Committing Freedom: The Cultivation of Judgment in Rousseau’s *Emile* and Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*

In the introduction to this volume, I have diagnosed a crisis of judgment that besets the eighteenth century, an unprecedented concealment of the space of autonomous judgment. On the one hand, empiricism, realism and sentimentalism seek to determine judgment too quickly or bypass it altogether; on the other hand, a nascent aestheticism finds its vocation in the suspension of judgment. Where, then, are we to find the resources to think an alternative practice of judgment? If judgment is the cognitive mode of relating to particularity, as so many have argued, then no “theory” is likely to be helpful. Kant knew that judgment cannot be taught, though it can be learned: “judgment is a peculiar talent which can be practiced only, and cannot be taught.”¹ Since judgment is a cognitive operation that by its nature resists theorization, the novel offers unique possibilities for staging a practice of judgment from which we might learn. I do not mean to suggest that all novels, because they confront us with a world in its particularity, are sites where we might hone our judgments. We are, by now, too well acquainted with the identificatory and absorptive dangers of sentimentalism, and the coercive and disciplinary realism and the didacticism of eighteenth-century novels.² To discover novels which take the problem of judgment seriously, we must look outside the mainstream of sentimentalism and realism in the novel to a counter-tradition that at times explicitly opposes and resists these tendencies. In novels

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by Fielding, Rousseau, Godwin and Austen, the problem of judgment comes to the fore as it rarely does elsewhere.³

In this essay, I will examine two texts that not only diagnose the crisis of judgment but seek to describe alternative practices which might restore a relative autonomy to judgment: Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Rousseau’s quasi-novelistic pedagogical manual, *Emile*. Both texts stage the process by which their protagonists learn how to judge, and both texts understand judgment as crucial to escaping the absorptive immediacy of sentimentalism. Perhaps most importantly, neither equates judgment simply with the adequation of thought to reality. For both, the autonomy of judgment, to the extent it is autonomous at all, is predicated on a certain fictive or imaginative capacity, and it is here that we have the most to learn from them.⁴ But it is here, too, that these texts differ most decisively. Rousseau, by attempting to eradicate the fictionality of judgment or deploying it surreptitiously, replicates the very crisis of judgment that plagues modernity. Ultimately, only Austen will offer us a way out of the impasse, with her phenomenology of judgment.

**Fictions of Judgment: The Education of Emile**

The task that Rousseau sets himself in *Emile* is, from the outset, a paradoxical one, and he never allows the paradox to fade from view: Emile must be taught how to be free. Conventional education is hierarchical and authoritarian, and whatever the content it imparts to the child, it cannot but reproduce authoritarian habits of thinking. The child does not develop its own capacity for judgment, but relies on the commands and judgments of others. By contrast, Rousseau proposes an educational strategy that will cultivate the child’s freedom. The content of

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³ On Fielding, Rousseau and Godwin, see essays in this collection by Fenno, Pfau and Rajan.  
⁴ See also the essay by Brodsky in this collection.
Emile’s education matters little; what matters is the process or the form. The project of *Emile* is to teach the child to think for itself.

But the paradox is immediately apparent: the child cannot think for itself. It is weak and its faculties are undeveloped. It exists necessarily in hierarchical relationships to its parents and tutors: this cannot be avoided, because we are not born autonomous. Thus, the child must be taught to be free, indeed, to use Rousseau’s formulation, it must be “forced to be free.” If we are not to abandon the project of a pedagogy entirely, then we must find a way to teach children so that they believe they are learning by themselves: “above all, let nothing of all this be done for him, but let him do it himself” (*Emile*, 143). Over and over again, Emile is tricked, manipulated, lured into scenes which have been staged for his benefit, but whose staging must remain inapparent to him. Were the force and the staging to become visible, we would be back in the situation of authoritarian pedagogy. Freedom can only be founded on a deception, a magician’s trick.

Let us for the moment set aside the paradox of Emile’s education, and the ruses Rousseau invents to circumvent it. They will come back to haunt us. For now, let us retain only the result of this process: Emile is being educated to be a free and autonomous individual. This means, more than anything else, that Emile must learn to judge for himself. The capacity for judgment is not one cognitive capacity among others that must be developed in Emile: it is the key element in

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his education because it guarantees autonomy.\(^7\) The Rousseauvian pedagogue tells us: “Eighteen years of assiduous care have had as their only object the preservation of a sound judgment and a healthy heart” (241; cf., 112, 192). But, the text is not simply a pedagogical manual about strategies for teaching Emile to judge well. It is a narrative of the advent of judgment, and this narrative is important in two ways. First, it suggests that we only become judicious in the course of a narrative. Good judgment is more than simply having the right kind of cognitive apparatus. It requires experience, and experience is something we only acquire in the course of a temporally and narratively extended life. As Aristotle has observed, it takes time to develop practical wisdom and good judgment, because judgment is predicated on having a storehouse of examples and experiences against which we can compare the current situation.\(^8\) Paradoxically, because good judgment requires experience, Emile’s education also shields him from having to make judgments when he is not yet ready to do so: “he continually enriches his memory while waiting for his judgment to be able to profit from it.” (112). In a strange way, then, the narrative through which Emile acquires the ability to judge is a narrative of the suspension of judgment.

The second reason I insist that *Emile* is not simply a theory or pedagogy of judgment, but a narrative of the acquisition of judgment is because it is here that we can connect *Emile* to modernity’s crisis of judgment. In what sense does Emile understand the crisis of judgment to be a specifically modern problem? Because *Emile* is a *Bildungsroman* in germ, we can read it as a narrative of the advent of modernity. It is not unusual for ontogeny to recapitulate phylogeny in narratives of *Bildung*, for the growth of the individual to serve as an allegory of historical

\(^7\) De Man has recognized the importance of the problem of judgment in *Emile*, but he focuses almost exclusively on the Profession of Faith. See Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 229. For him, “judgment” in *Emile* becomes something akin to the suspension of judgment in indeterminacy (239-43). See my Introduction to this collection.

development. Read in this way, Emile would tell a story in which the capacity for judgment, dormant or underdeveloped, finally comes into its own, ending hierarchical and deferential relationships between individuals, doing away with prejudices, superstitions and customs, establishing autonomy as the ground for a new social order. The narrative is utterly conventional: it is the narrative of Enlightenment itself in its canonically Kantian form, namely Enlightenment as an emergence into maturity characterized by independence from the judgment of others.9

But there is, of course, a problem here. Kant’s narrative of Enlightenment and modernity, of enlightenment as modernity, is not Rousseau’s. Far from it. Indeed, beginning with the First Discourse, Rousseau had made a career for himself by denouncing and reversing such narratives of progress, rewriting them as narratives of decline and increasing heteronomy. How, then, are we to make sense of Emile, and its putative “narrative of modernity”? Does it signal an inexplicable change of heart or does it constitute an unaccountable anomaly in the Rousseauvian corpus? There is no reason to think so. Like Rousseau’s previous texts, Emile has a critique of modernity, in the form of a critique of contemporary practices of pedagogy that effectively achieve the very heteronomy that Rousseau’s pedagogy hopes to combat. Emile, then, cannot be a narrative of modernity in any straightforward way, certainly not of a modernity which has arrived or is on the way. It is, rather, what I would call a counter-narrative of modernity, offering, against the backdrop of a failed modernity, a picture of what an alternative might look like, if only we could get on a different track. And if, as I have been arguing, a central platform for launching that alternative trajectory of modernity is to nurture the capacity for judgment, then

implicit in Emile’s critique of contemporary pedagogy is an account of modernity characterized by a failure or crisis of judgment.

Rousseau’s perceptive diagnosis identifies the crisis of judgment almost at its very inception. But how does he propose to respond to it? Emile promises to be a pedagogy of judgment, not just a diagnosis of a crisis. But, unlike Austen, Rousseau’s pedagogy replicates the very crisis it is meant to resolve. Let us attempt to track the process, if only in outline, through three scenes of judgment in the course of Emile’s education.

First scene: a fable of judgment. The first scene of judgment is a fable because it is imagined by Rousseau. It is a scene that Emile must not be exposed to, if he is to learn to judge well. It epitomizes everything that can go awry with the practice of judgment, and attempts to diagnose the root cause. The scene concerns a fable, precisely, a fable by La Fontaine called The Crow and the Fox, which is used to teach moral lessons to children and does nothing but corrupt their moral faculties. The fable tells of a fox who, seeing a crow with a cheese in its beak, entices the crow to sing by flattering it. As soon as the crow opens its beak to sing, it lets the cheese fall, and the fox makes off with it. Already, a scene of poor judgment. One would think that the child would have much to learn from the crow’s mistake. But Rousseau subjects the fable to a merciless critique, dissecting it to show the errors, misunderstandings and simple incomprehension it will engender in the child. At the heart of Rousseau’s objections, the accusation seems to be that the fable is too fabulous, fictional, figurative, that it is not sufficiently realistic. The success of the fox’s flattery depends on his eloquence. The line which clinches his performance is the following: “You would be the Phoenix of the landlords of these woods,” about which Rousseau comments: “What figurative speech! The flatterer ennobles his language and gives it more dignity to make it more seductive. Will a child understand this
finesse?” (114) If the fox’s “figurative speech” causes the crow to lose its judgment and succumb to flattery, it also leads the child astray and deranges its judgment. But the child is seduced in a different way. Compelled by the power of storytelling, it identifies too closely with the fox, and misses entirely the moral of the story:

Follow children learning their fables; and you will see that when they are in a position to apply them, they almost always do so in a way opposite to the author’s intention, and that instead of looking within themselves for the shortcomings that one wants to cure or prevent, they tend to like the vice with which one takes advantage of others’ shortcomings. In the preceding fable, children make fun of the crow, but they all take a fancy to the fox. (115)

The identificatory seductions of narrative produce a failure of judgment. But it is hard to know what exactly Rousseau’s accusation is. Is it, as one would expect from a text which wants to cultivate judgment, that the narrative, through its seductions, shuts down or short-circuits the child’s capacity for judgment, causing it to take the side of the fox without thinking? Or is it rather that the narrative suspends or paralyzes judgment, opening a space of freedom in which the child is abandoned to its judgment without a moral compass? Paradoxically, the problem would appear to be the latter, that fiction does not sufficiently constrain the possibilities of its interpretation, and allows the child too much latitude for the exercise of its own judgment. The children Rousseau imagines disregard the “author’s intention” when they wish to be foxes. At the moment when the fable introduces its moral judgment, Rousseau observes laconically: “General maxim. We can no longer follow” (115). When we try to make a judgment about the preceding narrative, we fail. Paralysis of judgment, then, and the abyss of freedom. The failure of the text to force a judgment for us means that we make a leap of our own, a judgment precisely, and impose our own interpretation and meaning on the text.

The paradox, even contradiction, of Rousseau’s position should be fully apparent. Judgment, I argued at the outset, was for Rousseau the bulwark of freedom and autonomy, but it
appears from his critique of the fable, that judgment (and along with it the freedom implicit in the capacity to judge) must be radically constrained. Rousseau wants to shut down the space of judgment itself, the free space in which judgment operates, as being itself too anarchic. And if, as I have just explained, Rousseau’s critique of the fable concerns in part its fictiveness and figurality, then his reservations about the practice of judgment have to do with judgment’s dependence on fiction and figure in a way which we will have to specify.

What is Rousseau’s response to the crisis of judgment (paralysis of judgment/proliferation of judgment) caused by the fable or fabularity itself? The solution can only be to insulate Emile from the literarity that permits too great a freedom of judgment: “Do not make speeches to the child which he cannot understand. No descriptions, no eloquence, no figures, no poetry” (169). Now, this literarity encompasses all books, which is why, immediately after dissecting the shortcomings of the fable, Emile’s tutor takes away his books (116). If the child’s judgment is not to take flight on the wings of fiction, it must be returned to the non-fictive world of experience and the senses:

In the first operations of the mind let the senses always be its guides. No book other than the world, no instruction other than the facts. The child who reads does not think, he only reads; he is not informing himself, he learns words. (168)

Judgment must be tethered to the senses, constrained to take no liberties. In short, there must be no judgment whatsoever, only deduction. What Rousseau will not concede here is the necessity for a certain fictioning leap in the activity of judgment. I assert this simply as a hypothesis for the moment; its proof will follow in a moment.

Second scene: judging by the senses. If the language of constraint, tethering and grounding of judgment seems inappropriate, we need only consider the veritable pedagogy of the senses Rousseau elaborates in Book 2. The effort there is not simply to ground judgment in the senses. Some of the senses are themselves too wayward, too prone to overreach and form
judgments which are not justified. The sense which can best bind the other senses to the body, which can put the other senses in con-tact with the sensory and material world, is touch:

Although touch is, of all our senses, the one we exercise the most continually, its judgments remain, as I have said, imperfect and more crude than those of any other sense, because we continually use along with it the sense of sight; and since the eye reaches the object sooner than the hand, the mind almost always judges without the latter. On the other hand, precisely because they are most limited, tactile judgments are surer. (138, my emphasis)

Only touch averts the danger of the leap by which the mind makes unreliable judgments independently of the senses. Sight, in particular, will not contain itself in the body: it takes flight by a metaphor, “reach[ing] the object sooner than the hand.” In order for the “judgments” of the other senses to be reliable, then, they must be calibrated against the judgments of touch:10

Since sight is, of all senses, the one from which the mind’s judgments can least be separated, much time is needed to learn how to see. Sight must have been compared with touch for a long time to accustom the former to give us a faithful report of shapes and distances. (143, my emphasis)

By means of a return to the senses, and touch above all, then, Rousseau hopes to eliminate the metaphoricity and figurality which plagued judgment by freeing it up too much. Judgment is only good judgment when it can be derived more or less directly from the senses, when it makes no unwarranted leaps, when it refrains from judging and is determined by the senses.11 But has the scourge of the fictive, the metaphorical, the figural been eliminated by the Rousseauvian ruse of a return to the senses, or has it merely been displaced? Is not the power of fictioning, in some form, the condition of the transcendence (finite transcendence in Nancy’s sense) which judgment achieves, its irreducibility to the merely sensory (270)? If to pass judgment is not merely to reassert what the senses already know, but to go beyond them, isn’t it necessary for judgment to

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have a certain freedom from the senses, a freedom established by the fictioning power itself? Let us examine the matter more closely.

By referring all judgment back to the sense of touch, Rousseau does not mean to trap us in the realm of the tactile. He is certainly not suggesting that Emile be blinded, and rely on his sense of touch alone, though rigorously speaking, one might expect that he would, just as he removed books from Emile’s education. If Rousseau is able to admit the other senses, it is because their judgments can be compared with touch. Indeed, judgment is nothing but the act of comparison itself. As the Savoyard Vicar tells us: “To perceive is to sense; to compare is to judge” (270, see De Man, 228). We only make a judgment when we perceive X as Y, when we claim that X is Y. It is only when we actively bring together and compare two things from disparate realms that we move beyond the mere tautology of sensation into judgment. Only by comparing do we escape the confining particularity of incomparable senses.

But this power of comparison, what is it if not the capacity for metaphor itself, the ability to see something as something else? And is this metaphorical leap, this judgment by way of metaphor or judgment as metaphor, not what Rousseau had hoped to eliminate by returning to the senses, and the sense of touch above all? Let us listen once more to Rousseau’s critique of La Fontaine’s fable. When the fox says, “if your song/ Corresponds to your plumage,” Rousseau comments as follows: “Corresponds! What does this word signify? Teach the child to compare qualities so different as voice and plumage. You will see how he will understand you!” (114, my emphasis). Here Rousseau denounces the fox’s flattery for teaching the child the very thing that, in his pedagogy of the senses, he himself will teach Emile, namely how “to compare qualities so different,” qualities such as “voice and plumage.” Comparison, it would seem, is at the very heart of the figurality Rousseau had hoped to eliminate. It is now clear that it was judgment
itself, the comparisons of judgment, that Rousseau had hoped to disable by banning fiction and
figurality in favor of the senses alone. But we have just seen that judgment, as the fictioning and
figural power of comparison, re-installs itself at the heart of the sensory itself, in the need to
compare sight to touch. Without the fiction (comparison) that renders judgment anarchic, that
provides it a space of freedom, there would be no judgment, merely the tautological assertions of
the senses. The fictioning capacity of comparison is the condition of every judgment, even those
that take their cue from the senses and maintain themselves in close proximity to the senses.

Third scene: Sophie. Ever resourceful, Rousseau is not one to be daunted by
contradiction. If Emile’s judgment cannot be protected from the fictionality which deranges it,
because that fictionality is the very condition of judgment itself, then fiction itself must be
recruited in the service of protecting or safeguarding judgment from its anarchic potential. Let us
now turn to a third scene of judgment in Emile. It is, in fact, nearly the only scene in which
Emile is called upon to exercise his own judgment in the text. This final scene of judgment is in
some sense the telos of the text, the judgment that Emile is being educated to make from the very
beginning, namely the decision about whom he will choose to marry. In this moment of crisis,
Emile must be protected from himself and his own freedom. But how? After all, the attempt to
achieve this by eradicating fiction had failed.

12 The most compelling readings of Rousseau are those that understand the effectivity of the contradictions rather
than attempting to erase them. See Louis Althusser, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx: Politics and History, trans. Ben
(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Starobinski, Jean-Jacques Rousseau; De Man, Allegories of
Reading; Wingrove, Rousseau’s Republican Romance, 23, 54. Todorov, by contrast, seeks to reconcile the
Rousseauvian contradictions by granting Emile a privileged place in Rousseau’s corpus, arguing that the other texts
are thought experiments to which Rousseau does not subscribe. See Tzvetan Todorov, Frail Happiness: An Essay on
But Rousseau’s diagnosis of the failure to achieve autonomy in Emile is more disturbing than the liberal Rousseau
Todorov retrieves.
In a stroke of perverse ingenuity, the answer Rousseau gives to this question is fiction itself. Only fiction, the very thing which deranges judgment and opens it to the possibility of error, can secure Emile’s judgment from being led astray. Sophie, let us remember, is a prophylactic fiction deployed by Emile’s tutor to buttress his judgment. She is meant to inoculate him against the seductions of the many licentious women the tutor believes he will encounter upon his introduction into society. Here, it seems, Emile must no longer ground his judgments in touch, because it is touch that will lead him most surely into their clutches. In this case, Emile must use a standard of judgment that is prior to experience, and the name of this a priori standard of judgment is Sophie:

It is unimportant whether the object I depict for him is imaginary; it suffices that it make him disgusted with those that could tempt him; it suffices that he everywhere find comparisons which make him prefer his chimera to the real objects that strike his eye. … by providing the imaginary object, I am the master of comparisons, and I easily prevent my young man from having illusions about real objects. (328-29, my emphasis)

Emile will compare the women he meets to the image he has of Sophie, and the process of comparison is, as we have seen, an act of judgment. We might suppose, then, that having had his judgment trained and nurtured by his tutor, we are witnessing Emile being allowed finally the freedom to exercise his judgment. But that would be hasty. Sophie is designed not to enable Emile’s judgment, but to substitute the tutor’s judgment for Emile’s: the tutor becomes “the master of comparisons.” Sophie is an absolute and unchanging standard (cf., Zerilli, 44). The notion that judgment must emerge in relation to experience, and calibrate itself by experience, is no longer operative here.

That Sophie is meant to constrain, bypass or disable Emile’s judgment is nowhere more apparent than in the fact that the fiction of Sophie is itself a fiction. That is to say that Sophie is

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13 The strategy is common in Emile. For example, instead of repressing Emile’s desires, the tutor puts even his most wayward desires to work in the service of his cultivation. The tutor prefers immanent strategies of education. This is also Rousseau’s strategy in the Social Contract. Cf., Todorov, Frail Happiness, 11, 66.
14 Derrida diagnoses the danger and necessity of supplanting/supplementation in Of Grammatology.
not, in fact a fiction, but a real person, the one whom the tutor has destined for Emile.\(^{15}\) Just as elsewhere in the text, this decision has been programmed in advance, while allowing Emile to imagine that he has judged for himself. At the moment Emile is called upon to reveal his freedom, to confirm that his education has in fact produced a free and autonomous subject, his freedom is revealed to be illusory. Rousseau describes this critical moment as “the most important and most difficult part of the whole education – the crisis that serves as a passage from childhood to man’s estate” (415-16). Crisis would imply a moment of decision and judgment, just as the transition to maturity heralds the accession to freedom. But there is neither crisis nor judgment nor freedom here:

She [Sophie’s mother] sees that it is time to captivate the heart of the new Telemachus. … At the first sound of this voice, Emile surrenders. It is Sophie. … Farewell freedom, naïveté, frankness! (415, my emphasis)

The fiction of Sophie is meant to ensure that, at this moment of crisis, there will be no crisis, that Emile will not have to exercise his judgment because his decision will already have been made for him.\(^{16}\) The only way to ensure that Emile shows good judgment, it seems, is to make sure he never has to judge for himself, to program his judgments by fiction or by the senses and experience. Rousseau appears to have exposed the utter incoherence of the project of educating for autonomy, and to have replicated in his own text the crisis of judgment in modernity which he sought to diagnose.

**“The Effect of a Second Perusal”: Austen’s Phenomenology of Judgment in *Pride and Prejudice***

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\(^{15}\) Cassirer argues that the state of nature, for Rousseau, is both fictive and empirical in a similar way (*Rousseau, Kant, Goethe*, 24), raising the possibility that it may help to bypass judgment as Sophie does. Cf., Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 274-75, 282. The role of judgment in the *Social Contract* will need to be taken up separately, but see Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 297.

\(^{16}\) Cf., Wingrove, *Rousseau’s Republican Romance*, 58-101, especially 85-86 and 99-100. For Wingrove, the willing subjection, even slavery, of the romance plot is integral to Rousseau’s conception of freedom, autonomy and consent. On woman as a figure of crisis in political thought, see Zerilli, *Signifying Woman*, 5-8.
Having argued for fiction when Rousseau turns to experience, and experience when he
turns to fiction, am I not contradicting myself? Am I not staging a crisis and refusing to judge?
What possibility is there for a viable practice of judgment, between the poles of fictionality and
experience? In the rest of this essay, I will turn to Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, because it is
unsurpassed as a model for understanding the practice of judgment; instead of oscillating
between the equally unsatisfactory poles of a radically grounded experience and a radically
ungrounded fictiveness, it reveals the co-constitutive structure of fictionality and experience in
producing good judgment. Austen’s novel points the way out of the nascent crisis of judgment
diagnosed and replicated by Rousseau’s *Emile*. However, we will also see that Austen’s solution
has remained largely invisible to recent criticism, because the crisis of judgment we inhabit has
been so powerful in shaping opinion on the novel. Although critics have long understood the
importance of judgment in Austen’s novels, recent criticism tends to replicate the very crisis I
have been diagnosing, either finding in her pedagogy of judgment a conservative reinforcing of
social norms17 or “rescuing” her from the charge of conservatism by showing that she forces us
to suspend judgment.18 Between these poles, the possibility of autonomous judgment is lost,

17 See Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary
Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 181-83, 194, 204-5;
164-67, 203, 212-13; James Thompson, *Between Self and World: The Novels of Jane Austen* (University Park:
Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988). Thompson’s position is more complicated, but he still sees judgment
being determined by social and psychological factors (7-13, 118-19, 126).
18 So much contemporary criticism, even that which sees Austen as a voice of conservative ideology, finds her
resisting or suspending judgment at crucial moments. See Johanna M. Smith, “The Oppositional Reader and *Pride
and Prejudice*,” 31 in *A Companion to Jane Austen Studies*, ed. Laura Cooner Lambdin and Robert Thomas
Lambdin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 27-40 (hereafter *Companion*); Elizabeth Langland, “*Pride and
Prejudice*: Jane Austen and Her Readers,” 52 in *Companion*, 41-56; Rachel M. Brownstein, “*Northanger Abbey,
Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice*,” 43, 57 in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Edward
Copeland and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 32-57 (hereafter *Cambridge
Companion*); Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History*
184, 195. Johnson (*Jane Austen*, 81) and Heydt-Stevenson (*Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions*, 25) emphasize the
process of judgment over judgment itself, which I have shown is often a strategy for evading judgment.
since the very exercise of judgment appears as a renunciation of autonomy.\textsuperscript{19} Pride and Prejudice itself points the way out of this impasse, I will show, by insisting simultaneously on the revisability and finality of judgment.

The moment I will analyze parallels Emile’s judgment of Sophie: it is the moment when Elizabeth changes her judgment of Darcy, a reversal that will culminate in their marriage.\textsuperscript{20} The turning point occurs famously after she reads, and indeed rereads, the letter from Darcy which explains his actions. Chapter 13 of Volume 2 is the crisis of the novel, in the precise etymological sense of this word. It is the moment of decision, and offers a phenomenological description of Elizabeth’s process of judgment as she reads the letter. What does this chapter give us to learn, by its example, about the unteachable and untheorizable process of judgment?

The lesson that imposes itself after reading this episode in the novel is that, to judge well, it will always be necessary to read again. Immediately after her first reading of Darcy’s letter, Elizabeth is not persuaded to change her opinion of him; if anything, she is further confirmed in it: “With a strong prejudice against every thing he might say, she began his account of what had happened at Netherfield. … He expressed no regret for what he had done which satisfied her; his style was not penitent but haughty. It was all pride and insolence.”\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, Elizabeth’s initial

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\textsuperscript{19} Nazar’s wonderful, Arendtian reading of the problem of judgment in Sense and Sensibility is an important exception to this general pattern. See Hina Nazar, “The Imagination Goes Visiting: Jane Austen, Judgment, and the Social,” Nineteenth-Century Literature 59.2 (2004): 145-78. She shows how attention to the social, in Elinor’s case, enables judgment rather than determining it.

\textsuperscript{20} Many critics writing on Pride and Prejudice recognize the importance of the question of judgment in the novel, and they often focus on Elizabeth’s reading of Darcy’s letter to understand this question, though their analyses and assessments differ widely. See, in particular, the readings of Reuben A. Brower, The Fields of Light: An Experiment in Critical Reading (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 164-81; Mudrick, “Irony as Discrimination: Pride and Prejudice” in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 76-97; Patricia Menon, Austen, Eliot, Charlotte Bronté and the Mentor-Lover (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 15-46; Thompson, Between Self and World, 103-30. Galperin argues that judgment only comes to serve a normative function at a particular historical moment in Austen criticism (Historical Austen, 80). My reading is perhaps closest in conception to Thompson’s, but with important differences. Ultimately, he sees Elizabeth’s changed opinion of Darcy as an effect of transference rather than good judgment (Between Self and World, 117-19).\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{21} Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism, ed. Donald J. Gray, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 134. Subsequent citations will be parenthetical, abbreviated PP.
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reaction to the letter recapitulates her reaction to her first encounters with Darcy; she approaches the letter “[w]ith a strong prejudice against every thing he might say.” It is only when she reads the letter again, and indeed revisits in her mind the events of the novel, that her judgment of Darcy changes: “Widely different was the effect of a second perusal” (137). Elizabeth’s response mirrors our own, as we are compelled to read Pride and Prejudice a second time, to discover how we could have misjudged Darcy so completely. Her reading of the letter stages a lesson in how to read Pride and Prejudice itself: if “first impressions” (the novel’s original title) are often misleading, then it will always be necessary to read a second time in order to judge well.

What exactly transpires on a second reading? Why does a second reading improve our judgment so dramatically, in the novel’s view? At first, the advice to read twice appears to recycle conventional wisdom about how to make sound judgments. At least four such explanations, common in the critical literature and in attitudes about judgment, come to mind. First, the text might be suggesting that judgment is improved by caution, reflection, re-examination.22 Read more carefully, more slowly, the novel would be telling us. Pay closer attention to the text. An injunction to close reading, as it were. Second, we know that good judgment requires experience. Experience could be meant in two senses, either as worldly wisdom or as new experience which brings fresh information to light (an empiricism that grounds judgments in facts).23 Perhaps “second reading” serves as a figure for experience in both these senses, since reading perhaps allows one’s judgment time to mature and compels one to wait until all the relevant information has been obtained. Elizabeth learns of Wickham’s

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22 For Butler, prudence is one of the “key virtues” in Austen (Jane Austen, 122).
23 The idea that experience, in both these senses, is a decisive factor in developing good judgment is common in the critical literature. See Brower, Fields of Light, 174, 176; Mudrick, “Irony,” 85; Butler, Jane Austen, 122, 208; Menon, Austen, 37; Galperin, Historical Austen, 3. If judgment concerns our cognitive relation to particularity then experience will indeed be indispensable for making good judgments. See Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1142a 11-20. However, experience cannot explain the specificity of Austen’s injunction to read twice.
treachery and Darcy’s magnanimity in the affair of Georgiana and is compelled to change her opinion of both. A lesson in Rousseauvian empiricism, it would seem, almost as though we were walking around a bucket of water with a stick in it, trying to understand why the stick appears bent when it is not (Rousseau, *Emile*, 205-6). Judgment, the text would be saying, is reliable only when it is made empirically. Third, it is a commonplace that good judgment requires a certain “critical distance,” disinterest or impartiality. Reflecting on Darcy’s letter has perhaps given Elizabeth a certain distance on the situation, an ability to view the situation from a third-person perspective, that was not available in her face-to-face encounter with Darcy.24 The importance of the epistolary form, and even more of the novel form which it figures, should certainly not be underestimated in this context.25 Finally, theories of aesthetic judgment, from Pope to IA Richards and Hannah Arendt, argue that a good judgment, instead of becoming mired in the details, takes a comprehensive view, reflecting on the whole and the interconnections between its

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24 See Butler, *Jane Austen*, 208; Mudrick, “Irony,” 76; Brownstein, “Northanger Abbey,” 55; Thompson, *Between Self and World*, 116; Arendt, *LKPP*. Galperin (*Historical Austen*, 119) and Menon, (*Austen*, 35) detect a struggle between detachment and involvement in Austen’s texts. While Austen does not settle for the commonplace of emotion clouding judgment, Lizzie’s judgment is least reliable when she is most interested in the outcome, suggesting that “interest” can skew one’s judgment. However, this does not mean that good judgment is only possible when one is “disinterested,” since Lizzie learns to judge Darcy and Wickham at a moment when she is deeply interested in the outcome of the judgment. In general, I agree with those critics who find no simple opposition between emotion and judgment in Austen (*Austen*, 15-46; Butler, *Jane Austen*, 209). For the counterargument, see Poovey, *Proper Lady*, 186, 195. Austen’s notion that emotion enables judgment has a long genealogy traceable at least to Stoicism. See Pfau’s essay in this volume; Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). By contrast, the opposition between sympathy and judgment becomes commonplace in sentimentalism. See Gary Kelly, “Religion and Politics,” 160, 162 in *Cambridge Companion*, 149-69; Butler, *Jane Austen*, 18-28, 101.

25 Galperin discusses the implications of Austen’s shift away from epistolary narration (*Historical Austen*, 8, 10, 21, 109-137). For him, epistolarity preserves the possibility for the reader’s interpretation and judgment, whereas Austen’s narration is more authoritative and didactic. (He still discovers an oppositional potential in the proliferation of detail in the novels.) By contrast, I am trying to show how Austen’s narrative opens a space for interpretation and judgment, against the absorptive identifications of sentimental epistolarity. A fuller discussion of this problem would need to address Austen’s use of free indirect discourse. See Galperin, *Historical Austen*, 21-22, 115; Thompson, *Between Self and World*, 73; Kelly, “Religion and Politics,” 161; D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or, the Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). I would suggest that the unstable origin of free indirect discourse places even greater demands on the reader’s exercise of judgment.
On her second reading of the letter, Elizabeth would certainly have the whole story in view as she makes her judgment on its details.

However, while each of these explanations accounts in part for Elizabeth’s improved judgment – she shows prudence and patience in reading the letter twice; she learns new information from the letter; she gains some distance on the situation by reading; she has a view of the whole narrative as she reads again – none of the four explanations is sufficient to account for the specificity of the injunction to a “second perusal” that is the hallmark of this text. First, couldn’t Elizabeth read more carefully the first time around? In fact, the text suggests that careful reflection by itself cannot account for good judgment, since Elizabeth considers carefully even when she misjudges Darcy’s character the first time (“After a few minutes reflection …”; “Elizabeth was again in deep thought” [55]). Second, isn’t all the new information available to Elizabeth at the end of her first reading? Indeed, the narrator tells us that it is not simply new facts, or Darcy’s ability to offer a different account of those facts, which changes the situation. Wickham has his own account. “On both sides it was only assertion” (135). Even when Elizabeth becomes sufficiently uncertain of her judgment to entertain the possibility of Darcy’s version of events, the best that the competing facts can do is to suspend her too hasty judgment, her prejudice. The demand for a second reading cannot be understood as a desire for a fantasized Rousseauvian empiricism. Quite the contrary: it opens up empiricism onto the space of the literary, as we will see. Third, doesn’t Elizabeth already have a certain distance on the situation initially, since she is reading Darcy’s letter rather than confronting him directly in the heat of the moment, as she did when she rejected his marriage proposal? Moreover, Elizabeth’s initial

response to the letter, the intensity of her emotional reaction and her “perturbed state of mind” (135), reveals that the letter offers no privileged critical distance or impartial perspective: “She read, with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before her eyes” (134). Elizabeth is deeply involved, engaged and interested in this judgment, and the letter does not simulate a perspective of disinterested and emotionally detached reflection. Finally, doesn’t the “whole” come into view after the first reading of the letter? The puzzle of the text remains, then. Why does Elizabeth need to read the letter again to judge well, and what is different about the second reading?27

Let us begin by examining Elizabeth’s first reading of the letter. The first reading is just as essential to the process of rereading as is the second. What, then, is the effect of the first reading, and how is it preparatory for the second? After her initial response in which Elizabeth reaffirms her prejudice against Darcy, she experiences bewilderment and confusion, not knowing what to think anymore: “In this perturbed state of mind, with thoughts that could rest on nothing, she walked on” (135). As Elizabeth begins to reread Darcy’s version of Wickham’s story, her certitudes dissolve even further. The process culminates in absolute indecision, as she confronts the aporia of the competing accounts given by Darcy and Wickham: “On both sides it was only assertion” (135). Elizabeth is torn between two different versions of the story and two different versions of Wickham’s character. In the aesthetic terminology we are familiar with, we might describe the simultaneously compelling and incompatible character of these stories as a tension, contradiction or aporia. What is most important for our purposes is that it provokes a suspension

27 My analysis addresses how Elizabeth revises her judgment. But it is worth asking what deranges her judgment initially, since she is a particularly acute judge of character in most situations. For accounts of why judgment might go awry, see Johnson, *Jane Austen*, 62; Mudrick, “Irony,” 84; Poovey, *Proper Lady*, 198.
of judgment, a crisis in the conventional sense of the word, which I have described as a hallmark of a number of influential twentieth-century interpretive theories.

Now, it is imperative that we not discredit the moment of the suspension of judgment. It is absolutely essential in the practice of good judgment. Crisis is the corrosive that eats at Elizabeth’s prejudices, forcing her to confront the details of the situation without any predetermined rules to rely on, without any heteronomous aids to assist her judgment. Crisis is what recalls judgment to its task, after it has been lulled into complacency by prejudice, opinion (gossip), or the rote application of rules inadequate to the situation it confronts. It compels an attention to the immanent logic of the situation without reliance on pre-given, transcendent ideals or arbitrarily asserted norms to guide one’s judgment.\(^{28}\) Crisis liberates judgment from its thrall to cognitive habits which serve as surrogates for judgment. By suspending judgment between two incommensurable poles, it frees judgment to approach the situation as it is, in all the richness of detail. At the moment of crisis, we are forced to be free, to apply our judgment freely to the particularities of the situation. If we have anything to learn from the twentieth-century interpretive theories I criticize in the introduction, it is precisely the necessity of this moment of crisis (freedom) for enabling the activity of autonomous judgment.

But it is important that the process does not stop here, as it seems to do for so many of these twentieth-century interpretive theories. It may be impossible to theorize the process further, since what takes place next transpires at the limits of theory, but we must at least pursue the phenomenological description of judgment as Austen does. As essential as the moment of crisis is, it is not sufficient to simply recognize or acknowledge one’s freedom without it being actualized in any way. Freedom, to be effective, must not be preserved in indeterminacy but must

\(^{28}\) Lizzie’s parents judge poorly, underscoring the absence of transcendent authority to guide her judgment. On this question, see also, Nazar, “Imagination,” 154-55.
realize and determine itself. Indeed, for Elizabeth, it may be impossible to stop at the point of 
crisis, without any resolution of the matter by judgment, since “it was impossible not to feel that 
there was gross duplicity on one side or the other.” The state of suspension Elizabeth arrives at is 
not a state of paralysis, immobility or equipoise; it is not a skeptical epochē. On the contrary, the 
state Elizabeth finds herself in is a restless one, so unsettled that it even impels her to physical 
movement: “In this perturbed state of mind, with thoughts that could rest on nothing, she walked 
on” (135). 29 Neither the novel nor Elizabeth herself is content to rest in this restless impasse, to 
revel in the failure of judgment. Elizabeth’s perturbation is not one that continues indefinitely; it 
is not the perpetual crisis so typical of modernity. It ends, by coming to a judgment after a 
second perusal. We must now try to discover what transpires on Elizabeth’s second reading.

As Elizabeth rereads, everything suddenly appears to her in a completely different light. 
There is not a gradual shift in her opinion. 30 Elizabeth does not limit her rereading simply to the 
letter. Rather, it as though she rereads the novel itself, replaying it in her mind. Her experience 
foreshadows our own, as we reread Pride and Prejudice and discover how differently it reads the 
second time round:

She perfectly remembered every thing that had passed in conversation between Wickham 
and herself, in their first evening at Mr. Philip’s. Many of his expressions were still fresh 
in her memory. She was now struck with the impropriety of such communications to a 
stranger, and wondered how it had escaped her before. … How differently did every 
thing now appear in which he was concerned! His attentions to Miss King were now the 
consequence of views solely and hatefully mercenary … (136, my underlining)

29 Heydt-Stevenson argues that Austen’s “novels acknowledge the physical dimension of consciousness” (Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions, 20), especially in Pride and Prejudice (Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions, 69-72).
30 This position needs to be qualified. Elizabeth’s love for Darcy only grows gradually (240, 243, 244, 246, 248), and a number of factors are required to explain it. The gradual growth of love, also emphasized in Emma and Sense and Sensibility, and is an important part of Austen’s critique of sentimentalism. The letter is, however, a sudden 
turning point: it changes Lizzie’s judgment of Darcy from someone she could not possibly love (128), Pemberley notwithstanding, to someone she could potentially love. On Austen’s unique melding of the languages of love and 
judgment, see Nazar, “Imagination,” 173.
Why is Elizabeth suddenly attuned to all these details of the text which “had escaped her
before”? What makes them suddenly leap into focus, when they were so easily overlooked
before? Was it simply that “she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd,” and must we indict
ourselves in similar fashion (137)? Has she just learned to pay better attention to the facts? I have
already explained that this is not a sufficient reason for Elizabeth’s revised judgment. Nor is it
simply that she has new information about Wickham, since this is already available to her (and
us) on a first reading. Rather, I believe that she returns to these facts with a different version of
Wickham’s character in mind. Darcy’s letter has provoked her to construct, at least provisionally,
an alternative account of Wickham’s character, and through the lens of this other character
construct, the facts acquire a completely different meaning:

The extravagance and general profligacy which he scrupled not to lay to Mr. Wickham’s
charge, exceedingly shocked her; the more so, as she could bring no proof of its injustice.
She had never heard of him before his entrance into the ---shire Militia … Of his former
way of life, nothing had been known in Hertfordshire but what he told himself. As to his
real character, had information been in her power, she had never felt a wish of enquiring.
His countenance, voice, and manner, had established him at once in the possession of
every virtue. She tried to recollect some instance of goodness, some distinguished trait of
integrity or benevolence, that might rescue him from the attacks of Mr. Darcy … But no
such recollection befriended her. She could see him instantly before her, in every charm
of air and address; but she could remember no more substantial good than the general
approbation of the neighbourhood, and the regard which his social powers had gained
him in the mess. (135-36, my emphasis)

There is nothing even in this portrait of Wickham to tip us off by itself; the problem is rather
what he has not said and what he has not done. Facts which had appeared meaningless –
unsignifying nothings and absences (“no such recollection,” “no more substantial good”) –
suddenly acquire an ominous meaning in the light of the new character construct which they
simply would not otherwise possess. They only acquire the significance of facts within a new
hermeneutic. A new character construct makes silences, omissions and lacunae signify; it brings
them to light when they were nothing before.
To appreciate fully the force of Austen’s insight here, it is necessary for us to enact the lesson of the novel by returning to the scene Elizabeth mentions remembering, “their first evening at Mr. Philip’s” and the conversation whose content now strikes Elizabeth as so improper (52-56). In retrospect, nothing could be more obvious than Wickham’s deft manipulation of the conversation, his careful probing to discover Elizabeth’s opinion of Darcy, his controlled and cautious revelation of “information” and Elizabeth’s desire to hear only what would confirm her ill opinion about Darcy:

Mr. Wickham was therefore at leisure to talk to Elizabeth, and she was very willing to hear him, though what she chiefly wished to hear she could not hope to be told, the history of his acquaintance with Mr. Darcy. … Elizabeth found the interest of the subject increase, and listened with all her heart; but the delicacy of it prevented farther inquiry. (52-54, my emphasis)

These sentences are innocuous enough when we first read them; we too want to know the details of Darcy’s relation to Wickham. But returning to them, we realize how much Elizabeth was predisposed to believe what Wickham has to say, just as we were (Poovey, 196). Elizabeth is not simply a passive victim of Wickham’s manipulation; she is actively engaged in constructing a malign conception of Darcy’s character: “After a few minutes reflection, however, she continued, ‘I do remember his boasting one day, at Netherfield, of the implacability of his resentments, of his having an unforgiving temper. His disposition must be dreadful’” (55). What is most remarkable about this conversation, though, is not Wickham’s psychological acumen in enlisting Elizabeth’s own prejudices to further damage her opinion of Darcy. Rather, what makes it such an extraordinary exercise for judgment is that it is written so as to be legible in two completely different ways, depending on what conceptions of Darcy’s and Wickham’s characters we approach the scene with. With Darcy’s letter in mind, and the new character of Wickham Elizabeth is experimenting with, all the Machiavellian details of the scene become legible. We see, for example, that Wickham only ventures his slander of Darcy once he is sure of Elizabeth’s
already poor opinion of the latter ("I think him very disagreeable."). Even Wickham’s pauses in the conversation take on an ominous tinge where before they signified only reluctance to malign Darcy: “I cannot pretend to be sorry,” said Wickham, after a short interruption” (53, my emphasis). But all of these damning details – the interruptions, silences, omissions, pauses and the timing of Wickham’s revelations – only become visible on a particular interpretation of Wickham’s character, when we judge him to be a predator on the marriage market. The heuristic of character shapes our reading of the facts, just as much as it emerges out of the facts.

Here I would like to challenge the reader to a thought experiment, to approach the scene as we do when we first read it. This is nearly impossible, because it is very difficult to filter out what we already know of Wickham and the sense of his character we later begin to develop. In this sense, Pride and Prejudice cannot be read twice, because the novel we read the first time around, when we knew nothing about the characters, has disappeared forever. But if we can try to remember for a moment what it must have been like when we first came upon the scene, with our poor opinion of Darcy and our sense of Wickham’s gallantry (“Mr. Wickham was as far beyond [the other officers] in person, countenance, air, and walk, as they were superior to the broad-faced stuffy uncle Philips” [52]), it is almost certain that we would read the scene the same way as we and Elizabeth initially did, as casting aspersions on Darcy’s rather than Wickham’s character. From our earlier perspective, sentences like the following appear innocent rather than ominous: “Her curiosity was unexpectedly relieved. Mr. Wickham began the subject himself”; “Are you much acquainted with Mr. Darcy?” (55). On our first reading, Wickham’s

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31 A number of critics believe that our reading of Darcy is prepared much earlier in the text, that only Lizzie, not the reader, is in the dark about Darcy. See Butler, Jane Austen, 216; Brower, Fields of Light, 177; Galperin, Historical Austen, 131. In the earlier scenes, there are indeed a number of clues that something is not right with Wickham’s picture of Darcy. Elizabeth herself notices that Darcy’s pride and his keeping company with Bingley are not commensurate with Wickham’s portrait (PP, 56). But these details are only enough to make us realize that we should suspend judgment till we know more.
revelations hardly appear improper. On the contrary, Elizabeth praises his reserve in refusing to expose Darcy, and apparently with propriety: “Elizabeth honoured him for such feelings, and thought him handsomer than ever as he expressed them” (55). It takes an extraordinary writerly feat to be able to produce a scene like this, legible in two completely different ways. And indeed, what is true of this scene is true of the novel as a whole. Part of Austen’s genius in writing *Pride and Prejudice* is to have crafted a novel full of scenes which open themselves to alternate readings, *depending on which sense of character is operative.* What we learn, above all, through the process of rereading these scenes is that their legibility depends almost entirely on the conception of character with which we approach them.

We are finally in a position to understand how Elizabeth revises her judgment of Wickham (and Darcy) through the process of second reading. What accounts for the *specificity* of a second reading – if it is not the acquisition of prudence, new facts, critical distance or a more holistic perspective – is that Elizabeth now approaches the earlier scenes in the novel with a new conception of character in her mind. Character is not some already existing thing about which Elizabeth makes a judgment; rather, the new conception of character is itself the product of the judgment she makes, revealing the constructive and creative power of judgment. The new character construct is provoked by certain anomalous details in Darcy’s letter, to be sure. But it would not be accurate to say that character is *determined* by the details Darcy reveals since “it was assertion on both sides.” Indeed, when Elizabeth finds her judgment suspended, she has two possible conceptions of character that might help make sense of the narratives, and she must

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32 This is not a question of ambiguity, aporia, undecidability or any of the other types of failed judgment I examine in the introduction. Judgment is not suspended. We read the scene one way or another, depending on which sense of character we approach it with. There is no neutral or impartial perspective from which both readings are available simultaneously, as Lizzie explains to Jane: “You never will be able to make both of them good for anything” (147). Brower is one of the few to see the exclusivity of the alternatives proposed in *Pride and Prejudice* (*Fields of Light*, 175).
choose between them. Character is properly a fiction, an explanatory construct or hermeneutic frame she uses to interpret and make intelligible the narrative. Elizabeth’s judging is a constant experiment; it involves creating a conception of character from the given details, and then using that conception of character to reread the details in a complex iterative process, *until one makes a judgment* that a particular conception of character best fits the details for the moment. We find ourselves in something of a hermeneutic circle here, because some conception of character is needed to interpret the details of the narrative, just as the details of the narrative are necessary to enable us to construct a character. Character comes both first and last, making it necessary to engage in the practice of re-reading. The hermeneutic circle or spiral is only interrupted when a (provisional) judgment is made. Because the judgment (i.e. character) is not determined by the details of the narrative – because we can always approach a scene with multiple character rubrics that we try on as Elizabeth does, and furthermore, because character is ultimately figured as inscrutable, and we cannot know its truth no matter how many narrative details we are given – it must be said that the judgment Elizabeth makes is not an empirical or epistemological one, but what I would call ethico-existential.

The temporally extended character of finite existence demands this iterative process of judgment in which *fictionality* plays an essential role in constituting (the intelligibility of) narrative. When we distinguish between first impressions and a second reading, we switch from the register of sensory experience, empiricism and sentimentalism (the immediate view of a suffering victim) to that of literary encounter. If first impressions are misleading, it is precisely because they are not yet a narrative, but mere data and bits of information. It requires the imaginative power of judgment to constitute them into a narrative. Austen shows us how
indispensable the fictioning power of the imagination is to good judgment. To read, in this context, is not to collect facts or process data but to read a narrative.\textsuperscript{33}

My analysis reveals just how unconventional and surprising Austen’s conception of character is, and how deeply it is bound up with a practice of judgment. Character is not a pre-given universal – a concept or type – under which we must subsume the details of the narrative. Nor is it a substrate whose secret truth we must attempt to excavate, as though character were the underlying principle generating the details of the narrative. Finally, character is not simply the agglomeration of details over time, so that we must wait for a whole narrative to unfold before we can discover it.\textsuperscript{34} Rather than being merely a cognitive tool that enables us to pass judgment on a narrative that already exists, character is itself the judgment which binds the otherwise merely contiguous details into a narrative, and gives the details intelligibility as and in narrative. Since the legibility of the novel depends on the conception of character we approach it with, we can fairly claim that character in this novel is a hermeneutic frame, a fictional construct that allows us to read the details of the narrative. If Austen’s characters appear so realistic, it is not only because of the richness of detail through which she evokes them, nor simply because of their inscrutability, roundedness and three-dimensionality which provokes infinite speculation (Lynch, \textit{Economy of Character}, 132-33, 141, 220-21); nor is it just that she shifts from a static to a complex, dynamic and developmental sense of character (Thompson, \textit{Between Self and World},

\textsuperscript{33} For a description of how Austen’s realism highlights the importance of fiction and narrative for mediating between the universal and particular, see Claudia Brodsky Lacour, “Austen’s \textit{Pride and Prejudice} and Hegel’s ‘Truth in Art’: Concept, Reference, and History,” \textit{ELH} 59.3 (1992): 606-9.

109-13; Brower, *Fields of Light*, 172-73; Mudrick, “Irony,” 76-97). Rather, Austen, through her strategies of writing, engages us in the very practice of judgment that constructs character.35

Attention to the problem of judgment allows us to understand better Austen’s unique place in the history of the novel. Novels in the eighteenth century had modeled themselves on other forms of writing: letters, romance, spiritual and criminal biography, epic, drama, confessions, utopias, even criticism. Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, in which each book mimics a different genre, recognizes and exploits the novel’s crisis of generic identity in this period. However, with Austen, the novel itself becomes the paradigmatic form on which her novel writing is based, and when we are urged to read twice, it is the novel form (as Austen understands it) that we are being taught to read.36 Indeed, *Pride and Prejudice* is the exemplary novel Austen has in mind when she urges the necessity of a second reading. The practice of judging that Austen wants to inculcate is integral to the constitution of the novel form as she envisions it. It is not only Darcy’s letter, but the novel as a whole that must be reread and judged anew. The letter has become a figure for the novel itself, rather than the novel being composed of a series of letters. Two of the most distinctive features that theorists of the novel credit Austen with are her rounded characters and her realism. But both of these, when understood in relation to the practice of judgment, look rather different than they usually do. We have already seen how unconventional Austen’s conception of character is. Similarly, her realism is not simply a matter of verisimilitude, the fidelity with which she reproduces the lineaments of her social world. Nor is it a coercive demand that we accept this world as it is and capitulate to its values. Rather, hers


is a “realism of judgment” in which “the real” is always presented as an occasion for our judgment, in which “the real” is only constituted as meaningful through the intervention of our acts of judgment. Viewed in this way, Austen is not the teleological culmination of the developments of realist techniques of narration in the eighteenth century. She, along with Fielding, constitutes a counter-tradition to the novelistic realism that would either determine our judgments entirely by the real or suspend our judgment in the face of the real.37

What I have been arguing, obliquely, is that Austen gives us, in this critical chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, an exemplary description of what a reflective judgment looks like, a judgment made without a pre-given concept. Character is itself this judgment. It is not some substantial entity given in advance, as one might infer from Austen’s surprisingly precise thumbnail character sketches,38 nor is it a type, some concept given in advance under which we may subsume the details of the narrative. Rather, we begin with only the details, with the profusion of heterogeneous particulars we find in the narrative, and on the basis of these details, we are called upon to infer some general concept (character) that would account, more or less well, for these details.39 The fit between the abstraction called “character” and the multiplicity of details in the novel will never be perfect. We can always return to some detail in the novel and reflect further on it, wonder how it fits with the sense of character we have developed, revise our

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37 Watt distinguishes between a “realism of presentation” and a “realism of assessment,” though he does not investigate the dynamics of judgment. See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 288, 290-301. Other critics have noticed that Austen’s realism is not simply a replication of reality but a critical reflection on it, without linking this explicitly to judgment. See Watt, introduction to Watt, *Jane Austen*, 6; Butler, *Jane Austen*, 161; Galperin, *Historical Austen*, 20, 77; 120; Poovey, *Proper Lady*, 194. Galperin’s *Historical Austen* explains that Austen’s role in the “rise of the novel” is more complicated than has been acknowledged.

38 See the description of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet (4) or Mr. Collins (48). Mudrick argues that we must distinguish between simple and complex characters in the novel (“Irony,” 76-97). But even a character as apparently simple as Bingley, whom Elizabeth believes she can see through (*PP*, 29), becomes a mystery by the end of the first volume. As we discover the insufficiency of character sketches, we are forced to understand character as a hermeneutic. On the inscrutability of character in Austen, see Galperin, *Historical Austen*; Lynch, *Economy of Character*.

39 However, this concept is never so abstracted from the details as to become a type. Although “general” with respect to the details, Austen’s characters are always highly particularized too.
character construct in the light of this detail, and so on.\textsuperscript{40} For example, the question of the exact nature of Elizabeth’s feelings for Wickham is nearly unanswerable? Did she love him? Was she merely infatuated with him? We could spend a long time drawing out the precise nuances of emotion, and its complications through irony, rationalization and pride. The process is potentially infinite, and must be so, given the nature of reflective judgments in which no concept is given in advance and character is ultimately inscrutable. In this, Austen’s reflective judgment resembles the reflective judgment I have described in Kant and in interpretive practices such as New Criticism. But there is this critical difference between Austen and the others we have been examining. For Kant and others, the potentially infinite revisability of a reflective judgment, the infinite conversations it might generate in the gap between particular and general, becomes an occasion and indeed an opportunity to suspend judgment, to indulge in indecision and indeterminacy, and to retreat into a self-reflexivity that marvels at our capacity to defer judgment endlessly, as though that were itself our end.\textsuperscript{41} The freedom to judge, according to these accounts, can only be preserved by protracting the state of indeterminacy, which is to say the freedom to judge is only free as long as we make no judgments. For Austen, the case is entirely otherwise: judgments have a relation to ends and ending, partly because there is a finality to judgment. Judgments are, in some sense, irrevocable: in Austen, marriage is the ultimate instance of an irrevocable judgment. We must make every judgment as if it were final, because it could become so at any moment. It is this potential irreversibility that causes us to tremble before every judgment. This is not to say that judgments are not provisional and revisable. They will always

\textsuperscript{40} See Lynch, \textit{Economy of Character}, 251. Mudrick describes some of the unresolved inconsistencies in Darcy’s character ("Ironic," 95). See also, Menon, \textit{Austen}, 31.

\textsuperscript{41} I only compare Kant and Austen insofar they are both concerned with “reflective judgments,” that is to say judgments made in the absence of a pre-given concept. I make no claims about the relation between Kant’s aesthetic judgments and how these might be related to judgments of character. However, Munzel makes a compelling argument for the relation between aesthetic judgments and judgments of moral character in Kant. See G. Felicitas Munzel, \textit{Kant’s Conception of Moral Character: The “Critical” Link of Morality, Anthropology, and Reflective Judgment} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
be infinitely revisable, but any one of these provisional moments could become final if we are called to act upon it in a way that sets an irreversible train of consequences into motion. It requires judgment to know when to stop the potentially endless process of revision and commit to a decision. Judgments must be neither too hasty (prejudice) nor too slow (indecision), but there is no mathematical mean here, only a more or less arbitrary judgment about when the time is right to make a judgment. Austen’s novels are exemplary of this process. We are always revising our judgments as we read and reread *Pride and Prejudice*, but when Elizabeth decides to marry Darcy, there is a finality to her judgment. She will, of course, continue to revise her judgment of Darcy, and this may lead to other irreversible actions, but the act of marriage cannot be undone or retracted, even if it were to end in divorce or separation. The advantage of the conceptuality of judgment I am outlining is that it allows us to think finality and revisability together, rather than as opposed as is usually the case.

There are at least two reasons to insist on the necessity for the process of judgment to terminate with a decision instead of sheltering itself in infinite reflection. Both have to do with the *political* promise of the conceptuality of judgment I want to recuperate from Austen. First, judgment is not only an end but a beginning.\(^{42}\) The end of deliberation, the achievement of a decision, means the beginning of action. Elizabeth marries Darcy, and while this may be the end of Austen’s narrative, it is also the beginning of another narrative we might imagine. A judgment, then, is precisely the point at which deliberation is translated into action. To refuse to judge – to indulge in a process of infinite deliberation and reflection – is also to refuse to act. It is to shelter oneself from the necessity of commitment, as though any judgment, decision or even action were invariably ideological. It is to preserve the purity of one’s freedom from the taint of

\(^{42}\) On the importance of the concept of “natality” for political thought and a theory of action, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 9, 178, 247.
any actual deed, as though to act were the very renunciation of freedom rather than its actualization. Here, then, is the second reason for insisting on the finality of judgment. Freedom is worth nothing if it is only the freedom to preserve itself in perpetual indecision and indeterminacy. To determine oneself in an act of judgment is not to fall into unfreedom, as is so often thought within the framework of a modern conceptuality of freedom. It is rather to actualize one’s freedom, to render it effective in some way, to make it good for something and towards something. Freedom and determinacy must be thought together, as two moments of the process of judgment – first, the crisis and, second, the judgment – rather than as antitheses of one another. Judgment must not be viewed as a dogmatic foreclosing of possibilities, but a considered elimination of alternatives necessary to any action. To judge, Austen teaches us, is to act on the basis of our freedom and to make that freedom real in the world.

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44 By arguing that judgment be conceived in relation to freedom, I appear to be siding with those for whom autonomy is an important feature of Austen’s characters (Johnson, Jane Austen, 86; Menon, Austen, 18, 33), and ignoring those for whom the material and ideological constraints of the characters’ social situation undermine their freedom (Poovey, Proper Lady, 205). But addressing the problem of judgment will not offer an easy resolution to the longstanding impasse in Austen criticism concerning the politics of her writing. For comment on this impasse, see Smith, “Oppositional Reader,” 28; Langland, “Pride and Prejudice,” 41, 45; Thompson, Between Self and World, 9, 127; Kelly, “Religion and Politics,” 156; Nazar, “Imagination,” 145-47. Although the practice of judgment I describe in Pride and Prejudice does not follow the conservative model of imposing “a fixed code of values” (Watt, “On Sense and Sensibility,” 43 in Watt, Jane Austen) or a “belief in external authority” (Butler, Jane Austen, 164), I do not mean to dismiss the importance of material constraints on Elizabeth’s judgment, which feminist criticism in particular has alerted us to. Undoubtedly, material and aesthetic considerations come into play when Elizabeth sees Pemberley, and shape her decision to marry Darcy. (Mudrick (“Irony,” 95) believes that Lizzie’s judgment is poor when she does not take social constraints into account.) Poovey, among others, has drawn our attention to the tragic and contradictory situation of women’s desire in this period (Proper Lady, 174). Is it not disingenuous, then, to argue that Lizzie gives us a model of free judgment? There are two things to be said in response. First, judgment always operates within a set of material constraints. A utopian conception of judgment must take into account the necessity of such constraints instead of demanding their elimination. Second, acknowledging that judgment always operates within constraints does not amount to a blithe acceptance of a particular set of constraints. Judgment can interrogate them. Thus, our judgment can take a qualified form: if we accept the social conditions under which Lizzie operates, then she made the right judgment, but we can and should
imagine other social conditions in which women are not dependent on men for their livelihoods, as they are in
Austen novels, in which case Lizzie would be confronted with different constraints and a different judgment. (On
the limitation of women’s choice to marriage, see Mudrick, “Ironic,” 95; Galperin, *Historical Austen*, 120; Poovey,
*Proper Lady*, 197, 203.) Beyond the usual opposition of a conservative, authoritarian mode of judgment and a
liberal, individualistic mode of judgment, I believe the practice of judgment Austen outlines is a precondition
(though not a sufficient one) for a radically democratic and utopian politics. But it will not guarantee such a politics,
as Lizzie’s judgment makes clear. There can be no such guarantees. Even the best judgments are fallible and capable
of failing in spectacular ways.