

**Reading literature, in any language, is escapism and will never replace real experiences. Discuss.**

The 'Old Navigator',<sup>1</sup> the eponymous character of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, spends his land-lubbing life telling those he encounters his cautionary tale of the shooting of the albatross.<sup>2</sup> The old man has repeated it numerous times by the point we hear it narrated to the transfixed 'Wedding-Guest'. How his story has altered in its telling is unknown. More intriguingly, is the Mariner recalling the event itself or the last time he recounted it? We cannot know if he has already displaced his real(?) experience with his own literature, and if he himself doesn't know, hasn't literature already replaced a real experience?

While this essay focuses on literature's *reader*, the author/narrator's role is similar: one creates and the other interprets. Although the reader cannot rely on autobiographical experience, the precedent set by the author enables us to uncover greater depth when exploring the effect literature has on the 'Wedding-Guest': our reader. The Mariner's psychedelic tale is an experience, not a series of events. He has interpreted the sense of these events and used it to change himself and affect life's future events, which, with understanding, can become experiences themselves. Thus, experience must be defined as a considered event. In *The Divine Comedy*, another epic poem, Dante's Dante has not *experienced* the afterlife until he has understood it, thanks to Virgil's elucidation.<sup>3</sup> Without this, the events fictional Dante witnesses would have remained a confused hallucination with no effect on his perspective. Using this foundation, I hope to prove three things: while reading can be a form of escapism, it is far from exclusively escapist; while literature cannot create experiences per se, it enables new experiences to be formed; and these two premises are not mutually exclusive. Nobel Prize-winner Olga Tokarczuk speaks for a generation when claiming that "never...have so many people been...storytellers".<sup>4</sup> The importance of discussing the role of the consumer of these multiplying stories is more vital than ever.

With so many forms of escapism (Longeway finds 11 in his psychological essay on the term), merely labelling literature as 'escapist' doesn't get us very far.<sup>5</sup> Escapism is more than purely the avoidance of addressing reality. Longeway deploys "entrenched escapism" for habitual "unconditional avoidance of a belief", with the escapist only returning to that belief in order to deny it if forced to do so.<sup>6</sup> Consider Plato's cave analogy in *The Republic*: to demonstrate what makes a good philosopher, he asserts that if anyone is to discover the 'truth' of the world, they cannot remain in its light, but must return to the 'cave' of humanity to enlighten others.<sup>7</sup> In our case, 'truth' becomes 'fiction' (or literature generally): so long as the reader "returns from the adventure of escape" to the cave of the real world to impart some of the wisdom they have received from their foray, their escape is legitimate.<sup>8</sup> Is it a coincidence that at Eton, Caesar and Nelson are extensively studied, providing a

---

<sup>1</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge', Poetry Foundation, accessed 22 April 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/samuel-taylor-coleridge>.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (London: Vintage, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, translated by Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Olga Tokarczuk, 'The Tender Narrator' (presented at the Nobel Laureate Award Ceremony, Stockholm Concert Hall, Sweden, 10 December 2019).

<sup>5</sup> John L. Longeway, 'The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception', *Behavior and Philosophy* vol. 18, no. 2, (1990): p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Longeway, p.6.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Classics, 1955), pp.240–248.

<sup>8</sup> Robert B. Heilman, 'Escape and Escapism Varieties of Literary Experience', *The Sewanee Review* vol. 83, no. 3 (1975): p.458.

source of 'escape' for 20 PMs who have used the knowledge gained for their political careers?<sup>9</sup> Magdalene's A.C. Benson regarded "an existence in which there was nothing to escape from...unendurable";<sup>10</sup> it is perhaps because of a 'Puritan' distaste that 'escape literature' has arisen as a genre at all – to keep our 'guiltier' interests in check.<sup>11</sup> A plunge into the lake of literature is not symptomatic of hiding from the world, but rather reinvigorating oneself in order to better face it. So long as we return to the cave, is it fair to define such a dive as escapist?

We can refine literature and reality's definitions too. Were the papers I read to prepare for this essay not a form of literature? Was the time spent reading them not beneficial? I uncovered viewpoints that I never would have encountered in 'real life'. No categorisation stands in our way of claiming that we are immersing ourselves more deeply in truth than if we had never opened the book. Returning to Plato (ironically "the voice of total suspicion of...escapist literature"<sup>12</sup>), when reading we are spending time out of his cave rather than trapped within it, and we are therefore, arguably, the ones living in reality, not the ones with our heads in the sand of our cave.

I cannot, however, insist that no reading is escapist; if the meaning of a text is "construed by its readers" rather than "fixed on its pages",<sup>13</sup> then to interpret the text, the reader must have a solid understanding of the real world in order to 'construe' it. A hermit lost in a book is not living in truth, but just as ignorant as one who doesn't think of anything beyond the present. Naturally, this situation is theoretical: most readers have a mutually enriching relationship between reading and life, whatever they read. In Clara Dupont-Monod's *S'adapter*, the narration of siblings and disability often falls to the disintegrating walls of the family house which declare that "[nous] qui faisons ce récit, nous nous sommes attachées aux enfants. C'est eux que nous souhaitons raconter".<sup>14</sup> No real-life event will enable us to experience life from the viewpoint of a wall. This reading provides an illuminating – and lasting – perspective on the flawed manner in which our anthropocentric minds view time, generating an experience. A more extreme example might be the unanticipated effects of Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*. Despite its commercial success, the book was banned in many European countries after reports that "[Goethe's] friends...[and] the general public...thought that they must transform poetry into reality...[and] shoot themselves".<sup>15</sup> To what can one attribute the suicide and method used if not the book that romanticised the deed? And if a book can be a cause of death, it must be an experience, certainly; can literature that is solely escapist truly result in the decision to leave the 'escapist' world and perform something so final in the real one?

What about novels which demote plot to a secondary position? *Tristram Shandy*<sup>16</sup> can scarcely be labelled a novel at all: it is predominantly digression and its events could be condensed into a few pages. We chiefly observe not the events recounted, but rather the explicit narrative devices and wit of the fictional novelist writing his autobiography but getting stuck, frustratingly, on the day of his birth. We simply cannot experience in real life what we read in the book, the 'story' being a mere strand of the whole, just as a film is not solely its plot. The notion that reading cannot 'replace real experiences' is arguably flawed because 'real life' cannot replace the experience of reading. Yet

<sup>9</sup> Robert N. Wilson, 'Literary Experience and Personality', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 15, no. 1 (1956): p.49.

<sup>10</sup> A. C. Benson, *Escape and Other Essays*, quoted in Heilman, p.443.

<sup>11</sup> Heilman, p.447.

<sup>12</sup> Heilman, p.453.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Darnton, 'Toward a History of Reading', *The Wilson Quarterly* vol. 13, no. 4 (1989): p.99.

<sup>14</sup> "[we] who are narrating this tale, have become connected to the children. It's their story we wish to tell." [my translation]. Clara Dupont-Monod, *S'adapter* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2021), p.12.

<sup>15</sup> Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, quoted in Darnton, p.89.

<sup>16</sup> Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (London: Penguin Classics, 1978).

simply because one is false, the inverse is not necessarily also false. But if we reduce ‘real life’ and reading to separate and equal planes (for who are we to judge which is more real or legitimate than the other?), then it is easier to claim that reading cannot replace real experiences. It cannot control at what pace and from what perspective it is read, thus the ‘content’ or ‘meaning’ of a book is most certainly “construed by its readers”<sup>17</sup> rather than predestined by an omniscient author. Yet, neither can real experiences replace read ones, as read experiences consist of more than events that can be mimicked by real-life actions. The experience of reading literature is so intrinsically linked to its words that when one reduces content to events on a timeline it is no longer the true content of the book.

Whether you have these pages in your hand or on your screen; whether it is light or dark; whether you are hungry or sated, every reading will be slightly different. To save you the trouble of rereading my essay at multiple points throughout the day, we can extrapolate this condition over time. Readers of *La Peste* would have recognised the infestation of fascism told by its fable of a rat-borne plague in an Algerian city. The post-COVID reader, even if aware of the intended analogy, cannot help but draw comparisons with the modern-day – more literal – plague. When Camus writes that “...pestes et guerres trouvent les gens toujours aussi dépourvus”,<sup>18</sup> the 1947 reader will consider their reaction to the war, and the post-2020 reader to the plague. We never consume literature in an isolated fashion; we come with experience from the world from which we cannot really escape. Likewise, replacing real experiences with fictional ones is impossible when the real experience itself is a prerequisite to understanding fiction. So, literature can simultaneously not be escapist and unable to replace real-life experiences. When the real and the fictional are so intrinsically linked, the line where they can be separated and replaced becomes hard to find.

Returning to the Mariner, how true are the events he experiences following the shooting of the albatross? Is it all a hallucination or fabrication to teach a pantheistic lesson? Whether a lie or not, we have experienced it with him, and by his delivery of the tale, even if invented, he has experienced it too. When Tokarczuk is asked whether her novels are true, she feels “this...bodes the end of literature”.<sup>19</sup> To a certain extent, “a thing that happens and is not told ceases to exist”,<sup>20</sup> we need literature to make experiences real at all. If the Mariner had not been possessed to tell his tale eternally, his experience would have fallen by the wayside. In our society where truth and lies are discussed more than the content of anything expressed, it is freeing to enter a more liminal world. A world in which we don’t know if we are escaping into literature or escaping into the real world, a world in which our experiences are not the culmination of events that we have physically undergone, but rather a consummation of ideas, words and stories that have infiltrated our hyperactive minds. Take heed of the “glib modernist mind which calls every ascent of the imagination ‘escapism’;”<sup>21</sup> reading literature is not escapist, because we intend to return, having gleaned something from our exodus. Ultimately, reading literature cannot *replace* real experiences; it *forms* experiences. We are not the sum of our events, we are the sum of our experiences, and reading literature is vital to creating them. But books must come with a warning: if you wish to return to the ‘place’ you came from, read no further; if you wish to return to an altered world, read on. That altered world may not

---

<sup>17</sup> Darnton, p.99.

<sup>18</sup> Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p.41. “Plagues and wars always find people equally unprepared” [translation from Albert Camus, *The Plague*, translated by Robin Buss (London: Penguin Classics, 2002)].

<sup>19</sup> Tokarczuk, p.10.

<sup>20</sup> Tokarczuk, p.3.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Swinnerton, quoted in Heilman, p.454.

have moved an inch objectively, but from the perspective of someone newly escaped from a book, it has changed immeasurably.

**WORD COUNT: 2,000**

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*, translated by Robert and Gene Hollander. New York: Anchor Books, 2002.
- Camus, Albert. *La Peste*. Paris: Gallimard, 1947.
- Camus, Albert. *The Plague*, translated by Robin Buss. London: Penguin Classics, 2002.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. London: Vintage, 2004.
- Darnton, Robert. 'Toward a History of Reading', *The Wilson Quarterly* vol. 13, no. 4 (1989): 86–102.
- Dupont-Monod, Clara. *S'adapter*. Paris: Éditions Stock, 2021.
- Heilman, Robert B. 'Escape and Escapism: Varieties of Literary Experience', *The Sewanee Review* vol. 83, no. 3 (1975): 439–458.
- Longeway, John L. 'The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception', *Behavior and Philosophy* vol. 18, no. 2, (1990): 1–20.
- Plato. *The Republic*, translated by Desmond Lee. London: Penguin Classics, 1955.
- Poetry Foundation. 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge', accessed 22 April 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/samuel-taylor-coleridge>.
- Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. London: Penguin Classics, 1978.
- Tokarczuk, Olga. 'The Tender Narrator'. Presented at the Nobel Laureate Award Ceremony, Stockholm Concert Hall, Sweden, 10 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/> (accessed 22 April 2023).
- Wilson, Robert N., 'Literary Experience and Personality', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 15, no. 1 (1956): 47–57.