

## Narrator's Care: Intrusive Narration as Formal Caregiving

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### I. Introduction: Deferring Harm

In the first chapter of Elizabeth Inchbald's 1791 novel, *A Simple Story*, the reader is presented with a dying Mr. Milner as he makes his final arrangements for the future of his soon-to-be-orphaned daughter. His plan is to send Miss Milner to live under the guardianship of his friend Mr. Dorriforth, reasoning that

Dorriforth is the only person I know, who, uniting every moral virtue to those of religion, and native honour to pious faith; will protect without controlling, instruct without tyrannizing, comfort without flattering, and perhaps in time make good by choice rather than by constraint, the dear object of his dying friend's sole care.<sup>1</sup>

But finding a safe middle ground between any of these binaries turns out to be nigh impossible. Mr. Milner's last formulation—in which he hopes for his daughter to become good “by choice rather than by constraint”—gets to the heart of the difficulty, for, under the strict rule of Dorriforth, “choice” and “constraint” are often indistinguishable. This is most evident in the important matter of choosing a husband. Beautiful, witty, and rich, Miss Milner is one of the hottest items on London's marriage market. Dorriforth would have her settle on a suitable mate as soon as possible, whereas she (at first from the pleasure she takes in drawing the attention of rich and charming young men, and eventually from her secret love for Dorriforth himself) would dwell indefinitely in a state of indecision. Thus, in response to Dorriforth's “fixed resolution” that she “refuse to see [Lord Frederick Lawnly], or agree to become his wife,” Miss Milner “appeared averse both to the one proposition and the other, yet came to no explanation why” (52). But Dorriforth, who senses that her wish to “defer the explanation” to Lord Frederick is actually just a ploy to dwell in a perpetual state of “not choosing at all,” commands her to “direct [her] choice,” for or against, one way or the other (83-4). In the economy of a marriage plot novel, where choice does not index freedom but rather a shutting down of options, and where what happens next is ineluctably connected to the finality of marriage, *not choosing* has a value in and of itself.<sup>2</sup>

It is against this background that I'd like to consider the ethical significance of the final scene in the novel, in which the fantasy of indefinite deferral is realized at the level of narrative form. Harry Rushbrook, heir and nephew to Lord Elmwood, confesses to his uncle that he loves his daughter Matilda. Elmwood, who has only just reunited with his daughter after saving her from abduction and certain rape by the devious Viscount Mar-

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Inchbald, *A Simple Story*, ed. J. M. S. Tompkins (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 5. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>2</sup> This fantasy of dwelling in the present and deferring indefinitely the burdens, certainties, and disappointments of the future appears in various forms throughout the novel. See, for example, Miss Milner reading a much-anticipated letter (94) and Harry Rushbrook reveling in the pleasure of the present (251). The fantasy of indefinite deferral is also present in moments that are particularly unhappy (e.g., when Miss Milner is waiting out the “tedious” hours before she sees Elmwood for what she believes will be the last time [183]).

grave, is infuriated by this confession, and commands Rushbrook “this instant to quit my house, and never dare to return” (335). Matilda knows nothing of this confession of love, but she begs her father to forgive him anyway. For her part, Matilda “loved [Rushbrook] as her friend, her cousin, her softer brother, but not as a lover” (334). Indeed, she has only seen her cousin a few times in her life, and never once has she suspected his love for her. Reconsidering, Elmwood allows Rushbrook’s fate to depend on his daughter, telling her to “go to him in the library, and hear what he has to say;—for on your will his fate shall depend” (336). Still unsure of what this might mean, but happy to have the opportunity to spare her cousin from disinheritance and ruin, she is stunned when Rushbrook tells her the truth: “I boldly told [your father] of my presumptuous love, and he has yielded to you alone, the power over my happiness or misery.—Oh! do not doom me to the latter.” It is at this point that the narrator steps in, two sentences before the novel ends, and saves Matilda from having to make any decision at all:

Whether the heart of Matilda, such as it has been described, *could* sentence him to misery, the reader is left to surmise—and if he supposes that it did not, he has every reason to suppose their wedded life was a life of happiness. (337, italics in original)

While the reader is left in the somewhat unsatisfactory position of not knowing for sure the outcome—we may only “surmise”—Matilda is, by comparison, granted a permanent reprieve by the narrator, who permits her to dwell forever in a suspended state between two undesirable alternatives.<sup>3</sup> By suspending the act of storytelling itself the narrator here marshals formal intrusion and silence for the benefit of a vulnerable protagonist. Looked at in a certain light, this is the most significant kind of care that could be administered to a literary character. Matilda is freed from the burdens of choice and futurity—the very burden that plagued her mother throughout the first part of the novel.

Thus my response to the question posed by this workshop—“Who Cares in the Eighteenth Century?”—is that the narrator cares. By using the power of form to insert itself between the reader and the story and literally preventing closure to the story, the narrator has rescued Matilda from the necessity of decision. How narrators care, and the formal complexities that determine the effects of their care, is the subject of the following pages.

## II. The Ethics of Intrusion

Intrusive narration is typically associated with the loud and humorous narrative style of authors like Henry Fielding or Laurence Sterne. To give a sense of how this kind of writing typically works, consider the following example from *Tom Jones* (1749):

Reader, take care, I have unadvisedly led thee to the top of as high a hill as Mr Allworthy’s, and how to get thee down without breaking thy neck, I do not well know. However, let us e’en venture to slide down together; for

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<sup>3</sup> In an 1810 letter to Inchbald, Maria Edgeworth acknowledged the peculiar power of her silences: “I am of the opinion that it is by leaving more than most other writers to the imagination, that you succeed so eminently in affecting it” (qtd. in Jane Spencer, “Introduction” to *A Simple Story*, xv).

Miss Bridget rings her bell, and Mr Allworthy is summoned to breakfast, where I must attend, and, if you please, shall be glad of your company.<sup>4</sup>

This narrator is our constant companion throughout the novel. He jokes with us, teases us and, indeed, seems to care about us in approximately the same way that a friend might. He is, moreover, a significant persona in the cast of characters in the novel. His consciousness is permanently on display, at times becoming even more interesting than the characters whose story he is telling.<sup>5</sup> In the light of preferences formed by transformations in the style of the novel since the nineteenth century, these intrusions are often thought of as “purely ornamental” or “seemingly gratuitous,” a relic of early novelistic form that novelists have since learned to abandon.<sup>6</sup>

But, as I've begun to argue, narrative intrusions can function in a particularly interesting way when their intrusions are on behalf of a weak or otherwise vulnerable character.<sup>7</sup> If these kinds of intrusions can have an ethical function, it is in the service of an ethics rather different from what is usually thought of when analyzing the ethical potential of the novel. The so-called New Ethical Theorists of the Novel, for example, argue that

By assenting to construct oneself in the image of the reader that is solicited through the text, the reader has made an ethical decision: she has opened herself up to alterity that is not only itself an ethical action but that creates the possibility for ethics.<sup>8</sup>

Starting from Wayne Booth's famous notion of an implied author—a figure who causes readers to “see what they have never seen before” and “moves them into a new order of perception and experience altogether”—these theorists posit that the kind of experience made available by reading is ethical in the sense that it causes the reader to confront and submit to beliefs, prejudices, assumptions, and so on that are not his or her own.<sup>9</sup> Readers are invited to participate in a kind of imaginative education, where what they experience in the act of reading may lead to real changes in their actions towards others who they may not have previously understood.

While I think that there is much to admire about these attempts to theorize the relationship between reading and ethical activity, particularly because they seem intuitively to capture an important aspect of the imaginative experience of reading, they leave unexamined the potentially harmful effects of unwanted or invasive prying into the private lives of others. Might the richness of imaginative experience elicited by our favorite nov-

<sup>4</sup> Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, ed. John Bender and Simon Stern (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 37.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the words of Dorrit Cohn, “the more conspicuous and idiosyncratic the narrator, the less apt he is to reveal the depth of his characters' psyches or, for that matter, to create psyches that have depth to reveal” (*Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978], 25).

<sup>6</sup> R. S. Crane, “The Concept of Plot and the Plot of *Tom Jones*,” in *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1952) 616-647; Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, second ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 216.

<sup>7</sup> There are numerous cases in the history of the novel of a narrator inserting himself between the reader and the action of the story where the effect is to protect a character from the intrusive curiosity of the reader.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy J. Hale, “Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel,” *Narrative* 15.2 (May 2007): 199.

<sup>9</sup> Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 398.

els cultivate interests in the lives of others that would actually lead to harm? Intrusive narrators appear, at least some times, to think so. And, rather than avoiding the subject by leaving unrepresented the private details of the characters' lives—thus using complete silence to prevent the satisfaction of our interests—these narrators *draw attention* to the fact that they are deliberately stepping in to block or interrupt our imaginative access. Our interests are piqued so that they may be left wanting. If one of the ways by which the novel achieves ethical efficacy is by cultivating imaginative identification with positions of alterity, the ethical potential here would seem to consist in something nearly opposite: we are asked, on behalf of a character, to accept the *frustration* of our imaginative interests. Caring about literary characters, somewhat paradoxically, may then imply that we must extend to them a kind of privacy that could, if taken too far, disable the very imaginative intensity on which our care depends.

### III. Experiencing Nothing

The ethical force of intrusive narration need not only consist in a frustration of the reader's interests, for, in being permitted or required to endure the silence imposed by the narrator—in experiencing the intrusion as an intrusion—a new kind of imaginative experience is made available to the reader. Here, it may be helpful to say a bit more about what I mean by “imaginative experience,” and specifically to emphasize its intimate relationship to narrative form. And for this, I'd like briefly to turn to the theoretical work of second-generation Chicago School critic, Ralph Rader.

Rader did not consistently use one term to refer to imaginative experience, though my two favorites are “objective literary experience” (which refers to experience itself, as it occurs in the reader's mind) and “intrinsic imaginative structure” (which refers to the formal cause of this experience).<sup>10</sup> Imaginative (or literary) experience, according to Rader, is objectively fixed, but only tacitly known—in the same way that we all tacitly know the rules of grammar even though we may not be able to express them formally.<sup>11</sup> Rader frequently drew examples from poetry and the novel to illustrate the objective experience that reading gives rise to. Thus, in reading Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, “My Last Duchess,” we experience the Duke as we would experience overhearing one person talking to another—“from the outside in, his inner self inferred solely from external signs”; whereas in Thomas Gray's “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” “the churchyard actor is conceived by the poem from within, so that we participate in his mental activity as if his eyes and his experience had become...our own.”<sup>12</sup> In the novel, on the other hand (at least since the publication of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* in 1740), the reader's imagination is presented with “a focal illusion of characters acting autonomously as if in the real world, within our subsidiary awareness of an underlying authorial purpose which gives their story...implicit significance and affective force.”<sup>13</sup> In each of these examples, differences in form, or imaginative structures, result in different objec-

<sup>10</sup> See, among other places, Ralph Rader, “The Concept of Genre and Eighteenth-Century Studies,” in *Fact, Fiction, and Form: Selected Essays*, ed. James Phelan and David H. Richter (Columbus: The Ohio State Univ. Press, 2011), 58-81

<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, Rader claims that he is interested in describing a “grammar of the natural imagination” (“Defoe, Richardson, Joyce, and the Concept of Form in the Novel,” in *Fact, Fiction, and Form*, 172).

<sup>12</sup> Rader, “The Concept of Genre and Eighteenth-Century Studies,” 66.

<sup>13</sup> Rader, “From Richardson to Austen: ‘Johnson's Rule’ and the Development of the Eighteenth-Century Novel of Moral Action,” in *Fact, Fiction, and Form*, 219.

tive experiences of the imaginative worlds they project. While the reader's aesthetic judgment may be up for grabs, their imaginative orientation to the objects they judge is fixed by form.

I want to use this notion of literary experience to identify some of the more complex imaginative effects of narrative intrusion, and to begin thinking through how these effects may have ethical significance. My test case will be Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), but the discussion here may be applicable to a wider range of intrusive narrators.<sup>14</sup>

The main character of *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price, begins the novel in a psychological posture that seems designed both to avoid being "main," and being a "character." When she first arrives at Mansfield Park as a very young girl, for example, Fanny's instinct is to avoid others, acknowledgment of herself and situation, even sensation—at all costs:

Afraid of everybody, ashamed of herself, and longing for the home she had left, she knew not how to look up, and could scarcely speak to be heard, or without crying.<sup>15</sup>

After a week of crying herself to sleep every night, and trying at all costs not to attract any form of attention, her kind-hearted cousin Edmund attempts to console her. But when he tries to persuade her to "speak openly" about her unhappiness, "for a long while no answer could be obtained beyond a 'no, no—not at all—no, thank you'" (12). Eventually she does speak to him, but the way that speech is represented suggests that the narrator is intentionally protecting Fanny from the kind of consciousness-penetrating gaze that she uses more casually on other characters (including Fanny, later in the novel). Here is a representative sample of Fanny and Edmund's conversation on this occasion:

'Let us walk out in the park, and you shall tell me all about your brothers and sisters.'

On pursuing the subject, he found that dear as all these brothers and sisters generally were, there was one among them who ran more in her thoughts than the rest. It was William whom she talked of most and wanted most to see. . . . 'William did not like she should come away—he had told her he should miss her very much indeed.' 'But William will write to you, I dare say.' 'Yes, he had promised he would, but he had told her to write first.' 'And when shall you do it?' She hung her head and answered, hesitatingly, 'she did not know; she had not any paper.' (13, emphasis added)

The distinction between the representation of Fanny's speech and Edmund's speech could not be more obvious—Edmund's speech is directly reported, whereas Fanny's speech is folded into the protective third-person distance of the narrator's position. Thus,

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<sup>14</sup> Approximately one third of the following discussion about *Mansfield Park* has been published in another essay in which I attempt to trace out a poetic prehistory for narrative impersonality. See Nick Bujak, "Form and Generic Interrelation in The Romantic Period: Walter Scott's Poetic Influence on Jane Austen," *Narrative* 22.1 (January 2014): 45-67.

<sup>15</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 11. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

as Gerard Genette writes of free indirect style, there is a “confusion between the speech . . . of the character and that of the narrator.”<sup>16</sup> But, the stylistic confusion between character and narrator does not envelop the whole scene—rather, Austen’s narrator intrudes so as to create a calculated diversion of direct attention to *just one* character’s words. We experience a similar effect later when, after a separation of many years, Fanny has the opportunity to see William for the first time. Surely this is a time when the content of Fanny’s experience would be, if not especially interesting, at least especially notable. But, again, the narrator intrudes, marking the separation between what Fanny actually feels and what we, as readers, are permitted to see for ourselves. “Their eager affection in meeting, their exquisite delight in being together, their hours of happy mirth, and moments of serious conference, *may be imagined . . .*” (17, emphasis added). Her experience is marked as a particularly rich one, but the content of it is cordoned off from narrative representation. Austen’s narrator—who is not the boisterous companion of Fielding but is rather a figure whose impersonal presence barely registers at the edges of our perception—specifically uses her formal separation from the imaginative plane on which the plot of *Mansfield Park* unfolds and combines it with her (characteristically Austenian) near-invisibility to intrude and therefore to create an imaginative barrier that protects Fanny from the kind of unbearable attention that she so desperately wants to avoid.

A much easier narrative technique would have been to ignore Fanny’s mind altogether—not to mark that the reader’s access is being denied but simply to move quickly and silently onto another subject. But Austen chooses to show her narrator in action, emphasizing that an impersonal third-person narrator can, by virtue of its impersonality and formal exteriority, make available imaginative experiences that would otherwise be unavailable. These narrative intrusions shed a kind of blurriness or psychological *improminence* onto the representation of Fanny’s mind such that, from the perspective of the reader, the place of the narrator and the place of the character can be said to merge. By approaching a common point—of social separation and partial invisibility—from opposite positions, we are able at once to experience the intensity of Fanny’s shyness and the asocial position of the narrator. And thus the brute formal fact of the matter, that this narrator occupies a different imaginative plane than the characters, becomes in the hands of Austen a tool for analyzing the complexities of care: limiting the effects of human vulnerability can, if pushed to an extreme, prevent a person from being understood *as* a person.<sup>17</sup>

The beginning of *Mansfield Park* can actually be seen as a test case for the limits of this kind of intrusive narration, for, while a novel whose narrator intrudes as a way of deflecting attention from her beleaguered protagonist is formally interesting, it would also seem to produce a distraction that works against the very project of plotted suspense and character-based storytelling on which Austen’s novels depend. Austen appears to acknowledge the seriousness of this dilemma when, merely a page after we last left Fanny—“imagin[ing]” rather than seeing how she felt—the narrative makes a jarring temporal leap over five apparently uninteresting years:

<sup>16</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), 172.

<sup>17</sup> This way of analyzing narrator-character relationships as reflective of a tension and attraction between sociality and impersonality is indebted to D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003).

The first event of any importance in the family was the death of Mr. Norris, which happened when Fanny was about fifteen, and necessarily introduced alterations and novelties. (18)<sup>18</sup>

It is perhaps easy for the first-time reader of *Mansfield Park* to think of these five years as actually being devoid of “event[s] of any importance,” because it’s not yet clear that the category of “importance” is in fact oriented to Fanny’s perception of events. But, to the re-reader (or even a first-time reader who only knows that Fanny Price is the novel’s protagonist), it is clear that these “alterations and novelties” have very little to do with the death of a family member, but rather refer to the unhappy changes the aftermath of this “event” threatens to introduce into Fanny’s life. Specifically, when Mr. Norris dies, Sir Thomas begins to think that Fanny ought now to spend the majority of her time living with her newly widowed aunt Norris. Mrs. Norris, of course, has already proven herself to be a skilled tormentor of Fanny, and so it’s no surprise that Fanny wouldn’t want to be constantly in her company. But, the threat of living under Mrs. Norris’s emotional abuse is only the most obvious of Fanny’s concerns, and it is possible to discern a deeper worry that living with her aunt would force her into a role of central importance (thus making her recognizable as a main character), and, moreover, that she would be forced to speak for herself. She admits as much when she tries to explain to Edmund why she is so averse to her pending removal:

“The only difference [says Edmund] will be, that living with your aunt, you will necessarily be brought forward, as you ought to be. *Here*, there are too many, whom you can hide behind; but with *her* you will be forced to speak for yourself.”

“Oh! do not say so.” (21)

It is not insignificant that, on the verge of finding herself without a multitude of people to “hide behind,” Fanny’s speech is directly reported (only the second time in the novel). It’s as if the narrator, in anticipation of the increased importance that is about to be imposed on Fanny (or in her desire to make the reader anticipate such a change), begins preparing an expanded role for her in the narrative representation as well. Becoming a more important character in one register (aunt Norris’s life) implies becoming a more important—that is to say: comprehensible—character in another (the narrative record of events).

Fanny may not have a clear sense of why she wants to avoid being made a central figure in what we, as readers, know is a marriage-plot novel—for example, it is not an act of protest against domesticity and the personality-limiting dictates of plotted progress and marriage—but Austen is keenly sensitive both to the formal and social significance of

<sup>18</sup> *Tom Jones* provides a useful comparison here. At the beginning of Book 3, Fielding announces his “intention to pass over several large periods of time.” But, far from blocking a reader’s imaginative access, as in the above scene from *Mansfield Park*, Fielding invites his “sagaci[ous]” reader to “fill up these vacant spaces of time with his own conjectures; for which purposes we have taken care to qualify him in the previous pages” (101). See Henry Power, “Henry Fielding, Richard Bentley, and the ‘Sagacious Reader’ of *Tom Jones*,” *The Review of English Studies* 61.252 (2010): 749-772, for a discussion of the significance of this scene.

such an anti-social posture. That is, Fanny is neither recognizable as a character in the novel, nor is she recognizable as the kind of person about whom we might possibly care. And, in this regard, the way in which Fanny is represented in these early moments in the novel can be thought of as sharing some the more exotic features of the “narrative voice” as it is described by Maurice Blanchot:

Being without its own existence, speaking from nowhere, suspended in the tale as a whole, [the narrative voice] is not dissipated there either, as light is, which, though invisible itself, makes things visible: it is radically exterior, it comes from exteriority itself, the outside that is the special enigma of language in writing.<sup>19</sup>

In sympathy with Fanny’s desire to avoid becoming the object of attention, the narrator wraps her in the kind of “radical exterior[ity]” that is usually only occupied, however “invisibl[y],” by the narrator herself. But, as Fanny finds herself on the verge of unavoidably being “brought forward,” the narrator begins to withdraw the fog of anonymity in which she had suspended Fanny for the previous five years. In short, we are able to see the importance that Austen invests in the formal separation between narrator and character, and also her understanding of what sacrifices each position requires: to be a narrator requires being invisible to the social world that draws your attention, and to be a protagonist requires speaking for yourself (even, or especially, in the presence of those who are invested in your unhappiness).

Of course, the inverse of this formulation is equally true, as the novel makes clear when Mrs. Norris absolutely refuses to take Fanny into her home, thus temporarily thwarting the possibility of making Fanny into a recognizable main character in the novel. In the aftermath of this non-event, where no “alterations and novelties” are actually introduced into Fanny’s life at all, Fanny once again disappears behind the screen of other characters, and the screen of narrative distance as well:

Fanny soon learnt how unnecessary had been her fears of a removal; and her spontaneous, untaught felicity on the discovery, conveyed some consolation to Edmund for his disappointment in what he had expected to be so essentially serviceable to her. (25)

Rather than reporting the words that Fanny’s “spontaneous, untaught felicity” describes, the narrative again keeps them at a distance. Fanny is permitted to remain elusive, the content of her consciousness largely unrepresented.

The narrator’s performance of various levels of proximity and distance—where Fanny’s consciousness and speech are alternately not represented at all (as in the five year gap), spoken of in vague summary, or recorded in rich detail—suggests the extent to which this narrator is defined by a complex or contradictory set of desires and positions. That is, she is interested in and drawn to protagonists (or characters who can be figured as such), but she is also sympathetic with the opposition to sociality and attention that

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<sup>19</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “The Narrative Voice: (the ‘he’, the neuter),” in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha, trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Aster and Robert Lamberton (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1999), 467.

would seem nearly impossible for a marriage-plot novel to comprehend. Perhaps another way of saying this is that Austen's narrator possesses a psychology that is similar in kind to that of the characters she narrates—both participating in sociality while not being entirely contained by it—and yet she is not herself a character, is not even a person.

It is important, however, that the narrator's embrace of "my Fanny" (362) within the protective distance of third-person anonymity or blurriness can *only* be temporary.<sup>20</sup> As the novel progresses—as the Crawfords enter into and disrupt the lives of Fanny and the Mansfield set—Fanny gradually becomes more open both to narrative attention and to sexual attention. The threat that a woman she despises (Mary Crawford) might win the heart of the man she eventually realizes she loves (her cousin Edmund) causes Fanny willingly to enter into the social gaze of the narrator and the novelistic world she represents.<sup>21</sup> That is to say, Austen's narrator is committed to, and capable of representing, both the extent to which a character defies or is separate from the social order in which she is (partially or wholly) embedded, and of the extent to which her expectations, desires, and judgments, are eventually determined by the standards of that same social order.

In *Mansfield Park*, narrative intrusion functions to project an experience of nothingness, which is itself reflective of impersonal narration. Readers, by sharing in this experience, are permitted to see the value and allure of asociality, and to understand that the attention we bring to bear *as readers* (of novels, of other, real people) can be harmful. There is, at the same time, an acknowledgment that permanent (formal or social) separation from a social order can also be harmful. Deprived of contact with other humans who care about us, invisible to a world that has ceased to perceive us as fellow people, we may end up preferring the comparatively easier burdens and pains of sociality. Without offering any easy solutions, Austen's manipulation of narrative form helps us to recognize the value and the limits—the benefits and the harms—of being a member of society.

#### IV. Conclusion: The Limits of Narrative Care

Up to this point I have been arguing for the ethical efficacy of intrusive narration. This has involved two claims: first that intrusive narration can help a reader to understand the potential harm of unwanted attention and, second, that when deployed in the guise of impersonality, intrusions can help a reader to imagine a world beyond sociality that is at once utopian in its freedom from harm and nightmarish in its negation of the values of personhood. In both cases, I've deliberately kept the focus on aspects of narrative care in which narrators intrude to provide care *for* a character. However we evaluate the critical potential of this kind of care, I hope it will be seen as distinct from what I take to be a much less interesting kind of narrative care—namely, narrators who care *about* their characters.

Nonetheless, there is, I think, at least one significant question about the limits of intrusive narrative care. I'm guessing that some readers of this essay will have already had the

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<sup>20</sup> See Miller, esp. 40-56, for a compelling analysis of the moment of "mortification" that results in the absolute distinction between character (or personhood) and narrator (or impersonality) in Austen's fiction.

<sup>21</sup> See William Galperin, *The Historical Austen* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), esp. chapter 6 ("Jane Austen's Future Shock") for a compelling analysis of the kind of limiting or partializing work—and projection of a grim, highly regulated future for women—achieved by the eventual jointure of Fanny's perspective with the narrator's more social perspective. Galperin argues that it isn't until *Emma* (1816) that Austen's practice of realism (or practice *against* realism, as it were) is able to countenance the kinds of possibilities that are unacknowledged by this totalizing vision.

thought, from my very first example, about whether intrusions at the level of *discourse* can really be thought of as providing “care” for a character. From one perspective, the freeze-frame ending of *A Simple Story* denies the continuation of the story, and thus forever frees Matilda from having to make an unpleasant decision. On the other hand, the reader is invited to “surmise” or “suppose” the future of the characters even beyond the end of the novel. Ditto the protection of Fanny Price’s mind from direct observation, in which the reader is invited to “imagine” how she felt.<sup>22</sup> And even if we weren’t invited to picture what is not represented, don’t we do so anyway? Do we actually picture Fanny Price as fading from view, or Matilda as never having to make her decision?

To begin answering this difficult question, it may be useful to distinguish among various kinds of imaginative positions that we may occupy as we read a novel. In *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*, Peter J. Rabinowitz laid the foundation for this kind of discussion. For my purposes, I’ll invoke three of Rabinowitz’s categories: the “actual audience” (“the flesh-and-blood people who read the book”), the “authorial audience” (joined when readers accept “the author’s invitation to read in a particularly socially constituted way that is shared by the author”), and the “narrative audience” (like Booth’s implied reader, an imaginative position “which the text forces the reader to take on”).<sup>23</sup> Of course, no “actual audience” member ever belongs to one single category—these hypothetical constructions help to emphasize that readers are “complex beings” whose experience while reading functions on many shifting and overlapping levels. By analyzing the stakes of imaginative care in novelistic narration, I am therefore most interested in the kinds of experiences that can be said to correspond to the last position enumerated, what Harry Shaw in a recent commentary on Rabinowitz and Booth has called the position of the “credulous reader”: “Credulous listeners are entirely taken over by the reality of the novel they are reading and its norms: what happens in the novel is, for them, ‘true.’”<sup>24</sup>

Whether any *actual* reader is ever *credulous* in the way Rabinowitz and Shaw (and Booth) describe is an open question. And there is an additional question about method: supposing that “what happens in the novel” (cause) does genuinely determine the imaginative experience of credulous readers (effect), how can we be sure that we have correctly apprehended the cause, the effect, or the precise way in which cause brings about the effect? There is, finally, the massive question of the efficacy of imaginative experience itself: can the experience of reading, in all its intensity and complexity, actually contribute meaningfully to real-world change? I raise these questions in part to indicate what I take to be the potential limits of my own analysis as well as the limits of any account of the ethics of reading. But I also think there is a way in which these same questions can

<sup>22</sup> As Nick Williams usefully pointed out in his introduction to this session of the workshop, the narrator of *A Simple Story* administers care of a primarily temporal nature, saving “Matilda from having anything so certain as a thought at all,” but the narrator of *Mansfield Park* administers care by hiding Fanny’s thoughts from representation, which has the effect of providing a “haven of space rather than of time, like the ‘little white attic’ set aside for her in *Mansfield Park*, but one where even the reader is occasionally denied entry.”

<sup>23</sup> Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1987), 20, 21, 95.

<sup>24</sup> Harry E. Shaw, “Making Readers,” *Narrative* 15.2 (May 2007): 209. My use of “complex beings” to describe imaginative experience is adapted from this same essay, 211.

usefully be read back into the history of narrative form. Why did authors experiment with the capacities of narrative form to provide care for their characters? What did they hope to accomplish? Were they successful? Narrator's care, this much we can know. It is a significant feature of novelistic representation during its first sixty-five or so years of life. Beyond this relatively stable ground are only large questions about the role of literature in the lives of readers since the eighteenth century.