

“What Have You Been Judging From?”:

Subjectivity and Judgment in Jane Austen’s Novels and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*

Rachel Stern

A thesis submitted to the Department of English for Honors

Duke University

Durham, North Carolina

1 December 2010

Contents

Acknowledgments.....	3
Abbreviations.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Chapter One / The “Transplanted” Heroine: Judgment, dialogue, and the free indirect style in Austen.....	12
I. Dialogue.....	14
II. The Free Indirect Style.....	21
III. Irony.....	25
IV. Conclusions.....	28
Chapter Two / “A Letter... to Supply Matter for Much Reflection:” Letters as a framework for introspection in Austen’s novels.....	32
I. The Epistolary Form and Context.....	35
II. Letter Reading as a Model for Introspection.....	42
III. Conclusions.....	56
Chapter Three / “The Extension of Our Sympathies:” <i>Middlemarch</i> and the praxis of subjectivity.....	58
I. Narrative and the “Pier-glass”.....	59
II. Inner Processes.....	70
III. Outward “Extension”.....	78
IV. Conclusions.....	85
Conclusion.....	88
Works Cited.....	91

Acknowledgments

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a young person in the process of writing an honors thesis must be in want of guidance and support. I have had the good fortune of receiving both in abundance. My family has shared in my excitement about this project from day one. In this as in all else, their encouragement has kept me going. My mother, in particular, was a willing listener whenever I needed to read through a draft or talk through a complication. In addition, I am indebted to my friends and fellow English students Valerie Henry, Anne Llewellyn, and David Womble for their patience, encouragement, and moral support.

Finally, unlike the Austen heroines who, as I argue in Chapter One, are unable to receive counsel, I have had the very great benefit of being counseled by my advisor, Professor Thomas Pfau, who has gone far above and beyond the call of duty in working with me on this project. Despite being on leave at the National Humanities Center to work on a book, he frequently sacrificed hours of his weekend, or otherwise went out of his way, to fit me into his schedule. His guidance was of course instrumental in shaping this project. Yet the debt of gratitude I owe him extends far beyond the production of this thesis. In guiding its development he has also been guiding my own intellectual development. In everything from the combination of rigor and insight with which he asks questions of a literary work and the attention he gives to the precise ramifications of any individual word choice, to the Thomas Mann-inspired writing habits he espouses, he has shown me first-hand how to think and write like a scholar, and given me standards of scholarship which I will carry with me through life as the highest to which I can aspire. Any future work I produce will be shaped by his influence as surely as this is, and for that I shall always remain profoundly grateful. This thesis is dedicated to him.

“Your judgment is my rule of right.”

“Oh, no! – do not say so. We all have a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be.”

– Jane Austen’s Henry Crawford and Fanny Price, *Mansfield Park*, p. 280.

With dim lights and tangled circumstances they tried to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement; but after all, to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness; for these later-born Therasas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul.

– George Eliot, “Prelude” to *Middlemarch*, p. 31-32.

(Title quotation from *Northanger Abbey*, p. 136.)

Abbreviations Used for Austen's Novels

MP *Mansfield Park* (Claudia L. Johnson, ed. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1998.)

P *Persuasion* (Patricia Meyer Spacks, ed. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1995.)

PP *Pride and Prejudice* (Donald Gray, ed. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2001. 3rd ed.)

SS *Sense and Sensibility* (Claudia L. Johnson, ed. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2002.)

Introduction

The variously predicted, declared, and disputed decline of the novel receives almost as much attention today as the putative ascendancy of the hard sciences and attendant modes of intellectual inquiry over humanistic models of thought. The “hard sciences,” of course, are so called because they pertain to “hard,” verifiable, quantifiable facts – whereas the humanities tend to concern themselves with the ineffable problems of the human condition. Like the novelist, the humanist seeks to grasp the ethereal and often ineffable nature of human existence, and to imagine and express the inexpressible. The historical rise of the novel appears to be in part a response to Enlightenment empiricism, a repudiation of the idea that only what we can see or touch is real, meaningful, and valuable. If dialogue and narrative are the literary forms of verifiable events of speech and action, free indirect discourse and other structural elements of the novel are the forms of hidden, unverifiable inner states, ideas, and developments. The novel’s capacity to articulate such otherwise unwitnessed and seemingly inscrutable experiences provided an unprecedented opportunity for its readers to develop a critical awareness of character, socialization, and judgment. Perhaps the Humanities, and the novel, will prosper or decline by their recognition – and emphatic assertion – of the importance of their project of articulating and critically examining those areas of human life which science does not have the tools to do.

This paper explores the ways in which Jane Austen and George Eliot stage the process of judgment in the structures of their novels. As Vivasvan Soni remarks,

Part of the problem with granting judgment a place in theoretical discourse, part of the reason that there are so few sustained accounts of judgment despite its ubiquity, is that judgment operates at the very limits of theory. Precisely because the kind of judgment that is interesting in this context is non-formalizable and concerned with particularity, there can be no theorization of judgment, finally, though we may be able to say certain things about it theoretically. We can reflect on the conditions of its possibility as Kant does, or give a phenomenological account of its practices. But as both Kant and Aristotle knew, judgment cannot be taught, though it can be learned through example and experience. Judgment cannot be adequately accounted for within the configuration of theoretical disciplines. Under these

conditions, the literary becomes an exemplary site for investigation into the problem, because of its ability to portray scenes that both stage the practice of judgment and exercise our judgment.¹

Throughout this study, I treat the novel as contributing to the philosophical process by which the work of judgment is laid open to critical examination. Because my project starts from the claim that the novel creates an imaginative space in which certain philosophical questions about the nature of human consciousness can be gamed out in the context of recognizable social scenarios – indeed, that the novel’s structures are inextricable from the problem of individual judgment – I have occasionally found the language of philosophy helpful in delineating the problems addressed in these novels. The novel here does the imaginative work of philosophy, and offers a literary counterpart to what Eliot describes in *Middlemarch* as Tertius Lydgate’s “delightful labour of the imagination which is not mere arbitrariness, but the exercise of disciplined power – combining and constructing with the clearest eye for probabilities and the fullest obedience to knowledge; and then, in yet more energetic alliance with impartial Nature, standing aloof to invent tests by which to try its own work” (154-155). The perceptive novelist, substituting psychological realism for “impartial Nature,” invents structural and narrative “tests” in which scenes of judgment play out. By thus “constructing” an imaginative and “clear-sighted” account of individual deliberation, in an exercise “disciplined” by the narrator’s perspective, the novel exposes the problems inherent in modern judgment. The protagonists of the novels I investigate, fundamentally alienated from their communities, have no access to a moral norm by which to regulate their deliberation or their inner lives more generally. Not only does the novel unfold the inner life and expose its flaws and distortions to our notice, it actively criticizes characters’ judgment, in the process effectively compelling the reader to think more critically about judgment, as Soni points out. It shows us a consciousness struggling to interpret the world around it while no longer understanding its own identity solely in terms set by the outside world.

The novel is unique in the extent to which it renders what Soni calls “concealed processes of judgment” explicit in literary form – a form shaped by this process and its defining problems.²

¹ “Introduction,” p. 20.

² *Ibid* p. 4.

Its formalization and valorization of inner experience reflects the situation of the modern individual, for whom the interior life is the locus, not only of emotional flux, but also of reflection, deliberation, and self-knowledge. (The latter, in this account, depends in large part upon constant introspection to track the development of a dynamic self, rather than simply on one's place in society). Our interiority thus holds the key to who we are and how we relate to, and act in, our society. In other words, it has become the sphere of judgment. This, of course, indicates a problem: the individual's judgment has come unmoored from the community and is left to drift as best it can without access to the guidance of a transcendent moral norm. Or, as Georg Lukács puts it,

[T]he novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life.... Thus the fundamental form-determining intention of the novel is objectivised as the psychology of the novel's heroes: they are seekers. The simple fact of seeking implies that neither the goals nor the way leading to them can be directly given, or else that, if they are given in a psychologically direct and solid manner, this is not evidence of really existent relations or ethical necessities but only of a psychological fact to which nothing in the world of objects and norms need necessarily correspond.³

The novel formalizes the split between individual "psychologies," or inner lives, to which the external "world of objects and norms" no longer "necessarily corresponds". Its account of judgment recalls the Stoic view of "the source [of judgment]... [as] the deliberative individual, no longer guided by a normative social framework but, in fact, seeking virtue against the backdrop of a political and social reality that appears substantially irrational," though in the novel this perspective is substantially complicated by the profound teleological uncertainty of modernity.⁴ Self-knowledge becomes a central component of a process of judgment grounded entirely in the subjective mind. Successful deliberation requires that one recognize and address the flaws and distortions generated by subjectivity. The goal of "uncovering and constructing the concealed totality of life" – overcoming the limitations of the subjectivity – is central to the

³ *Theory of the Novel*, p. 60-61.

⁴ Thomas Pfau, "The Letter of Judgment," p. 36.

novels I examine in this project, and indeed to the very form of the novel, which may be said to stage or formalize subjectivity in order to find a way to transcend it, or to represent the freedom of the inner realm as part of an effort to introduce some control into it. Soni's observation that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* "understand[s] judgment as crucial to escaping the absorptive immediacy of sentimentalism" could arguably be extended to her oeuvre as a whole.⁵

The novel's compellingly "absorptive" depiction of immediate experience often reproduces in the reader the very limitation of perspective that the novel seeks to transcend. One reads anecdotes of 18th- and 19th-century readers who would devour a volume in days, "shut[ting] themselves up," like Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe, "to read novels" for hours at a time (*NA* 22). And perhaps it is safe to assume that most of us who have read novels are familiar with the disconcerting sense of surfacing that comes from stepping away from a novel, a sense that reveals how deeply submerged we have been in the protagonist's world, to the temporary exclusion of our own lives and concerns, not to mention our critical faculties. The sense of immediacy that the novel creates reproduces some of the potential problems of the subjective experience. Soni writes,

[T]he allure of sentimentalism in the [18th Century] lies in the promise that it can ground our moral responses in the immediacy of our emotional, and indeed physiological, responses, once again circumventing the need for the activity of a fallible judgment. ... Sentimental literature also stresses the compulsory character of the sentimental response, and seeks to constrain ethico-emotional responses through an absorptive identification with a suffering protagonist. ... It is precisely the bypassing of judgment through the immediacy of a sentimental response to which writers such as Fielding, Rousseau, and Austen respond when they determine to write fictions that will foreground for readers their necessary implication in an ongoing practice of judgment.⁶

Austen, as well as her successor Eliot, uses novelistic form to disrupt and to reveal the limitations of immediate subjective experience, framing characters' inner lives with the

⁵ "Committing Freedom," p. 104.

⁶ "Introduction," p. 13-14.

perspective of a narrator who generally knows better. But Austen and Eliot also both insist that the most important work of judgment occurs in this day-to-day inner experience – that the inner life as it is present in us at any given mundane moment, far from consisting of a string of uncontrollable sentimental responses to the world around us, allows for reflection, for consideration of our interactions and responses – for judgments of how we are to live in the world.

The claims I am about to advance concerning Austen's and Eliot's representations of judgment reflect a larger set of questions, both about the nature of modern judgment and about the novel as a genre. As Lukács argues, the novel presents us with an individual fundamentally isolated from society. What is the social or moral value of the novel's account of human agency? What does it advance as the ideal relation between the individual and society? Or, rather than holding up an ideal, is the novel a revelation from which we cannot return – the pinnacle of literary history, posing an insoluble formal and philosophical problem? How can we understand the responsibility or agency of the individual within modern society, and, moreover, can the individual ever fully understand the extent of his own agency? To this latter question, Austen and Eliot offer very different answers, and my juxtaposition of their accounts of introspection raises the question whether the novel is ultimately the genre of self-knowledge or of self-delusion.

In this investigation of Austen, an instrumental figure in shaping the structures through which the novel explores judgment, and Eliot, one of Austen's most important successors in the nineteenth century, I learned the extent to which the novelistic framework can support widely divergent accounts and formal representations of judgment, interiority, and social structures. From the beginning, my project led me to consider how literary structures reflect and explore broader cultural transformations. The very existence of the novel as a form reflects a dramatic shift in the nature of human consciousness. But the different conceptions of this shift formalized by the two novelists examined here indicate the imponderability of the consequences of this shift. My study of Austen and Eliot points to the fundamental instability and uncertainty – even obscurity – of the role of judgment in modern life. While I have argued that literary form and style can represent (i.e., in a way, articulate) and even offer solutions to problems of the human experience that resist exploration by other means, the organization of the problem of judgment in

a literary form, in the case of the novel, by no means necessarily leads to a formal solution. The novel form is a form of interiority, of individuality, of alienation, but above all, it is the literary form of perplexity – of what Benjamin calls the “profound perplexity of the living.”⁷ As such, it can – indeed, it must – seek, as Lukács notes, to restore a transcendent norm, to escape the confines of the subjectivity; but the novel has yet to reach the end of its quest, and must operate in the deepest uncertainty as to whether such an end even exists.

⁷ “The Storyteller,” p. 87.

Chapter One: The “Transplanted” Heroine: Judgment, Dialogue, and the Free Indirect Style in Austen

In his essay “The Storyteller”, Walter Benjamin reflects on the new epoch in literature marked by the decline of the story and simultaneous rise of the novel. He writes,

What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it... The story-teller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.⁸

The novelist, by contrast, delineates a set of experiences that cannot be communicated through any traditional, oral mode of communication – the experiences of a consciousness alienated from society:

The novelist has isolated himself. The birth-place of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself didactically about his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life.⁹

The novel confronts the modern problem of the individual’s relationship to society, a problem which gives rise to the genre’s very structure. As Georg Lukács writes, “in all other genres... this affirmation of a dissonance precedes the act of form-giving, whereas in the novel it is the form itself.”¹⁰ The novel is thus the quintessentially modern literary genre. It is the only prose form without roots in oral communication;¹¹ instead, its form renders reading an individualistic and

⁸ Benjamin, p. 83.

⁹ Ibid. p. 83-84.

¹⁰ Lukács, p. 72.

¹¹ See Benjamin: “What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel. What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it,” p. 87.

even isolating pursuit. Unlike prior genres, the novel lends itself neither to reading aloud nor to memorization (or recitation). The multivolume format in which many early novels were published required readers to organize, retain, and connect information in new ways.¹²

The content as well as the consumption of the novel placed a new emphasis on individuality. The genre introduced the modern depiction of the individual as an alienated figure who, as Benjamin notes, finds himself largely incapable of effective communication with others. The novel's use of both dialogue and free indirect style formalizes this "incommensurability" of outer and inner life. The term "free indirect discourse" was coined to contrast the style in which the novel represents a protagonist's subjective experience with the grammatically more restricted direct and indirect discourse used to represent dialogue.¹³ This grammatical distinction points to the contrast between the social restrictions placed on dialogue and the "freedom" of the protagonist's interiority. Due to the nature of immediate interpersonal exchange as well as the social codes that often regulate it, dialogue can be more like a performance than an opportunity for communication. Even among intimates, novelistic dialogue does not lend itself to the exchange of "counsel". Judgment becomes a solitary, subjective activity, not a decision based on universally accepted absolutes or the counsel of others. As unarticulated thought, it is narrated in the free indirect style and is largely free from external regulation, although not necessarily from the narrator's perspective, as we shall see. This perspective, when included, adds an important dimension to the novel by prompting the reader to think critically about the character's thought process, but because it does not directly impinge upon the protagonist's consciousness, it frames, rather than guiding or correcting, the protagonist's deliberation. Thus free indirect style highlights the "free" subjectivity of the protagonist's consciousness by juxtaposing it with the narrator's objectivity.

The remarkable efficacy of Jane Austen's use of free indirect style and of dialogue has long been established. But an examination of her use of these forms may shed some light on a question that has been less decisively resolved in Austen criticism: how does Austen believe the

¹² On this subject see St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*.

¹³ Pascal, *The Dual Voice*, p. 8-10.

individual should relate to his (or, perhaps more aptly, her) society?¹⁴ Through an investigation of Austen's use of both dialogue, a medium constrained by social codes and used to communicate social values, and free indirect style, representing an individual's almost unconstrained freedom to think and judge for himself, this chapter will explore the nature of judgment and individuality in Austen. I will argue that Austen presents successful individual judgment as arising dialectically from the conflict between external restriction of speech and internal freedom of thought, and consequently, that she does not see social codes as necessarily inimical to individual judgment.

I. Dialogue

Austen's protagonists are intensely individualistic in their judgments and largely unwilling or unable to give or receive counsel. Their serious discussions with their intimates demonstrate dialogue's insufficiency either to convey or to influence subjective experience. Even the eponymous act of persuasion in Austen's oeuvre, Lady Russell's influencing a young Anne Elliot to break off her engagement to Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion*, calls the nature of persuasion into question. Because the event occurs eight years before the novel opens, the reader must rely on the narrator's summary of what took place. Austen writes that "Anne was persuaded to think the engagement a wrong thing – indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it," by her family's behavior, but particularly by "Lady Russell, whom she had always loved and relied on," and "who had almost a mother's love, and mother's rights" to counsel her (P 19).

¹⁴ On one side of this debate are critics like Marilyn Butler, who argues that "the crucial action of [Austen's] novels is in itself expressive of the conservative side in an active war of ideas," and that Austen, "as a critic of indulged feelings, and of authors who uncritically take characters at their own sanguine valuation, [...] is the Fielding of her period, reacting against the Richardsonian individualism of the sentimental genre" p 294-295. And Mary Poovey argues that Austen depicts "anarchic" individualism and female desire as ideally being channeled into a "private sphere of domestic relationships" which "can remain autonomous and yet retain a unique and powerful moral dimension," p. 239. By contrast, critics like Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Claudia L. Johnson read Austen as critical of the social mores of her time. Gilbert and Gubar see Austen's novels as conveying a subversive, anti-patriarchal message beneath what they call "Austen's cover story of the necessity for silence and submission[, which] reinforces women's subordinate position in patriarchal culture," p. 15.

Eight years later, having freshly renewed her engagement to Captain Wentworth, Anne vindicates her prior choice as an act of duty, a submission to Lady Russell's authority rather than an acknowledgment of the inherent merits of her view. Anne "was right," she asserts, in "submitting to" Lady Russell, because "had [she] done otherwise, [she would] have suffered in [her] conscience" (164). Thus, although one could argue that Anne's assertion stems largely from a desire to justify her behavior retrospectively to Captain Wentworth, the two passages, taken together, call into question Austen's idea of the nature and efficacy of persuasion. The narrator seems to give as much weight as Anne does to Lady Russell's role and "rights" as a mother-figure. Does Anne come to believe the engagement "a wrong thing" because Lady Russell has succeeded in imparting her convictions on the subject to her protégé, or merely because of Anne's sense of duty to Lady Russell? The behavioral code in which Anne was raised would compel her to obey her family and other authority figures; it remains unclear whether Anne has accepted Lady Russell's counsel on the merits, or merely submitted to it because social regulations compelled her to.

Other, more direct depictions of conversation in Austen's novels point to the unlikelihood of characters' truly persuading each other through dialogue. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Darcy may anticipate this difficulty when, after the disastrous conversation following his marriage proposal, he chooses to reveal the falsehood of Mr. Wickham's attacks on his character to Elizabeth Bennet via letter. Elizabeth's conversation with her closest confidante, her sister Jane, in the wake of this revelatory episode demonstrates the impossibility of sharing experience through dialogue. She relates to Jane "the chief of the *scene* between Mr. Darcy and herself," a formulation conveying maximal detachment from her own experience (146, emphasis mine). Austen's word choice suggests that Elizabeth recounts the exchange from the perspective of a disengaged spectator rather than expressing her own feelings in their immediacy. Her account of Darcy's letter is even more strikingly detached:

[Elizabeth]: "But you blame me for having spoken so warmly of Wickham [in the course of rejecting Darcy's proposal]."

[Jane:] "No – I do not know that you were wrong in saying what you did."

[Elizabeth:] “But you will know it, when I have told you what happened the very next day.”

She then spoke of the letter, repeating the whole of its contents as far as they concerned George Wickham. (147)

In “repeating the contents” of Darcy’s letter, Elizabeth reduces it to mere factual information, excluding her long and crucial struggle over whether to believe it. Her statement, “You will know [that I was wrong], when I have told you what happened the very next day,” suggests the antithetical experience: instantaneous conviction upon receipt of Darcy’s letter. Elizabeth’s drily factual retelling of the letter’s “contents” thus omits all reference to the perplexity and “perturbation” into which they threw her (135).

Even at Jane’s urging, Elizabeth only reluctantly acknowledges her own emotional response. When Jane remarks that Darcy’s disappointed love “is really too distressing. I am sure you must feel it so,” Elizabeth responds, “Oh! no, my regret and compassion are all done away by seeing you so full of both. I know you will do him such ample justice, that I am growing every moment more unconcerned and indifferent” (147). This is not, of course, a serious reply, and Jane eventually prevails upon her to admit that “when [she] first read that letter,” she was “very uncomfortable,” even “unhappy” (148). But neither Elizabeth’s own words nor Jane’s responses approach the intensity or psychological complexity of Elizabeth’s original experience. Where Elizabeth struggled to conquer her bias in order to decide fairly between the two men’s stories, Jane struggles, against all evidence, to think well of each. She labors “most earnestly... to prove the probability of error, and seek[s] to clear one, without involving the other” (147). And Jane’s “I do not know when I have been more shocked.... Wickham so very bad! It is almost past belief,” by virtue of its cliché vocabulary of surprise (“shocked,” “past belief”), and its one-dimensional focus on Wickham’s villainy, is an empty substitute for Elizabeth’s climactic discovery of her self-deception, “Till this moment I never knew myself” (137).

Elizabeth is clearly facetious when she asserts that these generic effusions of Jane’s reduce her own sense of shock or concern. Yet her evident wish to avoid a serious discussion indicates her discomfort with dialogue as a medium for significant reflection. Elizabeth turns several of her most crucial communications to Jane into jokes as though she is unwilling even to

attempt to convey her feelings seriously. In their discussions, neither succeeds in giving the other any significant “counsel,” with the dubious exception of Jane’s assent to Elizabeth’s decision not to expose Wickham’s villainy (148). Elizabeth is similarly flippant when her aunt Mrs. Gardiner wishes to give her advice about Wickham, provoking Mrs. Gardiner to remark, “Elizabeth, you are not serious now” (96).

To dismiss Elizabeth’s blithe tone in these discussions as consistent with her generally cheerful outlook, or even with the overarching mood of the novel that Austen so famously described as “light and bright and sparkling”¹⁵, would be to ignore Elizabeth’s capacity for serious reflection as demonstrated in many of the novel’s crucial passages of free indirect style. Rather, this conversation reflects a tension, which permeates the novel, between Elizabeth’s witty conversation and serious reflection. Her remarks to Jane indicate either a wish not to communicate the intensity of her experience, or the inability to do so. This exchange, characterized by dry facts and empty commonplaces, suggests that the form of dialogue itself drastically limits Elizabeth’s ability to share her internal struggles, and Jane’s to sympathize in them. The narrator conveys Elizabeth’s subjective experience of Darcy’s letter in the free indirect style, but the structure of dialogue simply does not allow Elizabeth to lay bare her own interiority as the narrator of a novel would. By its nature, a conversational exchange between two people must remain grounded in the external, social world. Jane is thus unable to participate in Elizabeth’s reflections, which instead take place entirely within Elizabeth’s interiority.

Austenian dialogue famously leaves much unsaid, adhering to unspoken social rules about what constitutes polite conversation. Characters rely upon their shared awareness of such rules to fill the gaps in conversation with implicit meaning. In the social circles constrained by this stringent code, a subtle, nonverbal language of gesture bears at least as much meaning as dialogue itself, so that many ideas that remain “unspoken” beyond the realm of dialogue are nonetheless communicated. For example, at various points throughout *Persuasion*, Anne and Wentworth convey the revival of their feelings for each other through subtle gestures. Wentworth’s lifting Anne into a carriage, the “glance of brightness” he gives her after observing

¹⁵ “Letter to Cassandra Austen (4 February 1813),” “Backgrounds and Sources,” *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 273.

a passing stranger's admiration of her, Anne's pointedly stepping forward to greet him in the Octagon Room before a concert, all communicate as much meaning as spoken statements could do (61, 70, 120). In fact, Austen even translates Wentworth's "glance of brightness" into a verbal message: it "seem[s] to say, 'That man is struck with you, – and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again'" (70). Austen explicitly delineates the contrast between permissible speech and gesture in *Sense and Sensibility*, when the unfortunate Edward Ferrars accidentally finds himself on a social call with only Elinor Dashwood and his conniving secret fiancée, Lucy. Although Elinor is well aware of their engagement, "the appearance of secrecy must still be kept up" and the restrictions on dialogue maintained. Lucy, anxious though she is to flaunt their engagement for Elinor's benefit, can "therefore only *look* her tenderness, and after slightly addressing [Edward], [says] no more" (170). The necessity of such forms of communication, to express what propriety prevents characters from speaking aloud, indicates the rigidity and extent of conventional limitations on dialogue. The division of immediate interpersonal communication into the domain of explicit speech and the domain of "unspoken" expression also heightens the interpretive challenge that each mode presents to Austen's characters.

Dialogue's structural dependence on common knowledge and implication, although suited to the exchange of factual information, hampers the communication of subjective experience. The result is that personal exchanges between intimates are oddly devoid of emotional intensity and significant "counsel;" judgment is largely relegated to the interiority and represented in the free indirect style. One of Anne Elliot's conversations in *Persuasion* with her mother-figure and original "persuader," Lady Russell, demonstrates the limitations of the exchange of counsel through dialogue. Lady Russell and Anne discuss Anne's cousin (and the heir to the family estate, Kellynch), Mr. Elliot, as a matrimonial prospect. Lady Russell, thoroughly pleased with Mr. Elliot, does not perceive Anne's qualms about his character and past. Not only does Anne distrust his motives, she also finds his lack of openness, "warmth[,] and enthusiasm" viscerally unappealing (106-107). Having presented to Anne the compelling picture of Anne's becoming, through marriage with Mr. Elliot, "the future mistress of Kellynch, the future Lady Elliot... occupying [her] dear mother's place, succeeding to all her rights, and all her popularity... presiding and blessing in the same spot, and only superior to her in being more

highly valued,” Lady Russell imagines that she has succeeded in convincing her friend of the desirability of such a union (105-106):

Lady Russell said not another word, willing to leave the matter to its own operation, and believing that, could Mr. Elliot at that moment with propriety have spoken for himself! – She believed, in short, what Anne did not believe. The same image of Mr. Elliot speaking for himself, brought Anne to composure again. The charm of Kellynch and of “Lady Elliot” all faded away. She never could accept him. (106)

These unspoken responses flow from the spoken conversation, exposing the gaps in understanding that dialogue leaves even between intimates: the characters’ perspectives remain incommensurable. This passage points to the difficulty of truly persuading another to come to a certain judgment. Lady Russell plays masterfully on some of Anne’s weaknesses, but remains fundamentally unable to understand or deeply to influence her viewpoint. She “excites agreeable sensations” (105) through her calculated appeal to Anne’s biases, temporarily “bewitch[ing]” Anne’s “imagination and heart” (106). It is Anne’s “judgment” and her “serious consideration of the possibilities of such a case,” which Lady Russell fails to take into account, because she has no insight into their nature. Lady Russell’s standards of judgment are not now (whether or not they ever were) normative for Anne, and without being able to understand Anne’s internal standard of judgment, Lady Russell cannot persuade her to approve of Mr. Elliot as a possible husband. The jarring transition between Lady Russell’s consciousness and Anne’s, marked by an incomplete thought of Lady Russell’s, a dash, and the mediation of the narrator’s statement, “She believed, in short, what Anne did not believe,” emphasizes the disparity between their mindsets.

The passage shows Lady Russell’s conclusion that she has excited Anne’s feelings enough and can now “leave the matter to its own operation” to be completely false. Lady Russell sees the dialogue she has guided as delimiting Anne’s range of possible judgments. She interprets Anne’s silence as a continuation of the structure of dialogue through unspoken implication. From this perspective, Anne’s silence would necessarily demonstrate her acknowledgment of the “shared knowledge” of Mr. Elliot’s desirability. But Anne’s silence is in fact of a very different nature: a removal from dialogue into the space of reflection. By “leaving the matter to its own operation,” Lady Russell actually frees Anne to consider Mr. Elliot at a

deeper level than dialogue permits. The above passage, beginning with Lady Russell's silence (and Anne's), leads Anne into a long reflection on Mr. Elliot, depicted in the free indirect style. The exchange demonstrates what Benjamin terms the novel protagonist's inability "to express himself didactically about his most important concerns" or to receive counsel (84).

Dialogue is at worst a severe constraint on reflection, and at best a mere starting point for it, as evinced by Austen's frequent use of the "hint". Rather than "counsel," Austen's protagonists give and receive "hints" in conversation. For instance, in *Pride and Prejudice*, after Elizabeth's aunt warns her about becoming too involved with the impecunious militia officer Wickham, "Elizabeth having thanked her for the kindness of her hints, they parted; a wonderful instance of advice being given on such a point, without being resented" (97). Perhaps advice is less likely to be resented when couched as a "hint": the term implicitly leaves the recipient's decision entirely to his own discretion. Unlike "counsel," it carries no connotations of moral force or authority. Whereas counsel offers a decisive answer, a "hint" begins or furthers, rather than deciding, a judgment. The replacement of "counsel" with the "hint" – a word that recurs throughout Austen's novels – reflects Austen's protagonists' task of deriving their own standards of judgment from observation, interpretation, and reflection, rather than simply accepting the moral framework of the society around them.

Because the non-constraining form of free indirect discourse facilitates Austen's depiction of this internal deliberative project, it is central to the structure of her novels. In her extensive use of the free indirect style to explore her protagonists' thought processes, she anticipates the modernist novelists' use of interior monologue. Austen's narrators, unlike the barely-there narrators favored by modernists like Joyce, usually retain full moral authority, but her use of the free indirect style invests her protagonists' inner lives and viewpoints with a degree of importance approaching that of the narrator's perspective.¹⁶

¹⁶ See Pascal. For a discussion of interior monologue and attempts to eradicate the narrator's voice from the modernist novel, see Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*.

II. The Free Indirect Style

Through the extensive use of free indirect style, Austen gives a voice to the workings of her protagonist's consciousness, while distancing her narrator from this voice through ironic observations. She uses free indirect discourse to move fluently between her protagonist's perspective and the independent narrative voice, unlocking the character's entire interior experience. Anne-Lise François remarks,

Free indirect style and third-person narration in general have special pertinence to the problem of thoughts and wishes that cannot withstand the work of articulation, because they leave in question the protagonist's relationship to the thought and speech acts attributed to her and assume no necessary connection between shared and lived experience.¹⁷

The style provides access, not only to the “thoughts and wishes that cannot withstand the work of articulation,” but also to the ideas and opinions that social constraints prevent characters from articulating. Austen's use of free indirect style to distinguish the protagonist's unarticulated thoughts from the narration of her “lived experience” not only “assume[s] no necessary connection between shared and lived experience,” but actively exposes the disconnect between the two – between the constraints of external speech and behavior and the freedom of internal reflection. Since particular social constraints existed on female speech during the period in which Austen wrote, the free indirect style, and the form of the novel, were particularly apposite (and unprecedented) tools for delving into the workings of the female mind and representing ideas whose articulation propriety would have prevented. Thus a protagonist's interiority is the primary location, not only of thoughts and feelings that she is not yet ready to acknowledge or state, but also of more developed opinions and ideas. Austen's use of free indirect style allows her to depict her protagonists' untrammelled thought processes. The fact that many of the heroines' theoretically communicable judgments remain unexpressed alongside their half-formed inclinations, suspicions, and impressions may explain in part why Austen heroines perpetually revisit and revise even their more developed opinions. Isolated subjective experience, rather than

¹⁷ Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets*, p. 224-225.

consultation with others, becomes the basis for judgment, and the narrator often filters a protagonist's experience through her consciousness instead of narrating it directly.

For example, when the rakish Henry Crawford proposes marriage to the painfully shy (and disapproving) Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* after informing her that he has just advanced her favorite brother's career, Austen emphasizes, not the conversation itself, but Fanny's internal reaction to it. Austen's syntax repeatedly places Fanny, the judge of the interaction, rather than Crawford, the primary speaker, in the active role:

When she... found herself expected to believe that she had created sensations which his heart had never known before,... she was exceedingly distressed, and for some moments unable to speak. She considered it all as nonsense, as mere trifling and gallantry, which meant only to deceive for the hour; she could not but feel that it was treating her improperly and unworthily, and in such a way as she had not deserved, but it was like himself, and entirely of a piece with what she had seen before; and she would not allow herself to show half the displeasure she felt, because he had been conferring an obligation, which no want of delicacy on his part could make a trifle to her. (205)

The first sentence of this passage turns the power dynamic between speaker and auditor on its head. The statement that Fanny "found herself expected to believe that she had created sensations which his heart had never known before" places her analysis – "*finding herself* expected to believe" – in the active voice. The passive formulation "expected to believe" further emphasizes the active role of Fanny's judgment by presenting Crawford's statement primarily as an idea to be responded to internally ("believed") by Fanny, rather than an idea he has expressed or one to which she will outwardly respond. Having dismissed his conduct as "mere trifling and gallantry, which mean[s] only to deceive for the hour," she returns to focusing on her own reaction as the only element of the exchange worth examining: "she could not but feel that it was treating her improperly and unworthily, and in such a way as she had not deserved." Once again Fanny, as the subject of the sentence, is the actor, and analysis the action. Austen further shifts the focus from Crawford's behavior to hers with the remark that Fanny "has not deserved" this manner of treatment. The first half of the long cumulative sentence representing the current of Fanny's internal reaction works up to the observation that Crawford's behavior is "entirely of a

piece with what [Fanny has] seen before,” once more placing the authority with Fanny’s prior perception. Fanny concludes her analysis by carefully formulating her external response.

In *Persuasion*, the narrator likewise systematically filters Anne’s first conversation with Captain Benwick, a shy sailor mourning the recent death of his fiancée, through Anne’s consciousness. The entire scene contains no direct speech, from either Anne or Benwick. Austen narrates the conversation in the free indirect style, depicting Anne’s interpretation of Benwick’s speech and her considered response. Austen’s diction emphasizes, not the conversation itself, but Anne’s analysis of the conversation as she seeks to draw Benwick out. Qualifications like, “He was *evidently* a young man of considerable taste in reading,” and “he did not *seem* reserved, it rather *had the appearance of* feelings glad to burst their usual restraints” (italics mine), emphasize, in formulations echoed throughout the passage, that the description of Benwick is Anne’s analysis – not an objective statement of fact (67). Anne analyzes his manners throughout the conversation as she judges how she ought to speak to him. When “he repeated, with such tremulous feeling, the various lines [of the poems they discussed] which imaged a broken heart,” he “looked so entirely as if he meant to be understood, that [Anne] ventured to hope he did not always read only poetry; and to say, that she thought it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely,” and, when “[h]is looks shewed him not pained, but pleased with this allusion to his situation, she was emboldened to go on” to recommend “safer” reading for a broken heart (67).

Here, unlike Fanny in the *Mansfield Park* passage, Anne participates fully in the conversation, and even “feels in herself the right of seniority of mind” to advise Captain Benwick” – a rare instance of an Austen protagonist’s feeling capable of sharing counsel¹⁸ (68). Thus Austen’s choice to filter Benwick’s speech through Anne’s judgment does not invert the power relationship in the conversation, as it did between Fanny and Henry. But it does demonstrate how Anne, more composed than Fanny, and informed by more experience of

¹⁸ Note that Anne, for instance, is apparently unable to share advice at any other point in the book: her sister Elizabeth angrily rejects her suggestion that Mrs. Clay is a danger to their family; Anne later “long[s] for the power of... pointing out [to Captain Wentworth and the Musgrove sisters] some of the evils they [are] exposing themselves to” in their careless flirtation (p. 55); and once she finally possesses decisive information about Mr. Elliot’s character, she puts off sharing it with Lady Russell.

humanity, if not of her specific interlocutor, turns the conversation to effect by analyzing Benwick's behavior. These episodes and others like them display the extent to which the protagonists' experiences come filtered through their subjectivity. The interplay of free indirect style with dialogue demonstrates that heroines use reflection to achieve their own desired ends within the restrictive structure of conversation.

Free indirect discourse stands on its own, without dialogue or direct narration, when Austen depicts instances of protracted deliberation. In addition to filtering protagonists' experiences through their subjectivity, as above, Austen uses long passages of free indirect style to convey their broader attempts to connect and understand their observations. The next chapter will argue that for this process, Austen's heroines draw on a template provided by their practice of letter-writing, one of the few day-to-day activities that would enable them to organize their experiences in narrative form. Austen's protagonists need an organizing principle for their judgments, since the process of judging is, as we have seen, effectively limited to their consciousness; their judgment is at the mercy of their unchecked subjectivity.

The narrator's judgment, however, generally remains sufficiently detached from the protagonist's subjectivity to detect the errors it produces. The protagonist's perspective goes unchecked within her own consciousness, not within the novel as a whole. Free indirect style, as Austen uses it, balances the protagonist's perspective with that of the narrator. Roy Pascal writes, "It is pre-eminently [owing to "the imagination and irony of the narrator"] that we hear in [free indirect style] a dual voice, which, through vocabulary, sentence structure, and intonation subtly fuses the two voices of the character and the narrator."¹⁹ Pascal further notes that throughout Austen's novels, the narrator's voice is decidedly the most authoritative of the two.²⁰ Austen's narrator relies on ironic asides, sometimes within a passage of free indirect discourse, to call the reader's attention to the protagonist's biases and errors of judgment.

¹⁹ p. 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

III. Irony

Georg Lukács calls irony “the self-surmounting of a subjectivity that has gone as far as it was possible to go” and “the normative mentality of the novel.”²¹ Irony prevents the novel from becoming fully absorbed into its protagonist’s subjectivity. It acknowledges and dramatizes the disconnect between the protagonist’s inner life as represented by free indirect discourse and the narrator’s more objective perspective, rather than allowing the novel to stage a full retreat into the inner life as a response to this disconnect. The tension between subjectivity and irony permeates Austen’s novels. Her use of irony distances the narrator from the protagonist’s consciousness, allowing the former to criticize the latter’s judgment. For instance, Austen’s narrator points to Elinor Dashwood’s bias in dismissing the odd behavior of her would-be suitor Edward Ferrars. Austen emphasizes the contrast, which Elinor fails to notice, between Elinor’s unquestioning faith in Edward’s intentions toward her and her suspicion of her sister Marianne’s suitor Willoughby:

Elinor placed all that was astonishing in [Edward’s] way of acting to his mother’s account, and it was happy for her that he had a mother whose character was so imperfectly known to her, as to be the general excuse for every thing strange on the part of her son. Disappointed, however, and vexed as she was, and sometimes displeased with his uncertain behaviour to herself, she was very well disposed on the whole to regard his actions with all the candid allowances and generous qualifications, which had been rather more painfully extorted from her, for Willoughby’s service, by her mother. (74)

In a similar passage in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen wryly notes that Elizabeth Bennet, in her reaction to Wickham’s evident fortune-hunting, is “less clear-sighted perhaps in his case than in Charlotte [Lucas]’s” (100). Even in *Persuasion*, in which the narrative voice may be more closely aligned with the protagonist’s subjective view than in any other Austen novel, Anne does not escape the narrator’s occasional ironic reflection; as she ponders her enduring devotion to Captain Wentworth, the narrator interjects, “Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy, could never have passed along the streets of Bath, than Anne was sporting with from

²¹ Lukács, p. 93, 84.

Camden-place to Westgate-buildings. It was almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way” (127). Throughout the novels, irony is the “normative mentality” through which the narrator steps back from the protagonist’s perspective and critically analyzes her judgments. This interplay between subjectivity and ironic distancing provides a wealth of insight into protagonists’ methods of forming judgments about the world around them. Austen captures their moments of acute, rational judgment (like Elinor’s skepticism about Willoughby or Anne’s skillful reading of Captain Benwick’s cues) as well as the biases they fail to notice (as when Elinor is less willing to critically examine Edward’s behavior than Willoughby’s, or as when Anne’s meditations tend toward romantic hyperbole). The structure of Austen’s novels depends upon irony to acknowledge what Lukács would term the “dissonance”²² between the free flow of the heroine’s interiority and the limitations of the social world, infusing the plots of her novels with subtle elements of the *Bildungsroman* as she traces her heroines’ intellectual and moral development in response to external experiences.

A significant part of the heroines’ response to these experiences of limitation is the development of an ironic perspective of their own. In *Persuasion*, for instance, Anne visits her sister’s family, the Musgroves, all of whom resort to her with their criticisms of each other’s behavior. A long litany of all of the various Musgroves’ various petty complaints concludes with the question, “How was Anne to set all this to rights?” (31). This exclamatory rhetorical question seems to be in Anne’s voice rather than in the narrator’s.²³ Instead of a narrator’s remark embedded within a passage of free indirect discourse, it is an organic part of the flow of Anne’s thoughts. Anne’s ironic reflection acknowledges the practical impossibility of the problem with which the Musgroves present her.

One of Elinor Dashwood’s conversations with her romantic rival Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility* provides another example of a protagonist’s ironic acknowledgment of chafing constraints. Elinor and Lucy are on their way to meet with the highly unpleasant, snobbish

²² p. 72.

²³ I base my methods of distinguishing between the voice of the narrator and that of a character on some of the criteria presented by Pascal in his very careful attention to this distinction throughout *The Dual Voice*.

mother of Edward Ferrars. Edward is both the object of Elinor's love and the man to whom Lucy is secretly engaged. Elinor is highly conscious that Edward's mother would countenance neither his engagement to Lucy nor an engagement between Edward and Elinor, and that Mrs. Ferrars seeks to marry Edward to the wealthy and high-ranking Miss Morton:

“Pity me, dear Miss Dashwood!” said Lucy... Good gracious! – In a moment I shall see the person that all my happiness depends on – that is to be my mother!” –

Elinor could have given her immediate relief by suggesting the possibility of its being Miss Morton's mother, rather than her own, whom they were about to behold; but instead of doing that, she assured her, and with great sincerity, that she did pity her, – to the utter amazement of Lucy, who, though really uncomfortable herself, hoped at least to be an object of irrepressible envy to Elinor. (164)

Incessantly obliged to feign friendship and sympathy for the utterly unamiable Lucy, Elinor privately appreciates the double irony that the dictates of Edward's mother may render their rivalry for him irrelevant by bestowing him on a third party, and that Lucy's request for pity, with which she hopes to inspire “irrepressible envy” in Elinor, is truly warranted. Although parts of this passage may be in the narrator's voice, these ironic observations occur in Elinor's. The reference to Miss Morton is consistent with Elinor's consciousness throughout this episode of “all the difficulties that must have perplexed the engagement, and retarded the marriage, of Edward and herself, had he been otherwise free” (168). The contemplation of a sharp retort reflects Elinor's annoyance, and her not voicing it suggests, not that it is the narrator's comment rather than hers, but that her characteristic sense of propriety leads her to choose to repress it. Finally, the statement, “she assured her, and with great sincerity, that she did pity her,” seems to be partially in the narrator's voice, where it recounts an action that Elinor performs, but the modifier “with great sincerity” must reflect Elinor's line of thought, since she would be acutely aware that her conversations with Lucy are generally characterized by insincerity. Both the constraint of socioeconomic gradations, represented by Edward's mother, and the constraint of Elinor and Lucy's customarily duplicitous mode of dialogue, are the objects of Elinor's irony.

Lionel Trilling remarks, “What we may call Jane Austen’s first or basic irony is the recognition of the fact that spirit is not free, that it is conditioned, that it is limited by circumstance.”²⁴ Austen’s protagonists register irony as they recognize the limitations placed on them by social conventions and confront the necessity of adapting themselves to their social situation. As we have seen, criticizing the protagonists’ thought processes is a crucial function of the narrator’s irony, whereas the characters themselves are more likely to apply this ironic perspective to the absurd constraints of the world around them than to their own errors of judgment. Within the Austen novel as a whole, the narrator enforces the “normative mentality”²⁵ through irony. Protagonists’ use of irony, constituting as it does “the recognition” that they are “limited by circumstance” brings their perspective closer to the narrator’s perspective, and thus the novel’s “normative mentality”. But how can they fully “surmount” their own subjectivity²⁶ without the benefit of either outside counsel or the narrator’s perspective?

IV. Conclusions

Like most of Austen’s heroines, Elinor Dashwood forgoes counsel from her nearest relations about her “most important concerns.”²⁷ She receives the news of Edward’s secret engagement to the petty and manipulative Lucy from Lucy herself, who swears her to secrecy. Thus a slightly different type of social code than the codes of politeness to which I have hitherto referred – a code of honor – prevents Elinor from communicating her devastating news to her family. But Elinor judges this omission to be the most appropriate course of action independently of her vow of secrecy. She decides that she is “stronger alone” in her recovery from the serious disappointment. This observation, of course, reflects the total inutility of her melodramatic mother and sister’s response to misfortune. She recognizes that “[f]rom their counsel, or their conversation... she could receive no assistance,... while her self-command would neither receive encouragement from their example nor from their praise” (SS 101). This vision of the

²⁴ “*Mansfield Park*,” p. 293.

²⁵ Lukács, p. 84.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 93.

²⁷ Benjamin, p. 84.

disadvantages of her family's "counsel" clearly emphasizes the novel's central theme, the drawbacks of excessive sensibility. But it also raises the question of whether any community could support Elinor in a way that would contribute to her "self-command," rather than displaying the "excess of... partial affection" – i.e., sympathetic concern – that a young woman disappointed in love might expect from her family. Could any social unit impose external control on her emotions as effectively as she can internally control herself? To some extent, Elinor's line of thought suggests that sharing her distressing experience with others – creating an external awareness of and eliciting an external response to her situation – would necessarily weaken her internal resolve and exertion.

The reflections of another Austen heroine apparently condemned to suffer in silence may help to explain Elinor's belief that sharing her grief with her family would reduce her own self-command. Anne Elliot finds herself "transplanted into" her sister's residence at Uppercross during the painful period when her ancestral home, rented out to offset the results of her father's extravagance, awaits its new tenants (*P* 29). "With the prospect of spending at least two months at Uppercross, it was highly incumbent upon her to clothe her imagination, her memory, and all her ideas in as much of Uppercross as possible," rather than dwelling too intently on the transactions that were of such vital importance to her family circle at Kellynch, and to which the residents of Uppercross seem largely oblivious (29). Anne's ethos of "clothing her imagination, memory, and ideas," in those of the alien community into which she has been "transplanted" extends beyond her visit to Uppercross and reflects her general method of making herself useful in society without sacrificing her intense individuality. This resembles Elinor Dashwood's attitude toward even her most intimate social circle. She is "stronger alone," stronger in maintaining a barrier between internal and external which, by forcing her to "clothe her ideas" in the mindset of a social world that neither shares nor acknowledges her subjective experience, assists her in regulating that experience. Thus by limiting her unhappiness to her own interiority, she not only contains, but actively combats it through constant effort to engage with the outside world on the outside world's terms. Elinor does not want her external community (in this case, her family) to set the norms for her reflection on this issue; she wants her inner life to regulate itself to the extent possible. She recognizes that her adherence to external social regulations helps her maintain internal control. This attitude, grounded in an acknowledgment of the

insurmountable barriers to the communication of subjective experience, represents Austen protagonists' embrace of this fundamental irony of the novel.

The genre of the novel marks a literary move away from depictions of societies like those found in the epic, in which no distinction between interiority and the exterior world is necessary because norms of both judgment and behavior have been so thoroughly internalized as to render such a distinction incomprehensible. In the novel's world, in which one can no longer either uncritically accept the standards offered by society or receive counsel from other individuals, the greatest tensions and conflicts take place within the protagonist's mind. The novel's protagonist experiences judgment as a profoundly individualistic process: he must learn how to deliberate effectually and arrive at some standard against which he may regulate his own subjectivity.²⁸ The ironic insertions of the narrator's perspective, by pointing to the character's errors of judgment, heighten the reader's sense of this necessity (and divest the "voice" of the protagonist's consciousness of the authority it might otherwise seem to possess within the narrative²⁹). The next chapter will explore how protagonists can come closer to internalizing the "normative mentality" of irony and examining their own judgments with the critical ironic detachment of an Austenian narrator.

Through isolation and the reflection that it fosters, Austen's heroines cultivate self-control and self-regulation. It is because they stand morally apart from the conventions of their society that they are able to examine these conventions critically. As Alasdair MacIntyre observes,

Acting upon certain specific reasons is usually exceptional and in normal circumstances is intelligible only in terms of and against the background of the structures of normality. It is departing from what those structures prescribe which requires the having and the giving of reasons.... Of course, when a reason is judged to outweigh the requirements of the customary structure, there is in the background the possibility of a not-yet-formulated judgment of some kind as to how good the reasons are for doing what the customary structure prescribes. And

²⁸ On this subject see Pinkard, on Hegel's view of skepticism, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, p. 68-69.

²⁹ See Pascal.

so reasoning which justifies particular requirements of that structure may emerge from the reasoning which puts it in question. But only in this secondary way do agents find reasons for doing what is normally prescribed.³⁰

Because they have departed from the prescriptions of their social structure, Austen's protagonists approach these "structures" as propositions to be rationally assessed, rather than internalizing them as key components of their identity. Reflection enables them actively to give their consent to behavioral codes or expectations, inhabiting them not in an act of submission to authority like Anne's initial acquiescence to Lady Russell's viewpoint, but because they understand how to manipulate them. Austen's protagonists also occasionally give their adherence to these rules legitimacy as a considered action by transgressing them. Thus they deliberately incorporate behavioral rules into their self-regulation rather than allowing external social standards to regulate their judgment. Their enactment of their social code is a reasoned one; while they appreciate its utility, they approach it from the perspective of an outsider (like Anne Elliot considering the Musgrove community), so that their embrace of this code is a considered choice. Austen's protagonists do not seek full psychological integration into a community that values the dictates of this social code, but maintain separate inner lives, and often finally escape external behavioral standards by leaving to create an external community in which they can regulate their behavior as well as their judgment themselves.

³⁰ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?*, p. 25.

Chapter II: “A letter... to supply matter for much reflection:”³¹ The letter as a framework for introspection in Austen’s novels

In Chapter One, I explored the problem of judgment in Austen’s novels through the formal tension between dialogue and the free indirect style. I concluded that, as individuals spiritually detached from the conventions of their society, Austen’s protagonists generally make a conscious, considered decision to embrace social restrictions on dialogue. Further, they profit from the divide between their restricted outer and free inner life to bolster their “self-command”. Not only do they substitute their judgment for convention as the arbiter of their social behavior, they also contain their “free” interiority, thereby gaining a degree of control over it. Austen’s sense of both the deficiency of this form of control and its moral significance appears in her word choice throughout her novels. The idea of “giving way to” reflection occurs frequently – as when Elizabeth Bennet, after her revelatory reading of Darcy’s letter, “wander[s] along the lane for two hours, giving way to every variety of thought” (*PP* 138). This formulation suggests at once protagonists’ almost compulsive need to reflect upon their experience, and the moderate amount of control they exert on their inner life by consciously choosing when to do so.³²

Although Austen’s heroines can restrict the range of their subjectivity by choosing when to allow themselves to “give way” to their need to reflect, it is generally (at least initially) Austen’s narrator, not the protagonist, who critically examines the substance of the protagonist’s reflections. In the previous chapter, I discussed Austen’s use of the free indirect style to present the critical perspective afforded by the narrator’s ironic voice along with her protagonists’ inner experience. While this treatment of the heroines’ interiority enforces, in Lukács’s phrase, “the normative mentality of the novel”³³, it clearly does so only insofar as it provides a more authoritative voice than the protagonist’s to point to the former’s failures of judgment. The

³¹ *MP*, p. 283.

³² Note also that Elizabeth gives in to her need for extended introspection during a period of apparently directionless “wandering”. Her lack of a direct purpose, and consequent temporary release from the tension between her desired ends and socially permitted means, frees her mental energy to attain greater insight in introspection (in this case, an accurate understanding of the veracity of Darcy’s letter).

³³ p. 84.

narrator's perspective is normative for the novel as a whole, but not for the protagonist; it acts as a structural counterweight, rather than a correction, to her perspective.

Anne-Lise François observes that the free indirect style (in the sense of “narrative techniques in general that assume no direct correspondence between the subject of an experience and the agent of its verbalization”),

is said to relieve characters from the work of self-representation – from the burden, as Frances Ferguson has recently put it, both of having ‘thoughts that rise to the level of the expressible’ (‘The Impact of Form,’ 167) (as characters in a play must) and of constantly reporting on themselves (as the perpetually writing protagonists of epistolary novels do). It frees characters, in other words, first from the work of speaking for themselves, giving accounts, and making themselves legible to others that constitutes the right and duty of Habermasian individuals and then from the no less onerous burden of having to signal ‘deep’ or unfathomable emotion.³⁴

In Austen's novels, the narrator assumes the formal responsibilities of “reporting on” the characters, and of imposing a “normative mentality” in the form of an ironic perspective on the protagonist's inner experience. Thus, through irony, free indirect style exposes the danger of the “freedom” of deliberation that it represents: a completely internal and unstructured reflective life frees characters from the important responsibility of accounting for or critically examining their judgments. While Austen's protagonists generally view the world from a critical, ironic perspective, they only gradually learn to turn this perspective on their own reflections.

For Austen, as for Friedrich Schlegel, learning to detach oneself from the subjective nature of one's own thought – to practice “that ‘hovering’ which, in the eyes of the early romantics, is the anticipation of a synthesis”³⁵ – is a vital component of moral and critical development. The alignment of the protagonist's perspective with the clear-sighted perspective of the narrator would, perhaps, represent the ultimate synthesis in Austen, merging the individual

³⁴ *Open Secrets*, p. 14-15.

³⁵ Szondi, *On Textual Understanding*, p. 66.

with the moral certainty and perception represented by the narrator. None of Austen's protagonists permanently achieves this synthesis – we would hardly recognize as Austen's a novel which did not display intense consciousness of its protagonist's complexity and fallibility, or which was not pervaded with the Calvinist sense of there being always further self-improvement to strive for (even for the most virtuous of heroines³⁶). The narrator's constant presence provides a standard against which to judge the self-awareness of the protagonist's thought, and we know that the closer the protagonist's perspective comes to the narrator's, and the less frequently the narrator exposes flaws in the protagonist's judgment, the more the protagonist is acquiring the habit of critical self-examination. But unexposed as they are to the narrator's critical voice, how do Austen's protagonists reach this point? How do they learn to critically examine the continuous reflection that is so vital to their ability to live in the world?

In this chapter, I will explore the letter's role in combining the communicative properties of dialogue with the “free” space for reflection denoted by the free indirect style, thus allowing for critical self-examination. I will argue that Austen's protagonists' practice of letter writing – and, crucially, letter reading – provides them with a framework for critical examination of their own subjective experience. As François points out above, “the perpetually writing protagonists of epistolary novels” bear the burden of “constantly reporting on themselves,” particularly on their inner responses to external events, facets of inner experience which would otherwise go unexpressed in a literary form that leaves no room for the free indirect style's narrative report on characters' psyches. But the experience François describes is not limited to characters in epistolary novels. Although their various notes and correspondences are supplementary to other novelistic devices, Austen's characters are no less invested in writing to each other. The structure of Austen's novels does not require characters to “report on” their own experiences to the reader,

³⁶ To characterize protagonists of Austen's successors' novels as “virtuous” (or not) might be considered an anachronism, but I apply the term here to Austen's heroines because her novels demonstrate her persistent interest in probing the concept of virtue in the modern world. Alasdair MacIntyre calls Austen “the last great effective imaginative voice of the tradition of thought about, and practice of, the virtues” (*After Virtue*, p. 240.) MacIntyre identifies the most significant virtues in Austen's oeuvre as “constancy” and a specifically “Christian... self-knowledge which can only be achieved through a kind of repentance” (p. 241). On the roots of “the virtue of self-knowledge” within the Christian tradition, see also Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 2008, p. 197-218.

but they nonetheless rely upon letters to “report on” their experiences to their sisters, friends, parents, confidantes. The letter allows for the exchange of counsel, which, as we have seen, other forms do not. Although the free indirect style, in François’s words, “relieves characters from the work of self-representation” within the novel as a form, although dialogue complicates and often hinders this “work of self-representation” to an interlocutor, epistolary communication facilitates and even invites characters’ undertaking the critical project of “reporting on” and accounting for their subjective experience.

I. The Epistolary Form and Context

Correspondence by letter is a unique form of dialogue, and the only form that enables Austen’s characters to communicate across any significant temporal and spatial distance. I will return later to effect of temporal distance upon the epistolary form. First, I would like to note some of the social implications of the letter. After all (at the risk of stating the obvious), one important formal characteristic of the letter is the fact that, having been deliberately composed, committed to paper, addressed, and (in most cases) sent through the post, it represents a concerted effort to reach a specific recipient. Although Daniel Cottom rightly quibbles with the utility of Austen’s use of the adjective “marked” to denote pointed, meaningful behavior³⁷ (as in, “He paid her very marked attentions”), it is fair to say that the letter represents a more (literally) “marked” effort to communicate with a specific individual than do most other modes of communication used by Austen’s characters. Hence, presumably, the social convention captured in the novels that treats epistolary communication as the mark of an intimate relationship.³⁸ Correspondence by its nature (leaving aside business correspondence, which is somewhat of a rarity in Austen’s novels) invariably either presupposes or fosters intimacy between correspondents.

Consider, for instance, Austen’s choice to rewrite the ending of *Persuasion*, in which Captain Wentworth declares his continued love for Anne Elliot eight years after she broke off their

³⁷ “The Novels of Jane Austen: Attachments and Supplantments,” p. 155-156.

³⁸ See especially Elinor’s reliance on epistolary clues to determine whether Marianne is engaged to Willoughby, or Lucy Steele to Edward, in *Sense and Sensibility*.

engagement. Austen replaces Wentworth's original declaration, grounded in gesture and implication, with a brief, passionate note hastily penned in response to a conversation that he overhears between Anne and Captain Harville. As I noted in the previous chapter, Anne and Wentworth's strangely intimate, if sometimes inadvertent, mode of communication relies upon gesture and implication to freight public dialogue with special, secret meaning (and sometimes to express more than either rules of dialogue or the estranged lovers' pride would allow). The *éclaircissement* described in the novels' original ending is entirely consistent with this idiom; it consists of an interchange of meaningful looks – “a silent, but a very powerful Dialogue” – and “a hand taken and pressed” (171). In the revised ending, Austen links Wentworth's letter to this nonverbal language. Like this language, the letter transcends the boundaries of spoken dialogue to convey meaning through a special intimacy between “speaker” (or writer) and “addressee”. As Wentworth writes to Anne, “I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach” (158). In both cases, this means secretly appropriating the general social forms to convey a second message. A casual word or remark may be fraught with hidden significance, and Wentworth uses the cover of a casual task, performed in a social setting – writing a letter concerning some business of his friend Captain Harville – also to pen his letter to Anne. “While supposed to be writing only to Captain Benwick, he had been also addressing her!” (158). Anne's suppressed exclamation at once offers an apt figure for their manner of communication throughout the novel and suggests that Wentworth's act of writing to her serves as his affirmation of the meaning behind the gestures – his acknowledgment that he has “been also addressing her” not only at that moment, but throughout the novel. In writing to Anne, Wentworth acknowledges and affirms their peculiar intimacy, thereby removing its peculiarity and putting an end to their estrangement. His choice of medium itself signifies this shift. Upon seeing the letter, Anne immediately recognizes that “[o]n the contents of that letter depend[s] all which this world [can] do for her!” (158).

Unlike the reconciliation scene in Austen's original ending, Wentworth's letter raises Anne and Wentworth's idiom of silent interaction to a new level of deliberate intimacy. No longer does their communication rely on the accidental relationship conferred by their shared past; the letter represents all the confidence and decision of their new, strengthened, and thoroughly intentional relationship to each other. Just as Anne and Wentworth reunite “more tender, more tried, more

fixed in a knowledge of each other's character, truth, and attachment; more equal to act, more justified in acting," Wentworth's letter purposely inaugurates a deeper, more confident, "more justified" – more considered – intimacy between them (160). In addition to constituting a concrete affirmation of his relationship with Anne, Wentworth's letter achieves the simultaneously private and explicit communication of a message that, in public dialogue, could be conveyed only through implication. The epistolary form affords a rare combination of subtlety and explicitness, as its strongest messages can be communicated beyond the reach of others' ears, even in a bustling social setting like the Musgroves' room at the inn.

The privacy³⁹ of the epistolary form forges a special relationship between correspondents that places it somewhat beyond the reach of social codes as a uniquely individualistic mode of communication.⁴⁰ Because correspondents have the opportunity to address each other as individuals, without reference to the conventional restrictions imposed by dialogue and by public social settings, the letter is particularly conducive to the sharing of subjective experience. It allows characters greater freedom to reflect seriously and sometimes extensively on the experiences they relate. When characters converse with others, especially in public settings, their conversation is shaped by a constant awareness of social conventions. When they write, by contrast, they are on a familiar footing with their correspondents. Furthermore, because

³⁹ Hannah Arendt writes, "To live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an 'objective' relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself," *The Human Condition*, p. 58. The "privacy" of the epistolary form is paradoxical: The letter fosters interactions not "seen and heard by" anyone other than the correspondents – unacknowledged by the outside world. Yet, at the same time, it obviously facilitates human contact and relationship, and allows another person to acknowledge one's message. The privacy of simple introspection is more profound because "deprived" of all external acknowledgment. The letter, by contrast, offers an opportunity to relate one's subjective experience to another and have it acknowledged. Thus it is not a "privation," but an affirmation of the inner life. (Arendt might consider this a step towards "the modern discovery of intimacy," p. 69.) As a form whose privacy is not absolute, and which protects the exchange of individuals' subjective experience from public notice while allowing each correspondent to acknowledge and to respond to the other's subjective experience, the letter places the inner life in a new light by fostering external affirmation of its existence and discussion of its contents.

⁴⁰ Of course social codes had some bearing on the letter, and were sometimes specifically tailored to epistolary composition, but the familiar relationship between correspondents often rendered such formality unnecessary. Such is the case, at least, in all of the letters I examine here.

correspondents are not face to face, with all the attendant obligation to speak –immediately and irrevocably – not only can they choose and compose their message with greater deliberation; they can also decide when to send it, and even whether to send it at all. All these elements of epistolary communication contribute to set it apart from conventional dialogue, giving correspondents the sense that the terms of their epistolary relation are far less rigid and more open to adjustment. They therefore focus specifically on themselves and their intended readers, rather than on otherwise “normative” social standards. Of course, many letters in Austen’s novels become “public” documents. Some do so by the design or desire of the author, as when Elinor Dashwood passes on Lucy Steele’s letter containing extravagant praise of the whole Middleton family to Lady Middleton’s kindly disposed mother Mrs. Jennings. Other letters reach new readers without their authors’ knowledge or consent, as when Anne Elliot’s old school-fellow, Mrs. Smith, shows Anne an old letter of Mr. Elliot’s to the late Mr. Smith as proof of his hypocrisy. In the midst of her visceral reaction to the letter’s tone, Anne recognizes that this letter was intended for a very different audience:

Anne could not immediately get over the shock and mortification of finding such words applied to her father. She was obliged to recollect that her seeing the letter was a violation of the laws of honour, that no one ought to be judged or to be known by such testimonies, that no private correspondence could bear the eye of others, before she could recover calmness enough to return the letter which she had been meditating over... (135)

The nature of the anticipated reader, Anne knows, shapes any letter, and the intimacy that forms the basis for a correspondence often renders its contents so personal that to read a letter intended only for another’s eyes is “a violation of the laws of honour”. The unauthorized reader “violates” decorum by assuming a false intimacy – an implicit interpersonal relationship, beyond the restrictions of social decorum, which does not actually exist.

Austen’s letter-writers most often demonstrate careful attention to their readers’ perspectives by endeavoring to anticipate readers’ responses within the text of their letters. Their deep investment in answering for the views and ideas they share with their correspondents renders their letters particularly reflective and self-conscious. Of course, the John Dashwoods, Lydia Bennets, and Lady Bertrams of the novels, too unintelligent to engage in meaningful self-

examination, do not write self-consciously, any more than they demonstrate strong social consciousness in their speech or behavior in social settings. But the more intelligent characters, as consciously as they seek to “guard” their own behavior and speech from any harmful interpretation in society, seek to anticipate their readers’ reactions and justify their own judgments in epistolary communication. Tilottama Rajan’s description of the relationship between Romantic author and reader could be applied to the correspondents in Austen’s novels: “Actual readers do not necessarily follow the roles prescribed for them within texts or by culturally limited critical conventions. Texts exist within the circuit of communication, and their ‘intentions’ are often displaced by an awareness of such readers, which puts authors themselves in the position of interpreters rather than prophets.”⁴¹ As we shall see, Austen’s letter-readers refuse to take the letters they receive at face value, instead closely analyzing them for further meaning. Letter-writers find themselves interpreting their own epistles from the point of view of the intended reader and approaching their own ideas as propositions to be supported against the reader’s potential dissent.

For instance, after a highly unpleasant meeting in London with her former friend Miss Bingley, Jane Bennet realizes that she has “been entirely deceived in Miss Bingley’s regard for [her]” (99). She writes to Elizabeth on the occasion, confirming Elizabeth’s view of Miss Bingley and conveying the revision of her own. But Jane defends her misjudgment, writing, “my dear sister, though the event has proved you right, do not think me obstinate if I still assert, that, considering what her behavior was, my confidence was as natural as your suspicion,” and reminding Elizabeth that “every advance to intimacy began on [Miss Bingley’s] side” (99). Mr. Darcy, when he writes to Elizabeth in part to explain his role in separating Mr. Bingley from Jane, is likewise attuned to Elizabeth’s probable response to his letter. In the midst of his characteristically blunt description of the “total want of propriety... betrayed by” a significant portion of Elizabeth’s immediate family, he interjects,

—Pardon me. – It pains me to offend you. But amidst your concern for the defects of your nearest relations, and your displeasure at this representation of them, let it give you consolation to consider that, to have conducted yourselves so as to avoid any share of the like

⁴¹ *The Supplement of Reading*, p. 2.

censure, is praise no less generally bestowed on you and your eldest sister, than it is honourable to the sense and disposition of both. (130-131).

This statement, by tempering the offense of Darcy's evaluation of Elizabeth's family, may help lend credence to the rest of his assertions in her eyes. Once Elizabeth has realized the validity of the perspective Darcy presents, his "compliment to herself and her sister, [is] not unfelt;" it "soothes" Elizabeth (although it "[can] not console her") as she adjusts to the shock of seeing her family's flaws from his point of view (137). Darcy's anticipation of the "offense" his statement will give to Elizabeth enables him to mitigate it in advance.

Even the self-absorbed Mary Crawford, Fanny Price's correspondent and (nearly successful) rival for Edmund Bertram's heart in *Mansfield Park*, tries to imagine how her reader will interpret her letters. Having heard a vague report that Tom, Edmund's elder brother and the heir to the baronetcy, is seriously ill, she writes to ask Fanny for details. In the context of Mary's attachment to Edmund and her social ambition, the few lines of her letter that manifest extravagant concern for Tom appear deeply insincere, given the subtext that Tom's death would leave Edmund the heir to the family estate. Fanny is so well aware of Mary's cynical views that she could hardly interpret these lines as expressions of genuine feeling. Mary proceeds in her letter to acknowledge this probability: "Fanny, Fanny, I see you smile, and look cunning, but upon my honour, I never bribed a physician in my life" (294). Here, Mary imagines both Fanny's interpretation of and her response to those lines; and though Fanny probably does interpret the lines as Mary conjectures, Mary grossly miscalculates her response. Fanny is far from "smiling" at Mary's heartless insincerity. Mary's prediction is only half correct (we can assume) because she ascribes to Fanny her own feelings, and thus in a way still reads the letter through her own eyes. Although Mary fails to anticipate Fanny's "disgust" at the sentiments expressed in her letter (295), she clearly composes the letter with the strong consciousness that Fanny will not only read, but closely analyze it. To forestall Fanny's judgment by justifying the perspectives such analysis would reveal, she endeavors to read her own letter through Fanny's eyes as she writes. Her failure lies in her inability to understand Fanny's moral perspective, not in any expectation that Fanny will read her letter at face value only. Although Mary ascribes her own thoroughly cynical viewpoint to Fanny, she nevertheless attempts to analyze her musings from

what she (incorrectly) considers to be an external perspective. Jane's and Mr. Darcy's letters to Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* are grounded less in selfishness and more in a thorough knowledge of the recipient's character and point of view. (Although Darcy clearly has less knowledge of Elizabeth than Jane does, recall that he composes his letter almost directly after his proposal to her, when she has explained her viewpoint to him with devastating clarity.) These letters, like many other letters written to intimates in Austen's novels, successfully anticipate, and address, the reader's reaction.

The practice of temporarily drawing back from their own contemplations to imagine how another individual might respond to them, and to justify these contemplations to a reader, trains Austen's letter-writing characters to think critically about the limitations of their own perspectives. This element of epistolary composition, grounded as it is in the expectation of the reader's intensive scrutiny, indicates that communication by letter is an interpretive challenge for reader as well as writer. Both are conscious that the epistolary form presents many levels of meaning; reading a letter is clearly a thoroughly analytical exercise. It is comparatively rare for Austen to incorporate letters written by her protagonists into the text of her novels. As François points out, there is less need for characters whose inner experience is narrated in the free indirect style to "report on" their experience through such a device. But Austen often depicts them reading, analyzing, and ruminating the letters they receive. I will argue that, along with their habit of letter-writing, Austen's protagonists' interpretive mode of letter-reading shapes their deliberations (as represented in the free indirect style) and gives them further critical tools to work towards "surmount[ing]" the "subjectivity"⁴² of their judgments. Whereas correspondence trains the letter writer to examine his own reflections from the perspective of his correspondent, letter reading provides characters with the model for critical self-consciousness based in an abstract, normative perspective – what amounts, in Austen's oeuvre, to an approximation of the narrator's viewpoint.

⁴²See Lukács, p. 93.

II. Letter Reading as a Model for Introspection

The letter's structural idiosyncrasies, and their effect upon the letter reader's experience, render letter reading a particularly apt model for critical introspection. The genre of the novel is unique in being less concerned, on the whole, with great events or heroic deeds than with the quiet details and imperceptible recalibrations of an ordinary life. The domestic focus of the novel as we know it today is certainly due in part to the influence of the epistolary novel in the Eighteenth Century, for this subgenre is highly attuned to details of existence hitherto rarely portrayed in literature.⁴³ Epistolary communication, both in these novels and in Austen's, promotes a habit of observing and reflecting on mundane, apparently inconsequential aspects of life. The richness of Austen's protagonists' inner lives, not to mention their perspicacity as judges of character, derives in part from their nearly unflinching attention to such details.

The epistolary phenomenon of perceiving the mundane or apparently irrelevant article as information worthy to be reported and reflected on derives in part from the persistent intrusion of the mundane upon epistolary communication. Quotidian details like postage costs and pickup and delivery schedules shaped people's letters, affecting how often and how much they wrote. The eponymous heroine of Rousseau's *Julie* tells her lover of having hastened to finish a previous letter in order to get it to that week's post on time. And when, in *Persuasion*, the Crofts offer to convey Mary Musgrove's letter to Anne themselves (so that Mary won't have to send it through the post), Mary exults, "I shall therefore be able to make my letter as long as I like" (109). Until 1840, postage in Britain cost fourpence and was paid by the recipient, not the sender (in 1840, the cost was lowered to a penny, to be paid by the sender).⁴⁴ Thus Samuel Taylor Coleridge repines in a letter to a friend, "I can scarcely reconcile it to my Conscience to make you pay postage for another Letter," and imagines "all the domestic affections that had been

⁴³ In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong notes that 18th-Century conduct books in the form of "fictionalized personal letter[s]" (108), particularly Richardson's epistolary novels, led to the development of the domestic novel. *Pamela*, by virtue of its epistolary structure, "concludes not with a marriage of families or fortunes, but with a message that conjoins different modes of subjectivity to produce the gender-divided world of conduct books. In triumphing over the other languages of the novel, personal letter writing successfully removes domestic relations from all economic and political considerations as it subjects such relations to a woman's moral scrutiny and emotional response," p. 122.

⁴⁴ Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy*, p. 128.

stifled, all the intellectual progress that would have been, but is not, on account of this heavy Tax.”⁴⁵ In Austen’s novels, too, “this heavy Tax” shapes characters’ letters. One letter sometimes encloses another note from the sender’s spouse or sibling, and correspondents often fill up the envelope as well as the sheets it contains. Two of the modes of composition to be examined in this section attest to the influence of the economic details of epistolary communication: Lady Bertram, who writes letters “without having any thing to say,” gets her money’s worth (or rather, gives her correspondent *her* money’s worth) by conscientiously filling her page with trivial information and empty rhetorical flourishes; while Mary Musgrove adopts a method perhaps even more common throughout Austen’s oeuvre, “keeping her letter open” so that it becomes a cumulative record of her news over an extended period of time, to spare her correspondent the cost of a new letter as each new piece of information arises (*MP* 288, *P* 109).

Another reason for the letter’s mundane focus is the dual purpose of the epistolary form. As noted above, the letter is not merely a vehicle for conveying news, but also, more than other available means of communication, a mode of defining and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Thus it may happen that the desire or obligation to keep up a correspondence, regardless of whether one has any news in particular to convey, causes correspondents to elevate trivial matters to the status of “news,” and reflect on them extensively in their letters. Sharing reflections on quotidian experience thus becomes a mode of intimacy. In *Mansfield Park*, the vacuous and otherwise completely indolent Lady Bertram embraces this practice:

Every body at all addicted to letter writing, without having much to say, which will include a large proportion of the female world at least, must feel with Lady Bertram, that she was out of luck in having such a capital piece of Mansfield news, as the certainty of the Grants going to Bath, occur at a time when she could make no advantage of it, and will admit that it must have been very mortifying to see it fall to the share of a thankless son, and treated as concisely as possible at the end of a long letter, instead of having it to spread over the largest part of a page of her own. – For though Lady Bertram rather shone in the epistolary line, having early in her marriage, from the want of other employment, and the circumstance of Sir Thomas’s being in Parliament, got into a way of making and keeping correspondents, and

⁴⁵ *Collected Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 670.

formed for herself a very creditable, common-place, amplifying style, so that a very little matter was enough for her; she could not do entirely without any; she must have something to write about, even to her niece, and being so soon to lose all the benefit of Dr. Grant's gouty symptoms and Mrs. Grant's morning calls, it was very hard upon her to be deprived of one of the last epistolary uses she could put them to. (288)

The entire, lengthy paragraph consists of only two sentences. Austen's own long, rolling sentences mimic Lady Bertram's "diffuse" (290), "amplifying style;" and while protractedly satirizing Lady Bertram's ability to make much prose of little matter, Austen must be conscious of the resemblance which Lady Bertram's ethos of "amplifying" the "common-place" details of domestic life bears to her own. Lady Bertram is, of course, a shallow and frivolous woman, whose writing is apparently without purpose or meaning, and to undertake a serious comparison of her style of composition to Austen's is to fall into the embarrassing mistake of dismissing Austen's portrayals of "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village"⁴⁶ as indicating a merely pedestrian degree of artistic vision. But Austen may appreciate the irony that even as she goes on to savage Lady Bertram's epistolary style for apparently equating the serious illness of her son with the Grants' departure for Bath, this mode of writing (and perceiving the world) bears some kinship to one that takes for its material the details of domestic life in a small community and the day-to-day subjective experience of its inhabitants.

Austen's discussion of Lady Bertram's epistolary style is evidently highly critical, and the implications of her characterization of "a large proportion of the female world at least" as "addicted to letter writing, without having much to say," clearly bear further investigation, but among other things, this notion of epistolary composition suggests that the letter as a form turns one's attention to the ordinary elements of life by remarking on the unremarkable. Letters usually remain in the background of Austen's novels unless they have an important piece of information to announce, but Austen makes it clear that correspondences are a central element of characters' lives, and an important mode of keeping in touch with each other, even when she does not write them into the text. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, Elizabeth, on a visit to Hunsford, at one point looks over all of the letters she has received from Jane since her arrival.

⁴⁶ Austen, "Letter to Anna Austen (9- 18 September 1814)," p. 276.

One can infer from Austen's not mentioning their contents that they contain no news of vital importance. Jane is a more feeling and less insipid character than Lady Bertram, but, nonetheless, probably sometimes sends Elizabeth mundane material in her letters simply by the nature of epistolary correspondence.

The letter's focus on quotidian experience is tied to its capacity for a level of psychological immediacy unprecedented in written language, which allows correspondents to share a detailed record of their subjective experience at the moment of writing. Ian Watt observes, "It is the minute-by-minute content of consciousness which constitutes what the individual's personality really is, and dictates his relationship to others.... The nearest record of this consciousness in ordinary life is the private letter" (191-192). Watt cites Richardson's much-parodied "attempt to achieve what in the 'Preface by the Editor' to *Pamela* he called 'an immediate impression of everything'" (193). The continental European epistolary novel likewise affords many instances of this phenomenon, from the use of dashes to indicate rapid-fire change of ideas in the letters of Goethe's eponymous Werther and Rousseau's eponymous Julie, marks of their writing in a state of emotional upheaval; to the Vicomte de Valmont's smug, deceptively chaste love letter to the Presidente de Tourneval, penned from the backside of a more licentious sexual partner and saturated with ironic references to his immediate environs and experience. Such obviously immediate epistles are rare in Austen, although we have encountered one in Captain Wentworth's breathless epistolary declaration of renewed love to Anne. His letter is fully steeped in his immediate emotional experience. Wentworth overhears Anne and Captain Harville comparing male and female constancy in love and pens a note saturated in the emotions this discussion arouses in him. The immediacy of feeling captured in his letter readily appears in lines like, "I can listen no longer in silence," "You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope," and "I can hardly write. I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me" (158).

Even when a letter is not grounded in such a strong emotional response to its writer's immediate surroundings, both Austen's narrator and her characters consider the form a reliable representation of its author's subjective state at the time of composition. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's narrator briefly summarizes Jane Bennet's disappointing encounter with her friend Miss Bingley in London, then presents Jane's letter to Elizabeth on the occasion as a text which

“will prove what she felt” (99). The letter is relatively sedate and analytical, especially in comparison to some of those found in the epistolary novels mentioned earlier: its syntax is meticulously correct, and it bears no dashes to indicate fluctuating or overpowering emotion. Nonetheless, the narrator introduces it as “proof” of Jane’s “feelings,” suggesting that it offers an account of Jane’s emotional experience at least equally authentic to what the narrator could depict, or chooses to depict, in the free indirect style.

Perhaps Austen here prefers this mode of depicting Jane’s feelings to the free indirect style because the novel is primarily concerned with Elizabeth’s inner experience, not Jane’s. Instead of devoting a long free indirect style passage to Jane’s feelings, therefore, she aligns us more closely with Elizabeth’s consciousness by directing us to read and interpret Jane’s letter, as Elizabeth does, in order to understand Jane’s state of mind. When Elizabeth later rereads with careful attention the letters which Jane has written her since Elizabeth’s arrival in Hunsford, she finds that, although “they contained no actual complaint, nor was there any revival of past occurrences, or any communication of present suffering,” there was “in all, and in almost every line of each, . . . a want of that cheerfulness which had been used to characterize her style, and which, proceeding from a mind at ease with itself, and kindly disposed towards everyone, had been scarcely ever clouded” (124). Elizabeth’s analysis of her sister’s letters suggests that close scrutiny will reveal some level of emotional immediacy in most correspondence. As Pfau observes of the epistolary form in *Julie*, “the diacritical medium of the letter . . . emerges as the crucial resource in [the protagonists’] quest to gain perspective and distance on their emotions . . . Julie early on in the novel already begins to shift away from a strictly *expressive* and towards a *symptomatic* reading of the epistolary medium.”⁴⁷

The letter’s basis in “immediacy” trains correspondents to scrutinize the letters they receive for deeper levels of meaning, as Elizabeth does in both passages cited above. Watt’s comment on the experience of reading the epistolary novel seems just as applicable to the experience of an actual correspondence:

⁴⁷ p. 46.

The very lack of selectiveness [in the composition of a letter], indeed, impels us to a more active involvement in the events and feelings described: we have to pick significant items of character and behaviour out of a wealth of circumambient detail, much as in real life we attempt to gather meaning from the casual flux of circumstance.⁴⁸

Its ability to capture immediate experience both external and internal combines with its temporal distortion to render it the letter a highly unique form of communication and, in Austen's novels, open it up to careful analysis. Of course, a letter is not always a completely open representation of its author's state of mind. A letter-writer may set out to deceive his recipient, as does de Laclos's Vicomte de Valmont, and as do Austen's Lucy Steele and Caroline Bingley, among others.⁴⁹ But even deceptive letters contain subtle clues as to the state of mind in which their author composed them – clues like tone, diction, even the physical state of the letter (which may be tear-stained or contain marked-out passages) – clues like those that we have just seen Elizabeth Bennet analyze to discern the “want of cheerfulness” behind the façade of contentment that Jane presents in her letters.

Not only does the epistolary form provide some insight into its author's immediate experience, it does so at a temporal remove necessitated by the form's travel time – thereby recreating inner experience at some distance from the protagonist, allowing her to read it critically and analyze it in detail. By training protagonists to examine the transcription of another's interiority, the letter-reading exercise brings them a step closer to turning a critical eye on their own. Temporal distortion builds further prompts for critical reading into the epistolary structure: in addition to representing immediate subjective experience, letters in Austen's novels (as elsewhere) are often, as I noted above, composed over relatively long periods of time, so that they serve to track the changes in their author's inner state.⁵⁰ The combination of psychological

⁴⁸ *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 193.

⁴⁹ A correspondent's self-delusion may also distort his message: one has only to recall Lydia Bennet's imbecilic note to her friend Mrs. Forster announcing her elopement with Wickham, in which she elevates her fleeting infatuation with him to all the dignity of love, no doubt believing her letter to be perfectly sincere. But in the case of self-delusion the letter remains a representation of some channel, however ultimately misguided, of its writer's immediate experience.

⁵⁰ Letter writing also occasionally offers evidence of one's own prior inner state at a temporal remove, which can be highly disconcerting. Goethe captures the uneasy sensation in *Wilhelm Meister's*

immediacy with this cumulative structure allows letters to stand on their own as not only objects, but enforcers, of irony.

In *Persuasion*, for instance, Mary Musgrove pens a letter to her sister Anne Elliot. As she tells Anne in her characteristically peevish tone, Mary's home, "as you well know, affords little to write about," so she lets the epistle accumulate with her gradual acquisition of news (107-108). Many of Austen's characters seem to adopt this mode of composition, due no doubt in part to postage prices that render separate letters conveying each piece of news a great expense (forced upon the recipient). This composition means that the letter's tone evolves with Mary's already changeable moods. Here Austen uses the epistolary form to explore Mary's style of folly in a more sustained, concentrated manner than she has often done in either dialogue or the free indirect style. The unconscious contradictions and caprices which Mary commits – and commits to paper – perhaps over the space of a week or more, become a single letter to be read in the space of a few minutes. The compression of Mary's ideas and moods into one letter yields many ironic juxtapositions. Mary writes, "Mrs. Harville must be an odd mother to part with [her children] so long. I do not understand it," but later, in hopes of being invited to stay with the Elliots in Bath, assures Anne that "I do not expect my children to be asked, you know. I can leave them at the Great House very well, for a month or six weeks" (108). She grumbles, "I have this moment heard that the Crofts are going to Bath... [T]hey have not had the civility to give me any notice, or offer to take anything. I do not think they improve at all as neighbours. We see nothing of them, and this is really an instance of gross inattention," but writes in the postscript, "I had a note from Mrs. Croft yesterday, offering to convey any thing to you; a very kind, friendly note indeed, addressed to me, just as it ought... I shall be truly glad to have them back again. Our neighbourhood cannot spare such a pleasant family" (108-109). Mary, insufficiently sagacious to

Apprenticeship when Wilhelm looks over his old poetry before burning it: "How different was his frame of mind now as he opened [his writings] from when he had bundled them together. When we open a letter that we once wrote and sealed upon a particular occasion but which never reached the friend it was sent to, and was returned to us, we have a strange feeling as we break the seal, our own seal, and converse with our different self as with a third person. Just such a feeling it was that gripped our hero as he opened the package and threw the various sheets into the fire, which burned brightly," p. 44. Like reading the accumulated letters of others, occasionally rereading one's own old letters (when, for instance, they are returned undelivered), "conversing with our different self as with a third person," is a component of epistolary communication that reveals the changeability of subjective experience – in this case, our own.

be a self-conscious correspondent (as, indeed, she is not a self-conscious speaker), has apparently failed to reread her own letter, and is oblivious to the irony of its inconsistencies. Her typical ill-humor and caprice pervade the letter, but the instances of temporal compression heighten the irony of her voice.

The vital irony of this letter, then, is grounded in what Benjamin terms “remembrance,” the “muse-derived element of the novel.”⁵¹ In the Austen novel, remembrance is one of the narrator’s most fundamental means of enforcing an ironic perspective or “normative mentality”⁵². Recall, for instance, the passage from *Sense and Sensibility* quoted in the previous chapter, in which Austen narrates, in the free indirect style, Elinor Dashwood’s improbable excuses for her suitor Edward Ferrars’s strange behavior to her. Austen’s narrator concludes the passage by juxtaposing Elinor’s current excuses to her previous, less optimistic, interpretation of the behavior of her sister’s suitor, Willoughby. When she makes these excuses to herself, Elinor presumably does not remember the conversation with her mother in which she dismissed similar excuses for Willoughby as feeble and improbable. But the narrator imposes her own remembrance of this event on Elinor’s assessment of Edward. Thus it is the narrator’s function not simply to enforce an ironic perspective on the protagonist’s inner life, but often to enforce this perspective through maintaining the remembrance essential to the novel, when the protagonist’s memory fails her. As the examples of Mary Musgrove’s letter and Elinor Dashwood’s lapse of judgment suggest, remembrance is integral to the ironic perspective in Austen’s novels. In keeping with Trilling’s premise that Austen’s “basic irony” lies in the recognition that “the spirit is not free,” but is “limited by circumstance,”⁵³ remembrance is the recognition that subjective experience constitutes a limitation of the “spirit”.

Although the perspectives of most Austen protagonists are heavily influenced by their capacity for both irony and remembrance, their perspectives are also limited and flawed. In general it is the Austenian narrator who satisfies the structural requirements unique to the novel,

⁵¹ p. 98.

⁵² See Lukács, p. 84.

⁵³ p. 293.

enforcing the ironic (“normative”) perspective, and strengthening this perspective through a remembrance which connects different moments of subjective experience into a viable narrative, in the process exposing the constraints of subjectivity. Part of Austen’s contribution to the genre lies in allowing for the minute psychological depiction of imperfect and dynamic protagonists through the creation of an authoritative, detached narrator to carry the burden of the novel’s formal requirements. This innovation, however, leads to the problem mentioned in the introduction: through an authoritative narrative voice, Austen effectively equips her novels for a close, critical, and sustained examination of the inner life of a fictional individual. In what we may call the Austen novel’s fundamental mode, the free indirect style (which I think it is fair to treat as the Austen novel’s matrix, into which the dialogue and letters are embedded), the narrator imposes a critical structure on the novel’s depiction of this individual’s subjectivity, not on the actual subjectivity of the individual. The Austenian narrator renders the novel a fully self-conscious form, awake to and working against the pitfalls of its own subjective focus. The Austenian protagonist is often, by nature, acutely self-conscious or “guarded” (she “guards” the barriers between internal and external, perpetually vigilant lest she “betray” her inner state to the external world by some outer sign), but she must become conscious in her inner life of the failures of her subjectivity and learn to “guard” her deliberative process against them.⁵⁴ Although the novel as a whole benefits from the narrator’s ironic voice, the protagonist cannot.

⁵⁴ Austen’s heroines are, of course, also noted for their capacity for self-consciousness in the sense of unease or embarrassment. Mark Canuel observes that “the highest compliment that Austen can pay to a character” is “her ability to be ‘mortified’” (“Jane Austen and the Importance of Being Wrong,” p. 143). The capacity for embarrassment demonstrates an individual’s consciousness of the social code, and Austen’s heroines find more frequent cause for discomfort in others’ violations of propriety than in their own behavior. When the newlyweds Wickham and Lydia present themselves unabashedly upon their ignominious return to Longbourn after their lengthy illicit cohabitation in London, it is Elizabeth and Jane, not the violators of propriety, who feel and demonstrate embarrassment: “*She* blushed, and Jane blushed; but the cheeks of the two who caused their confusion, suffered no variation of colour,” p. 205. Lydia’s failure to recognize her breach of the social code is itself a further breach. (Wickham’s is more specifically identified as “impudence,” p. 205.) As Erving Goffman writes, “One assumes that embarrassment is a normal part of normal social life, the individual becoming uneasy not because he is personally maladjusted but rather because he is not” (“Embarrassment and Social Organization,” p. 269-270). See also Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment*.

From the letter, however, the voice of the narrator is as conspicuously absent as it must be from the protagonist's mind.⁵⁵ As we have seen, in the composition of a letter, the self-conscious writer and the structure of temporal compression assume the narrator's usual functions of enforcing remembrance and irony. These elements are, in a way, built into the reflective, temporally distorted epistolary form. This form, then, enforces an ironic perspective on subjective experience, not merely for readers of the novel, but for readers within the novel. When Austen's protagonists reread their letters, as they very often do, their knowledge of the letter's eventual evolution (the "remembrance" imposed on the reader by the form itself) leads them to reread from an ironic perspective.

Protagonists' judgments, like the letters they write and read, are composed in a cumulative fashion. It is comparatively rare for Austen's heroines to be called upon to act on or even to express their judgments (hence the eligibility of the free indirect style, which can depict thoughts that characters themselves could never voice); most often, they continue accumulating and analyzing information gradually, deferring the formulation of a definitive judgment indefinitely. Mary writes that she has "kept [her] letter open" in anticipation of a piece of news (109); Austen's protagonists keep their judgments open as they gradually accumulate ever more pertinent information. In both letter-reading and judgment, one new piece of information can be pivotal, placing all of a character's prior reading of certain information in a very different light. When they encounter information that conflicts with their understanding of a given topic, Austen's protagonists "reread" their cumulative judgments, much as they reread the subjective experience accumulated in the letters they receive.

Perhaps the most striking instance of such "rereading" – and, indeed, one of the most resonant moments in Austen's oeuvre – occurs in *Pride and Prejudice*, when Elizabeth critically re-examines at once a letter from Mr. Darcy and her own manner of interpreting it. Humiliated and angered by Elizabeth's scornful rejection of his marriage proposal, and anxious to refute her vague accusations of his ill usage of Wickham, Darcy composes his epistolary vindication to Elizabeth the same night. (Note that the letter signifies a special relationship, based on the

⁵⁵ On occasion, Austen's narrator does interrupt the text of a letter with an ironic observation, but the text of a letter itself clearly leaves no room for a narrator.

awkward intimacy created by Darcy's proposal and the possession of this shared secret.) Elizabeth receives Darcy's letter from his own hand the following morning. Biased against Darcy "on the very beginning of [their] acquaintance" by his arrogant manner, and by Wickham's story of the abuses he received at Darcy's hands, Elizabeth initially reads his letter "with a strong prejudice against every thing he might say" (137, 135). But this initial reading raises enough doubt of Wickham's story to leave her in a "perturbed state of mind" that compels her to read the letter again and more carefully (135). The conflict between this new understanding of Wickham and Darcy and Elizabeth's prior judgment of them perturbs her until she can resolve it. Her perplexity, however, leads her repeatedly to defer her conclusion in favor of another reading: "She put down the letter, weighed every circumstance with what she meant to be impartiality – deliberated on the probability of each statement – but with little success. On both sides it was only assertion. Again she read on" (135). This passage suggests the extent of the challenge posed to Elizabeth's judgment, and the persistence required to overcome it.⁵⁶ The first sentence's series of clauses dramatically builds up only to arrive at an anticlimax: Elizabeth's "little success". Her careful "deliberation" and "what she means to be impartiality" do not immediately provide her with an answer. In order to "succeed" in determining which narrative is true, she must first succeed in refining her own approach to the task of judgment, and truly read "impartially," rather than allowing her analysis to be distorted by prejudice. She has already made some progress here; her reflection that "*on both sides* it was only assertion" indicates her increasing emotional distance from Wickham's story. But the statement that she read "with what she meant to be impartiality" suggests that she has not yet turned a sufficiently critical eye on her own manner of deliberation. In order to learn to do so, she must reread yet "again".

⁵⁶ Soni emphasizes that Elizabeth's deferral of judgment is far from a willing suspension thereof: "The state of suspension Elizabeth arrives at is not a state of paralysis, immobility, or equipoise; it is not a skeptical *epochē*. On the contrary, the state Elizabeth finds herself in is a restless one, so unsettled that it even impels her to physical movement: 'In this perturbed state of mind, with thoughts that could rest on nothing, she walked on.' Neither the novel nor Elizabeth herself is content to rest in this restless impasse, to revel in the failure of judgment. Elizabeth's perturbation is not one that continues indefinitely; it is not the perpetual crisis typical of modernity. It ends, by coming to a judgment after a second perusal," "Committing Freedom," p. 115.

Thus in the process of critically reconsidering Darcy and Wickham's "assertions," Elizabeth begins to think more critically about her own judgment. This component of her rereading comes to the fore as she carefully reexamines, not only Darcy's account of Wickham, but her own prior evaluations of both men. In addition to "read[ing], and reread[ing]" Darcy's assertion of Wickham's villainy "with the closest attention," she turns to her own memory for "proof of its injustice" (135). But far from removing her doubts about Wickham, this exercise heightens them, compelling her to reconsider the series of judgments by which she arrived at her "cherished opinion of his worth" (134). She not only notes her inability to "recollect some instance of goodness, some distinguished trait of integrity or benevolence, that might rescue him from the attacks of Mr. Darcy," but also recognizes in retrospect her own errors of judgment. She realizes that "as to his real character, had information been in her power, she [has] never felt a wish of inquiring;" she is "now struck with the impropriety of such communications [as Wickham's account of Darcy] to a stranger, and wonder[s] it [has] escaped her before" (135-136). This point in Elizabeth's introspection is the deliberative analogue to the practice of rereading a cumulative letter whose ending stands in stark contrast to its beginning (like Mary Musgrove's letter to Anne). "Rereading" her earlier assessment of Wickham in the context of a new and conflicting idea opens to Elizabeth an ironic perspective on her own judgment.⁵⁷ Thus her repeated deferral of judgment in order to reread Darcy's account and reexamine her own becomes a reevaluation, not only of Wickham's and Darcy's stories, but, more importantly, of her own analytical ability.

Had Elizabeth been more artfully deceived by Wickham, rather than having in larger part deceived herself (as might have been the case were she the heroine of an earlier kind of novel), Darcy's letter would have functioned as little more than a plot development, certainly not as the more substantial turning point that it is. Elizabeth's active role in her own deception, and her recognition thereof when her beliefs are challenged, render the moment – and the novel – particularly modern. As Elizabeth approaches the climactic realization of her own error, Austen's free indirect narration embeds the narrator deeply into Elizabeth's consciousness. This passage is

⁵⁷ Soni: "Elizabeth does not limit her rereading simply to the letter. Rather, it [is] as though she rereads the novel itself, replaying it in her mind. Her experience foreshadows our own, as we reread *Pride and Prejudice* and discover how differently it reads the second time round," *ibid.*

noticeably bare of the Austenian narrator's typical ironic asides; the ironic remarks occur in Elizabeth's voice as she begins to recognize the underlying irony of her failure of judgment. The narrator's ironic perspective is not necessary to impose the "normative mentality" here, because through "rereading" her judgment as she would a letter, Elizabeth has internalized the normative mentality supplied by irony. She briefly re-interprets her prior observations, directing a narrator's sense of irony against her former views and the drastic change which a new perspective effects in her interpretations: "How differently did every thing *now* appear in which he was concerned! His attentions to Miss King" – a girl Wickham has pursued for her fortune – "were *now* the consequence of views solely and hatefully mercenary; and the mediocrity of her fortune proved *no longer* the moderation of his wishes, but his eagerness to grasp at anything" (136, emphasis mine). The free indirect depiction of Elizabeth's internal struggle concludes, not with an eventual attempt by the narrator to withdraw from Elizabeth's perspective through irony, but with a passage of direct speech in which Elizabeth soliloquizes about her "folly". This abrupt stylistic transition marks the climax of Elizabeth's self-examination: "Till this moment," she exclaims, "I never knew myself" (137). The soliloquy's presence here is particularly jarring both because of its position after a long passage of free indirect discourse, and because of the rarity of soliloquies throughout Austen's oeuvre. At the risk of reading too much into this remarkable stylistic choice, one could argue that the break from free indirect discourse suggests Elizabeth's success in momentarily "surmounting" her own "subjectivity"⁵⁸ to align her perspective with the objective viewpoint of the narrator. The scope of her deliberation likewise seems here to transcend the bounds of her interiority as she voices her thoughts aloud.

Although most of Austen's heroines see the world around them from an ironic perspective, as they develop through social experience they must learn to turn this ironic viewpoint on themselves. Its heroine's failure to do so is part of what makes *Sense and Sensibility* a less mature novel than *Pride and Prejudice*, despite the two novels' having been written around the same time. Elinor Dashwood is capable of directing irony at other characters, but doesn't learn to direct it at herself, or to echo the ironic voice with which the narrator approaches Elinor's thought process. Even when Elinor revisits her relationship with Edward

⁵⁸ Lukács, p. 93.

upon learning of his engagement to Lucy, rather than recognizing the irony of her own willing blindness to his conduct, she feels “resentment of his behaviour,” and “indignation” – not shame or humiliation – “at having been its dupe” (99). She assigns all of the blame for her deception to his conduct, and none to her judgment. By contrast, Anne Elliot, the mature protagonist of one of Austen’s most mature works, can engage in ironic self-examination: “She hoped to be wise and reasonable in time, but alas! alas! she must confess to herself that she was not wise yet” (P 118).

Elizabeth’s critical reexamination of her manner of judgment reflects the influence of the practice of rereading letters. In this scene, Austen explicitly connects the two exercises, pairing Elizabeth’s rereading of her progressive judgments with her rereading of Darcy’s letter. Her willingness to reconsider, again and again, and with the utmost care, the same set of observations and reflections, resembles her attentive re-reading of her sister’s letters in search of a layer of meaning that had escaped her before. Of course, the two situations are quite different, but the habit of critical rereading fostered by epistolary correspondence clearly carries over into, and profoundly affects, protagonists’ introspection, lending to it the organizing principle of “remembrance” that the subjective mind and the free indirect style often lack. In introspection, the protagonist herself assumes the burden of remembrance as she re-examines past observations and reflections in the context of new data. This act of remembrance, contrasting old reflections with new, exposes the limitations on her perspective, fostering in the heroine an ironic view of her own judgment. As Lukács observes, “memory, from the viewpoint of present subjectivity, grasps the discrepancy between the object as it was in reality and the subject’s ideal image of it.”⁵⁹ To acknowledge the constraints of one’s own subjectivity, to acknowledge them systematically by viewing them through the lens of irony, is to turn a critical eye on one’s own judgment. And this critical perspective seeks to transcend, through irony, the very spiritual limitations that engender irony.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ p. 128.

⁶⁰ See Szondi, p. 67.

III. Conclusions

Georg Lukács writes, “Irony, the self-surmounting of a subjectivity that has gone as far as it was possible to go, is the highest freedom in a world without God”.⁶¹ Austen’s heroines’ ironic perspective on the world around them grants them, at a spiritual level, freedom from its constraints. This freedom translates into the detached stance that allows them to enact social conventions as a conscious choice. By examining their own reflections through an ironic lens, protagonists work to surmount the constraints of their subjectivity on their analytical faculties. As they recognize the existence of these constraints, they gain a degree of control over them. While letter-writing provides Austen’s characters with a rare opportunity to account for their judgments to others, the mode of critical rereading derived from letter-reading trains characters to hold themselves to account for their judgments. Although Elizabeth first scrutinizes her judgments about Darcy and Wickham long after she has formulated them, Austen indicates that the shock of juxtaposing past to present reflections will render Elizabeth a more careful judge and train her to turn a critical eye upon herself. Until she had recognized the “blindness” of her judgment, Elizabeth declares, she “never knew [her]self” (137). Time transcends the boundaries of Elizabeth’s immediate subjective experience and affords a broader view than her immediate interiority can access.⁶² The consciousness of this fact leads Elizabeth to acknowledge those boundaries and attempt to broaden them in her future introspection.

Epistolary correspondence, with its attendant (often glaring) temporal distortions, obtrudes the effects of time and the irony of remembrance upon characters’ consciousness, much as the narrator does upon the novel as a whole, and with much the same result: in a world in which the individual consciousness is [...] alienated from external life, a critical perspective is the greatest level of control an individual can achieve over either.⁶³ As a mode of control, of course, the critical perspective (especially that characterized by irony) is necessarily passive (at

⁶¹ p. 93.

⁶² Or, as Lukács writes, taking perhaps a more negative view of the effects of time on the individual in the novel than Austen might espouse, time “gradually robs subjectivity of all its perceptions and imperceptibly forces alien contents into it,” p. 121.

⁶³ On the relationship between judgment and freedom in Austen, see Soni, “Committing Freedom.”

best it can be actualized only as self-control). Austen's heroines, who so often lack the freedom to act, cultivate a rich critical perspective, drawing ever nearer to alignment with the closest thing to a transcendent moral framework to be found in Austen's novels: the firm standards of judgment that are "disembodied" in the critical Austenian narrative voice.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ On the "out-of-body" quality of Austen's narrative voice, see Mark Canuel, "Jane Austen and the Importance of Being Wrong," and D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen: The Secret of Style*.

Chapter 3: “The Extension of Our Sympathies:” *Middlemarch* and the Praxis of Subjectivity

George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* represents a significant stylistic and philosophical departure from the Austen novel. Recall that Austen’s narrative style is characterized by the tension between dialogue and the free indirect style – between the strictly regulated realm of speech and the “free” one of subjectivity. One could divide Eliot’s style along similar (although not identical) lines: characters’ speech vs. the narrator’s depiction of characters’ internal states. But it is more interesting, for my purposes, to consider the relation between Eliot’s largely internally-focused narrative and her narrative intrusions (her narrator’s “speech” to the reader). Because Eliot depicts the “freedom” of the inner life as, to a great extent, illusory, the Austenian contrast between the constraints of dialogue and the freedom of deliberation largely disappears from her novels; and because she depicts characters’ inner lives almost exclusively from the narrator’s perspective, the use she makes of the narrator’s voice becomes the dominant stylistic concern.

Eliot does not abandon the free indirect style altogether, but occasionally intersperses her narrative with glimpses of characters’ thoughts in free indirect discourse (not often longer than a sentence). Eliot is, after all, very much interested in characters’ inner lives – as Stefanie Markovits argues⁶⁵, Eliot increasingly devotes her attention to characters’ mental processes, rather than to their external actions, in her later work. But she traces these processes, if not always with the detachment of the scientist whom she seems to take for her model, always firmly from the narrator’s perspective. Whereas Austen’s narrator distanced the novel from the protagonist’s flawed subjectivity through the occasional ironic comment, Eliot’s narrator explicitly mediates characters’ subjectivity throughout her novel.

⁶⁵ “George Eliot’s Problem with Action.”

I. Narrative and the “Pier-glass”

The narrator of *Middlemarch* intersperses scientifically detached accounts of the process by which characters’ conscious and unconscious motives operate on their minds with direct appeals to the reader to sympathize with the characters in question, based on a possible connection between the reader’s past experiences or behaviors and those of the character. Eliot’s occasional metaphors or more general “comparisons” will have to be divided between these two categories of description of processes and appeals to sympathy: her scientific metaphors generally emphasize the complexity of the process, inaccessible to the characters themselves, by which characters’ minds work (of which more hereafter), while her frequent associations of characters’ situations with general experience seem intended to strengthen the reader’s sense of sympathetic connection to the characters. Describing Lydgate’s efforts to justify to himself the request of a loan from Bulstrode, Eliot’s narrator interjects, “—but who among us ever reduced himself to the sort of dependence in which Lydgate now stood, without trying to believe that he had claims which diminished the humiliation of asking?” (530).

In effect, Eliot wishes in her appeals to the reader’s sympathy to channel the store of the reader’s subjective experience (including the flaws such as selfishness, irrational views, or limitation of perspective that generally impede our sympathy) into a sense of fellow-feeling for individual characters and their specific troubles and flaws. Nancy Armstrong writes, “In concert with the human sciences, Victorian fiction produced a modern individual who incorporated within him all the qualities of the savage. What modern man had that savage man lacked was a distinctive capacity to keep his natural aggression in check and channel that energy toward socially acceptable goals: how one succeeded or failed to contain and redirect his desire... determined that individual’s identity.”⁶⁶ Eliot wishes to redirect her readers’ “savage” impulses and baser feelings, selfish motives that might otherwise emerge in problematic impetuosity, towards the socially laudable goal of an expanded sense of sympathy with the people around them. In her essay “The Natural History of German Life,” she writes,

⁶⁶ *How Novels Think*, p. 81.

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment.⁶⁷

Like Eliot, Iris Murdoch stresses the importance of a sympathetic “attention” in moral life, defining it as “a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality,” which is “the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent”.⁶⁸ In *Middlemarch*, Eliot “surprises” her readers into the “attention to what is apart from themselves” that will awaken their sympathy by explicitly appealing to a set of universal emotional experiences, drawing on widely familiar feelings and circumstances at once to render specific characters, events, and situations realistic, and to evoke the reader's “attention” to them. Eliot’s description of Lydgate’s “delightful labour of the imagination” that “reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens” and “provisionally fram[es] its object to more and more exactness of relation” (154, 155), supports the analogy that many critics have drawn between Lydgate’s scientific project and Eliot’s narrative one. Both apply an imaginative deductive reasoning to the minute processes they wish to trace, “combining and constructing with the clearest eye for probabilities and the fullest obedience to knowledge” (155).⁶⁹ Eliot draws on universal aspects of the human emotional experience at once to render specific characters, events, and situations realistic and to evoke the reader's “attention” to them.

Tracing the (internal) development of Rosamond’s attraction to Lydgate in the early days of their acquaintance, Eliot develops Rosamond’s thought process in stark contrast to Lydgate’s (and, implicitly, the narrator’s) project of particularizing from general experience: “Poor Lydgate! or shall I say, poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing”

⁶⁷ p. 263-264.

⁶⁸ Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, 34.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, Audrey F. Cahill, “Why Not Write in the First Person? Why Use Complex Plots?”, and U.C. Knoepfelmacher, who interprets Lydgate as a foil to Eliot with similar aims but insufficient methods, in “Fusing Fact and Myth: The New Reality of *Middlemarch*.”

(155). Eliot's depiction of Rosamond's world is a negative mission statement, delineating the kind of novel Eliot does not want to write. Rosamond's is a world which, devoid of any grand scientific aim, leaves room for visions of romance rather more extravagantly ill-judged than any which Lydgate's carelessness of this aspect of life has allowed him to formulate. And Rosamond, in contrast to Lydgate and the Eliot narrator, but in keeping with her own narrowly self-centered worldview, reasons inductively. She thrives on "that ruminating habit, that inward repetition of looks, words, and phrases, which makes a large part in the lives of most girls" (156). Indeed, it is only by their potential to be generalized into a prospective romance or marriage that these minute "looks, words, and phrases" deserve contemplation. Rosamond "register[s] every look and word, and estimate[s] them as the opening incidents of a preconceived romance – incidents which gather value from the foreseen development and climax" (156). Rather than proceeding from a general knowledge of Lydgate to a lover's appreciation of all of their smallest interactions, she interprets these "looks and words" as signifying the onset of the generic "romance". Her conclusion that "Lydgate could be no exception" to the rule she is "accustomed to hear that all young men might, could, would be, or actually were in love with her" (156), an apparent instance of deduction, on closer examination suggests a generalization from a series of local suitors (or an over-reliance on the opinions of "the elderly gentlemen who visited the Vincys" (157)).

From this statement Eliot's narrator, still emphasizing Rosamond's fixation on the fragmentary "looks and words" from which she extrapolates so much, proceeds to a flatly tautological remark: "His looks and words meant more to her than other men's because she cared more for them" (156). Situated amid the narrator's reflections on Rosamond's view of Lydgate, the statement seems to issue from the narrator's perspective rather than (in the free indirect style) from Rosamond's. Can we nevertheless take it as obliquely representative of Rosamond's own muddled judgment, and demonstrative of the logical perils of judging inductively from a vantage point of self-absorption? Or has the attempt to delineate Rosamond's thought process caused some temporary logical breakdown on the part of the narrator?

Eliot here faces the task of illustrating Rosamond's mind without, apparently, wishing to resort to the free indirect style long enough to draw the reader fully into Rosamond's perspective. (The most sustained instance of free indirect style in the passage lasts only for the better part of a

sentence.) This little logical hiccup, not clearly traceable either to Rosamond's or to the narrator's perspective, suggests the difficulty of Eliot's attempt in this passage to maintain scientific detachment and clarity while portraying the inner life of a character so absorbed in her own subjectivity. Perhaps more than any other character in *Middlemarch*, Rosamond judges her own thought and action, and that of others, by an internal standard. In other words, she is the character in the novel most like a character in a novel. (Consider Austen's heroines and the source of their norms of judgment and behavior.)

Eliot's description of "Rosamond's romance" is a critique of the novel's feminine, domestic focus, in which "it [is] not necessary to imagine much about the inward life of the hero, or of his serious business in the world: of course, he ha[s] a profession and [is] clever, as well as sufficiently handsome" (156). This could, of course, be read as contrasting the "romance" with the more realistic novel. The "novel" that George Eliot describes here could not, after all, be one with a male protagonist, and could especially not be a male *Bildungsroman* (which would of course center on the hero's discovery of and preparation for his "serious business in the world"). But cast Rosamond as heroine and protagonist – the role in which she places herself – and the novel that forms around her is just the "romance" Eliot describes, to which the heroine's subjective experience is central and the inner lives of other characters, even of the hero himself, barely tangential; and which is, like Rosamond, "entirely occupied not exactly with Tertius Lydgate as he [is] in himself, but with his relation to her," the heroine (156). Eliot notes with irony that Rosamond "read[s] the best novels, and even the second best," and Rosamond's maintenance of the constant subjective, internal focus of a novel's heroine links her still more strongly to the genre. She incorporates "every look and word" from Lydgate into the fabric of her fantasy — a fabric of "foreseen," because cliché, "development and climax" that already suggests overexposure to what George Eliot might consider 'silly novels'— and "ruminates" on them obsessively (156).

In the pursuit of her domestic accomplishments, too, Rosamond modulates her behavior with complete self-consciousness, "diligently attend[ing] to that perfection of appearance, behaviour, and all other elegancies, which would find in Lydgate a more adequate admirer than

she had yet been conscious of”⁷⁰ (156). She becomes more “industrious than ever” in “being from morning till night her own standard of a perfect lady, having always an audience in her own consciousness” (156). It is Rosamond’s self-absorbed (rather than self-aware) subjective experience that gives her existence and behavior meaning for her – no admirably grand and inherently impossible scheme such as those which animate Dorothea’s life. Rosamond, like any Austen heroine, tries to create a fulfilling life for herself within the inherent limitations of her social position (although Eliot gives us no indication that Rosamond recognizes them as limitations). Unfortunately for Rosamond, she is much shallower and less intelligent than any Austen heroine.⁷¹ But her failures of judgment and of self-awareness are not, perhaps, very far removed from the kind of errors to which Austen heroines themselves are susceptible until they learn to practice more critical introspection – including errors brought about by the fancy in competition with the interpretive faculties. But where Austen’s heroines are invested from the beginning in the task of interpretation, Rosamond seems to allow fantasy to replace it. Her fantasy world does not constitute a true, reflective inner life, but obstructs the development of one, obscuring the necessity of and opportunity for self-knowledge.

In the character of Rosamond, Eliot probes the implications of the realistic novel’s subjective mode. If she were the heroine of an Austen novel, or even if she were Gwendolen Harleth in the “novelistic” half of *Daniel Deronda*, Rosamond would, through some head-on collision with the external world, recognize the limitations of her subjective viewpoint and undertake the ongoing task of serious introspection. She does seem to experience such a collision

⁷⁰ Rosamond’s elevation of her everyday domestic activities at first glance recalls the epistolary novel’s valorization of immediate domestic experience. But the fact Eliot depicts Rosamond’s increased “industry” in “being a perfect lady” as performance rather than immediate experience distinguishes her from many, but by no means all, correspondents in novels of letters.

⁷¹ The cause-and-effect relationship between Rosamond’s self-centered fantasy life and her shallowness is circular: presumably her shallowness contributes to her formulating such a fantasy life in the first place; this structure of fantasy, by distorting her perspective of her interactions with others, reinforces her shallow understanding of her existence. Although George Eliot values habit as a means (one of the very few, in her worldview) of shaping one’s own character, it is unclear how one can either determine on or successfully carry out such a course of self-improvement when starting from a perspective as deficient as Rosamond’s; i.e., how the cultivation of a set of habits can truly take a character in a different direction, rather than simply reinforcing extant inclinations (which would, of course, be a good in and of itself), or whether Eliot, after the Greek model, in effect sees character as fate. This question will recur in Section II with Eliot’s treatment of Dorothea.

when Will Ladislaw vehemently spurns her (adulterous) advances. When Rosamond bursts into tears during her conversation with Dorothea, Eliot writes, “It was a newer crisis in Rosamond’s experience than even Dorothea could imagine: she was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others” (611). And, driven by apparently unselfish motives, she vindicates Ladislaw to Dorothea. But Rosamond’s “generous effort” is a mere “reflex of [Dorothea’s] own energy,” not a sign of any real depth or insight (613). Eliot’s sketch of Rosamond’s subsequent life suggests that this “great shock” has not permanently “shattered [the] dream-world in which she [is] easily confident of herself and critical of others;” on the contrary, she “continue[s] to be mild in her temper, [and] inflexible in her judgment,” taking the diminution of Lydgate’s attempts to “oppose” her “stratagems” as a sign that “he ha[s] learned the value of her opinion,” and valuing him in her turn largely because “he gain[s] a good income” (637). The crisis that would in an Austen novel have awakened Rosamond to new self-knowledge by exposing the limitations of her own subjectivity⁷² effects no lasting change in her perspective; her encounter with external fact doesn’t influence her judgment. It may lead her to critical introspection for a time, but that itself would in Eliot’s view be a useless exercise. This aspect of Eliot’s philosophy is in keeping with nineteenth-century novel’s pessimistic outlook on the potential for self-improvement, afforded by interiority.⁷³ Rosamond represents the subjective mode of the novel, and George Eliot’s distaste for this mode is fairly evident. In her essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, she laments that “in novel-writing there are no barriers for incapacity to stumble against, no external criteria to prevent a writer from mistaking foolish facility for mastery”.⁷⁴ Her depiction of Rosamond emphasizes that in the novel’s subjective mode, too, there are no “barriers” or “external criteria” to prevent an individual character from mistaking his individual perspective

⁷² Think, for instance, of Elizabeth Bennet: “Till this moment, I never knew myself.” *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 137.

⁷³ See Murdoch, “In a reaction of thought which is never far from the minds of more extreme existentialists (Dostoevsky for instance), one may turn here towards determinism, towards fatalism, towards regarding freedom as a complete illusion. When I deliberate the die is already cast. Forces within me which are dark to me have already made my decision,” *Sovereignty*, p. 36.

⁷⁴ *Selected Critical Writings*, p. 320.

(however distorted by fantasy) for objective truth. Introspection is not Eliot's answer to the problem of isolated subjectivity. (It will not be much of an answer even for Gwendolen Harleth.)

Rosamond's distorted "dream-world" stands in contrast to Lydgate's and Eliot's "delightful labour of the imagination." Murdoch writes, "Reality is not a given whole. An understanding of this, a respect for the contingent, is essential to imagination as opposed to fantasy. Our sense of form, which is an aspect of our desire for consolation, can be a danger to our sense of reality as a rich receding background." To exercise a sympathetic imagination is to resist the "consolations of form, the clean crystalline work, the simplified fantasy-myth."⁷⁵ Fantasy is a (literally) self-centered way of organizing experience, while imagination, although still starting from the individual's perspective, takes into account the "richness" of the "background" of reality. In the "pier-glass" passage, Eliot equates human "egoism" to a candle placed next to a scratched pier-glass which will produce "the flattering illusion of concentric arrangement" even though "it is demonstrable that the scratches [i.e., "events,"] are going everywhere impartially" (232). Not only do "the consolations of form" preclude the development of sympathy with others, they actively distort the egoist's perception of reality. Essentially, Eliot suggests that the individual's judgment is unreliable because of his tendency to organize and understand experience in narrative form. This perspective calls into question not only the value or reliability of judgment but also the capacity of the novel to carry out "great art's" project of "extending" readers' "sympathies" – a project, however, in which Eliot explicitly includes "the novelist".⁷⁶ A set of diffuse events, ordered and assigned some meaning by the illumination of an individual perspective, is the plot of a novel. And it is this structure which Eliot suggests is a

⁷⁵ Murdoch suggests that "the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea of character"—an idea very near to Eliot's philosophy – is the best antidote to "the consolations of form," "Against Dryness," p. 294. Slavoj Žižek also connects fantasy to the need for a structure, even if a distorting one, through which to understand experience: "fantasy does not simply realize a desire in a hallucinatory way: rather, its function is similar to that of Kantian 'transcendental schematism': a fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its co-ordinates; that is, it literally 'teaches us how to desire'. The role of fantasy is thus in a way analogous to that of the ill-fated pineal gland in Descartes's philosophy, this mediator between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*: fantasy mediates between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of the objects we encounter in reality – that is to say, it provides a 'schema' according to which certain positive objects in reality can function as objects of desire, filling in the empty places opened up by the formal symbolic structure," p. 7.

⁷⁶ *Selected Critical Writings*, p. 263-264.

gross distortion of “demonstrable” reality, a perversion of truth that will stifle the development of sympathy. Yet she chooses the novel form for her own project of expanding readers’ sympathies.

Eliot clearly wishes to write a different kind of novel, one representing the “demonstrable” truth that events are “going everywhere impartially”. *Middlemarch* is marked by a strong tension between the narrative structures of the novel’s subjective mode and Eliot’s project of fostering a broadly sympathetic attitude in the reader. In this context it is worth noting again what was mentioned above, that her appeals to the reader’s “attention” and “sympathy” necessarily interrupt – even systematically disrupt – the progress of the narrative. Her interest in “extending the sympathies” of her readers also leads her to extend the bounds of what can be considered a unified “narrative” by including a wide range of plotlines involving characters of many different socioeconomic backgrounds. As Frederic Jameson remarks, “George Eliot is subversively outspoken on the matter of point of view, democratically insisting on everyone’s right to this narrative centrality... [N]ow not the fateful destiny of this or that privileged or at least narratively favored protagonist, but rather the immense interweaving of a host of such lots or fates will involve a prodigious shifting of the axes of the novel.”⁷⁷ Henry James regrettably notes⁷⁸ that the breadth of Eliot’s perspective precludes a sustained focus on the mental state of any individual character – such as Dorothea, the ostensible protagonist. James might argue that holding the candle of individual consciousness to the pier-glass of events would allow for a deeper and more sustained psychological study of an individual. On the other hand, despite her consciousness that “the scratches are going everywhere impartially and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement,” the tidy closes to which Eliot brings some plotlines still suggest the “flattering illusion” of providential arrangement – perhaps most notably the Fred Vincy-Mary Garth subplot, in which Fred loses his expectation of

⁷⁷ “The Experiments of Time,” p. 119. As Ginsburg and Nandrea note, however, not all of Eliot’s characters in *Middlemarch* receive truly “equal” treatment from the narrator. *Prose of the World*, p. 250.

⁷⁸ “Unsigned review (*Middlemarch*).”

inheriting Stone Court only to become its owner after all, and the Bulstrode-Raffles-Ladislaw subplot, reliant on a rather far-fetched series of coincidences.⁷⁹

Thus, although *Middlemarch* pushes the limits of what constitutes narrative, it would not be accurate to say that Eliot places it in opposition to novelistic narrative. The narratory perspective is a crucial factor for Eliot, making the difference between an imaginatively “attentive” account of reality and one distorted by fantasy. Hannah Arendt writes,

Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants. All accounts told by the actors themselves, though they may in rare cases give an entirely trustworthy statement of intentions, aims, and motives, become mere useful source material in the historian’s hands and can never match his story in significance and truthfulness. What the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least as long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences, because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows. Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and ‘makes’ the story.⁸⁰

Thus, for Arendt – and for Eliot – in this vaguely behavioristic view, it is the “historical” perspective of the storyteller⁸¹ (who stands at a sufficient distance from the pier-glass to see its surface evenly illuminated) which discerns the true meaning of a series of events or “actions,” while those who participate in the story as it develops cannot know either the full story or its meaning – i.e., cannot fully appreciate the consequences of their actions or the ramifications of the events they experience. The “meaningfulness of the act” to the storyteller must always differ from its “meaningfulness” to the actor. The former locates the act’s meaning in what follows from it; the latter, in what led to it. For the actor, it is the act’s relation to himself, i.e. the process of deliberation resulting in the act, that gives it meaning. But for the storyteller, the act’s basis in deliberation becomes irrelevant, superseded by the act’s far-reaching external consequences – by

⁷⁹ See Jameson, p. 124-125.

⁸⁰ *The Human Condition*, p. 192.

⁸¹ Recall Benjamin’s distinction between “storyteller” and “novelist,” p. 83-84.

what results from it. The disjunction between actor and storyteller originates in the actor's investment in, and the storyteller's (i.e., ultimately the story's, or history's) indifference to, the Aristotelian narrative of a judgment that has its end in action

This is George Eliot's "basic irony" – very different from Austen's as characterized by Trilling.⁸² Austen's narrator and her protagonists, as we have seen, respond to the restrictions on "dialogue," or social life, by developing a critical ironic perspective, which flawed protagonists eventually learn to direct towards their own limitations of judgment. The sense of limitation that shapes *Middlemarch*, by contrast – the limitation of the candle of an individual consciousness or ego held up to the pier-glass of "events" – may be less easily internalized by characters. Eliot describes the most fundamental irony of her novel when she writes that "any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifferent or the frozen state with which we look at our un-introduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our dramatis personae folded in her hand" (102). For Eliot, the ironic perspective is that which takes the broadest view of human society (or the scratched pier-glass of events), recognizing all of its small and accidental connections, perceiving the furthest effects of an individual action, and resisting "the consolations of form". The irony here consists in the dissonance between the self-centered narratives through which individuals understand a set of events, locating the meaning of outer life (action) within their inner lives (deliberation), and the historian-narrator's broader, more objective understanding of a set of events, taking an action as the beginning, not the result, of the process that will determine its ultimate meaning.⁸³ As Arendt notes, because of the "inherent boundlessness" and "inherent unpredictability" of action, "the full meaning" of the story that

⁸² Recall that Trilling calls Austen's "basic irony" "the recognition of the fact that the spirit is not free, that it is conditioned, that it is limited by circumstance," p.293.

⁸³ Franco Moretti finds the locus of what F.R. Leavis identifies as Eliot's "maturity" – which "seems to imply 'complexity and completeness, fullness of vision and response'" – in the narrator of *Middlemarch*, whom Moretti calls "[a] character sui generis who reiterates the rupture we had already noticed in Balzac: maturity is no longer achieved within the story, but only in the disembodied universe of discourse. And the relationship between the two levels of the text is inversely proportional: the more devastating the characters' failure, the more impressive the narrator's self-mastery. It is the discontinuity between maturity and life that is stressed here, not their amalgam," p. 222.

results from any action “can reveal itself only when it has ended.”⁸⁴ How, then, does Eliot “put action on the inside”?⁸⁵

The ironic perspective of Eliot’s omniscient narrator is necessarily much less accessible to the individual – if accessible at all – than the Austenian narrator’s fundamental irony of personal limitation. Without insight into the eventual consequences of any given action, characters can at best weigh every individual action, however small or mundane, very carefully. Murdoch’s “attention” is a “task” which “goes on all the time[;]... at apparently empty and everyday moments we are ‘looking’, making those little peering efforts of imagination” – like those of Lydgate and the narrator – “which have such important cumulative results”.⁸⁶ In mundane and domestic situations, the situations sometimes overlooked by the storyteller or historian because of their smallness of scale, judgment becomes as significant as action. It is in this sphere that “willing, judging, desiring, and feeling gain the same ontological status as acting” in Eliot’s novels; hence Eliot’s “preference for unhistoric acts”.⁸⁷ And, as Stefanie Markovits points out, this understanding of the moral life is concordant with, not antagonistic to, the structure of the novel: “the acts glorified by George Eliot are those of novels, not of epics and legends.”⁸⁸ The story of characters’ judgments, their moral choices, is played out in the “everyday moments” and actions which open a space for a deliberative process sufficiently small that its meaning will not be invalidated by sweeping consequences, yet which, as it creates a habit, will produce “important cumulative results.” According to Aristotle, a judgment is achieved only when it issues in an action. Eliot likewise (as her treatment of Rosamond demonstrates) distrusts the free reflective mode, often separate from the possibility of action, that characterizes the novel. In the cultivation of habits through the achievement of a succession of micro-judgments on the smallest scale, Eliot’s characters gain some degree of deliberative purchase on their day-to-day activities, although it belongs to the Eliot narrator alone to

⁸⁴ p. 191-192.

⁸⁵ Markovits cites this D.H. Lawrence quote, “George Eliot’s Problem with Action,” p. 785.

⁸⁶ Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, p. 43.

⁸⁷ Markovits, p. 785.

⁸⁸ *Ibid* p. 789, 790. Consider the epistolary novel’s valorization of everyday experience, as discussed in my Chapter Two.

understand either the scope of the “story” or the inner workings of the individual characters themselves.

II. Inner Processes

The scientifically detached, purportedly objective, tone in which Eliot’s omniscient narrator describes characters’ thought processes illustrates her view that individuals cannot fully understand themselves or the “meaningfulness” of their actions. One of the earliest and strongest assertions of this view in *Middlemarch* comes in her unsettling non-explanation of the activities of Mrs. Cadwallader, the neighborhood busybody:

Now, why on earth should Mrs Cadwallader have been at all busy about Miss Brooke’s marriage...? Was there any ingenious plot, any hide-and-seek course of action, which might be detected by a careful telescopic watch? Not at all... Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. In this way, metaphorically speaking, a strong lens applied to Mrs Cadwallader’s match-making will show a play of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she needed. (74-75)

Far from being driven to meddle in Miss Brooke’s affairs by “an ingenious plot” of her own, Eliot suggests, Mrs Cadwallader is driven in all of her actions and behaviors by minute, biological causes discernable neither to the people around her nor to herself.

Eliot’s statement that Mrs. Cadwallader and the people who interact with her are manipulated, unbeknownst to them, by “a play of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she need[s],” claims that human life, human social interaction, human behavior and action, are just as biologically predetermined as

the microscopic organism's mode of food intake. This scientific, deterministic perspective on human motivation recurs in similar contexts, such as Eliot's epigraph to the chapter (LIII) describing Bulstrode's perspective on his purchase of Stone Court: "It is but a shallow haste which concludeth insincerity from what outsiders call inconsistency – putting a dead mechanism of 'ifs' and 'therefores' for the living myriad of hidden suckers whereby the belief and the conduct are wrought into mutual sustainment" (418). This comment strikingly resembles Eliot's assessment of Mrs. Cadwallader's motivation in its ascription of the relationship of "the belief and the conduct" to the biological image of a "living myriad of hidden suckers". Note that Eliot here even more explicitly replaces the human capacity for reason – "a dead mechanism of 'ifs' and 'therefores'" – with the supposedly more vital, inexorably biological, workings of "living... hidden suckers" beyond our knowledge or control – as the source of human thought and behavior.

This perspective appears to leave little room for either free will or effective judgment. For that reason, it is a startling view to hear from a novelist. If our every act as humans is pre-determined by some scientific process that we can neither control nor understand – why write novels?⁸⁹ And if, as Eliot's statement suggests, the application of successively "stronger lenses" will offer new perspectives on a situation, reveal new processes, and suggest new causal explanations *ad infinitum* – can a novelist ever hope to understand or portray human motivations and desires? These questions are at the root of Eliot's deviation from the functions and interests of the novel as established by Austen. Austen's worldview, and the particular problems in which she is interested – the problems of attaining self-knowledge and of regulating, according to some higher norm, deliberation that is removed from the possibility of action – closely correspond to the novel's structural characteristics as described by Lukács – the structure of a subjectivity alienated from external reality, kept in check by the narrator's irony.⁹⁰ Her novels, while illustrating the challenges of just interpretation, of communication, and of self-knowledge,

⁸⁹ The perspective that Eliot offers here seems more comfortably aligned with that of the classical epic, in which each character's role and duties are so clearly defined that there is often only one honorable course of action available to him in any given situation, although even then, of course, he has the free choice between honorable fulfillment of his duty and disgrace.

⁹⁰ p. 84.

remain grounded in the individual consciousness and in the conviction that self-knowledge is attainable. Even a character as relentlessly unpleasant as Mrs. John Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility* has some capacity, Austen suggests, for self-knowledge: she resents being obliged to take her sisters-in-law to an evening party because “...when people are determined upon a mode of conduct which *they know to be wrong*, they feel injured by the expectation of anything better from them” (SS 175, italics mine). Nearly every word of the first clause of this quote directly conflicts with the content or implications of Eliot’s Mrs. Cadwallader analogy. In the world that Eliot describes, Mrs. John Dashwood could neither truly “determine upon a mode of conduct” (it would be pre-determined for her), nor “know it to be wrong” – and this latter for two reasons. First, Eliot’s picture of human motivation cuts off any prospect of self-knowledge. If even our judgments are generated by a movement of “thought vortices” or “a living myriad of hidden suckers,” of which we know nothing and over which we therefore have little control, and if no amount of adjustment of perspective (through the application of a “stronger lens”) brings us any conclusive information about ourselves or our motives, we lack the tools to deliberate about our own judgments, and therefore our “courses of action”.

Second, Mrs. John Dashwood could not, in an Eliot novel, “know her course of action to be wrong” because, in the moral universe Eliot posits here, the concepts of right and wrong lose their meaning.⁹¹ George Eliot’s tender moral sensibilities have often been remarked on, but it must be admitted that they are of a peculiar kind. Results of actions are good or bad as they eventually prove helpful or harmful to others, and as they eventually shape the actors themselves, but, in a world where we can determine neither our actions nor their consequences, can there be “right” and “wrong” courses of action – can there be a moral norm that transcends individual subjectivity, or merely a “web” (one of Eliot’s favorite motifs) of undetectable processes and

⁹¹ Jameson: “[W]hat has been lost in the shift in the replacement of a diachronic providentiality – an attention to the salvation of the individual – by [Eliot’s] synchronic vision is simply the ethical itself, or better still, any sense of evil as such. There is, in George Eliot, goodness, but its opposite is simply unhappiness; and we are forbidden to judge either Casaubon or Bulstrode as evil, even [though] their contemporaries may well do so. The point is that, reinscribed in the web of interrelationships, what is painful or unhappy for one subjectivity in this immense network can, as it is transmitted over the links of a whole series, be transformed into something positive for others; just as the reverse can happen too. But this possibility of the transformation of negative into positive, of suffering into happiness and back, clearly lifts these categories up into another suprapersonal dimension and tends to efface older ethical or eudaimonic meanings,” p. 123-124.

coincidences? If Mrs. John Dashwood's rudeness to her sisters-in-law is the result of the workings of her "thought and speech vortices," no other course of action is open to her; can her "mode of conduct" then be considered "wrong"? If Bulstrode is inevitably impelled (note how the passive voice creeps into a discussion of Eliot's view of human agency) to murder Raffles by the microscopic workings of his "myriad hidden suckers," he is not choosing between acting rightly and wrongly; he is acting without choice.⁹²

The deterministic picture drawn by Eliot in the Mrs. Cadwallader passage leaves little room for free will, any fixed understanding of right and wrong, self-knowledge, or any benefits of deliberation. It is a grim prospect. But despite Eliot's wariness of individual judgment and of large-scale action as too easily derailed by unconscious motives, she redeems this worldview, and illuminates the contribution that such a view can make to the genre of the novel, by finding in it a small space for the entrance of judgment and the free will, and, consequently, for the ideas of right and wrong. We may be driven by the unknowable workings of "thought and speech vortices," but, through the exertion of our free will, at the "apparently empty and everyday moments"⁹³ when we deliberate about actions on a small scale, we can create new vortices for ourselves, preparing ourselves for future judgments. After all, although Eliot's narrator arouses our sympathy for Bulstrode (in large part through a detailed delineation of his acknowledged and unacknowledged motives) I doubt that any reader would judge his murder of Raffles to be a

⁹² Aristotle's definition of a voluntary action further illustrates the problematic nature of this view of human agency: "[T]o distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying the nature of virtue... Those things, then, are thought involuntary, which take place by force or by reason of ignorance; and that is forced of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts – or, rather, is acted upon, e.g. if he were to be carried somewhere by a wind, or by men who had him in their power," *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 38. The image of being "carried somewhere by a wind" conjures Eliot's favorite metaphor of being carried along in a current of emotion, and raises the question whether she would consider being "acted upon" by "thought and speech vortices" or the "myriad hidden suckers" that bring "the belief and conduct into mutual sustainment" as analogous to being acted upon by an external force like a wind. On the other hand, "the moving principle" here can hardly be considered external to the character, which suggests that Aristotle would consider his action voluntary – *impelled* rather than *compelled* – and Bulstrode thus responsible for his actions. S.T. Coleridge emphasizes the vital importance of this distinction to an understanding of individual moral responsibility, *Opus Maximum*, p. 36-38.

⁹³Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, p. 43.

morally neutral act. In several passages detailing his deliberations, Eliot points to the nature of Bulstrode's error. For instance:

Strange, piteous conflict in the soul of this unhappy man, who had longed for years to be better than he was – who had taken his selfish passions into discipline and clad them in severe robes, so that he had walked with them as a devout quire, till now that a terror had risen among them, and they could chant no longer, but threw out their common cries for safety. (548)

Bulstrode has set himself on the wrong path, and become a hypocrite instead of the Christian he “longed to be,” by failing to develop active Christian habits to displace the sinful ones denoted by the long companionship of his “selfish passions”. He has cultivated mere self-discipline⁹⁴ instead, for instance, of attempting to replace his selfish habits of mind with a habit of charity. Although he donates his time and money to “causes” like the new hospital, he is not charitably disposed towards his individual neighbors and relations; that is, he does not practice charity in his day-to-day life. For this reason, his Christian life in Middlemarch has been more deeply duplicitous than he realizes, and his attempts at introspection and firm self-control have proven futile.

The idea that virtue is predetermined by psychological “vortices” and “myriad hidden suckers” suggests some scientific interpretation of the doctrine of predestination. Austen's interest in introspection and self-knowledge can be seen as a particularly Calvinist preoccupation, but the dramatically different worldview presented in Eliot's novels suggests a merger of scientific with Calvinist ideas, in which the elect are biologically predisposed to cultivate the good habits and live the virtuous lives that are the sign of election, while the predispositions of the rest prevent them from living virtuously. Eliot does, however, assign to humans an active role in determining their fate. Stefanie Markovits, noting the similarities between John Stuart Mill's idea of free will and Eliot's own, quotes a passage from Mill's

⁹⁴ Recall the importance of “self-discipline,” “self-command,” and “self-possession” as a means of reigning in the subjectivity for Austen. For Eliot, by contrast, the limitations of convention no longer allow for self-control; they merely restrict our sympathies. Self-command, not a virtue that Eliot's heroines tend to possess in great abundance, is a false safeguard, failing its would-be practitioners at crucial moments, since neither self-knowledge nor complete self-control is within characters' power.

Autobiography and remarks on “the way in which after the difficulty is defined as one of human action, action itself drops out of the account, to be replaced by character, will, and habit. George Eliot typically treats action in this way. She wants to preserve a sphere for action, but the only kind of sphere she can envision, given her determinism, is tremendously limited.” Consequently “George Eliot obsesses over habits, good and bad” (788). This, surely (as indeed Markovits suggests)⁹⁵, is one reason for Eliot’s choice of the novel: the genre’s focus on “apparently empty and everyday moments”⁹⁶ allows Eliot to give small-scale deliberation and action a degree of narrative weight proportionate to their moral weight.

For Eliot, habit is the free will’s surest point of access and our surest means of escaping the fetters of our (biologically predetermined) subjectivity. Aristotle identifies habit as the means of developing “moral virtue” (the counterpart of “intellectual virtue”): “by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust... Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities” (23-24).⁹⁷ Without entering here Eliot’s perspective on the classical virtues, I think it is safe to say that Eliot considered habit to be of the utmost importance in shaping character, especially as it was one of the few opportunities available to humans in a deterministic universe to assert some agency over the quasi-biological processes that determined their thoughts, beliefs, and actions – and hence to shape their destiny. Habit is uniquely suited to play a pivotal role in this worldview because over time it “leads” the will into a “state of nature,”⁹⁸ thus, paradoxically, incorporating human agency into the very undetectable processes that seem to deny all possibility of such agency.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ p. 789.

⁹⁶ Murdoch, “Sovereignty,” p. 43.

⁹⁷ Markovits also references this passage, p. 785.

⁹⁸ Felix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, p. 73.

⁹⁹ Quoting Hannah Arendt, Markovits emphasizes the distinction – crucial for Eliot – between authorship and agency: “Arendt... den[ies] the concept of the authorship of one’s own story: ‘although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through his action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer.’ Arendt could have been describing the narrative of a George Eliot novel. The positive aspect of this scenario is the creation of community; as both Arendt and George Eliot recognize, the acknowledgment of our essential interrelatedness that allows for the working of

Felix Ravaisson, a contemporary of Eliot's,¹⁰⁰ writes,

In the end, this state of nature to which habit leads thought back, as it leads back the will and movement, is the condition and the primary source of any distinct thought, as it is of any express will and of any determinate movement. How can we deliberate about grasping in the present or retrieving from the past an absent idea? Either we are looking for what we already know, or we do not know what we are looking for. Before the distinct idea that reflection searches out, before reflection itself, there must be some kind of unreflective and indistinct idea, which occasions reflection and constitutes its matter, its beginning[,] and its basis. Vainly would reflection withdraw into itself, for it would only seek and yet escape itself forever. Reflective thought implies, therefore, a prior intuition, immediate and confused, in which the idea is distinguished neither from the subject that thinks it nor from thought itself. It is in the uninterrupted current of involuntary spontaneity, flowing noiselessly in the depths of the soul, that the will draws limits and determines forms.¹⁰¹

Habit, Ravaisson argues, becomes absorbed into the natural process of “involuntary spontaneity” that shapes all of our ideas, judgments, and, therefore, actions. Thus the means of self-improvement available to Eliot's characters is to create an instinctive, unconscious, or quasi-biological motivation – to “lead thought back,” as Ravaisson puts it, to a “state of nature”. Yet “habit is not... merely a state, but a disposition, a virtue” (25).¹⁰² “In short, the end result of habit

sympathy depends on the web woven of our collective deeds. But because of the web, individual action (especially action conceived on a grand scale; this distinction is important to George Eliot) rarely achieves its purpose... To use George Eliot's own metaphor in *Felix Holt*, her characters are trying to play chess with pieces that have passions and intellects of their own (FH, p. 236). Of course George Eliot herself has control, but she is the only real author. Arendt's distinction between authorship and agency is subtle, mirroring the conflict between free will and destiny. Like Arendt, George Eliot firmly believes in both, for all her insistent determinism, her belief in “inexorable consequences,” p. 787-788.

¹⁰⁰ Although Eliot's letters do not mention Ravaisson – see *The George Eliot Letters* – it is possible that she encountered his work.

¹⁰¹ *Of Habit*, p.73-75.

¹⁰² As F.R. Leavis points out, Eliot illustrates the effect of a “disposition” or habit of thought in the absence of any space for deliberative choice in her description of Gwendolen's acceptance of Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda*. “It will be noted how beautifully the status of Gwendolen's spontaneously acted self is defined by her relieved and easy assumption of it once the phase of tense negativity has issued in ‘Yes’. And it was clearly not this self that pronounced the ‘Yes’; nor does it come from a profound integrated

is self-improvement without explicit self-knowledge. This “disposition” or “virtue” is Murdoch’s “cumulative effect” of careful, “attentive” deliberation in small moments.

Eliot might agree at least in part with Samuel Taylor Coleridge that, “[t]he more consciousness in our Thoughts and Words, and the less in our Impulses and general Actions, the better and more healthful the state both of head and heart.”¹⁰³ Once one establishes the right guiding habits (habits of “consciousness,” or Eliot’s and Murdoch’s “attention”), the less free range that remains for an inherently flawed process of deliberation in any given crisis, the better. Coleridge, arguing that the Holy Spirit may act “in regenerate souls” from “within the will,” considers “motives,” or the results of deliberation, not quite as “a dead mechanism of ‘ifs’ and ‘therefores,’” but as “symptoms of weakness, and supplements for the deficient Energy of the living Principle, the Law within us.”¹⁰⁴ At a climactic moment in the novel, Eliot will echo this idea of “the living Principle, the Law within us,” as a guiding force for our actions. Of Dorothea’s struggle with her grief in her effort to do good, Eliot writes, “She yearned towards the perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her, and rule her errant will” – or that it might become, in Ravaisson’s conception, the basic idea “distinguished neither from the subject that thinks it nor from thought itself” (606). But in order to internalize her ideal of “the perfect Right” Dorothea will need to adopt the Eliot narrator’s mode of deductive thought.

self. George Eliot’s way of putting it is significant: “‘Yes’ came as gravely from Gwendolen’s lips as if she had been answering to her name in a court of justice.’ This is a response that issues out of something like an abeyance of will; it is determined for her. No acquiescence could look less like an expression of free choice. Yet we don’t feel that Gwendolen is therefore not to be judged as a moral agent. The ‘Yes’ is a true expression of her moral economy; that the play of tensions should have as its upshot this response has been established by habits of valuation and by essential choices lived. ‘She seemed to herself to be, after all, only drifted towards the tremendous decision: -- but drifting depends on something besides the currents, when the sails have been set beforehand.’ Even before what she saw as a moral objection arose to confront her, she had had no sense of herself as able to settle her relations with Grandcourt by a clear and free act of choice,” *The Great Tradition*, p. 106-107.

¹⁰³ *Aids to Reflection*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 58-59, 79.

III. Outward Extension

Eliot's account of Dorothea's decision to help Rosamond despite her own jealousy describes her willed progress from a passive to an active habit. She suggests that the inclination towards sympathy for Rosamond stems in part simply from Dorothea's character: "It was not in Dorothea's nature, for longer than the duration of a paroxysm, to sit in the narrow cell of her calamity, in the besotted misery of a consciousness that only sees another's lot as an accident of its own" (605). Yet her departure from "the narrow cell of her calamity" and "the besotted misery of her consciousness," in order to do something for Rosamond, is neither a natural movement for her nor one rendered "second nature" by long habitual practice. Although Dorothea has cultivated sympathetic habits of thought, she has yet to develop habits of action which will render her mode of thought useful. Her twofold decision to consider the situation from Rosamond's perspective – i.e., to sympathize with her – and to act on this sympathy, is the result of an intense effort of will, and marks the climax of Dorothea's *Bildungsroman*.

Throughout the novel, Dorothea longs to enter the active life. Her status as a female of high birth certainly limits her potential to act, although, ironically, it is as a wealthy widow – one of the most independent positions in which such a woman could find herself – that she seems perhaps most paralyzed. Indeed, Dorothea's own mode of thought is for much of the novel as great a constraint on her action as any aspect of her social position.¹⁰⁵ She wishes, as we know, to be very sympathetic (and she often is), but she is largely held back from doing much concrete good by what Eliot describes as her "theoretic" mind, which "yearn[s] by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there" (34). In effect, she yearns for a praxis. But she is so "enamoured of intensity and greatness" that she is "likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractations, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it" – i.e., to accomplish little in the attempt to execute a grand theory on a grand scale.¹⁰⁶ In "The Natural History of German Life",

¹⁰⁵ Markovits intriguingly suggests that "because of George Eliot's preference for unhistoric acts," the constrained, domestic role of the woman, preventing her from acting on a grand scale, "once accepted, is really a liberation to *do*," p. 790.

¹⁰⁶ It's true that Dorothea convinces Sir James and, later, Mr. Brooke, to enact her scheme for arranging tenants' cottages, and institutes the same arrangement on Mr. Casaubon's estate, but this can be seen as

Eliot remarks on the insufficiency of “[t]he tendency created by the splendid conquests of modern generalization, to believe that all social questions are merged in economical science, and that the relations of men to their neighbours may be settled by algebraic equations,” arguing that art, by presenting “a true conception of popular character” should not only “guide our sympathies rightly” but also “check our theories, and direct us in their application” (265). Dorothea’s aspiration to solve the great “social questions” of her age through “theories” and “generalizations” is a Quixotic one. In this respect, she embodies what Charles Taylor calls “an extremely important fact about modern consciousness: a tension between the affirmation of ordinary life, to which we moderns are strongly drawn, and some of our most important moral distinctions... We struggle to hold on to a vision of the incomparably higher, while being true to the central modern insights about the value of ordinary life.”¹⁰⁷

Franco Moretti argues that by the famous final paragraph of *Middlemarch* “the standpoint of vocation has been abandoned, because “to suggest that it can be fulfilled within everyday personal relationships implies a perversion of its meaning.”¹⁰⁸ He writes, “even though her relations hold her to be too ‘abstract’, Dorothea’s true vocation seems to lie rather in the realm of the ‘concrete’, and she can only conceive of ‘reforms’ immediately at one with everyday life: ‘I should like to make life beautiful – I mean everybody’s life. And then all this immense expense of art [Dorothea is in Rome], that seems somehow to lie outside life and make it no better for the world, pains one.’ (*Middlemarch*, 22).”¹⁰⁹ Not content with mere abstractions, Dorothea is one of the modern St. Therasas of Eliot’s “Prelude” to the novel, who “tr[y] to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement” (31).¹¹⁰ But she is constantly prevented from doing so, not only by (as

the unique situation in which Dorothea’s abstract schemes achieve fruition through the more active self-interest (and, in the case of Mr. Garth, much active good-nature) of others, and through Mr. Casaubon’s money.

¹⁰⁷ *A Secular Age*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁸ p. 218.

¹⁰⁹ p. 217-218.

¹¹⁰ This is exactly the purpose (or a “noble” version of the purpose) that Eliot ascribes to the “living myriad of hidden suckers” of the epigraph to Chapter LIII, claiming that is by their means (rather than by the “dead mechanism of ‘ifs’ and ‘therefores’ to which observers erroneously attribute the behavior of others) that “the belief and the conduct are wrought into mutual sustainment,” p. 418. The failure of the

Eliot points out) the restrictions of her social milieu, but also by the conflict between the “reforms” she “conceives of” and her day-to-day behavior – between her theory and her practice.

Moretti writes, “What transcends direct personal experiences does not interest Dorothea because it transcends them, but in so far as it can be restored to everyday life. Her most emphatic vocational pronouncement comes to her lips, symptomatically enough, at the thought of marriage: ‘There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal.’ Dorothea’s error, as the text will make clear, does not lie so much in constraining the vocational ethic within domestic walls: does not lie in her desire to ‘*marry Pascal*’, but in having married *Casaubon*: i.e., chosen the wrong husband.”¹¹¹ Yet (as Eliot herself might be the first to point out) Dorothea’s choice of Casaubon is not a mere “error” committed in a vacuum; it reflects her own values and wishes – and indeed points to a conflict in them. On one level she is attracted to Casaubon because she hopes to be able to “devote herself to [the] large yet definite duties” which she expects to come from the “lofty conception of the world” that her scholarly spouse will reveal to her – hopes that he will supply her both with a sweeping theory of life and an associated praxis (63). On another level, perhaps, she is drawn to Casaubon because his weaknesses as a scholar resonate with the flaws of her own “theoretic” mind. His grandiose theorizing on an obscure topic, and his paralyzing unwillingness to move from a lifelong labor of abstract contemplation to the concrete action of publication until his theory is perfect, ironically render him a particularly appropriate mate for a young lady whose activity is so hampered by her own proclivity for abstraction. The novel will indeed bear out Moretti’s observation that Dorothea’s “constraining the vocational ethic within domestic walls” is no crippling “error;” on the contrary, it is only through learning to act on “the vocational ethic within domestic walls” that Dorothea will effectively reconcile her “lofty conceptions of the world” with “the parish of Tipton and her own conduct there.” Eliot not only

“modern St. Therasas” to recognize the importance of the mundane moments that determine the disposition of these “hidden suckers” contributes to the dispersion of their “loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness... among hindrances” which stands in contrast to the “incalculably diffusive” “effect... on those around her” which Dorothea, through achieves through “unhistoric acts,” p. 640. The image of the distribution of a great force among small objects is nearly identical, but it is Dorothea’s intentional focus on “unhistoric acts” that allows her to avoid the less successful St. Therasas’ plight of apparent “inconsistency and formlessness,” p. 31.

¹¹¹ p. 218.

enforces the benefits of “constraining the vocational ethic within domestic walls,” but, in the failure of Dorothea’s initial struggles to do otherwise (as in the Lydgate plot), suggests the pitfalls of attempting to act effectively on a grand scale.

The “concrete” “vocation” Moretti describes creates a tension that straitens Dorothea throughout the novel: she can “conceive of,” but not actively carry out, “reforms” touching “everyday life”. In the first chapter of the novel, this tension is already palpable. Dorothea, Eliot tells us, can “not reconcile the anxieties of a spiritual life involving eternal consequences” with “the solitudes of feminine fashion” (34). Yet, having just refused her sister Celia’s suggestion that Dorothea as well as herself wear their mother’s old jewels, she “suddenly” falls “under a new current of feeling” and becomes enraptured with an emerald necklace (39). Both Dorothea and Celia become uncomfortable in the consciousness of the former’s inconsistency. The “scene... end[s] with [a] little explosion” between them, and, although the chapter concludes with a proportionally subtle reconciliation, the dissonance revealed between her judgment and emotion-driven, impulsive practice sets the stage for her difficulty with consistent, effective action throughout the novel.

Dorothea is paralyzed by her inability to particularize her abstract deliberations into “her own rule of conduct... in the parish of Tipton” on a day-to-day basis. She yearns for a praxis, but struggles to render any theoretical view of life consistent with the “current” of her own emotion. In Eliot’s worldview, the scope of human life is far beyond the individual’s ken; none of Dorothea’s detached theorizing can give her the keys to understanding the world, and thence to an “epic life wherein there [is] a constant unfolding of far-resonant action” (31). Instead, in order to act on her judgment at all, Dorothea must learn to think deductively, to apply her grand schemes for how humans should live together to the particular human interactions within the limited range of her view and influence – the sphere in which she longs to apply a “lofty conception of the world.”

As Dorothea reflects on Rosamond’s situation, she aligns her strong, situation-specific emotion with her abstract judgment of her duty through a rigorous effort.¹¹² Convinced after her

¹¹² See Ravaissou: “Effort comprises two elements: action and passion. Passion is the manner of being that has its immediate cause in something other than the being to which it belongs. Action is the manner

accidental encounter with them that morning that Rosamond and Ladislav are carrying on an adulterous relationship, Dorothea, finally recognizing that evening in the bitterness of her disappointment the depth of her love for Ladislav, gives way to her overwhelming emotion. But afterward, she feels “as if her soul [has] been liberated from its terrible conflict; she [is] no longer wrestling with her grief, but [can] sit down with it as a lasting companion and make it a sharer in her thoughts” (605). Her “paroxysm” over, Dorothea seeks to reconcile her intense emotion with these “thoughts” (605):

She began now to live through that yesterday morning deliberately again, forcing herself to dwell on every detail and its possible meaning. Was she alone in that scene? Was it her event only? She forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman’s life – a woman towards whom she had set out with a longing to carry some clearness and comfort into her beclouded youth. (605)

The questions “Was she alone in that scene? Was it her event only?” are clearly free indirect snatches of her own analytical process – questions that she puts to herself, since the omniscient narrator has already supplied the reader with an ample answer. When Dorothea poses them, too, it is as rhetorical questions – not points of dispute, but conscious promptings to recognize the already determined answer – no – and to probe its full implications. The narrator’s word choice equally emphasizes the rigor of Dorothea’s deliberative exercise, repeating that she “forces herself” to engage in this thorough examination from a fresh perspective. In effect, Dorothea revisits the scene after the fashion of the Eliot narrator, prompting her own critical capacities (as Eliot’s narrator prompts the reader’s) and demanding thorough consideration of “every detail and its possible meaning”. As she “live[s] through that yesterday morning deliberately again,” it remains suffused with emotion, but through questions and adjustments of perspective, she redirects that emotion, transforming it into active sympathy: “she said to her own irremediable grief, that it should make her more helpful, instead of driving her back from her effort” (as the Eliot narrator will draw on a reader’s supposed emotional experience to evoke sympathy for a

of being whose immediate cause is the being to which that manner of being belongs. Action and passion are thus opposed to each other; the coming together of these contraries contains all the possible forms of existence. Effort is therefore not only the primary concern, but also the archetype and essence, of consciousness,” p. 43.

character). Dorothea's mode of deliberation, and (unsurprisingly) Eliot's too, is the kind that consists in actively striving to shift one's perspective, and learning to perceive another's lot as sympathetically as we all view our own.

Dorothea's wish to harness her own emotion as sympathy leads into her wish to act, so that here, where "helpful" action is possible, she not only conceives of action as the natural end of deliberation but actually carries it out. Her many moments of reflection on the desire to perform a "rescue" take their "cumulative effect" here. She recognizes the difficult situation between Lydgate, Rosamond, and Ladislaw as one to which her charitable ideals apply, giving her a duty to act: "And what sort of crisis might not this be in three lives whose contact with hers had laid an obligation on her as if they had been suppliants bearing the sacred branch? The objects of her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy: they were chosen for her" (605-606). Dorothea realizes that the constraint of specific circumstances, which shapes all lives and actions, gives a specific shape to her abstract wish to "rescue". In this free indirect passage, as she contrasts this shaping influence of circumstances with the influence of "her fancy," Dorothea's word choice ("fancy" rather than "judgment") suggests a dawning awareness of the distinction between deliberation divorced from feasible action and deliberation where action is possible. Circumstance has guided her to "objects of rescue" whom it is within her power to help, whereas Dorothea's fondness for abstraction would lead her beyond the realm of the practical, where she could accomplish little. Immediately after Dorothea's shocking encounter, to Celia's asking what was troubling her, she responded, "'Oh, all the troubles of all the people on the face of the earth.'... 'Dear me, Dodo, are you going to have a scheme for them?' said Celia, a little uneasy at this Hamlet-like raving" (597). Now, faced with a "trouble" that it is in her power to address, Dorothea recognizes taking practical action, rather than developing universal "schemes," as her duty. She thus adopts the Aristotelian mode of deliberation in which "[w]e deliberate about things that are in our power and can be done" (43). And her adoption of a deductive mode of thought enables her at long last to act both consistently and productively (rather than rave like Hamlet) – i.e., to find a praxis.

Dorothea's decision to return to talk to Rosamond marks her entrance upon a new set of active habits grounded in her ideals,¹¹³ fulfilling her "yearn[ing] towards the perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her, and rule her errant will" (606). Equally important, by giving Rosamond the opportunity (and inclination) to clarify to Dorothea the nature of her relationship to Will Ladislaw, it enables his and Dorothea's marriage, thus allowing Eliot's idealistic heroine to rule her errant Will in more ways than one. It is worth briefly noting the allegorical implications of Eliot's choice to conclude one thread of her "home epic" (635) with the fruitful union of her idealistic heroine and the impulsive, explosively emotional Will. Not only is this marriage associated with Dorothea's newfound ability to act on her judgment, it also liberates Will from functioning as a senseless tool – "a mere pen and mouthpiece" – in the tortuous workings of the political system (as Eliot has suggested that the human will is played upon by intricate biological processes) (622). As Dorothea's husband, Will becomes "an ardent public man, working well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good" (638)¹¹⁴, rather than an "errant" "pen and mouthpiece" without any convictions of his own. By espousing himself to Dorothea's idealism, he in his turn acquires theories and ideas to give his individual actions consistency and purpose. Thus each gains from a marriage grounded in deductive thought.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Eliot emphasizes that this development is a turning point in Dorothea's life: looking out her window at the "moving figures" in the early morning, Dorothea feels "the largeness of the world and the manifold waking of men to labour and endurance" – an awakening which she has just undergone and a world of purposeful action that she is about to enter. "She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining," p. 606. She will join the anonymous walkers outside, and become one of "the number who live faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs," p. 640.

¹¹⁴ The novel's central political and historical activity – the elections and the vote on the Reform Bill – are likewise events that require the translation of a theory or ideal into an action – the act of voting.

¹¹⁵ As Moretti observes, the novel's other deductive thinker, Lydgate, does not fare so well in the merger of lofty aspirations and domestic life (see p.218). Like Dorothea, he hampers himself through an ill-judged marriage to a woman whose faults reflect major flaws in his own judgment: a failure to apply the careful attention that he bestows on his medical work to his day-to-day social interactions, and a willingness to project cliché fantasies of the ideal woman onto Rosamond rather than carefully consider either Rosamond's true nature or what qualities he would truly value in a wife.

IV. Conclusions

The solution to the problem of subjectivity that Eliot offers in *Middlemarch* is not a fully satisfying one. Deductive thought, the internalization of some high moral judgment as a habit to be applied in our day-to-day encounters, does not quite redress the rather sinister influence of the “vortices” and “myriad hidden suckers” whose workings we cannot truly understand, although the habits we develop do shape them. One must first determine upon an ideal and afterwards will oneself to act on it, as Dorothea has done. And there is a risk that one’s judgment may not escape the malignant influence of the wrong sort of vortices in this process – that is, that the creation of character through habit may be at most a reinforcement of the character traits from which one begins. The view of human character formation that Eliot presents could be seen as an adaptation of the Greek idea of character as fate. For Eliot, past character significantly steers future character development, which in turn determines one’s ability to escape the limitations of subjectivity through sympathy.

Eliot’s own discomfort with this system of bringing the individual out of the confines of the subjectivity is readily apparent in her subsequent novel, *Daniel Deronda*, in which the compromise of acting on one’s ideals in small, domestic ways disappears from view. Instead, its infamous double structure confines its heroine to tortured introspection in a limbo of conventional society¹¹⁶ while freeing its hero from his paralyzing excess of deliberative sympathetic imagination by sending him out to Palestine to carry out the grand actions in keeping with a more sweeping, historical or theoretical perspective on life and society. Unfortunately, this solution is no more satisfying, since in effect Eliot relegates introspection, critical self-examination, and the conscious lack of praxis in a world of limitations to the “realistic,” or novelistic half of the story – the Gwendolen narrative – while liberating Daniel from the paralysis of introspection (and from a restrictive social sphere) by assigning him a sweeping theoretical idea that comes with a ready-made group identity and allows for

¹¹⁶ Eliot seems to punish Gwendolen Harleth, like Rosamond, for thriving in the narrow feminine role – accomplishments, flirtation, witty conversation, etc. – but Gwendolen’s punishment is crueler in proportion to her greater intelligence and self-awareness, and she suffers in being awakened to the pain of the domestic sphere’s limitations without being offered a satisfying means of escape from the constraints of convention.

improbably grandiose action. The novel ends before Daniel runs against the need to particularize¹¹⁷ or Gwendolen finds a chance of developing a satisfying praxis.

Clearly, despite her appreciation of Austen's work¹¹⁸, George Eliot's approach to the questions inherent in the novel's form represents a significant departure from Austen's. As a consequence of her worldview, Eliot finds the novel's internal focus (as honed by Austen) deeply troubling. Though both novelists seek to achieve the same eventual end – the liberation of the individual from the confines of isolated subjectivity – Eliot's chosen means of doing so differ markedly from Austen's – a difference no doubt owing to her radically different view of the extent to which an individual can understand himself or his world. Eliot prefers “the extension of sympathy”¹¹⁹ from the realm of theory into specific human interactions to the constant reflection and introspection that are crucial to the perpetual struggle for self-knowledge, and which make up the core of Austen's novels. She sees self-knowledge, which was for Austen almost the ultimate good, as a chimera, and the struggle to attain it as a doomed effort that can only lead to solipsism and self-delusion.¹²⁰

Yet despite her distrust of the novel's internal focus and its attendant interest in self-knowledge, Eliot's choice of the novel form is, in some important respects, an effective one. She clearly appreciates its (and Austen's) emphasis on the deliberative space of day-to-day life. It is in day-to-day life that our moments of incremental deliberation, the small judgments we make without prolonged consideration of “motives,” add up to habits of behavior that will come to

¹¹⁷ Through a banal image of Daniel's potential life in Palestine, Henry James's Pulcheria wryly points out the disconnect between Daniel's lofty scheme of establishing a Jewish nation in Palestine and any day-to-day plan of action for its implementation upon his arrival: “‘Well,’ said Theodora, ... ‘I wonder what he accomplished in the East.’ ... ‘Oh,’ [Pulcheria] replied, ‘they had tea-parties at Jerusalem – exclusively of ladies – and he sat in the midst and stirred his tea and made high-toned remarks. And then Mirah sang a little, just a little, on account of her voice being so weak,’” *Daniel Deronda: A Conversation*,” p. 417.

¹¹⁸ See *The George Eliot Letters*. Eliot's style also bears conspicuous marks of Austen's influence.

¹¹⁹ “The Natural History of German Life,” p. 263.

¹²⁰ For Austen, the more you practice the skill of critical self-examination, the more self-knowledge you gain, whereas for Eliot, as we have seen, you can search ever deeper into your mental process without actually understanding it any better.

shape our larger actions. This idea of habit, and the importance it assigns to the commonplace and domestic areas of life, is thus the intersection of “plot” or “history” and individual judgment and agency – of subjective and historical narrative. Murdoch’s account of the moral life, in its resemblance to the novel’s structure, suggests the genre’s central place in investigations of judgment:

If we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. This does not imply that we are not free, certainly not. But it implies that the exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial... Of course psychic energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary.... Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion.¹²¹

The novel, more strongly than most other literary genres, presents judgment as indeed “something that goes on continually” in a “piecemeal” fashion, in the unimportant as well as “important” “moments”. Its structure captures the small but “crucial” space for judgment that Eliot finds in everyday life, “between the occurrence of explicit moral choices” – the succession of moments in which we “build up the structures of value” that will shape our explicit choices.

¹²¹ *Sovereignty*, p. 37.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, several words and ideas have stood out as particularly useful and important for considering the novel's representation of judgment. Some of the richest, most resonant words have come to me secondhand: Lukács's "dissonance"¹²², Benjamin's "remembrance"¹²³, and Murdoch's (echoing Eliot herself) "attention"¹²⁴. All three of these ideas are clearly associated with the reflexivity of the novel; indeed, all relate to irony. Irony clearly constitutes the recognition of a dissonance, specifically, between internal and external worlds. Remembrance, which Benjamin has called "the Muse-derived element of the novel"¹²⁵ is likewise a form of irony, reminding us at once that we are continuous consciousnesses – i.e., that our inner experiences are not discrete but fully connected – and that we are fallible and inconsistent, forgetting to hold two different people or situations to the same set of criteria, and losing sight at crucial moments of those values and ideas we have considered as most important to our attempt to live the good life. "Attention" or "attentiveness" is the practice of reflexivity whereby we mark the difference between the appearance of external phenomena and the event of their being registered by and for our consciousness. It thus serves as a transition from the merely factual and adventitious to the domain of meanings and, as such, enables us to keep our ideals in sight in the small as well as the climactic moments in our lives. It is another form of the irony of the limitation of human consciousness (for the "limitation of the spirit"¹²⁶ that Trilling has brought up is also an important concept here), reminding us not to take our own first impulses as infallible, but to stop and consider what view of the world they will lead us to construct. In the novel, irony is the crucial beginning of the process of understanding oneself. As Benjamin writes, the novel is "the medium of reflexivity."¹²⁷

¹²² p. 72.

¹²³ p. 98.

¹²⁴ *Sovereignty*, p. 34.

¹²⁵ Benjamin p. 98.

¹²⁶ p. 293.

¹²⁷ Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," p. 134.

At the present time, many see this reflexive medium as on the wane, and Benjamin's claim that the rise of "information" "brings about a crisis in the novel"¹²⁸ has come to seem perhaps prophetic. The novel has lost its hold on our culture's imagination, lost out to rapid-fire delivery of information, so that, rather than undertake a sustained, critical encounter with a depiction of a dynamic human consciousness, we learn to take in short bursts of information on a wide range of topics. (Although one hesitates to repeat doomsday clichés about the Internet age, it seems impossible to broach this subject without a nod towards Twitter's infamous 140-character limit as illustrative of a cultural fixation on quick information intake rather than sustained analysis.) What has been lost in the information-saturated and distraction-prone digital age is precisely a "medium for reflexivity" – a medium for thinking critically about how we understand and relate to the world around us. This is not to say that nothing has been gained as technological innovation drives us to process and respond to information with unprecedented rapidity. Still, "we need a new vocabulary of attention,"¹²⁹ a language of reflexivity, so that we may develop a considered understanding of who we are and what our role is in our society rather than being buffeted about by the constant onslaught of information.

The novels of Jane Austen and George Eliot offer two distinct ways of thinking about the conditions under which we undertake judgments; that is, two different accounts of self-knowledge and self-formation. Austen points toward a process of orientation with respect to a transcendent norm that is accessible within through truly critical introspection, while Eliot emphasizes the importance of orienting oneself with respect to a surrounding community. Both capture the effort such a reorientation requires. Elizabeth's reflection on Darcy's letter and Dorothea's consideration of her duty to come to Rosamond's rescue resemble each other in the sense of sheer will that both heroines exert to see past their biases to a fundamental truth. If there is one thing that these moments, and these novels, tell us about judgment it is that it requires constant effort, even in the moments when we feel least willing to make it. We cannot accept our initial perceptions, reactions, conclusions; we must work to understand and shape them. By revealing the limitation of our perspective, novelistic reflexivity confers on us a degree of

¹²⁸ p. 88.

¹²⁹ Murdoch, "Against Dryness," p. 293.

responsibility; in other words, it bestows on us a degree of agency. The novel tells us that we do not have to go through life as passive receptacles of information; we can choose to make an effort, to examine our judgments, to consider the relation we adopt to the outside world. If I could extend the project, I think it would be helpful to pursue the question of how these authors understand the role of the individual in society through an examination of the conceptions of the past presented in the structure of their novels – the character or identity, the individual, interior past; and history, the collective, external past.

Works Cited

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, Chicago: U Chicago P, 1998.
- Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. David Ross. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2009.
- Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.
- . *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism 1719-1900*. Columbia UP, 2005.
- Austen, Jane. *Emma*. Ed. Stephen M. Parrish. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2000. 3rd ed.
- . "Letter to Cassandra Austen (4 February 1813)." "Backgrounds and Sources." *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. Donald Gray. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2001, 3rd ed., p 273.
- . "Letter to Anna Austen (9-18 September 1814)." "Backgrounds and Sources." *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. Donald Gray. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2001, 3rd ed., p. 276.
- . *Mansfield Park*. Ed. Claudia L. Johnson. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1998.
- . *Northanger Abbey*. Ed. Susan Fraiman. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2004.
- . *Persuasion*. Ed. Patricia Meyer Spacks. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 1995.
- . *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. Donald Gray. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2001. 3rd ed.
- . *Sense and Sensibility*. Ed. Claudia L. Johnson. New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2002.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism." *Selected Writings, 1913-1926*. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1996. p. 116-200.
- . "The Story-Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2007.
- Butler, Marilyn. *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Oxford: Oxford UP 1987, reprinted 2002.
- Cahill, Audrey F. "Why Not Write in the First Person? Why Use Complex Plots? Some Thoughts on George Eliot's Theory and Practice." *Theoria*, vol. 68 (Dec 1986): p. 15-23.

- Canuel, Mark. "Jane Austen and the Importance of Being Wrong." *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Summer 2005): p. 123-150.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Aids to Reflection, in the Formation of a Manly Character on the Several Grounds of Prudence, Morality and Religion*. Liverpool: E. Howell, 1874.
- . *Collected Letters*. Ed. Leslie Griggs. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.
- . *Opus Maximum: The collected works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Vol 15. Ed. Thomas McFarland and Nicholas Halmi. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002.
- Cottom, Daniel. "The Novels of Jane Austen: Attachments and Supplantments." *Novel*: (Winter) 1981.
- Eliot, George. *The George Eliot Letters*. Ed. Gordon Haight. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.
- . *Daniel Deronda*. Ed. Edmund White. New York: The Modern Library Classics, 2002.
- . *Middlemarch*. Ed. Gregory Maertz. Ontario: Broadview P, 2004.
- . "The Natural History of German Life." *Selected Critical Writings*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1992, p. 260-295.
- . "Silly Novels By Lady Novelists." *Selected Critical Writings*. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1992, p. 296-321.
- François, Anne-Lise. *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 2008.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 2nd. Ed., New Haven: Yale UP, 2000.
- Ginsburg, Michael Peled, and Lorri G. Nandrea. "Prose of the World." *The Novel*, Franco Moretti, ed., Vol 2, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006, p. 244-273.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Trans. Burton Pike. New York: The Modern Library, 2005.

- . *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship. Goethe's Collected Works*. Ed. and trans. Eric A. Blackall, Vol. 9. New York: Suhrkamp, 1989.
- Goffman, Erving. "Embarrassment and Social Organization." *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 2, no. 3, Nov. 1956, p 264-271.
- Herd, Jennifer. *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 2008.
- Humphrey, Robert. *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1954, reprinted 1968.
- James, Henry. "Daniel Deronda: A Conversation." *Atlantic Monthly* (Dec 1876), vol. 38, 684-694. Reprinted in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*. David Carroll, ed. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1971, p. 417- 433.
- . "Unsigned review (*Middlemarch*)." *Galaxy*, vol. 15 (March 1873): p. 424-428. Reprinted in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*. David Carroll, ed. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1971, p. 353-359.
- Jameson, Frederic. "The Experiments of Time," *The Novel*. Ed. Franco Moretti. Vol. 2, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006, p. 95-127.
- Johnson, Claudia L. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1988.
- Knoepfmacher, U.C. "Fusing Fact and Myth: The New Reality of *Middlemarch*." *This Particular Web: Essays on Middlemarch*. Ian Adam, ed. Toronto: U Toronto P, 1975.
- Laclos, Choderlos de. *Dangerous Liasons*. Trans. Helen Constantine. London: Penguin, 2007.
- Leavis, F.R. *The Great Tradition*, New York: NY U P, 1963.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*. Trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge, Mass.: the MIT Press, 1971.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame, Indiana: U Notre Dame P, 1984.

- . *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame, Indiana: U Notre Dame P, 1988.
- Markovits, Stefanie. "George Eliot's Problem with Action." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol 41, No. 4, The Nineteenth Century: (Autumn 2001): p. 785-803.
- Miller, D.A. *Jane Austen, or, The Secret of Style*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003.
- Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987.
- Murdoch, Iris. Murdoch, Iris. "Against Dryness." *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1998, p. 287-295.
- . *The Sovereignty of Good*. New York: Schocken Books, 1970.
- Pascal, Roy. *The Dual Voice*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977.
- Pfau, Thomas. "The Letter of Judgment: Practical Reason in Aristotle, the Stoics, and Rousseau." *The Eighteenth Century*, vol 51, no 3 (Fall 2010): p. 29-56.
- Pinkard, Terry. *Hegel's Phenomenology*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Poovey, Mary. *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1984.
- Rajan, Tilottama. *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1990.
- Ravaisson, Felix. *Of Habit*. Trans Clair Carlisle and Mark Sinclair. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*. Trans. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Vol. 6. Series ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly. Hanover: Dartmouth College P, UP of New England, 1997.
- Ricks, Christopher. *Keats and Embarrassment*, London: Oxford UP, 1974.

Soni, Vivasvan. "Committing Freedom: Judgment in Rousseau and Austen." *The Eighteenth Century*, vol 51, no 3 (Fall 2010): p. 103 -127.

---. "Introduction: The Crisis of Judgment." *The Eighteenth Century*, vol 51, no 3 (Fall 2010): p. 1-28.

St. Clair, William. *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

Szondi, Peter. *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, Trans. Harvey Mendelsohn, University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989.

Trilling, Lionel. "Mansfield Park." *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent*. Ed. Leon Wieseltier. Evanston Il., Northwestern UP, 2008. 2nd ed. p. 292-310.

Vincent, David, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Polity P, 2000.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997.
