

MOORE, KELLIA, M.A. Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and Wentworth's Unconscious Constancy. (2014)
Directed by Dr. Anne Wallace. 30 pp.

In *Persuasion*, Jane Austen uses Frederick Wentworth, a fundamentally unique Austen hero, to revise the eighteenth century theories of mind she has relied on in her earlier novels. Specifically, her depiction of his memory both recalls and undermines Enlightenment traditions. In her first three novels, Austen depicts memories that function along the lines of theories set forth by John Locke and Samuel Johnson. Colonel Brandon, for example, manifests Locke's theory of association in his conscious, habitual connection of Marianne with his lost love Eliza. Brandon's melancholic recollections also align with Johnson's description of afflictive, unresolvable regrets that can continually invade the mind. Moreover, manifold Austen characters rely on Johnson's formulation of memory's primarily moral use; at pivotal moments in their development, characters as disparate as Marianne and Darcy look back on their past actions to assess their behavior, discover their shortcomings, and derive the impetus to change. Though Austen continues to employ these models in her depiction of Wentworth, she also subjects them to significant revisions that resemble depictions of memory by contemporary Romantic writers. Wentworth, locked in contradiction, attempts to expel painful regrets of Anne with a Johnsonian reliance on logic and industriousness. In the process, however, he continually reassesses Anne's past significance to him, violating the eighteenth-century conviction of memory's static fixity and invoking William Wordsworth's depictions of memories that can change and grow beyond their original contexts. Similarly, he engages in Johnson's process of reviewing and learning from his

past behavior, only to evince a serious misremembering in the midst of his moral reform. This depiction of memory evokes Byron's work in the *Turkish Tales*, and it is characteristic of the novel, manifested in Mrs. Musgrove's unexpected surge of grief for her dead son, in Anne's "retentive feelings" for Wentworth, and in Wentworth's breakdown on the Cobb. Austen continues to rely on eighteenth-century models, but she revises them in ways that recall Romantic writers like Wordsworth and Byron. In Wentworth's character and in *Persuasion* as a whole, Austen engages in a unique experiment that utilizes and even amalgamates the divergent traditions.

MOORE, KELLIA, M.A. "Nay Mama, If He is Not to Be Animated by Cowper!": Jane Austen, William Cowper, and Marianne Dashwood's Evocative Sensibility. (2014) Directed by Dr. Jennifer Keith, 39 pp.

Jane Austen's particular enjoyment of the poetry of William Cowper, though often treated as a critical commonplace, is rarely taken into account in discussions of her work. However, Austen's references to the poet in her novels suggest that Cowper, whether read aloud by Edward Ferrars or quoted from memory by Fanny Price, remained a serious influence, both on Austen's themes and craft. In *Sense and Sensibility* in particular, Austen places Cowper at the crux of Marianne Dashwood's cultivated sensibility and her relation to the outside world. Though Marianne's reliance on literary convention in her enacted sensibility is often treated by critics as proof of her affectation and of the ultimate inadequacy of her worldview, a closer look at Austen's evocations of Cowper's poetry in Marianne's habits and attitudes shows a more complex picture. While Marianne's habits and passions evoke a variety of literary precedents, an examination of the character's connections to Cowper offers a unique perspective on her connection to rural nature and on her responses to suffering. Austen's character "reads" and enacts Cowper's ideas not merely to form fallacious conclusions and indulge in deleterious habits, but also to enrich and expand her inner life. Ultimately, Austen uses Cowper's fond and nuanced description of a rural, domestic life in communion with nature to give Marianne the resources to handle dislocation and suffering, and she evokes his model of irreparably isolating pain in Marianne's breakdown, depicting her sensibility as a complex and ambiguous trait that can turn in upon itself to isolate her from others,

can effect a larger protest against her disenfranchisement, and can ultimately give her the tools to heal.

JANE AUSTEN'S *PERSUASION* AND WENTWORTH'S
UNCONSCIOUS CONSTANCY
AND
"NAY, MAMA, IF HE IS NOT TO BE ANIMATED BY COWPER!":
JANE AUSTEN, WILLIAM COWPER, AND MARIANNE
DASHWOOD'S EVOCATIVE SENSIBILITY

by

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JANE AUSTEN'S *PERSUASION* AND WENTWORTH'S UNCONSCIOUS
CONSTANCY

Memory is the purveyor of reason. –Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*

This much indeed he was obliged to acknowledge—that he had been constant unconsciously, nay unintentionally; that he had meant to forget her, and believed it to be done. –Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

“I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve,” Frederick Wentworth declares wryly at the end of *Persuasion*, and many readers may indeed agree (199). Entering the novel prideful, angry, and deeply mistaken in his understanding of Anne Elliot and of himself, Wentworth is able to reunite with Anne only after emerging from a painful process of maturation. As he muses at the end of his journey, he has discovered that the true impediment to their happiness was not Lady Russell’s persuasion, but rather his “own self” (198-9). While critics have highlighted the profoundly experimental and innovative elements of Austen’s last completed novel, the fundamental uniqueness of Wentworth’s character is not often acknowledged. It is certainly not rare for an Austen hero to learn a valuable lesson, but while other romantic interests, notably Edmund Bertram and Fitzwilliam Darcy, undergo clearly delineated character development, Wentworth’s case is singular. His transformation sidesteps his reason and even his conscious mind, rooted instead in profound and uneven changes. The crux of the difference is in Austen’s depiction of Wentworth’s memory. While Edmund and Darcy

use their memories as tools for moral development, Wentworth is subject to his memory's uncontrollable ebb and flow, sometimes able to deny the past and other times nearly drowning in its return.

Memory may seem an incidental aspect of Austen's novel, but in fact it was of paramount importance in the eighteenth century tradition from which Austen emerged. In Enlightenment thought, memory allows for a rational, unified individual, a conscious, thinking self rather than a bundle of transient sensations. John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in particular positions memory as "the lynchpin of personal identity" (Clingham 20). As Margaret Anne Doody puts it, "Memory in the Lockean world is the foundation of consciousness" (67). Without enduring and correct memory, there is no contract law, no criminal justice system, no social contract, and no representative government: "This entire structure, the whole ideology, is based on memory" (Doody 69). Memory was tied not only to consciousness, but also to reason and morality, notably by Samuel Johnson, who was highly influential on Austen.

Moreover, the concept of memory was subject to significant revision in the Romantic period. The works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, and Byron had already gained popularity by the time Austen was writing *Persuasion* (Deresiewicz 8). Memories in these works, rather than acting as static guarantors of individual consciousness or instruments for moral correction, can be unmoored from their original contexts, subject to growth and change; they are powerful individual or collective forces that overlay the ruins of Tintern Abbey or the monuments of Greece. Whether or not Austen was directly

influenced by Romantic writers,¹ it is clear that in her later novels (*Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*), her depiction of memory grows increasingly nuanced and also increasingly reminiscent of Romantic models of memory.

As such, there is more at stake in an examination of Frederick Wentworth's development than a question of his similarity to other Austen characters. In his unique journey, we see Austen both returning to and radically revising the eighteenth century models of mind on which her first three novels rely. Wentworth's knotty, contradictory maturation destabilizes Austen's earlier depictions of memory even as it echoes them.

Wentworth enters the novel already enmeshed in painful memory, still smarting under the wounds of his precluded courtship of Anne. Though it may seem that eight years and an active naval career should be more than enough to overcome his grief, Wentworth's anger remains unresolved. *Sense and Sensibility* offers a blueprint of what we might expect this prolonged bereavement to look like in Colonel Brandon, whose past heartbreak dogs him throughout the novel. Early on, we learn from Elinor that Brandon's "reserve appeared rather the result of some oppression of spirits, than of any natural gloominess of temper" (38). Brandon's pain only increases as he watches history seem to

¹ Austen demonstrates a liking for and a familiarity with Sir Walter Scott in her letters, and he is one of Marianne Dashwood's favorite authors in *Sense and Sensibility* (*Jane Austen's Letters* 665, *S&S* 36). We also know from Austen's letters that she read Byron's *The Corsair*, and she references his *Turkish Tales* in *Persuasion* (*Jane Austen's Letters* 268). The case for Wordsworth and Coleridge is only circumstantial—*Lyrical Ballads* was published in 1798, and the poets were both very popular by the time Austen was writing *Persuasion* (Deresiewicz 8). William Deresiewicz argues that Austen references Wordsworth twice in her novels, but his case is rather tenuous, since in both instances the references are much more easily attributable to Cowper and Gilpin, both of whom Austen was known to admire. In this paper, I am arguing less for direct influence than for a diffused influence through the growing Romantic literary and cultural scene.

repeat itself when Willoughby, fresh from seducing the younger Eliza Williams, turns to Marianne. Importantly, the connections Brandon makes here begin consciously. He first associates Marianne with his lost love Eliza because he “once knew a lady who in temper and mind greatly resembled [Marianne], who thought and judged like her” (43). The return of his memory by this conscious connection is demonstrated more clearly in Elinor’s view of his reaction to Marianne’s illness:

...she soon discovered in his melancholy eye and varying complexion as he looked at her sister, the probable recurrence of many past scenes of misery to his mind, brought back by that resemblance between Marianne and Eliza already acknowledged, and now strengthened by the hollow eye, the sickly skin, the posture of reclining weakness, and the warm acknowledgment of peculiar obligation. (258)

As Elinor points out the clear similarities between Marianne’s current state and the events of Brandon’s past, we see that Brandon’s memories return through a logical connection of the events. His reactions here fit squarely with Locke’s representation of memory in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The strength of Brandon’s painful recollections is only logical; deeply painful or pleasurable moments “naturally at first make the deepest and most lasting impressions... The great business of the senses being, to make us take notice of what hurts or advantages the body” (101; bk. II ch.10). Moreover, Brandon’s associations in this passage echo Locke’s conclusions in his famous “Of the Association of Ideas” chapter. Here, Locke attributes the peculiar irrationalities of individuals to the “wrong connexion of ideas” (290; bk. II ch.33). Through accident and force of habit, a person may associate a group of ideas that actually have little logical

connection. In this model, Colonel Brandon first notices Marianne's similarities to Eliza and then finds himself unable to separate the two because he has so habitually connected them in his thoughts.

Brandon's situation is especially similar to one of the more problematic examples that Locke puts forward—that of a mother grieving for her dead child. As Locke asserts, it is impossible to “use the consolations of reason” in such a situation because the mother's pain derives from an uncontrollable association of ideas; she may only be cured when “time has by disuse separated the sense of that enjoyment and its loss, from the idea of the child returning to her memory” (292; II.33). Margaret Anne Doody highlights the difficulty of this passage, questioning how “the delight [the mother] took in the child and the idea of the child could ever become separated in a parent's mind” (71). Locke's example may be troubled because he finds himself on less than solid ground; Doody points out that “Locke makes the irrational affectional memory feminine—it is mother-love that is mad and unreasonable” (71-2). Locke implies that his paradigm can explain even such uncontrollable grief, but he falters in the execution. Regardless, Colonel Brandon's memory fits into Locke's explanation. Brandon associates illness with Eliza's premature death, and so Marianne's illness seems analogous to Eliza's. Though Marianne's situation is different from Eliza's in significant ways, Brandon finds the ideas “following one another in an habitual train” (Locke 290; II.33).

Importantly, Brandon's memory also functions along the lines of ideas put forth by another eighteenth century thinker—Samuel Johnson. Johnson, whose profound influence on Austen is a critical commonplace, tackles the issue of irrationally strong

memories of past pain in an essay from *The Idler*. Like Locke, Johnson also finds himself somewhat at a loss for effective and rational solutions. Johnson's tone is more personal and affecting as he laments that "we suffer equal pain from the pertinacious adhesion of unwelcome images, as from the evanescence of those which are pleasing and useful" (225; no. 72). As Johnson posits,

It would add much to human happiness, if an art could be taught of forgetting all of which the remembrance is at once useless and afflictive, if that pain which can never end in pleasure could be driven totally away, that the mind might perform its functions without incumbrance, and the past might no longer encroach upon the present. (226; no. 72)

Johnson proposes two practical strategies in the fight against painful regrets: reason and employment. Though he admits that "the incursions of troublesome thoughts are often violent and importunate," he insists that "reason will, by a resolute contest, prevail over imagination, and the power may be obtained of transferring the attention as judgment shall direct" (226; no. 72). Similarly, "employment is the great instrument of intellectual dominion," and those who can keep themselves busy and productive will be able to focus on the present instead of the painful past (226; no. 72). We can detect echoes of this advice in Austen's portrayal of Mrs. Smith, who staves off depression and loneliness partly by keeping her hands busy with small knitting and craft projects (*Persuasion* 126). Moreover, it is likely that when Anne recommends to Benwick "such works of our best moralists...as calculated to rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurance," she recommends similar essays by Johnson (85). Indeed, as Deidre Shauna Lynch notes, "throughout the second half of the

eighteenth century readers made an almost medicinal use of the essay series *The Rambler*" (*Persuasion* 241).

Do Wentworth's painful memories follow similar models? It is part of the nature of Austen's fiction that we get little from Wentworth's point of view until late in the narrative. Earlier on, however, we do get a glimpse of his state of mind unmediated by Anne's observation. It is clear that his response to her presence is strong: "He had not forgiven Anne Elliot. She had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him" (54). His remaining anger suggests continuing pain. Even in his plans for a future marriage, he remains preoccupied with her—Anne is "not out of his thoughts" when he describes his ideal wife, and she is the "only secret exception" to his professed willingness to marry any eligible woman (54). In the Lockean model, Wentworth uncontrollably associates ideas of marriage with Anne. In addition, his anger remains because he cannot disassociate the pain of their parting from the idea of Anne herself (a somewhat strange formulation, but analogous nonetheless to Locke's example of a mother who cannot disassociate the pain of loss from the idea of the child).

Other aspects of Wentworth's attitude in this passage seem reminiscent of Johnson's formula for combatting regrets. It becomes apparent that Wentworth strives for nonchalance, trying to dismiss Anne as an irrelevant relic of a long buried past. As he posits, "except from some natural sensation of curiosity, he had no desire of meeting her again. Her power with him was gone for ever" (54). Far from lamenting the past's continuing hold, he denies its influence almost entirely. In fact, Wentworth adheres to this attitude throughout his time in Uppercross. Rather than evincing Colonel Brandon's

reticence and gloom, or even Anne's quiet, painful resignation, Wentworth generally radiates satisfaction and vigor, characterized, as Anne puts it, by a "glowing, manly, open look" (53). Interestingly, it is Benwick—a profoundly ambiguous figure who Austen's characters, and her critics, interpret in various ways—whose painful memories cover him like a pall. Wentworth, on the other hand, appears free of pain. It seems, on the surface, that he has successfully followed Johnson's model, choosing to seek active employment and wrest his thoughts from Anne in order to circumvent the painful inroads of regret.

In fact, it is particularly easy to interpret Wentworth's declaration that Anne's "power with him was gone for ever" as a true statement because of a sleight of hand on Austen's part. Her use of free indirect discourse in this section makes Wentworth's thoughts and opinions seem like factual pronouncements from the narrator. We begin with the information that "Frederick Wentworth had used such words, or something like them," so when we learn of his derision for Anne, it seems like an insuperable fact. It is only when we read that Anne "had given him up to oblige others" because of her "weakness and timidity" that it becomes clear that we are reading Wentworth's opinions and reactions in the moment; the effect is to make him seem uniformly disgusted (if preoccupied) with Anne and to make the case for his indifference seem stronger than it actually is.

Of course, Wentworth's later behavior suggests that he is actually locked in contradiction, denying the importance of his past with Anne while simultaneously privileging it. Austen frames this conflict with a complex dialogue of empirical and emerging Romantic models of memory, an interaction especially evident in the dinner

party scene at the Great House in Uppercross. The scene begins with an allusion to the association of ideas that seems to once again invite a Lockean interpretation of Wentworth's memory. As Wentworth tells the Musgroves about his personal history, Anne asserts that the "immediate association of thought" must make it an "utter impossibility" for Wentworth to be "unvisited by remembrance" of their shared past (55). Wentworth's situation would seem to be rather straightforward—he cannot help but associate 1806 with Anne's rejection, but, as Samuel Johnson might suggest, he consciously staves off regrets and gives no visible sign of pain.

A complication arises as Mrs. Musgrove begins to interrupt the conversation and require Anne's attention. Mrs. Musgrove's persistent intrusions become almost emblematic as she diverts Anne's attention from Wentworth's reminiscence three separate times with "fond regrets" of her own (56). The subject of Mrs. Musgrove's memories, of course, is her son Dick Musgrove's death at sea. Though Mrs. Musgrove's "large fat sighings" for "poor Richard" are often written off as a minor satirical episode, some critics have recognized the mother's sudden recollection as a "powerful" moment that informs the way Anne and Wentworth's memories work (Deresiwicz 132-3). As Mrs. Musgrove interrupts Wentworth's reminiscing, she interjects a different kind of remembrance, one that illuminates the depths and possibilities of memory in the novel.

Unlike the logical association of the broken engagement with "the year six" that Anne posits for Wentworth, Mrs. Musgrove's recollection has murkier origins. When Mrs. Musgrove unexpectedly realizes that her late son had served under Wentworth in the navy, the knowledge brings her a sudden burst of grief for his loss. However, she seems

to make the connection out of nowhere—it is, according to Austen’s narrator, “one of those extraordinary bursts of mind which do sometimes occur” (46). Locke is not without comment on occasions when memories “start up in our minds of their own accord,” but he connects these memories with unruly passions—they are “roused and tumbled out of their dark cells into open daylight, by turbulent and tempestuous passions; our affections bringing ideas to our memory, which had otherwise lain quiet and unregarded” (103; II.10). Mrs. Musgrove’s memory, however, is not originally connected to any passion. Austen’s narrator asserts that the son, “a thick-headed, unfeeling, unprofitable Dick Musgrove,” had actually been “very little cared for at any time by his family, though quite as much as he deserved; seldom heard of, and scarcely at all regretted” upon his death (45-6). Rather than stemming from forgotten passions, Mrs. Musgrove’s memory actually causes her “greater grief for him than she had known on first hearing of his death” (46). While it may be easy to write off this grief as a silly self-indulgence on Mrs. Musgrove’s part, the case Austen makes for the mother’s genuine feeling is surprisingly strong. As William Deresiewicz points out,

...it is important to remember that Mrs. Musgrove does not habitually sentimentalize [Dick Musgrove], does not even voluntarily remember him on this occasion...her son bursts up at her out of the depths of memory. Her grief may be greater than it was upon first hearing of his death, but it is not therefore less genuine. (132-3)

This is not a comic misremembering like Mrs. Dashwood’s claim that she has suspected Willoughby of some perfidy all along (*S&S* 256). Rather, the meaning of Richard’s death

is detached from its original context, and Mrs. Musgrove's recollection of her son has apparently grown and changed.

This episode of malleable memory is deeply at variance with understandings of memory in eighteenth-century empiricism. As Margery Sabin explains, "English empirical psychologists in the eighteenth century taught that experience remains 'stored' in memory in its original form" (94). Moreover, the "fixed character" of memory was seen as essential: "the power of the mind to revive past ideas and perceptions without distorting them was seen in the eighteenth century as fundamental to learning as well as to the exercise of the conscience" (94-5). The metaphors Locke uses to describe memory are particularly indicative of this "fixed" memory. He writes that "ideas are imprinted on the memory" and "laid aside" in a "repository": "This is memory, which is as it were the storehouse of our ideas" (101; X.2, 4). Inherent in these images is an idea of memory as a stable substance that can be put aside and returned to in its same form. Similarly, Johnson affirms that while the future may take on a "pliant and ductile" life in the mind,

...the images which memory presents are of a stubborn and untractable nature, the objects of remembrance have already existed, and left their signature behind them impressed upon the mind, so as to defy all attempts of rasure, or of change. (*The Rambler* 224; no. 41).

For both empirical thinkers, memory can decay and fade, but the initial *impression* remains—erosion may wear away words carved on a gravestone, but the words themselves do not change (Locke 102; X.5).

For all of Austen's reliance on Johnson, Mrs. Musgrove's memories of her son clearly do not work this way. In fact, the ability of Mrs. Musgrove's memories to transmute from her initial impressions actually aligns with the way William Wordsworth represents memory in his early poetry. While Wordsworth's depiction of "the power of images to live and grow in the mind" may not have come to full fruition until *The Prelude* (Sabin 89), an exploration of memory is of central importance to his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, which was already widely popular among "educated middle class readers" by 1811 (Deresiewicz 8, 160). Especially relevant to Austen's depiction of Mrs. Musgrove's grief is "The Two April Mornings." Here, the present seems superimposed over layers and layers of the past, memory upon memory, and the final stanza reveals that even the "present" of the poem is another recollection. Wordsworth's exploration of grief highlights the way "grief can grow rather than diminish through time and forgetfulness" (Deresiewicz 133). The central moment comes when Matthew tells the speaker of a past April when a memory of his late daughter has overtaken him:

Six feet in earth my Emma lay,
And yet I lov'd her more,
For so it seem'd, than till that day
I e'er had lov'd before. (37-40)

The grief is in one sense endlessly deflected through layers of remembering, and in another sense it is more immediate than it has ever been before. There is a certain mystery to the workings of Matthew's memory—a mystery that only deepens when we

learn that “Matthew is in his grave” and that we view him through the speaker’s memory (57). One of the poem’s images of natural profundity, a “fountain from its rocky cave,” evokes other images of lost girls expressed in the Lucy poems. Wordsworth often compares the Lucy figure to a fountain with hidden depths—she lives “Beside the springs of Dove” as “A Violet by a mossy stone / Half-hidden from the Eye!” or she plays by “the mountain springs” and listens “In many a secret place / Where rivulets dance their wayward round” (“Song” 2, 5-6; “Three years...” 15, 27-8). The memories Wordsworth portrays resemble not a repository where images can be safely stored, but a spring with a deep and unknowable source. These memories, like Mrs. Musgrove’s grief, can return unexpectedly and inexplicably, somehow different and stronger than they were before.

When Mrs. Musgrove repeatedly interrupts Wentworth’s stories of his past with her own “fond regrets,” it is as if Austen depicts a mysterious Wordsworthian memory persistently returning to disrupt the logical flow of Wentworth’s recollections and associations (*Persuasion* 56). When Mrs. Musgrove finally succeeds in getting Wentworth’s attention, his reactions speak on multiple registers. It is a testament to the complex dialogue of allusion in the novel that Wentworth responds to her irrational grief with “a certain glance of his bright eye, and curl of his handsome mouth”—traits that various critics have identified as Byronic (Waldron 147, Knox-Shaw 233). Immediately afterward, however, he calmly sits to talk with her and seems to sort out the rational from the irrational, displaying “the kindest consideration for all that was real and unabsurd in the parent’s feelings” (59). If Anne is correct to describe her own continuing attachment

to Wentworth as “absurd,” then Wentworth’s preference for the unabsurd does not bode well for her (53).

Though Austen has been careful to make Wentworth an enigma to this point, as the novel progresses she begins to highlight the contradictions that underlie his continuing regard. Interestingly, Wentworth’s behavior toward Anne in Uppercross and Lyme is more reminiscent of Darcy’s early courtship of Elizabeth than it is of Colonel Brandon’s defeatist attitude toward Marianne. Wentworth, unlike Darcy, is neither shy nor reticent (though they do both claim to possess excessive pride), but both treat their heroines with carefully indifferent politeness punctuated by short and unexpected bursts of interest. The significant difference here is that what Darcy negotiates in his hot and cold reactions to Elizabeth is not only his pride but also his future—he must decide whether he will give way and propose to Elizabeth or proudly maintain his distance. Wentworth’s hot and cold behavior toward Anne is similar, but his shifting attitude is not toward the future, but toward the past. We see Wentworth constantly reassessing what Anne has meant to him. At one moment, Anne’s “power with him was gone forever,” and in another (according to Anne), “He could not forgive her,—but he could not be unfeeling” (54, 77). He asserts that Anne has demonstrated her “feebleness of character” in listening to Lady Russell’s advice, but for the difficult job of nursing Louisa, there is “no one so proper, so capable as Anne!” (54, 95). Wentworth’s malleable impressions of Anne seem to elide Johnson’s depiction of memories as made up of immutable images. These small slippages in Wentworth’s apparently rational behavior hint at what we will find when Austen brings him to his breaking point. Though he may privately sneer at

Mrs. Musgrove's disproportional grief, he is about to experience a "burst of mind" of his own at Lyme.

Louisa's fall on the Cobb is one of the more sensational moments in any Austen novel, so it may seem only natural for Wentworth to react as strongly as he does. However, Wentworth is overcome to a surprising degree. It should not be forgotten that Austen depicts Wentworth as a highly successful naval officer. Peter Knox-Shaw describes the "mind-set" that sailors like Wentworth must adopt to be successful in a naval career, "a profession that is exposed to fatality and hazard at every turn" (225). Noting Wentworth's "make-or-break" attitude toward his time on the *Asp*, Knox-Shaw suggests that Wentworth has been so successful at sea because of his "attitude of self-reliance" and his "sangfroid" (225-6). From this perspective, Wentworth's utter impotence in the face of Louisa's accident seems surprising indeed. Even Captain Benwick is able to help Anne support Henrietta, but Wentworth is incapable of acting at all: "'Is there no one to help me?' were the first words which burst from Captain Wentworth, in a tone of despair, and as if all his own strength were gone" (92). When Harville arrives, we see the type of reaction we may have expected from Wentworth: "Shocked as Captain Harville was, he brought senses and nerves that could be instantly useful" (93). Of course, this accident is part of the way Austen proves Anne's mettle, and the reactions of the others serve to reinforce Anne's commendable presence of mind. However, surely Anne's strength does not require Wentworth's disempowerment, and he certainly could have recognized her worth even if he were capable of acting. Something else is at work here.

Wentworth's disproportionate response seems in some ways to parallel Mrs. Musgrove's. Significantly, he also experiences a grief that seems out of alignment with the actual situation. Without belittling Louisa's character or the seriousness of her injury, we can concede that Wentworth's wildly pained response appears excessive. He clearly esteems her and enjoys her company, but he is also clearly not in love. He later, perhaps unreliably, asserts that "he had not cared, could not care for Louisa," and perhaps this conviction is precisely the origin of his response to her injury (195). If indeed Wentworth's courtship of Louisa has been partly based on inclination and partly based on "angry pride," predicated on a confused, unacknowledged attachment to Anne, his explosive reaction becomes more understandable (195). In Wentworth's cry of "Oh God! her father and mother!" we can read a deep sense of guilt, a realization that Louisa is a young woman who has been innocently drawn to him and to his rather foolhardy advice (92). If it is true that "till that day...he had not understood the perfect excellence of the mind with which Louisa's could so ill bear a comparison," Wentworth's guilt would be compounded by the unexpected realization that he actually still loves Anne (195). The pain and anger of Wentworth's history with Anne has been very present despite his attempts to deny it, and the pressure has been building. His strong response to Louisa's fall may also include the release of these tensions, an unorthodox catharsis that frees him from his emotional lockjaw even as it shackles him with the responsibility for her serious accident. The sudden burst of conflicting emotions and memories leaves him paralyzed. It is one of Austen's more brilliant moves—the guiltier he feels for the fate of this young

woman he realizes he should never have courted, the more in love with Louisa he seems to Anne. Wentworth's character growth here is rough and twisted, difficult to tease out.

Wentworth's period of penitent self-assessment that follows is more typical of Austen, but it continues to present destabilizing contradictions. After the events at Lyme, Wentworth spends six weeks in a sort of purgatory, waiting for news of Louisa's recovery and agonizing over the realization that she and her family may consider them as engaged. He spends this time retracing recent memories and "lamenting the blindness of his own pride" for courting Louisa and refusing to acknowledge his preference for Anne (196). Wentworth's examination of his memory to discover where he has gone wrong and to learn from his mistakes is a process nearly all of Austen's protagonists undertake at pivotal moments—Marianne Dashwood's confession to her sister near the close of *Sense and Sensibility* is a typical example. We encounter a similar sentiment in Darcy's second proposal. As he explains to Elizabeth, "I cannot be so easily reconciled to myself. The recollection of what I then said—of my conduct, my manners, my expressions during the whole of it—is now, and has been many months, inexpressibly painful to me. Your reproof, so well applied, I shall never forget" (352).

This use of memory as a moral corrective is in fact essentially Johnsonian. As Johnson states in *The Rambler*, "It is, indeed, the faculty of remembrance, which may be said to place us in the class of moral agents" (223; no. 41). For Johnson, memory is an essential tool, not just for keeping moral maxims in mind, but for closely scrutinizing past conduct and learning from mistakes instead of glossing over them. Additionally, Johnson uses the persistence of painful regrets to employ memory as a sort of bogeyman,

reminding readers that though the present may be “inconceivably short, yet its effects are unlimited, and there is not the smallest point of time but may extend its consequences...through all eternity, and give us reason to remember it forever, with anguish or exultation” (225; no. 41). The idea is an interesting foil for Wordsworth’s declaration that “in this moment there is life and food / For future years” (“Tintern Abbey” 65-6). While Johnson’s statement emphasizes the permanence of our deeds, Wordsworth’s highlights the possibilities of memory in a poem where the speaker’s painful past is reinterpreted in terms of his present hope. Johnson’s depiction of a review of the past once again paints memory as a permanent, even imprisoning, force: “There is certainly no greater happiness, than to be able to look back on a life usefully and virtuously employed,” but, “Life, made memorable by crimes...is indeed easily reviewed, but reviewed only with horror and remorse” (225; no. 41). This function of memory is essential for Austen as well as Johnson, and the moral failings of her characters are almost always stated in terms of failures of memory. During his period of “penance,” Wentworth subjects his actions to such a review—indeed, his words seem to directly echo Johnson’s when he speaks of “the horror and remorse attending the first few days of Louisa’s accident” (195).

It is precisely here, when Wentworth relies on his memory for moral growth, that we might most expect Wentworth to possess a memory as perfectly rational as Darcy’s, a memory immune to “all attempts of rasure, or of change” (*The Rambler* 224; no. 41). Of course, it is also here that Wentworth evinces a significant misremembering. As he later explains to Anne, his brother remains in the dark about the renewal of his attachment to

Anne, “little suspecting that to my eye you could never alter” (196). Wentworth’s words blatantly contradict his initial conviction that Anne is “wretchedly altered” upon their first meeting at Uppercross (54). Anne, of course, remembers the moment keenly—Wentworth not only privately harbors the idea, but he expresses the sentiment to Mary, who swiftly communicates it to her sister with her typical lack of tact. Wentworth’s memory lapse may seem to undermine his process of self-correction. How can he effectively use his moral memory if his memory itself is still subject to error and revision?

It is not only Wentworth’s view of the past that is skewed, but also his view of the present. In the same conversation, he describes his distress in the days leading up to the proposal, speaking of his conviction that Lady Russell might persuade Anne to marry Mr. Elliot. His description of his fear is overshadowed by his memory: “was not the recollection of what had been, the knowledge of her influence, the indelible, immovable impression of what persuasion had once done—was it not all against me?” (197). Anne reasonably answers that he “should have distinguished” between the present and past and taken into account her strengthened ability to hold out against Lady Russell. Indeed, Wentworth has just declared that he has finally learned to esteem Anne’s “resolution” and “steadiness of principle” (197, 195). Wentworth’s reply casts doubt on the lessons he has so recently learned:

Perhaps I ought to have reasoned thus...but I could not. I could not derive benefit from the late knowledge I had acquired of your character. I could not bring it into play: it was overwhelmed, buried, lost in those earlier feelings which I had been smarting under year after year. (197)

His grief over the past, released in Lyme, overwhelms his judgment, and he errs even in the midst of correcting his past mistakes. Once again, Austen's portrayal of Darcy's memory offers a telling contrast. During the second proposal scene, Darcy tells Elizabeth of his wish, as far back as her visit to Pemberly, to show her that he has learned his lesson and that her "reproofs had been attended to" (354). Moreover, we learn that Darcy "*knew* enough of [Elizabeth's] disposition to be *certain*" of her sincerity in defying Lady Catherine (350, emphasis mine). Both his maturation and his understanding of Elizabeth's character are on solid ground. Wentworth, in contrast, finds himself unable to use such reasoning or knowledge, subject to his memory's irrational, and even inaccurate, grip.

In a system where "memory is the purveyor of reason," Wentworth's mental slippage here is deeply destabilizing (*The Rambler* 223; no. 41). Elsewhere in the novel, however, Austen has been laying the groundwork for such a departure. We have already explored Mrs. Musgrove's unexpected experience of memory's return; another significant instance of this sort of return can be found in Anne's reaction to her first encounter with Wentworth at Uppercross. After their first, brief meeting, Anne, plunged into "agitation," attempts to "reason with herself, and try to be feeling less" (53). Austen's dynamic syntax here, characteristic of the novel, expresses Anne's passionate confusion even in her appeal to logic: "What might not eight years do? Events of every description, changes, alienations, removals,—all, all must be comprised in it; and oblivion of the past—how natural, how certain too!" (53). With the phrase "oblivion of the past," Austen may feel Johnson waiting at her elbow, especially considering that he

defines memory in his dictionary as “Exemption from oblivion” (53, “Memory”). However, Austen subverts this expectation. It is not merely the power of superior memory that brings Anne’s attachment to Wentworth into the present tense: “Alas! with all her reasonings, she found, that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing” (53). Fascinatingly, this conclusion continues to employ Johnson’s vocabulary (the first definition in his entry on memory is “The power of retaining or recollecting things past”), but instead of speaking of retentive *images* or retentive *impressions*, Anne speaks of retentive *feelings*, injecting a new element into a Johnsonian and Lockean paradigm. Just as Mrs. Musgrove interrupts Wentworth’s narrative with her irrational grief, the sudden return of Anne’s abiding attachment interrupts her reliance on Johnsonian constructs of the passage of time. Interestingly, Wentworth’s description of his conviction of Lady Russell’s continuing influence seems to directly echo this move. As Wentworth speaks of the “indelible, immovable impression” of Lady Russell’s powers of persuasion, Austen once again uses language that directly invokes 18th century ideas of memory as a fixed force. However, Wentworth moves on to assert that he was “overwhelmed, buried, lost in those earlier *feelings*” (197, *emph. mine*). In both cases, Austen employs the vocabulary of empiricism only to slip beyond it.

Another more explicit dialogue of allusions takes place at Lyme, as Anne converses with James Benwick. Significantly, their conversation occurs while Wentworth and Harville entertain the room “by recurring to former days” and telling more stories of their shared past (84). Meanwhile, Anne and Benwick discuss the “first-rate poets” who exemplify “the richness of the present age,” among them Lord Byron and

Sir Walter Scott (84). Though Austen herself enjoyed Scott, it is Byron who she emphasizes here, not only in this particular scene, but also later as Anne and Benwick discuss “Lord Byron’s ‘dark blue seas’” moments before Louisa’s accident on the Cobb (91). It is Byron’s poetic persona, of course, who Benwick fashions himself after, apparently using Byron’s “impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony” to mourn the loss of his fiancé (84). Leaving aside the issue of the profundity of Benwick’s enacted grief, the Turkish Tales that Anne and Benwick reference, especially *The Giaour*, add another layer to Austen’s depiction of different kinds of memory. In the figure of the Giaour, Byron creates a character who strives to become a permanent monument to his lost love, remembering and reminding until his own death. To do this, of course, the Giaour must become a “living corse,” a being “pale as marble o’er the tomb” (762, 338). The burden of this undertaking becomes abundantly clear in the Giaour’s final confession, in which he declares, “My memory now is but the tomb / Of joys long dead—my hope—their doom—“ (1000-1). If the Giaour moves on, Leila will, in a sense, die a second death; he must keep her alive by himself serving as a living memory. Significantly, the Giaour’s pain remains fresh partly because Leila’s death at sea has left him no closure. The drowning itself creates a unique space in the poem; Byron depicts the event as a brief, eerie moment devoid of context, a deeply mysterious interlude that is reticent about the “hidden secrets” of Leila’s sinking body (383). For Byron’s Giaour, her disappearance into the ocean does not seem to prove her death:

She sleeps beneath the wandering wave—
Ah! had she but an earthly grave,
This breaking heart and throbbing head
Should seek and share her narrow bed. (1123-6)

There is always the possibility of return, of the sudden discovery of one of the secrets that the sea has kept hidden—“I knew ‘twas false—she could not die!” (1301).

William Deresiewicz connects Byron’s depiction of the sea (and of memory) as “a tomb full of hidden, sleeping secrets” to Mrs. Musgrove’s memory of her son, to Wentworth’s reminder that one of his ships came close to sinking, to Anne’s “retentive feelings,” and to Wentworth’s memory itself: “Anne, or at least his feelings for her, still slumbers at the bottom of the sea of Wentworth’s memory” (132-3). Of course, Anne and Benwick’s first conversation about Byron ends when Anne recommends that Benwick read more prose, suggesting “such works of our best moralists... as calculated to rouse and fortify the mind by highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurance” (85). While Anne may recommend prose (likely Samuel Johnson’s) to counter Benwick’s invocation of Byron’s *Giaour*, Wentworth will later criticize Benwick for not living up to the model. At the concert in Bath, Wentworth expresses his surprise that a man “pierced, wounded, almost broken” would move on so quickly—“A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman!—He ought not—he does not” (148).

Wentworth’s response to Benwick’s engagement is predicated on his rediscovery of his own lost attachment to Anne, and his fullest description of its endurance is much more reminiscent of Byron’s mysterious sea than Locke’s safe repository:

Thus much indeed he was obliged to acknowledge—that he had been constant unconsciously, nay unintentionally; that he had meant to forget her, and believed it to be done. He had imagined himself indifferent, when he had only been angry; and he had been unjust to her merits, because he had been a sufferer from them. (194)

Austen's use of the word "unconsciously" here is significant and unique. The word seemed to hold little significance for Johnson—in fact, it barely appears in *A Dictionary of the English Language*. While Johnson's dictionary includes four definitions for "Conscious" along with two variants, his entry for "Unconscious" is merely a short negative: "Having no mental perception" ("Conscious," "Unconscious"). Johnson's unconsciousness is simply an absence, a lack of mind, the state of Louisa after her fall when she "once opened her eyes, but soon closed them again, without apparent consciousness" (93). While for Locke consciousness may be mandatory for basic subjectivity ("Consciousness alone unites remote existences into one Person."), it is Wentworth's *unconscious* constancy that carries the day, immune to his continual attempts to push Anne away (Locke 248; XXVII.23). This is certainly not a Freudian unconscious, but neither is it Johnson's unconscious, a place of negation and mental inactivity. *Something* is happening beyond Wentworth's awareness.

In fact, concepts of an unconscious were beginning to emerge at the time not only in Romantic poetry, but in contemporary brain science as well. As Alan Richardson convincingly demonstrates in *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, new scientific models of perception and of the mind had a strong presence in the contemporary cultural scene, and poets like Coleridge, Keats, and Wordsworth were

often deeply engaged in examining and addressing new theories. It was around the turn of the century that a succession of scientists like David Hartley, F.J. Gall, Erasmus Darwin, and Charles Bell advanced a biological view of the mind, asserting the mind's location in the brain (Richardson 6). Such theories, which seemed to oppose the idea of an immutable, divine human soul (a cornerstone of traditional Cartesian dualism and Christianity), were often controversial and associated with political radicalism (15). As Richardson points out, Austen's depiction of the substantial change in Louisa's disposition after her blow to the head actually makes something of a stand for a brain-based theory of mind, "a notion that was still considered unproven, unorthodox, and ideologically subversive in Austen's time" (99). Indeed, throughout the novel, Austen's depiction of Anne's embodied experience advances this biological view over the mechanical Lockean model that bases human disposition entirely on external experience and education (6, 94). Moreover, Austen's "innovative style for conveying the heroine's impressions" evokes the era's "new psychological appreciation of unconscious mental life" (94). Ideas of an unconscious usually made their way into brain-based theories by way of the brain sensing and regulating internal bodily processes without conscious input—in Bell's theory, for example, "the brain presides, but in a largely 'secret' fashion, over bodily functioning" (33). Importantly, dreams were considered particularly responsive to "the subtle and pervasive influence of bodily processes—not least those related to sexuality—on psychic life" (45). It seems a small step from here to arrive at a fully blown Romantic unconscious, a profound and mysterious space where Coleridge can discover his *Ancient Mariner* or his *Kubla Khan*. Austen's representation of

Wentworth's "unconscious constancy" evokes one of the central concerns of Romanticism, an exploration of a divided subjectivity, of a mental life than can evade conscious volition.

While Anne may counter Benwick's taste in poetry with recommendations from a rival eighteenth-century tradition, she responds to the mysterious ebb and flow of Wentworth's memory with an instinctive understanding. When he mistakenly proclaims that she "could never alter" to him, she reacts with pleasure: "Anne smiled, and let it pass. It was too pleasing a blunder for reproach" (196). Indeed, "the value of such homage was inexpressibly increased to Anne, by comparing it with former words, and feeling it to be the result, not the cause of a revival of his warm attachment" (196). Anne understands the way Wentworth's returning feelings now overlay his memories, re-contextualizing and even occasionally revising them. The continuing attachment that binds Anne and Wentworth together evokes Locke and Johnson only to slip past them, made up of *unconscious* constancy and retentive *feelings*. Anne and Wentworth's memories resemble Byron's unfathomable sea, a profound space where past impressions can lie hidden or unexpectedly resurface. Like the speakers of Wordsworth's poems, they find recollections taking on new meanings, suffering a sea change before they emerge with a mysterious strength. Nestled beneath Austen's ostensibly eighteenth-century evocations of memory as an immutable impression or a tool to be used for moral growth lies a deep current of an irrational, Romantic memory that ultimately, provokingly, revives Anne and Wentworth's lost love.

Though Wentworth's memory initially divides him from Anne in Bath, it ultimately allows him to reunite with her. He is spurred to write his letter to her, of course, when she and Harville discuss male and female constancy. Anne's conclusion, that women possess the fidelity of "loving the longest, when existence or when hope is gone," is a testament to recollection without an object, to constancy out of proportion, to a memory of love that irrationally endures (189). Wentworth's sensitivity to the feelings she relates brings about his letter, but it seems unlikely that he actually hears her conclusion, as the end of the letter refers to an earlier part of the conversation, and as we see Wentworth "folding up a letter in great haste" just moments after Anne's words (190). This actual disconnect paired with an enduring understanding are emblematic of their relationship in the whole of the novel. Their connection is not ensured by logical or even factual truths, but by a shared history, by the power to discover new meanings in past events, and by the power of a memory in which retentive feelings can submerge and resurface.

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“NAY MAMA, IF HE IS NOT TO BE ANIMATED BY COWPER!”: JANE AUSTEN,
WILLIAM COWPER AND MARIANNE DASHWOOD’S EVOCATIVE
SENSIBILITY

“My father reads Cowper to us in the evening,” Jane Austen wrote in a 1798 letter, “to which I listen when I can” (*Jane Austen’s Letters* 28). Readers of *Sense and Sensibility* will notice the parallel to a scene in which Marianne Dashwood complains about Edward Ferrars’s stilted reading of Cowper: “Oh! mama, how spiritless, how tame was Edward’s manner in reading to us last night!” (14). The reactions of Austen and of her character are very different in tone, but both convey a sincere enjoyment of the poetry of William Cowper. It is surprising, then, to note the dearth of scholarly examination of Austen’s use of Cowper in her novels. While critics have recently focused on Austen’s connections with Romantic poets, situating her work in the context of the Romantic movement, studies focusing on “this favorite poet of Austen, of Marianne Dashwood, and of Fanny Price” are few (*S&S* xvi). As William Deresiewicz puts it, Cowper, “whom

virtually everyone acknowledges as a major influence, has scarcely ever been investigated as such” (162).²

Such an oversight is especially problematic in the case of *Sense and Sensibility*, a work in which the enjoyment and assessment of art plays a highly significant role. On a general level, characters in the novel often engage in multilayered discussions of taste and artistic merit. In scenes that center on Elinor’s painted screens, Marianne’s piano performances, or picturesque landscapes, characters use questions of aesthetic merit to discuss subjects that are less amenable to open conversation and, in the process, reveal their habits of mind and heart. Moreover, for Marianne in particular (and for Colonel Brandon and even Elinor), the assessment of art and the assessment of character are linked. When Marianne addresses what she feels to be an insuperable impediment to Edward’s status as her sister’s lover—that he has “no taste for drawing”—Elinor does not dismiss the idea as trivial, but rather engages with Marianne in a serious conversation about his “general taste” (15). Marianne consistently uses the question of taste as a

² Though Deresiewicz acknowledges this dearth, he does little to redress it, treating Cowper—along with Richardson, Johnson, and Burney—largely as an early influence that Austen moved beyond to create her best work. Other pieces that focus on Cowper’s influence include “The Worlds of *Emma*: Jane Austen and Cowper,” in which John Halperin focuses on the perspectives and blind spots of the characters in *Emma*, a theme he argues that Austen has developed from Cowper. In “Does it not make you think of Cowper?: Rural Sport in Jane Austen and Her Contemporaries,” Barbara K. Seeber examines Austen’s use of Cowper’s criticism of hunting. A particularly interesting piece is Bharat Tandon’s “Singing the Sofa: *Mansfield Park* and William Cowper,” in which Tandon presents a nuanced and incisive look at Austen and Cowper’s depictions of the ease and danger of comfortable domestic spaces. It is especially refreshing to see Tandon highlight Cowper’s influence on Austen’s craftsmanship, rather than just her themes, when he asserts that she develops Cowper’s “poetic mappings of physical onto psychological space,” expanding upon Martin Priestman’s examination of *The Task* (172).

barometer to measure the merit of those she encounters, most strikingly with potential suitors. Willoughby, of course, is immediately endeared when their first conversation reveals that “the same books, the same passages were idolized by each” and that he esteems Cowper and Scott “as he ought” (36). While Colonel Brandon earns her “respect” by giving serious attention to her piano playing, she deems Edward an inadequate suitor time and time again by his passionless reading of Cowper, his disdain for the picturesque, his gentle mockery of her favorite authors (27). Indeed, each of the novel’s explicit mentions of Cowper occurs in a conversation about the merits of a suitor.

Not only does Marianne use art to assess others, she also uses it to form her own worldview. Her initial condemnation of Edward occurs on two fronts—not only is he unable to appreciate Cowper, but “his figure is not striking...His eyes want all that spirit, that fire, which at once announce virtue and intelligence” (14). Of course, these characteristics do not belong to anyone Marianne actually knows; rather, they are what she “should expect in the man who could seriously attach” Elinor (14). Similarly, Willoughby’s first recommendation is that “his person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favorite story” (33). She has internalized the tropes and values of the contemporary literature of sensibility; as Margaret Anne Doody asserts, Marianne “lives in a world created by her reading of poetry, especially Cowper” (*S&S* xv).

In a work where questions of taste are often used as a vocabulary to work through larger issues, and, moreover, where one of the protagonists uses art as a primary means of understanding her world, it is certainly worthwhile to examine the influence of one of the

few poets cited by name. In fact, Austen uses Cowper to explore one of her novel's fundamental themes—sensibility. The link between artistic taste and sensibility in the novel is a close one. Myra Stokes writes that Austen uses the word 'taste' to describe "an instinctive responsive sympathy" to art, a definition that connects aesthetic taste to contemporary theories of sensationist psychology that described perception in terms of responsive nerves—theories that, of course, were the backbone of the concept of sensibility (Stokes 150).³ The connection between taste and sensibility in the novel becomes especially clear when Austen twice connects reading with sensibility; while Edward "read with so little sensibility," Willoughby "read with...sensibility and spirit" (*S&S* 14, 37).

Of course, critics have often used this connection to highlight the damage wrought by Marianne's disposition and reading habits. Robert W. Uphaus asserts that "Marianne Dashwood represents precisely the kind of female reader of sensibility whose romantic turn of mind...does indeed produce 'great Errors in Judgment'" (337). Similarly, Beth Lau writes that "Marianne...errs by judging others and modeling her own behavior according to a script she has learned from her reading of sentimental novels and impassioned poetry, including Cowper's" (182). In such quotations, Marianne's personality and literary taste are equated with her mistakes, and it seems that her sensibility is an entirely negative trait. Other scholars, however, have emphasized the complexity of Austen's depiction of a character who shares many of her own tastes and

³ For more on sensibility, see G.J. Barker-Benfield's *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Ann Jessie Van Sant's *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel*, and R.F. Brissenden's *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade*.

whose “abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor’s” (*S&S* 6). Margaret Anne Doody writes that “a complication of the novel is the amount of feeling Austen encourages the reader to have for Marianne” (xv). William Deresiewicz, citing the work of Marvin Mudrick, asserts that “Austen feared what she most loved... She esteemed ‘Elinor,’ but she loved ‘Marianne.’ She esteemed Pope, of all the poets she encountered in her youth, but she loved Cowper” (7).

Regardless of Austen’s “true” feelings toward this polarizing character, she places Cowper’s poetry at the crux of Marianne’s cultivated sensibility and of her relation to the outside world. An exploration of the novel’s engagement with Cowper exposes the multifaceted nature of Marianne’s sensibility, showing the way she “reads” and enacts the poet’s ideas not merely to form fallacious conclusions and indulge in deleterious habits, but also to enrich and expand her inner life. Ultimately, Austen uses Cowper’s fond and nuanced description of a rural, domestic life in communion with nature to give Marianne the resources to handle dislocation and suffering, and she evokes his model of irreparably isolating pain in Marianne’s breakdown, depicting Marianne’s sensibility as a complex and ambiguous trait that can turn in upon itself to isolate her from others, can effect a larger protest against her disenfranchisement, and can ultimately give her the tools to heal.

Marianne’s connection to rural nature is often handled with skepticism, not only by critics, but also in the novel itself by Elinor and Austen’s narrator. However, an examination of Austen’s references to Cowper suggests that Austen uses the poet to add a depth and authenticity to this connection. Far from a flat enactment of literary tropes,

Marianne's love for nature functions in the work in a mixed and complex way, enriching her experiences and providing an outlet for pain even as it submits her to charges of affectation and self-indulgence.

The first scene of the novel that focuses exclusively on Marianne also introduces some of these mixed qualities. On the night before the family's departure from their home, Marianne "wandered alone before the house" to say her "last adieus to a place so much beloved" (21). Her impassioned apostrophe to the trees of Norland is treated with a certain amount of gentle mockery—as Elinor later remarks, "It is not everyone... who has your passion for dead leaves" (67). The goodbye is heartfelt, but it also emulates literary tropes—as Kenneth L. Moler notes, "Flowery addresses to beloved spots were part of the stock in trade of the heroine of sensibility" (59). Indeed, Rosemarie Bodenheimer harshly dubs it "a piece of sentimental effusion which seems an early experiment in comic self-projection" (608). The derivative nature of her behavior here is particularly damning in light of the fact that Marianne highly prizes genuine feeling and originality, proclaiming, "sometimes I have kept my feelings to myself, because I could find no language to describe them in but what was worn and hackneyed out of all sense and meaning" (73). Margaret Anne Doody uses such inconsistencies to undermine the whole of Marianne's relation to nature, asserting that "Her aesthetic sense, her love for wild trees, rugged hills, and dead leaves, is a mediated and artificial sense" (*S&S* xvi). Moreover, the scene is part of a longer process by which Marianne and her mother have been purposely cultivating and augmenting their grief over the loss of Mr. Dashwood and Norland. While Elinor sensibly exerts herself to control her sorrow and attend to

neglected duties, Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood, with characteristic “excess of...sensibility” pursue “increase of wretchedness in every reflection that could afford it” and vow “against ever admitting consolation in future” (6). As Marianne bids goodbye to the estate, Austen already lays the groundwork for Marianne’s eventual breakdown and the family’s neglect of Elinor.

However, a look at the scene’s connections to Cowper sheds a different light on the matter. In a general sense, nearly all of Cowper’s work is suffused with a profound and generative love for the natural world and the rural domestic life that allows its enjoyment. For Cowper, only the countryside fosters the pursuit of the fruitful and moral life, offering individual liberty as well as a balance of labor and ease. As he proclaims in *The Task*, “But slighted as it is...the country wins me still. / I never framed a wish or formed a plan / That flattered me with hopes of earthly bliss, / But there I laid the scene” (IV.691, 694-7). Indeed, in a 1784 letter to William Unwin, Cowper explains of his poem that “the whole has one tendency. To discountenance the modern enthusiasm of a London Life, and to recommend rural ease and leisure, as friendly to the cause of piety and virtue” (qtd. in Priestman 11). Austen herself strongly associated Cowper with a love of rural life, writing in an 1813 about a departing manservant, “I am glad William’s going is voluntary, & on no worse grounds. An inclination for the Country is a venial fault.— He has more of Cowper than of Johnson in him, fonder of Tame Hares & Blank verse than of the full tide of human Existence at Charing Cross” (*Jane Austen’s Letters* 260).

This theme is often examined in *The Task* through evocative and far-reaching descriptions of rural walks. Cowper uses this device several times in the work, and

generally to good effect. It offers an opportunity to explore a multitude of themes while maintaining a consistent conceit; moreover, it provides a framework with which to understand the loose and even “baffling” structure of Cowper’s long work (Priestman 2). In his detailed study of the poem’s structure, Martin Priestman highlights “the importance of Cowper’s recurrent images of wandering, as if through the landscape of the poem.” Cowper’s use of “the language of wandering” signals his “deliberate and declared use of a stream-of-consciousness literary practice that follows on from Locke’s theory of the association of ideas” (3-4). Rather than adhering to a cohesive argument or plan, Cowper is “straying unassumingly through the mind” (Priestman 154). At times, Cowper’s work explicitly acknowledges this connection between the walk and his poem’s wandering trajectory—at the beginning of “The Garden,” he admits he has “rambled wide” in his attempt “to adorn the Sofa with eulogism due” (62). His digression has caused him to resemble “one who, long in thickets and in brakes / Entangled, winds now this way and that,” “But now, with pleasant pace, a cleaner road / I mean to tread” (61, 62).

Joseph F. Musser has demonstrated the way this rhetorical method actually emulates one of Cowper and Austen’s (and Marianne’s) pet concepts—the picturesque. As the walker moves through scenery, constantly shifting perspective, the poem wanders through related and contrasting subjects, and our gaze is directed toward a picturesque variation and roughness rather than to a static equilibrium (521). As Musser illustrates, the poem skillfully acts out Coleridge’s definition of the picturesque, in which “the parts only are seen and distinguished, but the whole is felt” (518).

Marianne's apostrophe to Norland evokes Cowper's extended walks in *The Task* when we learn that she "wandered alone" outside her beloved home, enjoying the grounds without any utilitarian aim (21). Moreover, her focus on the "well-known trees" recalls a section in "The Sofa" when he explores the "woodland scene" (S&S 21, *The Task* I.300). As his gaze "roves" through the various beauties of nature he encounters, he alights on a wood where "the gray smooth trunks / Of ash, or lime, or beech, distinctly shine, / Within the twilight of their distant shades" (I.288, 302-4). His walk celebrates not only wild trees, but also cultivated avenues and colonnades that offer "shaded walks / And long-protracted bowers" (I.256-7).

Cowper's description, however, also contains hints of loss—even as he walks under "chestnuts ranged in corresponding lines," he implies that such colonnades are subject to the changing tastes of the time; they are a "monument of ancient taste, / Now scorned, but worthy of a better fate" (I.263, 253-4). His comment refers to the contemporary trend of estate improvement, a movement widespread enough for Cowper to dub it "the idol of the age" (III.764). In her article about female landowners in eighteenth-century England, Briony A. K. McDonagh includes specific examples of estate improvement that run the gamut from practical to aesthetic. One widow, Elizabeth Prowse, conducted a range of improvements that included the construction or repair of riding paths, gravel walks, gates, water pumps, barns, and fences. By the time of her death, "she had landscaped the house and park, rebuilt the church, established the village school and improved the agricultural estate by introducing new machinery, new crops, drainage and long-term leases" (155). While such actions were meant to enhance the

productivity of the estate and the quality of life of its residents, improvements often also entailed drastic changes that were viewed by critics such as Cowper as unnecessary and destructive. Elizabeth Prowse herself commented in her accounting notebook on some of the previous owner's improvements—as McDonagh writes, “she records how her father-in-law had cut down the avenue at Grafton Park and drained, or as she put it, ‘destroyed’, the pond. She clearly disapproved of his decision to cut down the trees, noting how the avenue had given the previous landowner particular pleasure” (156). Rather than exhibiting naïve sentimentalism, Cowper's praise of the avenue is part of his serious criticism of such landowners who he felt treated their land as an instrumental means to a self-serving end.

Cowper returns to this theme after his description of the forest, lamenting, “Ye fallen avenues! Once more I mourn / Your fate unmerited, once more rejoice / That yet a remnant of your race survives” (I.338-40). Of course, Austen refers to this line directly in *Mansfield Park* during a discussion of Mr. Rushmore's plans to improve Sotherton. As the bumbling landowner speculates that cutting down more trees would enhance the view, Fanny responds, “Cut down an avenue! What a pity! Does it not make you think of Cowper?” (MP 46). Moreover, in *Emma* we learn that Mr. Knightley's estate has benefitted from his resistance to such projects—Emma feels an “honest pride” at the sight of Donwell Abbey, with “its ample gardens...of which the Abbey, with all the old neglect of prospect, had scarcely a sight—and its abundance of timber in rows and avenues, which neither fashion nor extravagance had rooted up” (260). Indeed, as Alastair

Duckworth asserts, “So important is estate improvement in Jane Austen’s novels that a case can be made for its role as a connecting thesis in her work” (26).

Marianne’s apostrophe to Norland may seem free of such considerations. However, in spite of naively assuming that “No leaf will decay because we are removed, nor any branch become motionless although we can observe you no longer,” her parting line contains a hint of the threat that Fanny and John Dashwood’s ownership carries—“But who will remain to enjoy you?” (21). She returns to a similar theme when Edward’s visit to Barton promises new information on the current state of Norland. This time it is Elinor who maintains that Norland “probably looks much as it always does at this time of year. The woods and walks thickly covered with dead leaves” (67). Marianne good-naturedly brushes off her sarcasm and continues: “with what transporting sensations have I formerly seen them fall! How have I delighted, as I walked, to see them driven in showers about me by the wind!” (67). Her words once again echo Cowper’s description of the colonnade, where “beneath, / The chequered earth seems restless as a flood / Brushed by wind” and “the leaves / Play wanton, every moment, every spot” (*The Task* I.343-4, 348-9). She concludes her rapture ominously: “Now there is no one to regard them. They are seen only as a nuisance, swept hastily off, and driven as much as possible from the sight” (67). Indeed, Elinor will later learn from John Dashwood that the improvement of Norland is already underway—Fanny desires a greenhouse, and “The old walnut trees are all come down to make room for it” (170). In light of such mismanagement, Marianne’s impassioned farewell may seem less excessive.

In John and Fanny Dashwood's ownership of Norland Park, Austen's implicit criticism of estate improvement elides into criticism of a much thornier practice—enclosure. Julie Park explains that *Sense and Sensibility* “was written and published just as the enclosure movement accelerated and reached its peak,” and in Elinor's conversation with John Dashwood, he also discusses “the inclosure of Norland Common” and the purchase of a nearby farm that will further consolidate his control of the land (Park 237, *S&S* 167). The conversation hits a variety of notes—John's gentle but implacable selfishness, his amusing self-pity, his obliviousness to the picturesque, and finally his reshaping, even objectification of the land (the new greenhouse “will be a very fine object from many parts of the park”) (170). Austen's tone is controlled throughout—we learn once, for example, that “Elinor could only smile,” a sentence that suggests that John is amusing and somewhat harmless, since Elinor can see through his self-serving rhetoric, but that also highlights Elinor's powerlessness, not only in relation to Norland, but even in the conversation (169). She must smile. She has no alternative.

This conversation also aligns Elinor and Marianne with Norland Park, for we soon see John Dashwood rate the beauty and monetary value of his half sisters in the same manner. Just as the new greenhouse will be “a very fine object” and the flower garden will be “exceedingly pretty,” Marianne, before her illness, “was as handsome a girl...as any I ever saw; and as likely to attract the men,” though now she is only liable to fetch “five or six hundred a-year, at the utmost” in marriage (170, 171). Elinor, of course, may now “do better” by marrying Colonel Brandon (171). Here, Marianne's love for Norland's trees and her open censure of John and Fanny set her up as a lone

dissenting voice, for Elinor “kept her concern and her censure to herself; and was very thankful that Marianne was not present, to share the provocation” (170). Marianne’s love for the picturesque, earlier viewed by Elinor with amusement, now hovers on the edges of the scene, a protest rendered silent.

While Cowper does not directly address enclosure in *The Task*, he expresses his “partiality to a Common” in a 1785 letter, regretting the loss of the common’s “wild odours”: “We have no such here. If there ever were any such in this country, the inclosures have long since destroyed them” (*William Cowper: Selected Letters* 118). The letter refers to a short section in *The Task* where Cowper describes a “common overgrown with fern” that “yields no unpleasing ramble” (I.526, 530). At least one contemporary poet, John Clare, enlisted Cowper’s poetry in his protest against the loss of the common. In “Lines on ‘Cowper,’” Clare hails Cowper as “the Poet of the field / Who found the muse on common ground” (1-2). Cowper’s precedent seems to have encouraged Clare’s own celebrations of “common ground.” In “Helpston Green,” this celebration becomes a powerful protest of the enclosure of the “injur’d fields” of Helpston Heath:

But now alas your awthorn bowers
All desolate we see
The tyrants hand their shade devours
And cuts down every tree. (1, 5-8)

Clare’s “Farwell delightful spot farwell” seems to resonate, however imperfectly, with Marianne’s “last adieus to a place so much beloved,” and though the perspective of the

rural laborer is absent in the novel, Marianne remains a voice of dissent who protests when Elinor can “only smile” (“Helpston Green” 49, *S&S* 21, 169). Austen’s references to Cowper in Marianne’s rhapsodies on nature sharpen this criticism of John Dashwood’s power over Norland Park and its past inhabitants.

Despite her habit of nourishing her own pain, Marianne also uses the natural world to compensate for dislocation. After her rhapsody to Edward about the dead leaves of Norland, Marianne falls “into a reverie for a few moments,” obviously regretting both Norland and Willoughby. However, “rousing herself again,” she then points out the view of Barton—“here is Barton valley. Look up it, and be tranquil if you can. Look at those hills! Did you ever see their equals?” (67). However often Elinor may (justly) criticize Marianne for unnecessarily augmenting her own grief, here we see that Marianne has, of her own accord, successfully used her love of nature both to acknowledge her pain at the loss of Norland and to redirect her thoughts toward the new beauties of Barton.

As Marianne encounters new sorrows, she continues to turn to nature. We learn of Barton that “the whole country about them abounded in beautiful walks” and that “the high downs...invited them from almost every window of the cottage to seek exquisite enjoyment of air on their summits” (31). After Willoughby’s sudden departure, Marianne relies extensively on these walks—the morning after he leaves, she “walked out by her self, and wandered about the village of Allenham.” These “solitary walks” become a daily occurrence (63). It is certainly possible to view Marianne’s behavior here in a negative light—Austen explicitly condemns her “indulgence of feeling” (63). Moreover, her behavior is tied to her preconceived romantic ideas; she “would have thought herself

very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby” (63).

However, once Marianne has achieved a “calmer melancholy,” the nature of these walks grows more ambiguous (63). Interestingly, Austen’s descriptions of these walks begin to show the influence of Cowper. I have already mentioned the importance of the concept of wandering to *The Task*—Cowper’s “language of wandering” is significant not only to the speaker’s protracted walks, but also to the poem’s structure (Priestman 4). In “The Winter Walk at Noon,” for example, Cowper rejoices,

Here unmolested, through whatever sign
The sun proceeds, I wander; neither mist,
Nor freezing sky, nor sultry, checking me,
Nor stranger intermeddling with my joy. (VI.295-8)

This solitary walk seems a model for Marianne’s daily excursions—she has a habit of “wandering away by herself” and “wandering from place to place in free and luxurious solitude,” and she “carefully avoided every companion in her rambles” (65, 229).

Austen’s repeated use of wandering hardly seems accidental. There is evidence that her knowledge of *The Task* extended to minute particulars—in an 1807 letter, she refers to “The Winter Walk at Noon,” alluding offhand to a specific flower mentioned only once in the long poem: “I could not do without a Syringa, for the sake of Cowper’s line” (*Jane Austen’s Letters* 124). It hardly seems likely, then, that the connection to Cowper’s “wandering muse” would escape her (*The Task* III.692). Marianne’s engagement with Cowper, who has “loved the rural walk” and delights in “a ramble on the banks of

Thames,” suggests that her coping mechanism may not be entirely fallacious (I.109, 115). Austen seems to reinforce this connection when we learn upon Willoughby’s departure that Marianne “read nothing but what they had been used to read together”—including, of course, Cowper (63).

It is significant that Marianne’s most raw heartbreak occurs in London, where she is estranged from nature and unable to escape the claustrophobic, often crowded indoors. The morning after Willoughby’s rejection, Marianne can find no outlet for her “nervous irritability,” and, unable even to go out unchaperoned, she must “wander about the house...avoiding the sight of every body” (134). This activity serves as the unfulfilling city counterpart to her rural walks. Indeed, not only is Marianne unable to channel her nervous energy into brisk walks, but we find Elinor consistently endeavoring to make her still. She attempts “to sooth and tranquilize her,” urges her “to get some quiet rest,” and uses lavender drops to render her “quiet and motionless” (134, 147, 143). Elinor, with her usual practicality, does the best she can to take care of her sister. There is no physical outlet for Marianne’s desire for “solitude and continual change of place,” so Elinor supplies the alternative—rest and unconsciousness (134).

This time of confinement and unhappiness lasts for two months, and it is not difficult to sympathize with Marianne when we learn that “she sighed for the air, the liberty, the quiet of the country; and fancied that if any place could give her ease, Barton must do it” (210). This passage positively resonates with the influence of Cowper. The freedom and beauty of the country and the claustrophobia and moral decay of the city are themes throughout *The Task*—in “The Winter Evening,” for instance, Cowper mentions

the villas in the midst of “the stifling bosom” of London, asserting that they prove “That man, immured in cities, still retains / His inborn inextinguishable thirst / Of rural scenes” (IV.766-8).

Moreover, the “ease” and “liberty” that Marianne longs for are both key concepts in the poem. Cowper’s use of ease is closely connected to his conception of life in the countryside. Much of the work done in the poem revolves around a tension between labor and ease, work and leisure, motion and rest. The multiple meanings of “ease” lend themselves to his questioning of these binaries—the lazy may overindulge in a life of restful ease, or the active may jump “the stile with ease” (13). The ease offered by the sofa may accommodate those who are tired after labor as well as the indolent.

Significantly, Cowper sees his work as inhabiting a balance between the labor of fulfilling his poetic task and the ease of a life of contemplation in the countryside. Sarah Houghton-Walker suggests that Cowper’s attempt at such a balance is actually unsuccessful, for “ultimately ‘ease’ itself seems hideously unattainable for one who sees his own damnation everywhere” (657). From this perspective, many of the passages where he discusses the ideal mix of labor and ease come off as self-defensive.

In “The Garden,” Cowper elucidates his stance and defends his position. He begins by nettling against (possibly internal) critics—“How various his employments, whom the world / Calls idle, and who justly in return / Esteems that busy world an idler, too!” (III.352-4). Though the scope of Cowper’s life is mostly encompassed by “Friends, books, a garden, and perhaps his pen...And nature in her cultivated trim,” he does not

lack “delightful industry enjoyed at home” (III.355-7). The tension between the two ideas is obvious as Cowper continues:

Me, therefore, studious of laborious ease,
Not slothful; happy to deceive the time,
Not waste it; and aware that human life
Is but a loan to be repaid with use. (III.361-4)

Though the passage soon collapses into Cowper’s anxiety about the God who will “call His debtors to account” for the life he has lent them, the poet’s affirmation of his “laborious ease” is a moment where his calling and his lifestyle seem to mesh perfectly, and labor and ease finally unify into one phrase (III.365). When Marianne feels that only “Barton could give her ease,” then, she does not desire a further period of self-indulgence or a mental holiday from suffering, but rather a time of productive rest, a return to her piano, to her books, and to a healing industriousness.

Austen’s reference to the “liberty” of the countryside is similarly evocative. Throughout the poem, liberty functions as an essential prerequisite for what Cowper considers a “civil life” (I.596). It is unacceptable for tyrants, slavers, or sinners to deprive others of their freedom, for “’Tis liberty alone that gives the flower / Of fleeting life its lustre and perfume” (V.466-7). Liberty is precious not only because it allows the development of civilization, but also because it allows Cowper to choose a life in the countryside. In his celebration of the rural life in “The Winter Evening,” he asserts that he longed for the country “ere yet liberty of choice / Had found me, or the hope of being free” (IV.698-9). Cowper’s insistence that “All constraint, / Except what wisdom lays on

evil men, / Is evil,” is a statement that Marianne, often disdainful of those who censure her behavior and generally reliant on her own conscience over the maxims of others, would surely identify with (V.488-50). Interestingly, Margaret Anne Doody suggests that “Marianne’s name signals some danger” because “it was the name used in revolutionary France at the time to signify a female figure of liberty” (xv).

Upon the arrival at Cleveland, Marianne finally achieves her desired “country liberty” (229). This scene is one of the few instances in which the narrator seems to enter fully and lengthily into Marianne’s perspective, and we learn many of the details of her walk and the emotions that accompany it. Her deleterious self-induced grief continues; she knows that she is thirty miles from Combe Magna, and she bathetically gazes at “the farthest ridge of hills on the horizon” because she guesses that the estate may be viewable “from their summits” (229). Though she continues to cultivate her “invaluable misery,” other elements of her walk seem surprisingly healthy (229). When Marianne extends her walk “feeling all the happy privilege of country liberty, of wandering from place to place in free and luxurious solitude,” Austen once again reinforces Cowper’s liberty, wandering, and solitude, suggesting that Marianne’s actions reflect sincere enjoyment and release (229).

Moreover, the contrast between Marianne’s behavior here and her behavior in town is telling. After Willoughby’s rejection, she obviously finds no pleasure in outings, whether for errands or for visits with Lady Middleton that even Elinor finds insipid. She eventually yields to Elinor’s influence and accompanies her on many such trips, but her inanimation in the event is striking—we learn that “it was become a matter of indifference to

her, whether she went or not: and she prepared quietly and mechanically for every evening's engagement, though without expecting the smallest amusement from any, and very often without knowing till the last moment, where it was to take her" (186). The arrival in Cleveland, however, seems to do away with this indifferent, mechanical behavior. She takes surprisingly strong initiative: "before she had been five minutes within [the house]...she quitted it again" (228). On her walk, she "resolved" to spend as much time as possible outside, and when rain prevents her evening ramble, she finds the library on her own and "soon procured herself a book" (229-230). Her walks continue to increase in scope, and she ranges "all over the grounds, and especially in the most distant parts of them" (231). Even when her fever begins, Marianne continues "engaging in her accustomed employments" (231).

It may seem as though Marianne later criticizes herself for these actions, maintaining that, "My illness, I well knew, had been entirely brought on by myself, by such negligence of my own health, as I had felt even at the time to be wrong" (262). However, she speaks here of "negligence" rather than harmful *action*, and, as we have seen, it is in town where her behavior is so strongly typified by inattention and indifference, while her arrival to the country immediately sparks initiative and resolve. Her long walks where "the grass was the longest and wettest" may have given her a cold, but the situation only becomes serious when it is "assisted by the still greater imprudence of sitting in her wet shoes and stockings" (231). The illness worsens when Marianne denies most of the "remedies" Elinor proposes, trusting instead to "good night's rest" to

“cure her entirely” (231). The countryside, Cowper’s “patroness of health and ease,” is the site of Marianne’s battle with fever, but it is not the cause of it (IV.780).

Austen’s depiction of Marianne’s rhapsodic engagement with nature, from her affected addresses to trees to her walking habits, may not be uniformly helpful, but it lends her intelligence and a rich inner life. Austen’s allusions to Cowper illuminate the sound judgment behind Marianne’s longing for the liberty and ease of her rural home and suggest that her recourse to solitary wandering is sincere and even salubrious. Moreover, Austen’s evocation of Cowper’s poetry sharpens her critique of estate improvement, a critique that also implicates enclosure and the disenfranchisement of Marianne and Elinor.

Early in *The Task*, Cowper’s discussion of the universal longing for liberty and rural nature takes an abrupt turn. After describing the delights of a freed prisoner and the yearnings of an invalid, Cowper turns his attention to a mariner suffering from calenture, a hallucinatory fever believed to be the result of tropical heat (Priestman 63). In the mariner, “his very heart athirst / To gaze at Nature in her green array,” the desire for nature and for liberty are combined with a sudden act of crazed despair:

Upon the ship’s tall side he stands, possess’d
With visions prompted by intense desire;
Far fields appear below, such as he left
Far distant, such as he would die to find—
He seeks them headlong, and is seen no more. (I.450-4)

The green of the sea becomes an image that at once evokes the beauty of nature, the sailor’s terrestrial home, and the hereafter, and the mariner dives into the water in a

desperate attempt to unite with the vision. Martin Priestman describes the passage as “a moment...where the image of drowning appears so starkly and is so strikingly placed, that it comes at every reading like a physical shock” (63). The turn in this passage is a rather representative example of the other side of Cowper’s poetry, a darkness that is often alarmingly close at hand in the speaker’s moments of comfort and triumph.

Cowper’s images of pain and despair are also present in *Sense and Sensibility*; indeed, they are central to Austen’s depiction of Marianne’s solitary suffering. An examination of Marianne’s enactment of Cowper’s example here is less exonerating of her behavior, but it is equally helpful in decoding it, unpacking her responses to those who try to understand her pain and illuminating the complex nature of her damaging reliance on certain tropes of sensibility. Austen’s evocation of Cowper serves to further complicate her depiction of Marianne’s sensibility, which initially seems to turn in on and negate itself but which ultimately offers Marianne a path toward recovery.

Of course, any sort of direct equation between the experiences of Cowper and of Austen’s character is problematic; while Marianne experiences intense heartbreak, she is still represented as essentially healthy. Cowper, on the other hand, suffered from severe and prolonged bouts of depression that led to several suicide attempts and ultimately left him convinced that he was inexplicably damned by the God he ardently worshipped (Newey 41-2). I certainly do not wish to make comparisons that belittle Cowper’s lifelong struggle with mental illness—rather, I wish to illuminate the way Austen’s character latches onto the concepts of suffering that Cowper outlines in his poetry and uses them to augment her own pain.

Cowper's drowned mariner returns to *The Task*, in a way, in his description of Kate. Significantly, Kate can be seen as the collateral damage of the mariner's suicide, for she "fell in love / With one who left her, went to sea and died"; indeed, Priestman argues that Kate's depiction "revives and rounds out the drowned-mariner image" (I.537-8, Priestman 65). An image of female isolation, despair, and return to nature, Kate embodies a response to pain typical of contemporary representations of (usually female) characters of deep sensibility. As a literary precedent for Marianne, Kate demonstrates that the loss of the beloved should effectively end life. Just as Marianne rambles as much as possible through the environs of Barton, Kate "wanders" on the cliffs near the sea, alone except when she receives occasional charity, for when "she heard the doleful tidings" of her lover's death, she "never smiled again" (I.545-6). Indeed, Marianne conceives of her own grief after Willoughby's rejection as "a misery which nothing can do away" (138).

Claudia Johnson describes such ideas as typical of the literature of sensibility—"the dementia and decay of the wronged woman was a commonplace upheld in... firmly canonized British novels" (160). Indeed, it is significant that Marianne is not the only one who holds such notions—characters as diverse as John Willoughby, John Dashwood, and even on occasion Mrs. Jennings see Marianne's decline as inevitable. Johnson outlines the political ramifications of this expectation, pointing out,

...the discreetly conducted death not only of injured heroines like Marianne but also of any women whom circumstances have made disagreeably redundant—widows, stepmothers, spinsters—at once clears the conscience and strengthens the economic interests of the respectably entrenched power. (165)

Rather than grappling with the destabilizing presence of “redundant” women who may disturb the line of patrilineal succession, respectable society is able to sentimentalize their woeful fate (165-6). Marianne’s physical decline in the face of Willoughby’s rejection, even her disdain for “second attachments,” may gratify her own feelings, but they also both serve to uphold the interests of John and Fanny. Marianne’s resemblance to Cowper’s Kate does not bode well for her.

Later in *The Task*, Cowper describes another image of suffering that offers a significant insight into his depiction of sensibility. He introduces the episode with an endorsement of sympathy as a practice:

It seems the part of wisdom, and no sin
Against the law of love, to measure lots
With less distinguish’d than ourselves, that thus
We may with patience bear our mod’rate ills,
And sympathize with others, suffering more. (IV.336-40)

Cowper’s explanation here is a typical expression of what were believed to be the salubrious effects of sensibility. As Jennifer Keith explains, poetry like Cowper’s “strives to evoke sympathy, prompting the reader to sympathize with the speaker’s suffering or emulate the speaker’s sympathy for another” (127). Such sympathy was believed to be “positive and socially efficacious” (Keith 127). Cowper’s description of a lone, weary winter traveler at first seems to fulfill these conditions. However, he soon moves on to deny the traveler feeling: “Oh happy! and in my account, denied / That sensibility of pain with which / Refinement is endued, thrice happy thou” (IV.357-9).

The traveler may feel “the piercing cold,” but his “frame robust and hardy” apparently precludes him from feeling the pain that Cowper feels in observing him (IV.359-60).

Cowper’s reaction here seems to epitomize what Keith describes as one of the central criticisms of sensibility, that “such sympathizing may be a narcissistic exercise, enabling the reader,” and in this case, the writer, “to feel morally and aesthetically superior to the sufferer and to anyone incapable of feeling such sympathy” (127). Because sensibility was thought to be an inherent quality derived from the physical sensitivity of the nerves, the traveler’s “frame robust and hardy,” from the poet’s point of view, precludes him from perceiving emotional and physical stimuli that Cowper feels with such acuity (Van Sant 1).

Cowper’s depiction of sensibility in this passage manifests itself in Marianne’s belief that her “feelings are not often shared, not often understood” (67). Both believe themselves to be largely alone in their susceptibility to emotion and pain because many around them are naturally less capable of feeling. While Cowper’s attitude toward the winter traveler suggests a sort of privilege in the poet’s unique sensibility, his more intense and personal expressions of suffering tend to exacerbate this divide, enhancing his isolation and suffering and decreasing his ability to connect with the “robust and hardy.”

In “Verses, Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk,” a poem that Austen particularly enjoyed, Cowper explores the relation between solitude and suffering with a more hopeful tone (*Jane Austen’s Letters* 238). The poem describes the loneliness of Selkirk, famous for surviving several years marooned on an island in the Pacific. Denied

“religion and truth” as well as “society, friendship, and love” because he is “out of humanity’s reach,” Selkirk pleads, “O tell me I yet have a friend, / Though a friend I am never to see” (403-4). The poem ends in hope, for the speaker concludes that God’s mercy can be found “in ev’ry place,” even the most remote (404).

It is telling to examine the contrast between this poem and a later poem—“The Castaway,” published in 1803. In the later poem, a stark expression of the suffering Cowper endured on his deathbed, the relationship between solitude and suffering is much more twisted and vexed. The castaway knows that if his shipmates attempt to save him, the entire ship will not survive the storm, “Yet bitter felt it still to die / Deserted, and his friends so nigh” (35-6). The Selkirk poem does not comment on the motivations of his former shipmates or describe how he became marooned, and the speaker simply attributes his pain to his isolation. Here, however, the castaway finds himself in a terrible bind—the more he loves his companions, the more he must wish for them to leave him behind to die alone, and his closest friends become complicit in his drowning.

Moreover, the poem’s narrator, the “I” mentioned briefly in the first stanza, returns abruptly at the poem’s conclusion to speak of his identification with the mariner because “misery still delights to trace / Its semblance in another’s case” (59-60). Cowper quickly proceeds to complicate this ostensibly typical allusion to the uses of sympathy. His position as observer changes from one of privilege and refined suffering (evinced in his relation to the winter traveler) to one of even deeper pain than that of the castaway. We learn that there has been no divine intervention to rescue either the castaway or the speaker:

No voice divine the storm allay'd,
No light propitious shone;
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,
We perish'd, each alone:
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he. (61-66)

The pathos of “we perish'd, each alone” is deeply paradoxical; Cowper's sympathy is ultimately ineffective, and the castaway and the speaker are estranged from one another even as they both perish. Moreover, Cowper has moved from the position of a privileged observer to one in even greater pain and “whelm'd in deeper gulfs than he.” As Priestman explains, “Such a stretch of sympathy, especially within what is basically eighteenth-century sentimentalism, implies a going-out from a basic position of security.” This security, however, “is now abruptly denied so that the suffering annihilates normal ‘emotional distance’, and then finally, in the separate fates of the two men, reverses it” (31). While Selkirk suffers *because* he is lonely, Cowper's speaker in “The Castaway” faces a more complicated situation: he is lonely *because* he suffers, and this isolation in turn engenders further suffering.

While the shipmates of Selkirk and the castaway are never explicitly denounced, Cowper is harsher towards such friends elsewhere. In “Retirement,” a poem that appeared in the same 1782 book of poems as “Verses, Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk,” (and, therefore, likely another poem familiar to Austen) Cowper describes a victim of illness and melancholy who receives little sympathy from his peers. As Barbara Packer asserts, Cowper “explodes into rage against those...well-meaning,

healthy, thick-headed British squires who...dismiss all mental suffering as imaginary”

(560). Cowper describes these friends as:

Blest, (rather curst) with hearts that never feel,
Kept snug in caskets of close-hammer'd steel,
With mouths made only to grin wide and eat,
And minds that deem derided pain, a treat,
With limbs of British oak and nerves of wire,
And wit that puppet-prompters might inspire,
Their sov'reign nostrum is a clumsy joke,
On pangs inforc'd with God's severest stroke. (307-314)

The variety of Cowper's references to the bodies of these inadequate friends reinforces the deficiency of their sensibility. Their appetites are hearty, their bodies are tough, and, most importantly, their nerves are far from sensitive and responsive—in fact, their nerves are composed of “wire.” While Cowper's next lines suggest that experience may soften them and allow them to understand mental suffering (“But with a soul that ever felt the sting / Of sorrow, sorrow is a sacred thing”), his description of their essential physical strength still implies that they may never understand the feelings of those who are more sensitive (315-6). This conviction, along with Cowper's assertion that of all “maladies,” melancholy “claims most compassion and receives the least,” creates the image of an utterly isolated sufferer surrounded by unfeeling friends who obviously inflict further pain through their own strength (301-2).

When Marianne describes Cowper's poetry as “those beautiful lines which have frequently almost driven me wild,” Austen invites us to consider Marianne as a reader of Cowper's work (14). We certainly can imagine her engaging with Cowper's depictions

of isolating pain. In fact, we have the response of another young woman who seriously read Cowper's poetry—Anne Brontë. Her poem "To Cowper" demonstrates the emotional power of his depictions of suffering:

Sweet are thy strains, celestial Bard;
And oft, in childhood's years,
I've read them o'er and o'er again,
With floods of silent tears.
The language of my inmost heart
I traced in every line. (1-6)

If Austen's character has responded similarly to any of Cowper's myriad depictions of isolated suffering, the origins of her reactions to pain and to those who try to understand her become clear. As we have already seen, Marianne's habitual response to suffering is to withdraw, and her favorite walks through the countryside are always solitary. Time and time again, she trusts not to her family for relief, but to time spent alone with music, with books, and with nature.

Perhaps one of Marianne's most selfish and provoking moments in the novel comes after Willoughby's heartless letter, when Elinor attempts to empathize with and help her sister. Elinor wishes to inspire Marianne to grieve with more fortitude, and she attempts to do so through the language of sensibility, urging her to, "Think of your mother, think of her misery while *you* suffer; for her sake you must exert yourself" (138). Her plea fails, however, because Marianne does not believe that Elinor is capable of understanding her pain:

I cannot, I cannot...leave me, leave me, if I distress you; leave me, hate me, forget me! but do not torture me so. Oh! how easy for those who have no sorrow of their own to talk of exertion! Happy, happy Elinor, *you* cannot have an idea of what I suffer. (138)

It may be Marianne's worst moment in the book; in a rush of self-centered petulance, she lashes out at her heartbroken sister and accuses her of her own vices, for, ironically, Marianne has failed even with all her carefully cultivated sensibility to discern that Elinor has been suffering deeply as well. However, an understanding of the models of sensibility that Austen associates her with illuminates the source of her mistake. Marianne's unfair indictment of "happy, happy" Elinor resembles Cowper's description of the winter traveler: "Oh happy! and, in my account, denied / That sensibility of pain with which / Refinement is endued, thrice happy thou" (IV.357-9). It seems that Marianne has been prepared to assume that her sister cannot truly understand her. Marianne's conviction here is also reminiscent of the importance of a clear responsiveness in the cultural understanding and scientific study of sensibility. As Ann Jessie Van Sant writes, "In both physical and psychological contexts...sensibility is a fundamental responsiveness that must be activated if it is to function or to be seen" (51-2). Because Elinor tends to not openly respond to pain, Marianne begins to assume, despite herself, that she must be less sensitive.

Elinor is so affected by Marianne's remark that she evinces a rare burst of outward emotion: "Do you call *me* happy, Marianne? Ah! if you knew!—And can you believe me to be so, while I see you so wretched!" (138). Elinor's response brings Marianne back to herself, and she asks for forgiveness. However, even though she, in her

better judgment, proclaims, “I know you feel for me; I know what a heart you have,” she cannot quite believe that Elinor’s sympathy can overcome her ostensibly superior physical and mental position: “but yet you are—you must be happy; Edward loves you—what, oh! what can do away such happiness as that?” (138).

Of course, Marianne also generalizes her assumption to the world at large: “why should I stay here? I came only for Willoughby’s sake—and now who cares for me? Who regards me?” (142). She has lost the empathy of Willoughby, she has denied herself the empathy of Elinor, and now she must face the prospect of the gaze of those she already believes to be tasteless and unfeeling: “The Middletons and the Palmers—how am I to bear their pity?” (142). Predictably, the feeling extends to Colonel Brandon, whose concerned visits she deems the result of his having “nothing to do with his own time,” as well as to the warm-hearted Mrs. Jennings who she considers incapable of “entering into her sorrows with any compassion” (152, 150).

It is not difficult to see the connection to Cowper’s description of the melancholic man’s unfeeling friends in Marianne’s view of these acquaintances who seem to be “blest, (rather curst) with hearts that never feel” (“Retirement” 307). To Marianne’s credit, she certainly does not err in her assessment of the Middletons and Palmers. Elinor herself finds their sympathy shallow and insincere; Mrs. Palmer chatters about Willoughby’s marriage to Miss Grey as much as possible, while Lady Middleton evinces no “curiosity after particulars, or any anxiety for her sister’s health” (161). Nevertheless, her snubbing of Brandon and Mrs. Jennings is nearly as unfair as her snubbing of Elinor.

It is in this section that Austen's narrator offers us the book's most clear and protracted criticism of Marianne. Significantly, Austen criticizes Marianne not for an excess of sensibility, but for a lack of 'candor,' a word whose contemporary meaning Myra Stokes defines as "wishing to do justice to, unwilling to think or speak ill" (171). Though Stokes connects this fault with Marianne's cultivated refinement ("One of the most important dangers attendant on Marianne's genuinely *refined* sensibility is that in its very *irritability*...it may lead her to condemn too readily."), it is interesting to consider that Marianne's propensity to condemn could also be seen as a failure of sympathy (172, emphasis in original). Like Cowper's speaker in "The Castaway," Marianne fails to connect to others who are also suffering. The difference, of course, is that while Cowper's speaker seems unable to connect because of the sheer weight of the pain in which he drowns, Austen's character, as evinced by her temporary acknowledgment of Elinor's ability to understand her suffering, seems more to *enact* Cowper's poem than to genuinely experience it. It is still within her power to take Elinor's advice and "exert" herself to think of and sympathize with others, but she chooses to remain isolated (138).

Of course, Austen does not allow Marianne to remain perpetually trapped in her self-imposed isolation. In an interesting development that further complicates Austen's depiction of Marianne's sensibility, untold tales of pain begin to spring up around Marianne in response to her situation, offering her more chances to respond with sensibility and candor. Indeed, it is ultimately through Marianne's ability to successfully sympathize with others that she emerges from her illness and pain.

The first story comes from Mrs. Jennings. Though she has already spoken of her husband's death with her typical garrulity earlier in the novel, her mention of the event upon Marianne's heartbreak now accompanies her sincere and good-hearted attempts to help. When she brings Elinor a glass of fine wine for Marianne, she explains, "My poor husband! how fond he was of it! Whenever he had a touch of his old cholicky gout, he said it did him more good than any thing else in the world. Do take it to your sister" (147-8). Though Elinor is somewhat amused at Mrs. Jennings's attempt to cure Marianne by such a method, she herself derives a wry comfort from drinking the wine. As Marianne's depression slides into physical malady, Mrs. Jennings's experience nursing her dying husband becomes more relevant, and when she resolves "with a kindness of heart" to assist in caring for Marianne, Elinor discovers that the woman is not only willing to help, but also of "material use" because of "her better experience in nursing" (232). Mrs. Jennings's kind and effective care does not go unnoticed by Marianne, who upon her recovery becomes "earnestly grateful" toward the woman, acknowledging her in a manner "so full of respect and kind wishes as seemed due to her own heart from a secret acknowledgment of past inattention" (258).

The rehabilitation of Colonel Brandon springs even more clearly from acts of sympathy. His painful tale of Willoughby's crime and of his own youth has lain "untouched for fourteen years," brought to light only because he hopes it will bring Marianne "comfort" and "conviction" (155, 152). When Elinor relates this story, which Claudia Johnson describes as a typical "sentimental tale," to Marianne, Marianne reacts immediately with sympathy for Colonel Brandon, treating him with "compassionate

respect” (Johnson 166, Austen 159). Brandon’s tale of suffering breaks down Marianne’s conception of her own isolation, revealing that he and the young Eliza share her experience of deep pain; moreover, it allows Marianne to use her sensibility in a positive and adaptive manner, learning to care for and esteem Brandon.

The next painful story to come forth is Elinor’s, for when Edward’s engagement to Lucy becomes public, Elinor finally explains that her knowledge of the secret has been in place “these four months” (197). It is not the news of the secret engagement itself, but rather Elinor’s confession of the deep pain it has occasioned her that wells up in response to Marianne’s belief in her own isolation. Marianne’s reaction to Edward’s engagement is initially heartfelt, but she quickly reverts to the suspicion that Elinor cannot truly feel deep pain because she relates the information so calmly. Elinor’s answer is one of deep pathos: “I understand you.—You do not suppose that I have ever felt much.—For four months, Marianne, I have had all this hanging on my mind, without being at liberty to speak of it to a single creature” (198). Marianne’s response is immediate and passionate: “Oh! Elinor...How barbarous have I been with you!—you, who have been my only comfort, who have borne with me in all my misery, who have seemed to be only suffering for me!” (199). The last bastion of her reliance on Cowper’s model of the deep isolation of those who suffer with true sensibility has fallen. However, the result in this case is less salubrious, for Marianne is crippled with the guilt of having failed to comfort her sister or even to emulate her fortitude.

Indeed, it isn’t until Marianne begins to recover from her fever that she finds true healing. In this recovery, Austen pulls the threads of her allusions to Cowper together,

and we once again see the way the poet's influence complicates Austen's representation of Marianne's sensibility. The same initiative that characterizes Marianne's return to the "liberty" and "ease" of the countryside in the arrival to Cleveland only increases once her illness has passed. Rather than describing Marianne's recovery and reform in terms of her giving up her particular passions and emerging, Clarissa-like, as a figure of patience and submission, Austen describes Marianne variously as "growing visibly stronger" and "awakened to reasonable exertion," gaining in "firmness" and "genuine spirit" (258-260). Moreover, even in the deepest throes of her remorse for her past behavior, Marianne never eschews her rural walks. Rather, she resolves to share them, declaring, "When the weather is settled, and I have recovered my strength...we will take long walks together every day" (260). The walks will continue, only now in the company of her family, free from the solitude that had slipped into a profound isolation. Moreover, the walks will continue to entail an enjoyment of nature and of the picturesque, for Marianne plans to "walk to the farm at the edge of the down" and even to "go often to the old ruins of the Priory" (260). Marianne's plan of "serious study" similarly evokes Cowper's conception of the industrious domestic life and its "laborious ease," as she declares that each afternoon, she will "divide every moment between music and reading" (Austen 260).

Importantly, Marianne and Elinor's discussion of Marianne's past misbehavior and their exchange of forgiveness does not occur indoors, but rather takes place on a "soft, genial morning" when Elinor is able to help her sister take a much-desired walk (260). Here, by the hill where Marianne and Willoughby first met, Elinor is finally able to reveal one last story of pain—Willoughby's own account of his misdeeds and his love

for Marianne. This recital involves a twofold exercise in sensibility, for it has taken a rather courageous act of sympathy on Elinor's part to initially listen to Willoughby's plea for "pity" and "compassionate good-will" (250, 252). Through his story, Elinor discovers in herself a deep sympathy for "poor Willoughby," and she accordingly keeps her promise to tell Marianne of the genuine pain he has caused himself (254). Here, surrounded by nature but no longer isolated, content to return to her country life of liberty and industrious ease, and called upon once again to find within herself sympathy for another who still suffers, Marianne finds healing through her multifaceted sensibility, a sense broadened and enriched by her engagement with Cowper's poetry.

Austen's evocations of Cowper, then, work to add new layers to her discussion of sensibility in the novel. An understanding of Cowper's influence allows us to see a genuine profundity in Marianne's connection to nature and her reliance on a rural, domestic life, highlighting Austen's critique of estate improvement, enclosure, and the system of ownership that has disenfranchised the Dashwood sisters. An examination of Cowper's depictions of sensibility and pain provides us with models for Marianne's suffering, tracing the roots of her self-imposed isolation and reinforcing the stakes of Austen's decision to represent Marianne as avoiding a cliché death and relying on her sympathy to heal. The complex new perspectives that emerge when Austen's evocation of one of her favorite poets is given a serious examination certainly calls for a further exploration of her allusions to Cowper, as well as a reassessment of the role of his influence in her work.

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