# Between Classicism, Realism and Romanticism: Austen's ambivalent attention to details

*Aurélie Tremblet, Univ. Grenoble Alpes, ILCEA4/CEMRA*

Keywords: Austen, details, representation, Enlightenment, individualism, Romanticism

Mots-clés : Austen, détails, représentation, Lumières, individualisme, Romantisme

In a letter to her favourite nephew[1], Jane Austen once compared his unpublished "strong, manly, vigorous sketches, full of variety and glow," to what she described as "the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory, on which I paint with so fine a Brush as produces little effect after much labour" (*Letters*, 337). This is undoubtedly Austen's most well-known metaphor – a rare figure of speech in her fiction but an oft-quoted statement, said to encapsulate the whole essence of her work. Needless to say nowadays, the remark she made to her literary-inexperienced relative was ironic and self-deprecating. Austen was actually keeping her distance from the allegedly feminine dimension of details, from their secondary status, their merely ornamental function, not to say insignificance and futility (all of which are playfully exposed in the use of the narrowing parenthesis and of the adjective "little," actually put under the magnifying glass of both repetition and antithesis). The quote nonetheless remains of value as, in the collective imagination, the novelist definitely is a miniaturist, the embodiment of neatness, punctiliousness and precision. We all have in mind the concession Charlotte Brontë made in her otherwise more than mitigated praise of Jane Austen: "She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well. *There is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy in the painting*"[2] (our emphasis). Nowhere was Austen's meticulousness more

[1]James Edward Austen-Leigh, who later wrote the biography entitled *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (Austen-Leigh Joan, "Jane Austen's Favorite Nephew." *Persuasion* 18, 1996, 144).
[2]Charlotte Brontë made this comment in 1850, after reading Jane Austen's *Emma* (*Selected Letters*, 161).

evident than in the frequent and thorough revisions she made of all her novels – the extent of which has generally failed to garner the attention it deserves[3]. Not only did she scrutinize her texts for the slightest misprints or lexical inaccuracies *before* they were published (and at times on several occasions) but, more surprisingly, she kept on revising them *after* as well, pointing out the few remaining small mistakes she, with her keen eye for detail, had been the only one to spot and which she was lucky enough to be able to correct in reissues during her lifetime. Throughout her career therefore Austen demonstrated an abiding interest in detail and notably, as her 1816 letter further intimates, in its correlative issues of *mimesis* ("paint with so fine a brush") and reception ("effect"), while preserving some distance from details and even showing a form of reluctance towards them, as this study will make abundantly clear.

Far from pretending to exhaust Austen's manifold uses of particulars in her novels, however, and therefore notably leaving aside the dramatic function of details mostly called upon in *Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma* (in which characters and readers, embarked on a hermeneutic quest, are meant to pay attention to the slightest clues and the minutest details in order to solve mysteries and recover the truth), this paper intends to focus upon the social, moral, but also narrative and stylistic issues at stake in the notion of details as Austen considered it in all of her novels. This essay can be said to pursue a twofold aim: it examines the particularity of Austen's attention to details, seeking to account for the pervading sense of threat she felt emanated from an indulgence in them, so as to set her reflection into its specific artistic, philosophical but also socio-economic contexts. Writing at the turn of the 19th century, the novelist came under very diverse influences and notably showed a conflicting appeal to classical[4] (i.e., late Augustan) and Romantic ideas. By exploring what will appear to be Austen's ambivalent aesthetics of details – an aesthetics imbued both with the spirit of the Enlightenment (valuing restraint, balance and composure) and with a Romantic aspiration towards vaster

[3]Claudia Johnson, however, who commented on the revisions *Sense and Sensibility* underwent, is among those who have sought to remedy the situation (xvi-xvii).

[4]By "classical" (and "Classicism" in the title) we mean relying on principles of order, measure and harmony – the qualifier is therefore to be understood as meaning "late-Augustan;" a term which more often than not applies to poets of the second half of the 18th century but which perfectly befits Austen as well, her writings being underpinned by those very principles. One may be usefully reminded that Austen had read and admired Alexander Pope. In addition to alluding to *The Rape of the Lock* and explicitly mentioning the Augustan poet in *Sense and Sensibility*, she once famously remarked: "There has been one infallible Pope in the World" (*Letters*, 256). She was also attracted by the order and regularity of Pope's heroic couplets as she attempted to write rhyming, closed, iambic meters herself (*Letters*, 183).

prospects – this study should simultaneously give us the opportunity to throw light upon the defining features and overall mechanisms of details[5], emphasizing their qualities and functions but also their ambiguities.

**Refraining from details (part 1) – an artistic principle**

One of the most striking narrative features of Austen's texts is the scarcity of their descriptive details[6]. Whatever import she placed on accuracy, on choosing the exact right word, indulging in details was actually a matter of real concern for the novelist. All of her writings tend to reveal that she refrained from resorting to lengthy physical descriptions – whether they be of her old mansion houses or of her characters, whose physical appearance and dress she showed no particular wish to develop. The estates of Longbourn and Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*, the descriptions of which are reduced to the bare minimum, are typical and well-known instances of such practice, but Chapter 6 of *Sense and Sensibility* offers another striking and telling illustration of it. It opens with the heroines' arrival to their new dwelling place, Barton Cottage. The description of the house is one of the most detailed of Austen's entire work as the number of rooms and even the approximate size of the sitting room are indicated. Surprisingly, however, the overall final impression remains that of a relative lack of details, for the new prospects that come with the house indeed prove somewhat vague. The depiction of the place, and more precisely of Barton Valley, ends in this conspicuously indeterminate way: "under *another name* and in *another course*, it branched out again" (34, emphasis added), strikingly stressing that Austen's removal of details was intentional.

Interestingly enough, Austen's reluctance to go into too much detail was general and her later novels were no exception. When she revised *The Watsons* for example, she "pruned her account of the Edwards' house of its minute particulars […thereby further proving she was] noticeably sparing in her use of this sort of detail" (Lascelles, 89). As Susan Fraiman has demonstrated as well (relying on Ian Watt's example of Richardson's thorough descriptions in *Pamela*[7]), such dearth of descriptive details, which might pass unnoticed by modern eyes, must have been quite unsettling

[5]We borrow the phrase from a French study on the notion of details entitled *La Mécanique du détail*. See Maud Hagelstein and Livio Belloï, *La Mécanique du détail*, 2013.
[6]George Henry Lewes highlighted this relative absence as early as 1859, paving the way for the numerous further comments on that matter.
[7]Austen was a great admirer of Richardson's work.

however for Austen's early 19th century readers. The practice was indeed uncommon among her contemporaries and immediate predecessors, a fact which prompted the critic to conclude: "We may imagine their [the readers'] frustration at Austen's reticence about such matters" (70).

The author was actually wary of details, which she thought represented a pitfall novelists should endeavour to avoid. The piece of advice she gave to her niece Fanny Knight, who was writing a novel herself at the time, is a case in point: "Your descriptions are often more minute than will be liked [...] You give too many particulars of right hand & left" (Lascelles, 89). Austen's withholding of details was indeed a genuine narrative choice, the cornerstone of a well-thought-out writing method, and an artistic principle that actually granted reception pride of place ("more [...] than will be *liked*"). For she was utterly convinced that details could alienate readers and jeopardize an entire work of art. In other words, she seemed perfectly aware of the fragmentary dimension and dividing potential of particulars. After all, the noun "detail" is derived from French *de* and *tailler*, "to cut" (based on Latin *talea*, "the cut"). It is indeed one of the first characteristics of details to have an impact on temporality[8]. Thorough descriptions put the plot on hold, interrupt *diegesis*, stretch narrative time. And such rhythmic slowing was at the risk of breeding tedium in the reader. More importantly, as the quote makes perfectly clear, the problem first and foremost lay in the profusion and potentially parasitical nature of details. Indulging in details meant running the risk of overwhelming readers, swamping them in a mass of irrelevant information, and making them lose the thread. Worse still, it could forestall clarity and hinder the general meaning of the work of art. Accumulating minor facts or foregrounding insignificant data could indeed bury in major events, collapsing the distinction between accessory and essential elements, background and foreground and therefore affecting the meaning and structure of the whole novel. To put it differently, small and inconsequential though they seemed, details actually threatened to disrupt the overall structure and harmony of the composition – a concern later shared by Baudelaire, who stressed the threat of chaos that details could pose for representation perhaps better than anyone else, in a famous statement loaded with ideological implications:

[8]"Details slow things down […] meticulous men work slowly," Denis Boisseau for example writes in "De l'inexistence du détail" (20-21, our translation).

> [The artist is] at the mercy of a riot of details all clamouring for justice with the fury of a mob in love with absolute equality. All justice is trampled underfoot; all harmony sacrificed and destroyed; many a trifle assumes vast proportions; many a triviality usurps the attention. The more our artist turns an impartial eye on detail, the greater is the state of anarchy. Whether he be long-sighted or short-sighted, all hierarchy and all subordination vanishes (16).

At this point of our analysis it should have become clear that Austen's dismissal of details, or at least careful approach to them, was driven by a broader concern – an overriding concern for order, measure and harmony in the direct conservative (as has just been suggested) but also classical tradition. Her artistic principle of checking excessive details was indeed in direct keeping with the Academic doctrine of general and particular forms. Her conception of details showed she adhered to classical codes of representation for, to her, details were first and foremost subservient to the overall structure, not so much to be considered *per se.* What prevailed and should always be given priority to was indeed the perspective of the whole.

*In Reynolds's footsteps*[9]

Yet if the artists' duty was to suppress details, notably for the sake of clarity and harmony, how far could they proceed in this strategy if they were to depict the world properly? Or, in Denis Boisseau's apt words, "jusqu'où mener l'épure ?" ("how far should the refining go?", our translation)[10].

A short detour by the Grand Style portrait painter and art theorist Joshua Reynolds, founder and President of the Royal Academy of Arts from 1768 until 1792, should enable us to better grasp the "delicate sense of proportion" (Schor, 16) Austen showed in her handling of details. The series of lectures Sir Joshua Reynolds delivered at the Royal Academy for over two decades (later published as *Discourses on Art*) put forward classical precepts, one of which is particularly revealing for our purposes: "the whole beauty and grandeur of the art consists, in my opinion, in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind."[11] Was this akin to a total rejection of details, to an "absolute censure," as William Hazlitt supposedly suggested in his statement that "the great style consists in

[9]We are greatly indebted to Naomis Schor's *Reading in detail* (especially pages 4-5 and 16-7) for this part, which notably takes up her reflection on Reynolds and tries to develop her argument that Austen showed a "delicate sense of proportion" (16).

[10]"[J]usqu'où mener l'épure ? […] À quel moment, sur quel seuil l'œuvre, dépouillée de ses fioritures, émincées jusqu'à l'épure tremblante, se dilue-t-elle dans l'insignifiance ?" (Boisseau, 27). (how far should the refining go? […] At which point, on which threshold does the work of art, cleared of its superfluous ornaments, cut to a trembling nothingness, dilute itself into insignificance? [our translation]).

[11]This passage is an extract from the lecture he delivered on 14 December 1770 (Reynolds, 76).

avoiding the details and peculiarities of particular objects" (Schor, 4-5)? M. H. Abrams and Naomi Schor after him have stressed that "a dual attitude toward the circumstantial […] pervade[d] the *Discourses*" (Schor, 5). Reynolds's aesthetics was in fact "bipolar, oscillating between a strict anti-detailism consonant with classical Academic discourse, and a lucid recognition of the uses of particularity in keeping with the contemporary rise of Realism," though in the end, "the general pole of Reynolds's aesthetics predominate[d] over […] the particular" (Schor, 5).

Austen's classical handling of details in her yet mimetic representations of the gentry showed she tried to strike a similar balance. Drawing a parallel between the two artists is all the more legitimate as the novelist implicitly referred to the painter in one of her writings. That the reference in question should occur in a passage hinging on the notion of representation has rightly caught critical attention. Opening the door to Pemberley, Mrs. Reynolds, a servant to the Darcy family for years, unknowingly provides the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* with a new perspective onto the male protagonist's world. Not only does she cast Fitzwilliam Darcy in a new and fuller light, revealing how far from reality previous representations of his character had been, but she further introduces Elisabeth to a "striking[ly] resemblan[t]" (277) portrait of him. Unmistakably, the idea conveyed was that of a Reynolds at the service of truthful representation. For all her prudent approach to details, Austen, too, was obviously perfectly capable of offering credible representations of characters. D. W. Harding has demonstrated that hers was a studied combination of full natural portraits and caricatures (80-81). Her caricatures could be more or less developed. The portraits she gives of her apothecaries or even doctors for instance are always rapidly sketched. Mr. Perry in *Emma*, Mr. Harris in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mr. Jones in *Pride and Prejudice* are all flat characters, most often objects of mockery serving as illustrations of greed or uselessness. Other portraits, however, required much defter strokes to be drawn. While still involving "selective emphasis" as they were simplified and relied on accentuated features, they "remain[ed] consistent with the author's intention of offering a credible portrait" (Harding, 81). The conceited Mr. Elliot in *Emma*, the stingy Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park*, the hypochondriac Parkers in *Sanditon* or Mary Musgrove in *Persuasion*, or the pompous Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* are but a few examples of great Austenian caricatures – types, assuredly, but which could remind one of actual acquaintances, striking a particular chord in all of us, in short remaining universally human. Austen is indeed well-known for what is

now commonly called her psychological realism. She is a past master at finely delineating personality traits, not so much by *telling* what they are through descriptions, as we have seen, but by *showing* them[12], every character unveiling a facet of their personality through their verbal exchanges with others. The author indeed manages to reveal her characters' identity through dialogues[13]. Idiolects and sociolects thus subtly disclose to the reader the age, the personality, the vulgarity or intelligence, not to mention the social status of her characters. Here is mostly when her subtle handling of details, her delicate sense of proportion comes into play. Her characterisation of Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* is revealing in that matter. To show how much of a fool he is, and yet how quite complex his personality is ("a mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility", 78), Austen resorts to the sporadic use of a specific detail. In Chapter 14, Mr. Collins incidentally describes his house as a "humble parsonage" (74). And indeed it is so compared to the elegant and costly house he admires so much – Lady Catherine de Bourgh's Rosings – so his inconsequential remark goes relatively unnoticed at first. But the repeated references to his "humble abode," carefully scattered in the novel, gradually reveal and then serve as playful reminders of Collins's true personality. It is the judicious and varied combination of repetitions first at close intervals (three occurrences in Chapter 14) and then at more spaced out intervals (one in Chapter 16, one in Chapter 28, and then three within the first lines of Chapter 38, as if to seal Collins's fate), but also at times in direct speech, at times in free indirect speech, which proves convincing: without being obtrusive and annoying, but on the contrary creating intimacy with the reader and enabling him or her to perceive that Collins's humility is exaggerated and self-deluding, that the man actually has quite an elevated sense of himself, Austen very successfully navigates (her brothers were in the Navy after all) through the complex use of details in her representation process.

*Of the inexistence of details*

One last point remains to be noted on that subject. Though initially a detail, the "humble abode" has rapidly taken on the appearance of a verbal tic. In other words,

[12]Among others, see Ernest Baker: "[I]n her own way, she adopted and carried further Fielding's dramatic method of presenting action through a succession of short scenes in dialogue. Though keeping the right to comment, she relied more on dialogue" (10).

[13]As Marilyn Butler argued, "the brilliant dialogue in *Pride and Prejudice* […] gives […] an objective insight into character" (223-224); a remark Mary Lascelles rightly applied to all of Austen's novels: "[Austen]'s unemphatic treatment of idiosyncrasy […] tends to suggest social variants in speech" (95).

the incidental remark has turned into a general, defining feature – which raises the following question: once noticed, can a detail, which can *ipso facto* no longer go unnoticed, still be considered a detail (Vaillant, 17)? The notion is not devoid of ambiguities. If a particular escapes notice, then it is its very essence and existence which are questioned. When a detail is spotted, however, it suddenly ceases to be a mere detail; its importance is acknowledged and the initial general meaning of the passage finds itself affected, if not totally reversed. Such a paradox has, understandably, prompted some critics to speak about the "inexistence" of details (Boisseau, 15 and 23-4 more particularly; Charles, 423). Michel Charles went so far as to conclude: "As a matter of fact, I don't know *if there are* details in texts, and I believe one would do better to do without the notion, which is properly unworkable" (our translation[14]). To put it in a more positive light, along with Liliane Louvel, suffice it to say maybe that such potentialities testify to a central characteristic of the notion of details: to how dynamic their nature inherently is (5). Not only because to be a detail is not a state, as Denis Boisseau has also argued, but an act, involving movement, from concealment to sudden appearance and possibly total reversal, but because, we would further like to stress, it requires the *active participation* of a third party. Details need to be detected by readers, or spectators, in order to exist, as art theorist Daniel Arasse first highlighted in his major study on pictorial details: "details are emblems of the representation process the painter has adopted as well as *emblems of the perception process spectators have engaged in*" (12, our translation and emphasis). Concluding on the dynamic nature of details thus implies acknowledging how central a role readers play in the notion.

**Refraining from details (part 2) – a moral principle**

Acknowledging the fundamental link uniting readers and details is all the more important as Austen was not careful in her approach to details for aesthetic purposes only. Her artistic dismissal was coupled with a rejection of proliferating details on social and moral grounds, because of the effect they had on others, on interpersonal relationships.

[14]"De fait, je ne sais pas *s'il y a* des détails dans un texte, et je crois qu'il vaut mieux se passer de la notion, qui est proprement impraticable" (423).

*The particular, the individual, the intimate: the egotist threat*

Austen's novels are teeming with "everlasting talker[s]" (*Sense and Sensibility*, 64), characters portrayed as taking great pleasure in going into details about a given situation. Strikingly, the large majority of them are cast in a negative light. The following representative passages seek to clarify the reasons for such a special treatment of details, which constantly associates them, in accordance with the etymological origin of the word, with the notion of the cut.

*Emma* offers a first glimpse at the situation:

> Mr. Elton *was still talking, still engaged in some interesting detail*; and Emma experienced some disappointment when she found that he was only giving his fair companion an account of the yesterday's party at his friend Cole's, and that she was come in herself for *the Stilton cheese, the north Wiltshire, the butter, the celery, the beet-root, and all the dessert*. (95, emphasis added)

Centred around a marked semantic and syntactic contrast (the anticlimactic antithesis "interesting"/ "disappointment", reinforced by the opposition between the adverb of restriction "only" and the accumulation), the sentence highlights that the length of a discourse and the enthusiasm of the speaker are obviously no signs of the general significance and relevance of a conversation. Details on the contrary reveal the uniqueness and subjectivity of any experience: Mr. Elton can certainly talk about cheese and vegetables with gusto, but the triteness of his comments leaves the eponymous heroine with a bitter taste – being members of the same leisured class definitely does not mean sharing similar centres of interest in Austen.

Neither does being a couple. The novelist's thematic focus on details actually enables her to stress how difficult genuine communication is for everyone:

> Maria, with only Mr. Rushworth to attend to her, and *doomed to the repeated details* of his day's sport, good or bad, his boast of his dogs, his jealousy of his neighbours, his doubts of their qualifications, and his zeal after poachers, subjects which will not find their way to female feelings without some talent on one side or some attachment on the other, had missed Mr. Crawford grievously. (*Mansfield Park*, 135, emphasis added).

The accumulation of details grammatically disjoins the subject ("Maria," at the beginning of the quote) and its verb ("had missed," at the very end), thus becoming a true obstacle, bringing out the communication gap separating even an engaged couple. If details are once more associated with the excess of accumulation, this time the anaphoric repetition of the possessive pronoun ("his… his… his") clarifies the nature of the excess. In all of Austen's novels, details are symptomatic of an

exaggerated attention to the self (the issue was therefore not a gendered one; Austen interrogated human nature as a whole). The following extract from *Sense and Sensibility* should enable us to develop this point:

> [W]herever it was, she [Mrs Jennings] always came in excellent spirits, full of delight and importance, attributing Charlotte's well doing to her own care, and ready to give *so exact, so minute a detail* of her situation, as only Miss Steele had curiosity enough to desire. (*SS*, 281, emphasis added)

We may first note that the term "detail," besides its common acceptation today as "a single piece of information," "an individual fact or item" or "a part of something that does not seem important," could also mean "narration" in Austen's time (Johnson's dictionary reads: "a minute and particular account"). Yet, what matters even more to us here is that Mrs Jennings' "detail" should be described as "so exact, so minute" and that what is therefore described as her indulgence in details should be presented not so much as the result of her interest in others (Charlotte) but, much rather, as the result of her self-centeredness ("full of delight and *importance*, attributing Charlotte's well doing to *her own* care"). If the central idea is again that particulars involve excess and subsequent social disunity (they have alienated every listener but for the cold-hearted, faking Miss Steele, ironically), the point is stressed phonically this time (in "ready to give *so exact, so minute* a detail" the repetition aptly combines with the final vocalic stretch of the juxtaposed diphthong /aɪ/ and long vowel /u:/ to suggest how heavily personal details can weigh on listeners). To Austen the problem is indeed that details mean *an emphasis on the particular, the individual, the intimate even*, for the subject matter Mrs Jennings is talking so openly about is nothing less than her daughter's pregnancy – a topic considered private in the 19$^{th}$ century and which decency usually required to steer clear of. The issue at stake, in short, is that of going *into details*, of *entering into details*, with all the profusion and excess the plural implies, and all the opening up, the breach onto the inner world, onto the personal, onto the individual, the preposition suggests. For, to the novelist, such stress on individuality acts as a break on social cohesion. *Persuasion*'s "many undesirable particulars" (250) are indeed a *topos* of Austen's aesthetics: details are problematic for they always operate to the detriment of social unity and harmony. That particulars are primarily seen as entailing social disconnection is evident in one last passage from *Mansfield Park*, which emphasizes that Mrs Price's indulgence in details has made her regretfully oblivious to her own sister's family: "[her mind was

fixed] on her own domestic grievances [… which] engrossed her completely. The Bertrams were all forgotten in detailing the faults of Rebecca" (445).

*Trinkets, knick-knacks: the materialistic culture of detail*

To fully understand the origins and profound social and moral implications of Austen's peculiar attention to details, her reflection must be set in its broader socio-economic context. At the end of the 18th century, Austen was depicting the emergence of a genuine culture of detail and rise in individualism.

One passage from Chapter 33 of *Sense and Sensibility* will retain our attention as it encapsulates the specific reasons for Austen's condemnation of details. The scene is relatively well-known, and takes place at Gray's, a shop located in the very heart of London[15].

> On ascending the stairs, the Miss Dashwoods found so many people before them in the room, that there was not a person at liberty to tend to their orders; and they were obliged to wait. All that could be done was, to sit down at that end of the counter which seemed to promise the quickest succession; one gentleman only was standing there, and it is probable that Elinor was not without hope of exciting his politeness to a quicker dispatch. But the correctness of his eye, and the delicacy of his taste, proved to be beyond his politeness. He was giving orders for a toothpick-case for himself, and till its size, shape, and ornaments were determined, all of which, after examining and debating for a quarter of an hour over every toothpick-case in the shop, were finally arranged by his own inventive fancy, he had no leisure to bestow any other attention on the two ladies [...]
> At last the affair was decided. The ivory, the gold, and the pearls, all received their appointment, and the gentleman having named the last day on which his existence could be continued without the possession of the toothpick-case [...] walked off with a happy air of real conceit and affected indifference. (*SS*, 250-251)

A detailed analysis is here essential. Obviously, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood (the heroines of *Sense and Sensibility*) find themselves confronted with material and moral obstacles in this urban environment. To the discomfort of a small overcrowded place is added the superficiality of the gentleman's preoccupation – he is indeed bent on buying a specific trinket for himself: a toothpick-case. The criticism levelled at him (a typical instance of the Austenian writing style) is delightfully tongue-in-cheek, hinging on a burlesque association: "having named the last day on which his existence could be continued without the possession of the toothpick-case." As critics have underlined (Copeland speaks of "the consumer madness of *Sense and*

[15]This part, as well as the final ones on Austen's dash, circle imagery and Romanticism, were initially developed in French in Aurélie Tremblet's doctorate thesis, *Jane Austen et le besoin de remailler le monde : une représentation romanesque problématique*, Littératures, Université Grenoble Alpes, 2017. Retrieved from These.fr database (Publication No. NNT : 2017GREAL020, tel-01876326)

*Sensibility*" for instance, 96), that the man's survival should depend on such a tiny and accessory object as a toothpick-case cannot but make the reader smile. Yet the smile may eventually wear down into a grimace for this appallingly trite consumption act is not without encompassing more serious failings. To be more precise, three contradictions stand out from the passage. The first has to do with the man's peculiar reliance on the trinket. Austen indeed seems to point out the existence of an ambivalence when first depicting Robert Ferrars as making up his object from start to finish ("[the] size, shape, and ornaments [...] of which [...] were finally arranged by his own inventive fancy"), before subsequently stressing the power this tiny insignificant object actually holds on the person, without the existence of which the very human existence seems threatened. We believe the novelist's focus on material details is thus instrumental in underlining the incongruity of the consumption act, by which, in the end, it is the object which seemingly makes the subject exist.

A second ambivalence is associated to the new craze for knick-knacks. Obviously, the association of several precious and rare substances ("The ivory, the gold, and the pearls") to a tiny ordinary tool, usually meant to serve a mere utilitarian function, seems nonsensical, enticing the reader to regard the purchase less as a practical and necessary act than as a ludicrous extravagance, as a *show* of affluence, even. As though, in the end, the gentleman's primary goal was to display his wealth. The final opposition between "real" and "affected" is indeed not to be disregarded, for it suggests Robert Ferrars is showing off and playing a role. Austen's delineation is consequently not without reminding us of the study the American sociologist and economist Thornstein Veblen later provided in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1898), when he argued that one of the main hidden undercurrents of consumer society was the need for ostentation. To the novelist, indeed, details simultaneously raise the issue of openness and transparency to others. Far from being synonymous with truthfulness and proximity, the act of going into details remains, as the vocalic clash of the hiatus further intimates ("happy air," making us feel the gentleman's condescending detachment), associated with obstacles and distance.

The materialistic culture of details is presented, on more than one account by Austen, as *structuring social relationships in a new and negative way*, for a third and last paradox stands out from the passage. As though they were communicating vessels, the extreme attention the gentleman pays to such a derisory object as the toothpick-case goes hand in hand with a relative indifference towards the other

individuals present in the room, and notably towards the two women (when gentlemanly politeness would have required that they be served first). The ironic anti-climax formed by the positive gradation ("the correctness of his eye and the delicacy of his taste," initially boding well of Robert's attention to details) and the negative expression which rapidly follows it ("proved to be beyond his politeness") stresses the inadequacy of the gentleman's behaviour. His correctness and delicacy are certainly not directed at the right object. To us, the novelist thus seems to be deftly depicting what another major thinker of consumer society – Karl Marx – later described as the consequences of "commodity fetishism," that is to say, the failings of a consumer behaviour which values things to the detriment of interpersonal relationships[16]. Through her attention to material details, Austen indeed meant to address the issue of the *reification* of social relationships. She delineated the contours of a new culture of details, of a new consumer society – which historians, sociologists and economists now all agree on saying emerged at the end of the 18th century in England[17] – in order to bring out the serious social, moral and existential issues she felt ensued from it.

*Rejecting an atomist vision of society: Austen and Shaftesbury's ethics of sympathy*

Nowhere in her nine novels does Austen play down the gap separating individuals and the moral necessity and difficulty of trying to overcome it.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Palmer, who is shocked by Willoughby's disrespectful rejection of Marianne for another richer lady and initially strives to spare her sister Elinor the pain of hearing more about it ("she hated him so much that she was resolved never to mention his name again"), finds it hard to do so:

> The rest of Mrs. Palmer's sympathy was shewn in procuring all the particulars in her power of the approaching marriage, and communicating them to Elinor. She could soon tell at what coachmaker's the new carriage was building, by what

[16]"[T] he socially determined relation of people themselves […] takes on here for them the fantasmagoric form of a relation between things. […T]he products of the human brain seem to be autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own where they have relations among themselves as with humans" (83 and 86).

[17]"There was a consumer boom in England in the eighteenth century. In the third quarter of the century, that boom reached revolutionary proportions. Men, and in particular women, bought as never before. […] Just as the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century marks one of the great discontinuities in history, one of the great turning points in the history of human experience, so, in my view, does the matching revolution in consumption" (McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, 10). With this statement, McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb were the first to underline and put a name on such a tremendous behavioural change. If Austen, however, does not seek to draw a line between masculine and feminine approaches to objects in her novels, she, too, describes this phenomenon as a ground-breaking one. It is all the easier to understand that this new behaviour was particularly striking as we now know it was a first in worldwide history: "It will be one of the major burdens of this book to show that consumer behaviour was so rampant and the acceptance of commercial attitudes so pervasive that no one in the future should doubt that *the first of the world's consumer societies had unmistakably emerged by 1800*" (McKendrick, 14, emphasis added).

> painter Mr. Willoughby's portrait was drawn, and at what warehouse Miss Grey's clothes might be seen. (244)

Mrs. Palmer's indelicacy and improper use of sympathy is certainly underlined and condemned by the narrator but another element catches our attention: "She could soon tell," followed by the stream of detailed information. Mrs. Palmer's need to express herself, to get out of her chest the details she has just been given, to talk at length about what interests her the most at that precise moment, is too pressing, too irrepressible a need for her to control; she seems overwhelmed by an internal urge she can't rein in and which eventually finds release to the detriment of Elinor.

To Austen, in strict accordance with Lord Shaftesbury's philosophy, sympathy – a fundamental concept for both – was indeed a social and moral duty which required training and work, for true virtue consisted in the arduous task of subordinating one's own interest and pleasure to the interest and pleasure of others (Klein, 56). In other words, for us to better grasp the moral dimension of Austen's condemnation of details, both moralists showed strong opposition to Epicure's doctrine, which sought the plenitude of the individual soul and was based on an atomist vision of human nature (human beings representing millions of different atoms each following their own trajectory and moved by a single goal: the pursuit of their own happiness). On the contrary, Austen and Shaftesbury placed a high premium on interpersonal relationships, which, to them, constituted the cornerstone not only of human felicity but of morality and social harmony. Politeness, benevolence, indulgence towards others (and not indulging in personal details and yielding to one's desires) were principles of moral conduct one had to abide by. One particularly instructive episode is the passage from *Emma* which depicts the heroine (secretly enamoured of Mr. Knightley) listening to her uneducated protégée Harriet telling her all about her love and hope of engagement with the same man:

> –She listened with much inward suffering, but with great outward patience, to Harriet's detail.–Methodical, or well arranged, or very well delivered, it could not be expected to be; but it contained, when separated from all the feebleness and tautology of the narration, a substance to sink her spirit– (445)

Austen's heroines' stoic attitudes have prompted much critical comment (Fanny Price and Elinor Dashwood, in *Mansfield Park* and *Sense and Sensibility* respectively, appearing as paragons of stoicism) and Tony Tanner, in his cogent study *Jane Austen* (1986), has brilliantly described and developed the tension existing in Austen's novels between the desire to "scream" and the necessity to "screen" one's

emotions (90). Here, clearly, everything revolves around the dialectics of interiority/exteriority, surface and depth, obstacle and transparency at the heart of the acclaimed stoic attitude towards details. The parallelism of construction stressing a central antithesis ("She listened with much inward suffering, but with great outward patience") is fundamental in that matter, but so is the general imagery of a Harriet opening up and unveiling the inmost depths of her soul to a downcast Emma ("sink") shaken to the core. Yet isn't the most striking element, the *punctum* of the picture which pierces and pains us, this small typographical cut, this punctuation detail that is the dash? This typographical marker, which is present in all of Austen's manuscripts and was fortunately kept in her printed texts, is especially worthy of attention for, to us, the idiosyncratic use the novelist makes of it is a central characteristic of her writing style[18]. One can see how dashes precede and close almost all of Emma's movements of mind, thereby visually constituting a frame. This is precisely the function they hold: like frames, they contain, tighten and separate at the same time – if they knit sentences together, if they stitch up the threads of one's thoughts, it is, in the end, to control and order (contrary to Harriet's disorderly attitude, not "well-arranged" speech), as though to fence off the unmentionable, to tame with their smooth profile the underlying turmoil, to fill in with their straight structures the gap of the unspeakable. In other words, dashes constitute, for Austen, the miniature figures of an essential strategy, a component of her representation system, which, under the cover of ordering, structuring and linking, actually allows its smooth and tight surface to force back what should not, or cannot, be uttered.

**Lonely as a ~~cloud~~ crowd?**

Austen's overriding concern was indeed to tackle the issue of *knowing and bonding* in a culture of details, making it abundantly clear that their profusion rang the death-knell of genuine communication and connection.

[18]Austen had read *Tristram Shandy* and was an admirer of Sterne who relied heavily on this marker. Was she inspired by him? There is probably no telling she was. But the way she uses this sign seems totally different from Sterne's. In her texts, dashes are not akin to parentheses; they do not really function as asides, do not cut the texts open because thoughts are running in every direction. Their only function is not that underlined by Carol Houlihan Flynn either. She considered Austen's tendency to use dashes in her handwritten letters so as to stress their asyndetic style: "Dashes casually break up endless paragraphs to signal fresh 'matters' inappropriately joined" (101).

*"The art of knowing one's own nothingness beyond one's own circle"*

Her texts are indeed permeated with the idea that one's self-centred and myopic approach to details makes one oblivious to the bigger picture, thereby undermining any possibility of relating and bonding with others beyond the surface level, of knowing others but in an approximate way. One motif in particular seems to have appealed to the novelist to conjure up this abiding sense of cognitive barriers, of a *circumscribed* vision and understanding of the world: her circle imagery. A major and most often positive metaphor implying protection, comfort, stability and unity notably (Bonnecase, 53) (one may think of the reassuring close-knit relationships the "circle of friends" and "family circle" supposedly stood for to characters such as Thomas Bertram, back to Mansfield after a tumultuous journey abroad), the image of the circle also epitomized Austen's profound awareness of – if not deep-seated anxiety at – our being cut off from one another, irredeemably enclosed in separate psychological bubbles. The acknowledgement of such a separation of beings, such an impediment to social connection – "the art of knowing one's own nothingness beyond one's own circle" (*Persuasion*, 45) – is indeed a fundamental Austenian concern which deserves attention. Both visually and phonically, the expression is indeed admirable, resorting as it is to repetition, paronomasia and alliteration to combine such terms as "knowing," "own" and "beyond" while associating them throughout with the negation. "No" seems indeed inscribed in each word of the statement, as though hammering in an ever-lasting reality, unveiled by people's indulgence in personal details – that of our inability to genuinely know and meet others – each individual leading a very distinct mental life, showing different tastes and being moved by different interests and concerns, not to mention unavowable urges and dark drives precluding any sharing. In other words, details actually revealed the difficulty – if not sheer impossibility – of meaningful interpersonal relationships and true intimacy. If distinct experiences led to incomprehension, similar ones (such as pregnancies, marriages and children) led either to silent embarrassment or jealousy. Here was an impasse man seemed doomed to be in. Note, as a matter of fact, how heavily the segment relies on the letter /o/, in a near monovocalism brilliantly suggesting the centrality and omnipresence of the circle, but also the difficulty of escaping from it. As if the sentence was meant to crystallise the inescapability of an encircling solitude, the

overwhelming sense that isolation is universal, the tragic existential predicament of us all.

*Finding unity in the cut (part 1): an aesthetics of the pars pro toto*

The lesson Austen had learnt and maybe even tries to teach us ("the art of knowing"), then, is that human beings actually have one thing in common. What unites us, what binds us together is this state of separateness, this seemingly irreducible distance, in other words this cut between us. What is there left for us to do, then? Which is the proper line of conduct to follow? For Austen, the solution paradoxically lies, once more, in the notion of the cut. The most sensible attitude to adopt when addressing others is, quite simply apparently, to refrain from personal details, to select and cut:

> Mrs Jennings had *already repeated her own history to Elinor three or four times*; and had Elinor's memory been equal to her means of improvement, she might have known very early in their acquaintance *all the particulars* of Mr. Jennings's last illness, and what he said to his wife a few minutes before he died. *Lady Middleton was more agreeable than her mother only in being more silent*. Elinor needed little observation to perceive that *her reserve was a mere calmness of manner with which sense had nothing to do*. (*SS*, 65, emphasis added)

The praise of restraint, measure and composure in one's use of details (though it can also mean verging on silence, potentially problematically, as Austen's heroes Mr. Darcy, Colonel Brandon and Sir George Knightley often are) is obviously in direct keeping with the philosophical tradition of the Enlightenment. We have underlined the moral importance Austen grants to the stoic reception of personal details, yet the import she places on the *social* necessity of cutting *for speakers* too is worth highlighting, for it is original and this time in accordance with Adam Smith's school of thought.

Austen regularly puts forward her narrators' rejection of details. That they are established as the guardians of language and communication effectiveness is stated in full light in the following passage from *Northanger Abbey*:

> This brief account of the family is intended to supersede the necessity of a long and minute detail from Mrs. Thorpe herself, of her past adventures and sufferings, which might otherwise be expected to occupy the three or four following chapters; in which the worthlessness of lords and attorneys might be set forth, and conversations, which had passed twenty years before, be minutely repeated. (*NA*, 27)

Obviously denouncing the inanity of Mrs. Thorpe's small talk, this narrative comment emphasizes the distance contrastively kept with details. The strategy is indeed that of

a three-fold cut as not only does the narrative voice *interrupt* Mrs Thorpe's speech (it had previously done so by resorting to the striking abbreviation "etc."), all the more putting an end to her trivia as these are the concluding lines of the chapter, but it *summarizes* her discourse ("brief account"), while further relying on *ironical distantiation* (that provided – in a way similar to the irony at play in the toothpick case situation – by the gap between the alleged "necessity" and the actual pointlessness of a speech relying either on sentimentalism and lyrical outbursts ["her past adventures and sufferings"], on unfounded generalities ["the worthlessness of lords and attorneys"], or on obsolete anecdotes ["conversations, which had passed twenty years before"]). Giving more credit, authority and interest to the narrator's own words while foregrounding her playfulness, the strategy thereby reinforces another interpersonal link, that between the jocular but seemingly reliable narrator and the reader. In other words, selection, suppressions, and sharp irony, not to forget dashes – all part and parcel of Austen's aesthetics of the cut – are simultaneously a means to relate, to reach out to readers and achieve, through fiction, some form of unity with others[19]. "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can" she writes in *Mansfield Park* (533). Hers is really an aesthetics of the *pars pro toto* if we may say so and as the synecdoche suggests ("pens" standing for "writers"), that is, a strategy in which the whole, harmony and unity, are to be reached via the cut, the part, and through fiction.

*Finding unity in the cut (part 2): Adam Smith and imaginative sympathy*

There, one may begin to sense the similarities that existed between Austen's vision and Adam Smith's, and more precisely the concept of imaginative sympathy he developed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, from now on *TMS*)[20]. Their premise was similar: our condition is one of separateness; knowing others' true intentions, fully understanding and meeting their feelings is a more than arduous task

[19]We feel that Austen's sense of solitude was acute because of the professional life she led, but that she came to see it as both potentially debilitating *and* empowering, destructive *and* restorative. We know that she wrote anonymously and did not even have a room of her own to compose at Chawton and did so near a little-used front door which she appreciated because it creaked open (giving her warning that intruders were drawing near and time to conceal the small sheets of paper she had grown accustomed to using), in other words, that, to her, composition required both isolation and secrecy, and yet that it was precisely through this secluded activity that she was to counteract loneliness and find unity with others, thanks to the bonds and intimacy she would create with her readers, familiar with her sharp irony and partaking in her wit and humour.

[20]A posteriori we realize a similar claim has been made by Rae Greiner, who sought to "wed Smithian theory" to Austen's *Persuasion* in an article judiciously entitled "The Art of Knowing Your Own Nothingness."

because our senses “never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person,” or, as Smith further develops:

> [W]hen we condole with our friends in their afflictions, how little do we feel, in comparison of what they feel? We sit down by them, we look at them, and while they relate to us the circumstances of their misfortune, we listen to them with gravity and attention. But while their narration is every moment interrupted by those natural bursts of passion which often seem almost to choak them in the midst of it; how far are the languid emotions of our hearts from keeping time to the transports of theirs? We may […] inwardly reproach ourselves with our own want of sensibility, and perhaps, on that account, work ourselves up into an artificial sympathy, which, however, when it is raised, is always the slightest and most transitory imaginable; and generally, as soon as we have left the room, vanishes, and is gone for ever. (*TMS*, part I, section 3, chapter 1)

There was only one way out of the deadlock: true sympathy could emerge, and distance could be bridged, by the workings of the imagination. Fictive modes of representation were indeed central in Smith’s philosophy (Greiner, 19):

> Sympathy involves the mental elaboration of cases, not feeling what the others feel […] it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what his sensations are. Neither can that faculty help us to this in any other way than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. (*TMS*, part I, section 1, chapter 1)

And imagination operated best when one refrained from personal details. We are, Smith explains,

> […] disgusted with that clamorous grief, which, without any delicacy, calls upon our compassion with sighs and tears and importunate lamentations. But we reverence that reserved, that silent and majestic sorrow, which discovers itself only in the swelling of the eyes, in the quivering of the lips and cheeks, and in the distant, but affecting, coldness of the whole behaviour.
> […] what noble propriety and grace do we feel in the conduct of those who, in their own case, exert that recollection and self-command which constitute the dignity of every passion, *and which bring it down to what others can enter into*! (*TMS,* part I, section 1, chapter 5)

In other words, because “the particular case” of a person who does not demonstrate his or her feelings implies both his/her “seeming to feel” (*TMS*, part I, section 3, chapter 1) *without indulging in the details of how he/she feels*, our imagination is granted more leeway, identification encouraged and facilitated, which alone can abate the feeling of separateness. To put it bluntly, the more detailed the experience, the more personal, the less identifiable it is; the edifice of one’s thoughts can only be accessed and appreciated when depersonalized, leaving enough room for the other (always perceiving reality through the prism of his/her own experience) to project

himself or herself – a vision Austen fully embraced, as the following letter to her sister Cassandra suggests:

> I have had a most affectionate letter from Buller; I was afraid he would oppress me by his felicity and his love for his wife, but this is not the case; he calls her simply Anna without any angelic embellishments, for which I respect and wish him happy. (*Letters*, 59)

If personal details jeopardize bonding, harmony and intimacy however can be reached, paradoxically, on a fictive mode and through the cut for Austen.

*The Romantic power of the imagination: finding unity in the detail of a letter*

For all her concern about individualism, for all her condemnation of the Epicureans' mode of being, one gets the lingering sense when reading Austen's novels that she was actually seduced by their aloofness with the social world, which took on two forms to her: the attraction that the *power of the imagination* but also, as we shall see, that *Nature* held onto her, as though the cut was best to be stitched not between men in society, but within them, in Nature. One particularly instructive episode, in chapter 9 of *Sense and Sensibility*, should enable us to demonstrate that Austen's position was actually consonant with Romanticism[21] and testified to an ambivalence towards details, which, far from simply condemning, Austen secretly (or maybe unconsciously, or reluctantly?) delighted in.

The scene begins with the description of Marianne and her sister Margaret's peregrinations in the hills surrounding their home. Their first immersions in nature are initially depicted as a drive to satisfy their imagination ("the girls had, in one of their earliest walks, discovered an ancient respectable looking mansion which, by reminding them a little of Norland, interested their imagination and made them wish to be better acquainted with it."[48]), thereby interweaving the theme of imagination and that of nature in a first Romantic association[22]. Then comes the outing in question, which will be the occasion to walk up the surrounding reliefs, in a freedom of movement associated to the unleashing of erotic energy (the scene will depict the love encounter between Marianne and Willoughby, both presented as "running"(50) –

[21]Austen has long been considered as separate from the Romantic tradition. If recent publications (Deresiewicz 2004 and Beth Lau 2009, notably) have convincingly attempted to challenge such assumption, we would further like to argue that Austen's Romanticism actually showed through as early as her first novels and that *Sense and Sensibility* should not be seen, as it too often is, as a mere caricature of Romanticism. For a more detailed analysis of Austen's Romanticism, see Aurélie Tremblet. *Jane Austen et le besoin de remailler le monde : une représentation romanesque problématique*, 2017, *op. cit.* pp. 128-32.

[22]"[T]he theme of imagination linked closely to the theme of nature […] characterizes the poetics of romanticism" (De Man, 8).

Marianne running towards a “garden gate” – and later as “tumbling about” (54), in a well-known sexual innuendo). Not to diminish the richness of the passage, it is characterised by two linguistic particularities:

> The whole country about them abounded in beautiful walks. The high downs which invited them from almost every window of the cottage to seek the exquisite enjoyment of air on their summits, were a happy alternative when the dirt of the valleys beneath shut up their superior beauties; and towards one of these hills did Marianne and Margaret one memorable morning direct their steps, attracted by the partial sunshine of a showery sky, and unable longer to bear the confinement which the settled rain of the two preceding days had occasioned. […] They gaily ascended the downs, rejoicing in their own penetration at every glimpse of blue sky; and when they caught in their faces the animating gales of a high south-westerly wind, they pitied the fears which had prevented their mother and Elinor from sharing such delightful sensations. (*SS*, 49)

The first appears in the segment introducing the young women’s walk: “and towards one of these hills did Marianne and Margaret one memorable morning direct their steps, attracted by the partial sunshine of a showery sky.” Somehow mirroring the in-betweenness of the weather (“the partial sunshine of a showery sky”), a Romantic figure of indeterminacy[23], the novelist’s attitude towards the Romantic appeal to nature and imagination is not as firm and definite as one might have supposed, bent on deriding Marianne’s Romantic outbursts as Elinor does. It seems to be wavering between two opposite directions, undecided, divided between a caricatural intent (afforded by the grandiloquent verbal inversion and alliteration in /m/ in “did Marianne and Margaret one memorable morning direct their steps”) and the linguistic and phonic pleasure she finds in this exploration of individual energy, as though Austen was secretly contaminated by the creative wind circulating around the summits whose breath of air inspires her with those whistling and hushing sounds (“the par**t**ial **s**unshine of a **sh**owery **s**ky”). Austen seems to be momentarily appreciating the freedom of her heroine at one with nature, almost on the verge of accepting the related energy of physical and sexual liberty, their being out in the open, in the nature of things. Something is indeed going on in this alliteration in /m/, in this repeated bilabial, a union of both lips which seems to be momentarily savouring a more general union, that between nature and Marianne’s and her sister’s minds, which

[23]James A. W. Heffernan defined visual indeterminacy and chromatic interaction as Romantic characteristics *par excellence*, in direct opposition to the Augustan attitude of Joshua Reynolds for example, according to whom “a firm and determined outline was indispensable”: “The atomistic coloring recommended by Reynolds simply did not match what the Romantic poets and painters saw in nature; for in nature, wrote Turner, ‘colors mingle, features join, and may converge’” (135-6).

seem grown with their physical elevation on those hills, in an eminently Romantic interaction with nature[24].

To this first characteristic, a second one must be added: when describing the surrounding nature, the text abounds in expressions strikingly associating notions usually considered antithetical. Marianne is for example drawn in by "high downs;" she and her sister are described in the following fashion: "They gaily *ascended* the *downs*," in a surprising combination taken up again in the following expression: "the *valleys beneath* shut up their *superior* beauties." The overall impression could be that of a nonsense or at least loss of logic, Austen expressing, in oxymoron-like expressions, her disagreement with Marianne's liberty, which she deems irrational and will eventually stop and punish with a sprained ankle. Yet we feel there is more to it than that, that, at this precise moment, she is actually enjoying playing with sounds, not so much definitely opposing terms as, much rather, taking pleasure in the phonic harmony she discovers in them, whether it be in the mirror structure (/s/ /n/ /d/ ; /d/ /n/ /s/) of "ascended the downs," or in the alliteration of "the *vall**ey**s b**e**n**ea**th* shut up their *super**i**or* b**e**aut**i**es."

One gets the lingering impression that, here, in this articulation of sounds, Austen is bodily experiencing a form of liberating freedom, that she is finding and yielding to a form of corporeal pleasure which somehow makes her partake in her characters' physical and sensual pleasure. In other words, the novelist manages to join others in a newly-gained liberty and union, which only the power of the imagination and letters could afford her. Here, to conclude, the detail of a letter outshines everything else, *voicing* takes precedence over telling and showing, and the powerfulness of details breaks through, in a total reversal eventually granting details the dual (literal and etymological) power to seduce.

[24]The Romantic correspondence between nature and the human mind was emphasized by Paul de Man, who quotes a passage from Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) (I, 23) which could account for the feeling of elevation arising from this alliteration in /m/: "It seems that by rising above the habitation of men one leaves all base and earthly sentiments behind, and in proportion as one approaches ethereal spaces the soul contracts something of the inalterable purity" (10-2).

**Works Cited**

ARASSE, Daniel. *Le Détail. Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*. Paris, Flammarion, 1992.

AUSTEN, Jane. *Emma*, ed. R. Cronin and D. McMillan, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

———. *Jane Austen's Letters*, 4th ed., edited by Deirdre Le Faye, Oxford University Press, 2011.

———. *Mansfield Park*, ed. John Wiltshire, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

———. *Northanger Abbey*, ed. B. Benedict and D. Le Faye, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

———. *Persuasion*, ed. Janet Todd and Antje Blank, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

———. *Pride and Prejudice* ed. Pat Rodgers, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

———. *Sanditon*, in *Later Manuscripts*, ed. J. Todd and L. Bree, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

———. *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Edward Copeland, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

BAKER, Ernest. *The History of the English Novel: Edgeworth, Austen and Scott*. New York, Barnes and Noble, 1967 (1929).

BAUDELAIRE, Charles. "The Painter of Modern Life." *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne, London, Phaidon, 1964 (1863).

BOISSEAU, Denis. "De l'Inexistence du détail." *Le Détail*, edited by Liliane Louvel, Poitiers, Publications de la licorne, 1999, p. 15-31.

BONNECASE, Denis. "Jane Austen ou la rhétorique séduite." *L'espace littéraire dans la littérature et la culture anglo-saxonnes*, edited by B. Brugière, Paris, Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1995.

BRONTË, Charlotte. *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, edited by Margaret Smith, Oxford University Press, 2007.

BUTLER, Marilyn. *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Clarendon Press, 1975.

CHARLES, Michel. "Le Sens du détail." *Poétique*, n°116, novembre 1998.

COPELAND, Edward. *Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790-1820*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

DE MAN, Paul. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. Columbia University Press, 1984.

DERESIEWICZ, William. *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets*, Columbia University Press, 2004.

FRAIMAN, Susan. *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel Development*. Columbia University Press, 1993.

GREINER, Rae. "The Art of Knowing Your Own Nothingness." *ELH*, vol. 77, 2010, p. 893-914.

———. *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction.* Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012.

HAGELSTEIN, Maud and Livio BELLOÏ. *La Mécanique du détail*. Lyon, ENS Éditions, 2013.

HARDING, D. W. *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen*, edited by Monica Lawlor, London, The Athlone Press, 1998.

HEFFERNAN, James. "The English Romantic Perception of Color." *Images of Romanticism: Verbal and Visual Affinities*, edited by K. Kroeber and W. Walling, Yale UP, 1978.

HOULIHAN FLYNN, Carol. "The Letters." *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by E. Copeland and J. McMaster, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

JOHNSON, Claudia. "Introduction." *Sense and Sensibility*, Norton Critical Edition, 2002.

KLEIN, Lawrence. *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early 18th-Century England*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

LASCELLES, Mary. *Jane Austen and Her Art*. London, The Athlone Press, 1995 (1939).

LAU, Beth (ed). *Fellow Romantics*. Burlington, Ashgate, 2009.

LEWES, George Henry. "The Novels of Jane Austen." *Blackwood's*, n° 86, 1859, p. 99-113.

LOUVEL, Liliane. "Introduction." *Le Détail*, edited by L. Louvel, Poitiers, Publications de la licorne, 1999.

MARX, Karl. *Capital*. Book I, Éditions sociales, Paris, 1983.

MCKENDRICK, Neil, et al. *The Birth of a Consumer Society: Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England*. London, Europa Publications Limited, 1982.

REYNOLDS, Joshua. *Seven Discourses Delivered in the Royal Academy by the President*. London, Cassel and Company Edition, 1778.

SCHOR, Naomi. *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*. Methuen, 1987.

SMITH, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759, www.marxists.org/reference/archive/ smith-adam/works/moral/index.htm. Accessed 1 May 2020.

TANNER, Tony. *Jane Austen*. Harvard University Press, 1986

VAILLANT, Alain. "La Poésie moderne : un art du détail." *La Mécanique du détail*, edited by M. Hagelstein, L. Belloï, Lyon, ENS Éditions, 2013.