



Article

The Work of a Moment: When Jane Austen Stops Time

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Abstract: This essay examines Jane Austen's occasional but potent attention to singular moments that seem to stand outside of the usual flow of time. Signaled by her use of phrases such as 'the work of a moment' or 'the work of an instant', these momentous moments gain resonance when studied against the backdrop of Austen's nuanced attention to temporal representation in narrative and to the temporal dimensions of human experience. The essay argues that Austen's momentous moments ultimately function as a crucial dimension of what Amit Yahav in *Feeling Time* designates the 'sensibility chronotope', a perspective that asserts primacy over chronometry and chronology. Attending to these moments in the fiction further enables us to assess Austen's contribution to what would later become a distinctive feature of the nineteenth-century realist novel, the preoccupation with roads not taken and 'lives unled', as Andrew Miller argues in *On Not Being Someone Else: Tales of Our Unled Lives*.

Keywords: Jane Austen; momentous moments; chronology



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Who can forget the moment—yes, moment—when Emma Woodhouse at long last realizes that the story she has tortured herself with (i.e., that Mr Knightley is in love with and ready to propose to Harriet Smith) is preposterous. So afraid of hearing him utter the dread words of his attachment to another, and this particular other, she cuts him short in conversation upon his return from London, only to immediately feel sufficient compunction to reconsider and invite him to continue. While he confesses his feelings for and attachment to her, Emma's mind is 'busy', and with 'wonderful velocity of thought' she realizes her mistake and takes in the delightful truth that he is in fact hers for the asking (or, more precisely, for the waiting to be asked). As the narrator then summarises: 'He had come, in his anxiety to see how she bore Frank Churchill's engagement, with no selfish view, no view at all, but of endeavouring, if she allowed him an opening, to soothe or to counsel her.—The rest had been the work of the moment, the immediate effect of what he heard, on his feelings' (Austen [1816] 2008, p. 339).

Careful readers of *Emma* might of course have seen Knightley's declaration coming. Whether in highly charged moments such as his exasperated rejoinder 'Brother and sister, no, indeed!' (p. 260), after Emma tells him that they are not so much brother and sister as to make an invitation to dance unwelcome, or in yet earlier moments, such as when he expresses with too much vehemence a dislike for Frank Churchill that Emma interprets as 'unworthy [of] the real liberality of mind which she was always used to acknowledge in him' (p. 119), Mr Knightley's attraction to Emma is an undercurrent of the evolving story. Yet, depicting the turn in Emma's fortune when Knightley confesses his attachment to her as 'the work of a moment' invites our consideration, indicating as it does a recognition of the sudden, the singular, and the seemingly fortuitous that runs counter to certain of Austen's most cherished themes and values.

Are such moments Jane Austen's version of an epiphany? Remarkable instances of chance, of happenstance? What to make of the sudden, seemingly serendipitous discoveries that make brief but game-changing appearances in her fiction? The sudden and serendipitous seem unlikely subjects to think about in relation to Jane Austen's fiction. Hers, after all, are novels that so often chart and reward gradual development, whether of friendships,

romantic relationships, or even self-understanding. Darcy was ‘in the middle before [he] knew [he] had begun’ to love Elizabeth, readers learn near the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, his phrasing implying a necessary passage of time (Austen [1813] 2004, p. 338). Elizabeth, in her turn, reports to Jane that her love developed ‘so gradually she hardly knew when it began’ (p. 332) and, when confronted with her father’s surprise at how her relationship with Darcy has developed, assures him of ‘the gradual change which her estimation of him had undergone, relating her absolute certainty that his affection was not the work of a day, but had stood the test of many months’ suspense’ (p. 335). Austen repeatedly teaches her readers to look suspiciously on that which develops too quickly. Think of the swiftly formed friendship of Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe (‘they passed so rapidly through every gradation of increasing tenderness that there was shortly no fresh proof of it to be given to their friends or themselves’ (Austen 2008, p. 23). Alternatively, consider the chagrin Elizabeth Bennet feels after realizing how soon she naïvely entrusted her confidence in Wickham or the quick pace of Marianne Dashwood’s ill-fated and damaging romance with Willoughby. Similarly, Austen warns that interpretations arrived at too swiftly are likely to be mistaken, as when Elinor sees Edward wearing a ring with a lock of brown hair and ‘instantaneously felt’ it to be her own (p. 65). *Mansfield Park* hints that Henry Crawford will be unable to change, to redeem himself, with its description of his enthusiastic yearning to live a life like that of William Price, Fanny’s brother: ‘the wish was rather eager than lasting’ is the narrator’s withering report (Austen [1814] 1985, p. 245). The counsel to be cautious, to steer clear of the peremptory, to prove oneself worthy by consistency and constancy, both of which require time to be demonstrated, is an undercurrent of many an Austen plot, perhaps evidenced most dramatically in *Persuasion*, when Louisa Musgrove makes the impulsive leap from the stairs in Lyme. Austen’s suspicion of the spontaneous occasionally inflects the narrative in less direct ways as well. ‘Surprises are foolish things’, Mr Knightley tells Emma when they discuss the sudden arrival of a pianoforte for Jane Fairfax. “‘The pleasure is not enhanced, and the inconvenience is often considerable’” (Austen [1816] 2008, p. 179).

It can be tempting to read Austen’s sustained at the level of plot and character study to the wisdom of taking one’s time, of avoiding swift and over-eager attachments or making peremptory judgements, as an extension of a conservative politics deeply fearful of rapid, radical change. Marilyn Butler’s *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975) remains an influential account of Austen’s response to and rejection of revolutionary fervor and of her anti-Jacobin inclinations, although, since its publication, scholarship by Claudia Johnson, Peter Knox-Shaw, Devoney Looser and others has offered alternative and arguably more nuanced assessments of her engagement with the politics of her times and to Enlightenment ideas and ideals more generally. In her recent chapter ‘Touching Upon Jane Austen’s Politics’, Looser reminds her readers of the influential role of Austen’s early biographers in painting the ‘largely conservative portrait’ and asserts that the fiction instead reveals its author’s ‘commitment to reform and to building greater social and economic access to existing institutions’ (Looser 2021, p. 127). Still, whatever Austen’s relationship to the politics and revolutions of her time, her confidence in gradual change and endorsement of incremental development of relationships seems unquestionable.

What to make, then, of her noticeable recourse to phrasing that directs readerly attention to the immediate, to sudden, singular moments and, moreover, that at least occasionally implies delight in the fortuitous and unplanned turn of events? In this essay I want to think through what her use of the phrase ‘the work of a moment’ (or close correlates) means to our appreciation of Austen’s craft and to our understanding of her response to cultures of sensibility. Why does accepting that an outcome might have been otherwise had not circumstances converged to cause a sudden shift in the course of events, or in a character’s understanding, matter? To answer these questions I will turn to Andrew Miller’s work on the idea of ‘lives unled’, of potential life happenings that ultimately did not eventuate, to suggest that Austen’s engagement with pivotal moments, what I call ‘momentous moments’, in fact presages a major emphasis of literary realism, what

Miller identifies in *The Burdens of Perfection* as literary realism's 'optative mode' (Miller 2008, p. 196). Miller writes that this mode 'conceives of one's singularity—the sense that one has this particular life to live and no other—by contrasting it with lives one is not living' and associates the mode with the 'aesthetic, ethical, and emotional power of realistic fiction', particularly as practiced by Dickens, Eliot, and Henry James (p. 192). I contend that Austen's attention to the momentary thus not only reveals her nuanced understanding of the temporal dimensions of subjective experience but also her keen apprehension of the optative mode as central to human experience and hence to the work of narrative fiction.

Pivotal moments in Austen's fiction of course stand out, when they do, because of their backdrop. If Emma Woodhouse delights that Mr Knightley's declaration was 'the work of a moment', she clearly also recognizes, as the novel repeatedly reminds us, that their understanding of each other is the product of some 21 years of time spent in one another's company. *Emma* features potent episodes in which the heroine pauses to reflect on how long-standing had been her regard for Mr Knightley and trust in his judgement. Even during her contentious conversation with Mr Knightley over her interventions in Robert Martin affair, to cite just one example, she ruminates that 'she thought herself a better judge of such a point of female right and refinement than he could be; but yet she had a sort of habitual respect for his judgment in general' (Austen [1816] 2008, p. 52).

If such occasions flag the powerful role of the durational, not the momentary, in shaping our understandings of ourselves and others, they make occasions when Austen invokes the sudden and revelatory all the more resonant. We might think of recourse to the instantaneous as a plot device, but seemingly sudden turns of events frequently register as equally sudden shifts in a character's thinking and feeling. We see this especially well in a memorable episode in *Persuasion* when, near the novel's end, Captain Wentworth re-enters Mrs Musgrove's room to discreetly leave a letter meant only for Anne. He places it before her 'with eyes of glowing entreaty fixed on her for a moment' and then leaves, 'almost before Mrs Musgrove was aware of his being in it', and the narrator (channeling Anne's thoughts) remarks that it was 'the work of an instant!' Before moving to a recitation of the letter's contents, the narrator continues, 'the revolution which one instant had made in Anne, was almost beyond expression' (Austen [1817] 1990, p. 223). The episode is steeped in the language of temporality, as of course is the whole novel. In his letter Wentworth pleads his case of constancy, urging that he be not 'too late', that his heart has been hers for the 'eight years and a half' since their first engagement, that he has waited the 'ten days' in Bath to discern her feelings, that 'every instant' he is overpowered with anxiety about his chances. Anne's response, too, is charged with the temporal: 'Half an hour's solitude and reflection might have tranquillized her, but the ten minutes only . . . could do nothing towards tranquility. Every moment rather brought fresh agitation' (p. 224). For a novel that in its opening episodes makes so much of the eight years that have elapsed since Anne and Wentworth first knew one another, the attention in this episode to the revolutionary instant is remarkable. Writing of *Persuasion* in an essay on Austen and psychology, John Mullan links feeling itself to the momentary and transient: "'feelings" in fiction would usually be fleeting, momentary, exquisite for this very transience'. The conception of 'romance' at the heart of *Persuasion*'s description of Anne as having been 'forced into prudence in her youth' only to learn 'romance as she grew older' links romance to the temporal in more than one way (Mullan 2005, p. 33), Mullan writes. Not only is it the 'natural sequel of an unnatural beginning', but it is an experience of exquisite, fleeting feeling, an invitation to acknowledge and savor the sudden, even though it cannot be fixed or contained. Anne's internal 'revolution' manifests itself in 'one instant' and then is continually recycled and re-experienced as new: 'every moment' brings 'fresh agitation.' In this potent instance, distinctive 'moments' repeat themselves rather than converge in a fluid experience of time; feeling is experienced as uncannily transient and continual.

Amit Yahav has brought much needed attention to notions of temporality developed in tandem with the culture of sensibility in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature. She explores the multifold ways that novelists of this period charted new ways to repre-

sent and foreground the qualitative, subjective experience of temporality (see for example [Yahav 2013](#)). Yahav's scholarship provides an essential prehistory to modernism, and especially to famous 'novels of time' such as *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Magic Mountain*, and *Remembrance of Things Past*. In *Feeling Time*, she draws on Bakhtin's claim that 'a new feeling for time was beginning to awake' in the eighteenth century ([Yahav 2018](#), p. 7) in order to make a persuasive case for sensibility's 'nuanced yet comprehensive approach to emotion' and to a 'range of feelings' associated with durational experience' (p. 6). Most importantly, though, Yahav delineates a 'sensibility chronotope' that 'cannot be fully understood—or even perceived—from a perspective that presumes the primacy of chronometry and chronology', one that she provocatively interprets as a 'modern reconfiguration of romance' (p. 9). In a fascinating analysis of *Sense and Sensibility* she points out that 'all the main characters get a chance to relive their plot lines as though they are re-reading them' and argues that Austen locates meaning in 'the second round' for all the characters because the second round emphasizes the 'unavoidable temporal recursive process of getting things right' (p. 79). If time serves as the medium for character growth and the acquisition of reason and knowledge, it does so by expanding beyond the linear, chronological, and forward moving.¹

The unusually momentous moments that Jane Austen singles out for attention, moments that seem to stand apart from time's usual flow forward, are an unexplored but critical dimension of the 'sensibility chronotope' that Yahav studies in *Feeling Time*. As the examples from *Emma* and *Persuasion* referenced above make clear, Austen isolates for special attention experiences of time that operate to disrupt, if only for an instant, the chronometry and chronology otherwise operative in her narratives. She of course adopted multiple strategies in her narratives to convey clock time or calendar time, strategies that align with categories of temporality examined in Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*: order, duration, and frequency. Her attention to particular moments would lose resonance were it not for the dominance of a clock and calendar time structuring the reader's understanding of the narrative's progression. Phrases such as 'the next morning', 'only a half hour before', 'one morning, about ten days after', 'that night', and 'for some weeks past', percolate through all of the novels, moving readers along a narrative path while temporally locating the character and the unfolding plots.² Much has been made of the famous episode in *Emma* in which most of the characters gather at Donwell Abbey to pick strawberries and picnic: 'Under a bright mid-day sun, at almost Midsummer, Mr Woodhouse was safely conveyed in his carriage, with one window down, to partake of this a-fresco party', Austen writes ([Austen \[1816\] 2008](#), p. 281). Toward the end of *Emma*, Austen simply notes at one point that 'Time passed on' and that it would be 'a few more to-morrows' before 'the party from London would be arriving' (p. 369). On other occasions Austen reveals herself as attentive to yet playfully dismissive of narrative demands for clock time, as in the narrative remarks that help bring *Mansfield Park* to its conclusion:

I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people.—I only intreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and become as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire. ([Austen \[1814\] 1985](#), p. 454)

Such examples suggest how varied was the temporal tapestry that Austen wove in her fiction and how nuanced was her understanding of the reader's need for temporal structure. At the same time, her fiction showcases the capacity of narrative to represent the subjective experience of time. She deliberately sought, in the many ways that Yahav explores, to draw her readers' attention to the qualitative experience and feel of time, such as through representations of 'spare time' ([Yahav 2021](#)). On many occasions in Austen's fiction, mentions of chronological time signal not just narrative movement forward or calendar and clock time but shade into expressions of their qualitative experience. Consider for example the narrator of *Northanger Abbey*'s sardonic comments at the opening of Chapter

13: ‘Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday have now passed in review before the reader; the events of each day, its hopes and fears, mortifications and pleasures have been separately staged, and the pangs of Sunday only now remain to be described, and close the week’ (Austen 2008, p. 69). Austen clearly chose not to write, more simply, ‘a week passed’; methodically listing the days better conveys the monotony and predictability of the social season in Bath as well as some of the silliness of the literary traditions Austen spoofs along the way in *Northanger Abbey*. Austen’s emphasis on the separate staging of the days, each linked to events and to emotions, rather than their convergence into an undifferentiated week, signals her emerging interest in narrative and temporal experience that would inflect all of her subsequent novels.³ Her grasp of the temporal nature of experience is on display everywhere in the fiction, as, for example, in this seemingly simple description in *Emma* of Mrs Weston’s recent marriage: ‘Her situation was altogether the subject of hours of gratitude to Mrs Weston, and of moments only of regret’ (Austen [1816] 2008, p. 15).

Austen’s flagging of particular moments as performing a noteworthy kind of ‘work’ by contrast invites readers to consider those exceptional experiences that disrupt the predictable or expected (such as that rendered in the *Northanger Abbey* example above) and hence the flow of time. These are moments that are not experienced as the natural and inevitable consequence of what has come before; they hence challenge one’s understanding of cause-and-effect. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Mrs Dashwood ponder the sudden departure of Willoughby from Barton Cottage and its environs in just this way. “‘It is all very strange. So suddenly to be gone! It seems but the work of a moment. And last night he was with us so happy, so cheerful, so affectionate?’” (Austen [1811] 2008, p. 66) is how Mrs Dashwood expresses her shock to her oldest daughter. Willoughby’s behavior makes no sense, adheres to no discernible cause-and-effect relation—it is experienced as an aberration of temporality, ‘sudden’, ‘the work of a moment.’ In *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy, by contrast, tries to convince Elizabeth that Bingley’s sudden detachment from Jane was in fact to be expected, once he had been convinced that Jane did not return his feelings: ‘To persuade him against returning into Hertfordshire, when the conviction had been given, was scarcely the work of a moment’, he explains to Elizabeth in the all-important explanatory letter given to her after his first, disastrous proposal (Austen [1813] 1990, p. 139). In *Emma*, Harriet Smith processes Mr Knightley’s ‘rescue’ of her at the dance in this way: ‘Such a change! In one moment such a change! From perfect misery to perfect happiness’ (Austen [1816] 2008, p. 268). Each instance involves characters processing sudden ruptures to expectation, expectations premised on temporal understandings of cause and effect, before and after, and patterns of behavior developed over time.

In his study of ‘Jane Austen’s Aesthetics and Ethics of Surprise’, Christopher Miller provides valuable insight into Austen’s attention to the temporal experience of sudden shifts in expectation and understanding. Distinguishing between ‘alarm’ and ‘surprise’, Miller describes surprise as ‘a briefer flare of feeling, a passage to some other emotional or cognitive state, and an experience that can be a source of either discomfort or pleasure, or both’ (Miller 2005, p. 240). Summarising Austen’s awareness of the ‘capacities of her art’, Miller describes Austen’s approach to representing the experience of surprise in a way that invokes, without naming it as such, the idea of the sensibility chronotope. According to Miller, ‘the conventional language of surprise has become [for Jane Austen] insufficient mimetic shorthand for more complex emotions; that the exact moment of surprise is so instantaneous and fleeting that it can only be represented through indirection and retrospection; and that the experience is best depicted not through reflexive exclamations but through sensory detail’ (p. 255). One sees a representation of just the sort of ‘passage’ between alarm and surprise that Miller describes in *Emma* when Emma sees Mr Knightley rescuing Harriet Smith from the mortification of rejection and leading her in a dance. The narrator writes, ‘In another moment a happier sight caught her;—Mr Knightley leading Harriet to the set!—Never had she been more surprised, seldom more delighted, than at that instant’ (p. 257). Here, Austen uses ‘moments’ incrementally, aligning them to Emma’s

vision as she moves through her dance steps but catches sight during its various turns of Harriet, and then Mr Knightley, and a few moments later the two of them together. The surprise registers as a moment on its rapid passage to 'delight.' Christopher Miller is especially astute on the after-effects of surprise. Writing of how Austen focuses on Anne's processing of Wentworth's reference to her as 'capable' (after Louisa's fall), he observes, 'Here, as elsewhere, Austen describes a revival from an ineffable complex of feelings: "She paused a moment to recover from the emotion of hearing herself so spoken of" (p. 133). The moment itself is a sort of blind-spot in Anne's consciousness, and 'recovery' is an apt term for its after-effects, in a novel so preoccupied with convalescence' (p. 256). Austen's word choices are, as always, key—'pausing a moment' implies that she controls her stream of thought and emotion, deliberately stops the flow in order (in this instance) to recollect herself. Miller's analogy that the moment functions as a sort of 'blind-spot' is interesting when considered alongside instances examined in this essay in which exceptional moments function more like epiphanies, experiences of sudden awareness, as opposed to moments where awareness is limited or absent.

Given the complexity of Jane Austen's exploration of imaginative capacity in *Emma*, it's no surprise to find that in this novel especially she thinks about the role of the individual in putting a moment to work—what 'work' the moment performs, in other words, depends upon the imaginative capacities and investment of the individual experiencing it as distinct. Consider, for example, the different ways in which Frank Churchill and Emma Woodhouse process the story of Jane Fairfax's boating accident and rescue by Mr Dixon. Conversing about it together after Frank Churchill narrates the story to Emma, he remarks: "'I dare say you would; but I, simple I, saw nothing but the fact, that Miss Fairfax was nearly dashed from the vessel and that Mr Dixon caught her.—It was the work of a moment. And though the consequent shock and alarm was very great and much more durable—indeed I believe it was half an hour before any of us were comfortable again—yet that was too general a sensation for any thing of peculiar anxiety to be observable. I do not mean to say, however, that you not have made discoveries'" (Austen [1816] 2008, p. 177). Declaring himself a 'simple I', Frank Churchill implies that he did not make more of the moment than as a fact, an incident that produced a sudden but otherwise meaningless action. Emma, by contrast, invests the 'moment' with much more, imagining it as evidence of an illicit romantic attachment. The passage also makes explicit the contrast between the temporal experience of duration and the temporal experience of the sudden; it is noteworthy, in this light, that 'shock' and 'alarm' are rendered as components of time's flow forward, just beyond the highly charged and exceptional 'moment' of Jane Fairfax's actual accident and rescue around which the speculation centers. Significantly, Mr Knightley considers Emma's disastrous mistake at Box Hill—her terribly insensitive treatment of Miss Bates, in front of all those gathered together—is considered by Mr Knightley to reflect Emma behaving 'in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment' (p. 295).

The six major novels that comprise the bulk of Austen's oeuvre reveal just how longstanding was her understanding of the generative possibilities of narrative fiction to represent human experiences of time. Even in her juvenilia and unfinished work, one finds evidence of the emerging interest. Writing of *Love and Freindship* in a perceptive study of Austen's juvenilia and the idea of the accidental or seemingly accidental, for example, Freya Johnston notes that Austen 'introduces two uses of the word "happen," one indicating a chance discovery, the other serving as a euphemism for carefully planned and successfully executed theft' (Johnston 2010, p. 115). She reads this as a 'comic manipulation of happenstance', an interpretation that invites our consideration of seemingly sudden changes in plot unfolding or character development. Virginia Woolf, one of Austen's early critics, was predictably attuned not just to her creative exploration of temporality but also to her finely crafted evocation of particular moments. In the essay on Austen collected in the first volume of *The Common Reader*, Woolf finds in *The Watsons* a 'foretaste' of Austen's powers. Noting what Austen does with a seemingly commonplace scene ('a dull young

man is talking to rather a weakly young woman on the stairs as they go up to dress for dinner'), Woolf writes,

But, from triviality, from commonplace, their words become suddenly full of meaning, and the moment for both one of the most memorable of their lives. It fills itself; it shines; it glows; it hangs before us, deep, trembling, serene for a second; next, the housemaid passes, and this drop, in which all the happiness of life has collected, gently subsides again to become part of the ebb and flow of ordinary existence. (Woolf 1984, p. 142)

Woolf's comment isolates the momentary as distinct from but also part of the whole; her reference to the 'ebb and flow of ordinary existence' summons up something like the weekly routine that Austen depicted in *Northanger Abbey* but also something more profound, the passage of time differentiated only by ebbs and flows of the ordinary, which is to say nearly undifferentiated because so predictable. Again, Austen's occasional attention to momentous moments gain resonance when appreciated against this backdrop of 'ordinary existence' humming ineffably along in its ebb and flow.

This particular kind of moment also needs to be distinguished from what William Galperin characterizes as the 'missed opportunity', as when he claims the following:

For it is plot, after all, with its temporal momentum forward, that creates the missed opportunity, making it an historical matter in contrast to which any fulfillment in and over time, whether by marriage to Wentworth or even to Fitzwilliam Darcy, is tantamount to letting "the real perish into art" (in Walter Benjamin's apt description) or into the particular probabilism that we call realism . . . Nor is it a coincidence that at the very juncture when the missed opportunity is almost certainly within recovery, whether at Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley or following the events at Lyme in *Persuasion*, other prospects and opportunities emerge, contesting those whose achievement is necessarily a foregone conclusion. (Galperin 2006, p. 357)

Galperin's intriguing focus on missed opportunity, what might have happened but did not, provides a striking counterpoint to the kind of singular moments that Austen depicts as performing instantaneous 'work', the crucial moments that foreclose the prospect or threat of missed opportunity, that redirect the path forward, and that elicit strong feeling at the moment of their revelation.

The singular moments that Austen draws attention to, particularly in the late novels of *Emma* and *Persuasion*, function rather like signals at a train station enabling plot lines to converge and understandings to emerge that redirect a character's life and her thought processes. They are what Andrew Miller in his work on the idea of 'lives unled' calls forking moments.⁴ If, as Amit Yahav argues, the temporality of our existence is contingent on the way human experience is composed into sensible patterns, these singular and disruptive moments illuminate the precise experience of allowing those sensible patterns to take new shapes, to be reconfigured in response to a powerful moment signaling the arrival of the unexpected, the unplanned-for alchemy of one experience acting on another. Austen's innovative use of free indirect discourse takes part of the credit, in that her use of that device enables her to temporarily pause the author-narrator perspective, with its retrospective and prospective orientations, in order to foreground the subjective experiences of her heroines as they recognize and respond to a surprising turn of events and singular moment of the 'turning'. In other words, Austen's momentous moments focus our attention on the immediate apprehension of a forking moment at the precise point of its forking. Significantly, she seems oriented toward the pleasure of experiencing the road as having forked, as offering a new, unanticipated, and more inviting way forward, rather than on thoughts of the road not chosen, or even foreclosed (with its attendant emotion of, say, regret).

Given *Persuasion*'s sustained attention to Anne's regrets, to the possibilities that were foreclosed to her when she was persuaded eight years before the narrative opens to

reject Frederick Wentworth's offer of marriage, it is worth returning in conclusion to the powerful 'forking' moment that so decisively redirects her life at the narrative's end, the instant in which Wentworth leaves a letter overflowing with feeling, the letter that determines her future, and his. Writing about *Persuasion* in *On Not Being Someone Else*, Andrew Miller describes Austen's plot as 'a chain of contingencies that occur during the brief period between Napoleon's exile to and escape from Elba—that is, during the few months when an English sailor, lucky enough to have survived war's dangers, might be on shore and have the opportunity to make love to a woman. Although we know from the beginning where we're going, we come to know that Anne and Wentworth are lucky. *Persuasion* is a novel of happenstance inevitability, like any other.' (Miller 2020, p. 76) Reflecting also on the precision of *Persuasion*'s historical moment, K.E. Ireland refers to it as a 'fortuitous lull', phrasing in sync with Miller's idea of 'happenstance inevitability.' (Ireland 1980, p. 207) Miller's analysis widens the apprehension of salient and singular moments that I've examined in this essay to include that other kind of 'moment' that so often frames our thinking about the nineteenth-century novel, the 'historical moment', and to understand just how crucialis Austen's attention in *Persuasion* to the work made possible by a relatively brief 'moment' of peace between exile and escape. In asking us to think about the ways that realist fiction, like our own lives, is steeped in preoccupation with what might have been, with roads not taken, Miller's work provides a context for understanding Jane Austen's attention to the pivotal moments when particular roads were opened (or re-opened) and, in fact, taken, and lives led. Seen through the lens of our human tendency to ponder roads not taken, and to experience regret, Austen's deliberately sunny endings, foregrounding as they do the feeling of 'no regret', make real sense and can even be understood as realistic, rather than fantastical in a fairy-tale sense. Emma's wedding lacks the kind of finery that a shallow and stupid woman like Mrs Elton might insist on, but surrounded by her 'small band of true friends' she is rewarded with 'perfect happiness' (Austen [1816] 2008, p. 381). Anne Elliot 'glories' in being a sailor's wife, and only wishes she had a family more worthy of a man with Wentworth's character. *Persuasion* famously flags the 'dread of a future war' as all that might dim Anne's sunny future (Austen [1817] 1990, p. 237). Austen's are not novels that traffic much, at least in their conclusions, in the substance or emotions of roads not taken, of what might have been. If this is evidence that they predate the ascendancy of realism in the novel⁵ it surely also testifies to their entrenchment in a sensibility chronotope more invested in feelings just as John Mullan described them: transient, and exquisite in their transience.

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Notes

- ¹ Yahav develops yet another valuable approach to temporality in Austen in her chapter 'Austen's Literary Time' for the *Routledge Companion to Jane Austen*, which in highlighting Austen's valuation of leisure reading, explores a kind of reading experience that 'leaves few long-term traces, provides only temporary pleasures, and solicits its effects less on the mind or on the heart, than on the body' (in Looser 2021, p. 207).
- ² K. R. Ireland in a study of temporality in Austen's fiction focused largely on *Persuasion* makes the interesting observation that 'events in Austen frequently relate not to clock or calendar time, but to other events such as visits, balls, dinners, parties, internal to the narrative itself. Other discriminations between recurrent and nonrecurrent aspects can then mark off, for instance, the annual return of month and season from the unique appearance of a dated year and a historical happening'. (Ireland 1980, p. 206).
- ³ I am assuming a chronology here that situates *Northanger Abbey* in the early stages of Austen's novel writing career, rather than near the end. Although *Northanger Abbey* was published posthumously, *Susan*, the novel that became *Northanger Abbey*, was begun in 1798, when Austen was also at work on early versions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

- ⁴ Miller discusses ‘forking moments’ throughout *On Not Being Someone Else: Tales of Our Unlived Lives* (Harvard UP, 2020). In the chapter titled ‘On Lives Unlived’ in his earlier book, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, Miller explores the terrain of what he terms the ‘optative mode’ in fiction, attention in novels to ‘counterfactual lives’ (or roads not taken). This mode is, he convincingly argues, a crucial dimension of realism. Miller writes, “I take this optative, lateral prodigality—this inclination to imagine counterfactual lives—to be a structural feature of nineteenth-century realistic prose. As realism proposes to give us fictions about how things really were, a space naturally opens up within that mode to tell us how things might have been but were not’ (Miller 2008, p. 196). It’s my contention in this article that Austen’s attention to momentous moments that seemingly function as forking moments in the lives of her characters not only demonstrate a dimension of her understanding of temporal experience but showcase her contribution to what later in the nineteenth century would become the dominant mode of the novel, realism.
- ⁵ Austen’s fiction also provides rich evidence for the novel’s investment in temporality before seriality surfaced as a dominant mode of publication. Claire Pettit’s recent study (Pettit 2020), treats seriality as a form of ‘knowledge about being in time’ that emerged during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, just after Austen died and her writing career ended.

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