Sociable Uncertainties
Literature and the Ethics of Indeterminacy in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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Abstract

This study seeks to establish a positive role for uncertainty in eighteenth-century British social thought. For too long scholars have viewed uncertainty as a bug in the eighteenth-century social program; I propose we redescribe it as an integral feature. I begin by taking Thomas Hobbes, rather than John Locke, as the initiator of a robust and dire British Empiricism, and hence the driving force behind the liberal moral traditions of eighteenth-century literature. Hobbes imagines a world literally governed by uncertainty, in which doubt skillfully harnessed can create sure political order: his shockingly pluralistic and contingent account of prepolitical subjects informs his theory of a sovereign whose principal attribute is unpredictability.

My first chapter describes Hobbes’s covert legacy in early eighteenth-century literature. In their replies to Hobbes, moral writers across forms and genres replace his absolutism, premised on pluralism, with liberalism premised on conformity. Exploring the naïve sentimentalism of Shaftesbury and Richardson, the heuristic sentimentalism of Hume and Adam Smith, and the meliorist optimism of James Thomson and other poets, I uncover Hobbesian strategies for managing the psychology of social subjects. To the extent that these liberal traditions resist uncertainty, they limit sociability along with it.

In three subsequent chapters, I track the repurposing of uncertainty, in works by Laurence Sterne, Anna Letitia Barbauld, and Jane Austen, for social ethics compatible with elements of political liberalism but also deeply committed to subjective pluralism. In the breakdown of Lockean language theory and heuristics of sentimental propriety, Sterne sees a messy yet powerful mode of sympathy and reciprocity. Barbauld’s counterfactual views of science in youth lead her to a politics of principled abstention; to see the fallout of meliorist political projects with the worried eye of a speculative ecologist. Austen’s infamous irony undermines the assuring wisdom of both societal convention and liberal individualism, clearing the way for a solicitude based in endless inquiry rather than constructions of stable character. If uncertainty was the problem that drove moral and social thought in the eighteenth century, it was also the material from which solutions might be fashioned.
Abbreviations Used

I have, throughout this study, cited the following sources parenthetically in-text using the given abbreviations. All citations indicate the abbreviation for the work in question and the page numbers from which the reference is drawn. The only exceptions are citations of Barbauld’s poetry, which include the poem number (as assigned by McCarthy and Kraft) and line number, as shown: 3.50-52. Complete information for the texts can be found in the Bibliography.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Work and Author/Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>ASJ</td>
<td>Laurence Sterne, <em>A Sentimental Journey</em></td>
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<td>L</td>
<td>Thomas Hobbes, <em>Leviathan</em></td>
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<td>Pamela</td>
<td>Samuel Richardson, <em>Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded</em></td>
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<td>Poems</td>
<td>Anna Letitia Barbauld, <em>The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld</em></td>
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<td>Jane Austen, <em>Persuasion</em></td>
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<td>PP</td>
<td>Jane Austen, <em>Pride and Prejudice</em></td>
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<td>SPP</td>
<td>Anna Letitia Barbauld, <em>Selected Poetry and Prose</em></td>
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<td>TMS</td>
<td>Adam Smith, <em>The Theory of Moral Sentiments</em></td>
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<td>Treatise</td>
<td>David Hume, <em>A Treatise of Human Nature</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>TS</td>
<td>Laurence Sterne, <em>The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman</em></td>
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Prior Presentation of Material

Brief portions of Chapter 2, section 5 had their genesis in a paper on *Tristram Shandy* for Sophie Gee’s eighteenth-century graduate seminar in 2007. Some material in Chapter 3, sections 2 and 7 was presented for a panel at the American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies Annual Meeting in 2013. The introduction and fifth section of Chapter 4 grew out of a lecture on *Persuasion* for Claudia Johnson’s undergraduate Austen course in 2009.
Acknowledgments

I might have here simply reproduced Sterne’s black page from *Tristram Shandy*; one sheet of thick ink containing all possible names. Like Sterne, I am more scriptor than author, transcribing the echoes of echoes. Even so, I cannot forbear acknowledging some of the more resonant voices in my hearing.

Thanks go first of all to my brilliant and supportive dissertation committee of Professors Sophie Gee, Claudia Johnson, and Starry Schor. You have been accommodating with my thinking and exacting with my writing. Through the subtlest and most consequential of feedback, you have guided me just where I needed to go. Short of a greater capacity on my part to implement your advice, I could not have asked for anything more. I also must thank Professor Onno Oerlemans at Hamilton College for doing so much to make me the reader I am today.

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John Reuland stands out among fellow graduate students for allowing me to crank his thermostat on many cold nights, and for a lot else. Particular thanks go as well to Laurel Byrnes, Matt Steding, Ariana Reilly, Mike Johnduff, Dan Johnson, Matthew Harrison, James Rutherford, Kyessa Moore, Grant Wythoff, Lyra Hostetter, and many others.

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To my parents and sister, loving thanks for your patience and unconditional confidence. Camp will always be for reading, but I’m looking forward to it being for other things again too. I know you’re relieved I’m done with this; you’ll have to take my word for it that I’m even more so.

Lastly, thanks and love to Carolyn. You have seen better than anyone—probably better than I even—the cost of this work. I hope today that some part of it might prove justified. You have believed; you have encouraged; you have insisted I not neglect my health or sanity. As tangible measures of love go, this is a big one. I am superlatively grateful, and glad that I can set down the laptop for a while. There was no path to this point that I could have walked without you.
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Introduction

“A Malady, Which Can Never Be Radically Cur’d:” The Peculiarity of British Uncertainty

I am first affrighted and confounded with that forelorn solitude, in which I am plac’d in my philosophy, and fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell’d all human commerce, and left utterly abandon’d and disconsolate. Fain wou’d I run into the crowd for shelter and warmth; but cannot prevail with myself to mix with such deformity. I call upon others to join me, in order to make a company apart; but no one will hearken to me. . . I have declar’d my dis-approbation of their systems; and can I be surpriz’d, if they shou’d express a hatred of mine and of my person? When I look abroad, I foresee on every side, dispute, contradiction, anger, calumny and detraction. When I turn my eye inward, I find nothing but doubt and ignorance. All the world conspires to oppose and contradict me; tho’ such is my weakness, that I feel all my opinions loosen and fall of themselves, when unsupported by the approbation of others. . . For with what confidence can I venture upon such bold enterprizes, when beside those numberless infirmities peculiar to myself, I find so many which are common to human nature? (Treatise 311-12)

At its best, David Hume’s writing has a way of cultivating alienation and sympathy at the same time. Infamous for his iconoclasm, he may nonetheless articulate here a representative crisis in eighteenth-century Britain: namely, a social crisis occasioned by overlapping difficulties of knowledge and fellowship. Hume’s philosophical arguments stand “forelorn,” almost alone, in eighteenth-century thought by sheer virtue of their intricacy, but here his ideas redound broadly. Extreme skepticism in some sense registers a far more common anxiety surrounding the loss of shared moral values. In the course of the Treatise of Human Nature’s first volume, what begins as speculative, private doubt on Hume’s part ultimately, inexorably encroaches on the most quotidian and public of his interactions with others—both in the parlor and in print. His uncertainty rises to urgent, emotional mental tumult. Sociability, he argues, subsists on the “approbation” of the “systems” espoused by one’s acquaintances; without mutual assumptions, mutual feelings break down. Accordingly, the sentimental aspirations of Hume’s prose are spoiled by his reflections on “human nature.” His effusive language of bonding and vulnerability—”fain would I run into the crowd for shelter and warmth”—and even of erotic
disappointment—”not being able to mingle and unite . . . abandon’d and disconsolate”—is lost in suspicion and bigoted contempt: he “cannot prevail with [him]self to mix with such deformity.” His desired “company apart,” his attempt at sociability, goes unheard in the absence of common discourse.

The question of skepticism’s prevalence in eighteenth-century Britain, Hume’s account aside, has not been settled. One classic account identifies skepticism with Pyrrhonism—the actual absence of belief—and Hume as its only real example in that time and place: an isolating proposition indeed.¹ More recent treatments identify broader patterns of “sceptical thinking” shared by poets, novelists, and essayists.² Historians of philosophy tend to use more restrictive definitions of skepticism than literary historians do. However, there is in both camps a general recognition of a climate of uncertainty that manifests across many forms of writing and which encompasses moral, scientific, political, theological, and linguistic topics. “Uncertainty,” perhaps, describes the theory and practice of eighteenth-century thought more usefully than “skepticism.” As attested by both the conservative elements of Hume’s thought and the ease with which he was caricatured in his lifetime, “skepticism” suggests a native attitude, potentially subversive but ultimately predictable or even formulaic, belonging to a particular individual. Uncertainty, by contrast, need not (although it might) occur within individual minds: often, it measures surprising disjunctions, misunderstandings, and conflicts that arise, without prior emotional or cognitive disposition, among multiple people and groups. The concept of

¹ Richard H. Popkin, “Scepticism in the Enlightenment,” in Scepticism in the Enlightenment, ed. Popkin, de Olaso, and Tonelli, 1-16. Popkin does, in later writings, allow that eighteenth-century skepticism, even of the extreme kind, was more common than this, but not with respect to Britain.

² Parker, Scepticism and Literature, 2-3: “Sceptical thinking . . . is a practice, or a process, not an intellectual position, and where it advances positions it does so with a certain playfulness or irony, with a consciousness of their necessary provisionality or contingency: as if opening a dialogue . . . [I]t is the imaginative writer who realizes and relishes this opening, finding pleasure in the play of intellect precisely while qualifying or modifying the kind of truth-claim that the intellect can make.” See also Tavor, Scepticism, Society and the Eighteenth-Century Novel, 1-2; Thorne, Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment, 283-88.
uncertainty, in other words, potentially involves forms of interpersonal and cultural reference that the concept of skepticism does not. Furthermore, as already suggested, skepticism implies a narrower range of cognitive and emotional states than does uncertainty, which might encompass varying shades of doubt, hope, conjecture, bewilderment, terror, excitement, and other responses to the same fundamental problems of epistemology. And uncertainty might serve as a more descriptive umbrella term for the intellectual constraints that, despite the spirit of rational inquiry in the period, eighteenth-century writers describe, such as: the narrow limits within which reason can provide authoritative information, the difficulty or impossibility of attaining definitive truth, the disconnect between physical reality and subjective experience, the approximative or hypothetical nature of knowledge claims, and the reliance upon such other psychological measures of assurance as belief, faith, intuition, and assent.³

It is with respect to the latter three of these developments that literature and literary language—specifically, its counterfactual, rhetorical, and absorbing qualities—can tell us about the eighteenth-century response to uncertainty. As Hume writes, in line with empiricist philosophers who preceded him, it is not knowledge or certainty that are available to the thinker, but belief and probability—forms of conviction that literature, as well as philosophy, is suited to deliver.⁴ It is through the elusiveness of knowledge that emotion likewise becomes such an important category of experience in eighteenth-century literature and thought in general. Far

³ Much of this is addressed in Giorgio Tonelli, “The ‘Weakness’ of Reason in the Age of Enlightenment,” in Scepticism in the Enlightenment, ed. Popkin, de Olaso, and Tonelli, 35-50. I will be dealing throughout with numerous examples directly, however.

⁴ L. A. Selby-Bigge recognized over a century ago that the stylistic and literary aspects of eighteenth-century British moral philosophy are of the first importance to it: in particular, he argues that the moralists cultivate an experiential style that puts abstract propositions “to the test of a concrete and homely instance,” citing as illustrative instances “the boundaries of the Kingdom of Bohemia, or the incident of the keyhole in Tristram Shandy” (introduction to British Moralists, 1:xviii). The extent to which the moral philosophy of the period is stylistically unaffected, or drawn from life, and to which Sterne’s writings might be aptly compared to it, are matters that will be considered at length in the chapters that follow. In any case, the marriage of literary and philosophical analysis is hardly a forced attempt at interdisciplinarity. It has been imperative all along.
from being at odds with the search for knowledge and certainty, emotion for Hume and many others is a necessary supplement to reasoning and a primary mode of persuasion: belief itself, Hume writes, is most centrally a feeling rather than a proposition, “more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures,” while morality “is more properly felt than judg’d of” (Treatise 234, 522). Hume’s passion is a measure of sociability’s fraught workings in an uncertain world; a registering of both its stakes and its outcomes.

Is uncertainty compatible with sociability? That is the question Hume here, at the end of the Treatise’s first book, poses. It is typical both of eighteenth-century British literature and of our modern interpretations of it that the loss of universal values should be seen as grounds for pathos. More unusual, perhaps, is the observation that uncertainty does not isolate Hume in any straightforward way. To the contrary, uncertainty is the foundation of his address. It is in this respect already social; something produced through contact with others. The external world offers itself to Hume’s acquaintance in tenuous, even illusory fashion—famously, cause and effect have no physical reality according to his reasoning in the Treatise—yet the claims of others have the power to unmoor his familiar habits of thinking. We might say that uncertainty is how his sociability, his occupation and concern with others, makes itself felt. If we in our turn are concerned on his behalf here he expects it to be on a similar basis. This passage has been read as literature as much as philosophy, with scholars noting its compelling, dramatic, even narrative style. Remarkably, Hume proves most accessible to his readers at the moment of his most intense isolation. The abstruse philosopher becomes a genuinely pathetic figure, fallen, fractured in his uncertainty, as he has described in the pages preceding:

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5 See, for instance, Pinch, Strange Fits of Passion, 20-21, 40-44; Parker, Scepticism and Literature, 142-43, 153-60; and Singer, “Hume’s Extreme Skepticism,” especially 596-97, 606-7, 613-15. All three readings stress the centrality of emotion and disposition to Hume’s epistemology. In particular, Parker and Singer further argue, respectively from literary and philosophical vantages, the importance of giving due weight to both Hume’s involving experience of skepticism and his naturalistic account of belief when interpreting his writings.
This sceptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady, which can never be radically cur’d, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chace it away, and sometimes may seem entirely free from it. 'Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses; and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. (Treatise 267-68)

Hume imagines a readership that not only pities him, but largely identifies with his situation. The spreading “malady” of skepticism is a sort of looming communal curse; a potential threat to everyday social operations: though it is lonely, he supposes it shared among the “us” of his audience. Although perhaps unwittingly, Hume appeals to doubt as a kind of unbidden impulse—like the unjustifiable inferences of the understanding and senses—which provides a standard of human experience where reason cannot. Uncertainty is a shared nexus of incapacitating distrust and paradoxical sympathy. It is the equivocal origin of social urgency, and in the rhetorical dimensions of his argument, Hume appeals to a larger speech community that collectively recognizes uncertainty as its problem.6

It is worthwhile to ask if or in what sense we today belong to that community. This study is an attempt to take uncertainty seriously as a force in eighteenth-century thought, and accordingly we should position ourselves carefully in relation to such a volatile thinker—by turns so skeptical and so credulous—as Hume. For decades, accounts of eighteenth-century thought, and particularly of the period’s moral philosophy, have emphasized its failure.7

Thinkers of the period seek authoritative standards for social conduct and values, but vainly, and

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6 Popkin asserts that, historically and in the Anglosphere particularly, there was no such community (“Scepticism in the Enlightenment,” 7-8). His argument, again, is concerned with Pyrrhonism or formal philosophical skepticism; as such, it does not address the more casual and acute forms of uncertainty that manifest in the stylistic elements of Hume’s—or anyone else’s—writings. Nevertheless, reception of these sections of the Treatise upon publication was largely negative: see Pinch, Strange Fits of Passion, 21, 40.

7 I shall consider some recent specimens in this tradition below. Assessments of failure, however, have been built into the modern canon from the start: Selby-Bigge, for instance, introduces his anthology of moral philosophy with protracted discussions of both rationalism and sentimentalism’s faults (introduction to British Moralists, xxx-xli, xlvi-lvii). There is an almost apologetic strain in much of this; suggestively but rather lamely, he attempts to make the best of apparent deficiencies: “one of the most splendid qualities of the philosopher is to write so as to be easily found out if he is wrong” (Ibid., xviii-xix).
their failures are grounds for regret and unease, if not crisis and despair. Authors as various as Swift, Richardson, Locke, Pope, and Johnson fit readily into this account, in that they all consider the difficulty and deep anxiety involved in brokering ethical relations among social subjects. Such a story jibes too with that told by Hume, whose *Treatise* opens by deploiring the frequency of chaotic, uncertain, and therefore rancorous philosophical debate: “[n]or is there requir’d such profound knowledge to discover the present imperfect condition of the sciences, but even the rabble without doors may judge from the noise and clamour, which they hear, that all goes not well within” (*Treatise* 41). The Enlightenment’s failure is in this sense the *Treatise*’s first premise, and the indefensibility of knowledge its conclusion; Hume is sometimes said to have helped usher in modern thought by destroying hitherto existing philosophy.⁸

Although quick to point out that moral and natural philosophy fall short, however, Hume betrays a nearly explicit desire to rebuild even while demolishing. Having revealed the perceptions of causality and personal identify as unreasonable illusions, and institutions like justice and property as artificial contrivances, Hume proceeds to acquiesce in them as necessities:

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour’s amusement, I wou’d return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.

Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin’d to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life. (*Treatise* 316)

Where reason fails, custom and instinct provide a solid basis for Hume’s sociability.⁹ To identify with his position, then, is not merely to note the corrosiveness of uncertainty, but to rely on alternative certainties he posits all the same. In critiquing Enlightenment thought in the Treatise, Hume ultimately reaffirms many of its values. A productive task for us would therefore be to avoid a similar trap. If uncertainty lies at the heart of social relations in the eighteenth century, we might neither recoil from, discount, nor explain it away. If we, as Humeans or literary critics, detect doubts in the period’s corpus of ethical thought, we might refrain from treating them as flaws, or as the inevitable shortcomings of representation. It is fitting that Hume have the first word in a study of the eighteenth century’s many uncertainties; it would be unpardonable for him to have the last.

I. Uncertainty and Liberal Society

The aspirations of eighteenth-century moral philosophy are, in many respects, the aspirations of classical liberalism, which at its core holds that the individual is the origin of political, moral, and epistemological authority.¹⁰ Hume’s commitment to empiricism, limited and secular government, and private property aligns him with liberal precursors, like John Locke and Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, who share these as values. Even more fundamental to early liberal social thought, though—in response to seventeenth-century absolutist theories of government by the likes of Thomas Hobbes and Robert Filmer—is the

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⁹ Hume does not represent this natural resolution of skeptical doubt as permanent, as numerous scholars have noted: in the remaining pages of the chapter, he argues that his skeptical reflections and credulous sociability alternately yield to each other in accord with his underlying emotional propensities for each (Treatise 317-18). It is important to note, however, that he still views these dispositions as fundamentally incompatible, insofar as he cannot imagine them existing simultaneously. His shifting emotions allow him to choose between uncertainty and sociability.

¹⁰ “[L]iberal thought,” writes John Gray, “embodies the Enlightenment project in its least implausible form” (Liberalism, 86). What that amounts to I do not know. Gray’s seminal, ambivalent account of liberalism identifies individualism, egalitarianism, universalism, and meliorism as its leading principles; however, in egalitarianism’s “den[al of] the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth among human beings,” and universalism’s relegation of “specific historical associations and cultural forms” to “secondary importance” (Ibid., xii), these principles can be readily understood as instrumental to the protection and assertion of individuality against institutional and even interpersonal forces. I hope to show this of universalism in particular. See also Manent, Intellectual History of Liberalism, xvi.
proposition that humans can self-govern and thereby live together in relative peace. With the powers of reason in doubt, this is hard to guarantee, as Hobbes himself deduced. It was as a remedy to both rational uncertainty and political tyranny, then, that moral philosophers of the period developed what we now know as sentimentalist ethics. Sentimentalism, as chiefly expounded by Shaftesbury, Hume, Francis Hutcheson, Joseph Butler, and Adam Smith, begins by doubting that moral distinctions originate with reason, and by accepting that they come instead from emotional perceptions—the so-called moral sentiments—to which everyone has access. Shaftesbury was the first influential advocate for the paradigm. He devotes much of his masterwork, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, to enshrining social love and benevolence as universal and dependable human capacities: “in the passions and affections of particular creatures, there is a constant relation to the interest of a species or common nature. Nor will anyone deny that this affection of a creature towards the good of the species or common nature is as proper and natural to him as it is to any organ . . . to work in its known course and regular way of growth.” As Hume later would, Shaftesbury enlists innate principles of “nature” to secure the “proper” or individual standards of action that reason cannot.

Liberal sentimentalism comes, of course, with uncertainties and ragged edges of its own. Much of Shaftesbury’s “Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit” grapples with the numerous contrary social influences whereby supposedly natural virtue might be lost or misdirected, including disproportionate affection for insignificant people, perverse cultural custom, superstition, and poverty. As he acknowledges in another essay from the *Characteristics*, “Sensus Communis,” this problem is all the larger, more chronic, and more urgent under the modern state, a political society of millions:

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12 Ibid., 174, 179, 180, 186.
Universal good, or the interest of the world in general, is a kind of remote philosophical object. That greater community falls not easily under the eye. Nor is a national interest or that of a whole people or body politic so readily apprehended. In less parties, men may be intimately conversant and acquainted with one another. They can there better taste society and enjoy the common good and interest of a more contracted public. They view the whole compass and extent of their community, and see and know particularly whom they serve and to what end they associate and conspire. All men have naturally their share of this combining principle, and they who are of the sprightliest and most active faculties have so large a share of it that, unless it be happily directed by right reason, it can never find exercise for itself in so remote a sphere as that of the body politic at large. For here perhaps the thousandth part of those whose interest are concerned are scarce so much as known by sight. No visible band is formed, no strict alliance, but the conjunction is made with different persons, orders and ranks of men, not sensibly, but in idea, according to that general view or notion of a state or commonwealth. Thus the social aim is disturbed for want of certain scope. The close sympathy and conspiring virtue is apt to lose itself for want of direction in so wide a field.\(^\text{13}\)

Writing just two years after the Act of Union between England and Scotland, Shaftesbury sees in the increasingly centralized, populous, and powerful Great Britain a problem most familiar to us today: it’s hard to care about things of which we have no knowledge. Noble, rich, connected, able to think as scarce ever anyone before about national and “universal good” as a goal within reach, he here nonetheless concedes that his notion of benevolence is exhausted by so fuzzy an object; that “the social aim is disturbed for want of certain scope.” This argument is not wholly self-defeating: in a show of Whiggish optimism, he casts the overgrown state as a newfangled disturbance of otherwise self-regulating, sociable human nature. Yet in effect, even this claim is precisely an admission that it takes specific contexts and exclusive groups—”less parties,” the “community,” a “more contracted public”—for his version of magnanimity and virtue to flourish. Shaftesbury’s liberalism celebrates what we today recognize as provincial, bourgeois social norms as opposed to cosmopolitan ones; local interests are far more perceptible and compelling than “[u]niversal” ones, and he takes his cues about “nature” from the circles he best

knows. Shaftesbury is, then, a foundational liberal thinker fundamentally uneasy about pluralism. It is straightforward, and indeed commonplace in eighteenth-century studies, to point out the ideological or solipsistic nature of supposedly universalizing gestures like Shaftesbury’s. Daniel Carey, for instance, observes that the *Characteristics* “merely offered a series of axioms or definitions which suffered from an inevitable circularity,” Nancy Yousef argues that Shaftesbury embodies a sentimentalism that “attempts, but does not quite succeed, in banishing anxieties about the fragility of the intimacies, friendships, familial and social engagements which are the constitutive contexts of ethical experience,” and Patrick Müller cites the Earl’s notion of an innate moral sense as an instrument of partisan Whig propaganda conceived to oppose creeping monarchism. Taking a rather different tack, Allen Dunn remarks of Shaftesbury’s theory of virtue that “there is an implicit tension between the self-critical dialogue that opens the individual to a heterogeneous outside world and the self-integrating dialogue that discovers a uniformity and harmony behind what appear to be the discontinuous particulars of experience,” and argues that “Shaftesbury’s attempt to extend the scope of reciprocal dialogue beyond the club so that it may include all humanity is constantly frustrated by his inability to give that humanity any specific form and, especially, any specific form that might excite love and devotion.”

Such critiques are readily available, even hackneyed. Likewise, the holes in Hume’s sociability have been and are susceptible to criticism. Jerome Christensen pointedly argues that

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14 See Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson*, chap. 4, tellingly if imperfectly titled “Contesting Diversity: Shaftesbury’s Reply to Locke.” Although I take serious issue with Carey’s essentially exclusive attribution of Shaftesbury’s unease to Locke, his account of Shaftesbury’s response to that unease is persuasive.

15 Ibid., 110; Yousef, “Feeling for Philosophy,” 613; Müller, “Hobbes, Locke and the Consequences,” 315-17, 325-27.

16 Dunn, “Dialogue and Difference,” 125, 131. In fairness, Dunn concludes by suggesting “that the tension between the political and civil spheres can be productive as well as debilitating, and [that] this too is part of the legacy of Shaftesbury’s conversation” (Ibid., 134), but no sentence follows to elaborate.
Hume’s class and institutional affiliations foreordain the outcome of his skeptical crisis: “[w]e can safely doubt because of our assurance that whatever vicissitudes Hume’s personal identity underwent his social identity was continuous.”\(^\text{17}\) Of Hume’s account of sympathy, which subsists on associative principles much like those that extricate him from his skepticism, John Mullan notes that “a description of local understanding has become one of generalized (and moralized) social coherence.”\(^\text{18}\) In all these critiques, the purported deficiency of the systems is that they do not deliver on their ostensible promises, and that through them we do not gain satisfactory insight into or knowledge of others, of a material reality, or of right social behavior. In short, they fail to eliminate uncertainty from social ethics. As Mullan argues of the larger sentimental tradition that encompasses both Shaftesbury and Hume, “[w]hat was originally posed as a capacity for sociability was eventually realized in the most private of experiences.”\(^\text{19}\)

This is part of the story, but it is and ought to be no longer the story itself. For one thing, with respect to “circularity,” oppositions like Mullan’s of “sociability” to “private . . . experience[]” beg the question as much as any Shaftesburian or Humean claim about such matters. Are not the very placement and nature of the line that divides “private” from public, or various organisms singly and collectively from one another, precisely what is up for grabs in descriptions of the social? Furthermore, and more troublingly, such claims have, at minimum, a dangerously complacent political tendency. The bulk of intellectuals have rightly come to see several aspects of liberalism as instruments of Western hegemony. But does a claim like Mullan’s not reflect, passively or actively, a Shaftesburian longing for, even valorization of, supposedly authentic social relations that somehow surmount ethical slippages between one agent and another; that ignore what Yousef calls “anxieties about the fragility of . . .

\(^{17}\) Christensen, “Hume’s Social Composition,” 44.  
\(^{18}\) Mullan, Sentiment and Sociability, 34.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 17.
intimacies?” Are the anxieties, as well as the intimacies, not the crux of ethics? Can the two be uncoupled?

I want to suggest that operative in such arguments is a belated, perchance unwitting attempt to recuperate Enlightenment goals, and a sort of vanguard effect whereby we appear in a better position than Hume or Shaftesbury to stipulate the provisions of more nearly universal social theory. Variety of ensuing pictures aside, this frame itself is rotten. Too often, it is filled up with the values of classical liberalism itself. What else are we to infer from Dunn’s expectation of, his very formulation of as a priority, Shaftesbury’s “giv[ing] humanity any specific form?” It is hard not to stress every word in that phrase, fraught as it is: “give,” as though it were begged; “humanity,” which always implies a moral opposite, *Homo sapiens* or otherwise; “any specific,” almost a contradiction in terms. What interests Dunn about Shaftesbury is, in sum, his quest to install and laud, as all-subsuming moral template, the contingent traits of the next aristocrat or bourgeois who darkens his door. Mullan’s conceptual suggestion that “local understanding has become . . . generalized” is entirely apt here; indeed I hope to show that such a pattern is intrinsic to the history of liberal thought. But are we surprised that a project like Shaftesbury’s fails on these terms—and more to the purpose, are we disappointed in him? For me, the thought that Shaftesbury fails to achieve any such thing evokes unalloyed relief. Ultimately, however, that is not what is interesting about it.

I do not mean to single out these critics; their vocabulary and claims, after all, are symptoms of something more persistent. What I rather mean to ask is: why are these the lines of questioning we have pursued? Eighteenth-century sociability is riddled with breakdowns and gaps. If I may say so, we know this. But to still and simply see, or even to credulously describe

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20 Mullan’s reading of Sterne particularly suffers from this: see Chapter 2 for several footnoted discussions of problematic aspects.
those breakdowns and gaps as faults is, in a nontrivial sense, to reproduce a familiar lament about uncertainty, and to fail to reckon with what that uncertainty might represent for social ethics. It is, in short, to treat uncertainty a priori as a bug in the eighteenth-century social program, as Hume and Shaftesbury themselves have done, rather than redescribing the program such that uncertainty becomes a feature.

Shaftesbury himself intriguingly suggests a way forward in analysis by musing on what uncertainty does. “Sensus Communis” continues with a consideration of salutary effects of conflict: it is in war, of all places, that “the knot of fellowship is closest drawn . . . mutual succour is most given, mutual danger run, and common affection most exerted and employed.” This is a hazardous crucible in which to forge social virtues—”by a small misguidance of the affection, a lover of mankind becomes a ravager; a hero and deliverer becomes an oppressor and destroyer”—but the difference is a matter of degree.21 Paradoxically, affections might arise from something so “savage” and uncertain as outright combat. Even Hobbes would never have asserted this. Shaftesbury next considers the rise of political parties and conspiracies: again under the bewilderingly huge modern state, “associating spirits . . . form new movements and seek a narrower sphere of activity when they want action in a greater.”22 Although the resulting factions are subversive and destabilizing, Shaftesbury stops notably short of calling them unsociable:

In short, the very spirit of faction, for the greatest part, seems to be no other than the abuse or irregularity of that social love and common affection which is natural to mankind. For the opposite of sociableness is selfishness. And of all characters, the thorough-selfish one is the least forward in talking party. The men of this sort are, in this respect, true men of moderation. They are secure of their temper and possess themselves too well to be in danger of entering warmly into any cause or engaging deeply with any side or faction.23

22 Ibid., 53.
23 Ibid.
It is an historical irony that Shaftesbury, grandson of one of the most polarizing and conspiratorial politicians in English history, so deplores faction, but also a bit of intellectual irony that he turns its specter to productive use. Although an “abuse or irregularity” of natural social faculties, faction nonetheless provides evidence for rather than against his argument: partisan interests are merely narrow applications, under an unwieldy political system, of what remains of the “common affection” of all people. Even social uncertainty, where it arises, is reducible to a broader principle of certainty.

Not everything is so tidy, though, for “faction” and “party” become third terms in Shaftesbury’s discussion of sociability. Perhaps it is true that “the opposite of sociableness is selfishness,” but faction is neither. In a fractured world, in which universal moral standards even by Shaftesbury’s admission don’t hold sway, it is local, conflicting, sometimes incommensurable viewpoints that mediate social relations. But these perspectives do not amount to selfishness any more than they do a natural and monolithic sociability. Instead, we might say that they are the product of contingent forces working upon culturally conditioned subjects. By opening up a third term, Shaftesbury allows that sociability might depend on more than just one’s access to an established and authoritative ethical paradigm. Under the influence of political faction, “[d]istinctions of many kinds are invented. Religious societies are formed. Orders are erected, and their interest espoused and served with the utmost zeal and passion.”

Although the potential results are terrifyingly multiform from Shaftesbury’s perspective, the absence of “certain scope” yields undeniable space for creativity; the sense even that groups’ specific claims find expression because larger, subsuming standards of good and virtue cannot be sustained. Uncertainty has in some sense a productive role, even if—or, perhaps, because—it is not a role Shaftesbury wishes to acknowledge.

24 Ibid.
II. Pluralism and Authority: A Return to Hobbes

This study seeks to establish a positive role for uncertainty in social relations during the British eighteenth century. It is a story of dynamic relationships that arise between pluralism, order, and agency. Although writers of the period have been alternately credited with building moral and social systems and with doubting their stability, I argue that we must understand these contradictory acts as mutually enabling. In making this case, I will examine literary and philosophical treatments of conditions like those under which Shaftesbury’s factions form; conditions under which the multiplicity of social agents and their values exceeds the limitations of moral systems that would describe them. To that end, the story properly begins not with Locke or Shaftesbury’s liberalism, but with the original crisis of uncertainty that prompted it: namely, with the work of Hobbes.

Hobbes points the way for us to what liberalism’s uncertainties mean and why they matter. His political provocation of eighteenth-century liberals grows out of his less acknowledged epistemological provocation. Although his political theory was incendiary in its own right, it was to a large extent overshadowed by—indeed, much of the outrage at his politics was prompted directly by—his thesis that nature and experience provide no clear basis for rational or social authority. Specifically, Hobbes’s empiricism precludes the existence of universal standards of goodness and virtue upon which a population can be made to agree: “[f]or these words of Good, Evill, and Contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule of Good and Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the Person of the man” (L 120). Among his eighteenth-century respondents Hobbes’s position was most often interpreted, following Richard Cumberland, as one of simple misanthropy; Shaftesbury in particular takes
great pains to debunk his alleged view that humans are naturally egoistic, acquisitive, and hostile to others. But as modern scholars have shown, Hobbesian thought is not merely egoistic. It is far subtler and more terrifying than that. Humans in Hobbes’s account are assured to be neither evil, benevolent, nor in accord about the definition of either.

Hobbes’s empiricism is in this ethical respect more radical than Locke’s or even Hume’s. Reducing the human organism to nothing but matter and motion, he argues that human values are devised, or found, through the chance experiences of individuals. The first book of his *Leviathan*, containing an account of human psychology and society, thus abounds with a dizzying sense of possible yet uncertain developments in human history, morality, science, and motivation. The variable experiences of various people shape all the facets and faculties of their minds, notably both demonstrative reasoning and emotional response: “[t]he causes of this difference of [acquired reason], are in the Passions: and the difference of the Passions, proceedeth partly from the different Constitution of the body, and partly from different Education” (L 138-39). Reason, the basis of morality for rationalists, and feeling, its basis among sentimentalists, are both what we would today call subjective and contingent. Under such unrelenting empiricism, there is no clear standard for judging the priority of political subjects’ rational or sentimental claims, beyond those very claims themselves: “every man looketh that his companion should value him, at the same rate he sets upon himselfe” (L 185).

25 See for example Cumberland, “A Treatise of the Laws of Nature,” trans. John Maxwell, in *Hobbes’s “Leviathan,”* ed. Baumrin, 8-15; Shaftesbury, “Sensus Communis,” 43-44. Rather brilliantly, Shaftesbury here assimilates the received version of Hobbist theory within his own theory of benevolence. The mere fact of the *Leviathan*’s publication argues against the egoistic hypothesis: “pray, whence is this zeal in our behalf? What are we to you? Are you our father? Or, if you were, why this concern for us? Is there then such a thing as natural affection? . . . It is directly against your interest to undeceive us and let us know that only private interest governs you and that nothing nobler, or of a larger kind, should govern us whom you converse with.” Shaftesbury assumes that Hobbes’s “interest” is as monolithic and obvious as the sovereign itself; paradoxically, he dictates for Hobbes the terms of Hobbes’s own supposed selfishness.

26 The egoistic position was broadly attributed to Hobbes throughout the eighteenth century and even into the second half of the twentieth. Only with the work of such scholars as Bernard Gert did this begin to change: see his “Hobbes and Psychological Egoism,” in *Hobbes’s “Leviathan,”* ed. Baumrin, 107-26.
Although Hobbes’s political theory is unabashedly authoritarian, then, it is itself a contrived solution to a radically anti-authoritarian epistemology, the outcome of which is egalitarian, uncertain, and incalculably multiform. On an individual level, human faculties are the origins of planning, insight, and prosperity for individuals, but among populations they produce a morass of competing values and, ultimately, insoluble and even lethal disagreements. Further, as I will show, it is only through the equally contingent judgments of the political sovereign—the uncertainty, in other words, of an absolute ruler’s will—that Hobbes hazards a solution. For Hobbes, uncertainty is a problem, but it is also—as Shaftesbury comes close to admitting—a space in which political subjects might vie for and acquire agency, as well as the raw material from which social order is engineered.

Both Hobbes’s radical epistemology and his totalitarian politics provide standards against which to measure the coercive elements of liberal alternatives. He too distrusts pluralism, but does not attempt to explain it away. Indeed, he insists on ruthless government because he anticipates endless, insoluble contention of ideas and values, whereas Shaftesbury can insist that government is a corrupting influence precisely because he presumes essential conformity among all humans’ core moral impulses. And whereas for Hume society agrees on many norms—“intercourse of sentiments,” he writes, “in society and conversation, makes us form some general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners” (_Treatise_ 653)—Hobbes can assume no such thing. In misreading Hobbes as a mere pessimist, they, and many others since them, downplay the pluralism revealed in his analysis, and deny the diversity of social subjects, in order to make their liberalism work.\(^\text{27}\)! We can reread the

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\(^{27}\) In somewhat attenuated form, this remains a problem badly in need of remedy. Although Hobbes scholarship has largely moved beyond the notion of a merely egoistic or pessimistic Hobbes, scholars working in other areas have not, accepting this canard often as uncritically as ever. Within just the past decade of Shaftesbury criticism see, for instance, Müller, “Hobbes, Locke and the Consequences,” 317-19; Yousef, “Feeling for Philosophy,” 609-10; and
*Leviathan* not only as a primer in how to oppress, but also for a suggestion of what Hobbes’s interlocutors have suppressed.

In this study, I aim to get nearer to the spirit of Hobbes than to that of Shaftesbury or even Hume, in that I want to take uncertainty seriously as an integral and functional feature of eighteenth-century British thought. Hume, in spite of all his appeals for sympathy, views his doubts as “infirmities” which are “peculiar;” sallies of mind quite understandable for he himself to make but quite contrary to the aggregate operations of human nature. Shaftesbury, to vindicate natural benevolence and sociability, casts moral uncertainty as a result of faulty institutions or education. Both men display a paradigmatically liberal aversion to the possible inability of humans to self-regulate. I would suggest that their dispute with Hobbes hinges, in part, upon the *peculiarity* of uncertainty. Hume especially uses the word “peculiar” throughout his *Treatise*, alternately to mean *odd* or *strange* on one hand and *particular* or *proper* on the other. Whereas he and Shaftesbury tend to consider uncertainty peculiar in the first sense with respect to society, Hobbes considers it so in the second sense. In fact, both senses are operative: even while uncertainty threatens to unmake the identities and relations of social subjects, it is properly part of those identities and relations. But the latter sense is, for our purposes and for eighteenth-century studies, the crucial one: the ability to see uncertainty as an essential characteristic of the period’s ideologies, not just a contradiction or oddity in them. For Hobbes, the political sovereign, though empowered to limit uncertainty, simultaneously draws his power from it: that power subsists precisely because the leviathan’s acts are not bound by any prior normative claim, whether it is his subjects’ or his own, and hence morally and epistemologically

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Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson*, 109. It is impossible to address the moral and political concerns, or covert agendas, of eighteenth-century thought adequately without on some level addressing the full, radical scope of Hobbes’s arguments about pluralism.

28 Parker, among others, notes this split in Hume’s thought: see *Scepticism in Literature*, 152.
unpredictable. In this, Hobbesian thought provides precedent through which we might analyze problems of social knowledge as functional phenomena. We can begin with Hobbes, therefore, in our reassessment of what the eighteenth century achieved socially and ethically. Positing a productive role for uncertainty allows us to describe the successes of eighteenth-century sociability in addition to tallying its impasses.

III. Texts and Methods

In the chapters that follow, I shall deal centrally with literary works by Laurence Sterne, Anna Letitia Barbauld, and Jane Austen. Their writings suggest—though I do not claim they exhaust—the kinds of uses to which social uncertainty was productively put in the latter eighteenth century. Besides comprising a mix of genres, genders, and generations, these authors also work within what I take to be the principal strands of liberal moral thought that developed in answer to Hobbes. Sentimentalism, which gained influence through the first half of the century, included both a Shaftesburian strand, in which the immediate perception of individual goodness and virtue allows reliable moral judgment, and a Humean strand, wherein habitual associations between stimulus and moral sentiment furnish a reliable, though not natural, standard for behavior and judgment. Moral rationalism, less influential in Britain in this period, was often expressed—especially in literature—as optimism, which sets vagaries of fortune, evil, and adversity in the context of larger, legible, and assuring patterns, be they God’s providential designs or society’s continual improvement through the exercise of reason. In its hierarchical and traditionalist aspects, optimism appealed to conservative thinkers; in its progressive or meliorist aspects, to liberals. 29 In contrast to Hobbesian sovereignty, these paradigms premise social

29 Meliorism is, for John Gray, one of four cardinal doctrines of liberal thought (Liberalism, xii). In the eighteenth-century context, John Andrew Bernstein has argued for the congeniality of providential optimism, often associated with conservatives like Pope and Bolingbroke, to liberals such as Shaftesbury as well: see “Shaftesbury’s Optimism,” especially 89-90. That a thinker like Shaftesbury, ideologically captive to notions of natural
stability and improvement on the stability of knowledge categories. Yet they also stress the narrow bounds within which knowledge is possible: under the providentialist strand of optimism, reason’s office is to comprehend humans’ role in a cosmic order that otherwise remains mysterious, and sentimentalism grounds ethics in feelings prompted either by putative human nature or by cultural convention.

Eighteenth-century moralism, then, is preoccupied with belief, structure, emotion, and indeterminacy, and as such it finds expression and development in literature as much as in philosophy. Insofar as counterfactuality, indeterminacy, ambiguity, irony, and suspense shape benevolence, should not “raise[] a banner in praise of truly soul-destroying greed” might be thought weak evidence for the comparatively less hierarchical nature of liberal optimism, but it is among the evidence Bernstein adduces (Ibid., 97).

Exemplary is James Thomson’s panegyric, from the closing lines of Summer, in praise of philosophy, by whose agency the speaker speculates on the immensity of the cosmos before retreating in thought and reflecting on his own mind. As such, this is a notable embodiment of both the providentialist and meliorist impulses:

Nor to this evanescent speck of earth
Poorly confined; the radiant tracts on high
Are her [Philosophy’s] exalted range; intent to gaze
Creation through; and, from that full complex
Of never-ending wonders, to conceive
Of the Sole Being right, who spoke the word,
And Nature moved complete. With inward view,
Thence on the ideal kingdom swift she turns
Her eye; and instant, at her powerful glance,
The obedient phantoms vanish or appear;
Compound, divide, and into order shift,
Each to his rank, from plain perception up
To the fair forms of fancy’s fleeting train;
To reason then, deducing truth from truth,
And notion quite abstract; where first begins
The world of spirits, action all, and life
Unfettered and unmixed. But here the cloud,
So wills Eternal Providence, sits deep.
Enough for us to know that this dark state,
In wayward passions lost and vain pursuits,
This infancy of being, cannot prove
The final issue of the works of God,
By boundless love and perfect wisdom formed,
And ever rising with the rising mind. (Thomson, Summer, in The Seasons, p. 36-86, lines 1782-1805)

Mullan, although his elision of “sociability” and “sympathy” is rather circular and poses, throughout his book, serious epistemological difficulties, makes an excellent case for this point: “the philosophical project of theorizing sociability, that which sympathy makes possible, is not an isolated one. The work of producing—of modelling or staging—society as a scheme of consensus and unanimity, and of warning against the forces or habits which threaten such a scheme, is an undertaking common to different types of writing. In the mid-eighteenth century,
both texts and the experience of them, literature provides a rich mode of analyzing potential outcomes of uncertainty for various groups including speakers, characters, and readers. The same is true of much eighteenth-century moral and political philosophy. As I have already begun to demonstrate, the evocative arguments of Hobbes, Shaftesbury, Hume, and others cannot be explained solely in terms of formal logic, particularly since neither lettered culture in general nor these men in particular would have recognized the division we make today between literature and philosophy. Attention to subtleties of rhetoric and persuasion is all the more warranted in parsing the argumentation of ideologies devised after traditional certainty was no longer possible. Thus poems and novels, as well as treatises, do systematic and conceptual work. Thus James Thomson’s nature poetry combines striking empirical description and violent imagery with a poetic syntax that subordinates scenes of chaos to the tonal and didactic purposes of God. Thus Samuel Richardson’s fiction imagines social ranks reconstituted to the advantage of the most moral, manifestly deserving characters. Vehement and dubious certainties—that a frightening world is meant to benefit us; that virtue does reveal itself to the careful observer; that social rules do have a constructive tendency—form the core of eighteenth-century replies to Hobbes, and the edifices in whose cracks intrepid minds like Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen would in turn cultivate flourishing communities on new principles.

More specifically, the literary interventions of Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen suggest how peculiar forms of social understanding might arise from the respective uncertainties surrounding Humean heuristics, poetic optimism, and Shaftesburian virtue. Through the near total breakdown of verbal and sentimental convention, Sterne’s characters are made to wrestle with each other’s moral philosophy and narrative fiction engage in the description of forms of society—and I will argue that this is the determining concern of the novel of sentiment in particular. But neither type of text simply reflects social conditions or relations: both produce society; both seek to make society on the page. A result and a measure of this is a common ideological complexity—writings confusingly caught between description and projection, between the results of an analysis and the temptations of an ideal” (Sentiment and Sociability, 25).
radically divergent values and opinions. From a lack of apparent design—the possibility that our ideological commitments cannot map readily onto the natural world—Barbauld’s political advocacy acquires its impetus. And in the very unknowability of others, their feelings, desserts, and true characters, Austen posits the basis of interpersonal concern, intimacy, and connectedness. Uncertainty has proven difficult for us to theorize, perhaps, because difficult for most eighteenth-century authors to theorize. But Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen, with Hobbes, envision social ethics that not only accommodate, but largely run on uncertainty. Their writings, therefore, reckon with eighteenth-century epistemology as few works in the period do. I hope they may likewise help us to reckon with it.

The subsequent chapters will first examine the legacy of Hobbesian thought in the early eighteenth century before considering the works of Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen at length. Chapter One opens with a consideration of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, particularly the radical and subjectivist epistemology of its first book. Uncertainty is a potent force in Hobbesian society, both prompting political crisis among contending parties and helping solve it via the uncertain will of a created sovereign, which paradoxically secures uniform “awe” among subjects. By examining the empirical and psychological premises underlying his political theory, I am able to track Hobbes’s subsequent, often subtle influence on his detractors. The personified forces of Nature and Progress that fill Thomson and William Collins’s poetry, the paragons of virtue that populate the writings of Richardson and Shaftesbury’s follower Francis Hutcheson, and the impartial spectator embodying Adam Smith’s sentimental heuristics are all liberal surrogates for the leviathan, which solicit the attention, belief, and finally the moral and political allegiance of social subjects in strikingly Hobbesian ways. Constituting authority by other means, these
authors replace an absolute monarchy premised on pluralism with liberalism premised on conformity.

By contrast, Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen transform uncertainty into a social resource compatible with elements of political liberalism but deeply committed to subjective pluralism. Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* are the subject of Chapter Two—novels in which there is no clear difference between understanding and misunderstanding others. Rejecting Locke’s normative theory of language as well as literary and philosophical tropes of sentimentalism, Sterne develops a mode of conscientious comedy that I have termed “ethical levity.” In refusing to take words and conventions seriously, he fashions them into pliant instruments of sympathy, the constant misuse of which brings new personal claims ever to the fore, and challenges both the verbal and material bases on which insular Lockean liberalism is based.

Chapter Three examines Barbauld’s poetry, essays, and her doubts about the political agendas to which empiricism and optimism lead her peers. Barbauld’s counterfactual treatment of ecology in early nature poems brims with images of life, consciousness, and vulnerability hidden in unwonted places: even the apparent background of the natural and social environment, she argues, cannot be wrought upon without unseen harm. She thus opposes theories of meliorism and providence that remove questions of scientific and military legitimacy from the realm of contingency and doubt. Barbauld’s dissent, and her uncertainty, are tokens of a lovingly close engagement with beings that schemes of improvement, no less than schemes of hierarchy, leave behind.

Lastly, Chapter Four argues the importance of doubt for intimate relationships in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*. The ready availability in these novels of moral
judgments, both individual and collective, blocks their protagonists’ responsive social investigation of others, most notably in romantic courtship. While the novels’ syntax and irony undermine knowledge claims, their tonal shifts toward surprise and interest promote a skeptical, heavily observational sociability based in unresolved inquiry. In place of sympathy or companionate clarity among legible characters, and against the backdrop of emergent nineteenth-century mercantilism, Austen envisions the uncertain status of others as the catalyst of an energetic, even erotic solicitude.

By suggesting new functions for the central indeterminacies in these authors’ work, I hope if nothing else to find new ways forward through some of the main scholarly controversies surrounding it. The question of whether Hobbes’s political theory logically follows from his account of human nature, for instance, overlooks just how indeterminate and contingent the latter appears in the *Leviathan*. A more salient question to ask of Hobbes, and of the eighteenth century as a whole, is what kind of political or social theory might follow from the possible absence of any essential human nature. In Sterne’s case, the bad habit of reading him as either a satiric wit or a sentimentalist at any one moment ignores how vital his humor is in generating the perspectival shifts that constitute his empathy. Attempts to pin down Barbauld on the political spectrum do not adequately address the explicit, disturbing moral equivalencies with which she casts doubt upon political affiliations of every description. And debates about the nature of the education received by Austen’s protagonists—whether through their judgments as individuals or through the sanction of groups—neglect the more basic question of whether the word “education” rightly describes their experiences at all.

Most of all and most broadly, I want to argue on behalf of uncertainty as a sort of index for productive social development in eighteenth-century thought. If uncertainty is in any sense a
literary value, it has traditionally been explained in Keatsian terms: as a poignant and well-wrought recitation of sad facts—or, perhaps, the sad elusiveness of facts—about a broader human condition, which acquire their value in the telling.32 But such critical traditions downplay the social origin, and orientation, of uncertainty precisely through insisting on this hard divide; through reducing empiricism to dualism and uncertainty to solipsism. The legacy of empiricism, and the history of the social, is one of counterfactuals as well as facts.33 As Roberto Mangabeira Unger has provocatively shown, the Keatsian idea of “negative capability,” of good uncertainty, can inform—or undo—social theory.34 It is my hope that some of the eighteenth century’s uncertainties might teach us a few things about the ascendancy of liberalism and, more importantly, what it may have denied us. My readings of Hobbes, Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen

32 Keats’s formulation of “negative capability,” in a letter to his brothers, is framed in such terms from the start: “I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed [sic] so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Keats to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27? Dec. 1817, in Letters, 43). We should not call him to account for the systems built from this solitary coinage, but at the least we can say that he has invited us to regard negative capability as aesthetic, overwhelmingly so: “pursued through Volumes,” he continues, the concept “would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration” (Ibid.). In the mid-twentieth century, this aesthetic principle itself became a pillar of New Criticism and aggressively decontextualized reading. Notably, Cleanth Brooks defends the last lines of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” on grounds of “dramatic propriety” (Well Wrought Urn, 154): a phrase nicely suggestive of social matrices and standards manifesting inside supposedly hermetic space. But the unsocial character of Keatsian uncertainty has, even with the rise of historicism, remained a critical dogma: Li Ou, for instance, in a recent book-length study of negative capability, asserts that it “does not imply sensuousness, but an intense aesthetic experience that embodies the actual human life that is full of ‘disagreeables’, and by its intensity, transforms it into artistic beauty and poetic truth” (Keats and Negative Capability, 3, emphases added).

33 Paul Feyerabend has infamously argued the counterfactual (or “counterinductive”) development of physical sciences in particular, using the writings of Galileo as rich historical documents. His theoretical postulates, though, are of more general interest, and suggestive of the modes of social epistemology I aim to describe: “A scientist who wishes to maximize the empirical content of the views he holds and who wants to understand them as clearly as he possibly can must therefore introduce other views; that is, he must adopt a pluralistic methodology... Knowledge so conceived is not a series of self-consistent theories that converges towards an ideal view; it is not a gradual approach to the truth. It is rather an ever increasing ocean of mutually incompatible alternatives, each single theory, each fairy-tale, each myth that is part of the collection forcing the others into greater articulation and all of them contributing, via this process of competition, to the development of our consciousness. Nothing is ever settled, no view can ever be omitted from a comprehensive account” (Feyerabend, Against Method, 13-14). Although I am wary of the appellation “knowledge,” substituting “sociability” in its place might allow this to perfunctorily describe the conceptual frameworks toward which I see Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen working.

34 See Unger, False Necessity, 277-312. I share with Unger an interest in addressing “conflict between the enabling conditions of self-assertion” (Ibid., 32), although he generally describes those conditions in terms different from and rather more dualistic than what I would use.
offer an alternative to the general habit of seeing uncertainty as an unwelcome guest in the eighteenth century. Their work allows us to speak of a skeptical literary strand of British moral philosophy, which seeks to harness the social utility of provisional information. For the commitment to uncertainty—to flux, misunderstanding, and doubt—is not merely compatible with, but, I hope to show, is commitment to the social world. Lastly, I want to suggest a way toward an aptly modern understanding of the eighteenth century’s doubts, in which they enable the recognition of difference while thwarting the entrenchment of power. For that, we turn first to Hobbes’s blueprint for power itself.
Chapter 1  
“To Keep Them In Awe:” Hobbesian Legacies in Eighteenth-Century Liberalism

And as in Arithmetique, unpractised men must, and Professors themselves may often erre, and cast up false; so also in any other subject of Reasoning, the ablest, most attentive, and most practised men, may deceive themselves, and inferre false Conclusions . . . no one mans Reason, nor the Reason of any number of Men, makes the certaintie; no more than an account is therefore well cast up, because a great many men have unanimously approved it. And therefore, as when there is a controversy in an account, the parties must by accord, set up for right Reason, the Reason of some Arbitrator, or Judge, to whose sentence they will both stand, or their controversie must either come to blowes, or be undecided, for want of a right Reason constituted by Nature; so is it also in all debates of what kind soever . . . (L 111)

It has been a matter of some controversy in the scholarly literature on Thomas Hobbes whether his moral or political theory can be logically deduced from his assumptions about human nature.¹ I think he would have relished the irony. Cross-purposes and scattershot opinions are no small part of his point, to say nothing of the multiplicity of outcomes ensuing from logical deduction. We can’t even agree about this. Hobbes is nothing if not an empiricist; in fact, the account of the human psyche in the first book of the Leviathan is so relentlessly materialist that it is baffling that he is not considered, rather than Locke, the founder of British Empiricism. And on the basis of Hobbesian empiricism, there is no more reason for reflex pessimism about human nature—such as it is—than for reflex optimism, nor indeed any inevitable expectation of government over anarchy. Hobbes does not understand human nature to be either buoyed or burdened by preexisting forms of relation: it is in “want of a right Reason constituted by Nature.” He does not regard the human species in merely atomistic or egoistic terms, as narrowly self-

interested or inherently unmotivated to associate. To the contrary, he imagines “a great many men . . . unanimously approv[ing]” an “account,” and the social matrix populated variously by “parties” and individuals. But the potential to get along is not a guarantee of doing so, for a group is as incapable as any individual of finding “certaintie” to which all will assent. There is no self-evident or native terrain, no set of assumptions, upon which people are born interacting, and no universal algorithm for finding one afterwards. Both experience itself and the reason that parses it, in other words, are insufficient fixes for any “controvercie” between parties in a social exchange. Nothing follows necessarily from human nature, Hobbes argues, and that is the entire problem.

Hobbes doesn’t think humanity is inherently bad, as too many literary scholars still assume; he thinks epistemology is intractably hard. From the modest beginnings of human action and inquiry arises an irreconcilable infinitude of ends. The *Leviathan*’s first book makes this argument even at a formal level: it begins with a discussion “Of Sense” before progressing chapter by chapter to faculties of imagination, speech, reason, and passion, and thence to the formation of such institutions as virtue and religion which are sources of conflict. Conceptually, Hobbes persistently ties variations in sense-experience to ultimate normative difference:

> And divers men, differ not onely in their Judgement, on the senses of what is pleasant, and unpleasant to the tast, smell, hearing, touch, and sight; but also of what is conformable, or disagreeable to Reason, in the actions of common life. Nay, the same man, in divers times, differs from himselfe; and one time praiseth, that is, calleth Good, what another time he dispraiseth, and calleth Evil: From whence arise Disputes, Controversies, and at last War. (L 216)

Conformity to “Reason” is itself a matter of “tast[e],” derived from the “divers” results of experience and operations of “senses,” yet finally determining the parameters of “Good” and “Evil” and occasioning “Disputes” and “War.” Horrifying outcomes from contingent and frivolous variations; a sort of Mothra Effect. Hobbes reiterates his empiricist premise often,
nowhere more pointedly than in the “Review and Conclusion” at the end of the text: “FROM the contrariety of some of the Naturall Faculties of the Mind, one to another, as also of one Passion to another, and from their reference to Conversation, there has been an argument taken, to inferre an impossibility that any one man should be sufficiently disposed to all sorts of Civill duty” (L 717). Even the avowed “laws of nature” by which he justifies his general scheme of sovereignty, though claimed to be axiomatic within his own system of definitions, neither oblige people to particular actions nor require uniform interpretation. Hobbes’s logic is intricate and, as attested by critical tradition, capable of all manner of gloss. It is already a matter of literary interpretation. What I hope to suggest are some ways in which his studied literary style complements and enacts a logical argument that is itself no less contested. From this, I seek to trace Hobbesian assumptions about sociability and power in literature that comes after him.

In many respects, Hobbes sets the table for eighteenth-century moral philosophy. In comprehensive terms, he depicts the growth of uncertainty into a moral and social epidemic; a consequence of his own empiricism that would corrode the foundations of civil society and interpersonal harmony. For all the opposition the Leviathan would excite in the subsequent century, Hobbes’s anxiety that disputes will “come to blowes” was not substantially questioned. Locke, for instance, is typically credited with a more charitable view of human social capacities,

2 Hobbes asserts, having laid them out, that “[t]he Lawes of Nature are Immutable and Eternall; For Injustice, Ingratitude, Arrogance, Pride, Iniquity, Acception of persons, and the rest, can never be made lawfull” (L 215). In typical fashion, he has defined these words carefully already. His argument here, then, proves analytic rather than synthetic; how laws of nature play out in the world remains inconclusive, as he recognizes. In the same discussion he writes: “The Lawes of Nature oblige in foro interno; that is to say, they bind to a desire they should take place: but in foro externo; that is, to the putting them in act, not always. For he that should be modest, and tractable, and performe all he promises, in such time, and place, where no man els should do so, should but make himselfe a prey to others” (Ibid.). Citing self-preservation as a valid reason to disregard the deduced laws, Hobbes leaves its criteria here notably vague, particularly in view of his complicated framework for covenants and his explicit assertions that words are in any case not enough to keep people to their word (L 192-201). More telling, however, is what follows: “whatsoever Lawes bind in foro interno, may be broken, not onely by a fact contrary to the Law but also by a fact according to it, in case a man think it contrary” (L 215). That he introduces personal interpretation here puts him on a subjectivist ground consistent with the speculative character of the Leviathan’s empiricist psychology more generally. Hobbes is scrupulous in his definitions, but he is under no illusion that others will not accept, reject, or understand definitions as they wish.
yet thinks about social conflict in terms just as dire as, if not borrowed directly from Hobbes: “where there is no authority to decide between the contenders,” Locke writes in his *Second Treatise of Government*, even “the least difference is apt to end” in a “*state of war.*” As we have already seen, sentimentalists like Shaftesbury and Hume understand the absence of universal rational or moral standards as the problem of their time. Hobbes therefore plays a vital role in the formation of early liberal thought, even if, as I shall argue, it is not in the end quite the role he was assigned. But furthermore, I contend, Hobbes *is* the founder of British Empiricism, for he defines both the epistemological problems and the urgent social consequences that animate the best work of the great empiricists that follow him, from Locke through Hume to Edmund Burke. He instantiates empiricism as a moral discipline.

Hobbes’s influence thus opens epistemology as a field with tremendous ethical, and psychological, reverberations. Yet the *Leviathan*, his masterpiece and established contribution to modern political and social theory, has been comparatively neglected as a point of departure for most other eighteenth-century philosophical and literary genres. Examining the *Leviathan* as a work of politically-oriented empiricism, rather than of empirically-informed politics, allows us to define Hobbesian conceptual and psychological assumptions which are shared by both philosophical and literary strands of eighteenth-century social thought. Even while attempting to limit uncertainty, he suggests how to build with it, and from those contrary tendencies almost everyone would have something to learn.

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3 Locke, *Second Treatise*, 16.
4 Daniel Carey’s *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson* is one recent example unfortunately lacking in this regard. Carey in too many cases simply elides Hobbes’s premises and conclusions with Locke’s, in others displays a lack of engagement with Hobbesian texts themselves: “[f]or Hobbes,” he symptomatically writes, “the state of nature seems to have represented an abstract notion answering to the needs of his philosophical system” (*Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson*, 17n8). The discussion of diversity in the present day with which Carey concludes might look different, and draw from a different stable of political philosophers, had he accounted at greater length for the challenges that Hobbes poses to the liberal tradition from without: see ibid., chap. 6, especially 222-30. For a thorough literary-critical study putting Hobbes to good use in the eighteenth century, see Kay, *Political Constructions*. 
I. Leviathan: Immitigable Contingencies

Hobbes’s influence on British Empiricism could be said to be multifaceted, but for our purposes it consists chiefly in his reduction of human ethics and social relations to experiential difference. On this materialist and subjectivist ground, Locke and Hume, among others, would later build their accounts of psychology and sociability. Furthermore, Hobbes articulates a proposition that anticipates the later sentimentalisms of Shaftesbury, Hume, and Adam Smith: that affective states play a constitutive role in ethics. The most salient and unpredictable variations in human nature are differences in the things we care about. Yet the attempt to determine the objects of emotions, though of the utmost importance to Hobbes, is necessarily limited and inconclusive. We can make that attempt, he writes in the Leviathan’s introduction, by heeding the injunction, “Read thy self,” which he asserts is meant to teach us, that for the similitude of the thoughts, and Passions of one man, to the thoughts, and Passions of another, whosoever looketh into himself, and considereth what he doth, when he does think, opine, reason, hope, feare, &c, and upon what grounds; he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts, and Passions of all other men, upon the like occasions. I say the similitude of Passions, which are the same in all men, desire, feare, hope, &c; not the similitude of the objects of the Passions, which are the things desired, feared, hoped, &c: for these the constitution individuall, and particular education do so vary, and they are so easie to be kept from our knowledge, that the characters of mans heart, blotted and confounded as they are, with dissembling, lying, counterfeiting, and erroneous doctrines, are legible onely to him that searcheth hearts. (L 82-83)

The sense of authority in the original injunction quickly dissipates. An individual’s peculiar tendencies (“constitution”) and “education” both yield variations in the “objects of the Passions;” the stimuli that motivate. Although Hobbes elsewhere treats such variation non-normatively—good, he writes, is just the name that the individual “for his part calleth” the things he desires (L 120)—he here associates it with subterfuge and malady. Yet he offers no real solution—“h[e]
that searcheth hearts” describes nobody in his world, not even the sovereign.\footnote{It is worth noting that pluralism in matters of feeling and belief is itself unobjectionable to Hobbes, as his discussion of “Captivity of our Understanding” to the sovereign indicates: by this phrase, he writes, “is not meant a Submission of the Intellectual faculty, to the Opinion of any other man; but of the Will to Obedience, where obedience is due” (L 410). Hobbes’s political theory proposes to secure obedience in word and deed; though it does have psychological content insofar as the sovereign has a persuasive effect on political subjects, Hobbes does not profess anything resembling discerning control over subjects’ private judgments or total affective patterns. Stanley Fish has argued similarly, but too far: Hobbes by his account creates a spectacular and superficial political order because he actively distrusts \textit{as such} individual judgment, conscience, and depth (“How Hobbes Works,” 65-67). Fish’s comparison of Hobbes to Milton is conceptually useful to a degree, but in key respects like this one it distorts our sense of the former.} Hobbes himself does not pretend to this ability, either, burying the overall hypotactic sense of his second sentence in the parataxis of the subordinate clauses: a list of just a few sorts of individual variation suspends and overwhelms the primary clause. The “search[ ]” fails. His description of hearts as “blotted and confounded” thus illuminates both scientific and moral dimensions to the problem: “blotted” carries connotations of \textit{marred} on the one hand and \textit{muddled} on the other, while “confounded” suggests confusion as well as transgressive deformation. The ethical and finally political problem posed by the ciphers on men’s hearts is cognate with the epistemological problem they pose.

If epistemological concerns overlap with ethical ones, it is because epistemology and affect are, by Hobbes’s account, reciprocally linked.\footnote{Affective considerations, for Hobbes, imply ethical considerations: in Book One’s tabular division of the sciences, he defines ethics as the “Knowledge of . . . Consequences from the \textit{Passions of Men}” (L 149). To posit an ethical preoccupation on Hobbes’s part is, by his terminology, to posit an emotional one.} Much of the \textit{Leviathan’s} first book details how exposure to varying stimuli can shape the individual’s affinities, aversions, and values. Hobbes’s chapter on the passions attributes their beginnings to a process of empirical reflection:

\begin{quote}
Appetites of particular things, proceed from Experience, and triall of their effects upon themselves, or other men. . . . And because the constitution of a mans Body, is in continuall mutation; it is impossible that all the same things should alwayes cause in him the same Appetites and Aversions: much lesse can all men consent, in the Desire of almost any one and the same Object. (L 120)
\end{quote}

Perspectival frames of reference, produced by physical “mutation” as well as causal inference based on contingencies of “triaill,” set the range of emotional commitments one is prepared to

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make. Yet Hobbes’s quasi-scientific, investigatory diction in describing this contingent epistemology overlaps with what is already political vocabulary: the status of “consent,” power, and social ethics follows from minutely varying details of informational flux. In the sense that individuals are themselves self-determining, “constitution” likewise carries a shade of its original, organic political resonance. Out of innocuous nuances in matter in motion arise all-important ideological stakes.

But if epistemology influences affective commitments, the converse can be true as well, for Hobbes argues that emotional allegiances in turn prompt the structural and cognitive aspects of one’s mental activity. *Leviathan*’s eighth chapter betrays a streak of emotivism, assigning cognition an instrumental role in the gratification of passion: “For the Thoughts, are to the Desires, as Scouts, and Spies, to range abroad, and find the way to the things Desired: All Stedinesse of the minds motion, and all quicknesse of the same, proceeding from thence” (L 139). Hobbes’s wonderful simile, casting “Thoughts” as “Spies,” further argues that the ingredients of political conflict—motive, value, strategy, struggle, secrecy—are already present in psychological eventualities. How thought is deployed, he writes, depends on “the things Desired,” which is to say that thought is motivated—or, as Hume would later put it, “the slave of the passions” (*Treatise* 462). To affective variability, for instance, Hobbes attributes the individual variation of what he calls “regulated” trains of thought: “From Desire, ariseth the Thought of some means we have seen produce the like of that which we ayme at; and from the thought of that, the thought of means to that mean; and so continually, till we come to some beginning within our own power” (L 95-96). Emotional difference among people underpins as well the uncertainties of language, for words, “besides the signification of what we imagine of their nature, have a signification also of the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker; such
as are the names of Vertues, and Vices” (L 109). Even reason itself is unavoidably motivated and value-driven—that is to say, dictated by individual emotions—as Hobbes indicates in the discussion of right reason where we began. Disputes about right reason arise, he writes, because the disputants “will have every of their passions, as it comes to bear sway in them, to be taken for right Reason” (L 112).

This is a crisis, Hobbes argues, because it leaves unresolved the question of authority. The uncertainty is specifically social in nature, due less to the “constitution individuall” per se than to the interaction of many such individual constitutions in group contexts. As we have seen, Hobbes is largely untroubled by the notion that good and evil are individually defined, and even asserts that individual desires are not, by themselves, sinful or immoral (L 187). The threat of unsociability comes not from the lack per se of standard values, as the sentimentalists would later fear, but from the simultaneous expression of incommensurable values: “though wee perceive no great unquietnesse, in one, or two men; yet we may be well assured, that their singular Passions, are parts of the Seditious roaring of a troubled Nation” (L 141). Hobbes’s word “singular” functions here much like Hume’s preferred word “peculiar” except, notably, without quite the same suggestion that the case is abnormal. Hobbes further describes the problem using the memorable metaphor of building-stones, which owing to their individual forms and firmnesses cannot be readily assembled into a larger structure:

A fifth Law of Nature, is COMPLEASANCE; that is to say, That every man strive to accommodate himselfe to the rest. For the understanding whereof, we may consider, that there is in mens aptnesse to Society; a diversity of Nature, rising from their diversity of Affections; not unlike to that we see in stones brought together for building of an Ædifice. For as that stone which by the asperity, and irregularity of Figure, takes more room from the others, than it selfe fills; and for the hardnesse, cannot be easily made plain, and thereby hindereth the building, is by the builders cast away as unprofitable, and troublesome: so also, a man that by asperity of Nature, will strive to retain those things which to himselfe are superfluous, and to others necessary; and for the stubbornness of his Passions, cannot be corrected, is to be left, or cast out of Society, as cumbersome
thereunto. For seeing every man, not onely by Right, but also by necessity of Nature, is supposed to endeavour all he can, to obtain that which is necessary to his conservation; He that shall oppose himselfe against it, for things superfluous, is guilty of the warre that thereupon is to follow; and therefore doth that, which is contrary to the fundamentall Law of Nature, which commandeth to seek Peace. The observers of the Law, may be called SOCIABLE, (the Latines call them Commodo;.) The contrary, Stubborn, Insociable, Froward, Intractable. (L 209-10)

Hobbes again holds out the possibility of “mens aptnesse to Society”—provided certain conditions hold. Sociability is first and foremost “accommodat[ion]”. He understands it in nearly proprietary terms: within a social context, the presence of the individual is manifest as a discrete set of claims or demands made upon other individuals, and sociable relations are those which balance less and more dire claims; which avoid “tak[ing]” or “retain[ing]” things “necessary to [the] conservation” of any fellow-subject. Conflict, then, arises from the eventuality of arrogating a position to oneself that may clash with others’; this “hindereth the building,” or the designs of the “builders” to construct an “Ædifice.” The problem is the lack of coordination that results from a plurality of designs, and from competing conformations.

Hobbes here gets at a feature of authority that will later drive the plots of both Austen and Sterne’s novels: far from there being a lack of standards on which to base social ethics, there is often more nearly an overabundance. It is worth noting that, in Hobbes’s view, man as such is not necessarily solitary, nasty, or brutish—it is “the life of man” that is (L 186, emphasis added). In other words, it is not man, but men that prove indecisive about standards of value. Every stone fits into the edifice in its own unyielding way, which leads to incompatibilities; each social body asserts itself, whatever that self be, in obdurate fashion. Relativity of good and evil aside, their individual definitions are subjectively experienced, and insisted upon, as absolutes. An ensuing,

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7 Black, “Science and Moral Skepticism,” 185: “What Hobbes must then contend with is the observation that our usual moral discourse is not skeptical or deflationary in this way. For people do often argue about final human ends as if there was some absolute and non-relational truth about the matter.”
pluralistic cacophony of emotional vectors fatally hobbles any attempt by subjects to secure social stability against external as well as internal conflicts: “being distracted in opinions concerning the best use and application of their strength, they do not help, but hinder one another; and reduce their strength by mutuall opposition to nothing; whereby they are easily, not onely subdued by a very few that agree together; but also when there is no common enemy, they make warre upon each other, for their particular interests” (L 224-25). Diverse minds diverge too far for coordination.

The political effects of the Hobbesian political arrangement, accordingly, cannot be separated from its psychological effects. From an empiricist perspective, the creation of a sovereign is an attempt to consolidate numerous, divergent affective priorities into a manageably small number, about the significance of which all or nearly all subjects can be made to agree. As Albert Hirschman and others have written, Hobbes views the passions as the solution to social strife as well as its cause:⁸ for they are themselves universal attributes; “the same in all men,” and differ only in their “objects” (L 82-83). Hence in instituting sovereign authority he aims to introduce a new object that, rather than “distract[ing]” subjects, engages them sufficiently to acquire shared relevance for them all. Hobbes has been called one of the first political scientists; that is, one of the first philosophers to examine political power in so-called realistic terms.⁹ This account is complete only with a recognition that, under his psychological empiricism, the passions are as much a part of reality as any other phenomenon; themselves material processes, and both the effects and causes of others. If Hobbes is a realist, then subjectivism is a central

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⁸ Hirschman situates Hobbes within a broader project in early modern political theory, “to utilize one set of comparatively innocuous passions to countervail another more dangerous and destructive set” (Passions and the Interests, 20).
⁹ See, for example, Boonin-Vail, Science of Moral Virtue; C. B. Macpherson, introduction to Leviathan, 9-63. Boonin-Vail’s account is remarkable for its persuasive subsumption of the passional and subjective elements of Hobbes’s moral psychology under the larger umbrella of his scientific worldview.
component of his realism. But as I will presently suggest, it is perhaps unclear, even with respect to his materialism, how well the appellation suits him.

The Hobbesian social contract is a legal arrangement because it is a psychological one. Under commonwealth, subjects relinquish some freedoms and abilities—including, significantly, the right to arbitrate disputes or pass personal judgment—in favor of the ability to have “foresight of their own preservation” by means of a “visible Power to keep them in awe, and tye them by feare of punishment to the performance of their Covenants” (L 223). Besides “awe” and “feare,” a repeated concept here is “foresight,” the promise of prediction on the basis of sight specifically. The sovereign, as depicted on the Leviathan’s frontispiece, is nothing if not “visible;” the combination of his spectacular, monolithic, and punitive features allows for Hobbes “that by terror thereof, he is inabled to forme the wills of them all,” or more precisely, to “reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will” (L 227). Through his account of commonwealth in Book 2, Hobbes appears to think of this leap from sight to will in the same empiricist terms he has previously elaborated: “the Common-peoples minds, unlesse they be tainted with dependance on the Potent, or scribbled over with the opinions of their Doctors, are like clean paper, fit to receive whatsoever by Publique Authority shall be imprinted in them” (L 379). Describing the mind in proto-Lockean terms as “clean paper,” He proposes a sort of authoritarian empiricism; a decisive realignment of social concerns around one ultimate stimulus. Particularly in light of his prior description of subjects as unyielding stones, this seems an imperfect solution. But even so it is none the less relevant for moral philosophy or social

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10 The question of whether Hobbes’s theory of political obligation can be made to work is much-debated. Boonin-Vail notably does not see a deficiency in Hobbes’s proposal to motivate allegiance through fear of death: “[a]lthough there is no summum bonum in Hobbes’s system, . . . there is still a summum malum” (Science of Moral Virtue, 55). Lloyd, however, sees in the logical relationship of punishment and order a problem insoluble through outright force: “Do people respond to the threat of punishment or don’t they? . . . If they do, then there will be no recurrent disorder; if there is recurrent disorder, then clearly they don’t respond to threat of punishment, and no more reiteration of that threat is going to reestablish order” (Ideals as Interests, 33). Lloyd’s solution to the problem
thought. Certainty of outcome under Hobbes’s system is not what his critics have found objectionable, nor what the system itself requires.

II. In Awe of Uncertainty

The *Leviathan* offers political subjects certainty in one sense only. The structure of commonwealth drives subjects to be sociable in that it has the power to “make their Agreement constant and lasting”—an agreement which is “more than Consent, or Concord; it is a real Unitie” because it creates in the sovereign a single legal personality and consolidates all the various aims of the polis into a single motive (L 227). By doing so, the commonwealth arrangement minimizes injustice, which Hobbes defines as “to contradict what one maintained in the Beginning” (L 191). The justice system, that is, is supposedly based on consistency and certainty. However, it does not do quite what Hobbes here alleges. Certainty is important to him only in a limited sense. The will of the sovereign must be manifest, yes—attentionally salient in order to influence the affects and motives of citizens—but that is not the same as being consistent or legible. Will itself, according to Hobbes, is just “the last Appetite, or Aversion” in a train of deliberations; decisionmaking is not so much a matter of resolution as of simple termination (L 127). If sovereignty works by consolidating many such wills into one, then the psychological basis of contractualism remains curiously open-ended. The certainty afforded by commonwealth does not imply that what the sovereign does will or even can be foreknown. To the contrary, the sovereign will’s power consists in the combination of its being manifest and arbitrary.¹¹

¹¹ The arbitrary nature or “paradox of sovereignty” has been argued most famously by Agamben, whose discussion itself leans heavily upon the work of Carl Schmitt: see *Homo Sacer*, 15-29. Building on Agamben, I am interested in
Uncertainty and indecision are, grammatically as well as conceptually, intrinsic to Hobbesian sovereignty. Hobbes indicates that “the Resolutions of a Monarch, are subject to no other Inconstancy, than that of Humane Nature” (L 242). What Hobbes leaves only implicit is that this is the same “Inconstancy” that produced the problem in the first place. He has not eliminated the deep uncertainties surrounding “Humane Nature;” he has instead contained and repositioned them. His very construction of absolute power relies on an endlessly expansive range of indeterminate actions on the part of the absolute monarch. For instance, “it belongeth of Right, to whatsoever Man, or Assembly that hath the Soveraignty, to be Judge both of the meanes of Peace and Defence; and also of the hindrances, and disturbances of the same; and to do whatsoever he shall think necessary to be done” (L 232-33). Included in these “meanes” is

the Power of Rewarding with riches, or honour; and of Punishing with corporall, or pecuniary punishment, or with ignominy every Subject according to the Law he hath formerly made; or if there be no Law made, according as he shall judge most to conduce to the encouraging of men to serve the Common-wealth, or deterring of them from doing dis-service to the same. (L 235)

Hobbes’s descriptions of sovereign prerogative are broad and inexplicit: repetitions of “whatsoever” and “or,” along with other words like “all,” cannot really be said to codify. Yet “shall” has the sound of legal finality, and gives form and force to the contingencies that constitute the sovereign’s decisions and acts. Decisive verbs rising out of a meandering syntax: this is an apt stylistic representation of the monarch who is endowed with absolute structural power to act upon others, but whose rationale for acting may freely be as convoluted, “blotted and confounded” as those of the people he is supposed to rein in. Potential is potency. Like the Biblical leviathan, the Hobbesian leviathan is at once conspicuous and mysterious, a combination that Hobbes’s Biblical borrowing only amplifies. The *Leviathan’s* frontispiece

the literary attributes of constructions of the sovereign, and how they might inform liberal social theory as articulated in eighteenth-century poetry, fiction, and philosophical writing.
Abraham Bosse, frontispiece to *Leviathan*, 1651. Image: Wikimedia Commons (public domain).
includes a Latin quotation of Job 41:33—“Upon earth there is not his like,” as the King James Version translates it—but the frontispiece, crucially, omits the remainder of the verse: “who is made without fear.” Hobbes makes no such claim of his sovereign, who though institutionally speaking has no equal, is prone to the same emotional vicissitudes, possibly including fear, as any other.

As a contractual arrangement meant at bottom to intervene in social ethics, Hobbesian sovereignty is notably amoral. The dictates of the sovereign, notoriously, may contradict the laws of nature as may the prepolitical subject’s. For instance, the sovereign may deprive subjects of their property “for the enriching of [his] favourite or flatterer” or kill them even though innocent, and although these deeds go against Hobbes’s deduced laws, the more important consideration is that the sovereign has the constituted right and ability to do them (L 243, 265). “It is true,” Hobbes writes,

that a Sovereign Monarch, or the greater part of a Sovereign Assembly, may ordain the doing of many things in pursuit of their Passions, contrary to their own consciences, which is a breach of trust, and of the Law of Nature; but this is not enough to authorise any subject, either to make warre upon, or so much as to accuse of Injustice, or any way to speak evill of their Soveraign; because they have authorised all his actions, and in bestowing the Soveraign Power, made them their own. (L 297)

The subject allows his assent and volition to be realized on in unpredictable ways, which creates a quite literally inescapable element of uncertainty. Again, the language of idiosyncratic, even furtive psychology (“many things in pursuit of [the sovereign’s] Passions”) appears in a discussion about “ordain[ing]” and “authoris[ing]” public deeds. Public, then, hardly means transparent or legible for Hobbes. If, as he argues, “there cannot easily arise any contradiction in the Lawes,” it is only because “the same Reason” that instituted the laws—that is, the sovereign’s reasoning—“is able, by interpretation, or alteration, to take it away” (L 317). This is not so much a matter of careful reconciliation as of sheer volition: “when the Soveraign
commandeth any thing to be done against his own former Law, the Command, as to that particular fact, is an abrogation of the Law” (L 346). Furthermore, because the sovereign is the acknowledged final authority, “no Law can be Unjust” (L 388).

Subjectivism and uncertainty thus drive the Hobbesian political arrangement, even from the top down. Law and justice are sovereign fiat, and falling in line with the social contract is less about heeding codified rules than about bending to the sovereign’s restless will. The individual subject does not get to assert any claim, even in pursuit of any putative standard of justice. Rather, social accord derives from removing and thwarting every subject’s ability to claim that the standards for justice and social protocol are objective; from removing the certain reference point that would allow the subject to self-assert his social or ethical claims. “The trouble,” suggests Stanley Fish, “is that in its present state our moral vocabulary is too full of substance, and therefore it must be purged of the pretensions that make it not only useless (because it has no single referent) but subversive (because it licenses precisely what must be curbed, the sway of private judgments).”

Thus realist may be an inapt term for Hobbes’s political theory, for it suggests the very seemingly absolute frame and claim to authority involved in the judgments of the prepolitical subject. In the absence of rational and empirical authority, Hobbes’s politics, like Hume’s morals, are more felt than judged of. They rest on the fearful sentiments that derive from uncertainty. It is therefore through radical alterity, rather than objectivity, that political subjects are made responsive to outside demands. This is an insight Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen would later rediscover and relish.

The utility of unrestricted power is not limited to the political sphere. Having once described the sovereign and his acts, Hobbes introduces, at the conclusion of Book Two, a concept of God created in the sovereign’s image, particularly in the way he exercises his power.

Discussing the example of Job, Hobbes argues that God’s “Right of Afflicting, is not always derived from mens Sinne, but from Gods Power. . . . Neither hath [Job] sinned, nor his fathers; but [he suffers] that the words of God might be made manifest in him” (L 398). The prerogative to punish is first and foremost a means of demonstration, not moral redress. Once more, “manifest[ation]” is a paramount rationale for the use of power—more so than “Sinne.” Both absolute power and the ensuing absolute deference in this case depend on absolute and uncertain prerogative, or “the [sovereign’s] right to doe what he pleased” (L 265). The result is a notable example of negative theology. When talking and thinking of God, Hobbes argues, we should not so much as “attribute Figure to him” or “say we conceive, and imagine, or have an Idea of him, in our mind,” any of which would imply that God is finite, or exists only within fixed boundaries (L 402-3). To speak of God with certainty is to assert that he is limited. Instead of inferring any such property, Hobbes writes, one is to speak of God’s nature, acts, and will in negatives and superlatives—counterfactual, uncomprehending terms—“as if [one] meant not to declare what [God] is, (for that were to circumscribe him within the limits of our Fancy,) but how much we admire him, and how ready we would be to obey him; which is a signe of Humility, and of a Will to honour him as much as we can” (Ibid.). In keeping with the empirical, psychological bases of allegiance he lays out in the first half of the Leviathan, Hobbes also promotes in religious matters a form of subjectivism and embryonic sentimentalism: only of our own affective reactions, “Humility” and the inclinations of “Will,” can we be sure. God, then, is the specter of an arbitrary monarch in the sky. Hobbes’s uncomprehending, devotional attitude and language parallels, in many ways, the monolithic awe he aims for the sovereign to inspire. Through a certain object’s uncertain attributes and acts, which exceed the “limits of our Fancy,” subjects are all oriented towards a given passion—political fear—of which too they can be certain.
Taken as a whole, Hobbes’s production of sociability has a mixed, ambivalent relationship with uncertainty. It allows no room for doubt about where the power to legislate, resolve disputes, or enforce contracts resides. Yet the motivational system, or set of affects, that gives force to Hobbesian contracts fundamentally relies on uncertainty; on the actions of the sovereign being inscrutable or out of joint from the perspective of those subjects with whom he interacts. The sovereign presents to social subjects an impenetrable mind, which demands attention, doubt, and ultimately deference. Though the specific manifestations of social uncertainty would radically change, this basic epistemological-affective structure would prove unobjectionable—in fact, it would prove essential—to Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen. In the intervening years, however, authors working in predominantly liberal strains of social thought—few if any of whom would have avowed a debt to Hobbesian thought—tended to borrow Hobbes’s emphasis on certainty rather than uncertainty. Whether by means of sovereignty, providence, virtue, or some other convention, the prevailing strategy for saving sociability in the eighteenth century is to enforce monolithic standards of value, conduct, and finally allegiance.

Hobbes, then, sets all the central terms of debate, and his answer would come to redound in areas of literature and thought far afield from the domain of political philosophy proper. Tracing his arguments from their empiricist beginnings has allowed us to see the sovereign as, at bottom, a powerful psychological stimulus designed to act upon the collective preferences and values of political subjects. Hobbes invests the sovereign with the indeterminate power needed to induce determinate reactions and motives across a broad populace; to render these, in one respect, matters of certainty. His whole plan of commonwealth depends on the sovereign’s being, in a physical-material as well as in a correlated affective sense, *irresistible*. Although the sovereign is supposed to wield real and terrible power, that power’s efficacy cannot be separated
from the spectacular, fundamentally rhetorical and persuasive figure the sovereign cuts. Although posited as a flesh-and-blood person, he is equally an “Artificiall person” in Hobbes’s sense (L 217); a personification figure whose power derives largely from his designation. As James Paxson has observed, the “Body Politic” of a king was traditionally understood to encompass the physical body, the legal-fictive persona, and the spatial domains of the monarch. In this sense, the leviathan both embodies and overlaps with representational techniques loosely grouped under the general heading of personification; he is already contiguous with available literary tropes. As the Leviathan’s iconic frontispiece attests, the sovereign is in his own right an icon; a figurehead upon which we, along with the rapt masses of the body politic, cannot but turn our eyes. In these representational respects, he is thus an aesthetic antecedent and a structural homologue for many of the personages and personification figures that appear in eighteenth-century literature and philosophy.

III. Hobbesian Poetics: Authority, Personification, Meliorism

Although ultimately evident in multiple forms and genres, Hobbes’s literary influence may have reared its head first and most directly in the poetry of the Restoration and early eighteenth century. If John Dryden established much of the poetic vernacular of that period, we must recognize in turn that several of Dryden’s own proclivities came from Hobbes. Absalom and Achitophel in particular seems to clarify the largely Hobbesian rationales underlying Dryden’s consistent loyalty to the House of Stuart over the last four decades of his life. As such, this poem grounds its emergent Toryism in explicitly Hobbesian arguments for absolute monarchy. Dryden gives these arguments lofty, forceful expression that both recalls Miltonic rhetoric and helps establish the heroic

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13 Paxson, Poetics of Personification, 44. The term “personification figure” is also Paxson’s: see ibid., 35.
couplet as an instrument of epigrammatic, proverbial ideological authority. Compact arguments, such as King David’s that “Without my leave a future king to choose,/Infers a right the present to depose,”¹⁴ are in effect captivatingly deft rejoinders to the opponents of his absolute rule. They are flashes of rhetorical authority that justify, but also partly constitute, the spectacular power of the sovereign.

Other passages of Absalom develop Hobbesian premises at greater length, notably its latter third, which features an extensive theoretical consideration of monarchical and republican political theories of the Restoration era. Although legitimacy (in all senses) receives special emphasis from Dryden, many of his claims about the motives for and power of government are plainly Hobbesian:

If [subjects] may give and take [sovereign prerogative] whene’er they please,
   Not kings alone (the Godhead’s images),
   But government itself at length must fall
   To nature’s state, where all have right to all.
   Yet, grant our lords the people kings can make,
   What prudent men a settled throne would shake?
   For whatsoe’er their sufferings were before,
   That change they covet makes them suffer more.¹⁵

Dryden obviously follows Hobbes in his view of “nature’s state, where all have right to all,” echoing Leviathan’s description of the chaos that ensues when “every man has a Right to every thing” (L 190). But more to the point, he shares Hobbes’s understanding of political fealty as a function of affect and preference. Regardless of “whatsoe’er” uncertain “sufferings” David’s Jewish subjects might have faced, it remains conclusive, even proverbial, that “more” potential suffering in the future is the counterpoint to the discontents of “before.” Although the precise circumstances of these temporal positions remain uncertain, the outcome of the comparison itself is assured. The alternatives to obeying the sovereign are all patently worse than its costs. As for

¹⁴ Dryden, Absalom and Achitophel, in Selected Poems, p. 140, lines 979-80.
¹⁵ Ibid., p. 135, lines 791-98.
Hobbes, so for Dryden is social certainty the inexorable result of an emotional gradient that consolidates diverse psychic states into a unity of opinion.

Dryden, like Hobbes, invests in King David a radically “visible Power,” not so much a sign of legitimacy as of existential threat. The surrogate of Charles II, David notably appears only toward the end of the poem, voicing awareness of the spectacular nature of his own power:

“Law they require, let Law then show her face;/They could not be content to look on Grace,/Her hinder parts, but with a daring eye/To tempt the terror of her front and die.”¹⁶ There is a move in these lines from the latent—in which the people’s motives are described as “not . . . content;” in negative, uncomprehending terms—toward the manifest, in which unclear popular feeling turns to outright “terror” and Dryden’s fanciful metaphor gives way to an open reminder of the lethal threat of sovereign violence. In fact, the whole movement of Absalom could be described as following a similar path from latency toward manifestation. David, though the frequent subject of description and conversation in a poem full of orations, does not speak until 930 lines into it. When Dryden at last introduces the king to us, he does so with a suspended syntax that reproduces, in miniature, the long delay that precedes it:

With all these loads of injuries oppressed,
And long revolving, in his careful breast,
The event of things, at last, his patience tired,
Thus from his royal throne, by Heaven inspired,
The godlike David spoke: with awful fear,
His train their Maker in their master hear.¹⁷

Having probed the furtive motives of British Whigs through his depictions of Absalom and Achitophel’s equally “revolving” and “careful” (or at least calculating) thoughts, Dryden finally terminates the long deliberations of political legitimacy via the stately revelation of a simultaneously stern, candid, conscientious, and attractive monarch. David, like Hobbes’s

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 140, lines 1006-9.
¹⁷ Ibid., p. 138-39, lines 933-38.
sovereign, has personal and possibly inexplicable motives, duties, and burdens—he is “oppressed” and even self-depreciating, among other things, about how to deal with his beloved rebelling son—but, his own faults and idiosyncrasies notwithstanding, capably wields power both to assert his own eminence and to diminish his subjects and their claims. The irony so often present from the poem’s first lines—“In pious times, ere priestcraft did begin/Before polygamy was made a sin”\textsuperscript{18}—here falls away; Dryden’s tone at David’s climactic entrance is straight awe.

As a morally checkered figure, Dryden’s David is nonetheless grand; his faults and idiosyncrasies, like the leviathan’s, even magnify his power. The king did some things wrong, Dryden concedes, and indeed it is easy to read passages of the poem as criticisms of the king’s sexual immorality,\textsuperscript{19} but in no way does this disqualify him from power, or bring Dryden’s speaker to question the king’s total legitimacy. David in fact implies willingness to renounce goodness in order to strengthen his rule: “since they will divert my native course,/’Tis time to show I am not good by force.”\textsuperscript{20} Accordingly, the bulk of his soliloquy shows him rejecting, alternately, the dictates of mercy and of justice, and the poem’s conclusion leaves the power struggle partially unresolved.\textsuperscript{21} Much of the poem’s tension derives from the all-suspenseful question of how David will act—a live topic at the time of its composition—while his consideration of so many divergent alternatives suggests the great range of the powers at his disposal. Achitophel and Absalom’s earlier debates about the legitimacy of government are

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  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 114, lines 1-2.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} For one such reading, see Jerome Donnelly, “Fathers and Sons.”
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Dryden, \textit{Abasalom and Achitophel}, p. 139, lines 949-50.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} In soliloquy, David proposes first to deal with Absalom and the rebels by decisive force, then to let Absalom “repent and “live” (Ibid., line 957), to punish the rebels by legal means (p. 140, lines 989-94), to provide his friends in power with special protection (lines 995-98), to resent the entire necessity of punishing subjects (lines 999-1003), and finally to let the rebels destroy each other through internal squabbles (p. 140-41, lines 1010-21). Dryden, in his preface to the poem, draws attention to this irresolution: “The conclusion of the story I purposely forbore to prosecute, because I could not obtain from myself to show Absalom unfortunate. . . . Where I the inventor, who am only the historian, I should certainly conclude the piece with the reconcilement of Absalom to David. And who knows but this may come to pass? Things were not brought to an extremity where I left the story: there seems yet to be room left for a composure; hereafter, there may only be for pity” (Ibid., p. 113-4).
\end{itemize}
pushed aside by the sovereign’s deliberations only of what he, as the government, shall do. The poem’s final couplet, which presents “the godlike David . . . restored,/And willing nations kn[o]w[ing] their lawful lord,” was a poor forecast of the Stuarts’ future, but it is highly attuned to its historical moment insofar as it proposes to achieve a measure of certainty by making citizens “willing” to obey through the superlative display of a Hobbesian, “godlike” sovereign. 

To be “lawful,” David’s actions need not be licit.

This emphasis on commanding spectacle, I want to suggest, with the Hobbesian psychological assumptions that underpin it, spread in some cases even to precincts of English poetry to which Toryism and political absolutism did not. Later poets writing from more liberal perspectives were rightly troubled by arbitrary power, even as they bent Hobbes’s foundational empiricist insights to their own purposes. James Thomson, a loud exponent of strong political order in poems like Liberty and “Rule, Britannia,” argues in The Seasons that sovereignty alone is not a sufficient or even primary principle of social accord. It is not to the sovereign directly, but to “serene Philosophy” that Thomson attributes sociability and order at the end of Summer:

Without thee [Philosophy] what were unenlightened Man?
A savage, roaming through the woods and wilds
In quest of prey; and with the unfashioned fur
Rough-clad; devoid of every finer art
And elegance of life. Nor happiness
Domestic, mixed of tenderness and care,
Nor moral excellence, nor social bliss,
Nor guardian law were his . . . but, taught by thee,
Ours are the plans of policy and peace;
To live like brothers, and, conjunctive all,
Embellish life. 

Thomson’s view of the state of nature—described in this passage as “than non-existence worse”—is thoroughly Hobbesian. Yet “guardian law[’s]” existence itself, he argues, is

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22 Ibid., p. 141, lines 1030-31.
23 Thomson, Summer, p. 84-85, lines 1730, 1758-77.
impossible without philosophical cultivation. Sociopolitical order must entail more than deferential fear; sociability itself is measured in positive affects like “happiness,” “bliss,” “tenderness,” and comfort in “finer,” “elegan[t],” and “[e]mbellish[ed]” circumstances. Inseparable from sociability for Thomson is meliorism, the predominantly liberal form of optimist discourse that, in its strongest form, imagines an attainable “society in which all the natural evils are suppressed and the immemorial human follies – war, tyranny, intolerance – abolished.”25 For Thomson, such a society is not, with respect to the individual subject, readily compatible with “savage” and “[r]ough” conditions like those found in nature’s “woods and wilds.” His poetry accordingly aims to reconcile the normative ends of meliorism, and the teleological assurances of providentialism, with the uncertainties and violence of the political and natural order by embellishing both; by depicting both as mere parts of larger structures that subsume their undesirable aspects to greater ultimate purposes.

It is contingency that leads Thomson, like Hobbes, to his impasses of sociability. His poetry reflects the erosion of common or absolute values, insofar as natural-philosophical discourses of the early eighteenth century threatened to dislodge the human species from its privileged position as masters of the earth: plainly, not all things in the world served a human purpose.26 Natural violence may appear as arbitrary as any of the leviathan’s acts: “not always on

24 Ibid., line 1774. Also in a Hobbesian vein, Thomson fears that human agriculture and exploration cannot flourish without philosophy. Uncultivated humanity would not possess “various skill/To turn the furrow, or to guide the tool/Mechanic; nor the heaven-conducted prow/Of Navigation bold, that fearless braves/The burning line or dares the wintry pole,/Mother severe of infinite delights!” (Ibid., lines 1765-70). These lines closely recall, in diction and structure, Hobbes’s description of the state of war: “In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea” (L 186).
26 Still invaluable, and furnishing a good account of this development, is Arthur Lovejoy’s comprehensive study of the Great Chain of Being. According to Lovejoy, the quasi-metaphysical idea of the Great Chain, at the height of its influence in the eighteenth century, increasingly led thinkers to see each link in that great cosmic hierarchy as an end in itself, rather than as a divine gift for the instrumental benefit of the human species; it suggested the idea that humans were nearer to the low end of the chain than they were to the upper end and God; it brought new awareness to how small the difference between humans and other animals adjacent in the chain; and it provided a plausible
the guilty head/Descends the fated flash” Thomson writes in *Summer*, before telling of a “beauteous maid” who is “struck” by lightning from “Mysterious Heaven” and left a “blackened corse.”

“[F]ate” itself seems uncertain; “[m]ysterious;” capricious even. In *Autumn*, the northern lights, resembling “armies in meet array,/Thronged with aerial spears and steeds of fire,” induce “panic” that travels “contagious through the crowd,” and a midnight traveler appears to die in a swamp or mire when he “sinks absorbed”—not only physically, the scene suggests, but mentally. His safety fluctuates, “[n]ow lost and now renewed,” in fateful response to an obscure stimulus: a will-o’-the-wisp, which “scatters round, or, gathered, trails/A length of flame deceitful o’er the moss.” The affective profile of nature depends on its epistemological status. With no “directive ray” cast over it, Thomson’s *Autumn* nightscape is counterfactual and chaotic: “Order confounded lies, all beauty void,/Distinction lost, and gay variety/One universal blot—such the fair power/Of light to kindle and create the whole.”

It is an illegible milieu, “blot[ted]” and inscrutable like Hobbesian hearts, in which uncertainty—the loss of “[o]rder” and “[d]istinction”—obliterates “beauty,” “ga[iety],” the social affections, and the prospect of an improving world.

Against a backdrop of threats that, far from being contrived for human good, display indifference or hostility toward humanity, the greatest danger for Thomson is that humanity might grow “forgetful of the hand/That hushed the thunder” after the storm, and of the “sense of powers exceeding far [their] own.” At stake is humanity’s sense of certainty: the present conviction of providential design and meliorist progress that guide external events for human good. *The Seasons* tasks itself both with the rational project of “up-tracing . . . [t]he chain of conceptual account of humans’ purportedly mixed or contrary nature, part intellectual and part corporeal (Great Chain of Being, 186-200).

29 Thomson, *Summer*, p. 71, lines 1239-42.
causes and effects to [God]” and the aesthetic project of rendering “[t]he whole magnificence of heaven and earth . . . with livelier sense,/ Diffusive painted on the rapid mind.”30 The tone of the *Autumn* night lightens with the return of the illuminating sun: “Hence every harsher sight! For now the day,/O’er heaven and earth diffused, grows warm and high;/Infinite splendour! Wide-investing all.”31 Placing “all” in a single light, bringing universal “splendour” and “diffused . . . warm[th],” the sun in effect banishes the “harsher,” obscure objects of night from consideration. It plays the Hobbesian role of a great force subsuming lesser ones. Its rising is also, tonally speaking, a kind of progress in miniature. In *Summer*, Thomson depicts the sun’s energy as the origin, both direct and indirect, of much of nature’s violence—“All-conquering heat, oh, intermit thy wrath!”—but also as an agent of political, philosophical, and divine progress.32 He imagines sunrise, for instance, as a martial event in which the landscape is cleared of undesirable, alien, even racially othered elements and made safe for the bourgeois British subject’s interests: “Short is the doubtful empire of the night . . . With quicken’d step/Brown Night retires: young Day pours in apace,/And opens all the lawny prospect wide.” The sun is a metaphor as well for philosophy, the “[e]ffusive source of evidence, and truth! A lustre shedding o’er the ennobled mind,/Stronger than summer-noon; and pure as that,/Whose mild vibrations soothe the parted soul,/New to the dawning of celestial day.”33 From “dawning” to “noon,” the progress of daylight signifies the meliorist narrative of human perfectibility, the gradual accumulation of

30 Ibid., p. 85, lines 1745-52.
32 Thomson, *Summer*, p. 49, line 451. The sun’s connections to divine and political power, in particular, are numerous. Among the religious connections drawn are those describing the sun as the “great delegated source/Of light, and life, and grace, and joy below,” whose “touch” imparts “mimic life” to “[t]he very dead creation,” and as the “servant-sun” of God, suggesting not only a relation with God the Father but also a comparison with the Son (p. 41-42, 46, lines 173-74, 160-61, 341). On the political side, the sun is “the powerful King of Day,/Rejoicing in the east,” emitting “tyrant Heat, dispersing through the sky,” “mount[ing] his throne,” and “[s]eem[ing] o’er this world of slaves to tyrannize . . . with oppressive ray” (p. 39, 43, 54, 61, lines 81-82, 209, 639, 885-86). Other natural forces are also given political resonance: thunder and floods possess a “black tremendous throne,” while the Nile, one of the most imposing outlets of these forces, is “[r]ich king of floods” which “[w]inds in progressive majesty along;” conversely, Britain’s power is “like the mustering thunder when provoked” (p. 59, 77, lines 798, 805, 815, 1475).
33 Ibid., p. 38, 84, lines 45-53, 1731-35, emphases added.
wealth, wisdom, “evidence, and truth,” and human salvation after death. God, indeed, is the force that allows Thomson to hold, as Hobbes could not, that “truth” emerges from “evidence;” from mere empirical trial. In the “lustre” of a day’s light is an eternal promise, the potential for “celestial day.” Owing much to Hobbes’s use of monolithic awe for ordering society, Thomson innovates aesthetically upon this model by endowing sovereign entities with radiant beauty. In so doing, he bridges in verse the distance between Hobbes’s starkly materialist scheme for political order and the decorous institutions envisioned by Edmund Burke at century’s end. He also, notably, begins to build a logic of exclusion into the poetic vocabulary of meliorist ideology.

God’s is not the only “hand” and agency which Thomson displays in The Seasons, a poem packed from start to finish with personification figures of all descriptions. The word “hand,” for example, occurs seventeen times in Summer; almost always used synecdochally, but generally referring to lesser intelligences dispersed through nature rather than to God directly. The second occurrence, addressed to the sun, suggests independent agency on the part of several natural forces:

round thy beaming car,
High-seen, the Seasons lead, in sprightly dance
Harmonious knit, the rosy-fingered Hours,
The zephyrs floating loose, the timely rains,
Of bloom ethereal the light-footed dews,
And, softened into joy, the surly storms.
These, in successive turn, with lavish hand
Shower every beauty, every fragrance shower,
Herbs, flowers, and fruits, till, kindling at thy touch,
From land to land is flushed the vernal year.  

As in the climactic thunderstorm midway through the poem, “storms” appear here in conjunction with a “hand;” in this case, a “lavish” one promoting “[h]armonious” order and “timely” benefits. Likened as benevolent agents, the storms appear “softened into joy.” Most of

34 Ibid., p. 40-41, lines 120-29.
Thomson’s other uses of the word “hand” likewise mark the intercession of benevolent intelligences in natural processes. As James Paxson observes in his watershed study of poetic personification, its numerous tropes, as elaborated in the medieval period, derive from positions in the medieval Great Chain of Being. They are, in that regard, already agents with defined roles in a universal scheme of providence. Even without express tokens of God, they act as local guarantors of plenty and progress.

In this sense, Thomson’s lesser personification figures too command a kind of awe. Although not overpowering or captivating like his greater potentates, these minor figures likewise transform chaotic events into legible matters of agency and design. Britain is not an arbitrary sovereign state, Thomson insists, but the moral institution that will “[s]end forth” among British subjects, “[i]n bright patrol,” a range of hyper-visible “saving Virtues,” including “white Peace,” “social Love,” “tender-looking Charity, intent/On gentle deeds, and shedding tears though smiles,” “Courage, composed and keen,” “clear Chastity,/With blushes reddening as she moves along,” and “Activity untired,/With copious life informed, and all awake.” In conferring physical appearances on this litany of virtues—a conflicted gesture which suggests a simultaneous independence from and dependence on empiricism—Thomson insists that virtue has real existence, with or without reference to the mind: here, too, he differs from Hobbes, who provides definitions of various virtues but makes no claim for their objective existence. But Thomson’s personification figures are Hobbesian insofar as they externalize the agency that governs social order, taking it out of the hands of individual subjects. Equally splendid and

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35 The sight of abundant vegetation is the work of a generous spirit—“Another Flora there . . . Plays o’er the fields, and showers with sudden hand/Exuberant spring”—and “Nature’s hand” prompts the movements of birds (Ibid., p. 147-48, lines 694-97, 735). In a more nationalistic strain, Thomson addresses his country as “Happy Britannia! Where the Queen of Arts,/Inspiring vigour, Liberty, abroad/Walks unconfined even to thy farthest cots./And scatters plenty with unsparing hand,” and asserts that British women are “[s]haped by the hand of harmony” (p. 76, 80, lines 1442-45, 1584).
36 Paxson, Poetics of Personification, 43.
37 Ibid., p. 81, lines 1604-14.
equally available to all observers, they provide common standards for social faith and conduct, based not on fear but on the costly promise of fear’s termination.

Thomson is hardly alone, of course, in his use of personification figures, among the most defining features of eighteenth-century English poetry. Although their abundance is partly due to the period’s fascination with and appropriation of classical poetry, such affinities themselves serve determinate historical ends. As we have seen in Thomson’s *Seasons*, personification addresses uncertainties that concerned Hobbes in the *Leviathan*, and which remained pressing concerns in its wake. In particular, because they suggest the possibility of progress regulated by external means not subject to human fallibility, personification figures are attractive as meliorist agents envisioned—in some cases as passive objects of emulation, in others as active makers of change—to guide human enterprises to favorable results. Even poets who eschew Thomson’s didactic theism make similar appeals to more modest forces of intercession and inspiration.

Among midcentury poets, Thomas Gray and William Collins are exemplary in their association of human cultural and intellectual progress with substantialized figures. Gray, in “The Progress of Poesy,” pursues the argument that “the Muse was given to Mankind by the same Providence that sends the Day by its cheerful presence to dispel the gloom and terrors of the Night.” In a standard meliorist trope of the period, Gray tracks the poetic Muse through classical antiquity to its final arrival on Britain’s shores. It is through the Muse’s aid that Milton “pass’d the flaming bounds of Place and Time,” and that the poet of today will now “mount, and keep his distant way/Beyond the limits of a vulgar fate,” while “oft before his infant eyes w[ill] run/Such forms, as glitter in the Muse’s ray/With orient hues, unborrow’d of the Sun.”

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38 Paxson, *Poetics of Personification*, 42: “substantialization, materialization, hypostasization, or the figural translation of any non-corporeal quantity into a physical, corporeal one.”
40 Ibid., p. 50-51, lines 98, 118-22.
inspiration offers immediacy of perception—perception of atemporal “forms,” independent of the world and of sense-experience—a secure position—“keeping” in one’s “way” of life, exempt from a “vulgar fate”—and a clear view of truth for the poet who experiences it. Gray’s ingenuity here is in the placement and measurement of progress within poetic tradition, in some ways an almost Humean gesture. The acts of the mind are verifiable as acts in the world are not; Gray’s novel development of poetic tropes while reflecting on the past is, unassailably, a step in the progress of poesy. But in its calculated lack of social and sensory reference, his meliorist expectation is limited, if not altogether solipsistic.

Although highly learned poets, Gray and Collins’s use of personification figures is thus not merely academic or antiquarian. Their poetic meliorism is intensely political and at times aggressively nationalistic. Collins, in “Ode to Peace,” depicts Peace as a maiden who will favor Britain due to the nation’s great admiration of her:

Tir’d of [War’s] rude tyrannic Sway,
Our Youth shall fix some festive Day,
    His sullen Shrines to burn:
But Thou who hear’st the turning Spheres,
What Sounds may charm thy partial Ears,
    And gain thy blest Return!^41

The substantialized Peace, Collins imagines, makes social accord possible by blessing the nation that agrees about her desirability. In a Hobbesian development, peace is thus a matter of adoring a single object rather than balancing a plurality of claims. In its uniform opinion and lack of grammatical definiteness, in fact, Collin’s “Youth” may itself be a homogenizing personification figure; a monolithic body politic.^42 Absent from Collins’s idea of social order here is any positive vision of pluralism or its correlative uncertainties. If this be peace, it is mediated through a

^42 Morton Bloomfield identifies such a device as “deictification,” which, as Paxson explains it, “chang[es] the word from a source noun to a proper noun” (Poetics of Personification, 30).
representational system that achieves a smooth and decorous image of historical progress precisely through the elision of difference among political subjects.

It is thus that eighteenth-century poets arrive through meliorist ideology at a version of Whig historiography; at selective and abstract constructions of historical process which, as Herbert Butterfield once explained it, “personify ideas in themselves and regard them as self-standing agencies in history.”43 Collins’s “Ode to Liberty” is typical in its account of Britain’s steady accession to power, wealth, and stability:

[Liberty] let our Sires and Matrons hoar
Welcome to Britain’s ravag’d Shore,
Our Youths, enamour’d of the Fair,
Play with the Tangles of her Hair,
Till in one loud applauding Sound,
The Nations shout to Her around,
O how supremely art thou best,
Thou, Lady, Thou shalt rule the West!44

The substantialized Liberty, having graced and departed a succession of European states, comes to rest in Britain. In an infinite causal recursion, her pleasing presence there results from the nation’s unique appreciation of liberty, and vice versa. As a master of the ode second to none among eighteenth-century poets, Collins is a direct forerunner of Keats, and in that respect it is worth noting how thoroughly political his odes are. Collins presents here the period’s standard meliorist narrative, which casts the British nation as the apotheosis and the final beneficiary, of political, intellectual, and economic improvements that reliably increase, as though by willed design, through history.

In a sense, such a conception of history did come to have the kind of agency Collins wishes it to have, for it provided a nationalist myth that, through the long eighteenth century,
united different factions in the celebration of a suitably abstract image of national advancement. Despite Whig history’s tendency of “dividing the world into the friends and enemies of progress,” its vision of that progress was the one obviously common ground that liberals and conservatives shared in the period. Dryden’s *Annum Mirabilis* is a notable early example, which envisions Britain overtaking the Netherlands as the seat of freedom and prosperity through the agency of huge, personified forces. London, “[m]ore great than human,” he writes, “seems to have renewed her charter’s date,/Which heav’n will to the death of time allow . . . like a maiden queen, she will behold/From her high turrets hourly suitors come:/The East with incense and the West with gold/Will stand like suppliants to receive her doom.” Dryden’s Britain is at once the anticipated heir of a general historical progression and the exceptional institution that stands above the fray and flux of history. The nation’s status as moral victor, that is, is at once historical and ahistorical. Under such forms of meliorism, “the liberal commitment to reform and improvement becomes a theodicy, part of a religion of humanity, and acquires the character of necessity.” Based in the psychological insights of Hobbesian empiricism, poetic meliorism thus goes in some respects further than the *Leviathan*. Whereas Hobbes is a merely political absolutist dealing openly with uncertainties, the meliorists commit themselves to a moral absolutism in an attempt to eradicate uncertainty from sociopolitical life.

**IV. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson: Sentimentalism, Character, and the Senses**

In effect, many eighteenth-century rebuttals to Hobbes treat his as not too much an absolutist, but too little. Other than sovereignty itself, there is no durable norm for which he stands; relativism and uncertainty are still front and center in his model of society. Thomson’s eagerness to emphasize the rectitude as well as the power of his chief potentates indicates

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45 Butlerfield, *Whig Interpretation of History*, 5.
uneasiness about enforcing order strictly on the basis of reward and punishment, and suggests that direct admiration of propriety and moral behavior is also necessary in social subjects if their agreement is to be durable. It is an anxiety Thomson’s verse shares with the philosophy of Shaftesbury, much of which is explicitly formulated to challenge philosophical positions attributed to Hobbes. Of note, Shaftesbury objects to the residual contingency surrounding obedience to absolute power:

Now as to the belief of a deity and how men are influenced by it, we may consider, in the first place, on what account men yield obedience and act in conformity to such a supreme being. It must be either in the way of his power, as presupposing some disadvantage or benefit to accrue from him, or in the way of his excellency and worth, as thinking it the perfection of nature to imitate and resemble him.\(^{48}\)

Shaftesbury’s “deity,” like Hobbes’s “\textit{Mortall God}” of a sovereign (L 227), influences social subjects rhetorically; through spectacular display that prompts a particular affect or emotion. Whereas Hobbesian deference to “power” depends upon “presupposing” additional external matters of fact, “disadvantage or benefit,” sentimentalist admiration of “worth” depends only upon the initial investment of one’s affinity in an agent directly. One whose social behavior is predicated on external reward and punishment, Shaftesbury writes, “is intrinsically of as little worth as if he acted in his natural way, when under no dread or terror of any sort.”\(^{49}\) This is not a problem that Hobbes—whose proposal for social order is almost indifferent to individuals’ inward or unvoiced inclinations—pretends to assess. Shaftesbury, however, is concerned with behavior as a manifestation of character, which he takes for granted cannot be situational or circumstantial. \textit{Character}, and in particular virtue, is the means whereby individuals become durably ethical and social beings rather than subjects united only by “terror.”

\(^{48}\) Shaftesbury, “Inquiry Concerning Virtue,” 183.

\(^{49}\) Ibid.
For Shaftesbury, character and virtue are the defining traits of humans as intellectual, moral, and spiritual animals. A recurring metaphor in the *Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit*'s first book compares humans to other animals acting only on the basis of external rewards and punishments, and argues that these motives too often leave the inner disposition unwrought upon: “Suppose now that the creature has indeed a tame and gentle carriage but that it proceeds only from the fear of his keeper, which, if set aside, his predominant passion instantly breaks out, then is his gentleness not his real temper, but, his true and genuine nature or natural temper remaining just as it was, the creature is still as ill as ever.” Absent some assurance of intrinsically good character, Shaftesbury assumes it intrinsically bad. Any external contingency that produces a good outcome is merely a diversion from the “predominant passion” of the moral agent in question, a passion which is authentic, “real,” “natural,” “true and genuine;” uniquely particular to that agent, and thus more pervasive than circumstantial behaviors. The “predominant passion” constantly threatens, covered by a “gentle carriage” which is “only” assumed as an expedient, and which “instantly breaks out” at first opportunity. Without a system of virtue, humankind would be naturally vicious. In this, Shaftesbury may actually have a more negative view of the species than Hobbes, who does not describe natural or prepolitical dispositions as themselves vicious.

Yet in general, Shaftesbury asserts that humans are naturally sociable. His very definition of “good” is social in reference, defining it as a measure of a creature’s effect on the systems of which it is a part: “a good creature is such a one as by the natural temper or bent of his affections is carried primarily and immediately, and not secondarily and accidentally, to good and against ill.” Social fitness, in other words, requires virtue—a discrete and autonomous

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50 Ibid., 171.
51 Ibid.
meta-affect that values and admires good behavior and motives. Essential to Shaftesburian virtue and sociability is “immedia[cy],” that they happen “directly.”\(^5\)\(^2\) Virtue entails the almost intuitive perception of emotions within and between minds, unencumbered by any necessary reference to external systems like law or language that could fail as social bonds at any point. Sentimentalism, as first articulated by Shaftesbury, is a liberal and individualist counterpoint to the absolutist social worldview of Hobbes, promising as such social certainty from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Shaftesbury denies sovereigns the right to be arbitrary, arguing that moral distinctions exist prior to religious or political ones and that “any fashion, law, custom or religion . . . can never alter the eternal measures and immutable independent nature of worth and virtue.”\(^5\)\(^3\) Under his sentimentalism, these measures are secure because they are obvious; indeed, tangibly so: everyone possesses the ready ability to choose and pronounce upon what is good and what is ill.

Shaftesbury’s system, foundational to the first phase of sentimentalist thought—which I shall call naïve sentimentalism—constructs virtue as a type of sense-object perceived by what later writers would term a moral sense. He presents moral perception as immediate, and as readily able to distinguish the beauty of its objects as is the sense of vision:

In a creature capable of forming general notions of things, not only the outward beings which offer themselves to the sense are the objects of the affection, but the very actions themselves and the affections of pity, kindness, gratitude and their contraries, being brought into the mind by reflection, become objects. So that, by means of this reflected sense, there arises another kind of affection towards those very affections themselves, which have been already felt and have now become the subject of a new liking or dislike.

The case is the same in the mental or moral subjects as in the ordinary bodies or common subjects of sense. The shapes, motions, colours and proportions of these latter being presented to our eye, there necessarily results a beauty or deformity, according to the different measure, arrangement, and disposition of their several parts. So in behaviour

\(^5\)\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^5\)\(^3\) Ibid., 175.
and actions, when presented to our understanding, there must be found, of necessity, an apparent difference, according to the regularity or irregularity of the subjects.\footnote{Ibid., 172.}

Shaftesbury’s widely-noted assumption of a polite readership is here implicit in his assertion that aesthetic beauty—and, by analogy, virtue or moral beauty—is self-evident; a common standard shared at least among all who matter.\footnote{Mullan succinctly sums up Shaftesbury’s imagined communities: “This is ‘society’ under a special political, as well as semantic, heading; it is the bonding of those educated into a tasteful appreciation of shared privilege” (Sentiment and Sociability, 28-29).} Although tutored by Locke in his youth, he here wholly ignores the epistemological challenges articulated in Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding, such as the potential complications in “forming general notions of things” via “reflection.” Shaftesbury attributes the sense of virtue to a process of “necessity,” analogous to the appreciation of visual art and everywhere reliable: the mind, “in all disinterested cases, must approve in some measure of what is natural and honest and disapprove what is dishonest and corrupt.”\footnote{Shaftesbury, “Inquiry Concerning Virtue,” 173.} The moral sense is “natural,” universal, and self-evident.

Shaftesbury’s follower Francis Hutcheson, some decades later, codifies naïve sentimentalism by grounding its subjectivist claims of self-evidence in empiricist discourses of perception. In particular, he argues for new, previously unrecognized sensory modalities, writing that “all Men feel something in their own Hearts recommending Virtue, which yet it is difficult to explain. This Difficulty probably arises from our previous Notions of a small Number of Senses, so that we are unwilling to have Recourse in our Theories to any more.”\footnote{Hutcheson, Essay on the Passions, xiv.} As Blakean as it sounds, this claim emerges directly from the materialist paradigm of one-to-one sensory causality:

\textit{Affections, Tempers, Sentiments, or Actions,} reflected upon in ourselves, or observed in others, are the constant \textit{Occasions} of agreeable or disagreeable Perceptions, which we call \textit{Approbation, or Dislike}. These \textit{Moral Perceptions} arise in us as necessarily as any
other Sensations; nor can we alter, or stop them, while our previous Opinion or Apprehension of the Affection, Temper, or Intention of the Agent continues the same; any more than we can make the Taste of Wormwood sweet, or that of Honey bitter.⁵⁸

This moral sense, and a likewise original “public sense” that takes pleasure in the happiness of others, render the human naturally calibrated for sociability; “made, previously to his own Choice, a Member of a great Body, and affected with the Fortunes of the Whole.”⁵⁹ Sociability is a tendency inborn and available for all, any deviation from which is due to cognitive error. Accordingly, Hutcheson repeatedly promises to “strip” ideas of false associations in order to show the authentic, intrinsic moral value of actions and objects. Virtue, like truth according to so many Enlightenment thinkers, immediately secures the recognition and assent of all observers. Hutcheson’s writing thus seeks virtue’s *exposure*; the manifestation of obvious moral qualia.

Yet moral immediacy is curiously mediate. Even while furnishing examples of unadorned moral and social sensations, Hutcheson recurs again and again to the adornments of art, drama, and literature. Due to our inborn public sense, he argues for instance that

> [t]he Joy, and Gaiety, and Happiness of any Nature, of which we have formed no previous Opinion, either favourable or unfavourable, nor obtained any other Ideas than merely that it is sensitive, fills us with Joy and Delight . . . The Poets know how to raise delight in us by such pastoral Scenes, they feel the Power of such pleasing Images: they know that the human Heart can dwell upon such Contemplations with delight; that we can continue long with Pleasure, in the View of Happiness of any Nature whatsoever.⁶⁰

Hutcheson succeeds only partially in getting sentimentalism away from its Shaftesburian origins in polite taste, for the individual’s capacity for sociable pleasure is prompted and proven by the “Scenes,” “Images,” “[l]eng[th],” and his appreciation of poetry. The pangs of the public sense, moreover, are “strangely diversified or complicated, when the Sufferers are multiplied, by representing the Persons attached to the principal Sufferer, and setting before us their *Affections*,

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⁵⁸ Ibid., 3-4.
⁵⁹ Ibid., 118.
⁶⁰ Ibid., 140.
Friendships, tender Solicitudes, care in Education, succour in former Distresses; this every one will find in reading the Stories of Pallas, Camilla, Nisus, and Euryalus; or in general, any Battle of Homer or Virgil."⁶¹ The reception of literary convention offers a naturalized example of reflex empathy; in “representing” and “setting before us” affecting stimuli, the faculties involved in the public sense themselves undermine the distinction between life and letters.

As for the moral sense, the pleasure it produces naturally exceeds all others, as the opinions of spectators confirm; yet Hutcheson does much to preempt their judgments:

Let them see one entirely employed in Solitude, with the most exquisite Tastes, Odors, Prospects, Painting, Musick; but without any Society, Love, or Friendship, or any Opportunity of doing a kind or generous Action; and see also a Man employed in protecting the Poor and Fatherless, receiving the Blessings of those who were ready to perish, and making the Widow to sing for Joy; a Father to the Needy, an Avenger of Oppression; who never despised the Cause of his very Slave, but considered him as his Fellow-Creature, formed by the same Hand; who never eat his Morsel alone, without the Orphan at his Table, nor caused the Eyes of the Poor to fail; who never suffered the Naked to perish, but warmed them with the Fleece of his Sheep; who never took advantage of the Indigent in Judgment, thro’ Confidence in his own Power or Interest; Let this Character be compared with the former; nay, add to this latter some considerable Pains of the external Senses, with Labour and kind Anxiety: which of the two would a Spectator chuse? Which would he admire, or count the happier, and most suitable to human Nature?⁶²

Hutcheson’s diction and syntax here anticipate—indeed, perhaps help to invent—the language of sentimental literature. A series of carefully wrought power relationships, a lexicon of privation on the one hand and cruelty on the other, and a paratactic sentence structure that builds toward one cumulative impression of multiple scenes and actions all contribute to what he presents as the instinct of an untaught heart. Hutcheson’s social certainty is borrowed. Even while investing his hopes in the admiration of virtue for its own sake, the literary tendencies of his philosophy concede that to infer virtue is already to be embedded in systems of signification.

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⁶¹ Ibid., 81.
⁶² Ibid., 138-39.
V. Fielding and Richardson: The Novel and the Durability of Character

Early literary sentimentalism, in consequence of (or in concert with) naïve sentimentalist philosophy, likewise appeals to an ethos of immediacy in social ethics while simultaneously cultivating the power and range of the novel as medium. Seen in this light, the development of novelistic narrative is in part a development of a repertoire of communicative modes, epistemological technologies and routines, to help make feasible the revelation of individual psychic and affective landscapes, and thus to allay social subjects’ doubts about each other. As contrasted with dramatic, poetic, allegorical, and other literary modes known in the eighteenth century, the novel has typically been distinguished for its interest in realism and particularity. Like the account of Hobbes as a realist, this classic and still substantially valid premise in the history of the novel nonetheless papers over an epistemological gulf between the nuances of material detail and of affective or cognitive particularity. By Dr. Johnson’s reckoning in Rambler No. 4, the eighteenth-century novel is caught between what we now call mimetic and pragmatic theories of art; more precisely, between the competing goals of realism and morality. To celebrate the novel’s potential for psychological penetration alongside or in conjunction with a materialist-oriented “realism” is, in some degree, to share with Hutcheson the position that psychic dimensions of character are as unproblematically observable as, say, visual or auditory reports.

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63 The classic account, by now thoroughly refuted, is that of Ian Watt: see Rise of the Novel, chap. 1 passim. The thesis of the realistic novel, however, has been taken up in other forms. According to Walter L. Reed, for instance, the novel “explores the difference between the fictions which are enshrined in the institution of literature and the fictions, more truthful historically or merely more familiar, by which we lead our daily lives,” giving “greatest weight” of all literary genres to the latter (Exemplary History, 5). Lennard J. Davis, in a different vein, identifies an “ambivalent reaction—an uncertainty to the factual or fictional reality of the work” as integral to the eighteenth-century reading experience (Factual Fictions, 24), but presents through the very dualistic nature of his model a version, or specter, of the factual which possesses a fundamental, if inaccessible, unity.

64 Johnson, Rambler, 3:19-25. The distinction between mimetic and pragmatic theories, of course, is M. H. Abrams’s: see Mirror and the Lamp, 6-21.
In having adopted various forms of this Hutchesonian position, however, histories of the novel cannot rightly be dismissed as ahistorical, for it is a position that the novel itself has systematically helped to propagate. For midcentury novelists writing after Hutcheson, empirical and descriptive interest in the material world readily coincided with a normative concern for the more nebulous domains of character and psychological truth. Henry Fielding, known neither in his own time nor ours as a moralist, asserts in the prefatory dedication to *Tom Jones* that that novel is an apt medium for inculcating virtue: “to recommend Goodness and Innocence . . . is likeliest to be attained in Books of this Kind; for an Example is a Kind of Picture, in which Virtue becomes as it were an Object of Sight, and strikes us with an Idea of that Loveliness, which *Plato* asserts there is in her naked Charms.” Here, his language is that of exposure, in both cognitive and aesthetic terms: an “Idea” transmitted in “naked Charms” conflates both the clarity and the content of moral values with stark sensuality. As such, Fielding’s avowed aims do not differ substantially from his rival Samuel Richardson’s. Among the readers’ letters with which Richardson prefaces *Pamela* is one from the clergyman William Webster, who professes to be

> charmed with the beautiful Reflections [Pamela] makes in the Course of her Distresses; her Soliloquies and little Reasonings with herself, are exceedingly pretty and entertaining: She pours out all her Soul in them before her Parents without Disguise; so that one may judge of, nay, almost see, the inmost Recesses of her Mind. A pure clear Fountain of Truth and Innocence, a Magazine of Virtue and unblemish’d Thoughts! (*Pamela* 8)

In its elision of “see[ing]” and “judg[ing],” Webster’s letter serves Richardson’s fictional purposes, for his novel argues that moral dimensions of social reality can be as certain as sensory ones, and resolves problems of epistemology by replacing normative evaluation with aisthesis. The “Soul” is as readily representable as discursive “Reasonings.”

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If character is, as the account goes, a central distinguishing parameter of the English novel from its inception, then in this capacity it has two conflicting meanings. Fielding and Richardson deal both in *this or that* character—discrete psyches that react to elements of their material and causal milieu—and of “character,” *zero article*, roughly synonymous with virtue and suggesting that the figures in novels are also repositories of moral axioms. Webster, in his letter to Richardson, juxtaposes, to the “Course” of Pamela’s “Distresses”—terms that suggest flux and irresolution—a diction of stasis: “Soliloquies,” those superlatively contrived theatrical moments wherein characters are as prone to argument and self-justification as to candor, “Reflections” and “Reasonings,” the faculties that produce schemata and “judge” value, and, perhaps most to the point, Pamela’s “Soul”—the emblem and promise of something atemporal and exempt from the sort of conflict that composes so much of the novel’s plot. Likewise, Richardson’s well-known description, in *Sir Charles Grandison*, of the epistolary form—consisting in “Familiar Letters, written, as it were, to the Moment, while the Heart is agitated by Hopes and Fears, on Events undecided”—does not jibe easily with the portrait of Grandison that that form is supposed to provide, “the Example of a Man acting uniformly well thro’ a Variety of trying Scenes, because all his Actions are regulated by one steady Principle: A Man of Religion and Virtue.”66 The shift is not only of temporal situation, but among different modes of experience as well. The “undecided” qualities of the “moment,” chiefly affective and material, ultimately serve the presentation of “steady principle,” or certain discursive commitment, and of virtuous “example,” a word which Richardson also uses to describe Pamela and even Fielding uses to describe his protagonists, while “trying scenes” and “variety” are reduced to moral and social threats, or mere vexations, to be excised. Viewed in this way, the purpose of the novelistic

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66 Richardson, preface to *Sir Charles Grandison*, 1:4.
plot is to contain or eradicate uncertainty, so as to move toward fixed and knowable measures of character.

The two most important novelists of the mid-eighteenth century, then, may be less concerned with the particularity of observational data than with a kind of emphatic and indelible portraiture. No less than contemporaneous poets, and in spite of their differences, they are both invested in the stabilizing social function of monolithic emotional objects. Fielding and Richardson’s protagonists, insofar as they display character, are personifications as much as they are persons. In their alluring way, they are reigning loci of awe; transplanted leviathans who produce social coherence by absorbing their fictional fellows and real-world readers. But unlike Hobbes’s sovereign, Dryden’s David, or even Thomson’s sun, the novelistic heroes have designs, motives, and intentions that are clear beyond doubt, because so insistently externalized. Naïve sentimentalism, in its literary as in its philosophical incarnation, purposes to render the parameters of character and psychology legible beyond doubt, and through this certainty to pave the way unto familiarity and intimacy. Fielding and Richardson therefore stake much on the idea that character is determinate, and tend to present it as such through formal and stylistic tropes—signs, tests, and displays—that aim to authenticate perceptions of virtue or merit, and which receive their tonal closure in coordination with the closure of problems of knowledge surrounding principal characters.

Between them, these two novelists codify most of the eighteenth-century novel’s standard strategies for resolving economic, moral, and socio-positional narrative tensions. In Fielding’s

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67 Smollett, Burney, and Radcliffe, for instance, all hold forth similar measures of character in order to facilitate sociability. Burney’s Evelina is typical. That novel’s eponymous, orphaned heroine’s family heritage, though alleged noble, is in doubt for most of the story: “I hardly know myself to whom I most belong,” she confesses. In reply, her suitor Lord Orville begs to help Evelina “hasten the time when that shall no longer admit a doubt!” (ed. Susan Kubica Howard [Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2000], 494). This eradication of “doubt” is a project in which Burney also participates, and for which she borrows all of the strategies here discussed.
Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones, the hero’s secret noble parentage brings him together with his respective heroine by removing all anxieties (hers, her family’s, and their community’s) about his inadequate, sketchy background and picaresque transgressions. Tom Jones is, in appearance and actions, obviously a gentleman, being taken as one many times by many people during his travels, but this pedigree must be established for certain before others can take these for granted. Shortly before the novel’s end, Mrs. Miller in London asks Mr. Allworthy: “And is my dear Mr. Jones then your Nephew, Sir? . . . And are your Eyes opened to him at last? And shall I live to see him as happy as he deserves?”68 These, as her run-together anaphora suggests, are inseparable questions. Tom’s “happ[iness]” depends on others’ “Eyes” being “opened.” The revelation of his intrinsic nobility does away with the last uncertainties that prevented Sophia Western from accepting his hand—not only Squire Western’s opposition, but also Tom’s past libertinism. Though Sophia first demands a probationary engagement to allay her doubts of his future fidelity (“Time alone, Mr. Jones, can convince me that you are a true Penitent”), she later declines to retract the agreement she made with her father to wed the next day: “I do not repent, nor do I believe I ever shall, of any Promise in favour of Mr. Jones.”69

Richardson, in representing the liberal ideal of companionate marriage, prompts the “ever”-valid “Promise” of abiding union through behavioral revelations rather than strictly hereditary ones. In Pamela, Mrs. Jervis remarks that the eponymous heroine “keeps herself so much to herself, and yet behaves so prudently, that they all esteem her, and shew her as great Respect as if she was a Gentlewoman born” (Pamela 28). Her union with Mr. B. is not a matter of her social class, nor of his—“your Virtue and Merit have engag’d you faithful Friends and Partisans, which my Money and Promises could hardly do”—but the parameters of her moral

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68 Fielding, Tom Jones, 951.
69 Ibid., 972, 975.
excellence are located along the same continuum of social recognition as are his material accumulations (*Pamela* 269). Mr. B.’s neighbors seek and enjoy Pamela’s company to the precise extent that she is a tried and true moral apotheosis, for, in one neighbor’s view, “it will be the Interest of all the Gentlemen, to bring their Ladies into an Intimacy with one that can give them such a good Example” (*Pamela* 285-86).

Such measures of character appeal to Fielding and Richardson because they promise access to salient socio-ethical attributes deemed essential to persons; permanent and durable. The epistolary form codified by Richardson is another such measure. He develops Pamela’s character through letters that are not so much spontaneous reactions to dangerous situations as reiterative declarations of fidelity, and righteous defiance of vice, unaltered by time or circumstance. Prior to one of Mr. B.’s rape attempts on her, she laments to Mrs. Jewkes:

> So here have I lived above sixteen Years in Virtue and Reputation, and, all at once, when I come to know what is Good and what is Evil, I must renounce all the Good, all the whole sixteen Years Innocence, which, next to God’s Grace, I owed chiefly to my Parents and my Lady’s good Lessons and Examples, and chuse the Evil; and so, in a Moment’s Time, become the vilest of Creatures? (*Pamela* 200)

Pamela resents and ardently opposes the reverses of “a Moment’s Time,” which appear to threaten, but cannot tarnish or invalidate, “sixteen Years Innocence.” Her letters, she suggests to her parents, are verifications of a stable ethical self: “it may be some little Pleasure to me, may-hap, to read them myself, when I am come to you, to remind me what I have gone thro’ . . . which, I hope, will rather strengthen my good Resolutions, that I may not hereafter, from my bad Conduct, have Reason to condemn myself from my own Hand” (*Pamela* 44). The very perspective from which Pamela’s moral conduct is to be evaluated, even by herself, is removed from the events of the narrative; written “to the moment” but valid in all moments. In *Tom Jones*, letters play a less formally central but still vital role in a narrative economy that likewise bases
sociability on interpersonal transparency. Sophia’s first letter to Tom after his eviction from Allworthy’s house assures Tom of her fidelity in his absence: “believe this, that nothing but the last Violence shall ever give my Hand or Heart where you would be sorry to see them bestowed.”\(^7\) To the external contingencies of “Violence” are opposed, again, intrinsic and fixed resolve. Sophia, in turn, realizes that Tom’s injunctions to her to forget him are meant to help her cope with their separation: “He use me ill? No, his poor bleeding Heart suffered more when he writ the cruel Words, than mine from reading them. O! he is all heroic Virtue, and angelic Goodness.”\(^8\) Both lovers understand through correspondence that their mutual, unwavering desire to be together persists in spite of mere uncertain events. The “Heart,” beneath the matter in which it is mired—and in contrast to the “blotted” hearts of Hobbesian subjects—is manifest in their missives. Tom rereads and kisses all Sophia’s messages multiple times, almost ritually: media though they are, they proffer a Hutchesonian immediacy.

**VI. Pamela: Closure, Uncertainty, Awe**

*Pamela,* due to its belabored comic ending and its use of visual proofs of character, is an especially rich illustration of the sentimental novel’s Hutchesonian aspirations. Even more than Sophia Western or Richardson’s Clarissa Harlowe, who show some resistance to the idea that their fathers infallibly know their minds, Pamela hopes that such knowledge and disclosure of her character is possible. She, like Clarissa, works vehemently to prove a moral status that is secure, durable, and legible, even at the cost of continued life. In one of her escape attempts, Pamela imagines her own suicide and the power she might exert over her captors by dying frozen in virtue:

when they see the dead Corpse of the unhappy *Pamela* dragg’d out to these slopy Banks, and lying breathless at their Feet, they will find that Remorse to wring their obdurate

\(^7\) Ibid., 315.
\(^8\) Ibid., 318.
Hearts, which now has no Place there!—And my Master, my angry Master, will then forget his Resentments, and say, O this is the unhappy *Pamela*! that I have so causelessly persecuted and destroy’d! Now do I see she preferr’d her Honesty to her Life, will he say, and is no Hypocrite, nor Deceiver; but really was the innocent Creature she pretended to be! (*Pamela* 172)

The emphasis here on Pamela’s body, like the tears, sighs, hand-wringing, and genuflection so common in sentimental fiction, marks the genre’s Hutchesonian attempt to render social and moral qualia autonomous modalities of sense. Yet insentience is as much a part of her display as sensibility. Imagining herself as a “dead Corpse” and “breathless,” she removes psychic variables altogether; fixed as “the unhappy *Pamela*,” she is in an invariant attitude, devoid of any fluctuating thought or consciousness. She renders herself entirely exterior and ascertainable, her “Honesty” fully out of Mr. B’s reach. By bringing closure to—in Pamela’s own words, “put[ting] a Period to”—the formal conflicts and emotional tensions of the story, particularly those of suspect moral tendency like Mr. B’s tenderness and Pamela’s “Heart giving way,” she promotes, almost enforces, a favorable reception of her life’s story (*Pamela* 171, 84). In a Hutchesonian triumph of natural sentiment, remorse will “wring” the “obdurate Hearts” of Mr. B’s household, working its way into psyches where it once “ha[d] no place.”

Dozens of stylistically similar displays notwithstanding, uncertainties of character and its reception persist. A defiant death, Pamela senses, might not exempt her name or character from the opprobrium of suicide; and thus wishes that these also be guarded after her death: that Mr. B. will “save me, or rather this Part of me, from the dreadful Stake, and the Highway Interrment; and the young Men and Maidens all around my dear Father’s, will pity poor *Pamela*; but O! I hope I shall not be the Subject of their Ballads and Elegies; but that my Memory, for the sake of my dear Father and Mother, may quickly slide into Oblivion!” (*Pamela* 173) Even after fixing her character so firmly, alternative and ignominious narratives of her life would remain a
possibility. Paradoxically, she both craves and dreads moral exposure, her aversion to the display further enhancing it. She exists at once as a modest, reactive creature and as an indelible moral emblem. Pamela, then, is caught in a contradiction regarding the nature of character—both her own and others’. Whereas her prior claims to virtue acquire force through constructions of Mr. B. and Mrs. Jewkes as static, persecuting foils, she predicates that virtue’s efficacy on their dynamism of character. Her imagined Mr. B. evidences enough psychological continuity over time to own himself the cause of Pamela’s suffering, but is capable of such dramatic swings of disposition as to feel ethically estranged at this moment from his behavior at earlier moments. The closure to which she aspires cannot be achieved without some indeterminacies of character. It is in fact a prerequisite of the villains’ sentimental conversion.

Pamela’s union to Mr. B. represents her “Virtue Rewarded” in part because it is supposed to resolve the ethical uncertainties—hers and others’—that pervade the first half of the narrative. Mr. B, for instance, wants to see eradicated his suspicions that Pamela might have “disguis’d any Secret of [her] Soul from him” with regard to her partiality for other men, and wishes for both their sakes that she might in turn trust him more completely: “Strange, damn’d Fate! . . . that when I speak so solemnly, I can’t be believ’d!” (Pamela 216, 84). Matrimony is the novel’s ultimate remedy for both. Yet the sheer length of story remaining after their marriage, almost disorienting to modern readers, suggests how comparatively untraveled Richardson’s narratorial path was in 1740, and how limited marriage’s ability to obviate social questions. The newlyweds find themselves still and repeatedly speaking of certainty and ease in the future tense, as when Pamela implores her parents’ prayers: “that I may not so unworthily act as if I believ’d I ought to set up my Rest in my mean Self, and think nothing further to be done” (Pamela 364). Mr. B. is

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72 During one of his rape attempts, for instance, Mr. B. is not susceptible to fondness or even lascivious desire, but is likened to a malevolent, “wicked,” “dreadful” demon-like figure whose voice comes in a “Clap of Thunder” and whose will is merely an enactment of a previously decreed “Time of Reckoning” (Pamela 203).
likewise restless. Because, he senses, “Man is as frail a Piece of Machinery, as any Clockwork whatever; and, by Irregularity, is as subject to be disordered,” he is continually devising precepts for good marital conduct, including aspects of manners like “Meekness” and “chearful Ease and Freedom of [Pamela’s] Deportment,” which Pamela and Richardson’s narrator eagerly reproduce in long lists (Pamela 369, 503). Elsewhere, Mr. B. argues the importance of keeping a strict dining schedule, rendering the couple’s interactions with each other, but also with their larger social circle, predictable and almost ritual engagements (Pamela 368-69). Despite Richardson’s liberal depiction of marriage as a companionate institution permitting social mobility, it finally proves inseparable from the security conferred by shared conduct, decorum, and routine in economic and cultural matters. Not even these, though, are certain. Pamela finds assurance in neither her newfound funds for almsgiving, her “fine new Liveries” on an exaggeratedly “quite new” chariot, nor Mr. B’s “last Work” of revising his will to make her “absolutely independent and happy,” undertaken because “human Life is uncertain,” “precarious,” and attended by “many Accidents” (Pamela 471, 487, 492-93).

Mr. B’s ominously precautionary view in this last case highlights a central irony in Pamela’s plot: in protracting their union’s search for certainty, the conjugal pair finds new cause for uncertainty. The very thought of her husband putting his affairs in order leads Pamela to conclude “that this World is not a Place for the immortal Mind to be confined to,” and looks forward instead to “that happy State, where is no Mixture, no Unsatisfiedness” (Pamela 496). The consolation left her is no less, nor more, than that offered by God. Pamela’s final hope of certainty veers, by novel’s end, fully away from the sentimentalist rationale animating Richardson’s fiction in the first place. Now openly abstract, this novel of particularity and an autonomous moral sense is left pinning its hopes on an eternal reward which it lacks the
resources to represent and which, as Shaftesbury anticipated, is a motive no longer attached to the world of human sociability. Pamela’s final letter, in fact, includes a light but unmistakable wish for an end to her social engagement: “When all these tumultuous Visitings are over, I shall have my Mind, I hope, subside into a Family Calm” (Pamela 497). Her settled family life, she imagines, exists in opposition to “tumult” and uncertainty but also in opposition to “Visit[ation],” to sociability. In its attempts to represent life, Richardson’s narrative cannot envision repose.

Mr. B., however, endures less uncertainty than his wife. When Pamela expresses doubt that she “will confer at least as much Honour as she will receive” through marriage, his answer is typically comfortable: “It will be best for me to think you will; and it will be kind in you to think you shan’t; and then we shall have always an excellent Rule to regulate our Conduct by to one another” (Pamela 311). The sentiment, couched in elegant symmetry, is not one of equality or reciprocity: he proposes a “Rule” of “Conduct” under which he, the magnanimous paternalist, can be sure of his wife’s virtue but she cannot be certain of her own adequacy. His prescription is more prescient than he, or perhaps Richardson, realizes, for the guarantee of at least one measure of Pamela’s virtue—that is to say, her fixed fidelity to her husband—lies precisely in her ongoing uncertainty and doubt, and in Mr. B’s status as a relative or qualified moral paragon. His liberal milieu aside, Richardson arrives at a surprisingly Hobbesian model of sociability.

For Pamela herself, character is not so much an alternative to political and class power as a form of them. Her letters, her spectacular displays of resistance, her charity, and her equipage are fundamentally assertions of power; of awe-inducing charisma that orients others socially. Their avowed effect on Lady Davers is not only persuasive but coercive: “I believe I shall be forced to love thee,” she tells Pamela, “whether I will or not: And the Sight of your Papers, I dare
say, will crown the Work, will disarm my Pride, banish my Resentment on Lady Betty’s account, and justify my Brother’s Conduct” (Pamela 456, emphasis added). This diction, asserting the strength of Pamela’s all-engrossing example, has a nearly political resonance. But far more monolithic and ultimately decisive power resides in Mr. B., who from the story’s opening is endowed with sovereign power over the entire countryside: “Is there no Constable nor Headborough,” Pamela laments, “to take me out of his House? . . . alas! he is greater than any Constable, and is a Justice himself; such a Justice, deliver me from!—But God Almighty, I hope, in time, will right me!—for he knows the Innocence of my Heart!” (Pamela 60). Eliciting her parents’ fellow-feeling and concern, Pamela here expresses hope of circumventing her master’s power alternately through legal or spiritual means—yet, in effect, this petition is made directly to him when he reads her letters. Richardson’s formal innovation of intercepted messages serves to broaden Mr. B’s power and role; he is the omniscient godlike figure who improves Pamela’s lot and the patriarch who is interested on her behalf. The identification of him as a “Justice,” a magistrate but also perhaps an abstract force from which Pamela needs “deliver[y],” further suggests that he towers over the political landscape. Upon earth, in practice, there is not his like.

Mr. B’s primacy over people and events does not diminish even as he seems to soften toward Pamela. She repeatedly undertakes to escape rather than submit to him, claiming to prefer a state of nature: “Lord bless me, I wish I was well out of the House; tho’ it was at the Bottom of a wit Ditch, on the wildest Common in England!” (Pamela 62). Yet the possibility of suspending or evading her master’s power is tenuous at best and illusory at worst. Her first sustained attempt is defeated, apparently, by her own apprehensions:

To be sure, there is Witchcraft in this House; and I believe Lucifer is bribed, as well as all about me, and is got into the Shape of that nasty grim Bull, to watch me! . . . what could I do without Money or a Friend?—O this wicked Woman! To trick me so! Every thing, Man, Woman and Beast, is in a Plot against your poor Pamela, I think!—Then I know not
one Step of the Way, nor how far to any House or Cottage; and whether I could gain Protection, if I got to a House: And now the Robbers are abroad too, I may run into as great Danger, as I want to escape from; nay, greater much, if these promising Appearances hold: And sure my Master cannot be so black as that they should not!—What can I do?—I have a good mind to try for it once more; but then I may be pursued and taken; and it will be worse for me; and this wicked Woman will beat me, and take my Shoes away, and lock me up. (Pamela 152)

What primarily averts Pamela from her flight is the emotional gradient produced by her fears, most of which have been carefully prepared by Mr. B. and Mrs. Jewkes. The absence of money and confidantes, the remoteness of the house and strangeness of the country, the rumor of “Robbers” propagated by Mrs. Jewkes (Pamela 62), and the seemingly independent abuse of Jewkes herself all accumulate into the impression of a danger “greater much” than the thought of remaining with Mr. B. Escape, as an ostensible alternative, is scarcely more predictable or hospitable than nature as delineated by Hobbes. Certain, though, is the affective core of Pamela’s response to those indefinite dangers: “tho’ I fell not into their Hands myself, yet they gave me as much Terror, and had as great an Effect upon my Fears, as if I had” (Pamela 154). The scene works to legitimate Pamela’s domestic situation by projecting villainy’s origin outward onto other spaces, despite its emanation from the domestic situation itself: a strategy more typical of novels with conservative political values in the eighteenth century. Mr. B.’s sleight of hand allows him to couch a baldly Hobbesian calculation—endurable obedience to him versus unendurable disobedience—as a choice between an inhospitable world on the one hand and increasing intimacy on the other. As Pamela only imperfectly recognizes, “he pretends he will leave me at my Choice” (Pamela 152).

Seen in this light, Pamela’s departure from the household, realization that she is in love, and return to the house represent not a turn away from patriarchal sovereignty toward

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73 For this and other forms of conservative literary tropes in the eighteenth-century novel, see Claudia Johnson, *Women, Politics, and the Novel*, chap. 1.
sentimental relations, but the extension of sovereignty further into Pamela’s psyche. If Mr. B’s imploring letter compels her to return, then Richardson’s description of her thought-train carefully denies us any ability to distinguish internal compulsion from external:

This Letter, when I expected some new Plot, has affected me more than any thing of that Sort could have done. For here is plainly his great Value for me confess’d, and his rigorous Behaviour accounted for in such a Manner, as tortures me much. And all this wicked Gypsy Story is, as it seems, a Forgery upon us both, and has quite ruin’d me! . . . I must own to you, that I shall never be able to think of any body in the World but him!—Presumption, you will say; and so it is: But Love is not a voluntier Thing:—Love, did I say!—But, come, I hope not!—At least it is not, I hope, gone so far, as to make me very uneasy; for I know not how it came, nor when it begun; but creep, creep it has, like a Thief upon me; and before I knew what was the Matter, it look’d like Love.

I wish, since it is too late, and my Lot determin’d, that I had not had this Letter; nor heard him take my Part to that vile Woman; for then I should have bless’d myself, in having escap’d so happily his designing Arts upon my Virtue; but now, my poor Mind is all topsy-turvy’d, and I have made an Escape, to be more a Prisoner! (Pamela 248)

Pamela posits sentimental understanding between herself and Mr. B., who partakes of her emotional pains, “confess[es]” his feelings for her, and transforms from her captor into her co-victim in an externally-inflicted “ Forgery.” Yet the prospect of separation causes her to experience “tortures,” to feel “ruin’d,” and to sense that her emergent affection for Mr. B. is “not a voluntier Thing,” but has “cre[pt] . . . like a Thief upon” her. Her regretful lamentation continues with the assertion that, had she been able to marry Mr. B, her “Obligation” to him “would have press’d [her] to Death” (Ibid.). In context, this diction is remarkably consistent with her previous musings about captivity, rape, and robbers. And this is fitting, for B’s letters to her are still full of ominous hints of his power over her and others: “ tho’ I can forgive you,” he writes to her, “I never can my Sister, nor my Domestics; for my Vengeance must be wreak’d somewhere” (Pamela 247). Upon sending his servant to fetch Pamela, Mr. B. all but threatens to continue his pursuit of her should she resist: “I would have set out myself, for the Pleasure of bearing you Company back in the Chariot; but am really indisposed . . . if you will not so far
favour me, you shall be under no Restraint . . . But spare me, my dearest Girl, the Confusion of
following you to your Father’s; which I must do, if you persist to go on; for I find I cannot live a
Day without you” (Pamela 250). Here then, as before, Pamela cannot reasonably be said to act
on the basis of unforced companionate choice. She is still in her master’s, soon to be husband’s,
thrall.

*Pamela’s* sentimentalist tropes of psychological penetration are inadequate producers of
social certainty, perhaps, because it is instead Mr. B’s Hobbesian consolidation of power and
awe that sustains his union with Pamela. That power, frequently only hinted at, breaks forth in
domestic crises with spectacular displays that compel resolution through sheer dread. Lady
Davers, unmoved by Pamela’s personal conduct and appearance, is reconciled to her, finally,
through her brother’s undisguised fury, which she “beseech[es]” Pamela to help her allay
(Pamela 433). In the face of Mr. B’s onslaught and departure, both women “we[ep] for
Company;” more terrible than any other adversity, his anger drives Lady Davers to accept and
even defend Pamela: “Pardon *Pamela*, if you won’t me; for she has committed no Offence”
(Pamela 433, 435). This is a Hobbesian strategy for enforcing social accord: one common affect
produces the resolve to keep the peace. Yet Mr. B., like Richardson, takes pains to conceal this
strategy. He is, at first, unreceptive to the women’s attempts to reconcile, and explains to Lady
Davers, “I desire [Pamela] never to see me on such Occasions, till I can see her in the Temper I
ought to be in when so much Sweetness approaches me” (Pamela 435). Such a statement is
consistent with Richardson’s larger interest in domestic decorum, but also betrays a discomfort
with, and an attempt to conceal, patriarchy’s basis in force. B. later remarks that Pamela “should
not have given Cause for any Part of my Conduct to her, to wear the least Aspect of Compulsion
or Force,” and wishes that “she would draw a kind Veil over my Faults,” in a proto-Burkean
vision of decorous authority (Pamela 446). He desires to present to Pamela a consistently kind and temperate demeanor, warning her, “in this Temper shall you always find a proper Influence over me” (Pamela 443). Pamela obliges, trusting implicitly in his motives and integrity: “I will endeavour to conform myself, in all things, to your Will,” she tells him (Ibid.). Yet, because Mr. B.’s behavior is owned to be far from placid or absolutely consistent, Pamela is in effect pledging herself to his “will” in the Hobbesian sense—whatever he has lately said is law. The moral parameters to be privately discerned under Richardson’s sentimentalism, at last analysis, are as unsteady as the public dictates of absolute authority.

VII. Heuristics, Hume’s Treatise, and the Migration of Certainty

About contemporaneously with Pamela, David Hume published his own major intervention in sentimentalist thought, abandoning Hutchesonian principles and establishing new bases for sociability. Hume’s Treatise disavows the proliferation of the sort of autonomous “internal senses,” posited by naïve sentimentalists, which prompt immediate or invariant emotional responses to objects:

‘tis utterly impossible [objects] shou’d each of them be adapted to these passions by a particular provision, and primary constitution of nature . . . tho’ the effects be many, the principles, from which they arise, are commonly but few and simple . . . ’tis the sign of an unskilful naturalist to have recourse to a different quality, in order to explain every different operation. (Treatise 333-34)

In the reductionist scheme of the Treatise, human moral and social capacities, like all forms of experience, subsist in relations among only two classes of perceptions, ideas and impressions. Thus the process of sympathy—the central mental operation in Hume’s account of what Hutcheson would term the public and moral emotions—facilitates understanding between persons through expressly indirect means:

When any affection is infus’d by sympathy, it is at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it.
This idea is presently converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection. However instantaneous this change of the idea into an impression may be, it proceeds from certain views and reflections, which will not escape the strict scrutiny of a philosopher, tho’ they may the person himself, who makes them. (Treatise 367-68)

Sympathy provides a basis for sociability neither wholly natural, as for Hutcheson, nor wholly contrived as for Hobbes; it proceeds via the association of ideas, a process inevitable in general but highly contingent in specifics. 74 Stepping back from traditional sentimentalist subject matter, Hume does not allow that sympathy begins with anything more than the five senses and the relation of causality. Much of his diction is coldly cognitive, enumerating things and conditions he has already classed as constituent parts of the understanding—“known,” “effects,” “signs,” “idea”—or actions of transfer and approximation: “convey,” “convert,” “acquire,” “become,” “produce,” “change,” “proceed.”

Hume’s insistence on this matter of mediacy is shared by Adam Smith in his Theory of Moral Sentiments, which corrects naïve-sentimentalist epistemology even more directly: “As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation” (TMS 9). Imagination, the power of “conceiving,” is a necessary faculty in sympathy, Smith argues, because “our senses will never inform us” of other people’s feelings or psychological states (Ibid.). His reference to “senses” seems a response particularly to the proliferation in Hutcheson’s work of sensory modalities, which, multiple or not, do not give direct access to the happenings in other minds. Only by imagining ourselves “in the like situation” as suffering others are we able to produce “an idea of the manner in which they are affected:” sympathy proceeds by approximation and analogy rather than identity, intuition, or even directly by

74 See for example Treatise 57-9, 140-1.
empirical “experience.” Smith’s version of sympathy, like Hume’s, is as much about cognition as about affect—“form[ing] some idea,” “conceiving,” “representing,” and “copy[ing]” (Ibid.) are constructional acts that necessarily precede any sympathetic emotion.

Thus, although strident sentimentalists, treating emotional inferences about others as the basis of all moral approbation and disapprobation, Hume and Smith do not grant the existence of sentimental perception as such. Hume in particular insists that it is only custom, the reiterated experiential link between ideas of an affective state and “external signs in the countenance and conversation,” which, when those signs appear in a person associated in some way with us, takes “force and vivacity” from our lively sense of self to produce firsthand apprehension of emotion; “the very passion itself.” As with most forms of belief and opinion for Hume, sympathy relies on relations of ideas rather than matters of fact; habitual association, rather than reason or the necessary structure of the world. Social inferences are not only necessarily mediate, but consequently devoid of certain reference to the social substrate, dependent instead on the memory and expectation of how the individual observer has felt in previous situations. Nevertheless, Hume and Smith are determined to ensure that the subjective and uncertain building blocks of sympathy do not compromise the consistent or reliable interpretation of social cues. They do so, in fact, through appeals to custom; by elaborating a body of conventions about lived experience: which emotions commonly arise during particular events, which emotions follow on the heels of other particular emotions, and similar conjunctions. Both writers are, in their own ways, interested in “general rules,” templates, and guidelines whereby social agents can agree on who feels what and on which feelings have priority. As such, they enact a paradigm that I will term heuristic sentimentalism.
Hume, following Shaftesbury, considers social pleasure an intrinsic need—even the most wealthy and powerful of men, if isolated, “will still be miserable, till you give him some one person at least, with whom he may share his happiness, and whose esteem and friendship he may enjoy” (*Treatise* 412)—but, following Hobbes, does not regard sociability as an intrinsic power. Several of Hume’s statements, like Hobbes’s, could be misread as endorsing egoism: “NOTHING is more certain,” Hume writes, “than that men are, in a great measure, govern’d by interest” (*Treatise* 585). This, the heuristic which founds the need for all his heuristics, is cast merely, if somewhat grotesquely, as a consistent extension of Hume’s radical empiricism. Men are too absorbed in their own situations, he argues, to grasp those of other people; local individual experience threatens to crowd out sociable capacity. Specifically, the spatial, temporal, and dispositional limitations of individual agents invalidate and introduce harmful distortions into their sympathetic assessments. This is the same problem Hume’s idiosyncratic, alienating skepticism poses for him at the end of the *Treatise’s* first book. Sympathy alone is not sufficient to broker sociability because it confirms us in our prejudices and provincially interested paradigms: “in the original frame of the mind, our strongest attention is confin’d to ourselves; our next is extended to our relations and acquaintance; and ’tis only the weakest which reaches to strangers and indifferent persons” (*Treatise* 540). Hume deems this a plain consequence of his classification of mental experiences by their vividness, more forceful and proximate perceptions having greater motivational force than weaker or remoter ones (*Treatise* 586). This unavoidable self-centering of experience has dire consequences for broader forms of sympathy: “’Tis certain, that no affection of the human mind has both a sufficient force, and a proper direction to counterbalance the love of gain, and render men fit members of society, by making them abstain from the possessions of others” (*Treatise* 543). Of all the vices, Hume writes, narrow interest and
avarice are the worst, because of their all-pervasive consequences: “This avidity alone, of acquiring goods and possessions for ourselves and our nearest friends, is insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society. There scarce is any one, who is not actuated by it; and there is no one, who has not reason to fear from it, when it acts without any restraint, and gives way to its first and most natural movements” (Ibid.). Although he attributes dozens of legal, economic, political, and social motives and passions to sympathy, often constituting these considerations as the sums of perceived external opinion, Hume denies here that sympathy has any sway—avarice “acts without any restraint,” untroubled by any possible remorse; itself a kind of institutionalized, “perpetual” and “natural” threat. Although no confirmed exponent of Hobbes’s ethics, Hume argues for the necessity of establishing rules of justice on the Hobbesian basis of an unendurable emotional gradient, produced by “insatiable” forces, that leaves “no one, who has not reason to fear.”

Most astonishing about this discussion, particularly in light of Hume’s insistence on the separability of individual ideas (Treatise 57), is the certitude with which he argues his point. The self-evidence he asserts—“‘tis certain”—is audacious, largely on account of how casually he asserts it. In that regard, it is a typical statement for Hume, for he is incessantly speaking in certainties. In a book crammed full of contentious, pervasive skepticism, it is all the more conspicuous that Hume makes such heavy use of such formulations—“’Tis certain,” “we may establish it as a certain maxim,” “’tis a most certain rule,” “nothing can be more certain,” “’tis indeed certain,” “we may be certain,” “’tis certainly true,” and others75—to say nothing of numerous weaker heuristic statements like that with which he opens the Treatise: “NOTHING is more usual and more natural” (Treatise 41). These phrases are of course colloquial, but they are none the less integral to Hume’s substantive argument. He lets another of them slip into his

75 See for example Treatise 194, 186, 656, 192, 375, 361, 202.
explanation of the steps that produce sympathy: “However instantaneous this change of the idea into an impression may be, it proceeds from certain views and reflections, which will not escape the strict scrutiny of a philosopher” (Treatise 368). The use of “certain” instead of, say, “peculiar” carries obvious significance in that the articles described are established via “strict scrutiny;” unable to “escape” the enquiry. The “certain views and reflections” that guide affective and social orientations constitute a particular mechanics of sympathy and morality, but also a determinate one. And the same certitude that allows Hume to diagnose a problem of sociability suggests to him a solution.

In order to achieve more “extensive sympathy” than individual moments in time allow on their own, Hume makes recourse to “general rules” or heuristics, which he proposes will correct the distortions of time, place, and disposition that naturally beset sympathy (Treatise 636). Most of these heuristics consist in predicted, even stipulated emotional reactions to particular ideas and events. A few examples include the necessity of shared belief for shared conversational pleasure—“’Tis certain we cannot take pleasure in any discourse, where our judgment gives no assent to those images which are presented to our fancy”—the disagreeable nature of inconsistencies—“Nothing is more certain from experience, than that any contradiction either to the sentiments or passions gives a sensible uneasiness, whether it proceeds from without or from within; from the opposition of external objects, or from the combat of internal principles”—and the unavoidability of anger when harmed even unwittingly: “nor is there any thing more certain, than that men often fall into a violent anger for injuries, which they themselves must own to be entirely involuntary and accidental” (Treatise 170, 255-56, 399). Hume’s use of the word “certain” is, again, both figurative and substantive. Further, his examples themselves evidence a blend of the casual and the authoritative, incorporating familiar modes of thinking, and anecdotal
expectations, into a sophisticated philosophical framework for describing broad patterns of human cognition. As in his general account of causal relations, Hume cites here “experience” as the determinant of certainty; ideas previously associated with given emotional reactions are maximally certain to be associated with those reactions again in the future. Such an appeal to custom promises to give psychological habit the broad validity of—as well as the content of—social, political, and cultural convention.

In its attempt to bridge the gulf between narrow and broad applications of sympathy, Hume’s system of heuristics relies promiscuously on both individual, idiosyncratic associations and on collective, orthodox ones. The movements of sympathy he describes, in great measure, suppose the prior existence of many of the same affiliative and institutional groups that come with the establishment of justice, government, and commerce: “where, beside the general resemblance of our natures, there is any peculiar similarity in our manners, or character, or country, or language, it facilitates the sympathy” (Treatise 368). Fellow-feeling runs best in institutional channels that prescribe who one’s fellows are. His reductionist aims aside, Hume is obliged more than once to enshrine particular status quo interactions as original principles of human nature. It is our inherent tendency to extend our feelings toward one person to his associates—“Nothing is more natural than to bear a kindness to one brother on account of our friendship for another, without any farther examination of his character. A quarrel with one person gives us a hatred for the whole family, tho’ entirely innocent of that, which displeases us”—and to admire the rich and powerful merely because they are so: “there is nothing more certain, than that we naturally esteem and respect the rich . . . ’tis certain riches go very far towards fixing the condition of any person” (Treatise 391, 410).

76 For more on Hume’s admiration of the rich, see Treatise 411, 360-66.
Importantly, Hume’s heuristics tend to focus on the mental habits and expectations of observers more than any supposedly actual feelings of the social subjects observed. This proves to be the case even when he does discuss the latter. For instance, he argues, a man disposed to vanity will find all his possessions to be appropriate objects of pride—“his cookery is more exquisite; his table more orderly; his servants more expert; the air, in which he lives, more healthful”—which further validates Hume’s explanation of how that passion arises: “As every new instance is a new argument, and as the instances are here without number, I may venture to affirm, that scarce any system was ever so fully prov’d by experience, as that which I have here advanc’d” (*Treatise* 361). The conceit and certitude here seem to bear a trace of irony; Hume’s ownership of his theory is done wryly, and using the same language of superlative and abundance that he uses to describe worldly possessions. All the relations we believe we have with objects, in other words, he translates into relations with ideas.

This movement in Hume’s analysis—from relations among things to relations among ideas—is crucial, for it underlies all his assertions of certainty, with regard not only to sentiment and morality but to understanding and epistemology as well. Although he argues “’tis still certain we cannot go beyond experience” (*Treatise* 44), knowledge and certainty are virtually not to be had on an experiential basis; apart from some branches of pure mathematics, intellectual subjects cannot rise higher than belief and probability. Most famously, he insists that causation cannot be understood as an inherent power or property of any object, for such a property is undiscoverable. Causation is suggested instead by “certain” sequences of perceptions in the mind:

We have already taken notice of certain relations, which make us pass from one object to another, even tho’ there be no reason to determine us to that transitions; and this we may establish for a general rule, that wherever the mind constantly and uniformly makes a transition without any reason, it is influenc’d by these relations. . . . When the mind, therefore, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of
another, it is not determin’d by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination. (Treatise 140)

Hume takes the “constan[cy]” and “uniform[ity]” of “certain” philosophical relations (contiguity, succession, and constant conjunction) to be the basis of a “general rule” about mind’s susceptibility to those relations. In so doing, he takes the burden of causal thinking from the shoulders of “reason,” which has the effect of severing causal thinking as well from objective referentiality. Unlike reason, which devises propositions about the external world which may prove true or false, the inference of causation subsists internally, solely in the mind’s tendency to “pass from one object to another.” It is a psychological rather than material property.

As an originally implanted impulse of the mind, causal attribution provides a reliable and predictable way to form conjectures about the world as a whole—“A cause traces the way to our thought, and in a manner forces us to survey such certain objects, in such certain relations”—including the social world (Treatise 176). Hume’s skeptical crisis is resolved by means of “nature,” which disposes him to “indolent belief in the general maxims of the world” (Treatise 316). A bit of suspension of disbelief, a bit of certainty, is requisite to cope even with quotidian reality that entails deeds so generic as “talk[ing]” and “act[ing],” and reasonings about cause and effect provide that certainty. Thus Hume’s philosophy, while obliterating the possibility of certainty in the objective world of things, repeatedly falls back on utterly confident statements about the tendencies of mind. It is a gesture of all-corrosive skepticism but also of deep conservatism, which brings the entire force of our intuitions about the world to bear on the proclivities of judgment and belief. We cannot be sure about connections of objects in the real world, but we can be sure about the “uncontroulable necessity” whereby nature “has determin’d us to judge as well as to breathe and feel” (Treatise 234). Expectations as inescapable as basic mechanics and the rising of the sun, Hume argues, cannot be justified on rational or referential
grounds; the force we feel with regard to such judgments is instead a product of a relocated
certainty, issuing from within the durable patterns of mind and consciousness. Empirical
experience remains to Hume inscrutable and irreducible to prediction, but causation—
association; the succession of ideas in the mind—gives us certainty.

In the face of a world about which we cannot be certain at all, it is habits, instincts, and
sentiments that allow some certainty. This would seem to be what Hume means when he writes,
at the end of Book I’s conclusion, that “Human Nature is the only science of man” (Treatise
320). It is the only subject approachable with anything like scientific rigor. Humean heuristics
are the results of that inquiry; the practical embodiments of human nature. His appeals to
certainty, as he acknowledges in the same passage, are rhetorical: “such expressions were
extorted from me by the present view of the object, and imply no dogmatical spirit, nor conceited
idea of my own judgment” (Treatise 321). Yet their very rhetoricity enacts and further supports
the thrust of his primary argument: certainty is more a matter of attitude than of substance.

Trusting in the tendencies of mind, Hume has the basis wherewith to operate in the world at
large, and in social domains particularly. He closes the third book of the Treatise, following his
discussions of morality and justice, with an appeal to readers as to the validity of his thinking:
“upon the whole I am hopeful, that nothing is wanting to an accurate proof of this system of
ethics. We are certain, that sympathy is a very powerful principle in human nature. We are also
certain, that it has a great influence on our sense of beauty, when we regard external objects, as
well as when we judge of morals” (Treatise 667). In his certainty about the particulars of
sympathy, Hume invites readers to come along with him. Although he uses the first person plural
elsewhere in the Treatise, these are the first and only two uses of the phrase “[w]e are certain,”
and the only concomitant assertions of a shared condition—a shared predicate of being—and a
shared conviction. Placed where it is, at the end of a hundreds-of-pages journey from near-total skepticism to social credulity and good faith, this wording seems to be a culmination of Hume’s heuristic sentimentalism. Be experience what it may, our general rules, certainties, and expectations surrounding human nature, that “only science of man,” will furnish a common standard.

VIII. “Situations” and Propriety: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Hume falls back on a general notion of habitual causal thinking in the first place, enumerating a relative few emotional heuristics, because of what he views as the general caprices and contingencies of individual preference. Many of the centralmost virtues in Hume’s account, including justice, are artificial; conventions devised according to the habits and needs of communities. They are not, in other words, absolute or objective imperatives. According to Hume, “every distinct perception, which enters into the composition of the mind, is a distinct existence, and is different, and distinguishable, and separable from every other perception, whether contemporary or successive” (*Treatise* 307). No one experience, that is, infallibly implies another. This is of special consequence for Hume’s understanding of emotion, which “contains not any representative quality” signifying any other perception: “When I am angry, I am actually possest with the passion, and in that emotion have no more reference to any other object, than when I am thirsty, or sick, or more than five foot high” (*Treatise* 462-63). Thus, although in Hume’s reckoning particular passions may be deemed unconventional, they cannot be deemed incorrect:

‘Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. ’Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me. ’Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledge’d lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter. A trivial good may, from certain circumstances, produce a desire superior to what arises from the greatest and most
valuable enjoyment; nor is there any thing more extraordinary in this, than in mechanics to see one pound weight raise up a hundred by the advantage of its situation. (Treatise 463).

The mind is not rationally or providentially calibrated to produce invariably “the greatest and most valuable enjoyment;” it is closer to a system of pulleys serving any application we “prefer.” The materialist paradigm embedded in such metaphors allows Hume, like Hobbes, to present his social arguments as descriptive rather than normative; functional rather than right.

Smith’s sentimentalism undertakes not only a substantive expansion of Hume’s, elaborating more and more detailed heuristics of feeling and behavior, but a normative expansion, insisting that these heuristics are expressions of propriety as well as custom. In Hume’s list of not-unreasonable passions, the most psychotic egotism and the most self-annihilating altruism are both reducible to tenable acts of “prefer[ring]” and “chus[ing]” in accord with one’s own emotional dispositions. Furthermore, Hume presents these radically different possibilities in consecutive, terse sentences, suggesting that there is no “contrary” relation between them. The assumptions of one thought or feeling do not at all freight the next; they are separable units nowise calibrated to each other. Smith’s sentimentalist intervention aims to correct this lack of calibration in order to establish moral and social standards that are rational and proper as well as conventional. His most innovative technique for doing so is to alter the object mediating the sympathetic process: sympathy, he writes, “does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it” (TMS 12, emphasis added). Passions under Smith’s sentimentalism are not evaluated in isolation or on their own terms, but comparatively with the entire associated set of emotions a “situation” excites, including the meta-affects of approbation or disapprobation that constitute the sense of propriety. Passions coincide, through the objective medium of the situation, with consistent and commensurate
moral sentiments. Thus, Smith writes, rebutting Hume’s more volatile examples seemingly directly, “[t]he man who has only scratched his finger, cannot much applaud himself, though he should immediately appear to have forgot this paltry misfortune” (TMS 147). Smith’s model of sociability offers not only a mechanism for discovering emotions, but a context for interpreting them as well.

The heuristics and norms that result from Smith’s situational thinking are at times astonishingly specific. He argues, for instance, that the sudden accumulation of wealth is likely to be met with broad disapproval and that more moderately paced acquisition is a recipe for greater approval and happiness:

An upstart, though of the greatest merit, is generally disagreeable, and a sentiment of envy commonly prevents us from heartily sympathizing with his joy. If he has any judgment, he is sensible of this, and instead of appearing to be elated with his good fortune, he endeavours, as much as he can, to smother his joy, and keep down that elevation of mind with which his new circumstances naturally inspire him. He affects the same plainness of dress, and the same modesty of behaviour, which became him in his former station. He redoubles his attention to his old friends, and endeavours more than ever to be humble, assiduous, and complaisant. . . . It is seldom that with all this he succeeds. We suspect the sincerity of his humility, and he grows weary of this constraint. In a little time, therefore, he generally leaves all his old friends behind him, some of the meanest of them excepted, who may, perhaps, condescend to become his dependents: nor does he always acquire any new ones; the pride of his new connections is as much affronted at finding him their equal, as that of his old ones had been by his becoming their superior . . . He generally grows weary too soon, and is provoked, by the sullen and suspicious pride of the one, and by the saucy contempt of the other, to treat the first with neglect, and the second with petulance, till at last he grows habitually insolent, and forfeits the esteem of all. If the chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being beloved, as I believe it does, those sudden changes of fortune seldom contribute much to happiness. He is happiest who advances more gradually to greatness, whom the public destines to every step of his preferment long before he arrives at it . . . with regard to whom it cannot reasonably create either any jealousy in those he overtakes, or any envy in those he leaves behind. (TMS 41)

This analysis is typical for Smith, in that so many of his analyses expressly aim to be typical despite getting as wrapped up in individuals as in types. Here, he vacillates between the two, describing his “upstart” as alternately a concrete character living in time amidst contingencies—
“If he has any judgment, he is sensible;” “endeavours more than ever”—and an abstract hypothetical person having undergone hundreds of experimental trials: “It is seldom with all this he succeeds.” Heuristic words like “generally” and “commonly” intrude subtly into what is otherwise voiced in declaratives and structured as a coherent narrative of an individual’s social actions. Much of Smith’s sentimental argument takes its force from the accumulated length and tension of this story: the very thoroughness of the upstart’s “endeavours” calls dubious attention to his “sincerity,” and the enumeration of friends’ doubts and pretensions is crucial in accounting plausibly for his “weary” reaction. Smith wants us caught up with him in his rhetoric, using like Hume an inclusive “we” to promote the convergence of his and our perspectives. But Smith’s account deploys different stylistic resources, which are calculated at once to absorb through their particularity and gradual, at times surprising unfolding of emotions, and to hold predictive value; to be anything but novel or creative. Narrativity becomes for Smith a form of authority.

In this regard, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* can be seen as a further development of the heuristic project taken up in Hume’s *Treatise*. In both texts, conclusions derived from individual, situated, local experiences are taken naturally to reveal things about the world at large. Smith’s upstart and other examples straddle a line between anecdote and rule. Even as Smith expressly injects his own vantage into his reasoning—“as I believe it does”—the avowed generality of his examples implies that situational emotional dynamics with overdetermined underlying causes are transferable to other cases. The reactions the upstart excites provide the basis of maxims about human sentiment and behavior: “He is happiest who advances more gradually to greatness . . . it cannot reasonably create either any jealousy . . . or any envy.” Such a statement is as sententious as Johnsonian prose, and as compact and excerptable as Dryden or
Pope’s couplets. For Smith as for Hume, contingent and even idiosyncratic perception acquires the intuitive and evidentiary force of natural law.

But Smith’s heuristics go significantly further in their number, particularity, and normativity than Hume’s which mostly concern the reliability of causal thinking, formation of passions, and necessity of justice in general. The situated, tension-building representation of social interactions leads Smith to posit that resentment and vengeance, for instance, arise as necessary and proper correlatives of compassion for a victim: “Our heart, as it adopts and beats time to his grief, so is it likewise animated with that spirit by which he endeavours to drive away or destroy the cause of it. The indolent and passive fellow-feeling, by which we accompany him in his sufferings, readily gives way to that more vigorous and active sentiment . . . We are rejoiced to see him attack his adversary in his turn” (TMS 70). In a similar manner, the joy we observe in one receiving a gift or favor “serves only to animate our fellow-feeling with his gratitude” to his benefactor (Ibid.). In other words, the energies of one passion in a scenario lead us reliably to another, much as, by Hume’s account, causation and belief depend on the vivacity of the first percept in the chain. Whereas Hume often writes of “hidden causes,” Smith writes of positive causes; emotions that come in bundled pairs or sets, as introduced by a particular situation. Because Smith views an emotion as a necessary causal link within a larger system, its deviation from an ethical mean will have corresponding consequences for other emotions as well: “The man who feels little for his own misfortunes must always feel less for those of other people, and be less disposed to relieve them” (TMS 244). One feeling’s magnitude is inseparable from other feelings being of comparable magnitude—an assertion Hume would never make. For Smith, it is unthinkable that social concern for people could ever exceed the magnitude of other, attenuated concerns of self: we are to believe that Hume’s hypothetical choice of “total ruin” for
the sake of an “Indian” is untenable. This expectation that one emotion follows in quality and quantity from another is one of the constitutive measures of propriety.

Smith’s use of situations and narrative to build his case for the dynamics of sympathy leads him to import a good deal of cultural, economic, and political apparatus into his sentimentalism. Imaginations unaccustomed to running through the personal associative patterns of others cannot sympathize with the emotions that result from those associations. The ability or inability to do so, he argues, is the respective origin of an emotion’s proportion or disproportion. Sentiments like love and carnality are especially prone to disproportion, their component affinities being too based on private mental routine for us to understand as spectators: “[o]ur imagination not having run in the same channel with that of the lover, we cannot enter into the eagerness of his emotions,” and so love “appears to every body, but the man who feels it, entirely disproportioned to the value of the object,” and “is always laughed at” (TMS 31). Owing to similar unfamiliarity, we must mute our discussions of our own work and intellectual interests in order to cater to interlocutors who care less about them than we do:

    It is for a reason of the same kind, that a certain reserve is necessary when we talk of our own friends, our own studies, our own professions. All these are objects which we cannot expect should interest our companions in the same degree in which they interest us. And it is for want of this reserve, that the one half of mankind make bad company to the other. A philosopher is company to a philosopher only; the member of a club, to his own little knot of companions. (TMS 33-34)

In spite of Hume and Smith’s construction of elaborate heuristic systems to facilitate social agreement, we are back to the alienation that drives Hume to desperation at the introduction and conclusion to the Treatise’s first book. Smith suggests that it is not enough to have the imaginative and affective capacity for sympathy—parties must also and centrally share a material-cultural matrix if sociability is to happen reliably. In its absence, there is “bad company,” little understanding, and less approval.
In other words, Smith suggests that sympathy takes place essentially and primarily through the “channel” of pre-existent institutional affiliation; that the experiences of different groups and classes are impenetrable to each other except insofar as they speak a common language about common values. His sentimentalism is no more an alternative to than a covert reproduction of many of the structural assumptions of contractualism and hierarchical-authoritarian distributions of power. In particular, Smith shows great deference to the ranks and ethos of legal, military, ecclesiastical, and bourgeois economic structures. He takes Hume’s assumptions about natural admiration of the rich and powerful even further, arguing that rulers’ misfortunes seem greater than everyday men’s: “All the innocent blood that was shed in the civil wars, provoked less indignation than the death of Charles I” (TMS 52). This sort of reaction is a function of one’s ideological and geographical position; one’s place as a patriotic citizen. Public awe toward war and warriors, too, is due to proximity to objects’ and actions’ local consequences, and comparative distance from remoter ones: “Instruments of war are agreeable,” he writes, because “we have no sympathy” with the suffering that they cause to a foreign army’s suffering and, from our perspective, they are more directly connected with the velour, skill, and discipline of our own countrymen (TMS 36). The relative weight of proximate and remote consequences, however, reverses when Smith needs to justify economic as opposed to military morality, the former presupposing priority of remote future good over present good. “When for the sake of the present,” he writes, “we sacrifice the future, our conduct appears to [the impartial spectator] absurd and extravagant in the highest degree;” by contrast, our feelings “exactly correspond” with the spectator’s “when we abstain from present pleasure, in order to secure greater pleasure to come” (TMS 189, emphasis added). Smith’s use of the zero article in conjunction with “greater pleasure” argues the priority of future pleasure to be a broad
assumption; broad enough to found “that eminent esteem with which all men naturally regard a steady perseverance in the practice of frugality, industry, and application, though directed to no other purpose than the acquisition of fortune” (TMS 189-90). Smith’s impartial spectator, enforcing ostensibly a body of norms built up from empirical-psychological first principles, is already committed to Christian eschatology—presuming “greater pleasure to come”—and the proto-capitalist teleology that takes for granted that muddling through hard conditions now must needs lead to reward later.

Smith’s dual optimisms toward divine providence and commercial plenty have consequences for his notions of concrete persons’ morality as well. He imagines that most people are in good health, comfortable in living, free of debt, and of “clear conscience,” and that therefore, because they have further to fall than to rise in the world, it is easier for most to sympathize with joy than with suffering, the latter of which takes a greater effort of displacement: “Adversity, on this account, necessarily depresses the mind of the sufferer much more below its natural state, than prosperity can elevate him above it” (TMS 45). This is a narrowly bourgeois account that attempts, among other things, to normalize comfort and “prosperity” while stigmatizing any loud complaint about “adversity.” Smith proceeds to argue that the poor, criminals, soldiers, and others all comprehend on this basis an imperative to stifle the expression of their own sufferings: “[t]ake the whole earth at an average, for one man who suffers pain or misery, [one] will find twenty in prosperity and joy, or at least in tolerable circumstances” (TMS 140). “[T]olerable circumstances” are the norm; “pain” and “misery” comparative rarities: in assigning relative frequencies to these, Smith is calibrating the discursive and imaginative fields in which sympathy takes place, weighting them toward acceptance of the world as it is and limiting how much protest counts as reasonable or proportionate. He regards
most feelings of resentment as too large for, and a good deal of the remainder as too mild for approval, because as spectators “we cannot enter into” them (TMS 77). Moral Sentiments is importantly innovative in that it begins to account for the intersubjectivity of social exchange: the proposition that sufferer and observer affect each other reciprocally. Yet it treats intersubjectivity crudely, insofar as, if the sufferer’s psychological state is impenetrable to the observer, only one possibility ensues—disapproval. As the particular situations for which heuristics exist become more numerous, the possible behaviors and available explanations assigned to each situation become more finite. The result is a body of rules that fails and even refuses to explain many particular instances of human social behavior: namely, the impartial spectator, that locus of opinion whose moral distinctions are all based in sympathy, but which is paradoxically independent of the people and public opinion all around it.

IX. “The Judge Within:” Smith’s Impartial Spectator

By “impartial spectator,” Smith means the set of social and ethical attitudes embodied in his heuristic standards of propriety, and attributed to a fictional person who himself becomes an object of sympathy for social agents, and thereby the basis of their own moral self-approval or disapproval. Smith argues that the spectator’s availability as a common reference of sentiment ensures that proper ethical judgments will be universally acknowledged as such: “The person concerning whom we form these judgments, must himself necessarily approve of them. When he puts himself into our situation, he cannot avoid viewing his own conduct in the very same light in which we appear to view it” (TMS 128-9). As an external standard of social propriety, the spectator ensures that individuals’ claims and actions are duly proportioned and prioritized: “it is only by consulting this judge within, that we can ever see what relates to ourselves, in its proper
shape and dimensions; or that we can ever make any proper comparison between our own interests and those of other people” (TMS 134).

The impartial spectator is not all nods and accord, however, but works as often to produce certainty in spite of disagreement, governing the dynamics of social exchange from beyond or above it. Smith writes that any moral judgment that contradicts natural rules of propriety is subject to “repeal” or “correction,” which together connote political, and in particular legal and penal power (TMS 128). The spectator’s power of promoting accord, he suggests, derives as much from force as from sympathy and reason: to oppose improper judgments in public fora, subjects can “call upon a superiour tribunal, the tribunal established in their own breasts . . . the supreme arbiter of all our actions . . . the judge within . . . this abstract man, the representative of mankind, and substitute of the Deity, whom nature has constituted the supreme judge of all their actions” (TMS 128-130). Smith describes the spectator as if enumerating titles of honor. Notably, the spectator is “representative,” insofar as he is both a heuristic (“abstract man”) and an authority (“supreme judge”) for humankind. His authority, then, is bound up with his imposition of a certain, predictable set of emotions over and in spite of social conflicts in order to rectify them. In that regard, the impartial spectator retains more correspondences with the leviathan than Smith acknowledges.

An attentive and anxious reader of Hobbes, Smith convincingly surmises that moral rationalists and sentimentalists who aim to refute Leviathan’s claims are obliged to demonstrate a system for apprehending right and wrong antecedent to the institution of government (TMS 318). Yet his own alternative system of sentimental propriety and justice is not enough to make everyone approve the same behaviors as moral; an element of strong persuasion, if not coercion, is also needed:
We are soon taught by experience . . . that this universal approbation is altogether unattainable . . . that by pleasing one man, we almost certainly disoblige another, and that by humouring an individual, we may often irritate a whole people. The fairest and most equitable conduct must frequently obstruct the interests, or thwart the inclinations of particular persons, who will seldom have candour enough to enter into the propriety of our motives, or to see that this conduct, how disagreeable soever to them, is perfectly suitable to our situation. In order to defend ourselves from such partial judgments, we soon learn to set up in our own minds a judge between ourselves and those we live with. We conceive ourselves as acting in the presence of a person quite candid and equitable, of one who has no particular relation either to ourselves or to those whose interests are affected by our conduct, who is neither father, nor brother, nor friend either to them or to us, but is merely a man in general, an impartial spectator who considers our conduct with the same indifference with which we regard that of other people. (TMS 129)

Where uncertainties of public opinion and social ethics arise, the impartial spectator provides certainty in their face. Smith’s language here is thoroughly political—not only because it discusses the balance of “interests” and power among different groups, but because it adjudicates among them by such rigorous, institutional, and finally inflexible means. The spectator itself is Hobbesian insofar as he has “no particular relation” to any particular subject, and is established rather for his ability to adjudicate disputes detachedly. Yet Smith hints that the avowedly impartial spectator specially “considers our conduct.” The conflicts he envisions include his readers “disoblig[ing],” “irritat[ing],” “obstruct[ing],” and “thwart[ing]” groups with contrary interests, and the spectator’s role in these to assert the propriety of his readers’ interests over others’. The voice of the spectator is essentially an assertion of power, in that it serves to “defend” the ongoing existence and legitimacy of “our situation” and “our conduct,” “how disagreeable soever” our associated motives and actions are to another group. The goal, then, is to bypass or even obviate social exchange more than to accommodate the conflicting sentimental claims of other parties. Though based on sympathy, the spectator also works to forestall it.

More particularly, the impartial spectator expresses a moral perspective partly public (“general”) and partly individual (“situat[ed]”) in origin—“in a great measure derived from the
authority of that very tribunal, whose decisions it so often and so justly reverses” (TMS 129)—both unto the same end of excluding some social claims by normalizing certain others as proper. Hobbesian as well as Humean, Smith’s spectator unites the powers of objective external norm and independent subjectivity. Public and private judgment are equal constituents, notably, of standards of justice, which—uniquely, Smith argues—allow the use of force to promote them: “we feel ourselves in a peculiar manner tied, bound, and obliged to the observation of justice. We feel, that is to say, that force may, with the utmost propriety, and with the approbation of all mankind, be made use of to constrain us to observe the rules” of justice (TMS 80). An individual approves necessarily of the punishments performed against him, because the impartial spectator—as the representative of “all mankind”—would approve them. Yet the use of explicit “force,” as in Pamela, greatly overlaps with what are commonly accepted as the more internal, even volitional states of sentimental attachment (we are “tied”), allegiance, and duty (we are “bound” and “obliged”). Because humans ordinarily feel so little sympathy for casual acquaintances, “Nature has implanted in the human breast that consciousness of ill-desert, those terrors of merited punishment which attend upon its violation, as the great safe-guards of the association of mankind . . . if this principle did not stand up within them in his defence, and overawe them into a respect for his innocence, they would, like wild beasts, be at all times ready to fly upon him; and a man would enter an assembly of men as he enters a den of lions” (TMS 86). Whereas language of a “consciousness” “implanted in the human breast” anticipates Bentham’s theory of self-policing panoptic surveillance, the fiction of the impartial spectator—a judge within—hearkens also backward to Hobbes, working by radically public psychological means to produce deference. The spectator, himself also a spectacle embodying legitimated, “merited” feelings of resentment, “overawe[s]” social agents, deploys “safe-guards,” and
provides for “defence” against unjust acts. Further sanctioning this coercion is the emotional gradient produced by the alternative, reminiscent of a state of nature or war, wherein a group resembles “a den of lions,” individuals “wild beasts,” and the prevailing sentiment is constant “read[iness] to fly upon” one another. In modeling and promoting specific sentimental norms, the impartial spectator reveals himself to be based on an essentially Hobbesian calculation; part of the whole punitive complex underlying political certainty and accord.

Other examples in *Moral Sentiments* propose to awe subjects into propriety by similar means. Resentment, although foundational to justice, is as improper as hatred if carried to excess: “Too violent a propensity to those detestable passions, renders a person the object of universal dread and abhorrence, who, like a wild beast, ought, we think, to be hunted out of all civil society” (TMS 40). Yet too little resentment is likewise blameworthy, prompting a threateningly collective demand of conformity: “Even the mob are enraged to see any man submit patiently to affronts and ill usage. They desire to see this insolence resented, and resented by the person who suffers from it. They cry to him with fury, to defend, or to revenge himself” (TMS 35). Whereas visible poverty, on account of our fellows’ sentiments toward it, is as painful as being pilloried, wealth and success, if ill-gotten, lead the crooked merchant to sense resentment “ready to burst out from all sides against him”, and the corrupt soldier to conceive worse: “while glory seems to surround him on all sides, he himself, in his own imagination, sees black and foul infamy fast pursuing him, and every moment ready to overtake him from behind” (TMS 83, 65). In giving form to such reactions, Smith further consolidates the bourgeois norms that encourage industry by stigmatizing both fraud and failure. It is not enough merely to obey public heuristics of justice oneself; one must endorse and promulgate them as one’s personal sentiments. The uniformity of opinion Smith aims to produce entails not only fear of a sovereign,
but a whole host of dictated and mediated reactions to almost everybody one interacts with. In this sense—in that he purports to rule people’s judgments based on reason and sentimental rectitude rather than external power—Smith aspires to control more domains of human experience than does Hobbes.

The only alternative Smith sees to obedience to or punishment from the impartial spectator, it would seem, is removal from society. This, however, leaves the subject in a state of untenable, profoundly uncomfortable uncertainty:

> Every thing seems hostile, and he would be glad to fly to some inhospitable desert, where he might never more behold the face of a human creature, nor read in the countenance of mankind the condemnation of his crimes. But solitude is still more dreadful than society. His own thoughts can present him with nothing but what is black, unfortunate, and disastrous, the melancholy forebodings of incomprehensible misery and ruin. The horror of solitude drives him back into society, and he comes again into the presence of mankind, astonished to appear before them, loaded with shame and distracted with fear, in order to supplicate some little protection from the countenance of those very judges, who he knows have already all unanimously condemned him. (TMS 84-85)

The subject experiences not only “fear,” but is “loaded with shame” as well. On the other side, the language of “black, unfortunate,” “incomprehensible, “melancholy,” “disastrous” “horror” recalls Hume’s skeptical crisis at the end of the Treatise’s first book, as does the situation as a whole, a dilemma about whether to run from or toward society. Whereas Hume can conceive of himself doing either, however, Smith—like Richardson, and like Hobbes—posits an emotional gradient that will infallibly drive his subjects toward highly organized systems with centralized loci of power. After a century of socio-ethical innovations, we are left not far where we began: if society and sociability are to be had at all, it must be on terms of certainty; by means of the authority that shores up agreement.
X. A Conclusion

All the strands of social thought we have examined in eighteenth-century Britain are driven by the empiricism that dominated the period, in that they both accept many of its premises and formulate systematic defenses against its implications. Hobbes and Hume, along with John Locke, sustain especially compelling arguments that uncertainty is a ubiquitous feature of experience and of the material, psychic, and social worlds. Yet having revealed this uncertainty, all of them retreat from it along various paths, seeking to establish certainties elsewhere. Undaunted in their analyses that show a priori bases of social hierarchy and agreement to be untenable, they nonetheless insist that hierarchy and agreement are indispensable. The generations of liberal thinkers following Hobbes, including both sentimentalists and language-oriented moral rationalists like Locke, seek new ground on which social subjects might agree with each other without the loud external contrivance of the leviathan. Sharing Hobbes’s interest in the psychological basis of social ethics, his later opponents posit myriad internal capacities for sociability—all of which, however, still borrow Hobbesian strategies of affect management and, in that sense, Hobbesian distributions of power.

Sovereignty, providence, character, and heuristics: these are the four interrelated principles discussed in this chapter for the production of socially orienting awe. It is striking that, of these four, sovereignty has the most comfortable relation to uncertainty. What the leviathan does is arbitrary; unconstrained by the design, rectitude, and regularity that respectively characterize the other three principles. The fact that Hobbes is so uncertain about human nature, I have argued, accounts for the enmity liberal thinkers had against him in the first place. To say his politics follow from his theory of human nature, then, is to suppose an authoritative relation to material facts and chances that for Hobbes neither matter, motion, nor contingencies allow.
Authority in Hobbes’s account can never issue from experience; it is the corollary of power alone. This is perhaps his most vital insight and, in their own ways and through various channels, the one that Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen would rediscover for their own.

These subjects of the following chapters, although steeped in the same milieu of empirically-informed social thought, understand the implications and practice of empiricism somewhat differently from the early- and midcentury writers discussed heretofore. Largely absent from the empiricisms of Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen is the urgency of induction; the drive toward stable moral and epistemological certainties that characterizes the authors we have examined so far. These three authors, although all deeply socially-minded in their own ways, do not understand themselves to be treating of the final status of the external or objective reality of the social matrix in the same way their predecessors do. Instead, they insist on a productive social role for experience as experience; as a shifting field of centrally important information rather than as the instrumental matter from which certainties are formed. I do not thereby claim for them a position anything like what Paul Feyerabend has referred to as epistemological anarchism, let alone political anarchism; Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen all take for granted the existence of both the state and the central discursive institutions within it—language, sympathy, providence, character—that we have examined in this chapter. They were, in documented respects, all liberals. Yet their writings also offer important alternatives to liberalism, in that they find good in the breakdown of liberal structures and assumptions. In the sense that Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen investigate the utility of emotional responses to uncertainty, their respective visions of sociability can all be said to make a return to Hobbes. Yet theirs are not uncertainties swirling around the will of the sovereign alone, nor the speculative, solitary

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77 Feyerabend, Against Method, 1.
moments of the philosopher. Theirs are sociable uncertainties, prompting engagement with a broad range of social subjects.

The social ethics of Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen recuperate, for positive purposes, the uncertainties that empiricism unleashed only for liberalism to disown. These authors find ground on which subjects might interact without understanding or agreement, arguing in fact that they can benefit from the lack. Early eighteenth-century attempts to shore up liberal society, I would suggest, might be objectionable not to the degree they failed, but to the degree they succeeded. Thomson’s poetry, Richardson’s fiction, and Hume and Smith’s philosophy all make credible attempt to resolve urgent social questions of authority, conduct, and judgment, but in other respects forestall social process, obviating the reciprocal investigation of emotion, event, and difference. Uncertainty, then, is more than a social eventuality to which characters and interpreters must be reconciled. It is the condition that makes contact with and information about others possible. Uncertainty is the engine of sociability.
Chapter 2
“Splenetic Cordiality:” Laurence Sterne’s Ethical Levity

Now if I might presume, said the corporal, to differ from your honour——
—Why else, do I talk to thee Trim: said my uncle Toby, mildly—— (TS 469)

With delicate words, Laurence Sterne shakes a central tenet of polite sociability. Contention, he asserts, is the purpose of conversation, and “differ[ence]” of opinion plays a central role in what readers of the above might aptly call the utmost cordiality. In other words, *discord produces accord*. If this claim is valid, then it challenges the bases whereupon societies were constituted in the eighteenth century. The period, largely defined by its multi-pronged and mostly liberal reply to Hobbes, manifested a broad if cautious optimism that humankind is essentially good, and naturally capable of getting along. Whereas sentimentalists posit sympathy as an innate capacity whereby individuals can mutually calibrate their emotions to each other’s, moral rationalists (including John Locke and his progeny) still regard reason as a serviceable social intermediary, insofar as it might demonstrate universal moral truths founded in certain knowledge. In contrast to Uncle Toby Shandy and Corporal Trim’s exchange above, both the moral-rationalist and the sentimentalist approaches rely on agreement: specifically, on direct agreement as brokered by a system of signs—words, on the one hand, and impassioned bodily states on the other—whose meanings are clear beyond reasonable doubt to their users.

Sterne, although likewise an optimist about human social capacities, does not believe that language, gesture, or any other sign-system can, in practice, be mutually intelligible in this fashion or degree. The brief exchange above is little more than an epigraph suggestive of his social ethics as a whole, but it contains many of their vital and signature elements. The prolific dashes, any reader of Sterne knows, typify his style, and here as elsewhere they punctuate both the grammatical and tonal texture of the passage. They are pivot-points, coordinating
simultaneous shifts of rational ‘knowledge’ and of affective states. Toby’s goal in discoursing is
to have Trim “differ”, but equally to have him “presume:” if the one suggests an incongruence of
logic, then the other indicates emotional content; confident authority in the act of differing. And,
although there is almost no presumption evident in the remarkably placid exchange above—
Toby speaks as “mildly” to Trim, his ostensible subordinate, as Trim to him—this is a rare
moment, even for these gentlest of Sterne’s characters.

Differing in Sterne’s fiction entails more than just disagreeing, and conflict is more than
an aesthetic principle of tension. Differences are often acrimonious, and nearly always jarring.
Walter Shandy, we are told, has “such a skirmishing, cutting kind of a slashing way with him in
his disputations, thrusting and ripping, and giving every one a stroke to remember him by in his
turn—that if there were twenty people in company—in less than half an hour he was sure to have
every one of ‘em against him” (TS 474). As his son Tristram observes, Walter “would see
nothing in the light in which others placed it;—he placed things in his own light” (TS 115–6).
But despite Walter’s uncanny ability to get all his interlocutors “against him,” they do not seem
to stay there. Although his philosophical discourses are overbearing and incomprehensible, he
has amicable understandings with others, and although every character in Tristram Shandy
evinces one or another kind of peevishness, the novel undeniably asserts a general human
capacity for friendly and peaceful social relations. Walter and Toby, who both invite
“disputations,” are eminently considerate not only of each other, but of all the other characters in
their universe. Sharpening wits on one another is not only compatible with empathy, but integral
to it. The shakier the ground, it seems, the stabler the stance. The greater the “differ[ence]”, the
more successful the “talk.” It is a social solution Locke, to say nothing of Hobbes, would never
have envisioned.
I. Locke’s *Essay: Language, Certainty, and Power*

For Locke, good clear language is so central to sociability that the third book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* begins with an almost liturgical account of humans’ creation as verbal beings: “GOD having designed Man for a sociable Creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind; but furnished him also with Language, which was to be the great Instrument, and common Tye of Society.”¹ Specifically, language exists so that each person might transmit propositional knowledge, “from which others, as well as himself, might receive Profit and Delight,” and from which society as a whole might receive “Comfort, and Advantage.” This is done through precise discourse in philosophical settings, but otherwise—and much more broadly—through the “civil Use” of language, which “may serve for the upholding common Conversation and Commerce, about the ordinary Affairs and Conveniences of civil Life, in the Societies of Men, one amongst another,” and, he later adds, “one Generation to another.”² Knowledge can, by means of language, be accumulated as well as shared.

In both their philosophical and civil capacities, Locke insists that words must have invariant meanings if they are to function at all. Fixity of words promotes reliable knowledge, including that of law and morality, and provides for its transmission, whereas uncertainty of meaning impedes the formation and communication of the clear ideas that contribute to knowledge. When the stable meanings of words are contested, “confusion” ensues regarding, among other things, one’s legal and religious duties to others: “Many a Man, who was pretty well satisfied of the meaning of a Text of Scripture, or Clause in the Code, at first reading, has by consulting Commentators, quite lost the sense of it, and, by these Elucidations, given rise or

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² Ibid., 404-5, 476, 509.
increase to his Doubts, and drawn obscurity upon the place.”³ This, we have already seen, is a problem of the utmost urgency: in his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke agrees with the monarchist Hobbes in his worry that, absent an external authority to resolve uncertainties, social relations are likely to degenerate into a state of war.⁴ Language and its proper usage, then, must be defended. It is a repository of wisdom—part providential gift from God and part heuristic legacy of past generations—that enables liberal self-determination.

A surprising number of modern critics have taken Sterne’s use of Lockean philosophy in his fiction as an agreement with Locke on this point, and argued that Sterne, too, views verbal “confusion” as a threat to sociability. John M. Stedmond, for instance, classes “the frustrating difficulties of communication” and “man’s efforts to use the recalcitrant conventions of vocabulary and syntax both to arrive at truth and to convey it” as among the “obstacles” Sternean characters face, and Helene Moglen, though observing that these difficulties inhere in all language, denies that Sterne celebrates them: “Puns, innuendoes, and double entendres transform the simple object, whose identity and characteristics would be similarly defined by all, into the causes of painful and inarticulate confusion. Emotions, predispositions, and personal conditioning make definition impossible. Ambiguities abound and, while they may reflect the imprecision of language itself, they are primarily the result of individual eccentricities.”⁵ Jonathan Lamb argues that the association of ideas in Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey* is more

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³ Ibid., 480. In the same paragraph, Locke has a nearly poststructuralist insight into the recursive definition of signifiers through other signifiers: “we see, that in the interpretation of Laws, whether Divine, or Humane, there is no end; Comments beget Comments, and Explications make new matter for Explications: And of limiting, distinguishing, varying the signification of these moral Words, there is no end” (Ibid.). However, he backs away from this insight, asserting that such a process constitutes an abuse rather than ordinary use of language.

⁴ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 16.

⁵ Stedmond, *Comic Art*, 164; Moglen, *Philosophical Irony*, 20. For further readings that attribute to Sterne, and to varying degrees, the Lockean valuation of clear language, see Bloom and Bloom, “Hostage to Fortune;” and Briggs, “Tentativeness.”
Hartleian than Lockean, but still insists that the purpose of Yorick’s language is to accumulate as much knowledge for the individual as possible.⁶

To posit an agreement between Sterne and Locke on the matter of clarity is to assume that precise definition is a feasible or good thing in Sterne’s eyes, and to deny, in spite of all his gleeful wordplay, that the uncertainties of language as such might have a positive role to play between characters in his fiction. Giving such social weight to the certainty of language, or to the “simple object” as Moglen does, borders on accepting the Lockean position that the “greatest part of Disputes [a]re more about the signification of Words, than a real difference in the Conception of Things.”⁷ Because he maintains that moral truth is readily accessible to logic, Locke can imagine that arguments over words’ meanings are pathological, owing either to deficient faculties or willful obfuscation, that these arguments constitute most of the conflict in the world, and that their cessation would be a means unto social accord.⁸ He refers repeatedly to contests over the meaning of words as “wrangling,” treating it as a lamentable source of serious problems, yet trifling and superfluous at its root. Locke’s theory of language as “common Tye” intends to promote peace, yet turns a blind eye to the substance of many conflicts: the possibility that a great many arguments are about fundamentally different conceptions of things, and that sociability entails more than the dispassionate sharing of propositional knowledge.⁹

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⁶ Lamb, “Language and Hartleian Associationism.” This argument, at least Lamb articulates it, scarcely concerns itself with the social utility of language. Similarly, Peter M. Briggs confronts the gap between language and reality as pertinent to the individual good life rather than social ethics: “If external realities cannot be fixed and known, then let them be teased into shapes to suit the individual fancy” (“Tentativeness,” 509). Is this all that can be said for Sternean wit? For another argument that values the clarity of language, see Bloom and Bloom, “Hostage to Fortune.”

⁷ Locke, Essay, 485.

⁸ Ibid., 516-17, 489, 511-12. In particular, Locke asserts that morality, like mathematical knowledge, is capable of demonstration, and takes for granted that the “law of reason” is accessible to people everywhere, even in the state of nature (Second Treatise, 32-34, 66).

⁹ See Briggs, “Tentativeness,” 503: “Locke urged that any substantial good for man must come from reasoning upon known materials from the real world. Through Tristram, Sterne in effect responded that, though we cannot reason upon those things of which we have only partial awareness, still we can find some good in them: if this is so, then
Specifically, the assemblage of simple ideas into words is, even by Locke’s admission, ideologically motivated from its outset. Under Locke’s empiricism, complex ideas are built in the mind out of more basic units of perception, such as shape, duration, or pain, but this does not make complex ideas “empirical” in the sense that they exhaustively record the objective attributes of real objects. For Locke as for Hume, there is no necessary connection between any two perceptions. A complex idea is instead a strategic selection of some perceptions, to the exclusion of others, that suits the desires of the one doing the framing:

the mind in [generating the concepts known as] mixed Modes arbitrarily unites into complex Ideas, such as it finds convenient; whilst others that have altogether as much union in Nature, are left loose, and never combined into one Idea, because they have no need of one name. . . . Men make and name so many complex Ideas of these mixed Modes, as they find they have occasion to have names for, in the ordinary occurrence of their Affairs.\(^{10}\)

A language’s ability to answer the particular and local needs of its speakers matters to Locke, and on just that ground he justifies the adaptation of language to suit specific cultural and intellectual needs. Yet this is a fine line to walk; adaptation and certainty are uncomfortable bedfellows. Elsewhere, Locke opposes figurative language and wit, and the idiosyncratic association of ideas, as though these had nothing to do with the needs and wants of speakers. Although “it is the Office and Excellency of our Reason to trace” the “natural Correspondence and Connexion” of some ideas, he writes, “there is another Connexion of Ideas wholly owing to Chance or Custom” which results in the faulty or pathological association of ideas, alternately deemed by Locke to be “Obstinacy,” “Prejudice,” “Madness,” and “the most dangerous [human error], since so far as it obtains, it hinders Men from seeing and examining.”\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Locke, \textit{Essay}, 431-32.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 394-95, 401.
But how are we, truly, to distinguish these? Locke waffles on the basis of verbal convention, arguing that “ordinary occurrence” is a sound basis for combining disparate ideas and “Custom” is not. Unable to extricate objective ethics from subjectivist epistemology, Locke is obliged to concede that no word has the same meaning in all places, and that “common Use, being but a very uncertain Rule, which reduces it self at last to the Ideas of particular Men, proves often but a very variable Standard.”\(^\text{12}\) But this is hardly to say that what gets excluded from the proper signification of words is arbitrary. More often than not it is carefully calibrated to the interests of a powerful speaker. Revealingly, Locke sanctions variations in concept-formation and usage only from one country to the next:\(^\text{13}\) the formulation of words is less a means of liberal self-determination among organic speech communities than a reproduction of existing social arrangements under already-acknowledged sovereign authorities.

Locke’s infamous critique of figurative language tries to evade the ideological content of ideas in general, but in the process contradicts observations he has made elsewhere. He complains that “figurative Speeches” and “Wit and Fancy” are preferred to “dry Truth and real Knowledge” as reasons for speaking, when in truth “Information and Improvement” are manifestly higher goals than “pleasure and delight:” and thus, “if we would speak of Things as they are, we must allow” that figurative uses of language “are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong Ideas, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment.”\(^\text{14}\) Here, Locke assumes that thinking can be and ought to be a separate matter from feeling; that “pleasure” and “passions” have nothing to do with “information” or “judgment.” Superficially, this position conforms to his

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\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., 522.
\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 432-35: for instance, he coolly observes “that those of one Country, by their customs and manner of Life, have found occasion to make several complex Ideas, and give names to them, which others never collected into specifick Ideas.” Although Locke supposes this phenomenon more pronounced in the case of mixed modes than in ideas of substance (i.e., objects), because the latter seem to have more definite existence in nature, it is still of first importance, because under mixed modes are included moral concepts such as murder or incest, which can be classified radically differently under different regimes.
\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 508.
claim in Book 2 of the *Essay* that pain and pleasure have no necessary connection to sensation or reflection.\(^{15}\) Affective valence, Locke argues, is strictly epiphenomenal, and hence immaterial to the quite separate sensory and cognitive assessment of “things as they are.” Yet in nearly the same breath, Locke claims that things “are Good or Evil, only in reference to Pleasure or Pain,” and in Book 4 vindicates the reality of sense-impressions through their effects on our “Happiness, or Misery, beyond which, we have no concernment to know, or to be.”\(^{16}\) As an empiricist committed to a transcendental moral standard, Locke faces inevitable contradictions, particularly with regard to feeling as a form of information about the world and as a basis for ethical preference. Requiring, in the absence of innate ideas, some criterion whereby the individual organism could recognize or even care about moral distinctions, he nearly echoes the Hobbesian assertions that “to have no Desire, is to be Dead” (L 139) and that the designation of good and evil is a purely relative function of personal preference.

The presence of feeling in Locke’s epistemology opens new grounds whereupon to evaluate the creation of complex ideas and words. The subsumption of simple ideas under the heading of a word is no longer simply a matter of describing objects with naturally coinciding properties, but rather the normative project of consolidating a particular speech community’s interests and promoting the structure of its “ordinary affairs.” *Marriage*, for instance. There is good reason for Hobbes, like Locke, to insist on precision in all his definitions (L 105-6). All language serves ends of partisanship and power; it is a claim upon the world. If good is determined “only in reference to Pleasure or Pain,” then those enforcing the common usage of language are as beholden to their passions as those who would dispute it. Furthermore, restricting

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., 229: “For as in the Body, there is Sensation barely in it self, or accompanied with Pain or Pleasure; so the Thought, or Perception of the Mind is simply so, or else accompanied also with Pleasure or Pain, Delight or Trouble, call it how you please.”

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 229, 537.
particular uses of language means excluding contrary interests. Writing of scholars who, in his own judgment, willfully obscure their language, Locke rather tellingly writes: “Our good or evil depending not on their Decrees, we may safely be ignorant of their Notions . . . if they do not use their Words with a due clearness and perspicuity, we may lay them aside.” Social cohesion is achieved only when everybody knows and understands the terms on which it is negotiated, and thus it is important that those terms be fixed, for “a Definition is the only way, whereby the precise Meaning of moral Words can be known; and yet a way, whereby their Meaning may be known certainly, and without leaving any room for any contest about it.” This sounds almost callous. There is more at stake here than the “clearness and perspicuity” of proposed knowledge: Locke intends to “lay . . . aside” nothing less than the encoded wants and needs, both material and ethical, of a speaker speaking unconventionally. No room for verbal contest means no redress either for the disparities of power or claims on resources that might be built into the community’s language.

Locke’s demand for verbal fixity, as a normative principle of order within liberal society, is politically debilitating for all but those who benefit from the status quo: and, in contrast to his political theory, his theory of language affords no clear means whereby an oppressive arrangement might be altered or abolished.

Locke does imperfectly suggest an alternative, however. The rules which prescribe and proscribe the appropriate use of words, he writes, cannot be “arbitrarily” decreed by any single authority, even “the great Augustus himself,” but derive from “common use, by a tacit Consent . . . which so far limits the signification . . . that unless a Man’s Words excite the same Ideas in the

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17 Ibid., 481.  
18 Ibid., 517.  
19 See Briggs, “Tentativeness,” 504: “the products of rational ‘liberty’ in Tristram Shandy most often are narrow, self-contained, self-delusive, or simply foolish. . . . If man cannot pretend to know the world of objects as surely and reasonably as Locke expected that he might, perhaps he can make a virtue of the mind’s detachment from that alien and elusive world.”
Hearer, which he makes them stand for in speaking, he does not speak intelligibly.”

Locke here legitimates the conventions of language in almost the same terms he uses to legitimate state power in the *Second Treatise of Government*. Yet he also argues that “every Man has so inviolable a Liberty, to make Words stand for what *Ideas* he pleases, that no one hath the Power to make others have the same *Ideas* in their Minds, that he has, when they use the same Words, that he does.” In this, Locke nearly argues that *pluralism* is what limits unilateral changes to language. If no one has the right or ability unilaterally to alter the signification of words, it is not because language is an inert medium based on prior “common use,” but rather because “every Man” retains the “Liberty” to alter it. The idiosyncrasy that in one passage of Locke may be “la[id] aside” becomes, in another passage, the force that guarantees language remain a democratic, accessible, social medium. It is an unwitting suggestion, though, in what otherwise remains a prescriptivist and covertly authoritarian account of language. It requires both the playfulness and the pathos of Sterne to adequately develop such an alternative, whereby language might be made more supple and responsive; whereby “[t]he cause of formal knowledge is not forwarded, but meaningful and ethical human relationships are made possible.”

**II. Of Moralism and Monomania**

It was . . . natural for Mrs. Wadman, whose first husband was all his time afflicted with a Sciatica, to wish to know how far from the hip to the groin; and how far she was likely to suffer more or less in her feelings, in the one case than in the other. . . .

To clear all up, she had twice asked Doctor Slop, “if poor captain Shandy was ever likely to recover of his wound——?”

——He is recovered, Doctor Slop would say——

What! Quite?

——Quite: madam——

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21 Ibid.

22 Moglen, *Philosophical Irony*, 24. Her account, however, offers sympathy as a too-facile alternative to knowledge and words, as I will presently show. Sterne’s model of sociability does not eschew uncertainties of language through appeals to unproblematic, wordless communication. Rather, it mitigates abusive graffiti by entrusting everyone with spraypaint.
But what do you mean by a recovery? Mrs. Wadman would say.
Doctor Slop was the worst man alive at definitions; and so Mrs. Wadman could get no knowledge: in short, there was no way to extract it, but from my uncle Toby himself. (TS 528)

Whereas Locke believes that words’ meanings must be precisely controlled in speech to preserve social accord, in Sterne’s universe precision in discursive domains almost inevitably produces omissions in social and ethical domains. Though they arguably begin with sincere concern for Toby’s welfare, the Widow Wadman’s efforts to ascertain the extent of his groin injury rapidly become the total basis of her interactions with him. She claims initially that she “could like to know [the wound’s severity] merely for his sake,” but her maid Bridget excitedly displaces the concern for emotional wellbeing with the concern for measured anatomical precision: “We’ll know the long and the broad of it, in ten days . . . I’m confident Mr. Trim will be for making love to me—and I’ll let him as much as he will . . . to get it all out of him” (TS 469). Already, imperceptibly, and without any clear intention to have it so, interpersonal contact is secondary and instrumental to the establishment of determinate facts, which Widow Wadman soon believes to be of the first importance in providing her relationship with Toby a solid basis. It is not that she won’t hear what his priorities are; it’s that she can’t. She is less sex-obsessed than knowledge-obsessed. When Toby obliquely hints at his interest in children and hence marriage, then begins an enthusiastic reading of the Biblical account of the siege of Jericho, we’re told that these overtures “work’d not at all in her; and the cause of that was, that there was something working there before” (TS 527). She is interested in Toby, but conditionally, upon narrow terms that he himself is in the dark about, and the eventual discovery of which leads to the most heartbreaking moment of the entire novel, his final dejected return to Shandy-Hall (TS 536).
If we accept that the Toby-Wadman episode is one of Sterne’s touchstone explorations of intimacy among people, it seems the greatest obstacle to Sternean sociability is monomania: an inert investment in an idea, individual, or other stimulus, to the exclusion of others, and often linked to an ardent pursuit of epistemological or moral certainty. The various “hobby-horses” Sterne tracks in *Tristram Shandy* provide several examples, threads that characters pursue with all their hearts and attention. If unchecked, hobby-horses detach people from the social world. Walter is deeply invested in the Lockean, rationalist project of transmitting improving truths to others, in particular to Tristram, notably attempting to compile a “*Tristra-pædia*” of arcane information that he nonetheless hopes will be useful to his son (TS 298-301). In order, for instance, to garner further support for his theory of Christian names’ influence on the fortunes of those who bear them, Walter all too happily casts their adulterous Aunt Dinah in an ignominious light, deaf to Toby’s plea for “feeling and compassion for the character of our family” and to “let this story of our aunt’s and her ashes sleep in peace” (TS 56). Walter retorts: “What is the character of a family to an hypothesis? . . . Nay, if you come to that—what is the life of a family . . . How many thousands of ‘em are there every year that comes cast away, (in all civilized countries at least)——and consider’d as nothing but common air, in competition of an hypothesis[?]” (Ibid.). There is a tone of magnanimous purpose in this, as though the truest mark of “civilized countries” were whether their people be willing to sacrifice this much for the sake of propositional knowledge. Though Walter defends this position as a dispassionate and neutral one—“in *Foro Scientiae* there is no such thing as MURDER,——’tis only DEATH, brother”—his fervor gives the lie to his pretense of objectivity (Ibid.).

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23 Walter’s treatment “murder” may be a parody or *reductio ad absurdum* of Locke, who writes as follows: “What the word *Murther, or Sacrilege, etc.* signifies, can never be known from Things themselves: There be many of the parts of those complex *Ideas*, which are not visible in the Action it self; the intention of the Mind, or the Relation of holy Things, which make a part of *Murther, or Sacrilege*, have no necessary connexion with the outward and visible
his energies. Whereas so much of the talk in Shandy-Hall jumps eagerly from topic to topic, here Walter neglects, through his fixation, the significance of the new concern altogether.

Neither is sympathy the easy alternative to language and rationality that the sentimentalists, not to mention some of Sterne’s critics, would have it. The mute, embodied rhetoric and ensuing moral imperatives subsumed under the banner of “sympathy,” to the extent that these are prepared or heuristic responses, are just as liable to absorb Sterne’s characters in one social good at the expense of others. The most designedly piteous episode in *Tristram Shandy*, the death of the soldier Le Fever, ominously suggests as much. When Toby learns that Trim offered Le Fever no money during his first visit to the dying man, Trim protests, “I had no orders,” to which Toby replies: “thou didst very right, Trim, as a soldier,—but certainly very wrong as a man,” appealing to Trim’s spontaneous generosity and encouraging its use in the future (TS 341). Yet Trim’s largely formalized interactions with Toby and Le Fever in the episode suggest he acts as a soldier and not as a man. It is Toby, after all, who speaks of Trim’s moral standing as a matter of his soldierly character: “At the great and general review of us all, corporal, . . . it will be seen who has done their duties in this world,—and who has not; and we shall be advanced, Trim, accordingly” (TS 339). If Toby and Trim are driven by sympathy, it is a sympathy driven in turn by sense of onerous duty. Toby nonchalantly smokes a pipeful of tobacco before devising any plan of help, wishes he had “not known so much of this affair,” desires upon Trim’s return to be “asleep,” and finally—after swearing vehemently that Le Fever

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Action of him that commits either: and the pulling the Trigger of the Gun, with which the Murther is committed, and is all the Action, that, perhaps, is visible, has no natural connexion with those other Ideas, that make up the complex one, named Murther” (*Essay*, 478-79).

24 Moglen, for instance, recognizes that for Sterne, social ends are not predicated entirely on “formal knowledge,” but attains this insight by arguing around the uncertainties of language: “definition,” she writes, “can cause confusion and dissension in an area where intuition, if left alone, can create harmonious understanding” (*Philosophical Irony*, 24, 21). Such a fallback to sympathy or intuition accepts naïve sentimentalism at face value. It fails to address the psychological and interpersonal consequences of language’s ambiguity—the very issue at hand, and one that a book on irony should be eager to confront.
“shall not die, by G—” and planning to get help in the morning—does get to bed (TS 335-36, 340-41).

In Toby’s interactions with Le Fever, heuristic sympathy’s basis in custom comes home to roost. Toby is committed to giving aid, but within the framework of routine, as shown when he meets Le Fever face to face: Toby “asked him how he did,—how he had rested in the night,—what was his complaint,—where was his pain,—and what he could do to help him:——and without giving him time to answer any one of the enquiries, went on and told him of the little plan which he had been concerting with the corporal the night before for him” (TS 342). Here, Captain Shandy sounds surprisingly like the Widow Wadman, asking gentle questions while preoccupied with something else entirely. One wonders whether his intervention in Le Fever’s case is entirely distinct in his mind from the siege reenactments on the bowling-green. Toby proceeds to order, not offer Le Fever lodging in his house—“You shall go home directly”—and his bedside manner “beckon[s] to the unfortunate [son] to come and take shelter under him” in a secure but also subordinate position (Ibid.). Afterwards, Toby encounters “little or no opposition from the world in taking administration” of Le Fever’s debts and remaining belongings, of which he unaccountably gives a “regimental coat” to Trim and, when he deems Le Fever’s son old enough, his father’s sword to him (TS 346). In this sympathetic capacity, Toby is less samaritan than patriarch: one who, in Locke’s political theory, turns a familiar relationship into an occasion for executive prerogative.

The Le Fever episode is not strictly a spontaneous meeting of pure hearts, but has unsettlingly institutional and contrived elements. Nowhere is this clearer than at the moment of Le Fever’s death, which Tristram cuts short: “Nature instantly ebb’d again,—the film returned

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25 It is worth noting, in particular, Smith’s reflex moral approbation of soldiers and their exploits in relation to Toby’s military relationships: see, for instance, TMS 132-34, 138, 191-2.
to its place,—the pulse fluttered—stopp’d—went on—throb’d—stopp’d again—moved—stopp’d—shall I go on?—No” (TS 343). If the bathetic end of Le Fever’s story ruins its sentiment, it is a sentiment Sterne seems to distrust. There is a nearly sadistic quality to Tristram’s question: not “shall he go on?” or “shall it?,” but “shall I?” is the question. It is almost as though Tristram were prolonging Le Fever’s death: and, with intense, tearful images of the Inquisition scattered through the other volumes of the novel, any position as the arbiter of life and death must a deeply unsettling one. Le Fever’s purpose in the text, it seems, is not to be helped but to die; to be an object of pure pathos. Pity is such an absolutely central concern that help and consolation have no place remaining. Such a degree of pathos virtually requires an unhelped and unconsolled object. Suffering is so emphatically the ethical criterion that Le Fever is obliged to it.

Construed as a reaction one ought to have—as a moral heuristic—sympathy and charity lead just as often to indifference and neglect. Notably, the parson Yorick’s uncharitable impulses in the first chapters of A Sentimental Journey arise precisely when he regards charity as an obligation. For all his avowed opposition to gravity (TS 23), Yorick’s treatment of the Franciscan monk in Calais reeks of soberly moralistic blindness. After listening to the monk’s “little story” of his and his order’s hard straits, Yorick proclaims, “heaven be their resource who have no other but the charity of the world, the stock of which, I fear, is no way sufficient for the many great claims which are hourly made upon it” (ASJ 5-6). He moves readily, even unconsciously, between benevolent and callous outlooks, owing to the very terms of his thought: “heaven be their resource” is at once a prayer and a dismissal, and it is exactly on the basis of “great claims” elsewhere that he forgoes looking into the magnitude of the monk’s. Yorick continues:
the true point of pity is . . . that your order should wish to procure [food and clothing] by pressing upon a fund which is the property of the lame, the blind, the aged and the infirm . . . the unfortunate of our own country, surely, have the first rights; and I have left thousands in distress upon our own shore . . . we distinguish . . . betwixt those who wish only to eat the bread of their own labour—and those who eat the bread of other people’s, and have no other plan in life[.] (ASJ 6)

Locke’s “Essay on the Poor Law” is of particular interest here, for it deals specifically with the systematic management of England’s poor based on where they live, how able-bodied they are, and other criteria. The charity Yorick offers, in other words, is the same sort of charity we might expect of the author of the Second Treatise of Government: based more on discursive affiliations, like citizenship or parish of residence, than on the material privations that necessitate charity in the first place. Yorick, like Locke, allows no wrangling over the meaning of charity. The same liberal concepts intended to secure citizens what they need—“property,” “rights”—are Yorick’s grounds for denying the monk both, and when the parson admits to having “left thousands in distress,” he is using one act of neglect in England to justify another in France.

Even scriptural law, as much as the Poor Law, can limit the scope of sociability, as Sterne’s sermon on “The Abuses of Conscience,” reproduced in Tristram Shandy, suggests. Sterne presents as exempla three men who, respectively, debauch and abandon a young woman, neglect the distress of the poor, and swindle friends and customers for personal gain. It may be possible to act so cruelly in public matters, he argues in the first case, because “Conscience all this time was engaged at home, talking aloud against petty larceny,” and in the third case because

26Sterne’s atypical use of the Christian image of the “straight path” provides further evidence that he might be at something unorthodox for even a latitudinarian priest. Rather than moral rectitude, he uses it to signify the trajectory of oblivious self-interest. The end of Tristram Shandy’s sixth volume ridicules the idea of linear (straight-proceeding, or neatly teleological) narrative, and trivializes the moral significance of “right line—the path-way for Christians to walk in” by equating it merely with “the shortest line . . . which can be drawn from one given point to another” (TS 379-80). In A Sentimental Journey, Yorick indicts “Mundungus” for having “travell’d straight on looking neither to his right hand or his left, lest Love or Pity should seduce him out of his road,” and for consequently having produced a travelogue “without one generous connection or pleasurable anecdote to tell of” (ASJ 25). Finally, in his sermon “Philanthropy Recommended,” Sterne condemns the archetypes of the selfish priest in the Parable of the Good Samaritan because he is “afraid to look up, lest peradventure he should see aught which might turn him one moment out of that straight line where interest is carrying him” (Sterne, Sermons, 4:24).
“Conscience looks into the Statutes at Large,—finds perhaps no express law broken by what he has done . . . Conscience has got safely entrench’d behind the letter of the law.”

Sterne’s exempla in this sermon do objectionable things because absorbed in a long list of objections, precise shalt nots. According to Melvyn New, sentimentalist “morality without religion” and “Catholic religion without morality” have a common flaw in Sterne’s eyes: “The fault of both is certainty.”

To use verbal or sentimental conventions in a Lockean or otherwise rigid manner, Sterne argues, is likely to be counterproductive to the social good sought, for to define “social good” is necessarily to define its limits. Tristram claims in his belated Preface to “hate set dissertations” because they “darken your hypothesis by pacing a number of tall, opake words, one before another, in a right line, betwixt your own and your readers conception” (TS 158). He here imagines that objects—not only the graphic and typographic symbols that punctuate his text so often, but also the verbal representations of objects that oscillate between literal and metaphorical—allow a kind of dynamic exchange between parties, wherein to take liberties with the meaning of a word is to suggest one’s momentary state of mind.

This is not to say that long

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27 Sterne, Sermons, 4:258-59.
28 New, Book for Free Spirits, 38. At various junctures, New argues that Sterne’s criticisms of dogmatic certainty are hypocritical, because themselves absolutist, but caricatures skeptical positions in the process. He writes: “The romantic dream of inclusivity, the sceptical paradise of free and fearless hovering, the soaring above ‘discipline, compactness, simplicity, restraint in motion and deportment’ are all evasions of the demands of the self for certainty and security in confrontation with the otherness of the world” (Ibid., 127). This describes a zero-sum game wherein any correspondence of belief and evidence anywhere must undermine skeptical attitudes everywhere. As such, it corresponds to Pyrrhonism or total skepticism tolerably well, but poorly to the more intricate and acute uncertainties that emerge in Sterne’s novels.
29 For more on why this differs from the monomanias and hobby-horses above, see Cash, “Lockean Psychology.” This seminal intervention on Sterne’s use of Locke argues that Sterne does not draw upon what Locke calls the association of ideas, which is pathological, but rather upon Locke’s view of the normal mind as a “stream of consciousness” or continuous “train of ideas,” whose relationships are more flexible and dynamic than those of associations. “Unlike Lockean association,” writes Cash, “suggestion is a synthesis of ideas resulting in a new juxtaposition of them; it is not the recall of an idea which had become fused to another because they were contiguous in some previous experience” (132, emphasis added). Cash’s article remains important and substantially correct—the association of ideas as defined by Locke is closer to how hobby-horses work than to anything else in Sterne—but it overestimates the extent to which Sterne agrees with Locke in other areas.
discourses on social and moral policy can never achieve positive social or moral ends: it is more precisely to say that such discourses proceed relatively inexorably, and are not permeable to the fluctuating states and needs of organic minds. Moral law breaks down at its interstices, in the blind spots and exceptions that its provisions fail to anticipate. “Attitudes are nothing, madam,” Tristram writes: “’tis the transition from one attitude to another—like the preparation and resolution of the discord into harmony, which is all in all” (TS 221). The potential efficacy of Sterne’s sociability is that it functions in just those interstices; that it thrives on a kind of discursive and institutional entropy.

III. Diversion Toward Politics

If unyielding ideas and imperatives threaten sociability, Tristram Shandy attempts to salvage it in part by making diversion and digression central impulses of his life’s story: he offers it as a “Diversion to [the reader’s] passionate and love-sick Contemplations,” achieved by “introducing an entire new set of objects to his Imagination” (TS 483-84). Some readers of Sterne, though, have always understood “Diversion” in the narrowest possible sense, as a renunciation of serious social ethics. Many of the moral and political critiques today leveled at sentimental literature generally, and Sterne’s fiction (as a supposed apotheosis of the tradition) in particular, rehearse arguments that have been around in some form since the 1770s, and which object to it chiefly as a diversion or trifle: sentimentality justifies the bourgeoisie’s ascension to power by celebrating and flattering the emergent class’s supposedly innate goodness, channels social discontent (that might otherwise have driven substantial or structural reforms) into ephemeral emotional exchanges, and “disengages the will from forms of practical action that only less modish virtues – religious principle, ethical commitment – have the power to impel.”

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30 Keymer, “Failure of Feeling,” 87. See also Frank, “A Man Who Laughs.” Both pieces review, and partially recapitulate, these and other critiques of literary sentimentality in general and in Sterne.
All of these arguments assume that the world of political and ethical engagement is remote from the kinds of experience sentimental literature describes. Spontaneous acts of charity are not, in this account, signs of social conscience; without an explicit idea of virtue, as Shaftesbury would say, any ethics must be uncertain. Sterne’s narrators themselves seem at moments to confirm this. Tristram announces that he counts as his hobby-horse “any thing, which a man makes a shift to get a stride on, to canter it away from the cares and solicitudes of life” (TS 470), and Yorick seems equally averse to staying hard courses: “When evils press sore upon me, and there is no retreat from them in this world, then I take a new course—I leave it” (ASJ 72-73). Accordingly, many of the attachments they describe among themselves and their associates are transferable on a whim, or upon the turn of a phrase, as with the first woman Yorick meets in France: “I was certain she was of a better order of beings—however, I thought no more of her, but went on and wrote my preface” (ASJ 14). As Sterne’s alter ego, Yorick might be thought to embody most nearly Sterne’s own opinions, or criticisms, of freewheeling sentiment.

It tells only part of the story, though, to think of diversion only as a movement from certain objects. Equally important is the movement to other objects, and the vectoring of feeling into new channels. Yorick’s rapidly shifting attention gets him beyond the “certain” and almost neoplatonist impulse that, in a sentimental plot like Richardson’s, would validate the woman’s moral claim by indexing it to a transcendental “order.” The diversion is back toward the protean social world of the senses, as even the relatively introverted act of “wr[iting his] preface” gives Yorick a chance to joke with passersby and the disruption gives him an opportunity to consider

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Locke, interestingly, uses similar terms to those deployed against sensibility in the 1770s when he denounces the abuse of words for “Affected Obscurity” as another frivolous pastime for the privileged, which serves “the Interest and Artifice of those, who found no easier way to that pitch of Authority and Dominion they have attained, than by amusing the Men of Business, and Ignorant, with hard Words, or employing the Ingenious and Idle in intricate Disputes, about unintelligible Terms, and holding them perpetually entangled in that endless Labyrinth” (Essay, 495).
the woman in a new light when he next interacts with her. If we are to evaluate Sterne as a sentimental novelist, surely we should look to the single, conspicuous definition of sensibility that appears in his novels:

—Dear sensibility! . . . eternal fountain of our feelings!—’tis here I trace thee—and this is thy divinity which stirs within me—not, that in some sad and sickening moments, ‘my soul shrinks back upon herself, and startles at destruction’—mere pomp of words!—but that I feel some generous joys and generous cares beyond myself—all comes from thee, great—great SENSORIUM of the world! which vibrates, if a hair of our heads but falls upon the ground, in the remotest desert of thy creation. (ASJ 98)

Yorick again avows less concern for eternal than for temporal matters. If his sensibility is at times rapid and capricious in its attachments, then it is also attuned to subtle fluctuations in the world around him.

Tristram, in his sensibility, is perhaps more like Yorick than immediately obvious. The same narrator who enthusiastically proclaims, while remembering his Uncle Toby, that “Digressions . . . are the life, the soul of reading” can elsewhere insist, when first drawn away from a conversation with Eugenius, that “there is nothing in this world I abominate worse, than to be interrupted in a story” because he cares at different times for both positions—both people; both sets of ideas and things—and can formulate strong defenses of them that nevertheless give way to each other (TS 58, 385). The “transient spark of amity” between Tristram and a French woman that makes him feel “seven years acquainted,” and Toby’s comically brief and bloodthirsty vow to protect Trim from blame in the matter of Tristram’s accidental circumcision, provide further examples (TS 431, 305). From the most whimsical view of a situation arises a hyperbolic and intense commitment that is nonetheless mobile, and quickly responsive to shifts in the surrounding terrain. Emotional volatility becomes the basis of security. It thwarts the persistence of habits and conflicts, and feeds upon a fluid panoply of impressions and associations. In Sterne’s social world, a misérable’s face can undo the predetermination not to
give alms, and a deep-seated argument between two parties can be defused by their quibbling over semantics. Though these kinds of allegiance are ever-shifting, the advocacy associated with them is ever-potent.

Frivolous matters have a vital and functional place in Sterne’s moral universe. To argue otherwise—that the sallies of wit entail the suspension of a more urgent reality—is to argue that one’s ideations, attitudes, and affects are not themselves part of that reality, an assumption deeply at odds with the psychological bent of eighteenth-century moral philosophy. Sterne’s choice of epigraph for Tristram Shandy’s first two volumes—Epictetus’s claim that “Not things, but opinions about things, trouble men” (TS 1n)—addresses just this point, and aligns Sterne with the traditions of his day that located ethical good in subjective experience. For both Hobbes and the sentimentalists, feeling is the irreducible horizon of all motive, preference, and value; even Locke, we have seen, agrees. That Yorick proposes combating unsociable passions by means of other passions suggests that Sterne situated himself at least partly in this empiricist-sentimentalist vein: “I was never able,” Yorick proclaims, “to conquer any one single bad sensation in my heart so decisively, as by beating up as fast as I could for some kindly and gentle sensation, to fight it upon its own ground” (ASJ 73). By managing the humors of his characters

31 Carol Kay and John Mullan are among the critics to make this case for Sterne’s fiction, especially Tristram Shandy. Kay views the novel’s satirical and political elements as toothless: in it, Sterne “actively make[s] his writing ‘innocent’ by invoking forms of writing that usually function as authoritative social acts and converting them to play,” such that its characters’ aggressive political and moral arguments “have no bad effects” (Political Constructions, 210, 218). According to Mullan, “[i]t is conventional in the literature of the period for those possessed of sensibility to seek (usually rural) retreats, havens in which they can try to live on vegetables and sentiment. Tristram Shandy also idealizes a space in which sympathy can work, though it takes the idealization to the verge of absurdity” (Sentiment and Sociability, 183).

Neither of these arguments adequately examines how verbal nuance regulates affective and power relations among Sterne’s characters. This is why Kay in particular fails to admit “play” as an approach to politics, and thus sees Sterne’s political tendencies as deferential to authority. She here neglects the political importance of emotion as originally argued by Hobbes. Both readings imply that only a systematic, structural, or permanent action is properly political, and that an individual exchange in so-called private space, without wider ramifications, is not. Sterne rejects this dichotomy. If the vigorous conversations that pepper his narratives “have no bad effects,” it is because those effects are defused, rather than made impossible. His vision of sociability entails private opinions clashing in, and thereby constituting, public fora. Grousing and carping aside, vegetables are more substantial than some omnivores think.
and, indeed, his readers the way he does, Sterne understands himself to be doing ethical work par excellence. His novels offer a model of sociability facilitated by the uncertainties of ordinary language. Diversion is neither quietist nor indifferent about ethics; it is an insistently ethical process of dynamic reconsideration and accommodation.

The flexibility of sentiment is precisely the origin of its ethical utility. In Sterne’s narratives, quick tempers, punning misreadings, and unexpected events cause things, ideas, and their consequences to be continually viewed in a fresh affective light. The utility of such tonal shifts is to a great extent the product of affect’s influence on information-gathering—which, Silvan Tomkins argues,

does not necessarily create error. In a moment of anger, characteristics of the love object which have been suppressed can come clearly into view. In a moment of sympathy, the positive qualities of the rejected object may be equally illuminated. There is a real question whether anyone may fully grasp the nature of any object when that object has not been perceived, wished for, missed, and thought about in love and hate, in excitement and in apathy, in distress and in joy. . . . There are many ways of “knowing” anything. Only an animal who was as capable as man could have convinced himself that the scientific mode of acquaintance is the only “real” mode through which he contacts reality.

An emotion, in other words, is an interpretive paradigm that tends to reveal its own purposively selective range of sensory and cognitive information. For Sterne, emotions can shift on the point of a single word. His fiction imagines everybody participating in conversation, but denies that language, sensation, or affect are stable enough, as systems of information, to insulate anybody altogether from the fluctuating claims of their surroundings. Lockean prescriptivism is hopeless for his characters. Sterne’s own use of language, Peter M. Briggs suggests, is calculated to make

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32 Cf. Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, 177: Sterne’s novels, Mullan argues, rely on ineffable, authentic gestures and physiognomies as the bearers of feeling and mechanism of sympathy. The movements and postures of Trim, Toby, and others “are swaddled in allusion and analogy because they are not immediately available” to anybody but the characters themselves. But body language needn’t be “immediately available” if we as literary critics allow that verbal resonances like “allusion and analogy”—not to mention misconstructions and failures to identify—can themselves prompt emotional shifts. Language figures so prominently in Sterne’s ethics not because it misses a hypothetical “real” mark, but because its very productive capacity is to miss marks of all kinds.

33 Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, 1:75.
many attributes of and relations among objects apparent at once: “Unlike simple comparisons (or simple oppositions), Shandean appositions refuse to fix a single principle of similarity or difference and thereby to delimit and focus possible implications . . . they open up a far broader range of interpretive possibilities, a simultaneous and unsettling awareness of whole worlds of similarities and differences to be explored.”34 A word’s valence, in Sternean conversation, is revealed to fall along many axes simultaneously, and each of its senses opens onto an entire economy of values and priorities. Hence social and power relations in Sterne are seldom, if ever, either fully unidirectional or fully reciprocal. They unfold sideways, circuitously, and out of left field.

The sociability that emerges in Sterne’s work is at heart a dynamic balancing act of many people’s claims. Tristram, as an eager storyteller, foregrounds his own frenetic attempts to accommodate all his readers, claiming, for instance, to “guard against” critics’ wrath by “pay[ing] them all court,” keeping “half a dozen places purposely open for them,” and trying to anticipate some of their objections to the work (TS 69). One could readily argue that Sterne’s writing consists entirely in this authorial gesture of representing and responding to different voices. According to Melvyn New, he “locates human creativity and purpose in the division of interpretation, division among both readers and readings—not because division always offers a third ‘true’ choice (the ‘middle way’ of classical thought), but because it offers a second—an insistence on the other—as part of every interpretative act.”35 The perspective of others becomes important in conversations at all narrative levels, and the attention of others is what is at stake in them. Tristram, worried his book will be maligned by erudite readers, wagers that no gesture would invite reprisal as much “as that of leaving them out of the party, or, what is full as

35 New, Book for Free Spirits, 123.
offensive, of bestowing your attention upon the rest of your guests in so particular a way, as if there was no such thing as a critic (by occupation) at table,” and an incensed Walter wishes that Toby had “favoured” his discussion of noses “with one grain of attention” (TS 69, 191).

Explicitly at issue in these exchanges is the ability of interlocutors to grasp one another’s aims and needs. In Sterne’s novels, understanding is inseparable, even indistinguishable, from misunderstanding. Through creative, diverting, often unwitting reinterpretation of words and heuristics, characters force new emotional and hence ethical awareness on each other and on themselves. Because the Lockean clarity of words and the heuristic reliability of sentimental convention cannot hold under such circumstances, the values and goals that they express are up for debate. The resulting negotiation determines what Jacques Rancière terms the “distribution of the sensible;” that is to say, it “consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it. . . . Those who make visible the fact that they belong to a shared world that others do not see . . . must demonstrate the world in which [their] argument counts as an argument and must demonstrate it as such for those who do not have the frame of reference enabling them to see it as one.” For Rancière, this is the fundamental gesture of all politics: manifesting one’s claims within a code and milieu indisposed to recognize them. Sternean sociability is political along similar lines. It is a ceaseless working-out of power relations at the level of the word.

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37 Kay dismisses this sort of task as nonpolitical: “The scene of play in Sterne is so free because we are constantly reassured that someone else somewhere else (like Pitt when he is not relaxing in the country) is taking reasonably good care of things, looking after the state” (*Political Constructions*, 222). It is certainly possible to level this criticism at Rancière’s model of politics as well, and it is true that Rancière does not treat specifics of policy formulation, at least in *Dissensus*.

But neither Rancière nor Sterne characterizes disputes over the “distribution of the sensible” as the end or goal of politics. Rather, these seem to have the characteristics of a beginning. Although Sterne deals with power relationships at a scale that allows resolution through conversation alone, he does implicate governing bodies in similar kinds of conversation, suggesting that even legislators’ prerogatives have the same foundation. Sterne appears to understand power in Hobbesian terms, in that it is marked by the pursuit of uncertain or whimsical
IV. Ethical Levity

Intimations of something like negative capability, or provisional knowledge, pervade Sterne’s prose, but are most expressly formulated as a theory of language by Walter, in his explanation of auxiliary verbs. According to him, the auxiliaries “open new tracks of enquiry, and make every idea engender millions:” the adjustment of tense, mood, and associated verbs allows any idea to be “put negatively . . . [o]r affirmatively . . . [o]r chronologically . . . [o]r hypothetically,” among other possibilities (TS 323-24). The constructions Walter runs through constitute a lexicon for creative thought, from which “a magazine of conceptions and conclusions may be drawn forth” (Ibid.). That we can’t take his discussion quite seriously is part of the point: learned wit’s alternation of humor and erudition demonstrate the very kind of verbal transformation Walter here values. It is marked, in fact, as one of the centralmost developments in *Tristram Shandy* via Sterne’s adapted epigraph to Volumes III and IV: “it was always the design to pass in turn from jests to serious matters and from serious matters to jests” (TS 123n).38

mMotives. The learned ecclesiastical council in *Tristram Shandy*, the powerful aristocrats in *A Sentimental Journey*, and the political club in *A Political Romance* (ASJ 151-79) all participate in the Shandean discursive milieu, all show some susceptibility to the ethical levity I describe below, and, to the extent that they are inflexible, Sterne shows that inflexibility to be more an expression of personal monomania than of law’s immutability. Kay later asserts: “we cannot establish a single formula for the political influence of cultural imagery; rather such imagery provides one more area of contention for competition in power.” (Ibid., 245-46). This comes, though, in the penultimate sentence of her discussion of *Tristram Shandy*, and it’s a point she never returns to again. What she neglects in Sterne is that nobody’s habits ever get monolithic billing; that, as constructions of a particular word, image, or proposition find themselves at variance, negotiation is continuous. Individual idiosyncrasy may have much to do with producing accord, but that is because it constitutes a matrix of language whose imperatives never manage to be fixed.

Rancière, for his part, sharply criticizes attempts like Kay’s to demarcate a political domain in opposition to supposedly nonpolitical domains: “The so-called return of the political, in proclaiming a return to pure politics and thus an end to the usurpations of the social, simply occludes the fact that the social is by no means a particular sphere of existence but instead a disputed object of politics. Consequently, the end of the social that it proclaims is simply no more than the end of political litigation over the partition of worlds. The ‘return of politics’ thus boils down to the assertion that there is a specific place for politics. Isolated in this manner, this specific place can be nothing but the place of the state. So, the theorists of the ‘return of politics’ in fact announce its extinction. They identify it with the practices of state, the very principle of which consists in the suppression of politics” (*Dissensus*, 43).

38 Marc Martinez further observes that Sterne’s addition of *a seris ad jocos*—“from serious matters to jests”—to John of Salisbury’s Latin “places his work in the Minippian tradition of the *spoudogeloion*, the serio-comic, which oscillates between the two categories” (“The Death of Yorick,” 27).
It is the prevalence of this transformation that governs the social receptivity of Sterne’s characters.

A jesting perspective differs from a grave or moralistic one in that the former can indeed move in both these directions: as easily from earnest to levity as vice versa. Hobby-horsical monomania disables one’s sense of humor. Although Sterne’s characters can be led to their obsessions through the most casual of coincidences, it is harder at times to lead them from them—to refocus their attentions upon some new care—by the same means. Many of Walter’s ideas, Tristram tells us,

at first enter’d upon the footing of mere whims . . . and as such he would make merry with them for a half hour or so, and having sharpen’d his wit upon ‘em, dismiss them till another day.

I mention this, not only as matter of hypothesis or conjecture upon the progress and establishment of my father’s many odd opinions,—but as a warning to the learned reader against the indiscriminate reception of such guests, who, after a free and undisturbed entrance, for some years, into our brains,—at length claim a kind of settlement there,——working sometimes like yeast;—but more generally after the manner of the gentle passion, beginning in jest,—but ending in downright earnest. (TS 45)

What begin as series of “whims”—“merry” and unanticipated successions of ideas—assume “settlement” in Walter’s mind; becoming “opinions” of “downright earnest,” “settle[d]” and immoveable. Walter is, at his most pedantic moments, deaf to all ambiguity; that is, deaf to any of a word or idea’s implications beyond those he intends. Rather than facilitating flexible engagement with the world through active debate, “downright earnest” opinions press blindly and gravely in a single direction, impervious to irony. Yet in another light, Walter’s defense of pursuing hypotheses even at the expense of life is more cavalier and less to the point than Toby’s whistling of the tune “Lillabullero” in response (TS 56). As a diverting way of dealing with maddening, oblivious gravity, Toby’s “Lillabullero” suggests much about the ethical significance of levity in Sterne’s narratives. If social responsiveness is to trump unsociable monomania, then
the “settlement” of habit must be reversed. Rigid and solemn customs must be made back into
matter for ridicule.

Levity, because it doesn’t marry speakers to obstinate viewpoints, is sociable. Sterne
works toward conception of sociability as something other than a ponderous obligation: instead it
is something occasional, produced by local contingencies of speech and feeling. In light of
charity’s potential excesses, it seems significant that Yorick’s French valet La Fleur is not a
charity case. When Yorick’s internal “Wisdome” admonishes him for taking a “drummer” into
his service, his reaction is particularly notable given *Tristram Shandy’s* glowing celebration of
soldiers, and the similarity of the names “La Fleur” and “Le Fever.” Yorick has no paternalist
impulse to block out the world in the young man’s defense: although La Fleur’s livelihood hangs
in the balance, the parson evaluates his options playfully. As Thomas Keymer observes, *A
Sentimental Journey* “fails, or refuses, to sustain any clear distinction between sentimental
sincerity and Shandean satire.”39 This is no failure, however. Yorick’s levity in these potentially
high-stakes circumstances makes him more sensitive, for it deflates the terms of prudence and
rectitude that the object of his benevolence cannot live up to:

—And so, quoth Wisdome, you have hired a drummer to attend you in this tour of your’s
thro’ France and Italy! Psha! said I, and do not one half of our gentry go with a hum-
drum compagnon du voyage the same round, and have the piper and the devil and all to
pay besides? When man can extricate himself with an *equivoque* in such an unequal
match—he is not ill off—But you can do something else, La Fleur? Said I——O
qu’ouï!—he could make spatterdashes, and play a little upon the fiddle—Bravo! said
Wisdome—Why, I play a bass myself, said I—we shall do very well.—You can shave,
and dress a wig a little, La Fleur?—He had all the dispositions in the world—It is enough
for heaven! said I, interrupting him—and ought to be enough for me— (ASJ 27)

Wordplay is enough to alleviate the dismissive tone of Yorick’s initial judgment. His heuristic,
conspicuously archaic “Wisdome” first uses “drummer” as a derisive mark of idleness or

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39 Keymer, “Failure of Feeling,” 89-90. Keymer himself fails, however, to consider that the two might be integral to
or even substantially compatible with each other.
uselessness, before his skeptical self-interruption (“Psha!”) diverts him. Conventional traveling companions, or pages, he observes, are “hum-drum.” In one register, Yorick treats the word “drum” phonemically: pleasurable for its mere sound, with all the semantic weight of doggerel verse. This is a label that can be flung far and wide, at virtually any signified, without hurting or even sticking to it. In another register, however, the parson strikes upon ‘true’ wit, insinuating that other “compagnon[s] du voyage” are no less (if not more) “hum-drum”—boring, mediocre, and slow—than his drummer.

Yorick thus adjusts to surrounding circumstances by folding figurative constructions into literal ones and vice versa: while the former move allows him to see things from a new perspective, the latter ensures that he will not cleave too immovably to it.\(^{40}\) Subsequently, the musical associations of humming and drumming lead him to envision other bourgeois travelers’ retinues as “piper[s]” and then “devils,” a procession of images that hints at superfluity and vice without needing to damn either: it suffices for Yorick to loosen the hold of the moralistic “Wisdome” with which he entered the transaction. He can thereby reduce ability itself—a central attribute and measure of the Lockean economic agent—to fodder for parody and play. Yorick is amused enough by “spatterdashes” and “fiddl[ing]” to proclaim that these skills constitute “all the dispositions in the world” and “enough for heaven,” no less gratifying than traditional servant-skills like “shav[ing]” and “dress[ing] a wig.”

Sterne proposes a seemingly idealistic version of charity, but also makes a trenchant point about the construction of value and exchange. As Yorick elsewhere proclaims, “when a few words will rescue misery out of her distress, I hate the man who can be a churl of them” (ASJ 12). The limits of economic generosity, in this formulation, are coterminous only with those of

\(^{40}\) As Lamb explains, puns are “words that . . . preserve a thriving relationship between things, ideas, and words by their ambiguity. They also keep Yorick free from the strict inquiries and univocal judgments of public morality: a man can ‘extricate himself with an *equivoque*’” (“Language and Hartleian Associationism,” 293).
rhetorical effusiveness. Yorick’s interactions with the begging misérables in the final “Montriul” chapter, shortly after hiring La Fleur, further illustrate the point. When a threadbare man among this group “withdr[aws] his claim, by retiring two steps out of the circle,” thereby showing “deference for the [female] sex,” Yorick gives him a sous “merely for his politesse,” and gives another “simply pour l’amour de Dieu, which was the footing on which it was begg’d—The poor woman had a dislocated hip; so it could not well be, upon any other motive” (ASJ 30-31). The wit to which Yorick exposes his beneficiaries is unsparing: it delights in the coincidence of the man’s “beggary and urbanity” because these are “at such variance in other countries” (Ibid.), and arguably makes light of the woman’s disability. Yet it allows Yorick to avoid taking his charity to narrow extremes (he “overlook[s]” one man in the “eagerness of giving,” but quickly addresses this with a large unspecified sum) and celebrating as such either poverty or almsgiving, which he performs when simply flattered. His commitments are sentimental and political because they refuse to take discourse seriously. 41 Such a relation to language puts him in mind of a woman’s handicap merely when considering the “footing” of her address, and of the literal “cruel journey” precipitated by the wish to “let [beggars] go to the devil” (Ibid.). If words illuminate anything here, it is through the uncertain light they cast over to other words, rather than through the unwavering light they cast down on things. His outlook treats symbols, meaning, and value like the language-game components they are. It recognizes, redeployes, and responds to the conventions encoded in words, while refusing to grant them the authority and finality to which they pretend. I will call this position ethical levity.

41 Cf. Mullan, Sentiment and Sociability, 180. Like many critics, he notes a putative contradiction in Sterne between levity and sentimentality: “we have the running paradox: the bearers of feeling—Trim, Toby, Walter, even Yorick— are imagined as at once absurd and admirable.” But the emotional condition of admiration, at least as Mullan describes it, relies upon a change, or new focus, of perspective, which in turn requires a language mobile enough at least to suggest it; to navigate incongruous juxtapositions and subversions of ‘logic.’ It demands language deployed in a jesting, even absurd manner. This is hardly “paradox:” levity—exuberant, deprecatory, and absurd by turns— makes admiration possible.
Insofar as ethical levity operates on Sterne’s characters, their negative affects and, for that matter, positive ones, are never set in stone. Consequently, what we might typically be inclined to consider ‘unsociable’ impulses can, through their subsequent development, end up promoting sociability. *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* are both full of negative affect, in the form of vexing situations and cranky characters, and yet both are, so to speak, feel-good books throughout. For the angry characters are almost universally the loose-lipped ones, who voice their displeasure candidly and get over it promptly. Yorick is one of these: Sterne writes that his alter ego had no impression but one, and that was what arose from the nature of the deed spoken of; which impression he would usually translate into plain English without any periphrasis, —— and too oft without much distinction of either personage, time, or place . . . And as his comments had usually the ill fate to be terminated either in a bon mot, or to be enliven’d throughout with some drollery or humour of expression, it gave wings to Yorick’s indiscretion. (TS 23)

Words’ very presentation as jokes suggests that Yorick himself is open to amicable relations with his targets, rather than inalterably outraged. His feelings themselves are fleeting “impression[s]” rather than internalized or cherished judgments. Like Walter’s feelings, or even those of the...

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42 Critics are divided on the exact nature of the moral stance attributed to Yorick here. New cites this passage as evidence that Yorick’s “attitude is that of the moral absolutist” (*Book for Free Spirits*, 35), and that Yorick’s pursuit of a new, tolerant way is inescapably hypocritical. According to Martinez, Yorick’s “‘conversation’ tries to reconcile the two antithetical conceptions of comic representation, polarised between the envenomed excesses of satire on the one hand and the sympathetic sobriety of humour on the other . . . humour, unlike satire, tends to suspend any judgmental certainty based on firmly established categorical dichotomies,” and Yorick’s death transforms him into “the true humorist, deprived of malignancy and yet full of lucidity” (“The Death of Yorick,” 33, 36). Moglen similarly argues, “Sterne did not write as a satirist. Because of the interest in the psychology of the individual as he relates to himself and interacts with others, Sterne wrote as a novelist” (*Philosophical Irony*, 29)—a dichotomy that takes Augustan wit and novelistic sympathy as incompatible tendencies. Mullan, by contrast, argues for role of language in interpersonal identification: “Sterne’s novel can only propose a sympathy which overrides monomania because it is authoritative enough to trace obsessions like Walter’s and Toby’s through their bizarre and specific involutions” (*Sentiment and Sociability*, 161).

Even Mullan, however (and Moglen and Martinez more so), takes for granted that Sterne proposes, as an alternative to “involut[ed]” verbal communication, an ideal, unrepresentable sympathy entailing wordless, artless contagion among innocents. Even the heuristic sentimentalists do not see sympathy as a mystical process of emotional infection, but rather as an altered succession of ideas within individual, isolated subjectivities, which in turn triggers affective shifts. “[I]nvolutions,” at least in literature, are traced through words, and words produce particular (if indeterminate) emotional reactions from characters as well as from readers. The full, relentless irony of...
cantankerous Dr. Slop, Yorick’s are uniformly intense, but can change valence quickly and readily. To be sure, Yorick incurs “small book-debts” with those he speaks so freely of, yet imagines “that as not one of them was contracted thro’ any malignancy;---but, on the contrary, from an honesty of mind, and a mere jocundity of humour, they would all of them be cross’d out in course” (TS 24). He overwhelmingly doesn’t take such exchanges permanently or personally. Yorick’s Shakespearean namesake, after all, is described by Hamlet as “a fellow of infinite jest; of most excellent fancy,” and the Horatian-Burtonian motto selected for Volume V of *Tristram Shandy* invites a comparison of Yorick’s humor to the novel’s as a whole: “If perhaps I say anything too facetious, you will grant me this right indulgently” (TS 271n). Tristram, like Yorick, will say what he thinks, but is unwilling to press a point uncomfortably far with others—and, indeed, unable to, if others insist on parsing his words their own way.

Ethical levity is thus no more necessarily funny than innuendo is necessarily sexual. It is not a mood, but a mechanism of transition between moods. More important than humor per se is productive misreading, which renders meaning uncertain and stimulates new emotions. Ethical levity can arise in thought as well as in speech, while interpreting bodies and objects as well as words. After admiring from a distance the young woman he meets in Calais, and fancifully

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43 When Slop first sees his bag of obstetrical instruments so thoroughly knotted up by Obadiah, it occurs to him that Mrs. Shandy could deliver Tristram before he even finishes extricating his tools: “But here,” the adult Tristram observes, “you must distinguish—the thought floated only in Dr. Slop’s mind, without sail or ballast to it, as a simple proposition; millions of which, as your worship knows, are every day swimming quietly in the middle of the thin juice of a man’s understanding, without being carried backwards or forwards, till some little gusts of passion or interest drive them to one side” (TS 132).

44 Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 5, scene 1, lines 184-5, p. 152. Hamlet’s subsequent meditation upon Yorick’s skull deals with mutability, flux, and the bathos that undermines a loved object as a result of organic life itself. He is sickened to see the late jester’s punky bones. Yet this bathos has an obverse—namely, the quotidian wonder that identifies Alexander the Great in objects like corks, and that hence shows deference even unto inanimate things that enter its field of awareness. As my discussion of material “accident” will presently suggest, some form of ethical levity may be at work even here.
interpolating the features of a “goddess” or “angel[ ] of light,” Yorick finally gets a good look at her face and finds it quite different from what he had envisioned:

When we had got to the door of the Remise, she withdrew her hand from across her forehead, and let me see the original—it was a face of about six and twenty—of a clear transparent brown, simply set off without rouge or powder—it was not critically handsome, but there was that in it, which, in the frame of mind I was in, attached me much more to it—it was interesting; I fancied it wore the characters of a widow’d look, and in that state of its declension, which had passed the two first paroxysms of sorrow, and was quietly beginning to reconcile itself to its loss—but a thousand other distresses might have traced the same lines; I wish’d to know what they had been—and was ready to inquire (had the same bon ton of conversation permitted, as in the days of Esdras)—“What aileth thee? and why art thou disquieted? and why is thy understanding troubled?”—In a word, I felt benevolence for her; and resolv’d some way or other to throw in my mite of courtesy—if not of service. (ASJ 15)

The dual sense of “declension” as both grammatical exercise and sentimental spectacle is notable here and elsewhere in Sterne’s oeuvre. *Tristram Shandy* describes Yorick himself as at least “as mercurial and sublimated a composition,---as heteroclite a creature in all his declensions” as anyone in France or Italy (TS 22), suggesting that the parson’s own personality depends on the “composition” of the language he uses and encounters. As nouns shift conformations and are brought into new case relationships with surrounding words, so does a series of visual suggestions evoke a range of reactions in Yorick. In the passage above, the young woman’s unadorned physiognomy strikes him first as “not critically handsome,” but then as “interesting.” In contrast with admiration or libido, “interest” leads Yorick to seek more information about the object before him, and each new turn of thought mobilizes a new feeling.\footnote{I shall discuss the social utility of interest at greater length in relation to Austen’s novels: see Chapter 4, Section 4.} He first speaks somewhat wistfully of her apparent “paroxysms of sorrow,” but quickly doubts of them, abandoning any single hypothesis and arriving at the desire to “inquire” about her history. This, in turn, brings him to issues of rhetoric and diplomacy; how one ought to formulate the question so as to be solicitous yet respectful. Finally, parsing one “word” after another, he resolves not to
ask her these questions at all, but instead to afford her “courtesy” and perchance “service.” In only a few moments he goes from idealizing and objectifying her at a distance to wanting to hear about her history and needs.\textsuperscript{46} And it is nothing he even intends or wills: the uncertainties of language and imagination are the real agent here.

\textbf{V. Wordplay and Sentiment: The Uncertainty of Conversation}

By deploying language strategically, or unwittingly, Sterne’s characters can bring themselves around to new ethical positions, even ones that they are not emotionally prepared to assume. Consider Dr. Slop’s extended, formalized cursing of Obadiah after he ties Slop’s obstetrical bag shut with dozens of knots. Owing to comedy of tone, form, and situation, it’s hard to take the curse itself—actually a letter of excommunication—seriously as Slop recites it. Yet as he vents his frustration, some of his more suggestive curses mobilize sentiment on Obadiah’s behalf too, as when Toby and Walter wince respectively at his “groin” and “genitals” being cursed (TS 141). More importantly, the energies of the performance are spent not primarily on specifying the severity of the curse, which remains unelaborated, but rather on \textit{listing} the various places and activities in which Obadiah might endure it. This is notably untrue of Slop’s initial, much harsher reaction: “I wish the scoundrel hang’d—I wish he was shot—I wish all the devils in hell had him for a blockhead” (TS 133). The doctor’s English rendering of the excommunication directs its energies, however, elsewhere:

\textsuperscript{46} Four chapters later, Yorick suggests that this initial view of the woman is devoid of levity as I have defined it: “HAVING, on first sight of the lady, settled the affair in my fancy, ‘that she was of the better order of beings’—and then laid it down as a second axiom, as indisputable as the first, That she was a widow, and wore a character of distress—I went no further; I got ground enough for the situation which pleased me—and had she remained close beside my elbow till midnight, I should have held true to my system, and considered her only under that general idea” (ASJ 20). The prior contexts from which both these “axiom[s]” are drawn, though, suggests that Yorick is again shifting his viewpoint here. The syntax and tone of the passage above, along with Yorick glibly dismissing her to write his preface immediately after deeming her angelic being, indicates that neither proposition is particularly fixed in his mind. Even if he claims to be “certain” that she is a spiritual being, and even if he intends the word as a statement of material or fact, its brief stay in his consciousness, and the intervening ideas suggested to him by other people and things, effectively render it a flash of emotive hyperbole.
“May the holy choir of the holy virgins, who for the honour of Christ have despised the things of the world, damn him.—May all the saints who from the beginning of the world to everlasting ages are found to be beloved of God, damn him.—May the heavens and earth, and all the holy things remaining therein, damn him,” (Obadiah) “or her,” (or whoever else had a hand in tying these knots.) (TS 139)

The anaphoric and epistrophic structures of Slop’s translation draw more attention to, and more momentum from, the verses than the refrain. In cursing Obadiah from head to toe, Slop arguably evinces more zeal as a student of anatomy and rhetoric than as a man frustrated, and his recitation ultimately has as much to do with grammatical exhaustiveness and precision as with hurling abuse. This is likewise true of La Fleur in A Sentimental Journey, who can use a graduated range of French curses in the manner of “the positive, comparative, and superlative, one or the other of which serve for every unexpected throw of the dice in life” (ASJ 32). The “learned wit” of the curse is not the opposite of earnest sentimentality, nor incompatible with, nor even devoid of it. It is, in fact, vital to Sterne’s sentimentality. Aggression, compassion, and learned wit all coincide in the discourse, and jockey for position in the minds of the interlocutors. Sterne’s famous chattiness here serves an arbitrating function, principally allowing Slop to talk off steam.

The digressive nature of Sternean discussion reconfigures emotional dynamics in groups. Though this reconfiguration is merely incidental to the use of language, it is essential to the management of affect, which must, Sterne believes, proceed by diverting rather than attempting to subdue the passions. Muted curses in maddening situations like this one, Toby suggests in notably political terms, “are like sparrow shot . . . fired against a bastion” (TS 134); they lack the motive force necessary to break in on the fortified, hostile position first taken. Better to acknowledge directly the emotional component of one’s attitudes. “Small curses,” Walter observes, “stir the humours—but carry off none of their acrimony:—for my own part, I seldom
swear or curse at all—I hold it bad—but if I fall into it, by surprize, I generally retain so much presence of mind . . . as to make it answer my purpose—that is, I swear on, till I find myself easy” (Ibid.). Rather than trying to snuff out an antisocial passion altogether, Walter proposes to “carry [it] off,” or dissipate it in long discourse. As such, the ensuing model of social relations is a novel solution to what Albert Hirschman identifies as a much broader project in political and moral philosophy dating back at least to Hobbes: “to utilize one set of comparatively innocuous passions to countervail another more dangerous and destructive set.”

47 The role of conversation in scenarios like this is analogous that of the electron transport chain in molecular biology: having accounted for the conservation of energy, it relieves agitated bodies of that energy in safe, gradual steps.

Ethical levity likewise creeps into the conversation among Walter, Slop, Toby, and Trim about Stevinius’s sailing-chariot.48 Here we see Hobbesian psychology in microcosm, insofar as successions of ideas influence characters’ affective and power relations. Walter is baffled that Slop’s sudden arrival has reminded Toby of this obscure engineer, and hence of military fortifications, so he rebukes his brother for mentioning his hobby at inopportune times: “let the occasion be never so foreign or unfit for the subject,---you are sure to bring it in . . . I declare I would not have my head so full of curtins and horn-works” (TS 89). This, in turn, suggests cuckoldry to Slop, who insinuates as much at Walter’s expense. Walter is now more frustrated with Slop than with Toby, and, through Tristram’s comparison, is brought into sympathy with historical critics of false wit—specifically, John Dennis, but also Locke himself, who like Walter

47 Hirschman, *Passions and the Interests*, 20. Montesquieu’s theory of the separation of powers, for instance, is a means of playing off the ambitions of different government officials against each other, thereby moderating all of them.

48 Stedmond usefully calls this realigning conversation with Slop, Walter, Trim, and Toby “an exercise in cross purposes” (*Comic Art*, 80). Although he documents each character’s purposes individually, he does little to explain how they actually “cross.” That is, how these purposes interact with each other or resolve.
cannot abide the “insinuation of a pun” amidst “serious discourse.” If Toby’s associations are inopportune, Slop’s is more so, striking Walter like “a fillip upon the nose.” Playing peacemaker, Toby interposes himself, explaining to the doctor that “the curtains my brother Shandy mentions here, have nothing to do with bed-steads . . . nor have the horn-works, he speaks of, any thing in the world to do with the horn-works of cuckoldom” (Ibid.). Toby’s diplomacy gradually brings Slop into a less antagonistic position and puts Walter in better humor with him—Walter contributes questions, if unenthusiastically, to Toby’s explanation. The explanation is precise both in its content and its grammar, the parallel “neither”/”nor” structure carefully rebutting both components of Slop’s pun. Toby, no mean Lockean himself, expects to defuse the whole misunderstanding by reasserting the intended meanings of these terms.

In attempting to control the reception of his rhetoric in this one respect, though, Toby loses control of it in others. After multiple paragraphs on curtains and horn-works, Walter loses patience with him: “By the mother who bore us!——brother Toby . . . you would provoke a saint . . . so full is your head of these confounded works, that tho’ my wife is this moment in the pains of labour,—and you hear her cry out,—yet nothing will serve you but to carry off the man-midwife” (TS 90). Walter has by now forgotten Slop’s pun, and his frustration with Toby also heightens his sense of his wife’s urgent need. Furthermore, he jabs at Toby’s casual pursuit of “the science of fortification,” which figuratively vexes him to death but literally “has been the death of thousands” too (Ibid.). Walter’s colloquial word choice acquires an additional sense,

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49 Slop’s is a serious allegation in context: see Hunter, “Clocks, Calendars, and Names,” 193-94.
50 Stedmond, again, observes a similar error in the marriage articles that Walter insists upon and which Toby helps to draw up. The stipulation about birth in London, which Toby likewise inserts into the discourse, “has the exact opposite effect to that intended and leads straight to Tristram’s difficult birth in Shandy Hall.” Both of Toby’s attempts at precision, then, are among Sterne’s “many illustrations of human inability to shape the future by taking thought, by attempting to plan like an omniscient being. . . . The comedy lies . . . in the disparity between the desiccated tone and the human implications. In its striving for objectivity and impartiality, such language denies the very humanity it seeks to treat with impeccable fairness. Whenever he tries to act with complete disinterest (in a godlike way to sit in judgment) man inevitably treats his fellow humans as things—as mechanisms” (Comic Art, 61).
accusing the hapless Toby of relishing deaths in war. But Toby’s mild, visibly pained reaction, which prompts Tristram’s tangential remembrance of the occasion when Toby spared the life of a fly, elicits an equally quick apology from Walter:

Brother Toby, said he,—I beg thy pardon;—forgive, I pray thee, this rash humour which my mother gave me.—My dear, dear brother, answer’d my uncle Toby, . . . say no more about it;—you are heartily welcome, had it been ten times as much, brother. But ’tis ungenerous, replied my father, to hurt any man;—a brother worse . . . ’tis base:—By heaven, ’tis cowardly.—You are heartily welcome, brother, quoth my uncle Toby,—had it been fifty times as much. (TS 92)

This is sociability par excellence, continually and somewhat awkwardly revising the terms of the brothers’ understanding, while demonstrating that no single word matters that much anyway. When Toby finally observes in the chapter’s final paragraph that he takes sincere pleasure in the increase of Walter’s family, Slop bawdily asserts that Walter, too, takes pleasure in it, but Walter is now able to make a sexual joke at his own expense: “Not a jot,” he replies (Ibid.).

In this whole clumsy flurry of tension and solicitude, Walter moves step-by-step towards reconciliation with others. The sheer volatility and volubility of his feelings makes him more receptive. Tristram describes Walter’s as a “quick sensibility of nature, attended with a little soreness of temper . . . in the little rubs and vexations of life, ’twas apt to shew itself in a drollish and witty kind of peevishness:—He was, however, frank and generous in his nature,—at all times open to conviction; and in the little ebullitions of this subacid humour towards others . . . he would feel more pain . . . than what he ever gave” (TS 91-92). His crankiness, by prompting further reactions and hence changing the psychic landscape of the discussion, actually facilitates his compassion and ultimately his improved humor. Negative affect, too, promotes ethical levity insofar as it induces significances to shift. And whereas both Hobbes and Smith propose to

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51 As Briggs explains it, “Walter Shandy and Uncle Toby do not have and can never have a reasonable relationship, but they do possess one that is loving, sympathetic, highly eccentric, but also enduring; they ‘know’ one another on terms which stand outside Lockean understanding” (“Tentativeness,” 508).
control outbursts of anger through the presence of monolithic sovereigns and spectators, Sterne suggests that the uncertain dynamics of conversation can interrupt and eventually dissipate it without the intercession of such an overbearing judge.

Uncertainties of conversation make social agents flexible. The “rubs” of daily intercourse mentioned here anticipate Yorick’s discussion of French manners in *A Sentimental Journey*, wherein he compares the French to the coins in his pocket: “by jingling and rubbing one against another for seventy years together in one body’s pocket or another’s, they are become so much alike, you can scarce distinguish one shilling from another” (ASJ 75). We are a long way from Hobbes’s metaphor that casts individuals as rigid building-stones; instead, the collision and friction involved in “rubbing” leaves colliding bodies more like each other than before. Walter feels pain even while inflicting it: in this, Sterne owes something to Smith’s proposition that sympathy is reciprocal, and that an observer’s feelings moderate the sufferer’s as readily as the reverse:

as nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned, so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators. As they are continually placing themselves in his situation, and thence conceiving emotions similar to what he feels; so he is as constantly placing himself in theirs, and thence conceiving some degree of that coolness about his own fortune, with which he is sensible that they will view it . . . and as the reflected passion, which he thus conceives, is much weaker than the original one, it necessarily abates the violence of what he felt before he came into their presence, before he began to recollect in what manner they would be affected by it, and to view his situation in this candid and impartial light. . . . Society and conversation, therefore, are the most powerful remedies for restoring the mind to its tranquillity, if, at any time, it has unfortunately lost it; as well as the best preservatives of that equal and happy temper, which is so necessary to self-satisfaction and enjoyment. (TMS 22-23)

Sterne would dispute that the “light” imparted by observers is “impartial,” but his own understanding of sociability as an intersubjective process does not require it to be. Furthermore, he explores the role played by language and its uncertainty in a way Smith and Hume, who focus
above all on imagination, do not. Anger and irritation, in Sterne’s telling, are especially suited for triggering sympathy on account of how vocal they are about their own terms and causes. Anger’s very involvement in harangues means that its assumptions remain encoded in a medium that others can gloss however they wish.

Walter’s marriage is similarly arbitrated. After his wife leads them to London under a mistaken apprehension of pregnancy, his quickness of mind does not allow him to stay in any one attitude very long. After “pettish[ly]” lamenting the trip’s “cursed expence,” Walter gravely considers the “loss of a son, whom it seems he had fully reckon’d upon,” imagining the “condolences of his friends” and the couple’s “foolish figure” in public, which by “satirical vehemence” he then renders in “humorous and provoking descriptions;” “tormenting lights and attitudes . . . so truly trag[ically] comical, that [Mrs. Shandy] did nothing but laugh and cry in a breath” (TS 36-37). He next turns his frustration directly upon his wife, insisting that her false claim of pregnancy is due either to “imposition” or “weakness.” The latter word triggers Walter’s analytical faculties, and gets him “running divisions upon how many kinds of weaknesses there were.” He looks so eagerly for categories that he subsumes himself as an example of several: his “syllogism” makes him consider “[h]ow far the cause of all these vexations might, or might not, have arisen out of himself.” His state of newfound self-loathing in turn suggests to him “many little subjects of disquietude,” to which he gives vent until Mrs. Shandy complains that “he would have tired out the patience of any flesh alive” (Ibid.). By journey’s end, she is the one censuring him for his odd humors, although he began the trip in a contractual position of power to do it to her. This is an instance of levity and sociability not because either Shandy is laughing—neither is anymore—but because even Walter, for all his legal preparation and rhetorical mastery, still has moments and angles from which he looks silly.
VI. Consolation

If conversation involves relinquishing self-assertiveness, consolation involves finding it. Whereas anger invites its own disruption by disrupting others, distress, shame, and other feelings associated with injury and loss are comparatively introverted. The Smithian mechanism of reciprocal sympathy, which moderates anger after its expression, stifles grief’s expression preemptively. When the master of Yorick’s Paris hotel reminds him that he could be sent to the Bastille for having forgotten his passport, Yorick is distressed, but doesn’t want to impart distress to his servant: “I COULD not find in my heart to torture La Fleur’s with a serious look upon the subject of my embarrassment, which was the reason I had treated it so cavalierly” (ASJ 58). And even when whispered of in his own parish, Tristram tells us, Yorick “would never . . . take pains to set a story right with the world, however in his power” (TS 259). Instead of multiple “distributions of the sensible” contesting each other through expressions of feeling, Yorick avoids addressing his difficulties, thus leaving them unavailable for address. Down to the small details of body posture, Sterne evinces a prescient understanding of how sadness and shame can uniquely stifle sociability. Walter, laid low with the news of Tristram’s crushed nose, is unaware even that his limbs are touching each other: “He felt it not. A fix’d, inflexible sorrow took possession of every line of his face.—He sighed once,—heaved his breast often,—but utter’d not a word” (TS 171). Most of Sterne’s major characters endure bouts of similar

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52 It is instructive to compare Sterne’s physical descriptions of humiliated characters with Tomkins’s account of the physiological consequences of shame. Tomkins writes: “The shame response is an act which reduces facial communication. It stands in the same relation to looking and smiling as silence stands to speech and as disgust, nausea, and vomiting stand to hunger and eating. By dropping his eyes, his eyelids, his head, and sometimes the whole upper part of his body, the individual calls a halt to looking at another person, particularly the other person’s face, and to the other person’s looking at him, particularly at his face. . . . We are inclined to favor the theory that shame is an innate auxiliary affect and a specific inhibitor of continuing interest and enjoyment” (Affect Imagery Consciousness, 2:352-53). These physical attitudes, importantly, are both signs and components of an analogous social attitude; namely, the avoidance of “communication;” the “inhibit[ion]” of both “interest and enjoyment.”
introversion. These are monomanias in their own right, in which the meaning and valence of an idea are never in question.

Consolation requires shifting the subject’s attention and energy back onto conversation, to allow fresh trains of ideas to do their work. Toby recovers from his war wounds, Tristram starts to tell us, because “[t]he history of a soldier’s wound beguiles the pain of it,” but finally it is the diversions and interruptions in that history that cure him of his melancholy: vain attempts to describe the circumstances of his injury leave Toby “sadly bewilder’d . . . he could get neither backwards or forwards to save his life; and was oft times obliged to give up the attack upon that very account only” (TS 63, 68). Sterne shifts the ground upon which Toby’s recovery takes place. It is not finally a matter of “beguil[ing]” his original trauma through sleight-of-hand, akin to reason’s pretensions to calm the passions, but through tying up his feelings in discursive “bewilder[ment].” He cannot explain himself, we are told, “to save his life:” while this speech formula takes on the literal significance of life and death, the notion of “life” at the same time takes on the figurative function of rhetorical flourish. This shift between grave and frivolous registers is a kind of levity: it raises the stakes of recovery to say this, and it lowers them too.

Similarly, when Tristram sails to France to escape death and illness, his frantic staccato outbursts at sea are likened—by their content, grammar, and rhythm—to the storms and rough waters that elicit them. This is a kind of self-conscious pathetic fallacy on Tristram’s part that, from the distance of narration, reduces the perilous tumult of the waters to a mere tantrum. When one of his interlocutors begs the captain, “for heaven’s sake, let us get ashore,” she is evidently keener to escape the blustering noise of a harangue than that of a gale (TS 387). Her plea contests the very severity of Tristram’s perceived plight, and as such is welcome: his hardships
are a matter of discussion, but not of resigned or settled condolence. If only temporarily, the dynamics of conversation are more absorbing than the events that produced it.

The succession of ideas transfers onto rhetoric an intensity otherwise reserved for inert trauma. Walter, inexhaustibly verbose, benefits most notably and infamously from it, as Tristram explains: “where the pleasure of the harangue was as ten, and the pain of the misfortune but as five—my father gained half in half, and consequently was as well again off, as it never had befallen him” (TS 282). When he receives news of his older son Bobby’s death, Walter is clearly moved, but his associated ideas crowd so closely upon him that “the misery was, . . . ’twas difficult to string them all together, so as to make any thing of a consistent show out of them” (TS 283). Like Dr. Slop cursing Obadiah, Walter finds his energies drawn away from the initial complaint:

> “Kingdoms and provinces, and towns and cities, have they not their periods? and when those principles and powers, which at first cemented and put them together, have performed their several evolutions, they fall back.”—Brother Shandy, said my uncle Toby, laying down his pipe at the word evolutions—Revolutions, I meant, quoth my father,—by heaven! I meant revolutions, brother Toby—evolutions is nonsense.—’Tis not nonsense—said my uncle Toby.—But is it not nonsense to break the thread of such a discourse, upon such an occasion? cried my father—do not—dear Toby, continued he, taking him by the hand, do not—do not, I beseech thee, interrupt me at this crisis.—My uncle Toby put his pipe into his mouth. (TS 283-84)

Walter’s heavily punctuated, anaphoric Consolatio is almost a surrogate for his son’s body or his bloodline: he would gladly have preserved it intact, but it is precisely the sites at which it’s pierced and rent—much like a wounded groin or an empty place at the table—that elicit feeling.

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53 By the end of volume 7, Tristram professes to have “left Death, the lord knows——and he only—how far behind” and to have “fled him cheerfully,” imagines Death complaining about his quarry’s “mettlesome rate,” and speaks of death as though it were a remote and inconsequential person rather than a biological horizon: “as he lag’d, every step he lost, softened his looks——why should I fly him at this rate?” (TS 428) Sterne does not propose that such a change of mental scenery can defer literal death: Tristram’s life-thread remains measured as before, its length known only to deities. France is not a place to convalesce or obtain conventional medicine, but to travel at breakneck speed for diversion and consolation. Though death’s biological certainty isn’t negotiable, Sterne argues that its discursive certainty is. By making it figurative, rendering it a winded, cranky traveler, Tristram dulls its anticipated sting, and diminishes its looming, all-consuming specter. The way death must needs be received is anything but certain.
The excitement of tracing his ideas allows Walter to “absolutely forg[e]t” his dead son by the end of the chapter. Yet this is another moment of emotive exaggeration: Walter clearly shows subsequent signs of grief. One can surmise that his experiences after this oration parallel his experiences following the temporary diversion of the meeting of clerics: “The moment he got home, the weight of his afflictions returned upon him but so much the heavier, as is ever the case when the staff we lean on slips from under us . . . he had certainly fallen ill with the extinction of them, had not his thoughts been critically drawn off, and his health rescued by a fresh train of disquietudes left” (TS 265). The pain of Tristram’s disfigurement and misnaming recur, alleviated a second time only by the “fresh train of disquietudes” culminating in Bobby’s death. Consolation is always unfinished. As luck would have it, it is also an ongoing process endemic to language and consciousness.55

Although Walter and Tristram draw on their extensive reading and grasp of rhetoric as formulaic means of allaying pain, consolation depends on the uncertain elements of language, elements often contributed by others. It is not a ritual that can be performed and forgotten. Tristram treats his reiterated pledge in Volumes I and VII—that his book “shall be kept a-going these forty years, if it pleases the fountain of health to bless me so long with life and good spirits” (TS 59)—like a contract, desperately offered up to rein in that which cannot be reined. Yet he passes over Eugenius’s remark that death entered the world “by sin” (Ibid.), and at no

54 Bloom and Bloom seem to read Walter’s oration less charitably, arguing that he “enjoys misfortunes as counters in a game” and demonstrates an “inability to separate materialistic trivia from tragic deprivation,” the latter being “without social substance” (“Hostage to Fortune,” 504). They subsequently acknowledge, however, that the past for Walter, though “flimsily constructed,” “also permits him a certain thematic energy” and “is no less real in his mind than the present is for, say, Dr. Slop or Obadiah” (Ibid., 507). Ultimately, they seem undecided on the value of Walter’s consolatory rhetoric.

55 When my father’s brother, also Bobby, died in 2010, it fell to me to sit with my grandmother during the calling hours. I was, in our conversations, awed at the vivid clarity of memories that reached, in many cases, back to the middle of the 1930s. But more than this I was astonished at the range of emotions the retellings evoked in her: mirth, admiration, regret, gratitude, annoyance, and others that I cannot recall after even five years. My mind drifting to Walter’s Consolatio, I realized that these were as involving and involved as any emotions I had ever witnessed. But at every interruption of our diversion, before the next renewed rhapsody, her grief welled up again. I note this as remembrance, not as evidence.
point does he seriously propose the evasion of death through prayer, faith, or God’s mercy. Those in need of consolation cannot hope to rely upon fixed formulae or covenants. If writing consoles Tristram, it is not because it mitigates death, but because it interposes new ideas about death and its nature. His comfort relies upon the instability of signifiers; uncertain meanings are vehicles for flexible, resilient emotions. Walter, trying to counter Slop’s botched delivery of Tristram with the grandest of names, touts with some dramatic irony the efficacy of this mental resource: “though it can’t prevent the shock—at least it imposes upon our sense of it” (TS 223).

VII. Accident and Purpose

Sterne’s ethical levity is bound up as well in chance events, or accidents, of the physical world. The word “accident” occurs nearly two dozen times in *Tristram Shandy*, and often coincides with random events wherein objects behave unexpectedly, as when a raised windowsash falls upon Tristram’s foreskin or a hot chestnut rolls off a table and burns Phutatorius (TS 301, 256). Both objects fail to stay in their assigned positions. Accident, then, is an almost aleatoric component to physical objects: a kind of inert uncertainty that keeps them from being committed with finality to any single purpose. It facilitates something like a material pun. In medieval and Renaissance philosophy, traditions which Locke and Sterne inherited, accident refers to those properties of a thing which are non-essential, as opposed to the necessary and functional properties that make it what it is. Accidents are the chance, material quirks found in any given specimen of a general type. For Sterne, however, accident determines much of an object’s significance, in much the way wit and levity operate on words. When Toby rebuts

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56 See Bloom and Bloom, “Hostage to Fortune,” 512: “as long as he laughs at himself and others, he can at least distance the recollection of his body’s transience. On presumptive evidence alone death becomes the irreversible reality; for although it marks the end of one journey, even that semblance of finality is inconclusive. And death as a condition of being cannot be comprehended.”

57 Locke, notably, rejects the classical distinction of accident and substance, arguing that it is based on an abuse of words and that no clear idea of substance does or can exist (*Essay*, 174-76). His accounts of substances, however, still rely on the notion of essences and, as such, of essential purposes: see ibid., book 2, chap. 22, and book 3, chap. 6.
Walter’s pedantic remarks on classical sieges by “redoubling the vehemence of smoaking his pipe,” he creates “so dense a vapour” that Walter—a mild consumptive, we are told—gets “a suffocating fit of violent coughing,” which pains Toby to see and prompts his tearful assistance, which in turn makes Walter vehemently regret the vehemence of his original argument: “May my brains be knock’d out with a battering ram or a catapulta . . . if ever I insult this worthy soul more” (TS 167-68)

Sterne’s depiction of objects, like his treatment of words, puts us in mind of the interests that lay behind their assembly and use. In this instance, the pipe and its smoke have competing significances for each brother—a refuge from pedantry, then a lung irritant—the very unfolding of which reconfigures the momentary balance of power between brothers in correspondingly new ways. What is merely accident to Toby is of the utmost consequence to Walter. In a similar development, when Dr. Slop enlists Susanna, Walter’s maid, to hold a candle for him despite her discomfort doing so, it sets his “bushy and unctuous” wig aflame, thus turning his prior play for occupational and sexual domination of her against him. Enraged, Slop continues demeaning Susannah, calling her an “impudent whore,” but she retorts that she “never was the destruction of any body’s nose,” both parrying the venereal-disease implications of Slop’s epithet and reminding him of his hand in Tristram’s disfigurement (TS 332). She fairly accuses him, to paraphrase Blake, of blasting the newborn infant’s tear, reconfiguring sexual and genital stigma instead as a stigma on Slop’s intrepid obstetrical methods. Tristram describes Susannah and Slop’s rapport as one of “spleenetic cordiality.” when they tenuously reconcile enough to

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58 This passage is an important counterexample to Kay’s allegations of misogyny in *Tristram Shandy*: she attributes to the novel an effort at “remasculinization,” whereby “modern, ‘refined’ men yearn for the vigorous militarism of a more sexually segregated society, while also competing with women for the prestige of civilized sensitivity” (*Political Constructions*, 17). In particular, Kay argues that the novel marginalizes women by keeping them out of sight in decidedly private spaces, and depicting them as crudely libidinous. Although the first charge has merit, Susannah’s example here ought to be enough seriously to undermine the second, as Kay presents only two examples herself.
cooperate again, it is thanks to the shared, peripheral, chastening realization that “the cataplasm had failed,” and that their acrimony led them to neglect the child’s more significant injury (TS 331-32).

The volatility of burning objects like a pipe or candle is only one of the more overt ways in which material things stubbornly fail to conform perfectly to anybody’s purposes. Few objects in Sterne’s novels have fixed or uncontested functions. More often, express or implied debates ensue about what the significance of a given object is, or, more to the point, what—and whom—it is for. To a degree, these are proprietary debates: no matter whether miserable Susannah, misogynistic Slop, or the anxious household first procured the candle, all three parties have distinct vested interests in how it is used, and the question in the conflict is to whose purposes it will be bent. The disposition of property here is no arcane matter. Locke’s labor theory of property informs both of Sterne’s novels, most explicitly in Walter’s argument for the ownership of his ideas: “he had spared no pains in picking them up, and the more they lay out of the common way, the better still was his title” (TS 177). This humorous expansion of labor to include idiosyncratic mental process suggests that all ethical levity entails a scuffle over ownership; over the grounds whereupon different parties have invested themselves in a word or object, and over what may be dismissed as accident or peripheral. Objects, then, are surely no exception.

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59 Such a notable understatement—that “the cataplasm had failed”—combined with the chapter break and shift of setting, marks a tonal distinction between chapters: in other words, a realignment. The non-closure of chapter 3 is fitting, because the scuffle isn’t resolved through express remorse on Slop’s part. Instead, it terminates when Susannah throws “what was left in the pan” (TS 332), immediately giving way to the relatively sober, even abashed tone of the next chapter, which sees both of them trying to atone for the bit of inattention paid to Tristram. The flinging of moist remedies thus quenches not only the literal heat from Slop’s burned wig, but also both parties’ hot tempers: it is, in multiple senses, a “cordial” missile.

60 As Lamb usefully observes, Yorick more than once “admits that he has no rights to the words he has used, that he has no right to rights—either the word or the linguistic privilege it names—because the word is the unsociable and univocal name for unambiguous ideas and has just proved itself to be so by attracting neither people nor ideas to its meaning” (“Language and Hartleian Associationism,” 294).
Even in deliberate acts, objects acquire much of their significance from seeming accidents. In *A Sentimental Journey*, Yorick finds an absorbing Rabelaisian fragment scrawled on “waste paper” that he’d been about to discard: “but stopping to read a line first, and then drawing me on to a second and third—I thought it better worth” (ASJ 85). Value, literally “worth,” is a function of reading, and reading is a product of the largely random collisions of objects and ideas. Yorick does not exactly labor. The paper is already “waste,” incidental to larger economies of distribution and exchange, when La Fleur “beg[s]” it in order to keep his hand clean while bringing Yorick a quantity of butter—a mundane detail of a servant’s life that Yorick nonetheless finds something in to interest himself (Ibid.). Eager to read and translate the subsequent sheets, he learns that La Fleur has used them (the leftovers from his initial task) to wrap up a bouquet for a young woman, which she subsequently regifts “to one of the Count’s footmen—the footman to a young sempstress—and the sempstress to a fiddler, with [the] fragment at the end of it” (ASJ 89). His servant’s disappointment does not altogether displace Yorick’s wish to read the remaining sheets, but it adds a new dimension to their import. “Our fortunes were involved together,” he observes (ASJ 89), suggesting that their mutual wellbeing is pending the issue of their mutual luck. Though each has a distinct stake in the lost sheets, each also apprehends the needs and desires expressed in the other’s stake, and even as the rest of the fragment continues to be passed among new people with new significances, and the final arrangement of both relationships and value remains undecided, Yorick and La Fleur’s mutual well-wishing gives them a common, if momentary, priority.

— Locke himself suggests numerous proprietary analogies between word and object in his *Essay*, though in all cases these argue for the stable, certain use of words. It is as difficult, he writes, “to draw those Men out of their Mistakes, who have no settled Notions, as to dispossess a Vagrant of his Habitation, who has no settled abode,” and the verbal obscurities that define their positions “make these Retreats, more like the Dens of Robbers, or Holes of Foxes, than the Fortresses of fair Warriors” (*Essay* 492, 495). He who “uses the same Words sometimes in one, and sometimes in another Signification,” Locke believes, “ought to pass in the Schools and Conversation, for as fair a Man, as he does in the Market and Exchange, who sells several Things under the same Name” (Ibid., 506).
Material accident thus has the potential to cut across the day-to-day exchanges that encompass different classes and class interests. When Yorick encounters a young woman in Paris who turns out to be a chambermaid to a gentlewoman with whom he has previously corresponded, he first merely “desire[s] the girl to present [his] compliments to Madame R****,” and when she comes calling at his hotel, it is to seek his correspondence with her mistress. Circumstances, however, get Yorick equally interested in the emissary: apart from these details of protocol, she is described as anything but subordinate. Yorick’s “conviction of consanguinity,” evidently due to their “affections” being sympathetically “drawn together,” leads him to trying to “trace out” a “family likeness” between the chambermaid and himself (ASJ 56). Declined differently when they meet again, she is described as amorously as any other romantic interest in the narrative: “the sun . . . reflected . . . so warm a tint into the fair fille de chambre’s face—I thought she blush’d—the idea of it made me blush myself—we were quite alone; and that super-induced a second blush the before the first could get off” (ASJ 76-7). In a sense, all encounters guided by the succession of ideas are chance encounters, because they progress so much by contingency. Here, the ruddy “tint” of sunlight is enough to recall the flush of sexual desire in an instant, and prepare the phallic and vaginal imagery that follows: “[she] took up first the pen I cast down, then offered to hold me the ink: she offer’d it so sweetly, I was going to accept it—but I durst not.” This, coupled with Yorick’s close examination of the purse she has knit and her implied loss of balance and fall onto his bed, lead him insensibly and gradually to transgress decorums that he is more nervous about than any character in Tristram Shandy: “the devil was in me,” he frets, and his almost adolescent anxieties about having her on the bed or even in the room with him calls to mind his innkeeper’s earlier warning against having strange women in the house (ASJ 77).
Whether or not they ought, Sterne argues, systematic considerations of prudence and decorum can’t reliably navigate world and society—the accidents and unpredictability of mind and matter impinge too much upon them, unleashing the uncertainty inherent in arbitrary signifiers. The imperative of restraint is itself permeable, and hence insufficient to govern Yorick’s conduct: reflecting on the “devil,” he continues, “I seldom resist him at all; from a terror, that though I may conquer, I may still get a hurt in the combat—so I give up the triumph, for security; and instead of thinking to make him fly, I generally fly myself” (Ibid.). Yorick’s “fl[ight]” can be convincingly read as both intransitive and transitive. One the one hand, he diverts his passions rather than attempt to snuff them out: flight aptly describes the kind of resourceful and dynamic attachments we have seen his repeatedly form. On the other hand, taken transitively, Yorick also flees himself, or his self. The contingent workings of levity and accident are precisely what allow him to apprehend a set of experiences and claims beyond those he identifies as his own, and see the situation as more than an instance of objectionable conduct: in other words, to begin to see the chambermaid as an ethical subject.

VIII. Bold Appropriations and Faint Agencies

Let us return to the assertion above that ethical levity entails a struggle over ownership. If this is so, Sterne’s novels depart sharply from both Locke’s labor theory of property and his theory of language, which make similar assumptions about nature and agency. Material objects, Locke writes in the Second Treatise of Government, are readily convertible into individual property, insofar as labor takes objects “out of the state that nature hath provided,” thereby “put[ting] a distinction between them and common . . . add[ing] something to them more than nature, the common mother of all, had done.”61 Sterne knew this bit well, even parodically

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61 Locke, Second Treatise, 19.
adapting it to explain the origin of Walter’s discursive idiosyncrasies and his claims upon them. But Locke insists in the *Essay* that words ought not be unilaterally appropriated for new purposes, as objects are: “For Words, especially of Languages already framed, being no Man's private possession, but the common measure of Commerce and Communication, 'tis not for any one, at pleasure, to change the Stamp they are current in; nor alter the ideas they are affixed to.”

Sterne clearly diverges from Locke on this issue, insofar as he discusses Walter’s proprietary use of words in the same terms as that of natural objects. To be sure, he resists the idea that words actually are or can be property, both implicitly—through a narrative composed largely of eclectic borrowings—and expressly, as after Slop’s use of a borrowed curse to damn Obadiah. Tristram writes: “Now don’t let us give ourselves a parcel of airs, and pretend that the oaths we make free with in this land of liberty of ours are our own; and because we have the spirit to swear them,—imagine that we have had the wit to invent them too” (TS 143). But if he is in doubt about who owns a particular “oath,” his uncertainty seems to arise from a glut of positive claims, rather than from a language’s negative status as “common:” he insists that “there is not an oath, or at least a curse amongst [all oaths], which has not been copied over and over again out of Ernulphus, a thousand times,” vainly traces the possible origins of a single proverb or “sentiment,” uttered by Walter, through its many ancient iterations, and professes to “intercept

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62 In accounting for Walter’s ‘ownership’ of his ideas, Sterne lampoons the very selection of criteria for ownership. Tristram imagines his interlocutor demanding a basis for the ownership of an apple, and answers in nearly the identical terms as Locke: “how did it begin to be his? Was it, when he set his heart upon it? or when he gather’d it? or when he chew’d it? or when he roasted it? or when he peel’d? or when he brought it home? Or when he digested?—or when he——?” (TS 177). Tristram’s own reasons for preferring the labor theory are scarcely less parodic: “the sweat of a man’s brows, and the exsudations of a man’s brains, are as much a man’s own property, as the breeches upon his backside,” and their being “dropp’d upon” the article in question “mix[es] up something which was his own, with the apple which was not his own” (Ibid.). Revealingly, Sterne’s *literal* identification of this “something” as sweat trivializes the products of one’s body as the basis of the proprietary claim. Locke actually requires a more capacious and figurative understanding of this “something” than Sterne does—one that includes labor as a part of the body—to legitimate ownership.

many a thought which heaven intended for another man” (TS 145, 295-96, 436). Authorship is either elusive or overlapping. On such grounds, Sterne might grant that language is “common” insofar as it is intersubjective and somewhat mutually intelligible, but seems to reject Locke’s ironically novel use of “common” to mean neutral, unwrought, or absent of prior labor, like the putative state of “nature.” Language to Sterne, far from being devoid of proprietary claims, is saturated with them: words, as any author so committed to patchwork intertextuality must realize, brim with the past, only partially intelligible agendas of those who have spoken before and, in many cases, are still speaking. Sterne posits not a property, but a proprietary flux in language.

Sterne’s insights into the neutral “common” medium of language also have implications for Locke’s theory of property in general. Whereas Locke presents ownership as an unambiguous result of individual labor, Sterne’s very treatment of objects points to more. Sterne is not alone among eighteenth-century novelists in describing the complex circulation of objects, but in Tom Jones, for instance, though Sophy Western’s muff disappears, reappears, and travels, it is always Sophy’s, and always categorically and functionally a muff. By contrast, in Tristram Shandy Trim refashions Walter’s unused, heirloom jackboots into miniature mortars for a siege reenactment, thereby “cut[ting] off the entail” as well as the boot tops: in other words, altering both the proprietary claim on and the function of the object in question (TS 162-63). Trim, indeed, cannot distinguish. In A Sentimental Journey, the sheets containing the fragment and bouquet, which pass through both Yorick and La Fleur’s hands, derive their value and purpose from the actions of, at the fewest, four people, despite being “waste” and thus outside the formal economy of remuneration. The total value, function, or ownership of any given object, Sterne’s examples demonstrate, is uncertain.
In making this case, like his case about the ownership of language, Sterne does not so much entirely diverge from Locke as underscore some of the untidy details of Lockean theory. For all his attempts in the Second Treatise to shore up property rights, Locke cannot escape some inkling of the immensely complex web of work needed to produce a single loaf of bread, including “iron, wood, leather, bark, timber, stone, bricks, coals, lime, cloth, dying drugs, pitch, tar, masts, ropes, and all the materials made use of in the ship, that brought any of the commodities made use of by any of the workmen, to any part of the work.”\textsuperscript{64} This “strange catalogue” quickly becomes unwieldy for him, spiraling outward and involving itself in ever more work—even, we sense, the work done by “nature” in “furnish[ing] the almost worthless materials,” which Locke nonetheless cannot neglect to mention.\textsuperscript{65} It is as though in 1690 he were already cracking his head upon network theory and the dizzying, exponential increase of nodes at each degree of remove. The same tracing of a sentiment or object’s development that makes Sterne almost giddy seems merely to tire Locke. He admits “it would be almost impossible, at least too long, to reckon up” an exhaustive list of contributors to even the loaf.\textsuperscript{66}

The Lockean state of nature, then—from which every new property is supposedly drawn by an original act of labor—is laden with what economists would term externalities, both prior and current. Walter, we are told, “would weigh nothing in common scales,” but in this respect he is hardly unique (TS 116). Every new verbal or material appropriation, in order to function, must pass off as “common,” as a baseline of mere entropy, that which is in fact the material residue of others’ work and purposes, and the language that is, in Roland Barthes’s phrase, “a tissue of

\textsuperscript{64} Locke, Second Treatise, 27.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid. Though not used as a mechanics term until the nineteenth century, work—which encompasses physics as well as economics—might be more suggestive than labor of the overlapping and often accidental or unconscious processes whereby objects are altered. Geologic forces do not labor to produce fossil fuels, but they do work.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.” Sterne the eclectic neo-Augustan might himself be less aptly described as an “author” than as a Barthesian “scriptor.” He flouts Locke’s description of any item, once “mixed” with labor, as thereby “remove[d] out of the state that nature hath provided,” instead insisting that “there is nothing unmixt in this world” (ASJ 74, emphasis added). Yorick, in this instance, obtains a passport identifying him as “Mr. Yorick, the king’s jester,” owing to the stubborn, bardolatrous misunderstanding of the count who interceded on his behalf (Ibid.). Tristram could surely relate to this predicament, having been eagerly, mistakenly named after Yorick’s curate by Yorick’s curate (TS 230). Even identities come inscribed, however unwittingly, with the claims of others. There is nothing simply “common” about “scales,” names, or other standards of measure in the first place. “Property is theft; [p]roperty is freedom:” for Sterne, as for Proudhon, this is not paradox but corollary. Each new claim willfully overlooks—and, as Melvyn New argues, must overlook—the tangle of previous and simultaneous claims made upon the same material. What New himself overlooks in his cynical analysis is that Sterne’s language is a less stable medium, and more susceptible to

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67 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in Image Music Text, 146.
68 In Marx’s terms, every item in Sterne’s novels comes to its users as an already-alienated product of work: cf. Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, trans. Milligan, 69-84. (Milligan translates Entfremdung as “estrangement,” which likewise preserves the social shades of the original.) But even Marx, to the extent that he sees labor as the origin of value, fails to see the full range of claims, or work, embedded in the environments he describes. Socialists and environmentalists might find something useful in Sterne.
70 As New rightly argues, “the idea of an indeterminate text is so often confused with a meaningless one. One of Sterne’s shrewdest insights about language, however, is to recognize the vast difference between the two, despite what may be their shared basis in human weakness: as interpretative beings we are unable to establish certainty, but equally unable to rest without assigning meaning. . . . Sterne’s text . . . is richly determined, although often under the banner of differing camps—and this, I suggest, is much closer to the experience of language and ideas in the marketplace than more theoretical notions suggesting the infinite play of language” (Book for Free Spirits, 122). Sterne’s novels are indeterminate; but this, I would add, because they are overdetermined and overmeaningful.

New’s basic claims about the necessity of interpretation are unobjectionable, but at times he pushes his reasoning too far: “every individual reading is also an exercise of censorship . . . we can make even a blank page speak our own favorite prejudice!” (Ibid., 126, 128). This, though, omits that there are thousands of these pages, and that the very circulation of Sterne’s text makes possible thousands of results. New persistently calls Sterne an absolutist, and in a trivial sense (i.e., that Sterne, like anyone else, finds a particular set of things to be inherently or absolutely good) this is correct. But absolutism is nowise incompatible with the pluralistic vision Sterne offers in his fiction, for he never portrays a relativistic milieu devoid of absolutes. To the contrary, he insists that it is saturated with personal absolutes, all of which vie for hearing in a social medium that renders their status uncertain.
transformation, than unyielding or dogmatic claims would require for support. It is indeed the back-and-forth of deeply personal, strongly voiced assertions that brings new ethical awareness into focus. Sternean sociability thus disavows, along with Locke’s theory of language, his classical-liberal theory of property too, for Sterne’s central premise is the continuous recognition of another’s use of symbols and objects.

Proprietary flux, the possibility that one’s ideas might operate totally differently in the mouth of another, means that chance largely governs how individual ethical commitments work out in practice, and that individuals lose a good deal of control. Walter, seconded by Tristram, deprecates any “shuttlecock of a fellow” who would “read such books, and observe such facts, and think such thoughts, as would eternally be making him change sides,” yet despite their misgivings they are both prone to changing allegiances mid-conversation (TS 176). Yorick, upon arriving at his Paris hotel, is equally ambivalent: “my first sensations . . . were far from being so flattering as I had prefigured them. I . . . saw all the world in yellow, blue, and green, running at the ring of pleasure. . . . Alas, poor Yorick! cried I, what art thou doing here? On the very first onset of all this glittering clatter, thou art reduced to an atom” (ASJ 69-70). Again, Yorick’s almost erotic discomfort—in this case, at the thought of the “ring of pleasure”—coincides with an enlargement of social awareness. If Sterne sees something positive in uncertainty, it is that the ensuing sociability exceeds the moral agenda of any particular person. Losing a sense of his own “prefigured” purposes and goals in Paris, Yorick takes sudden interest in things and people as he encounters them, moving from place to place almost unwittingly; an “atom” whose reactions depend chiefly on which bodies he happens to collide with, rather than strictly on his individual will. If this, as Yorick suspects, leaves his “virtues the sport of contingencies” (ASJ 4), it is because the total range of possible virtuous deeds in a particular situation cannot be anticipated
by a finite set of normative certainties.\footnote{In the same passage, Yorick reveals himself, for a parson, to be unusually open to the possibility of virtue being situational: “‘twould oft be no discredit to us, to suppose it was so: I’m sure at least for myself, that in many a case I should be more highly satisfied, to have it said by the world, ‘I had had an affair with the moon, in which there was neither sin nor shame,’ than have it pass altogether as my own act and deed, wherein there was so much of both” (ASJ 4-5). It’s worth pointing out this reverie, shortly after Yorick’s arrival in Calais, is immediately preceded by a chapter-end wherein he rhapsodizes about his own benevolence, and immediately followed by his resolution to refuse charity to the Franciscan monk he meets. As such, these musings mark the very moment, and the most pronounced in the entire novel, at which his virtuous intentions fail to produce a morally favorable outcome.} Contingency in this sense therefore need not mean that Yorick has no control of his actions, but that virtue—if understood in Shaftesbury’s sense as the admiration of the good—has proved itself time and again in Sterne’s novels to be situational. Yorick requires a degree of uncertainty to become aware of the good in the first place. Contingency, in expanding the verbal claims and emotional objects of which he is aware, confers him—and those around him—with a kind of agency.\footnote{Tomkins argues a similar utility for the objects of distress specifically, in terms pertinent to sentimental literature and its political engagement: “The presence of distress indicates a potential for remedial action either by the individual, or with his support. Therefore one might assess the level of normal development by the width of the distress spectrum . . . [education] requires exposure to more and more sources of distress” (Affect Imagery Consciousness 2:317).}

Sterne, however, is no materialist, and he stops well short of suggesting that blind chance is ultimately responsible for social accord. Yorick opines more than once that his own ductility is somehow preordained. When seeking his new passport he quips, “I think there is a fatality in it—I seldom go to the place I set out for” (ASJ 65), and during his quasi-romantic encounter with the chambermaid, he freely enjoys the excitations produced by sexually suggestive events, believing them to be providential:

> If nature has so wove her web of kindness that some threads of love and desire are entangled with the piece—must the whole web be rent in drawing them out?—Whip me such stoics, great governor of nature! said I to myself—Wherever thy providence shall place me for the trials of my virtue—whatever is my danger—whatever is my situation—let me feel the movements which rise out of it, and which belong to me as a man—and if I govern them as a good one—I will trust the issues to thy justice: for thou hast made us—and not we ourselves. (ASJ 78)

Yorick may be mired in indeterminacies of “[w]herever” and “whatever,” and uncertain of what particular “issues” will come of his “movements,” or even what those movements are, but
nonetheless believes God is in ultimate control. Providence can have no determinate content from Yorick’s perspective; it works without him knowing how or whither, and his unknowingness is in fact crucial to its efficacy. In a similar vein, when Walter speaks of “that great and elastic power within us of counterbalancing evil . . . like a secret spring in a well-ordered machine,” Toby understands that spring to consist in “Religion” and “the grace and assistance of the best of Beings” (TS 222-23), suggesting that his providentialism is fully compatible, if not coterminous, with the “secret” and uncertain workings of the Shandean mind. And Sterne himself, in his sermon “Time and Chance,” puts forth a similar conception of providence, wherein “sundry events fall out,—which we who look no further than the events themselves, call chance, because they fall out quite contrary both to our intentions and our hopes.” It is central to Sterne’s ethics, no less than his theology, that “chance” events are so named only because they frustrate narrow “intentions.” The whole tendency of his fiction is to reveal chances, accidents, uncertainties as meaningful; as the traces of other and ineffable agencies.

Sterne’s theology then, is negative, like that of Hobbes: God’s will is manifest in human affairs as uncertainty, and we should not presume his sanction in any of our planned courses of action. But unlike both Hobbes and Locke, Sterne relishes pluralism and the mundane competition for authority to which it leads. He does not expect God to govern human affairs by miraculous intercession, or through commanding humankind to cleave to a transcendental order as iron filings to magnets, but through the contested currency of everyday human reality, objects and words. Although Sterne understands the resulting process as teleological, the social telos in

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73 Stedmond, Comic Art, 105-6.
74 Sterne, Sermons, 77. Qualifying the term chance, Sterne further argues: “in respect of God’s providence over-ruling in these events; it were profane to call them chance, for they are pure designation . . . [and] without invading the liberty and free will of his creatures, can turn the passions and desires of their hearts to fulfil his own righteousness, and work such effects in human affairs, which to us seem merely casual” (Ibid.).
question is out of any particular human hands. It is intersubjective, continually being adjusted, and always outpacing and troubling every individual construction of "public good." Sterne’s characters might be said to speak altogether in what Hobbes calls "saying[s] much usurped of late" (L 82), or what Locke deems abuses of language. But it is exactly owing to his own verbal idiosyncrasies that Sterne discerns a subtle and salutary form of conflict in which all human pretensions to authority are exposed as pretensions first and foremost, and wherein power’s justification is as ephemeral as any passing word.
Chapter 3
“The Weakness of a Virtuous Mind:” Anna Letitia Barbauld, Meliorism, and the Ethics of Vulnerability

If mind, as ancient sages taught,
A never dying flame,
Still shifts thro’ matter’s varying forms,
In every form the same,

Beware, lest in the worm you crush
A brother’s soul you find;
And tremble lest thy luckless hand
Dislodge a kindred mind. (Poems 19.29-36)

Anna Letitia Barbauld’s “Mouse’s Petition” is remarkable for intervening in a scientific enterprise only to urge the value of uncertainty. As a response to her close friend Joseph Priestley’s gas experiments involving the asphyxiation of mice, Barbauld’s poem may not seem especially empirically rigorous; today’s scientists might charge it with committing the fallacy of anthropomorphism. Barbauld, however, seems less keen to delineate a personality per se for a mouse than to try on various affective and rhetorical attitudes. She offers, for instance, both religious and political reasons for sparing the trapped, titular mouse. These, however, are clearly secondary to—if not in the service of—sensory and sentimental arguments that consist in indeterminate inferences about other beings’ minds. If mice instead lack “soul[s],” the poem continues, and “if this transient gleam of day/Be all of life we share,” then “[l]et pity plead within thy breast/That little all to spare” (Poems 19.37-40). Barbauld has come a long way from Alexander Pope, who early in the century thought it patently ridiculous, if not blasphemous, to expect that one’s dog would accompany one to heaven.¹ But her comparative liberality stems more from irresolution than from decisive contradiction. As to whether or not mice have souls,

the mouse-speaker is itself oddly agnostic, and stylistically speaking its musings produce a sort of hovering clemency. Accentuating the speculative subject of the first stanza above are a grammar composed of subordinate clauses, and punctuation that exploits and heightens the halting quality of the poem’s ballad meter. The effect, however brief, is one of hesitation and qualification. By contrast, the following stanza moves quickly, focusing less on contemplation and more on precipitate action—manipulating objects, crushing worms—with unexpected attritions. Consciousness is a surprising, indefinite phenomenon, and the uncertainty surrounding it, Barbauld suggests, is what produces social generosity. In recognizing weakness—the tenuousness of life and mind—we recognize our “kindred.”

Barbauld’s poetry demonstrates both affinity for and qualms about scientific inquiry. Critics have pointed to “The Mouse’s Petition” in particular as an early example of animal-rights literature—and rightly so, considering its cautious and open-minded inquiry into an animal’s psychic state. But its ethical concerns are not confined to science and animal rights alone, for its very lexicon betrays Barbauld’s broader concern with how psychic states in general complicate cultural and political agendas. The poem’s addressee is, in many senses, a conventional Enlightenment liberal, who evidently values as intrinsic goods “liberty” and the cultivation of a “philosophic mind” (Poems 19.2, 25). His very pursuit of the latter good has, however, consequences which are understood only belatedly, and the very consideration of which gives Barbauld pause. Although she shares, with Priestley, many values of the radical Enlightenment, she here presents reluctance and abstention, more than intrepid progress, as the foundational

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2 Kathryn Ready reads the first two stanzas (this chapter’s epigraph) as a straightforward allusion to Platonic transmigration, an uncommon belief in the eighteenth century, and thus as a clue that mice are at best a metaphorical proxy for Barbauld’s primary (human) objects of concern (“What then, poor Beastie!,” 98-100). It is odd that Ready, open as she is to so many readings beyond the literal, overlooks the possibility that these stanzas and their references to “mind” might have other significances, some perhaps subjectivist rather than descriptive.

3 See, for instance, Bradshaw, “Gendering the Enlightenment;” Bellanca, “Animal Sympathy.”
project of a beneficent society. “From Barbauld’s dissenting perspective,” writes Marlon B. Ross, “petitioning, rather than tearing apart the political from the moral fabric, is transformed into a weaving gesture that binds the aggressive act of a political demand to the submissive act of prayerful blessing.” In other poems, she carries this impulse to trying lengths, perhaps even uncomfortable lengths: to name a few, she implores her abolitionist allies to “[c]ease” and “[f]orbear” in their lobbying, advises the poor, with whom she deeply sympathizes, nonetheless to “bear th[eir] wrongs” (Poems 87.1, 41, 98.11), and refuses to accept as liberating or progressive the claims of either Napoleonic France or Regency Britain. But behind this seeming effacement of liberal opinions lies a steadfast attention to the victims of ideology, wherever Barbauld finds them. She senses that the Dissenting Enlightenment and its meliorist agendas can, as readily as Tory attachments to king and country, be carried too far. Hence she strives to keep her eye upon that which to her matters most, and indeed which gives ideology its significance: the living beings who are alternately its referents and exponents, and whose very existence is often registered socio-politically in terms simplified or glossed over.

A cautious and temperate thinker, Barbauld is acutely aware of how cultural and political values, like strong Shandean hypotheses, can lead to reckless and even destructive social actions, and devotes a tremendous amount of writing to this concern. One of her best-known prose works, the political sermon “Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation” is at its heart an injunction for readers to apprehend the possible consequences of their own social agendas. Although it is written from a predominantly Dissenting antiwar perspective, Barbauld also urges caution and conscience for liberal reformers, whose particular bad habit is to agitate for changes inimical, perhaps harmful, to the majority:

Reformers, conceiving of themselves, as of a more enlightened class than the bulk of mankind, are likewise apt to forget the deference due to them. Stimulated by newly discovered truths, of which they feel the full force, they are not willing to wait for the gradual spread of knowledge, the subsiding of passion, and the undermining of prejudices. They too contemn a *swinish multitude*, and aim at an aristocracy of talents. It is indeed their business to attack the prejudices, and to rectify, if they can, the systems of their countrymen, but, in the mean time, to acquiesce in them. It is their business to sow the seed, and let it lie patiently in the bosom of the ground, perhaps for ages—to prepare, not to bring about revolutions. The public is not always in the wrong for not giving into their views, even where they have the appearance of reason; for their plans are often crude and premature, their ideas too refined for real life, and influenced by their own particular cast of thinking; they want people to be happy their way; whereas every one must be happy his own way. Freedom is a good thing, but if a nation is not disposed to accept of it, it is not to be presented to them on the point of a bayonet. . . . If the established religion, in any country, is absurd and superstitious in the eyes of thinking men, so long as it is the religion of the generality, it ought to prevail, and the minority should not even wish to supplant it. The endeavouring to overthrow any system before it is given up by the majority, is faction; the endeavouring to keep it after it is given up by them is tyranny; both are equally wrong, and both proceed from the same cause, the want of a principle of due subordination. (SPP 304-5)

Barbauld here posits a moral equivalence between conservatives like Edmund Burke who defend problematic institutions and radical meliorists of Thomas Paine’s stamp who advocate their decisive abolition. In redeploying Burke’s infamous slur against the French mobs—“*swinish multitude*”—she satirizes the evident contempt for common life and opinion that conservative and liberal agendas interchangeably share. Meliorists’ attachments to their own systems, carried too forcefully, can come to resemble Burkean prejudices, which Barbauld is quick to condemn: “there is neither patriotism nor good sense in fostering an extravagant opinion of ourselves and our own institutions, in being attached even to our faults, because they are ours, and because they have been ours from generation to generation. An exclusive admiration of ourselves is generally founded on extreme ignorance, and it is not likely to produce anything of a more liberal or better stamp” (SPP 307-8). Throughout this discussion, she imputes to both positions a vocabulary of overindulgence (“too refined,” “extravagant”) and possessiveness (“their,” “our,” “own”). Even as she carefully speaks of moral probabilities only—“not always in the wrong,” “often,” “if,”
“generally,” “appearance of reason,” “not likely”—she finds herself among polemicists who claim moral certitude, and seek to eradicate all doubt that their “particular cast of thinking,” diagnoses of present systems, and programs for improvement are the correct ones.

Barbauld, for her part, seemingly accepts neither Custom nor Reform as intrinsic goods, but takes instead the counterfactual consequences of both as the basis of her political ethos. Her greatest worry is that either position, though based in goodwill, could go so far as to secure particular interests at “the point of a bayonet;” at the great expense of other interests. Barbauld’s alternative, and explicit object of “deference” and “due subordination,” is the much murkier “bulk of mankind.” This nebulous object, more indistinct than a personification figure properly would be, allows her to reconsider the legitimacy of any public action by appealing to its latent psychic consequences. Mind, in much of her prose as in her verse, is a very indistinct thing. Unlike Paine and other meliorists, she does not expect that rational debate will inevitably produce a unanimous or even majority rejection of “absurd and superstitious” beliefs. People cling tenaciously to their ideas, as lichens to new rock. This, however, is itself a measure of freedom: she insists that “every one must be happy his own way,” a democratic and intentionally vague stance that allows the possibility of abundant difference among social beings. As William McCarthy has argued of her essay “On Prejudice,” this accommodating treatment of a vast multitude (or far-flung readership) contrasts sharply with Burke’s calculated endorsement of particular institutions as the manifest will and pride of the British nation. As in “The Mouse’s Petition,” Barbauld marks out mind as an inviolable space in which individual values can

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5 As William McCarthy observes, “On Prejudice” argues that some principles should be rehearsed until they become intuitive. However, he adds, “Barbauld tactfully does not specify these principles; they are only ‘whatever is fair and honourable in action—whatever is useful and important in systematic truth.’ Thus she refrains from giving them the political content—awe of kings, respect for nobility, and the like—that Burke imposed on ‘our natural feelings[‘]” (Voice of the Enlightenment, 380).
flourish, without stipulating the political content or tendency of those values. If the content matters, it is on account of the vessel in which it manifests.

I. Circumstances, Authority, and Barbauld’s Ecological Turn

Her radical sympathies notwithstanding, Barbauld does, on some points, agree with Burke. He, like Barbauld, points to the multiplicity of everyday details and lives as a leading criterion of his political ethics. The entire basis of his authority in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he avows, rests on his discernment of the circumstances that make the English constitution the exceptional arrangement it is:

> I cannot stand forward, and give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction. Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour, and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.

Circumstances provide “distinguishing colour” to the elements of human society: as such, Burke suggests, they resemble Lockean secondary qualities, and have more to do with perception and subjectivity than the objective essence of things. They are the measures by which any “principle” may be deemed “beneficial or noxious.” Unlike Barbauld, though, Burke uses this premise to legitimate existing institutions. Careful attention to circumstances over many generations gradually allows the best of human wisdom to achieve apotheosis, in the institutions of state and culture—“the practice of [our] ancestors, the fundamental laws of [our] country, [and] the fixed form of a constitution, whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long experience, and an increasing public strength and national prosperity.”

The citizen thus embraces the “wise prejudice” of his nation, for his and his nation’s benefit. Burke reflects on circumstances, at last, to vindicate customs that require no further reflection: for such reflection might “leave the man

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7 Ibid., 58.
hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved.” In this, he cannot entirely escape or efface an ambivalence toward circumstance as precisely that which, in the “moment of decision,” leaves one “unresolved.”

Whereas Burke constructs an unabashedly prejudiced political subject, Paine sets out to disprove his theory of statecraft through deductions about “natural man.” He engages to remedy Burke’s fallacious appeal to tradition, notably, by outdoing it:

The error of those who reason by precedents drawn from antiquity, respecting the rights of man, is that they do not go far enough into antiquity. They do not go the whole way . . . but if we proceed on, we shall at last come out right; we shall come to the time when man came from the hand of his Maker. What was he then? Man. Man was his high and only title, and a higher cannot be given him.”

Paine here echoes Rousseau’s Second Discourse in his conceit of “go[ing] the whole way;” seeking to intervene in Burke’s traditionalist method by doubling down on it. In their own ways, both seek to delineate certain socio-political arrangements that follow necessarily from the human condition. Although Burke can be and often is understood in relation to the empiricist tradition, he is in this respect as far removed from Hobbes’s assumptions about contingent moral psychology as is Paine’s radical, melioristic rationalism.

A central assumption Paine’s meliorism and Burke’s conservatism share, then, is that the more closely circumstances are examined, the more decisively their respective claims are vindicated. Paine predicts that The Rights of Man, once propagated through the world, will end in its inevitable and irreversible liberation:

The Revolutions in America and France have thrown a beam of light over the world, which reaches into man. The enormous expense of Governments has provoked people to think, by making them feel; and when once the veil begins to rend, it admits not of repair. Ignorance is of a peculiar nature: and once dispelled, it is impossible to re-establish it.  

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8 Ibid., 96, 87.  
9 Paine, Rights of Man, 166.  
10 Paine, Rights of Man, 225. It is important to note that Barbauld, in “An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts,” similarly includes an “appeal to the certain, sure operation of increasing light and
Paine, like Burke, makes a platform out of disavowing alternative forms of knowledge, policy, and conduct based on a conviction of his system’s manifest truth. This is recalcitrant optimism on the part of both men, as well as textbook Whig history: Burke “is apt to imagine the British constitution as coming down to us safely at last, in spite of so many vicissitudes; when in reality it is the result of those very vicissitudes,” whereas Paine is prone to “seeing the modern world emerge as the victory of the children of light over the children of darkness.”¹¹ We might further describe each paradigm as what Eve Sedgwick has called a paranoid critique, “an explanatory structure that [one] may see as tautological, in that it can’t help or can’t stop or can’t do anything other than prove the very same assumptions with which it began, [and which] may be experienced by the practitioner as a triumphant advance toward truth and vindication.”¹² One notable result is the detached, abstracted, nearly personifying terms in which both men cast the progress and morality of nations. It is in this regard that Barbauld’s differences from the meliorist agenda in particular come into sharper relief.

Both Barbauld’s style and purpose when inquiring into circumstances—most of all the particularities of space and geography—differ greatly from Burke’s. Consider Barbauld’s vignette of British women sending their sons off to die in war at the beginning of the poem that capped her career, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*:

> Frequent, some stream obscure, some uncouth name
> By deeds of blood is lifted into fame;
> Oft o’er the daily page some soft-one bends
> To learn the fate of husband, brothers, friends,
> Or the spread map with anxious eye explores,

knowledge” (SPP 276). However, as already seen, she appears to lack confidence in such progress when writing “Sins of Government” just three years later, and—as will be seen—her poetry seriously challenges the possibility of such apocalyptic epistemology. If Barbauld had faith in such “appeals,” that faith was *far* from consistent. I think an equally good possibility is that this is a deliberate appeal to the very values of the titular opposers: not to the subtler consciences of a larger public in “Sins of Government,” but to parliamentarians deeply invested in a national discourse of optimism.

Its dotted boundaries and penciled shores,
Asks where the spot that wrecked her bliss is found,
And learns its name but to detest the sound. (*Poems* 124.31-38)

This is a sad image, and not less so for its termination in bitterness. If it provides a picture of war, it’s an emphatically one-sided picture, wherein the home team can give vent to its griefs and anxieties but the opponents only appear to them as a “spot” to be “detest[ed].” At the same time, the “daily page,” “spread map,” and foreign “name” provide multiple layers of potentially propagandistic mediation. This remains a compassionate portrait of British widows, which takes their heartbreak seriously, and regrets that such “soft-one[s]” can be so hardened. Yet their limited perspective also troubles Barbauld in its own right, insofar as it is a clear outlier in an oeuvre that overwhelmingly treats geography and place quite differently. War, Barbauld writes in “Sins of Government,” is driven by “a species of patriotism, which consists in inverting the natural course of our feelings, in being afraid of our neighbour’s prosperity, and rejoicing at his misfortunes” (SPP 309-10). In envisioning foreign citizens as “neighbour[s],” Barbauld denies Hume and Smith’s assertion that local interests take “natural” or inevitable precedence over those remote. Her verse does not demonstrably treat the two differently, emphasizing sensory and subjective correspondences over locational distinctions. In this respect, we might describe her thinking about place less as geographical than as ecological in focus.

Barbauld’s first major political poem, “Corsica,” likewise shows a cartographer’s impulse, locating Corsica “amidst the waves . . . like a rock of adamant” in the “Tyrrhene main” and describing its coasts’ contours:

> Hail to thy rocky, deep indented shores,
> And pointed cliffs, which hear the chafing deep
> Incessant foaming round their shaggy sides:
> Hail to thy winding bays, thy sheltering ports
> And ample harbours, which inviting stretch
This delineation of the shore’s “winding,” though, quickly takes on other dimensions. The described contours are picturesque, but the effect is one of tonal as well as visual irregularity: the coast is “indent[ed],” “pointed,” “shelt’ring,” with “shaggy sides” and “hospitable arms,” battered by the “chafing deep.” Space and location here acquire not only the third dimension of depth, but also a fourth, psychic dimension—that of bodies in contact; of touch. Each descriptor suggests a different mode of physical proximity or contact: many of which evoke human relationships, and which collectively produce a nuanced, even contradictory affective profile. The island is a hard-nosed, intimate, wild, delicate, tumultuous place—and all this in six lines. “Corsica’s” opening thus engages with place quite differently from the *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* excerpt above.

Barbauld’s verse is everywhere attuned to the affective consequences of proximity. Some of her poems are even more place-oriented. Notably, five pieces that McCarthy and Kraft believe she used in geography lessons—“India,” “Constantinople,” “Lapland,” “Canada,” and “Animals, and their Countries”—explicitly aim to enliven young readers’ conceptions of distant lands. Barbauld describes Lapland thus:

> By the rapid rein-deer crost;  
> Where tap’ring grows the gloomy fir,  
> And the stunted juniper;  
> Where the wild hare and the crow  
> Whiten in surrounding snow;  
> Where the shiv’ring huntsmen tear  
> His fur coat from the grim white bear;  
> Where the wolf and arctic fox  
> Prowl among the lonely rocks (*Poems* 163.4-12).

Environment and inhabitants are enmeshed: corvids and lagomorphs “[w]hit[e]n,” and canids rove among “lonely rocks.” As I shall argue presently, I think this is more than mere pathetic fallacy on Barbauld’s part. “Canada,” another place-lesson poem, devotes roughly equal attention to other species and First Nations people: “In light canoe the painted Indian rows,/Or hunts the
floundering elk thro’ melting snows;/Wields his huge tomahawk in deadly fray,/And rends with shouts the reeking scalp away,/Or smokes the fragrant calumet of peace,/And bound in wampum leagues bids savage discord cease” (*Poems* 164.19-24).\(^{13}\) Rather than conveying precise locational or cultural information about the sites, or establishing their strategic or economic importance, these poems give uncertain impressions of different modes of life, and the interdependent, often tense relationships among them. There is no narrative about Canada’s native tribes; Barbauld presents instead three possible, logically disjunct images, linked by “[o]r.” Remarkably for poems meant to teach geography, much of the effect produced seems to depend on not having a precise sense of location or causality; on being awed at the plenitude of life that emerges with the eye’s every movement. In contrast to the strictly political map, composed of “dotted boundaries,” these local descriptions have living, teeming textures. Texture, for Barbauld, evidently transmits important if confused information. It facilitates a relation to the larger world that straight engagement with the political, and the political map, does not. By altering the scale at which we think about place, action, and allegiance, it promotes a new kind of sociability: a sort of local ethic with cosmopolitan applications, or, as Nicholas Birns explains it, “a universality that is open to the alterity embodied in concrete referents.”\(^{14}\) Even in the halls of Parliament, the social and political are for Barbauld inextricable from the textural and ecological.

**II. Living Textures**

It is instructive to compare Barbauld’s use of texture to Pope’s (which she inherited), for both poets excel at creating close impressions of delicate surfaces. Furthermore, Pope contrasts

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\(^{13}\) Barbauld omits here that scalping greatly increased among First Nation groups as a result of bounties and other forms of European influence. Her description of “savage discord” can hardly be accidental, but neither does it depart from her descriptions of war elsewhere, nor is her imputation of warlike behavior—balanced, as well, by peaceful behavior—more pronounced in this case than for descriptions of European conflicts. Nevertheless, as I hope to suggest, Barbauld would be among the first to admit the possibilities of susceptibility to propaganda, and of a picture painted doing unmeant harm.

\(^{14}\) Birns, “Thy World, Columbus!,” 552.
suggestively with Barbauld because his verse anticipates many of Burke’s conservative and providentialist impulses, particularly a faith in the incalculably wise contrivance of the status quo: “Whatever IS, is RIGHT,” as the Essay on Man would have it.\footnote{Pope, \textit{Essay on Man}, p. 515, epistle 1, line 294.} Pope thus voices, in the prefatory “Design” of the Essay, ambivalence about investigating too closely the particulars of the world when devising his ethical system:

There are not \textit{many certain truths} in this world. It is therefore in the Anatomy of the Mind as in that of the Body; more good will accrue to mankind by attending to the large, open, and perceptible parts, than by studying too much such finer nerves and vessels, the conformations and uses of which will for ever escape our observation. The \textit{disputes} are all upon these last, and, I will venture to say, they have less sharpened the \textit{wits} than the \textit{hearts} of men against each other, and have diminished the practice, more than advanced the theory, of Morality.\footnote{Ibid., p. 502.}

Pope, of course, did not live to benefit from the latter eighteenth century’s interest in sensibility and physiology, but his differences from Barbauld run deeper than that. For him—in sharp contrast to Burke—the certainty of “large, open, and perceptible” aspects of experience makes them the preferred medium of moral reasoning. His evocations are predominantly visual, inviting investigative scrutiny and appraisal of beauty, as with the sylphs in “The Rape of the Lock:”

\begin{quote}
Loose to the Wind their airy Garments few,/Thin glitt’ring Textures of the filmy Dew;/Dipt in the richest Tincture of the Skies,/Where Light disports in ever-mingling Dies,/While ev’ry Beam new transient Colours flings,/Colours that change whene’er they wave their Wings.
\end{quote}

\footnote{Pope, \textit{The Rape of the Lock}, in \textit{Poems of Alexander Pope}, p. 224, canto 2, lines 63-68.}

In Barbauld’s poetry, different affects and sense-modalities predominate. To her, the delicacy of things isn’t grounds for admiration, but above all for caution. Whereas Pope excels in shiny things, Barbauld excels in soft things: Barbauld’s verse is not only textural but tactile. This is evident in “The Caterpillar,” a late poem in which the speaker is moved to spare a lone caterpillar’s life despite regarding the species in general as vermin. Although the poem begins
with the speaker “scann[ing]” the caterpillar’s “form with curious eye,” most of the specific
description treats not its look but its feel—its “velvet sides,” the “light pressure of [its] hairy
feet,” its colony “folded in their silken webs”—and the ways in which it touches the speaker’s
body: “thee, houseless wanderer,/My garment has enfolded . . . Thou hast curled round my
finger.” Even the visual image of a “silver line that streaks [its] back” suggests tactile
experience, as though a delicate stroke of paint were being dabbed onto the creature’s body
(\textit{Poems} 133.3, 6, 8, 18, 6-9, 4).

What is the utility of texture for Barbauld? Because touch, Eve Sedgwick offers, is a
reciprocal act that occurs in three dimensions, and thus resistant to dualistic interpretations,
“texture seems like a promising level of attention for shifting the emphasis of some . . .
conversations away from the recent fixation on epistemology . . . by asking new questions about
phenomenology and affect.”\textsuperscript{18} Sedgwick’s terms, notably her ironically dualistic distinction of
epistemology from phenomenology, do not quite suit a sentimentalist milieu in which affect is
the foundation of ethical insight, but with respect to rationalist and scientific discourses it gives
us some purchase on Barbauld’s use of texture. Whatever motivates the speaker in “The
Caterpillar” to spare the insect’s life, it seems to be something other than knowledge.

\begin{quote}
Bending thy head in airy vacancy,
This way and that, inquiring, thou hast seemed
To ask protection; now, I cannot kill thee.
Yet I have sworn perdition to thy race,
And recent from the slaughter am I come
Of tribes and embryo nations . . . This I’ve done,
Nor felt the touch of pity: but when thou,—
A single wretch, escaped the general doom,
Making me feel and clearly recognise
Thine individual existence, life,
And fellowship of sense with all that breathes,—
Present’st thyself before me, I relent,
And cannot hurt thy weakness. (\textit{Poems} 133.11-29)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} Sedgwick, \textit{Touching Feeling}, 17.
The poem is implicitly sentimentalist: its ethical position, in Humean terms, is felt, not judged, and derives from “the touch of pity.” There is a moment of “recogni[tion],” evidently aesthetic rather than propositional. Grammatically, the lines between the em dashes are the subject of Barbauld’s final sentence; that which “[p]resent[es]” itself before the speaker. Her experience of the caterpillar, then, passes from perception to “feel[ing]” to “recogni[tion]” to “fellowship” in the short space needed to utter ‘thou present’st.’ Mercy comes in a rush that nearly outruns her language and thought. Indeed her assertion that she “cannot hurt [the creature’s] weakness” indicates that she identifies it more by its fragility than by its species, for which she retains an apparently unmitigated hatred-on-principle. And although she infers some degree of sentience in the creature, she stops short of attributing any specific experience (like pain or fear) to it. Its distress is potential—a “weakness” that merely “seem[s]” to implore—rather than clearly actual; particular yet indefinite.\(^\text{19}\) In other words, at issue is not pain outright, but rather vulnerability; the capacity for and uncertainty of pain, as contrasted with the resoluteness of “sworn perdition” and the categorical destruction of caterpillar “tribes.” Examining the consequences of one’s social ethos so closely—and Barbauld gets almost microscopically close—leads, in a way, to less clarity than examining it confidently in the abstract, by suggesting the complicated, inscrutable, yet serious negative consequences of that ethos.

Barbauld’s poetic approach to science—much like her approach to geography—in this way eschews positivist epistemology in favor of a counterfactual survey of possibilities. It is at least as much imaginative and affective as rational. The discussion of planets in *Hymns in Prose*

\(^{19}\) Alice Den Otter writes that Barbauld “us[es] the vocabulary of Romantic individuality to explain why she is making an exception for this particular being” (“Parasites, Pests, and Positionality,” 218). Although I think it important to note the apparent suspension of received truths about caterpillars-as-species, it is likewise important to parse this attribution of “individuality,” and in particular “Romantic individuality.” If a Keatsian individuality, which “ha[s] no nature” and is defined through its shifting sympathies with others (Keats to Richard Woodhouse, 27 Oct. 1818, in *Letters*, 158), I agree with Den Otter’s description.
for Children, William McCarthy argues, is “not . . . to be taken narrowly, as mere astronomy,” but “ethically” as well, in order “to open the mind to Otherness, to possibilities of vast difference from what we know in our limited, parochial way” (SPP 254-56). This sociable orientation is already evident in “The Invitation,” an early poem that includes one of Barbauld’s most compelling statements of the link between empirical and imaginative work. Describing, somewhat disapprovingly, the future biological and medical researches of her students, she appears less concerned about the substance of their discoveries than about the substances from which they extract them:

Some pensive creep along the shelly shore;
Unfold the silky texture of a flower;
With sharpen’d eyes inspect an hornet’s sting,
And all the wonders of an insect’s wing.
Some trace with curious search the hidden cause
Of nature’s changes, and her various laws;
Untwist her beauteous web, disrobe her charms,
And hunt her to her elemental forms:
Or prove what hidden powers in herbs are found
To quench disease and cool the burning wound;
With cordial drops the fainting head sustain,
Call back the flitting soul, and still the throbs of pain. (Poems 4.155-66)

There are several registers of language in play here. Whereas some of the diction suggests unidirectional acts of investigation in relatively neutral terms (“inspect,” “trace with curious search”), other terms suggest stronger, more negative affects that give the lie to scientific rhetoric of objectivity. Tactile modalities, as opposed to visual, enable Barbauld more openly to confront subjective implications with which scientific experiments are not concerned. Subject-positions here are tenuous: the “hornet,” usually possessed of a “sting,” is exposed to “sharpen’d eyes”—a

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20 McCarthy, Voice of the Enlightenment, 45. McCarthy particularly credits Fontenelle’s Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes with shaping Barbauld’s approach to science.

21 In a key passage of “The Invitation,” Barbauld describes the Bridgewater Canal—which opened in 1761, and featured an aqueduct bridge that carried the canal over the River Irwell—in terms that suggest its production was equally the work of fancy, association, and precision engineering: “The traveller with pleasing wonder sees/The white sail gleaming thro’ the dusky trees; . . . Now, like a flock of swans, above his head/Their woven wings the flying vessels spread” (Poems 4.67-72).
verbatim anticipation of the openly destructive gaze of “The Caterpillar’s” speaker (Poems 133.17)—and hands that “[u]nfold,” “[u]ntwist,” and “disrobe” the life forms they examine. Humans, however, are shown to be just as frail, subject to “throbs of pain” and even “flitting” like small winged creatures between life and death, even as they inflict hardships in part to escape them. Taken as a whole, “The Invitation,” especially its last third, suggests an apt irresolution about which intellectual pleasures and pursuits—science, military strategy, commerce, lawmaking, history, poetry—are most fittingly or, perhaps, most innocuously enjoyed.22

Barbauld’s reservations toward, or qualification of, meliorist ideology thus appear in some of her first writings. Looking more does not necessarily lead her to learning more. Another early poem, “To Mr. P[riestley], with some Drawings of Birds and Insects,” answers, according to McCarthy, “patriotic naturalist” Thomas Pennant’s 1766 suggestion for British poets to write about native animals.23 Describing migratory birds, however, Barbauld goes well beyond descriptive or naturalistic language: “The congregated nations wing their way/In dusky columns o’er the trackless sea;/In clouds unnumber’d annual hover o’er/The craggy Bass, or Kilda’s utmost shore” (Poems 3.65-68). Here we see obscurity, a Burkan aesthetic principle, enticing readers into an affective response; images occur in what Burke might term “crouded and confused” fashion.24 But whereas Burke channels obscurity toward the production of specifically sublime feeling, and ultimately toward fealty to a monolithic State, Barbauld’s chosen ends are more numerous. She uses obscurity to produce an indeterminacy of feeling—the image is at once

22 Robert W. Jones argues that, in particular, the end of the poem “questions the patriot’s enthusiasm. The image of ‘undaunted zeal’ is a marker of a limit unwisely exceeded . . . Such zeal leads to unjustified war and gives the patriot nothing more than a ‘life of hardships’ repaid ‘by a line’ of lapidary verse . . . It is peace, not patriotic war that unlocks the divine; close observation, not impetuous zeal that discloses the true nature of things. Although the poem ends modestly, this is not an abdication or a refusal to enter the political realm rather but [sic] an affirmation and an advocacy of a more principled, less aggressive life” (“Idea of Resistance,” 127).
24 Burke, Philosophical Enquiry, 57.
tranquil and unsettling—but the uncertain elements of “feeling” extend beyond those of tone. There are also uncertainties of space, body, and position. Thanks to her impressionistic writing, birds become indistinguishable from background: they “hover,” without clear relation to “Bass,” “Kilda,” or any other place, and share adjectival traits—“dusky,” “unnumber’d,” and their gathering into “clouds”—with the sky itself. Barbauld’s choice to depict migratory birds thematizes and further enhances this effect: “congregated nations . . . o’er the trackless sea” particularly calls human immigration and colonization to mind. If these creatures hail from Britain, they are none the less citizens of the world.

The overall impression of “Birds and Insects” is one of sentient diaspora; of nervous bodies ensconced unpredictably across the land. Barbauld’s images of insects achieve the same effect: “who can follow nature’s pencil here?/Their wings with azure, green, and purple gloss’d, /Studded with colour’d eyes, with gems emboss’d./Inlaid with pearl, and mark’d with various stains/Of lively crimson thro’ their dusky veins./Some shoot like living stars, athwart the n

(\textit{Poems} 3.104-9). The descriptions of wing markings as “colour’d eyes” and “dusky veins” suggest the proliferation of sensitive organs in uncustomary places, as does Barbauld’s simile recounting the incubation of larvae: “So when Rinaldo struck the conscious rind,/He found a nymph in every trunk confin’d;/The forest labours with convulsive throes,/The bursting trees the lovely births disclose” (\textit{Poems} 3.85-88). We find the same, again, in “The Invitation,” when Barbauld considers the excavation of the earth: “The sons of toil with many a weary stroke/Scoop the hard bosom of the solid rock;/Resistless tho’ the stiff opposing clay/With steady patience work their gradual way;/Compel the genius of th’ unwilling flood/Thro’ the brown horrors of the aged wood” (\textit{Poems} 4.59-64). Even something as seemingly innocuous as digging into the ground has potentially painful repercussions: it is cast as a violation, or a
rending asunder, and in view of Barbauld’s attention to worms and insects, this is barely hyperbole.

Whereas Sternean sociability, then, thrives to an extent on conflict, Barbauld’s sociability sees conflict everywhere and continually shrinks from it. There is an almost paralyzing impulse in much of Barbauld’s verse, similar in some ways to the Jain doctrine of *ahimsa*: a recognition of the possibility that any movement, however innocuous, is of the gravest consequence to some body or other. Indeed, according to William McCarthy, Barbauld was “said to have disliked picking flowers lest she injure a feeling creature.” If “The Mouse’s Petition’s” describes a small animal’s plight in strikingly political terms, then the poem is only enacting a more general and persistent concern of hers: the ubiquitous chance that one’s actions in the world might “[d]islodge a kindred mind.” Sterne’s prose argues that one’s material and verbal milieu is saturated with the claims of others, but Barbauld’s contemporaneous poetry goes a step further: the environment—the ostensible ‘background’—is, in more or less literal terms, saturated with the very bodies of others. Much more than a Barthesian “tissue of quotations,” Barbauld’s poetic language approaches the composition of biological tissue, appearing to us almost innervated. By this I mean that that tropes, signs, and images that we recognize as indices of life and feeling are interwoven with other poetic matter, often to crop up in novel and unexpected ways. She creates, in short, a productive confusion of subject and substrate.

Barbauldian uncertainty is thus not total. Her verse stops short of evoking flat-out epistemological chaos, promoting instead a form of pareidolia—the apprehension, among her images, of meaningful patterns suggestive of life. She is not the first eighteenth century writer to explore such perceptual habits. According to Hume, they are part of human nature and (as are most things with him) unsupportable by reason:

There is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice or good-will to every thing, that hurts or pleases us. Hence the frequency and beauty of the prosopopoeia in poetry; where trees, mountains and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion. . . . Nor is a river-god or hamadryad always taken for a mere poetical or imaginary personage; but may sometimes enter into the real creed of the ignorant vulgar; while each grove or field is represented as possessed of a particular genius or invisible power, which inhabits and protects it.²⁶

To a sensory background composed of “object[s],” humans “universal[ly]” and prolifically “ascribe” kinships, not to mention “malice,” “good-will,” and “sentiment and passion.” Hume shows ambivalence toward this tendency. He seems to argue that it is a slippery slope—that, at least in its “vulgar” instances, it is essentially a form of superstition that leads to egotistical, anthropomorphic theism. Yet it has other, perhaps more significant and gratifying applications too: not only prosopopoeia but also, it seems, another Humean imaginative enterprise—sympathy. By Hume’s own account in the Treatise, sympathy depends first on the relation of resemblance, or the perception of familiar patterns external to us: “we never remark any passion or principle in others, of which, in some degree or other, we may not find a parallel in ourselves. . . . The stronger the relation is betwixt ourselves and any object, the more easily does the imagination make the transition.” Any feeling we posit in another entity is initially inferred mediately from bodily signs, and only afterwards “conceiv’d to belong to another person, as we conceive any other matter of fact” (Treatise 368, 370).Hints of resemblance, in other words, impel the observer to organize stimuli into living patterns.

Perceiving indices of life among a flux of data is a necessary precondition for sociability, according even to the heuristic sentimentalists. Yet in appealing to “experience and reflection” to forestall the belief in any “particular genius or invisible power”—which would seemingly

⁲⁶ Hume, Natural History of Religion, 12.
include the guardian genius of Britain—Hume likewise dismisses the ascription of “familiar” or “intimate” “qualities” to “objects” in the background. He is so driven by heuristics as a matter of course that his expectations cannot alter; too credulous, ironically, of his own division between pareidolia as mere imaginative play and sympathy as a proper ethical domain. Hume’s discussion describes Barbauld’s methods, perhaps, but not her ethics. Her aim in describing nature is not prosopopoeia, the consolidation of natural entities into personification figures. It is the opposite: dispersion; elision; uncertainty.

III. The Mutuality of Action

Barbauld seemingly understands the world through what Mary Ellen Bellanca calls a “multilayered discourse on cruelty;” a “complex texture of reciprocal signification,” common in sentimental poetry, wherein “one vulnerable group often pointed to another.”27 “The Mouse’s Petition” ends with a benediction of sorts, but one based in the murine speaker’s reciprocal recognition of a threat to its human captor: “So, when destruction lurks unseen,/Which men, like mice, may share,/May some kind angel clear thy path,/And break the hidden snare” (Poems 19.45-48). Although the mouse’s capture is a deliberate act in a controlled setting—the poem directly alludes to Priestley’s experiments on “the vital air” (Poems 19.20)—the threat to the addressee is much more vague: “unseen,” “hidden,” and one that he only “may share.” Human susceptibility to harm, as with other species Barbauld has described, is unpredictable. Accordingly, the mouse’s rhetoric of liberty is less that of a subject pleading with its benevolent steward than an appeal to the addressee having previously “spurn’d a tyrant’s chain,” and to mutual status as “nature’s commoners” seeking to “enjoy/The common gifts of heaven” unmolested (Poems 19.10,23). The poem’s addressee is enmeshed in a world rich with “mind,”

27 Bellanca, “Animal Sympathy,” 48; she borrows the first phrase from Moira Ferguson. See also Barker-Benfield, Culture of Sensibility, 232-34, for further discussion of precedents for female writers—in particular, Margaret Cavendish—likening women’s experiences to those of animals.
which “shifts thro’ matter’s varying forms,” but this encompasses both potential victims and potential aggressors. As such, Marlon Ross writes, it “resolutely refuses” to lapse into satire or single out “an identifiable object of ridicule and a recognizable political scapegoat . . . The last two lines of the stanza, instead of pursuing a factional political agenda . . . give[] way to ‘common gifts,’ which may be seen to have no partisan ideological interest.”28 Other Barbauld poems about the natural world make similar arguments: in “India,” for instance, “‘Mid tall bamboos lies hid the deadly snake,/The tiger couches in the tangled brake;/The spotted axis bounds in fear away,/The leopard darts on his defenceless prey” (Poems 161.9-12). In “Canada,” “Unnumbered pigeons fill the darkened air,/Glut the tired hawk, the loaded branches tear” (Poems 164.13-4). Texture here still creates a sense of unease, if not urgency. Some hidden creatures meditate harm as readily as others feel fear, and their quick “bounds” and “darts” are functions of both distressed flight and stealthy attack. With ubiquitous vulnerability comes its obverse, ubiquitous danger.

The emphasis on touch and proximity in Barbauld’s poetry constructs action and power in new ways. Vulnerability, because a shared attribute, becomes a basis for shared attribution. The close interaction of multiple parties, all susceptible to hardship and loss, means that actions are themselves shared to an extent, their results being such at times that agency is multiple or indeterminate. Mercy is a compelling argument insofar as captors, too, understand what it is to be compelled. Barbauld’s “Ode to Remorse,” a Regency-era poem, reinforces the point in recounting the prophet Nathan’s admonishing influence on King David:

As, wrapt in artful phrase, with sorrow feigned,  
He told of helpless, meek distress,  
And wrongs that sought from power redress,  
The pity-moving tale his ear obtained,  
And bade his better feelings wake:

Then, sudden as the trodden snake
On the scared traveller darts his fangs,
The prophet’s bold rebuke aroused thy keenest pangs. (Poems 125.35-42)

Remorse is a pause-giving force, like the predatory creatures of “India,” that “[c]rouching midst rosy bowers lurk[s] unseen” (Poems 125.55). Barbauld likens it to a serpent that “darts,” again, in a single gesture of both fragility and power: its bite is a reaction to being “trodden.” The evocation of tactile modes, like Nathan’s “cutting, tender” glance at David (Poems 125.44), suggests multiform contact between contending parties, a far cry from the emphatically unilateral power of Dryden’s David. The passage’s pronoun ambiguity has a similar effect. Atypical for Barbauld, it nonetheless suits a description of a lowly scholar humbling a king’s “power” with tales of “helpless, meek distress”—as though in the act of hearing, David’s position were confounded with lesser ones. This, roughly, seems to be the mechanism of Barbauldian sympathy: a changing-of-places based less in authoritative or comprehensive imaginings of a decidedly other victim, as Hume and Smith prescribe than in possibility; the sense that one’s own actions might tend toward any number of painful and unforeseen outcomes, even to oneself. Although imagination and narrative obviously matter in Barbauld’s account, she also elides remorse with power flux; with the “fangs” of reverse and retaliation, and the uncertainty of action.

In the closely-knit textures and Barbauld’s verse, to act—to initiate contact between parties—is to open a relation or invitation whose outcome is indeterminate. Multiple verbal effects in her poetry reinforce such a conception of action. Robert W. Jones observes that Barbauld’s use of the “un-” prefix—such as “unpierc’d” in “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” (Poems 58.20)—frequently “describes an object or a state in a way that associates, even contaminates it with what is normally imagined to be its opposite,” thus obliging readers “to
comprehend two normally exclusive states simultaneously.”

This technique has sobering ethical implications even in an occasional poem like “The Invitation,” which opens by bidding Barbauld’s friend Elizabeth Belsham “happiness and peace, but does so by saying that she hopes the coming years will be ‘unruffled and unstain’d by tears’ . . . Barbauld wishes to keep the idea of content always in close proximity to the possibility of its extinction. The reader must then appreciate the delicacy of any human state.”

Barbauld gets similar results from her use of the subject-object-verb inversion. She often uses ambiguous verbs and nouns in this configuration, such that her phrases become genuine crucibles, and that there is no way to decide which noun is the subject and which the object, as when in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, “empires fall to dust, then arts decay./And wasted realms enfeebled despots sway” (*Poems* 124.243-4). Especially in a Regency poem, it is easy to read the “sway[ing]” influence between “wasted” kingdom and “enfeebled” monarch as a mutual one. Persons and institutions likewise have a fluid interaction when, later in the same poem, “even the exiles [London’s] just laws disclaim” (*Poems* 124.309).

In another occasional poem “To the Baron de Stonne,” we are left to wonder, after the passage of several years, “What scenes the present may efface” (*Poems* 83.45-6)—in other words, just which set of impressions will displace which other. Such grammatical elisions promote a view of actions as seldom unidirectional, and more often reciprocal, with each involved party simultaneously occupying the subject- and object-position. Words, for Barbauld as for Sterne, are the sites of submerged struggle. Her task is not to divert that struggle, but to render it tangible.

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30 Ibid., 124.
IV. The “Fellowship of Sense”

Barbauld’s halting conception of the world prevents her from sharing the confidence with which either Burke or Paine conjures affective commitment to political causes. Both men—who together might be said to define the political spectrum of the 1790s—approach social order as a matter of shaping institutions first and foremost. On these grounds, Burke speaks favorably of Cromwell and other past revolutionaries:

Their rising was to illuminate and beautify the world. Their conquest over their competitors was by outshining them. The hand that, like a destroying angel, smote the country, communicated to it the force and energy under which it suffered . . . among all their massacres, they had not slain the mind in their country. A conscious dignity, a noble pride, a generous sense of glory and emulation, was not extinguished. On the contrary, it was kindled and inflamed. The organs of the state, however shattered, existed.  

Although Burke denies “that the virtues of such men [a]re to be taken as a balance to their crimes,” 32 the Reflections as a whole suggest that the venerable state edifice is the centralmost social consideration, and at least in some cases compatible with, nor undermined by the human attrition underlying its establishment. Cromwell might have killed people, but that aside, he still nurtured the honor of the state. This may be the faintest praise imaginable, but all the more remarkable for that: Burke can and does consider state edifice and human attrition separately. Paine, for his part, assumes something similar when he argues that the deposing of the French King was nothing personal: “It was not against Louis XVI., but against the despotic principles of the government, that the Nation revolted. These principles . . . were become too deeply rooted to be removed, and the Augean stable of parasites and plunderers too abominably filthy to be cleansed, by anything short of a complete and universal Revolution.” 33 Although he could not have anticipated the Terror of 1792-93, Paine grants at least one of its necessary conditions by

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31 Burke, Reflections, 48.
32 Ibid.
33 Paine, Rights of Man, 144.
assuming that the human and the institutional, people and principles, can be considered separately, and that the institutional is of paramount interest in societal matters.

Barbauld does not share this view of the social. To begin with, her verse picks up on—and takes seriously—the organic metaphors in Burke and Paine’s political writings, which themselves echo Hobbes’s description of the state as “an Artificial Animal” (L 81). Barbauld documents biological “organs” that have been “shattered,” in some cases, exactly because they are “deeply rooted;” so ensconced in social fabric that scarcely any action can avoid damaging them. “The Catepillar” specifically challenges the practice of dismissing or destroying “parasites” on the grounds of economic or moral utility. If principles can take “root,” it is because they are carried in and espoused by living beings, fragile in their own right. Seemingly responding to Paine in particular, she claims in “Sins of Government” that monarchy cannot be considered separately from the monarch who fills it, nor indeed from the citizens whom it represents.

We are not fondly to imagine we can make of kings, or of lawgivers, the scapegoats to answer for our follies and our crimes: by the services of this day they call upon us to answer for them; they throw the blame where it ought ultimately to rest. It were trifling with our consciences to endeavour to separate the acts of governors sanctioned by the nation, from the acts of the nation; for, in every transaction the principal is answerable for the conduct of the agents he employs to transact it. If the maxim that the king can do no wrong throws upon ministers the responsibility, because without ministers no wrong could be done, the same reason throws it from them upon the people, without whom ministers could do no wrong. (SPP 300)

The human element of government (including the people served), Barbauld insists, ultimately answers for the morality of its deeds, despite the tendency to make “scapegoats” of royal or parliamentary offices. Barbauld’s use of this word to refer to a group firmly in power is unusual, and as such draws attention to two things. First, that institutional features alone do not account

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34 Den Otter, “Parasites, Pests, and Positionality,” 219-20. Barbauld and Paine’s shared “analogy between garden pests and political adversaries,” Den Otter points out, had in fact been somewhat “conventional” since the Renaissance, appearing for instance in Richard II (212).
for any political function; that political structures exist and act only with human support, including that of citizens.\textsuperscript{35} Second, and corollary to this, that such scapegoating would be a wrong done to the persons in whom the offices are invested. She is less interested, consequently, in principles than in “principal[s].” Social and political institutions are not rarefied or abstract matter to be refashioned at will: the circumstances of particular political subjects forbid it, and for Barbauld—as for Pope, and in contrast to Burke—circumstances yield for Barbauld less clarity about what kinds of institutions she would like to see. And for her, that uncertainty is a mechanism, if not of decisive action, than of steadfast moderation. She offers few, if any, definitive patterns after which the social fabric ought to be cut. For her verse uncovers in that social fabric, the schematic material of political principle, the same susceptibilities that pervade the natural world. The most entrenched and politicized positions, she argues, nonetheless have small, fragile occupants.

Barbauld does voice the occasional regicidal thought in her early writings, as in “The Times” and “An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley’s Study,”\textsuperscript{36} but more often she seems reluctant to let personal injury be heaped unproblematically on monarchs, or legislators, or any other powerful group, in response to questions of policy. Her “Epistle to William Wilberforce,” the only major poem she wrote about slavery, is framed as a request that Wilberforce and other abolitionists desist in their polarizing reform efforts, even as she champions the cause: “Forbear!—thy virtues but provoke our doom./And swell th’account of vengeance yet to

\textsuperscript{35} Thus Laura Mandell is explicitly wrong that, “[w]hen Barbauld personifies the English people into a body, ‘the Nation,’ she distinguishes it from government” (“‘Those Limbs Disjointed,’” 31). As we shall see, the claim that Barbauld “personifies the English people into a body” also needs considerable qualification.

\textsuperscript{36} “The Times” laments that, whereas in Roman times, “Brutus struck one well aimed blow./And instant vengeance laid the Tyrant low,” modern Britons lack the fortitude for regicide: “When Virtue is so rooted from the ground/That hardly can one generous Vice be found, . . .Then, then exclain ‘Oh hapless Times indeed’;/For deeper is the wound that does not bleed” (\textit{Poems} 10.7-18). This poem’s motto—“Tempore Georgii IIIi”—makes explicit its contemporary thrust, and probably accounts for its remaining unpublished until the twentieth century. “An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley’s Study” lists one item more radical than the rest: “A group of all the British kings./Fair emblem! On a packthread swings” (\textit{Poems} 21.7-8).
come;/For, not unmark’d in Heaven’s impartial plan,/Shall man, proud worm, contemn his fellow-man?” (Poems 87.41-4). In a poem dealing predominantly with the decadence and hypocrisy of British slaveowning culture, this is an astonishing moment of forbearance, which in Julie Ellison’s reading, “proclaims the shortcomings of rhetorical flagellation while praising the attempt to make the guilty suffer.” Yet “praising” may be too strong a description. Barbauld clearly harbors vengeful feelings herself, but has equally clear reservations about “vengeance.” Following the quatrain is a fifty-line forecast of Britain’s moral and cultural decay that, much like Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, voices generalized regret as well as targeted indignation. Barbauld doesn’t show slaveholders explicit clemency again in the poem, but nonetheless shows signs of ambivalence, devoting more attention to the strife among the free population than to the hardships of slaves themselves, and celebrating none of it. The masters of domestic servants are sickly and debauched, “[o]f body delicate, infirm of mind,” and laborers suffer in ways that the pastoral rhetoric of the period overlooks: “No willing arm the flail unweary’d plies,/Where the mix’d sounds of cheerful labour rise; . . . But shrieks and yells disturb the balmy air,/Dumb sullen looks of woe announce despair,/And angry eyes thro’ dusky features glare” (Poems 87.66, 75-83). Her preoccupation in “Wilberforce” is the decimating decline of Britain’s collective morality, security, and ultimately health: “The spreading leprosy taints ev’ry part,/Infests each limb, and sickens at the heart” (Poems 87.98-99). Although her rhetoric draws on sentimental treatments of, and shares sensibility’s concern with, slavery and oppression, it turns it to make unconventional points about power as well. Even those who sustain and benefit from the

38 Ellison argues, particularly, that the poem’s gradual “process of role reversal or poetic justice seems to abandon moral judgment to the impersonal reflexes of economic logic. The shift makes possible a change of tone from pity, directed at generic victims, to prophetic, almost Blakean, exasperation. The ‘angry eyes’ glaring out of the sullen faces of degraded British citizens mark the aggressive potential of sensibility. The victim’s body houses rage, not the slave’s ‘constant tear’” (Ibid., 238).
savagely oppressive economy of slavery are “proud worm[s];” individuals with both domineering and vulnerable sides, teetering between the positions of commander and caterpillar.

Barbauld’s poetic treatments of the king himself exhibit more pronounced sympathy, particularly from a Dissenter with liberal and radical roots.39 “On the Death of the Princess Charlotte” dwells longer upon the pathos of George III’s decline than on that of his granddaughter’s demise, and draws much of this pathos from the unknowability of his mental states:

In careless apathy—perhaps in mirth
He spends the day; yet is he near in blood,
The very stem on which this blossom grew
    . . . Oh forbear
Nor deem him hard of heart, for, awful, struck
By heaven’s severest visitation, sad,
Like a scathed oak amidst the forest trees
Lonely he stands; leaves sprout, and fade, and fall,
And seasons run their round, to him in vain. (Poems 135.18-28)

If George is an “awful” figure here, it is not due to Hobbesian awe; the repercussions of psychic uncertainty redound onto his subjectivity rather than away from it. “On the King’s Illness, nearly contemporaneous with Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, similarly shows affinity for the king on the grounds of his “human feelings,” and of his equal ground with his subjects in both health and infirmity—because of which, Barbauld suggests, “falls the tear from eyes not used/To gaze on kings with admiration fond” (Poems 122.11, 14-15). It seems that such Burkean “admiration” has no place here, either, for the set of affects Barbauld cultivates differ markedly: “A Nation’s pity and a Nation’s love/Linger beside thy couch, in this the day/Of thy sad visitation, veiling

39 Linda Colley observes that after about 1790, it became commonplace to speak of George as “a husband, a father, a mortal man subject to illness, age and every kind of mundane vulnerability, and, therefore, essentially the same as his subjects” (Britons, 232). “On the King’s Illness,” however, goes further in specifically eschewing royalty as a criterion for fondness: George is specifically unlike “spectre kings” in “dark chambers of the nether world” (Poems 122.7-8). McCarthy understands this to mean that, “were it not for his human virtues, George would join his fellow kings on ‘their burning thrones’ in hell” (Voice of the Enlightenment, 464). The “spectre” of majesty counts for nothing with Barbauld; “mundane vulnerability” seems to be an essential, not merely supplementary, basis for respect.
faults/Of erring judgment and not will perverse./Yet, Oh that thou hadst closed the wounds of war!/That had been praise to suit a higher strain” (*Poems* 122.23-28). The poem voices an impulse to “veil[]” the king’s “faults,” but also a competing impulse—and liberty—to expose them. The “wounds of war” are effectively the shared deficiencies of the king, which are not so much condemned as lamented, and that on an almost familiar basis: “beside thy couch” rather than before thy throne.40

To apply Sedgwick’s insight more broadly to Barbauld’s poetics of texture and proximity, the terms and terrain on which Barbauld imagines fellow-creatures to relate to each other differ from hierarchical systems like Thomson’s or Pope’s. In the *Essay on Man’s* first epistle, Pope’s survey of animals, conspicuously unlike Barbauld’s, is all relative and comparative, justifying brute creation’s entire subordination to humans—“Without this just gradation, could they be/Subjected these to those, or all to thee?”—and, by the same logic, inequality among people.41 He considers it an article of faith, and a blessing, that higher natures are not subject to the pains and experiences of lower ones: “Why has not Man a microscopic eye?/For this plain reason, Man is not a Fly./Say what the use, were finer optics giv’n,/T’inspect a mite, not comprehend the heav’n?/Or touch, if tremblingly alive all o’er?/To smart and agonize at ev’ry pore?”42 Pope’s optimist verse is still based in a Newtonian attitude toward objective material order, and presumes secure positions in the “[v]ast chain of being” for all, even for “The

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40 The word “beside” is significant here. There are three further instances of it in Barbauld’s poetry, two of which (like the example above) describe domestic relationships with the aged: Barbauld describes, in “To Miss R[igby],” on her Attendance upon her Mother at Buxton,” how the addressee “To the husht chamber of disease retires,/To watch and weep beside a parent’s bed” (*Poems* 8.6-7), and in “Washing-Day” how the speaker once “shelter’d” herself “beside the parlour fire,” near her “dear grandmother, eldest of forms,” on whom the children nonetheless play tricks (*Poems* 102.67-8). Here, it thus makes the king approachable in new ways, particularly for a sometime radical.

Sedgwick celebrates the conceptual power of “beside” as a preposition, for it “permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking,” including “cause versus effect” and “subject versus object,” and comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggression, warping, and other relations” (*Touching Feeling*, 8).


42 Ibid., p. 511, epistle 1, lines 193-98.
Rape of the Lock’s” fairy races: “Ye know the Spheres and various Tasks assign’d,/By Laws Eternal, to th’ Aerial Kind.”43 Offices are understood to circumscribe each class of being’s range of experiences, and the interactions different classes have with each other. Although Pope argues for the integrity and rightness of each creature and its place in the universe, the logic of the chain insists that local hardships and “partial Evil” are simply the inevitable byproducts of a separately considered “universal Good.”44 Angelic natures do not even concern themselves in human affairs, any more than humans need concern themselves in insect affairs.

In contrast to Pope’s sylphs, the various ranks in Barbauld’s poems all seem to partake of the same pains. In “To the Baron de Stonne,” the fairy retinues accompanying Barbauld through life have the lifespan and fragility of mayflies: “The little Loves which round her fly,/Will moult the wing, and droop, and die” (Poems 83.20-21). In a poem on aging and the vicissitudes of futurity, Barbauld imagines these hardships extending even into the intangible world; there is no transcendent beauty to which Burkean chivalry should attach itself. “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” ascribes latent sensitivity in the infinite half-order of the cosmos, “[w]here, one by one, the living eyes of heaven/Awake, quick kindling o’er the face of ether/One boundless blaze; ten thousand trembling fires,/And dancing lustres, where th’ unsteady eye/Restless and dazzled, wanders unconfin’d/O’er all this field of glories” (Poems 58.25-30). Barbauld speculates that such “citadels of light, and seats of GODS” are “Perhaps” her “future home,” yet if souls have a kinship with giant stars and deities on the one hand, they are likened on the other to fireflies, darting and still very much alive to psychic flux (Poems 58.61-2).45 Likewise, in “To a little

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43 Ibid., p. 513, epistle 1, line 237; Pope, Rape of the Lock, p. 225, canto 2, lines 75-76.
44 Pope, Essay on Man, p. 515, epistle 1, line 292.
45 The cosmic, seemingly transcendental poetics of “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” deserve further commentary here. According to Robert Jones, “[a]lthough Contemplation encourages the reader to understand the night sky as ‘hieroglyphics’ inscribed on a ‘mystic tablet’ so that man might adore the work of God, the image is more about being disconcerted than it is about finding a path to ‘light us on to our home’ . . . twinkling stars fill the sight, leaving it restless and dazzled; they demand but also defy description leaving the viewer exhilarated yet vanquished,
invisible Being who is expected soon to become visible,” the embryonic “Germ of new life” that Barbauld welcomes into the world. “What powers lie folded in thy curious frame,—” she writes, in a mode neither unambiguously exclamatory nor interrogative, as though the as-yet unformed human’s mature condition were to be encased in a chrysalis; already, at birth, well advanced into its life cycle (*Poems* 100.5). In “On the Birth of a Friend’s eldest Son,” written for Priestley’s child, Barbauld builds in an astonishing amount of uncertainty about the future for an occasional poem:

> Who can tell what eager passions  
> In this little heart shall beat,  
> When ambition, love, or glory,  
> Shall invade this peaceful seat.

> Who can tell how wide the branches  
> Of this tender plant may spread,  
> While beneath its ample shadow  
> Swains may rest, and flocks be fed. (*Poems* 6.21-28)

Only just born, Priestley’s son is already part of a dense social texture that includes military, class, and ecological relationships, and which produces indeterminate sensations in each “little heart.” If, as empiricism and scientific taxonomy gradually displaced the Chain of Being as paradigms, poets saw in imagination “a power that could bridge the gulf between man and nature and knit the two together again,” then Barbauld’s imaginings do so in radically egalitarian fashion. Vulnerability extends even beyond living humans and animals, to spirits and to homunculi as well—to the limits, in other words, of the conceivable sensible world. It is the fabric of Barbauld’s universe.

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This is what leads Barbauld’s speaker to spare “The Caterpillar:” its “fellowship of sense with all that breathes” (Poems 133.27). By “fellowship,” she seems to refer primarily to a shared likeness; a recognition, in the caterpillar’s particularity, of her own bodily and psychic susceptibilities. But the has institutional overtones as well. Barbauld is trying to cultivate respect for an object for palpable, diffuse mutability. She relies, in fact, on the positive chance of exactly that which Burke refused to countenance: that humankind is “little better than the flies of a summer.” An allegiance structured through contiguities differs from Burke’s, Pope’s, or even Paine’s. Barbauld’s “fellowship of sense” is credited, to end “The Caterpillar,” with the compassionate impulse that thwarts soldiers’ bloody-minded imperatives in battle. It encourages a set of feelings, and an act of mercy, that both Burke and Paine would probably welcome, but which neither of their political rationales is quite suited to achieve.

V. Concerns Beside Virtue

Barbauld’s use of texture and proximity reorients social actors to each other, placing them in relations lateral and nodal rather than vertical. She is suspicious, in other words, of the role eminences and hierarchical forms of difference play in social ethics. This has implications for moral distinctions as well. In the jarring final moment of the poem, “The Caterpillar’s” speaker, having spared the caterpillar, declines any special moral status for doing so, and denies it as well to the soldier in an analogous situation: what prompts mercy is “not Virtue,/Yet ’tis the weakness of a virtuous mind” (Poems 133.41-2). This is a striking step back for a child of the liberal Enlightenment. In part, it is plausibly a reaction against Shaftesbury’s naïve-sentimentalist conception of virtue, in that Barbauld’s speaker cannot, per his prescription, admire any good or utility of the caterpillar from her vantage within the system of human relations. But this is itself, I think, only one aspect of a larger problem integral to the meliorist

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47 Burke, Reflections, 95.
conception of virtue—or, perhaps more precisely, Virtue—which consists less in Shaftesburian enjoyment of a static object than in transitive, process-oriented descriptions of virtuous action. If virtue, conceived as a sentimentalist correlative of character, fails to tell the whole story about social subjects, Barbauld argues that it fails all the more if conceived as a meliorist correlative of agency.

It is significant that Barbauld disclaims virtue while on a metaphor dealing with soldiers in battle, for the early poem “Corsica”—perhaps her most patriotic work, and probably the most unqualified endorsement of military action in her career—features a glowing personification of virtue on the battlefield. “When the storm thickens,” Barbauld writes, “when the combat burns,/And pain and death in every horrid shape/That can appall the feeble, prowl around./Then virtue triumphs; then her tow’ring form/Dilates with kindling majesty; her mien/Breathes a diviner spirit” (Poems 9.143-8). Virtue, as a literal attribute of the Corsican army, seems akin to courage—an intrepid spirit that does not balk at, and even thrives under threats. But so personified, virtue is almost an evasion of “pain and death;” an ostentatious decoy-body, alternative to those involved in “combat,” which displays its size and splendor exempt from harm or suffering. Indeed, Dame Virtue’s chief attribute is her imperviousness: she will “oppose her swelling breast/Like a firm shield against the darts of fate” (Poems 9.166-67). She does not share the vulnerabilities of the rest of Barbauld’s menagerie. Behind this figure of virtue, Corsicans and their friends alike can rally, and its presence on the island allows Barbauld confidently to foresee Corsica’s victory in the conflict. The Corsicans, she writes, have

long withstood
With single arm, the whole collected force
Of haughty Genoa, and ambitious Gaul:
And shall withstand it, trust the faithful Muse!
It is not in the force of mortal arm,
Scarcely in fate, to bind the struggling soul
That gall’d by wanton power, indignant swells
Against oppression; breathing great revenge,
Careless of life, determin’d to be free. (Poems 9.98-106).

Though ostensibly speaking of the island’s “genuine sons” (Poems 9.85), she again collapses their numbers into one entity, with “single arm” and one “struggling soul.” It is a personification figure of the Corsicans—more precisely, a deictification—abstracting them even from themselves. As Laura Mandell notes, Barbauld’s personification figures tend to raise questions about the “particular agency behind universal, impersonal figures” such as “the imaginary ‘nation’ advanced by emerging bourgeois ideology.” Such a purportedly durable surrogate is reductive of the mass of creatures and desires for which it would stand. Recourse to such monolithic constructions virtually strips Barbauld’s verse of its textural properties.

Barbauld’s ambivalence toward virtue in “The Caterpillar” thus seems to derive from her broader concern with scale and circumstance. Virtuous action (in particular, Calvinist notions of virtue) will not admit of local contingencies affecting it, but willfully overlooks accident and material condition. It demands imperviousness; spurns danger and adversity. In pronouncing so unequivocally about the outcome of the Corsican conflict, and enjoining British involvement in the young republic’s cause, Barbauld assumes the authority of a political prophet, performing with Thomson’s pompous patriotism as well as his verse style. Yet even “Corsica,” like other early poems, registers some sense of the messy and fragile fabric upon which statesmen and soldiers work. Her hopes, the end of the poem concedes, never came to fruition: contrary to her predications, the Corsican Republic fell to France in May 1769. In this epilogue of sorts,

48 Mandell, “‘Those Limbs Disjointed,’” 30. Mandell further argues that “realist” political constructs, equally with aestheticized personifications, “obscure agency,” and that Barbauld deploys personification to “demystify” both (Ibid.). I shall consider personification tropes in more detail in my discussion of Eighteen Hundred and Eleven. With regard to “Corsica,” I should only like to propose that, if the personification figures in that poem are troublesome or naïve, it is because their imputation of agency is too clear, not too “obscure” or “mystif[ied].”
Barbauld appears politically chastened.\textsuperscript{49} Trying to conclude a futile, naïve poem with a measure of grace, she consoles herself and her readers by celebrating the Corsicans’ unscathed “freedom of the mind,” evidently an ability to acquiesce, or at least endure, in spite of the failure; to practice a social ethics that can imagine sufficient outcomes outside meliorist frameworks. She reasons that “[n]ot with the purple colouring of success/Is virtue best adorned” (\textit{Poems} 9.201, 195-96): perhaps because, as Robert W. Jones observes, “‘purple’ is both nastily imperial and potentially bloody;”\textsuperscript{50} a surprising trace of the violence implicit in the performance of virtue. It is sometimes better, Barbauld senses, that one’s overt political or moral aims be thwarted. In subsequent decades, as her political telos shifted, she would better articulate why.

In 1792, Barbauld revised the ending of her “Thoughts on the Devotional Taste,” replacing the original of several pages with a single paragraph, the purpose of which was to clarify that, although she had enlarged upon the benefits of several churches, she nonetheless saw their deficiencies as well.

Large views of the moral polity of the world may serve to illustrate the providence of God in his different dispensations, but are not made to regulate our own individual conduct, which must conscientiously follow our own opinions and belief. We may see much good in an Establishment, the doctrines of which we cannot give our assent to without violating our integrity; we may respect the tendencies of a Sect, the tenets of which we utterly disapprove. We may think practices useful which we cannot adopt without hypocrisy. We may think all religions beneficial, and believe of one alone that it is true. (SPP 231)

Amidst a scattered field of convictions and conventions, Barbauld insists that the individual can make accommodating choices. She claims an ability, reminiscent of “the freedom of the mind,” to work around institutional constraints. Remarkably, however, her appositions leave unclear which position ‘comes first’ and which constitutes the accommodation. Even though we “may”

\textsuperscript{49} Robert W. Jones writes: “What is striking in these final lines is the degree to which Barbauld questions the authority of her own position . . . [and] her own right to speak, implying that by indulging her delight in struggle she has erred and has succumbed to an unthinking clamour” (“Idea of Resistance,” 135).

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 136.
see good in an establishment, we may nonetheless find ourselves opposed to particular of its doctrines, and, although we might generally oppose an establishment’s doctrines, we may still see particular good in it. Barbauld’s model of individual conscience thus eschews “large views” (as in “Sins of Government”) by stepping back from both Custom and Reform as automatic impulses; by positing situational value in both but inherent virtue in neither.

Barbauld’s revision of “Thoughts” seems to have coincided with her more explicit reconsideration of political debate and action in the wake of the French Revolution. Her 1790 “Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts,” although arguing in the main that Dissenters suffer unjust discrimination, is remarkable in reconfiguring “toleration” as the prerogative of Dissenters; as a minority’s conscientious recoil from its own powers. Toleration occurs, she writes, when “from lenity or prudence we forbear doing all which in justice we might do. It is the bearing with what is confessedly an evil, for the sake of some good with which it is connected. . . . Abuses are tolerated, when they are so interwoven with the texture of the piece, that the operation of removing them becomes too delicate and hazardous. Unjust claims are tolerated, when they are complied with for the sake of peace and conscience” (SPP 267). The dictates of “justice” may be at odds with those of “prudence,” “lenity,” “peace and conscience,” Barbauld senses, and thus a tolerant person’s concern for justice is secondary to her concern for “the texture of the piece” whereby evils (apparent or real) may be “connected” with goods. Reform is carried out upon a living, “delicate,” and perhaps infirm substrate: it is evidently for this reason that Barbauld casts the discursively simple “remov[al]” of “Abuses” as an “operation” no less “hazardous” than the excision of an inoperable tumor. Barbauld’s wariness of reform and innovation is less Burkean than it might seem. For Burke, the particular content of one’s political prejudices is itself important, for prejudices embody the accumulated
sum of past generations’ inherent wisdom: they are explicitly the will the dead, abstracted. For Barbauld, however, prejudices must be taken seriously because of their associated objects: in particular, that they have referents and exponents in the living world. What matters most to Barbauld are the occupants of an ideological position, not its coordinates. There are elements of opponents’ systems that deserve to be thought of and treated well, and others of which we should be wary. It is thus important to be able to negotiate around—or, perhaps, beside—the tenets of a particular system, but it is also important not to dismiss them outright. Barbauld’s ideal mode of public action and discourse is not to overturn one system or value in favor of another, but to pick her way carefully through a single, messily woven social texture comprised of systems and values together with organisms.

Hence “The Caterpillar’s” consideration of proximity to one’s opponent marks a further development and explicit articulation of an unease that seems to have dogged her for her entire career, and which by the mid-1790s undermined her capacity for meliorist agendas. Her engagement with relations of contiguity and “beside-ness” allows her in Sedgwick’s words to eschew “the bossy gesture of ‘calling for’ an imminently perfected critical or revolutionary practice that one can oneself only adumbrate.”51 It is one thing to declare that caterpillars are pests and must be eradicated. It is another to renounce altogether ‘pest control’ in a country that had known severe food shortages in the years immediately prior.52 To spare a caterpillar, Barbauld’s textural preoccupation shows us, one need do neither; needn’t initiate movement in the arena of huge and abstract forces. Her ethics of proximity aims to break through the kind of

51 Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 8.
52 From the caterpillars’ “silken webs” (Poems 133.18), one can infer that the species in question is a variety of tent caterpillar, which in good seasons can denude entire stands of trees. In her excellent article on this poem, Den Otter confirms that the markings described correspond to those of the Lackey moth larva—a European tent caterpillar—and documents their eighteenth-century reputation for destructiveness, propagated by such authorities as Linnaeus and the London Aurelian Society (“Pests, Parasites, and Positionality,” 214-6).
partisan thinking that reduces organic agents to the bearers of, in McCarthy’s words, “Manichean” moral absolutes. By replacing “Virtue” with “weakness,” Barbauld puts political agents into a closer, more doubtful relationship with each other. The substitution of terms here recalls Barbauld’s note to “The Mouse’s Petition,” added for the third edition, in which she (reluctant to stigmatize Priestley further than the Establishment already had) insists that the poem dramatizes not “the plea of humanity against cruelty,” but rather “of mercy against justice.” It creates a genuine dilemma, the solution of which is not to be found by choosing one concept over another. Any population has moral terms that can be waved about on its behalf, but those terms are not why a population matters. Barbauld’s sense of texture allows her to avoid seeing Virtue, humanity, or justice as collections of ideological units to be shuffled around at will. It forces her to see societal forms and reforms as tenuous associations between living beings, rather than as theoretical exercises or choices merely among different values.

By the 1790s, Barbauld’s poetry was explicitly encouraging such a shift. “The Rights of Women,” written in response to Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, satirizes the female political ambition to rule over men, and urges instead a politics of accommodation. As increasing numbers of critics are observing, the poem is not a conservative dismissal of feminist causes: in fact, McCarthy observes, its critique of women who would use their “grace” and “[b]lushes” to gain power over men (*Poems* 90.9-12) aligns with Wollstonecraft’s

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54 Barbauld, quoted in headnote to “The Mouse’s Petition,” *Poems*, 245. Kathryn Ready argues that this note “serves immediately to legitimize Priestley’s air-pump experiments and to minimize the issue of animal suffering” (“What then, poor Beastie!,” 99). How either of these follows—particularly the second—is, quite simply, unclear.
55 For two early, influential objections to the poem on these terms, see Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility*, 222, 266, and Ross, *Contours of Masculine Desire*, 217-20. For recuperative readings that take more nuanced approaches to the poem, see Bradshaw, “Limits of Barbauld’s Feminism;” Janowitz, “Amiable and Radical Sociability;” and McCarthy, *Voice of the Enlightenment*, 350-5,
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positions. Such a proclivity is at once coquettish and belligerent. Barbauld, however, is concerned with it not only as a model of gender relations, but as an instance of a more general attitude toward power and reform. Her poem juxtaposes a lexicon of government and politics—“empire,” “rule,” “reign,” “war,” “rights,” “subject,” “golden sceptre”—with descriptions of women as victims, whose political clout is a function of their suasive sensibility: “degraded, scorned, opprest,” “injured,” and speaking in “[s]oft melting tones” (Poems 90.7-19, 1-2). Of these two aspects, Barbauld suggests, women’s vulnerability will win out: their “store/Of bright artillery glancing from afar” is not, as for Pope or Burke, a reliable index (or means) of power. Rather, she warns her female reader, “Subduing and subdued, thou soon shalt find/Thy coldness soften, and thy pride give way” (Poems 90.9-10,27-28). The act of “subduing,” Barbauld’s participle shift emphasizes, includes an object as well as a subject, and those who purpose to defend the “oppresst” will quickly find their own “rule” undermining that very aim, reproducing the severe and oppressive structures they first purposed to remove. Barbauld has reservations about delicate people’s capacity for permanent political dominance. If women, from either nature or culture, possess greater sensibility and emotionality than men—as Barbauld generally seems to believe—then they are ill-suited to rule the way men have. But in the context of Barbauld’s broader political reticence, this is much to women’s credit. In place of repressive, authoritarian,

56 McCarthy, Voice of the Enlightenment, 353. He glosses the end of the poem as follows: “Cease to politicize the relation of love as a power relation; yield yourself to mutuality. This close is practically a versification of Wollstonecraft’s view that ‘the illegitimate power, which [women] obtain, by degrading themselves, is a curse, and that they must return to nature and equality’” (354, addition in original).

57 Bradshaw argues that “a separatist female writing community would function not as liberational but as a further re-enforcement of the eighteenth-century ideology of the separate spheres” (“Limits of Barbauld’s Feminism,” 27). Marlon Ross, despite his initial insistence that the poem “reaffirms the status quo,” evinces a grasp of the ways it challenges the legitimacy of “normalizing acts of exclusion” and the affects that underlie power (Contours of Masculine Desire, 220). In a subsequent article, he understands Barbauld’s gender politics in more nuanced terms, as a question of “how women can enter the loop of power without being further contaminated by the consequences of power. Gaining their rights might simply transform women’s state, from one of being more victimized by male power than guilty of its abuses, to one of more equally shared corruption and guilt” (“Configurations of Feminine Reform,” 91). His view of Barbauld, though questionable in some historical and biographical particulars, is far from wholly negative, and appears to have shifted over time.
or paranoid politics, Barbauld imagines “[t]hat separate rights [be] lost in mutual love,” and that sociability between the sexes be mediated by common potential as the victims of gender ideology (Poems 90.32). It is because she sees the sexes as equal in this regard that their “separate” status is to her untenable. In arguing against systematic domination of any group by any group, if not absolutely the fastest way of achieving better lives for women, then perhaps, on the whole, this is the least destructive.

VI. Rhetoric, Sympathy, Citizenship

In keeping with her recurring treatment of texture and scale, “Sins of Government’s” explicit aim is to bring the nation’s collective ethic in large political matters into line with the ethics of the individual and village, which is characterized by “differences arising from jarring interests and interfering claims between us and our neighbours, &c.” (SPP 299). Barbauld’s phrase suggests a somewhat Sternean understanding of day-to-day sociability as a series of entangling clashes. This, along with the essay’s persistent diction of probabilities and counterfactuals, presents social ethics as less a matter of discovering one’s simple “duty” or “rule” of conduct (although these words occasionally appear) than of gaining an expansive sense of complexity; a sense that one’s actions are not clear-cut nor predictably limited in their consequences.

Repent this day, not only of the actual evil you have done, but of the evil of which your actions have been the cause.—If you slander a good man, you are answerable for all the violence of which that slander may be the remote cause; if you raise undue prejudices against any particular class or description of citizens, and they suffer through the bad

\[58\] Ross asserts that the poem “argues against women’s rights” and that Barbauld “cannot grant women absolute equal rights with men” (Contours of Masculine Desire, 217), without noting that Barbauld treats the issue of “separate,” not equal rights, and that the hyperconventional feminine prerogatives represented in the poem would be a poor, shallow excuse for “rights” indeed. Ross bases his latter, more broadly biographical claim not only on this poem, but on Barbauld’s 1773 letter to her husband in which she declines his proposal to start an academy for young women. Ross’s reading of this letter is disappointingly cursory and even crude—like several early feminist dismissals of Barbauld—but this appears due in large part to understandable false assumptions stemming from Barbauld’s niece Lucy Aikin’s misrepresentation and abridgment of the letter in 1825. For more details, including the unabridged text of the letter, see McCarthy, “New Facts, New Story;” and Voice of the Enlightenment, 341-8.
passions your misrepresentations have worked up against them, you are answerable for
the injury, though you have not wielded the bludgeon, or applied the firebrand; if you
place power in improper hands, you are answerable for the abuse of that power; if you
oppose conciliatory measures, you are answerable for the distress which more violent
ones may produce. If you use intemperate invectives and inflammatory declamation, you
are answerable if others shed blood. It is not sufficient, even if our intentions are pure; we
must weigh the tendencies of our actions, for we are answerable, in a degree at least, for
those remote consequences, which, though we did not intend, we might have foreseen.
(SPP 318-19)

Barbauld doubtless has the 1792 burning of Priestley’s home at Birmingham in mind, but she
stresses that “actual evil”—suggestive of an evil not only manifest in reality, but also current and
proximate as well as act-ual, discrete and volitional—is not the only problem to be addressed.
There is also the matter of potential evil, whose difficult traceability is reflected in Barbauld’s
sentence construction. Her anaphora emphasizes the consequentialist and emergent nature of her
ethics—a matter of the “if,” not the “intentions”—while the winding syntax emphasizes the
escalating chain of events and “remote cause[s]” that can lead to unmeant harm: from mere
“description” arise “prejudices,” which may in turn give rise to “bad passions,” which in turn
could produce “injury” by means of a “bludgeon” or “firebrand.” The gradual amplification of
damage surprises us, and, if it seems exaggerated, it is entirely plausible. There is also a subtly
tactile shift in Barbauld’s diction: if debates about “conciliatory measures” sound formal or
academic at worst, the “distress,” “violenc[e],” and “shed blood” that might result are much
more tied to the body and its susceptibilities. As in her poetry, it is when Barbauld starts
considering “the tendencies of our actions” that she really gets into the domain of uncertainty.

In other passages of “Sins of Government,” questions and considerations likewise
proliferate regarding the possible side-effects of common civic acts. In one lengthy paragraph,
Barbauld asks her reader, of any approved governmental plan currently in place, “whether the
filling up of the plan be equally unexceptionable” (SPP 305). As above, Barbauld’s sentences are
anaphoric and additive: “Our laws, are they mild, equal, and perspicuous; free from burdensome forms and unnecessary delays . . . Are they accessible to rich and poor, sparing of human blood, calculated rather to check and set bounds to the inequality of fortunes than to increase them, rather to prevent and reform crimes than to punish them?—If good, are they well administered?” (Ibid.). Her questions range further, over the lenity and intelligibility of law and, perhaps predictably, the latent psychological consequences of the Corporation and Test Acts. Her scathing description of a military budget—“so much for killing, so much for maiming, so much for making widows and orphans, so much for bringing famine upon a district”—is similarly structured.

These passages clearly aim for expansiveness but seemingly, and importantly, not for exhaustiveness. Barbauld’s strategy is to overwhelm the reader: to draw attention to the act of inquiry while simultaneously suggesting that inquiries will necessarily be incomplete. Considering Britain’s acts as a whole, Barbauld writes: “Can we look round from sea to sea, and from east to west, and say, that our brother hath not aught against us? If such instances do not exist under our immediate eye, do they exist any where under our influence and jurisdiction?” (SPP 308). Although sensation is of the utmost importance to Barbauld, the “immediate eye” cannot establish on its own the extent of abuses for which the citizen might be accountable within the vast arena “from sea to sea, and from east to west.” This image and action strikingly resembles the flight of fancy trope so common in the work Thomson and his generation, and indeed employed by Barbauld herself in poems such as “A Summer Evening’s Meditation.” Barbauld is calling, then, for imaginative exertion. In “Sins of Government,” she does so with what we might call leading questions: they are suggestive as well as interrogative. Such questions perform rhapsody, eliciting—in part by modeling—the kind of considerations readers
might have without suggesting that they (the questions) are exhaustive in themselves. The reader is meant to do much of the work.

The very rhetoricity of Barbauld’s writing—its textural conceits, counterfactual exempla, ambiguous verb use, and other persuasive devices—indicates an anxiety on her part that good social ethics are not readily acquired. Speaking in the terms of sentimentalist faculty psychology, this rhetoricity, along with her appeal to faculties including sensation and imagination, suggests that the human moral sense is neither an automatic nor autonomous capacity. Although she read Hutcheson in her youth, her prose and especially poetic works make it hard to maintain, with McCarthy, that she was for any significant portion of her career a naïve sentimentalist. Rather than appeal to a primal moral faculty that perceives moral qualia autonomously, Barbauld grounds social attachment in imaginative-sensory suggestions of the “fellowship of sense.” The moral sense depends on other faculties, which must therefore be cultivated. In “The Mouse’s Petition,” she celebrates “The well taught philosophic mind” which “To all compassion gives,/Casts round the world an equal eye,/And feels for all that lives” (Poems 19.25-28). We have seen that Barbauld’s versions of both geography and ecology entail a good deal of uncertainty, seeking complexity and interdependencies rather than a reductionist account of the world. In that sense, then, the majority of her poems contribute to the formation of a “well taught philosophic mind,” insofar as they consistently try to construe the world in textural terms. Her poetry is a supplement and support to the epistemological and affective attitudes that underlie good sociability. Whatever Barbauld’s opinion of humans’ natural benevolence, it is obvious that persuasion and debate are extraordinarily important to her. She believes it’s a civic duty to make one’s position clear; to point out errors in others’ arguments even if those errors have been

59 McCarthy observes that Barbauld’s father exposed her to Hutcheson in her youth, and consequently claims Hutcheson, along with Stocism, as one of the most formative influences on her thought. Biographical circumstances aside, I do not believe Barbauld’s writings reveal a significant or consistent Hutchesonian streak.
established as law: “the more strictly we are bound to acquiesce, the more it is incumbent on us to remonstrate” (“Sins of Government,” SPP 317).

For Barbauld, there is nothing in the bare proposition of vice or oppression that necessarily activates the moral sense: “There are some,” she writes, “whose nerves, rather than whose principles, cannot bear cruelty—like other nuisances, they would not chuse it in sight, but they can be well content to know it exists, and that they are indebted to it for the increase of their income, and the luxuries of their table” (SPP 308). For such individuals, there is a degree of cavalier nonchalance accompanying the mere knowledge that cruelty exists for their benefit. This is, in Barbauld’s view, a clear ethical deficiency—one which evidently discredits the idea that aversion to vice is an innate or universal capacity. The moral sense, she argues, is not so much an autonomous faculty as the product of other faculties’ coordination: “nerves” and “sight” play a primary role, as do the tangible considerations of “income” and “luxuries of . . . table,” in leading individuals to “chuse” on outcome, for good or ill, over another. Hence her poetic emphasis of proximity, a literary modus operandi that enlists sensation and imagination in order to shape moral sentiments.

Without these faculties’ cooperation, discussions of war and strife transmit no sense of danger. In merely “know[ing],” in “principles” and words, conflict seems predictable and hence palatable. From the earliest stages of life, Barbauld argues in “What is Education?,” individuals imbibe most of their beliefs from “the education of circumstances—insensible education—which, like insensible perspiration, is of more constant and powerful effect, and of infinitely more consequence to the habit than that which is direct and apparent” (SPP 323). These are not Burkean circumstances that endow one with increasing authority; although they do accrue rather
like Burkean prejudices, they do not ensure an accumulation of organic wisdom. What holds for a single child applies as well to society as a whole:

States are educated as individuals, by circumstances; the prophet may cry aloud, and spare not; the philosopher may descant on morals; eloquence may exhaust itself in invective against the vices of the age: these vices will certainly follow certain states of poverty or riches, ignorance or high civilization. But what these gentle alteratives fail of doing, may be accomplished by an unsuccessful war, a loss of trade, or any of those great calamities, by which it pleases Providence to speak to a nation in such language as will be heard. If, as a nation, we would be cured of pride, it must be by mortification; if of luxury, by a national bankruptcy, perhaps; if of injustice, or the spirit of domination, by a loss of national consequence. In comparison of these strong remedies, a fast, or a sermon, are prescriptions of very little efficacy. (SPP 332)

Here is a call for the value of uncertainty. Like Sterne, Barbauld puts forth the daring idea that “unsuccessful” enterprises are the most effective to “accomplish” the “cure” of social vices. Discourses do only a very small part—the impression of “loss” and “calamities” is “perhaps” needed to effect real changes in personal or collective ethics. It is for this reason that Barbauld, in an 1803 letter, writes disdainfully of those who declare in polite conversation, “with a most smiling and placid countenance, that the French are to land in a fortnight, and that London is to be sacked and plundered for three days,—and then they talk of going to watering-places. I am sure we do not believe in the danger we pretend to believe in; and I am sure that none of us can even form an idea how we should feel if we were forced to believe it.”

Linda Colley, based on diaries of the period, asserts that fears and rumors of French landings were widespread between 1795 and 1805, but such polite whisperings mean little to Barbauld. Aside from deploring citizens’ detachment from the hazards of war, she deplores in Thackerayan tones their ability to fit the subject right into their own social schedules: not only can they break off “and then . . . talk of going to watering-places,” as though merely changing the scene of their entertainment, but they confine the hypothetical ravages of the invaders to a precise timeline—with a landing “in a

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60 Barbauld to Judy Beecroft, 28 July 1803, quoted in McCarthy, Voice of the Enlightenment, 460-61.
61 Colley, Britons, 306.
fortnight” and then pillaging “for three days,” as if by appointment. There is a kind of smug security in such a viewpoint, which Barbauld opposes ever more vocally from the 1790s onward. Our view of war as citizens, she writes in 1793, is taken in while “sitting aloof from those circumstances of personal provocation” and “protected in our usual occupations” (“Sins of Government,” SPP 312), a situation which Colley asserts did not produce apathy, but merely “made responses to the wars more unabashedly chauvinistic.”⁶² The zealous prosecution of war from home—down to and including individual approval of it—is a massively calamitous hobby-horse; a procedure that troubles nobody with the accidents of others’ distress or aggression. Education by circumstances is the same chastening force to which Barbauld appeals in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*.⁶³

Citizens’ manner of aloofness toward the costs of individual interest seems to have troubled Barbauld in social arenas other than that of warfare. “Washing-Day” criticizes (if not outright challenges) bourgeois distance from the labor that sustains bourgeois households. Barbauld’s speaker professes identification with the gentleman-addresssee’s exasperation on washing-days: “Ye who beneath the yoke of wedlock bend,/With bowed soul, full well ye ken the day . . . for to that day nor peace belongs/Nor comfort” (*Poems* 102.9-13). But if the poem’s lofty diction suggests the perceived enormity of hardship for the master of the house, it also carries more than a hint of mockery on the part of the speaker:

require not thou
Who call’st thyself perchance the master there,
Or study swept, or nicely dusted coat,
Or usual ‘tendance; ask not, indiscreet,
Thy stockings mended, tho’ the yawning rents
Gape wide as Erebus, nor hope to find
Some snug recess impervious; should’st thou try
The ’customed garden walks, thine eye shall rue

⁶³ Ross, “Configurations of Feminine Reform,” 98.
The budding fragrance of thy tender shrubs,  
Myrtle or rose, all crushed beneath the weight  
Of coarse check’d apron, with impatient hand  
Twitch’d off when showers impend: or crossing lines  
Shall mar thy musings, as the wet cold sheet  
Flaps in thy face abrupt. (Poems 102.33-46)

You shall share the encumbrance, the poem insists, of deeds done for your benefit. The rhythm and lineation of this passage lend the “[t]witch[ing]” hand and “[f]lap[ping]” sheet the most intrusive effect possible, and indeed the compression of Barbauld’s grammar makes much of the poem laborious to read. The possessive modification of “thy tender shrubs,” uncharacteristic in Barbauld’s depictions of life forms, confers an extended sense of proprietary fondness and loss, as though it were the household’s—or one’s own—members being “crushed” in the bustle. When the maids “chase repose,” they both work to hasten their own ease and, as a consequence, disturb their masters’ (Poems 102.14). Yet most of these complaints, the speaker strongly suggests, are insignificant. The mock-heroic description of stocking-holes that “Gape wide as Erebus” is all but impossible to identify with, particularly in contrast to the “yawning rents,” or leaky tenements, that must have housed so many British poor. The poem’s ironic thrust, then, would seem to be aimed less at the serious poetic treatment of domestic labor than at the bourgeois who personally “dread[s]” washing-day while dismissing his maids’ tribulations as “petty miseries” (Poems 102.8, 28). For, as if in response to such a dismissive attitude, Barbauld points to an actually significant hazard: that the addressee is only “perchance the master” of his house.

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64 The speaker opens the poem by first accusing the muses of having “turned gossips,” then inviting the “domestic Muse,/In slip-shod measure loosely prattling on,” to “sing the dreaded Washing-Day” (Poems 102.1-8). In echoing the judgments of critics who decry such subjects, however, Barbauld—a fond reader of Goldsmith—seems not to be seconding them, but rather turning her irony upon those comfortable landed readers who might second them; who might believe such subjects to be undue intrusions upon their lives and leisure.
This passing remark suggests the gentleman’s fortunate birth, but also his quite literal subordination to his servants in matters of domestic economy. In “Washing-Day,” the hapless master is placed (again, through the speaker’s double-edged identification) in the position of a child begging vainly for “butter’d toast” or a “soft caress” (Poems 102.61-64). It is the maids, by contrast, who run the house this day. Barbauld seems to have relished this sort of humbling reversal, for her “Thoughts on the Inequality of Conditions” develops it further. The wealthy man, she writes, is vulnerable on account of the “adventitious wants and infirmities which take possession of [him], and make him dependent on those who administer to them. . . . Skill is power. The owner of a large house and domain may call himself, if he pleases, the master of them . . . but he cannot deprive his steward, his butler, his gardener, his cook, even his dairy maid, of that importance which arises from their understanding what he does not understand” (“Inequality of Conditions,” SPP 348-49). Taken together, these two texts bring home just how unsound many a household’s foundation is. In both of them, Barbauld insists not only on the poor’s resulting difficulties, but on their real power over those who employ them. The “perchance” is meant to be disquieting.

VII. Drawing Out Leviathan: Eighteen Hundred and Eleven

Eighteen Hundred and Eleven is thus consistent with the concerns of Barbauld’s earlier career. In “Washing-Day’s” “anxious looks/Cast at the lowering sky” (Poems 102.20-21), we already see intimations of the later poem’s “tempest blackening in the distant West” (Poems 124.60). The project of these two poems, in a sense, is no less contiguous: Eighteen Hundred and

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McCarthy asserts that Barbauld fully accepted Whig history in her youth, and that the Regency marks her first clear dissociation from it (Voice of the Enlightenment, 457-58). William Keach vacillates on this question, arguing once that the poem “marks a decisive break with the meliorist historical perspective” of Barbauld’s “progressive Dissenting ideology” (“A Regency Prophecy,” 577), but elsewhere that it “realizes impulses that are apparent in Barbauld’s poetry from the beginning” (“Survival of Dissent,” 57). I contend that, if Barbauld ever demonstrated a “meliorist historical perspective,” she must have begun to break from it in the late 1760s (with, for instance, her revisions of “Corsica”), and already substantially broken from it by the mid-1790s (as shown in works like “Wilberforce” and “Sins of Government”).
Eleven attempts to collapse this distinction between domestic and global issues and thereby bring the ethics of the latter into line with those of the former. The poem depicts localized detail as well as huge, abstract sociohistorical forces, including on the one hand prominent spots in the British landscape and culture—like Cambridge, Dr. Johnson’s tomb in St. Paul’s, and relics at the British Museum—and on the other the “death drum” of jingoism and the “Spirit” that governs the rise, progress, and end of civilization (Poems 124.1, 215). Eighteen Hundred and Eleven develops, to its fullest extent, Barbauld’s interest in texture, scale, and the mutuality of action, in an attempt to complicate the meliorist values that informed Britain’s actions in the Napoleonic Wars.

The poem opens with an allegorical representation of the conflict that, couplets aside, would not be out of place in “Corsica” or in Thomson: “Colossal Power with overwhelming force/Bears down each fort of Freedom in its course;/Prostrate she lies beneath the Despot’s sway,/While the hushed nations curse him—and obey” (Poems 124.7-10). It is unclear whether it is “Freedom” or the personified Britain that “lies beneath” the massive specter of Napoleon’s France, but it is feminine and subject to violation. A distressed maiden—perhaps a Clarissa, or a Marie Antoinette—thus represents the Enlightenment wisdom and goodwill held to be native to Britain. The outlook in these lines, if bleak, is none the less clear. When public rhetoric, casts huge, quasi-personified forces and states en masse as the actors in war, as Thomson and Collins do in their meliorist depictions, then British widows’ macroscopic engagement with the political map—which comes some twenty lines later—is understandable enough.

Barbauld quickly complicates, and begins to shrink from, this expository perspective. Her next personifications are decidedly more visceral, and less suggestive of virtue under siege—“Man calls to famine, nor invokes in vain,/Disease and Rapine follow in her train”—and she
begins to look to the texture of the landscape: “The tramp of marching hosts disturbs the plough. . . [. . .] and war’s least horror is the ensanguined field” (Poems 124.15-22). In context, “field” suggests a farmer’s field as readily as a battlefield, and the evoked extent of damage spirals from there. A battlefield is the least of horrors; there are bloody farmers’ fields to consider, very mixtures of tillage and gore; there are even greater horrors than that. Through her elision of place, Barbauld sets in motion worried imaginings about the final scope of the war. The geography of Britain and France is not as clear-cut or reassuring as a widow with a map would make it out to be. In fact, it is immediately after that passage that Barbauld lets loose with one of the most hurtful pronouncements in the poem:

And think’st thou, Britain, still to sit at ease,  
An island Queen amidst thy subject seas,  
While the vexed billows, in their distant roar,  
But soothe thy slumbers, and but kiss thy shore?  
To sport in wars, while danger keeps aloof,  
Thy grassy turf unbruised by hostile hoof?  
So sing thy flatterers; but, Britain, know,  
Thou who hast shared the guilt must share the woe. (Poems 124.39-46)

This is as explicit a deflation of British optimism as Barbauld could have written, and in particular the place Thomson claims for Britain as “Island of bliss! Amid the subject seas . . . at once the wonder, terror, and delight/Of distant nations; whose remotest shores/Can soon be shaken by thy naval arm;/Not to be shook thyself, but all assaults/Baffling, as thy hoar cliffs the loud sea-wave.”

Barbauld’s borderline mockery of such British hopes for tranquility and, especially, her insinuation that the nation has “shared the guilt,” may seem gratuitous or even sadistic, and upon publication were met by turns with defensiveness and hostility. Notably, John Wilson Croker, writing for the Quarterly Review, objected to Barbauld’s characterization of “Famine” and food shortages: “We had indeed heard that some mad and mischievous partisans

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66 Thomson, Summer, p. 81, lines 1595-1601.
had ventured to charge the scarcity which unhappily exists, upon the political measures of government:—but what does Mrs. Barbauld mean? Does she seriously accuse mankind of wishing for a famine, and interceding for starvation?\textsuperscript{67} What Croker seems to object to most, even dismissing it as “mad and mischievous,” is the “charge” of famine to “the political measures of government”—in other words, Barbauld’s inculpation of Britain. His avowed non-comprehension must be a performed expression of contempt, for he states Barbauld’s argument more or less accurately. Britain’s policies led to food shortages both at home and abroad\textsuperscript{68}—and if this does not entail directly or expressly “wishing for a famine,” it nonetheless, according to Barbauld’s view of “remote consequences,” amounts to “interceding for starvation.” As the world’s undisputed naval superpower at the time, Britain, too, was an imperial aggressor over its “subject seas.”

Croker’s reaction to \textit{Eighteen Hundred and Eleven} recalls a similar, if less devastatingly misogynistic review of John Aikin’s \textit{Evenings at Home} some ten years earlier. Among the fourteen pieces Barbauld contributed to her brother’s collection was “Things by their Right Names,” a brief dialogue wherein a child asks his father to hear a tale of “a bloody murder,” to which his father responds by describing a battle and insisting that “murder” describes battles accurately (SPP 291-2). Sarah Trimmer, herself a pioneer in children’s literature, disliked the implications of the piece: “to call a battle ‘a bloody murder,’ when the cause on one side or other is justifiable, is \textit{not} ‘calling things by their \textit{right} names;’ if it were, then the people of Israel, when they went against the idolatrous nations to extirpate them from the earth, were \textit{bloody}

\textsuperscript{67} Croker, review of \textit{Eighteen Hundred and Eleven}, 310.
\textsuperscript{68} At home, the compulsory allocation and rationing of crops, along with Britain’s embargoes against occupied nations, led to acute scarcities throughout the war, including several in 1811. On the Continent, those embargoes and the British use of scorched earth tactics, notably in Portugal, had similar results.
murderers, though they acted by the express command of the LORD GOD.”69 This is, in fact, Barbauld’s point; murders are murders, divine sanction notwithstanding. We have seen that she thinks about conflict counterfactually, in terms of moral probability rather than moral certainty. War is certainly no exception: it

requires the extremest necessity to justify it; it ought not to be the common and usual state of society. As both parties cannot be in the right, there is always an equal chance, at least, to either of them, of being in the wrong; but as both parties may be to blame, and most commonly are, the chance is very great indeed against its being entered into from any adequate cause; yet war may be said to be, with regard to nations, the sin which most easily besets them. (SPP 312)

In this same passage, Barbauld repudiates providentialism; “the idea which most nations have entertained, that they are the peculiar favourites of Heaven. We nourish our pride by fondly fancying that we are the only nation for whom the providence of God exerts itself; the only nation whom he has endowed with a competent share of wisdom to frame wise laws and rational governments” (SPP 311). Justice and moral sanction are comforting, and reductive, lenses through which to view conflicts. In answer to the war’s apologists, and those who consider the progress of the state beyond question, Barbauld denies that express moral commands, or the most venerable tradition, ensure us of acting well: “the united will of a whole people cannot make wrong right, or sanction one act of rapacity, injustice, or breach of faith” (SPP 302). How one defines or quantifies these terms in the absence of majority compact is a question Barbauld never answers in “Sins,” and seems even less disposed to answer in Eighteen Hundred and Eleven. The poem considers conflict without the consoling lenses of either justice or God, and finally without even the “Colossal Power” or Manichaean specter of Napoleon: in other words, without what we might call the structural devices of the British historical narrative.

69 Quoted SPP 292n1.
For this is the most fundamental certainty *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* aims to circumvent: the certainty of meliorist Whig history; that Britain was the moral and intellectual heir of history’s accumulating westward progress, which Geoffrey Hartman deems the “largest of Enlightenment clichés.”

Barbauld once more draws on this nationalistic myth as popularized in Thomson’s *Liberty*, but much more equivocally than in “Corsica.” Barbauld’s mature essay “On the Classics” argues against the smooth progress of Whig history specifically, insisting “the real sources of History . . . betray the deficiency of our documents, and the difficulty of reconciling jarring accounts. . . . It will show the unsightly chasms and breaks which the modern compiler passes over with a light foot.” Barbauld ascribes something like textural properties, “chasms and breaks,” to the textual traces of history; her interest seems to lie more in “betray[ing] the deficiency” and “show[ing]” the “jarring” nature of bad explanations than of “reconciling” or “pass[ing] over” these.

The Barbauld of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is likewise suspicious of claims to political and historical authority, even her own. In a letter shortly after the poem’s publication, she writes: “I acknowledge it to be gloomy & I am sure I do not wish to be a true prophet, yet when one sees the continual change, the astonishing revolutions which have changed & do change the political face of the globe, what nation has a right to say ‘My mountain stands strong, I shall never be moved[?]’” Barbauld is unconcerned with whether her poem is “true” or “prophet[ic];” rather, she aims to give pause to the meliorist who would make such claims. History interests her to the extent that it influences ethical commitment; the poem is aimed at the production of subjective doubt, not objective fact. Readings of the poem that align Barbauld with

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71 See for instance Bradshaw, “Dystopian Futures;” and Rohrbach, “History of the Future.”
72 Quoted in McCarthy, *Voice of the Enlightenment*, xviii.
73 Barbauld to Judy Beecroft, 19 March 1812, quoted in McCarthy, *Voice of the Enlightenment*, 481.
specific structural or policy initiatives—like revolution, feminist dystopianism, or the production of a Dissenting intellectual canon—would thus seem to charge her with the very excess of confidence and dubious authority that the poem challenges in the first place. Its persistent concern with power relations and cosmopolitan ethics are hardly symptoms of a poet “unmoored from her previous circles of sociability,” or seeking to assert her own plan for reform against the Establishment. Barbauld did “wish” for a better society, but aimed to achieve this through education of the individual conscience; through mutual respect for the fragility of fellow subjects and the precariousness of ‘general good.’

_Eighteen Hundred and Eleven_ does not shy away from, nor seek to bring clarity to, disjunctions or contradictions inherent in events, nor posit immutable causal relationships among them. Take, for instance, the trope of Britain carrying on the cultural legacy of Rome, an assumption notably underlying Edward Gibbon’s influential _Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire_ and which Barbauld shockingly transforms:

> And now, where Caesar saw with proud disdain
> The wattled hut and skin of azure stain,
> Corinthian columns rear their graceful forms,
> And light varandas brave the wintry storms,
> While British tongues the fading fame prolong
> Of Tully’s eloquence and Maro’s song.
> Where once Bonduca whirled the scythed car,
> And the fierce matrons raised the shriek of war,
> Light forms beneath transparent muslins float,
> And tutored voices swell the artful note.
> Light-leaved acacias and the shady plane
> And spreading cedar grace the woodland reign;
> While crystal walls the tenderer plants confine,
> The fragrant orange and the nectared pine . . . (Poems 124.283-96)

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75 Janowitz, “Amiable and Radical Sociability,” 78.
Britain’s formation is marked by strife and uncertainty that the meliorist account of it neglects to indicate. Barbauld exploits Rome’s dual role in British historiography—still as the island’s intellectual progenitor, but also as its first successful invader and subjugator. In enjoying the benefits, Britain is not exempt from their costs. This passage capitalizes aesthetically on the historical coincidence, juxtaposing suggestions of a rough climate and explicit images of Roman invasion and Celtic resistance with “transparent muslins,” “fading fame,” “light-leaved” trees, “crystal walls,” “tenderer plants,” and even “wattled hut[s].” The (mostly) luxuries Barbauld describes are decadent and precarious: her rich imagery is particularly tactile, and all the textures are, in one way or another, fragile.

William McCarthy judges this the “most haunting passage in the poem,” and without explaining that assessment in great detail, understands it to argue that “progress . . . [has] brought enervating luxury.” The textures here, however, seem decidedly more innervated than enervated. Luxury does not exempt the comfortable rich from hazards to their lifestyle or persons; it may well heighten those hazards, as Barbauld argues in the late essay “Thoughts on the Inequality of Conditions:”

The poor woman, whose thin and scanty garment is not sufficient to defend her from the blasts of winter, suffers, no doubt, from the cold; and so does the young lady of fashion, who is also obliged, by that fashion from whence she derives her importance, shiver in a thin and scanty garment, and to expose her health by encountering without sufficient covering the noxious damp of the midnight air. (SPP 350)

This is what Barbauld earlier in the poem terms “Enfeebling Luxury” (Poems 124.64). It is therefore a mistake for anyone—for radical antiwar Dissenters, and certainly for the prowar Establishment—to withhold sympathy for other groups’ losses, or to imagine that Britain’s elite is, merely on account of its status, intrinsically exempt from hard trials. Barbauld turns the patrician edifices of state, arguably compensations for political and military uncertainty, into

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76 McCarthy, Voice of the Enlightenment, 474.
expressions of it. This brittle, delicate environment anticipates in some ways the pleasure-dome in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” It is a palimpsest; a stable and sanitized cultural legacy willfully superimposed over the vicissitudes of conflict and statecraft. Augustan tropes help to enforce an untenably ideal image of Britain: in particular, the “light varandas” encroached on by “wintry storms” suggest that the nation is almost literally willing itself to be on the Mediterranean, and ignoring the inhospitable reality of its situation. Barbauld thus exposes as an incongruous fiction the image of a transcendental, unspoiled Albion as the beacon of the Enlightenment, and undermines the smug exceptionalism and historical teleology that legitimate British military action. The country is, in fact, on a palpably shaky foundation. *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* transfers the same vulnerability that characterizes individuals onto the state as a whole. Britain’s landscape in the poem, alternately “crystal,” “transparent,” “tenderer,” and in rough ruins, may endure the same looming bodily hardships as any soft-bodied insect—or any distant nation.

*Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* constitutes society on a strikingly anti-meliorist basis, that of looming decline. The eventual fate of nations is, save British cultural inheritance for Americans, the only bond among those nations in the poem. Barbauld indicts Britain for its willful denial of emergent collapse: “Crime walks thy streets, Fraud earns her unblest bread,/O’er want and woe thy gorgeous robe is spread,/And angel charities in vain oppose:/With grandeur’s growth the mass of misery grows” (*Poems* 124.317-20). These lines indict the Burkean construction of the state, which would “spread” a “gorgeous robe” to conceal the nation’s “want and woe.” In perhaps the most famous and salient sentences of his *Reflections*, Burke defends just such a gesture from reformers who aim to deconstruct it, and according to whom “[a]ll the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the
understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.” To Barbauld, the drapery itself is indecent, not the body it encloses; her poem differs implicitly from Burke’s opinion that, “[t]o make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely.” In “the mass of misery,” Barbauld sees the obverse of the “fellowship of sense”: it is ugly, and perhaps even embarrassing, but it is rightfully an object of concern for just these reasons. The “defects of our naked shivering nature” make us respect each other because they are ours, and because they are defects.

Besides being her most infamous poem, then, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is also one of Barbauld’s most typical. In the face of an optimism in which both Britain’s conservatives and its liberals participated, and in the conflicts it justifies, the poem is a reminder of their uncertain consequences. Ideological positions are never clearly delineated in the poem: it renders the Napoleonic Wars, and history more generally, as a spectacle of shared decline and chaos rather than a contest between any identifiable factions or doctrines. Barbauld’s moral equivalencies, finally, have redemptive value as well. Croker misread the poem as a satire, Marlon Ross notes; for satire “divides the sheep from the goats and discounts any possibility of alliance based on pure principle because it tends to identify with the political expediency of factions. . . . Satire refuses any possibility for mediation, legitimating the ‘right’ side, the writer’s (and reader’s)
side, and ridiculing the ‘wrong’ side.” 79 Instead, the meliorist worldview with which the poem opens gives gradual way to an impersonal and thoroughly precarious one. Not only does the British reader acquire a sense of present danger, but he scarcely knows where to stand in consequence. Rather than satire, Ross argues, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is another occasional poem, a genre “politicized in such a way that political factions within the state may be subsumed by an overriding national interest that affects all good citizens.” 80 Particularly in the last third of the poem, the speaker’s eye passes so rapidly between historical explanation and concrete cultural detail that the many nations and societies alluded to are conflated. Barbauld confuses the sides themselves, and (although the sense of desolation and danger is present almost constantly toward the end of the poem) gives us no purchase on the question of who the foe is.

If Linda Colley’s theory of British identity formation in the eighteenth century holds water—namely, that it arose as a common belligerence toward a common Gallic adversary—81 then the uncertain threats in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* promise to remake the collective and even individual consciousnesses of the nation. Some of the travelers Barbauld initially envisions in ruined Europe are American, but it is hardly clear that she continually describes the same characters throughout the poem. What she seems to describe is a largely Anglophone diaspora: atomized, wandering, with no obvious connections among each other. The markers of nationhood, one of them discovers, are changed utterly once Europe confronts the prospect of its decline:

> In desert solitudes then Tadmor sleeps,  
> Stern Marius then o’er fallen Carthage weeps;  
> Then with enthusiast love the pilgrim roves  
> To seek his footsteps in forsaken groves,  
> Explores the fractured arch, the ruined tower,

79 Ross, “Configurations of Feminine Reform,” 104.  
80 Ibid., 95.  
Those limbs disjointed of gigantic power;  
Still at each step he dreads the adder’s sting,  
The Arab’s javelin, or the tiger’s spring;  
With doubtful caution treads the echoing ground,  
And asks where Troy or Babylon is found. (Poems 124.249-58)

The traveler proceeds carefully, but his care is a product of his environment as a whole. His treading “[w]ith doubtful caution” and “[s]till at each step” suggests danger is everywhere—no longer strictly across the channel, embodied in a larger-than-life Corsican, or condensed anyplace else. The tableau of Napoleon raping Europe, composed of “marmoreal personifications that rule [Barbauld’s readers] and victimize others,” has given way to less enduring figures that can be “influenced by their own individual actions.” The statue Barbauld describes, a possible forerunner to Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” could very well depict Admiral Nelson, or Bonaparte himself, but in its present condition is anything but a monolith. Its “limbs disjointed of gigantic power,” and a “fractured arch” that could be part of either a “foot” or a “tower,” both recapitulate earlier details of the poem, but in shambles and, crucially, in terms that suggest visceral as well as architectural damage. The images of dangerous animals and foreigners recall Barbauld’s geography-lesson poems, and resemble some of those images in “Ode to Remorse,” which Barbauld wrote around the same time. If this ode drew any inspiration from Collins’s eighteenth century odes, it nonetheless differs substantially from them. Barbauld cannot commune with remorse; it appears in many times, places, and forms, to many people, in the guise of different creatures, and in conjunction with different actions.

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82 Mandell, “Those Limbs Disjointed,” 35. I agree with Mandell that Barbauld hereby “promot[es] her readers’ identification with a personification whose limbs they believe to be manipulable by their own limbs,” and that “Such a notion differs fundamentally from the nationalist identification with an imaginary group defined by opposition to an aggressor” (41). I disagree, however, that personifications such as “Liberty, Equality, and Nation” are meant to centrally or exclusively unite readers into “a legitimate body of people [who] will overturn oppressive forms” (Ibid.)—a model still seemingly based on “opposition to an aggressor,” and thus on reductive treatments of individual agency and subjectivity.
By the end of Barbauld’s career, what extra-human powers and personifications there are in the world appear to no longer to be on the side of her readers, or anybody else. In her “Dialogue in the Shades,” one of Barbauld’s last significant prose works, the muse Clio, unable to keep up with the tumults of recent history, seeks to quit her charge:

now I am required to be in a hundred places at once; I am called from Jena to Usterlitz, from Cape Trafalgar to Aboukir, and from the Thames to the Ganges and Burampooter; besides a whole continent, a world by itself, fresh and vigorous, which I foresee will find me abundance of employment. . . . I wish to Jupiter I could resign my office! Son of Maia, I declare to you I am sick of the horrors I record; I am sick of mankind (SPP 470, 472).

As the colossal Napoleon/Ozymandias figures in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* look particularly weak and human by the end of that poem, so does the muse of history here. Human events exhaust the explanatory power of divine favor or historical narrative. Violence, in particular, is singled out as the human tendency least able to be explained away, or contained within historical account. Some of the personifications in the latter half of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* are even more changeable. Fancy, as figured in the poem, is every bit as ambivalent as Clio about representing historical events: “Fond moody Power! as hopes—as fears prevail,/She longs, or dreads, to lift the awful veil,/On visions of delight now loves to dwell,/Now hears the shriek of woe or Freedom’s knell” (*Poems* 124.115-8). Imagination is far from a prophetic force: the historical glimpses it produces are counterfactual, and no more linear than Clio’s movements around the earth. Whereas the poem opens with “the logic of systematic moral correction,” Julie Ellison notes, “Fancy’s emotional volatility transforms prophecy into a series of competing fictions,” and thus “abandons the narrator’s dignified tonalities and overreacts.” It is also worth noting “Freedom’s knell,” a rebuttal to the meliorist position which simultaneously exposes the hollow abstractness of the forces imagined to mediate it.

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Instead of Britain, Power, or Liberty personified, the poem ends with several imposing yet tentative views of the “Spirit” or “Genius” that inspires, preserves, and abandons human ingenuity and civilizations. This vague force is first introduced as “[m]oody and viewless as the changing wind,” and last glimpsed “midst mountains wrapt in storm,/nAndes’ heights he shrouds his awful form;” its “progress” is “[s]ecret,” its wanderings “vagrant,” his “fancy” “playful” and “changeful,” and his “birth” “unknown” (Poems 124.217, 323-24, 259, 263-65, 216, 259). William Keach observes that the Genius’s presence in the poem “mystifies the historical shifts in cultural power and authority,” but perhaps assumes too much when he deems this mystification “needless” fault on Barbauld’s part, as though she had meant to argue that these shifts are predictable or controllable.84 This device introduces an element of uncertainty into societies’ fortunes, but—as the puzzled history of its reception testifies—it resists attempts to identify it as the Genius or Spirit of any particular thing or cause.85 At stake in critical uncertainty on this matter, however, is not the rectitude or accuracy of any single ideological position than with for ability of ideology in general to appropriate circumstances to suit its own narrative. Barbauld cannot outright prevent her poem from being used that way nor, indeed, shed her own ideological tendencies, but the prospect of a hazardous and uncertain future offers, if nothing else, a considerable check against such rhetorical habits. She writes that the Genius, in his typical relations with places and nations, “hates, capricious, what he loved before” (Poems 124.242). With regard to the moral sanction of higher authorities, this depiction is dammingly hopeless for most human enterprises. Multiple critics have asserted that the poem’s final tableau

84 Keach, “A Regency Prophecy,” 574.
85 Croker resents the difficulty of such identification: “who or what he is, or whence he comes, does not very clearly appear . . . This extraordinary personage is prodigiously wise and potent, but withal a little fickle, and somewhat, we think, for so wise a being, unjust and partial” (review of Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, 312). Bradshaw argues that the Genius represents the Enlightenment zeitgeist (“Dystopian Futures”), but also that it clearly embodies neither the forces of (feminine) Freedom nor of (masculine) Exploitation (“Gendering the Enlightenment”).
endorses the Americas’ status as Britain’s moral and intellectual successor. That the poem ends here, however, does not mean it resolves or reposes. In fact, the last images are quite transitive: the Genius “soars” to “other climes” (321), and “treads” (325), never clearly stopping. Moreover, its position “midst mountains wrapt in storm” and “shrou[ed]” invites comparison with Olympian gods (or perhaps truant muses), which are not known for steadfastness or benevolence in their relations with humans. There are ample hints, then, that this power will persist in its fickle apathy toward the inhabitants of the earth, and that their projects of freedom are not likely to have its sanction for long. If there are huge forces intervening in socio-political affairs, then they are not the sort that we should hope to bend to our ends. They may well be indifferent to us and our suffering, and should not be claimed as the bearers of certainty. In this, Barbauld constructs the Spirit as a sort of leviathan of nations: as Hobbes’s arbitrary sovereign unsettles the rational and moral authority claimed by individuals, so does Barbauld’s Spirit do the same to states.

By the end of the poem, human prerogatives and agency have been taken out of the equation: nations’ fates have nothing to do with their moral standing or military clout, but are determined by the whims of the Spirit:

Northward he throws the animating ray
O’er Celtic nations bursts the mental day:
And, as some playful child the mirror turns,
Now here now there the moving lustre burns;
Now o’er his changeful fancy more prevail
Batavia’s dykes than Arno’s purple vale,
And stinted suns, and rivers bound with frost,
Than Enna’s plains or Baia’s viny coast . . . (Poems 124.261-68)

Ideological differences among societies do not predict or limit the harm that any of them will incur, and thus have ceased to be relevant. This revision of the meliorist narrative indicates

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erratic, even spastic movements among nations. It is hard to identify any specific historical events which might correspond to the Genius’s momentary favorisms; the past itself is far from a closed or determinate record in the poem. Its psychic effects are submerged, speculative things.\textsuperscript{87} Croker’s objections to the poem, furthermore, consist largely in the counterfactual nature of many of its scenes, and his very zeal in dismissing it may indicate that he took its arguments seriously.\textsuperscript{88} Barbauld does not seem, finally, to believe that Clio’s task is distinct from that of the muses of poetry: whereas Aristotle argued that poetry shows counterfactual possibilities that history does not, Barbauld asserts that it is history’s province to show these as well. For they have bearing not only on what might happen, but on our view of what is and has already been happening. Without the reductive notions of narrowly national genii, and with all the contingencies of possible harm in play, an attitude emerges that allows one better to recognize political, social, and corporeal needs, regardless of which ideological position has previously secured or condemned others in one’s eyes. In the last third of \textit{Eighteen Hundred and Eleven} it’s no longer clear what the various actors are vying for; only that it’s not worth the strife. And that, if not exactly a fully articulated political platform, is nonetheless a sociable understanding. Mutual vulnerability is itself an ethical bond; the basis of Barbauld’s “fellowship of sense,” a site of emergent suffering that trumps partisan affiliation, and brings the confident yet dubious meliorism of her time to a desperate impasse. That she was so vilified for it—that

\textsuperscript{87} Emily Rohrbach argues that “[t]he poem’s prospect on the future allows nothing outside what we already know from the past” (“History of the Future,” 184), but treats the history of the past as though it were entirely known within the poem, or as though Barbauld pretended to know it. In an historiographic argument, this is a significant omission. To the extent that the past consists in an unsettling constellation of vulnerabilities, Barbauld forces us to expect more of the same in the future. But to claim that Fancy’s “vision appears unhindered by the notion of historical contingencies” (Ibid.) is to overlook perhaps fancy’s most consistent subject matter in the poem.

\textsuperscript{88} Reacting to images of waning British commerce, Croker objects: “We do not know where Mrs. Anna Letitia new resides . . . for the description just quoted is [nothing] like the scene that is really before our eyes” (\textit{review of Eighteen Hundred and Eleven}, 310). Reacting to Barbauld’s uneven descriptions of ruin, he unleashes his most condescending sarcasm: “O the unequal dispensations of this poetical providence! Chatham and Nelson empty names! Oxford and Cambridge in ruins! London a desert, and the Thames a sedgy brook! while Mr. Roscoe’s barns and piggeries are in excellent repair, and objects not only of curiosity but even of reverence and enthusiasm” (Ibid., 311-12).
she attracted an enmity usually reserved for huge and abstract effigies—suggests that, however imperfectly, or momentarily, they might have got the point.
Chapter 4
“Gnawing Solicitude:” Intimacy and the Fate of Character in Jane Austen’s Novels

[A] thousand feelings rushed on Anne, of which this was the most consoling, that it would soon be over. And it was soon over. In two minutes after Charles’s preparation, the others appeared; they were in the drawing-room. Her eye half met Captain Wentworth’s, a bow, a curtsey passed; she heard his voice; he talked to Mary, said all that was right, said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to mark an easy footing; the room seemed full, full of persons and voices, but a few minutes ended it. Charles shewed himself at the window, all was ready, their visitor had bowed and was gone, the Miss Musgroves were gone too, suddenly resolving to walk to the end of the village with the sportsmen: the room was cleared, and Anne might finish her breakfast as she could. (P 40)

Everybody knows that Jane Austen is the novelist of education and discernment, whose rich-minded characters, despite all the misleading appearances and false opinions imposed on them, ultimately arrive at true, triumphant judgments of their surroundings and of each other. As one recent critic asserts, she presents “a world that is nothing if not consistently intelligible, and where the main work of making it so is given over to ‘person and face,’” to the description of individuals.¹ During Anne Elliot’s first reencounter with Captain Wentworth, however, neither person nor face is consistently intelligible, effaced instead by intensely impressionistic language: loaded with sensory data, its punctuated, paratactic style represents the movements of the eye and ear, but little else. In contrast to Austen’s stock in trade, free indirect discourse—the language of thought, reflection, interiority, and sense-making—this is the language of sensation; of unorganized stimuli bombarding a dizzy observer. The observer herself, only intermittently identified as Anne, seems lost in the accumulation of detail. Singled out even among Austen’s heroines for her psychological depth, Anne often dominates the pages of Persuasion so thoroughly that her opinions and reflections obscure details of her social world. Here, though, there seems to be little more to her than retinas and eardrums, registering events without

¹ Miller, The Secret of Style, 14.
reflecting on them. In the context of surrounding paragraphs, in which her thoughts are strongly present, and in which she actively ponders, “how were [Captain Wentworth’s] sentiments to be read?” (P 40), her ideas and opinions are comparatively inaccessible in this passage. She is silent, and her interlocutors’ statuses are correspondingly uncertain.

Such impressionistic moments are more common in *Persuasion* than in any of Austen’s other works, and they recur throughout Anne and Wentworth’s anxious romantic pursuit of each other. The man she eventually marries is, in this respect, a man she encounters great difficulties knowing. Events and actions unfold to her in these moments as isolated incidents, not as the connected, goal-oriented movements of stable agents. It’s not Anne, but only “her eye,” that “half meets” Wentworth’s in this case, and “a bow” and “curtsey” that “pass” without being attributed to anyone. She “hear[s] his voice” without, evidently, processing it as language or taking its meaning. Such severe materialism, such lack of commentary on the mind, might not be out of place in, say, *A Sentimental Journey*, but for Austen—or for the Austen we think we know—it is in multiple senses *out of character*. For character, in both the psychological and moral senses of the word, is what is missing here. As I hope to demonstrate, if we think of character as a stable set of personal traits, its loss is productive.

Nowhere in Austen scholarship are character, certainty, and knowledge deemed such important values as they are in relation to courtship and intimacy. Essentially the culmination of the marriage plot’s development in eighteenth-century fiction, Austen’s novels are widely regarded as celebrations of liberal companionate marriage between informed individuals. Their resolutions, in this account, conclude epistemological plots as well as romantic ones; knowledge gains produce interpersonal gains. *Pride and Prejudice* is the classic example. Prone alternately to haughty dismissal (“pride”) and premature judgment (“prejudice”), Elizabeth Bennet and Mr.
Darcy must learn to discern each other’s true characters, laying the groundwork of a stable marriage. And yet, as the supposed culmination of all Darcy’s “staunch faithfulness and beau gestes,” his second proposal to Elizabeth comes to us in oddly reticent language:

Elizabeth feeling all the more than common awkwardness and anxiety of his situation, now forced herself to speak; and immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to understand, that her sentiments had undergone so material a change, since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure, his present assurances. The happiness which this reply produced, was such as he had probably never felt before; and he expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do. (PP 366)

Remarkably, at the commencement of their union, Darcy and Elizabeth appear less certain of each other, not more, than previously. In place of the loud assertiveness of Darcy’s earlier proposal and Elizabeth’s rejection of him, we find a periphrastic evocation of “awkward[],” halting, “not very fluent[]” speech. Emotions are understated and even speculative in comparison to the bombast of that first proposal. As characterization goes, this passage brims with qualification: “probably” detaches the hinted “happiness” from the declarative register of fact and from psychological continuity with Darcy’s feelings “before” (which may not, it is suggested, culminate here), while the repetitive “as” implies an approximative rather than indicative relation between observable “express[ion]” and mental condition. Austen refers us not to Darcy’s revealed state of mind but to our “suppos[ition]” about it, and given that she has previously marked out the phrase “violently in love” as mere verbal formula, “so hackneyed, so doubtful, so indefinite” (PP 140), we cannot regard that referent without a measure of skepticism. Austen’s penetration of inner life, easily her writing’s most celebrated trait, is lost in the play of language. If Pride and Prejudice is, as traditionally asserted, a highly unified work of

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2 Bander, “Neither Sex, Money, Nor Power,” 38.
art, we must specify in what sense that unity holds. This scene may ease romantic tensions, but it sustains—even intensifies—epistemological ones.4

I do not wish to refute so much as to refine this general notion of Austen’s novels as epistemological dramas: the stories of Anne Elliot and Elizabeth Bennet indeed cannot be separated from their doubts about the quality of social information. Uncertainty, however, is far more pervasive in their stories than previous accounts suggest. Existing studies of Austen, their particular emphases notwithstanding, tend to agree that the endpoint of Austen’s knowledge plots is the replacement of faulty judgments with sound ones and the final attainment of true knowledge. They have considered, in other words, how education happens and what it entails. I would like to consider instead whether our notion of “education” effectively describes Anne or Elizabeth’s development. For their doubts do not abate. Further, I argue, those doubts are an integral part of intimacy in both *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Increasingly, the heroines’ uncertainty chastens their social inferences, keeping them uncomfortable but also accountable. The protagonists’ romantic interactions thus model a social ethics in which psychology is inscrutable, sympathy provisional, and doubt the basis of concern. Anne and Elizabeth’s ultimate possibility for agency rests upon their social responsiveness; upon being continually alive to social cues.5 Amidst a complex field of uncertain social signification, that entails learning to judge less, not better.

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4 For further analysis of this scene’s opacity, see Lundeen, “A Modest Proposal,” 72-73.
5 Cf. Soni, “Committing Freedom,” 380-81. I argue below that doubt and uncertainty are themselves principles of action for Elizabeth. Preliminarily, however, her climactic dispute with Lady Catherine de Bourgh effectively suggests how irresolution and uncertainty (with regard to Darcy’s and even her own intentions) might coexist with assertiveness and agency.
I. The Knowledge Plot, Prejudice, and the Poles of Authority

The opaque manner of Elizabeth and Darcy’s coming together complicates the consensus view of Austen’s novels as bildungsromane, or stories of psychologically formative events. The couple’s individual perspectives surely shift in the above scene, but any corresponding change of character is less clear; deep or durable psychology eludes detection. Yet it is broadly to Bildung that generations of critics have attributed the marriages of all Austen’s couples, including Elizabeth and Darcy. D. D. Devlin asserts, for instance, that Austenian heroines’ “supreme happiness in the final pages results from the birth (‘hard and bitter agony’ for them) of a new clarity of vision.” William H. Magee describes Austen’s marriage plot as “a variable pattern for detailing the growth of successive heroines,” which “create[s] a self-contained world of art with an optimistic ending suited to [her] concept of human progress.” For James Thompson, “[i]f the romance plot of these works is based on some sort of trial or agon, that trial is resolved only through knowledge of the other, the sine qua non of successful marriage according to Austen.”

More recently, D. A. Miller asserts and that the movement of Austen’s plots consists simply in the omniscient narrator allowing the given and certain elements of character to manifest themselves, and Vivasvan Soni argues strenuously for the importance of judgment in Elizabeth’s realization of freedom.

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7 Miller, *The Secret of Style*, 32; Soni, “Committing Freedom,” 374-75. Miller, apparently, is invested in Austenian narrators’ renunciation of their own personal attributes precisely because they are fixed and confining. As such, his argument does not uncover social uncertainties so much as flee from social certainties. He argues, for instance, that Elizabeth’s detached, irreverent treatment of Darcy betrays her “unconscious desire, which everyone but the two of them perceives, to flirt with him and win him over . . . from the start Elizabeth’s style presumes all the freedom from need, the severance from vulgarity, that it eventually secures her in fact as mistress of Pemberley” (44). Here, Miller falls for the illusion of stable character: as I shall argue subsequently, Elizabeth sincerely and resolutely does not want Darcy in their early encounters. Soni argues against what he describes as a recent critical preoccupation with the suspension of judgment in *Pride and Prejudice* (371n36); however, his cited evidence amounts at most to assorted discussions of local textual ambiguities.
Insofar as they track the overthrow of particular forms of judgment, many critics could be said to recognize in *Pride and Prejudice* some strain of limited skepticism. However, such recognition has invariably served to strengthen claims on behalf of some other, favored form of judgment. Uncertainty yields to knowledge: widely disparate strains of Austen scholarship all tend to share this positivist premise. Their disagreements center instead on which *kinds* of knowledge and judgment receive Austen’s final backing. This question has been framed many ways, including as a choice of class alternatives (aristocratic vs. bourgeois norms) and gender ideologies (patriarchy vs. egalitarianism), but in essence pits public judgment or collective orthodoxy against private judgment or individual decision. Alistair M. Duckworth argues, for instance, that Elizabeth’s “internal development from a private to a social outlook” reveals the “permanence of the estate and . . . the necessarily partial and angled view of the individual.” Marilyn Butler similarly asserts that all Austen’s heroines experience a “moment of self-discovery and self-abasement, followed by the resolve in the future to follow reason”—“reason” equating to conservative tradition; “the old ethical certainties”—and that the depiction of Elizabeth “rebukes the contemporary doctrine of faith in the individual.”

Contrastingly, critics who read Austen as an exponent of private judgment tend to cast her as a political liberal. According to Tony Tanner, the emergent capitalist society in *Persuasion* is characterized by “manners which, however ‘incorrect’ or even crude according to established social notions of decorum and propriety, do nevertheless reveal the true qualities of the inner man, or woman.” In place of aristocratic customs that have lost their rational basis and social utility, individual agency—economic as well as epistemological—productively reconfigures communities based on the “inner” and “true qualities” of their constituents. Similarly, Ann W.

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Astell points out “Anne’s need to educate herself by pointing out the inadequacy of the would-be mentor figures who surround her,” asserting “she has found a way to supply the need for a mentor within her own consciousness.” D.W. Harding famously designates a form of private conviction, “regulated hatred,” which is the heroine’s means “of being intensely critical of people to whom she also has strong emotional attachments.” He takes it for granted that Austen heroines like Anne Elliot and Emma Woodhouse have discerning judgments aplenty, and does not so much stress the time needed to develop them as the time needed to disclose them. Mary Poovey’s analysis is typical of those that seek to reconcile claims of self and society: “by simultaneously dramatizing and rewarding individual desire and establishing a critical distance from individualism, [Austen] endorses both the individualistic perspective inherent in the bourgeois value system and the authoritarian hierarchy retained from traditional, paternalistic society.”

A central problem in privileging one form of knowledge over another in Austen’s novels is the sheer difficulty of locating their vast array of specious truths along the axis of public and private judgment. As the sheer breadth of Austen scholarship suggests, all forms of intellectual authority invite ample doubt in her work. The scenes above privilege neither self nor society as a guide for insight or conduct, and throughout both novels Austen’s volatile irony corrodes knowledge claims of every description. The choice, then, may be a false one. As James Thompson has shown, the poles of the public-private dichotomy in Austen’s work are linked as much historically and economically as they are stylistically. But furthermore, individual and community share epistemological procedures and deficiencies. Take, for instance, the shifting

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10 Astell, “Anne Elliot’s Education,” 6, 7.
11 Harding, Regulated Hatred, 15.
12 Poovey, Proper Lady, 205.
13 See Thompson, Between Self and World, especially pages 6-18.
nature of Anne’s “persuasion.” Semantically, it is alternately passive and active: while considering Wentworth’s previous offer of marriage, Anne is “persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing” through Lady Russell’s counsel, but in retrospect she is “persuaded that . . . she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been in the sacrifice of it” (P 19, 20). The word encompasses socially suggested convictions as well as privately formulated ones, to neither of which Austen grants clear authority. In Anne’s case, neither can replace the social information that she gleans from observing afresh.

Judgments in *Pride and Prejudice* likewise pose problems regardless of origin. Already in the novel’s famous first sentence, the distinction between group and individual vantage threatens to collapse: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (PP 3). On the one hand, this serves as a kind of floating maxim; almost a physical law of the universe. Voiced and placed as it is, the sentence’s heuristic applicability seems to bleed back into our world as well as forward into the novel’s. By speaking in measured cadence of “truth” and the “universal[],” Austen pretends parodically to all the authority of moral philosophy; one finds countless such sententious formulae in the writings of Dr. Johnson and Hume. Yet this lofty dictum incorporates as much

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15 See Miller, *The Secret of Style*, 34-35: he describes the sentence’s voice as dispassionate and disembodied, lacking a clear origin, and dictating social imperatives while itself remaining exempt from them.

16 Litz, *Jane Austen*, 107; Brownstein, “Irony and Authority,” 64-65; Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*, 117. Both Johnson and (as we have seen) Hume’s written assertions of truth and certainty are numerous, but of special interest are possible antecedents for Austen’s opening sentence. Citing Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Knox-Shaw remarks, “[t]he world of *Pride and Prejudice* is at hand when [Hume] remarks on the power of credulity in small communities: ‘There is no kind of report, which rises so easily, and spreads so quickly, especially in country places and provincial towns as those concerning marriages; insomuch that two young persons of equal condition never see each other twice, but the whole neighbourhood immediately join them together.’” Further, Hume opens the *Treatise’s* discussion of free will with a familiar-sounding appeal to the social fact of material causality: “‘Tis universally acknowledg’d, that the operations of external bodies are necessary, and that in the communication of their motion, in their attraction, and mutual cohesion, there are not the least traces of indifference or liberty” (447). As Litz observes however, Johnson’s didactic reflections on marriage in the *Rambler* may be likelier sources, particularly those voiced the character Hymenaeus: “I was known to possess a
petty gossip as general rule, for in placement and diction it overlaps also with the subsequent words of Mrs. Bennet, which likewise concern a “single man of large fortune” impelled to marry (PP 3-4). One could read the first sentence, even, as free indirect speech, that Austenian verbal technology which, as John A. Dussinger observes, muddles the distinction between self and other in her novels. Public and private agency, then—expansive and narrow vantages—converge in one received opinion, which seems infallibly to guide the novel’s social interactions. Reminiscent in some respects of Smith’s heuristic voice, the Austenian voice of wisdom speaks at once in gross generalization and with myopic parochialism; operates both “universally” and “singl[y];” looks everywhere and nowhere.

If social mores have origins part private and part public, then in practice their adherents find them instruments of both self-assertion and self-limitation. Mr. Collins, in adopting this mixed “truth” almost verbatim (PP 70), espouses a standard of conduct that circumscribes his behavior and reactions in the world. He acquires agency through preemptive choice—literally, prejudgment—that minimizes ambiguities and dilemmas: too late to engage one Bennet sister and rejected by another, he readily transfers his ambitions from Jane to Elizabeth to Charlotte Lucas all the same. Mr. Collins’s approach gives him some control over the reverses of courtship, yet greatly limits the terms of his intimacies. In turn, Charlotte accepts his “imaginary” regard because, “[w]ithout thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage

fortune, and to want a wife; and therefore was frequently attended by these hymeneal solicitors, with whose importunity I was sometimes diverted, and sometimes perplexed” (Rambler, 3:248).

17 Dussinger, In the Pride of the Moment, 87-93. He further argues that the novel’s opening sentence “mimics the aphoristic manner of the Augustan moralist to ridicule the mercenary attitudes toward marriage in the period;” however, he downplays philosophical moralism per se as a target of that ridicule: “Not authority . . . but only the threadbare authoritarian manner is what the narrative tone implies” (97-8). The first sentence may render the distinction untenable.

18 See Morgan, In the Meantime, 10. Speaking of the novel’s opening dictum, which actuates Mr. Collins’s behavior, she writes: “To invoke universals is to live in a world of forms, to think with all the spaciousness and all the hollowness of preconceptions and thus withdraw from life in its demanding and inconclusive particularity. Such objectifying keeps us from the risks and thereby the hopes of an involved intelligence.”
had always been her object” (PP 122): in settling for what they get, both nonetheless get what they want, for their union’s mutual appeal is structural rather than companionate. In similar fashion Lydia and Kitty Bennet pursue “a red coat” (PP 29), as their mother understandingly describes it, and their admiration switches rapidly among any who fill it. The “red coat,” seemingly a metonym, is really the object itself. The girls and the Collinses alike seek partners not for any of their attributes as “men,” but as props for the scripted procedures of “marriage.” It is the humans who are, if anything, metonyms for the garb.

Common, therefore, to the amours of Lydia, Charlotte, and Mr. Collins is a lack of curiosity toward details inessential to their scripts. In this regard, they view the world algebraically. Their intimates have value less as responsive creatures than as abstract placeholders; mere terms in an algorithm that governs social interaction. Charlotte considers marriage the “pleasantest preservative from want” (PP 122), and her fiancé, by implication, is “in want of a wife:” significantly, the word want elides lack and desire. Mr. Collins aims to fill a vacant niche in his fastidiously ordered life, as though the business of intimacy were as readily soluble as any equation, and the endeavor wholly absorbs his sentiments. Although his servile eagerness and Lydia’s manic energy do mark their attempts as credible bases for happiness, such happiness lacks social reference. Their attention to protocol, like that of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mrs. Norris, the Thorpes, Mrs. Elton, and other Austenian “caricatures,” vitiates their perception of other social agents. I do not thereby mean to say that they neglect an “outer” social world in favor of some “inner” life—a binary I think Austen leaves untenable—but rather that

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19 For instance, several of Mr. Collins’s motives, however repugnant, are openly affective: he seeks a union in part because “it [though not she] will add very greatly to [his] happiness” (PP 105). See Claudia Johnson, *Women, Politics, and the Novel*, 80: “Austen trots character after character before our attention so that we may consider what pleases or, conversely, what vexes and mortifies them, thus inviting us to assess the quality and durability of their happiness.”

20 The designation is Harding’s: see “Character and Caricature in Jane Austen,” in *Regulated Hatred*, 80-105.
they exercise schematic powers of mind while neglecting observational powers. Mr. Collins’s behavior is a disturbingly adult update of youthful Austen parodies like “Henry and Eliza:” objects and people are incorporated into his story by purely structuralist logic, for their ability to fill holes and functions in the narrative, and regardless of peripheral implications. Working against his presumption of acceptance, Elizabeth can scarcely persuade him of his rejection: “I know not,” she says, “how to express my refusal in such a way as may convince you of its being one” (PP 108).

II. “Do You Know Who I Am?:” Character as Prejudice

The example of Mr. Collins has special relevance for sentimentalist social ethics because of his frequent recourse to character as a salient moral parameter. In effect, it is another form of scripted essentialism, which assimilates social claims made before his eyes: “I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application,” he tells Elizabeth, “and perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character” (Ibid.). The language of Richardsonian moralism reads here almost like a threat; Mr. Collins’s pretension to “know” the “female character” is as piercing as it is blunt. Nearer the end of the book, he celebrates his marriage in similar terms that sound passably companionate yet abound in moral blindness: “My dear Charlotte and I have but one mind and one way of thinking. There is in every thing a most remarkable resemblance of character and ideas between us. We seem to have been designed for each other” (PP 216). In both cases, putative moral insight about women negates them as objects of social awareness.

21 Central to the humor of Austen’s juvenilia is the gleeful infliction of slapstick or even grotesque outcomes on characters in order to advance plots. “Henry and Eliza” is exemplary: “Her Children were too small to get down the Ladder by themselves, nor would it be possible for her to take them in her arms, when she did. At last she determined to fling down all her Cloathes, of which she had a large Quantity, and then having given them strict Charge not to hurt themselves, threw her Children after them” (Austen, Catharine and Other Writings, 34). For the “functions of characters” under structuralism, see Propp, Morphology of the Folktale, 20-22.
Importantly, this is not “negation” in an ontological sense, whereby language effaces some essential “being,” but in an epistemological sense, whereby prejudicial views of character block out further perceptual and social cues. The very notion of character as a deep psychological core of determinate traits, traditionally deemed Austen’s “realistic” achievement as a novelist, would seem unhelpful here. Might this conception of intrinsic character not be the thing obscured in Austen’s knowledge plots, but the thing obscuring?

In *Persuasion*, knowledge of character (such as it is) does little to facilitate Anne and Wentworth’s intimacy. With the possible exception of Mr. Knightley in *Emma*, Wentworth has strong claims to know his partner better than any of Austen’s male protagonists, and his relationship with Anne is the worse for it. As he admits to her in the novel’s penultimate chapter, he has struggled to “bring . . . into play” his “late knowledge” of her, because “it was overwhelmed, buried, lost in those earlier feelings;” an “indelible, immoveable impression” and the “force of habit” helped galvanize him against her (P 163). Wentworth’s diction suggests empiricist epistemology. In Humean fashion, his expectations are prompted by “habit” or custom, while his use of “impression” recalls Locke’s in the *Essay*, referring to an experience sufficiently strong to be imprinted on the memory. Neither familiarity with nor remembrance of Anne, then, brings Wentworth closer to her; to the contrary, they limit the scope and content of

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22 For a symptomatic account of the former, see Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death,” in *The Work of Fire*, 322: “When we speak, we gain control over things with satisfying ease. I say, ‘This woman,’ and she is immediately available to me, I push her away, I bring her close, she is everything I want her to be, she becomes the place in which the most surprising sorts of transformations occur and actions unfold: speech is life’s ease and security. . . . For me to be able to say, ‘This woman,’ I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost its being—the very fact that it does not exist.” Even if this provided insight into Austen’s work, it is hopelessly unclear where such “being” would reside.

23 In modern criticism, the realism of Austen’s characterization is more often an implicit assumption than a primary thesis. Sources that develop the proposition at greater length include Brown, “The Comic Conclusion;” Paris, *Character and Conflict*; Gard, *The Art of Clarity*; Harris, *A Revolution Almost Beyond Expression*; and Robert Miles, “Character,” in *The Cambridge Companion to “Pride and Prejudice,”* ed. Todd, 15-26. For a rich counterpoint, see Phelan, “Character, Progression, and the Mimetic-Didactic Distinction.”

his subsequent inquiries and observations: “I was proud, too proud to ask again. I did not understand you. I shut my eyes, and would not understand you, or do you justice” (P 164). If the “eyes” are necessary to “understand” another person, and if impressionistic style of so many scenes between Anne and Wentworth is in turn a representation of seeing or sensing, then the sort of understanding the couple needs may not revolve around fixing each others’ characters at all.

Austen mobilizes considerable irony against the notion of character as a predictable index of her people’s moral and social status. In Pride and Prejudice, it is at times a topic of jest among the protagonists, as when Mr. Bingley describes Elizabeth as a “studier of character” (PP 42) or she in turn declares him to have a good collection of surface attributes:

“He is just what a young man ought to be,” said [Jane], “sensible, good humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners!—so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!”

“He is also handsome,” replied Elizabeth, “which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can. His character is thereby complete.” (PP 14)

This is a parodist’s use of the word, almost as detached from any serious stake as Austen’s juvenilia are. On other occasions character is the object of involved, tenacious, and finally unsupportable belief, as when Bingley’s “character s[i]nk[s] on every review of” his letter to Jane or when Elizabeth retorts to Darcy, “[y]our character was unfolded in the recital which I received many months ago from Mr. Wickham” (PP 149, 191). In Persuasion, Wentworth believes himself inherently worthy of Anne and equal to her lifestyle: “he was confident that he should soon be rich;—full of life and ardour, he knew that he should soon have a ship, and soon be on a station that would lead to every thing he wanted. He had always been lucky; he knew he should be so still” (P 19). He makes “luck” to signify precisely what it is not—an inherent attribute—and takes contingent events as the manifest desserts of character. Both forms of irony
to which character is exposed increasingly invite the reader to share in the uncertainty that Elizabeth begins early on to articulate: “The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense” (PP 135).

Even as the novels’ formal conflicts resolve, their equivocal relations to character remain. Mrs. Gardiner’s attempt to close the book on Darcy appears a red herring—“I fancy, Lizzy, that obstinacy is the real defect of his character after all. He has been accused of many faults at different times; but this is the true one”—whereas Elizabeth speculates about his character in negative, evasive terms, asserting “that they had entirely mistaken his character” and “that his character was by no means so faulty, nor Wickham’s so amiable, as they had been considered in Hertfordshire” (PP 324, 258). In her testy exchange with Lady Catherine, Elizabeth’s reticence extends to measures of her own psyche: “You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these” (PP 357). Such gestures still contain more irony than description; they eschew known quantity. Settled character, a parameter essential for moral approval or disapproval under both naïve and heuristic sentimentalism, does not bear such weight in *Pride and Prejudice*, at least so far as the protagonists are concerned.

That some of Austen’s propositions about character *do* hint adequately at moral or psychological attributes is an irony of another kind. Strong subjecthood—often, the kind claimed in rank, blood, or position—often seems to make people irredeemable. Mr. Elliot, deeply invested in decorum, fashion, and “the consequence he is heir to” (P 137), may, for all that, be the most unambiguous villain in Austen’s oeuvre. The account of him that Anne receives from Mrs. Smith is surely no worse in substance than Elizabeth’s mistaken account of Darcy, which likewise lays to his charge the callous ruination of a naïve friend—yet the former, unlike the
latter, is never questioned. Mrs. Smith anxiously offers Anne “the truth” about Mr. Elliot while she is still “unprejudiced,” and does not equivocate about it: “He is totally beyond the reach of any sentiment of justice or compassion. Oh! he is black at heart, hollow and black!” (P 132)

Despite her skepticism toward such secondhand information (P 136), Anne accepts it without serious or sustained challenge. The language of certainty and objectivity receives no ironic valence or qualification here; problems of knowledge that would be insoluble elsewhere do not extenuate Mr. Elliot’s apparent faults. As described by Mrs. Smith, he is drawn from a Manichaean universe of starkly opposed moral binaries—“totally beyond . . . justice or compassion;” “hollow and black”—with which the narratorial voice unwaveringly agrees. This reads less like Austen than like Pamela describing her captors.25

Seeking social consequence through the establishment of character, therefore, seems a doomed enterprise. Mr. Collins’s rigid ambitions of good standing in his community are self-defeating, for they actually remove him as an object of social curiosity. Far from a paradox, such removal is by design: when his patron, in a similar vein, demands of Elizabeth, “do you know who I am?” (PP 354), she aims to suppress any further inquiry on the point. Nearly every loud declaration of Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s oblivious snobbery originates in her fixed, quasi-structuralist sense of what she and her virtues are—“My character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness, and in a cause of such moment as this, I shall certainly not depart from it”—as well as others: “My daughter and my nephew are formed for each other” (PP 353, 356). Lady Catherine’s is the very lexicon of certainty, full of uncurious and absolute assumptions about what people “know,” “must,” “are,” and “will.” All these verbs posit some kind of essential character in their subjects; being is nearly the only kind of action Lady

25 As Claudia Johnson notes, Mr. Elliot’s “conventionalized villainy” is revealed through “conspicuously artificial means” (Women, Politics, and the Novel, 144).
Catherine’s discourse recognizes. It is likewise the stability of their characters that allows Elizabeth to anticipate mortifying behavior from Lydia—“Her character will be fixed, and she will, at sixteen, be the most determined flirt that ever made herself and her family ridiculous”—and to regret failing to warn others about Mr. Wickham: “Had his character been known, this could not have happened” (PP 231, 277). As with Mr. Elliot, or with Mrs. Elton in Emma, the newlywed Wickhams’ mental lives go unquestioned to the end: “As for Wickham and Lydia, their characters suffered no revolution from the marriage of her sisters” (PP 386).

Insofar as Austen’s people are vested in discourses of character, they prove as predictable and flat as their social scripts themselves. Mr. Elliot and Wickham, in never really meriting doubt, get exactly what they ask for. The energies of Austen’s knowledge plots simply pass them by, offering neither redemption nor much interest.26 The narrative economy of these novels, then, might give us cause to revisit D. W. Harding’s division of “character” and “caricature” in Austen’s novels. Caricatures, according to Harding, cannot be viewed or related to, either within the novels or by readers, with the same nuance as the less obtrusive characters can be. The distinction he makes (using Mrs. Norris in Mansfield Park) is, importantly, not a matter of realism or the familiar “round character”/flat character” binary, but rather of figures’ rhetoric and assumptions:

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26 Even in Wickham’s case, the relation of past to present character remains problematic. By the time Darcy undeceives Elizabeth, she is no longer disposed to the confident severity toward Wickham that she had shown toward Darcy, suggesting a degree of uncertainty in dealing even with one-dimensional people. It is also worth noting that the rectitude of exposing Wickham’s rumored past is never settled upon: when Elizabeth insists to Jane that a public condemnation would have prevented Lydia’s departure, Jane concedes that “[p]erhaps it would have been better” but observes that “to expose the former faults of any person, without knowing what their present feelings were, seemed unjustifiable. We acted with the best intentions” (PP 291). Upon publication of his deeds, Meryton’s knowing posture, which recalls its earlier stance toward Darcy, seems forced and unconvincing: “Every body declared that he was the wickedest young man in the world; and every body began to find out, that they had always distrusted the appearance of his goodness” (PP 294-95). Though arguably due to the Bennets’ fond hopes for Lydia’s deliverance, the various devices used throughout the novel to paint Wickham in a sinister light largely fall flat by its conclusion. In particular, the final exchange between Wickham and Elizabeth suggests that Wickham’s account of himself may be compatible with details provided by Darcy, and that Elizabeth, for all her tenacious dislike, is open to better thoughts of and relations with Wickham in the future (PP 327-29).
[Mrs. Norris’s] arguments are sensible enough, the phrasing not silly, but the speech is so disproportionate in length and dogmatic certainty to Sir Thomas’s attempt at cautious consideration that we recognize at once the volubility of the opinionated and domineering woman who goes over other people like a steam roller. The long speech, in which she expects and receives no help from social give and take, creates the impression that she is being exhibited and exposed.\textsuperscript{27}

In Harding’s terms, this makes Mrs. Norris a caricature rather than a character, but in the terms of \textit{Pride and Prejudice} and \textit{Persuasion}, at least, those personages who most appeal to character are the caricatures; the most socially inert. Mr. Elliot, Lady Catherine, and Wickham freely adopt the essentialisms that damn them; their statuses are certain to the extent that they aspire to stability and permanence. Mr. Elliot gleefully blocks Anne’s attempts to get any information about his past beyond the cultivated image he has provided: “She wondered, and questioned him eagerly—but in vain. He delighted in being asked, but he would not tell” (P 124). Whereas Anne and Wentworth desire to communicate, and do so only with great effort, Mr. Elliot refuses to; his projected persona is in his view all-sufficient. The moral significance of a fixed psychology for Austen could not be more different from its significance for Richardson or even Smith. In embracing settled character, Austenian antagonists cease to be social subjects.

\textbf{III. The Heroine’s Impasse}

It follows that Anne and Elizabeth’s capacities for sociability and intimacy depend on their respective abilities to see character as unfixed. Elizabeth’s prejudice in the first half of \textit{Pride and Prejudice} is well-established among scholars, but the manner in which she finally rids herself of that prejudice warrants attention. As I have suggested, the notion that she matures by learning to heed the wisdom of either herself or others—in other words, by finding a new basis for epistemological authority—creates more questions than it resolves. Knowledge positions in the novel resist demarcation along such lines; as William Deresiewicz has shown, even the

\textsuperscript{27} Harding, \textit{Regulated Hatred}, 83.
opinions marked as her own derive in large part from the very community from which she professes independence. Her answer to Darcy’s first proposal, although more eloquent than the neighborhood’s opinion of him, is scarcely less hyperbolic: “You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it . . . and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry” (PP 192-93). The most important thing to note in this reply is that prejudice is not a form of ignorance. Elizabeth displays no doubt about Darcy’s character or how to respond to him. Likewise, Darcy shows little doubt she will accept him on account of his rank—“He spoke of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security”—and, once rejected, maligns the Bennets without compunction for a “condition in life . . . so decidedly beneath [his] own” (PP 189, 192). Whatever the nature of the impasse they face, it has little to do with lack of insight.

It is tempting to dismiss Elizabeth and Darcy’s articulate, secure judgments of each other as simply mistaken precursors to real knowledge, as Tony Tanner has suggested. This will not do, however, for each recognizes the merit of the other’s charges and, contrary to some critics’ readings, there is no evidence that Elizabeth’s contempt is an expression of budding, latent love, or anything less than sincere. In these respects, their judgments readily meet two of three criteria for knowledge, conventionally defined by epistemologists as justified true belief. That Darcy and Elizabeth believe each other unsuitable mates is undeniable; that his assessments of her family or hers of him are just is, by their mutual admission, likewise hard to dispute. That their beliefs are true is less clear, but plausible: Austen leaves ample room to doubt that the Bennets come to be

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29 Tanner, Jane Austen, 106.
30 When Elizabeth rereads Darcy’s objections to her family, “[t]he justice of the charge struck her too forcibly for denial,” and immediately following their engagement Darcy asks Elizabeth, “[w]hat did you say of me, that I did not deserve?,” though he does take issue with some of her initial prejudice’s grounds (PP 209, 367).
more thoughtful, or Darcy to think less of himself, in the second half of the novel.\textsuperscript{31} She might therefore, like Edmund Gettier and others, dispute that truth, belief, and justification are alone sufficient conditions for knowledge.\textsuperscript{32} But Austen’s interest seems to lie less in the theory of knowledge as such than in its practical possibility, or its utility if attained. That Elizabeth is prejudiced in this case does not preclude her from also being knowledgeable—or vice versa. Functionally, her prejudice resembles knowledge more than it does ignorance: it provides an interpretive schema through which to view subsequent events, settles doubt, and obviates questions. The problem, perhaps, is that these were her goals in the first place; that she expected knowledge to be there for the finding, and to aid her.

Knowledge, no less than prejudice, forestalls ongoing observation for both Anne and Elizabeth. Anne, upon Wentworth’s return, discounts the possibility of ever again being close to him: “Now they were as strangers; nay, worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement” (P 43). The problem is not that she errs. Anne’s belief in Wentworth’s enduring resentment is both justified and true, and once she takes it as a stable personal attribute, it is all she sees in him. Having now internalized the certainty of their “estrangement,” she is unreceptive to possibility of “acquaint[ance].” Based on three pages’ worth of renewed interaction, Anne projects infinite swaths of time with words like “never” and “perpetual,” constituting expectations that aren’t open to the passage of time, nor change of circumstance. In practice, such judgment is \textit{too} precise; too focused on particular points of social data to leave room for revision. Similarly, in rejecting Darcy, Elizabeth’s references to huge tracts of time and space (\textit{“the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to}\textsuperscript{31} Darcy, for instance, “ha[s] yet to learn to be laught at,” a realization that cows Elizabeth’s utterance as not even mutual disdain had managed to (PP 371). Mrs. Bennet and her younger daughters offer too many instances of insensibility and incivility to cite here; perhaps more revealing is the similarity, discussed below, that Mr. Bennet’s insensibility bears to theirs when he ridicules the possibility of Darcy loving Elizabeth.

\textsuperscript{32} For his classic argument, see Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”
marry”) reinforce the dominance of her initial impressions over her ongoing experience. As James Thompson suggests of Elizabeth, “the simple skill of plumbing the other is complicated by the quarry’s possibility of change, and it is time and change that both characters have to reckon with in their assessment of each other.” At once anecdotal and universal in scope, the heroines’ knowledge is problematic in its origin as well as its application. The observation of new stimuli becomes an exercise in confirmation rather than investigation; in this “[e]ssentially reflexive” pattern, “cognitive inertia becomes behavioral and emotional stasis.” Stability of knowledge, that is, comes to limit social agency and empathy.

The impasses faced by Austen’s heroines raise fundamental questions about the role knowledge plays in intimate relationships. In Pride and Prejudice especially, it has adverse effects for Elizabeth’s familial interactions too. Both Mr. Bennet and Jane demonstrably value her happiness, yet cling to obsolete notions of her interests. Jane, on first hearing of her sister’s engagement, is incredulous: “I know it to be impossible. . . . Oh, Lizzy! it cannot be. I know how much you dislike him” (PP 372). Mr. Bennet makes Darcy’s character the subject of a family joke—“We all know him to be a proud, unpleasant sort of man”—while dismissing Elizabeth’s professions of personal attachment: “in other words, you are determined to have him” (PP 376). These well-meant assumptions oppress Elizabeth, perhaps because they follow nearly identical statements by Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Like Jane, Lady Catherine appeals to the “impossib[ility]” of the very engagement to which she gives credence—“I know it must be a scandalous falsehood”—and like Mr. Bennet she reduces Elizabeth’s desires to simple willfulness: “You are then resolved to have him?” (PP 353, 358). Even the more perceptive Bennets accept, if in lesser degree, that the respective characters of Elizabeth and Darcy clearly

33 Thompson, Between Self and World, 110.
34 Deresiewicz, “Community and Cognition,” 510.
disallow the union. Their familial sympathy misfires in presuming familiarity. In this, Austen’s moral skepticism surpasses Hume’s: his postulate that familial connections prompt love “without enquiring into [relatives’] other qualities” (Treatise 401) has alienating consequences here. The repeated uses of the verb to know in these few pages further suggest the epistemological position that Austen’s protagonists must work through: not a lack of knowledge, but a glut of it. Rather than surmount prejudice to arrive at knowledge, they must turn from knowledge to avoid what is, in effect, prejudice.

Instead of treating character as a determinate attribute of persons, Austen increasingly argues for a more responsive view of social agents. In an early scene, Mr. Darcy warns Elizabeth “not to sketch [his] character at the present moment, as there is reason to fear that the performance would reflect no credit on either” (PP 94), and by Pride and Prejudice’s end, in marked and proximate contrast to Lady Catherine, Elizabeth finds herself pleading her father not so much to sketch a new character of Darcy as to abandon his old one: “You do not know what he really is,” she protests (PP 376). Such impulses have not gone wholly unnoted: for the Victorian Richard Simpson, Austen’s characterization eschews the “statuesque repose” of the “individual soul and its secret workings” in favor of “a living history” wherein virtues consist in “continual struggles and conquests.” Among modern critics, Susan Morgan and Tara Ghoshal Wallace have noted the prominent place of uncertainty in Austen’s fiction, and Peter Knox-Shaw has shed much-needed light on the skeptical milieu of her early life, in which the

36 Wallace, Jane Austen and Narrative Authority, 45-58; Morgan, In the Meantime, 7-10, 79-83. Numerous passages in Pride and Prejudice lead Wallace to “discover not only their resistance to [her] efforts to fix meaning but also a general epistemological uncertainty” (45), and to conclude that truth in the novel is elusive. Morgan argues that in Austen’s novels, “[g]iven a fluid reality, the move to truth requires being able to live in uncertainties, the ability to sustain judgments which are temporary and incomplete,” and that such a state of affairs shows “Austen’s commitment to an optimistic skepticism which allows her characters a continuing process of perceiving” (10).
materialist philosophy of eighteenth-century sentimentalists held prominent place. Austen’s reticence, however, is more than a principle of sociological mimesis, as Simpson suggests, an intermediate step toward truth, as in Morgan’s account, or an accommodation of characters’ individual creativity, as Knox-Shaw would have it. For Austen, uncertainty is integral to intimacy. Her epistemological plot moves away from finalities of judgment, toward more provisional modes of thought, and a more responsive and responsible version of social agency.

IV. Interest as Intimacy: Affect and Epistemology

Anne and Elizabeth’s epistemological shifts coincide with shifts in their desires, and—especially in Elizabeth’s case—with a tonal shift in the narrative. Initially, Elizabeth encounters Darcy intent on a particular outcome. Before the Netherfield ball, she thinks “with pleasure of dancing a great deal with Mr. Wickham, and of seeing a confirmation of every thing in Mr. Darcy's looks and behaviour,” and during her stay there gleefully needles Darcy by refusing to dance: “I always delight in overthrowing those kind of schemes, and cheating a person of their

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37 Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*, chap. 1-2. See also Canuel, “Jane Austen and the Importance of Being Wrong:” in an innovative reading, he argues that *Mansfield Park* “renders errors in knowledge and conduct as objectives generally to be cherished,” but links this affinity to punishment—“through which any person might attain narrative distinction through a pattern of distinguishing corrections”—rather than sociability (125).

38 Wallace’s reading of *Pride and Prejudice* “exposes the inadequacies alike of careful reticence, of ambiguity, and of absolute assurance, demonstrating how each of these strategies serves to block access to the ‘whole truth’ in narrative,” and concludes that, “[i]n leaving intact moments that elude comprehension, Austen consciously and conscientiously admits that her text, in spite of its seamless surface, is neither coherent nor comprehensive, that the indeterminacy that keeps it alive also kills its claims to be truth” (*Jane Austen and Narrative Authority*, 45, 58). It seems that Wallace, in these faintly regretful propositions, is subtly lamenting the lack of certainty in the novel: the “whole truth” is theoretically present in Austen’s text, and merely obscured by inescapable doubts. Uncertainty, then, is still not to be celebrated.

Morgan, too, largely fails to sustain her skeptical premise, arguing of *Persuasion*, for example, that the course of Anne and Wentworth’s feelings for each other shows their “continuity of character;” that the “juxtaposition of past and present in the novel moves from a sense of difference and radical change to a sense of identity . . . the whole matter of falling in love is understood as a revival of already existing feelings” (*In the Meantime*, 179, 185-86). Uncertainty’s function for Morgan is to be assimilated into constructions of character that remain fixed. It remains, even in these analyses, an obstacle about which the critic writes with wistful, even grudging resignation. See also Simpson, unsigned review, 249; Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*, 107. For Knox-Shaw, uncertainty seems a stepping stone unto liberal individualism and insight—a view still reminiscent of the knowledge plot as traditionally understood.

39 Soni attributes eighteenth-century skepticism to “a nascent aestheticism” in the period, suggesting a Keatsian mode of indolent uncertainty; “a state of paralysis, immobility, or equipoise” (“Committing Freedom,” 363, 375). I argue that for Austen, uncertainty spurs vigorous social engagement.
Elizabeth here describes, in our terms, meta-affect: her social gratification, like Mr. Collins’s, comes from seeing emotional dynamics conform to a particular script. She evades the possibility of fondness toward Darcy: “To find a man agreeable whom one is determined to hate!—Do not wish me such an evil,” she protests to Jane (PP 90). Elizabeth’s “determin[ation],” and in particular the valence of her “hate,” reinforce her agency by limiting her responses. Anger and contempt—self-confirming, divisive, and aggressively assertive affects—seem to amplify her individual claims and grievances. At the same time, her growing “resentment” carries the normative weight of communal disapproval, being an emotion both common in Meryton and foundational to moral-philosophical theories of justice and law. By the time Darcy’s tide-turning letter to Elizabeth arrives, therefore, its contents still at first “ma[k]e her too angry to have any wish of doing him justice” (PP 204). Such indignation leaves little room for doubt.

By contrast, the affects dominating the latter portions of both novels—surprise and interest, to use Silvan Tomkins’s taxonomy—shrink from the claims of prejudice. That Elizabeth, along with Darcy, undergoes an emotional shift during his first proposal is widely agreed upon; their mutual “mortification” has been cited as a first instance of educative pain for

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40 See Fisher, The Vehement Passions, 13-15: he attributes to anger “an outward-streaming energy, active, fully engaging the will and demonstrating the most explosive self-centered claims on the world and on others.” In contrast, fear and its related emotions “are taken as disturbances of the self, rather than internal material of the self . . . we are overwhelmed by something outside ourselves . . . something that undermines, for at least the moment, our capacity to think of ourselves as agents.”

41 Resentment plays a prominent role, especially, in Smith’s theory of justice: see TMS 78-91. In Pride and Prejudice, this sentiment is common in early chapters, as when Mrs. Bennet’s “dislike of [Darcy’s] general behaviour, was sharpened into particular resentment, by his having slighted one of her daughters” and “Miss Bingley warmly resented the indignity [Darcy] had received, in an expostulation with her brother for talking such nonsense” (PP 11, 51). Resentment conspicuously loses moral force, however, late in the novel: Elizabeth brushes off the threatened “resentment of [Darcy’s] family,” and both Miss Bingley and Lady Catherine opt at last to abandon their resentments (PP 358, 387-8). Cf. Emsley, Philosophy of the Virtues, 88-91, on the novel’s association of justice with “righteous anger.”
Austen’s word “mortification” has many tonal facets, however. The couple’s pain as such comes subsequently, even incidentally, to their initial jolts of surprise. Darcy’s words at first simply shock Elizabeth, who requires further cognitive work to arrive at indignation: her “astonishment [is] beyond expression” and free of valence, then, with their respective social positions dawning on her, she is “sorry for the pain he [is] to receive; till, roused to resentment by his subsequent language, she los[es] all compassion in anger” (PP 189). Most of her responses likewise astound Darcy before aggrieving him: “his astonishment was obvious; and he looked at her with an expression of mingled incredulity and mortification” (PP 193). In *Persuasion*, surprise entrances into the action are the rule, not the exception, for Captain Wentworth, and at times, as in his first arrival at Bath, they discompose him as well as Anne. Though the first few of these at Uppercross prompt Anne’s eventual despair, her encounters with him at Bath lead to uncertainty and interrogation: after seeing him for the first time there, she “felt a great inclination to go to the outer door; she wanted to see if it rained. Why was she to suspect herself of another motive? Captain Wentworth must be out of sight” (P 117). Her emotions, as well as his, coincide with question marks, and like Elizabeth’s take shape only after shock has subsided.

Surprise is qualitatively and temporally distinct from the passions that follow it and, unlike the passing trial of despair, persists almost until the ends of both novels. It does not properly educate so much as excite. At Pemberley, Elizabeth hears “with increasing astonishment” Mrs. Reynolds’s reports of Darcy: “This was praise, of all others most extraordinary, most opposite to her ideas. That he was not a good-tempered man, had been her

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43 There is a case to be made that surprise entrances in both novels constitute a form of situational irony, which thwarts expectations as effectively as any of Austen’s myriad other ironies.
firmest opinion. Her keenest attention was awakened . . . [she] listened, wondered, doubted, and was impatient for more” (PP 248-49). With respect to these unexpected praises, and Elizabeth’s subsequent encounter with Darcy, his previous addresses offer no precedent at all. Surprise breaks off her meta-affective pursuit of certain outcomes, without implying positive attachment to new ones. It prompts fresh epistemological and affective assessments. For Hume, the subjective disorientation that comes with emotional variation compromises stable moral judgment, itself a meta-affect. For Austen, that may be just the point. The affects that come to predominate in her denouements are quieter than those they replace, but this is because they urge a more cautious and involved epistemology, not because they are inherently more private, authentic, or ineffable. Even Mrs. Gardiner’s favorable report of Darcy’s intercession on Lydia’s behalf falls well short of decisive for Elizabeth: “Her heart did whisper, that he had done it for her. But it was a hope shortly checked by other considerations” (PP 326).

Austen’s alternative to deceptive certainty about others cannot be credulity of another sort; resentment cannot simply be replaced with love in order to right lovers’ judgment. Besides surprise, nascent intimacy depends greatly and sustainedly on another affect—interest,

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44 Cf. Tomkins, Affect Imagery Consciousness, 2:273: “The affective response of surprise ... we conceive to be a general interrupter to ongoing activity. . . . It is ancillary to every other affect since it orients the individual to turn his attention away from one thing to another. . . . [It] momentarily renders the individual incapable of either continuing whatever he was doing before the startle or of initiating new activity so long as the startle response is emitted . . . its present role would appear to be primarily that of a circuit breaker.” Tomkins classes surprise in its own category as the “resetting” affect, neither inherently positive nor negative in valence. Austen’s similar understanding allows her to assign it a major role in the disruption of prejudice.
45 “When we form our judgments of persons, merely from the tendency of their characters to our own benefit, or to that of our friends, we find so many contradictions to our sentiments in society and conversation, and such an uncertainty from the incessant changes of our situation, that we seek some other standard of merit and demerit, which may not admit of so great variation” (Treatise 634). Hume envisions emotional variability as cognate with idiosyncrasy; a mark of individual whim and bias. Austen’s conception of surprise allows her to imagine more open-ended emotional variations.
46 Cf. Thompson, Between Self and World, 45-57.
47 Cf. Emsley, Jane Austen’s Philosophy of the Virtues, 94-97.
the driver of attentive inquiry.\textsuperscript{48} Anne, although she cares much more for Captain Wentworth than her sister and Mrs. Clay do, is proportionally less confident in assuming his presence at a gathering the following day: “They were reckoning him as certain, but, with her, it was a gnawing solictitude never appeased for five minutes together” (P 151). Anne’s “gnawing solictitude” epitomizes Austen’s conception of interest. As an action both of the mouth—a labored attempt to nourish—and of the stomach, as it churns with hunger, “gnawing” entails both a sense of emptiness and a striving for fullness, whereas “solictitude” denotes an abiding, worried attention to the needs of another as well as a strenuous, even obnoxious request on one’s own behalf. Taken in total, the phrase describes a tenuous process of negotiation among multiple claims; incessant exchange wherein concern is predicated on a palpable lack of knowledge, and wherein the observer’s interested inquiries are bound up in the interests of those she observes.

That Anne’s impulse is “never appeased for five minutes together” gets at one of the most radical aspects of Austen’s model of sympathy. In presuming that social facts, inferences, and feelings are ever-changing, Austen argues that sympathy, too, happens in time—in contrast to heuristic models that treat the sympathetic process as instantaneous. As Hume first describes it, sympathy arises when the observer’s imagination converts a cognized idea of another’s feeling into an affective impression of it: “the passions arise [in us] in conformity to the images we form of them” (\textit{Treatise} 370). The imagination’s currency, “images,” are not dynamic; the word rather suggests stasis and isolation, as though social action were arrested for viewing. Futurity does come to bear on Humean sympathy, but it is a determinate future that one can extrapolate, in images, from the present, as in Hume’s account of painted figures affecting a viewer: “A figure,

\textsuperscript{48} Tomkins aptly describes interest as the “most seriously neglected” affect (\textit{Affect Imagery Consciousness}, 1:185); however, as I hope to show, its explanatory power, particularly with regard to sociable uncertainties, is great. It is worth noting in the context of Elizabeth and Darcy’s intimacy that Tomkins reserves a prominent role for excitement, the most intense form of interest, in human sexuality (Ibid.).
which is not justly ballanc’d, is disagreeable; and that because it conveys the ideas of its fall, of harm, and of pain: Which ideas are painful, when by sympathy they acquire any degree of force and vivacity” (Treatise 413). For Hume, and far more so for Smith and his narrative, situation-based sympathy, the present moment already implies and contains the germ of the futures that will subsequently unfold thence. It is, in other words, grounds for prejudice.

Rather than “images” and “figure[s],” both heuristic indices of character, the interest-driven sympathy of Austen’s heroines engages principally with propositions, hypotheses, and tentative inferences—forms of thought that do not presuppose coherent psychology in social subjects. Darcy’s conflict with Wickham, though hinging like Pamela’s trials upon a failed seduction, registers in his letter to Elizabeth as a clash of information rather than of psyches. As Elizabeth reads the account, two versions of events jockey for her assent, and her revised views of the men come off like counterfactual exercises in logic: Wickham’s “behaviour to herself could now have had no tolerable motive,” and “Mr. Darcy’s conduct . . . was capable of a turn which must make him entirely blameless” (PP 207, 205, emphases added). The most probing and emotionally turbulent point of the novel, this chapter draws its drama from the play of ideas; Elizabeth’s wrestling with “probability” and “assertion” (PP 205). She has no privileged access, nor any naïve-sentimentalist capacity for moral perception: Darcy, in fact, pointedly abjures the Richardsonian posture of writing “to the moment” in a show of immediacy.49 Upon subsequent considerations of the letter, “her feelings towards its writer [a]re at times widely different” (PP 212). Elizabeth’s chief desire in these scenes is to get further information. Whereas Pamela’s

49 “You may possibly wonder,” Darcy writes to Elizabeth, “why all this was not told you last night. But I was not then master enough of myself to know what could or ought to be revealed” (PP 202). Regarding Austen’s relation to naïve-sentimentalist philosophy, Devlin argues that Austen rejects Shaftesburian benevolism (Jane Austen and Education, 52-58), but Gilbert Ryle has detected a Shaftesburian moral vein in her novels, particularly in their breadth of characters and psychological vocabulary: see his “Jane Austen and the Moralists,” in English Literature and British Philosophy, ed. Rosenbaum, 180-84.
epistles are treasured by herself and collated by Richardson’s editor-narrator as a record of enduring virtue, Darcy and Elizabeth both repudiate his letter. Darcy wants it destroyed on account of elements in it that he “dread[s] [her] having the power of reading again,” and Elizabeth agrees to burn it if he wishes (PP 368). Yet she assures him that past transgressions are moot: “think no more of the letter. The feelings of the person who wrote, and the person who received it, are now so widely different from what they were then, that every unpleasant circumstance attending it, ought to be forgotten” (Ibid.). Elizabeth claims distance from “the person[s]” of Darcy and even herself, suggesting these are relics of “circumstance” rather than of psychological continuity: “I cannot be so easily reconciled to myself,” Darcy remarks with some irony (PP 367). The letter serves its purpose, and their intimacy moves on.50

Interest thus disburdens the heroines from their psychological and behavioral expectations. Like Anne’s “gnawing solicitude,” Elizabeth’s “impatien[ce] for more” commits her to observation regardless of its outcome; she aims no longer to see that others conform to her notions, but whether they do. After Darcy’s appearance at Pemberley, she “long[s] to know what at that moment [i]s passing in his mind; in what manner he th[inks] of her, and whether, in defiance of every thing, she [i]s still dear to him” (PP 253). Likewise at Longbourn, “Elizabeth eagerly watche[s] to see whether Bingley would take the place” beside her sister, and although she “dare[s] not depend upon the consequence, she yet receive[s] pleasure from observing his behaviour” (PP 340). In both cases, “pleasure” ensues from “observing” and communicating, rather than from the supposed “consequence” of these acts. Elizabeth refuses to infer specific

50 Cf. McMaster, “New Faces, New Understandings:” in a more character-centered reading, she argues that this so-called “debriefing scene demonstrates the impress of one character upon another, the interpenetrating changes that each has wrought upon the other, which make them now so fully dovetailed and at accord.” I see no such authoritative perspective arise in these scenes. Darcy’s gestures to Elizabeth may draw formal inspiration from the eighteenth-century sentimental novel, but they conspicuously fail to bare his heart to her. For more on Austen’s relation to the sentimental novels of her forebears, particularly Richardson, see Mudrick, Irony as Defense and Discovery; Bradbrook, Jane Austen and Her Predecessors; and Harris, Jane Austen’s Art of Memory.
feelings. Jane professes a similar basis for her rekindled relationship with Bingley, “assur[ing]” her sister that she has “learnt to enjoy his conversation as an agreeable and sensible young man, without having a wish beyond it” (PP 343).

Whether we find Jane’s statement candid or not, interest plays an undeniable role in the larger social economy of *Pride and Prejudice*. Darcy is the first to exhibit this emotion when, shortly after meeting Elizabeth, he “beg[ins] to wish to know more of her,” without yet wishing for particular facts (PP 24). Interest, in pursuing investigation itself as an end, promotes disinterestedness. It avowedly grounds Darcy’s view of Jane, too, however wrong it may be: “I did not believe her to be indifferent [toward Bingley] because I wished it;—I believed it on impartial conviction, as truly as I wished it in reason” (PP 197-98). Such “impartial[ity]” does not resemble Smith’s removed and muted version; for Austen, to be impartial is to be intensely motivated by the search, and hence unattached to the find. As Elizabeth grows fonder of Darcy, investigation and skepticism become foundational values of their relationship. Her question about his advice to Bingley—“Did you speak from your own observation . . . when you told him that my sister loved him, or merely from my information last spring?”—is at once teasing and ethically germane (PP 371). And Elizabeth refuses to presume affinity between herself and Darcy, as she once presumed aversion. During her otherwise frank exchange with Lady Catherine, she hedges about his feelings, alternately speculating “if he is” engaged to Miss De Bourgh, “if [she herself is his] choice,” and “if [he] does not object to” Elizabeth’s social standing (PP 354-56). When Lady Catherine suggests that Elizabeth is “resolved to have” Darcy, Elizabeth disavows the attributed meta-affect in terms both confident and cryptic: “I have said no such thing. I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness” (PP 358). She does not only love Darcy; she interests herself in him. Her
attachment and pursuit cannot be cleanly separated from her commitment to making second, and third, and fourth guesses.\textsuperscript{51}

V. Sociability and Syntax

Syntactically, too, Austen’s novels build growing uncertainties into their heroines’ growing intimacies. Sentence structures throughout \textit{Persuasion}, and in the final volume of \textit{Pride and Prejudice}, work to frustrate the heuristics that for Hume and Smith enable the assessment of other minds. Whereas, in Hume’s account, sympathy takes its cues from highly conventional patterns of thought—verbal and gestural signs lead irresistibly to the associated idea, and thence to the impression of a feeling—other feelings and thought-trains intervene by Austen’s account. The heroines’ predominant passions run orthogonal rather than parallel to those of their love interests, linked more to the taxing work of inferring emotion than to its successful reproduction. Such tonal shifts and syntactic discontinuities, furthermore, work against Smith’s tonal and syntactic arguments that certain emotions follow reliably from certain situations. His absorbing account of the “upstart,” for instance, anticipates the prejudices of Meryton in that it is jointly composed of disembodied general maxims and narrowly idiosyncratic experience. Austen’s resistance to both these alternatives is not a matter of staking out a position along the familiar spectrum of personal perspective versus social fact, but of enacting an observational sociability that shakes the pieties of each.\textsuperscript{52}

As the most scenic and sensory of Austen’s novels, \textit{Persuasion} is particularly rich in what we might call a radically observational style. As we have already seen, the grammar of such

\textsuperscript{51} Cf. Soni, “Committing Freedom,” 381: “To refuse to judge—to indulge in a process of infinite deliberation and reflection—is also to refuse to act . . . .[f]reedom and determinacy must be thought together.” Austen’s uses of tone and syntax challenge this claim by casting sustained inquiry as emphatically, restlessly, and consequentially active.

\textsuperscript{52} It is not enough, then, to read in Austen’s novels a Smithian argument “that order, rather than being preordained and fixed, [.i]s continuously created by the expression of individual being,” nor straightforward acceptance of and “reference to a received [human] nature that was mixed” (Knox-Shaw, \textit{Jane Austen and the Enlightenment}, 107, 253).
passages delays and frustrates our ability to deduce relationships among various objects described as well as between objects and speaker. Few moments in Austen achieve this so well as the group’s scenic entrance into Lyme:

They were come too late in the year for any amusement or variety which Lyme, as a public place, might offer. The rooms were shut up, the lodgers almost all gone, scarcely any family but of the residents left; and, as there is nothing to admire in the buildings themselves, the remarkable situation of the town, the principal street almost hurrying into the water, the walk to the Cobb, skirting round the pleasant little bay, which, in the season, is animated with bathing machines and company, the Cobb itself, its old wonders and new improvements, with the very beautiful line of cliffs stretching out to the east of the town, are what the stranger’s eye will seek; and a very strange stranger it must be, who does not see charms in the immediate environs of Lyme, to make him wish to know it better. (P 64, emphases added)

The long sentence’s periodic syntax makes its imagery all the more vivid, by presenting discrete details yet withholding until the very end how any of them fits into a larger context. Because the sense of the primary clause is suspended for most of the sentence, and the intervening terms are all weighted equally with an initial “the,” it is never quite clear which of these items “there is nothing to admire in” and which of them “are what the stranger’s eye will seek.” The adjectives “remarkable,” “beautiful,” and “pleasant” provide some guidance, but are hardly enough to overcome this disorienting effect. The designation of affinity and aversion is deferred: Austen scripts no reaction to the observational process, instead eliciting interest first and foremost. Jocelyn Harris’s historical and biographical argument that Austen’s depictions of Lyme combine “physical realism”—she “records exactly what she saw in Lyme Regis, together with her own reactions to it”—with “Romantic implications” that “infuse” the landscape may thus require some qualification. A deep uncertainty about the authority of the senses, characteristic of eighteenth-century empiricism, lurks in Austen’s description of the town. At a schematic level,

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53 Harris, *A Revolution Almost Beyond Expression*, 154-55. Among Romantic allusions in Austen’s Lyme, Harris detects Gilpin, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Byron. With respect to realism, she further argues that Austen provides “extraordinarily accurate information about Lyme” and “writes as carefully as any topographer” (148, 152).
this sentence affords no sense of place or movement apart from the eye’s travel, and no way to place people in the landscape. In the absence of such orienting framework, to persevere in reading is, in itself, “[to] wish to know [the scene] better.”

Scenic details aside, Austen most often uses such impressionism to descriptions of people, thoughts, and actions; the sights in the parlor are as many, as rich, and as curious as the sights in strange cities. The first meeting between Anne and Wentworth is one such moment: owing to Anne’s surprise, customary habits of taxonomy are subverted, the grammar of Wentworth’s statements isn’t registered, impressions aren’t grouped into broader, categories, and bodies in motion are not identifiable as characters. Another such moment occurs in the much later concert-hall chapter, when Wentworth breaks off his discussion of Captain Benwick’s former grief:

Either from the consciousness, however, that his friend had recovered, or from some other consciousness, he went no farther; and Anne, who, in spite of the agitated voice in which the latter part had been uttered, and in spite of all the various noises of the room, the almost ceaseless slam of the door, and ceaseless buzz of persons walking through, had distinguished every word, was struck, gratified, confused, and beginning to breathe very quick, and feel an hundred things in a moment. It was impossible for her to enter on such a subject; and yet, after a pause, feeling the necessity of speaking, and having not the smallest wish for a total change, she only deviated so far as to [speak.] (P 121, emphases added)

Austen here defers Anne’s very agency, packing a barrage of stimuli into the subordinate clause that interrupts her in the act of being struck and gratified. Anne’s reaction nearly becomes itself another stimulus, no more privileged or permanent than anything else she here experiences.

The syntax that so complicates psychological inference thus foregrounds social ethics as well. Like Anne, Elizabeth is scarcely so concerned for and attentive to others as when she is in epistemological suspense. Some hints of this appear early:

Elizabeth happening to see the countenance of both as they looked at each other, was all astonishment at the effect of the meeting. Both changed colour, one looked white, the
other red. Mr. Wickham, after a few moments, touched his hat—a salutation which Mr. Darcy just deigned to return. What could be the meaning of it?—It was impossible to imagine; it was impossible not to long to know.” (PP 73)

Surprise and interest, again, are Elizabeth’s primary emotions. She “long[s] to know,” but cannot “imagine” what she would know. There is no coherent psychology here: the men’s “look[s]” are not clearly attributed, and Elizabeth does little more than register them. Admittedly, this is an anomalous moment in her early acquaintance, and in the first half of Pride and Prejudice, into which composed certainties crowd from all quarters. It takes a crisis of knowledge to reawaken such doubt later; Elizabeth must form inferences before their falsehood can strike her. In a sense, Austen develops her heroines by intensifying this pattern of observation and conjecture, generating cycles of epistemological suspense more minutely, at sentence level.

Elizabeth and Anne’s alternating sensations and reflections produce distinctive prose textures whose tension is largely epistemological. For Anne, this restless pattern begins immediately after that first reencounter at Uppercross: “Whether former feelings were to be renewed, must be brought to the proof; former times must undoubtedly be brought to the recollection of each; they could not but be reverted to” (P 42). At first, Anne appears open to the idea that internal states vary with time, distinguishing “former feelings” from present ones and seeing the need for “proof,” some kind of experiential test or inquiry, to ascertain the Captain’s present ones. But in the very next clause, she moves from a receptive “whether” to an inflexible “must,” and professes to know his thoughts “undoubtedly”—so securely as to obviate proof. This security, which supports Anne’s belief of their “perpetual estrangement” for the next two chapters, turns thus upon a single sentence wherein an inquiry gives way to a conclusion. As with Elizabeth, so with Anne does this alternation seem basic to the fabric of consciousness: the tendencies to be shocked out of old propositions and to produce new ones are both givens, and

together constitute a sociability that dares consider social cues only momentarily legible. Although we could locate this epistemological process within the familiar dichotomy of outer versus inner worlds, we might—in view of the shared deficiencies Austen exposes in both public and private judgments—more aptly see it as an alternation between different faculties of the mind, or modes of experience.

Austen’s syntax tracks both her heroines’ guesswork and the emotions that mediate it—surprise, interest, fear, joy, and others—in a manner that recalls Sterne, though perhaps with finer nuance. Her most sustained and virtuosic treatment of social epistemology occurs in the concert-hall episode of *Persuasion’s* second volume, a much-neglected chapter whose entire length would merit a running commentary if space permitted, and which traces the related contours of epistemology and affect in unprecedented detail. Wentworth arrives almost immediately, much sooner than Anne expects, in the second sentence of the chapter, whereupon she greets him and anxieties promptly ensue: “After talking however of the weather and Bath and the concert, their conversation began to flag, and so little was said at last, that she was expecting him to go every moment; but he did not; he seemed in no hurry to leave her; and presently with renewed spirit, with a little smile, a little glow, he [spoke]” (P 120). Austen, in the first portion of the sentence, follows Anne’s consciousness as it becomes increasingly meta or speculative, progressing from the subjects of their conversation to a general sense of its waning to the “expect[ation]” that Wentworth is uninterested and ready to leave, and marked in the process by rising anxiety. The sudden parataxis, however, punctuated by semicolons, interrupts and calms the anxious rhythms of Anne’s thought with the observation that Wentworth is not leaving. From this, too, she posits intention, inferring that he “seems” content to abide with her. Finally, she is again drawn into an observational mode by physical details of Wentworth’s
communication which, owing to periodic syntax, precede the sense of his utterance and even the orienting concept of “he,” and which convey intense interest.

This alternately tense and comforting texture, which undermines conjecture as soon as it is utterable, pervades the entire chapter formally, at the levels of plot and paragraph, as well as syntactically, effectively ensuring that Anne cannot assume anything about Wentworth for long. When they are shortly separated, his physical distance from her coincides with the beginning of her solipsistic reflections:

all, all declared that he had a heart returning to her at least; that anger, resentment, avoidance, were no more; and that they were succeeded, not merely by friendship and regard, but by the tenderness of the past; yes, some share of the tenderness of the past. She could not contemplate the change as implying less.—He must love her.

These were thoughts, with their attendant visions, which occupied and flurried her too much to leave her any power of observation; and she passed along the room without having a glimpse of him, without even trying to discern him. When their places were determined on, and they were all properly arranged, she looked round to see if he should happen to be in the same part of the room, but he was not, her eye could not reach him; and the concert being just opening, she must consent for a time to be happy in an humbler way. (P 123)

When Anne and Wentworth aren’t in contact, they are far more liable to misunderstand each other. The more Anne contemplates, the more her reticence—positing only “some share” of “a heart returning to her at least”—gives way to the conviction that “[h]e must love her.” In these moments of reflection, exchange ceases as Anne, oversatisfied, neglects the world of sense and the signals she is sending in it: by the time she gets her bearings, Wentworth is out of sight, and Mr. Elliot has insinuated himself beside her, thereby leaving her open to rumor and misconstruction.

When Anne locates Wentworth across the room some time later, she first must struggle even to make eye contact, which shakes her confidence: “As her eyes fell on him, his seemed to be withdrawn from her. It had that appearance. It seemed as if she had been one moment too late;
and as long as she dared observe, he did not look again” (P 125). His failure to seek out Anne during an intermission, then his apparent aloofness when she does spot him, discompose her further: “he looked grave, and seemed irresolute, and only by very slow degrees came at last near enough to speak to her. She felt that something must be the matter. The change was indubitable. The difference between his present air and what it had been in the octagon room was strikingly great” (P 126). Anne’s stable image of him loving her cannot subsist in the face of possibly contrary evidence; nor is it a sufficient basis for her attachment to him, and so she is driven to investigate and find new information—to be solicitous of Wentworth. She is “anxious to be encouraging” (P 125) until Mr. Elliot pulls her away and Wentworth leaves frustrated, and although she guesses correctly that jealousy is the explanation, the last lines of the chapter stress that further communication is necessary: “How was the truth to reach [Wentworth]? How, in all the peculiar disadvantages of their respective situations, would he ever learn her real sentiments?” (P 127) Although form corresponds to style and tone in this chapter, following contours that dramatize Anne’s solicitude, the chapter’s formal closure does not entail tonal or epistemological closure.

The syntax of restless epistemology takes longer to emerge—and has been less noted—in *Pride and Prejudice*, but is increasingly common following Elizabeth’s visit to Pemberley. Darcy’s behavior there unsettles the last vestiges of her anger and the fear that he might act coldly toward her, but what replaces them is less clear and more tentative:

He who, she had been persuaded, would avoid her as his greatest enemy, seemed, on this accidental meeting, most eager to preserve the acquaintance, and without any indelicate display of regard, or any peculiarity of manner, where their two selves only were concerned, was soliciting the good opinion of her friends, and bent on making her known to his sister. Such a change in a man of so much pride, excited not only astonishment but gratitude—for to love, ardent love, it must be attributed; and as such its impression on her was of a sort to be encouraged, as by no means unpleasing, though it could not be exactly defined. She respected, she esteemed, she was grateful to him, she felt a real interest in
his welfare; and she only wanted to know how far she wished that welfare to depend upon herself, and how far it would be for the happiness of both that she should employ the power, which her fancy told her she still possessed, of bringing on the renewal of his addresses. (PP 265-66)

Though Elizabeth’s spirits lift, David Monaghan surely overstates the case in arguing that she “is now fully aware of the significance of [Darcy’s] approaches and of her own response.” Her reflections proceed haltingly, dealing more with how Darcy “seemed” than with what he intended. To be sure, her punctuated inference of “love, ardent love” is, as it is for Anne, a bold leap, but it is soon undercut by qualified access to her very own feelings in the next clauses and by formal contingencies, mainly involving Lydia and Wickham, that shake her assurance. Upon Darcy’s eventual return to Longbourn, she “th[inks] for that space of time, that his affection and wishes must still be unshaken,” but nonetheless “w[ill] not be secure” in this thought: “‘Let me first see how he behaves,’ said she; ‘it will then be early enough for expectation[’]” (PP 334-35).

Elizabeth’s viewing, like Anne’s, insistently tempers her thinking in later chapters. Her impression of Bingley and Darcy in the subsequent scene is too fluid for her comfortably to assume its validity: she

looked forward to their entrance, as the point on which all her chance of pleasure for the evening must depend.

“If he does not come to me, then,” said she, “I shall give him up for ever.”

The gentlemen came; and she thought he looked as if he would have answered her hopes; but, alas! the ladies had crowded round the table, where Miss Bennet was making tea, and Elizabeth pouring the coffee, in so close a confederacy, that there was not a single vacancy near her, which would admit of a chair. . . . Darcy had walked away to another part of the room. She followed him with her eyes, envied every one to whom he spoke, had scarcely patience enough to help anybody to coffee; and then was enraged against herself for being so silly!

“A man who has once been refused! How could I ever be foolish enough to expect a renewal of his love? Is there one among the sex, who would not protest against such a weakness as a second proposal to the same woman? There is no indignity so abhorrent to their feelings!”

55 Monaghan, Jane Austen, Structure and Social Vision, 90. As Bander points out, respect, esteem, and gratitude do not imply love for Mr. Vincent in Maria Edgeworth’s Belinda, a novel much admired by Austen (“Neither Sex, Money, Nor Power,” 37).
Elizabeth’s informational and emotional positions shift rapidly between mutually destroying observations and inferences. She at first hangs her total pleasure or total estrangement from Darcy on his conduct, but her triply qualified impression—“she thought he looked as if he would”—is too inconclusive to yield either. Having intently watched the men, Elizabeth is suddenly surprised ("alas!") to see the “crowd[]” of women making a competing social claim. She promptly schematizes this “confederacy,” sectioning it into “vacanc[ies]” for “chair[s]” and ruling that there is none for Darcy. Stymied, she turns her eyes back to him, but is lost in her own speculations when she takes his physical distance as mental distance. The paragraph of direct discourse, ostensibly the strongest statement of character in this excerpt, hence tells us the least about the social world: Elizabeth asks purely rhetorical questions, invokes gender heuristics worthy of Mr. Collins, or of Hume or Smith, and swaps her prior interest for frustration and resentment. These, however, subside when Darcy returns to her side—momentarily, until their talk flags and they are placed at different card tables for the rest of the night. As in several earlier social encounters, inference formation is almost choreographed; timed to coincide with the reactive absence of its object.56 Although not as extended as *Persuasion*’s concert-hall chapter, this scene resembles it in masterfully placing knowledge problems at the heart of romantic

56 Insofar as spatial relationships are shown to influence epistemology, problems of knowledge appear in the novel’s formal structures long before its syntactic structures. When Mrs. Bennet first learns of Mr. Collins’s engagement to Charlotte, she is “too much overpowered to say a great deal,” but as soon as Sir William Lucas departs, she composedly outlines her conclusions about the match: “her feelings found a rapid vent. In the first place, she persisted in disbelieving the whole of the matter; secondly, she was very sure that Mr. Collins had been taken in; thirdly, she trusted that they would never be happy together; and fourthly, that the match might be broken off” (PP 97-8). During Elizabeth and Jane’s visit to Netherfield, Miss Bingley unwittingly discloses the conditional nature of her civility to them: “You may depend upon it, Madam . . . that Miss Bennet shall receive every possible attention while she remains with us” (PP 31, emphasis added). This promise is deeply ironic, for absence facilitates prompt judgment, with the Miss Bingleys “abusing [Elizabeth] as soon as she [is] out of the room. Her manners were pronounced to be very bad indeed, a mixture of pride and impertinence; she had no conversation, no stile, no taste, no beauty” (PP 25).
feeling and the marriage plot. The succession of approaches and repulses does not have merely emblematic significance.\textsuperscript{57} It traces the fluctuations of doubting, solicitous minds.

VI. Mirth and Doubt

Neither the tone, form, nor grammar with which courtship is depicted, then, provides or implies the easing of epistemological problems. Admittedly, marriage, though hardly the only relevant condition for the endings of Austen’s novels, remains structurally assured. And even in the heroines’ doubtful moments, suppositions about character are inevitable. Yet in \textit{Pride and Prejudice}, conventional diction of closure leaves Elizabeth unconvinced and uncomforted, even when the voice asserting certainty is her own:

“My dearest child,” [Mrs. Bennet] cried, “I can think of nothing else! Ten thousand a year, and very likely more! ’Tis as good as a Lord! And a special licence. You must and shall be married by a special licence. But my dearest love, tell me what dish Mr. Darcy is particularly fond of, that I may have it to-morrow.”

This was a sad omen of what her mother’s behaviour to the gentleman himself might be; and Elizabeth found, that though in the certain possession of his warmest affection, and secure of her relations’ consent, there was still something to be wished for. But the morrow passed off much better than she expected; for Mrs. Bennet luckily stood in such awe of her intended son-in-law, that she ventured not to speak to him, unless it was in her power to offer him any attention, or mark her deference for his opinion.

Elizabeth had the satisfaction of seeing her father taking pains to get acquainted with him; and Mr. Bennet soon assured her that he was rising every hour in his esteem. (PP 378-79)

As Tara Ghoshal Wallace has observed, the very language of certitude in Austen’s denouements, patently ill-suited to some instances, cannot be read naively.\textsuperscript{58} At best, certainties are minimal and local. Elizabeth’s “certain possession” of Darcy’s “warmest affection” is, in context, no unalloyed good, surrounded as it is by double-edged reminders of “security in [her] relations’

\textsuperscript{57} Monaghan reads such alternations symbolically in \textit{Pride and Prejudice}, citing the balls in the first half of the novel as paradigmatic instances (\textit{Jane Austen, Structure and Social Vision}, 68).

\textsuperscript{58} Wallace, \textit{Jane Austen and Narrative Authority}, 46. For instance, the assertion that Lydia “retain[s] all the claims to reputation which her marriage had given her,” in Wallace’s reading, “subverts the textual closure asserted by the absolutes and superlatives of the ending.” See also Grove, “Jane Austen’s Free Inquiry,” 132-41; and Newman, “Can This Marriage Be Saved.”
consent,” obsequies purely on account of status, and her mother’s “awe.” The diction surrounding Mrs. Bennet suggests political abjection stemming from her rapturous attention to rumored character. This is unwanted and unwarranted, however. Mr. Bennet’s “pains to get acquainted with” Darcy assume by contrast a lack of information rather than plenitude, and depict “esteem” as a dynamic process. The “affection” which leaves “something to be wished for” may also leave something to be guessed at, particularly because Austen’s use of the word “affection” is never wholly devoid of the older, general sense she inherits from the moralists and often shot through with compromising irony.59

Likewise, Elizabeth’s “absolute certainty that [Darcy’s] affection was not the work of a day, but had stood the test of many months suspense” (PP 377), reveals little about emotional content, or much of anything other than her empirical sense of duration. Jane’s reaction to the sister’s engagement, too, reframes expectations of what one can be certain about: “My dear, dear Lizzy, I would—I do congratulate you—but are you certain? forgive the question—are you quite certain that you can be happy with him?” (PP 373). Having been forced to discard her conviction of incompatibility between Elizabeth and Darcy as individuals, she now inquires about the flow of information between them—the capacity for, not the fact of, happiness. Such certainties prominently suggest the work that Elizabeth and Darcy have done and continue to do. We might see in this outwardly secure diction a snapshot of ongoing instability that anticipates, at least in its psychological dimensions, Anne’s final unsettled joy in *Persuasion*: “with Captain Wentworth, some moments of communication continually occurring, and always the hope of

59 For sentimentalists from Shaftesbury to Smith, the primary sense of “affection” resembles that of “affect” in the present day. Even when using it more narrowly, Smith treats the word as a sign of communication and emotional process more than goodwill as such (TMS 220). Austen’s own uses of the word tend to accord with its present-day sense, but several are ironic, as when we learn that “Miss Bingley’s congratulations to her brother, on his approaching marriage, were all that was affectionate and insincere,” yet leave Jane “affected” even so, or that “[Wickham’s] affection for [Lydia] soon sunk into indifference; her’s lasted a little longer” (PP 383, 387). Cf. Tave, *Some Words of Jane Austen*, 131-41.
more, and always the knowledge of his being there!” (P 164) These are not the sort of images that would support heuristic sympathy or suggest innate benevolence. Underlying them instead is a sociability based, or perched, on pervasive uncertainty about the quality and finality of “communication.”

Few would deny that Austen’s novels seethe with irony. It seems to me that we cannot credit her as an “ironist” without considering that she is a skeptic as well.60 The philosophy of Richard Rorty may be helpful here. In Rorty’s idiom, ironism denotes recognition of language’s contingency and therefore a habitual distrust of statements about truth or ultimate reality (“metaphysics”). The ironist, owing to her “radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses,” refuses to accept as settled fact any belief or assumption, particularly those concerning the supposed moral status of others.61 Austen has strong claims to be an ironist in Rorty’s sense insofar as her own final vocabulary resists framing the protagonists’ social or moral positions as matters of certainty. Following their engagement, Elizabeth and Darcy’s rapport entails little meeting of hearts and a great deal of banter over problems of information, in which each foregrounds and faults the communication strategies of the other (PP 380-82).

One can fairly surmise from this that Elizabeth and Darcy’s uncertainty facilitates their intimacy. Elizabeth’s newfound confidence includes a conscious portion of presumption and invention, however playful, in which she delightedly downplays the difficulties of observation and epistemological work. Asking Darcy to account for the origin of his attraction, she ends up filling in the details herself—“I have saved you the trouble of accounting for it”—and she suggests that his appreciation of her should be a largely revisionist enterprise: “My good

60 The term “ironist,” as applied to Austen, is Mudrick’s: see Irony as Defense and Discovery, 6.
61 Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, 73. Rorty notably associates ironism with liberalism, but his version of liberalism, mediated by contingency and irony, differs markedly from most traditional strands.
qualities are under your protection, and you are to exaggerate them as much as possible; and, in return, it belongs to me to find occasions for teasing and quarrelling with you as often as may be” (PP 380-81). The telos of “hastening together to perfect felicity,” as in Northanger Abbey, is never far from the crosshairs of parody, as when Austen tells of Darcy “anticipating the happiness of Bingley, which of course was to be inferior only to his own” (PP 371). Elizabeth appeals to pro forma closure when assuring Jane of her marital joy, in a bombastic voice reminiscent of the opening chapters: “It is settled between us already, that we are to be the happiest couple in the world” (PP 373). Her frequent jokes in the last chapters suggest one who constructs self-consciously because she understands what constructivism means. Problems of knowledge do more than underlie the relationship; they occupy its center and even furnish a good deal of the couple’s joy.

If such emotional wariness does typify Austen’s narratorial style, it is neither pathological nor defensive, but sociable and conscientious. Elizabeth, asked to trace the origin of her love for Darcy, makes what is explicitly a joke about the first sight of Pemberley doing the trick, before straying even further from the promise of deep psychological access: “Another intreaty that she would be serious, however, produced the desired effect; and she soon satisfied Jane by her solemn assurances of attachment. When convinced on that article, Miss Bennet had nothing farther to wish” (PP 373). Austen’s diction is cagey. A “serious” state becomes merely an “effect,” more surface tone than felt mood; “solemn[ity]” and “attachment” are rhetorical tropes suited primarily to “convince[]” a proposition or “article,” rather than a material reality, is

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62 Austen, Northanger Abbey, 185.
63 Cf. McMaster, “New Faces, New Understandings.” Elizabeth, in McMaster’s reading, “makes it her explicit business [in this scene] to ‘understand, thoroughly understand’ his heart, as well as her own.”
64 For allegations of Austen’s defensiveness or deficiency, see Mudrick, Irony as Defense and Discovery, especially 1, 19, 30, 36; Miller, The Secret of Style, 20-29; Harding, Regulated Hatred, 5-26; and Charlotte Brontë, letter to W. S. Williams, 12 April 1850, in Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage, ed. Southam, 1:128.
65 For the implications of Elizabeth’s “serious” speech, see Brownstein, “Irony and Authority,” 66.
the object of “desire[s]” and “wish[es].” And indeed, Jane’s response confirms the persistence of solipsism: “Now I am quite happy . . . for you will be as happy as myself” (PP 374). Unreserved happiness, conjured as if to settle all dubious guesses and social anxieties, has quite the opposite effect in context.66

In *Persuasion*’s penultimate chapter, Wentworth bears the brunt of similar but less playful ironies immediately following his engagement to Anne. Once more, the discussion treats chiefly of the couple’s epistemological difficulties, but it does so from a perspective that is conspicuously and unsociably Wentworth’s: in a rare shift, it is his voice rather than Anne’s that the narrator here adopts, and until the end of the scene the only words spoken are his. Instead of lively dialogue, Wentworth pursues a protracted, somewhat tedious exposition of his prior anxieties. As such, his understanding lags a step behind. While congratulating himself on being past his errors, he recurs exclusively to the past. It is revealing that Anne’s only two utterances here consist in rejoinders about Wentworth’s failures of observation: “I should have thought . . . that my manner to yourself might have spared you much or all of this” (P 163). As the conclusion of the scene, this reply marks its only moment of possible levity; Anne implicitly rebukes him for drawing out his now needless explanation, as well as his former prejudice, when better attention to her might have obviated both. It is part of the joke that her words address the present, for his do not. As rendered in free indirect speech, his account is at times jarringly one-sided, referring to Anne in a disengaged third person: “he had not understood the perfect excellence of the mind with which Louisa’s could so ill bear a comparison” (P 161). His encomiums on Anne’s “perfection,” meanwhile, are both unpersuasive and ineffectual within his larger story of protracted doubt, and his assertion that “nothing was to be retracted or qualified”

66 See Poovey, *Proper Lady*, 201: “when marriage with Darcy cancels all the gloomy forecasts about Elizabeth’s future, Austen no longer suggests a possible relationship between social causes and psychological effects.”
in his letter is sheer apophasis, coming as it does amidst a long qualification of his many emotional states. Wentworth’s sense of Anne is sufficiently problematic that the couple’s “return[] again into the past, more exquisitely happy, perhaps, in their re-union, than when it had been first projected . . . more fixed in a knowledge of each other’s character,” is deeply unsatisfying (P 160, emphasis added). Among the different moments of the “past” and of a previously “projected,” revisited “re-union,” one cannot readily say which moment is the source of the specific version of “knowledge” that its indefinite article implies. In spite of—or perhaps because of—Austen’s gifts for writing irony and interiority, the limits of knowledge for her protagonists are at least as bound and narrow as they have been at any point in the previous century.

There is no privileged telos, it seems, in Austen’s knowledge plot; the risk of seeing wrongly or reductively never quite recedes. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth’s remark that “Lady Catherine has been of infinite use, which ought to make her happy, for she loves to be of use” does not shock us, but the narrator’s similar treatment of the more sympathetic Gardiners might, reduced as they are to structural components, “the persons who, by bringing [Elizabeth] into Derbyshire, had been the means of uniting them” (PP 381, 388). The Gardiners, too, are “of use;” like Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, they figure in the novel’s parting shot as cogs in its narrative algorithm. By throwing the formal function of characters in our faces, *Pride and Prejudice’s* last sentence challenges our assumptions about the trajectory of intimacy. Essentialism and scripted relations remain all too probable; skepticism toward the dictates of judgment remains necessary. It may be that Austen sees in Elizabeth and Darcy’s marriage

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67 In the closing pages of *Mansfield Park*, Austen “intreat[s] every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire” (319). Brownstein suggests that it is Darcy and Elizabeth, rather than the Gardiners, cast as “puppets” in the last sentence (“Irony and Authority,” 69).
neither a union of communities nor of kindred spirits, but a tenuous intimacy exactly as dear as it is perishable.

VII. Awkward Society

Though ostentatious and authoritative benedictions litter the final pages of these novels, authority itself fails to materialize in them. None of the protagonists seems to believe the proclamations of closure swirling about in their discourse—not creditably, anyway—and the narratorial style is too equivocal to be read straight. Whether the perspective embedded in that narration suggests inner monologue one moment or disembodied omniscience the next, it all the same withholds the moral clarity characteristic of social relations under sentimentalist regimes. Characteristic of Hume, for instance, who recommends something like a disembodied and therefore more consistent view of social interactions:

> every particular man has a peculiar position with regard to others; and ’tis impossible we cou’d ever converse together on any reasonable terms, were each of us to consider characters and persons, only as they appear from his peculiar point of view. In order, therefore, to prevent those continual contradictions, and arrive at a more stable judgment of things, we fix on some steady and general points of view; and always, in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation. (Treatise 632)

In the face of uncertainty, amidst the “continual contradictions” arising from a plurality of “peculiar” views, Hume suggests a scheme by which social agents might “converse” on “reasonable terms.” Similar normative schemes have been attributed likewise to Austen, often in order to cast her as a conservative. Yet such corrective process is linked in Hume’s thought to the correctional, punitive elements of liberal sentimentalism. Smith’s impartial spectator, too, exists to model and enforce “general points of view,” standards rationally comprehensible to everyone and the purpose of which is not so much to stifle individual opinion as to insulate from

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68 According to Duckworth, for example, Austen’s treatment of the visit to Pemberley “refutes perspectivism as a bar to true moral discrimination as it recognizes its inevitable existence in human relations” (Improvement of the Estate, 122). Miller further contends that Austen’s detached narration not only endorses, but enacts such impersonal social judgments: see The Secret of Style, passim 31-56.
momentary emotional perturbations. The goal is as much epistemological as socio-ethical: to home in those feelings that the sentimentalists deem proportional to the behavior of those observed. This is about more than direct moral judgments as such; it is also about their manner. For Hume, as for Smith and Locke, smooth and polite discourse on “reasonable terms” about points of “general” agreement serves to regulate opinion and consolidate class interests. It fences liberal society against strange “distributions of the sensible;” against destabilizing, at times incomprehensible claims.

Despite her perennial association with manners and reputation for detachment, Austen does not properly value either. Indeed, she appears suspicious of both. Mr. Elliot, in addition to being too obsequious in character—he “stood too well with everybody”—may be unsociable, Anne suspects, precisely for his equanimity.

Mr. Elliot was rational, discreet, polished,—but he was not open. There was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others. This, to Anne, was a decided imperfection. Her early impressions were incurable. She prized the frank, the open-hearted, the eager character beyond all others. Warmth and enthusiasm did captivate her still. She felt that she could so much more depend on the sincerity of those who sometimes looked or said a careless or hasty thing, than of those whose presence of mind never varied, whose tongue never slipped. (P 107)

Anne views “careless or hasty” remarks, the sort that define tripping, awkward sollicitude, as vital proof of others’ “frank,” “open-hearted,” and “eager” tendencies—in other words, of their communicativeness, receptivity, and interest; the tools of a sociable being.69 “[P]olish” in her view constitutes an “imperfection.” Impartiality, as I have shown, coincides more for Austen

69 As Tanner explains it, Persuasion’s “emphasis on the ‘value’ of ‘connexions,’ . . . emphasises a merely titular or ‘nominal’ and fortuitous relationship rather than any true bonding or sense of reciprocal human relatedness” (Jane Austen, 216-7). Anne thus “suspects Mr Elliot precisely because he seems too controlled and good-mannered” (230), for his control and good manners are the mechanism and evidence of his unsociability. Tanner regards Persuasion as anomalous in its willingness to condone apparently crude manners: “remember that Emma’s most significant transgression occurs precisely because her tongue slips and she says ‘a careless and hasty thing’ to Miss Bates . . . to get some idea of the kind of change in Jane Austen’s values it represents just think how a Darcy or Knightley would appear if tested by these criteria” (231). In fact, though, both Darcy and Knightley are so tested: this is exactly the impetuous, if awkward, loquacity that allows them, like Wentworth, to achieve communicative and emotional breakthroughs with their future wives.
with interest than with detachment or with decorously attenuated moral sentiments. Receptive sociability entails minutely involved affect: surprise, interest, fear—and awkwardness. Rather than urbane conversation, as in Hume’s conception, or sensuous communion as in Hutcheson’s, sociability arises for Austen as a strikingly inelegant dance, wherein two parties ill-equipped to keep up with each other manage, through continuous effort, to do it anyway. Often, successful disclosures coincide with breaches of decorum—as when Lydia reveals Darcy’s presence at her wedding and Elizabeth in turn confronts Darcy about it—but even with manners suspended, the couples cannot be said to have a clear or authentic breakthrough either. Leading up to Darcy’s second proposal, the principals’ psyches are inscrutable, isolated from each other even by strong punctuation and separate clauses: “Very little was said by either; Kitty was too much afraid of him to talk; Elizabeth was secretly forming a desperate resolution; and perhaps he might be doing the same” (PP 365). Intimacy unfolds in fits, starts, and non sequiturs, on awkward terms in continual need of revision. Individual psychology consists in “secret[s]” that “perhaps” or “might” be verifiable.

Austen stages similarly tentative exchanges in *Persuasion* as well as in *Emma*. In the latter novel, Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley, each despairing of the other’s affection, continually and clumsily redirect their own words in an effort to give and gain encouragement: sensing Knightley’s unease, Emma advises him not to “commit [him]self” to discussing unpleasant topics and, when he takes this as a rebuff, invites him to prolong their walk and address her as a friend. His reply is scarcely more confident or explicit:

‘Emma, [friend] I fear is a word—No, I have no wish—Stay, yes, why should I hesitate?—I have gone too far already for concealment.—Emma, I accept your offer—

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70 Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*, 91. Monaghan, by contrast, argues for the primacy of the “formal social occasion” in bringing Elizabeth and Darcy together: see *Jane Austen, Structure and Social Vision*, passim, and in particular 14 and 64-92.
Extraordinary as it may seem, I accept it, and refer myself to you as a friend.—Tell me, then, have I no chance of ever succeeding?\textsuperscript{71}

Sociability here consists in unrelenting doubt about the reliability of information, and in worried attempts to find out more. Abashed and uncertain, Knightley speaks in a self-interrupting style that does clumsy but hence cautious justice to what Emma, and by extension he, might be thinking and feeling. Subject to misinterpretation, and alerted to each other’s discomfort, they continually redirect their own statements. Awareness and reassurance are always in want of renewal. Even the couple’s moment of understanding is heavily qualified: “Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure,” Austen famously writes.\textsuperscript{72}

In the canceled penultimate chapter of \textit{Persuasion}, the scene of Anne and Wentworth’s engagement closely resembles those in the earlier novels, with a surprise encounter, misplaced jealousy and dejection (Mr. Elliot filling the role of Frank Churchill), a dialogue full of pauses, dashes, evasion, stuttering, and misconstruction, and a quick narrative undercutting of the couple’s triumph: they enjoy only a moment of understanding before Mrs. Croft interrupts and flusters them anew (P 169-71). In their dashed staccato rhythms, formal interruptions, and insistence that communication is perennially difficult, the lovers’ reconciliations nearly recall the erratic, heavily mediated sensibility of Sterne’s novels. Constant misconstruction fuels messy but conscious exchanges among the central figures; uncertainty spurs elaboration and further dialogue. That Austen so nearly repeats herself suggests a persistent link between awkwardness and intimacy in her imagination; that she wholly replaced this chapter of \textit{Persuasion} argues, at the very least, that what has worked for one couple might not work for another. No single narrative formula, in other words, is suffered to become a general or dominant solution to all Austen’s knowledge plots. The revised ending uses familiar grammatical obstacles to

\textsuperscript{71} Austen, \textit{Emma}, 337.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 339.
communication, such as the indirection of Anne’s statements to Captain Harville and the choppiness of Wentworth’s note to her. But it also introduces new formal obstacles: wearying chit-chat with others, the covert passing of Wentworth’s letter, the group’s obstructive ministrations to the overwhelmed Anne, and her stratagems for reaching Wentworth. Anne’s embarrassment in this version is more public, and her setbacks more pressing and tangible.

In such awkward, disorienting exchanges, Austen disavows an ethics that provides reassurance from either within or without. Like Barbauld, she attempts to chasten liberal individual hubris as well as aggressive conservatism without veering too close to either alternative in order to avoid the other. It is telling that Anne, after becoming engaged to Wentworth, neither substantially affirms nor categorically repudiates her earlier position: “I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend whom you will love better than you do now. . . . Do not mistake me, however. I am not saying that she did not err in her advice. It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides” (P 164). The form of remorse and correction Austen develops is thus not wholly rooted in the economy of personal wisdom and failure, nor even in personhood itself, but in an ongoing openness to events. Whereas for Hume moral conduct depends on the respective approbation and disapprobation of virtue or vice, which can only be posited in a stable, identifiable agent—”[i]t must depend upon durable principles of the mind, which extend over the whole conduct, and enter into the personal character” (Treatise 626)—Austenian solicitude is driven by inadequate information rather than an inadequate self: “I have now,” Anne continues, “as far as such a sentiment [as conscience] is allowable in human nature, nothing to reproach myself with” (P 164). It is thus through deep uncertainty, rather than absolute possession, that Austen “establishe[s], within the boundlessly oppressive imperiums of gender, conjugality, and the Person, something like
extraterritoriality.” The heroine’s sensory, emotional, and cognitive exercises are subject to her own evaluation in a way that she and her love interest, as agents with an essentialized core of supposedly personal attributes, would not be. The parting concern is not the moral status, as measured in loathing or in pure love, of legible people, but the status, as measured in interest, of the data that bombard her brain, whose meaning is continually negotiated in conversation.

As such, Austen’s argument seems to have less in common with Hume’s meta-ethical framework than with his epistemology—in particular, his account of personal identity—which precludes it (Treatise 299-311). Psychological continuity is not a given in Meryton, and in its absence flourish such ethical dispositions as caution, deference, accountability, and forgiveness: “Perhaps I did not always love [Darcy] so well as I do now,” Elizabeth confides to Jane. “But in such cases as these, a good memory is unpardonable. This is the last time I shall ever remember it myself” (PP 373). The recurring stress on forgetting and irresolution in Pride and Prejudice’s last chapters suggests that knowledge can’t be accumulated, only renewed. But more fundamentally, its stress on observation enacts a resistance to the very founding premise of liberalism like Smith’s, the dichotomy of individual and society. Writing in a style that so closely elides aloof pronouncement and rich subjectivity, Austen endlessly complicates any clear epistemological distinction between the two, and denies the prospect of either one serving as a normative check on the other. She goes, therefore, beyond the liberal dilemma in which individual freedoms and universal values are locked in an antagonistic relationship while being simultaneously guarded and guarded against.

Miller, The Secret of Style, 75. He views this “extraterritoriality” as the core of Austen’s “world-historical achievement,” but views Persuasion as a betrayal of it, in that the novel’s narrator identifies so closely with Anne’s perspective, thereby taking the heroine’s attributes and vulnerabilities upon herself.

For more on the ethical status of memory in Pride and Prejudice, see Doody, “A Good Memory Is Unpardonable,” 90-94.
Evasive about character and authority, Austen points instead to propositions, observations, and provisional viewpoints as the necessarily raw material of intimacy. *Persuasion* does document the triumph of liberal values—the rise of the bourgeoisie in the successes of Wentworth and his fellow sailors, and in the Elliots the decline of traditional aristocracy—but stops short of endorsing them. When rejected by Anne, rather than being struck with humility like Darcy, Wentworth does persist in self-validating resentment, “unconvinced and unbending” about his own merit, and “feeling himself ill-used by so forced a relinquishment” (P 19). But, as critics with widely different readings of Austen have observed, Wentworth’s ostensibly liberal self-assertion does not offer a meaningful alternative to conservative values.75 By the end of the penultimate chapter, he has withdrawn his pretensions of deserving Anne:

[“]I have been used to the gratification of believing myself to earn every blessing that I enjoyed. I have valued my self on honourable toils and just rewards. Like other great men under reverses,” he added with a smile, “I must endeavour to subdue my mind to my fortune. I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve.” (P 165)

Unimpressed with Anne’s family, Lady Russell, and the wisdom that deemed him unworthy of them, Wentworth goes to sea to prove his worth, but finds instead that notions of worth cannot be supported in the fluidity and flux of that world. The trials he faces in pursuing Anne render his class contempt untenable. She is not his prize; their marriage is not virtue rewarded. That Wentworth appears amused while counting himself among “great men under reverses” suggests he, no less than Elizabeth, at last takes a degree of ironic, even parodic pleasure in such formulations. Character becomes, in both novels’ final analysis, the vehicle for a sort of ethical

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75 Claudia Johnson, investigating Austen’s critical treatment of political ideologies, observes: “Wentworth’s determination is generally considered to mark him as a ‘new man,’ temperamentally as well as ideologically opposed to the way of life Sir Walter represents. But like his gallantry towards women, his steadfastness to the point of inflexibility actually aligns him with Sir Walter” (*Women, Politics, and the Novel*, 157). Making less allowance for irony, Butler argues that “the comparison Jane Austen makes between an idle, useless ‘gentleman’ proud of his rank, and the eminently useful sailors” is not a mark of progressivism, but “belong[s] to a familiar kind of conservative social comment” (*War of Ideas*, 284). Butler is surely right that “eminen[ce],” like “rank, can be used to prop up regressive institutions, but the comparison she alludes to is more demonstrably Wentworth’s than Austen’s.
levity. Wentworth’s attempt “to brook being happier than [he] deserve[s]” is, in other words, to accept and enjoy a happiness that isn’t correlated with constructions of dessert; to dispense with stable character as a criterion rather than seek out hierarchy in new places for new purposes. His last words, and their playfulness, put pressure on his individuality itself: if worth can be uncoupled from his identity, he can himself be read as “Went-worth,” a figure who has both embraced and abandoned liberal conceptions of virtue and dessert. His most formidable developmental task, which he shares with both Anne and Elizabeth, is not to perfect judgment, nor even to elicit the favorable judgments of others, but to suspend judgment, while finding happiness in that suspension.

_Persuasion_ could be seen to mark the culmination not only of Austen’s doubts about the utility of knowledge in social relations, but in some sense of the eighteenth century’s uncertainties as a whole. Captain Wentworth is a compelling social agent because his position is not the correlative of anything essential about his character. His acquisition of fortune is based, he comes to admit, largely on luck.\(^\text{76}\) And even at the end of his story, that fortune is far from assured. The short final chapter, which Austen left basically unaltered in revision, concludes on an ominous and noticeably less secure note than any other Austen novel:

Anne was tenderness itself, and she had the full worth of it in Captain Wentworth’s affection. His profession was all that could ever make her friends wish that tenderness less; the dread of a future war all that could dim her sunshine. She gloried in being a sailor’s wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession

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\(^{76}\) See Hopkins, “Moral Luck and Judgment,” 153: “When Admiral Croft and Wentworth reminisce—Anne and the Musgroves are listening—Wentworth jests about the admiralty ‘now and then . . . sending a few hundred men to sea, in a ship not fit to be employed’ because they ‘have a great many to provide for; and among the thousands that may just as well go to the bottom as not, it is impossible for them to distinguish the very set who may least be missed.’ The Admiral counters twice with ‘Lucky fellow,’ reminding Wentworth that there were at least ‘twenty better men’ who had applied for command of the Asp. ‘I felt my luck, admiral,’ replies Wentworth . . . The emphasis on moral luck continues with Wentworth never having ‘two days of foul weather all the time he was at sea,’ having ‘the good luck’ then to capture a French frigate, and, finally, as ‘another instance of luck,’ bringing his vessel into Plymouth just before a four-day gale which would have almost certainly sent it to the bottom: ‘Four-and-twenty hours later, and I should only have been a gallant Captain Wentworth, in a small paragraph at one corner of the newspapers.’ No wonder that Anne shudders to herself” (first ellipsis in original).
which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than its national importance. (P 168)

Marriage is not exactly an empty form, but it is one that Anne and Wentworth will have to fill up themselves. Although Wentworth is established as both sailor and husband, the emotional valences of both offices are equivocal to say the least. The “tax of quick alarm” that Anne must pay thus suggests a parallel between Wentworth’s ongoing economic labor in society and their ongoing emotional labor in matrimony. These positions require constant reinforcement to maintain and, as Wentworth learns, cannot be reinforced by merely asserting his own entitlement: “he must mitigate his self-will before reconciliation [with Anne] is possible.” It is not clear what measures of character, status, or morality remain afterwards. Tony Tanner acknowledges this precariousness, realizing that it is the price and condition of a “society based on feelings;” he does not, however, investigate its salutary possibilities. It is not merely that once-benevolent patriarchal principles have been corrupted and evacuated of their human significance, and can safely be eliminated. Rather, the absence of social certainties is the precondition for Anne and Wentworth’s intimacy. What Tanner calls “impermanence” is indeed a hazard, but therefore (and more importantly) it is also a possibility; the variable that gives feelings room to flourish and develop without the constraints of moralistic demands on character. Whatever the eventual shape of the modern capitalism emerging in Persuasion, Austen does not celebrate it as a means of accumulation. She seems intent, at the start of the nineteenth century, to envision its future possibilities as a system of activity, not as a system of reward, or the genesis of what Barbauld dubbed an “aristocracy of talents” (SPP 304).

78 Tanner, Jane Austen, 246: “Even though Anne and Wentworth are models of emotional stability and constancy, the emotions are by nature inherently potentially unstable, and, without the reinforcement of some forms—formalities—and conventions, any society based on feelings must be precarious and in danger of ensuring its own impermanence.”
Veering as it does between identification with her heroines and enunciation of impersonal critiques, Austen’s narratorial voice leaves little safe from doubt. She gives voice, then, to the cumulative uncertainties of the long eighteenth century, surpassing even Sterne and Barbauld in her exploration of the ways private and public values collide, conflict, and converge. In this respect, Austen realizes implications of uncertainty to a degree matched only by Hobbes: namely, that groups, individuals, and institutions alike have only radically partial relations to experience, and that debates of value, materially and epistemologically speaking, cannot ever be put to rest. Yet in the absence of clear rational, sentimental, or traditional authority, social arrangements need not arise from an entrenched relation of power, as Hobbes posits, but might also emerge from the absorbing, insoluble play of epistemology itself. The social world Austen imagines at the close of *Persuasion* is one Hobbes would never have dreamt of—a world in which industry exists *because* “the fruit thereof is uncertain” (L 186).

It is hard to imagine such a world, perhaps, because it is not our world. Hobbes is the horizon from which multiple histories of sociability and uncertainty began to diverge, but we cannot in our time trace all those paths with equal facility. Liberal psychology and political theory—so needed and so restrictive by turns—disseminated themselves in so many cultural forms that by Barbauld’s death in 1825 their fruit was being reaped everywhere. Enclosure of private lands from common was all but complete in Britain, and new histories of upward progress, mediated by industry and technology rather than directly by God, were being written. The remainder of the nineteenth century had seemingly radical potential—it witnessed the rise of social science and new forms of coordinated class, racial, and gender awareness—but that potential was not realized. Even the legacies of Marx, Darwin, and Freud, none of which was congenial to liberal ideas of free will, rational agency, or providence, were contaminated with
traces of individualist hubris and the optimism of hegemony. Marx freely drew on Locke’s labor theory, ultimately sketching a crude class antagonism that overlooks the subtler, perhaps more revolutionary dynamics of appropriation that Sterne sees. Despite Darwin’s loss of faith and insistence that nature was not hierarchical, he could not forbear treating natural selection as a teleological movement toward perfection and functionality—inferred attributes whose implications Barbauld, especially in late works like “Thoughts on the Inequality of Conditions,” fundamentally distrusts. And Freud posited deep, embedded psychology based on drives and on coherent, if submerged and fractured, histories of the individual, neglecting the Austenian possibility that not knowing another person might be the most arousing and therapeutic thing of all. By the mid-nineteenth century, then, even for these bold explorers to think radically was in some respects for them to work with liberalism’s materials; with Lockean parcels entailed on all posterity. In spite of so many innovations on all their work, we are still today muddling through their impasses; the uncertainties they did not elaborate.

Literature, meanwhile, is still taken by most as epiphenomenon—reflecting rather than intervening in intellectual conditions—owing, perhaps, to the very differentiation of disciplines I have been describing. With the notable exception of Bertrand Russell, Britain has seen few, if any, true polymaths of Hobbes’s stature in the nearly three and a half centuries since his death: I take it, however, that this has less to do with a decline in national intelligence than with a degree of specialization that eighteenth-century minds would not have recognized. That we view Austen’s models of sociability, or Barbauld’s or Sterne’s, for that matter, as “literary” and having fundamentally different aims from the writings of Hobbes, Hume, and Smith is, I have tried to suggest, indefensible by any solid epistemological, substantive, or stylistic criteria. As virtuosos of parody, Austen and Sterne especially draw much of their material from a moralistic
tradition in which novels, poetry, and treatises play a joint role elaborating the standards of thought, in which rhetoric, affect, and tension are broadly accepted as forms of argument, and in which uncertainty, finally, must be made the best of. The distinction between literature and philosophy, in short, is first and foremost institutional; the product of authority being granted differentially to various sectors of culture. Authority, granted, is not precisely what Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen cultivate. Nor is earnest, connected as it is with gravity and certainty. What they principally seek and merit, maybe, is our attention.

Sterne, Barbauld, and Austen wrote in, and to, and of historical circumstances that have passed. Their models have no universal applicability, but are nonetheless useful for us and our moment, in part for that reason. Like Hobbes does, and like many of us aspire to, these authors of uncertainty eschew theories of essential human nature, exploring instead structures of thought that emerge from relentless particularity. They wrote, as well, at the dawn of an age of liberalism from which we in our time have not yet exited. They reveal coercive elements of that liberalism, but they do more than this. They imagine successes from liberal thought’s failures. They suggest adaptable, ad hoc mechanisms of social investigation, accommodation, and egalitarianism—the only pillar of liberalism now worth saving, and the one in worst repair. And they consider how one might achieve specific measures of freedom from within liberal structures too prone to treating freedom as unitary, even personified essence. In a world which Hobbes long ago deduced to be zero-sum, in which the institution of liberties has for centuries proven materially and morally inseparable from their curtailment elsewhere, and which daily becomes the more so, that is no small thing.
Bibliography


