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Jane Austen, Secret Celebrity, and Mass Eroticism

David Kurnick

My hope is to live . . . a life of undying fame that I don't have to participate in. I don't want anything to change, except to be as famous as one can be, but without that changing anything. Everyone would know in their hearts that *I* am the most famous person alive—but not talk about it too much . . . It is the quality of fame one is after here, without any of its qualities.

—Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?: A Novel from Life*

SHEILA HETI'S NARRATOR MIGHT SEEM merely a peculiarly intense kind of narcissist. But her words also offer a precise account of a crucial feature of the ontology of fictional characters: their quality of being intimately knowable by a large public. At least since the advent of print, fictional character has been a form of imaginary personhood rendered publicly accessible by technologies of distribution that move through social worlds far larger than any single individual can inhabit. Since the eighteenth-century explosion of the book market that Clifford Siskin has characterized as a mediatic “quantitative sublime,” that distribution can be said to operate on a mass scale.¹ The dominant trends in literary criticism have accustomed us to thinking of the disequilibrium that structures readers' relations to fictional characters as epistemological in nature, and so as a kind of surveillance: we know more about fictional characters than they can know about us. But it is one of the premises of this essay that we might equally understand this relation as a form of celebrity—that we might ask how it is that none of the people surrounding Leopold Bloom, Nancy Drew, Bigger Thomas, Emma Bovary, or Alexander Portnoy know how sheerly famous they are, how many beholders they have. The question will seem counterintuitive only if we limit our sense of these characters to their diegetic existence, where they may be little known, unpopular, or even downright obscure. But the media platform by which most readers have historically accessed the story of Jude Fawley—a mass-distributed codex—means that we necessarily encounter Thomas Hardy's beleaguered hero as *famously* obscure

(a paradox that Hardy's mock-heroic title renders explicit). If we allow that character-being is conditioned by fiction's media format, we arrive at a definition of fictional existence that answers closely to Heti's terms: fame lacking all perceptible effects in the phenomenal world where these characters live out their days, fame "without any of its qualities."

Such a definition renders visible a *massiness* that is structurally integral to the idea of fictional character. We may reflexively understand fame as a form of singularity, but the infrastructure of celebrity is the mass that consumes it. P. David Marshall notes that the term "celebrity" is derived from a Latin word that signifies crowdedness as well as renown: "The original Latin *celebrem* . . . had not only the connotation of famous but also that of 'thronged.' The celebrity, in this sense, is not distant but attainable—touchable by the multitude."² Marshall's last observation—that the idea of celebrity entails not only the imagination of a spectating mass but the fantasy of its corporeal access to the famous individual—will be important to this essay, which claims that startlingly innovative effects occur when novelists manipulate the latent massiness of fictional characters, and that such massiness takes on an erotic valence via that fantasy of touchability. It is frequently said of readers that we like to imagine our relation to fictional characters as intimate or personal, and this claim captures something undeniable about an aspect of the experience of novel reading. But such intimacy is itself intimate by definition with the idea of the mass. As David Brewer has compellingly argued, literary characters are common property, creatures whose "felt publicity" makes them binding agents of reading publics.³ To establish a fantasmatic relation to a fictional character is thus also to apprehend, however obliquely, the many others who may be doing exactly the same thing. The reader's bond with a fictional character is a slantwise apprehension of the fact that, as Audrey Jaffe has put it, "the reader is a mass character."⁴

The claim that reading has something to do with eroticism would be no surprise to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentators who met the surge in printed fiction with an alarmed discourse about the seductions of the novel, especially for the female reader presumed susceptible to fiction's addictive pleasures. This connection is central to Deidre Lynch's powerful account of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reading cultures in her recent *Loving Literature: A Cultural History*. Lynch offers a picture of the period's reader as a passionate lover who reacts to the glut of circulating printed matter by indulging in an "erotics of exclusive possession."⁵ The mass appears here in ghostly fashion—as the social horizon of readerly feeling, the background noise to be tuned out, defeated, or just ignored. In a world of mass readership, Lynch writes,

“shared affect . . . can appear as an infringement on one’s individuality.”⁶ The readerly fantasy she traces is accordingly one of taking the book out of circulation—of loving it more ardently and more specifically than anyone else. The social form that subtends this fantasy is that of the “steady and steadying affection” of “long-haul intimacy,” in which “a reader’s marriage to his books” might resemble “marriage to a person.”⁷

Lynch’s compelling argument offers one reason to take seriously the novels of Jane Austen as constituting a kind of media theory. If reading’s entanglement with a troubling eroticism has historically been met with a fantasy of containment by the structures of conjugality, then the most influential architect of the marriage plot in anglophone literary history might also be understood as offering an anatomy of that media fantasy. Indeed, Lynch’s 1998 book *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* concludes with a bravura account of Austen’s *Persuasion* that set the terms for her later history of loving literature. In her earlier book, Lynch argues that Austen’s novel helps readers navigate a destabilizing cultural field—of commodities, books, and persons—with their singularity intact. *Persuasion*’s marriage plot, according to Lynch, “fulfills readers’ desire for a literature that would take into account what is most individual in our individualities, that would be addressed to no one but ourselves.”⁸ This essay’s different account of the same novel starts from the idea that taking Austen seriously as a media thinker also requires an adjustment to what we mean by marriage, and to how we understand that institution’s relation both to eroticism and to individualism. The multiplicity built into the reader’s phenomenological experience of fiction means that fantasies of exclusive possession, when directed at literary characters, are never just that. The novelistic marriage plot—precisely because it circulates in mass fashion—is not a private affair. The massiness that inheres in literary characters is nowhere stranger than in this genre nominally given over to erotic individuation. This essay contends that such strangeness reaches a pinnacle of self-aware power in *Persuasion*, a novel that understands the mass public not as a threatening other from which to protect its erotic plot but as that plot’s very object.

This characterization of Austen’s last completed novel may feel odd to those who know anything about it: the heroine Anne Elliot’s shyness and her aversion to crowds; her social isolation, which the narrative’s tight focalization exacerbates; even the brute fact (common, the reader may recall, to all of Austen’s novels) that she becomes engaged to one specific man at the novel’s close and not to a crowd of them. But I argue that *Persuasion*’s love plot is highly attuned to its circulation among a large body of readers, and that the novel operationalizes that awareness

to intensify its plot's erotic charge. In part, this novel's openness to the mass is a matter of thematic choices. *Persuasion*'s tropism toward scenes of anonymous urban encounter, its romanticizing of the corporate body of the navy, and its harsh critique of the landed gentry in favor of a less settled world of mercantile capitalism have been read as signaling an opening of Austen's work to the dislocations of the modern. Part of my aim is to demonstrate how thoroughly such features orient Austen's love plot toward a new sense of social scale.⁹ But I also argue that Austen's formal choices—particularly her manipulation of narrative perspective—work at a more intricate level to rewire her love plot's affective circuitry. Austen's use of these devices incites a peculiarly hectic process of readerly interpellation: *Persuasion* plays on the fact that readers may identify with both the heroine's desire for her lover(s) and the lover's desire for *her*.

The novel's originality, I claim, accordingly resides not only in what Jocelyn Harris identifies as its thematic "revisionings of gender" (reminding us, for example, of Frederick Wentworth's domestic virtues and Anne's executive competence), but also in the way its narrative complexity demands any reader's doubled identification with both female protagonist and male suitor.¹⁰ In doing so, the novel renders visible the peculiar fact that a heterosexuality lived with any psychic mobility harbors a nonheterosexuality at its heart. And because that psychic mobility is a function of our being readers of a mass-circulated fiction, *Persuasion* posits heterosexuality, *insofar as it is published*, as a form of prescribed non-normativity. Such volatile readerly identification may finally be of interest less for performing some queer resistance (this queerness, after all, is endemic in normative heterosexuality) than for allowing the novel's love plot to push beyond the confines of the couple form entirely. The affective mobility scripted by the novel means that each vector of desiring identification represents a longing not just for one body but for a multiplicity of them. When such effects are at their most acute, I'll claim, it is as if the novel's diegetic plot (Anne and Wentworth's long-tried love for one another) touches on and even merges with that plot's mediatic condition (in which both of them are the thronged objects of mass attention). The result is that the book's plot becomes an allegory of a media condition coming into consciousness of itself, as if the novel is intimating to its characters a charged awareness of what I have called their celebrity quality. In doing so, I argue, *Persuasion* also eroticizes readers' apprehension of our mass status.

Seen in this light, the novel emerges not just as the culmination of Austen's career-long experiment in the social meanings the fiction of courtship can bear, but as a key early moment in the nineteenth-century

attempt to cognize—and to feel—the emerging historical object that was the mass.¹¹ That attempt, Austen’s novel surprisingly helps us to see, was connected to a fundamental perversity, a nonconjugal erotics that found expression not only in the later meanderings of the modernist flaneur but also in the heart of the normative courtship plot. One of my goals, then, is to suggest the ways Austen’s work anticipates literary experiments in impersonal erotics that might seem distant from her narrative and social worlds. Another is to reconfigure some of the ways we think about the relation between the erotic and the nineteenth century’s understanding of large-scale social phenomena. The last several decades of literary scholarship have done much to elucidate how profoundly the century of Charles Darwin and Thomas Robert Malthus understood the question of the collective through sexuality and especially through reproduction. But the period also produced a sexualized understanding of the human aggregate that severed the links among the erotic, marriage, and reproduction. Austen is an unlikely pioneer in that project, perfecting the novel of heterosexual courtship even as she explores its availability for thinking the erotic otherwise.

Austen’s moment was awash in massifying forces to which her last novel has determinate links. Britain’s long war with France almost exactly coincided with the last two decades of the novelist’s life. *Persuasion*, with its host of sailor characters, is the text in her canon that brings this “war at a distance” (in Mary Favret’s resonant phrase) closest to the heart of the story.¹² This militarization of Austen’s character world can also be understood as making *Persuasion* a reflection of European populations more generally, if we follow Georg Lukács’s claim in *The Historical Novel* that the Napoleonic wars “made history a *mass experience*” by increasing the number of people involved in major political upheavals.¹³ Lukács describes this as a “change from quantity into quality,” and his words remind us that quantity was itself becoming a sociohistorical actor during these years.¹⁴ The UK conducted its first census in 1801. A signal mechanism whereby the nation came to imagine sovereignty not in terms of land but of population, the census conceptualized the individual as an integer in a massified aggregate.¹⁵ Karen O’Brien has argued that, as a clergyman’s daughter who regularly acted as parish clerk, Austen was in all likelihood directly involved in the 1801 census, which “required local clergymen to trawl through their parish registers and record numbers of baptisms and burials at ten-year intervals from

1700, along with the annual numbers of marriages from 1754.”¹⁶ That census provided Malthus with the numbers that allowed him to transform his 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population* into the statistically supported second edition of 1803. O’Brien makes a convincing case that Austen’s experience with the census, along with her likely acquaintance with Malthus’s essay, informed both her novels’ sense of “what it means to be a redundant female” and their suggestion that marriage had “acquired peculiar national resonance.”¹⁷

Compelling as such concrete thematic links between Austen’s work and the massifying technologies of her day are, I pursue their connection in a different register by arguing that Austen’s most intimate reckoning with the mass happened through her engagement with an expanded reading audience. In a historical moment in which, as Silvana Colella claims, the “unprecedented proliferation of ‘mass’ readers [was] not unrelated in the public mind to the *undue* proliferation of new political subjects,” the mass-distributed book served as a potent metonym for the mass of people, and the quantitative sublime of the book trade as a proxy for the newly quantifiable human aggregate.¹⁸ Scholars like Jan Fergus and Michelle Levy have shown that Austen was aware that she was participating in that sublime scale, even as she commanded a relatively small readership. Even an author publishing in modest print runs—Austen’s largest, for *Emma*, was 2,000 copies—was thinking in numbers that far exceeded the scope of normal human acquaintance (and of course the number of books sold did not equate to the number of readers, since a significant portion of copies would go to circulating libraries.¹⁹) More important is the fact that print publics, as Michael Warner has argued, are phenomenologically defined by conditions of impersonal address, of readerships with no firmly imagined outer boundary.²⁰ *Persuasion*’s texture resonates strikingly with the expansiveness that Warner attributes to the print public sphere: the novel makes Austen’s famously restricted social canvas feel more various and crowded than ever before. (It is a novel, as Adela Pinch acutely notes, in which “even the best of families . . . are perceived as crowds.”²¹) The novel’s alertness to the buzzy rhythms of urban life, and its turbulent atmosphere of physical and social mobility, gain new resonance when understood as attempts to reckon with its media condition.

Austen had of course been thinking and writing about the phenomenology of the reading public since her early fiction. *Northanger Abbey* famously satirizes its heroine for infusing her experience with the outré emotions of gothic fiction. But it is remarkable how consistently the book’s metanovelistic satire invokes an expansive number of books and readers. Austen’s jokes in *Northanger Abbey* repeatedly rely on the twinned

assumptions that Catherine Morland has read many scores of books *and* that she herself may have several thousands of readers. Thus, Catherine mistakes her avid reading for cognitive access to large cohorts of people when she considers “all the heroines of her acquaintance” or ponders the “many . . . examples” of suspicious behavior that her reading has provided.²² (Her real “acquaintance,” of course, is quite limited, and all her “examples” imaginary.) These jokes about Catherine’s wide reading are linked to the notion that Catherine is herself the object of mass observation. From her narrator’s opening claim that “no one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine” to the passing comment that “every young lady may feel for my heroine at this critical moment” to the closing wink to “my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity,” the mass nature of novelistic address—its orientation toward anyone who may be watching, every young lady, all of us reading along together—is the overt source of *Northanger Abbey*’s comedy.²³

If in such moments Austen makes the claim for her character’s ontological massiness explicit, in the tonally distinct environment of *Persuasion* such invocations occur more quietly. When Austen writes, for example, that the widowed Lady Russell’s lack of interest in a second marriage “needs no apology to the public,” the invocation of an unbounded body of readers has migrated securely into the fantasmatic infrastructure of the fiction.²⁴ As my final example from *Northanger Abbey* indicates with particular clarity, that infrastructure tends to rise to visibility in meta-fictional moments where the novels display what Christina Lupton has called the “consciousness of mediation,” an awareness of the “complicated and multifaceted present and future of the text as object.”²⁵ Such consciousness is particularly pronounced in *Persuasion*, whose first sentence invokes the phenomenology of novel reading—dispersed among a large public and normally ranging over a wide variety of texts—via the inverse image of Sir Walter Elliot, who “never took up any book but the Baronetage,” and then only to reread obsessively the passage in which he and his descendants are listed (*P* 3). *Persuasion*’s opening thus renders palpable its own mediatic status, opposing its protocols of consumption and circulation to the narcissistic enclosure represented by Sir Walter’s reading habits. Lupton notes that such invocations of bookishness have no fixed ideological or affective implications. Where our contemporary critical orientation, influenced by poststructuralism, might lead us to expect such moments to ironize or corrode the text’s seriousness, Lupton shows how readily they consort with a wide variety of political orientations and attitudes toward the story being related.

The insight makes sense of the fact that, though *Persuasion* is Austen's most self-conscious novel about its textual status since *Northanger Abbey*, the affective temperatures of the two books are widely divergent. Where the earlier novel's self-referentiality imparts a satirical playfulness to the proceedings—we are always close to an awareness that its characters are creatures of paper and ink—in *Persuasion* such consciousness issues in a corporeal and emotional intensity unprecedented in Austen's fiction. That these features are connected to the novel's imagination of the public is also made visible by comparing it with *Northanger Abbey*. Both novels are set for much of their duration in Bath, a city whose jostling, disorienting crowdedness serves as an objective correlative of the mass media themselves. In *Northanger Abbey*, Bath is a place where one is "tired of being continually pressed against by people," a city whose crowds pose an obstacle to desire, since all the people one sees are "people whom nobody cared about, and nobody wanted to see"—or so Catherine reflects on one occasion when she cannot locate her lover in the press.²⁶ *Persuasion*'s heroine too has "a very determined, though very silent disinclination" for Bath's crowds (*P* 135). But where the earlier novel removes its heroine from the city that serves as an emblem of the media she addictively consumes, *Persuasion* keeps Anne in agitated circulation there, delivering some of the most intense moments of her love plot in its public rooms, shops, concert venues, and inns, before finally bringing her together with her lover on the crowded city streets.

Far from being incidental to her love plot, Anne's immersion in the pressure of the public realm exactly coincides with that plot. *Persuasion*'s drama almost wholly consists in its heroine's coming into awareness of the fact that, despite her isolation, she is an object of social perception. The fact that Anne Elliot's object choice has been established in the narrative's prehistory renders the novel's courtship plot literally redundant: *Persuasion*'s excitement lies not in the discovery of an affection but in the confirmation that it still exists. Austen's structuring of the novel's focalization makes the question of whether Anne is loved into the more elemental question of whether she is *beheld*—a question, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth has remarked, that lends an "erotic *éclat*" to the novel's most basic moments of social recognition.²⁷ To a remarkable degree, the novel's action consists of a series of ratifications that Anne is as much Wentworth's object of attention as she is ours. The moments when Austen's lonely and neglected heroine is startled to find herself under her lover's gaze pile up over the course of this brief novel: Anne, exhausted from a long walk, feels Wentworth suddenly lifting her into a carriage; Anne, struggling under the weight of a rambunctious toddler, abruptly comprehends that Wentworth has removed the child

from her back; Anne, rushing to help a woman who has fallen down a flight of stairs, hears Wentworth praise her coolness under pressure; Anne, drifting back to her piano during a dance party where she has been reduced to providing music, finds her lover occupying her seat and moodily stroking the keys. Spatially, these moments tend to take the form of an unforeseen approach from behind or from some area just outside of Anne's zone of attention. Cumulatively, they suggest that *Persuasion* operates according to a social logic diametrically opposed to the one Anne imagines she inhabits: a logic in which the world that lies just beyond her field of vision literally consists of adoring observation.

"Wentworth" is the proper name for this space of rapt attention. But Austen engineers the narrative shape of the novel so that he continually blurs into the social surround. Perhaps the key event in their courtship—the moment when even Anne finds it impossible to deny that she is being observed—is occasioned by a stranger's frank admiration of her on a public thoroughfare as she walks with friends and family along the waterfront in Lyme. This is the most striking episode of cruising in Austen's canon, and the one that most closely approximates the modern acceptance of the term: a scene of public erotic survey not mediated by a ball, pump-room, or some other staging ground for the marriage market (and recounted with a phenomenological minuteness absent in summaries of Isabella Thorpe's or Lydia Bennet's flirtations on the streets of Bath and Meryton.²⁸) The scene mimics the spatial and focalizing structure that operates throughout the narrative, but socializes its erotic energies:

When they came to the steps, leading upwards from the beach, a gentleman at the same moment preparing to come down, politely drew back, and stopped to give them way. They ascended and passed him; and as they passed, Anne's face caught his eye, and he looked at her with a degree of earnest admiration, which she could not be insensible of. She was looking remarkably well; her very regular, very pretty features, having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion, and by the animation of eye which it had also produced. It was evident that the gentleman (completely a gentleman in manner) admired her exceedingly. Captain Wentworth looked round at her instantly in a way which shewed his noticing of it. He gave her a momentary glance,—a glance of brightness, which seemed to say, "That man is struck with you,—and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again." (*P* 135–36)

The passage follows classic Girardian outlines, in which the presence of a third party catalyzes desire between the principals. But the triangle achieves such clarity here—the intermediary is so blatantly functional-

ized—that it fails utterly to serve the obscurantist function of Girard’s “romantic lie,” which demands that the lovers fail to recognize the mediated quality of their attraction.²⁹ Here, the players clearly discern Girard’s structure, and are excited by it. The instability of the erotic vector occasions a cognate confusion in voice and perspective that reaches its zenith in the statement that “she was looking remarkably well.” The sentence is a narrative switchboard, impossible to assign to any one character’s focalization because it applies so well to all of them: it registers all at once Anne’s self-rationalized pride, the passerby’s interest, and Wentworth’s attention. Most strikingly, it also appears simply to report narrative truth; for once Anne’s free indirect discourse coincides with the perspective of the world in general. The moment thus represents a startling reworking of one of Austen’s signature devices.³⁰ Frances Ferguson calls free indirect style “the most nearly indisputable representation of a general will” available to the novel as a form; Austen’s use of it, she continues, “recognizes what we might want to think of as a communal contribution to individuals.”³¹ If Ferguson’s definition helps us see free indirect style as the narrative expression of publicity, a formal argument for the turning-outward of being toward the social, Austen here marks that torsion with an unmistakably erotic motive.

That this erotic confirmation occurs across the body of a random member of the public signals not only a new sexual frankness in Austen’s work but a coincident openness to historically emergent social logics. Girard’s theory of mimetic desire is also an account of modernity understood as an energy of democratizing social leveling, and critics have fruitfully used that theory to understand Austen’s body of work (not short, of course, on erotic triangles). Writing about the proliferating romantic triangulations in *Emma*, for example, Beatrice Marie describes the world of that novel as one of “democratic desire,” a world where “traditional notions of rank and caste are challenged by new social forces that express themselves through universal rivalry and Girardian mimesis.”³² The description brings into sharper view what is novel in *Persuasion*: never in Austen’s work has the triangular dynamic been at once so sudden, so urban, and, crucially, so anonymized. Never, in other words, has the modernity that the Girardian triangle announces come so close to articulation at the narrative surface. While later we learn that the man on the steps is a member of the gentry—in fact Anne’s cousin—it matters to the historical texture of the novel that here he might be literally anybody. (The anxious parenthetical assurance of his gentlemanly status only underlines the impossibility of knowing for certain the social truth of any such contingently encountered character.)

This moment of anonymized eroticism allegorizes the structure of secret celebrity that underlies the phenomenology of print fiction generally. Precisely by virtue of his randomness, his air of having been summoned into the narrative merely to remark Anne's remarkableness, this observer in Lyme stands in handily for Anne's readerly observers, and in the process suggests an image of those readers not simply as attentive observers but as desiring ones. At moments, the plot's status as a media allegory almost becomes explicit. Lady Russell, for example, understands her desire to get Anne to Bath in terms remarkably suggestive of *Persuasion's* media condition: "Anne had been too little from home, too little seen," she believes. "She wanted her to be more known" (P 15). But what Lady Russell here understands as her own private wish is doubled by Anne's ontological condition. What Lady Russell wants Anne to become is what Austen has already posited her as: a published person. Thus does *Persuasion* make the romantic teleology of the marriage plot into a reckoning with its own media condition. One result is that to identify with Anne's desire—an identification virtually mandated by the novel's tight focalization—is also to identify with her desire for access to that ample world in which she would be adequately appreciated. It is, in other words, to identify with a kind of desire for *ourselves* under our mass aspect.

But attending to the novel's plot as an allegory of its mediatic condition also makes it possible to recognize the existence of another, perhaps stranger channel of readerly identification in the novel, one that operates more covertly but with a peculiar intensity. This identification is with Anne's admirers—Wentworth foremost among them—who thematize in the world of the story the attention we practice in reading the novel. It is the reader who is Anne's best and most constant witness; long before Wentworth enters the picture, the reader has become accustomed to being the only character on the scene who is primarily focused on her. This proximity carries a certain intimate charge, as well as a certain frustration that mimics the constraints of the novel's social world: the reader becomes Anne's invisible spectator, with no way to make her cognizant of our admiration. Austen's positioning of the reader as a concerned lover has been powerfully described by critics like Lionel Trilling, who says of Emma Woodhouse that "our hand goes out to hold her back and set her straight, but it cannot reach her."³³ And Andrew Miller, writing of *Persuasion*, speaks of how the reader's "helplessness" and "incapacity"

give birth to the fantasy that “somehow we might also be able to help the characters about whom we are reading.”³⁴ Despite their difference in emphasis, each critic invokes a desire to reach concretely—even bodily—into the narrated universe. It is a fantasy that *Persuasion*’s deployment of Wentworth seems engineered first to exacerbate and then to relieve: his appearance grants readers a proxy in the world of the novel, a prosthesis capable of giving bodily expression to the attention we have been silently lavishing on the heroine. The process is best illustrated by two moments to which I have already alluded: Wentworth’s removal of her raucous nephew Walter Musgrove from her back as she tends to the sickbed of his brother, and, a few pages later, Wentworth’s helping her into the Crofts’ carriage. Not coincidentally, these are among the most startlingly physicalized scenes Austen ever narrated between two of her fictional lovers.

The drama of these moments at the level of event is minimal: these are routine acts of consideration. What gives each a well-nigh cataclysmic force is the way they become dramas of focalization, in which the reader’s proximity to Anne takes on flesh. Each is marked by a peculiar torque in the novel’s focalization through Anne, as if the narrative were briefly registering another center of attention through which the reader might feel. In the first case, Austen writes with notable indirection that Anne “found herself in the state of being released from him; someone was taking him from her, though he had bent down her head so much, that his little sturdy hands were unfastened from around her neck, and he was resolutely borne away, before she knew that Captain Wentworth had done it” (*P* 80). The confusion of bodies attendant on Austen’s use of the pronoun “he” makes it briefly unclear whether the person bending Anne’s head down is her nephew or the person removing him, and thus discloses the fantasy image (ours? Anne’s?) of Wentworth actually climbing onto Anne’s back.³⁵ The structure of delayed recognition is repeated when Wentworth helps her into the carriage: “Yes,—he had done it. She was in the carriage, and felt that he had placed her there, that his will and his hands had done it” (*P* 91). Again the approach of the attentive lover occurs from behind, and again that spatial disposition licenses a physicality otherwise rare in Austen’s world. When Anne concludes that the lesson of the event is that “he could not forgive her,—but he could not be unfeeling” (*P* 91), Austen tempts us to simply conflate emotional and physical “feeling.” In both cases, Wentworth’s sudden presence at Anne’s back gives flesh to our readerly attention, as if the intensity of the longing consciousness to which we are confined has conjured for us a pair of hands. The split in the reader’s fantasmatic positioning here—our sense of being at once “with” Anne *and* reaching

out to touch her from beyond the narrated universe—is key to these scenes' hectic power, and to their sexual charge.

It can seem in such moments that Austen has anticipated the virtual-reality suits of James Cameron's *Avatar* or the sex-surrogate-for-hire scenario from Spike Jonze's *Her*—both allegories of the fantasy of bodily contact between world and narrative interior that Roland Barthes suggests subtends any act of aesthetic witness.³⁶ As articulated at those sites, this structure of interpellation takes an indicatively male and heterosexual form. It takes that form in *Persuasion*, too, insofar as any reader's desire to make contact with Anne routes itself through an identification with Wentworth. (And it may not be an accident that the critics whom I have cited as acknowledging the possibility of this vector of identification in Austen are men.) The fact that this structure of reader surrogacy takes shape in the midst of the novel's overarching identificatory logic—according to which any reader of the novel is structurally positioned to feel and think with Anne—indicates that Austen's work harbors more varied routes of readerly identification than are commonly imagined. That the novel enjoins this doubled identification on readers of whatever gender only makes the disorienting effects of printed romance more remarkable.

Austen manipulates such effects—with all their funhouse spatiality and fungible gender positioning—most powerfully in the stunning proposal scene in the White Hart Inn. It is a scene of peculiar directness, in which the choreography of the lovers' bodies is rendered with dramatic minuteness. But it is also a scene of peculiar mediation, in which multiple minor characters, scraps of random conversation, and textual ephemera intervene between the principle players.³⁷ Alone among Austen's proposal scenes, this one happens in company: the gregarious Musgroves' rented rooms constitute a space of precarious semiprivacy, bounded by a thin social membrane that may be pierced at any time by a new arrival. The lovers do not speak to one another but communicate as if telepathically by turning drawing room chatter to their own purposes. Moreover, the declaration itself is not spoken but written, and Wentworth does not deliver it into Anne's hands but leaves it on a desk with a "direction hardly legible," as if it is a matter of indifference whether his declaration of long-nurtured devotion is picked up by Mrs. Musgrove or Captain Harville or a passing chambermaid (*P* 237). Far from working against the climax's direct power, the extreme mediation of the scene instead augments its visceral impact—a fact that makes sense once we understand the novel's readers, for whom all novelistic effects are also textually mediated ones, as its ultimate addressees.

One way to gauge the ingenuity of the scene's address to its readers is to notice that it combines the patterns of readerly positioning I have

been tracing. We have seen that *Persuasion* engineers its focalization to make Anne's feeling for Wentworth resemble a longing to be exposed to a mass of readers, even as it manages its scenic choreography to make Wentworth's feeling for Anne resemble those readers' desire to break into the narrative universe. In the White Hart both scenarios operate at maximum intensity. The scene offers the clearest instantiation yet of Anne's covert celebrity. The room is abuzz with talk of marriage (as Mrs. Croft and Mrs. Musgrove discuss James Benwick and Louisa Musgrove's engagement) and the gendered nature of devotion (Harville reflects with Anne on Benwick's speedy recovery from his grief over the death of his fiancée). Neither conversation has anything overtly to do with Anne's situation—and yet she experiences this echo chamber of impersonal cultural noise as a form of eroticized direct address. Thus, when Mrs. Croft decries long engagements—"or an uncertain engagement; an engagement which may be long"—we read that Anne "felt its application to herself, felt it in a nervous thrill all over her" (*P* 231): the comment appears literally to have laid hands on her. It hardly mitigates the statement's force—it even enhances its tactile power—that its "application" is equivocal: does it support Anne's initial refusal of Wentworth (which avoided an uncertain engagement) or his insistence that they marry (which would have avoided a long one)? It seems less important to answer the impossible question than to note that the comment allows Anne to experience herself as the subject of random conversation, and to experience this being-talked-about with the immediacy and thrill of intimate touch. Up to now the structure of secret celebrity has found embodiment in actual diegetic observers—an admiring spectator here, an appreciative comment there. At the White Hart, the structure departs from thematization to become a matter of atmosphere, as marginal Anne mentally recruits stray comments to testify to her utter centrality to the narrative proceedings. It is as if Heti's fantasy ("Everyone would know in their hearts that *I* am the most famous person alive—but not talk about it too much") has been rendered flesh—as if Anne has finally understood herself as the thronged heroine of a novel: the secret occasion for and object of all the talk there is.

In one sense, the letter that Wentworth hurriedly pens in the crowded room and then leaves for Anne to find is simply a final confirmation of that centrality. Its opening words—"I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach"—render unequivocal the fact of his long, silent attention (*P* 237). The visceral power of the declaration is augmented by its textual mediation: as several critics have noted, the proposal is experienced by readers in the same medium as by the heroine.³⁸ Wentworth's second-person address thus

hails the reader (who can also of course only be “reached” via the word) with startling precision. But even as the letter aligns readers with Anne’s position, it also encourages us to feel ourselves in Wentworth’s: the letter’s yearning ambition to “reach” Anne precisely anticipates Trilling’s fantasy of laying hands on the heroine or Miller’s ambition to step into and “help” the novel’s inhabitants. “I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach”: the words confirm Wentworth’s position as a surrogate for the reader at the moment of the love plot’s affective climax. In virtually demanding that we feel with both lovers at the moment of their coming together, Austen’s classic marriage plot turns out to harbor an energy startlingly exorbitant to heterosexuality—an energy born of shuttling between each of these supposedly normative positions. And because each position allegorizes different aspects of the reader’s experience, such fungibility can be understood as making readers’ intensified apprehension of the story’s medium into a love plot of its own. These lovers come together as two particular bodies. But their union is also a figure for the anonymous reading public’s arriving, in a rush of erotic energy, at a sense of its own mass constitution.

The novel’s “queerness,” from this perspective, emerges in the way its heterosexual plot shades into an eroticism of the crowd that uses the courtship plot as a host body but is not limited by that plot’s cultural meanings. Austen in fact revised the concluding stretches of the novel precisely to crowd its inevitable conjugal conclusion. *Persuasion* is Austen’s only completed novel for which portions of the draft manuscript survive, and they show that she revised the proposal scene not just to conjure the virtuosic identificatory effects I have been examining but also to open Anne and Wentworth’s plot to hectic social traffic on the brink of its closure. In the original version, flatly enough, Anne simply goes to the Crofts’ Bath apartment, where she finds Wentworth paying a visit. When the Crofts briefly leave the lovers alone, he makes his proposal and is accepted. The social commotion of the later version, by contrast, approaches the intensity of farce, as Austen contrives a series of visits that parade almost every one of her characters several times before the reader’s eyes in the space of a few pages: Sir Walter, Mrs. Clay, Mary and Charles Musgrove, Mrs. Musgrove, Henrietta Musgrove, Wentworth and Harville, Mr. Elliot, Elizabeth Elliot, and Mrs. Croft shuffle in and out of White Hart in these rapidly paced scenes.³⁹ (Louisa Musgrove, recovering from her head wound, and Benwick, nursing her, are excused from putting in an appearance.) The pages recall a modest theatrical company’s efforts to create the effect of a mass through a surplus of bustling movement. They prepare the social ground for the climactic scene at the White Hart, where the lovers’ excitement is so inextricable from the

volubility in which it occurs that it seems to take that volubility for its object. This socialization of affect also enfolds the scene's readers. "She felt its application . . . all over her": the words are yet another of Austen's invitations to readerly identification, describing not only Anne's sense of being the object of random chatter but also any reader's experience of feeling herself in the grip of a compelling story about someone else entirely. (As Sarah Raff writes of this moment, "*Persuasion* here promises each reader that she alone is its coded topic."⁴⁰) In offering Anne as a surrogate for the collective and anonymous figure of the novel's readers, Austen makes her heroine undergo a decidedly impersonal paroxysm just as she comes into her own centrality.

The climax of Austen's final novel might thus be understood as a key moment in the realist lineage that Fredric Jameson describes as constituted by a constant struggle between "named emotion" and that "reduction to the body" and its "waves of generalized sensations" that contemporary theory has denoted as "affect."⁴¹ Anne is, of course, in love: her emotion here is the most frequently named in this or any other book—which makes it more notable that Austen's treatment of the moment pushes it toward pure somatic inflammation. Jameson argues that affect's impersonality makes it a literary marker of the apprehension of new historical realities, a sensitive "organ of perception of the world itself."⁴² This claim helps make sense of the fact that Austen's united lovers avoid the privacy that would permit them to enjoy the finally named emotion that bonds them and instead keep their love on the streets at the novel's close. They retreat to the only "comparatively quiet and retired gravel-walk" where they are said to be "heedless of every group around them, seeing neither sauntering politicians, bustling house-keepers, flirting girls, nor nursery-maids and children" (P 240–41). Adela Pinch aptly calls this a moment of "urban pastoral," and it produces a striking narrative double-vision: in directing readers' attention to the burgeoning public that her lovers are too wrapped in feeling to perceive, Austen's narrator offers that public as the very image of that feeling, a metonymy that shades into metaphor.⁴³ Summoning a miniature census as an emblem of her lovers' "overplus of Bliss," Austen prompts us to name that bliss as the pleasure of dissolving into a historically new sense of multiplicity (P 268).

The above phrasing is from the canceled chapter 10 of the draft of *Persuasion*, and its irony derives from the fact that the word "overplus"

figures in the period almost exclusively in financial contexts. One exception to that pattern—Malthus’s discussion of the “overplus of marriages” in the 1806 edition of his *Essay on the Principle of Population*—illustrates the willingness to make human subjects into numbers that so offended Malthus’s many critics.⁴⁴ Austen probably did not have this passage in mind, even if she had read this edition of the *Essay*—and even if, as Charlotte Sussman writes, “the returning veterans of the Napoleonic wars were being imagined to be one of the principal elements of ‘surplus population’ in the early nineteenth century.”⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Malthus’s phrase signals a precedent for Austen’s deployment of the rhetoric of quantification in the context of a discussion of marriage. In fact, such linkages of the numerical with the domains of human emotion and human relations had become a widespread semantic feature of the intellectual landscape by the time Austen wrote. She died just before an “avalanche of printed numbers” began issuing from European bureaucracies and learned societies.⁴⁶ (Ian Hacking, whose phrase this is, dates the deluge from 1820.) But while political arithmetic had not yet shaped state policy in the first decades of the century, it had yielded charismatic slogans that overtly blended feeling and number. Sir John Sinclair, for example, whose *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1791–1799) was the first anglophone text to employ the term “statistics,” had claimed that his goal was to ascertain the “quantum of happiness” in the population by cataloguing the Scottish nation’s resources, and Jeremy Bentham’s *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1781) had notoriously dedicated its fourth chapter to the “Value of a Lot of Pleasure or Pain, How to be Measured,” a project that was later named the “felicific calculus.”⁴⁷

Such slogans indicate a widespread fusion of the languages of quality and quantity. But Austen’s ironic usage signals an even more startling deployment of quantifying and incipiently demographic language: as a signifier of erotic intensity. In doing so, she prompts us to hear her irony shading into ardor. This “overplus” is an excess at once of bodies and of affect—more precisely, an excess of bodies perceived *as* an excess of affect. *Persuasion*’s pertinence to this intellectual context has less to do with Austen’s possible interest in demographic science than with the way she grounds the novel’s erotics in its media condition, accommodating the body of her readership at the heart of the romantic plot. As a result, Austen also challenges the ways critics have tended to frame the relation between literature on the one hand and scientific and philosophic discourse on the other. The human sciences are discourses of the general—of the human aggregate and the supposed rules that govern its movements. One way scholars have claimed value for the literary, of course, is as the domain of the unique, the singular, and the

irreducibly individual. The opposition was itself solidified in precisely Austen's period, as Maureen McLane and others have noted. "The romantic fetish of singular individual consciousness," McLane writes, "emerges . . . against a background of actual and theorized multitudes of men, whether considered as nations (Adam Smith) or as populations (Malthus)."⁴⁸ Austen's small-canvas plots and her psychological acuity might make her work seem perfectly suited to stand for the literary in this individualizing sense. One recent guide to Austen's work that contemplates her work's possible relation to Bentham's thought captures this sense neatly: "There is only one Henry Crawford. If Jane Austen had wished to write a utilitarian novel in which the greatest happiness would have been possible for the greatest number, she could have done it by creating at least two Henry Crawfords!"⁴⁹

I have been arguing that she did create more than one Henry Crawford—that Henry Crawford, like his novelistic kind more generally, contains multiplicity in his very being. Eroticizing that multiplicity is Austen's project in *Persuasion*, a novel that stands not only as the culmination of her work but as a foundational gesture in a nineteenth-century project of rendering the abstraction of the mass into something readers could feel. To see Austen as a player in that larger intellectual effort is to put her in some productively unfamiliar literary-historical contexts. Understanding Austen's love plots as centrally interested in the promiscuous quality of novelistic address, for example, helps us to see her as a participant in what Jacques Rancière has described as modernity's aesthetic regime. In his account, the desire to feel oneself addressed by novelistic voice—to feel oneself to be the star of one's own novel—is a democratic energy that takes overtly erotic form, an "unending tumult of thoughts and desires, appetites and frustrations" born of the diffusion of "the new media . . . that put all words and all images, all dreams and all aspirations at the disposal of anybody and everybody."⁵⁰ Rancière's prime exemplar of the aesthetic regime is Emma Bovary. But the fact that Austen's protagonist and Heti's narrator also thrill to the suspicion that they might be the heroines of their stories indicates the chronological and geographical breadth of the regime Rancière describes. It also suggests that the cultural differences among national literatures may be less important than their shared preoccupations—that the Austen who pushed her heroine toward an erotics of the crowd might not be far from the Charles Baudelaire who declared that "the pleasure of being in a crowd is a mysterious expression of sensual joy in the multiplication of Number . . . Ecstasy is a number."⁵¹

Ecstasy thus conceived has no necessary relation to any particular sexual configuration. That Austen's influential courtship plots might

be described in these terms is one dividend of reading those plots as allegories of the reading public's mass body. Moreover, noticing how detachable Austen's erotics can be from their heterosexual plots also makes visible how detachable those heterosexual plots are from the idea of reproduction. For all the reputed normativity of Austen's courtship novels, it is striking that the projected offspring of the united lovers are never mentioned in her closing narrative summaries, and that the idea of those children is never invoked as a motivating factor in the choice of mates. Indeed, while the paucity of happily married couples in Austen's work has been much remarked upon, it is equally important that the happiest couple we get to know at all well, *Persuasion's* Admiral and Mrs. Croft, is childless, a condition given no explanation and hardly any narrative comment. These facts suggest that Austen's canon is a zone of exception to the rule, articulated by Frances Ferguson, that "marriage . . . in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, always stands for marriage-and-children."⁵²

Ferguson made that observation in 1988, in one of the earliest essays to canvas the relations between the period's political economy and its imaginative literature. Since then, critics like Catherine Gallagher and Emily Steinlight have deepened our sense of this linkage, and sexuality has, for obvious reasons, been central to this scholarship.⁵³ In following the pattern Ferguson names, this work has tended to link sexuality firmly to reproduction, and therefore to see the period's population thinking as irreducibly connected to questions of resource scarcity, overcrowding, and schemes for managing women's and working-class sexuality—the whole host of issues that contemporary theory, following Michel Foucault, terms "biopolitics."⁵⁴ But the example of *Persuasion* alerts us to other ways numbers, crowds, and masses signify erotically in nineteenth-century literature: namely, as intensifiers of sexual feeling, as objects of vibrating excitement in their own right, as calls to solidarity and belonging that radiate with erotic energies only tangentially, if at all, related to conjugality and the reproduction of the species. Whereas the Malthusian plot insists that sexuality must lead to misery in one way or another—through being denied or indulged—this other lineage makes visible an alternative brand of population thinking, one that decouples erotic pleasure from reproduction and in the process casts the newly perceptible density of the social world in strikingly eroticized terms.

Persuasion makes the burgeoning public, that space of felt "overplus," the object of its heroine's desire—and ours. And because the novel's readers are hailed as the constituents of that public, the novel achieves the unprecedented feat of writing a love story in which the mass stars as the object of its own desire. This description of *Persuasion* is sufficiently

distant from our received sense of Austen that we may be tempted to claim that, in this last novel, this small-scale writer has worked herself to the very edges of her representational universe—that the bard of three or four families in a country village, the worker of the little bit of ivory two inches wide, has approached a larger canvas, a more populous cast, a wider sense of the world. But *Persuasion* indicates, more strangely, that the desire to evaporate into the social dwells at the heart of the mass-circulated romantic plot.

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NOTES

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1 Clifford Siskin, “More Is Different: Literary Change in the Mid and Late Eighteenth Century,” in *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780*, ed. John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 808.

2 P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2014), 6.

3 See David Brewer, *The Afterlife of Character, 1726–1825* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 13–14. Accounts stressing literary character’s relation to the idea of multiplicity include Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004); Catherine Gallagher, “George Eliot: Immanent Victorian,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 94 (1997): 157–72; and Aaron Kunin, *Character as Form* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

4 Audrey Jaffe, *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock-Market Graph* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2010), 36.

5 See Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015), 129.

6 Lynch, *Loving Literature*, 128.

7 Lynch, *Loving Literature*, 160, 195.

8 Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 244.

9 On *Persuasion*’s modernity, see Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990).

10 Jocelyn Harris, *A Revolution Almost beyond Expression: Jane Austen’s Persuasion* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2007), 99.

11 On the evolution of the concept of the “mass,” see Stefan Jonsson, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2008). Jonsson pinpoints the years following the French Revolution as the moment in which the word in French and English began to designate a social (and not just physical) phenomenon.

12 See Mary Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010).

13 Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1983), 23.

14 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 23.

- 15 Kathrin Levitan, *A Cultural History of the British Census: Envisioning the Multitude in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1–19.
- 16 Karen O'Brien, "The Cultural and Literary Significance of the 1803 *Essay*," in Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population: The 1803 Edition*, ed. Shannon Stimson (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2018), 549.
- 17 O'Brien, "The Cultural and Literary Significance," 560. On the links between Austen and Malthus's work, see also Sheryl Craig, *Jane Austen and the State of the Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- 18 Silvana Colella, "Intimations of Mortality: The Malthusian Plot in Early Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 24, no. 1 (2002): 28.
- 19 See Michelle Levy, "Austen's Manuscripts and the Publicity of Print," *ELH* 77, no. 4 (2010): 1015–40 for a discussion of Austen's ambivalence about writing for the "indiscriminate market" of print. See also Jan Fergus, "The Professional Woman Writer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 12–31.
- 20 See Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 159–86.
- 21 See Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996), 146.
- 22 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, in *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932–34), 5:119, 186–87.
- 23 Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:13, 66, 252.
- 24 Austen, *Persuasion*, in *The Novels of Jane Austen*, 5:5 (hereafter cited as *P*).
- 25 Christina Lupton, *Knowing Books: The Consciousness of Mediation in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 5.
- 26 Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 5:21–22, 31.
- 27 Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 173.
- 28 One way to gauge the originality of the scene at Lyme is by noting that in these other spaces everyone present has passed a minimum test of social accountability—by being invited or, in the case of Bath's pump-room, by literally signing in. See Marilyn Butler's note on pump-room procedure in her edition of *Northanger Abbey* (1818; Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1995), 223.
- 29 The French title of René Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976) was *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* ("Romantic Lie and Novelistic Truth").
- 30 D. A. Miller argues that *Persuasion* is the Austen novel that most consistently performs such confections of character and narrative perspective—a failure, for Miller, since in his account free indirect style works most powerfully when it stops just short of total identification and performs the opposition between character and narrator "at ostentatiously close quarters." See Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 59. For Miller, Austen's narrative voice achieves the nearest approach the English novel knows to what he calls "absolute style," a quasi-divine independence from human frailty or need. My approach would read the holism that characterizes Miller's absolute style as a name for the social whole that Austen's moment was beginning to apprehend through the technologies of the mass's self-awareness. The difference accounts for our diverging accounts of *Persuasion*'s meaning in Austen's career: for Miller, the novel's unprecedented mingling of Anne's personhood with the narration represents the bathetic breakdown of Austen Style. In my account, the convergence signals not Anne's success at dragging her creator down to her level but her erotic tropism toward the mass public.

I am perplexed to find Miller's account of these passages convincing and yet to want to offer mine. In grateful recognition of that perplexity, this essay is for him.

31 Frances Ferguson, "Jane Austen, *Emma*, and the Impact of Form," *MLQ* 61, no. 1 (2000): 172, 164. For a related account of free indirect style as a communalizing device, see Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012), 36–44.

32 Beatrice Marie, "Emma and the Democracy of Desire," *Studies in the Novel* 17, no. 1 (1985): 8, 10.

33 Lionel Trilling, "Emma," *Encounter* 8, no. 6 (1957): 54.

34 Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008), 128, 129, 135.

35 In a letter to her aunt, Maria Edgeworth praised the vividness of this moment: "The love and the lover admirably well drawn," she wrote. "Don't you see Captain Wentworth, or rather don't you in her place feel him, taking the boisterous child off her back as she kneels by the sick boy on the sofa?" Edgeworth's self-amendment testifies to the multi-layered quality of the narrative perspective here: we are at once with Anne and watching her. My thanks to this essay's anonymous reader for bringing this letter to my attention. Augustus J. C. Hare, ed., *The Life and Letters of Maria Edgeworth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 1:260.

36 See Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 83–84.

37 For accounts of this scene that stress its intensely mediated quality, see Ann Gaylin, *Eavesdropping in the Novel from Austen to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 49–53; Jenny Davidson, *Reading Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017), 34–35; and Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 166–70. Closest to my concerns is Sarah Raff's *Jane Austen's Erotic Advice* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 159, which also understands *Persuasion* as "a roman à clef about the reader" that reaches an erotic climax in the mediations of the proposal scene. Whereas the erotic vector Raff posits operates most intensely between the reader and the fantasized author, my claim is that the doubled identification demanded by the scene eroticizes the reader's status as a participant in a mass. Despite this difference in emphasis, Raff's powerful reading of the scene has been instructive for mine.

38 See Lynch, *Economy of Character*, 244; and Raff, *Jane Austen's Erotic Advice*, 159–60.

39 The fullest treatment of Austen's revisions is in Harris, *A Revolution Almost beyond Expression*, 36–72.

40 Raff, *Jane Austen's Erotic Advice*, 132.

41 Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 29, 28.

42 Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 43.

43 See Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion*, 149.

44 See Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Patricia James (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 2:4. Malthus is discussing not an actual excess of marriages but a research challenge: because, he contends, marriages are recorded more reliably than births and deaths, the records represent an "overplus of marriages" for which the demographic researcher must correct in calculating the "fruitfulness of marriages" (the title of the chapter in question).

45 Charlotte Sussman, "Memory and Mobility: Fictions of Population in Defoe, Goldsmith, and Scott," in *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture*, ed. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 204.

46 Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 18.

47 Sir John Sinclair, *Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1798), 20:xiii. On Sinclair's use of the term "statistics," see Tom Crook and Glenn O'Hara "The 'Torrent of Numbers': Statistics and the Public Sphere in Britain, c. 1800–2000," in *Statistics and the Public Sphere: Numbers and the People in Modern Britain, c. 1800–2000*, ed. Crook and O'Hara (New York: Routledge, 2011), 7. See also Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, printed in the year 1780 and now first published* (London: Payne and Son, 1789), xxvi.

48 Maureen McLane, *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population, and the Discourse of the Species* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 40.

49 Richard Gill and Susan Gregory, *Mastering the Novels of Jane Austen* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 222.

50 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 52.

51 Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (London: the Blackmore Press, 1930), 29.

52 Ferguson, "Malthus, Godwin, Wordsworth, and the Spirit of Solitude," in *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), 117.

53 See Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006). As Emily Steinlight remarks, "Sexuality, more than almost any other element of [Malthus's] argument, was a sticking point in the . . . controversy that greeted" the *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2018), 40.

54 Michel Foucault defines biopolitics as a "seizure of power that is not individualizing but, if you like, massifying, that is directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-species." For Foucault the technologies of biopolitics replace the individualizing function of an earlier disciplinary regime; the new disposition of power addresses itself to "a living mass" but no longer to "the body." But Austen's apprehension of the shift Foucault identifies occurs precisely at the level of the bodily sensorium. See Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), 243, 249.