultaneously fusing both linguistic and extra-linguistic media together to create meaning. Similarly, Ronald Primeau also explains that Tristram displays anxiety “about how language can not only fail to contribute to, but even become an obstacle blocking, the creation and experiencing of a work of art” (20). Essentially, the nature of reading in *Shandy* extends far beyond text, as in the set of marbled pages in Volume III, leading up to which Tristram writes:

—And pray who was Tickletoby's mare?—'tis just as discreditable and unscholar-like a question, Sir, as to have asked what year (ab. urb. con.) the second Punic war broke out.—Who was Tickletoby's mare!—Read, read, read, read, my unlearned reader! read—or by the knowledge of the great saint Paraleipomenon—I tell you before-hand, you had better throw down the book at once; for without much reading, by which your reverence knows I mean much knowledge, you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page (motley emblem of my work!) than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unravel the
many opinions, transactions, and truths which still lie mystically hid under the 
dark veil of the black one. (Sterne 3: 218)

By “Tickletoby’s mare,” Tristram evokes a character from Rabelais and subsequently chastises 
readers for their ignorance of this iota of obscure literary knowledge. If they were to “read, read, 
read, read,” all literature, even Rabelais, who is to say that readers would have that knowledge 
readily available to make a connection between this allusion and the adjoining non-textual 
pages? Or, better yet, how would the reading of any text influence readers’ understandings of 
the marbled page? Although it seems that Tristram desires the marbled pages to assist readers 
and consequently make light of a “moral,” it happens that the marble pages display an 
indeterminacy comparable to the text on the adjoining page, not merely the allusion to Rabelais, 
but all of the words. Neither textual nor visual art contains determinate meaning, in the same 
way that one might misconstrue both the spoken words and actions of another in a real-life 
encounter. In *The Practice of Reading: Interpreting the Novel*, Derek Alsop and Chris Walsh 
convey how the marbled pages in the first edition of *Shandy* underscore the significance of the 
marbled pages in later editions, writing, “Indeed, the very fact that in the first edition every 
marbled page is unique – marbled by hand – suggests the uniqueness of each individual’s 
imaginative ‘reading’” (37). Thus, rather than heightening readers’ understandings through this 
composite (textual and pictorial) portrayal of a “moral,” Tristram amplifies both the limitations 
of textual and visual reading.

This undertaking to intermingle artistic media contradicts a view that Tristram presents 
earlier about the inability of conveying meaning through visual art. Even as early as Volume I, 
Tristram insists on the impracticality of employing the “Pentagraphic Brethren” to illustrate 
prints and pictures of his Uncle Toby’s character, writing, “One of these you will see drawing a
full length character against the light;—that’s illiberal,—dishonest,—and hard upon the character of the man who sits,” and “Others, to mend the matter, will make a drawing of you in the Camera;—that is most unfair of all, because, there you are sure to be represented in some of your most ridiculous attitudes” (Sterne 1: 80). After deliberation, Tristram resolves to employ his Uncle Toby’s hobby-horse to express his character, but not before he displays an attitude toward the pictorial mode that he contradicts later in the novel—specifically shown via the use of the marbled pages. Tristram presents his skeptical view of an extra-linguistic means to illustrate Toby’s character; however, he employs an extra-linguistic means to project an allegedly important “moral” afterward, thus outwardly contradicting his earlier declaration.

Moreover, Tristram presents another contradiction through his use of actions and gestures within his narrative that lend credence to the importance of extra-textual reading, particularly because the scenes that bear this additional support exist in the textual form. A perfect example occurs when Corporal Trim, Susannah, Obadiah, the coachman Jonathan, and the cook-maid assemble in the kitchen to mourn the death of Walter Shandy’s first son, Bobby. Shortly after the sad news reaches this motley group, Tristram relates the scene of Trim’s lamentation: “Are we not here now, continued the corporal, (striking the end of his stick perpendicularly upon the floor, so as to give an idea of health and stability)—and are we not—(dropping his hat upon the ground) gone! in a moment!” (Sterne 5: 377). Trim’s words themselves may be of little significance, Tristram explains, but the parenthetical gestures infuse the scene with such profundity that Trim’s onlookers break into hysterics. Rife with the use of metonymic devices, Tristram’s narrative conveys the idea that words cannot encapsulate the meaning of a scene. Tristram’s rhetoric in the recapitulation of the scene in which Trim drops his hat (devoid of extra-textual devices), then, essentially deprecates itself for attempting to convey meaning
without the proper tools for doing so, such that when Trim rhetorically asks, “Are we not here now” (Sterne 5: 377), Tristram not only calls attention to Trim’s companions and the kitchen in which they reside, but also readers and the text in which the narrative exists. Indeed, readers are here in that they are at this juncture of the narrative, but not really (t)here as firsthand observers of Trim’s emphatic speech. Readers, no matter how shrewd, cannot fully comprehend the effect of Trim’s speech because words (even parenthetical phrases portraying gestures) do not have the capacity to convey determinate meaning. After Tristram relates the scene, he reminds readers of his philosophy of the nature of language, writing, “Let it suffice to affirm, that of all the senses, the eye, (for I absolutely deny the touch, though most of your Barbati, I know, are for it) has the quickest commerce with the soul,—gives a smarter stroke, and leaves something more inexpressible upon the fancy, than words can either convey—or sometimes get rid of” (Sterne 5: 377). Given that Tristram has yet to be conceived when Trim’s dropping of the hat takes place, he knowingly relates an event that he had not seen firsthand and writes Trim’s speech that he had not heard firsthand, thus raising questions about his own capacity to relay the effect of Trim’s gesture successfully. Even more implausible is Tristram’s established medium for relating such a gesture in that he attempts to convey the profundity of a non-linguistic action through language. Tristram attempts to write a gesture in such a way that his readers will be able to comprehend the gravity of Trim’s (e)motions. Therefore, the discrepancy between what he is saying and what he is doing once again draws out Sterne’s presence in the text, for it is he that uses Tristram to communicate the inferiority of language while simultaneously attempting to use language to get a point across. At this point, Sterne’s voice is again filtering through Tristram’s own, incessantly mocking Tristram’s attempt at transcending the nature of language to convey determinate meaning. Tristram claims to know that he cannot emphasize the true importance of
Trim’s gesture, yet he still attempts to elucidate the scene in such a way that bridges the interpretive gap.

Without having seen the hat drop to the floor in person, Tristram’s understanding and reaction to the scene equates with that of his readers; and yet, he affects to have an understanding of the scene to which readers are not privy. Although Tristram’s anti-determinate and anti-linear beliefs on textual reading (which will be established shortly) arguably align with Sterne’s own beliefs, Sterne satirizes Tristram’s conviction to express genuine, real-life experience within any artistic medium, even the hybrid cross between textual and pictorial material presented in Tristram’s narrative. That Tristram is a fictional character himself enhances Sterne’s mockery of him, consequently revealing Sterne’s presence in the text more forcefully. Even if Tristram were to harness a medium capable of conveying a flawless, textual representation of real-life experience, he is still a fictional character, earnestly attempting to create that which he cannot. Tristram, despite satirizing readers who partake in a wild-goose chase, partakes in a wild-goose chase of his own. The pervasive humor of *Shandy* is rooted in Sterne’s “comic acceptance that what we might be able to see can never be equally determined by the words we have to use to describe it” (Alsop 34, author’s italics). That said, Sterne’s satire of his readers is incredibly tricky, as his narrator’s obsession with creating textual meaning is often the subject of his satire as well. Through Tristram, Sterne shows readers that in spite of the indeterminacy of language and text, specific readerly inclinations exist that foster Tristram’s confidence to create determinate meaning via the use of extra-linguistic devices. Although Sterne uses Tristram to satirize a specific class of readers—those set on capturing the wild-goose—he also uses Tristram to demarcate the limits of meaning that one can achieve in any medium, even in real-life interactions with other people. Whereas Tristram, much like Locke, expresses distress over “this
lack of access, one soul to another,” Sterne views this indeterminacy of language and meaning as “a basis for dramatic and comic development” (Traugott 8).

The function of Lockean thought is also crucial to the understanding of Shandy, as it provides Sterne with another satirical target that facilitates his satire of both Tristram and the reader. Peter Briggs points out in “Locke’s Essay and the Tentativeness of Tristram Shandy” that criticism of Shandy has suggested a range of functions for its use of Locke in the past: a fictional translation of Locke’s Essay, a subversion of Lockean thought, as well as an exploitation of the popularity that Locke garnered from Sterne’s eighteenth-century readers. Moreover, Briggs maintains that “the range of opinion itself suggests that Sterne may have used Lockean ideas in more than one way, in more than one spirit” (493-94). That Lockean ideas can potentially play multiple roles in Shandy is certainly a testament to the indeterminacy of language that Shandy acknowledges, but Locke’s doctrine deserves its own attention before applying it directly to the novel.

In his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke explains two beliefs central to his philosophy: first, that people harbor no inherent ideas at birth (they are born a “blank slate”); second, that man attains ideas through corporeal experience with the external world and through internalizing and reflecting upon those ideas. Although Locke’s “association of ideas” normally constitutes the bulk of connections between the Essay and Shandy, the previous two tenets require some scrutiny as well, particularly because they are so important to Locke. Of the first, Tristram’s attempt at beginning the story of his life at his conception obviously precedes even the “blank slate” or the lack of ideas with which he is born. Having said that, his solipsistic endeavor to prefigure his birth with his conception and a series of events that take place prior to it certainly provides readers with enough information about Tristram that they know his
character quite well by the time he is born in Volume III. Thus, when one reads *Shandy*,
Tristram’s delayed birth indicates that the blank slate of which Locke speaks has been partially
filled from the beginning, which ultimately discounts the theory that the novel is a fictional
representation of Lockean thought. Expanding on the theory of the “blank slate,” the second of
the two Lockean beliefs revisits the notion that indeterminacy of meaning does reside within the
pale of context. Ideas derive from corporeal experience and the internalization of that experience
(or “life and opinions,” as it were), such that if they are retold or rewritten, they will always (as
Fish stresses) be transmitted within a context that constrains the meaning of those ideas to a set
of patterns or a range of interpretations.

With Locke’s central beliefs in mind, his “association of ideas” loosens the constraints
that limit the indeterminacy of meaning to specific patterns of interpretation. Locke’s phrase,
“association of ideas,” holds that two attached ideas, when received and internalized together,
will eventually, if not immediately, unite and remain associated. If one were to smell bananas
upon entering a specific shop for the first time, for instance, Locke’s “association of ideas” holds
that one might think of the smell of bananas when subsequently entering or even reflecting on
that specific shop, or even think of the shop when smelling a banana. To Locke, the “association
of ideas” represents a deviation from reason and thus represents a sort of “madness,” often
resulting from “a wrong connexion [sic] of ideas” (Chapter XXXIII). As John Traugott writes in
*Tristram Shandy’s World; Sterne’s Philosophical Rhetoric*, “Locke’s theory abysmally separates
the individual from reality, including other individuals, and even himself should he forget his
past ideas,” which ultimately “forces him to conceive men as having, each of them, a little world
apart” (10). To Locke, this “little world apart” stems from language, as the words one uses to
communicate meaning merely signify ideas: “Therefore, if the idea is not clear or determinate,
the sign of it can do no more than confound the understanding” (Traugott 51). Similarly, Tristram incessantly expresses his view of “the unsteady uses of words, which have perplexed the clearest and most exalted understandings” (Sterne 2: 93), thus establishing an important parallel between him and Locke. To Sterne, on the other hand, this view of language as a barrier necessitates, again, “a comic acceptance that what we might be able to see can never be equally determined by the words we have to use to describe it” (Alsop 34, author’s italics).

In Shandy, Sterne reveals both his qualms and Tristram’s acceptance of associationism in that “Whole conversations are performed without a single participant’s understanding or having the least desire to understand” (Traugott 8-9, author’s italics). Tristram, often by invoking the hobby-horses, or the ruling passions of those participants, depicts each conversation with a sincerity that bears a dual function: first, Tristram’s anxiety over the indeterminacy of language, and second, Sterne’s underlying comic voice, which cherishes the indeterminacy over which Tristram feels uneasy. Sterne, rather than merely warning readers and displaying anxiety about this indeterminacy of meaning (like Locke and Tristram), takes Locke’s theory and forcefully exaggerates it, so much so that the rashness of Locke’s associationism can be seen quite explicitly in Tristram’s life-story (especially in Uncle Toby and Mr. Shandy). For instance, when Mr. Shandy first hears of Tristram’s crushed nose—by this point, readers should be fully aware that “noses” are among Mr. Shandy’s hobby-horses—he cries out, “did ever a poor unfortunate man, brother Toby… receive so many lashes?” (Sterne 4: 296). Within the context of the conversation and considering the traumatizing news which Mr. Shandy has just received, readers ought to be able to interpret Mr. Shandy’s meaning correctly—that is, that his question is rhetorical and that he is not literally seeking a factual answer. The interpretive gap between Mr. Shandy and readers is limited by the context in which the words are spoken. However, Uncle
Toby does take his question literally and immediately conjures up an answer according to his own hobby-horse, replying, “—The most I ever saw given... (ringing the bell at the bed’s head for Trim) was to a grenadier, I think in Mackay’s regiment” (Sterne 4: 296-97). Sterne exaggerates the gravity of Lockean associationism to such a degree that he takes Locke’s theory and transforms it into comedy, into a situation that should not evoke pity or sympathy over the inability of his characters to bridge the interpretive gap—only laughter at the misunderstandings which result from it. But Sterne does this through his narrator, Tristram, who exaggerates the “association of ideas” within his narrative to convey a different message to his readers: that without their full engagement in this conversation between author and reader, their hobby-horses will take the reins and pull them further away from Tristram. To Sterne, however, this interpretive gap exhibits a comical fact of life. Sterne understands that the gap does not inhibit all human communication, but as Traugott writes, Sterne has “succeeded in making probable the Shandy passions... by taking those situations which on Locke’s terms would lead to total noncommunication, and shown them as attempts at personal expression which are communicable not as words but as situations” (30-31). Therefore, Sterne shows readers that there is no need to be alarmed by the indeterminacy of Toby and Walter’s relationship, as their myriad misunderstandings do not represent plausible conversations, but hyperbolic caveats which stem from Tristram’s own anxiety over the indeterminacy of language.

Despite the unpredictability of Tristram’s characters, his own digressive yet progressive technique for relating scenes does not adhere to the same manner of associationism. To consider Shandy a textual representation of Lockean associationism, the novel’s eponymous narrator would have to narrate ideas that stem from his own experiences and his own associations—an impossibility given that much of Tristram’s narration recounts events that occur before his birth.
Therefore, Sterne employs Tristram differently than Tristram does Uncle Toby and Mr. Shandy, as Tristram’s own digressions are not a product of impulsive associations, but of a design that, as Briggs and Cash suggest, depicts another way in which Lockean philosophy is presented by Sterne. This distinction between Tristram and the characters in his narration, however, raises an important question: If Tristram is not plagued by the same associative “madness” that Locke would impute to Uncle Toby and the others, then why does his narration assume such a digressive structure? Cash explains that Tristram’s narration, often dubbed an eighteenth-century version of the stream-of-consciousness technique, “is the psychology of the train of ideas, rather than Locke’s associationism, which constitutes Sterne’s unquestioned assumptions about the nature of the mind and which explains the mind of Tristram and the organic narrative, *Tristram Shandy*” (Cash 129-130). The “train of ideas,” explains Locke, incessantly replaces one idea with another, not based on “unreasonable associations” (Chapter XIV), but on the succession of controllable ideas that shape our concept of time. Therefore, rather than narrating a story rooted in the reemergence of associated memories, Sterne uses Tristram to provide a seemingly associative life-story, but one that demonstrates full control over his own ideas and the characters within his narrative. However, Tristram uses his own characters and their associative tendencies to relate his uneasiness about Lockean associationism and the indeterminacy of language, both of which provide Sterne with comedic outlets.

*Shandy’s* digressive, non-sequential structure also presents a tenet of Tristram’s philosophy of the nature of reading. Because he constructs a narrative in which author and readers both play roles in the construction of meaning, Tristram displays a narrative that challenges linear, straightforward advancement. To Tristram, the futility of a linear narrative stems from a lack of determinacy and has an ultimate purpose; he does not endeavor to portray a
chronological tale in which a sequential order of events leads up to a climax or dénouement, and thus he writes, “Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;—they are the life, the soul of reading!—take them out of this book, for instance,—you might as well take the book along with them” (Sterne 1: 77). At one point, in Volume 4, Tristram even diagrams his laundry list of digressions to show “the four lines [he] moved in through [his] first, second, third, and fourth volumes” (Sterne 6: 488). Much in the same vein, in “Ziggerzagger Shandy: Sterne and the Aesthetics of the Crooked Line,” Pat Rogers discusses Sterne’s coinage of the term “zigzaggery” (according to the OED) and the way in which the image of the zigzag “sets up ideas for [the characters,] and for the narrator, of other modes of ‘transverse progression’” (97). Some examples of this “zigzaggery” can be seen in the reading of Trim’s sermon, which “makes regular alterations between the text of the sermon and the response of the audience” (Rogers 104), as well as Sterne’s narrative mode, in which he “hold[s] competing moods of comedy and sentiment on par... to combine discrete materials without privileging any individual motif as the grand central theme of his book” (Rogers 106). Overall, Sterne employs a zigzagging or seesawing motion into just about every scene in Shandy, whether in the associative patterns of the characters in Tristram’s narrative or in as explicit a motion as the illustrated diagrams—all techniques for provoking the reader’s active participation.

Indeed, Tristram relishes the digressive structure of his own narrative, and at times he even instructs readers to take digressions upon themselves—to flip back through previous chapters and volumes to review what they have already read. In one such scene, Tristram calls forth the fictional reader, “Madam” (whom he habitually mistreats throughout his narrative), and chastises her for her careless reading of the previous chapter. In the farcical dialogue that follows his initial condemnation, Madam explains that she must have either “miss’d a page” or
that she “was asleep” (Sterne 1: 65), with which Tristram strongly disagrees, proposing that she simply “know[s] nothing at all about the matter” (Sterne 1: 65) and that she must go back and reread. Their dialogue and Tristram’s request may appear a bit ridiculous; however, Tristram’s subsequent explanation elucidates the second, significant belief of his philosophy of reading, which firmly opposes linearity:

I have imposed this penance upon the lady, neither out of wantonness or cruelty, but from the best of motives; and therefore shall make her no apology for it when she returns back:—Tis to rebuke a vicious taste which has crept into thousands besides herself,—of reading straight forwards, more in quest of the adventures, than of the deep erudition and knowledge which a book of this cast, if read over as it should be, would infallibly impart with them. (Sterne 1: 65)

Although Tristram ascribes his request to neither “wantonness” nor “cruelty” here, he does address a “vicious” readerly practice—“vicious” meaning “Of the nature of vice; contrary to moral principles; depraved, immoral, bad” (OED). Tristram, then, not only aims his satire at those readers who seek determinate meaning in *Shandy*, but also those who read forward, refusing to put active thought and readerly engagement before linear entertainment. These two beliefs, after all, constitute a contiguous relationship, as those seeking overall determinate meaning of a text anticipate that meaning to surface toward the culmination of a linear narrative. Just as the metaphor of the wild-goose chase generates an image of the pursuer hopelessly trailing the goose up, down, and across an unpredictable trajectory, so too does Tristram engage specific readers in a hopeless, non-sequential search for finite meaning. Tristram’s satirical target thus ultimately consists of readers who yearn for determinacy and linearity.

From the first pages of *Shandy* forward, Tristram makes his cognizance of “actual
readers” (ostensibly) quite clear, asserting that the relationship they will cultivate together ought to exemplify a “conversation” of sorts. And despite delving into his own exceedingly personal matters (such as his mother’s mid-coital clock-winding episode and his accident at the sash window), Tristram does not promote a personal relationship with a single reader isolated from the notion of extraneous readership, but he openly distributes his attention among an assortment of “rhetorically conjured readers” (Benedict 485). Along with the second-person “you,” Tristram directs his interest toward “good folks” (1: 16), “readers” (1: 18), “Sir” (6: 482), “Madam” (1: 65), “your reverences” (3: 167), “your worships” (3: 182), “critics” (3: 189), “thou” (8: 593) and a wide array of others, peppering in adjectives and combining names to further serve his purpose, as in “dear Sir” (1: 17), “Sir Critick” (2: 91), and “your honours and reverences” (9: 649), to name a few. Tristram, however, never expresses what characteristics separate these imagined readers: How is the rhetorically conjured “Sir” different from the “gentleman” or any of the other conjured male readers, for instance? Although it would seem that each of these constructed readers represents a broad base of readerly attitudes, Tristram does create an ostensible rift between male and female readers that intimates an underlying message. Benedict writes that “Madam” and “Sir” are invoked most often, and in such a way that Tristram implies a vast disparity between the readerly attitudes of men and women—a disparity that pigeonholes every man as a “sympathetic reader” and every woman as “a bad one” (Benedict 485). Although Tristram frequently venerates his male readers, he constantly ridicules the woman reader for her poor attention to details. The reason for this disparity, says Benedict, has to do with the opening chapter of Shandy, in which Tristram’s mother interrupts Walter Shandy’s orgasm in order to wind the clock; from this moment forward, the female reader, “Madam,” both “furnishes pleasure” and “frustrates it” (Benedict 485), thus causing Tristram to reprimand her
accordingly. One particular instance of Tristram’s mistreatment of “Madam” will be elucidated more fully when discussing Tristram’s philosophy of reading. However, at this point, Tristram’s distinction between readers embodies another issue altogether, as critics of Shandy have frequently questioned if all the rhetorically conjured readers should be seen as representations of actual readers or be seen as internal characters.

In “Tristram Shandy’s Phantom Audience,” William C. Dowling argues that Shandy “is a story without an audience” (284). Dowling asserts that criticism of Shandy, though of a vastly learned cast, too often presupposes that these “internal, imaginary readers... represent roles or masks for actual readers” (285), when, in fact, he insists that they function much like Dr. Slop or Widow Wadman—as yet another fictional character in the text. Although Dowling’s argument seemingly jeopardizes the basis of this particular study, it does not bear an adverse effect for several reasons. First, and perhaps most importantly, Sterne’s satire of readerly attitudes becomes known through the mask of Tristram, whose tone thus becomes destabilized and may cause readers to question whether his tone is ironic or sincere. Therefore, this duality—Tristram’s narrative and Sterne’s implied voice—represents a feature of satire that cannot go unacknowledged. In “Satire and Conversation: The Logic of Interpretation,” Charles Knight discusses this duality of voices as well as two of the readerly reactions it evokes, the first of which is that “we may be unsure whether a statement is to be seen as ironic or straightforward” (239). Therefore, in Shandy the effect of having a fictional, first-person narrator like Tristram is that readers must try to distinguish between two possible interpretations of two possible voices—as with Tristram and Sterne’s distinct motives in exaggerating the manifold representations of Lockean associationism.

Secondly, “On a more personal level,” Knight writes that “we may have difficulty
because we suspect that we are among the satirist’s intended victims, or we may find the implied values so antithetical, or the mode of attack so repulsive, that we must reject the work completely” (Knight 239). Readers of Shandy, then, inherently feel on their guard toward the narrator and implied author as they too could be among the satirical targets. With this function of satire in mind, although the “rhetorically conjured readers” who Tristram creates may not truly represent “actual readers” as Dowling says, Tristram still exposes all “actual readers” of Shandy to a litany of readerly attitudes that they themselves could possess, subsequently causing “actual readers” to question their likeness to implied readers whom Tristram so often mocks in his “conversation” with them. Tristram also addresses the second-person “you” quite often, devoid of any pronouns or names which directly precede it. Likewise, Helen Ostovich views Tristram’s superficial persuasion and engagement of the reader in this “conversation” as a sham, for she claims that the relationship seems less like a conversation and more like a “dispute”—a dispute in which Tristram reveals “Madam the reader, as [his] hobby-horse” (188). Before coming to this conclusion, however, Ostovich suggests the possible meanings of the word “hobby-horse,” among which is the following description: “Metaphorically the hobby-horse is androgynous; not only a frivolous fellow or buffoon but also any lustful person, particularly a woman... In this latter context, ‘riding a hobby-horse’ means fornicating” (Ostovich 173; OED). Naturally, then, within the scope of reader-response theory, viewing the “rhetorically conjured readers” as both analogues to actual readers of Shandy and implied readers (a commonly held notion in criticism of Shandy) is indeed a foregone conclusion—even though one with which Dowling adamantly disagrees.

Despite Tristram’s belief that writers should encourage readerly activity, he still admonishes writers about becoming careless and creating loose, disorderly work: “Writers had
need look before them, to keep up the spirit and connection of what they have in hand” (Sterne 2.144). Although *Shandy* contains vast interpolations, myriad digressions, elaborate caveats, and detailed lists, Tristram stresses the importance of weaving it all together like a “fine spun web” (Sterne 2.149) or a “good, honest, devilish tight, hard knot” (Sterne 3.167). Tristram actually includes a lengthy digression regarding that very subject—knots—and even promises a chapter on knots that he never actually gets around to writing. At one point, in Volume 3, Obadiah returns to the Shandy household with Dr. Slop’s green bays bag, but before embarking on his journey, he knots the bag intricately so as to avoid losing any of its contents along the way. In the comical scene that ensues, Tristram transforms the knotted medical bag into a metaphor for his entire narrative:

In the case of these knots then, and of the several obstructions, which, may it please your reverences, such knots cast in our way in getting through life—every hasty man can whip out his pen-knife and cut through them.—’Tis wrong. Believe me, Sirs, the most virtuous way, and which both reason and conscience dictate—is to take our teeth or our fingers to them. (Sterne 3: 167)

Although Tristram claims “such knots cast in our way in getting through life” ( Sterne 3: 167, author’s italics) and not through a novel, the novel at hand—and many other eighteenth-century novels, in fact—recount stories of a life; it could even be said that the novel was created as a new means of relating life stories. In the case of *Shandy*, Sterne intimates this truth in the title, and therefore these knots come to represent Tristram’s frustratingly digressive narrative (or life-story). More importantly, the means for disentangling the knots represent both the poor and proper approach to reading his narrative, of which the proper approach adheres to his philosophy of reading and the resistance of both determinacy and linearity. Rather than expending no
imaginative effort and reading hastily through the narrative for its linear storyline and an overriding determinate theme or meaning (readers will find only dead-end traces), the real challenge for readers becomes engaging with the narrative and extracting knowledge from it. Tristram grants his readers access to a bag of tools much like Slop’s bag. That said, what concerns Tristram is not how his readers get inside the bag, but the process of opening it, ultimately relating to the wild-goose chase in which the chase itself bears more importance than a concluding capture of the goose. This particular scene, for instance, answers questions concerning how Sterne’s novel—or any novel—ought to be read. Dr. Slop, while attempting to cut through the knot with his penknife, slices open his thumb, drawing blood. Though it may be a bit cliché, Tristram implies that a hasty reading of *Shandy*, devoid of any imaginative effort, will only hurt readers in the end. To Tristram, the proper method of reading a novel requires arduous effort—“to take our teeth or our fingers to them.” The irony of Dr. Slop’s anger over Obadiah’s intricate knot is that it provokes him to curse Obadiah heatedly, thus causing Mr. Shandy to bring him Ernulphus’ book of curses—essentially another strain of the digressive knot that intricately weaves the novel together (Sterne 3: 169). In expressing his anger over a knot within the narrative, Slop adds to and tightens the knot that is the narrative.

In Volume 2 of *Shandy*, Tristram explains his own perspective of the sort of relationship that a writer should engender and maintain with readers, and in so doing, he posits one of his core beliefs about the nature of reading: “No author,” he writes, “who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay the reader’s understanding, is to halve the matter amicably, and leave something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself” (Sterne 2: 111). For Tristram, the interplay between writers and readers should resemble a conversation in which both participants play a crucial role
in the production of meaning. This dual production creates an unique variety of meaning—not finite meaning intrinsic to a text, but meaning contingent on readers’ interactions with it.

Tristram harbors no aversion to meaning in general—not in the least bit—only he understands the indeterminacy of meaning in a textual, linguistic medium, rife with multiple connotations and interpretations unique to each individual reader. With this multiplicity of meaning at the fore, the clockmakers’ metaphors of the wild-goose chase and *ignis fatuus* correspond perfectly. In *Shandy*, Sterne does not pit Tristram against all readers, merely those who, like the clockmakers, expect or yearn to discover determinate meaning in the text; or, in keeping with the metaphors, Tristram provokes those who expect to overtake the wild goose, as well as those who expect to overtake the source of that vague, shimmering light (*ignis fatuus*). The readers who embrace the notion of the chase itself and who view the process of reading as the true discovery of knowledge and meaning, on the other hand, free themselves from the clutches of Tristram’s criticism (but not Sterne’s). That the meaning of *Shandy* calls attention to readers’ judgments, interpretations, and perhaps especially their hobby-horses, was in effect Sterne’s appeal to readers to knowingly engage in the critical school of reader-response theory a century prior to its conception. Having said that, even readers who understand the importance of their own engagement in the chase itself are easily misled if they fail to see Sterne’s mockery of them through the ironic didacticism of Tristram.

However, having already mentioned his contradictory desire for determinacy and his censure of the “Madam” reader, Tristram is asking something of this Madam that likewise goes against his belief in the indeterminacy of language and text, thus bringing forth Sterne’s own authorial voice. Because Tristram fulminates over his reader’s confusion of language while simultaneously believing in the indeterminacy of language that very well could have been the
cause of her confusion, Tristram’s unreliability as narrator comes to the fore. Especially alarming for readers too is Tristram’s didacticism throughout the novel, as he constantly instructs (and moralizes to) his readers—on the viability of combining sentiment and comedy upon the story of his brother Bobby’s death, for instance (Sterne 5: 384-385). According to the OED, the term “didactic” means “Having the character or manner of a teacher or instructor; characterized by giving instruction; having the giving of instruction as its aim or object; instructive, preceptive” (OED). In Shandy, much of what Tristram says to readers can be read as didactic, as he often instructs readers on the correct approach to reading a text and on how to avoid getting embroiled in the wild-goose chase. That said, in “Madness to the Method: Sterne’s Tristram Shandy as a Mock-Educational Novel,” Carl Fisher writes that “While Tristram Shandy may not be the prototypical Bildungsroman, the spirit of instruction colors the entire narrative” (25). At times, Tristram even displays his didacticism through the instruction of additional subjects and sorts of media, as when he expresses his own education of “philanthropy,” of which he claims to have acquired merely by witnessing his Uncle Toby’s treatment of a fly: “This is to serve for parents and governors instead of a whole volume upon the subject” (Sterne 2: 116).

Interestingly, Tristram also uses extra-textual material to accompany such didactic claims insofar as he uses a pointing finger to emphasize the importance of the previous quotation. In yet another instance of this didacticism, Tristram discusses Trim’s posture during the reading of the sermon, after which he writes, “This I recommend to painters;—need I add,—to orators?—I think not; for, unless they practise [sic] it,—they must fall upon their noses” (Sterne 2: 123). Again, here he emphasizes the importance of his instruction with a large hand which points in the direction of the quotation as well. Tristram, again displaying his awareness of the limitations
of language, employs extra-textual material to assist him, but through the use of this absurd pointing hand, Sterne clearly mocks Tristram's attempt at instructing readers.

Having said that, even the slightest contradiction on Tristram's behalf draws out Sterne's voice and consequently discounts the truth of Tristram's statements. In discussing didacticism as it pertains to Sterne, David Mazella writes, "Sterne simply cannot imagine his book, or himself for that matter, as a source of normative moral guidance. For this reason, he stresses... his dependence upon his readers' imaginations, and the inevitably plural, contradictory results of such collective acts of reading" (157). Therefore, it is his apprehension of didacticism and his amusement with indeterminacy that cause Sterne to create a narrator whose didactic nature and innate desire for determinacy undermine and contradict the efforts Tristram puts forth to emphasize an indeterminacy of language. This rhetorical technique, interestingly, also satirizes readers who obey Tristram's every word in *Shandy*, even if they too feel they are striving for indeterminacy. Accordingly, even without having that background information, "actual readers" of *Shandy* ought to realize that the aforementioned dispute between Madam and Tristram ought not to have any bearing on their reading of the text, as Tristram declares "I told you in it, That my mother was not a papist" (Sterne 1: 65, author's italics), which (re)informs readers of that iota of information whether they had previously missed it or not. Ultimately, nowhere in the previous chapter (Chapter XIX) does Tristram say the very words "my mother was not a papist," thus rendering his entire declaration in this scene an overt contradiction. As far as chapters go in *Shandy*, the chapter that Tristram tells Madam to reread is quite long, so any reader who goes back to read will definitely feel Sterne's satire, especially if they were to seek out and expect some new, significant meaning to surface.
Ultimately, to both the philosopher John Locke and the fictional character Tristram Shandy, the indeterminacy of language creates an indeterminacy of meaning which thus creates an environment in which no individual can fully convey determinate meaning to another. Whereas Locke and Tristram see “this lack of access, one soul to another” (Traugott 8) as a bleak representation of the world, Sterne views this notion as he views most ideas concerning the human condition—as an outlet for comedy. That people cannot fully understand each other in totality is, to Sterne, a comic fact of life. Thus, it is not that indeterminacy of language causes all forms of communication to fail, for humanity will still find ways of communicating with each other, and like reader-response theorists suggest, there will never be any form of communication that lies outside the pale of context. Indeed, there will always be constraints and restrictions on the internalization and production of meaning, such that all forms of communication (textual or other) will continue to thrive. In Shandy, Tristram affects a compliance with this indeterminacy and even advocates it at times, encouraging readers to relish the process of the wild-goose chase, rather than the capture of the goose itself. However, even with a solid grasp of the indeterminacy of language and a digressive system which makes his narrative appear indeterminate, Tristram displays an underlying anxiety—as with his alleged moral in the marbled pages and his didactic treatment of the reader—that undermines his beliefs and intimates Sterne’s comic voice, which filters through his own. Through Tristram’s writerly habits and the readerly habits accompanying them, Sterne theorizes about the nature of writing and reading, ultimately satirizing anyone who attempts to cut through the knots of his novel with their penknife or who finds the proverbial wild goose to be within their grasp.
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