



Center for the Study
of Writing

SAGES First Seminar Essay Awards

2014-2015

The SAGES First Seminar Essay Awards

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The SAGES First Seminar Essay Awards highlight the best student writing produced in SAGES First Seminars each year.

The essays included in this booklet were selected from those nominated by SAGES faculty for this award in fall 2014.

April 17, 2015

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“Politically Handcrafted”

Gwen Hildebrandt

Written for FSSO 161, “The Craft of Cloth”; Erika Olbricht, English (Seminar Leader)

Assignment Description: Students were asked to analyze a contemporary fabric artist’s work while synthesizing essays by William Morris and Walter Benjamin in order to answer the question: what is the value of the handmade?

Instructor’s Nomination: Gwen was able to negotiate a difficult assignment with clarity, true insight, and confidence. I love her ability to articulate persuasively how the two writers relate to one another—putting them into dialogue—while then applying those insights to the artist she chose to discuss.

“Asymptomatic Quarantine in America”

Christine Scherer

Written for FSSO 166, “Does History Matter?”; Peter Bennett, Music (Seminar Leader); Joseph Cheatle, English (Writing Instructor)

Assignment Description: In contrast to assignments 1 and 2, which had very restrictive prompts and were intended to challenge the students’ skills in structuring their essay, assignment 3 was open and much more content driven – they were to “focus on a social, political, ethical or scientific issue about which there has been a history of controversy or debate. You should pick a topic that you find relevant to your own interests, and, using books and reputable peer-reviewed journals, you should provide a history of the way in which the debate has been conducted.”

Instructor’s Nomination: I was impressed by Christine’s choice of topic, the perceptive way she managed to narrow it down (quarantine vs. isolation), and her excellent use of high-quality sources. The essay reflects much more than the prompt though: in writing it she embraced the whole idea of the class (that history isn’t just about the distant past

and that it can have direct relevance today) in a way that made for an interesting and engaging piece of writing.

“It’s Complicated’: Jane Austen’s Affair with Romanticism”

Ann Wang

Written for FSSO 168, “The Work of Making Art”; Wells Addington, English (Seminar Leader)

Assignment Description: Students read a biography of an artist, and then wrote an essay interpreting one of the artist’s works against a reading their working/creative methods. The essays may have also explored ideologies of creative production that emerged in neoclassicism/romanticism/modernism/postmodernism.

Instructor’s Nomination: Wang understands Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* as reflecting a Neoclassical urge to represent reality and yet she suggests Austen cannot—or would not—escape the trappings of Romanticism. The essay, through a careful articulation of its concepts and arguments, offers a sophisticated analysis of Austen’s conflicting artistic ideologies. Wang presents Austen as a cusp figure, wavering between two centuries’ ideals, and in so doing asks us to reconsider the very categories she employs in the essay.

Politically Handcrafted

Gwen Hildebrandt

The technological age is in full force and the vast majority of today's world economy is based upon mechanically crafted goods. The general attitude toward the handmade is an attachment often condescendingly described as one of "sentimentality," with implications of nostalgia and uselessness. Handmade craft has a much greater value in the modern world, however—that of politics.

Walter Benjamin, a German scholar who heralded the start of the technological age in the 1930s, describes the political potential of art as forming the vast majority of its value. The qualities that society extols in art—uniqueness, history, tradition—lead to a "cult value" that Benjamin despises, as he considers it a tool of fascism. As uniqueness or "authenticity" is required in order for art to have cult value, Benjamin celebrates the increasing banality of art: "mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" (224). That is, mechanically reproducible art cannot be "authentic" and thus cannot maintain cult value, so art must find new value and direction. Benjamin isolates two main developments in art other than mechanical reproduction that cause and reflect this shift—film and photography. While many scholars of his time complained about these new forms of art—if they deigned to use that term—Benjamin sees them as hallmarks of progress. To Benjamin, the critics he quotes complain about the positive attributes of the advancement into the modern age of art—the ability to easily reproduce art, the camera's ability to penetrate the secrets of the visible world. Benjamin sees the unadorned, realistic nature of photography and film as a revolutionary leap forward in art, because he believes these art forms hold a much greater capacity for politics through raw realism and easy distribution. When the cult value Benjamin so abhors is rendered unusable by new processes and mediums of art,

“[art] begins to be based on another practice – politics” (224). To Benjamin, this is worthy of celebration and the true value of art is as a tool of politics.

While Benjamin believes in the supreme importance of art’s political uses, he focuses solely on the possibilities for politicized art that arose from the start of the revolution of mechanical production. William Morris, an English scholar in the 19th century, instead views the handmade as the most promising prospect for political art. Writing in a time dominated by economic powers rather than purely political ones, Morris sees the immense force of the capitalist, machine-fueled economy as the greatest political and social threat.

Although he opposes the new mechanical developments Benjamin adores, Morris still has a tempered view of the handicraft he promotes and the technological market replacing it. He does not immediately and eagerly promote a return to the days of pure handicraft, despite being both a Socialist vehemently opposed to the capitalist machine and an aesthete who believes machinery has taken the beauty out of life. Instead, Morris is cautious and logical enough to earn himself a great deal of credibility. He recognizes that people are highly reliant upon machinery—that a return to the days of handicraft is nearly impossible, nor likely to come about in the future—and admits to the “dynamic good” of machinery—how the industrial revolution’s drastic reordering of the economy induced significant development in society. Morris’s vision is not of an unlikely return to an unrealistically golden past, but of a future where society will tame its technological development: “It is my firm belief that we shall in the end realize this society of equals, and also that when it is realized it will not endure a vicarious life by means of machinery; that it will in short be the master of its machinery and not the servant” (155). Essentially, Morris wants a social and political revolution to create a better society, which will then temper and rein in the use of machines, eventually reconstructing the economy to favor individuals.

To that end, Morris looks upon handicraft as a useful political protest against the tyranny of mechanized capitalism, calling the handicraft movement of his time “both noteworthy and encouraging” (155). Yet while the handicraft movement was meant to be political in nature, the art it produced was not necessarily imbued with politics in the way Benjamin imagines, blatantly expressed through individual works; the mere production of handmade goods was a political statement of its own. Here Morris points out what Benjamin fails to uncover in his analysis of the political value of art. Benjamin is correct in his analysis—it is easier to *politicize* mechanically produced art—but handmade craft has a political value in and of itself.

Through this lens, Morris’ ideas can complement Benjamin’s, and vice versa. Plausibly, Morris would agree with Benjamin’s praise of the political uses of photography, film, and mechanical reproduction—in alignment with Morris, Benjamin opposes a society dominated by elites; he simply views the struggle in societal rather than economic terms. Although Morris is unhappy with many of the changes wrought by mechanical production, none of these—namely, changes in the market and working conditions—is embodied by machine-made art. Morris’ goal is not the elimination of machinery through handicraft; rather, he recognizes the inherent political statement made by continuing handicraft into the technological age. Benjamin does not oppose handicraft—he simply celebrates mechanical production. His foremost focus is politics, though, which could be further supported by the political value of handicraft.

This reconciliation of Morris’ and Benjamin’s ideas is further illustrated through Rowena Dring, a modern textile artist who depicts landscapes in a semi-realistic fashion by sewing together colored pieces of cloth—“stitched paintings,” as she calls them (see Appendix A). A craft artist who makes her works by hand, Dring’s work is also aligned with Benjamin’s belief in mechanical reproduction and the rise of new technologies in art. Dring uses cameras, Photoshop and mechanical sewing machines to create her art. In that sense, Benjamin appears to have accurately

predicted the rise and usefulness of machines in political art. What Benjamin did not foresee was that, as mechanical production of all amenities of life became the normal state of society, handmade production gained intrinsic political value. Dring's stitched paintings touch on a number of political statements about humans' interactions with the natural world around them, and the handcraft portions of the process of making her works support those statements. The underlying connection of politics between Benjamin and Dring remains steady, though, as Dring states, "the point where art and politics meet is of fundamental importance to me." Dring's art may utilize the political value of handicraft that Benjamin did not acknowledge, but they share an investment in expressing political views through art.

Dring's art itself shares a strong connection with Morris' ideas—not only is her art handcrafted, but the politics she espouses, particularly with respect to handmade art, could easily be traced back to Morris. In her own words, Dring is "concerned about the effects of cheap garments and other consumer products"—in other words, worried about grand-scale factory production, just as Morris bemoans the new market in the mechanical age. Dring's essential goal with her artwork is to "challenge common perceptions of production values and the relationship of this to the environment." While environmental issues had not yet formed in Morris' time, he deals extensively with production values; the core of Morris' concern with the rise of mechanical production is that factory-produced goods undercut the production value of individualized, handmade goods. Ultimately, both Dring and Morris have similar political goals for handcrafted art.

Notably, Dring and Morris also are most interested in the same intersection between handicraft and art, in a clear contrast to Benjamin. A distinction must be made between the handcrafted art Morris and Dring extol and the elitist art Benjamin places into contrast with mechanically produced art. To Benjamin, aristocratic art, such as oil paintings of kings, is the opposite of machine-made art. To Morris, handcrafted art of a humbler, more everyday sort defines the

contrast with mechanically manufactured art. To Dring, handicraft faces opposites on two spectrums—the mechanized and the exclusive. She specifically notes, with respect to her replacement of the conventional oil-on-canvas medium with needlework, that “the values these mediums have traditionally signified are exchanged, and needlework is re-positioned as an equal to fine art.” Dring’s political goals, even just those related to production values, are thus multi-fold, and partially representative of both Benjamin and Morris—making the political challenge to “fine art” Benjamin urges through the medium whose use and intrinsic politics Morris supports.

The link between all three of these figures in the art world lies in the political value of handmade craft. Although Benjamin does not explicitly examine the handmade, and may seem to disparage it through his praise of the mechanically produced, he cares first and foremost about politics. Since a new method of expressing politics through art has come about with the handmade craft in the technological age, this is in some way Benjamin’s legacy as well as Morris’. Morris recognized the artistry of handcraft, Benjamin recognized the politics of art, and Dring now brings those together into political handcrafted art.

Appendix A

**IMAGE 1: Rowena Dring, *Other Side from Vegas*
(2008)**

<http://www.rowenadring.com/#/western-lands/>

Editor's Note: image removed because copyright permission could not be obtained before publication.

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Asymptomatic Quarantine in America

Christine Scherer

On October 17, 2014 Dr. Craig Spencer arrived in New York City after voluntarily treating Ebola patients in Guinea for several weeks. Four days later, after riding the subway, running through Central Park, taking a taxi, and bowling with friends, Dr. Spencer called his employer to report Ebola-like symptoms. He was removed from his apartment by a biocontainment unit and diagnosed with Ebola a few hours later at Bellevue Hospital Center.¹ Panic spread through the public like wildfire following the news of the diagnosis. As what-ifs became reality, the Center for Disease Control and Governor Cuomo held a press conference to ensure New York City residents that all protocols were met and it was unlikely Dr. Spencer infected other people. Even with the reassurance, many people questioned how someone who had direct contact with Ebola patients was allowed into the United States without inspection.

Just two days after Dr. Spencer's diagnosis, on October 25th, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois imposed a law requiring all medical workers returning from African countries where Ebola cases have been reported to undergo mandatory twenty-one day quarantine.² Under the law, medical workers who are not symptomatic upon their arrival on U.S. soil are permitted to complete their quarantine from their place of residence. If a medical worker arrives in the U.S. and displays symptoms of Ebola, he or she is

¹ Marc Santora, "Doctor in New York City Is Sick With Ebola," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2014, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/24/>.

² Jeffrey Drazen, "Ebola and Quarantine," *New England Journal of Medicine* (2014), Accessed November 21, 2014, doi: 10.1056/NEJMe1413139.

immediately transported to a hospital and placed in isolation.³

The law is controversial because it applies to both symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals, meaning even healthy volunteers are quarantined and isolated from society for three weeks upon their return to the U.S. Many feel this could discourage medical personal from volunteering in Africa where help is desperately needed. Additionally, many feel it is wrong to single out those in the medical profession. The law also questions the ethics of asymptomatic quarantine. Is forcing a healthy, innocent person to stay in his or her home for three weeks fair? Some argue it violates basic human rights whereas Governor Christie argues it is within his rights as governor to issue the quarantine for the purpose of protecting the citizens of his state.⁴ Looking at American history, we find that the quarantine of asymptomatic people was widely used in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in cities with large immigration ports. The quarantines were very discriminatory towards specific ethnic groups and poorer socioeconomic classes, and until recently, involuntary quarantine of a group of people has not been used in the United States since 1954.⁵

³ It is important to note the differences between isolation and quarantine. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) defines isolation as the removal of an infected individual from a population. This typically happens at a hospital once the patient has begun to show symptoms. The CDC defines quarantine as the removal of an individual from a population because he or she has potentially been exposed to a disease ("Legal Authorities for Isolation and Quarantine." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*: October 8, 2014. Accessed November 8, 2014).

⁴ Alice Gainer, "New York, New Jersey Set Up Mandatory Quarantine Requirement Amid Ebola Threat." *CBS New York*. October 24, 2014. Accessed November 20, 2014.
<http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2014/10/24/>.

⁵ The National Quarantine Act of 1891 permits the federal government to issue quarantine policies for all ports of entry into the United States. Separately, each state can have their own standards and policies for their ports of entry. The federal government does not have the right to

One of the first cases of asymptomatic quarantine came during the New York City typhus outbreak of 1892. The New York City Health Department was able to trace the source of the outbreak to a Jewish immigrant who recently traveled from Russia to the United States aboard the *SS Massilia*. As more cases were reported, officials found that the majority were Jewish acquaintances of the man or fellow Jewish passengers on the *SS Massilia*.⁶ The New York City Health Department ordered the isolation of typhus patients to a contagious-disease hospital on North Brother Island. Neighbors of typhus patients and all other Jewish passengers on the *SS Massilia* were quarantined on North Brother Island in a separate facility. The quarantine quarters for the asymptomatic people were tight and filthy. Some Jewish immigrants in quarantine fell ill with typhus and spread the disease to other healthy immigrants in quarantine before they could be moved to the hospital, leading to more illnesses and deaths. Jews were blamed for the typhus outbreak and, regardless of health, were forced into confinement. While the quarantine and isolation did stop the spread of typhus throughout New York City, it came at the price of the health of other innocent immigrants.

A few months following the typhus outbreak, cholera found its way into New York City and was a much more frightening because it could be transmitted through asymptomatic people. Cholera is transmitted by eating or drinking food or water contaminated with the waste from an individual carrying cholera. The disease killed seventy to ninety percent of people infected and health officials believed this was a disease spread through poor hygiene, and therefore must be caused by people living in the slums.⁷ In an effort to keep carriers out of the United States, President

overrule the states' policies, and vice versa. The recent quarantine laws were state laws (Ibid).

⁶ Howard Markel. *Quarantine: East European Jewish Immigrants and the New York City* (Johns Hopkins University Press: April 26, 1999), 55.

⁷ Ibid 87.

Benjamin Harrison ordered all passengers traveling steerage on arriving ships to undergo a twenty-day quarantine. Cabin passengers, holding more expensive tickets, were exempt.⁸ Here we see discrimination based on class and socioeconomic background, which forced innocent asymptomatic passengers to be quarantined for three weeks after an already long and grueling trip to the United States.

In the following decades, the number of immigrants to America increased dramatically. Ports in New York City were handling large numbers of arrivals every day. In an effort to consolidate, Ellis Island was established as the main entrance point for immigrants into New York City. The state of New York had its own standards for entry, and if sick passengers were found on ships, they were placed in isolation. Like isolation during the cholera outbreak, isolation at Ellis Island was largely based on socioeconomic status. For instance, ships coming from Europe were inspected and sick passengers traveling first or second-class were removed from the ship and placed in isolation on a small island. Unless they were able to prove they had been vaccinated for the disease found on the ship, all steerage passengers, regardless of health, were vaccinated and placed in quarantine on Hoffman Island.⁹ Although the quarantine resulted in vaccinations for immigrants, the conditions in the quarantine quarters were poor and cramped and exposed steerage passengers to a variety of diseases that they had not been vaccinated for. In particular, children were particularly vulnerable because they did not have strong immune systems.

Ellis Island's quarantine policy was also extended to entire ships whose journey originated from a country with high cases of contagious disease.¹⁰ For instance, ships originating from ports in Cuba and the Bahamas arrived in

⁸ Ibid 89.

⁹ Frank White, "Barriers Against Invisible Foes," *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* 33 (1892) 663, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~quarantine>

¹⁰ Ibid

New York about three days later. However, since many ports in these regions were susceptible to yellow fever, immigration officials quarantined passengers on the ship until they had been away from port for five days.¹¹ Authorities believed the incubation period for yellow fever was five days, so if no one on the ship had developed yellow fever after this time, the passengers most likely were not carrying the disease and the ship was free to dock. This type of quarantine left people in tight quarters for days. Although they had made it to the United States safely and were showing no symptoms, they were not allowed to enter until in the incubation period had passed. This quarantine was ethnically discriminatory. The quarantine was solely based on where the ships' journeys began, not on the health of the passengers. Here we see the most similar instance of the Ebola quarantine. In both cases, the government is basing the quarantine off of where someone is traveling from.

Looking back, the measures taken to keep disease from spreading by the U.S. and state officials seem extreme and morally wrong. Most quarantines were based on stereotypes of certain classes and ethnicities. However, it is also important to remember that transmission of diseases was not well understood at this time. Howard Markel notes, "The reasoning was clear, if misguided, when one considers 1892 concepts of bacteriology and maritime quarantine."¹² The knowledge of bacteriology was lacking, and instead, officials blamed whole groups of people. As science discovered the mechanisms for transmission of bacterial and viral infections, quarantine became less practiced. It was eventually extinguished in 1954 with the closing of Ellis Island.¹³

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Markel. *Quarantine*, 74

¹³ The CDC has not issued a quarantine order since 1963 when a woman was involuntarily quarantined for her exposure to smallpox. State governments have sparingly used quarantine order on a case-by-case basis. Neither the CDC or state governments have issued a quarantine order for a large group of people in the last fifty years.

When Cuomo, Christie, and Quinn passed the quarantine law in their respective states, it broke a sixty-year drought in asymptomatic quarantine. Although quarantine has been utilized during outbreaks of contagious diseases, it has been on a voluntary basis. Since 1954, the United States has not quarantined anyone unless they willingly did so.¹⁴ For instance, during the SARs outbreak in the early 2000's, the United States public called for quarantine for everyone who was exposed to the disease. Many people were indeed quarantined, however the government did not issue a mandatory quarantine. The CDC obtained permission from the individual prior to being quarantined.¹⁵ By quarantining on a voluntary basis, states were able to avoid ethical debates over individual rights versus the states duty to protect its citizens.

After examining American history, it is clear the new law is eerily similar to previous quarantines in that it discriminates medical personnel. The law does not require family members or co-workers of Ebola patients to be quarantined even if they were exposed to the patient once they showed symptoms. For instance, this law would not have prevented the first case of Ebola in America. Thomas Eric Duncan contracted the disease from a pregnant woman a week before traveling to America. A witness testified that he carried her from her home in Liberia to a hospital a few blocks away, in direct contact with her sweat and vomit – a perfect setting for Ebola to spread.¹⁶ Yet under the new law, Duncan would not have to undergo mandatory quarantine.

(Michelle Tsai “When Can the Government Quarantine Its Citizens?” *Slate News* June 8, 2007, accessed January 12, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/.)

¹⁴ “Legal Authorities for Isolation and Quarantine.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. October 8, 2014. Accessed November 8, 2014.

¹⁵ Mitka, M. “SARS Thrusts Quarantine Into the Limelight.” *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 290, no. 13 (2003): 1696-1698.

¹⁶ Greg Botelho, “U.S. Ebola patient: The Travels and Health Travails of Thomas Eric Duncan” *Cable News Network*, October 2, 2014, accessed November 28, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/01/health/>

Many argue that by discriminating against health care workers, it could deter them from volunteering in West Africa where their help is desperately needed and could cause Ebola to spread through Africa, which would increase the likelihood that Ebola enters the U.S. again like in the case with Duncan.

On the other hand, many people support the law and feel it is the best way to protect our borders. Looking back at American history, there were no plagues that killed large amounts of people. Could they have been prevented by the quarantines? If the new law had been passed just a few days earlier, Dr. Spencer would have been quarantined and not permitted to travel throughout the city. Although no other cases of Ebola have been reported in New York City, there was mass panic when his diagnosis was announced.

There are obvious ethical issues at play with this law. Forcing someone into confinement when they are innocent of a crime and are not showing symptoms of a disease clearly infringes on his or her rights. However, the state governments have a job to protect their citizens. So now we must determine if infringing on someone's rights is justified in the effort to keep Ebola out of the United States. Regarding legislation in the 19th century, Markel writes, "It is useful to discuss the development of the National Quarantine Act of 1893 using the following questions: What were the different viewpoints and preferred solutions? How did racist or anti-immigrant views become embedded in the resultant policy? What role did the science of bacteriology play in these deliberations? What were the results of the legislation that ultimately passed?"¹⁷ Similar questions need to be applied to this recently passed law. How did the transmission of Ebola affect this law? How did the views of cleanliness and lack of medical technology in Ebola stricken nations affect the law? When we search for the answers to these questions, we find that officials were quick to judge conditions in Africa and did not understand how Ebola is transmitted and as a result are

¹⁷ Markel, *Quarantine*, 138.

confining American citizens in their homes when we should be honoring them for their sacrifice.

While the law is still debated, health care workers are arriving everyday and beginning their quarantine. When disembarking a plane, each health care worker is inspected for symptoms of Ebola, such as a fever. If one displays symptoms, he or she is immediately placed in isolation at a hospital. If one is symptom-free, he or she may complete the quarantine at his or her place of residence and report their temperature every twelve hours.¹⁸ We can hope that these people in quarantine are treated with the utmost respect. However, we need to do all we can to end the quarantine. It will not be effective in keeping Ebola from spreading because American health care workers will be deterred from volunteering in West Africa because of this law. As a result, the disease will continue to spread through West Africa and will eventually find its way back into the U.S. New York, New Jersey, and Illinois do not have the right to quarantine asymptomatic health care workers because as long as they are asymptomatic, they do not pose a risk to the public. It greatly imposes on their rights and will only deter volunteers from working in West Africa. Hopefully the three governors will see how discriminatory their law is and not require the quarantine. By looking at American history, we can see that quarantine has put down groups of people. Today, we should know better. We know how Ebola is transmitted, and we can take other measures to stop the spread of the disease in the United States other than quarantining asymptomatic health care workers.

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¹⁸ Gainer, "New York, New Jersey Set Up Mandatory Quarantine."

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“It’s Complicated”: Jane Austen’s Affair with Romanticism

Ann Wang

Published posthumously in 1818, *Persuasion* is English author Jane Austen’s last completed novel (Birch). Like so many other artists now reverentially named among the greatest of their respective mediums, Austen defied the expectations and norms of the creative processes in her time, writing in the Neoclassicist style, even as she lived in a predominantly Romantic era. Inspired by ancient Greek art, members of the Neoclassicist movement—such as Samuel Johnson, who believed that the best art was a “mirror of life” (Johnson 2)—emphasized *mimesis*, or imitation, of reality. Contrastingly, Romantics focused on ideals and emotions: John Stuart Mill, a key figure in Romanticism, states that in art “the succession of [...] ideas is subordinate to the course of [...] emotions” (Mill 13). Mill believes that emotions should precede ideas—emotions lead; ideas duly follow. In the Neoclassicist mold, Austen “wanted her novels to be true to life” (Byrne 2). But even as she desired to imitate reality, she also wrote novels containing key elements from Romanticism. Rather than mirror Neoclassicist beliefs without distortion, Austen writes romance in a way that reveals the coexistence of both Neoclassicist and Romantic ideologies in her artistic life. Having this broader perspective of Austen’s philosophies—understanding her work as romantic fiction, despite her bent toward realism—readers can learn to neither treat her novels as reality, nor underestimate the truths present in them.

Although Jane Austen lived and worked while Romanticism was steadily gaining influence, she did not professedly ascribe to Romantic views. These views were comparable to those held by the writers of the “late eighteenth-century ‘novel of sensibility’” (Byrne 66), who “placed emphasis on the feelings rather than on reason”

(Byrne 65-66). Austen, rather than conform to the prevalent opinions of her time, “belonged firmly to the camp of anti-sensibility” (Byrne 66). Skeptical of the extravagantly sentimental novels of her day, Austen “preferred novels that were ‘natural’ and ‘true to life’” (Byrne 79). She shunned the popular novels of her day that set their focus on feelings and excluded or belittled reason; she staunchly supported a more realistic—a Neoclassicist—approach toward novel writing, an approach that reflected the happenings of every-day life.

Samuel Johnson, a noteworthy figure in the Neoclassicist movement, expresses his appreciation for writing that achieves the undistorted reflection of day-to-day life. In his “Preface to *Shakespeare*,” he writes of his admiration for Shakespeare as the supreme artist, because “his characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world [...] they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find.” (Johnson 1). Johnson believes that Shakespeare’s fame flourished because his writing was applicable to all humanity: according to Johnson, Shakespeare’s work was Neoclassicist to the core, the very “mirror of life” (Johnson 2). Similarly, Austen, who herself also greatly admired the English playwright (Byrne 136), “wanted her novels to be [...] grounded in the real world” (Byrne 2). Austen, venerating and imitating Shakespeare’s portrayal of true-to-life characters, wrote a reflection of reality as she understood it.

Persuasion—full of Austen’s infamous dry humor, shrewdness, and experience with romance as well as with reality—revolves around the story of Anne Elliot, the daughter of the foolish and pompous Sir Walter Elliot. We follow Anne—clever, gentle, refined, but also past the bloom of her youth and beauty—as she learns to reconcile past decisions with present feelings. We watch as she begins to understand the discrepancies and contradictions unavoidable in human character and as she gives love a second chance in her life, discovering the futility of denying its power and redeeming a relationship once considered

utterly lost. As Austen's last finished work—written between 1815 and 1817 (Birch)—*Persuasion* represents the culmination of Austen's mature wit and expertise. *Persuasion* demonstrates Austen's signature stylistic techniques in its "precision, tact and minute detail" that bring life to her "fictional worlds" (Byrne 9) and in its characters "'finished up to nature, with a precision which delights the reader'" (Byrne 9)—a precision that belies the emotional writing and Romantic beliefs prevalent in her time.

However, Austen's dedication to the factuality of the tangible world does not by any means imply that she overlooks emotion in her writing. She recognizes emotion as an essential aspect of human life, and her novels contain beautiful and lasting love stories. Nevertheless, Austen's decision to allow reason, not emotion, to rule her writing and her heroines still remains one of her identifying trademarks. Even in her most Romantic moments, Jane Austen remains firmly grounded in reality and within the boundaries of her knowledge of individuals' experiences, so that a steady rationality and reality lie underneath her writings, even—perhaps especially—in her descriptions of emotion.

Austen, having her foundation in reality, avoids exaggeration and glamorization even as she depicts one of the most tenderly romantic scenes in *Persuasion*. Near the beginning of Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth's reacquaintance, Wentworth unintentionally finds Anne at her nephew's sickbed, gently nursing him. The boy's brother, bored to mischief, cannot be persuaded to let Anne care for the sick child in peace. Recognizing Anne's predicament, Wentworth gallantly steps forward and carries the mischief-maker away, neither asking nor needing thanks from Anne for his deed. Because of the coolness of their previous encounters, this act leaves Anne confused, wondering about Wentworth's intentions (Austen 75-77). Here, we see emotion portrayed in terms of action—not as an abstract, not as flowery words with nothing to support them, but rather as a fact, as something tangible. We see no hyperbole, no extravagant sentimentality, but rather a levelheaded

acknowledgement of the existence and impact of human emotion on our thoughts and behaviors.

In a letter to her brother, Austen expresses her distaste for extravagant and idealistic sentiment: “Pictures of perfection make me sick and wicked” (Byrne 179). Accordingly, her heroines suffer no picturesque fainting fits—Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* remains cool-headed and logical in situations of crisis (Austen 105-106)—and her heroes make no dramatic speeches of eternal love—Captain Wentworth admits his love for Anne in a letter, rather than face to face (Austen 223-224). Byrne notes that “the greatest [quality] of Austen’s characters [is] the fact that we can all identify people like them among our own acquaintance” (Byrne 302)—with all their imperfections and weaknesses. Austen’s characters suffer the mundane hurts we suffer and make the often awkward declarations of love we make: her characters are real—we know people like them.

Numerous scholars have testified to Austen’s affinity for realism. Sir Walter Scott claims that she was “the first novelist [...] to offer an accurate representation of ‘the current of ordinary life’” (Byrne 9). Virginia Woolf notes the universality of Austen’s realism, saying that Austen “was writing ‘for everybody, for nobody, for our age, for her own’” (Byrne 54). In addition, biographers such as Byrne point out that “Jane Austen writes brilliantly about courtship and love, but always in a way that is leavened with a healthy dose of realism” (Byrne 188). We cannot deny Austen’s penchant for realistic writing, and these scholars and authors all underscore her Neoclassicist side; however, in doing so, they do a disservice to her Romantic tendencies, downplaying—if not completely dismissing—them.

Though not nearly as many testimonies to her Romantic side exist, Jane Austen did possess a distinctly Romantic facet in her artistic production. In her novel *Persuasion*, Jane Austen narrates Anne Elliot’s thoughts and feelings with a decidedly Romantic voice: Anne Elliot thinks to herself that “surely [...] our hearts must understand each other ere long” (Austen 209), optimistically hoping—believing—that the tension between herself and Captain

Wentworth must end soon. Anne's conviction of the inevitability and supremacy of love even in the face of opposing evidence demonstrates a distinctly Romantic opinion. Here, in this example of the juxtaposition of reason and emotion, emotion directs, and reason obeys.

Further complicating the simplistic view of Austen as a mere Neoclassicist are other Romantically-disposed passages in *Persuasion*. When depicting the relationship between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth, Austen describes them as "once so much to each other! Now nothing!" (Austen 60). Austen writes that "now they were as strangers; nay, worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement" (Austen 60-61). Austen's descriptions of Anne's feelings of loss and emptiness—particularly when reported with such absoluteness and such permanence—resonate with Romantic ideals, as do her portrayals of Anne's emotional state after speaking to Captain Wentworth on several occasions: "She had some feelings which [...] were too much like joy, senseless joy!" (Austen 158); "She had enough to feel! It was agitation, pain, pleasure, a something between delight and misery" (Austen 165). In these passages, Austen paints Anne's emotions in a decidedly Romantic light: the use of exclamation marks, the proximity of conflicting emotions, the intensity and sovereignty of those emotions as felt by Austen's heroine all reinforce and bolster the view of Austen the Romantic, who views emotion as more powerful than reason.

However, the contradiction between other writers' various testimonies of Austen's Neoclassicist style and Austen's own Romantically-inclined writing becomes insignificant when compared to how Austen herself expresses opposing ideologies in a single sentence in *Persuasion*: "How she might have felt had there been no Captain Wentworth in the case, was not worth enquiry; for there was a Captain Wentworth; and be the conclusion of the present suspense good or bad, her affection would be his for ever" (Austen 181). Here, Austen writes of the futility of inquiring into hypotheticals—a mark of Neoclassicism and of

her focus on reality. However, in the same passage, she also writes of Anne's "affection" that would belong "for ever" to Captain Wentworth. Such a description emphasizes the eternity and supremacy of "affection" and, consequently, places the stamp of Romantic thought on Austen's work.

Furthering these apparent inconsistencies in Austen's artistic philosophy even more, the most passionate scene in the book, in which Captain Wentworth admits his lasting love for Anne Elliot in fervently Romantic words—"You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me that I am not too late, that such precious feelings are gone forever" (Austen 223)—is delivered in the form of a letter. By using the written—not spoken—word as the medium of delivery for the one impassioned declaration of love in *Persuasion*, Austen gives "a feeling of being at one remove, of authorial detachment" (Byrne 189). By using a letter to convey Wentworth's feelings, Austen simultaneously displays a cool, detached attitude toward while also writing passionately about love—unconquerable, everlasting love.

Through these passages in *Persuasion*, we can see that Jane Austen does not limit herself to writing either mere romance or mere reality. Her descriptions, her attention to detail, and her pragmatic approach to life—including all its accompanying and inevitable emotion and drama—demonstrate the value she places on realism. However, beside these passages lie passionate declarations of idealized love and scenes in which reason succumbs to emotion, and because of this, we can see that Austen's writing demonstrates more than purely a "mirror of life" (Johnson 2): idealizing and intensifying emotions, she also depicts the immense weight and control these same emotions have on and over us, as well as the role they play in our learning, our thinking, our acting. Austen writes with such subjectivity and individuality—individuality not only of her characters, but of herself—that defining her as a mere Neoclassicist becomes problematic.

Through her writing, we can see that Jane Austen was, perhaps, like so many others, secretly a Romantic at heart—but no less of a Neoclassicist for it. Even as we readily

acknowledge the Neoclassicist care that Austen gives to detail in her novels, recognizing her Romantic side cautions us against taking her books as accurate representations of life during her time. We cannot read her works as a history: despite her attention to realism, Austen called herself more of a comedian than a historian (Byrne 303). Rather, her writing—her art—blurs the line between Neoclassicism and Romanticism, selecting elements from both and suggesting that the two need not exclude one another. Although art mocks all our attempts at defining it, perhaps even understanding it, still we strive to do so—and Jane Austen opens new possibilities for that definition and provides us with another avenue to reach that understanding. She demonstrates that attempting to interpret a piece of art in the context of its author, its era, and its audience often results in no definite conclusions; instead, denying the strict characterizations that come with eras of art and evaluating a work independently of its creator and context may produce a more comprehensive appreciation for the artwork itself. Perhaps looking into Austen’s work can persuade us to reconsider the lines we have drawn and the restrictions we have put around art in its varying forms.

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