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Distraction as Liveliness of Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Characterization in Jane Austen

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“How could you begin?” said she. “I can comprehend your going on charmingly, when you had once made a beginning; but what could set you off in the first place?”
“I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I *had* begun.”
—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

What should we make of Elizabeth Bennet’s liveliness? At the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, she asks Darcy “to account for his having ever fallen in love with her”: “Now be sincere,” Elizabeth asks, “did you admire me for my impertinence?” Darcy replies: “For the liveliness of your mind, I did” (378). Frequently, Jane Austen uses three main words to describe a character; for Elizabeth, these are “lively,” “playful,” and “quick.” Liveliness of mind and quickness of thought are, of course, Elizabeth’s defining traits in the novel. However, as I will argue, the nuances of her “lively, playful disposition” only fully emerge when Elizabeth’s habits of mind are compared with those of the other, minor characters by whom she’s surrounded—specifically those within her family (51). It is, then, no accident that when Mr. Bennet introduces Elizabeth into the novel he sets her mind against her siblings: “They have none of them much to recommend them,” replied he; “they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters” (45).

In this early scene, Austen cues the reader to pay close attention to Elizabeth’s quickness of mind by having Mr. Bennet describe it explicitly. She also encourages the reader to understand the character in comparative terms: Elizabeth is noteworthy because she possesses a swiftness that Lydia, Mary, Kitty, and Jane lack. Throughout, the novel itself rewards such attention, for Austen strategically modulates her narrative so that implicit comparisons among characters can begin to convey—rather than merely describe—that quick liveliness that makes Elizabeth so vibrant. As Austen works to capture Elizabeth’s cognitive agility and intellectual vivacity within what Blakey Vermeule calls the “fragile

casing of narrative,” however, she also develops a new structure for literary characterization using representations of attention—a paradigm in which distraction can build the fiction of a heroine’s liveliness of mind (7). Darcy may say as much about Austen’s narrative, then, as he does about love when he says: “I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation . . . I was in the middle before I knew that I *had* begun” (378). Darcy cannot pin down his impression of Elizabeth’s impulsive quickness to a single moment because Austen has so finely integrated distraction within the novel’s texture; Elizabeth’s vivacity—and the techniques that produce it—are embedded almost intangibly within the story and structure.

A number of critics have recognized the rich effects of Austen’s structure of characterization without quite being able to identify their cause, to say *how* they give Elizabeth such energy and life. Tony Tanner notes that Elizabeth has a “dimension of complexity, a questing awareness, [and] a mental range and depth” which makes her seem “trapped in a constricting web of . . . simple people” (126). Alex Woloch builds on this, suggesting that this depth is the effect of the “central tendency of the narrator” in *Pride and Prejudice* “to closely link the description of an ‘intricate’ mind with a counterpoised description of a ‘simple’ one” (52). Understanding how attention structures the novel’s characterization, however, gives such arguments new specificity and texture; for, as I will show, Austen carefully links intricate minds with distraction and simple minds with narrow focus—and it is the comparative “reading” of these minds and attention spans on the reader’s part that gives Elizabeth’s questing awareness the illusion of range and depth.

Pride and Prejudice often brings minor characters into focus so—and only so—we can compare the inferior quality and complexity of their concentration to Elizabeth’s. Austen severely limits the complexity of minor characters’ attention spans; against them, the intricacy of Elizabeth’s mind emerges in relief, and she claims the psychological richness of a central character. This means that Austen’s minor characters play anything but a minor role in this drama of attention and characterization. Mary Bennet, for example, is essential to the narrative development of Elizabeth’s “quickness.” Austen carefully deprives Mary’s attention of complexity and sets it against Elizabeth’s livelier distraction. As I argue, Austen’s process for simulating her heroine’s vivacity has two key components: first, she associates Mary’s rigid attention with mental stupor and uses this to play up the “something more” of Elizabeth’s “quickness”; next, she develops a well-crafted set-piece of distraction that seems able to model—and perhaps actually narrate—the heroine’s vibrant mind in action, and places it at the novel’s center. Using distraction to convey Elizabeth’s creative vibrancy, the novel develops a structure for comparing characters’ minds and attention spans—one where Mary’s rigid focus defines by contrast the playful flexibility of Elizabeth’s mind.

DEEP INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND COMPARATIVE THEORY OF MIND FOR LITERATURE

Many of Austen’s novels use such uneven comparisons to develop psychological intricacy for a main character—which gives her famous portrayals of deep intersubjectivity

a complex twist. In his book, *I Know that You Know that I Know: Narrating Subjects from Moll Flanders to Marnie* (2004), George Butte defines deep intersubjectivity as

the web of partially interpenetrating consciousnesses that exists . . . when a self perceives the gestures, either of body or word, of another consciousness, and . . . perceive[s] in those gestures an awareness of his or her own . . . [O]ut of this conversation of symbolic behaviors emerges a web woven from elements of mutually exchanged consciousness. (28)

Lisa Zunshine's pioneering work uses Theory of Mind to discuss such moments, revealing that Austen's "layering of human consciousness" emerges, in part, from her ability to represent increasingly recursive levels of "multiply embedded states of mind" in prose ("Why Jane Austen Was Different" 278). The model of deep intersubjectivity has produced excellent readings of the layered scenes of observation in Austen's novels; however, when we bring it into the larger, messy world of a novel, we need new language. Phrases like "mutually-exchanged consciousness" begin to ring oddly false here, especially in narratological discussions of Austen's characterization. Why?

Butte and Zunshine can use deep intersubjectivity's language of openness and exchange so constructively, I think, because they tend to approach Austen's novels from a micro-level, often analyzing multiple short episodes or passages. When these same moments of multi-character observation are viewed from a macro-level, however, they seem to perform a radically different function. At the level of characterization, the idealized principles behind theories of deep intersubjectivity—its webs of interpenetrating minds, its mutuality of exchange, its reciprocal fashioning of multiple selves—give way to a much more imbalanced system of exchange. And, though many things are negotiated, narratologically speaking, through Austen's webs of fictional consciousness, such exchanges are rarely mutual.¹ Austen creates networks of characters, I argue, not to model the mutuality and reciprocity of multiple subjectivities, but to produce competition for the scarce resources of narrative space and cognitive richness. Scenes of intersubjectivity (and mutual exchanges of observation) from her novels, ironically, support a distinctly anti-reciprocal, *intrasubjective* process of characterization.²

Analyzing the interplay between Mary and Elizabeth's attention to reading (and recognizing how vital it is to Austen's depiction of their mental states) thus underscores the need for what I call a *comparative Theory of Mind* for discussions of literature, as compared to Theory of Mind proper. Theory of Mind (ToM), or "mind reading," is a model used in cognitive science to describe "our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and desires" (Zunshine 6). In this essay, I emphasize the importance of distinguishing between ToM and ToM for literature in one specific point: **how we manage the presence of "extra people." When we attribute mental states to fictional characters, peripheral figures have an unusually strong influence on literary mind reading.** When I walk into a supermarket, ToM engaged, and decide that the person in front of me looks angry and the person behind me bewildered, I may compare them implicitly, but the fact that they are in the same line will have very little to do with the precise mental states I attribute to them.³ In the novel, however, such a juxtaposition of characters can change everything.

As Zunshine points out, literature relies on “stimulat[ing] our Theory of Mind mechanism”:

On some level, then, works of fiction manage to “cheat” these mechanisms into “believing” that they are in the presence of . . . agents endowed with potential for a rich array of intentional stances.

The very process of making sense of what we read seems to be grounded in our ability to invest the flimsy verbal constructions we generously call “characters” with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires and to look for the “cues” that would allow us to guess at their feeling and thus predict their action. (*Why We Read Fiction* 10)

When certain psycho-narratological cues in *Pride and Prejudice* encourage us to “mind read” Elizabeth as distracted, however, something more happens than “guessing at” Elizabeth’s feeling. Such cues urge us to interpret the heroine’s distraction as a basic sign of her cognitive complexity—the literary mark of a fictional mind endowed with a rich array of intentional stances, or one worth spending the time “reading.”

However, our ability to invest characters like Elizabeth with an imaginary mind worthy of complex mentalizing may not only rely upon but arise from our awareness of other, “simpler” minds, specifically those of surrounding minor characters like Mary. This opens up a crucial difference between the ToM process for real and fictional minds. In the world, whether we believe people to be fascinating or dull, we still automatically assume that the people we see have minds, and that their mental states are worth “reading” for signs of potential threat or benefit. This is not so true of fiction, where the illusion of a character’s mind (and a fictional mind with psychological richness) must be built, sentence by sentence. Moreover, unlike a person, a novel can be skimmed, or ignored, without much danger to us. Literature, in this sense, must not only develop narrative strategies that “‘cheat’ these mechanisms into ‘believing’ that they are in the presence of . . . [real] agents” (Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction* 10), they must also give enough realism to a fictional character so that we exercise our ToM extensively on his or her mind. Since narrative space is limited, underdeveloped minor characters that receive less description (and thus provide us with less ToM information to process) must vie with protagonists both for our attention and for our activation of literary ToM. This competition for cognitive richness may be essential to crafting the illusion of psychological depth for main characters in the first place—a narratological mechanism for fooling our ToM into thinking a character made up of typeface and sentences has a mind to read at all.

If so, how can we describe a character’s potential for this rich array of intentional stances? The techniques that build this cognitive richness? In the pages that follow, I suggest that the analysis of attention not only offers us new models for understanding Austen’s novels, but also reframes discussions of the fictional representation of human minds to better appreciate the intricate variety of thoughts (and habits of thinking) modeled in narrative fiction. Traditional models of characterization, often based on E. M. Forster’s classic distinction between the “flat” and the “round” character, tend to rely

on a generative but ultimately limited paradigm of psychological “depth” that requires us to measure cognitive richness and realism in terms of volume. Here is Forster: “[A] novel that is at all complex often requires *flat* people as well as *round*, and the outcome of their collisions parallels life more accurately” (108). Looking at how characters’ inner lives and minds develop around collisions of attention as I do, however, opens this discussion to descriptors of character far more complex than the flat and the round. Analyzing characters’ various modes and habits of focus moves us toward a range of characteristics for fictional minds that explode the simplicity of mental volume—qualities of mind like quickness, endurance, flexibility, capacity, intensity, divisibility, and fluidity. My reading of *Pride and Prejudice* looks at how Elizabeth’s “liveliness” interweaves three of these: flexibility, quickness, and fluidity.⁴

CHANGING THEORIES OF ATTENTION AND DISTRACTION

Understanding why distraction, of all things, could work in Austen’s novel to convey such mental liveliness, however, requires us to return to its historical moment. For most of the early modern period, distraction was associated with madness, sin, and error. Such interpretations emerged from religious (and thus moral) readings of concentration. Attention and distraction were seen as the product of effort, and consequently were linked to virtue and vice. The basic metaphor for attention was a straight line, with distraction as a divergent angle. Distraction was therefore a sinful mental digression—a wandering from the right way of godliness. Such ideas supported a single-object theory of concentration, where proper focus was seen as maintaining stasis, or fixing the attention—imagined as narrowing the concentration to a single point or path (and keeping it there).⁵ This is the basic logic behind the allegorical topography of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678): the sin of the pilgrim, Christian, is allowing himself to be diverted by characters like Mr. Worldly Wiseman, and thus straying from the narrow road of righteousness on his way to the “Celestial City.”

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, however, writers began to move away from such conspicuously moralistic descriptions of distraction to develop a more neutral, psychological framework for interpreting attention. By the 1740s, there were at least **two competing philosophies of attention at play: a moral one, in which attention and distraction mark the line between virtue and vice; and a psychological one, in which attention and distraction are just two different modes, or states, of mind.** Those using this newer psychological model believed that thoughts rarely stand still or follow a straight path, and created new definitions to accommodate the mind’s natural movements. John Locke and David Hume, for example, emphasized that the narrowing stretch of intensely focalized attention was an essentially temporary mental posture, only one of the many states the mind shifts through on a daily basis.⁶ They were more interested in describing the spontaneous movements—and changing modes—of attention over time than in assessing its success or failure in sticking to a point. Accordingly, philosophers in this tradition began to describe distraction, not as a geometric angling off path, but as an interruption in attention’s proper temporal rhythm, a moment (or set of moments) when our moving thoughts do not match up with our intended object of

focus. Distraction, for them, was a kind of temporal disjunct, an inequality between the amount of time a task requires and the time the mind devotes to that task. Some began to suggest that this odd mental tempo could have benefits as well as costs—specifically, the ability to bring unusual ideas together, and thus spark creativity.

Denis Diderot articulates this shift in ideas about attention most explicitly, and he voiced the strongest challenge to the perception of distraction as pure vice:

La distraction a sa source dans une excellente qualité de l'entendement, une extrême facilité dans les idées de se réveiller les unes les autres. C'est l'opposé de la stupidité, qui reste sur une même idée... Un bon esprit doit être capable de distractions, mais ne doit point être distrait.

“Distraction,” Diderot argues in the *Encyclopédie* (1754), “stems from an excellent quality of the understanding.” It has its source in an “extreme facility” of mind—for distraction, he argues, “allows ideas to trigger, or awaken one another.” Diderot believed distraction to be a vital state of mind for generating new thought. He also considered it the creative opposite of compulsive attention, which he described as the over-focused stupor of “remaining, unchanging, on one idea.” According to Diderot, a “good mind” was spontaneous enough to accommodate distractions but stable enough to avoid going mad.

If Diderot’s redefinition of distraction articulated the wider cultural reorganization around the concept of attention, Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is its narrative realization.⁸ The novel takes up the idea that distraction contains a productive kernel of creative energy (as well as the suggestion that excessive concentration could make one intellectually numb) and turns attention into a literary device for better simulating the complexity of Elizabeth’s inner life. In this context, Elizabeth’s capacity for distraction (and other characters’ lack of it) is just as important as her oft-discussed powers of observation. *Pride and Prejudice* sets up Elizabeth’s distraction to signify her liveliness and spontaneity and silhouettes it against a backdrop of obnoxiously over-attentive minor characters. The most noteworthy of these is Elizabeth’s sister, Mary. In Austen’s careful (and satirical) hands, the girl’s unshifting attentiveness becomes the antithesis of creativity.

MARY BENNET: OR, THE PROBLEM OF HYPERFOCUS

Austen’s Mary Bennet gives us one of the earliest and clearest descriptions of a character stuck in the heightened state of absorption scientists now call *hyperfocus*. Psychologists like Thomas Brown, who approach distraction from a neuro-cognitive perspective, describe this state of mind as follows:

Hyperfocus is an intense form of mental concentration that focuses consciousness on a narrow subject. [Those who hyperfocus] are unable to stop focusing on one thing and redirect their focus to another when they need to. They end up “locking on” to some task, sight, or sound—and totally lose track of everything else. (33)

If the cognitive term “hyperfocus” is anachronistic, the concept it refers to is not. John

Locke began looking at the problems of absorption in his 1688 *Essay on Human Understanding*, in which he notes that intense contemplation threatens to shut out other thoughts. When the mind “fixes it self with so much earnestness on the Contemplation of *some Objects*,” Locke worries, it will “take no notice of the ordinary Impressions made then on the Senses” (228). Such over-attention, for both Locke and Brown, has distinct costs: a shutting down and a subsequent inability to notice the ordinary impressions of the surrounding world.

Austen experiments with this idea (and its narrative implications) in *Pride and Prejudice*, where she makes Mary Bennet a figure of hyperfocus.⁹ For much of the book, the girl remains inflexibly locked in a state of close attention, taking “no notice of the ordinary Impressions made on [her] Senses.” Mary focuses stubbornly on two main actions: reading books and playing piano. And, though Austen shows **her absorption in these to be deep, earnest, and focused, it is also, importantly, static. Mary seems to attend to all tasks in precisely the same way—with unremitting, relentless concentration. The costs for her in terms of character development are intentionally high.** When Elizabeth and Jane return home from Netherfield, “they found Mary, as usual, deep in the study of thorough bass and human nature” (95). The novel implies that Mary’s focus has not shifted at all in the meantime: she is still reading as intently as she was when they left a few chapters before. The key is not just that Mary’s still reading, but that she is still absorbed—deeply absorbed—in her study.

Fifty years prior, when more traditional religious ideas about attention clearly held sway, depicting a character’s absorption in the study of morality could be imagined to reliably convey piety and goodness, as well as the psychological depth of that character’s mind and interest. As Michael Fried notes in *Absorption and Theatricality*, French painters of the 1760s intentionally sought to “capture” characters in visible states of heightened attention in their artworks so as

to arrive in the end at the sort of emotionally charged, highly moralized, and dramatically unified situation that alone was [thought] capable of embodying with sufficient perspicuousness the absorptive states of suspension of activity and fixing of attention that that painter and critic alike regarded as paramount. (56)

However, for absorption to carry such cultural significance and emotional resonance, such moments of intense focus needed an additional quality: they needed to be temporary. With the short iterative “as usual” (and the tedious cycle of repetition it connotes), Austen drains Mary’s absorption of the potential for such emotional and narrative charge.

The monotony of this “as usual” holds throughout the novel. Mary is only granted one mode of attention—hyperfocus. This stoic intensity limits her as character, conversationalist, and thinker; for the narrator implies that Mary’s clockwork diligence robs her of mental agility. Inflexible-minded from too much study, she cannot even keep up, Austen suggests, with the basic temporal flow of conversations going on around her. We see this most clearly when Mr. Bennet teasingly asks Mary to comment on the etiquette

rules for introducing a suitor like Bingley. She fails woefully, producing the following painful exchange: “‘What say you, Mary?’ Mr. Bennet asked, ‘for you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts.’” Here the narrator interrupts to note that though “Mary wished to say something very sensible,” she “knew not how.” “‘While Mary is adjusting her ideas,’” Mr. Bennet interjects, tongue-in-cheek, “‘let us return to Mr. Bingley’” (47). The joke relies on the sharp contrast between Mary’s supposedly “deep reflections” and her shallow—in fact, absent—contribution to the conversation. Mary’s habit of absorption seems to slow down her mind, producing such verbal stupor that the conversation moves on before she can adjust her ideas, or get her thoughts flowing so as to speak. Mary thus becomes a figure for the cognitive costs of excessive attention—inflexibility, rigidity, and a deep social awkwardness.

Since Mary cannot loosen her attention, she is also barred from character change.

After Lydia’s elopement, an event that fuels much character development for Elizabeth, Mary remains unmoved. Unable to cobble together a single new thought in the face of family disaster, Mary recycles undigested maxims she’s picked up in her old readings. In this, her longest speech of the novel, she produces four rather frozen gems of morality, culled from her conduct books:

“that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable—that one false step involves her in endless ruin—that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful,—and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behaviour towards the undeserving of the other sex.” (298)

Mary’s focus on morality (much like her blind concentration on piano performance at the Netherfield ball) remains disturbingly undisrupted by any attention to her family’s reaction. The problem, as Zunshine might put it, is that Mary is attuned, not to the dynamic “presence, behavior, and emotional display” of people around her, but to an inert set of objects—her books, and to a static memory of the morals they contain (“Why Jane Austen Was Different” 277). Indeed, undismayed by (and perhaps completely oblivious to) Elizabeth’s uplifted eyes, Mary continues “to console herself with such kind of moral extractions from the evil before them” (298).

This concentration on studying becomes the novel’s “excuse” to keep Mary “in-doors,” not only excluded from the many walks in *Pride and Prejudice*, but also from any kind of productive mental wandering.¹⁰ Set up only to study and be static, Austen’s Mary can “never spare time” from reading, and thus can’t indulge in a walk:

Lydia’s intention of walking to Meryton was not forgotten; every sister except Mary agreed to go with her. . . .

Mrs. Bennet was not in the habit of walking, Mary could never spare time, but the remaining five set off together. (105, 364-65; emphasis added)

Indeed, when Lydia tries to tempt Mary to go outside by describing the joys of travel—coach rides, new ribbons, and cucumber sandwiches—Mary can only respond: “‘Far be it from me, my dear sister, to depreciate such pleasures. . . . But I confess they would have no charms for me. I should infinitely prefer a book’” (238). No model for Aus-

ten's audience, the over-attentive Mary is instead a cautionary figure for the dangers of reading too much. The novel mocks Mary for her habit of reading to the exclusion of all else, and lauds Elizabeth for her ability to stop (and to digress in thought and action). In such a world, when Miss Bingley calls Elizabeth a "great reader" who takes "no pleasure in anything else," Mary's novelistic presence sharpens the insult. And, Austen's caricature of Mary both fuels the outrage (and raises the value) of Elizabeth's famous retort: "I am *not* a great reader, and I have pleasure in many things" (74).

Mary's absorption in books is literalized in her lack of mobility in the novel, and her absorption limits her both in mental (and in narrative) space. Austen now uses Mary's motionlessness to reflect a still deeper inflexibility—that of mind and character. For example, when Elizabeth returns home from Pemberley, stunned and altered by the news of Lydia's decision to run off with Wickham, Jane hurries downstairs to meet her. Mary and Kitty, however, stay upstairs, both too focused on their daily routines to notice their older sister's entrance. The narrator suggests that this habitual self-absorption has left the two girls oddly unmoved by any reaction to Lydia's elopement:

[They] had been too busily engaged in their separate apartments to make their appearance before. One came from her books, and the other from her toilette. The faces of both, however, were tolerably calm; and no change was visible in either. (297)

Their sister's tragedy, Austen implies, has not influenced them in any way. Their surface calm reflects the shallowness of their respective characters. Mary's calm derives from obliviousness; she is too busy in her books, it seems, to be bothered. A few lines later, Jane accidentally explains Mary's inertia—and why she has not asked Mary to help manage their mother's hypochondriac nerves. The others "would have shared in every fatigue, I am sure," Jane tells Elizabeth, "but I did not think it right . . . and Mary studies so much, that her hours of repose should not be broken in on" (301). With her absorption in books seemingly unbroken by any distraction, the ever-attentive Mary is not only compressed but crystallized into a minor figure. She remains a tableau—not character but unshifting caricature—of excessive, and ultimately impoverished, attention.

ELIZABETH BENNET: OR, THE BENEFITS OF DISTRACTION

Elizabeth, swift of thought and quick of tongue, has (distinctly unlike Mary) the capacity for distraction, and thus, I argue, the capacity for change. Playing on the notion that distraction reawakens ideas, Austen mixes in some absentmindedness with Elizabeth's normal attentiveness to establish her difference from flatter characters like Mary and to demonstrate her superior flexibility of mind. Though Elizabeth's powers of observation are unparalleled in the first half of the novel, in the second half, her attention is frequently interrupted—often while reading—and still more often by her conflicting emotions for Darcy. Austen places the most important scene of disrupted focus at the center of *Pride and Prejudice*, when Elizabeth reads Darcy's letter. And it is here—at the novel's turning point, or *volta*—that Austen uses Elizabeth's distraction to cultivate her most detailed, and realistic, descriptions of the heroine's mind.

Distraction, for Diderot, marked a creative mind in movement, though one perhaps not always quite moving at the right tempo. Michael Posner and Raja Parasuraman, two contemporary leaders in the field of attention, both emphasize this aspect of attention's cognitive complexity, and the importance of such movements in time. Each describes attention as a continuous, multilayered process—optimally, the ongoing process of focusing on the right things, at the right time, at the right speed—which allows us to adapt to the shifting conditions and demands of the surrounding world. Attention, for Parasuraman, “is not a single entity but the name given to a finite set of brain processes that can interact, mutually and with other brain processes, in the performance of different perceptual, cognitive, and motor tasks” (3). Posner's *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Attention* explains attentional orienting “as the set of processes by which neural resources are deployed selectively . . . on the basis of changing motivation, expectation, or volition in order to optimize perception and action” (157). Brown, I think, best synchronizes these two theories for a discussion of distraction when he writes:

The continuous process of attention involves focusing and shifting focus, regulating alertness, sustaining effort, and regulating the mind's processing speed and output . . . Attention, in this sense, is essentially a name for the integrated operation of the executive functions of the brain. Distraction marks the failure to activate and manage these various cognitive functions in the right way at the right time. (11, 21)

In one sense, distraction is still clearly a cognitive failure here—or at least a mark of cognitive inefficiency. The neurochemical networks associated with the executive functions have failed to direct and shift the mind's focus appropriately to concentrate on the “right” object or task at the “right” time. But distraction is not the opposite of attention, Brown makes clear; it simply marks a certain disruption, or pattern of cognitively clustered disruptions, in attention's normal process and rhythm. What Diderot (and I think Austen) emphasize is that such mistimings and disruptions can be oddly useful—at times, essential—for bringing new thoughts together spontaneously to catalyze innovation.¹¹

Distraction, in this sense, marks not a deficient but an unpredictable, or sporadic, tempo of focus. The mind bounces loosely and haphazardly at a changing pace, moving between intense concentration and sharp interruption, delving into an idea and then snapping away from it. Austen spends a full chapter describing Elizabeth reading (and re-reading) Darcy's letter in this quick shifting mode of mind, and her description is replete with such spontaneous, playful leaps of attention. This chapter—and the distraction it contains—fleshes out the heroine's otherwise stock characteristic of liveliness by creating a space in which the narrative can model her mind's quickness, flexibility, and fluency, creating a more textured sense of her inner life.

For Elizabeth's reading there is none of Mary's frozen “as usual.” Elizabeth's distracted reading habits thus open out into complexity.¹² As her mind moves swiftly and erratically through Darcy's letter at ever-shifting paces, it begins to convey not only the heroine's impulse and emotion, but also the fluency of her ideas and her elasticity

of mind. Mind, again, is literalized in motion. Unlike Mary, Elizabeth not only walks, but walks while she reads; and, in truth, reads much like she walks: “crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity” (70). Austen grants this same breathless quickness to Elizabeth’s reading of Darcy’s letter:

She read, with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before her eyes. (223)

This energetic, distracted reading—a kind of mental jumping and springing through the text—as well as her strong yearning for the next line make Elizabeth unable to focus fully on the sentence before her.

At the end of this first speed-reading of Darcy’s missive, Austen is careful to tell us, Elizabeth’s mind is left so scattered that she “scarcely know[s] anything of the last page or two.” She ends the letter still pacing restlessly in a “perturbed state of mind,” with “thoughts that [can] rest on nothing” (223). Though such mental restlessness may keep Elizabeth from fully absorbing the meaning of Darcy’s letter at first, her distraction produces what Mary’s plodding mind cannot: a rapid burst of thoughts.¹³ Pausing only halfway through, Elizabeth “instantly” 1) establishes Darcy’s belief of Jane’s insensibility to Bingley to be false; 2) assesses the letter’s style as “not penitent, but haughty”; and 3) firmly labels him “all pride and insolence” (223). Only thirty seconds later, Elizabeth begins reading the letter again; however, this second time, distracting thoughts and emotions now endlessly interrupt the swift flow of her reading. She must stop and re-read after almost each paragraph, and at times, after each sentence. This makes her reading seem full of motion, if also restless and haphazard. Moreover, these interruptions create narrative, and clearly, it is the back and forth within Elizabeth’s mind, and not Darcy’s letter, that Austen ultimately seeks to convey.

The narrator, in fact, lingers for an entire chapter over Elizabeth’s distraction, using the space created to articulate the new thoughts it produces. Austen here seeks to capture Elizabeth’s mind in process within the narrative form itself; the very structure of the novel begins to take on the tempo of Elizabeth’s particular liveliness.¹⁴ The illusion of the heroine’s cognitive intricacy and vibrancy of mind seems to emerge from within the chapter’s montage of leaps, stops, and starts:

The letter was unfolded *again* . . . she *again* began the mortifying perusal. But when she read, and re-read . . . *again* was she forced to hesitate. She put down the letter.
Again she read on.
 After pausing on this point a considerable while, *she once more continued to read* . . .
 From herself to Jane—from Jane to Bingley, her thoughts . . . soon brought to her recollection that Mr. Darcy’s explanation *there* had appeared very insufficient; *and she read it again* . . . (223-25, 227; all but the penultimate emphasis added)

Again and again, her returns to Darcy’s letter are interspersed with extensive descrip-

tions of her distraction. Some interrupting new thought (often in free-and-indirect discourse) necessitates the “again” of a more attentive reading—and each new close reading again scatters her thoughts. The narrator shuttles between narrative input 1 (Elizabeth’s stages of reading) and input 2 (the thoughts that make up her distraction). The more ragged texture of this distracted reading can connote Elizabeth’s liveliness, in part, because the caricature of Mary as all-absorbed monotonous reader works as such a fit foil for her sister’s energetic mind. Mary’s strict mode of study does nothing better than show us what Elizabeth’s style of reading is not.

A lively-minded heroine, the novel imagines, must not read in a neat and orderly fashion. Instead, Elizabeth’s mind, like the narrative that describes it, refuses linear development. And as the novel layers distraction upon distraction, we seem to get a bundle of insights produced in short, erratic bursts of concentration. This makes the novel, like her mind—or, in fact, her mind, like the novel—dart in and out, back and forth, as it throws light on a variety of fresh ideas and emotions. This switching back and forth creates an eccentric narrative rhythm—one that plays out spontaneously against the steady, calm rhythm of Darcy’s carefully written letter itself, embedded in full (and uninterrupted) just a chapter before. It is here, in this narrative simulation of distraction-punctuated thoughts, that I think Austen renders Elizabeth’s liveliness of mind most subtly—for she invites her audience not only to “read” the heroine’s distraction, but to enact it (and reflect upon it) as readers themselves.

Incorporating distraction within the novel’s form, Austen not only finds a way to capture the richness of her heroine’s spontaneity; she also turns distraction into a powerful catalyst for narrative movement and character development. For example, it is in one of the moments of free-and-indirect discourse that emerge in the distracted spaces between her re-readings that Elizabeth finally realizes: “Mr. Darcy’s conduct,”

which she had believed it impossible that any contrivance could so represent, as to render . . . less than infamous, was *capable of a turn* which must make him entirely blameless throughout the whole. (224, my emphasis)

In the first half of the novel, of course, Elizabeth declares Darcy “the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry” (214). Only after her distracted reading of his letter does Elizabeth undergo “so material a change” that her “sentiments” become precisely the opposite (366). The very halts and leaps, slants and errors of the heroine’s mind as she reads seem, in fact, to fuel the novel’s crucial moment of double transformation: Elizabeth’s acknowledgment of her emotions for Darcy and her profound recognition of her prejudices against him. *Pride and Prejudice* imagines that distraction stimulates rapid bursts of thought in a strong mind; it is this production of new, if disordered, thoughts that makes Elizabeth’s distraction the novel’s vehicle for deep mental change.

Playing on this idea of distraction-as-transformation, the chapter ends with a complex scene that shows Elizabeth’s creative mind adrift; distraction, as always, prompts in her an energetic, chaotic awakening of ideas:

[Elizabeth] wander[ed] along the lane for two hours, giving way to every variety of thought; re-considering events, determining probabilities, and reconciling herself as well as she could, to a change so sudden and so important. (227-28)

Wandering, it seems, is what allows her mind to churn, both giving way to and producing “variety of thought.” Elizabeth’s final ability to let her mind roam affirms that she has true mobility of mind and is capable not only of rich thought and variety, but of character change both “sudden” and “important.” Austen builds the eccentric rhythm of concentration—and its generative power—into the chapter itself.

In a letter to her sister, Cassandra, Jane Austen claims that Elizabeth’s playfulness is in fact the novel’s, and teasingly suggests that the insertion of some distraction would perfectly offset its liveliness:

Upon the whole however I am quite . . . well satisfied enough.—The work is rather too light, & bright, & sparkling;—it wants shade;—it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter—of sense, if it could be had, if not, of solemn specious nonsense—about something unconnected with the story: an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparté—or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & general Epigrammatism of the general style. (203)

Liveliness. Comparison. Distraction. The building blocks are all here: “the playfulness of the general style”; “anything that would form a contrast”; “a long chapter . . . about something unconnected with the story.” It is only in these moments—when distraction’s playful creativity becomes, in this sense, both its protagonist’s main trait and the defining stylistic quality of the novel—that we are able, I think, to read Elizabeth’s mind as that of a fully fleshed-out heroine. And if attention has become part of the novel’s structure, as I suggest, the modality of distraction is not only vitally tied to Austen’s strategies of characterization, but inextricable from the novel’s deepest levels of meaning making.

In this sense, it is no surprise that *Pride and Prejudice* encourages us to measure out the spontaneity and vitality not only of novels’ styles, but of fictional minds by their ability to accommodate creative distraction. Though descriptions of attention and multilayered observations can provide both readerly challenges and rich narrative texture, they too are enfolded into Austen’s comparative, competitive structure of characterization. Elizabeth is invested with the potential Zunshine speaks of, the rich array and variety of thoughts, feelings, and desires; Mary is not. Novels often encourage us to attribute more mental depth and ToM to characters (like Elizabeth) who are given the room to demonstrate mental variation than we do to characters (like Mary) who can only demonstrate one rigid habit of mind, or what Alan Palmer has called a “mind-rut.” However, as my discussion of *Pride and Prejudice* also shows, some characters activate readers’ ToM more than—or even, perhaps, against—others, and this may need to occur if we are ever to gain a sense of our heroes and heroines as fully-realized

psychological entities. Maneuvering the reader's selective attention and attribution, as orchestrated by the novelist, becomes an important and deliberate tactic for developing psychological richness in the closed, structured world of fiction.

If it is only against the unchanging absorption of simple characters like Mary that scenes of Elizabeth's distraction can build the illusion of her cognitive complexity, we need a comparative literary model of ToM to talk about Austen's novels—and perhaps about fiction in general. Using a comparative model to understand how ToM works when we read fiction lets us take the potential distribution of mentalizing into account in a novelistic zero-sum-game of character development. Though all characters may stimulate our ToM, some characters stimulate it more than others. Not all minds (or mind readings) are created equal in narrative fiction; it is only by depriving Mary of mental richness that Austen can give Elizabeth's novelistic mind such subtlety. And it is only by caricaturing Mary's absorption that Austen can use distraction as she does: as a measure of character, as an invitation to mind read "liveliness," and as a literary device for conveying the cognitive richness of an intricate mind.¹⁵

NOTES

- 1 The major exception to this point, of course, is Austen's modeling of reciprocity for the central couples of her marriage plot. The chemistry, for example, between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, Emma and Mr. Knightley, or Anne and Mr. Wentworth all rely on this narrative principle of mutual exchange. These pairs, however, are still pairs of major characters; and they still claim subjectivity, cognitive complexity, and narrative space at the expense of minor characters like Mr. Collins, Miss Bates, or Mrs. Clay.
- 2 It is no accident, I think, that our favorite passages modeling intersubjectivity from Austen make main characters—Elizabeth (not Lydia or Mr. Hurst) or Anne Elliot (rather than Louisa or Miss King)—the subject of the sentence. In the famous example from *Persuasion*, "It did not surprise, but it grieved Anne to observe that Elizabeth would not know [Wentworth]. She saw that he saw Elizabeth . . ." (117), there is an intricate hierarchy of observers and observation embedded within the passage's multiple recursivity—with Anne at the top, then Wentworth, then Elizabeth. Butte implicitly acknowledges this privileging of certain characters over others in deep intersubjectivity when he notes that Austen's "favorite observers" are often her heroines, "women . . . finely attuned to the network of perceptions that surround them" (110). And, it is Anne's finely honed skills for "observing observation, even observation of herself," according to Butte, that give this scene's deep intersubjectivity such power (112).
- 3 These inferences, presumably, are based on the separate sets of physical and verbal cues I have picked up unconsciously from each shopper, not on a comparison of the two based on their accidental position in the same line.
- 4 Fluidity of thought can be imagined as a combination of what cognitive scientists call ideational fluency, that is, the ability to "generate a certain *quantity* of new and

imaginative responses to a task” and what they call ideational flexibility, that is, the ability to produce novel responses in a wide range of *categories* (Turner 190).

- 5 *Attention* originally comes from the Latin *ad-tendere* (to stretch toward), implying that the attentive mind consciously elongates and narrows itself in a fine, taut beam toward the thing upon which it wishes to focus. Traditional seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century definitions of attention conventionally describe attention as a voluntary mental stretch. Writers of this period often represented it as an intense gaze, where attention seems to reach along an invisible line from the eye to the object. Similarly, since distraction derives from *dis-trahere* (Latin for to drag away, or apart), distraction originally referred to anything that dragged the mind from the direct line of attention. This idea of attention as line supported religious readings of concentration as a moral good, for if one could only be on the proper path of attention or off of it, the divine consequences of attention could seem equally clear.
- 6 Locke argued that there were a number of “various *Modes of thinking* which the Mind may observe in itself” (227). He believed that “the Mind employs itself about [its present Ideas] with several Degrees of Attention,” and, in a day, necessarily moves through “a great variety of degrees,” ranging “between earnest Study & very near minding nothing at all” (227-28). “Men,” argued Hume in his *Treatise*, “are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity; and are in a perpetual flux and movement . . . the thought has evidently a very irregular motion in running along its objects, and may leap from the heavens to the earth, from one end of the creation to the other, without any certain method or order. . . . The capacity of our mind is not infinite” (39, 92). By 1757, Hume imagined that the mental stretch required of aesthetic attention necessitated so much self-discipline that, at even the slightest interruption, the Mind, like a spring, would relax: “The least exterior hindrance to such small springs, or the least internal disorder, disturbs their motion,” he claimed, “and confounds the operations of the whole machine” (“Taste” 139).
- 7 Translations in this paragraph are my own.
- 8 Associations of distraction with spontaneity, innovation, and creativity like those we see in Diderot’s article gathered currency throughout the 1760s, 70s, and 80s, and such suggestions appeared in a number of Austen’s favorite literary works—including Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759), Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767), and William Cowper’s *The Task* (1785). However, Austen may well have read Diderot herself. Tutors by her French cousin, Eliza de Feuillide, she “read French with facility” (Holbert 83, citing Leigh 24) and Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* was published widely in cheap editions (see Darnton’s *The Business of Enlightenment*).
- 9 For a more detailed reading of Jane Austen’s relationship to John Locke—specifically her “dramatization” of Locke’s educational tracts in *Northanger Abbey*, see Jocelyn Harris’s *Jane Austen’s Art of Memory*, 1989, pp. 1-33.
- 10 For more on this point, see Alex Woloch’s *The One vs. The Many*. I base my cognitive work on attention in *Pride and Prejudice* on his brilliant analysis of Austen’s structure of characterization.

- 11 Useful terms for discussing Austen's early association of distraction and creativity may be found in the modern work of cognitive psychologists interested in the conditions for increasing our ability to link seemingly disparate concepts into novel synthesis (Snyder 416). For such increased creativity, researchers like Alice M. Isen and Ellis Paul Torrance emphasize the importance of maintaining a defocused attention, thus having additional cognitive materials available for association, increasing the breadth and range of the elements seen as pertinent, and facilitating cognitive flexibility, all of which raise the chances that unusual, or diverse, cognitive elements will in fact become associated to produce new thought (Isen 1987; Torrance 1974).
- 12 The contrast Austen sets up here between Mary and Elizabeth's styles of reading resonates with the differentiation of general crystallized intelligence (gC) and general fluid intelligence (gF) in cognitive science. Crystallized intelligence refers to the acquisition and maintenance of culturally specific knowledge (Mary's memorization of specific lines from Francis Burney's *Evelina*, or of Bach's musicological principles for analyzing figured bass). Fluid intelligence applies to the flexibility of mind needed to solve complex and changing problems (Elizabeth's unscripted process of interpreting Darcy's letter).
- 13 This depiction of Elizabeth's reading as made up of short bursts of attention punctuated by distraction, interestingly, seems to follow the rhythms of what we now call working memory. In his article, "Cognitive Science and the History of Reading," Andrew Elfenbein defines *working memory* as the "mental faculty allowing readers to store, process and manipulate recently read textual input through such operations as comparison with other parts of the text, retrieval of relevant background knowledge, and the creation of forward and backward inferences" (487). As he argues, individual reading span is determined by a reader's "ability to control attention" so that he or she can "maintain information in an active, quickly retrievable state" (Engle 20). For an investigation of how working memory serves as a predictor of reading span, and how reading span tests figure into assessments of general fluid intelligence and ideational fluency, see Engle et al., 1999.
- 14 This experimental representation of mind in *Pride and Prejudice* foreshadows her later stylistic innovations in *Persuasion*. As A. Walton Litz claims, *Persuasion* moves "away from the Johnsonian norm," developing a "rapid and nervous syntax designed to imitate the bombardment of impressions upon the mind" (228-29). In "Of Heartache and Head Injury: Reading Minds in *Persuasion*," Alan Richardson says further that the stylistic innovations critics have ascribed to the novel result from its prominently including "the gaps and disruptions in the represented flux of consciousness" (11).
- 15 I am grateful to John Bender, Denise Gigante, Blakey Vermeule, Lauren Caldwell, and the anonymous readers from the *Theory of Mind and Literature* volume for their abundant insights and assistance in the preparation of this essay.

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