

“DESCRIBING WHAT NEVER HAPPENED”:
JANE AUSTEN AND THE HISTORY OF
MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

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I.

Jane Austen's fictions are seemingly rife with missed opportunities. From her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), to her last completed novel, *Persuasion* (1817), the missed opportunity casts a shadow over Austen's world that her narratives never quite succeed in either dispelling or, even in *Persuasion*, fully redressing. *Sense and Sensibility* is forever haunted by the specter of John Willoughby, whose own reflections at the novel's close—in particular the “pang” he experiences at the thought of Marianne Dashwood's marriage to Colonel Brandon—are less a retributive instrument than a darkling echo of earlier prospects that the novel has concertedly nurtured.¹ It is no accident surely that, in a typical gesture of damage control, the recent cinematic adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* has no place for the most cinematic moment in the entire book: Willoughby's tenth-hour, and largely self-exculpatory, visit in the midst of Marianne's near-fatal illness. The movie, it is true, ends with a version of Willoughby in pang as he surveys Marianne's and Brandon's domestic tranquility from afar. But this grandiose and contrived image of him contravenes the novel's concluding observations (and directives), which are marked less by melodramatic longing than by a duller ache where the everyday is simply fraught and set against an horizon of plenitude from which life and its pleasures are a falling away:

But that he was for ever inconsolable, that he fled from society, or contracted an habitual gloom of temper, or died of a broken heart, must not be depended on—for he did neither. He lived to exert, and frequently to enjoy himself. His wife was not always out of humour, nor his home always uncomfortable; and in his breed of horses and dogs, and in sporting of every kind, he found no inconsiderable degree of domestic felicity.²

The countercurrent against which happiness must struggle for Willoughby, and the marital and gender division it projects, hardly requires unpacking.

But what is less immediately clear is how the impedance to joy, both here and elsewhere in Austen, is as much a function of things as they are as an index of something missed or bypassed that does not belong entirely to the realm of fantasy. In addition to noting that Marianne remains Willoughby's "secret standard of perfection in woman," and a placeholder for the very plenitude that Willoughby had himself figured (and had figured as recently as his dramatic reentry to the narrative), the narrator projects a different sequence of events from those that have transpired. For "in the voluntary forgiveness" of his benefactor following his marriage to what the novel calls "a woman of character," Willoughby is given "reason for believing that had he behaved with honour towards Marianne, he might at once have been happy and rich." This is not of course how things have worked out, either for Willoughby or for Marianne, who is gloomily described as being "taken from" her family on the occasion of her marriage.³ Still, the force of any lesson derivable from these developments is mitigated not just by the imperatives of comedy, which see to it that Willoughby is left, more or less unpunished, in the company of his animals and diversions, but even more by what in the context of the novel is very nearly a historical imperative. In this respect, loss is not strictly speaking absence but a residue or trace of something sufficiently palpable in its lingering materiality that it literally blots both the comedic close and the *sententia* attached to it.

Persuasion, by contrast, appears pitched in a different direction insofar as the interrupted union of Anne Elliot and Capt. Frederick Wentworth is identified at the novel's outset as the problem or missed opportunity that the narrative must somehow redress. But even as *Persuasion* is given over in nearly exclusive measure to restoring what was lost in the prehistory of the narrative, when Anne initially rejected Wentworth's proposal of marriage, it is far from clear that what Anne has missed, much less what is restored to her at the novel's close, rises to the level of the plenitudinous. If anything, the opportunity Anne willfully forsakes in the narrative's prehistory, or that she declines to pursue for reasons that exceed and contradict her retrospective view that she merely bowed to family pressure in rejecting Wentworth, remains an opportunity that she may be right in continuing to avoid, which she in fact does for much of the novel. And, once again, we have the cinematic adaptation of *Persuasion*, and the damage control

it compulsively exerts, to recall this particular irony. Where the novel ultimately deposits its heroine in domestic space, where she remains (in her own description) “quiet, confined” and where her “feelings prey upon [her],” especially in “the dread of a future war,” the movie finds Anne happily aboard ship in contravention not just of the novel but of her husband’s own proscriptions and the gender divisions they help foster. “I hate to hear of women aboard ship, or to see them on board; and no ship, under my command, shall ever convey a family of ladies any where, if I can help it.”⁴

My point is not to diminish *Persuasion*’s knowing and therefore bittersweet pursuit of Anne’s requital, however moderated. It is to stress that the missed opportunity that informs *Persuasion*, or just as memorably *Pride and Prejudice*, is primarily a symptom in Austen’s writing rather than a device relating primarily to the exigencies of plot. For it is plot, after all, with its temporal momentum forward, that creates the missed opportunity, making it an historical matter in contrast to which any fulfillment in and over time, whether by marriage to Wentworth or even to Fitzwilliam Darcy, is tantamount to letting “the real perish into art” (in Walter Benjamin’s apt description) or into the particular probabilism that we call realism.⁵ Nor is it a coincidence that at the very juncture when the missed opportunity is almost certainly within recovery, whether at Elizabeth’s visit to Pemberley or following the events at Lyme in *Persuasion*, other prospects and opportunities emerge, contesting those whose achievement is necessarily a foregone conclusion. At Pemberley Elizabeth’s gaze is suspended between the vista of Pemberley House, and the fantasies of marriage and proprietorship it provokes, and the equally delightful view, indeed prospect, from Pemberley’s windows, where the landscape typically recedes beyond recognition or closure. So, too, Anne’s seemingly inevitable procession to marriage, and to the achievement of what she had previously forsaken, struggles in *Persuasion*’s second volume against an ever pressing anteriority, or what amounts in the act of reading to a kind of collective memory, where Anne’s earlier autonomy, underwritten in large measure by her invisibility to the male gaze, stands in critical relation to her more recent interpellation as the heroine of romance.

So, in effect, the missed opportunity in Austen figures an alternative history: a history that, while unfulfilled and unwritable, does not lack a material sanction, which proves the sanction, in turn, for something that lingers in the face of disappointment or even in the felicity of marital closure. This can also be put in terms relevant to at least one

recent theory of historiography. For the particular dynamic of absence and loss that, on Dominick LaCapra's view, informs a history of the traumatic, where absence gradually modulates to a sense of loss, or to something palpable that can be worked on and through, achieves a condensation in Austen's writing that works to nearly opposite ends. This is so because the loss of which LaCapra speaks involves, unlike Austen's, something wholly and truly palpable. It involves something so fully *lived* that its absence, particularly as such absence becomes "conflated with loss," renders mourning an "impossible, endless, quasi-transcendental grieving, scarcely distinguishable (if at all) from interminable melancholy."⁶ It is LaCapra's purpose, as it was Freud's, to disentangle loss and absence, thereby liberating mourning to a purpose that is therapeutic in a psychological sense and empathic and enlightening in an epistemological register. Such moves are necessary because the traumatic event, specifically the rending that must be felt as absence before the fullness of its void can be marked and understood, is indeed something that, in the words of Hayden White, "really happened."⁷ In Austen, by contrast, we encounter a loss that often barely qualifies as such and a working through, accordingly, where prospect and retrospection are less easily parsed and even cooperative, as the following instances from *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma* jointly show.

The moment in *Northanger Abbey*, which virtually defines the way loss becomes a site of value in Austen, providing still another clue to what D. A. Miller has suggestively termed the "secret" of Austen's "style" (more on this later), is a declarative statement with apparently little bearing on the matters I have just raised. Confronted by Isabella Thorpe with the news that she had given Isabella's brother, John, "the most positive encouragement" as a potential suitor, Catherine Morland states flatly by way of reply: "You are describing what never happened."⁸ Catherine's reply seems innocent enough, all the more in that John Thorpe, as readers have already witnessed, remains fairly repellent. Nevertheless, the charge of "describing what never happened," apart from its immediate application to certain developments (or non-developments) in the novel, is interesting in the way it marshals misrepresentation in the service of "what," to quote White again, "really happened." By its very syntax, in other words, "what never happened" looks in two directions that coalesce into something overdetermined. In a single stroke are a description of something that allegedly took place as well as a voiding of that prospect for which "never" is not just the solitary instrument in Catherine's statement but a prohibition as well that, as her sentence stands, can only embarrass but never erase "what" it is pressed to discountenance.

All of this may seem much ado about nothing. However, beyond the fact that the retrieval of something from nothing is precisely my point regarding the history of missed opportunities in Austen, whose narratives are variously committed to “describing what never happened,” it has an equally specific bearing on the novel at hand. Regardless of whether Catherine is right in her assertion, and whether we are inclined to concur with her claim on the basis of what the novel has made available, there is also a great deal about Catherine that we simply don’t know and a good deal, too, about the nature of her outing, indeed her carriage ride, with John Thorpe that has gone unreported. No matter how odious Thorpe remains to the narratorial gaze, he is indisputably the most sexualized male that Catherine has encountered in the novel thus far and, in the novel’s ultimately complicated engagement with the Radcliffean gothic, the most sexualized man she will encounter. And so no matter how much Catherine protests to Isabella, her “never” carries roughly the same force of denial and the same force of prohibition as it does in a more generalized or thematic vein. “What never happened” provides an aperture, by way of both grammar and other materials, onto other possibilities for which the overdetermined “what” remains the perfect, if ineradicable, placeholder.

The description of “what never happened” is a largely symptomatic event in *Northanger Abbey* in which the pressure of circumstance—both Isabella’s wish-fulfillment and Catherine’s denial—projects an alternative history that collapses immediately under the weight of sheer impossibility. However, when weighed in conjunction with an equally incidental moment in *Emma*, the initiative of “describing what never happened” takes on a quite specific valuation in the way the prohibition signified by “never” is lifted sufficiently now to mark a different course of events that is merely foreclosed upon rather than denied. The moment to which I am referring involves Harriet Smith’s fourteen-minute visit to the family of her rejected suitor Robert Martin, where she encounters friends with whom she had recently lived for six weeks and is brought into proximity with a family, indeed a world, from which she has been persuaded by Emma to distance herself. Recounted in retrospect, which in turn gives it a distinctly historical cast, this moment proves paradigmatic for so much else in *Emma* and, as we shall see, in Austen generally.

The episode begins as Harriet is observed walking away from the Martins’ home in response to Emma’s “summons,” which is relayed by the appearance of her carriage at the Martins’ gate. And it is recounted over the better part of a long paragraph, in which Harriet’s

account of things is refracted so as to include both her perspective as well as Emma's perspective on the evidently "pain[ed]" viewpoint of her companion:

She had seen only Mrs. Martin and the two girls. They had received her doubtingly, if not coolly; and nothing beyond the merest common-place had been talked almost all the time—till just at last, when Mrs. Martin's saying, all of a sudden, that she thought Miss Smith was grown, had brought on a more interesting subject, and a warmer manner. In that very room she had been measured last September, with her two friends. There were the pencilled marks and memorandums on the wainscot by the window. *He* had done it. They all seemed to remember the day, the hour, the party, the occasion—to feel the same consciousness, the same regrets—to be ready to return to the same good understanding; and they were just growing again like themselves, (Harriet, as Emma must suspect, as ready as the best of them to be cordial and happy,) when the carriage reappeared, and all was over. The style of the visit, and the shortness of it, were then felt to be decisive. Fourteen minutes to be given to those with whom she had thankfully passed six weeks not six months ago!—Emma could not but picture it all, and feel how justly they might resent, how naturally Harriet must suffer. It was a bad business.⁹

Like the more obvious missed opportunities in either *Persuasion* or *Pride and Prejudice*, this foreclosure on felicity proves only temporary. The "bad business" that Emma conducts by her summons eventually goes bust and is succeeded by the more enduring enterprise of family happiness in Harriet's eventual marriage to Mr. Martin. But that is not the point, or as much the point here as it is, say, in *Pride and Prejudice*, where Elizabeth's rejection of Darcy at the end of volume two, and the missed opportunity into which it quickly morphs, is plainly central to the plot and to the cultural work that plot performs.¹⁰ Here, by contrast, we have something that, like so much else in this novel, is relatively freestanding: something so palpable (even with a halflife of barely seven minutes) that its cancellation is especially striking and otherwise distinct from the loss for which the longer *durée* of a six weeks' visit is necessarily a precondition. Where the nonappearance of Mr. Martin marks, at least for the moment, a shift in Harriet's life that seems irreversible, plunging her into something like the melancholy that obtains when, as LaCapra notes, absence (in this case of Martin's empenciled hand) is conflated with genuine loss, a mere fourteen minutes of same-sex conviviality propels the text, in imitation of the Martin women, in a different direction. Very much

like the “Miss Martin,” in fact, who is glimpsed at the visit’s end (but appropriately enough at the episode’s beginning), “parting with [Harriet] seemingly with ceremonious civility,” the text is pitched toward the expectation of more: toward a plenitude that something of a few minutes suddenly induces.¹¹

By no means am I disputing the other—most would argue primary—function of this episode, which is connected to the novel’s plot and to the developmental trajectory in which Emma learns the error of her ways en route to becoming a responsible citizen. The “bad business” that Emma recognizes as such, and the resentment that she understands herself to have “justly” provoked, are certainly moments of conscience that, however abbreviated, remain a resource on which the heroine will gradually draw, especially with Mr. Knightley’s assistance. What I am suggesting, rather, is that even as it looks forward to didactic closure, both in Emma’s own reflections and in the more immediate grief that her meddling has produced, the episode stands equally as a synecdoche of Austen’s altogether unique “style.” It does this in the way the everyday, as Austen’s earliest readers were quick to recognize, is at variance with plot, both in its temporal movement forward and as a vehicle of both ideology and regulation. The recursive movement of the episode, both as something glimpsed in retrospect and as a goad to further regression and to the plenitude on which it verges, all seemingly provoked (but also figured) by the pencil marks “on the wainscot by the window,” is not just pitched in a direction contrary to narrative progress, which leads immediately to the severance of Harriet’s relations; it also comprises a sequence of events that filters backward to a vanishing point for which utopia might just be another term. The fullness of description remains an objective correlative for something more again, something that “could not but” be “picture[d],” that neither Emma’s progress to ostensibly responsible agency nor even Harriet’s to matrimony will ever rival, either as events in themselves or as portents. And with such weight of history, and its promise of genuine difference, shadowing any and all developments both present and future, “it was,” as Emma rightly and suggestively opines, “a bad business.”

There are reasons or explanations for this phenomenon in Austen, which in the spirit of Miller’s recent study must be also marked as being characteristically Austenian.¹² And while I differ with Miller about what is most pressing or characteristic of Austen’s style, and about the “secret” that subtends it, I am in general agreement that this style is, first and foremost, a mark of inimitable difference, whether from con-

temporaries such as Frances Burney or from other discourses such as realism or history and the periodizing and explanatory initiatives they serve. In her now famous essay, “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick comments usefully on the “history of impoverished ‘Jane Austen’ readings,” which she correctly assigns to a way with Austen that she tartly describes as “progress[ive].”¹³ Such readings are progressive, she argues, both for their relative contemporaneity in embracing certain heteronormative dictates and, in a movement commensurate with Austen’s own plots, for their invariable endorsement of some moral point or closure that the spectacle of onanism, as Sedgwick discovers it, for example, in *Sense and Sensibility*, recursively resists. “Austen criticism,” she writes, “is notable not just for its timidity and banality but for its unrelenting exaction of the spectacle of a Girl Being Taught a Lesson—for the vengefulness it vents on the heroines whom it purports to love, and whom, perhaps, it does.”¹⁴

We see this vengefulness, or incentives to it, in the episode just noted, where the “picture” of “it all” is clearly evidence against Emma as well as a “spectacle” that Emma introjects, marking herself as a potentially ethical, if still deficient, subject. But what we also see here is something that Sedgwick, with attention again to *Sense and Sensibility*’s embrace of a lost (and subsequently pathologized) “sexual ecology,” calls “residual”: something fathomable but, like the pencil marks on the wainscot, as an afterimage of “what” *was*.¹⁵ Where for Sedgwick the residual is ultimately readable in Austen, and therefore retrievable, over and against certain protocols of reading that have become entrenched in the last century and a half, what transpires in *Emma* is more akin to a description of what (never) happened. And “what” it signifies, both immediately and representatively, is that the very prohibitions that Sedgwick attaches to certain disciplinary discourses, but which are mitigated, on her reading, by a return to history, are not easily undone. If anything, the banality and vengefulness to which Austen criticism is inclined to gravitate are very much at the surface in the *Emma* episode and legitimated along a temporal axis that may very well move initially in two directions—in projecting a missed or foreshortened opportunity—but that is ultimately unidirectional in projecting and representing things as they are becoming.

And so what Sedgwick provocatively identifies in *Sense and Sensibility* is in some ways a misrecognition that marks the faultline between Austen’s achievement and an otherwise proximate achievement more stubbornly invested in an anteriority that Austen, for her part, perceives as sufficiently passed or irretrievable to have (never) happened. The

name for this other achievement is romanticism, and it is the great virtue of Sedgwick's effort at recovery to have marked a site of both difference and similitude that exerts explanatory power. For the institution of reading Austen that Sedgwick inveighs against is primarily (and by her own reading of the prohibitions against passional display in the medical discourse of the 1880s) a misappropriation in which Austen is anachronistically cobbled either to the institution of the realistic novel that she helped found and that flourished in the nineteenth century, or to the satiric—but still regulatory—disposition of what Charles Lamb disparagingly called the “last century.”¹⁶ What almost no critic appreciates, save in relatively banal terms, is that Austen's achievement, marked always by her inimitable difference, is necessarily time-bound: that she is the other in a moment and to a movement to which she maintains a notably synchronic relation.

This is hardly the first time that Austen's relationship to the period in which she wrote has been broached. Despite the influential arguments of historicizing critics such as Jerome McGann, for whom Austen simply gives proof that not every literary production of the romantic period need be romantic, there is a consensus now that Austen's deployment of free indirect discourse, through the focal point of a single character's consciousness, accords with the developing ideology of individualism of which romanticism remains the discourse par excellence.¹⁷ There are, needless to say, many readings that engage the issue of individuality in Austen quite differently or as a development that—whatever her formal sanctions—Austen seeks to mitigate.¹⁸ Almost no one has pressed on the other aspect of romanticism in Austen in which individualism figures, sometimes for the worse: namely romanticism's investment in substantive social change. The reasons for the general reluctance to view Austen in a more oppositional vein are fairly obvious. Despite their frequent disaffection with things as they are, Austen's narratives, with their remarkable attention to the vagaries of quotidian life, appear generally wedded to a probabilistic (as against a romantic or visionary) orientation in which any real apart from what has already happened is generally out of bounds. I am arguing, however, that this sense of the past is less an endorsement of precedent, or a subscription to the empirical logic of probability, than an orientation that inclines toward romanticism in the way the past, as an index of what was also possible, operates alternately if all too briefly as a site of opportunity. Or put somewhat differently, “what really happened” doubles alternately and retrospectively as “what never happened” or, following the gist of Harriet's visit to the Martins, as “what . . . happened” before it was suddenly “all . . . over.”

In an argument with notable affinities to Sedgwick's, Jerome Christensen enlists anachronism—or an insistent anteriority—as a defining feature of romanticism, which he describes as a “movement of feeling that challenges the present of state of things.”¹⁹ In its vaunted primitivism and general preoccupation with things past, the romantic “inappreciation of time” in the movement toward modernity is, for Christensen, a “willful commission of anachronism,” an “assertion of the historical as that which could not be over because it has not yet really happened.”²⁰ All counterintuition aside, what Christensen means to get at in romanticism, over and against the largely Marxist and judgmental shape of historicist readings of romantic discourse and ideology, is a certain intractability of which anachronism remains the vehicle and hope, however paradoxically, the tenor. “The romantic movement,” he writes, “is inescapably anachronistic because it is the politics of the future and always will be until something better comes along.”²¹ Such efforts to filch hope from the jaws of defeat—defeat being the “end of history” in “the freshly consolidated global hegemony of the liberal state” along with certain critical practices that read movements like romanticism as waystations in that teleology—are shrewd and honorable.²² But they comprise an argument that marks, along with Sedgwick's, Austen's proximity to—and *only then* her difference from—the futuristic orientations of her contemporaries. Where romanticism may be recuperated, or at the very least retrieved from the usual charges of evasion or apostasy, thanks to its now-stubborn naiveté, Austen's writing, including the very attention to detail that distinguishes her “style” from that of virtually anyone else writing at this time, reveals her radically skeptical (skeptically radical?) refusal to regard history as a template for the future. For Austen the historical has “really happened,” with the pencil marks to prove it and, worse, with what undoubtedly seemed the “end of history” in plain sight.

II.

We need only look to *Mansfield Park*, which I have described recently as “Jane Austen's future shock,” to see Austen's difference in this regard, which can also be described as the difference between the residual, such as Sedgwick and Christensen construe it, and the residual at its vanishing point.²³ For if it is the case that romanticism additionally marks the birth of a historical practice that, as James Chandler has recently argued, may be deemed a precedent for the historical approach to romantic-period discourse in our time, such

practice is also emptied in Austen's novel of the assured, relatively stable, distance that enables critique, particularly as an engine of progress.²⁴ According to Chandler, the particular, indeed historical, self-reflexivity that develops at this time is effectively two-pronged and the result of two potentially cooperating discourses that he terms the "case" and "casuistry." The case—for example "England in 1819" as it was named and understood by writers such as Percy Shelley—is the "genre in which we represent situations" whereas "casuistry," a practice recuperatively lifted from Catholic theology, refers primarily to "the application of principle" to specific "circumstances" without which a case could not become one. The "case" is by definition, then, "a falling away" from "some principled notion of 'rightness,'" making casuistry, in turn, the "science" that "deals with such cases" and in fact discovers them.²⁵

Now, in *Mansfield Park*, the first Austen novel to be published at the time of its initial composition, this balance of case and casuistry is continually upended. Dubbed "Mansfield Park" in an arguably ironic echo of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield's recourse to Elizabethan precedent in describing England as having "air too pure for slaves to breathe in," the England of Austen's novel is alternately a "falling away" from what the narrative doggedly presents as a better standard of social practice as well as a falling away from something patently residual that continually frustrates its consolidation as a case.²⁶ In something more like a mobius strip or an endless loop, the case and the science that claims to understand it in *Mansfield Park* maintain a perplexing fluidity over the imperatives of narrative, which are didactic and unidirectional. Although decadent and diminished, on the argument of newer principles, the England of *Mansfield Park*—or the England *that is* "Mansfield Park"—is marked equally by an emergent culture, whose seemingly newer principles are challenged in a myriad of ways by the culture aforementioned, which takes a different and longer view of things. Mary Crawford's riposte supporting architectural changes wrought upon a chapel—"every generation has its improvements"—is not just an exercise in unprincipled relativism (even if it appears that way from one casuistic angle) but an observation that wreaks considerable damage on a developmental view of history as well as on any value-system to which a notion of improvement might be tethered.²⁷ Mary's statement explains too, then, why "Mansfield Park," both the site of slaveholders *sans* slaves and the novel so titled, is more than just a site of competing ideologies or values. For in its necessary situation along an axis of development (despite the heroine Fanny Price's ostenta-

tious traditionalism), “Mansfield Park”—the seemingly immaculate and domesticated counterweight to the imperial and military Britain that cannot go by any other name—is far from evenhanded, especially in its projected teleology. Commensurate instead with William or Fanny or even Susan Price’s upward mobility, “Mansfield Park” properly names and masks a Britain very much in formation. It names a culture, in other words, whose values and whose instruments of value, including the institution of the novel itself, are transparently self-serving rather than a reliable measure of anything that, by contrast, is unambiguously “a falling away.” And, once again, we have the missed opportunity as a signifier of what *has* fallen away to mark and measure this critical and disturbing transformation.

The missed opportunities that characteristically inform the three major set-pieces in *Mansfield Park*—the visit to Sotherton, the private theatrical at Mansfield, and, last but not least, Henry Crawford’s efforts to persuade Fanny to become his wife—are remarkable not for their intimations of plenitude *à la* Harriet’s visit to the Martins, but for intimations of the very opposite: for the way that “what never” happens in these three instances is virtually unrecuperable save as the other to what the narrative aggressively promotes. The result in each instance of Fanny’s opportunistic reticence, what the missed opportunity exposes is the winner-take-all logic that drives the narrative in the very image of the imperium it serves. On the losing side of a culture war, in other words, in which both the narrative and its heroine are impressed, are possibilities that time and progress have to a large degree vanquished.

The first such opportunity, presented during the visit to Sotherton, comes nicely in the form of a “prospect,” which Fanny and her walking companions, Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford, are prevented from entering by a locked “iron gate” and an adjacent ha-ha that “give” Maria in particular “a feeling of restraint and hardship.” Rather than waiting for their host, Mr. Rushworth, to unlock the gate with a key, Maria accepts Henry’s assistance in “pass[ing] round the edge of the gate,” leaving Fanny to remonstrate by warning Maria that she will hurt herself. But Maria does not hurt herself. She negotiates the “prohibitions” with Henry’s assistance and the two are quickly out of view, leaving Fanny alone “with no increase of pleasant feelings” which soon escalate to “disagreeable musings.”²⁸ The cause of these “musings” turns out to be less clear than first seems. Although a feature of Fanny’s prudence and seeming probity, her unhappiness is provoked as much by the bad behavior she has witnessed as by her being left

alone, both by her immediate companions and by Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford as well. The “smiling scene” before her (as Henry so describes it to Maria), and to which Maria, in turn, assigns both a “literal” and a “figurative” meaning, stands in inverse proportion to a subjectivity troubled by more than it can comprehend.²⁹ All we know, or may surmise, is that were Fanny somehow capable of entering the prospect—were she more like Elizabeth Bennet here and less concerned with ruining her gown—we would be contending with something other than her clear and present misery. None of this, of course, is to praise Henry or Maria or to suggest that the novel is expressly validating their dalliance. It is to observe that their very irretrievability on moral or ideological grounds does not work palpably to the benefit of the standards—or the standard-bearer in this case—by which they are found wanting. If anything, the self-determination that Maria displays, and to which she is provoked by certain prohibitions, propel her toward certain smiling prospects that belong “figuratively” at this point, both in time and in Austen’s writing, to a world—indeed a woman’s world—that is or *was* a good deal less miserable, even as it is increasingly hard to discover.

The other two prospects that Fanny eschews, leaving her similarly ensconced in states of misery, follow the first smiling prospect. They do so in measuring by counterexample what the present and the near future hold in store, both for social practice and for aesthetic practices, like the novel, all of which are encumbered by an increasingly dogmatic investment in both Britain’s and woman’s perceived sanctity. This is not the occasion, perhaps, to detail the many proscriptions against private theatricals in the conduct manuals for women at this time, including Thomas Gisborne’s *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797), which Austen was reading as she was conceiving *Mansfield Park*. All we need observe, again, is that Fanny’s ostentatious refusal to participate in the production of *Lovers’ Vows* (“No, indeed, I cannot act”) is met by a concomitant misery that, while ostensibly a function of jealousy over Edmund Bertram, operates “figuratively” once more in projecting or in retrojecting a smiling horizon of female agency and mobility: “Alas, it was all Miss Crawford’s doing. She had seen her influence in every speech [of Edmund’s] and was miserable.”³⁰

It scarcely requires saying that one of the most nagging problems in this novel involves the virtual transposition of *Pride and Prejudice*’s Elizabeth Bennet into the character of Mary Crawford, who, unlike her prototype, is plainly an exhibit in the case against England’s decadent or residual culture. Still another instance, then, of the way detail ef-

fectively compromises narrative and temporal momentum, here and elsewhere in Austen, Mary's character, particularly as an afterimage of *Pride and Prejudice's* winning heroine, performs an even more specific and historical function. As Fanny both observes and demonstrates, the fundamental difference between Fanny and her adversary comes down to what Mary *does* and is evidently happy doing versus what Fanny doesn't do and is made miserable in consequence. This is just as true of Mary's brother, Henry, whose interest in theatricals is memorably registered in the exhortation: "Let us be doing something."³¹ That these doings are undone by events—be they Sir Thomas's arrival at Mansfield, which puts an end to the theatrical undertaken in his absence, or Fanny's rejection of Henry upon learning of the latter's philandering—is hardly surprising. For such developments are aspects of plot, both as an apparatus of time *and* as a vehicle of ideology. They are developments, that is, in which the "authentically temporal destiny" (in Paul de Man's phrase) of doing, with special attention here to female agency, is additionally demarcated by the emergent culture of female restraint and undoing, or by a culture where a woman's only proper agency is in saying "no" again and again and again.³²

All of which brings us to the third missed opportunity in *Mansfield Park*: the prospect of marriage to Henry. The least definitive, perhaps, of the various prospects that both Fanny and the novel reject, Henry's courtship of Fanny speaks more to transformations in the novel and to the cultural work the genre performs, particularly in its development from epistolary form to the more authoritative operation of free indirect discourse. It would be preposterous to dispute Austen's investment in the new narrative technology of third-person omniscience or her understanding of her instrumentality in what Walter Scott, in discussing *Emma*, aptly described as the "[new] style of novel."³³ Nevertheless it bears remembering that at least one, and perhaps both, of the novels that Austen had published thus far were initially drafted in epistolary form—and that this form was characterized, in Austen's understanding, by its constitutive indeterminacy, making it the antithesis in many ways of domestic fiction in its realistic and probabilistic formation. This sense of epistolarity, and the criticism of the novel it implicitly harbors, is very much on view in *Lady Susan*, the one mature epistolary narrative of Austen's still remaining. In ending as it does—with an abrupt and disingenuous turn to omniscience and moral authority—*Lady Susan* effectively exposes its close as a damping down of the largely indeterminate and pleasurable text that has preceded it. If *Lady Susan* Vernon is not exactly a role model for a presumably female readership, there

are precious few alternatives to her example that readers can fall back on. Instead, the challenges that the heroine poses to the culture of domesticity, chiefly the affective ties uniting husbands and wives and parents and children, go largely unmet in the narrative.³⁴

And what of *Mansfield Park* in this vein? The answer in a word, or a title, is *Clarissa*: a text that for Austen, as for many of her contemporaries, was the *sine qua non* of epistolary indeterminacy. Although certain aspects of *Clarissa*'s plot are jumbled in Austen's brief redaction, Richardson's novel is pretty clearly the intertext for the concluding phase of *Mansfield Park*, which is dominated by Fanny's exile to Portsmouth as punishment for having rejected Henry and by Henry's attempts to win her affections all the while.³⁵ In *Clarissa* it is the arranged marriage that makes Clarissa Harlowe vulnerable to the libertine Lovelace and that renders Lovelace in turn (or by turns) an attractive alternative. Here, it is the mandatory exile to her parents' slovenly home in Portsmouth rather than the mandated marriage per se—in this case to the character most resembling Lovelace—that softens Fanny in the face of Henry's entreaties. It is not easy to parse or to interpret this discourse imbrication, in which the new style of the novel and its epistolary antecedent are brought into strained compliance. But we have, by Henry's performance as Fanny's seemingly considerate and generous suitor, sufficient echo of both epistolary indeterminacy and the less constrained reading practices it helped cultivate (again by Austen's lights) to propel the novel backward in time to a provisional uncertainty that only the ham-handed disclosure of Henry's elopement with the newly-married Maria Rushworth ultimately cancels. The opportunity missed therefore is not the felicity (much less the agency) that Fanny necessarily forsakes in rejecting Henry—even as Henry, like his sister, remains a good deal more interesting at this juncture than the character summarily wrenched into villainous turpitude. The opportunity forsaken and no longer retrievable—of which Fanny's rejection is primarily a figure now—is the epistolary novel itself or a version of the novel at variance with the miserably regulatory *Mansfield Park*.

Austen would revisit this very issue at the terminus of her career, by which point she had, for the moment, abandoned her characteristic mode of narration in favor of something more hyperbolic. In *Sanditon*, the novel she was working on at the time of her death, Austen looks backward—and with something approaching nostalgic good humor—to the indeterminacy of epistolary form in allowing Sir Edward Denham to take Lovelace not as a cautionary example but as a role model. In

contrast to novels that might resemble Austen's six completed works in representing what Sir Edward disparages as "ordinary Occurrences from which no useful Deductions can be drawn," the novels that Sir Edward reads are ones, apparently, from which any number of deductions may emerge. *Clarissa*, for example,

display[s] Human Nature with Grandeur—such as shew her in the Sublimities of intense Feeling—such as exhibit the progress of strong Passion from the first Germ of incipient Susceptibility to the utmost Energies of Reason half-dethroned,—where we see the strong spark of Woman's Captivations elicit such Fire in the Soul of Man as leads him—(though at the risk of some Aberration from the strict line of Primitive Obligations)—hazard all, dare all, atchieve all, to obtain her.³⁶

Austen is being broadly satiric here and in a necessarily old-fashioned way. Still, the "ineradicable ambiguity" of epistolary form to which Sir Edward's literary criticism largely refers has the additional effect of recalling, or in this case underscoring, what Austen recognizes or at least hopes is a gap separating the "ordinary" as such and the particular deductions that domestic fiction mobilizes it toward.³⁷ It might be a stretch to maintain that the novels that Sir Edward discountenances are explicitly Austen's own novels. Nevertheless, the habits of (mis)reading that he has apparently picked up from Richardson are put to curiously similar effect in his failure to divine a purpose or lesson from domestic fiction. It is more that the uses of epistolary fiction, especially those forged in the crucible of what appears to be misreading, are strangely continuous (in light of who is reading and who is writing here) with the apparent inutility of at least one kind of domestic fiction in failing to provide any firm lessons or deductions, including ones that both Scott and Bishop Whatley after him saw Austen and writers like her to be imparting. In both instances, it appears, crimes of reading are accessory to the crimes or abuses of novelistic writing, epistolary and otherwise. While the incentives to misreading that Sir Edward follows in Richardson are plainly *there* in Richardson's text, they are, by Sir Edward's own demonstration, prevalent in other kinds of novels as well and in the overdetermined reading practices these works encourage, if not always to Sir Edward's delight. Domestic novels—or let us say *certain* domestic novels by a *certain* author—are as open apparently to readings where didacticism and deduction are consistently challenged as a work like *Clarissa* is able, on at least one reading, to function splendidly as a lover's handbook.

One way, then, that Austen challenges the didactic ends of narrative—or the didacticism of her plots—is through the missed opportunity, which marks an alterity that has been forsaken but not forgotten. And while the pathos, not to mention the status, of these opportunities resides precisely in their irretrievability, or in their unrecoverability according to the principles that the plot of *Mansfield Park*, for instance, both fosters and adheres to, there is in the backhanded prestige granted epistolarity, if only as that which had to be jettisoned so that Austen could become “Jane Austen,” something of a homology between a revision in form and a revision in fact. Independent of its status as a joke, the scene of misreading in *Sanditon* maintains a curious substantiality not just as a countermovement to time in embracing certain antecedent genres and practices but also in the way that “ordinary Occurrences” constitute a reading matter for Sir Edward at variance with the “deductions” that only plot, in its momentum forward and as a vehicle of ideology in domestic fiction, can produce. In other words, the missed opportunity marks the resistant residue that time leaves behind, both in fiction and, in the peculiar constitution of Austen’s novels, in “what” is ultimately fact or reality itself.

III.

In his recent and provocative *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*, Miller alights upon time as something opposed to what he calls “Austen Style,” which is not only the sum and substance of Austen’s inimitable, seemingly divine, narrative voice but also, if only temporarily, the property of certain of her characters, including Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, and Mary Crawford. Resembling the godlike (and for Miller’s part neutered) “stylothete” in their provisional renunciation of what Miller calls personhood—the identity forged in the crucible of “social necessity”—these heroines are inevitably subordinated to the stylothete by some mortification or shame. Introducing the heroine to that “state of lack,” which makes for “a well-functioning [female] subject,” such shame ultimately compels the heroine “to embark on life as a person,” placing her on a continuum with the “most dreadful features” of a character like Miss Bates.³⁸ Unlike the narrator, whose divinity consists in a freedom from “all accents that might identify it with a socially accredited broker of power/knowledge in the world under narration,” or in a remarkable exteriority to all things and persons that Miller calls “extraterritoriality,” the Austen heroine is irreducibly and sadly a character in time and in space.³⁹ “What . . . overtakes Emma’s

style . . . is nothing less than a sense of its temporality measured not against the large, event-filled scale of world-historical time, but in that minor unity of social pressure within which the Novel typically begins and ends: a generation from youth to eventual settlement.”⁴⁰ Time, that is, has essentially one function in Austen, especially when set against the narrator’s exemption from virtually all imperatives, save for those aspects of the real on which style typically exerts itself. And that function, though somewhat tautological, is as a prerequisite for a “person’s” being *in time* and in a world, by extension, where temporalization is as closed a field as the spatial and social constraints that frame and circumscribe Emma’s development.

That time might conceivably exert a pressure of its own in Austen as opposed to simply constituting the *durée* on which the social must inevitably intrude—that its very pressure on the social or material may be sufficient, if only retrospectively, to retrieve the social from its status as a theater of lack or limit—is inconceivable on Miller’s argument. And that’s because the secret of Austen’s style for him, and of the particular exclusiveness of the narrator’s position, is lodged as much in what amounts to a queer exceptionalism, where the notion of extraterritoriality effectively spatializes the narrator’s sublime neutering, as in a subjectivity that is curiously romantic in its register of an equally sublime individuality. Miller smartly concedes that such subjectivity (as distinct now from personhood) is not without its costs in Austen. Primary among these costs is the melancholy that accrues in the recognition that the social and conjugal world that the stylothete shuts out has been abandoned in a preemptive, even mimetic, maneuver that recapitulates society’s disavowal of the neutered non-person in turn. But none of this ultimately diminishes the fact that we are in roughly the same place vis-à-vis “Austen Style” as we often find ourselves in Blake or in Wordsworth or in Shelley or even in Keats, who wishes—as does Austen apparently—to “leave the world unseen” and uninterpellated.

But Keats also knows better than, or differently from, other members of the so-called “visionary company.”⁴¹ His pun on “unseen,” referring simultaneously to a visible and social materiality that he is desperate to eschew but will not or cannot in the end, has an equally useful correlative in his notion of “slow time,” whose paternity or control over people and things (beginning with the Grecian Urn itself) is not absolute but provisional and a sanction for the speaker to think out loud—and in real and slow time no less—about what time has not merely “overtaken.” And Austen, whose first three novels were largely

exercises in coordinating reality to time (and time to reality) in the nearly two decades between their initial composition and eventual publication, was provoked, I would argue, to similar conclusions, including those that take the symptomatic form of opportunities in what *was* the here and now.

Such opportunities are everywhere in Austen, even and especially at the apogee of “Austen Style” itself, which for Miller, as for nearly all readers, finds its *locus classicus* in the famous first sentence to the most beloved of Austen’s novels. Here is Miller on that sentence:

The heady *promesse du bonheur* that the great first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* extends to us, despite the fact that it too lends its authority to acknowledging the depressing law of universal conjugality, comes down to one thing: that no one who writes with such possession can be in want of *anything*. The sentence self-evidently issues from a state of already having achieved—or, at any rate, of having entirely dispensed with need to achieve—everything that, for instance, the typical nineteenth-century ambition plot seeks to obtain, and even more. But the fact of enjoying, or imagining enjoying, the happy ending of a plot that one has been spared the labor of working through, makes the sentence merely a pleasant daydream. The fact of enjoying, or imagining enjoying, the happy ending of a plot that, except in this mode of writing, one never *could* perform—a plot that otherwise, even within its middle-class confines, one must know only as foreclosed—this is what makes the sentence the ecstatic and strangely wrenching experience it has always been.⁴²

“Wrenching” to be sure, but why “merely a pleasant daydream” or “only as foreclosed”? Although provoked by certain qualifiers that imply or derive limits from a plot whose “happy ending” is apparently irresistible, my query is directed finally at the image of an authority so remote and self-possessed that its only conceivable desire is to imagine desire in the assurance of its “happy” requital.

But the syntax of this famous sentence, notably the “must” onto which everything in it converges, projects an altogether different desire where time and requital are rather uncooperative, particularly in their promissory or progressive trajectory. Suspended, rather, between a ventriloquized desperation, which emanates from and redounds on single women (and their families) in their needy acts of projection and introjection, and a lingering or residual exasperation over the way “the universal law of conjugality” has become a necessitarian doctrine, “must” looks as obsessively toward marital closure as it looks oppositionally and resistively toward an emancipatory horizon that is regressive

in both origin and location. It may be “universally acknowledged,” and by that sanction a truism, that “a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” But this does not obscure the fact that this normative scenario is simply that: an imposition where the coercive weight of public opinion is echoed and authenticated in the wish-fulfilling fantasies of women, where truth is a by-product of vulnerability and subordination.

Miller implicitly acknowledges all this. But what his elegant reading also sidesteps are the alternatives in time (or in what was once time) onto which the sentence opens and to which it is pried upon by the exasperated “must.” That “truth” remains inseparable from universal acknowledgment, that it requires the prop of opinion, custom, and fantasy to maintain its epistemological sovereignty, admits another possibility that impedes and sours both the “happy ending” and the detached delectation in which the narrator seemingly indulges. This other possibility, entertained for much of the novel and by the many Austen heroines similarly inured to remaining unmarried, looks to a condition where women no longer need marriage and where men, accordingly, are no longer obligated, much less entitled (like either Darcy or even Collins), to perform as rescue lovers. Such a prospect presupposes that conventional marriage, especially in its mystified form as the telos of narrative or romance, is likely an impediment to women and on a continuum with the subordination that drives them to marriage in the first place. And it presupposes, too, that men and women are not just the objects but also (or potentially) the agents of imperatives that can theoretically change at any moment. That such changes are almost entirely a matter of abstraction, that the famous first sentence quickly modulates to the stable and detached irony of an authoritative narrator to whom the marital prospects of unattached women and the anxiety of their parents are components of the human comedy, does not diminish either the alternative or its power, in retrospect, to contest what is universal and true. For however far from consensus, the prospect of things otherwise maintains an immediacy here sufficient to project, or to retroject, a very different “want” along the same temporal axis that ends, pursuant to other wants, with the flattening of woman into “wife.” Sustaining the exasperated “must,” in other words, particularly amid the encroachments of universal wish-fulfillment, is the woman, again—the missing or anterior woman—whose procession to the altar is, as Miller rightly notes, only a matter of time.

But this development is not the only matter of time at issue now. The transfer of woman to wife and to the increasingly straitened world

of domestic ideology, no matter how aligned with “the nineteenth-century ambition plot,” has a specifically historical resonance, linked no doubt to the particular and peculiar situation of this novel as a work in time, to which the exasperated (as opposed to ventriloquized) “must” refers. Where Miller’s “must” (or the “must” as he implicitly reads it) remains the universal signifier of a fantasy so pervasive that it can claim among its many adherents the very stylothete herself, whose extraterritoriality is bounded suddenly by wish-fulfillment, the exasperated “must” looks beyond and before to something else—the only trace or remnant of which is the “wrenching” that this one word administers and performs. It looks to a history—and, with respect to *Pride and Prejudice*, to a history of composition and revision over many years—during which the real of this and two other Austen novels was plunged into a welter of temporal flux amid a number of developments, from the rise of the novel to realistic (and regulatory) form to the growing entrenchment of domestic ideology with its doctrine of separate spheres, which are marked and monitored here by the compression of woman into “wife.” The ending of this famous sentence is as much a “happy ending” as it forecloses on an identity and ultimately on a world that are increasingly prehistoric and the regress, in effect, from which plot, in its momentum forward, extricates itself but not without a murmur of discontent.

Austen alludes to this temporalization fairly directly in the prefatory “advertisement” to *Northanger Abbey*, where she notes the “considerable changes” in “places, manners, books, and opinions” in the years separating the novel’s conception from what turned out to be its posthumous publication.⁴³ Ostensibly an apology for the novel’s satire, whose apparent object—the gothic novel—was no longer an enthusiasm or an especially timely target, the “changes” referred to in the advertisement bear equally on certain prospects to which other aspects of the novel are answerable. Chief among these possibilities, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, are the practices and proclivities by which the novel’s heroine resists her disposability to a narrative where growth and capitulation are synonymous.⁴⁴ Such “changes” are also an issue in both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, where the heroine’s eventual domestication finds a correlative in specific formal transformations that, following *Pride and Prejudice*’s first sentence and its précis of the courtship narrative, hearken similarly in two directions: toward the rise of the novel as a realistic and regulatory instrument; and toward a past and a milieu in which the relative indeterminacy of form, and in the case of *Sense and Sensibility*, epistolary form, works

in consort with certain social practices in fashioning an horizon of possibility whose inevitable disappointment is a means nonetheless of its authentication.

Such authentication, or what is really a process of authentication, is connected to the missed opportunity as I have been describing it, which takes the symptomatic form in Austen of introducing, if only as a condition of prohibiting, “what . . . happened” in effect before it didn’t. And while this striking give-and-take owes undoubtedly to the circumstances under which Austen was compelled both to revisit and to revise a real during an interval of “considerable change,” the missed opportunity pertains more in the end to “what happened” over the longer *durée* of at least fifteen years than to the more miniscule adjustments to a recoverable world that any revision, certainly any revision over time, would almost certainly mandate. While it may be risky, then, to generalize about the various changes that take symptomatic form in Austen’s novels of opportunities and possibilities either missed or foreclosed, it is somewhat safer to say that what counts as progress in Austen, at least by the lights of narrative deliberation, is continually met by an impedance that, particularly at the level of circumstantial detail, is also a value judgment and a generally negative one.

This is hardly the time to dilate again on the many developments, from the rise of the nuclear family to the rise of domestic ideology to the rise of the novel as a regulatory instrument, not to mention Austen’s personal disappointments as a woman and increasingly a dependent, that made the past more cherished as a site of possibility than the present of her novels’ publication. Nevertheless, the response of Austen’s earliest—and in many ways most discerning—readers, for whom her works were marked primarily by the *absence* of plot, especially as an absorptive or interpellative device, underscores the degree to which Austen’s unique style, lodged in her inimitable way with “ordinary occurrence,” is the arguably definitive version of the missed opportunity in figuring a world that time has otherwise subsumed in cooperation with plot.⁴⁵ In recommending *Sense and Sensibility* to a friend, Lady Bessborough joined with her contemporaries in finding the novel striking or “amusing” despite what she also described as its “stupid ending.”⁴⁶ Assuming that Lady Bessborough’s sense of an ending accords with a sense of story that wrenches “ordinary occurrences” into putatively “useful deductions,” what she is pointing to by contrast is a style—and an unmistakably Austenian style—whose “secret” is lodged in the way “what happens” in her novels somehow “never happens” or happens only in the reductive and largely “stupid” form of a story.

Thus while the missed opportunity makes the loss of something a condition of its having “happened” however fleetingly, the resuscitation of details and things, especially in the uncanny form they take upon rereading a mature work like *Emma*, has the effect—and, with all that is at stake now, the oppositional effect—of placing the “never” in “what never happened” under erasure. Reginald Farrer, whose unequivocal praise of *Emma* is regularly quoted despite its 1917 imprimatur, is only partly right in observing that the novel “is not an easy book to read” and that “its infinite delights and subtleties of workmanship” are appreciable “only when the story has been assimilated.” For “the manifold complexity of the book’s web” by which twelve readings of the novel provide “twelve periods of pleasure . . . squared and squared again with each perusal, till at every fresh reading you feel anew that you never understood anything like the widening sum of its delights” never quite succeeds in uncomplicating, much less in removing, the “dens[ity]” and “obscur[ity]” that abide “until you know the story.”⁴⁷ It is the case rather that repeated readings of *Emma*, which the obscurity of the Frank-Jane counterplot may initially invite, open onto a difficulty or infinity, to borrow Farrer’s hyperbole, that is “squared and squared again” in excess of those “delights” that bear directly and explicably on what one critic nicely terms the “shadow novel-within-a-novel.”⁴⁸ While all readers of *Emma* remember very clearly the story of the heroine’s development under Knightley’s tutelage, these same readers—or, following Farrer’s argument, (re)readers—are likely to find themselves in his position of also forgetting, in effect, the many aspects of the novel they had previously encountered. Or to put it even more strongly, any (re)reading of *Emma* is likely to produce a homology, however unappreciated, between Austen’s real in all its “infinite” and uncanny pleasure and Miss Bates’s real, which is equally forgettable for apparently different reasons.

But if Miss Bates is someone readers are inclined to want to forget or to gloss over, the effort involved in representing her, which is indistinguishable from the world *according to* Miss Bates, suggests that there is a link—and a very important one now—between the work of Miller’s so-called “stylothete” and the phenomenology of a character who, he argues, is the essence of interpellated abjection and personhood. This homology involves the way the world according to Miss Bates remains a reality that would otherwise be extinct and have gone unnoticed were it not for this character’s preternatural and curatorial ability to remember what no one else, apparently (save Austen), either can or cares to. This kind of memory, or way with the world, is more

than just a synecdoche of “Austen style” in its remarkable *apostasis* from plot and from the administration of time; it is an instantiation *at the very level of style* of possibilities and opportunities that, no matter how local or ephemeral or transient or bounded, are always recoverable and always lost and an index of “what never happened.”

IV.

There is one more point to address—inconclusive and possibly unnecessary—regarding the oft-raised and endlessly generalized relationship of fiction and history writing. This is because Austen’s history of missed opportunities also positions her amid a number of competing theories that bring history and the novel in its realistic form into juxtaposition and, on at least one important argument, into necessary compliance. If “what” happens in Austen’s novels finds an accompaniment in what *also* happens only under a condition of somehow not happening or of becoming lost, her writings give a sense of what history writing can and perhaps should do in its relative freedom from the imperatives of story. Correspondingly, Austen’s novels provide an equally important alternative to the peculiar boundedness of fiction, both as a probabilistic, regulatory instrument and even as a visionary or utopian vehicle.

The debate, at least in recent years, has been between what may be termed the “utopian” approach to the novel, especially (and perhaps counterintuitively) in its realistic form, and what may reciprocally be described as the “realistic” approach to history, where “what really happened” is less a matter of actual historicity than of narrative logic and plausibility. Following the influential work of Paul Ricoeur, proponents of this latter view, among them Hayden White, regard realistic narration as “the mode of discourse in which a successful understanding of matters historical is represented” and as a paradigm, accordingly, that renders history writing “a privileged instantiation of the human capacity to endow the experience of time with meaning, because the immediate referent of this discourse is real, rather than imaginary, events.”⁴⁹ The very probabilism to which fiction was increasingly urged to conform in Austen’s time becomes, on White’s argument, the condition or means by which “real . . . events” effectively claim their reality in history and can be said, then, to have “really happened.”

By contrast, proponents of fiction such as Frederic Jameson, or more relevantly Bakhtinians such as Gary Saul Morson, tend not only to stress the utopian or idealistic reach of narratives that are primarily

realistic in scope, as opposed to either fantastic or romantic; they are additionally inclined to find good news in these narratives despite the fact that it never rises to that status or even to a circumstance that a narrative can actively entertain.⁵⁰ For Jameson this comes down to a politically chiasmic reading of both narrative deliberation and closure, where unity (as an armature of probability and narrative logic) necessarily figures certain communitarian possibilities that are somehow filched from both things as they are *and* from history itself. And Morson, who is similarly invested in the alternative worlds to which realistic novels ostensibly point, explores a number of techniques, most Bakhtinian in either origin or inspiration, where narrative coherence is continually met by “other possible presents that might have been” by which we may glimpse any number of “unrealized but realizable possibilities.” In thus restoring “the possibility of possibility,” narratives bound by form and convention to a largely deterministic worldview are, at the same time, according to Morson, the very loci of freedom itself.⁵¹

It goes without saying that Austen’s fictions, as I’ve been exploring them, are effectively suspended between the freedom or possibility that both Morson and Jameson extol and the more probable world that the writing of history must necessarily embrace if such history, by the lights of Ricoeur, White, (and before them) David Hume, is to make any kind of sense. But it is not merely her suspension between these orientations that describes Austen’s situation or her bearing for that matter on these larger issues of representation. By the time that Austen was composing her narratives, history writing, as Everett Zimmerman has detailed, had gradually migrated from recounting events on the basis of their historicity, or by having actually taken place, to a more probabilistic view in which history, as Hume maintained, is primarily a task of coordinating anterior “objects of which we have no experience” to “those of which we have [experience]” in the understanding “that what we have found to be most usual is always most probable” and likely to have been that way before.⁵² Thus while the realistic novel is in some ways a reconstitution *après la lettre* of history writing in its empirical form, where the past remains a paradigm for human understanding in general rather than a site of difference, the Austenian novel, often deemed synonymous with realistic writing, registers an impatience with that charge by continually situating the “usual” as an empirical construction in the company of the “unusual.”

Now by “unusual” I mean a number of things, the most important involving a connection to the “usual” that the prefix, in its necessarily dependent relationship to what it negates, never completely severs.

Like the “never” in “what never happened,” which takes a backseat to certain prospects limned and signified by “what,” the “unusual” refers as much to some aspect of the ordinary or the everyday as it marks a divergence from a more general scheme of causality and plausibility, where “what really happens” in Austen is a foregone conclusion that simply repeats what has happened on countless occasions already. Less a signifier of the extraordinary or the improbable, what the unusual describes is the peculiarly evanescent and temporalized status of events and details in Austen that, however ordinary, are at the same time, and in the very material experience of reading her, extraneous to the narrative logic by which Mr. Martin and Harriet Smith (to cite just one example) are destined to marry, allowing history therefore to repeat itself.

Such extraneousness, as registered in, say, Harriet’s fourteen-minute visit, is a far cry from the horizons of freedom that Morson extracts from plotlines in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novels that are never followed. What gives the unusual its special value, rather, both as a feature of Austen’s unique style and as an alternative to versions of both history and literature that depart variously from the strictures of determinism and causality, is its largely *noncontradictory* relationship to what happens again and again in Austen’s novels as single men in possession of fortunes discover themselves in want of wives. In its always differential and always dependent relationship to the usual, the Austenian unusual claims its special status both as an opportunity, whose prestige is linked to an inevitable and necessary dematerialization, and as a paradigm for “what” both history and fiction may represent in their suddenly concomitant acts of recovery and loss. It is tempting of course to view all of this as a mark of Austen’s well-earned inimitability. Yet with the focus finally on history, especially as a subset (for better or for worse) of the literary per se, Austen is more properly instructive and even representative in writing and recalling *something else* in all its ordinariness.

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NOTES

¹ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 334.

² Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 334.

³ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 334.

⁴ Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. John Davie (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 219, 237, 68.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Artforum* (February 1977): 47.

⁶ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), 69.

⁷ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987), 20.

⁸ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, *Lady Susan*, *The Watsons*, and *Sanditon*, ed. Davie (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), 112, 114. All citations of these novels are to this edition.

⁹ Austen, *Emma*, ed. Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), 167.

¹⁰ I discuss the political and cultural work of the novel's plot in my *The Historical Austen* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 134–37.

¹¹ Austen, *Emma*, 167.

¹² D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003).

¹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 836, 837.

¹⁴ Sedgwick, 833.

¹⁵ Sedgwick, 834.

¹⁶ Charles Lamb, in *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 4 vols. (London: Methuen, 1903), 2:142.

¹⁷ Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 18–19. On other aspects of Austen's romanticism, see Nina Auerbach, *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985) and Clara Tuite, *Romantic Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002).

¹⁸ See, for example, Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) and Alistair Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1971).

¹⁹ Jerome Christensen, "The Romantic Movement at the End of History," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 457.

²⁰ Christensen, 469.

²¹ Christensen, 475.

²² Christensen, 453.

²³ See my *The Historical Austen*, 154–79.

²⁴ James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁵ Chandler, 39, 198.

²⁶ Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, quoted in Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction* (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1983). I am indebted to Kirkham for this connection.

²⁷ Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 77.

²⁸ Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 89, 90.

²⁹ Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 89.

³⁰ Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 131, 141.

³¹ Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 111.

³² Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), 206.

³³ [Walter Scott], "Emma," *Quarterly Review* 14 (October 1815), collected in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B. C. Southam, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), 1:63.

³⁴ This challenge is especially acute in the case of the seemingly virtuous Catherine Vernon, who, though charging her sister-in-law (Lady Susan) with having "no real Love for her daughter" and having "never done her justice, or treated her affectionately" (Austen, *Lady Susan*, 232), manages in the course of her twelve letters, which comprise about a quarter of the narrative, never to mention any of her own children by name. For further discussion, see my *The Historical Austen*, 120–24.

³⁵ For *Clarissa* as the intertext of this episode in *Mansfield Park*, see Duckworth, 76. See also Joseph Wiesenfarth, *The Errand of Form* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1967), 103.

³⁶ Austen, *Sanditon*, 357.

³⁷ On the ambiguity of epistolarity as Austen reflects on it through the character of Sir Edward, see Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), 278.

³⁸ Miller, 46, 47.

³⁹ Miller, 32, 75.

⁴⁰ Miller, 50.

⁴¹ The view of the Romantics as agnostic humanists and individualists is espoused by Harold Bloom in *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971).

⁴² Miller, 34–35.

⁴³ Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, xliii.

⁴⁴ See my *The Historical Austen*, 138–53.

⁴⁵ See my *The Historical Austen*, 44–81. See also my chapter "Austen's Earliest Readers and the Rise of the Janeites," in *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Audiences*, ed. Deidre Lynch (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), 87–114.

⁴⁶ Lady Bessborough, in *Lord Granville Leveson Gower: Private Correspondence, 1781–1821*, ed. Castalia Countess Granville, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1917), 2:418.

⁴⁷ Reginald Farrer, "Jane Austen," *Quarterly Review* 222 (July 1917) collected in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, 2:266.

⁴⁸ W. J. Harvey, "The Plot of *Emma*," in *Emma*, ed. Stephen M. Parrish (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 456.

⁴⁹ White, 60, 173. See also Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 2 vols. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984–1985).

⁵⁰ See Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994) and Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981).

⁵¹ Morson, 118, 119.

⁵² David Hume, "Of Miracles," quoted in Everett Zimmerman, *The Boundaries of Fiction: History and the Eighteenth-Century British Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), 40.