

Introduction

Austen and the Economy of Art

Jane Austen has always been known for her economy of art. The author who described herself as composing on “the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory [...] with so fine a Brush” (*L*, p. 337) has been praised, as well as criticized, for the circumscribed focus of her plots, the precision of her writing style, for her miniaturism. Nineteenth-century readers compared her fiction with Flemish painting and with instruments of reduction, the microscope that examines tiny details, and the sieve, filtering away all extraneous matter.¹ Austen’s fiction yielded “no redundancy or waste”.² By contrast, critical writing today emphasizes the expansiveness of Austen’s view. Austen’s scene no longer solely consists of the marriages of the English gentry; rather it reverberates with national and global politics: with banking, wars, scandal, slavery. Nevertheless, Austen’s skill remains in the minimalism of her approach, her intimations and taxing hints. Her art is one fundamentally characterized by exactitude and compression.

This book does not study Austen’s economy thematically. Rather it takes as its subject a series of technical principles that shaped her fiction and its content, and that galvanized the representational powers of fiction. From the beginning of Austen’s writing life, in the stories that she wrote as a teenager, matters relating to the size and scale of fiction preoccupied her and these matters constitute in no small part the brilliance of her early writing. The radical contractions of Austen’s early fiction provide clues to her technical accomplishments later on. There are many surprising formal continuities between the drive to brevity of the juvenile writing and

¹ On the last of these, see R. H. Hutton, unsigned review, ‘The Charm of Miss Austen’, *Spectator* (1890), in B. C. Southam (ed.), *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage 1870–1940*, vol. 2 (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 196.

² Unsigned articles, ‘Miss Austen’, *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* (July, August, 1866), in B. C. Southam (ed.), *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), vol. 1, p. 206. Further references to *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage* are by volume number.

Austen's lengthened-out published fiction. Austen made concision a rationale for her novels and both Austen's private and public writing provide a strong body of evidence to support this.

There are very few extant comments made by Austen about her own novels. There are, however, two series of letters which are especially revealing as to Austen's own technical practices. The first series comprises parts of two letters that Austen wrote to her sister, Cassandra, on the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813.³ These two letters give unique access to Austen's thoughts about one of her completed novels on first seeing it in print and offer a raw account of the formal and stylistic decisions that she had made. These letters to Cassandra are celebrated for Austen's palpable excitement and pride on the arrival of this "my own darling Child", a novel that she playfully claims to be "too light & bright & sparkling". Yet Austen also comments on much more practical matters: the exclusion of a narrative superstructure when writing dialogue, the value or otherwise of matter extraneous to the story, the novel's length (how it is shorter than *Sense and Sensibility*) and the respective length of individual volumes following the process of 'lopping and cropping' that she had undertaken in preparation for publication. Cassandra Austen, after her sister's death, noted that *Pride and Prejudice* was published "with alterations & contractions".⁴ How striking it is that on reading through *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen turns over different aspects of the novel's formal "contractions" and even betrays anxieties about her choices. At the same time, she delights in what she characterizes as the "Epigrammatism of the general stile".

The second series of letters to reveal Austen's compositional practices are the five letters written by Austen to her niece Anna Austen over the summer and autumn of 1814 concerning the novel that Anna was writing, 'Which is the Heroine?'. Austen wrote to Anna with her and Cassandra's opinions of the novel-in-progress, along with her own views regarding principles of success in fiction. At this point, Austen was an established author of three published novels, with the composition of *Emma* under way.

³ Friday 29 January and Thursday 4 February 1813; (*L*, pp. 210–12).

⁴ Cassandra's memorandum is held in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. It is transcribed in Kathryn Sutherland, 'Chronology of Composition and Publication', in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 12–22, p. 16. Sutherland comments on the memorandum being possibly drawn up soon after Austen's death, perhaps towards the end of 1817, to help Henry Austen prepare his 'Biographical Notice' of Jane Austen accompanying the posthumous publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*; in James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 219, note 44.

These letters have been called Austen's "art of fiction"⁵ and this is an art that is alert to the superfluous, in terms of inconsequential circumstances and "wandering" plot, but also at the level of the sentence. Austen repeatedly criticizes overly descriptive or detailed writing. Prosiness and minuteness are singled out as errors. Instead, Austen firmly recommends revising and paring back. "[H]ere & there," writes Austen carefully to Anna, "we have thought the sense might be expressed in fewer words" (*L*, p. 280; 10–18 August 1814). Reading a later instalment, she recommends that Anna look back over her writing so as to "curtail" and 'scratch out' that which is "prosy & nothing to the purpose" (*L*, p. 288; 9–18 September 1814). In the same letter, Austen writes: "You describe a sweet place, but your descriptions are often more minute than will be liked. You give too many particulars of right hand & left.—" (*L*, p. 287).

Austen knew from her own experience the importance of identifying and reducing passages that "are more minute than will be liked". This is an overt if overlooked topic in a number of her extant letters, where she reflects on the problem of detail: how much to include and how much is sufficient to interest. The paradox of a formal economy in any kind of writing is the abundance that can accompany restriction of scene and subject, as the details that constitute that scene come more vividly into view. Austen was attracted to the minute and enjoyed in her correspondence the protracted details of the everyday, but she was alert to the dangers of excess. This book will argue that her fiction explored and navigated this dynamic in many different ways. More particularly, Austen had overt stylistic strategies – the subjects of each of the chapters that follow – that prioritized concision and exclusion, and by their means she found a new denotative capacity for detail, which had a profound impact upon the English novel.

The Economy of Art: Austen's Reception

A number of early critics of Austen's work identified a principle of exclusion governing her fiction and recognized a consequent dilatory effect. What was new about Austen's work was the absence of excitable incident and plot, but this was an omission that was filled by a new emphasis on character.⁶ The writer of the first article of a series on 'Female Novelists' in

⁵ Kathryn Sutherland, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: from Aeschylus to Bollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 248.

⁶ In 1862, Julia Kavanagh surmised that "Miss Austen knew that she excelled in character, and probably guessed that she might not excel in adventure". Julia Kavanagh, 'Miss Austen's Six Novels', in *English Women of Letters* (1862), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 183.

the *New Monthly Magazine* of 1852 conveyed the relation between reduction and growth within their own style, dismissing in one short, simple sentence Austen's minimizing of plot, to build instead in an amplifying manner towards Austen's attention to "processes", "evolution" and the "gradually wrought" within her new form of fiction:

Plot she has little or none. If you only enjoy a labyrinthine *nexus* of events, an imbroglio of accidents, an atmosphere of mystery, you will probably toss aside her volumes as 'desperately slow'. Yet, in the careful, artist-like management of her story, in the skillful evolution of its processes, in the tactics of a gradually-wrought *dénouement*, in the truthful and natural adaptation of means to ends, she is almost, if not quite, unrivalled. Nothing can be more judicious than her use of suggestions and intimations of what is to follow.⁷

The microscope was the best analogy for Austen's capacity both to limit her field and enlarge the characters within it: "The field of view may be in some sense a small one; but like that of a good microscope in able hands, there is abundance of light, and the minutest markings of character are beautifully shown in it".⁸ According to R. H. Hutton in 1869, Austen's is a dizzying play of scale, a "minifying instead of a magnifying medium" that reduces the scale of life, "while really multiplying its humours".⁹

But for others, Austen was too minute and, in consequence, overwhelmingly diffuse. Richard Whately, in one of the earliest appreciations of Austen's fiction, describes how her "minuteness of detail has [...] been found fault with".¹⁰ William Charles Macready in 1836 complained that *Mansfield Park*

has the prevailing fault of the pleasant authoress's books; it deals too much in descriptions of the various states of mind, into which her characters are thrown, and amplifies into a page a search for motives which a stroke of the pen might give with greater power and interest.¹¹

⁷ Unsigned article, the first in a series on the 'Female Novelists', *New Monthly Magazine* (May 1852), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, pp. 137–8.

⁸ W. F. Pollock, from 'British Novelists – Richardson, Miss Austen, Scott', *Fraser's Magazine* (January 1860), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 168.

⁹ Hutton, 'The Charm of Miss Austen', in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, pp. 195, 196. See the description of Austen's "microscopic observation of foibles", from an unsigned review of Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook*, *Edinburgh Review* (July 1839), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 121. George Saintsbury suggested that "for all the 'miniature'" in Austen's delineation of the pettiness and selfishness of men, "there is something gigantic"; from 'Preface' to *Pride and Prejudice*, illustrated by Hugh Thompson and published by George Allen (1894), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 217.

¹⁰ Richard Whately, unsigned review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, *Quarterly Review* (January 1821), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 98.

¹¹ William Charles Macready, diary entry, 9 July 1836, in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 118.

It is perhaps unsurprising that an actor and actor-manager such as Macready would have been displeased with Austen's elaboration of states of mind instead of character in action or in speech. But unusually, at this early stage of Austen criticism, Macready pinpoints Austen's amplifications as not depicting character broadly, but excavating characters' interiority and the workings of the mind. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called Austen's fiction "a kind of Bowditch's Laplace in the romantic astronomy", referring to Pierre Laplace's five-volume edition of *Mécanique Céleste* (1799–1805) with its extensive notes and commentaries.¹² Far from being "a small, thin classic" as Mary Augusta Ward would have it,¹³ Austen's work swells for Longfellow into encyclopedic tomes, incapable of leaving anything to the imagination. Like Longfellow, Virginia Woolf described Austen as refusing to leave gaps: she "stuffs up every chink and cranny of the fabric until each novel is a little living world".¹⁴

It was George Henry Lewes who coined the phrase "economy of art" for Jane Austen's fiction, in 1859 in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and in doing so he established the developing orthodoxy that Austen's brilliance lay in her artistic concentration. Lewes's essay sought to extend Austen's reputation beyond a coterie readership and he promoted Austen as an unequalled practitioner of minimalism in fiction:

no novelist has approached her in what we may style the 'economy of art,' by which is meant the easy adaptation of means to ends, with no aid from extraneous or superfluous elements.¹⁵

Having endorsed in previous publications Macaulay's view of Austen as comparable with Shakespeare, in 1859 Lewes claimed that Austen was unsurpassed even by Shakespeare in dramatic presentation. That is, Austen rejects the easy option of description and instead leaves her characters to present themselves through speech. Criticism of Austen often pointed to omission. Lewes's is an example: he lists the "absence of breadth, picturesqueness, and passion"¹⁶ in her fiction and dwells on what she fails to describe,

¹² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, from his journal entry, 23 May 1839, in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 117.

¹³ Mary Augusta Ward, 'Style and Miss Austen', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 51 (December 1884), 84–91, p. 91.

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, unsigned review of W. and R. A. Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters*, and Sybil G. Brinton, *Old Friends and New Faces*, *Times Literary Supplement* (8 May 1913), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 244.

¹⁵ George Henry Lewes, unsigned article, 'The Novels of Jane Austen', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (July 1859), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 152.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

whether it be the physical appearance of her characters or details of scenery. But this results in the unrivalled economy of her writing, “the truest representation, effected by the *least expenditure* of means”. The following year, Lewes returned to Austen in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, once again to praise her “principles of Economy and Selection”, “nothing is dragged in, nothing is superfluous”.¹⁷

Lewes began admiring Jane Austen in print from the early 1850s and over the next decade his appreciation of Austen’s formal restraint developed into a thesis of economy to be applied more broadly to literature. In 1859, he asserted how “almost all defects in works of art arise from neglect of this economy” and how “[i]n novel-writing, as in mechanics, every obstruction is a loss of power; every superfluous page diminishes the artistic pleasure of the whole”.¹⁸ The sharpening of the economic metaphor in Lewes’s literary criticism was indebted to Herbert Spencer’s 1852 essay ‘The Philosophy of Style’ and would result in Lewes’s own 1865 *Principles of Success in Literature*, first published as a series of essays in the *Fortnightly Review*. Using the analogy of the “mechanical apparatus”, Herbert Spencer argued that stylistic accomplishment made the least claims on the resources of the reader.¹⁹ Writing should aim in its syntax and figurative language at efficiency, brevity and ease of comprehension, and minimize “friction” and “inertia”.²⁰ Spencer was mainly attempting to rectify obscurity of meaning due to poor expression, but he nonetheless advocated more generally ease of interpretation as a merit of reading. That Austen claimed with respect to *Pride and Prejudice*, “I do not write for such dull Elves” / “As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves” (*L*, p. 210), is one counter to Spencer’s desire for saving a reader’s effort, as Austen clearly demanded, indeed by means of economy and omission, an intellectual endeavour from her audience. In *The Principles of Success in Literature*, Lewes modulated Spencer’s philosophy by querying any rigid sustainability of literary economy, even as he established it as the first of his five laws on which such success depends.

In describing the ‘Law of Economy’, Lewes employs Spencer’s mechanistic notion of the undesirability of any “friction” in the process of reading, so as to exclude the retarding effect of the “superfluous”. Lewes does

¹⁷ George Henry Lewes, unsigned article, ‘A Word about *Tom Jones*’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (March 1860), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, p. 175.

¹⁸ Lewes, ‘The Novels of Jane Austen’, *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, pp. 153, 162.

¹⁹ Herbert Spencer, ‘The Philosophy of Style’, in *Essays: Scientific, Political, & Speculative* (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1996; first published in the *Westminster Review*, October 1852), vol. 2, pp. 333–69, p. 335.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

not refer to Austen by name in *The Principles of Success in Literature*, however, his repeated emphasis on Austen's eschewal of the "superfluous" in previous writing fed into his theory. But Lewes here registers the difficulty of an absolute exclusion of "superfluity": "[e]conomy is rejection of whatever is superfluous; it is not Miserliness" and in a paradoxical turn "redundancy" can be salvaged in the name of clarity:

Perhaps the very redundancy which he [the author] lops away might have aided the reader to see the thought more clearly, because it would have kept the thought a little longer before his mind, and thus prevented him from hurrying on to the next while this one was still imperfectly conceived.²¹

In fact, the "best economy" allowed in places for "liberal expenditure" when "dictated by a generous impulse, not by a prodigal carelessness or ostentatious vanity". The economical writer judiciously permits expansion, even something like repetition, so as to aid a reader towards a vividly delineated apprehension and by consequence to allow variation in pace and cognitive progress.

In many places, Austen's private writing about fiction seems strikingly close to Lewes's theories of economy in *The Principles of Success in Literature*. Her comments cohere with Lewes's focus on the importance of revision,²² 'striking out' and 'lopping' (Lewes) or 'scratching out', 'lopping and cropping' (Austen) anything which "will not carry away any of the constituent elements of the thought" (Lewes) or is "nothing to the purpose" (Austen). Austen's literary criticism also seems to correlate with Lewes's fundamental dislike of redundancy, as redundancy diverts attention towards "collateral detail". Under the 'Law of Simplicity', Lewes recommends that for a successful narrative structure "parts of novels should have organic relations". He continues:

Push the licence to excess, and stitch together a volume of unrelated chapters, – a patchwork of descriptions, dialogues, and incidents, – no one will call that a novel; and the less the work has of this unorganised character the greater will be its value, not only in the eyes of critics, but in its effect on the emotions of the reader.²³

Austen rejected precisely such "unrelated chapters" when she joked with Cassandra that *Pride and Prejudice* "wants to be stretched out here &

²¹ George Henry Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature*, with an introduction by Geoffrey Tillotson (Farnborough, Hants: Gregg International Publishers, 1969; first published in the *Fortnightly Review*, May–November 1865), p. 70.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 74.

there with a long Chapter [...] about something unconnected with the story" (*L*, p. 212). Yet we can see Austen in her letters, especially her early letters, also drawing attention to the dilemma of what in fact constitutes the extraneous and reflecting upon the management of what deserves elaboration or otherwise.

Jane Austen's Letters: "That Choosing Instinct"

In 1885, Mary Augusta Ward published a hostile review of Lord Brabourne's edition of his great-aunt Jane Austen's letters. The review, 'Style and Miss Austen', is, following Lewes, the next major assessment by a well-known literary figure of Austen's economical style. Ward contrasted Brabourne's edition unfavourably with Austen's "determining quality" of "self-restraint".²⁴ The very act of publishing two volumes of personal letters containing the common events of day-to-day life was contrary to the "virtue of literary reticence".²⁵ Regarding the editorial matter, Ward claimed that Jane Austen herself would have been bored by the inappropriate lists of family pedigrees.²⁶ Ward also noted the lightness of tone characterizing Austen's letters as muted by the effect of the introductory chapters with their long lists of names and "wandering" criticism.²⁷

In 'Style and Miss Austen', Ward, as much as Lewes, saw economy as a universal standard by which to judge the worth of a literary work and whether it is a "classic".²⁸ The terms of praise employed by Ward are "concentration" and "condensation", and she viewed Austen's genius as a confirmation of a historical process of ongoing literary refinement and distillation:

The progress of literary expression during the last two hundred years has on the whole [...] been a progress towards concentration. Literature tends more and more to become a kind of shorthand. The great writers of this generation take more for granted than the great writers of the last, and the struggle to avoid commonplace and repetition becomes more and more diffused. The mind of the modern writer is on the whole most anxiously concerned with this perpetual necessity for omission, for compression. It will never describe if it can suggest, or argue if it can imply. [...]

²⁴ Ward, 'Style and Miss Austen', p. 91.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 84.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 85.

²⁸ Ward writes of Susan Ferrier: "Miss Ferrier is scarcely read now [...] and will gradually drop more and more out of reading. And it is very easy to understand why, if one does but approach her books with these qualities of expansion and contraction which go to make up a classic in one's mind. She has little or no faculty of choice, nothing is refused that presents itself"; *ibid.*, p. 90.

It was her possession of the qualities of condensation that made Jane Austen what she was. Condensation in literary matters means an exquisite power of choice and discrimination – a capacity for isolating from the vast mass of detail which goes to make up human life just those details and no others which will produce a desired effect and blend into one clear and harmonious whole.²⁹

There is a great deal of truth in this for Austen's fiction, including Austen's place in a broad formal trajectory towards compression. Novel writers of Austen's generation were rethinking the heritage of Samuel Richardson whose profuseness played a central part in his innovative transformation of English fiction, as he sought to capture human life through such a "vast mass of detail" or in his own words, the "minute". Jane Austen's brother Henry noted her admiration for Richardson, but her dissension from his prolixity.³⁰

George Henry Lewes accounted for Austen's economy largely in terms of what she chose not to describe. Mary Augusta Ward dwelt upon Austen's concentration in matters of language. Austen's style indicates "the perpetual effort to be content with one word rather than two, the perpetual impulse to clip and prune rather than expand and lengthen".³¹ A process of revision is acknowledged here ("clip and prune"), but Ward repeatedly envisages Austen's powers of condensation as a "gift" or an "instinct", the insights of which are spontaneous: Austen "seizes at once upon the most effective image or detail and realises at a glance how it will strike a reader".³² Ward writes in the tradition established by Henry Austen, that his sister's compositions arrived fully formed. For Ward, the best of Austen's letters show "the perfect spontaneity of the writer".³³

Ward felt that the most revealing letters in Brabourne's edition were the girlish ones that record flirting with Tom Lefroy and others. These come closest to the vitality of *Northanger Abbey* and remind us of the spirit of Catherine Morland, giving "glimpses, as it were, into the workshop which produced the novels".³⁴ But there are other letters, many of which were included in Brabourne's edition, that not only give glimpses of the workshop (which Ward conceives of as the subjects and tones of the later fiction), but

²⁹ Ibid., p. 89.

³⁰ Henry Austen, 'Biographical Notice of the Author' (1818), in Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p. 141.

³¹ Ward, 'Style and Miss Austen', p. 90.

³² Ibid., pp. 90, 91.

³³ Ibid., p. 85.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 86.

that reflect on the abilities and tasks of the worker. Austen thinks through the matter of selection, tempering Ward's view that condensation was a spontaneous and innate talent. Austen herself did not always feel that she had the gift of a "choosing instinct".³⁵ But she was mindful of its importance.

What often comes to the surface of Austen's letters are reflections regarding the distribution and delivery of the writer's material: that is, the dynamics between the letter's content, the quantity or extent of that content and the stylistic means of conveying it. She muses on her desire for detail and she jokes about being boring. The much reprinted letter-writing manual *The Complete Letter-Writer* advises tradesmen to be concise in letters of business, while the writer of familiar letters is instructed to range widely through a variety of subjects. There is no guidance, however, about managing the line between enjoyable detail and prolixity.³⁶ Austen, by contrast, frequently comments on it. Writing a good letter to a known correspondent is inevitably different from writing a good novel, yet the processes of embracing or fending off material, engaging or boring a reader are germane to both.

The letter that Ward uses as an immediate example of the workshop of Austen's fiction, written in 1796 when Austen was twenty, is certainly familiar to a reader of the novels in its subjects of flirting, marriage and gossip, but also in its satirical register and knowing self-contradictions. But that very letter opens with the revealing address to Cassandra:

My dear Cassandra,

I shall be extremely anxious to hear the Event of your Ball, & shall hope to receive so long & minute an account of every particular that I shall be tired of reading it. (*L*, pp. 7–8; 5 September 1796)³⁷

This comment, however playful, reveals a consciousness about the proportion of detail to interest and the reader's remuneration or reward for the time spent reading. What readers might think they desire through curiosity might soon be satiated. This is a subject that recurs in Austen's letters and indeed her fiction. In fact, the opening of this letter is strikingly close to the debate between Catharine and Camilla Stanley in Austen's unfinished manuscript 'Catharine, or the Bower', composed a few years

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁶ *The Complete Letter-Writer; or, Polite English Secretary*. [...] *The Twelfth Edition, Improved* (London: for Stanley Crowder; and Benjamin Collins, in Salisbury, 1768), pp. 35, 32.

³⁷ This letter is included in *Letters of Jane Austen*, ed. with an introduction and critical remarks by Edward, Lord Brabourne (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1884), vol. 1, p. 138. Further references to this edition are listed as 'Brabourne'.

earlier in 1792. There the two young women discuss Charlotte Smith's novel *Ethelinde*, with Camilla objecting to its length:

"Besides, Ethelinde is so long—" "That is a very common Objection I beleive, said Kitty, but for my own part, if a book is well written, I always find it too short."

"So do I, only I get tired of it before it is finished." (*J*, p. 249)

In this passage, the sentiments of which Austen liked enough that she reworked them for *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen registers, again in a comic mode, the same interplay between detail and interest, description (for which Smith is celebrated) and length as she does in her letters. Camilla is the butt of this comic dialogue for being a superficial reader, but Austen could recognize and identify with the sentiment of becoming "tired" with a style of writing that is both desired and enjoyed.

In another letter to Cassandra about a ball (also included in Brabourne's edition), Austen reflects upon how minuteness may be a matter of time-limited enthusiasm for events, which are quickly excised by the memory:

Your desiring to hear from me on Sunday will perhaps bring on you a more particular account of the Ball than you may care for, because one is prone to think much more of such things the morning after they happen, than when time has entirely driven them out of one's recollection. (*L*, p. 63; 20–21 November 1800)³⁸

Much later, when recording for Cassandra the *exact* page number reached in each proof volume of *Emma*, it is uncertain whether she is stating straightforwardly Cassandra's sisterly interest in the last detail of her proof-reading or whether she is apologizing for straying too far into minutiae that can interest no one but the writer: "A Sheet come in this moment. 1st and 3^d vol. are now at 144.—2^d at 48.— I am sure you will like Particulars" (*L*, p. 312; 24 November 1815).

The magnifying element of Austen's fiction, her predilection for observing the minute that her nineteenth-century critics pointed to so often, has a corollary in this repeated enjoyment of "particulars" in letters. She repeats in her correspondence her pleasure in detail: "You know I enjoy particulars, & I was particularly amused with your picture of Grafton House" (*L*, p. 300; possibly late December 1814).³⁹ "[L]ittle events" form the substance

³⁸ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 241.

³⁹ This scrap from a letter was probably written to Anna Lefroy (*L*, p. 445–6). Austen's niece, Anna Austen, married Benjamin Lefroy on 8 November 1814.

of a good letter (here an admirably “long” one from Cassandra).⁴⁰ They may also give a writer a structure:

I shall now try to say only what is necessary, I am weary of meandering—so expect a vast deal of small matter concisely told, in the next two pages.⁴¹ (L, p. 179; 30 January 1809)

Austen not only tells Cassandra that she is going to get to the point, but seems to think out on paper, however casually, the nature of the content (“small matter”), its quantity (“vast deal”), and the compensatory time of telling (“concisely told”). That Austen is alert to the opposing spatial relations she invokes – between “vast deal” and “small matter”, “little matter” and the “long” – is most obviously demonstrated when she acknowledges that to write “at large”, to write more fully, is also to write “at small”, with more precise detail:

I can now answer your question to my Mother more at large, & likewise more at small—with equal perspicuity & minuteness, for the very day of our leaving Southampton is fixed—⁴² (L, p. 170; 10–11 January 1809)

Austen adopts a verbal play that acknowledges one spatial extreme to be inevitably productive of another.

While Austen relished minuteness, she also acknowledged in her letters that it can be tedious (as any reader of Richardson would know), as well as “foolish”. Miss Milles, whose conversation Austen recorded when staying at Godmersham, has been identified as a possible prototype of the garrulous Miss Bates in *Emma*. Austen states:

She undertook in three words to give us the history of M^{rs} Scudamore’s reconciliation, & then talked on about it for half an hour, using such odd expressions & **so foolishly minute** that I could hardly keep my countenance.⁴³ (L, p. 255; 26 October 1813)

But a couple of weeks later, when still at Godmersham, Austen uses the same expression, consciously or unconsciously, mirroring her vision of Miss Milles in her own potential to give excessive detail:

⁴⁰ “You are very amiable & very clever to write such long Letters; every page of yours has more lines than this, & every line more words than the average of mine. I am quite ashamed—but you have certainly more little events than we have. M^r Lyford supplies you with a great deal of interesting Matter (Matter intellectual, not physical)—but I have nothing to say of M^r Scudamore” (L, p. 136; 20–22 June 1808). This letter is included in Brabourne, vol. 1, p. 356.

⁴¹ To Cassandra Austen. Included in Brabourne, vol. 2, p. 73.

⁴² To Cassandra Austen. In Brabourne, vol. 2, pp. 54–5, noted as 10 January.

⁴³ To Cassandra Austen. Included in Brabourne, vol. 2, p. 196.

My dearest Cassandra,

Having half an hour before breakfast—(very snug, in my own room, lovely morn^g, excellent fire, fancy me) I will give you some account of the last two days. And yet, what is there to be told?—I shall get **foolishly minute** unless I cut the matter short.—We met only the Brittons at Chilham Castle, besides a M^r & M^{rs} Osborne & a Miss Lee staying in the House, & were only 14 altogether. My B^r & Fanny thought it the pleasantest party they had ever known there & I was very well entertained by bits & scraps. —I had long wanted to see D^r Britton, & his wife amuses me very much with her affected refinement & elegance. —Miss Lee I found very conversible; she admires Crabbe as she ought. (*L*, p. 261; 6–7 November 1813)

Conscious of the dangers of the minute as Austen is, the letter exemplifies small matter "concisely told". Austen narrates her visit to Chilham Castle by moving in brisk sentences between the individuals that she met there. However, she finds herself straying into the very minuteness that she finds displeasing: while Lady B[rook] is described as getting away from a visit to a concert with admirable promptness, it is Austen who finds herself 'dawdling' in writing about her:

Lady B. was much what I expected, I could not determine whether she was rather handsome or very plain.—I liked her, for being in a hurry to have the Concert over & get away, & for getting away at last with a great deal of decision and promptness [*sic*], not waiting to compliment & dawdle & fuss about seeing dear Fanny, who was half the even^g in another part of the room with her friends the Plumptres. **I am growing too minute, so I will go to Breakfast.**⁴⁴ (*L*, p. 262; 6–7 November 1813)

The subject of this letter may be the trivial everyday matter that Mary Augusta Ward identified as uninteresting; that is, the "ordinary chit-chat of the ordinary gentlewoman". But surely Austen's self-consciousness about what she thought to be the requisite amount of detail to interest does have relevance for understanding her fictional economy? In December 1808, Austen approved of Mr Deedes's epistolary style in a letter to Cassandra:

He has certainly great merit as a Writer, he does ample justice to his subject, & without being diffuse, is clear & correct; —& tho' I do not mean to compare his Epistolary powers with yours, or to give him the same portion of my Gratitude, he certainly has a very pleasing way of winding up a whole, & speeding Truth into the World.⁴⁵ (*L*, p. 162; 9 December 1808)

Austen repeatedly measures success in writing by some rule of concision and this enjoyment of a letter "speeding Truth into the world" proves

⁴⁴ Included in Brabourne, vol. 2, pp. 209–11.

⁴⁵ In Brabourne, vol. 2, p. 39.

consistent with many of her novelistic choices. Whether Austen had an unfailing “instinct” for the concise is moot, but she did admire it in different forms, and in the earliest fiction that she wrote, as a teenager, she seems to have been strongly motivated by it.

Jane Austen’s *Juvenilia*: the Contractive Imagination

By and large, Austen’s teenage writings retain their reputation as being distinct from her mature fiction.⁴⁶ This is because of their often outrageous narrative events, including murder, bigamy and drunkenness, and their highly burlesque tone that is only occasionally evident in the satirical portraits of the mature work. The style of the *juvenilia* is most commonly thought to re-emerge in the caricatures of Austen’s last work *Sanditon*, especially in its improbable hypochondriacs.⁴⁷ But Austen’s critique of contemporary fiction in the *juvenilia* undoubtedly shaped her mature art. Through her parodic dissent from aspects of sentimental fiction of the day, she created the terms of her own style. Not only that: the teenage writings prove to be, formally, a foundation for all that she writes later. It is in Austen’s early writings that we see most clearly her radically contractive thinking and her formative interest in narrative acts of concision, diminution and acceleration.

As a teenage writer, Austen was motivated by the possibilities of contraction. Her interest in reducing famously enormous works speaks volumes. Any reasonable expectation of length one might have for a history of England, based on the historical exemplars of the day, whether David Hume’s six-volume or Oliver Goldsmith’s four-volume histories, or even their popular three-hundred-page abridgements, is overturned by her own ‘The History of England’, written in a mere thirty-three, illustrated and capacious spaced manuscript pages. The most entangled narratives of succession are summarized with blasé compression, as with the Wars of the Roses: “for Henry Tudor E. of Richmond as great a Villain as ever lived, made a great fuss about getting the Crown” (*J*, p. 179). Aiding her young niece Anna, Austen depleted the seven volumes of *Sir Charles Grandison* to five small dramatic acts and a mere fifty-two manuscript pages.⁴⁸ In the *juvenilia* as a whole, the notoriously lengthy genre of the

⁴⁶ Peter Sabor closes his ‘Introduction’ to the Cambridge edition of Austen’s *Juvenilia* with a description of the style of these early writings as “quite unlike the work of any of her contemporaries, and equally unlike her own mature novels” (p. lxvii). Conjectural dates for the composition of individual pieces within the *juvenilia* are taken from *Juvenilia*, xxviii–ix.

⁴⁷ Sabor, *Juvenilia*, p. xxiv.

⁴⁸ The short play is in Jane Austen’s handwriting and it is likely that Austen transcribed her niece’s composition (*LM*, p. cxvi). For the history of the attribution of the play *Sir Charles Grandison*,

novel was repeatedly reduced, most ruthlessly in *Volume the First*. There, one complete novel reaches fifty-four manuscript pages ('Jack & Alice'), but, excluding the 'Detached peices', the prose fiction in this volume averages at fifteen pages apiece. Austen's completed work, 'The beautifull Cassandra' (also in *Volume the First*) displays most ostentatiously the project of reduction, consisting of twelve chapters, with no chapter running to more than four sentences or six manuscript lines. The novel takes up four manuscript pages, excluding the dedication (see Illustration I.1).⁴⁹

In her teenage fiction, Austen channels the same questions that she would raise in her letters, regarding the distribution of words to event, towards a bravura comedy of narration. She achieves this through a deliberate disequilibrium between details and their significance. The comedy of the early writing often consists in compressing narrative that anyone would expect to be protracted by means of absurd flights through time. In 'Frederic & Elfrida', Charlotte receives and accepts two proposals of marriage in the space of three tiny paragraphs (*J*, p. 9), while in 'Amelia Webster', three courtships are conducted in seven miniscule letters to close with a triple wedding. Austen also ridicules fictions that make absurd claims for plenitude. Inset tales, where characters tell of their previous lives and adventures, were common into the nineteenth century and frequently satirized by Austen who reduces these often lengthy, contextual episodes into a formulaic hyperbole that delivers nothing:

At the request of your Mother I related to them every other misfortune which had befallen me since we parted. (*J*, pp. 134–5)

As soon as she had complied with my wishes in this particular and had given me an accurate detail of every thing that had befallen her since our separation (the particulars of which if you are not already acquainted with, your Mother will give you) I applied to Augusta for the same information respecting herself, Sir Edward and Lady Dorothea. (*J*, p. 135)

I informed them [Philander and Gustavus] of every thing which had befallen me during the course of my Life, and at my request they related to me every incident of theirs. (*J*, p. 137)

see *LM*, pp. cxi–cxviii. Brian Southam gives the alternative view that Austen was the author of the play: *Jane Austen's 'Sir Charles Grandison'*, transcribed and ed. by Brian Southam; foreword by Lord David Cecil (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). As elsewhere, page counts of Austen's manuscript texts exclude title or other prefatory pages.

⁴⁹ Jane Austen, 'The beautifull Cassandra', in *Volume the First*, pp. 115–19 in *Jane Austen's Fiction Manuscripts: A Digital Edition*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (2010). Available at www.janeausten.ac.uk. ISBN: 978-0-9565793-1-7. In their edition of Austen's *Teenage Writings*, Kathryn Sutherland and Freya Johnston describe the first notebook as suggesting a writer "testing how sparsely and cryptically a piece of fiction might be assembled and retain the elements necessary for comprehension", in Jane Austen, *Teenage Writings*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Kathryn Sutherland and Freya Johnston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. xvi.

116

The beautifull Cassandra.
a novel, in twelve Chapters.

Chapter the first

Cassandra was the Daughter and the only Daughter of a celebrated Millener in Bond Street. Her father was of noble Birth, being the near relation of the Duke of —'s Butler.

Chapter the 2^d

When Cassandra had attained her 16th year, she was lovely & amiable & chancing to fall in love with an elegant Bonnet, her Mother had just completed bespoken by the Countess of — she placed it on her gentle Head & wadded ^{shop} from her Mothers to make her Fortune.

Chapter the 3^d

The first person she met, was the Viscount

Illustration I.1 Jane Austen, 'The beautifull Cassandra', in *Volume the First*, p. 116.

By permission of the Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford. MS.Don.e.7

Inset histories, while promoting inclusiveness, can make a novel distractingly heterogeneous. Austen reduces *ad absurdum* such narrations that must inevitably be briefer than promised.

Alongside such contractions of the extensive are ostentatious irrelevancies. Both strategies serve as commentary on the novelist's need for

selection. Importantly, Austen's satirical irrelevancies are never quite permitted to become fatiguing in themselves, as they are contained by the briefest of narratives. In 'The adventures of Mr Harley', the minute narrative which amounts to a total of sixteen lines, space is given to the fellow travellers of Mr Harley in a stage-coach – "A man without a Hat, Another with two" – along with the woman he remembers to be his wife (*J*, p. 46). It is impossible to say in cases like this whether there is any biographical relevance to such strange details, but to read these manuscript narratives as existing for eyes beyond a family coterie – and Austen was imagining them in part as published works – details like these remain tantalizingly obvious non-starters. The travellers and their hats, about whom we learn nothing else, are miniature emblems of those circumstances in fiction "of apparent consequence, which will lead to nothing" about which she would much later write to Anna (*L*, p. 281; 10–18 August 1814).

Elsewhere in the juvenilia, Austen creates narrators who more ostentatiously are unable to select and sieve, most egregiously in the 'Memoirs of Mr Clifford: an unfinished tale—' which begins, conventionally enough, with a journey to London:

Mr Clifford lived at Bath; and having never seen London, set off one Monday morning determined to feast his eyes with a sight of that great Metropolis. He travelled in his Coach and Four, for he was a very rich young Man and kept a great many Carriages of which I do not recollect half. I can only remember that he had a Coach, a Chariot, a Chaise, a Landeau, a Landeaulet, a Phaeton, a Gig, a Whisky, an Italian Chair, a Buggy, a Curricule and a wheelbarrow. He had likewise an amazing fine stud of Horses. To my knowledge he had six Greys, 4 Bays, eight Blacks and a poney. (*J*, p. 51)

The narrator skips over the dangerous fever that incapacitates the hero for five months, to describe Mr Clifford resuming his journey with another routine inventory of its ensuing stages. In 'Edgar & Emma', Austen fuses narrative listing with irrelevant protagonists to present intertwined stylistic and structural infelicities. It is difficult for the reader even to find the hero Edgar Willmot from a catalogue of family simulacra. Emma watches his many siblings descend from a carriage to visit:

Mr and Mrs Willmot with their three eldest Daughters first appeared—Emma began to tremble—. Robert, Richard, Ralph, and Rodolphus followed—Emma turned pale—. Their two youngest Girls were lifted from the Coach—Emma sunk breathless on a Sofa. (*J*, p. 35)

When Emma demands that Mrs Willmot tell her how the rest of her family does, "particularly your eldest son", Mrs Willmot replies:

“Our children are all extremely well but at present most of them from home. Amy is with my sister Clayton. Sam at Eton. David with his Uncle John. Jem and Will at Winchester. Kitty at Queens Square. Ned with his Grandmother. Hetty and Patty in a convent at Brussels. Edgar at college, Peter at Nurse, and all the rest (except the nine here) at home.” (*J*, p. 36)

Emma in response to this news retires to her room to cry for the rest of her life. Austen “crams in” (to use Virginia Woolf’s phrase) an enormous amount of detail into a small narrative space and, like ‘The adventures of Mr Harley’, at the expense of what one might expect to be the emotional centre of the tale, in this case the feelings of the characters for each other.

The genesis of such excessive and stalling listing is the same magnifying element, that love of the minute, that marks out Austen’s fiction. It is the same characteristic that leads Austen in her letters to complain of her own minuteness, as she details one by one the company that she has met when visiting Godmersham. That Austen goes on to write *Emma*’s Miss Bates reveals an affectionate sympathy with non-selection. ‘Edgar & Emma’ also acknowledges sympathetically the desire to list: it is understandable that Edgar is no more important to his mother than Sam, David, Jem and Will etc. But while for a mother all children may be loved equally, Austen was aware that a novelist, as much as a lover, must be able to choose.

‘Emma & Edgar’ is one of only four chaptered fictions in Austen’s juvenilia. All four of the chaptered novels are included in *Volume the First* and three of the four are placed by Austen at the beginning of the volume. All three of these opening works could be described as fiction in search of its protagonists. All three resist their framing titles. The five chapters of ‘Frederic & Elfrida’ have a carefully organized chiasmic architecture, in which the relationship between the eponymous pair begins and ends the novel, but largely disappears in the three central chapters which are occupied by the engagements of Elfrida’s friend Charlotte (Chapter 3) and their mutual acquaintance Rebecca Fitzroy (Chapters 2 and 4). By the end of this brief novel and at the point of their betrothal, Frederic and Elfrida have grown old. The couple are the superstructure – the title, starting point and conclusion – to a fiction that interests itself in others. The subject of ‘Edgar & Emma’, as we have seen, is Edgar’s absence, while Emma herself only turns up in the second chapter of this three-chapter novel. Jack in ‘Jack & Alice’ similarly does not materialize, as “he never did anything worth mentioning” and then is reported as having died (*J*, p. 27).

Among these early chaptered novels, ‘Jack & Alice’ is the most overt critique of wandering, episodic fiction. It has a narrative structure of nestling inset tales: Lady Williams tells Alice of her “Life and adventures”, to be

interrupted by an encounter with Lucy who tells of her “Life and adventures”. While Alice goes on to offer herself in marriage to Charles Adams in Pammydiddle, Lucy is being proposed to by a duke in Bath, then to be murdered by the “malvolent Sukey” [*sic*] (*J*, p. 30). Taken further than ‘Frederic & Elfrida’, chapters seem to propose to the young Austen an abrupt and digressive shifting between characters that is very different from her mature writing. Once more, one of Austen’s later warnings to Anna of “too frequent a change from one set of people to another” seems prefigured in the satire of the juvenilia (*L*, p. 281).

‘The beautifull Cassandra’ is structurally different, as well as physically separated, from the other chaptered fictions in the juvenilia and is one of its most enigmatic pieces. The narrative is tightly focused on one character and has a very time-limited focus of seven hours in a day, with each chapter containing some specific action. The actions across the chapters are linked mainly by chronology and there is a dreamy surrealism to these unfolding chapters, as the sixteen-year-old Cassandra heads off from the family home to make her fortune. This involves walking past various persons with a curtsy or a blush, but also committing at least one act of violence, when she knocks down the pastry-cook. She refuses to pay for six ices she devours and when unable to pay for a coach fare she places her bonnet on the coachman’s head, with unspecified force. The deliberate rebelliousness of the beautiful Cassandra is confirmed and nullified in a rather touching last chapter when, returning home, Cassandra is pressed safely to her mother’s bosom. The novel takes pleasure in unladylike behaviour and as such captures something of the free-spirited heroines to come.

While it is true that the plot of ‘The beautifull Cassandra’ is simple structurally and in terms of action, this does not preclude it demonstrating a sophisticated piece of thinking about the novel form. Contraction is its foundational act of rebellion. Austen reduces “a novel” to twelve chapters, each containing an action as small as walking past someone in the street. This tale so vividly captures Austen thinking about the novel in the tiniest of units: small events, small time frame, tiny chapters. This is Austen shrinking the novel back to its most contained and constricted dimensions, and musing on what such dimensions can nevertheless hold.

Little Habitations: Economies of Space

Austen’s squeezing of narrative into diminutive text is re-enacted thematically across her teenage writing, as she squeezes characters into and out of exceptionally constricted spaces. The minute proportions of one chapter

of ‘The beautifull Cassandra’ exemplifies this confluence of formal and thematic compression. While Austen squeezes her chapter into one sentence, a character inhabits a space that is far too small for her:

CHAPTER THE 10TH

Cassandra was next accosted by her freind the Widow, who squeezing out her little Head thro’ her less window, asked her how she did? Cassandra curtseyed and went on.

CHAPTER THE 11TH

(J, pp. 55–6)

The point may be that the beautiful Cassandra’s friend is so impoverished that she inhabits the smallest, cheapest room in a little house. But to have a window smaller than one’s head is unusual. Austen creates a comedy of littleness to accompany her narrative diminishments and once again this generates verbal play with scale. The Widow while making herself physically smaller, becomes larger, lexically expanding into the “window” that she squeezes out of, while “little” has to fit (impossibly) through “less”. Ultimately, the Widow’s massive efforts bear negligible narrative yield, as Cassandra passes on.

Austen’s writing on the “little” was significantly fostered by eighteenth-century satire, in particular the mock-heroic tradition. Austen’s performance in Fielding’s early eighteenth-century burlesque *Tom Thumb* in the family theatricals at Steventon is an apposite emblem of Austen’s comic interest in the greatly small. She seems to have enjoyed the common satirical expansion “little diminutive” (used memorably by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*).⁵⁰ Margaret Lesley uses the tautology twice of her new mother-in-law in ‘Lesley Castle’: “there is something so extremely unmajestic in her little diminutive figure, as to render her in comparison with the elegant height of Matilda and Myself, an insignificant Dwarf” (J, p. 157, also p. 174). Even at the end of her writing life, Austen was determined to include a bathetically named Capt: Little (again great and small) as one of the few subscribers to the circulating library at Sanditon, as surrounding text seems to have been written to accommodate him. The immediately preceding account of Mrs Whitby “sitting in the little inner parlour” is revised to “sitting in her inner room” (S, b2-18).

⁵⁰ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* eds. Melvyn New and Joan New; with an introductory essay by Christopher Ricks; and an introduction and notes by Melvyn New (London: Penguin Books, 1997; first published, 1759–67), p. 85. This is the description of Dr Slop’s pony.

Brigid Brophy has suggested subtle, personal reasons for Austen's radical contractions in the juvenilia. Brophy identifies across Austen's work a psychological response to the downsizing of the family from the moneyed grandeur of her mother's ancestry in particular. Thus, Brophy sees the declining fortunes of the Austen family as underlying both the narrative compression of Austen's 'The History of England' and her repeated return in the published novels to small domestic spaces.⁵¹ Austen's adult life was affected by a series of largely unwanted domestic moves, until she finally settled in Chawton, a house in which, according to her niece Caroline, some bedrooms were "very small" and "none very large", with a garden at least in which "you did not feel cramped for room".⁵² The experiences of the Dashwoods, Fanny Price and the Elliots, who all have to re-accommodate themselves in relatively cramped conditions, do seem strikingly personal, given this context. In the teenage, pre-Chawton writing, Brophy sees Austen's interest in narrative contraction as exemplifying more of a generational consciousness of diminishing circumstances.⁵³ But this early fiction also has an explicit interest in tiny homes, endorsing an interpretation of Austen's consciousness of a life of downward mobility. Austen reduces habitable spaces to their furthest extremes in the juvenilia, much as she does the writing spaces her early stories inhabit. Whatever the causes for Austen's interest in this, there is an early correlation between stylistic conception and subject matter that pertains to Austen's mature writing life.

Samuel Beckett thought that Austen "had much to teach him", when reading *Sense and Sensibility* in 1935.⁵⁴ What might he have thought had he read 'Love and Freindship', where Austen envisages a scene comparable with *Endgame* or *Play* over a hundred years before Beckett was born?⁵⁵ While Beckett has characters in these two plays live in dustbins and urns, Austen blithely narrates the home of Gustavus and Philander in 'Love and Freindship' as the basket on the back of a stage-coach (*J*, p. 137). The basket does not have the same mortal connotations as Beckett's unusual residences, and the characters' residence there is not as necessarily long

⁵¹ Brigid Brophy, 'Jane Austen and the Stuarts', in *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B. C. Southam (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 21–38, p. 31.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 28. Brophy quotes Caroline Austen's *My Aunt Jane Austen: a Memoir*, written in 1867 and published first in 1952.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵⁴ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: the Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 203.

⁵⁵ There no record that Beckett did read 'Love and Freindship', though it was first published in 1922.

lasting, but Austen's characters seem as neutrally inclined to their constricted lot as Beckett's. With a gentility that belies their residence in a ridiculously confined space usually reserved for luggage, Gustavus and Philander, writes Laura, "desired me to step into the Basket as we might there converse with greater ease" (*J*, p. 137).

The last work included in *Volume the Second*, 'A Tale', is entirely devoted to the subject of taking a "small house", which its protagonist Wilhelminus expects to be larger than the two rooms and closet it turns out to be (*J*, p. 225). Undismayed by this discovery, Wilhelminus hosts an extraordinarily large gathering, given the size of his new home:

Robertus accompanied him, with his Lady the amiable Cecilia and her two lovely Sisters Arabella and Marina to whom Wilhelminus was tenderly attached, and a large number of Attendants. —An ordinary Genius might probably have been embarrassed in endeavouring to accommodate so large a party, but Wilhelminus with admirable presence of Mind, gave orders for the immediate erection of two noble Tents in an open Spot in the Forest adjoining to the house. Their Construction was both simple and elegant—A Couple of old blankets, each supported by four Sticks, gave a striking proof of that Taste for Architecture and that happy ease in overcoming difficulties which were some of Wilhelminus's most striking Virtues. (*J*, p. 226)

Such thrifty quick thinking is likewise in evidence in *Volume the First's* 'The Visit' when Miss Fitzgerald politely seats visitors for whom there are insufficient chairs in the laps of others (*J*, p. 65). But in these closing lines of *Volume the Second*, Austen contemplates outright penury in the form of a shelter constructed from sticks and old blankets. Wilhelminus's "happy ease in overcoming difficulties" is repeated in Austen's later valorizing of reduced spaces in her published novels, by means of compensatory moral criteria. This is evident in the hospitable warmth of the Dashwoods' "too small" home.⁵⁶ In *Persuasion*, Wilhelminus is resurrected in the character of Captain Harville who invites a large party to "rooms so small as none but those who invite from the heart could think capable of accommodating so many" (*P*, p. 106). The cheerful Miss Bates sticks her head out of a window (like the beautiful Cassandra's friend) to invite Mr Knightley into her "little room", which he declines as it is "full enough" already with visitors (*E*, pp. 263–4).

⁵⁶ Mrs Dashwood twice describes the house in this way: "too small for our family" and its parlours "are both too small for such parties of our friends as I hope to see often collected here" (*Se&S*, p. 34).

In the published novels, Austen repeatedly examines the contrasting experiences of the large and the small, as characters move from, and compare, one state to another.⁵⁷ This is especially the case in *Mansfield Park* where Fanny Price has to move back and forth between the cramped and the spacious, between Portsmouth and Mansfield. Austen writes movingly of Fanny Price as a little girl turning up in the big house of Mansfield where “[t]he rooms were too large for her to move in with ease” (*MP*, p. 16) and who finds solace in a neglected schoolroom which becomes her “nest of comforts” (p. 179). Her cousins, Maria and Julia don’t complain, conscious of how much better their own rooms are. In this nest, Fanny finds “consolation” and is able to ‘muse’ (p. 178). Akin to Virginia Woolf’s ‘room of one’s own’, this private, seemingly undesirable space becomes one of generative and creative potential, populated with plants, books and a writing desk. Fanny’s “nest of comforts” is a sign of the novel in which it appears, as Austen describes her writing, not long afterwards, as “a Nest of my own”.

Austen’s image of the nest has received relatively little attention in comparison with the “little bit [...] of Ivory”.⁵⁸ Austen employs both images in a letter to her nephew, James Edward Austen, who has lost “two Chapters & a half” of a novel that he is composing:

It is well that I have not been at Steventon lately, & therefore cannot be suspected of purloining them;—two strong twigs & a half towards a Nest of my own, would have been something.—I do not think however that any theft of that sort would be really very useful to me. What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety & Glow?—How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour? (*L*, p. 337; 16–17 December 1816)

For nineteenth-century commentators, the nest seemed an appropriate image for the domestic nature of Austen’s writing. James Edward may have recalled this letter to him when in his *Memoir* he described his aunt’s novels as containing “no notice of politics or public events; scarcely any discussions on literature, or other subjects of general interest”.

⁵⁷ See John Wiltshire, ‘Comfort, Health and Creativity: a Reading of *Emma*’, in *Jane Austen’s Emma*, ed. and with an introduction by Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism/Infobase Publishing, 2010; previously published in *Jane Austen: Introductions and Interventions* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)), pp. 65–74, p. 69.

⁵⁸ Barbara K. Seeber’s discussion of the nest in *Jane Austen and Animals* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 2–4 is one exception.

Rather, “[t]hey may be said to resemble the nest which some little bird builds of the materials nearest at hand, of the twigs and mosses supplied by the tree in which it is placed; curiously constructed out of the simplest matters”.⁵⁹ Anne Thackeray in 1871 also employed the image of the nest, as a symbol of Austen’s fiction, again composed out of local, domestic stuff, “a whole, completed and coherent, beautiful”.⁶⁰

While in the nineteenth century, the nest articulated the domestic limitations of Austen’s subject matter, the little bit of ivory has come to represent global interactions at the most significant ethical scale, illuminating a historical background of colonial trade, luxury consumerism and animal exploitation.⁶¹ In terms of narrative style, Austen replaces the image of the nest with that of the ivory because of the unsuitable accretiveness of the nest’s construction and form. The ivory, by contrast, cannot allow addition or join. Nonetheless, the nest is the immediate image Austen calls on for her work and it is coherent with the long series of little habitations that fascinated her. Indeed, in the nest the written and habitable space become one. Austen has transformed a preoccupation with physically restricted spaces into the positive image of the artwork as home. Gaston Bachelard describes the nest as a “*daydreaming of security*” and “a beginning of confidence”.⁶² It is impossible to ascribe to anyone daydreams and their meanings, yet Bachelard’s words seem in their expansive possibilities more true than those that describe Austen the nest-builder as an artist of limited materials. The nest is the smallest habitation, but one synonymous with creation. Bachelard’s sense that “tininess is the habitat of greatness” resonates with Jane Austen’s fictional habitats, as well as her stylistic habits, as both have latently expansive capacities.⁶³ Even the image that Austen settles on for her work, “the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work” articulates this paradox. Austen’s inclusion of a parenthesis (itself about two inches wide) that amplifies “the little bit” to include an unnecessarily empirical description belies any notion of her fiction as resolutely “little”.

⁵⁹ Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, p. 51.

⁶⁰ Anne Thackeray, ‘Jane Austen’, *Cornhill Magazine* (1871), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 169.

⁶¹ See Jon Mee, ‘Austen’s Treacherous Ivory: Female Patriotism, Domestic Ideology, and Empire’, in *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*, eds. You-me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 74–92. Also, Seeber, *Jane Austen and Animals*, p. 4.

⁶² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, with a new foreword by John R. Stilgoe (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994; first published as *La Poétique de l’espace*, 1958), pp. 102–3. It was around the time that Austen was writing that ‘nest-egg’ became a financial metaphor, signifying the acquisition of more (*OED*, 4).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

**Economies of Expression: the Contents
of Jane Austen's Style**

Jane Austen repeatedly grasped the generative potential of stylistic economy. This book outlines three stylistic interests that emerge from her earliest writing and play a fundamental part in the evolution of her fiction. These are structural concision to plotting, reductions of narrative description and the omission of attribution in forms of speech. All three contribute to what makes Austen's fiction distinctive. While each chapter engages with the range of Austen's fiction, emphasis is placed on her early writing, the juvenilia and the published novels that had their origins in the 1790s: *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. This book itself becomes more minute in its focus, moving from the larger construction of Austen's novels to repeated rhetorical patterns across them to small phrases omitted. The techniques described, however, interweave and promote each other.

The first chapter of this book attends to the subject of structural concision. Austen displays in her early writing – in the teenage fiction, *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice* – a scrutiny of novelistic length and organization. These are writings that comment on their own construction. In this chapter, I bring together what amounts to a substantive body of material across Austen's published and private writing to show how questions of narrative protraction, connection and excision were at the forefront of her criticism and art. Austen's formal interests cohered with a burgeoning aestheticization of the novel in the early nineteenth century and are bound up with her knowledge of picturesque theory. Austen's dislike of the superfluous, commented upon in her letters, is bolstered by wider debates in criticism and aesthetics, and that come, in turn, to bear on the formal economies of her own fiction.

The second of my chapters concentrates on a single rhetorical figure, apophasis. This figure is a paradox: a denial of expression that the speaker then or simultaneously contradicts. Austen's alertness to irony made apophasis prevalent across her fiction and formative in the evolution of her style, from the comic absurdity of the early fiction into the complex engagement with human character and interiority that characterizes her later work. Apophasis is a figure that is fundamental to both of these styles in being contractive as well as, potentially, amplificatory and diffuse. It suppresses the descriptive, while facilitating expansion elsewhere. This

chapter, as well as my third, identifies narrative constraint as contributing to Austen's developments in depicting the mind in action, in free indirect discourse.

The third chapter, on dialogue, identifies a relatively unknown speech category, free direct speech, as an innovative force in Austen's fiction, which to date has not been fully grasped. Free direct speech occurs when direct speech is presented without framing clauses. Remarkably, given how little Austen says about her own fiction, she refers to this feature of her writing, describing missing "said he"s or "said she"s, in one of her letters to Cassandra about *Pride and Prejudice* (L, p. 210; 29 January 1813). The omission of speech attribution opens up aspects of Austen's thinking about the novel's relationship with drama, as speech is left unmediated by a narrator. On the other hand, Austen acknowledges that she is content to risk the reader's confusion or uncertainty in a manner that is inimical to drama, but, as I shall argue, is germane to the presentation of thought. Free direct speech contributes, in other words, to Austen's famed development of free *indirect* discourse. Free direct speech is itself a much neglected literary form, virtually unknown in comparison with its indirect relation. My claims for the innovatory nature of free direct discourse in Austen's novels have implications, therefore, that extend far beyond her fiction.

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of free indirect discourse in the history of the novel. It has even been described as the novel's identifiable form *per se*, as much as fourteen lines signify the form of a sonnet.⁶⁴ Free indirect discourse occurs when a narrative voice merges with, or seems to adopt, the voice of a character. The delivered speech is 'free' from a narratorial report as to the person speaking. In other words, there is no attribution. The technique transformed fiction by facilitating a subtle depiction of character consciousness, as narrative can move unobtrusively into the viewpoint of a character. This book shows how Austen's instincts for narrative concision interact with her interest in character consciousness. This can be demonstrated by reference to a last historical appreciation of Austen's skills in fictional economy.

Austen's best-known narrative omissions are her proposal scenes. In 1917 Reginald Farrer described them as "notorious", yet demonstrative of

⁶⁴ Frances Ferguson, 'Jane Austen, *Emma*, and the Impact of Form', in *Reading for Form*, eds. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2006; first published in 2000 as a special issue of the *Modern Language Quarterly*), pp. 231–55, pp. 233–4.

an intense “concentration” that makes Austen among the “greatest writers”.⁶⁵ Jane Austen knew that the largest, the most significant things in life require, artistically, the smallest space:

In the supreme moments, in point of fact, humanity becomes inarticulate, and thus no longer gives material for art. Jane Austen, knowing this, is too honest to forge us false coin of phrases, and too much an artist to pad out her lines with asterisks and dashes and ejaculations. She accepts the condition, asks her reader to accept it also, and contents herself with dealing with the emotions on either side of the crucial outbreak. It is notorious how she avoids detail in her proposal-scenes; certainly not from ‘ladylike’ cowardice, nor from any incapacity, but merely in her artist’s certainty that the epical instants of life are not to be adequately expressed in words. ‘What did she say? Just what she should, of course; a lady always does.’ Jane Austen, with whimsical gaiety of candour, here lays down her position once for all, and frankly tells her reader that there are matters into which neither he nor she can decently pry.⁶⁶

Such a pulling back from explicit romantic expression has garnered much critical attention and has been deemed a matter of tact, modesty and disinterest, as well as a creative instinct that silence says it best.

This is the longer scene from *Emma*, which Farrer uses to exemplify his point:

What did she say?—Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does. —She said enough to show **there need not be despair**—and to invite him to say more himself. **He *had* despaired** at one period; he had received such an injunction to caution and silence, as for the time crushed every hope;—she had begun by refusing to hear him. —The change had perhaps been somewhat sudden;—her proposal of taking another turn, her renewing the conversation which she had just put an end to, might be a little extraordinary!—She felt its inconsistency; but Mr. Knightley was so obliging as to put up with it, and seek no farther explanation. (*E*, p. 470)

Austen does not, in fact, content herself with dealing with “emotions on either side” of an elision. Rather, this passage from *Emma* narrates the conversation that has been suppressed. The emphatic “He *had* despaired”

⁶⁵ Reginald Farrer, ‘Jane Austen, *ob.* July 18, 1817’, *Quarterly Review* (July 1917), in *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, p. 253. “This elimination of the author is only part of the intense concentration which the greatest writers develop in their subject. [...] It is at this point that all living writers (with the exception of Rhoda Broughton) fail. They are telling stories [...] with an eye to their audience and to themselves and their own pet notions, telling them, that is, objectively, not subjectively, and piling up masses of detail and explanation in order to obscure the inner lack of any completed identity between the author and his matter” (p. 249).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 252–3.

gives the intonation of Knightley replying to Emma, picking up on what retrospectively seem to be her own terms “there need not be despair”. The summary of the narrator thus carries with it the sounds of a conversation that we have been led to believe is not there. Why does Austen, after ostensibly avoiding narrative description in such a pronounced way, go on to repeat in miniature the scene that has only just been summarized? What is the purpose of this elision that turns out to be barely that?

The scene is apophatic, as expression is negated only to be expressed. Frequently in Austen’s fiction a declaration of non-expressibility brings with it an amplificatory effect in which Austen’s interest in capturing the mind in motion is strongly implicated. Apophasis in this scene creates a sweetly comic irony, as such a significant matter cannot lie hidden. Austen allows the couple their privacy by not giving us their words directly, nor attributing any speech to them at all. Rather conversation is intimated in the indirect discourse that follows, which then flows into Emma’s thoughts. Ultimately, a much more private space than even the declarations of two lovers is revealed: the subjective mind. Austen’s use of free indirect discourse had a suppleness and subtlety as yet unprecedented in English fiction. In what follows, I suggest that Austen’s instinct for stylistic contraction promoted it.