



Back Stories: Human Embodiment and the Novel

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Back Stories:
Human Embodiment and the Novel

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by
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Back Stories: Human Embodiment and the Novel

Abstract

Back Stories: Human Embodiment and the Novel argues that our most familiar narrative structures are integrally linked to the unique phenomenological attributes of the human back surface – a side of the body that, asymmetrical to the front, can neither see nor be seen by its possessor. The argument advances through detailed analyses of novels that render especially obvious the relation between the human back and novelistic forms. In these works by Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Hardy, numerous narrative shapes are mapped onto the front-back asymmetry of characters' imagined bodies. And such mappings, particularly varied and salient in these novels but present throughout literature, indicate a deep cognitive association between narrative form and embodied perception as shaped by the human body's dorsoventral morphology.

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"Listen to me," cried Syme with extraordinary emphasis. "Shall I tell you the secret of the whole world? It is that we have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind, and it looks brutal. That is not a tree, but the back of a tree. That is not a cloud, but the back of a cloud. Cannot you see that everything is stooping and hiding a face? If we could only get round in front—"

G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*

Introduction

Every human being is constrained by a disability – the inability to see every surface at once. Of course, I cannot see beyond a horizon from the edge of a shore or the North Atlantic Ocean from the South Pacific. But pure distance or absence aside, I cannot fully view even an object sharing a room with me and so near that it sits in my hand: even at this proximity, I can only see its face.

And nearer still than the nearest object – my own body? Here I confront an impasse. For the absolute prohibition on viewing other surfaces is *merely* that I cannot see them all at once – I must sail a bit further or rotate the object in my hand. Such are the demands of physics. But my body submits to that added, harsher law of biology commanding certain surfaces to remain eternally out of my sight.

Perhaps I can easily accept this of my face, since the edge of my brow and the tip of my nose do their best to peek into my periphery, and since, above all, this side of my person offers the consolation of sight itself. But my back: that is a different story.

The possession of a back – a side that can neither see nor be seen by the person to whom it belongs – literally pursues us all our lives. And that its unique attributes are integral to shaping our most familiar narrative structures is the argument of this dissertation, which advances through detailed readings of novels that render especially obvious the association between the human back and novelistic forms. In these works by Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Hardy, numerous narrative shapes are mapped onto the front-back asymmetry of characters' imagined bodies. And such mappings, particularly varied and salient in these novels but present

throughout literature, indicate a deep cognitive association between narrative form and embodied perception as shaped by the human body's dorsoventral morphology.

Our backs provoke countless perceptual asymmetries – not only the fact that we can see our fronts but not our backs and that our fronts can see but our backs cannot, but also, for example, that our backs are not visible to us but visible to others. Such asymmetries inhere in numerous narrative structures. Third-person narration suggests talking behind the back, the past tense allows for looking back, and plot structures of courtship, revenge, betrayal, and regression tell stories respectively of having a back, getting back, backstabbing, and backsliding.

With these examples, I appear to have already left the world of the literal body and entered a domain of pure verbal metaphor. But the novels I analyze suggest that the figurative meanings of the word “back” are but a symptom of a fundamental understanding of the world around us in terms of our bodies – a result of our conceptual frameworks, specifically our narrative structures, being extensions of our immediate phenomenological experiences. When I use the word “back” in describing part of such a structure, I do not exit but rather conjure the bodily realm – a realm with which that narrative structure is already associated. Linguist Keith Allan catalogues thoroughly and systematically in “The anthropocentricity of the English word(s) ‘back’”¹ the characteristics of the biological human back that are embedded in nearly all of the word's uses – and this dissertation shows that these uses are signs of continuing cognitive links between literal and metaphorical backs, as evidenced by the embedding of the human back's singular features in so many classic prose narrative forms and techniques, *independently* of the word “back.”

¹ Keith Allan, "The Anthropocentricity of the English Word(s) " Back", " *Cognitive Linguistics* 6, no. 1 (1995), 11.

At its core, the back is the region located across the shoulders and down across the spine, which not only allows for the uniquely human ability to stand upright and walk on two feet, but more importantly, is essential to our physical and neurological structure. As such, the spine is extended often to describe that part of an inanimate object crucial to its sustainment. For example, every book relies on the basic integrity of its spine.

Of the back's many characteristics, this dissertation finds its dual blindness and non-visibility to its possessor to be the most meaningful, both in themselves and in conjunction with other features – for example, it is compelling that our most crucial sustaining structure is, specifically, the most visually vulnerable one. Allan does not address its visual inaccessibility and impotence, the two features that will be key in the structural analysis of narrative to follow, but he does name several other characteristics of the human back that are figuratively extended to other domains in which the word “back” is used. Of these characteristics, three are the most pertinent to this argument.

First, the back is that region opposite what Allan terms the #interactive-side#. He places the word between hash-marks to designate it as a technical and not merely descriptive term. The back is where we do *not* find, among other things, the organs crucial for seeing, smelling, eating, speaking, and hearing; the breasts, crucial for nurturing; the genitals, crucial for reproduction; or the limbs, crucial for interaction with other humans and our physical environment. In English, this feature is figuratively extended, for example, to the “back” of the hand, the direction in which the fingers do *not* easily move and act.

Second, the back designates the side opposite the leading edge during normal walking. This gives rise to the “journey schema,” from which are derived still more referents of the English word “back” – for example, the space left behind when traveling. Combined with the

universal schema “time is a journey,” it leads to the notion of looking or going back in time. The back’s role in the conceptualization of time is perhaps the most universal and prominent of its metaphorical extensions, and front/back (or by extension, ahead/behind) is certainly the most dominant framework, among the world’s languages, for construing time. The association is addressed in all my chapters, and it is invoked, of course, in the dissertation’s title.

Third, the back is opposite the side that normally confronts another human viewer or object. In English, this meaning transfers to a static inanimate object on which there is no intrinsic front, and on which the side opposite the viewer is contingently named “the back.” According to Allan, this is “figuratively extended from a prototype in which two people are face to face” (17) – what has been called “the canonical encounter”² between humans. I would suggest that the “backs” of inanimate objects might get their name from the fact that they, like our own backs, cannot be seen.³ This is the association that appears in many of the novels I will consider, and that my epigraph and opening paragraph seek to evoke. In any case, the reason we call the opposite side of an object its back is not pertinent to my argument, in which the many uses of the English word “back,” beyond its reference to the body, are simply a *convenience*. It is handy but not a necessity for my argument that the word “back” applies to the non-visible sides both of the human body and of objects, because these sides share, independently of the word, a conceptual association that materializes itself in narratological phenomena.

² Herbert Clark, “Space, Time, Semantics, and the Child” in Timothy E. Moore, *Cognitive Development and the Acquisition of Language* (New York: Academic Press, 1973), p. 35.

³ It may be interesting to note that in certain other languages, including Hausa, Kiswahili, and Maasai, the side confronting the viewer is called the “back” and the opposite side is called the “front”: objects are imagined to be facing the same direction as the viewer. Of course, in these languages, it cannot be the non-visibility of one’s own back that is being extended to name the “back” of the object. But the object is conceived as another body, and the ascription of “front” and “back” across languages, which depends on cultural convention, is not pertinent to this dissertation, which relies not, as I say, on the versatility of the English *word* “back” but on the properties of the bodily area to which it refers.

Some of the fundamental components in the association between narrative structures and the back of the human body are best introduced by way of a concentrated instance of their manifestation, and there is perhaps no better example than that offered by Dickens in *David Copperfield*. As a child, David is sent to Mr. Creakle's harsh boarding school because, in self-defense, he bites his abusive step-father Mr. Murdstone. Once there, David's punishment is to be forced to wear a placard on his back that reads, "'Take care of him. He bites.'"⁴ The speaker of the first phrase, in the second-person, is indiscernible yet bold. Imperative tense allows the sentence to go without a subject – the removal of the deictic "you" from the otherwise declarative "You take care of him." Its absence intensifies the speaker's impersonality, since pointing to a "you" might establish a personal rapport with the placard's reader. The tense, moreover, helps its speaker carry not only such absolute impersonality but, with it, a total authority, since its defining grammatical function is to command. By the end of its brief first sentence, in other words, the placard already couples two of the three classic features of a normative extradiegetic narrator: unquestionable authority and a personality absent from the world of which it speaks. A third feature then arrives without delay, when, with its second sentence, the placard shifts into omniscient narration's typical third-person stance in the cutting grammatical clause whose brevity seems only to amplify the already established authority – the simple subject and verb, "He bites."

And yet, this impersonal, authoritative, third-person speaker's deepest resemblance to a classic narrator is not grammatical but physical, as it speaks about David from a location irrevocably inaccessible to David's eyes. The text that reads "'Take care of him. He bites.'" in

⁴ From Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 81.

our world is just as permanently unavailable to David as the sight of his back in *his* world. And that *David Copperfield* is narrated not by an omniscient narrator but by a very personal, limited, and first-person narrator – the future David who quotes the placard – only underscores the universality of *any* narrator or narration's location being, relative to the character's fictive personality, identifiable with that personality's physical back surface.

David devotes five full paragraphs to detailing the excruciation of wearing the placard – horrifying shame, paranoia, depersonalization, nightmares, and even a growing belief that he does bite. Indeed, its psychological effects are far more powerful and enduring than the brief pain provoked by the more conventional corporal punishment he suffers later, when beaten with a cane.

What I suffered from that placard, nobody can imagine. Whether it was possible for people to see me or not, I always fancied that somebody was reading it. It was no relief to turn around and find nobody; for wherever my back was, there I imagined somebody always to be. (82)

David's "nobody can imagine" pretends it will describe a suffering so exclusive as to be inconceivable to anyone but himself, yet subsequently detailed is a condition whose basis is absolutely universal. The pain of the placard is nothing, finally, but the pain of possessing a back – a surface available to all but oneself – and David's sense of singularity comes only, no doubt, from the fact that no one bears the relation to his back that he does. We are to understand, furthermore, that the placard's power derives entirely from its location and not from its language – a location that *already* does what the placard does, in making David perpetually readable to unseen viewers, and in speaking, like the voice behind an imperative utterance, impersonally and authoritatively on its subject.

David's misery emerges, of course, from being not only unable to read the placard but also to write it, just as he is unable to write the novel that speaks about him – indeed, speaks *him*,

helping to determine his ontology and constitute him. In the audio track to Yoko Ono's *No.4, or Bottoms*, the 80-minute 1966 film consisting entirely of 15-second shots of naked human bottoms as their owners walk on a treadmill, Ono attributes her interest in bottoms to the fact that "you cannot control how your bottom moves, unlike your face, regardless of your intelligence. Cabinet ministers and laborers, beautiful women and ugly women ... their bottoms all have innocent looks beyond their control." Ono's description of the bottom extends fairly to the back, whose refusal to be determined in expression by its owner is akin to the refusal of the text of the placard or the novel to be written by David.

Of course, within the fictional world, David – at least, future David – controls the text and the representation of his former self, looking back and conjuring an image of himself that, now that it is in the past and can be recreated, can also be seen by him from all directions.⁵ His looking back would seem, in other words, an overcoming of his previous inability to look *at his* back, his narrative project recalling the fact that we can only see our backs in secondary representations of ourselves, whether in a mirror, a photograph, or, as in this case, an autobiography. But granting young David this gift – unknown to him – of a future self that will eventually see and perhaps control the remembered expression of his back, we must still recognize the *author* to which even any narrator is ultimately subordinate. Neither of the Davids can escape the authorial power that is Dickens himself, determining the existence of the narrator and characters. And just as older David's position as first-person narrator only underscored the universally unavailable status of any *narrator*, so does *David Copperfield*'s status specifically as

⁵ Sartre, in *The Imaginary*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge, 2004), speaking not of the image of oneself but of other objects, notes that only imagined ones can be seen from all directions. The limitation on real objects is part of what obligates the 1999 BBC film adaptation of *David Copperfield* to have David wear the placard on his chest, so that his misery, evident only in speech and facial expression, can be concurrently visible to the audience.

fictional autobiography underscores the universally all-determining power of any *author*, relative to the diegesis. The text is drawn from but not isomorphic with the life of Dickens; in sharp contrast to that real life, the words of both young and future David are predetermined and authored from the outside – constituted from that outside – specifically, from a location unavailable to their direct gaze, just like their backs.

Since the back is uniquely capable of speaking at once *about* its owner, *without* that owner's readership or full authorship, and in a way that helps determine and indeed *constitute* that owner, it is uniquely perfect for physically materializing, within a narrated world, the ontology of that world's narration and authorship. Conversely, the back, when it enters his (self-)consciousness, is uniquely perfect for imposing upon the character, within his fictional world, his painful ontology as a character – an ontology defined by being perpetually spoken of, viewed, and partially constituted by that speech and viewership from a location that is inaccessible to him. The ontologies of narrator and character, in other words, can be physicalized to unique perfection by the back surface as it constrains and structures the phenomenological perception of the human being.

The placard episode in *David Copperfield* not only offers an example of fundamental narratological structures that bear an inherent relation to the peculiar fact of human embodiment, but also foregrounds the vulnerability that results from the back's non-visibility and lack of ocular power. This is a continuing motif throughout my chapters, which, as I will now discuss, concern themselves not only with such ontological positions as those detailed above but also with narrative stances, plot forms, and their combination.

*

Jane Austen's final novel *Persuasion*, the subject of Chapter 1, propagates multiple kinds of narratological symmetry, including a final marital engagement that repeats an earlier one in the backstory, thus creating plot balance, and a heroine whose mind is superlatively observant, self-aware, and uninterruptedly foregrounded, thus helping to efface the typical asymmetry between character and narrator. Under these conditions of near-perfect balance, Austen locates the stakes of the narrative on the front-back asymmetry of the body. The otherwise invulnerable Anne has two insurmountable blind-spots, which the novel combines: one, her uncertainty regarding the future (that is, whether her engagement to Captain Wentworth will re-occur), and two, her inability to see or control what is on her back. By a variety of means, including several threatened or actual injuries to other characters' spines and the most singular romantic scene in Jane Austen, in which Captain Wentworth rescues Anne by removing from her back a child who is bending forward her spine and harassing her, the novel defines its narrative closure as a balance between the invulnerable front and vulnerable back of the body – of love as literally having someone's back.

Chapter 2 turns to Charles Dickens's first long novel, *Dombey and Son*, in which a network of backs embodies the shapes of the novel's plots, which emerge from the intricate, nested interactions among the characters to whom those backs belong. Numerous plot structures of reversal rely for mobilization on the asymmetrical blindness of the back relative to the front, so that the *abstraction* of potential or actual plot reversals as such is mapped onto the *material* reversals (or failed reversals) of the body. In the process, numerous idiomatic expressions describing interpersonal plot structures are nearly or completely literalized: taking back (relenting), getting back (revenge), and backstabbing (betrayal), among others. Within the plot reversals, the final enabler is almost always a character's deliberate or accidental manipulation of

the front-back asymmetry of a body, such that the author's *real* agency in plot orchestration is continually materialized within the fictional world not through a character but in the form of a back that is as visually unavailable to its owner as the author is. The final phase of the novel, meanwhile, suggests the possibility of an effacement of the typical asymmetries in ocular power between a front and a back as aligned with an effacement of the typical asymmetry between the perspective of a character (limited) and that of anyone outside the diegesis, whether author, narrator, or reader (omniscient).

In Dickens's first-person retrospective *Great Expectations*, Chapter 3 argues, the physical back is crucial to motivating acts of authorship and narration as enterprises within the novel. The impulse to narrate seems to emerge from the association, during multiple episodes in Pip's experience, of subjection to the back's vulnerability on the one hand, with subjection to narratological power on the other hand, whether as the object of someone else's narration (for example, that of Magwitch or his convict friends) or in being secretly constituted by an authoring backstory (the childhood encounter that later, in the form of his *Great Expectations*, supplies his *living*). Confronted with this association, Pip's act of narrating *in turn* is seized upon as if to subvert the limitations of his physical and narratological ontologies by imposing the latter on other subjects – in other words, by becoming a narrator who, relative to his new narrated world, has no “back.”

Chapter 4 argues that the story of the heroine of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is a story about her relation to her own back as it imposes upon her, to her increasing awareness, the limitations of her ontology as a character in a determined universe. Like Pip, Tess experiences something of the horror of being a character in conjunction with something of the horror of having a back, not only, as for Pip, through words spoken behind her

back or, more dramatically, the reappearance of a figure from her backstory behind her back, but also by the back's equally heavy involvement, as in *Dombey and Son*, in embodying, orchestrating, and underlining the artifice structuring the plot turns that determine her. Tess suffers more from her back and her ontology than any other character discussed in this dissertation, consistent with the fact that when she feels their pressure, there is no pretense whatsoever of her power to defend herself – unlike in the case of young Pip, for example, who is comfortably nested in his own older self's authoring of his narrative. Indeed, the Naturalist novel, with its premise that individuals are largely determined (“authored”) by social and natural forces outside their control, inherently, in a sense, materializes within its fictional world the narratological, ontological reality that the character-devices represented by fictional persons are also controlled by outside agents. Since the embodiment of narratological conditions within the fictional world is thus always ongoing in Naturalist novels, it is perhaps not surprising that the vulnerability of the back – the signifier of narratological determinism *par excellence* – would materialize so frequently in them.⁶

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Among other things, my analyses of these novels suggest that associations between the bodily back surface and the other uses of the word “back” exist, as I have said, independently of the shared word. And perhaps nothing speaks to this independence more persuasively than the fact that so many idiomatic and metaphorical expressions involving the back appeared in English long after the association between the source domain (the physical back) and the target domain

⁶ One of many instances in Émile Zola appears in the novel *L'Assommoir*. Coupeau's fall from the roof, which is also the first domino to fall in the “natural” decline of Gervaise's business and then life, is provoked by his looking back to wave to Nana behind him.

(usually an abstraction, such as time or knowledge, and in these cases, integral to a narrative structure) had already materialized in these novels.

Let us take, as an instance, the term “backstory” – referring, in the case of a literary work, to the history of events leading up to what is framed as the narrative of primary interest, and in the case of a person, to the history of events leading up to a given moment in the person’s life. By definition, the backstory does not acquire this name in real-time but rather with a certain, if only very miniscule, belatedness. And it is at least momentarily, if not for a long time, unavailable to some viewer, whether the reader, another character, or perhaps, as is often the case with nineteenth-century protagonists who must discover their own origins, to the subjects of the backstories themselves. In this sense, it is like the back of a viewed object, and in the latter case, also like the back of one’s own body.

All the chapters in the dissertation present instances in which the idiomatic expression is literalized through the placement or mapping of backstory elements and associations onto or around a fictional person’s back. It occurs, indeed, throughout novels of writers beyond those I discuss. Bulstrode, in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, first contemplates the resurfacing of his shameful past while looking out a window on whose surface he sees the reflection of the room behind him; and when, without his knowledge, the townspeople have discovered his history, they talk about that history behind his literal back, immediately after he has just passed by on the street. Ladislaw, meanwhile, feels the shame of his origins, once discovered, like a placard on his back, a precursor of the association evoked later in Eliot’s career by the adolescent Daniel Deronda, who first becomes self-conscious about his ignorance to his parentage thanks to the words of his tutor, who sits behind him during the conversation. Throughout these and other novels, stories that are made to be felt on the back tend not to involve just *any* part of the past but

instead a portion entailing non-visibility to self or others. Additionally, they constitute a backstory not only for the fictional person but also for what is framed as the or a main narrative of the novel, so that the very structure of the novel is mapped onto the asymmetry in visual availability between the character's imagined physical front and back. And yet, though the word "backstory" was indeed originally conceived in a narratological context, with respect to a fictional character's background history, it first appeared in the 1980s, over a century after these novels had already literalized it. The words "backstabbing" and "backfiring," whose literalization is hinted towards in *Dombey and Son*, also entered English in the twentieth century.

Conceptual metaphor theory was first extensively considered by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980. They argued that metaphors are not purely linguistic phenomena but active conceptualizations. Many kinds of linguistic studies have since supported this theory, suggesting that we do metaphoric processing even when using very conventional idioms and metaphors, and confirming that metaphorical expressions are accompanied by a lively *thought* association between the source and target domains. They are not, in other words, expressions that are historically metaphoric but now purely *verbal*, fixed phrases. Such studies analyze data, for example, on real-time hand gestures that accompany the use of a metaphor. A study on the Aymaras, a South American tribe whose language, unlike most, places the past metaphorically in front of ego and the future behind it, found that they gesture forward with their hands when speaking of the past and backward when they speak of the future.⁷

⁷ Rafael E. Núñez and Eve Sweetser, "With the Future Behind them: Convergent Evidence from Aymara Language and Gesture in the Crosslinguistic Comparison of Spatial Construals of Time," *Cognitive Science* 30, no. 3 (2006), 401-450. (In a sense, I am suggesting that the relations between structures and episodes in the novels, dealing in narrative structural and literal uses of the back, function as this sort of data – they are like the hand that gestures backward as its owner speaks of "A long time ago..." without even necessarily using a verbal metaphor like "It is behind me now.") Other studies have gathered data, for example, on the processing times of a statement relative to whether it is consistent or inconsistent with a primed metaphorical mapping, finding that we process statements faster when they are consistent with the metaphorical mappings we have in mind. Lera Boroditsky, "Does Language Shape Thought?: Mandarin and English Speakers' Conceptions of Time," *Cognitive*

Since its introduction nearly forty years ago, conceptual metaphor theory has grown in its advancement of embodied cognition, a theory spanning beyond linguistics into psychology, neurobiology, artificial intelligence, and many other disciplines. It argues that not only our language but many if not all aspects of mental concepts and activities are shaped by our bodies and the way our bodies function. My analyses suggest that fundamental narrative structures are among these “mental concepts and activities” – thus, our body shapes not only our language but also the art we create with that language. The novels act as data in support of embodied cognition by showing that authors conceive of narrative structures that imbibe the qualities of the shape of our real bodies and frequently make this imbibing obvious. Like embodied cognition, the analyses are an argument against Cartesian dualism, suggesting that literary forms are not purely mental phenomena but instead emerge also from the peculiarities of our bodies – that if our bodies had a different shape and different constraints, our classic literary structures might be different too.⁸ We might not, for example, be so interested in creating fictional literary characters in the first place – in imagining people who are spoken of and constituted by words eternally, irrevocably inaccessible to their sight – if we did not have back surfaces that impose a similar condition on us.

And we might not be so interested in reading about them either. While my analyses add to the body of work in support of embodied cognition, certain kinds of recent psycholinguistic

Psychology 43, no. 1 (2001), 1-22; Dedre Gentner, Mutsumi Imai and Lera Boroditsky, "As Time Goes by: Evidence for Two Systems in Processing Space-Time Metaphors," *Language and Cognitive Processes* 17, no. 5 (2002), 537-65.

⁸ In the science fiction short story “Story of your Life,” two linguists study the language of an extraterrestrial species whose bodies have no backs – they have eyes in every direction and no dorsoventral asymmetry (no dorsality or ventrality to speak of). In their script, words are legible no matter what direction they are rotated, and one of the linguists wonders whether “it’s a consequence of their bodies’ radial symmetry: their bodies have no ‘forward’ direction, so... their writing doesn’t either.” Ted Chiang, *Stories of Your Life and Others* (New York: Vintage, 2016), 106.

studies, conversely, can help support the idea that we, as readers, process the reversals and asymmetries of fundamental narrative structures through our backs. One fMRI study, for example, showed that the areas of the brain that process the source domain (e.g. sensed texture) are activated when hearing a sensory metaphor (e.g. “He had a rough day”).⁹ Another study asked participants to listen to a story about a relationship described in metaphorical terms, with some participants hearing a successful story (“Your relationship was moving along in a good direction”) and others hearing an unsuccessful one. They were then asked to walk, blindfolded, towards a marker while thinking about the story they had heard, and those who heard the successful story walked longer and further than those who had heard the unsuccessful one. In the control group, participants heard the stories in non-metaphorical terms (“Your relationship was very important to you”) and, regardless of whether they had heard a successful or unsuccessful story, all walked similar distances. The study showed, as others have and as its conductor psychologist Raymond Gibbs put it, that “people’s understanding of metaphorical narratives is partly based on their embodied simulations of the metaphorical actions referred to in these stories.”¹⁰ Of course, in both these studies, the metaphor was verbally articulated, but it worked by referring to a conceptual mapping, and the mobilization of that mapping resulted in an experience that simulated real embodied experience. When these novels create and mobilize conceptual mappings between the body and narrative structures, they quite possibly provoke the reader’s embodied experience of the structures. And it is fitting that this would occur frequently at least in realism, which begs for realization. Indeed, the somatization of a narrative structure is

⁹ Simon Lacey, Randall Stilla, K. Sathian, “Metaphorically feeling: Comprehending textural metaphors activates somatosensory cortex,” *Brain and Language*, Vol. 120, 3, March 2012, 416-421.

¹⁰ Raymond Gibbs Jr., “Walking the Walk while Thinking about the Talk: Embodied Interpretation of Metaphorical Narratives,” *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 42, no. 4 (2013), 363-378, 363.

a profound way of realizing that structure, and this is one way that narrative *form*, rather than detracting from the liveliness of a character or episode, can very much, in this way, help elicit it.

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It probably exists, but I have not yet found, in the history of philosophy, a prolonged meditation on the back's lack of ocular power.¹¹ The phenomenologists Husserl and especially Merleau-Ponty would perhaps have been the likeliest candidates for offering one, since they were preoccupied with the lived body's dual status as perceiving subject and perceived object – with, that is, the individual's intertwined¹² experiences of both having and being a body – and both philosophers wrote at length on the body's ability to perceive its own being, as well as on that ability's limits. But the specific limit that was their central interest was the subject's inability to perceive its own physical act of perceiving. “The same Body which serves me as means for all my perception obstructs me in the perception of it itself and is a remarkably imperfectly constituted thing,” writes Husserl in *Ideas II*, and he meant that the body cannot perceive itself as it can other objects above all because the perceiving organ excludes itself from the domain of objects perceived.¹³ It is because of this preoccupation with the perception of perception that when it comes to vision, the back's non-visibility, when it is briefly mentioned by Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, is almost always categorized with that of the eye, which is the

¹¹ Even meditations on any other aspect of the back are extremely rare: other than Keith Article's article on the word “back” that I cited earlier, only two have crossed my path. One is by David Wills, *Dorsality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). His focus is on the theoretical and historical implications of turning backward – the keyword in his text, indeed, is not “back” but “turn.” The other text is an essay by Karl Knausgaard on the back of the neck. The area inherently makes him think of decapitation, and so while he does touch on the fact that the neck cannot view, its potential for suffering fatal injury is his guiding concern. “The Other Side of the Face,” *The Paris Review*, May 28, 2014, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/05/28/the-other-side-of-the-face/>

¹² For Sartre, by contrast, the body is always, steadfastly, in either one or the other of the two ontological states – it can never be an object of its own perception and a perceiver *at the same moment*.

¹³ Edmund Husserl, *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*, ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 184.

primary “enigma” (as Merleau-Ponty would term the body’s simultaneous status as perceiver and perceived). Not the back, but “An eye does not appear to one’s own vision,” writes Husserl.¹⁴ The primacy of interest in the un-seeable eye throughout Merleau-Ponty means that when the back is mentioned (which is extremely rarely), it is nothing but, at most, a less interesting version of the eye, which at least can see. Put simply, “can see but cannot be seen” is more intriguing, to the phenomenologists, than “cannot see and cannot be seen.” In a paradigmatic instance of at least his equalization of the eye and back’s relative importance, Merleau-Ponty, when he argues in his late work *Chiasm* that a complete view of oneself requires the gaze of others, writes: “As soon as we see other seers ... through other eyes we are for ourselves fully visible; that lacuna where our eyes, our back, lie is filled, filled still by the visible, of which we are not the titulars.”¹⁵ The lacuna that is the back is lumped together with the eyes. This is the pattern throughout his work, in which the back holds little interest in itself for being simultaneously both non-visible *and* non-viewing.

As I will soon touch upon, many thinkers rely on the back – without actively meditating on it – as a keystone for theorizing such basic principles as selfhood, authority, and truth. But there is at least one compelling case of an unmistakable neglect of the back that is perhaps unreasonable. As the basis of what he calls the first philosophy – his philosophy of ethics – Emmanuel Levinas relies on the idea of a primordial, pre-cognitive, pre-discursive, and very much embodied face-to-face encounter between two subjects. An Other appears before the eyes of an I, and before the I can even begin to reflect upon it – before reason has entered the picture – moral law is already sanctioned by the sheer nature of the face.

¹⁴ Ibid., 178.

¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 143.

There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. ... The face is exposed, menaced.... At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill. ... The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse.... The first word of the face is the “Thou shalt not kill.” It is an order.¹⁶

The face for Levinas is dual: defenseless, in its need for ethics; powerful, in its ability to “speak” and command it. Its defenselessness, in other words, is limited, and so we might ask whether there isn’t some other “skin” on the body that is in fact the “most naked, most destitute.” Indeed, what would these words better describe than the back, which in *its* “very uprightness,” “its upright exposure,” is “exposed, menaced” – all the more “without defense” for being, unlike the commanding face, far less capable of “speaking,” figuratively or literally?

Ethics may indeed have an embodied and pre-discursive rooting, but if it does, that rooting is much likelier in the human back than the face. How, if it cannot “speak,” would the back present such a command? It could do so within the I before that I encountered any Other. Prior to inter-subjectivity or interpersonal perception is sheer phenomenological perception, and a call toward ethics would emerge in the I’s solitude.

After all, from the moment I open my eyes, I see that I am half-blind – roughly half of what surrounds me, and half of what is me, escapes my sight. And I recognize vulnerability before I encounter anyone else, as my back, on its own, is already an Other. (“[W]herever my back was,” writes David Copperfield, “there I imagined somebody always to be.”) Furthermore, as *Persuasion* reminds its reader, my back is in dire need of protection because it contains my most crucial sustaining structure: my spine and its cord – holding me upright, connecting every part of my body to my mind, and helping to manage every organic function within me. Because of the extraordinary fact that this center of my central nervous system is placed where *I* can’t see

¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity, Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86-89.

it but every *Other* can, ethical intercourse between I and Other is deemed crucial before two faces even meet, before any real Other enters the periphery – precisely because, and not in spite of, the fact that the back cannot confront, cannot speak. Indeed, my face, seeing and speaking to the world, can fend for itself. But my spine begs blindly and silently for the mercy of my species, and the prime, primal call to ethics emerges from that silence, by the spine's location precisely *not* near the face, but in the back.

“Face-to-face” as a phrase is associated most famously in philosophy with Levinas, but its neglect of the back as an equal if not more powerful enabler of key steps in cognitive development has occurred not only in the case of ethics, as here, but also in the case of self-consciousness. It is latent, for example, in psychoanalysis, in the concept of the mirror stage. The infant’s encounter with the mirror is an encounter with a face – as in Levinas, it is that area of the body which is of prime importance. And yet the back figures, without emphasis or active theorization, as a crucial aid in explaining self-consciousness in other writings by the mirror stage’s conceiver himself, Lacan, who nonetheless does not even note, let alone theorize, this reliance on the special qualities of the back.

In his essay “Logical Time and The Assertion of Anticipated Certainty,”¹⁷ Lacan proposes a game. There are three prisoners and five dots; three dots are white and two are black; each of the prisoners has one of these dots placed on his back, and all the prisoners are told that whoever can ascertain the color of the dot on his back first can leave the cell. He must base his conclusion on logic and not probability, and he is able only to see the dots on the other two prisoners' backs. The game begins, and every prisoner sees two white dots.

¹⁷ In *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1999).

How do I, as a prisoner, know I am wearing a white dot on my back? I acknowledge that if I were seeing a white dot and a black dot, I would have to be a white dot, because someone else, seeing two black dots, would leave knowing they were a white. Since no one else is leaving, no one else is seeing one black dot and one white dot either. Everyone must be seeing two white dots. Hence, I am a white dot, and I may leave.

Of course, when everyone thinks this way, everyone starts walking towards the door, and then the condition under which each came to his conclusion – the fact that *no one* was walking towards the door – is now a source of doubt. Thus, everyone hesitates, which provokes everyone's certainty once more, which results, in turn, once more in hesitation. This continues endlessly until or unless at least one of the prisoners realizes that the only way to win the game is not to hesitate at the moment of doubt, but instead to act confidently on the basis of one's *anticipated* certainty. Lacan writes, "Truth manifests itself in this form as preceding error and advancing solely in the act that engenders its certainty; error, conversely, manifests itself as being confirmed by its inertia and correcting itself only with difficulty by following truth's conquering initiative" (173). He then argues that this is not only the logic by which truth manifests itself (he is not alone in his reliance on the back as a basis for theorizing truth, as I will soon discuss), but also the basis for how all human subjects assert their own status as human. The process is thus: (1) "A man knows what is not a man" (in the game, what is a black dot); (2) "Men recognize themselves among themselves as men" (everyone realizes he wears a white dot); (3) "I declare myself to be a man for fear of being convinced by men that I am not a man" (I shall leave the cell without indulging the hesitation that will only lead to more hesitation).

Neither Lacan's essay itself, nor any essay about it that I have encountered, lingers on the game's reliance on biology, but it is striking that the way Lacan physically instantiates the notion

of primal doubt – a doubt no less significant than of the self as human – is by an ocular vision unimpeded by curtains or blindfolds. Everything is pure surface, purely visible, and yet there is doubt, and this is possible only because of the back. Lacan can only discuss doubt while keeping all surfaces visible and using a metaphor of vision as certainty because of the singular unavailability of the back surface. Furthermore, his essay subtly suggests that the most fundamental of identity problems – am I human? – emerges out of our anatomical configuration, and – contrary to what is suggested by the mirror stage – centers around one’s relation to one’s own back and not face.

In *David Copperfield*, the “Am I a man?” doubt is beautifully encapsulated in young David’s seeing the pasteboard placard on a table before he realizes it is intended for himself, and thinking it is a warning for a dog; later, after he wears the sign long enough, David recalls, “I positively began to have a dread of himself, as a kind of wild boy who did bite” (82). Here, we see not only the Lacanian suggestion of one’s self-doubt emerging from the asymmetry of one’s body, but also the idea that the back is the location on the body that houses authority. As I noted earlier, the placard’s authority over David derives entirely from its location, and that location’s special relation to authority is noted throughout literature and theory. In Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” the law broken by a prisoner is etched onto his back, and Althusser’s account of the political subject in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”¹⁸ emerges from his allegorical account of the policeman or Other who hails the subject with the call, “Hey, you there!” from behind him. The subject’s inevitable turning backward at the sound of the call reveals his subjection (and his sense of that subjection) to authority as *already being there*, as if in his very body, before the application of any direct assertion or force – an authority that is imagined in the

¹⁸ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

metaphor as emerging from and resting in his back. In terms of narrative structure, ultimate authority comes, of course, from the author, and as I have said, its determinative force is repeatedly made explicit on and through the backs of characters.

Alongside ethics, selfhood, and authority, truth, too, has been conceived as bound with the back. In Plato's well-known "Allegory of the Cave" in *Republic*, humanity is represented by prisoners chained in a cave. Behind them is a fire, and behind the fire is true reality – what Plato famously terms throughout his writings, "the forms." But the prisoners are chained such that they are unable to look back, and they are likewise unable not only to see the forms, but also to know that the forms are even there. All they can see are the shadows the forms cast on the wall in front of them, and the prisoners mistake this for reality. Truth is inaccessible to our direct sight – it is a matter of faith and perhaps assertion, and it is located behind our backs.

A similar spatialization of higher reality is found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The idea that God is inaccessible to our direct sight is of course central to it, and the *Bible* physicalizes God's invisibility through the non-visibility of the back. When Lot's wife is leaving Sodom and Gomorrah for disobeying God's decree that she not look back, she turns into a pillar of salt, and the reason, as many an exegesis puts forth, is because she sees God himself behind her, coming down to destroy the cities. Seeing God, like looking behind you while you look before you, is a physical impossibility.

The single occasion on which God directly grants the direct request to be seen emphasizes this alignment more powerfully than anything else in the Bible. The chosen viewer is Moses, to whom God replies, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you.... But ... you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live. ... [Y]ou may stand on a rock. ... I will ... cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see

my back” (Exodus 33:19-33:22). Moses’s vision is posterior in not only the spatial but also the temporal sense – it occurs only after God has already passed by. The moment suggests that God is graspable, in a sense, only retrospectively, and recalls the *David Copperfield* and Lacan illustrations of how one’s own back is *also* only graspable retrospectively (in Lacan’s case, after one has walked out of the prison). In this sense, God becomes akin to the only other surface that Moses can only see by looking back: the back of Moses himself. Indeed, God’s face is in the back of Moses temporally, and is on the back of the side that faces Moses spatially, because it is like the back of Moses. Like God, his back is always with him, always helping figuratively and literally to mold him, but always steadfastly out of his view. It is only by spatializing the visible God such that it identifies with the other side of Moses’s body that the moment can lend embodiment to God without jeopardizing the law that faith in the Biblical God rely on the absence of direct physical evidence: faith, that is, in what is always present but always unseen. Always *just on the other side* of us.

The history of theory and philosophy has thus helped suggest, without much self-consciousness of it, that the back’s lack of ocular power may be one of the means by which our very bodies ask us to be good people, make us wonder whether we are human, subject us to authority, and incite us to doubt the supremacy of empirical data alone. This dissertation makes the sustained case that it also structures our narrative art – that literature speaks not only about but *through* the characteristics of phenomenological experience as shaped, continually, by the back.

Chapter 1

The Front-Back Balance of *Persuasion*

Real love, it finds you somewhere with your back to it.

Beach House, “Real Love”

Anne Elliot, the heroine of *Persuasion*, is peculiar among Jane Austen’s characters for several reasons: she is the only protagonist with a backstory, she is privy to all narrative information, and she participates in the most unusual erotic scene in Austen’s oeuvre. This chapter reveals these apparently unrelated aspects of the novel to be part of a unitary dedication to formal symmetry that resists the inherent imbalances required by the structures of normative realist fiction – whether in plot (dissimilarity between beginning and ending) or characterization (epistemological imbalance between narrator and character). The chapter further argues that *Persuasion* recruits the dorsoventral asymmetry of the human body, especially the ocular vulnerability of the spine, to generate the stakes of the novel, ultimately framing its closure as a correction of the imbalance between the front and the back of the body.

Late in her career, Austen’s famed love of economy as a general principle – beyond brevity, but certainly including it – reached an unprecedented intensity, figuring heavily in both of her final novels, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. Economy in her work is not a matter merely of outcome, though the economic outcome is crucial to what is, finally, a fascination and preoccupation with the process of achieving of it. D.A. Miller describes it as being “not a question of starting small, but of making smaller. The exquisite economy... practiced on ‘the

little piece (two inches wide) of ivory’ entails fierce gestures of refusal.”¹ There is a pervasive love of balance in *Persuasion*, and it is more specifically a love of the gesture of balancing. If the plot of *Emma* progresses systematically towards a set of optimal matches that ensure, in the final count, that no eligible single person is “thrown away,” then *Persuasion* continually brings into balance, on scales large and small, terrains diegetic and structural, the firsts and lasts, the beginnings and ends, the fronts and backs whose *imbalances* present an unacceptable and therefore temporary asymmetry, designed as if to provide yet another context, another opportunity, for a “fierce gesture” of economy.

The obvious symmetries in *Persuasion* are part of a ubiquitous formal preoccupation with balancing that explains one of the most intriguing paradoxes presented by the novel, which, Cheryl Ann Weissman notes, “contrast[s] a playfully contrived, non-mimetic fictional background with an earnestly realized... central figure.”² How is it possible that the novel’s self-conscious artifice in narrative design does not undermine the pronounced realism and famous relatability of its protagonist? Through Anne Elliot, Austen performs corrective gestures of balancing – striving to dissolve the asymmetries inherent to the structure of realist fiction.

In *Persuasion*, Austen replicates across plot structure and characterization the love of economy that is displayed thematically. This chapter will first theorize the practice of balancing as a pervasive conceptual device in the novel. This will lay the imaginative foundation for examining the same practice across cross-sections of the novel: one, its realist plot, and the other, its realist characterization.

¹ D.A. Miller, “The Late Jane Austen,” *Raritan*, Volume 10, Issue 1 (Summer, 1990), p. 6

² Cheryl Ann Weissman, “Doubleness and Refrain in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*,” *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, Volume 10, Number 4 (Autumn, 1988), p. 91.

Both cross-sections pose problems for a lover of balance, because each contains an iteration of the general imbalance intrinsic to realism itself: between reality and the representation of reality. How is (artificial) representation to achieve aesthetic balance and symmetry while sustaining (as if natural) plot movement? How might it conceive of and characterize a person whose inevitably asymmetrical relation to her status as a fictional device – in the sense that she can never know she is a device – inherently resists such gestures? And if these symmetries are achieved, how does the narrative generate stakes?

Part One - Thematic and Structural Balance

The word “equal,” even if it occurred a little less than thirty-five times in *Persuasion*, would still acquire significance from the fact of its being used in Anne Elliot’s very first utterance in the novel: “The navy, I think... have at least an equal claim with any other set of men, for all the comfort and all the privileges which any home can give.”³ The phrase “equal claim” is arbitrary neither in its specific diction or reference, which both speak to the novel’s stylistic preoccupation with balance. The very first time she speaks, Anne alleges her aversion to the social biases that, by mistakenly perceiving inequality where there was none, prevented her marriage to Captain Wentworth. The plot’s cardinal event, she implies, was governed by a false sense of balance.

Anne’s older sister Elizabeth is unmarried largely because, other than Mr. Elliot, “There was not a baronet from A to Z whom her feelings could have so willingly acknowledged as an equal” (5). The significance of equality between the two members of a marriage is here put in

³Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (Toronto: Dover, 1997), p. 13.

such direct terms that it strikes us all the more forcefully when it is expressed by one of the principal members of the novel's central marriage plot: "[Captain Wentworth] had been most warmly attached to [Anne Elliot], and had never seen a woman since whom he thought her equal; but, except from some natural sensation of curiosity, he had no desire of meeting her again" (44). Little does Captain Wentworth know, we might say, of the balancing the novel will effect across diegetic and aesthetic structure, converging him with Anne – balancing that balanced convergence of two minds, equal in temper, with the novel's own closure. The novel's antepenultimate sentence at that moment of closure, and the final one about Anne and Captain Wentworth, invokes not only this double balance, but still another: "Anne was tenderness itself, and she had the full worth of it in Captain Wentworth's affection" (188). There is balance between what Anne has been deprived of up to this moment, and what, in turn, she will now have.⁴

The word "worth" thus conjures the novel's plainer thematic representation of balance: namely, the notion of balancing "accounts" in both the discursive and financial senses. When Anne recalls that Mrs. Smith and her husband's "income had never been equal to their style of living," she sees but a duplication of the financial (mal)practice that throws into motion the novel's plot: Sir Walter's overspending and consequent debt, which forces him to rent out his home, and to find tenants "equal" to its state and circumstance in Admiral and Mrs. Croft. The

⁴Garrett Stewart notes of this famous sentence of repeated "worth" that "a tacit emotional economy of conjugal payback marks the rhetorical disappearance of the once-guarded and wary heroine into the abstract personification of marital readiness per se, having retrieved her squandered fortunes in a reclamation of the man-who-got-away. ... It's the narratographic baring of its narratological device in reconvergent lines of desire." Stewart draws attention here to the way the double balancing of persons and feelings is self-consciously highlighted such that it lays bare its own artifice. I gesture toward the relation between such duplications or symmetries and their pronounced artifice on the following page. Garrett Stewart, *Novel Violence: A Narratology of Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 247. His argument around this sentence is developed in *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 100-112.

theme of retrenchment as a metaphor for the novel's other themes has been noted by critics,⁵ but its internal structure of balancing – as a method for achieving symmetry between a beginning state, which changes, and a final state, which is brought to equal the first – has not been considered in terms of its aesthetic and narratological significance.

The undisguised, large-scale dimensions of *Persuasion*'s structural symmetry are impossible to miss. Its two volumes, with twelve chapters each, represent the shortest of all of Austen's novels, embodying brevity and balance. The duplication even across one set of chapters to the next emphasizes the sense of "equality." Lenore Macomber extensively describes this symmetry across chapters, observing for example that "Anne and Wentworth, are in each other's company only in the second half of each volume," and that his reappearance, following a mysterious absence of some time, occurs both times in Chapter 7. Likewise, it is both times in Chapter 6 that Anne hears news of Wentworth's being single – the first time, in Volume I, from *his* sister, Mrs. Croft; the second time, in Volume II, from *her* sister, Mary. Such abundant duplications across chapters are so thoroughly catalogued by Macomber that I need not enumerate them further.⁶ Suffice it to say that their pervasiveness points beyond the symmetry to the pointedness *of* that symmetry, which carries no pretense of being, like an improbable narrative event, a chance occurrence. In Weissman's words, the novel's "bizarre and implacable

⁵Elaine Showalter discusses the importance of retrenchment in *Persuasion*, not only financially but also metaphorically as meaning psychological withdrawal and recovery. Elaine Showalter, "Retrenchments," *Jane Austen's Business: Her World and Her Profession*, ed. Juliet McMaster and Bruce Stovel (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 181-191. This is in keeping with a number of critics who show that economic reality in Austen's world is a concern at once literal and symbolic. (See, for example, Edward Copeland's observation of the interrelation of romance and income in "Money," *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], pp. 131-148).

⁶Lenore Macomber, "A New View of Austen's *Persuasion*", *Persuasions On-line*, Volume 24, No.1 (Winter 2003), accessed through <http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol24no1/macomber.htm> on 5/26/14.

emphasis on doubleness and refrains in diction, plot, themes, and even syntax” cannot but suggest that “Austen appears to have gone out of her way to focus attention on the artifice of fiction.”⁷ Austen’s symmetry is extremely self-conscious.

This self-consciousness – self-consciousness as itself the central thematic and formal locus of the novel – asserts itself on the novel’s very first pages, which depict Sir Walter absorbed in his own origins. In his wonder at himself, or rather, at the invisible roots of himself, Anne Elliot’s father, on the first page of *Persuasion*, is not unlike Tess’s father on the first pages of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, confronting and contemplating where, or from whom, he has descended. The difference, of course, is that while the written records of Mr. Durbeyfield are just as inaccessible to him as their truth, Sir Walter Elliot is described as having often before him the Baronetage, in which he “could read his own history with an interest which never failed” (1). Before him, written on paper literal both to himself and to us, is each previous and contemporary iteration of his own title – including a reflection of the iteration provided by his own self and body.

The novel begins with a straightforwardly impersonal, third-person description: “Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage...” (1). This brief first paragraph is followed by a direct quotation from the Baronetage itself, which also describes Sir Walter, but gives us the most objective details not of his character or appearance but of his status and family: “Elliot of Kellynch Hall: Walter Elliot, born March 1, 1760, married, July 15, 1784...” (1). As we look at this piece of another book within our book, we read what Sir Walter reads. And perhaps more interestingly, Sir Walter reads what we read. Indeed, by the paragraph’s end, Sir Walter Elliot

⁷ Weissman, p. 87, 91.

has read half as much of the novel as we have.

At a superficial glance, Sir Walter seems strangely privy to the totality of his own identity. The quotation from the Baronetage suggests the sort of privilege I will later argue is unique to and overwhelming in the characterization of Anne: Sir Walter is able to read the book he is in, and thereby to efface the distinction between his asymmetrical dual statuses as a person on the one hand and as a piece of writing on the other – asymmetrical since the typical fictional person is not privy to the piece of writing which constitutes him. This brief meta-fictional privilege, during which Sir Walter is able to read *Persuasion*, is a vivid physical exemplification of – and brings materiality to – Sir Walter’s vanity, as described immediately upon the conclusion of the Baronetage quotation:

Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot’s character; vanity of person and of situation. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth; and, at fifty-four, was still a very fine man. Few women would think more of their personal appearance than he did; nor could the valet of any new made lord be more delighted with the place he held in society. He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion. (2)

In his (diegetic) world, Sir Walter’s vanity is two-fold: he regards highly both his high regard in society and his physical appearance. The second vanity throws his narcissism of character – his self-centeredness – onto a physical plane that recalls the original story of Narcissus himself, lost in admiration of his physical image, presented by a reflection. Sir Walter’s vanity is thus already of material quality in *his* world before Austen’s syntactic structure lends it materiality in *our* world. This materiality lives in the chiasmus that positions beauty - age (“handsome” and “youth”) against age - beauty (“fifty-four” and “fine man”), imitating in grammatical structure the visual inversion inherent to physical reflection across the surface of a literal mirror.

The doubling inherent to such material reflection is iterated again in the language of the fourth sentence, in the conceptual splitting of Sir Walter into equivalent *subject* (“He” who gives “respect and devotion”) and “constant *object*” (“*the* Sir Walter Elliot” who receives his own abundant self-love). Such language lends expression to Sir Walter’s belief that he has a perfect view of his perfect self: that he has achieved a perfect balance between his dual status as a thinking subject (a person) and a viewed object (a device). But the third-person narrator’s view, unavailable to him though available to the reader, throws off balance the potential perfection of such fantasized equivalence.

Indeed, upon the conclusion of the Baronetage quotation (Sir Walter’s last moment of access to the text of *Persuasion*), the description that reduces Sir Walter concisely and incisively to “first” and “last” instantly collapses this fantasy with an ironic third-person stance that underscores the total inaccessibility of this novel to Sir Walter. This inaccessibility is made to feel just as material as the potential access felt, earlier, by way of the juxtapositioning of the narration’s descriptions of Sir Walter in quantitative and qualitative relief against the description of him in the Baronetage.

Because the novel’s single introductory paragraph begins “Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch Hall,” we are primed in advance to recognize as an imperfect mirror-image the subsequent paragraph of direct Baronetage quotation that begins “ELLIOT OF KELLYNCH HALL. Walter Elliot, born March 1, 1760...” (1). The similarity of wording underscores their overall difference. For the third-person narration’s brief, straightforward paragraph of Elliot description is followed by not one but several paragraphs of Baronetage description, each one tiresomely detailed and long (some are direct quotation, some are paraphrase). These paragraphs of Baronetage text, already over twice the length of the novel’s own introductory paragraph of description, are

exceeded still in length by the “original” Baronetage, which “formed altogether two handsome duodecimo pages, and concluded with the arms and motto” of the Elliots (2).

Austen therefore seems to auto correct for economy, correcting as if automatically the non-brevity of her subjects, whether the subject is the Baronetage, quoted and paraphrased, or Sir Walter himself. She condenses temporally the several occasions on which Sir Walter has read the Baronetage (in the novel’s introductory paragraph) and then, reductively, selects the single most apparent implication of that behavior for a description itself reductive: “Vanity was the beginning and end....” But Austen does not perform these economizing gestures without leaving their trace – without leaving behind the original, flawed version that required her skill. What is thus achieved is not simply economy, but a performance *of* economizing that seems to invite recognition of itself as such. The irritatingly long, over-detailed quotation and description of the Baronetage rendition of the Elliots provides inferior quality writing against which the narration’s own – placed in stark and physical juxtaposition – can stand in superior, and material, relief.

Austen’s narration thus asserts its power to abbreviate and its skill in so doing, delineating both while giving them a physical dimension. For crucial to this juxtaposition of her good writing next to the “handsome duodecimo pages” is its double-sidedness; Austen’s more economic descriptions of Sir Walter – and there are, true to a love for symmetry, two – stand physically before and after the Baronetage version, sandwiching it. They suggest the power of being both behind and before an object at once – likewise, the power of an equalization between “before” and “after” to seemingly nullify the excessiveness in between.

This is the power showcased even within the sentence, “Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot’s character.” If, from the fact of his having the regular practice of staring at a narrative representation of himself, we already knew vanity to be a part of Sir Walter’s

character, then by the end of this sentence, we know it to be the entirety of his character. But the language of the sentence does not move likewise from part to whole. Rather, we are leaped as if *forward*, from “beginning” to “end,” by a narration whose brevity is made possible by the homogeneity of character it emphasizes. “Flatness” of character is here expressed with a metaphor not of depth but temporal expansion/compression, a gesture that reappears when Captain Wentworth, speaking with his sister, “more seriously described the woman he should wish to meet with. ‘A strong mind, with sweetness of manner,’ made the first and the last of the description” (45). The narration’s language emphasizes the compression it is performing in describing Wentworth’s implicitly longer original description, while also indicating that this has been made possible by the homogeneity – and therefore condensability – of that description. If start and finish are the same, in other words, what lies between them – whether spatial, temporal, or personal – can be collapsed into, or understood to be, “little more than nothing.”⁸

Part Two - Narrative Balance

But traditional narrative cannot be “nothing.” It requires expansiveness and movement: a displacement from a beginning to a distant and dissimilar end. For this reason, the structure of traditional plot inherently resists temporal balance and symmetry. In the case of a courtship plot, the displacement from singlehood to marriage poses a resistance against a wish for aesthetic balance between the plot’s beginning and end, or back and front. Yet in *Persuasion*, Austen manages effectively to create a sense of narrative (change and development) while preserving, indeed propagating, aesthetic symmetry and balance. This resolution – the balancing, as it were,

⁸When Anne first sees Captain Wentworth again: “Alas! with all her reasoning, she found, that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing” (43).

between the readerly and the writerly – is achieved with the crucial help of a backstory.

Twenty-seven-year-old Anne Elliot holds a singular place among Austen's heroines: one, for being the oldest, and two, for having what is made possible by this maturity – a backstory. *Persuasion* begins with Anne already having been persuaded to reject Captain Wentworth's marriage proposal, in a pluperfect tense whose pretense is that we stand not at the imperfect beginning of a successful courtship plot, but within the epilogue of one that has perfectly failed. The plot's direction is thus oriented as if in reverse, moving backwards toward a duplication of the original proposal. Across the *story*, at least, there is balance.

The *discourse*, by contrast, seems deliberately designed to create a sense of narrative movement despite this symmetry of story. It positions the "beginning" as if in the center of a chiasmus, in between the two engagements.⁹ By not beginning simply before the first engagement, the discourse carries the pretense of telling as if only a portion of an "original," larger story, thereby producing a sense of true displacement from single-Anne to affianced-Anne.¹⁰ This distinction between single-Anne and affianced-Anne, what constitutes the novel's primary plot movement, is yet suppressed by the novel's continual mention of her "constancy," a

⁹Viewing the start as the center of a chiasmus -- the single, invisible point of intersection within a double of doubles -- is helpful from a theoretical standpoint, as it imitates the temporally embedded action and experience of writing and reading, and thus helps justify using *Persuasion* as a particular focal point for a general narrative theory. Following a chiastic structure, the relation of writing (as action and experience) to the written text (as object) is in some sense the inverse of the relation of the written text (as object) to reading (as action and experience). The "two" texts, written and read, sandwich between them a sort of vacuum or vanishing point that stands for a certain temporal and literary "presence." Such a "present" is defined by the point at which past and future are concurrent -- at which reading and writing are happening together. It is perhaps for this reason that Anne's continual closeness, even interchangeability, with the novel's narration/author, always seems to be allied with our sense of her presence in temporal and physical senses -- as a character fully embodied, like us, right here right now, as she simultaneously, as it were, reads and seems to write the novel.

¹⁰ Tony Tanner suggests that *Persuasion* reads like a "second novel" that begins where a "first novel" has gone wrong. I am suggesting that it reads not as the first of two novels but as the second half of a single one. (Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986], pp. 211-212.)

habit culminating in the assertion, at the novel's end, that Anne's character has remained constant since even before the original engagement: "...I must believe that I was right, much as I suffered from it, that I was perfectly right in being guided by [Lady Russell].... ...I am not saying she did not err in her advice. ... But I mean that I was right in submitting to her..." (184).

Anne's character has remained fixed throughout, and is, by the end of the novel, fixed in and on Captain Wentworth's mind as well: "Her character was now fixed on his mind as perfection itself, maintaining the loveliest medium of fortitude and gentleness; but he was obliged to acknowledge that only at Uppercross had he learnt to do her justice..." (180). Since the perfect balance of fortitude and gentleness in Anne's character has remained constant throughout story and discourse, the novel's production of narrative development occurs by way of the other member of the courtship plot, Captain Wentworth, who grows into an understanding of Anne's worth.¹¹ "...[O]nly at Lyme had he begun to understand himself. At Lyme, he had received lessons.... ...[T]he scenes on the Cobb and at Captain Harville's had fixed her superiority. ... There he had seen everything to exalt in his estimation the woman he had lost..." (180). The description betrays that Captain Wentworth's development is not so much an issue of "understanding himself," some change in character provoked by inward gaze, so much as a shift in preference provoked by the acquisition of more complete information, obtained by more thorough external observation ("scenes" at which "he had seen everything"). The person of whom he previously has had only a front-view, as he moved from the first engagement onward in his life, can now be seen from a different direction; Anne's previous "error" in rejecting him,

¹¹The only other plot "developments" are Henrietta's marriage to Charles Hayter, which is already set to occur before the novel begins, and Louisa's marriage to Captain Benwick. Incidentally, Louisa is the only character to provide Anne and Captain Wentworth's courtship with any kind of "plot" in the traditional sense, by acting as the rival who throws Anne's desirability into relief, thus allowing her (Anne) to "win."

held as a sign of weakness, can now be seen in the context of her subsequent behavior, which retroactively reframes the “error” as a sign of steadiness.

The system that preserves Captain Wentworth’s character across a change in perspective, provoked by a temporal movement that makes possible a fuller, more symmetrical perspective, pertains equally to Anne. We are less conscious of her change, of course, because it has already occurred before the beginning of the discourse, within the backstory. But her transformation so-called is also to see Captain Wentworth more fully – that is, to add to her front-view of him (his possibility, his career prospects) a back-view, in which these possibilities and prospects transform into hard facts. As she puts it: “‘If I was wrong in yielding to persuasion once, remember that it was to persuasion exerted on the safety, not of risk’” (182). And in defending Lady Russell’s advice: “‘It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides...’” (184). The impossibility of seeing an event from both directions at once – from the perspective of possibility and probability preceding it as well as the perspective of its confirmed reality, after it has occurred, both as it is *and* as it relates to what was seen previously – is here emphasized. That epistemological asymmetry, inherent to any person’s embedding within one-way, linear time, takes shape in both Anne’s and Wentworth’s respective developments. Anne’s, occurring in the backstory, is mirrored by Wentworth’s, occurring in the discourse. Together, they form an aesthetic symmetry that nonetheless features, in each half, the sort of narrative movement traditionally designed to fulfill readerly expectations.

The crucial role of the backstory in this achievement of structural symmetry across – indeed *through* – narrative progression and asymmetry is perhaps better understood if visualized:

*Two phases
of development:*

[-----A.E. develops-----] | [-----C.W. develops-----]

Story:

Engagement 1 [-----novel begins -----] **Engagement 2**

|backstory| |discourse|

*Two types
of symmetry:*

[A.E. start -----equal to-----A.E. finish]

[First Engagement-----equal to-----Second Engagement]

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object. Here, of course, I mean front-view and back-view in a temporal sense – a perspective looking forward balanced by a perspective looking backward. Later in the chapter, I will show such balancing occurring likewise across a spatial dimension.

Part Three - Character Balance

Adela Pinch imaginatively writes at the end of an essay on *Persuasion* that “For Anne, we could say, the repetition of romance renders her early experience as one she is now quoting.”¹² Pinch seems on the verge of suggesting what I will argue: that the form of *Persuasion* allows Anne to experience *in narrative action* her status as a literary character. Like plot, which requires a change and development inherently resistant to aesthetic balance, so fictional character, too, carries asymmetrical properties whose resolution would seem impossible without the collapse of realist fiction essentials.

A fictional character, at once both an imagined physical person and a formal device, carries inherent internal imbalance. The first is made of the imaginary body and mind that think, see, feel, and grow old. The second is an effect of the ink, language, and narration that also constitutes it. The fact that a fictional person cannot see that she is narrated creates an imbalance between these nevertheless coexistent statuses, with the person subordinate to the narration. But in *Persuasion*, with the characterization of Anne Elliot, the typical epistemological or narrative asymmetry that governs the relation between character and narration (or fictionality and reality) is dispelled, leaving Anne with the privileges of a narrator while transforming the narrator’s responsibilities into functions of Anne’s own mind – a mind that appears therefore to belong

¹² Adela Pinch, “Lost in a Book: Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*,” *Studies in Romanticism*, Volume 32, Number 1 (Spring, 1993), p. 117.

peculiarly to herself, a “herself” apart from the narrator. Indeed, by the conclusion of the novel, the novel has presented no perspective that Anne has not occupied or imagined herself.

To be a character in Austen is, generally, to be ironized by a narration that represents you from a perspective either very distant or otherwise impossible to access. This perspective, usually and famously ironic, is a site of sharp imbalance between the fictional person and the narration. But Anne Elliot is never shown in a way other than how she sees herself; she embodies, in other words, a seemingly perfect symmetry between her personhood and her knowledge of that personhood as it is partially constituted by its narrated-ness.

Anne’s possession of a backstory begins establishing this symmetry right away. It positions her, at the novel’s start, ahead of the reader and on equal footing with the knowledge of the narrator. The story of her failed courtship with Captain Wentworth is like a completed novel – complete with her own development in it – of which she is fully aware even as she has been, or because she *has been* rather than *is*, its protagonist.¹³

We might expect this one-to-one ratio between Anne and the narration to disintegrate upon Captain Wentworth’s reappearance, which reopens the otherwise closed backstory and, with it, the disadvantages attached to the impossibility of reading *ahead* the same way she has been able to read *backward*. But strangely, it is at this moment, as the backstory crosses over into real-time, that the ratio – its equality – is only more forcefully developed and articulated, as if Anne, faced with the sudden disempowerment and vulnerability of her temporal and marital station, has determinedly begun narrating the novel herself.

¹³Here I may appear to agree with Tanner’s suggestion that *Persuasion* seems like the second of two novels, but the novel, I argue, disagrees with this, since it casts the first one specifically as a *backstory* and not a different story. It does so by suggesting the collapse of the intervening time in Anne’s mind (for example, “...she found, that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing,” quoted in footnote 5), and thereby emphasizing the continuity of the old with the new: a single story whose thread is renewed.

It is in Chapter 7 that the climactic first encounter of Captain Wentworth and Anne officially – that is, physically – reopens their backstory. After a few missed encounters and chapters of delay and anticipation (for Anne and the reader), she finally encounters him unexpectedly while having breakfast. Though Charles rushes in to warn of his arrival, the time for preparation is brief. “Mary, very much gratified by this attention, was delighted to receive him; while a thousand feelings rushed on Anne, of which this was the most consoling, that it would soon be over. And it was soon over” (43). The encounter, lodged between its near-identical anticipation and remembrance, is narrated so economically that it is hardly narrated at all. The balance between hope (“that it would soon be over”) and memory (“And it was soon over”), which allows the collapse and elision across “it,” underscores the equivalence between the narration’s knowledge/perspective and that of Anne. The first perspective is Anne’s focalized one; the second, arguably, is the narration’s objective one.¹⁴ The relation of narration to character is given a peculiar inflection of generosity, as Anne is given what she wants. The confirmed fulfillment of her hope is articulated through a repetition that deviates from the original only in the tense of its verb – after all, the narrator must be at some remove, if only a slight grammatical and temporal one, from the focalized character.¹⁵ No sooner has Anne wished

¹⁴The moment is reminiscent of the transition between Chapters 20 and 21 in Volume II of *Emma*, the first ending with the short sentence, “Emma could not forgive her” (159), and the second beginning with the longer sentence, “Emma could not forgive her;--but as neither provocation nor resentment were discerned...” (160). D.A. Miller’s thorough account of this moment notes how the very same phrase is deployed as free indirect discourse (in the first instance) and pure narration (in the second), and he argues that the repetition of words in the second instance signals the narration’s reluctance to “pull away” from the previous identification with Emma. (*Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*, pp. 62-67). Here too does (near-)identical phrasing capture a shift from free indirect discourse to pure narration. The “(near-)” is important. It *isn’t* identical. And that’s what, paradoxically, creates a sense of identification. Whereas the absolute verbatim repetition in *Emma* augments our sense of *alienation*, here the slight difference, the sense of an imbalance brought into balance, heightens our sense of *identification*.

¹⁵ Even if the second sentence is not taken to be pure narration and is instead felt to originate from Anne’s perspective, as it may for some readers, its directness and objective factuality would still place it in the perspective of “Anne-as-narration” – that is, Anne as she sees and thinks when so closely aligned with the narration as to be indiscernable from it. So, though my reading of this section seems to depend on attributing each sentence to a different perspective, arguing instead that such separation is not possible would only reinforce (and might be even

for the encounter to be “over” than, discursively, it is. Text responds to her needs, and does so by a performative utterance, in the same way that the author responds to her needs. Anne’s mental discourse is repeated in a free indirect discourse (if it is free indirect discourse – or, even if it is free indirect discourse, it is) of remarkable proximity: it seems neither very unhindered (*free*) nor very circuitous (*indirect*). Her words are repeated like an incantation by an author/fairy godmother who submits fully to the command of Anne’s wish.

The verb’s tense moves from conditional uncertainty to past perfection in the process of fulfilling Anne’s desire. And the demonstrative identification between Anne and the narration is further confirmed and intensified a paragraph later, when we hear Anne’s reflection on what has just transpired. “‘It is over! It is over!’ she repeated to herself again, and again, in nervous gratitude. ‘The worst is over!’” (43). Anne seems to return the narration’s mimicry with mimicry of her own. She remarks not once but *twice* upon the fact of its being “over,” producing a couplet that parrots not only her own previous wish, which would be natural, but also the narration’s subsequent repetition of it as an accomplished fact. In mimicry of this repetition, in turn, the narration repeats the fact of its repetition – “she repeated to herself *again*, and *again*.” The proliferation of written “overs” seems all the more infinite for being represented by not only quotation but also notation. And Anne is made to seem not only capable of *reading* the text, since she repeats what the text says, but capable also of *writing* the text: 1) since what she repeats is the text’s repetition *of her own thought*, and 2) because the text then repeats what she says, by both quotation and notation, *after* and *even though* she has already said it.

These moments may seem to confirm Miller’s characterization of Austen as having forsaken, in *Persuasion*, her godlike impersonality in a personal over-identification with her

more demonstrative of) my ultimate point about the remarkable intensity of identification between Anne and the narration.

protagonist, or as Anne having “dragged the narration down with her.”¹⁶ But to ascribe greater agency either to Anne or to Austen – the notion of any one-way exertion of will, whether Anne’s on Austen or Austen’s on Anne – is contradicted by a visible *reciprocity* of viewing and understanding whose representation materializes, through written repetition and repetitive notation, on the physical page. This dynamic is stunning. Usually, a text only pretends to be a duplication (a transcript, a *representation*) of what it in fact presents. Here, that pretense is subverted. The text really does duplicate Anne’s thought and speech, and Anne in turn really does duplicate the text. Anne seems to exist as if independently of the narration, which seems to be a voice *in addition* to her real one rather than the (ultimately superior, entitled) *conveyor* of her fictional, ironized one. Austen’s equalization of the usual asymmetry between character and narration collapses the gap between them so as to result, counter-intuitively, in a more rather than less “personified” character.

Referencing Anne’s continual self-castigation, Miller notes that the narration seems never able to do anything to Anne that she has not already done to herself. But this is not so much the result, as he would argue, of Anne having disabled Austen’s usual penchant for irony by having dragged her down than it is, I would argue, a case of Austen’s narration having enabled Anne – brought *her* up to *its* level. In defense of this argument is the dramatic design that throws Anne into relief against, or singles her out from, an army of vain, self-absorbed characters who *do* invite the narration’s sharp ironic critique. Interestingly, Austen’s original and probably intended

¹⁶ Miller, *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). “...Anne has dragged the narration down with her into an unprecedented relinquishment of its own cognitive advantage. No longer quite distinguishable from the consciousness that it would otherwise be scoring points against, the narration that has trained us to think of it as the total absence of Person must now seem, if not personified *personifiable*... in the kind of person, like Anne, whose consciousness has so thoroughly internalized narration’s ironizing effect *on* character that narration can seem, however eerily, to originate *with* character, like a diary written in the third person” (73).

title for *Persuasion* was *The Elliots*. The title recalls the sense, in the opening pages, that Austen's description of the family is competing with the Baronetage version; the original title suggests, as it were, that the novel was originally imagined as an affront to the Baronetage. Indeed, Anne does not seem to have less vanity, or less general interest in her own image or her own self, than the other members of her family. Mary's may be charged with "inheriting a considerable share of the Elliot self-importance" (26), but Anne has not escaped this signature family trait either. The crucial difference between Anne and the rest of her family is in her narrative representation; her vanity, though continually articulated, is just as continually affirmed and justified – it is permitted to escape the scathing critique suffered for example by Sir Walter at the novel's start, and its subjective impressions are given objective validations and confirmations. For example, "Anne always contemplated [the Musgrove sisters] as some of the happiest creatures of her acquaintance; but still, *saved as we all are*, by some comfortable feeling of superiority from wishing for the possibility of exchange, she would not have given up her own more elegant and cultivated mind for all their enjoyments..." (29, my emphasis).¹⁷

If the fact that the narration does ironize other characters were not enough to argue for its access to usual ironizing powers, and for the fact that there is instead a balancing of Anne's character-device dichotomy at work (a bequeathing of power from Austen to Anne), we might look to the evidence that Anne is so often able to perform irony on herself. This is partly perhaps the result of their being so much irony inherent to Anne's *experience* that further, third-person irony cannot quite be layered onto the representation of her thoughts about it. For example, Anne does not *really* want the encounter with Captain Wentworth ever to be over. The wish for

¹⁷ The other difference is that Anne's vanity is enabled to equalize her status as subject (viewer) and object (viewed object).

it to be “soon over” is itself so ironic, so directly contradictory to what she would actually want, that further irony is disabled – or would be redundant.¹⁸

The strangest, most striking example of Anne performing irony on herself is also one of the most unusual moments of free indirect discourse imaginable in a traditional novel. It accompanies the novel’s first sign that Captain Wentworth has renewed his romantic attachment to Anne, who then seems to perform free indirect discourse within her own mind, as if having merged with the narration to such a degree that she hears it in her own head, discoursing within and through it. It occurs in Bath, after Anne is made aware that Captain Wentworth is to be invited to Bath but before she knows that he has already arrived – in anticipation yet to be balanced by confirmation. Waiting in a store with Mrs. Clay, Mr. Elliot, and her sister, she “descried, most decidedly and distinctly, Captain Wentworth walking down the street. Her start was perceptible only to herself; but she instantly felt that she was the greatest simpleton in the world, the most unaccountable and absurd!” (129). Typical for Anne, no one is quicker to notice or judge her own surprise than she herself. But this self-critique reaches an extraordinary pitch as it then bumps up against the irony inherent to her desire (hiding in the ““It is over!”” of their first encounter in the kitchen): that it is both painful and pleasurable to see him.

She now felt a great inclination to go to the outer door; *she wanted to see* if it rained. Why was she to suspect herself of another motive? Captain Wentworth must be out of sight. She left her seat, she would go; one half of her should not be always so much wiser than the other half, or always suspecting the other of being worse than it was. *She would see* if it rained. She was sent back, however, in a moment by the entrance of Captain Wentworth himself.... (129, my emphasis)

¹⁸ The contradictory, ironic nature of Anne’s overall experience in the novel is captured directly in the minutes leading up to Captain Wentworth’s climactic letter in Chapter 23: “She had only to submit, sit down, be outwardly composed, and feel herself plunged at once in all the agitations.... There was no delay, no waste of time. She was deep in the happiness of such misery, or the misery of such happiness, instantly” (171).

The internal monologue here plays out literally like a narrated dialogue. Questions, answers, assertions, retorts: Anne engages in a self-balancing of the utmost intensity. Perhaps the most striking sentence is the most economical – “She would see if it rained.” Removed from context, it reads technically like pure narration, even though it is in free indirect discourse. Accepting that it is free indirect discourse, it is still technically not a true thought, as Anne refuses to admit its kernel of (self-aware) dishonesty – lying by omitting the plain knowledge that verifying the presence of rain is a cover for verifying the presence of Captain Wentworth. The deception is not a successful one: its transparency is exposed by context, which frames it as a recapitulation of the earlier clause, “she wanted to see if it rained.” The exchange of “*wanted to see*” for “*would see*” is a shift not only from desire to decision but also from half- to fully-committed self-deception. But what is remarkable is that the rain pretense, in its first formulation as simple desire, *is* a successful deception, because the phrase “she wanted to,” in *its* prefatory context, seems to be pure narration, objective truth. We thus understand only belatedly that Anne could, in lying to herself, lie also to the reader. This brief identification with the reader is the result of an active recognition of her status as a half-narration/half-character hybrid, “one half of her” being “so much wiser than the other half.” As she tries to balance the jostling of two narratological positions, in other words, she reads it like we do.

The typical epistemological advantage of the narrator/reader is completely surrendered to or seized by Anne, and the fact that we do not know which is testament to the perfection of the balance. In either case, Anne is empowered with a narrative advantage withheld from most novel characters as a rule, and certainly from all other Austen characters, as she transcends the limitations of her character-hood to occupy the positions of character, narrator, and reader

simultaneously.¹⁹

Taking a brief glance at *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma* may help us to understand the context of this characterization technique in Austen. Already in the former novel, the notion of a backstory is deployed in a context featuring the intersection of discursive economy with the problem of asymmetry between self and self-knowledge. This occurs when Colonel Brandon, upon Marianne's disappointment over Willoughby's coldness, relates Willoughby's backstory to Elinor. Brandon, prompted into a lengthy monologue by "nothing but an earnest desire to be useful," is apparently "relating some circumstances" when he draws attention to his attempts and failures to be economical. "'You will find me a very awkward narrator, Miss Dashwood; I hardly know where to begin. A short account of myself, I believe, will be necessary, and it *shall* be a short one. On such a subject,' sighing heavily, 'can I have little temptation to be diffuse.'" Yet without temptation, Colonel Brandon *is* diffuse, and nowhere more so than on the subject of himself, saying more about his own relation to, feelings for, and actions surrounding "'[his] little Eliza'" than about Eliza herself. About Willoughby's actions, he says the very least, though they are what ostensibly prompts the elocution in the first place.

The uneconomical, unwieldy nature of the narrative, apparent at a moment's glance in its sheer length on the pages that relate it in direct speech, is deliberately emphasized by his own interruptions of it. These interruptions, whose lengthiness is left uncondensed by the narration

¹⁹ Louise Flavin discovers in *Persuasion* a "complexity of polyvocality... achieved by having a narrator report what a character hears another character say that another character has said," and critics such as John Dussinger conclude that such vocal layering lends "the illusion of depth to character" (99). I am noting a "polyvocality" created not by the filtering of multiple voices through a single one but by the multiplication of a single voice into several, and I am attributing to *this* phenomenon (or more specifically, to the overarching technique of characterization that makes such a phenomenon possible) the sense that Anne's character has not simply depth but true personhood, as can only exist when independent -- broken free -- from submission to one's author or fictional status. (Louise Flavin, "Austen's *Persuasion*," *Explicator* Volume 47, Number 4 [1989], p. 21; John Dussinger, "The Language of 'Real Feeling': Internal Speech in the Jane Austen Novel," *The Idea of the Novel in the Eighteenth Century*, Ed. Robert W. Uphaus [East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1988], p. 99.)

that relates them, expose elements of his own character and history in obtrusive parentheticals: ““But can we wonder that, ...without a friend to advise or restrain her (for... I was with my regiment in the East Indies) she should fall?”” And ““I saw her... after the death of my brother, (which happened about five years ago, and which left to me the possession of the family property,) she visited me....”” Though his speech’s proclaimed objective is only to diminish Willoughby, its primary concluding effect is to elevate Brandon; what Brandon calls Willoughby’s ““dishonorable usage”” of Marianne helps to excuse what he *himself*, with self-pardoning reflexivity, deems ““a recital which may seem to have been intended to raise *myself* at the expense of others.”” He underscores, in other words, the extent to which a one’s view of oneself is inherently imbalanced. Even as one thinks (or thinks he seems like) he is talking about someone else, he may be talking about himself. And one cannot talk about oneself economically, because one’s relation to oneself is just as out-of-balance as one’s relation to any other potential narrator. Verbally relating his backstory so lengthily and digressively, Colonel Brandon frames the imbalance between self and self-understanding as a problem in discursive economy. This is why I wished to emphasize the six-word brevity of the most striking sentence in the Bath window scene, above: “She would see if it rained.” Its self-aware self-deception – the very opposite of that belonging to Colonel Brandon – posits equivalence not only between the positions of Anne and the narrator/reader but also between Anne and *herself*, and it does so in a language of the utmost economy. Narratological, psychological balance seems to coincide inevitably with the very brevity of discourse. And this may explain why *Persuasion*, the Austen novel most invested in balance and symmetry, is also the shortest one in her oeuvre.

Brandon’s speech also lends a spatial-temporal inflection to the problem of asymmetry between self and self-knowledge. Its final paragraph begins with the singular statement,

“‘[Willoughby’s] character is now before you; expensive, dissipated, and worse than both.’”

The speech has used the dissipation of Willoughby’s character to excuse not only its own discursive dissipation, but also the egocentrism to which it has done service. This expense of narrative material, responsibility for which is thrown from (a perhaps clumsy) Austen to Brandon to Willoughby, has nonetheless been narratively useful, for it has brought the full backstory of Brandon’s character – which we, along with Elinor, have hitherto seen only in real-time, only from the front – crucially *before* Elinor and the reader, just in time for Brandon to supplant Willoughby as being, as always having been, a suitor for Marianne. The word “before” does double duty in this sentence: a spatial preposition representing sight/knowledge, and a temporal preposition representing a past previously unseen/unknown.

The word “before” is similarly used in *Emma*, at the narratological climax of the novel, when narration and protagonist are at last balanced. Of all Austen heroines, Emma is the most dramatically subordinated to narrative form; no other novel features a greater imbalance between the energetic orientation of the narrative towards a particular outcome (in this case, the economy of having no one be unmarried) and the energetic inclination of its heroine (in this case, never to be married). Emma’s submission to the will of the narrative’s form – her conversion to believing Mr. Knightley ought to marry her – means the closure of this disparity. The fictional person’s desire is made to match the form’s desire for the character-device’s movement: the previous asymmetry is collapsed. And here is how the moment is narrated: “Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating, in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. ... Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was *before* her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness

which had never blessed her *before*” (my emphasis).²⁰ The temporal and spatial “befores” converge to signal the convergence of two (and more) iterations of Emma “herself.” Her reflection upon the past, melded with her reflection upon herself, suggests the sensation of Emma seeing her own back: it is before her. The self-reflexivity of a backstory that catches up to the present and offers the character a sensation of seeing herself as if from multiple directions, is in place before the start of *Persuasion*’s discourse, and it stays in place for the entirety of its narrative. *Persuasion* is thus an extended version of what in *Emma* is a chapter or two of self-acknowledged suffering occasioned by near meta-fictional self-knowledge.

Given this occurrence in *Emma*, it is perhaps unsurprising that the equilibration of spatial and temporal asymmetries occurs throughout *Persuasion*. Just as Anne’s narrative privilege, unlike Emma’s, is present for the whole duration of the novel, so too does her experience of space and time feature constantly – not just for “a few minutes” – the sensation of seeing in multiple directions at once, and likewise the sensation of being seen as if from multiple directions. Robyn Warhol notes that *Persuasion* is “the most physical, the most literally ‘sensational’ of Austen’s novels, in that the heroine’s experiences, and the textual transmission of them through her perspective—are thoroughly grounded in the senses.”²¹ It is indeed within the pages of Austen’s most physical novel that we discover a protagonist whose exceptional narrative privilege constantly assumes forms of physical privilege over material limitations and vulnerabilities.

²⁰ Jane Austen, *Emma* (New York, Penguin, 2003), p. 382.

²¹ Warhol bases this statement on the novel’s emphasis on “looks” and “looking.” Though I will certainly discuss these physical activities, I believe they are not the only way in which *Persuasion* expresses its interest in the human body. It is interested, I will argue, in much more than simply the *eyes* of the body. Robyn R. Warhol, “The Look, the Body, and the Heroine: A Feminist-Narratological Reading of *Persuasion*,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Volume 26, Number 1 (Autumn, 1992), p. 7.

For example, in Part II of the novel, after Louisa (the novel's primary contender for the title of "Mrs. Captain Wentworth") has become engaged to Captain Benwick and Anne knows Captain Wentworth to be therefore "unshackled and free" (123), Anne encounters Captain Wentworth at a concert in Bath. She sits next to her cousin and suitor Mr. Elliot, who is all but proposing to her when

her attention was caught by other sounds immediately behind her, which rendered every thing else trivial. Her father and Lady Dalrymple were speaking.

"A well-looking man" said Sir Walter, "a very well-looking man."

"A very fine young man indeed!" said Lady Dalrymple. "...Irish, I dare say."

"No, I just know his name. ... Wentworth – Captain Wentworth of the navy. His sister married my tenant in Somersetshire,--the Croft, who rents Kellynch."

Before Sir Walter had reached this point, Anne's eyes had caught the right direction, and distinguished Captain Wentworth standing among a cluster of men at a little distance. As her eyes fell on him, his seemed to be withdrawn from her. It had that appearance. It seemed as if she had been one moment too late; and as long as she dared observe, he did not look again: but the performance was recommencing, and she was forced to seem to restore her attention to the orchestra and look straight forward. (139)

What is (being spoken) behind Anne helps her identify and direct her attention properly to what is (standing) in front of her.²² And what is striking is that on a much smaller time scale than any other in the novel, Anne can judge the past from the present; she can judge from the manner in

²²A similar instance of such listening, though one much less gratifying for Anne, occurs in Part I, Chapter 10, on the road to Winthrop. Anne, her sister Mary, Louisa Musgrove, and Captain Wentworth are waiting among hedgerows for the others to return from a visit to the Hayters, when "Anne, really tired herself, was glad to sit down; and... soon heard Captain Wentworth and Louisa in the hedge-row, behind her.... They were speaking as they drew near" (63). Louisa proceeds to relate how she insisted that Henrietta stand by her original plan to visit Charles, and not be persuaded by Mary to annul the visit. Captain Wentworth makes a fervent speech in praise of Louisa's strong character. "He had done, and was unanswered. It would have surprised Anne if Louisa could have readily answered such a speech: words of such interest, spoken with such serious warmth! She could imagine what Louisa was feeling. For herself, she feared to move, lest she should be seen. While she remained, a bush of low rambling holly protected her" (64). The scene is significant for being the one in which Anne is confirmed in her dual suspicion that Captain Wentworth: one, is romantically attached to Louisa, and two, begrudges Anne the susceptibility to persuasion that ended his engagement to her.

which Captain Wentworth's eyes are averted ("withdrawn") from her that they are in the process of being averted; she can judge that a moment earlier, they were on her. She can deduce, know with near-certainty, even when she has not watched herself be watched, that she has been watched without her knowledge.

The mini-narrative, on a minute time-scale, is something of a condensation of the novel's story. Anne is "too late" to arrive at the conclusion that she should have married Captain Wentworth, he has since "withdrawn" his affection, and now their story has "recommenced" but she can only "look straight forward," for he refuses to "look [at her] again." Temporal and visual perception intersect, and seeing this as a metaphor for the novel, we may see also how it may be read as a metaphor for a peculiar gesture in narrative practice – one in which a character would be privy to being watched or spoken of by a narrator even when she is not able directly to see that this is the case.

Austen seems uncannily aware of the anatomical fact that human ears are better able to hear the sounds behind them than those before them. The evolutionary advantage of such a capacity is not hard to guess: ears help balance the deficiency of eyes in not allowing us to look (without the help of a mirror or other source of representation) at what is behind us. That both this episode and the one preceding it (discussed below) occur during a musical concert (the novel's only such event) underscores the importance of the auditory sense, here, as one that balances the visual. In this scene, what is behind Anne (auditorily) helps her better see what is in front of her (visually). The distinction between what is in front of her and what is behind her is thus, in a sense, effaced; and the *process* by which this effacement is achieved, as in the case of any balancing in the novel, is made visible. In this scene, what is behind her is rendered capable of illuminating what is in front of her. Anne's back, far from being a source of ignorance or

blindness, is made instead to be a source of knowledge. Indeed, in the scene immediately preceding this one, what is in front of Anne becomes capable of illuminating what is behind her, again effacing the relative epistemological disadvantage of having a limited visual field.

In the scene above, Anne can better understand what's in front of her with the help of what is behind her; in the one below, she can know what is behind her based on what's in front of her. Up to this point in the novel, Sir Walter and Elizabeth have been, in the arrogance of their social standing and to Anne's dismay, openly rude to and dismissive of Captain Wentworth, who, when he sees Anne and that she is standing in front of her father and sister,

was preparing only to bow and pass on, but her gentle "How do you do?" brought him out of the straight line to stand near her, and make enquiries in return, in spite of the formidable father and sister in the back ground. Their being in the back ground was a support to Anne; she knew nothing of their looks, and felt equal to everything which she believed right to be done.

While they were speaking, a whispering between her father and Elizabeth caught her ear. She could not distinguish, but she must guess the subject; and on Captain Wentworth's making a distant bow, she comprehended that her father had judged so well as to give him that simple acknowledgement of acquaintance, and she was just in time by a side glance to see a slight curtsy from Elizabeth herself. This, though late, and reluctant, and ungracious, was yet better than nothing, and her spirits improved. (134)

Here, it is empowering to Anne to have the source of her dismay be behind her, where she cannot see it. The behind suggested by her back is a site not of vulnerability but of protection; she does not have to see what she does not want to see, and it empowers her to do "everything which she believed right." Still more interestingly, her father and sister's position outside her visual periphery poses no hindrance to her ability to know what they are saying and doing. She can derive, retroactively, the information that they have acknowledged Captain Wentworth, from his bow, which their acknowledgment has inspired. Cause can thus be derived from effect – the past can be guessed, and even confirmed, from the present. This dynamic is consistent with with

several instances across the novel in which the content of a question is derived from the answer it provokes, but the retrospective hermeneutics in play are significant here for literalizing retrospection; Anne is able to see what is before her temporally as a result of its being signaled by what is before her spatially, as if Captain Wentworth were a mirror reflecting for her the previous moments, occurring outside her periphery, prior to her own “side glance” obtaining less indirect proof.

By making viewable a typically unviewable “behind,” Austen obviates the vulnerability that one would imagine inheres to the back’s lack of ocular power. Indeed, Austen seems to satirize the Latinate convention of imagining the past as “behind” and the future as “ahead” – of imagining what is “before” in a temporal sense to be unavailable to what is “before” one’s eyes, spatially. Since certainty is only possible with respect to the past, and even the most probable events in the future are open to uncertainty, it would be more appropriate to associate the back, and the unseeable behind towards which it is directed, with the future, which cannot be seen. It seems this is the association assumed by the representation of the human back in its most literal form in Austen, for it raises vulnerability of the back as the part of one’s life one cannot see: one’s future.²³

Persons are vulnerable to time not only in their uncertainty about the future, but also in their habitation within physical bodies that are necessarily objects of temporal evolution – they are vulnerable, that is, to the natural changes worked on the body over time. Critics generally agree that, as John Wiltshire puts it, “time and vicissitude, the actions of nature, are more explicitly foregrounded in this novel than in any other of Jane Austen.” Indeed, the novel

²³ Later in this chapter, I will discuss the back in further detail, examining Austen’s awareness that its vulnerabilities go beyond the limitations they suggest merely on our *knowledge*, whether visual or temporal.

“emphasiz[es] the changes and vicissitudes wrought by time, and... the human body as an object besieged by its onslaughts.”²⁴

This preoccupation is most palpably represented by Sir Walter, who thinks he is invulnerable to time. The line, examined in Part II of this essay, “He had been remarkably handsome in his youth; and, at fifty-four, was still a very fine man,” showcases his narcissism in its grammatical structure. This narcissism fuels Sir Walter’s delusion, made increasingly apparent over the course of the novel, that he has maintained constancy or balance of appearance across “youth” and “fifty-four.”²⁵ Of course, he has not, and thus Sir Walter embodies yet another asymmetry that, in another character, will be brought into balance. In this case, the asymmetry, similar to the others in being between self and self-knowledge, is an asymmetry between self and body.

This sentence (“He had been remarkably handsome...”) that first hints at Sir Walter’s ardent and consistently articulated fantasy that everyone’s appearance be impervious to old age recruits greater irony when it is echoed in the novel’s first description of Captain Wentworth, seemingly the only character for whom the fantasy is a reality: “He was, at that time, *a remarkably fine* young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit and brilliancy...” (18, my emphasis). The words “remarkably” and “fine” bring together both halves of Sir Walter’s chiasmus – his “*remarkably* handsome” youth and his “still *fine*” fifty-four.

²⁴ John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body: “The Picture of Health”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 164.

²⁵In Part II, above, I discuss how the equation of first and last, or front and back, can mean a length of time that has been nullified. It is interesting that in the chiasmus of this sentence, time is the thing in the center of two balanced/equal entities: it is the thing that can be compressed or effaced. Of course, the very chiasmus that both mimics and represents Sir Walter’s fantasy likewise throws into relief his lack of the Austen’s powers. For it is Austen alone who can collapse, or decide who else can collapse, the intervening time between non-consecutive moments so as to efface their distinctions.

Later, the first description we get of the newly returned Captain Wentworth comes from Anne's perspective, who thinks that "he was not altered, or not for the worse.... No; the years which had destroyed her youth and bloom had only given him a more glowing, manly, open look, in no respect lessening his personal advantages. She had seen the same Frederick Wentworth" (44). The line offers the physical version of what I have noted, in Part II, about character transformation: Anne develops during the novel's backstory phase; Wentworth develops during the novel's discourse phase. And yet, if the vulnerability of Sir Walter's body to time is synced with his vulnerability to being narrated, and the total imbalance between Sir Walter the person and Sir Walter the character finds iterations both diegetic and discursive, then proportionately, the invulnerability of Anne to the narration should be accompanied by a similar invulnerability of her body to time. But unlike Captain Wentworth, who begins (and ends) the novel looking just as before, the similar invulnerability of Anne to time is, paradoxically, made to seem *arrived at*, and not at all taken for granted. This emphasizes again the similarity across time that would allow the collapsibility of what is in between – maintaining stasis across both ends of the original narrative (fabula). Says Captain Wentworth near the close of the novel,

"[Edward] enquired after you very particularly; asked even if you were personally altered, little suspecting that to my eye you could never alter."

Anne smiled, and let it pass. It was too pleasing a blunder for reproach. It is something for a woman to be assured, in her eight-and-twentieth year, that she has not lost one charm of earlier youth; but the value of such homage was inexpressibly increased to Anne, by comparing it with former words, and feeling it to be the result, not the cause of a revival of his warm attachment. (181-182)

Anne's eventual balancing with Captain Wentworth allows the illusion of un-alteration, maintaining consistency across the start and finish of the novel. The self-declared illusion may seem to mar the perfection of such alteration, but that is precisely the point – what is represented is the *process* by which we arrive at "perfection": the balancing involved in Captain Wentworth's

merger with Anne such that their appearances, together, appear as unchanged across time as their characters.

Without the eventual proposal from Captain Wentworth – without the transformation in his character during the discourse that balances out her transformation during the backstory -- Anne's appearance, like Sir Walter's, would be vulnerable to time. But unlike her father, she is, with typical privilege, made to be aware of it. And crucially, the privilege is emphasized as being specifically a *narrative* one because of the way she is made aware – that is, as if by an informant sent deliberately by Austen herself. As we see below, the usual backward-glancing pattern whereby we infer questions retroactively from their answers, and the usual narrative privileges whereby Anne is excused any moment of vanity and spared suspense on her questions, are all in play. Austen protects Anne from the embarrassment of elaborating

On one other question, which perhaps her utmost wisdom might not have prevented, she was soon spared all the suspense; for after the Miss Musgroves had returned and finished their visit at the Cottage she had this spontaneous information from Mary: "Captain Wentworth is not very gallant by you, Anne, though he was so attentive to me. Henrietta asked him what he thought of you, when they went away, and he said, 'You were so altered he should not have known you again.'" (44)

This speech-within-a-speech-within-a-speech, like a coiled snake, leaps and smarts Anne's consciousness with a picture of herself as an object simultaneously seen and spoken of. With typical self-effacement, Anne suffers, at a third remove, the atypical sight of her defacement – confronts an utterance, spoken behind her back, of the effect of time (the time "behind" her) on her face.²⁶ And yet, though they cannot be altered, a sympathetic Austen, with ever-faithful

²⁶ These feelings of being looked at and spoken of, so different from her experience in the initial chapters of the novel, begin to be the norm of Anne's experience of herself until the novel's closure, but they always involve her keen awareness of them: "These were some of the thoughts which occupied Anne.... *Once* she felt that he was looking at herself—observing her altered features, perhaps, trying to trace in them the ruins of the face which had once charmed him; and *once* she knew that he must have spoken about her;—she was hardly aware of it, till she heard the answer; but then she was sure of his having asked his partner whether Miss Elliot never danced?" (52). Again, with this latter answer, we see the pattern of a question being withheld until its answer is given, and

complicity, allows Anne to seize and repeat the words, as if she were a narrator herself – “‘Altered beyond his knowledge!’ Anne fully submitted, in silent, deep mortification” (44) and again, “So altered that he should not have known her again!” (44). Here, with a third-person view of her own body, Anne resembles not simply *a* narrator but *the* narrator of the novel, not only capable of but in all actuality performing a free indirect discourse delivery of the subjectivity of Captain Wentworth.

His narrative disadvantage here is underscored by the content of the passage that immediately follows

“So altered that he should not have known her again!” ...

Frederick Wentworth had used such words, or something like them, but without an idea that they would be carried round to her. He had thought her wretchedly altered, and, in the first moment of appeal, had spoken as he felt. He had not forgiven Anne Elliot. (44)

Captain Wentworth’s narrative disadvantage relative to Anne is emphasized by his being, like all novel characters, “without an idea” that nothing he says is truly private, while Anne’s formal advantage is highlighted by the lack of transition between the two paragraphs. The break in between them is, reading forward, quite smooth, but it is jarring when read backward, with the knowledge that the perspective in the second one is not that of Anne. For going forward, we are given no reason not to think we are still in Anne’s point of view, and therefore every reason to imagine that she is continuing to read, because capable of reading, Captain Wentworth’s mind. It is not until we arrive at “Elliot,” the distancing articulation of Anne’s social identity, that we realize we have left her perspective.

Thus, Anne’s perspective is exited for the first and one of the only times in the novel in a

likewise given by an intermediary.

manner that nonetheless reveals and sustains her narrative privilege, her near one-ness with the narration. We, with Anne, experience near-perfect symmetry between Anne-the-person and Anne-the-device, as Anne-the-person both narrates and is narrated; this symmetry, in turn, is replicated in Anne's phenomenological experience, as she faces her face and, without any irony, experiences symmetry between how she looks and how she thinks she looks – between herself as a subject and herself as an object.

This pattern throughout the novel has been discussed at length over the course of this essay. But there occurs in the novel a single, significant exception to the rule of Anne's symmetry and privilege, and it occurs at the end of Chapter 9, in Book I.

It is one of the most physically intimate scenes in Jane Austen, and one of the strangest among physically intimate scenes in nineteenth-century fiction. The interaction occurs when Anne is in the midst of tending to little Charles, who has sustained an injury to the back. Accidental the injury may be, but it seems no accident that the body part in pain is the back, for it is precisely the back's vulnerability that is so forcefully rendered when little Walter, brother to the ailing Charles,

began to fasten himself upon [Anne], as she knelt, in such a way that, busy as she was about Charles, she could not shake him off. She spoke to him, ordered, entreated, and insisted in vain. Once she did contrive to push him away, but the boy had the greater pleasure in getting upon her back again directly. "Walter," said she, "get down this moment. You are extremely troublesome. I am very angry with you."

...

But not a bit did Walter stir. (58)

Throughout the novel, as I have emphasized, there is no opinion that Anne does not share or know of herself, no information that she does not eventually have. Anne is the keeper of seemingly all narrative knowledge, equivalent to the novel's author. But it becomes clear in this scene that the extent to which Anne's knowledge can protect her ultimately has a limit. Anne's

back is something – *the* single thing – about herself, toward whose protection her epistemological privileges are powerless, for they are subject to more powerful phenomenological laws. Anne may try to “speak, order, entreat, insist” and otherwise “contrive,” but not even the author who has created her can let her see or control her back directly. It is outside not only her vision but her personal control. I say “control,” for it becomes clear in this scene that the back has vulnerabilities beyond its lack of ocular power. It poses problems of autonomy and of self-governance. The assault on her back by little Walter reminds us that the back is open to the influence, control, and determination of external forces – notably, other people. As such, it represents the true limit of Anne’s privilege as a character, because it is the true limit of herself as the owner of a human body.

In another moment, however, she found herself in the state of being released from him; some one was taking him from her, though he had bent down her head so much, that his little sturdy hands were unfastened from around her neck, and he was resolutely borne away, before she knew that Captain Wentworth had done it.
Her sensations on the discovery made her perfectly speechless. She could not even thank him. She could only hang over little Charles, with most disordered feelings. (58)

There is a longer delay here than usual, but sure and soon enough, Anne is rescued from her position of total submission, restored to equivalence between herself as a subject and herself as an object. This seems lodged in the comforting and familiar reflexive, “she found herself.” But the usual symmetry is undermined by the subsequent set of clauses. For one thing, they extend the duration of Anne’s imbalance, as, added to her inability to control her back, there is added a temporary ignorance as to who, in addition to Walter, is now acting upon it as well. The clauses seem to signal an asymptote for the otherwise supreme authority of both Anne and the narration. Their instability permeates the clauses, for example, in their wildly shifting tenses, from past perfect (“she [Anne] found”), past progressive (“someone [Captain Wentworth] was taking”),

pluperfect (“he [Walter] had bent”), past perfect tense in passive voice (“[Walter’s] hands were unfastened; he was resolutely borne away”); to pluperfect (“Captain Wentworth had done it”). Jumping back and forth across temporal states, the clauses do not present a logical sequence or progression of events. Highly anomalous in an otherwise very rationally narrated novel, they suggest the existence of some “Anne” that neither Anne nor the narration can protect or understand. For, it would seem, even if *Austen* refuses to make Anne an object of narrative or readerly scrutiny or violence, her very possession of a body will still leave her a vulnerable object.

The “disordered feelings” with which the scene concludes are detailed in the final lines of the chapter, moments later: “She was ashamed of herself, quite ashamed of being so nervous, so overcome by such a trifle; but so it was; and it required a long application of solitude and reflection to recover her” (59). Most critical explanations for Anne’s shame point simply to the scene’s erotic charge. But there seems to be something deeper at work, since shame – its implied divergence of subject opinion and object status – seems structurally inconsistent with Anne’s usual ontological symmetry. I would argue that Anne’s continued sense of asymmetry even after her rescue is caused by her awareness that it was not, still is not, within her control to be thus rescued. The disequilibrium between Anne, the subject that nurses little Charles, and Anne, the object upon whom little Walter climbs, is one that Captain Wentworth seemingly corrects. But he cannot correct the potential for disequilibrium that is still always there, always suggested by her back itself. Thus, though the discovery that “Captain Wentworth had done it” ostensibly restores Anne’s freedom from little Walter along with her usual omniscience and self-possession, it really works only as a further assault upon her “sensations,” which in turn render her “speechless,” disempowered yet again, and perhaps worse than before. The rescue, in this sense, is unresolved

and incomplete, leaving in its wake the apparent need for more lasting rescue.²⁷

The perpetual insistence of potential disequilibrium, suggested by the back, is emphasized earlier by the fact that little Walter climbs upon her back not once but twice. “Once she did contrive to push him away, but the boy had the greater pleasure in getting upon her back again directly.” Anne’s powerlessness is underscored in a repetition that reminds us that as long as Anne has a back, there will *always* be this potential for assault. The position of her extremely bent head echoes and emphasizes her total helplessness and submission to this condition. Anne’s back is always going to be a liability; the best insurance policy, as the rescue proposes, is to confirm the eternal presence of a Captain Wentworth, available physically at all times to have her back: to have him, that is, for a husband.

This lack to be filled – or rather, this potential for disequilibrium to be ameliorated – is at the heart of *Persuasion*’s beauty as a love story. Among all the Austen courtship plots – plots of development across stakes that are social, economical, ethical, or psychological – *Persuasion* stands out for having stakes that are physical. The way Anne needs Captain Wentworth is not quite how any other Austen heroine needs their eventual partners. This is a novel dealing in marriage as a union of two real bodies²⁸ -- the private disequilibriums of each human back,

²⁷Generally, this scene is read as a romantic one, in the sense that Captain Wentworth expresses empathy and erotic attachment, and Anne’s pain is simply a form of confused pleasure. The language, overwhelmingly negative following the rescue, does not seem to support the reading that Anne is pleased by the episode. If she is, it is strange that the narrative does not imply this in any way. Nonetheless, critics will argue, for example: “Relieved to discover through the touch of his hands on her that she has a body, Anne feels physical relief and emotional aliveness. In coming to consciousness of her body freed from pain and brushed into momentary contact with his body, Anne knows again feelings of emotional pain and pleasure, however confusing that knowledge might be. Physical pain, physical pleasure are felt by Anne as emotional pain, emotional pleasure. The object of her consciousness--Wentworth--again affects her body, agitates her mind, and creates new feelings that she represents to herself. Wentworth’s touch brings her to somatic knowledge conscious of itself, of who she was, of who she is. Anne’s relief is to awaken to full being” (Kay Young, “Feeling Embodied: Consciousness, *Persuasion*, and Jane Austen,” *Narrative*, Volume 3, Number 1 [January, 2003], p. 86).

²⁸ The more *intellectual* nature of Austen’s other marriage plots versus the more *physical* nature of this one is emphasized by the admitted failure of language at these moments of romantic intensity (distinct from the silent elision of other novels, in which, in any case, the romance seems, probably as a result, less intense). This is

experienced solitarily as permanent vulnerability, cancelled or at least mitigated by a union that forms, out of the merged disequilibriums, a new equilibrium of its own.

A narrative about a heroine who is insistently represented as invulnerable is in this way, by way of this scene, given consequence. If Anne, in her constancy, is not going to change, if she is always immediately brought into balance with her external and internal worlds, if she and everyone around her has already accepted her old maid status – if, in short, she is infinitely safe, protected even by the very narration that constitutes her – then what does it matter whether she marries or not? The scene inflects the potential/eventual marriage with real stakes. In an artistically controlled environment of such total symmetry between person and device, or character and narration, the shape and susceptibility of Anne's body conveniently saves Austen the pain of contriving plot, character, or otherwise formal asymmetries in order to generate narrative stakes.

Of course, one scene alone cannot generate the narrative stakes of an entire novel. And insistence on Anne's vulnerability would undermine her embodiment of otherwise perfect symmetry in characterization. Instead, just as the reader repeatedly encounters Anne's invulnerabilities to epistemological limitation, so the reader is made to consider the treatment of Anne's back in this scene in a context that emphasizes its relative invulnerability; that context

visible both in the sentence that immediately follows Anne's realization that it is Captain Wentworth, and no other, who has thus rescued her: "Her *sensations* on the discovery made her perfectly *speechless*," as well as in Austen's original chapter narrating Anne and Wentworth's official reunion. She later rewrote this chapter entirely, but in its original version, "[Captain Wentworth] now sat down, drew it a little nearer to her, and looked with an expression which had something more than penetration in it – something softer. Her countenance did not discourage. It was a silent but a very powerful dialogue; on his side supplication, on hers acceptance. Still a little nearer, and a hand taken and pressed; and 'Anne, my own dear Anne!' bursting forth in the fulness of exquisite feeling, -- and all suspense and indecision were over." As John Wiltshire describes it, "In the original climactic chapter, ... the final reconciliation is achieved, in fact, by a scene in which body language is made to seem an effective substitute for the spoken word, and to communicate that full and precise meaning of which the previous manifestations of feeling were scarcely decipherable tokens" (190).

compels the reader to consider the treatment of her back relative to the treatment received by the backs of others

Three characters in particular are contrasted with Anne to this purpose. Each of them reveals their vulnerability not so much to aging in time as to becoming fixed in space: to becoming literally paralyzed. We never see the deaths of major characters in Austen, let alone death scenes, so in *Persuasion*, we see arguably the closest thing to represent the body's vulnerability in time and space. Paralysis, resulting from injury in the back, comes not only to *represent* vulnerability to immobility but to *signify* vulnerability to sterility.

Not by accident is a literal back accident – a spinal injury – the thing to prevent what would otherwise be Anne's first encounter with Captain Wentworth.

[Anne] and Mary were actually setting forward for the Great House, where, as she afterwards learnt, they must inevitably have found [Captain Wentworth], when they were stopped by the eldest boy's being at that moment brought home in consequence of a bad fall. The child's situation put the visit entirely aside; but she could not hear of her escape with indifference, even in the midst of the serious anxiety which they afterwards felt on his account.

His collar-bone was found to be dislocated, and such injury received in the back, as roused the most alarming ideas. It was an afternoon of distress.... (38)

Anne's feelings of "not... indifference" are described just as obliquely as the "most alarming ideas" that are felt on account of little Charles's bad fall. And their similarity and juxtaposition suggest the similarity between her "escape" of Captain Wentworth on the one hand and the escape of little Charles from unspoken paralysis. Anne's escape of what would have been a surprise encounter reminds us of the "behind," allied with the future, filled with uncertainty. Anne, in this sense, escapes the vulnerability of her back, just like little Charles. But for all his escape of being permanently stalled, Little Charles still temporarily stalls narrative movement by delaying Anne and Wentworth's first meeting. In so doing, he represents not only the temporal

but also the physical significance of their reunion.

This representation is furthered by the subsequent injury sustained from a fall, this one by Louisa Musgrove. Just as with little Charles, for whom the “work of time to ascertain that no injury had been done to the spine” (39) eventually ensures that his spine is unharmed, so we discover also, after a delay, that “Louisa’s limbs had escaped” (83). But unlike little Charles, she *is* in a certain way affected permanently by her injury. Its relation to the narrative is spatialized in its immediate aftermath, when everyone present at her fall returns to the inn from which they departed when beginning their walk: “they set forward, treading back with feelings unutterable, the ground which so lately, so very lately, and so light of heart, they had passed along” (82-83). The self-conscious “set forward, treading back” cannot but recall the structure of the narrative, in which the courtship of Louisa and Captain Wentworth progresses up to the point precisely of this injury before it is cut short, with Louisa returning to being no more a prospective bride for him than any other “pleasing young woman who came in his way” (45). The spatial is likewise linked with the temporal: “so lately, so very lately.” Indeed, Louisa’s paralysis is not a bodily one but a narrative one. She may yet walk, but she is stopped short, permanently, in her courtship with Captain Wentworth. And she is instead paired, by the novel, with Captain Benwick, the most physically stationary of all the seafarers represented in the novel.²⁹

The effect of Louisa’s fall is definitively to ruin her chances with one marriage and potentially to endanger her chances with any marriage at all. This link is solidified by the figure

²⁹Interestingly, Louisa’s fall may foreclose her chances with Captain Wentworth but it furthers Anne’s cause by removing her only serious rival from the game. She thus occasions the “forward” movement not only “backward” to the inn but “backward” also towards the (original/duplicate) engagement of Anne and Captain Wentworth. This, we may recall, is not the only time Louisa occasions the larger movement of Austen’s narrative. Earlier, as we find out when Anne hears it spoken behind her ears, Louisa encourages Henrietta to go onward to Charles Hayter’s house rather than being ““turned back”” under the influence of Mary.

of Mrs. Smith, who unites physical paralysis with sexual sterility, coupling both with these in narrative ineffectuality. The one effect she might have had on the plot – by dissuading Anne from marrying Mr. Elliot – is rendered moot by Anne’s having already received confirmation of Captain Wentworth’s affection by the time she sees Mrs. Smith. “The good she did – or meant to do –” brings her the reward of lasting financial security, and the novel’s mention of her in its concluding paragraph seems, likewise, to raise her to prominence. But the latter seems done as if purposely to highlight Anne’s security from the fate of Mrs. Smith.

Indeed, the bodily injuries and states of little Charles, Louisa, and Mrs. Smith seem designed specifically to throw into relief Anne’s invulnerability to such injury. She is thrown into sharp contrast beside Mrs. Smith in the novel’s final scene, is able through Louisa’s fall to secure in Captain Wentworth’s mind an image of mental fortitude, and escapes by way of Little Charles’s fall an encounter of surprise far worse than the eventual, actual one, which offers at least a few seconds of preparation. And her safety, along with its narrative significance – precisely relative to these examples – is articulated directly when, immediately after the novel’s climax, when she has finally received confirmation of Captain Wentworth’s returned (reciprocal and resurrected) affection, Mrs. Musgrove, grandmother to little Charles and mother to Louisa, connects Anne’s seeming weakness with their falls.

She is not totally wrong to do so, for Anne’s subservience to her body is emphasized in the moments immediately following the climactic letter:

The absolute necessity of seeming like herself produced then an immediate struggle; but after a while she could do no more. She began not to understand a word they said, and was obliged to plead indisposition and excuse herself. They could then see that she looked very ill, were shocked and concerned, and would not stir without her for the world. This was dreadful! Would they only have gone away.... (177-178)

Anne’s body seems to speak without her consent just as her mind refuses to speak, or even

“understand,” any words – a sign perhaps of her distance from the communicative mode of the narrative and the text generally. For it is beginning with these moments and through the end of the novel that Anne is increasingly narrated from an objective third-person stance, and not in free indirect discourse, as if, with her engagement, she has abandoned her complicity with and the protection of the narration: after all, she is now taken care of by another. It is this very fact that lends irony to Mrs. Musgrove’s declaration that she go “take care of [her]self,” alongside her suggestion that she not walk, as if it were now that Anne’s body is finally vulnerable to danger:

"By all means, my dear," cried Mrs. Musgrove, "go home directly, and take care of yourself.... Charles, ring and order a chair. She must not walk."

But the chair would never do. Worse than all! To lose the possibility of speaking two words to Captain Wentworth... (and she felt almost certain of meeting him) could not be borne. The chair was earnestly protested against, and Mrs Musgrove, who thought only of one sort of illness, having assured herself... that Anne had not at any time lately slipped down, and got a blow on her head; ... could part with her cheerfully.... (178)

Anne’s safety, upon Captain Wentworth’s proposal, is metaphorical and literal, as she seems protected from physical and sexual disability. But it seems to disable her oneness with a narration that is otherwise so complicit in her mental well-being. Thus Anne *does* change in the course of *Persuasion*’s narrative, in the sense that her bond with the narration is transformed in inverse relation to her bond with Captain Wentworth: as the latter becomes consolidated, the former is dissolved. This is the very opposite of the sequence we find in every other Austen novel, in which protagonists are narrated ironically and distantly until the moment of engagement, after which, at one with the will of the marriage plot form, their person-hood and device-hood are equalized. With Anne, we see a character balanced with and protected by the narration, merged with it completely, free of typical asymmetry, until the engagement inserts between her and the narration a typical formal distance. Anne moves as if directly from the

protection of Austen to the protection of Captain Wentworth – perhaps because this latter “protection,” motivated by the stakes of Anne’s fictional body, cannot ultimately be supplied by an author/narrator whose bodilessness imposes a limit on *her* power to provide balance and protection within that fictional world.

Chapter 2

Spinelessness in *Dombey and Son*

*At my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near*

Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"

The mapping of narratological structures onto the dorsoventral morphology of the human body is a phenomenon that appears throughout the novels of Dickens. The placard on David Copperfield's back, as we saw in the "Introduction," provides one obvious and concentrated example: the placard, like the narrator, speaks about David without his consent and from a location that is permanently unavailable to his direct sight. And the first-person past tense narration of the novel may be a structural consequence of the scene: older David looks back and writes his backstory as an overcoming of his previous inability to look at and write on his back. Chapter 3 will offer evidence that *Great Expectations* represents precisely such a physio-narrative project – we will encounter a first-person narrator whose physiological experience of his backstory through his back seems to shape his telling of that story.

This chapter will show, among other things, that in Dickens, the narratological significance of the human inability to look at one's own back does not appear only in his fictional autobiographies, with the ontological complexity of a single person's split, or doubling, into character and narrator. The capacity of the back to materialize narrative structures both in the diegetic world and in ours is more versatile and widespread than the first-person retrospective narratives would suggest. And nowhere in Dickens's oeuvre is this capacity recruited more abundantly and conspicuously than in *Dombey and Son*.

Whereas Dickens's first-person retrospective structures associate themselves primarily with the protagonist/narrator's back, *Dombey and Son* deals in a whole network of backs. As such, it is not, as in the other novels I examine in this dissertation, primarily narrative stance and framing – for example, backstories – that become mapped onto the back surface. Here, it is predominantly a character system that helps materialize narrative structures – partly, by implicating the human body's shape in the intricate plot dynamics produced by character networks. The chapter will show, in other words, how narratological forms can be embodied by the properties not only of a single back but of a back situated among other backs.

The chapter is made up of three sections. The first two parts show how the novel aligns front-back anatomical asymmetry with character-author narratological asymmetry. The third part studies the novel's interest in effacing such asymmetries – in imagining, as it were, a state of physical and figurative backless-ness. Part One, "Going Behind the Back," discusses the two most authorial characters – analogues of the novel's author – and how their narrative, narratological, and physical positions associate any character's vulnerability to authorial power with a person's vulnerability to viewers who are unseen due to their back. Part Two, "Backstabbing," illustrates how the novel's actual author, directly through the back, materializes within the novel his power over the novel, making the back's vulnerability itself a character. And Part Three, "Taking and Getting Back," explains how narrative reversals, iterated physically such that characters approximate a freedom from the vulnerability of their backs, are associated with their perceiving themselves in a manner symmetrical to how the author perceives them. Though the organizing principle of the chapter will be the embodied asymmetry between author and character, it will also illuminate embodied asymmetries – or the sense of effaced asymmetries – in plot structures, temporality, and syntax.

The titles of my sections suggest the chapter's dominant interest in the first of these three, along with an interest in related metaphors of the back. Indeed, a remarkably large number of such metaphors are literalized in the novel. As I discussed in the "Introduction," such instances in all my chapters provide support for the cognitive linguistic theory that we do not simply speak but in fact *think* metaphorically. *Dombey and Son* makes an especially strong case, not only because it literalizes such a prolific number of back metaphors, but because so many of them belong to English expressions Dickens could not have known. The source domains of "backstabbing" and "backfiring," for example, are approximately literalized by the novel using the human back. Yet like the word "backstory" – the example I gave in my introduction – the expressions were not in common use until the twentieth century. This belatedness makes their literalization even more significant to this project's role in supporting theories of embodied cognition. The association between the human back and the "back" in these expressions is not purely linguistic but rather deeply conceptual, existing prior to and independently of the words.

The scenes and structures of *Dombey and Son* literalize many such metaphors, often in overlap, through a plot that is simple and intricate at once – simple, because the isolated motivations, actions, and results are relatively straightforward; intricate, because these are networked and nested in ways that subvert the potential limitations of having, compared to Dickens's other long novels, relatively fewer characters. Not only the plot's individual components and events but also their complex sequencing and interconnectedness engage the human back, so I will provide a summary to refresh the reader's memory of them.

The six characters important to recall for this argument are: 1) Mr. Dombey, the novel's arrogant protagonist, cruelly neglectful of his loving daughter Florence and head of the extremely successful firm, Dombey and Son; 2) Edith, Dombey's cold and proud second wife,

trapped in a loveless marriage with him; 3) Mr. Carker, the novel's villain and the manager of Dombey's firm; 4) Rob the Grinder, a young, cowardly, working-class vagrant; 5) Alice, a destitute former prostitute, betrayed by Carker in the novel's backstory; 6) Good Mrs. Brown, Alice's elderly, manipulative, and likewise destitute mother.

Carker hates Dombey but deceptively flatters him, acting as his closest confidante while plotting a flagrant betrayal, gathering information on everyone around him for the purpose. He hires Rob the Grinder to spy on Florence and establish control over Edith, whose hatred for Mr. Dombey and love for Florence he plans to exploit towards his betrayal of Mr. Dombey. The day after an explosive argument between Mr. and Mrs. Dombey, Carker and Edith run away together and meet in France, where Edith reveals that she hates him and has planned all along to trick him into believing she will be his lover, only to abandon him once he had helped her leave Dombey. Back in England, Good Mrs. Brown and Alice make Rob the Grinder betray Carker and reveal where he and Edith have gone. As revenge on Carker for his long-ago betrayal of Alice, they sell the information to Dombey, who they know will use it to pursue his own, probably fatal, revenge on Carker. Meanwhile, in France, Edith disappears immediately after her revelation to Carker, as Mr. Dombey, using the information obtained from Alice and Mrs. Brown, approaches their hideout. Carker goes on the run from Dombey, ultimately arriving at a train station platform from where, in his surprise at suddenly seeing Dombey behind him, he accidentally steps back onto the tracks and is killed by an oncoming train. In the subsequent and final chapters of the book, nearly every character who has committed some offense towards another regrets it.

As I will show, every sentence in the summary above describes one or more events that engage the literal human back to instigate or reinforce their narratological, interpersonal,

linguistic, and/or temporal dynamics. Such engagements of the back also occur in events that are subordinate or peripheral to these. The chapter will theorize this phenomenon, arguing, as I have said, that narrative structures in the novel are mapped onto the human body in such a way as to physicalize not only asymmetries in narrative and narratological structures, but also, ultimately, the subversion of those asymmetries.

Part One - Going Behind the Back

Until relatively late in the novel, the most authorial character in *Dombey and Son* appears to be Mr. Carker, who seems to possess maximum knowledge and control of others, the *sine qua non* of the novel's author. Our first encounter with him alone occurs in Chapter 22, entitled, in emphasis of his power, "A Trifle of Management by Mr. Carker the Manager." At his desk working, he looks like "a player at cards," with "the face of a man who studied his play, warily: who made himself master of all the strong and weak points of the game: who registered the cards in his mind as they fell about him, knew exactly what was on them, what they missed, and what they made: who was crafty to find out what the other players held, and who never betrayed his hand."¹ The sequence of colons in place of a sequence of commas refuses the straightforwardly paratactical; instead, it more coldly separates and stratifies the clauses: each one overtakes the previous one much as Mr. Carker overtakes everyone around him. But the multiplicity of colons has another effect. Because we are typically accustomed to the presence of a single colon in a sentence, we expect, on our first reading, that the clause that *follows* each colon will be the back of the sentence. But when it is then followed by another colon and another clause, it turns out to

¹ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (London: Wordsworth, 2002), p. 277.

have been not a back but another front. In this way, the sentence seems to produce, up to the beginning of its final clause, a sense of syntactic backless-ness. And such a sense is embodied within the metaphor of Carker's access to the cards that the other players hold. Carker should be able to see only the backs of those cards, not their faces; indeed, the faces of the cards should be, relative to Carker, their backs. But in so much as both sides are accessible to him – in that both are thus faces – the cards become, like the clauses leading up to the final one, backless.²

Carker's knowledge suggests an overcoming of the human inability ever to see, directly, the front and the back of an object at once. And he derives power not only by transcending this usual asymmetry between visible and non-visible, but also by perpetuating a different asymmetry, in which the transcendence belongs to him and not to others. Furthermore, this asymmetry, between the visual power of Carker and that of the other players, exists alongside an asymmetry between the backs and faces of Carker's cards in the sight of the other players. The backless-ness of their cards relative to Carker is not shared by Carker's cards relative to them – these latter cards quite emphatically raise their backs and hide their faces from the other players. And it is apt that this fact is proclaimed in the final clause of the sentence: the *back* of the sentence: where front-back asymmetry reasserts itself by telling us that Carker “never betrayed *his* hand.”

The back-defying limitlessness of Carker's visual power reappears during the leisure excursion prior to Mr. Dombey's marriage to Edith and during which Carker is beginning to establish control over her through his constant, acute observation. Mr. Dombey, Edith, and others are in a carriage, and Carker is on horseback.

² It is striking that the front-back asymmetry of a card is evoked also by Hardy – for example, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, a character by the name of *Car Darch* has treacle running down her back without her knowledge.

Mr Carker cantered behind the carriage at the distance of a hundred yards or so, and watched it, during all the ride, as if he were a cat, indeed, and its four occupants, mice. Whether he looked to one side of the road, or to the other - over distant landscape... - or upwards in the sunny air... - or downward, where the shadows of the branches interlaced... - or onward, where the overhanging trees formed aisles and arches... - one corner of his eye was ever on the formal head of Mr Dombey, addressed towards him, and the feather in the bonnet [belonging to Edith], drooping so neglectfully and scornfully between them; much as he had seen the haughty eyelids droop; not least so, when the face met that now fronting it. Once, and once only, did his wary glance release these objects; and that was, when a leap over a low hedge, and a gallop across a field, enabled him to anticipate the carriage coming by the road, and to be standing ready, at the journey's end, to hand the ladies out. (358-359)

The inordinate length of the sentence describing Carker's gaze – a length evident even with my elisions – intensifies our sense of the wideness of that gaze's reach. Nothing, it would seem, can easily bring a limit – a period – to the inclusiveness of his vision. The “or” that is repeated between “upwards,” “downwards,” and “onward” seems to tell us that he only looks in one of these directions at a time, but their condensation into a single sentence also suggests the simultaneity of their availability to him. This suggestion is further advanced by the explicit statement that Carker keeps an eye on Mr. Dombey and Edith all the while. He seems, in other words, capable of seeing in all directions at once. And as with the playing cards, this author-like omniscience seems to transcend the typical human inability to see the front and the back of an object at once. Just as his horse, by moving from behind the carriage to its front, seems to render the “prey” vulnerable from all directions, so is Carker apparently able to see the face not only of Dombey, which is “addressed towards him,” but also of Edith, which is not. The text subtly emphasizes the two-sidedness of this viewing through the somewhat awkward verb used to indicate that Edith's face is turned away from Carker: rather than saying that Edith's face *confronts* Dombey's, or vice versa, we read, “[Edith's] face met [Dombey's] now *fronting* it” – an emphasis on the fact that Carker's face is in the contradistinctive *back* of her, and that despite this, he is seemingly able to deduce that her eyelids are drooping like the feather in her hat.

Carker's power is most overtly physicalized in his relationship with Rob the Grinder, whose back absorbs completely his psychological vulnerability to Carker, who, in turn, exercises an authority over him so complete, it recalls precisely that of an author over a character, were the character to be aware of the author. Rob "had a sense of power and authority in this patron of his that... exacted his most implicit submission and obedience," and "had no more doubt that Mr. Carker read his secret thoughts, or that he could read them by the least exertion of his will if he were so inclined, than he had that Mr. Carker saw him when he looked at him" (544). In Rob's imagination, Carker's physical sight is isomorphic with his private information, authorial insight, and more general power. Because of this identification of sight with power, Rob conversely correlates lack of sight with powerlessness: he experiences his inability to see in all directions at once as isomorphic with his inability to assert power. In one later scene of the novel, we see Rob constantly "glancing cautiously up at the packer's and at the bottle-maker's, as if, from any one of the tiers of warehouses, Mr. Carker might be looking down" (590). But as early as the immediate aftermath of Carker first hiring and asserting control over him with "as much a threat as a promise" (290), Carker bids him farewell and is riding away when he realizes that Rob, against his orders, is still accompanying him. Mr. Carker, irritated, commands him to go, and "To insure his obedience, ... watched him as he retired. It was curious to see that even then Rob could not keep his eyes wholly averted from his patron's face, but, constantly turning and turning again to look after him, involved himself in a tempest of buffetings and jostlings from the other passengers in the street: of which, in the pursuit of the one paramount idea, he was perfectly heedless" (290).³ The direct correlation between physical and mental power is once more

³ It may be of interest to note the peculiarity that the object of Rob's "pursuit" is behind him rather than in front. The paradox of following what is behind you involves a reversal of front and back related to the novelistic representation and perception of time, which I will discuss in Part Three. But it is literalized more than once in Dickens's works independently of temporal significance, and sometimes whimsically. *Our Mutual Friend* features

evident, as Carker's face is to Rob not only a material object but a "paramount idea." Likewise, the ambiguity of the subject who views Rob helps associate Carker's "omniscience" with that of the actual author: "It was curious to see" – for whom? The ambiguity over whether this visual opinion belongs to Carker or to the author absorbs a sense of the latter's power into that of the former.

Rob's mental abstraction and physical "turning and turning again" foreshadow Carker's mind and movements late in the novel, when, as I will discuss in Part Three, he has lost all his power. But already in the background of these scenes, Carker's authority is challenged by the power of Good Mrs. Brown, which supersedes his on both diegetic and narratological planes. Unlike in the case of Carker, whose authority does not begin to be clear until Chapter 22, when we finally encounter him alone rather than in a group, there is no scene containing Good Mrs. Brown in which she does not exercise authority. Indeed, though she is by far the most destitute figure in the novel, we never encounter her as anything but interpersonally – and, as we will see, narratologically – powerful.

The power is established and maintained from the first moment of her introduction, which occurs in the context of her temporary abduction of Florence in the streets of London. Immediately, she begins commanding Florence, who silently obeys every instruction. Mrs.

it, for example, in Eugene Wrayburn's playful (at least for him) practice of guiding Bradley Headstone, who is stalking him, through random neighborhoods and along meandering paths with no destination. Though one might expect that Bradley Headstone has the advantage of Wrayburn in being behind him – in seeing him, that is, unreciprocally and without his consent – Wrayburn, in his awareness of the stalking and in his manipulation *of* that stalking, reverses the power dynamic. This psycho-spatial dynamic is then iterated in the plot. Out of his jealous wish to eliminate Wrayburn as a rival for Lizzie, Headstone executes (to Wrayburn's surprise) a nearly fatal attack on him. But this leads not only to Wrayburn's marriage to Lizzie (a surprise for Headstone), but – by making so painfully clear his advantage over Headstone – to the latter's suicide. Headstone's attempt to kill Wrayburn leads to Wrayburn indirectly killing him, such that Wrayburn's advantage over Headstone, in other words, has *followed* directly from the apparent advantage of the latter over the former, just like in the stalking scenes. Dickens famously loved the pursuit scene; nearly every novel has one. But backward-pursuits like Rob's of Carker or Wrayburn's of Headstone reveal his concurrent interest in the back not only for its asymmetry but for the suggestion of reversibility that, for Dickens, always underlies it.

Brown's power is almost exactly like that of Carker over Rob, and even includes, before Florence leaves, "assurances that there would be potent eyes and ears to her employment cognizant of all [Florence] did..." (72). Like Carker's threat on Rob, it recalls the omniscience of the novel's author. And sure enough, like Rob, Florence too, when she is sent on her way, "often looked backwards – every minute, at least, in her nervous recollection of the old woman – [but] she could not see her again" (73). Also like Rob, there is a delay before she finally leaves – she does not go not until after "often looking over her shoulder, and often going a little way, and as often coming back again, lest the all-powerful spies of Mrs Brown should take offence" (73). Mrs. Brown's authority, like Mr. Carker's, has the effect of making a child look repeatedly backward in apprehension of being watched.

But, it turns out, Rob is being controlled, ultimately, not by Mr. Carker but by Mrs. Brown, who, unlike and unbeknownst to Carker, is deliberate in exploiting the vulnerability of Rob's back in establishing power over him. She takes advantage of it quite literally in a late scene I will discuss in Part Two, but she uses it figuratively as a threat when he displays resistance to her authority: "'Could I raise a crowd of old company about you tomorrow morning, that would follow you to ruin like copies of your own shadow, and do you turn on *me* with your bold looks?'" (589). Her authority supersedes Carker's in several ways. Within the diegesis, her commands to Rob overrule those of Carker – the young mignon reveals, in violation of Carker's orders, information he has gathered for and about him. And this epistemological advantage over Carker within the fictional world is matched and intensified in effect by the parallel narratological advantage she has over us. Unlike Mr. Carker's establishment and perpetuation of control over Rob, which has been given to us in real-time, in thorough detail, and through the direct representation of Carker's point of view by the more powerful omniscient

narrator, the establishment of Mrs. Brown's control is only related belatedly and in her own indirect language as she reminds Rob of it. In other words, since she has already been bribing and coercing Rob a long while by the time we discover it, she has been doing so not only behind Carker's back but behind our backs as well.

Mrs. Brown continually goes behind our backs not just in her interactions with Rob but throughout the novel. Sometimes, this occurs even as she is doing something right in front of us: some of her scenes conceal something about her from us (as if behind the scenes' backs) only to have it materialize later (as if from behind our backs). Dickens establishes this pattern from her first scene. The glaring resemblance between Florence's reaction to Mrs. Brown there and Rob's reaction to Carker later, as both of the children look repeatedly backward at their authority figures after their first encounters with them, suggests that the text is consciously presenting the two for comparison. But Mrs. Brown's scene appears first, and since, on a first reading, we do not know that the comparison is being established, there exists a component to the scene that is behind our backs, endowing it with an advantage over that of Carker, where nothing is out of view. Furthermore, it is not the only such component in the scene. We discover later (452-453) that Mrs. Brown knows Florence's identity at the time that she abducts her – she is not a completely strange child to her – and that from this moment on, Mrs. Brown begins, behind our backs and theirs, to stalk the Dombey and Carker.

Dickens's way of representing Good Mrs. Brown brings her authorial power into the real world not only by so frequently withholding and narrating her activities belatedly, but also by always letting her narrate them herself, in direct speech. Moreover, the novel offers no authorial perspective on her that she does not have of herself, we are almost never given her point of view, and even basic details of her actions are usually withheld. For being the most powerful figure in

the novel, she is given remarkably little “character-space,” not only in the sense that her subjectivity goes unrepresented, but also in the literal sense that she occupies extremely few pages – fewer, at least, than 5% of them. Ironically, this intensifies rather than diminishes our sense of her power, which continually exceeds our expectations.

In her introductory Florence-abduction scene, for example, the narrative encourages us to dismiss her as an extremely peripheral character, because even though she dominates Florence, it is Florence – getting lost in the middle of the thrilling excursion we are following – who dominates the narrative. “Good Mrs. Brown,” owner of a name that the narrative itself implies is false and cartoonish (“[Florence] wonder[ed] whether Bad Mrs. Brown, if there were such a person, was at all like her” [70]), seems a typical, caricatured, ultra-minor character in Dickens, resembling in physical description a fairy tale witch: “a very ugly old woman, with red rims round her eyes, and a mouth that mumbled and chattered of itself,” “hobbling,” “miserably dressed,” with a “shrivelled yellow face and throat” (71). And even though it is Mrs. Brown’s knowledge of the Dombey’s that will make possible the momentous death of the novel’s villain, and even though accumulation of that knowledge begins in this scene, the brief incident is made to seem completely inconsequential.⁴

Indeed, it seems perfectly random despite its being part of what we might call a “back”-story in two senses: one, in that its roots (Carker’s betrayal of her daughter Alice) are temporally grounded in the backstory of the novel’s discourse (which begins with Paul’s much later birth); two, in that it occurs in the “background,” out of our usual, direct line of sight and as if obstructed by – as if *behind* – the foregrounded action involving the Dombey’s and Carker. This

⁴ That is, Good Mrs. Brown’s identity seems inconsequential. The event is visibly and immediately consequential in another way, of course, in that it leads to Florence’s first encounter with the foregrounded Walter Gay – it is the first step in the marriage plot, and that is immediately obvious.

sense of the story being in the background, moreover, is intensified by the way the backstory is related: briefly, obliquely, and only after having been explicitly withheld for a long time (Alice tells Mr. Dombey, for example, “I have as good cause for my anger [at Carker] as you have for yours.... How it is so is no matter; that is my story, and I keep that story to myself” [669]). Indeed, whether it is in the delayed, self-mediated, suppressed, or outright lack of access to her activities and ideas, Mrs. Brown enjoys not only interpersonal power but a narrative power akin to that of an author, whose personality is also absent from the text, and whose authority comes from a location without the diegetic world and our periphery. It thus exposes not only Carker’s vulnerability but our own.

Her “location’s” metaphorical association with the “back,” in the sense of coming out of Carker’s backstory (forgotten by him, and cast into the pluperfect by the narrative) and in the sense of being in the background, where it is less visible and knowable to him and to us, becomes literalized within the diegesis in the relative orientations of Mrs. Brown and Carker’s bodies during the only two scenes in which they share a space. Through those scenes, narratological power becomes associated with the exploitation of a back’s lack of ocular power.

The first of the two scenes occurs in Leamington, prior to Dombey and Edith’s engagement. Both Mrs. Brown and Carker are stalking Edith as she walks and then sits among some trees. As Edith gets up, Good Mrs. Brown approaches her and asks for money in exchange for telling her future. When Edith says she does not want to hear it, Mrs. Brown asks how much she would pay *not* to hear it, and threatens to call it out behind her if she (Edith) walks away without paying. Mr. Carker appears and steps between them, allowing Edith to get away, which provokes Mrs. Brown now to threaten him: ““give me something, or I’ll call it after *you*!”” (354). And indeed, she does, announcing, as Mr. Carker “turned upon his heel” (355), that Edith will

become Mrs. Dombey. In Part Three, I will discuss the temporal significance of this scene – the relation between past, future, front, and back. But for now, I will note that we do not know, on a first reading, Mrs. Brown’s identity any more than Carker does; we do not even know that it is the same woman who abducted Florence earlier. But when we do learn later that it was her, it is when she recounts the meeting to Alice, including in her telling a detail that occurred behind our backs and Carker’s: ““But there we were ... face to face. I spoke to him, and he spoke to me. I sat and watched him as he went away down a long grove of trees; and, at every step he took, I cursed him soul and body”” (453). Indeed, even “face to face” and the mirror-image chiasmus of “I spoke to him, and he spoke to me” suggests an equivalence between the two characters that only highlights the dissymmetry in the subsequent image of one behind the other’s back without the latter’s knowledge.

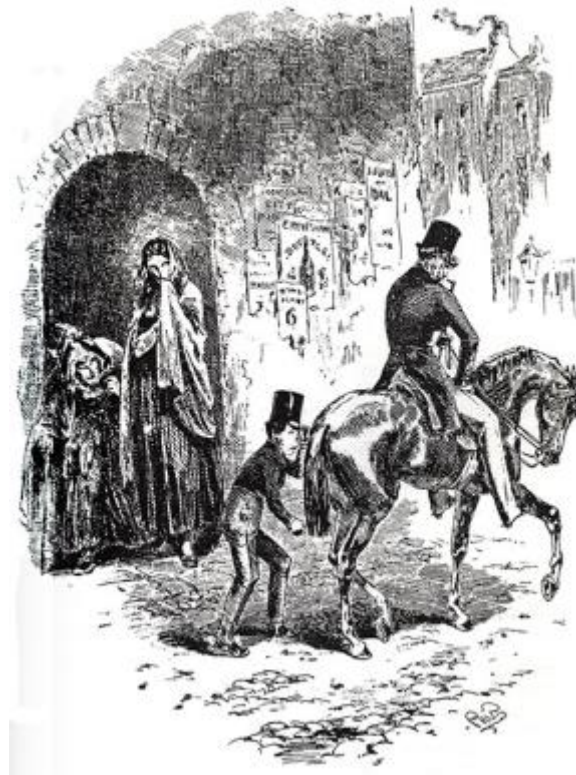
Similar to the appearance of Magwitch’s convict friend behind Pip’s back in the coach ride scene of *Great Expectations*, an element associated with Carker’s backstory is positioned behind Carker’s back such that the story adopts qualities of that back surface. Of course, as my chapter on *Great Expectations* argued, Pip is aware, albeit incompletely, of his back and backstory such that he enjoys a certain narratological privilege. Carker’s situation, by contrast, is one of distinct narratological disadvantage – his body fully materializes the condition of being a character even as he wants desperately to be, and thinks he is, an author. In being unaware of Good Mrs. Brown’s identity and presence, Carker is unaware as much of the current aspect of his backstory as of the aspect of his back surface and of what is, at any given moment, behind it.

This condition worsens over the course of the novel. In the only other scene containing both Carker and Mrs. Brown, not long before his betrayal of Mr. Dombey and its immediate backfiring, not only is he still unaware of who she is, he is also unaware that she and her

daughter are even near. “Walking his white-legged horse thus to the counting-house of Dombey and Son one day, he was as unconscious of the observation of two pairs of women’s eyes, as of the fascinated orbs of Rob the Grinder, who... trotted along on foot by his master’s side...” (586). It seems no accident that this scene immediately precedes the one, in this very chapter and discussed above, in which it is revealed that Mrs. Brown has been secretly bribing Rob behind Carker’s back – figuratively – this whole time. As Carker’s betrayal of Mr. Dombey and his failure approach, in other words, his vulnerability to Mrs. Brown – the superseding of her power over his – which has been there all along, begins to take on an increasingly embodied form. Indeed, the scene signals the beginning of the “turn” in Carker’s power, which will end, as I will discuss in Part Three, with a convergence between repeated turns of his body backward and complete interpersonal annihilation.

While the emergences of Good Mrs. Brown from behind our figurative backs show us that we have been just as ignorant of her secret power as Carker has, the vulnerability of Carker’s literally unseeing back highlights the safety of our own and restores our sense of narratological privilege. The back of Carker, until now the seemingly most powerful figure in the novel, epitomizes narratological disadvantage, as his vulnerability to the narratologically powerful Good Mrs. Brown calls to mind his vulnerability to the narrative itself. Alice and Good Mrs. Brown talk about Carker behind his back literally just as the narrator does meta-fictionally, and they see him behind his back the way the reader does meta-fictionally. The status of this scene as such a narratological analogue is manifest in the accompanying illustration.

Figure 1. “Abstraction and recognition” (587)



The drawing locates not only Mrs. Brown, Alice, and Rob behind Carker, as the story does, but also the reader, as the text does. Carker is completely turned away from us no less than from them. The illustration highlights unforgivingly, in other words, Carker’s simultaneous vulnerability to the other characters, to the author, and to us.

Thus, though Carker has, in authorial manner, been gathering information on and power over most of the other characters, seeing the fronts and the backs of their cards, as it were, he is himself vulnerable to being seen from both sides. The fact that he thinks he is not – that he in fact thinks the very opposite – intensifies our sense not only of his figurative and literal blindness, but also of the alignment, suggested initially by him but established ironically and fully by Good Mrs. Brown in her narratologically and physically advantaged status, between

character vulnerability and the back's lack of ocular power.

Part Two - Backstabbing

The previous section focused on characters who serve as authorial analogues and who use their access to the unseeing backs of their subjects as physical representations of their power. This section discovers the back, in its power to render its owner vulnerable, to be itself a direct embodiment of the real author, possessing an agency that supersedes that of any one character in some of the novel's central plot structures. As we have already begun to see, such structures are frequently schematized and mapped onto the positions and orientations of bodies, and this section will begin by summarizing and comparing two such instances.

The first of the two appears in Chapter 42. Dombey's marriage to Edith is in trouble, and he arrives at Carker's house to convey his plan to humiliate and subdue Edith by having Carker act as a middleman in the marriage, communicating Mr. Dombey's thoughts to her for him. Unbeknownst to Dombey, Carker plans to betray him by running away with Edith himself. The structure of this projected betrayal plot is spatialized. Hanging on one of Carker's walls is the portrait of a woman who looks exactly like Edith and at which Carker looks "as if it were a living thing; ... with a wicked, silent laugh upon his face, that... was all derisive of the great man standing so unconscious beside him" (547). Then, "inviting Mr. Dombey to a chair which had its back towards this picture, he took his own seat opposite to it as usual" (547). Throughout the ensuing dialogue, we read indications of Carker's gaze at the picture: that he "leered" at it (548), that "Blended with the look that Carker bent upon [Mr. Dombey] was a devilish look at the picture over his head" (551), that "his eager eye scanned Mr. Dombey's downcast face ... and ... showed a strange triumphant look at the picture, as appealing to it to bear witness how he led

[Dombey] on again, and what was coming” (552).

The second instance appears in Chapter 52. Carker has run away with Edith and the enraged Dombey wants to hunt him down. Good Mrs. Brown, accompanied by her daughter Alice, offers Dombey information on their whereabouts. They don’t have this information; Rob the Grinder does. But as we know, Good Mrs. Brown exercises considerable power over him. She invites both Dombey and Rob to her house and positions Dombey, before Rob arrives, in a room behind the chair in which Rob will sit – a room from where Dombey can overhear everything without being seen. When Rob has arrived and been seated, he asks, “‘What’s she staring at’ ... in allusion to [Alice], whose eyes were fixed upon the face that ... looked out [from the room] behind [Rob]” (675). Mrs. Brown makes Rob reveal where Carker has gone. Claiming that he does not know how to pronounce the name of the city, which he has only seen written down, he agrees to write it down too. Then,

As he bent his head down, the person for whose information he so unconsciously labored, moved from the door behind him to within a short stride of his shoulder, and looked eagerly towards the creeping track of his hand upon the table. At the same time, Alice, from her opposite chair, watched it narrowly as it shaped the letters, and repeated each one on her lips as he made it, without articulating it aloud. At the end of every letter her eyes and Mr. Dombey’s met, as if each of them sought to be confirmed by the other; and thus they both spelt D.I.J.O.N. (680)

Two betrayals occur in the scene: one, Rob’s betrayal of Carker, who has repeatedly ordered Rob to be silent on his affairs; two, Alice and Good Mrs. Brown’s betrayal of Rob, who believes that they will not allow this information to be passed on.

Carker positions and looks at Edith behind Dombey in the first scene; Alice positions and looks at Dombey behind Rob in the second. Carker will use Edith to backstab Dombey; Alice uses Dombey to backstab Rob. Both scenes suggest the betrayer’s ability to view their victim

from both the front and the back at once, and this physical advantage is aligned with the psychological one. Moreover, what is figuratively signified in the first scene is literally true in the second: vulnerability to betrayal arises from the inability to see what is behind one's body while contemplating what is in front. As with the trust-building (or trust-testing) exercise known as the "trust fall," in which one deliberately allows oneself to fall backward into the arms of the (hopefully not mistakenly) trusted person, trust in these scenes is made one with the back, allowing each betrayal to evoke subtly the semi-literalization of that graphic word for the fracturing of trust, "backstabbing."⁵

When we view the second scene in the direct light of the first, a number of obvious reversals emerge – in the first, Dombey wants to be the source of mediated communication, but in the second, he is the receiver; Carker was obtaining secret power over Dombey, but now Dombey is obtaining secret power over Carker; immediately before Dombey's arrival at his house, Carker told Rob specifically not to eavesdrop when Mr. Dombey arrived, and that he "had better not" go about "babbling and tattling" unless he wanted to be "a lost rascal" (546), but now Rob is speaking not only about Carker but also, in a sense, *as* Carker.

The novel invites us to notice these reversals specifically as such – and not to see them merely as organic, multidimensional developments in plot – by establishing the spatial continuity, which draws attention to the similarities that throw into relief the nature of the contrasts. And this invitation is extended another way too. If the readers are unable to keep the bodily positioning at Carker's house in memory long enough to notice its recreation in the

⁵ As I said in the Introduction, it is unlikely that Dickens was aware of the word "backstabbing," which did not become common in the English language until after the novel's publication. But this strengthens rather than weakens the argument that we *conceptualize* abstractions metaphorically, independently of the words that indicate this.

second scene, they may at least note Carker's pet parrot, which appears nowhere in the novel but in these two scenes, and which in both cases sits on the table between the betrayer and the betrayed. The symbolism is perhaps too obvious to merit elaboration – parrots repeat what they hear; Dombey asks Carker to repeat his (Dombey's) words to Edith, and Rob is repeating Carker's location to Good Mrs. Brown/Alice, hoping they won't repeat it. Indeed, he may even be inspired by this fear to write down the location so that the parrot itself won't be able to repeat it. Of course, the parrot's appearance, like the spatial positioning, itself repeats. With the help of such obvious symbolism, including the fact that the narrator is itself repeating what others have said, done, and written, the scene draws attention to the artifice of the text and its authorship – the text *qua* text and the plot *qua* plot.

As though thus unable to conceal its awareness that the betrayal “plots” are also the plot of the novel, the text's interest in its own status then announces itself in the plot's execution through the unnecessary act of *writing* and *reading* – unnecessary in the sense that Rob could easily try to utter the word “Dijon,” or the name of some other place, well enough to make it overheard and understood. “D.I.J.O.N.” is written and read, of course, not only in the diegetic world but also in ours, the world in which these activities, together, are responsible for the very existence of the narrative – the plot. What becomes particularly important for this dissertation's argument, of course, is that within the fictional world, it is this writing and reading in *conjunction* with the shape of the human body that is ultimately responsible for the betrayal – the plot turn of the novel. It is not Rob's will that accounts for his instrumentality in Carker's eventual death but the inability of his back to see and to exert will – to defend itself against unseen viewers. Responsibility for the betrayal – the successful realization of the plot – is displaced from Mrs. Brown onto the direct text within our world and its interaction with the

shape of the human body in theirs. Such displacement is embedded even earlier within Rob's first move in helping lead to Carker's death, in the way that he first discovers that Carker has gone to Dijon. Rob tells Mrs. Brown, "When [Carker] left [Mrs. Dombey] with me, he put a piece of paper with a direction written on it in the lady's hand, saying it was in case she should forget. She wasn't afraid of forgetting, for she tore it up as soon as his back was turned, and when I put up the carriage steps, I shook out one of the pieces..." (680). Rob's initial backstabbing of Carker also, in other words, has involved writing, reading, and the back.

Thus, the writing and reading occurring within the novel draw our attention to the writing and reading of the novel, which, for the span of the word "D.I.J.O.N.," merges our world completely with the fictional one. And the novel is careful both to draw attention to its own authorship and to do so in conjunction with taking authorial power – that is, ultimate responsibility for the plot turn – away from any one character. Indeed, it takes care to note that Good Mrs. Brown is not the *direct* backstabber of Rob, who explicitly extracts a promise: "[Take] your solemn oath now, that you'll never tell anybody.' This Mrs. Brown very readily did: being naturally Jesuitical; and having no other intention in the matter than that her concealed visitor should hear for himself" (677). She betrays Rob not by a parrot-like repetition of his words – that job belongs to the narrator⁶ – but by exploiting the shape of his body.

⁶ We may observe the shadow, in this scene, of an idea that novelistic narration is itself a form of underhanded betrayal. The cruelty of narration usually makes itself felt, in the novels examined in this dissertation, when it takes the form of talking behind the back and that talking is heard by the person talked about. Pip feels annihilated hearing the convicts talk about him on the coach ride; Tess is mortified when she hears Angel's brothers talking about her as they walk behind her. In both cases, the "narrators" are unconscious that their subject is before them. Here, the subjects stay unaware, and what is highlighted is not narration's practice of speaking, which aligns only with that of the author, but of watching, which aligns also with that of the reader. The inherent underhandedness of the practice is explicitly stated when Florence accidentally sees Carker, without his knowledge, leaving Edith's quarters the night of her disappearance: "Her invincible repugnance to this man, and perhaps the stealthy act of watching anyone, which, even under such innocent circumstances, is in a manner guilty and oppressive, made Florence shake from head to foot" (610-611).

And this is not the only place that responsibility for an interpersonal plot turn is, remarkably, outsourced from the participants' hands and words to the anatomical morphology of their bodies. The most dramatic example of such agency displacement is Dombey's revenge on Carker – constituted by the latter's death – for which the back-outsourced backstabbing of Rob here is already indirectly responsible. Carker's death is provoked by Dombey's body, yes, but not by the exertion of its physical will so much as by its position and orientation relative to those of Carker's body. Immediately after Edith abandons him in France, Carker goes on the run from Dombey, who he knows is out for revenge against him. He finds his way to a train station and is on the platform,

Walking to and fro, alone, looking along the lines of iron...; when, turning in his walk, where it was bounded by one end of the wooden stage on which he paced up and down, he saw the man from whom he had fled, emerging from the door by which he himself had entered there. And their eyes met.

In the quick unsteadiness of the surprise, he staggered, and slipped on to the road below him. But recovering his feet immediately, he stepped back a pace or two upon that road, to interpose some wider space between them, and looked at his pursuer, breathing short and quick.

He heard a shout – another – saw the face change from its vindictive passion to a faint sickness and terror – felt the earth tremble – knew in a moment that the rush was come – uttered a shriek – looked round – saw [the train]... close upon him – was beaten down, caught up, and whirled away upon a jagged mill, that... licked his stream of life up with its fiery heat, and cast his mutilated fragments in the air.

When the traveller who had been recognized recovered from a swoon, he saw them bringing from a distance something covered, that lay... upon a board, between four men.... (718)

I will address some parts of this passage, which I have quoted at length for that purpose, in Part Three, but for now I will note that Dombey does not, with a willing hand, physically push Carker onto the path of the train that kills him. Indeed, displaying “sickness and terror,” he is not even pleased by the event. It is striking, moreover, that Dombey's proper name is distinctly

absent from the passage, in which he is referred to instead as “the man,” “his pursuer,” “the face,” and “the traveller.” Indeed, Dombey’s name is mentioned only once in the entire chapter, whose single focus is Carker’s flight from him – the novel’s central, title character. The chapter and especially this passage seem extraordinarily eager, in other words, to remove Dombey’s agency from the scene, making it clear that the ultimate credit for his revenge belongs not to him but to the train, and further, to Carker’s back, which the train uses to get Carker back. Just as in the scene with Rob and Good Mrs. Brown, the novel is eager to suppress the agency of any single character in bringing about the plot turn and instead to locate that agency in the back.

Of course, what is equally responsible for the revenge – more specifically, the death – is the word “D.I.J.O.N.” This word, written in our world and the fictional one, gains efficacy within the latter only by joining forces repeatedly with the back surface, which thus also functions as a kind of portal between the fictional world and ours. For between every backstabber and backstabbed, or every avenger and target, is an intermediary that pulls the final trigger in the plot reversal, and that intermediary is always the human back. But as we are reminded by the self-consciousness and artifice of these scenes – with the symbolism of the parrot, the repetition of spatial positions, and centralization of written text – the ultimate orchestrator of each reversal, deserving of all the credit, is the author-artist, a figure who thus repeatedly and pointedly materializes his authority through the back surface, imposing his narratological powers on its phenomenological limitations.

Part Three - Taking and Getting Back

As this dissertation continually argues, a character’s vulnerability to the author’s control is one of many narratological vulnerabilities that can be embodied by the human back. For

example, a fictional persons are partially constituted, without their awareness, by their status as a real-world narrative device, much as they are partially constituted by a back they cannot see. Likewise, they are viewed non-reciprocally by extradiegetic figures – like authors, narrators, or readers – much as they can be viewed non-reciprocally as a consequence of their unseeing backs. It is conceivable, thus, if narratological asymmetry is embodied through their backs, that approximation to effacing the asymmetry between their fronts and backs would be associated with effacing the asymmetry between themselves and the author or reader. For example, if the reader's view of a character is embodied within the text as viewing them from behind, then the character's being able to see what is behind them – of approximating a state of backless-ness – might align with obtaining the reader's view of them. In *Dombey and Son*, a few characters approach this condition: for example, Edith, who seems to enjoy it all along, and Dombey and Carker, who come to enjoy it – or rather, to endure it – over the course and as a result of the plot's structural reversals.

Until they run away together, Carker wields considerable power over Edith and seems to know everything there is to know about her, as if he were her reader and she were a character. But Edith is fully aware of his power and as if even of this fictional status, which is explicitly suggested by the text. She harbors from the start of their acquaintance a “conviction that he read her life as though it were a vile book, and fluttered the leaves before her in slight looks and tones of voice which no one else could detect” (483). Furthermore, consistent with the pattern I have discussed, Carker's figuratively narratological advantage is compared to a physical pursuit. “Upon the dangerous way that [Edith] was going, he was still; and not a footprint did she mark upon it, but he set his own there straight” (596). Edith's awareness of his power is instantiated in parallel, and not even figuratively but literally: she is capable of deducing what Carker does

behind her actual back. Their first encounter is in the scene I referred to in Part One, when Carker intercepts Good Mrs. Brown's demand, among the trees, that Edith pay her to share – and then *not* to share – knowledge of Edith's future. But their formal introduction occurs a few minutes later through Mr. Dombey, and immediately, she knows more than has frontally met her physical eye. "As her eye rested on [Carker] for an instant, ...he saw in its bright and searching glance a suspicion that he had not come up at the moment of his interference [among the trees], but had secretly observed her sooner. As he saw that, she saw in *his* eye that her distrust was not without foundation" (356, emphasis in text). Carker's "reading" of Edith's mind is isomorphic with his physical perception of her gaze, but Edith is able to perceive from his present gaze a previous gaze that occurred *outside her periphery*.⁷

Indeed, unlike Carker's back, Edith's back is never represented as unknowing. When she exits the final, explosive dinner with her husband right before her abandonment of him, she makes sure not to allow him to see her back without her knowledge: "Without a word, without a shadow on the fire of her bright eye, without abatement of her awful smile, she looked on Mr. Dombey to the last, in moving to the door, and left him" (610). And whether it is a coincidence or not, it is striking that the illustration accompanying the earlier scene I discussed in Part Two – the "confidential" conversation between Carker and Dombey, with the Edith-like portrait hanging behind Dombey's back – suggests this physical invulnerability.

⁷ In my chapter on *Persuasion*, I discuss Anne Elliott's similar but less mysterious deduction at the concert scene: she understands from Captain Wentworth's expression that her father and sister, standing behind her, have greeted him politely.

Figure 2. “Mr. Dombey and his ‘confidential agent’” (587)



The portrait makes visible her face and her back at once, and with her gaze fixed on the viewer, suggests the approximate impossibility of the viewer seeing her back without her knowledge.

Likewise, the actual Edith challenges the reader to see some part of herself that she cannot see herself. The only such “part” would be, in the portrait-Edith’s case, her status as painted, and in the character-Edith’s case, her status as written. But perhaps character-Edith’s blindness to this

status seems somewhat subverted or balanced by the way she goes behind the reader's back in plotting her betrayal of Carker, which surprises us no less than him.

Hanging behind the unwitting Dombey, who is always portrayed with much that is unavailable to him and nothing that is unavailable to us, the Edith-like portrait brings into relief his back-vulnerability. In parallel, character-Edith, by never letting him see her back and by figuratively backstabbing him, does the same in the world outside the painting. Indeed, Edith underscores the back vulnerability and susceptibility to backstabbing not only of Dombey but also of Rob the Grinder and Carker, all three of whom have backs that are the unknowing objects of others' gazes and all of whom are betrayed. Edith, in contrast to them, is never viewed without her knowledge, and with her back thus invulnerable, she neither can be nor is ever betrayed herself. She is thus an exceptional figure in the novel and one who proves the rule's consistency: interpersonal and narratological invulnerability align with a subversion of the asymmetry between front and back, and vulnerability to betrayal and the ironic gaze of the reader align with the asymmetrically greater vulnerability of the back relative to the front.

Edith's gaze thus always seems to approximate symmetry with the gaze of the reader, but Carker and Dombey's gazes become able to do so over the course of the novel and, also, as if as a consequence of the backward-facing structures of vengeance and regret, respectively. In Carker's case, the vengeance for his betrayals provokes his self-awareness partly by itself invoking the act of betrayal. Indeed, Carker's change from powerful to powerless is also a change from betrayer to betrayed:

Figure 3. Power and Betrayal in *Dombey and Son*⁸

In the backstory, before the discourse of the novel begins with reference to Paul Dombey's birth, Carker has already betrayed Alice. As the novel progresses, Carker comes to betray Dombey. Then comes the reversal in Carker's position, in which his previous position as backstabber becomes the position of backstabbed – Edith turns out to have been fooling him into thinking she had romantic interest in him, and Rob the Grinder gives away his location, against orders.

	Backstabber	-->Backstabbed
Backstory	Carker	-->Alice

Rising Action	Carker	-->Dombey
-----[reversal]-----		
Climax	Edith	--> Carker

Falling Action	Rob the Grinder--> Carker	

Part of the sophistication of this reversal, or revenge, is that neither of the victims of Carker's backstabbing are the ones to backstab him in return. This structure evokes the physical impossibility of two people simultaneously stabbing each other in the back in a literal sense, the way they might be able, by contrast, to stab each other simultaneously in the front. A literal stab in the back performed by a person who is backstabbed would be delayed – an act inherently of revenge – and would require an intermediary. This physical problem is evoked by the novel in Alice and Dombey's revenge on Carker relying not only on intermediaries (Edith, Rob, and the train), but on specifically, as we saw, the backs of those intermediaries and of Carker. Rob picks

⁸ This diagram focuses specifically on Carker's power reversal and therefore does not include every betrayal – for example, Alice and Good Mrs. Brown's betrayal of Rob and Edith's betrayal of Dombey.

up the word “D.I.J.O.N.” behind Edith’s back, Dombey reads the word from behind Rob’s back, and the train gets Carker from behind. In other words, Alice and Dombey do backstab in the process of their revenge, and this backstabbing not only involves the literal back but also requires delay and intermediaries the way that a literal stabbing of Carker in the back would require if *his* betrayal took the form of a literal stabbing in the back.

Carker’s reversal from betrayer to betrayed can be perceived as a kind of structural chiasm, and this view is encouraged by Edith’s syntax during the “tremendous”⁹ scene in the French hotel room, where Edith reveals that she has no intention of being Carker’s lover as she has led him to believe: ““You have been betrayed, as all betrayers are”” (704).¹⁰ In the two-faced structure of Edith’s exclamation, the two conjugations of “to be” (“have been” and “are”) appear before and after the nearly back-to-back forms of “betray.” Aptly, this chiastic structure appears alongside her announcement that Dombey is in France too, and intent on vengeance. ““Lastly, take my warning! Look to yourself!’ she said, and smiled again. ‘You have been betrayed, as all betrayers are. It has been made known that you are in this place, or were to be, or have been. If I live, I saw my husband in a carriage in the street tonight!’” (704). In its internal x-y/y-x mirroring, inherent to the reflexive structure of chiasmus, Edith’s syntax in the

⁹ That is the descriptor Dickens had in mind. His original plan was to make Edith the mistress of Carker, but three weeks before the number went to press, he decided to have her betray him instead, at least partially because his friend Lord Jeffrey found the love affair implausible. Dickens wrote in a letter to John Forster, “Note from Jeffrey this morning who won’t believe (positively refuses) that Edith is Carker’s mistress. What do you think of a kind of inverted Maid’s Tragedy, and a tremendous scene of her undeceiving Carker, and giving him to know that she never meant that?” 21 December 1847, Quoted in *Dickens at Work*, eds. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson (London: Routledge, 2013), 109.

¹⁰ The context of this sentence (which I quote later in this paragraph) suggests that Edith is referring not to her own betrayal but to the betrayal of their location by someone close to Carker (she does not know who). This is not relevant to my argument about the sentence, which is focused purely on Carker and his change of status in these chapters and not on those who orchestrate it – not, in other words, on Edith’s specificity as the source of this sentence.

“betrayed/betrayer” sentence grammatically mimics her imperative that Carker self-reflect and “Look to [him]self!” Indeed, the lines imply multiple kinds of reflection. The betrayal he now faces reflects his own betrayals. And this mental self-reflection joins a physical one, both in our world, where the ink doubles the word “betray,” and in the fictional world, where the “Look to yourself!” imperative is juxtaposed with the warning about Dombey at his heels: Carker had better look back at himself, literally – he’d better watch his back. We thus encounter a physically embodied version of a new narratological symmetry whereby Carker is called, like the reader, to look at Carker from all directions.

Syntactic chiasmus appears throughout these final chapters, where it repeatedly implicates a symmetry between character and reader perspective in conjunction with the type of reversal most prevalent in the novel once the betrayals and vengeance have passed: relenting. The most foregrounded regret, of course, is that of Dombey for his daughter. It signifies the completion of the plot’s primary arc, as his signature arrogance is at last subdued. “But that which he might have made so different in all the past – which might have made the past itself so different... -- ...that was the sharp grief of his soul” (771). In the chiastic sequence “different, past, past, different,” the second two words duplicate and reverse the first, as if correcting them the way Dombey wishes he could correct the past. The symmetry, indeed, suggests a balance that imitates the balancing of scales inherent in the pain of Dombey’s regret. And this symmetry between crime and punishment is parallel to the symmetry between Dombey’s real and self-image – what he sees of himself, now, is balanced with what he really is. In this sense, Dombey views himself closer than before to the way the reader sees him, effacing the previous irony of his position.

But the chiasmus that governs the regret's articulation, specifically, also brings reader and character closer together by helping to reify Dombey's remembering. An act of retrospection is performed by the reader too, who is practically forced, by the second pair of words, to remember the first. Further, just as Dombey sees the past version of his actions in figurative reverse – as the opposite of how he saw them before (as wrong instead of right) – so too does the reader's look backward involve remembering the present words ("past... different") in reverse ("different... past"). By a multitude of means, in other words, the chiasmus brings Dombey's fictional retrospection into the real world, helping to efface the asymmetry and shorten the distance between fictional character and real reader.

The chapter of Dombey's correct and complete self-seeing further suggests his symmetry with the reader by the direct suggestion of his access to the words of the narrator. Not long before the chiasmus, we encounter a paragraph that is verbatim quoted from an earlier chapter. The only difference is that in the earlier version, Dombey had no access to it, and that in this one, it is subtly suggested that he does. When younger Florence approaches her father in Chapter 18 for comfort upon her brother's death, Dombey cruelly rejects her and she lets out "one prolonged low cry," immediately upon which the narrator speaks, as it were, *to* Dombey's deaf ears: "Let him remember it in that room, years to come! ... Let him remember it in that room, years to come!" (240). The lines are the first and last sentences of a paragraph, and they are repeated at the beginning and end of a different paragraph below. That second paragraph is repeated verbatim in the chapter of self-reflection I have been discussing, along with repetitions of the first and last sentences ("Let him remember...") throughout the chapter. This time, though, these latter sentences are interspersed among and sometimes immediately followed by the just as frequently repeated line, "He did remember it" (771). Dombey thus seems to hear the narrator's

words now in a way that he did not before. As if in a literal rendition of René Girard's theory of the classic novel, Dombey is a protagonist who becomes capable of reading the novel he is in.

Dombey, insofar as he regrets the past, is like almost every other character in the novel who is guilty of some wrong-doing. One of the few exceptions is Edith, who seems perpetually to enjoy symmetry between herself and her self-image just as she seems to enjoy, as we have seen, symmetrical visual access to what is behind and ahead of her. This visual access is also aligned, as her lack of regret would suggest, with a perpetual symmetry between her access the past and her access to the future. When Good Mrs. Brown, among the trees, threatens to call out Edith's future from behind her back, the older woman aligns the typical unknowability of the future with the un-seeability of the back.¹¹ But Edith, in reply to "I'll tell your fortune true," confidently declares, "with a proud step," "I know [it]. ... 'I knew it before'" (354). She thus continues the pattern of access to the back equating to narratological advantage – an approximate transcendence of the typical asymmetry between a character who never yet knows their future and an author and reader who have perpetual access to it.

¹¹ This alignment is literalized throughout Dickens. Pancks introduces himself to Little Dorrit as a fortune-teller, asking to see the palm of her hand and tracing out the lines, identifying each as signifying one of her relatives. He then pretends to see himself in the corner of the palm and asks "What do I want here? What's behind me?" He carried his finger slowly down to the wrist, and round the wrist, and affected to look at the back of her hand for what was behind him" (307). He tells her she will discover the "worth" of what is there in time – "I haven't told you so much of your fortune yet, Miss Dorrit, as to tell you what's behind me on that little hand" (308). He thus aligns the back of her hand – and the back of himself – to that part of her future which is unavailable to her knowledge. Later, in Chapter 34, titled "What was behind Mr. Pancks on Little Dorrit's Hand," it is revealed to her (notably, not by Mr. Pancks) that, due to events that transpired before her birth, she is owed a large literal fortune. The fortune, literal and figurative, brings literal and figurative "accounts" into balance – Little Dorrit is given the money she is owed, and her associated backstory is now recounted and "accounted" for as much as the present story. The fortune likewise brings, figuratively, symmetry of visibility between the back and the front of Mr. Pancks and of Little Dorrit's hand. Of course, Mr. Pancks refers to the back of her *hand*, not the back of her body. But the "back" of the hand gets its name as an extension of the human body's "back" – namely, as I discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, to the fact that it is, to use Keith Allan's designation, opposite the #interactive-side#. In any case, Little Dorrit's back is solidly evoked by the association with Pancks's back, which is just as unavailable to her, when he speaks, as her own – and just as unavailable as the fortune that will balance everything.

Carker crystallizes the pattern definitively in the chapter of his fleeing and death. The loss of his power provokes a consciousness of his back surface that aligns with an awareness of his life that approximates the reader or author's awareness of it. The structural plot reversal by which he turns from betrayer to betrayed, for example, is experienced by Carker as a literal, spatial turn. Immediately upon the backfiring of his plan, in France, he decides to flee by moving not onward to Italy but instead backward to England. And the novel suggests explicitly that the choice is provoked by the reversal of his plot: "...perhaps some sympathy of action with the turning back of all his schemes – impelled him to turn back too, and go to England" (708). Carker aligns his body, in other words, with the structural turn in the narrative, making one act the metaphor of the other.¹²

Indeed, one of the symptoms of Carker's distress in this chapter is an inability to distinguish between the sources and targets of metaphors. "It was a fevered vision of things past and present all confounded together; of his life and journey blended into one" (713). Lakoff and Johnson have called LIFE IS A JOURNEY a universal metaphor,¹³ and as I put forth in the introduction to this dissertation, literalizations of metaphor in literature, especially when those

¹² Carker's defeat becomes a part of his body, much like his cowardice: "He could have laid hands upon himself for his cowardice, but it was the very shadow of his defeat, and could not be separated from it." We receive a different model of the pursued criminal in *Oliver Twist*, during and after Dickens's favorite scene in it – Bill Sikes's gruesome murder of the innocent prostitute Nancy. Whereas Carker's back registers his cowardice, Sikes's back registers his guilt – the immediate "shadow" of his crime. As he prepares for his escape from the apartment: "All this time he had never once turned his back upon the corpse; no, not for a moment. [The] preparations completed, he moved, backward, towards the door..." (424). The anguish begins once he is on the run – on the run, that is, from his own back, since no one else is aware of his crime. "At times he turned, with desperate determination, resolved to beat this phantom off, though it should look him dead; but the hair rose on his head, and his blood stood still, for it had turned with him and was behind him then. He had kept it before him that morning, but it was behind now – always" (428). *Oliver Twist* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

¹³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980). I have borrowed their practice of putting general conceptual metaphors in capital letters to indicate that I am conceiving of them the same way they do.

metaphors are not verbally articulated,¹⁴ support the cognitive linguistic theory that metaphors are not just ways we speak about the world but indications of how we cognitively construe the world. The metaphor functions for Carker not simply as a linguistic phenomenon, but rather, like “backstabbing” or “getting back” do for the novel, as a conceptual one – and we know this because it is also, for him, a literalized one. Furthermore, as we see from the first clause in the sentence, it is one that blends with another universal metaphor: “TIME IS MOTION THROUGH SPACE.” “[P]ast and present all confounded together” because, as I will discuss, the space around Carker blends together as he blends the universal metaphors together.

Carker’s perception of time involves the confounding not only of “past and present” but also of both with the future, and his journey involves motions that are not only forward but also backward. Just as “the past, present, and future all floated confusedly before him, and he had lost all power of looking steadily at any one of them” (717), he likewise loses the power to look steadily in any one physical direction. His “constant apprehension of being overtaken” (712) lead to him repeatedly “looking back to see who followed” (713). At other times, he is “only intent on going fast – except when he stood up, for a mile together, and looked back; which he would do whenever there was a piece of open country” (712). And as in the scene with Edith and Good Mrs. Brown, the novel here too allies the future with what is behind. For example, at one point in the darkness, Carker hears noises behind his back and, in terror, demands that the

¹⁴ A few paragraphs earlier, we read, “[Dombey’s] fierce arrival...; the sound of his voice; their having been so near a meeting face to face; [Carker] would have braved out this.... But the springing of his mine upon himself seemed to have rent and shivered all his hardihood and self-reliance” (707). Dickens’s metaphor – the unraveling of Carker’s plan as the “springing of a mine upon himself” – manifests the source domain of the expression “backfire.” The figurative use of the English word “backfire” did not appear until the twentieth century, but along with the word’s absence from the text, this is what makes its exposition in the nineteenth century interesting. The association between the rebounding of a plan and the literal firing backward of a weapon, in the opposite direction from its target, existed and exists independently of the word. As I discuss elsewhere in this chapter and in the dissertation Introduction, the word appeared as the efficiently articulated version of a conceptualization that was long since deeply rooted in the thinking – the actual and, clearly, *embodied* cognition – of English speakers.

driver tell him their source. The driver replies that there is nothing there – “no, nothing but the day yonder” (710). The next day, in other words, is at Carker’s back.

Consistent with this alignment, Carker’s perpetual looks and turns backward seem to subvert the normative human inability to read the future. He constantly seems to foresee, for example, his death on the railroad. “Unable to rest, and irresistibly attracted – or he thought so – to this [rail]road, he went out and lounged on the brink of it, marking the way the train had gone, by the yet smoking cinders that were lying in its track. After a lounge in the direction by which it had disappeared, he turned and walked the other way – still keeping to the brink of the road...” (716). The interjection of “he thought so” after “irresistibly attracted” indicates Carker’s sense of himself as determined by some outside force that he is helpless in resisting – a force that compels him to walk towards the train tracks where, he seems to know, he will end up. It is a sense, as we read earlier, “Of being madly hurried somewhere, whither he must go” (713). Of course, as a character, Carker-the-device *is* predetermined – “irresistibly” compelled to go where the narrative will drive him. The interjection subtly suggests an awareness of this very helplessness – his approximation to understanding himself as a predetermined character.

Carker’s decision not to leave or even to stand still by the tracks but instead to “turn and walk” in the opposite direction is repeated immediately afterward, where it further associates the continual backward turns with a premonition of the future and a sense of its inevitability. After one train goes by, “He waited for another, and for another. He walked back to his former point, and back again to that, and still, through the wearisome vision of his journey, looked for these approaching monsters. ... To see the great wheels slowly turning, and to think of being run down and crushed!” (716). Of course, when the heavily foreshadowed moment arrives – detailed in the passage I quoted at length in Part Two – the back-and-forth continues, as Carker paces “to

and fro” on the platform, from one end back to another. At last, literally the last three things Carker does before he dies are “turn around” to see Dombey, “step back” onto the tracks, and, in one final movement, “look round” at the train, which even in those final seconds, continues to creep up behind him from the future.

The “great wheels” of “these approaching monsters,” both their turning motion and, as I will eventually discuss, the trains to which they belong, are themselves allied with the association between premonition and the turns of Carker’s body as he looks and walks back and forth. We read earlier that in Carker’s mind, “...the monotonous wheel of fear, regret, and passion, he kept turning round and round, made the journey like a vision...” (712). The time frames of future (“fear”) and past (“regret”) keep turning the way Carker’s body and the train’s wheels do. Since front and back are correlated with time frames, whether past and future or anteriority and posteriority, and since what is ahead of and what is behind Carker’s body in space constantly trade places with his repeated turns, so do his gazes on the past and the future constantly trade places, his access to the former becoming balanced by an uncanny access to the latter. “It was constantly before him all at once” (715), we read, and the condition describes our own reading of it, in that it is all before us at once too, something made possible by the fact that it has all occurred *before* us, in the past. Indeed, existing outside the book, we have access to Carker’s past and future all at once – for us, they are simply relatively anterior and posterior events in a sequence from which we are unbound. In experiencing his life this way, Carker experiences it the way the reader does, thus effacing the asymmetry between the two narratological planes. Indeed, the reversal of his plot and the reversals of his body correct the asymmetry I discussed in Part One, when, while he was on horseback, Mrs. Brown spoke about him behind his back and the reader watched him too. There, he was blind to his vulnerability, to

his future, and to what was literally behind him. Now, there is no more asymmetry in his vision, and asymmetry between him and the reader is likewise minimized.

The turning “round and round” of time is, significantly, mimicked by Carker’s body *during* his death as well, which is looked forward to by the mention, here, of the “monotonous wheels” of the time frames in his mind. These mental wheels foreshadow those final wheels, which are described while killing him as “a jagged mill, that spun him round and round, and struck him limb from limb” (718). As with the chiasmus of Dombey’s regret for a different past, the reader is invited by the word-pairs here to retrospect – to look backward in time (to the previous word) the way Dombey and Carker also look backward in time. But unlike Dombey, Carker looks back not only temporally but spatially, and the reader, in being invited by the word repetition to do the same, is thus invited also to embody Carker. Even if the reader chooses not to look again, physically, at the first of the two words, she still reads – because the words are the same – what she *would* read if she looked backward. No matter what, in other words, she embodies Carker’s condition: the condition of seeing what is behind. The typical asymmetry between the immateriality of Carker’s fictional body and the materiality of the reader’s living, physical body is thus effaced.

The double word pattern is associated with the simultaneous visibility of past and future in still another way. The word-pairs, in the context of these wheels, are foretold earlier and also from the back, when this particular “jagged mill” wheel is still in the future and Carker is in the carriage in France: “Again and again he listened for the sound of wheels behind. Again and again his fancy heard it, coming on louder and louder” (710). “Round and round,” “limb from limb,” “louder and louder” – again and again, Carker, like the reader as she encounters the second word in each pair, is compelled to look at what is behind, and again and again, this

necessarily places it ahead. The figure of Carker thus reaches for an effacement of the asymmetry between real reader and fictional character always in crucial conjunction with the approximately effaced asymmetry between forward and backward directions, and between anteriority and posteriority – a veritable state of narratological, spatial, and temporal “backlessness,” aptly represented as much by the spineless, cowardly Carker as by the repeated image of the wheel, whose circular shape equates, in the geometrical sense, to an absence of *sides*.¹⁵

*

Of course, a future that is visible is inevitable, and the future’s visibility to Carker, allied with the continual coming-into-visibility of what is behind him, impresses upon him, as I have already shown, his ontological state of being narratively predetermined by the author. This predetermination is embodied not only by Carker’s back but by that back’s relationship with the train – the train that determines, by the grace of the author, his final fate.

Its relation to inevitability is a major part of the narrative importance of the railway, which forms the novel’s most dominant object symbol. Railways began to be conceived and constructed not long before the time of Dickens’s writing, and they are described thoroughly in multiple chapters. Though Dickens addresses at length their short-term destructive effect on areas of London and on the way that riding a train blurs the visual perception of space, he also meditates thoroughly on the railway’s effect on time, which was standardized throughout London

¹⁵ We might remember here that in Hardy, also, circles are evoked as an alternative to the vulnerability of the back: Henchard, after getting caught in the grip of his backstory, spends the final days of his life walking in a circular orbit around Casterbridge; Tess, similarly haunted by her back and backstory, chooses the circular Stonehenge as her final destination; and in that same novel, Car Darch, laughed at for the treacle running down her back, lies down on the ground and starts spinning in circles. Of course, the ultimate impossibility of backlessness within the diegesis – of effacing the asymmetry between the back and front of the character’s imagined body, or his past and future, or the character and author – is embodied by Jude, spun in a circle while repeatedly struck on his backside.

to help predict the arrivals of trains. Indeed, the departures, arrivals, and routes of trains are predetermined much like Carker's fate, and the tracks upon which they run – “the allotted corners grooved out to the inch for their reception” (205) – in equal measure show where the train has been (anteriority) and designate where the train is going (posteriority).

The materialization of narrative inevitability in the form of railway scheduling appears in the patterned appearance of the word “tracks” through the novel. We read, when Carker is in France, that when he is “standing in the carriage, looking back, he could discern the track by which he had come, and see that there was no traveler within view on all the heavy expanse” (712). This look backward looks forward to his gaze, when he is back in England and “irresistibly” visiting the railroad, on the “smoking cinders that were lying in [the train's] track” (716). Of course, this look at the back of the train looks ahead to when, in the final lines of the chapter, he looks back round at the head of the train and dies. The connection between the inevitability of train tracks and that of the narrative is materialized in the description Rob's inscription of the word “D.I.J.O.N.” Though already quoted in Part Two, here it is once more: “As [Rob] bent his head down, the person for whose information he so unconsciously labored, moved from the door behind him to within a short stride of his shoulder, and looked eagerly towards *the creeping track* of his hand upon the table” (680, emphasis added). The word “D.I.J.O.N.” as it gets written – both in the diegetic world and in our real one – presents a material, creeping track for the *train* of events that will kill Carker. Its meaning refers both to the place where Carker has gone and to where Dombey will go “after” him, and its physical characters are part of the material text in our world – already written *in the past* and determining *in advance* the movements in and of every place and person.

From the extradiegetic perspective, what “occurs” or “changes” in any novel is merely

the extent to which predetermined occurrences or changes becoming definitively known. This narratological rule of reading is absorbed into this diegesis. Carker seems to move from powerful to subordinate, for example, but as I discussed in Part One, he has in fact always been subject to Good Mrs. Brown's background power. His powerlessness, like his ontology as a viewed, predetermined character, has always been helping to constitute him; he has simply not known it. Carker's so-called reversal is more precisely a revelation of what was always there, and indeed, this is characteristic of reversal in Dickens more generally,¹⁶ and why front/back is such an appropriate philosophic ground for it in his oeuvre. A reversal between front and back is not a change in the object – the object does not, for example, open (this is why inside/outside is not as apt a metaphor). Rather, it is a change in the perspective upon the object. What is revealed is a “back” in the sense that it was always there, *constituting* the object, *available* and yet, for a time, *out of view*. The reversals are reveals of backs – fictional facts and subjects being rotated, like the real-world pages we turn from front to back to gain access to the facts and subjects in the first place.

Since the back provides such an appropriate ground for considering narratological structures, it is no wonder that its literal presence can often present such an effective embodiment of those structures within the fictional worlds that are shaped by them. The authorial power of the written word “D.I.J.O.N.,” as I argued in Part Two, is supplied not by its double existence in the real and fictional worlds, written by Rob imitating the action of the writer Dickens, but by the back. And as I have discussed in Part Three, the word's efficacy in minimizing the asymmetry

¹⁶ We see this in this novel's central narrative arc, for example. Dombey goes from cold to loving towards Florence. But it was so important to Dickens's vision that reversal be mere revelation that in his prefaces to the novel, the single comment he cares to make about the novel's content is one whose only purpose is to undercut this central change as such: “Mr. Dombey undergoes no violent internal change, whether in this book, or in life. A sense of his injustice is within him all along” (3).

between Carker's diegetic and narratological statuses is also supplied by the back. Ever the portal between the two realms, the back works to take the real into the fictional and bring the fictional into the real. Put differently, the back is crucial in helping the characters of Dickens appear to move beyond realism – a mere resemblance to reality – into reality itself.

Chapter 3

Turning Back in *Great Expectations*

“Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*

When young Pip returns from his first, transformative visit to Satis House, he tells his inquisitive sister and Uncle Pumblechook none of the details. Instead, he concocts an outrageous tale about Miss Havisham sitting in a black velvet coach while having cake and wine on a gold plate, four large dogs fighting for veal-cutlets out of a silver basket, and he, Miss Havisham, and Estella all playing with flags and swords. “I was perfectly frantic – a reckless witness under the torture – and would have told them anything.”¹ Though it remains unclear why Pip chooses not to elaborate upon the reality but instead to fabricate fiction (he later calls the choice “a case of metaphysics” [59]), it is plainly associated with the foregoing physical abuse. “When I reached home ... I soon found myself getting heavily bumped from behind in the nape of the neck and the small of the back... because I did not answer those questions at sufficient length” (55). If the abuse provokes the impulse to produce fiction, it may do so by exploiting the vulnerability of his back surface. In attacking specifically those parts of his body which are unavailable to his sight, and in determining his body as an object thus detached from his willing mind (“*I found myself getting bumped*”), it may incite the determination to reassert autonomy – knowledge and control – by the creation of a secondary world, a mastered world, contained in his imagination and

1 Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London: Wordsworth Editions), p. 57.

guarded on every side.

This scene, in which an assault on the back inspires the telling of a tale, captures in miniature part of the argument of this chapter, which will explain what drives the grown Pip to write his autobiography. This explanation, in turn, will help elucidate how an improbable plot nonetheless produces the keenly felt sense of its protagonist's aliveness.

In *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Peter Brooks directs our attention to the adolescent Rousseau in *Confessions* producing fiction in the context of a vulnerable body. Brooks recounts how Young Rousseau

seeks dark alleyways where he can expose himself to women "in the state in which I would have wished to be in their company. What they saw was not the obscene object...; it was the ridiculous object" (89). The passage... suggests that it is the backside rather than penis that he exposes..... ... [One] day, he exposes himself in a courtyard where serving girls come to draw water from the well.... Although he offers what he describes as 'a spectacle more laughable than seductive,' some of the girls are offended, and call for a man. Rousseau retreats into the labyrinthine cellars. He is pursued ... and is brought up short by a blank wall. The man ... seizes him and demands an explanation. Thus pushed to the wall, Rousseau has recourse to what he calls "un expédient romanesque": a novelistic invention, a fiction. He recounts that he is a young foreigner of high birth whose mind is deranged, that he has escaped from his father's house because he was going to be locked up, that he will be done for if his identity is made known, and that he can perhaps some day reward an act of grace. ...

Rousseau's exposure of the erotically marked part of his body is here directly linked to the capacity (and the necessity) to create fictions, to tell stories about his life as it might have been.²

In the latter paragraph, Brooks locates the source of Rousseau's tale-telling in his sexuality.

Indeed, *Body Work*, the seminal work of narrative theory centered on the human body, conceives of that body almost solely in terms of desire. But since the "spectacle" that Brooks identifies as sexual is one that Rousseau unambiguously describes as "more laughable than seductive," and since the exposed body part is explicitly "ridiculous" and not "obscene," it would seem that the

2 From Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 41. Brooks quotes from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les confessions; Autres textes autobiographiques* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1962).

“direct link” from the backside to the story-telling cannot be found in the erotic. What or where, then, is the real link? For an answer, we ought probably to consider not only the moment of exposure but every act committed or undergone by Rousseau’s backside in the episode. Specifically, we must not overlook the event that transpires in between the exposure and the story-telling: the pursuit of Rousseau by “the man.”

The most recurring physical configuration in the final chapters of Dickens’s novels is the pursuit. The pursuer is not always an antagonist, though they may seem like one to the pursued (Mr. Bucket’s pursuit of Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*, for example). But whoever the chaser and whomever the chased, the back of the latter’s body becomes vulnerable to the gaze of a viewer who is not likewise viewable. This is what happens to Rousseau’s backside, as it changes from deliberately exposed to unwantedly pursued. Even if we grant, against the text’s grain, that the initial exposure is sexual, it is still not the immediate antecedent to the story-telling. The catalyst to young Rousseau’s narrative discourse is a transformation of his back that is not sexual but phenomenological – a change from self-controlled to vulnerable, from suggesting the visible, desirable objects of his gaze (the girls), to becoming itself an object of the non-visible, undesirable gaze of his pursuer. The recourse to narration, then, is the escape to a world where there is nothing unseen, nothing out of view for a narrator who tells all that is told.

What drives Pip to write his autobiography is a question to which the narrator himself offers no explicit answer. Though presumably narrator-Pip does not invent the story he tells, any act of narration involves the production of a secondary world, and is therein an act of authorship. This chapter will locate in Pip’s body his motivation to produce such a world. For nostalgia, commemoration, expiation: none of the usual motives explicitly apply to this tale written by a detached man of whose current status – age, location, marital status – we know nothing.

Indeed, who is Philip Pirrip? The difficulty of the question rests in its tense, for his autobiography tells us only who he was. Unlike *David Copperfield*'s, which shifts frequently among temporalities and ends finally in a present tense that indicates the moment of writing, Pip's ends where it has always been: steadfastly in the past. For all the commotion surrounding the original and revised endings of *Great Expectations* – which is the more effective? plausible? authentic? – neither, in some sense, is an ending at all. Without a present-tense conclusion, how are we to know that a few months after the terse London encounter with Estella in the original ending, Pip didn't run into her once more, never to part again? And when Pip confesses, in the final words of the more sentimental, revised ending, "I saw no shadow of another parting from her," how do we know he saw correctly?

In this chapter, Pip's eventual faceless-ness – by which I mean (because the text will be shown also to mean) the absence of any present identity save that of story-teller – will be shown as crucially tied to what the novel suggests is a corresponding backless-ness – the absence of vulnerability in the narrator. The presentation of that tie will provide a foundation for the argument that Pip's motivation to narrate his story is underpinned by the troubled relationship that story produces between him and his back. As we will see, the protagonist of *Great Expectations* persistently experiences the conjoining of physiological and narratological conditions. And the written narrative is the completion of a narratological reversal that begins within that narrative and that copes with his physical experience.

We will keep in mind, throughout this argument, that the narrative is a recreation of past events at the same time that it is itself an event subsequent to those events. I will use the terms "diegesis" and "tale" (as distinct from "telling") unusually in this chapter. They will refer to the series of events that ends in Pip's encounter with Estella in the final scene he depicts as a

narrator. The terms will not, in other words, describe the entire fictional world separate from ours: they will not include the current world of narrator-Pip. Thus “diegesis” will usually mean the narrated world as even narrator-Pip experiences it. When it does not, I hope that context will make its usage clear.

The relation I will discuss between narrative structure and the body will in turn suggest an explanation for how a story that so many readers have found to be so improbable nonetheless feels, to many others, so real.³ I will argue that the somatization of the structure, arrangement, and design of all the strange facts, events, and details bring to the narrative an aliveness that engages our own in such fundamental, universal ways – through the morphology of our bodies as they absorb the novel – that it cannot but absorb, in return, our own reality.

Part One – Authorship

In doubling as both narrator and character, the figure of Pip is an internally split and asymmetrical one. Narrator-Pip possesses every piece of relevant narrative information, while Character-Pip’s knowledge is, even at its fullest, limited at least by an ignorance to his status as a character in his future self’s written narrative. Likewise, Narrator-Pip either speaks or selects every utterance in the novel, while Character-Pip never speaks – he can only have spoken in the

3 Henry Crabb Robinson wrote in 1861, “...at the best there is an untruth and improbability in all the incidents and characters that destroys it entirely as a novel” (*Diaries*, July to August 1861; in *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, ed. Edith J. Morley, 3 vols. [London: J.M. Dent, 1938], vol. 2, 802-3). By contrast, Christopher Ricks writes, “[T]he love of Pip and Magwitch ... is made compellingly real; the whole novel is perhaps Dickens’s most straightforwardly realistic” (“*Great Expectations*,” *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson [Routledge: London, 1962], 187-211, excerpted in Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Edgar Rosenberg [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999], 673). F.R. and Q.D. Leavis put the “problem” best: “... [Dickens] has at last, in *Great Expectations*, managed to reconcile realism and symbolism so that in this novel we move without protest, or uneasiness even, from the ‘real’ world of everyday experience in the non-rational life of the guilty conscience or spiritual experience, outside time and place and with its own logic: somehow we are inhibited from applying the rules of common sense to it even where we hardly recognize that it is symbolic action and can not possibly be plausible real life” (*Dickens the Novelist* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1979], 289).

past, and those words are only heard when they are permitted to be by Narrator-Pip. Indeed, Narrator-Pip has full command over the text, making every verbal decision – what to include or exclude, what to quote directly or indirectly, what events to condense or expand, what to narrate and what to describe. The contrast between these positions is dramatized within the diegesis in the first two-thirds of *Great Expectations*, the inequality made stark in the continual enforcement of ignorance and silence upon Pip by those around him. The very sister who “ask[s] a number of questions” the moment Pip returns from Satis House repeatedly admonishes him for seeking information: ““Drat that boy... what a questioner he is. Ask no questions, and you’ll be told no lies””; “That’s the way with this boy! Answer him one question, and he’ll ask you a dozen directly””; “People [who] are put in the Hulks... always begin by asking questions” (13).

The blindness is coupled with muteness. The narrative, whose first sentence describes the limitations of an infant tongue able to “make of [two] names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip,” contains multiple forces, some of them within Pip himself, that silence him. His reasonable fear of the police keeps him from answering their inquiry into whether anyone has seen the convicts (“Everybody, myself excepted, said no, with confidence”), but even the novel’s most benign figure keeps Pip from speaking of his encounter with the convicts: “The fear of losing Joe’s confidence, and of thenceforth sitting in the chimney corner at night staring drearily at my for ever lost companion and friend, tied up my tongue” (34).

Likewise, in multiple dialogues throughout the first half of the novel, Pip’s speech is miniscule in proportion to that of his interlocutors. As late as his first conversation with Herbert in London and then during his first visit to the Pockets’ in chapters 22 and 23, other characters deliver narratives of their histories and backgrounds with slight replies from Pip. It continues a pattern that begins when Joe and Pip discuss Joe’s upbringing, and Pip’s responses, scattered

over pages amid large paragraphs of Joe's speech, never exceed a single line. "Are you, Joe?"; "Yes, Joe"; "Certainly, poor Joe!" (38-41).

Furthermore, his tendency towards self-censorship ("I didn't see; but I didn't say so" [39]) is adopted by his future, narrator-self, who represents both small and long utterances in past tense indirect speech, muffling their original sound ("I saw that, and said so" [39]). The pattern of brief replies continues during his first visit to Miss Havisham's, where, not allowed to hear Pip's dialect, we are compelled instead to infer it from Estella's comments: "He calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy!" (51).⁴ Indeed, in the first half of the novel, narrator-Pip hardly ever quotes the barely-speaking character-Pip. This stark contrast between a narrator who speaks fluently and frequently, and a character who speaks little both within his world and in the fabric of the text, dramatizes the relative speaking power belonging to these disparate narratological positions.

A fictional character's prohibitions from knowing and speaking as much as a narrator are brought together in Pip's experience most evidently in the conditions of his Expectations. His sister's admonitions about asking questions prefigure those of Mr. Jaggers when he arrives to give Pip the transformative news about his change in fortune. The minimal information he offers stands in contrast to his extraordinary emphasis on the stipulation that Pip is to know nothing about and say nothing regarding the source of his fortune.

4 We are also surprised at his dialect, which we otherwise never directly encounter, in the note he scrawls to Joe as he practices his writing ("...I opE I shAl soN B haBeLL 4 2 teeDge U JO..." [37]). Offering a copy of this letter may seem like a highly permissive gesture on the part of narrator-Pip, allowing character-Pip substantial speaking power. But other than the affection Pip feels for Joe, the epistle communicates no narrative information but that Pip lacks this narrator's ability to write. The display of orthographical errors and disordered capitalization works to marginalize young Pip, widening the distance that I am arguing is produced between the authoritative narrator and subjugated character, and justifying all the other instances of censorship. The distance is emphasized by the subsequent commentary on the note: "...I delivered this written communication (slate and all) with my own hand, and Joe received it as *a miracle of erudition*" (37, emphasis added). The final phrase is ironic not least because of the erudite nature of the word "erudition" – a word inaccessible to young Pip.

Now you are to understand, secondly, Mr. Pip, that the name of the person who is your liberal benefactor remains a profound secret, until the person chooses to reveal it. ... Now, you are distinctly to understand that you are most positively prohibited from making any inquiry on this head, or any allusion or reference, however distant, to any individual whomsoever as the individual in all the communications you may have with me. ... That is not for you to inquire into. ...[T]he secret is solely held by that person and by me. (117-118)

Jaggers assumes in these moments a position akin to Narrator: in possession of knowledge that is determining Pip's entire existence and that leaves Pip himself in ignorance of it; an intermediary between an authorial source of action (Magwitch) and its subject; and knowing and communicating, yet not apparently affecting, the substance of what he communicates. Jaggers's status as a narratological analogue seems hinted at by the capitalization of "Great Expectations" when he first announces them, as if he is aware of the novel he and Pip are in.

His unusual combination of omniscience and impotence is made immediately plain on his first arrival. "The strange gentleman, with an air of authority not to be disputed, and with a manner expressive of knowing something secret about every one of us" (115), introduces himself with the immediate disclaimer, "I have unusual business to transact with you, and I commence by explaining that it is not of my originating. If my advice had been asked, I should not have been here. It was not asked, and you see me here. What I have to do as the confidential agent of another, I do. No less, no more" (116). In this description of a position analogous to that of a narrator, he positions and references Magwitch's role as the author. Indeed, in the peculiar division of labor, the secrecy, the intimacy, the asymmetry, and the near but not complete isometry⁵ between Jaggers and Magwitch in this scene, we seem to encounter an embodiment of

5 It is striking that at one point when Pip hopefully expects that Mr. Jaggers is about to disclose the identity of his benefactor, he forms an association between Jaggers and Magwitch, who is at this point still a distant memory from his childhood and nothing more: "As I sat down, and [Jaggers] preserved his attitude and bent his brows at his boots, I felt at a disadvantage, which reminded me of that old time when I had been put upon a tombstone" (244).

the relationship between Narrator and Author in normative realist fiction.

We will now turn our attention to Magwitch's status as Pip's author – as the force that most crucially subjects Pip to an experience of his status as a character and most intensely duplicates, within the novel (both the tale *and* its subsequent telling by narrator-Pip), the novelist's power to determine story and language. As the originator of Pip's Great Expectations – the source of income that constitutes them – Magwitch is, after Dickens and narrator-Pip, third in line to be considered the author of the narrative.

Critics continually refer to Magwitch as Pip's author, but they use “author” metaphorically, referring to Magwitch's production of Pip's Expectations and thereby Pip's life. For indeed, Magwitch refers to Pip repeatedly as “the gentleman what I made” (281), and even when Pip is in the narratologically more empowered position of Reader, he remains written and read – presented – by Magwitch, who “stand[s] before the fire surveying [Pip] with the air of an Exhibitor, ...appealing in dumb show to the furniture to take notice of [Pip's] proficiency” (287). Magwitch certainly acts *like* Pip's author, but this argument will be interested more in the ways Magwitch acts *as* Pip's author. Since our concern is Pip's motive for writing, what is important is how Magwitch literally controls the language and structure of Pip's literary work.

The Expectations, by affording him his tutoring lessons with the Pockets, give Pip the fluency and literacy that make it possible for him to write the story, which is, circularly, about the Expectations. Pip is motivated to accept those Expectations of Magwitch's making, moreover, by his love for Estella, who is also of Magwitch's making. The self-consciousness of that double authorship is plain in Magwitch's disruptive appearance in the revised ending. As they renew their romantic history after running into one another randomly in the old garden of where Satis House once stood, Pip asks Estella whether she often returns there. She answers,

“I have never been here since.”

“Nor I.”

The moon began to rise, and I thought of the placid look at the white ceiling, which had passed away. The moon began to rise, and I thought of the pressure on my hand when I had spoken the last words he had heard on earth.

Estella was the next to break the silence that ensued between us.

(411)

The superfluous reference to Magwitch’s death scene is inexplicable unless we acknowledge the inseparability of Magwitch’s biography from the love story with Estella – and furthermore, Pip’s registration of this inseparability. That in this final reference to Magwitch on the final page of the novel, Pip gestures towards his *hand* is important, for it closes the story begun on the first page of the novel – the page on which Magwitch first appears, and on which he instantly acts as Pip’s author, telling him to *hold*, as if in his hand, his noise.

Though we may initially believe, on that first page, that Pip is starting to tell the story with the powerful double voice of its main character and narrator, the first oration within the tale demands instead his silence, and it is delivered by Magwitch:

My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; ... and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

"Hold your noise!" cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. "Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!" (3)

"Hold your noise!" This violently abrupt and disembodied interjection is all the more jarring for appearing at the end of smoothly paratactic parallel structure and a steady flow of rich sensory detail. The fact that young Pip has not spoken yet when he is told to be quiet makes Magwitch sound as if he is responding partially to the older Pip who is writing the novel, since that is the Pip who is technically speaking and whom we can hear. That narrator is made particularly palpable immediately prior to Magwitch’s outburst because he refers to himself in the third-

person, splitting himself into two ("the small bundle... was Pip") – or rather, given that he is already split in two (character and narrator), into three. The externalized perspective evokes that of the older Pip. In the sharp cross-over from a thus blended first-person/third-person stance to direct speech, the burst of Magwitch up from among the graves thus offers the partial sense of a character bursting up and out of a diegesis in order to speak to a narrator he is not supposed to be able to hear. The total absence of preparation for the disruption intensifies this sense: since "Hold your noise!" would typically arrive in the middle of a dialogue rather than the start of one, it suggests, retroactively, that Magwitch has secretly been hearing older Pip's narrative voice up to this point and is now replying to and usurping it.

As if blessed with an uncanny ability to read the novel he is in, Magwitch seems to seize the position of its author. And since authors of realist fiction cannot render themselves embodied within the fictional worlds they speak of, Magwitch's occupation of the author position is accompanied by the disembodiment of his voice – a disembodiment felt by Pip even as he can presumably see Magwitch speaking. Despite his eyesight, Pip seems temporarily unable to locate Magwitch as the origin of the voice he hears – only that the two are appearing simultaneously: "...cried a terrible voice, as a man started up...."⁶ Even as his body presents a material form within the fictional universe, Magwitch seems able to retain in his voice the authority of invisibility, as if speaking from outside the diegesis. He is like an author who has jumped into the world he is describing without relinquishing his out-of-universe existence.

Indeed, this imperative crying out from the darkness that surrounds young Pip, who in

6 Edgar Rosenberg notes, in an essay about the manuscript, the change Dickens made in this sentence: "...Dickens, as the text stands, startles the reader almost as much as he terrifies Pip with that out-of-nowhere **"Hold your noise!" cried a terrible voice**"; beneath that terrible voice, the more terrifying for remaining impersonal and unidentified, we detect the bland, **"Hold your noise! said a man"**" Edgar Rosenberg, "Writing *Great Expectations*," in Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Edgar Rosenberg (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), pp. 427-468, 442.

turn stands in the midst of graves hiding convicts he cannot see like a character who stands in the midst of a narrative he cannot read, emerges as if postmodernly from his author or narrator. The sense is heightened by the imperative that he be silent, since, as I have discussed, the author or narrator speaks everything even in a first-person narrative, and it is only by his permission that a character's speech acquires the privilege of being heard directly, through quotation. Thus with his first appearance and first words, Magwitch instantly behaves like an embodied analogue of an author of fiction. Meanwhile, Pip is made to experience consciously some of the fundamental aspects of his ontology as a character – to feel like an embodied analogue of a character in fiction, able neither to speak nor to know who seeks to control his voice.

Magwitch seems not to seize the author position until that first utterance within the diegesis. And yet, radically contrary to what is apparent at first glance, it is disingenuous to claim that Magwitch's entry into the text is “‘Hold your noise!’” Though, up to this point, Narrator-Pip seems to be speaking in normative, pure, first-person past-tense narration – introducing himself and his experience in a comfortable voice all his own – Magwitch already lives even in those opening three paragraphs.

This is evident when we read these paragraphs against the backdrop of Magwitch's autobiography in chapter 42. Almost the entire length of that chapter, beginning with the first sentence, is given over to Magwitch. In normative, pure, first-person past-tense narration, Magwitch introduces himself and his life experiences in a comfortable voice all his own. The similarities between the opening paragraphs of Magwitch and Pip's autobiographies are glaring, especially when we compare them to the opening of *David Copperfield*. That David's is so different – detailing the excitement and anticipation on the day of his birth – and that Dickens reread *David Copperfield* immediately before beginning *Great Expectations*, suggests that he

was consciously forming a new template.

Pip and Magwitch take as their starting point not physical but mental birth. Magwitch: ““I first become aware of myself down in Essex, a thieving turnips for my living”” (293). Pip: ““My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening”” (3). Pip may add that the person who makes that afternoon memorable is the very person whose autobiographical style he is imitating. Magwitch’s engendering of Pip’s consciousness, in which his arrival provokes a “vivid and broad” awakening, coincides with his authorship of Pip’s narrative, as if there can be no Pip without Magwitch, who sets his story into motion – gives him a story – and most importantly, gives that story its language. Magwitch: ““I know’d my name to be Magwitch, chrisen’d Abel. How did I know it? Much as I know’d the birds’ names in the hedges to be chaffinch, sparrer, thrush”” (293). Pip similarly gives us his surname first, and first name second: “My father’s family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip...” (3). Likewise, just as Magwitch identifies himself as one object among many in a natural landscape, Pip locates himself (as we see in the passage quoted above, in the paragraph leading up to Magwitch’s “Hold your noise!” interjection) only having first located, as if they have equal significance to his own, the churchyard, the marshes, the river, and the sea. Consistent with this environmental self-contextualizing in the context of self-textualization, both speakers also refer to themselves in the third-person. Magwitch: ““So fur as I could find, there warn’t a soul that see young Abel Magwitch, with as little on him as in him, but wot caught fright at him...”” (293). And Pip, as we have seen: “...the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip” (3). Both thus self-split to occupy positions like external third-person narrators with respect to themselves, just as they are nonetheless adopting first-person narrative stances.

That Pip adopts the language of Magwitch's autobiography from the moment he begins his own proves that Magwitch's authorship of Pip and his narrative is not limited to his production of the Expectations and Pip's motivation to pursue them: his authorship is not just metaphorical. It also originates the language that articulates it.

Part Two - Reversal

As I have argued, Magwitch is not simply the primary authorial surrogate of the narrative, but also its writer – Pip, *his* subject. Of course, in reading the narrative, we experience the reverse. Magwitch's delivery of his autobiography takes up only one chapter out of fifty-nine. Like his utterance of ““Hold your noise!”” it is selected by narrator-Pip for quotation. Just as Pip's spoken and quoted utterances are minimal relative to that of his interlocutors, the proportion of Magwitch's utterances relative to those of narrator-Pip's is small. Moreover, Magwitch's autobiographical soliloquy occurs not only within Pip's autobiography, but also subsequent to the establishment of Pip's autobiographical style in the novel's first chapter. This makes chapter 42 sound like the secondary echo of Pip, even though, in diegetic time, it has occurred earlier and constitutes the primary source. This section will discuss how these reversals are part of a unitary project of narratological reversal that actually begins within the tale, immediately upon the delivery of Magwitch's autobiography; subsequent sections will argue for the physiological basis of that reversal. As we will see, the narratological reversals discussed in this section – in narrative ontology (for example, character exchanging positions with narrator), sequencing (Pip's narration being heard before Magwitch's, and the latter being heard within the former), and strategy (retrospection) – are conscious iterations of physical reversals.

Magwitch may determine the narrative's production, content, and language, but he is

subordinated by multiple elements of its structure. That formal subordination has a version within the tale, as Magwitch begins to be vulnerable and subservient to Pip even before he becomes a character in Pip's story. The same is true of other characters.

The reversal by which Pip assumes the position of author and Magwitch becomes his character begins immediately after Magwitch is done soliloquizing, when Herbert writes a note to Pip behind Magwitch's back, explaining that the former accomplices Magwitch has been speaking of, Arthur and Compeyson, are Miss Havisham's brother and former lover, respectively. The note contains details about Magwitch that Magwitch does not know Herbert and Pip know. I will soon discuss in detail the narratological and physical significance of that moment, but for now, it is important to note the timing. It is not earlier, with his revelation that he is Pip's benefactor, but here, with his autobiography, that Magwitch surrenders his authority to Pip. The reversal of Magwitch's status as being "so bound up with [his] fortunes and misfortunes, yet so unknown to" Pip begins immediately to precipitate an overall narratological reversal (291).

From this point forward, and not before, the markers of character ontology that Pip has experienced within the diegesis – ignorance and silence – begin to be reversed, taking him to the extreme other end of the knowledge and speech spectrum, culminating eventually in his writing the entire narrative. Those diegetic reversals are the precursor to the narratological one that begins upon the completion of the diegetic tale.

Until Magwitch's autobiography, Pip embodies Character. But by the end of the novel, nearly every major character – from Estella to Joe, Magwitch to Mr. Jaggers, Mrs. Gargery to Miss Havisham – participates in a reversal, moving from authority in speech and knowledge to subordination in parallel with Pip's movement from disproportionate silence to speech,

ignorance to knowledge, subordination to authority, character to narrator.⁷ Pip changes from being the embodiment of Character to being the eventual speaker and keeper of everyone else's secrets: an embodiment of Narrator within the narrative that he narrates.

The reversal in his status is completed by his singular, independent discovery of Estella's parentage, incited by Magwitch's revelation of his status as benefactor. The dynamics of Pip's subsequent confrontation with Jaggers, hitherto the most knowing figure in the novel, allegorizes the ontological reversal of Narrator and Character. When Pip discloses the fact that he knows the identity of Estella's father, "A certain stop that Mr. Jaggers came to in his manner – he was too self-possessed to change his manner, but he could not help its being brought to an indefinitely attentive stop – assured me that he did not know who her father was" (348). Jaggers's loss of control, his Character-like vulnerability to an authoritative knowledge greater than his own, is matched by Pip's acquisition of a hitherto absent ability to notice and extract from subtle details accurate information about the world around him. With its help, he not only knows more about Magwitch and Estella than Jaggers, but knows instantly *that* he knows more, for here, as in the next passage, Pip is able to read subtle details for accurate information, reversing his previous tendency to miss or mistake the reality around him. He is now further able not only to notice and mine "slightest" vulnerabilities in the person to whom he is imparting (rather than beholden to for) information, but able also to conceal his own secret of

7 It may be interesting to note here that each silencing or blinding force in Pip's life leans on a threat as the crux of its power – a threat to which they, themselves, seem at first to be immune. From Magwitch, who rises from the gravestones as though having conquered death, the threat is a cut throat; from the police, the Hulks; from Joe, lost friendship; from Mrs. Joe, Tickler (physical violence); from Jaggers, lost expectations. Yet each of these threats are destabilized and evacuated over the course of the novel, revealing the authority that leaned on them to have been empty all along. Magwitch, with legs chained, doesn't even have a bite to eat, let alone a knife for cutting Pip's throat, and ultimately comes to depend on Pip entirely for his freedom; the police fail to incarcerate Pip even when he lands deeply in debt and actually does belong in prison; Joe's friendship survives far worse damage than the revelation of Pip's first robbery; Jaggers loses his hold over the fortune when Pip turns twenty-one; and Mrs. Joe ends up the object of such brutal violence that she can never again commit it herself.

having, again secretly, gone behind Jaggers's back: "Even Mr. Jaggers started when I said those words. It was the slightest start that could escape a man... but he did start.... ...I was afraid to look at [Wemmick] just then, lest Mr. Jaggers's sharpness should detect that there had been some communication unknown to him between us" (348). And, aware of the complete destabilization of every authority figure in his life, Pip forcefully throws off, once and for all, his sister's early and Mr. Jaggers's later "ask no questions" injunction, as he reacts to Mr. Jaggers's evasion of the parentage issue: "I could not submit to be thrown off in that way, and I made a passionate, almost an indignant, appeal to him to be more frank and manly with me" (349). In all these new abilities, Pip resembles a narrator – Mr. Jaggers, now, his character.

The final line of chapter 50 captures perfectly the epistemological reversal in tandem with the verbal and narratological ones. Pip asks Herbert,

"You are not afraid that I am in any fever, or that my head is much disordered by the accident of last night?"
"N-no, my dear boy," said Herbert, after taking time to examine me. "You are rather excited, but you are quite yourself."
"I know I am quite myself. And the man we have in hiding down the river, is Estella's father." (345)

In the final two lines, we see the description of a subject followed by the name of that subject: the syntax is a recapitulation of Magwitch's self-identification in his autobiography, and it echoes the syntax of what will be written *later* (in diegetic time) and has already appeared *earlier* (in narrative structure) – the opening lines of the novel, as Pip will sit, or has seated himself, to write his autobiography. We hear in "I know I am quite myself" the echo of "the small bundle of shivers was Pip." But unlike that statement, which was followed immediately by Magwitch's "Hold your noise!" interjection and "you little devil!" identification, Pip's authority here has *him* immediately following his *self*-identification with the authoritative identification of *Magwitch* – in a way, moreover, that Magwitch could not identify himself, since he is ignorant of

the existence of his daughter. The epistemological and vocal reversal and asymmetry are striking, as Pip assumes the role of a knowing, speaking narrator before he has even started writing the novel.

Magwitch's new impotence, in which "he spoke so low as to be scarcely audible [and] therefore ... spoke very little" (386), throws into relief the potency of Pip, to whom he is "ever ready to listen" (368), and who already begins narrating Magwitch's life, writing biographies in the form of multiple petitions and appeals to authorities who might reverse his death sentence. Meanwhile, character-Pip functions more like a narrator in the fabric of the autobiography as well. Unlike at the beginning of the novel, where we rarely hear his young voice, now, post-Magwitch-reversal, his past utterances are quoted constantly. We garner as much information from that direct speech as from his future, Narrator-self. Indeed, at the end of the novel, *all* the most recent news we have of Pip's life, apart from the Estella reunion – his work life, his single life, his hopes, his dreams – comes through his directly quoted conversation with Biddy. In other words, as the embodiment of his status as a character transforms gradually into the *embodiment* of a narrator, character-Pip also takes over for us the *function* of a narrator. Through that functional take over, Character-Pip seems to meet Narrator-Pip at the end of the novel.

Part Three - Narrative and Bodily Asymmetry

I will now turn to the central argument for which the above analysis provides a foundation: that Pip's tale and its telling entwines physiological and narratological experiences that embody, motivate, and otherwise affect one another. First, I will focus on this entwinement primarily as it occurs in Magwitch's autobiography, also describing, where appropriate, the aspects shared with that of Pip.

It is important to note the structuring principles of Magwitch's and Pip's autobiographies. Magwitch seems to conceive of himself as a subject not in his own biography but in that of Compeyson. Indeed, each life event and detail Magwitch's recounts, including those from his pre-Compeyson infancy, when he already had the appearance of a would-be criminal, serves either to explain or to elaborate upon his life of crime with Compeyson. And his biography ends only and exactly when he arrives at the current status of their relationship. Nothing is recounted in Magwitch's story that does not garner relevance and narratability from its association with Compeyson. The same can be said of Pip's narrative with respect to Magwitch: nothing is recounted that does not garner relevance and narratability from its association with his benefactor.⁸ Not by accident is the shortest chapter of the novel (shortest by far – 8 paragraphs, 3 of them under 3 sentences) also the one that covers Pip's apprenticeship with Joe – the phase of his life bearing the thinnest relation to Magwitch, as Pip feels “for a time as if a thick curtain had fallen on all its interest and romance...” (91). There is no ambition plot without Magwitch's life story of providing *Expectations*, and no courtship plot without Magwitch's life story of having had a daughter. Pip's telling works to make it look like there are multiple plot threads and that they all revolve around Pip, but this is a reversal of what is true within the tale: there, the true overarching and subsuming life story is that of Magwitch – specifically, as that story functions within that of Compeyson. Even Orlick, though from Pip's village, does not exist independently of the Magwitch-Compeyson story. He eventually works for Compeyson, Magwitch's accomplice-turned-nemesis; he uses Pip's protection of Magwitch from Compeyson as a lure for bringing him to be attacked in the quarry; and earliest in the novel, the immediate provocation of

8 In Compeyson, we find Pip's author's author – his grand-author, aa it were. Even aside from authoring Magwitch's story, Compeyson breaking Miss Havisham's heart motivates her breaking of Pip's (through Estella), and it is his criminal masterminding that leads Magwitch to Pip (via the Hulks). This grand-author status is physicalized in a scene I will discuss in this chapter's conclusion, in which Wopsle, performing on stage and facing Pip who is in the audience, locates Compeyson sitting behind him.

his original fight with Joe and attack on Pip's sister is that Joe agrees to let Pip take a half-day off to go see Estella, who has been left fatherless and therefore adopted by Miss Havisham because of Magwitch's conviction for crimes – crimes committed with Compeyson. Every sub-plot leads back to the story of Compeyson and Magwitch.⁹

Pip sees himself as a character in Magwitch's narrative just as Magwitch sees himself as a character in Compeyson's narrative. And these dynamics are materialized in their bodies. When Magwitch first meets and makes him his character, Pip tells us, he "tilted me back as far as he could hold me, so that his eyes looked most powerfully down into mine, and mine looked most helplessly up into his" (6). The parallel syntax and language throw into relief the power contrast: powerfully/helplessly; down/up. Later, when the power dynamic is reversed, and Magwitch returns to reveal his identity, he stands at the bottom of a staircase that Pip lights from above with a lamp.

9 The status of *Great Expectations* as Dickens's most economical major novel is attributable to – or isomorphic with – the plot's zealous, focused orientation not around one idea, character, or even relationship exactly, but around the even more contracted circle of a single character's authorship of another.



Figure 1. “The terrible stranger in the Churchyard”
(Chapter 1)

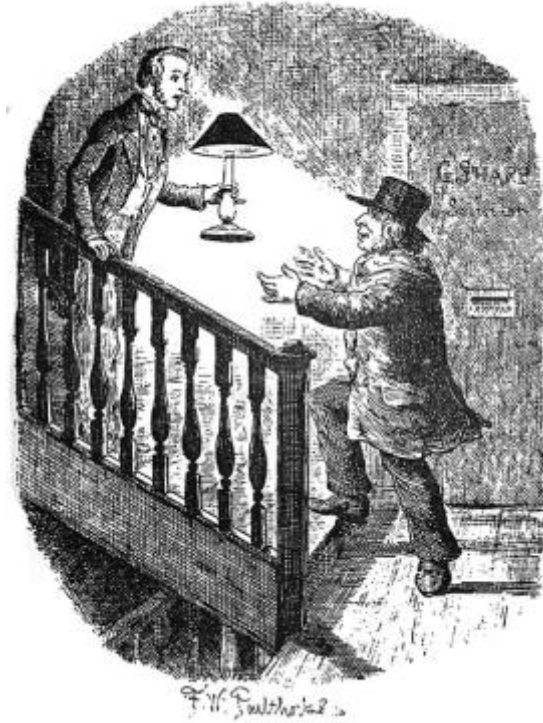


Figure 2. “On the Stairs” (Chapter 39)

The most widely published accompanying illustrations – by F.W. Pailthorpe for an 1885 edition of the novel – pictorialize the power asymmetries and their reversal.¹⁰ Both physical images bear relation to textuality. The first one contains the epitaphs Pip is reading. And in the second: “I stood with my lamp held out over the stair-rail, and he came slowly within its light. It was a shaded lamp, *to shine upon a book*, and its circle of light was very contracted...” (268). The light designed to illuminate written text illuminates Magwitch, whose story Pip is about to discover (*read*), and who will then become a character-subject in the text Pip will *write*.

Dickens goes to great lengths to emphasize the physicalization of asymmetry in the

¹⁰ Dickens did not collaborate with an illustrator for *Great Expectations*. The novel’s original serialization, like its first edition in book form, was issued without illustrations.

relation between Compeyson and Magwitch. As Magwitch puts it, Compeyson “‘could speak to [the jury] wi’ his face dropping every now and then into his white pocket-handkercher – ah! and wi’ verses in his speech, too – and warn’t it me as could only say, ‘Gentlemen, this man at my side is a most precious rascal’?” (297). The asymmetry in speaking power recapitulates (if one is outside the diegesis) or is recapitulated by (if one is inside it) Pip’s lack of speaking power relative to his author-figure or narrative-producer, Magwitch. It manifests in disparate physical appearances and disparate judicial verdicts. As Magwitch tells us, “... I noticed how heavy it all bore on me, and how light on him,” and this is “for, says the counsellor for Compeyson, ‘My lord and gentlemen, here you has afore you, side by side, two persons as your eyes can separate wide; one, the younger, well brought up, who will be spoke to as such; one, the younger, seldom if ever seen in these here transactions Can you doubt, ... if there is two in it, which is much the worst one?’” (297).¹¹ The ontological asymmetry between author and character, Compeyson and Magwitch, is physicalized with two consequences: first, they are punished to asymmetrical degrees; second, Magwitch wants particularly to smash his face.

As soon as Magwitch tells us of the verdicts, he tells us what he said to Compeyson:

“‘Once out of this court, I’ll smash that face o yourn....’”

...

“‘I had said to Compeyson that I’d smash that face of his, and I swore Lord smash mine! to do it.

“‘We was in the same prison-ship, but I couldn’t get at him for long, though I tried. At last I come behind him and hit him on the cheek to turn him

11 The asymmetry is heavily emphasized by a long series of repetitive, comparative, rhetorical questions:

“‘And when it come to character, warn’t it Compeyson as had been to the school, ... and warn’t it him as had been know’d by witnesses in such clubs and societies, and nowt to his disadvantage? And warn’t it me as had been tried afore, and as had been know’d up hill and down dale in Bridewells and Lock-Ups? ... And when the verdict come, warn’t it Compeyson as was recommended to mercy on account of good character and bad company, and giving up all the information he could agen me, and warn’t it me as got never a word but Guilty? ... And when we’re sentenced, ain’t it him as gets seven year, and me fourteen, and ain’t it him as the Judge is sorry for, because he might a done so well, and ain’t it me as the Judge perceives to be a old offender of wiolent passion, likely to come to worse?’” (297)

round and get a smashing one at him, when I was seen and seized. ...”

...

“... Upon my soul, I half believe he escaped in his terror, to get quit of me, not knowing it was me as had got ashore. I hunted him down. I smashed his face.” (298)

The repetitive stress on Magwitch’s desire exclusively to smash Compeyson’s face attracts notice. Among other things, it registers the dorsoventral asymmetry of Compeyson’s body. Magwitch’s interest not in the face alone but in the overall asymmetry – on one side, the face, distinct and potent; on the other side, the back, flat and vulnerable – is captured by his attack strategy of “coming [up] behind him.” And his way of serving justice – balancing the scales between them – is to bring balance and symmetry to the shape of Compeyson’s anatomy: a dehumanizing and disempowering flattening of his face to match the sightless, voiceless flatness of his back. This would be effective justice because Compeyson’s face is not only asymmetrical to his own back but to the face of Magwitch – it is the very source of the unjust imbalance in their “sentences,” both those that are delivered by the jury and those that they each utter.

Smashing Compeyson’s face means physically effacing his visual and verbal agency – effectively, his real authorial power over Magwitch. And the narratological equivalent of this gesture is narration itself. Compeyson may authorially direct and control Magwitch within the tale, but he is silenced into a mere character when Magwitch tells it. As narrator, all visual, speaking, and selecting power belongs to Magwitch; he makes himself his *own* character (in the “now” of his telling) in resistance to having been that of Compeyson (in the “then” of his tale), who is now *his* character. The association of this narratological “revenge” with the physical revenge of face-smashing is evident in how emphatically the former revenge is made to be embodied.

“My Missis as I had the hard time wi’—Stop though! I ain’t brought *her* in—”

He looked about him in a confused way, as if he had lost his place in the book of his remembrance; and he turned his face to the fire, and spread his

hands broader on his knees, and lifted them off and put them on again.
“There ain’t no need to go into it,” he said, looking round once more.
“The time wi’ Compeyson was a’most as hard a time as ever I had; that said,
all’s said. Did I tell you as I was tried, alone for misdemeanour, while with
Compeyson?” (296)

I have included the final two sentences of this quotation to reiterate how thoroughly Compeyson is directing and motivating Magwitch’s narrative. But what is also notable here is how embodied Magwitch’s narrating becomes at the same time that it evokes the act of writing. Magwitch’s physical eyes do just what they would if he were reading or writing a real “book of his remembrance” like the one Pip is writing. And when Magwitch conceals details about Molly, he conceals his face, as if narrative information and his face are the same, just as the space behind him is akin to the time behind him. Indeed, the invitation to link Magwitch’s narrative experience with his physical one – beyond, that is, through his throat and mouth, which give physical sound to his utterances – rests most interestingly in the spatialization of Magwitch’s narrative activity: as the illiterate Magwitch speaks his autobiography aloud, he sits facing the fire, at an angle facing away from Pip and Herbert; he then turns back to look at them every time he speaks. He thus retro-spects literally and figuratively at once – looks backward physically as he looks backward in time.

Thus, Magwitch’s autobiography showcases how major narrative structures and devices – balance, retrospection, ellipses, the relative ontologies of author/narrator and character – are mapped onto and around the human body. The continuity of this mapping over and into Pip’s narrative and body is captured immediately upon the completion of Magwitch’s soliloquy. At that point, Herbert writes a note to Pip in a book behind Magwitch’s back. The note he writes is a piece of text containing the information that Compeyson “is the man who professed to be Miss Havisham’s lover” (298). It is a written utterance conveying information that is at once *about* Magwitch yet *visually and epistemologically unavailable* to Magwitch. It thus turns Magwitch

into a literally written character; simultaneously, it turns Pip and Herbert into his reader and narrator, respectively.

So as Magwitch turns to face the fire again, he is a character, and this is possible due to his body's back surface, which leaves him vulnerable to being transformed into a text that is controlled and viewed by others without his knowledge or consent. That he stops looking backward is aligned, of course, with the fact that his narrative too stops looking back: it ends in the present – in a state that leaves his secondary and until now *self-controlled* character status open to writing and editing. “I was put in irons, brought to trial again, and sent for life. I didn't stop for life, dear boy and Pip's comrade, being here” (298). Not *there*, where he can see himself from all directions, but *here*, where he cannot, by virtue of the shape of his body, see himself and his surroundings completely – indeed, he currently has Compeyson at his back, pursuing him, at the same time that he has Pip and Herbert writing about him behind his back. As I will later show, *Great Expectations*, the sheer presence of the body, in the absence of 360-degree information, presents danger.

The turn back to the fire is a turning into Pip's character – a physical and narratological reversal that lasts the rest of the tale, as Pip begins to write about Magwitch first in the form of the appeals he writes in an effort to reverse his death sentence, and then of course in the writing of the novel.

The turn back to the fire also marks the divergence of Magwitch's narrative strategy from that of Pip. For Pip's narrative never abandons the past tense – never lets his back become vulnerable. Resting and *being there*, in a past tense with which he and the narrative *stop for life*, Pip never stops watching his back. And the following section will seek to explain why.

Part Four - The Status of the Back

Magwitch's status as a character in Compeyson's story seems to spark in Magwitch a desire for self-mastery that motivates him to narrate his autobiography. The fact that he refers to himself in the third person seems to validate the hypothesis that he is satisfying a wish to be a character once more, only this time his own. Pip, of course, also refers to himself right away in the third person. And since Pip feels like a character in Magwitch's story just as Magwitch is a character in Compeyson's story, it is reasonable to ask whether Pip is similarly motivated to write his autobiography by a desire to assert autonomy. And Pip's narrative is not just linguistically and structurally similar to Magwitch's; his project to become a narrator also begins immediately after that of Magwitch. This detail also suggests that Magwitch's autobiography in a sense inspires Pip's, and that the latter may therefore have similar motivations.

Being one's own character is a way of seeing oneself from multiple directions at once. What makes Pip insecure about being unable to do so in real life? As I will argue in this section, he experiences all the narratological asymmetry and vulnerability discussed in the previous sections very painfully through the dorsoventral asymmetry of his body – the unavailability of one side relative to the other. I will enter that discussion by first saying a word on the general status of the human back in the novel.

*

In the ethos of *Great Expectations*, having an upright and therefore potentially vulnerable back is one of the most crucial characteristics of the human condition. This is signaled on the first page of the original manuscript. In the novel's second paragraph, Dickens interpolated "on their backs":

To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of

five little brothers of mine – who gave up trying to get a living exceedingly early in that universal struggle – I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born **on their backs** with their hands in their trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence. (3)

Pip imagines his brothers as never having lived. Even prior to the explicit image of their hands as never having moved, the construal is implied in their having given up “trying to get a living *exceedingly* early,” as if their moment of death surpassed, in reverse direction, the earliest moment of “this state of existence” outside the womb. It is apparent, in other words, that “born on their backs” here is synonymous with “stillborn,” while it is also apparent that the passage sufficiently conveys the implication of stillbirth *without* “on their backs.” Since “on their backs” is thus superfluous, its deliberate insertion suggests, if only subtly, a certain consciousness of the otherwise upright, exposed back as somehow indispensable to the contradistinctive consideration of aliveness.

“[A] foot and a half” being about the average length of newborn infants, these were not necessarily stillborn, and the text does not absolutely verify whether they really were. Here at the novel’s inception, what matters is the *conception* of death – and its obverse, life. The relation of aliveness to the back, prone or upright, returns to the fore when Pip is born again, newly outfitted with his great expectations. The first thing Pip goes to buy with his recently acquired fortune is clothing, and arriving at the shop of Mr. Trabb the tailor for the purpose, he confronts Trabb’s assistant, “the most audacious boy in all that countryside” (127). Interestingly, Trabb’s boy is never referred to in the novel by any name other than “Trabb’s boy,” suggesting a total ownership on the part of Trabb, like that of Magwitch’s self-proclaimed ownership of Pip.¹² The text’s first treatment of Trabb’s boy is similar, at any rate, to that of Magwitch’s boy: “Hold that

¹² After his return to England, Magwitch calls Pip “my boy” (274) and “my gentleman” (281), and recalls saying to himself in Australia, ““If I ain’t a gentleman, ...I’m the owner of such”” (274).

noise,’ said Mr. Trabb, with the greatest sternness, ‘or I’ll knock your head off!’” (128) recalls Magwitch’s injunction to Pip in the novel’s first piece of dialogue – “‘Hold your noise! ... Keep still, you little devil, or I’ll cut your throat!’” (3). This scene in Trabb’s shop is held up in obvious contrast to that earlier moment; here, the now wealthy Pip is flattered with an obsequiousness underscored by the juxtaposed abuse and humiliation suffered by Trabb’s boy. The situation, right at the start of Pip’s new life, leads to his construal of death as a metaphorical laying upon one’s back. “...I saw [Trabb’s boy] collapse as his master rubbed me out with his hands, and my first decided experience of the stupendous power of money was, that it had morally laid upon his back Trabb’s boy” (129). As Mr. Trabb figuratively kills his boy by telling him to hold his noise as if in his hands, in other words, his own hands seem to stimulate Pip, as it were, erotically. Thus, if we count the five had by Pip’s parents, the novel implies at least six

sexual encounters that result not in life but in immediate death, literal or moral, and the articulations of these deaths as backs on the ground impress by contradistinction the fundamental importance of the upright back to the aliveness of our protagonist, the sixth Pirrip brother and Magwitch's boy, Pip.

Figure 3. "Trabb's boy"

This illustration by F.W. Pailthorpe of Trabb's boy and Pip corresponds to a much later scene in chapter 30. Here, Trabb's boy mocks Pip's wealthy splendor and haughtiness, pretending to fall backward at the sight of him. Pip has tried to take detours to avoid this humiliation, but he fails because Trabb's boy, cleverly, appears from around corners up ahead, effectively trapping Pip (identical to how, in one of the final scenes of the novel, the police boat



carrying the informant Compeyson appears from around an inlet up ahead as Pip and Magwitch try to escape along the Thames, thinking the police boat is at their backs).

The contrast between Trabb's boy being laid upon his back and Pip's living upright back, discussed above, is pictorialized here. Of course, unlike the earlier scene in Trabb's shop, it is Pip and not Trabb's boy who is shamed here, and the drawing captures two phenomenological and epistemological implications of the back, its double capacity in one sense to protect and in another to endanger – the first, by offering an ability to conceal oneself from another, the second, by allowing for the concealment of another from oneself. Both are deployed in the novel, I will later argue, toward physicalizing the phenomenology and epistemology of narrative.

In the scene, Trabb's boy's power follows from Pip's proneness to facing him – in other words, his inability to turn his back on him. Again and again, Trabb's boy appears from corners up ahead: "I had not advanced another two hundred yards when, to my inexpressible terror, amazement, and indignation, I again beheld Trabb's boy approaching"; "I had not got as much further down the street as the post-office, when I again beheld Trabb's boy shooting round by a back way." Pip can no more escape the humiliation of facing Trabb's boy than he can escape his own face. And the drawing, meanwhile, emphasizes this vulnerability precisely by refusing to exploit it. In keeping Pip's back to us, it spares him a secondary physical humiliation – that *of* his conscious humiliation within the story. It represents, in a sense, Pip's counterfactual ideal, and I will later argue that this sort of physical reversal from tale to representation-of-tale, which occurs here pictorially, also occurs verbally on a larger scale across the narrative and its narration. In conjunction with other examples, it will become clear that physical experiences like this one later provoke older, narrator-Pip's decision to reveal nothing of his current status at the moment of writing – neither age, location, nor marital status. He seems to exercise completely,

in his capacity as a narrator and in the act of narrating, the very power to conceal his face that is withheld from him in his capacity as a character within the narrative.

But to return to the drawing: Pip's back fully confronts us such that his front is fully concealed. In that concealment, Pip seems to be spared some shame – he doesn't have to face us because his back does instead. Through the limitations on its expression, the back offers privacy protection, and in multiple scenes throughout the novel, this capacity to protect provides power – power, in each case, derived from deliberately withholding information from a viewer or interlocutor. The convict who gives Pip the two one-pound notes at the pub gives Pip “only a look with his aiming eye – no, not a look, for he shut it up, but wonders may be done with an eye by hiding it” (66). The eyes are emphasized in their status as a source of information rather than an organ of perception, a manipulated, viewed object first and the receptors of a viewing subject second. This status is used to give embodiment to Pip's character-state of being, in the first half of the novel; Pip is perpetually in ignorance and faces are therefore repeatedly used to conceal rather than disclose information. When the most important news and secret about Pip's life is introduced: Mr. Jaggers “occasionally shut his eyes ... as much as to express that he knew all kinds of things to my disparagement, if he only chose to mention them” (118). The face is used here not to perceive but to communicate – specifically, to communicate lack of communication.

Sometimes, the concealment in question is not in the face but of the face, and in such cases, the back always becomes crucial to hiding it. The illustration above, though not produced at the time that Dickens was writing the novel, exemplifies how faces are always concealed in *Great Expectations* by a turning away, the confrontation of a viewer with one's back – effectively turning the face into a back and the back into a face. The first instance occurs at the start of the novel. Pip has stolen the file and victuals and is returning to the marshes to give them

to Magwitch, whom he thinks he is approaching:

...I had just ... scrambled ... beyond the ditch, when I saw the man sitting before me. His back was towards me, and he had his arms folded, and was nodding forward, heavy with sleep.

I thought he would be more glad if I came upon him with his breakfast, in that unexpected manner, so I went forward softly and touched him on the shoulder. He instantly jumped up, and it was not the same man, but another man! (15-16)

The man, as we find out later, is Compeyson, who late in the novel deliberately sits behind Pip's back, without Pip's knowledge, in a theater. There, he successfully uses Pip's back to remain invisible, but here, Pip's similar attempt is foiled; *he* becomes the one caught by the power of Compeyson's back in a state of blindness. The back belonging to Compeyson's accomplice Orlick is similarly powerful: "He flared the candle at me again, ... for an instant blinding me, and turned his powerful back as he replaced the light on the table" (364). The direct cause of Pip's blindness here is a candle, but the mention of Orlick's back recalls the earlier scene where Drummle, watched by Pip through the window, is leaving a hotel. When someone appears to assist Drummle, we read, "the slouching shoulders and ragged hair of this man, whose back was towards me, reminded me of Orlick" (304).

The impossibility that the back and face should ever be available at once (save with a reflecting intermediary, like a mirror or narrative that duplicates and reverses one of them), and the asymmetry by which one offers more information than the other, acquires significance not only by repetition but by appearing at two of the most critical moments in the narrative: one, in chapter 5, when Magwitch, re-captured after getting Pip's help, re-enters the custody of the police, leaving child-Pip behind (seemingly for good); the other, in chapter 39, when Magwitch returns from Australia to reveal his identity to Pip. The back's mention in both cases is an interpolation in the original manuscript. In chapter 5, words are shifted and added to include the reference to the back; in chapter 39, the reference to the back is purely inserted, just like in the

second paragraph of the novel. Here are the two instances:

In chapter 5:

The original: “The something that I had noticed before, clicked in the man’s throat again, and he turned away. The boat had come back, and his guard were ready....”

The edit: “The something that I had noticed before, clicked in the man’s throat again, and **he turned his back. The boat had returned**, and his guard were ready...” (34).

In chapter 39:

“Even yet, I could not recall a single feature, but I knew him! ...I could not have known my convict more distinctly than I knew him now, as he sat in the chair before the fire. No need to take his file from his pocket and show it to me...; no need to hug himself with both his arms, and take a shivering turn across the room, **looking back at me for recognition**. I knew him before he gave me one of those aids...” (270).

Once more, as in the second paragraph of the novel, the fact that both conjurations of the back here are interpellations in the manuscript highlights Dickens’s active interest in the narrative possibilities of that body part. In the chapter 5 example, the change in verb for the boat, from “come back” to “returned,” is obviously done to make possible the mention of Magwitch’s back without the repetition of the word “back.” And the word changes, from original to edit, from being a direction to being a body part – a body part apparently so important, it requires the shifting and replacement of other words. The deliberate choice to mention it is matched by the extra deliberation acquired by Magwitch’s movement as it transforms from “turning away” to “turning his back.” The latter is an empowered gesture, evoking greater agency. And whereas “turning away” implies a desire to look elsewhere, an “I don’t want to see,” “turning his back” implies a deliberate concealment – an “I don’t want *you* to see.” It expresses – or more specifically, physicalizes – Magwitch’s and the narrative’s forthcoming and equally deliberate concealment from Pip of the identity of his benefactor. The turning of his back corresponds to Pip’s blindness.

And when in chapter 39 Pip’s blindness is corrected – reversed – this is coincident with Magwitch reversing his prior turning of his back to turn around, now, and show his face. The

“looking back at me *for recognition*” says, now, “I want you to see.” As we know, this moment marks the beginning of Pip’s transition from character-status to narrator-status. That this change is mapped onto two reversals in bodily orientation is one instance of a phenomenon that, as I will show, occurs on multiple scales and ubiquitously throughout the novel.

In both these cases, Magwitch is in control of his back. It is not a source of vulnerability, but this is only because he knows, and controls, the person behind him. Indeed, one’s upright back, unlike one’s prone back, has a relationship with the space behind the body, and its degree of vulnerability follows directly from the degree to which one is ignorant of what resides in that space. The drawing of Trabb’s boy and Pip, as we saw, exemplified the vulnerability of the exposed face, but it also gestures, like the episode itself, toward the vulnerability of the back surface – the largest continuous flat surface in the drawing, and unavailable to the gaze of its owner despite its perpetual availability to the gazes of others, including Trabb’s boy and ourselves. What leaves Pip unable to conceal his face from Trabb’s boy, after all, is the inability of his back to inform him whether he is actually running away from Trabb’s boy as he intends to do. His back’s lack of ocular power is thus the primary vulnerability, and it is this vulnerability, along with the difficulty and complexity of trying to overcome it, that ultimately defines the status of front-back asymmetry in *Great Expectations*. Even when the back is a source of power, protecting against the disclosures of the face, it is only because the back’s vulnerability is in temporary abeyance. No character’s back is characterized as perfectly immune to potential gaze or attack.

Far from it, the vulnerability of the back as it is exposed to unseen viewers appears repeatedly in *Great Expectations*, which also recruits this feature to literalize idioms and metaphors of narrative reversal and inaccessible information. In addition to Magwitch’s account

of his attack on Compeyson from behind, we read about Mrs. Joe being “knocked down by a tremendous blow on the back of her head, dealt by some unknown hand when her face was turned towards the fire” (101).¹³ Orlick, who vengefully sneaks up on her holding Magwitch’s long-ago filed-off leg iron, confesses his deed during his attack on Pip in the quarry, which he begins by getting Pip “caught in a strong running noose, thrown over [his] head from behind” (358). The acts of revenge by Magwitch and Orlick deliberately evoke and literalize the idiomatic phrase, “to get back.” And though the word “back” in the idiom refers to the abstract concept of reversal or return generally speaking, the literalization of the idiom works by extracting the word “back” from the phrase and recruiting its other semantic reference to a body’s physical back surface. In this way and others, the novel continuously recruits the polysemy of “back” to project abstract concepts onto the shape of the human figure.¹⁴

Revenge is not the only conceptual category Dickens is projecting onto the human figure here. Orlick is enacting revenge for Pip’s betrayals. We remember that Pip goes behind Orlick’s back to tell Jaggers he ought to be fired from his post at Miss Havisham’s gate, and he tells Biddy she must not humor his advances. Orlick is getting Pip back, in other words, for what he perceives as Pip’s backstabbing,¹⁵ though the scales seem balanced without Orlick’s revenge: the latter has discovered the second betrayal by himself going behind Pip’s back and

13 We remember the orientation of her face later, when Magwitch also faces the fire during his delivery of the autobiography, looking back every time he speaks. The firelight illumination of both Mrs. Joe and Magwitch’s faces is a way of exaggerating – literally highlighting – the asymmetry between front and back surfaces.

14 Notably, Pip gets back at Trabb’s boy immediately after the latter’s face-to-face mockeries. Specifically, he goes behind Trabb’s boy’s back and writes Mr. Trabb withdrawing his dealings with the tailor’s shop, citing Trabb’s boy as the reason. The act no doubt brings Mr. Trabb’s punishment down on Trabb’s boy’s head.

15 Magwitch’s revenge on Compeyson is also retribution for betrayal. Compeyson disclosed private evidence against his own accomplice as a way to avoid punishment. Later, Compeyson seeks revenge on Magwitch by betraying him to the police. The tropes of betrayal and revenge as occurring behind the physical back, literalizing the metaphors and idioms of backstabbing and getting back, also appears in that great plot of betrayal and revenge, *Othello*. Iago, who tells backstabbing lies about Cassio behind his back, later literally stabs him from behind, and then framing Roderigo for the crime, stabs the latter as if to avenge Cassio’s stabbing.

eavesdropping on his conversation, as if he were Pip's omniscient narrator – a role he assumes even more obviously when he quotes Pip during his attack, “repeating my words to Biddy in the last interview I had with her” (360).

The evocation through literalization of metaphors and idioms like “backstabbing” and “getting back” is more sophisticated than the use of those which last the length of a phrase – more so even than recurring or extended metaphors. Getting back and backstabbing describe not localized concepts or events but plot structures – temporally dynamic sequences containing forward movements necessary to the backward movements that complete them. I will now turn to another plot device, arguably the most important one in the novel: the backstory.

Part Five - Pip's Back, Pip's Backstory

Upon Magwitch's “turning his back” at the end of Chapter 5, Pip's entire childhood encounter with him – threat, robbery, assistance – becomes, to his mind, his backstory. Beginning from that point and until Magwitch's return from Australia, Pip usually conceives of the experience as a hermetically sealed event restricted to his childhood, discontinuous with his life ever since, concealed from anyone he faces, and now metaphorically “behind” him. To his perception, it is immaterial. I will soon discuss in detail the two ruptures in the continuity of this assumption. One occurs in his adolescence, when he is at The Jolly Bargemen pub with Joe, and a mysterious stranger, who later turns out to be sent by Magwitch, inexplicably gives him two one-pound notes; he also stirs his drink with the file that Pip, in his childhood, stole from Joe and gave to Magwitch. Later this night, Pip's sister is attacked with Magwitch's leg iron, which was, at that long ago time, filed away with this same file. The other rupture occurs when that same emissary sits behind him on a coach ride from London to Kent. These episodes, though they

evoke deep, powerful feelings of shame, guilt, and terror, seem (to him) significant only to his mental life, ultimately inconsequential for his material one. The feelings are only feelings.

Of course, unbeknownst to him, the “backstory” is very much the current story: it has transformed itself into his Expectations. Those Expectations provide his *living*: his status and his food. They do not simply affect him; they help literally to constitute him – from the intangibles of all his social relationships, which are determined by that living’s significance, to the very cells of his body, which depend on that living’s substance.

Readings of the novel sometimes seem to forget the sustained presence of the Magwitch encounter, adopting instead the view the Pip has of it, as being a thing entirely of his past. For example, Peter Brooks, “implicitly assuming that one can make a transfer from the model of psychic functioning proposed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to the literary text” (123), argues that “the repetitions of the convict material experienced by Pip ... [are] returns of the repressed” (125) and that “Repetition as return becomes a reproduction and reenactment of infantile experience: not simply a recall of the primal moment, but a reliving of its pain and terror, suggesting the impossibility of escape from the originating scenarios of childhood, the condemnation forever to replay them” (126).¹⁶ Implicit in these words – *return*, *reproduction*, *reenactment* – is a dismissal of the original encounter as being continuously and consistently present in the form of Pip’s body and identity. At most, the episodes can be called *reappearances*, and even then, relative only to Pip and not to the reader: it is only in Pip’s limited vision that the story has disappeared behind him. To us, it is always here, constituting Pip’s entire story – not only what he is made of within the tale, but also, in its telling, what is deemed worthy of narration and what thereby helps narratologically to constitute character-Pip.

¹⁶ Peter Brooks, “Repetition, Repression, and Return: The Plotting of *Great Expectations*,” in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984), pp. 113-142.

Younger Pip may not be aware, at first, that his backstory is helping to constitute his lived experience, but even before that story takes the form of his Expectations, he already registers it as a part, at least, of his body. The night of the first reappearance, when his sister is attacked by the leg iron that Pip helped Magwitch remove (by giving him the file that has also reappeared this night), she is attacked, importantly, from behind. Pip's otherwise mysterious construal of his perceived backstory as a portion of his body may be catalyzed by the physicalization of metaphor involved in the association of his backstory – behind him in time – with what is behind his sister in space.

The expression of this construal is subtle. Confronting the file, the leg iron, and his sister's attack, Pip is filled with the terror and guilt over the original story, and considers confessing everything to Joe. "I suffered unspeakable trouble while I considered and reconsidered whether I should at last dissolve that spell of my childhood, and tell Joe all the story. ... The contention came, after all, to this; -- secret was such an old one now, had so grown into me and become a part of myself, that I could not tear it away" (103). It has not yet taken the form of his living – his Expectations. But to the extent that Pip is not just a person but also a formal device in his future self's narrative, Pip *is* already being constituted by the narrative-producing backstory that has brought him into being. And in that sense – in Pip's capacity as a character – the backstory *is* inseparable from "himself," and young Pip registers this.

But it is not totally clear how he registers it; the "contention," given his ignorance of the real pertinence of his backstory at this moment (the fact that he does not know he is a character in a written narrative determined by Magwitch/backstory), is strange, and its articulation registers the strangeness through its subtle use of metaphor. We can intuitively understand that Pip seems to be describing a secret so deeply personal or private that he does not feel he can

share it. But “personal” or “private” – anything abstract, for that matter – are not the words he uses. Instead, we encounter a metaphor that deploys a radical logic, coherent only if understood against the backdrop of the human body. The phrase “I could not tear it away” understands a spoken word to be in a sense like Wemmick’s “portable property” – to be subject to zero-sum transference. And the metaphor of *tearing*: to what sort of portable property could it refer but to a piece of the body, especially when it is described as having “*grown into* him and become a part of himself”? The first two words of this phrase are particularly interesting not only for helping the others carry a primary, physical, suggestion, but also for pushing the secondary suggestion – with the preposition “into” – that the backstory has literally transmogrified into Pip. Of course, the addition of “a *part* of himself” undercuts the fullness of that secondary suggestion, since it makes room for the components of Pip that have “grown” independently of the backstory, much as our limbs grow independently of our heads and torsos. But only the head and torso are the parts of one’s body that really cannot be torn away without the disfiguration of one’s identity, and as it happens, it is *only* on those literal body parts that Pip goes on to feel that spell of his childhood, his backstory, in the scene we will soon consider: specifically, in the hair on his head, the teeth in his mouth, and to his deepest dismay, the spine in his back.¹⁷

As we know, Pip’s first act upon receiving his Expectations is to go to Mr. Trabb’s shop for a new set of clothes, thus immediately fitting the money to the shape his body – the money that is the current shape of his backstory. It is apt indeed that Pip should change the shirt on his back, since from this moment, his Magwitch backstory begins to function like the back surface of his body: it is a central constitutional element of his being (both narratologically, in the sense

¹⁷ We may take note here of Dickens’s active interest in Sarah Biffen (1784-1850), a successful Victorian miniature painter born without arms or legs. He mentions her in at least three novels (*Nicholas Nickleby*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, and *Little Dorrit*). Helen Small notes that Dickens “possessed a show-bill from one of her exhibitions.” Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Helen Small and Stephen Wall (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 975.

that Pip is completely a character in the Magwitch narrative, as well as within the diegesis, in that it provides his living) yet it lies out of his view and he thinks it irrelevant to his present identity. We tend not to consider the fundamental markers of our identities on, or *as existing* on, our backs, even though our backs are central and fundamental to our beings, and even though, for those who know us, it is not much harder to identify us from the back than from the front. But aside from these simple observations about the plot design and about our bodies, the encoding of Pip's backstory onto and into his literal back is something that certain scenes and passages in the novel indisputably ask our imaginations to consider and our bodies to register.

One scene in particular asks more forcibly than any other. It occurs when Pip is returning to the marshes for the first time since having moved to London. Upon his arrival at his point of departure, Pip learns that two convicts will be riding the stage coach with him, and that one of them is the mysterious stranger who gave him the two one-pound notes in his adolescence. We know from "could not tear it away" that at this point, Pip already conceives of the Magwitch story as helping to constitute his body. This is why Pip confesses to us, when Herbert mentions that convicts will be riding with him, "I had a reason that was an old reason now, for *constitutionally* faltering whenever I heard the word convict" (193, emphasis added). As the coach begins its journey, the two convicts are seated side-by-side behind Pip; the convict he recognizes, indeed, is seated *immediately* behind him, "with his breath on the hair of my head" (194). The positioning of an element from Pip's backstory behind Pip's back would be enough to invite us to form an association between Pip's backstory and his back surface – the conflation of what is temporally "behind" with what is physically so. But the backstory is only the *plot device* that gets literalized. Here, we see the simultaneous literalization of its *narration* itself: talking behind the back.

As they ride in the coach, Pip falls asleep in the midst of

considering the question whether I ought to restore a couple of pounds sterling to this creature before losing sight of him, and how it could best be done. In the act of dipping forward as if I were going to bathe among the horses, I woke in a fright and took the question up again.

But I must have lost it longer than I had thought.... Cowering forward for warmth and to make me a screen against the wind, the convicts were closer to me than before. The very first words I heard them interchange as I became conscious were the words of my own thought, 'Two One Pound notes.'

'How did he get 'em?' said the convict I had never seen.

'How should I know?' returned the other. 'He had 'em stowed away somehows. Giv him by friends, I expect.'

...

'Two one pound notes. ... Well? So he says ?'

'So he says,' resumed the convict I had recognized – 'it was all said and done in half a minute, behind a pile of timber in the Dockyard – "You're a going to be discharged?" Yes, I was. Would I find out that boy that had fed him and kep his secret, and give him them two one pound notes? Yes, I would. And I did.' (195)

Pip learns from this conversation that the night of his sister's attack involved the re-materialization of his backstory in more than one way: not only in the reappearance of the file (in the pub) and the leg iron, but in the arrival of a gift and emissary from Magwitch himself. He learns, in other words, that on that night, he was unwittingly and unwillingly back in a story he had thought was behind him. And he learns that he is back in it even now, where he is. Thus in this scene, Pip gets to experience in real-time his ontology as a character in this written narrative.

The convicts, talking about Pip ("that boy") figuratively and literally behind his back, physicalize the structure of third-person narration. Just like a typical omniscient narrator, the words the convict speaks are, without Pip's consent and without even his preliminary consciousness, "the words of [Pip's] own thought," to which this convict has unusual access and in which he has unusual interest. Even his manner of recounting the conversation with Magwitch sounds like classic written narration, as if he were writing a novel. After direct quotation ("You're a going to be discharged?"), he records his response in indirect discourse ("Yes, I was"), then carries on to relate the rest of the exchange in indirect discourse as well.

The narration of Magwitch's request is especially striking for its sophisticated ventriloquism: the convict must render Magwitch's oral interrogative from the first-person stance of an "I" who is *not* Magwitch ("Would I find out that boy...?"). This is followed by a smooth transition from indirect represented speech ("Yes, I would") to pure narration ("And I did"). He deftly showcases stylistic turns of narrative fiction so familiar to us, we have no trouble understanding every complex jump across speakers and temporalities, words and actions – what was done, what was spoken, when, and by whom – though the sentences are so few, brief, and simple ("Yes, I would. And I did").

The extent to which Dickens wants to emphasize Pip's live experience of himself as a written character in this scene – literally a character in someone else's narrative – is made clear by the way this chapter ends. After Pip gets off the coach near the marshes, he heads to the Blue Boar. There, in the chapter's closing scene, Pip is sitting in the coffee-room when

The waiter ... took the earliest opportunity of putting a dirty old copy of a local newspaper so directly in my way that I took it up and read this paragraph:

Our readers will learn ... in reference to the recent romantic rise in fortune of a young artificer in an iron of this neighborhood ... that the youth's earliest patron ... was a highly-respected individual not entirely unconnected with the corn and seed trade.... ...[W]e record HIM as the Mentor of our young Telemachus, for it is good to know that our town produced the founder of the latter's fortunes. (197)

Just like on the coach, Pip finds himself spoken of without his consent, in a voice not his own.

But what is auditory in the scene with the convicts is here made literary, bringing young Pip into our world as he reads exactly what we are reading. The direct quotation from the newspaper,¹⁸

18 A similar reciprocity between text and reader, heavily physicalized, occurs in *Little Dorrit*: "Mr. Merdle's right hand was filled with the evening paper, and the evening paper was full of Mr. Merdle. His wonderful enterprise, his wonderful wealth, his wonderful Bank, were the fattening food of the evening paper that night" (*Little Dorrit*, 583-585).

lying on the page before us and Pip at once, puts him on our plane. Of course, since it describes Mr. Pumblechook as Pip's "earliest patron," the story being told about him is an apocryphal one. Even though Pip has the privilege of reading the text he is in, he is reading a false text.

In the immediately subsequent passage – the first paragraphs of the following chapter – Pip continues to read himself in another false text, but this time without knowing it. The mistakenly identified "patron" Pumblechook in the immediately preceding passage becomes here the mistakenly identified "patroness" Miss Havisham.

It was too early yet to go to Miss Havisham's...; I could go there tomorrow – thinking about my patroness, and painting brilliant pictures of her plans for me.

She had adopted Estella, she had as good as adopted me, and it could not fail to be her intention to bring us together. She reserved it for me to ... do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance, and marry the Princess. ...[T]he house... had made up a rich attractive mystery, of which I was the hero" (197).

The experience of himself as a fictional character two scenes earlier, and then having it take a written form in the scene after, now morphs into his self-conception as a hero in a work of literature belonging to an actual literary genre. But the careful charting out of Pip's progress in discovering his ontology as a written character is accompanied by his persistent misreading of the story – his own story. As Pip becomes an increasingly privileged character, he becomes an increasingly disadvantaged reader.

Pip's sense of being in Miss Havisham's story is reminiscent both of the structure of third-person narrative and of that form's association with his body, established in the immediately preceding coach scene.¹⁹ His subjection to Miss Havisham's authorship is so

19 Though unlike Pip, Estella correctly reads the plot she is in, she precisely for that reason encourages Pip's impression of being in a story and his delusion about being in Miss Havisham's. She embraces the fact that she has no will of her own ("We have no choice, you and I, but to obey our instructions" [226]) and understands that she is a device ("We are not free to follow our own devices, you and I" [226]). Pip notes that she speaks "as if our association were forced upon us and we were mere puppets" (229), and Estella indeed conceives of herself entirely as another's creation, referring to herself "as if [she] were some one else" (227), and the way

willful and direct that her words literally become his own: “Far into the night, Miss Havisham’s words, ‘Love her, love her, love her!’ sounded in my ears. I adapted them for my own repetition, and said to my pillow, ‘I love her, I love her, I love her!’ hundreds of times. Then, a burst of gratitude came upon me that she should be destined for me, once the blacksmith’s boy” (207). Pip’s reference to himself as “the blacksmith’s boy” reveals how thoroughly he is not only allowing himself to be written into a story but simultaneously reading himself within that story, from the outside. The reading also becomes extremely physical and embodied: as he looks around Miss Havisham’s ghastly room, “I saw in everything the construction that my mind had come to, repeated and thrown back at me. ...I saw it written, as it were, in the falls of the cobwebs..., in the crawlings of the spiders..., in the tracks of the mice..., and in the gropings and pausings of the beetles on the floor” (258).

We thus encounter a series of three consecutive scenes – the coach scene, the newspaper scene, the Arthurian romance – containing Pip’s new self-awareness as a character.²⁰ In all three scenes, we find a rectification of the typical asymmetry that exists in the relationship between a character and reader – the relationship in which the character is unable to find out about the reader. Of course, in all these situations, reader-Pip, as I have discussed, is misreading the true status of character-Pip; he is unable to see that he – character and reader alike – is in the Magwitch text. Narratological asymmetry is still very much alive, and it does not get truly rectified until Magwitch’s return from Australia. There, with Magwitch turned around to show his other side – his face – Pip sees that he has hitherto seen only one side of his backstory.

The eventual impulse to narrate his own story – write the novel – stems from the desire to

Magwitch refers to his character Pip: “I am what you have made me” (259) and “I must be taken as I have been made” (261).

20 Interestingly, these scenes occur in the dead center of the novel measured by chapters; in a fifty-nine chapter novel, they occur in chapters 28 and 29.

form *definitive* symmetry between his statuses as character and reader by occupying the powerful position of narrator. By determining the words that determine him, Pip can be sure of reading the right words – sure of himself. He can be behind the convicts, behind the newspaper, and behind himself as he ignorantly, vulnerably misreads himself into the Arthurian romance. He can see himself from all directions at once – obtain a 360-degree view of himself, as it were. This explanation also illuminates why Pip chooses to remain invisible throughout the writing, almost never referencing the moment of writing, and refusing to end the narrative in the present tense and disclose his current status or location. This way, Pip has no new back – he is not once more a character. He creates a universe with respect to which he has no back. It also renders especially apt the shape of his symmetrical name: P-i-p backward and forward.

The ability to read, at once, what is literally on the face and the back of an object, while, at the same time, remaining unread oneself, is a possibility that becomes implanted in Pip's consciousness immediately prior to this sequence of scenes, right before Pip mounts the coach. Thanks to the changes on his appearance wrought by time and his rise in fortune, Pip is unrecognizable to the convict he so readily recognizes in return. Pip is even protected from exposure by a pseudonym (the possession of which, we may note, resists Magwitch's/Jaggers's stipulation that he always retain the name "Pip" [117]) when Herbert shouts out, "'Goodbye Handel!'" as the coach drives away (194). On the coach, in other words, Pip's face is literally and figuratively concealed from the convicts, who, asymmetrically, do not know that the person they are talking about is before them. True to the emphatic pattern before us, this asymmetry is also given embodiment: before they have gotten on the stage coach, Pip notices that like other convicts, these two have "great numbers on their backs, as if they were street doors" (194). They have, in other words, identifying markers that are visually unavailable to themselves, but

certainly available to Pip.

*

While he is on the coach listening to the convicts behind him, Pip confronts the inescapable vulnerability of his human and formal ontology – the formal experienced as human. He confronts the vulnerability to ignorance regarding one’s own self – *not* seeing the reach of one’s backstory, *not* seeing the backstories within one’s backstories. In being shown these things, Pip is also shown that he has not seen them before, and is now still vulnerable to not seeing things like them. And the scene is designed so that the realization becomes inextricably associated with the equally inescapable vulnerability to ignorance that is implied by his upright back. Pip is no more able to flee his vulnerability to ignorance than he is able to flee his body. And it is his registration of this condition that explains why, despite having been safe, sound, and indeed privileged this entire time, Pip, as he walks away, “felt that a dread, much exceeding the mere apprehension of a painful or disagreeable recognition, made me tremble” (196).

The inextricability of the two vulnerabilities – narratological and physical – is made plain by how seamlessly Pip moves between bodily and mental anguish. “It is impossible to express with what acuteness I felt the convict’s breathing, not only on the back of my head, but all along my spine. The sensation was like being touched in the marrow with some pungent and searching acid, and it set my very teeth on edge” (195). Pip’s phrasing in the first sentence makes no distinction between the “real” sensation on his head and the perception of sensation in his spine, and the word “sensation,” and not “perception,” is repeated once more in the subsequent sentence. The episode seems to draw from psychalgia or psychogenic pain disorders, sufferers of which experience pain that does not align with their physical symptoms. Pain in these conditions, such as fibromyalgia, or the rarer complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS), is not considered by experts to be unreal or imagined; rather, its mechanism is simply not attributable

to damage that is perceptible to the five senses of an external observer. It is due not to tissue damage or any pathophysiological cause but to the sufferer's emotional or mental experience. The brain seems to experience an abnormal increase in the neurotransmitters that signal pain, and sometimes, these pain receptors seem to develop a sort of memory of the pain and become more sensitive over time, causing "overreaction" to pain signals.²¹ The novel seems to register such possibilities, for as we will see, Pip becomes over the course of the plot increasingly sensitive first to "the back" as a body part primarily belonging to others (in witnessing the pursuits and the attack on his sister from behind) and then to his own, alongside the psychological pain of his vulnerability as a character. It is in an effort to treat his physical pain that he writes the narrative, whose structure – with its narrator-character power reversals – can rectify the psychological pain imposed by his body's back and narrative ontology.

The scene seems also, remarkably, to register two related aspects of specifically the back relative to the rest of our bodies – aspects that combine the physical with the mental experience of having one. Harvey Schiffman describes how researchers have used "nylon filaments" (like the hair on Pip's head stimulated by the breath of the convict behind him) "whose force could be precisely calibrated in milligrams" to test "various body parts for threshold levels of pressure or touch."²² They found that the back had the second lowest threshold, making it, after only the face, "the most pressure-sensitive part of the body" (97). Researchers also tested all the areas of the body for a person's ability to identify precisely where stimulation has occurred, and they found that despite its being one of the highest in pressure sensitivity, the back had the single

21 For more, see John E. Sarno, *The Divided Mind: The Epidemic of Mindbody Disorders* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

22 Harvey Richard Schiffman, *Sensation and Perception: An Integrated Approach* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1976), p. 97. The study cited here is from Weinstein, S., "Intensive and extensive aspects of tactile sensitivity as a function of body part, sex, and laterality (Chap. 10)," in D. R. Kenshalo (Ed.), *The skin senses* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1968).

highest average error – usually “of more than a centimeter” (for finger tips, by contrast, the “average error is of the order of a millimeter” [100]). When it comes to correctly identifying where we are experiencing cutaneous sensation, in other words, we are worst when it comes to our backs.

We might thus say that the back converges extremely high physical sensitivity with superlatively low intellectual understanding, and that this is perfectly captured by Pip’s experience of combined pain and uncertainty – or rather, the pain *of* uncertainty, as he uncomfortably faces, with his back, what he has not known and may therefore still not know. Nowhere is this blend of the body with the narratological – the narratological made embodied – plainer than in the emphasis placed on the convict’s respiration: “his breath on the hair of my head” (194); “with what acuteness I felt the convict’s breathing... all along my spine” (195). It remembers that speaking is a form of breathing – that the convict’s respiration is an act at once tactile and discursive, somatic and semiotic.

Indeed, what may be most striking in the passage is that one’s simple *breathing* – that gentle, continual, universal exercise of so many species – should provoke in another such violent, acute, and singular agony. It seems to say that in the narrative fabric of Dickens, narration is not neutral. There is something brutal in its inherent asymmetry – a brutality made barefaced when its object, or perhaps we should say “victim,” is physically present at the site. The scene exemplifies what Barthes said of the third-person pronoun, “he”: “wicked: the nastiest word in the language: pronoun of the non-person, it annuls and mortifies its referent.”²³

The text’s insistence on that violence is conspicuous in its description of Pip’s excruciation while experiencing his status as its object – the helpless object of both a

23 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 169.

determinative backstory and its present form as a voice behind his upright back, talking about him from a location he cannot see. The convict's breath/speech moves straight through his soft tissue to his bone, a substance typically so durable, it takes longest to submit to a body's natural decay. The way it thus literally "annuls" him, as Barthes says, captures the way a character is in some sense nothing at all without the writing that speaks of and ultimately constitutes him. Nothing – certainly nothing material – is his own; everything belongs to the "pungent and searching acid" that is the speaking or writing breath.

Indeed, acid is one of the few substances in existence that can immediately decompose bone matter. And its mention seems to assure us that the damage on Pip's consciousness is, like his backstory, irreversible. The effect on his character and his consciousness of himself as a character is, from this moment, permanent and pervasive. We have already seen this in the immediately subsequent two scenes, as he reads of himself in the newspaper, and as he locates himself in Miss Havisham's fairy tale.

The sense of permanence is evoked further by the reference to the hardest parts of the human body – the teeth. Pip's confession that the sensation "set my very teeth on edge" may seem at first glance to use a common idiom to express the provocation of nervousness, precariousness, irritation, or excitement. The very fact of the phrase being an idiom means that we are not to take the "teeth" in the expression as a reference to Pip's literal teeth. But by a number of devices, Dickens moves the expression onto a literal plane. Just having imagined Pip's non-metaphorical head, spine, and marrow, we are primed, by the time we encounter "teeth," to imagine yet another real body part. The priming is enhanced further by the language of the penultimate sentence, whose sounds are then recapitulated in the subsequent one. The echo in diction ("*my spine*" / "*my teeth*") and rhythm ("*my head, but all along my spine*": four

consecutive iambs just like “it set my very teeth on edge”) incite us to borrow for the referent of the second clause the literality of the first.

But the most indisputable role in this literalization of the idiom is no doubt played by the quiet insertion of “very” immediately before teeth – “my *very* teeth.” The adjective places an emphasis that captures “the acuteness with which I felt the convict’s breathing.” This “very” extracts and foregrounds “teeth” from amid “teeth on edge,” and asks us to imagine it in an isolation that animates it (on its own, what could it reference but literal teeth?) prior to layering upon that material surface the abstract psychological states (nervousness, anxiety) produced by “on edge” – the completion of the idiom. Indeed, Dickens manages, with that single word “very,” to recruit all the bodily sensation at the source, or the heart (as it were), of the idiom.

That “very” functions much like the scene itself, in that both literalize the physical source of an idiomatic or metaphorical construction like “teeth on edge,” “backstory,” or “talking behind the back.” Whereas a metaphor or idiom works by taking a physical object (like a back), *dematerializing* it, abstracting a portion of its properties (say, that it can’t be seen), and applying them to an intangible domain (like gossip), this does the opposite. It takes the intangible idiomatic concept (talking behind the back), abstracts the portion of its expression derived from a physical domain (the back), and *re-materializes* it, only charged now with all the significance of the idiomatic construction it was merely helping, in its dematerialized life, to describe. That somatization animates the abstraction of the narratological.

In this way, it imitates the ability of metaphor itself to bring real physicality to abstractions, and thereby, in this case, to bring reality to fiction. A neuroscientific study used functional magnetic resonance imaging to show that hearing metaphors of texture activated not only areas of listeners’ brains that process language, but also those that process tactile sensation.

Physical metaphors, in other words, imitate physical experience.²⁴ And we may infer that when they appear in fiction to capture large-scale narrative structures, they invite us to process narrative itself through our bodies.

Part Six - Fictional Conceptions, Real Bodies

This concluding section will argue that the structures and shapes I have discussed give Pip materiality in our world – the real world. The physical ways that Pip’s personhood (in his fictional world) co-exists with his status as a formal device (in our world) effects his physical transmission into the book and into the reader: two material objects that not only make Pip’s fictive personality possible in the first place, but also come to share with him their materiality. This is made possible by the shapes of these two objects, with their fronts and backs, and the way they interact with the shape of Pip as they absorb and imagine him.

To advance this argument, I will focus first on the scene in which Pip goes to the theater towards the end of the novel, when he is keeping Magwitch in hiding from the police and afraid that he is being pursued by Compeyson. At the theater, Mr. Wopsle, one of the actors on stage, sees Compeyson sitting behind Pip in the audience – without Pip’s knowledge. When Wopsle tells Pip what he has seen, Pip tells us, “Involuntarily I looked round me, as I was accustomed to look round me when I went home...” (327). By this late point in the novel, Pip is ultra-conscious of his back, no doubt due to the experiences I have discussed so thoroughly, and to the nature of pursuit.

I cannot exaggerate the enhanced disquiet into which this conversation

24 Simon Lacey, Randall Stilla, K. Sathian, “Metaphorically feeling: Comprehending textural metaphors activates somatosensory cortex,” *Brain and Language*, Vol. 120, 3, March 2012, 416-421.

[with Wopsle] threw me, or the special and peculiar terror I felt at Compeyson's having been behind me "like a ghost." For, if he had ever been out of my thoughts for a few moments together since the hiding had begun, it was in those very moments when he was closest to me; and to think that I should be so unconscious and off my guard after all my care, was as if I had shut an avenue of a hundred doors to keep him out, and then had found him at my elbow. (328)

Pip's superlative, impossible to exaggerate "enhanced disquiet" (an expression that, strangely, sounds hardly like an exaggeration) seems to bleed into his description. To describe his experience of discovering Compeyson to have been behind his back, Pip presents a comparable, hypothetical situation that ultimately replicates the very experience he is describing – "*as if*... I had found him at my elbow." Indeed, the horror of having Compeyson at his elbow can only be conveyed by single metaphor: having him at his elbow. In attempting to formulate an analogy for his heightened sense of vulnerability, Pip can flee the original sensation that provoked it no more than he can flee Compeyson, or his back. The repetition occurs, perhaps, because the back is *already* an analogue for vulnerability – an enduring metaphorical and literal blind spot.

The uniqueness of the back in its particular regard as not simply a blind spot but above all a permanent, inescapable one is acknowledged here in no uncertain terms, as it provokes a "*special and peculiar* terror" that only it could. The persistence of the back when all else is visible or under control – its resistance to full knowledge – is emphasized by the theater context. That Pip goes to the theater in order to escape his consciousness of and sensitivity to others' gazes underscores the function of drama and of fiction generally as an escape from vulnerability to gaze. As we become voyeurs, we, along with our backs, disappear. In the viewership of theater especially, one willingly leaves one's body to occupy another's body while remaining free of its vulnerabilities. At once occupying and witnessing a body, the viewer forgets his own back. For Pip, the promised escape from his body is a false lure; it entices his mind to leave his body unattended only to expose that body to all the danger inherent to its shape. In snapping into

consciousness first of Wopsle's gaze in front of him, and then of Compeyson's gaze behind him, the persistence of his body in the wake of his mind's departure forces itself upon him like an unshakeable encumbrance – like the persistence of his backstory and the persistence of the narrative itself.

Meanwhile, the scene jerks us into a consciousness of the strange persistence of *our* reality despite our absence from it – into an awareness of our own backs. And we do so partly because we recognize in Pip someone who, like us, is lost in fiction, and also because *what* Pip views is just like what we view: the vulnerability of the back. The first play's dénouement, we are told, is “brought about through an honest little grocer... getting into a clock, with a gridiron, and listening, and coming out, and knocking everybody down from behind with the gridiron whom he couldn't confute with what he had overheard” (325). The grocer in the play listens to what the other characters say without their knowledge, thus simulating a reader or narrator, and then materializes that asymmetry by taking advantage of their backs, knocking them down from behind. Pip sees fictional characters undergo experiences parallel to those that *we* are seeing fictional characters undergo.

But the grocer character, who views the others without their knowledge, is himself unwittingly exposed to the gaze of Pip, who is a “reader” of the grocer's world, fictional relative to Pip's. Meanwhile, like the characters unknowingly viewed and attacked from behind by the grocer who is their fellow character, Pip is unknowingly viewed from behind by Compeyson, who is *his* fellow character. And just as the grocer and other characters are unwittingly exposed to the narratologically privileged gaze of Pip, so too are Pip and Compeyson unwittingly exposed to *our* narratologically privileged gaze on them. We are asked to wonder: to what fellow character, then, is my back at this moment unwittingly exposed? And to whose narratologically

privileged gaze may we both be vulnerable?

If Pip manages to forget the vulnerability of his back at the very moment he is watching the fictional vulnerability of others' backs – indeed, *because* he is watching that vulnerability – aren't we too, in watching Pip's fictional back vulnerability, forgetting our own? The danger Pip feels as a result of the open possibility continually suggested by his back is something we understand because we too have backs, and we too are lost in fiction. We do not merely *simulate* Pip's embodied experience; we actually experience the same thing he does. Remarkably, in drawing on the reader's back and the fact that he is reading a text that is in front of him, the text accesses the body and psyche of every competent reader of the text. No particular experience or ability is required to feel Pip's panic; it is enough for the reader to have a human body and to be making sense of the novel – a process that necessarily entails imagining Pip with a human body as well. Reading about Pip reproduces Pip: it provokes the replication of a “special and peculiar terror” – not that special and peculiar after all.

The episode once more conflates the narrative backstory and physical back, but it uses that now established pattern to achieve the feat of realizing Pip's fictional psychology not by soliciting empathy but by interrelating its fictional physical dynamics with the real-world physical and psychological dynamics inherent to reading fiction. And it seems no accident that the reader's physiological reaction is provoked by a scene that centralizes not reading but theater, which relies so thoroughly on simulated embodied experience. The replication of Pip's experience in our world involves the provocation of a physiological reaction that turns us into actors who house Pip's feelings and personality the way the actors on stage give their bodies over to the characters they play.

The conscious project of the text to involve us in it is evidenced by the fact that Pip issues

one of his few direct addresses to the reader immediately before this scene. “Fearful of having [Estella’s marriage] confirmed ..., I avoided the newspapers.... Why I hoarded up this last ... hope ... how do I know! Why did you, who read this, commit that not dissimilar inconsistency of your own, last year, last month, last week?” (324). It is partially out of the depression provoked by Estella’s marriage that Pip goes to the theater, and he makes sure (or reminds us), immediately before he goes, that we relate to his motive and subsequent behavior – and that we are aware of relating to it.

The fictional world thus seems to see and register our presence. In this, it resembles Mr. Wopsle’s viewing of Pip from the stage – a breaking of the fourth wall that usually keeps real and fictional worlds hermetically sealed off from one another. A broken wall is perhaps a particularly apt image, since it evokes the collapse of two-dimensionality effected by Mr. Wopsle’s seeing Compeyson *behind* Pip rather than in the same row, and our subsequent sense of the text’s awareness of our backs – its potential to see behind us.

Along with the way it provokes in us an awareness of our own backs, there is still another way that this near-metaleptic scene (perhaps as nearly metaleptic as realist fiction can be) jumps off the page and into our world. It does so through the ink on the page, whose positioning instantiates, in the real and literal space of our world where that ink exists, the spatial configurations and dynamics under representation. This phenomenon occurs on micro- and macro-levels – at the level of the sentence and in the overall written-ness of the book. My discussion of the second will conclude this argument, but first I will discuss the other as it occurs in the sentence that immediately follows the passage quoted above.

The sentence describes Pip’s terror: “... [It] was if I had shut an avenue of a hundred doors to keep him out, and then had found him at my elbow. I could not doubt either that he was

there, because I was there, and that however slight an appearance of danger there might be about us, danger was always near and active” (328). The words are animated into enacting – seemingly experiencing – their meaning. When Pip says “he was there, because I was there,” the phrase “he was there” occurs behind “I was there,” following it on its heels. The location of Compeyson as he follows Pip thus becomes materialized into the words on the page. Just as the pursuer duplicates the movements of the pursued, the image of the words representing these characters, here, are likewise duplicates – only the subject is changed (“He” to “I”). Of course, when we say that one word follows another, we typically mean that it comes afterward. Here, in that sense, we might say that Pip (“I was there”) follows Compeyson (“he was there”). By this logic, it would seem that the words are *not* in fact embodying and behaving like their referents – that they are behaving, indeed, in a completely opposite manner. But when “follows” describes the activity of something that comes “afterward,” it is from *our* perception of the words as elements in a series, as we view them one after another. By contrast, Character-Pip, as embodied in the “I” of “I was there,” is not reading the text as we are; he is not viewing himself from the outside, as an element in a sequence. Rather, he is inside it, experiencing this “I” from within, in a sentence where motion is occurring forward/right-ward. The “I” is *oriented* towards the words on the right – those are what it is walking towards, or facing – which means that the words on the right are in front of “I” (Pip) and that the words to the left – “he was there” (Compeyson) – are behind him.

The words here bring to live materiality in our world, in ink, the pursuit of Pip by Compeyson. The animation continues in the following words: “however slight an appearance of danger there might be about us, danger was always near and active” (328). At first, danger, like the first appearance of the word “danger,” exists as a hypothetical – a “might be about” which

keeps danger (the word and the concept) at a literal remove from the word and concept “us” (Pip and Magwitch). But as danger turns out to be “near and active,” sure enough the word “danger” appears immediately next to “us.” It is *near* indeed – separated from it only by a comma. And it is *active* too – suddenly an active grammatical subject after having been a more passive object in the previous clause. Indeed, danger/“danger” ends up, after that second occurrence, sandwiching and enclosing “us”/Pip and Magwitch, who cannot escape it: no matter what direction they turn, a version of it is behind/before them, like their very own backs. It is a textual materialization of the final capture scene on the boats: Pip and Magwitch think they are fleeing a Compeyson who is behind them, but he traps them by emerging from up ahead.

The real-world, physical embodiment of characters is matched by the embodiment of narratological structures, and this occurs not only through the ink on the page but through the book-object as a whole. It also occurs, of course, through the backstory.

Pip’s backstory is the narrative’s vanishing point. Multiple plot lines emerge from it, and as we move along them and watch them reverse their structures, they return to it too. As I have discussed at length, that backstory, in determining his social persona and means of living, helps constitute Pip. Because it does this so centrally, it lodges specifically in his *spine*: that most central portion of his inner structure, sheltering the cord that connects every part of his body to his mind. Just as, likewise, the backstory connects each part of the narrative to every other. Just as, likewise, our book’s spine connects each leaf to every other. Indeed, Pip feeling the backstory in his spine renders the material book an instantiation of him – one that constitutes him thus not only conceptually but physically. For the book’s spine constitutes *its* vanishing point: every written line, on every right-hand page, emerges from it. And as we turn each page from right to left, reversing it to see its backside, every parallel written line returns to it too. That the

book is Pip embodied explains why its spine is inscribed with the most material form taken by Pip's vanishing-point backstory: his *Great Expectations*.

Chapter 4

The Back Story in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

*Behind Me—dips Eternity—
Before Me—Immortality—
Myself—the Term between—*

Emily Dickinson

The Well-Beloved contains a scene, hardly out of place in Hardy, in which one character walks in on a second who has her back to the first. Though it was completed shortly after *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and before *Jude the Obscure*, the novel features a heavy stylization and avoidance of verisimilitude¹ that distinguish it from its famed brethren, which continue to make generations of readers cry with empathy. It is therefore somewhat striking that what Avise is doing with her back toward Pierston when he enters is “weeping over a book,”² experiencing a powerful physical reaction over text while within a text that makes no overt attempt to elicit the same from *its* reader.

Perhaps the moment would support J. Hillis Miller's characterization of *The Well-Beloved* as “an interpretation... or even... parody” of Hardy's other novels: an undisguised display of “the fictionality of fiction” that presents “a schematic and 'unrealistic' version” of “the geometric artifice” the others share.³ If nothing else, the little moment, gesturing as if towards a potential reader of *Tess* or *Jude*, may speak to Hardy's irrepressible interest in the realist form he has

¹“Like *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, *The Well-Beloved* is a highly stylized narrative in which repetition, re-enactment, and rehearsal take precedence over 'verisimilitude'” (J.B. Bullen, *The Expressive Eye: Fiction and Perception in the Work of Thomas Hardy* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986], p. 224).

²From Thomas Hardy, *The Well-Beloved* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, New Wessex Edition, 1975), p. 165.

³J. Hillis Miller, “Introduction,” *Ibid.*, pp. 13-16.

seemingly forsaken in his abandonment of typical Victorian verisimilitude.

This chapter, on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, will speak to the fever pitch manifestation of that interest in his late career, and further to the precise quality of that interest as an intense absorption in the ontology of a fictional character as she faces the most basic exigencies of fictional form, manifested through her body. It is this absorption in the weight and meaning of formal exigencies, and not “geometric artifice,” which these novels have in common with *The Well-Beloved*, and which explains the entrance of such a formally divergent work in the midst of, and in such close proximity to, novels like *Tess* and *Jude*. As critical readings like those of Miller or Eagleton implicitly admit, reducing these novels to “geometric artifice” requires a sort of reading most readers are not willing to do because it usually requires reading them against the grain of their humanity, compellingly embodied by the characters for whom Hardy's story-telling is loved.⁴ While Austen is often admired for such “coolly” aesthetic achievements as economy or geometry, Hardy is often criticized for perceived poor design: the “improbable” use of chance, melodrama, convoluted syntax and diction, mechanical plotting, or stilted dialogue.⁵ But even when his *characterization* is faulted – for “flatness” or “stageyness,” for example – his *characters* are still the figurative souls. In Joan's Grundy's delineation, they “are not primarily psychological or moral entities; they are *experiencing* creatures, and their inner life is a fusion... of internal impulses and external pressures. ... [W]e know what life *felt* to them....”⁶

This chapter will argue that Hardy is actively attentive to the formal pressures on those

⁴Eagleton argues about *Jude the Obscure*, for example, that “What have been read as its ‘crudities’ are less the consequences of some artistic incapacity than of an astonishing raw boldness on Hardy's part, a defiant flouting of verisimilitude’ which mounts theatrical gesture upon gesture in a driving back of the bounds of realism” (from *Criticism and Ideology* [New York: Verso, 2006]), p. 131.

⁵Peter Widdowson, *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1989), Chapter 1; Joan Grundy, *Hardy and the Sister Acts* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 12.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 10. Notably, the emphasis here is not mine.

internal impulses: his creatures experiencing the conditions of their own fictionality. The intersection of a character's dual status as both a device and fictional person captures Hardy's narrative imagination. Specifically, Hardy seems entranced by the consciousness of the fictional person as she pushes and is pushed against, tugs and is tugged by, the fundamental rules and terms of her fictionality. These include but are not limited to: first, ignorance to that fictionality; second, perpetual vulnerability to becoming the object of unilateral narrative gaze or the subject of unilateral narrative utterance; third, entrapment in an authorially determined plot that is bound by temporal linearity, experientially irreversible and incompressible. Of these, perhaps the most unbreakable, even in the most adventurously experimental postmodern fiction, is the first. It is logically impossible for fictional persons to know that their knowledge does not exist; to the extent that they are capable of knowing anything, their knowing is to that extent real.

But this study will witness Hardy bending the taken-for-granted inflexibility of that first rule while taking the others to task. The argument will read in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* a story about the story – the deliberate production of a secondary narrative that is simultaneously separable from and contiguous with the novel's primary (ostensible) narrative.⁷ In so doing, it will likewise discover the most interesting payoff of this production, which is to effect a plane on which Tess-the-person may approximate a consciousness of Tess-the-device, and on which this approximation may then be followed.

The intense preoccupation with the ontology of fictional character manifests noticeably in the particularities of the human body. Elaine Scarry's summation is apt: “[Hardy's] subject is not the passage of persons through the world but the passage of embodied persons through the world, and he is, on this subject, without peer in the three centuries of the English novel. The human

⁷In describing the secondary narrative as “separable,” I do not mean that the primary (ostensible) narrative can exist without it; indeed, it cannot. I mean only that it can be sifted out.

creature is for him not now and then but habitually embodied: it has at every moment a physical circumference and boundary.”⁸ In Hardy's fiction as in real life, there is an absolute persistence of the human body at the site of the (fictional) person. And since in normative realism, the character is everywhere both a fictional person and a formal device – since the device is inevitably located at the site of the person – we cannot but find, at the site of that formal device, the corresponding persistence of the body. So in Hardy, the human body can act as a point of convergence for the two – as an analogue for a character's dual status as both person and thing.

The human body furnishes a peculiarly suitable terrain on which the rules governing a character's ontology may be understood or subverted. The carnal materiality of the body in Hardy is self-evident. No less pervasive is the effect of this materiality on the consciousness (past or present) that is inevitably implied by a body. Turning once more to Scarry: “Human consciousness is always, for Hardy, embodied human consciousness: all states of being – not just overt, physical activity but even what appear to be forms of physical inactivity like reading or perceiving or feeling – inevitably entail reciprocal jostling with the world.”⁹ Since any fictional person's perpetual “state of being” is the state of being a fictional character, we may infer what I will argue: that in Hardy, this state too becomes intertwined with features of human embodiment. Indeed, this is how Hardy punctures the airtight first rule of fictionality that would guarantee the character's unconsciousness *to* that fictionality. In a world where states of being are always states of physical being, the state of fictionality is no exception: it assumes features of physical experience, and it does so such that its own rules, from the first to the third and beyond, can be experienced by means of, and therefore by the consciousness tethered to, a human body.

⁸Elaine Scarry, *Resisting Representation* (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 51.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 50.

The structure of this argument will depart from the general scholarly rule of linear sequencing. At the center of its rhetorical circumference is a “spine”: a passage from *Tess* that accompanies the reader through much of her passage through this argument’s pages. Like the spine of any person or book, this one in multiple ways “holds together” what surrounds it.¹⁰ Most of these ways will become clear in the argument's course.

The spine will as much unify this course as allow for it to be somewhat wayward – starting and stopping, moving forward and backward, free to roam by virtue of its tethering to a location both figuratively and literally present throughout the argument. The “spine” passage's figurative presence – its significance – forms one of the argument’s rhetorical centerpieces. This is presented, literally, in the argument’s approximate middle. The other literal presence of the “spine,” offered simply in the form of complete and direct quotation at the argument's outset, serves as a reference point from which each of the argument's subsequent parts, leading up to the spine, are derived. Though each such part emerges in some way from the spine, its completion lends back to that source a greater structural integrity, consolidating and strengthening it by helping to capture the full range of its meaning. The parts following the spine, in turn, grow free from it.

The literality of this figurative organization may engender in the reader an actually

¹⁰We may be reminded of “The Death of the Author”: “Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it” (145). If the text of our spine passage exhausted its “subject” – the full flesh of its span of reference – on its own, it would be unnecessary (or redundant, or impossible) to articulate an argument about and around it. But many a literary argument hopes to prove that it is *already* articulated in the literature that forms its object of analysis. This argument hopes further to show that its threads are coiled into a single passage in particular – into everything from that passage’s language to its location among a network of passages, events, and turns that strikingly centralize it.

physical relationship with the text. Physically turning back to the full quotation of the “spine,” for example, may alert the reader to the privileged ability, withheld to the fictional person, to thus move backward with respect to a written narrative, both spatially and temporally – looking at previous pages or reversing her progress through the argument. The reader is invited to recognize the very physical power, invulnerability, temporal freedom, flexibility, which are withheld from a character by the terms of her fictionality.¹¹

To complete this introduction to a rhetorical structure designed partly to animate the rules of character-hood by exploiting the reader's relative exemption from them, let us initiate that structure by turning back to the moment in *The Well-Beloved* that positions a character in the place of a reader:

But only Avice was there, seated..., her back being toward him. She was holding her handkerchief to her eyes, and he saw that she was weeping silently.

In another moment he perceived that she was weeping over a book. By this time she had heard him, and came forward. ... When he had taken a cup of tea she went away, leaving the book behind her.

Pierston took it up. The volume was an old school-book; Stièvenard's “Lectures Françaises”, with her name in it as a pupil at Sandbourne High School, and date-markings denoting lessons taken at a comparatively recent time....

For a school-girl – which she virtually was – to weep over a school-book was strange. Could she have been affected by some subject in the readings? Impossible. (165)

¹¹Hardy makes such an overt gesture himself, in the maps of Wessex that precede each of his novels (the late ones and the later editions of earlier ones) and to which the reader is free to turn at any time in her reading. Notably, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the first of the final three “Novels of Character and Environment” that form this argument's subject, was his first publication to include such a map. This deliberate merger of the fictional with the real – by way, no less, of the physicality inherent to maps (which both reference physical locations and abandon the signifying method of language in favor of a more directly physical representation) – lends further credence to two components of this argument: 1) that Hardy was increasingly preoccupied at this time with fictionality *qua* fictionality (its simultaneous distinction from and proximity to reality) and 2) that this preoccupation assumes a peculiarly direct physical form in the texts of these final novels. (That *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is “the earliest attempt on Hardy's part to place much of his fiction in a single historical and topographical context” as well as “the first time... we observe Hardy acting overtly as local historian for the more accurate information of readers” is put forth by Simon Gatrell in “Wessex,” *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, Ed. Dale Kramer [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], p. 25.)

As it turns out, Avice appears to be weeping over a book not at all like *Tess* or *Jude*; rather, she is crying over a school-book. Perhaps still more surprisingly, neither Pierston nor we find out exactly what, in that book, elicits her tears. She takes the secret with her when she leaves, leaving “behind” her the book, Pierston, and us all at once. But at the start of that paragraph, we are already left behind in another sense. For by the end of its first sentence – by the end, that is, of the moment that passes while Pierston perceives she is crying over a book – Avice has already, as we discover belatedly and in the pluperfect, “heard him.” She has done so behind our backs, as it were, though it is behind her back that, a mere moment earlier, the scene begins. The very moment we find out that Avice is *reading*, in other words, is the same moment we transition from being spatially behind Avice (with her not knowing that we are there) to being temporally behind her in the action (with our not knowing [yet] what she is doing).

A reader’s position with respect to a character is always epistemologically privileged: the second is never able to know of the first, and the first can eventually know everything there *is* to know of the second. A reader, in other words, is always in a character’s blind spot. Avice-as-reader is alerted to her blind spot (Pierston) just as it becomes visible to her; but she does so, strikingly, by herself entering our blind spot. In a way, the placement of Avice, a character, in the position of a fictional reader is the very thing to put her real reader in the brief epistemological position of a fictional character.

What’s more, the text renders a strikingly palpable convergence of epistemology with phenomenology. Ordinary spatial and temporal parameters of ignorance and discovery are charged with, because iterated in, the parameters of embodiment. Their materialization is made possible specifically by the body’s built-in “blind spot” – by its possession of a back.

The following meditation on *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* will show more thoroughly that,

how, and with what consequences the features of fictional narrative and human embodiment merge. It will demonstrate how stringent rules governing the body are exploited toward representing equally stringent rules governing fictionality, and it will do so through sustained focus on the body part that manifests this convergence more strikingly, compositely, and germanely than all others: the back.

The Spine

She went on without turning her head. Her back seemed to be endowed with a sensitiveness to ocular beams – even her clothing – so alive was she to a fancied gaze which might be resting upon her from the outside of that barn. All the way along to this point her heart had been heavy with an inactive sorrow; now there was a change in the quality of its trouble. That hunger for affection too long withheld was for the time displaced by an almost physical sense of an implacable past which still engirdled her. It intensified her consciousness of error to a practical despair; the break of continuity between her earlier and present existence, which she had hoped for, had not, after all, taken place. Bygones would never be complete bygones till she was a bygone herself.¹²

Tess of the d'Urbervilles¹³ continues her passage “without turning her head” because it would be of no use to do otherwise. She can achieve no “break of [temporal] continuity” from what is now behind her. And there can be no break from its ocular beams, since her “large orbs”¹⁴ can neither meet nor share the disembodied gaze that takes her back as its object. Turning her head would bring her no closer to confronting, affecting, or escaping the troubled backstory that, in its refusal to become only a story, rests instead as a felt sensation on her back.

Part One – Which Backstory?

“...[A]n almost physical sense of *an* implacable past which still engirdled her....”

The indefinite article before “past” refers definitively to *a* particular portion of *the* more general past. As such, it signifies a specific story from that past – sometimes called a backstory.

¹²Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 384-385.

¹³This unitalicized rendering of the novel's title reminds us of what is effected by the novel: the approximate conflation of an imagined person with the material book that represents her. This idea is also subtly suggested by Gillian Beer's observation that “Hardy in his emplotment... adopt[s]... the single life span as his scale. Whereas George Eliot's novels and Dickens's novels, tend to include death, rather than end with death, Hardy's texts pay homage to human scale by ceasing as the hero or heroine dies. The single life span is ... polemical. That is one formal expression of his humanism” (*Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* [Cambridge University Press, 2000], p. 223).

¹⁴“As [Angel] fell out of the dance his eyes lighted on Tess Durbeyfield, whose own large orbs wore, to tell the truth, the faintest aspect of reproach that he had not chosen her” (54).

Like any story, true or fictional, a backstory does not reference every event and detail in its time span. It implies, more selectively, a set of events that are not necessarily continuous and that, for whatever reason, carry relevance in the moment at or from which the backstory is summoned or viewed. Hypothetically, Tess's backstory could be constituted by any set of events pertaining to her life prior to this instant in the *fabula*. But we know that the “implacable” part of her past that she “sense[s]” is the one involving Alec d’Urberville. We know because it is that “existence,” the one determined by him, from which she has most wanted a “break of continuity.” And we know because immediately prior to this moment, she has just seen Alec after a significant time away from him.

In a novel whose events seem usually to be the immediate or indirect results of previous ones, whose outset depicts a character being alerted to his ancestry, and whose very title signals its obsession with origin, there are numerous potential backstories.¹⁵ But of all her possible backstories, *this* story acquires for Tess a seemingly physical form.

The “implacable” aspect of Tess's history with Alec being sexual, it is also physical. But its physicality remains inadequately recognized by readings that would pinpoint sexuality as the primary meaning of the body in the novel.¹⁶ In “the almost physical sense of an implacable past”

¹⁵ The novel's structure and themes indeed seem everywhere to assert the importance of antecedence. Tess's conscious relation to this importance will be examined in greater detail as the argument progresses. But for now, its notice presents an opportunity to distinguish this argument from the classic readings. Miller, for example, finds fault with the attempts to find in *Tess* a “center that can be identified.” In his estimation, “The reader tends to assume that Hardy's world is in one way or another deterministic. Readers have, moreover, tended to assume that this [center] will be single. It will be some one force, original and originating” (J. Hillis Miller, “Tess of the d'Urbervilles: Repetition as Immanent Design,” in *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982], p. 140). I would suggest that if readers tend to assume Hardy's world is deterministic, it is because this world actively invites that assumption.

¹⁶ These readings constitute a great, if not possibly the greater, proportion of the total readings of *Tess*, many of which are feminist critiques that either criticize a misogynist objectification of Tess or laud a radical, progressive re-envisioning of what constitutes a “pure woman.” Even Peter Brooks, who, for all his argument's debt to Freud, is much less interested than these readings in *gender*, asserts sexuality to be the body's main implication for the novel: “One might also maintain that it is Thomas Hardy who finally unveils the body in the English novel, most particularly in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, facing at last, in relative nakedness, the presence and power of Eros, and

is a physicality seemingly beyond, or before, sex. Explicitly, it has nothing to do with such feelings as “hunger for affection,” and implicitly, it is neither about repulsion for unwanted affection. The crux of this “practical despair” is a body part apart from Tess's cheeks or lips or bosom or throat: a body part that the novel never dares nor deigns to sexualize.¹⁷ Tess's back is a special body part – a dimension of her body's very structure.

Why should any story make itself felt on Tess's back? How does it come to do so? And why a backstory? Why *this* backstory? This last question cannot be answered simply by correlating the physicality inherent to any sexual history with the physicality assumed by a history felt strangely on one's back. There is something peculiar about this history that allows it such unique carnal power.

Indeed, this particular history has always entailed a “secondary narrative,” a story that is contiguous with the apparent one and may thus be imagined as its metonymic backside. The protagonist of this secondary narrative has still been Tess, but her antagonist in it has not been Alec; instead, it has been her own back. Indeed, Tess's back sustains an evolving relation to Tess herself. And the evolution of Tess's sexual relationship with Alec unfolds concurrently with this evolution of this relation to her back. The novel's representation of this evolution is as literal as Tess's back is, and the following sections will trace it.

Following the genealogy of Tess's relation to her back will disclose the felt connection

making the next step – to D.H. Lawrence – merely inevitable” (*Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992]).

¹⁷The overt sexualization of so many of Tess's individual body parts: “...his lips touching cheeks that were damp and smoothly chill as the skin of the mushrooms in the fields around” (126); “...that little upward lift in the middle of her red top lip was distracting, infatuating, maddening (208); “She had an attribute... that caused Alec d'Urberville's eyes to rivet themselves upon her. It was a luxuriance of aspect, a fulness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was” (82); “[Angel] suggested to her how to tuck in the upper edge of her bodice...; and when... the pendant to the necklace hung isolated amid the whiteness of her throat, as it was designed to do, he stepped back to survey her” (287).

between the back and the fundamental features of narrative practice. This will lay, in turn, the foundation for understanding what follows this spinal phenomenon – in particular, the uncharacteristic narrative strategies and events of the novel’s final phase: “Fulfilment.”¹⁸

Part Two – Alec’s Laughter (Front View)

“... [*S*]eemed to be endowed with a sensitiveness to ocular beams – even her clothing....”

Tess's back *seems* in this scene to be “endowed with a sensitiveness to ocular beams,” but of course this is not literally the case. If it were, the novel would not meet its genre’s demand for plausibility. But since there is no obligation for a Naturalist novel to be as continuously distressing as it is realistic, *Tess* can sometimes entertain the opposite fancy: one for which the word “endowed” would be more unequivocally appropriate. I mean the comforting dream that would find backs endowed with ocular senses – *powers* – rather than sensitivities:

The reaping-machine left the fallen corn behind it in little heaps... and upon these the active binders in the rear laid their hands—mainly women, but some of them men in print shirts, and trousers supported round their waists by leather straps, rendering useless the two buttons behind, which twinkled and bristled with sunbeams at every movement of each wearer, as if they were a pair of eyes in the small of his back.

But those of the other sex were the most interesting of this company of binders, by reason of the charm which is acquired by woman when she becomes part and parcel of outdoor nature. (137)

In this description of labor in the fields near Tess's home, to which she returns after her time at the d'Urberville estate early in the novel, the fantasy that one might have eyes on one's back is suggested in the context of men’s clothing. Because this context also, and quite explicitly, contrasts men and women, the passage may seem to encourage the notion that in a world where backs *could* have eyes, only men would have them. No doubt such a reading would find support

¹⁸ I am following Hardy's spelling in dropping one of the *l*'s in this word.

among those critics who find sexism rampant across Hardy's work. Even the straightforwardly admiring tone that subordinates men's charms to those of women could be submitted as an example of Hardy's voyeurism, fitting the stereotype of the misogynist who is empowered or permitted to view – whether from front or behind – the objectified woman whose own ocular powers are as limited as they are inconsequential. In this way, a study of the back in Hardy would “discover” yet another part of the body that is gendered.

But that would be disingenuous. What is noted about these pretend “pair[s] of eyes” is not, after all, their would-be *gaze* but their *look*, as they twinkle and bristle in the sunlight. Whatever the presumed or implied gender of the narration, it views the men, no less than the women, as more or less “interesting” objects. Its gaze is thus equalizing, like the back itself, whose implied visual limitations come to bear as a dimension of the body’s universal structure. Exemplifying the extent to which having a body is itself inherently universalizing, these limitations transcend the stratifying categories of gender.

This universalizing quality is implicit in Angel's observation to his father that “when he should start in the farming business he would require eyes in the back of his head to see to all matters.... Would it not be well, therefore, for him to marry?” (223). In this vision of wedded bliss, a man and a woman couple together to compensate for – to cancel out – each other’s limitations, represented by their two blind backs. We are made to imagine equality in terms of an embodied (double-bodied) symmetry that would thus supersede the more minor differences between those bodies.

If a coupled body is empowered, then an uncoupled one is vulnerable, and it is this belief that is articulated by the novel's first explicit reference to Tess’s back. She goes to the market at Trantridge and lingers late into the night, compelled to wait for others to tire of their revelries so

that she may not have to walk home alone. Eventually, she finds herself the sole spectator of a large group of dancing couples. The perfect arrangement of these dancers into pairs is explicitly described: “They did not vary their partners if their inclination were to stick to previous ones. Changing partners simply meant that a satisfactory choice had not as yet been arrived at by one or other of the pair, and by this time every couple had been suitably matched” (108). Tess, excluded from a perfect economy of protected physical movements, is still and alone in a doorway, watching. It is seemingly because she is watching others, and because no one is in turn watching (out for) her, that her back is left vulnerable to Alec d’Urberville’s sudden gaze and approach: “A loud laugh from behind Tess’s back, in the shade of the garden, united with the titter within the room. She looked round, and saw the red coal of a cigar: Alec d’Urberville was standing there alone” (109).¹⁹ The moment emphatically literalizes the vulnerability implied by an uncoupled and thereby exposed back.

Not by accident does this first mention of Tess’s back coincide with the first interaction between Tess and Alec on the very night of their later sexual encounter in the woods. That encounter is the defining event of Tess’s sexual history with Alec as well as of the “secondary narrative” that tells of Tess’s evolving relation to her own back. That these two narratives are contiguous and concurrent will become increasingly evident as we reread what leads to and then follows the sexual encounter. It is seen already, here, in the perfect coincidence of these two moments: the moment of Tess and Alec’s first brief encounter that night (foreshadowing later events in ways that can only become clear in retrospect) and the moment that first brings Tess’s back explicitly into the narrative.

¹⁹ The sentence immediately preceding these contains the phrase, “making odd lots of the single people,” emphasizing the link between singlehood and Tess’s back vulnerability.

As I will argue, the later encounter is fundamentally staged, by the sequencing of the narrative, as an exploitation of the vulnerability of Tess's back. For now, we may note at least the scope of that exploitation as it relates to this section's focus on the back's genderless universality. Long before the sexual encounter transpires, its undesirability for the revolted Tess is clear; it is a union contrasting jarringly from Angel's vision of a happy, backless, equalized couple. Likewise, what is taken advantage of is not simply the availability and susceptibility of Tess's feminine sexuality. More generally, it is the vulnerability of her very humanity that is exploited. When it occurs, after all, she is doing something done by all living creatures: sleeping.

Among other reasons, this vulnerability should be imagined as located on her back both because it is imposed on her metaphorically from "behind" – that is, by antecedent events – and because those events literally locate vulnerability at the site of a person's back. This will be fleshed out in the following three sections.

Part Three – Tess's Laughter (Front View)

"...[A] sensitiveness to ocular beams... alive... to a *fancied gaze*..."

Long before Tess senses a disembodied and anonymous gaze on her back in the "spine" passage, a different back experiences the real gaze of living companions who, by their positioning and the language that captures their shared viewership, are made to seem similarly disembodied and anonymous. The back belongs to Car Darch, the "leading pedestrian" of the group that accompanies Tess homeward from Trantridge shortly after the scene in which Tess watches the dancing couples and hears Alec's laugh. Car "carrie[s] a wicker-basket containing her... purchases for the week ... on the top of her head...":

"Well—whatever is that a-creeping down thy back, Car Darch?"
said one of the group suddenly.

All looked at Car. Her gown was a light cotton print, and from the back of her head a kind of rope could be seen descending to some distance below her waist, like a Chinaman's queue.

"Tis her hair falling down," said another.

No; it was not her hair: it was a black stream of something oozing from her basket, and it glistened like a slimy snake in the cold still rays of the moon.

"Tis treacle," said an observant matron. (110-111)

Here we encounter the first extended study of the human back in *Tess*. Hardy's strategic placement of Car at the lead such that her back is available to everyone in the group, including Tess, allows for that terse, heavy sentence immediately following the mention of her back: "All looked at Car." The poignancy is in what is unsaid but necessarily true – "All *but Car* looked at Car." The brevity of the actual sentence underscores Car's total reduction, or sentencing, to an object of seemingly universal gaze.

This universality, compressed in the word "All," throws into relief the manner by which this gaze singularizes Car, since, unable to look at her own back, she is the only one who cannot share that gaze. This intense particularization is strengthened by the anonymity of the viewers in the lines immediately preceding and following – literally surrounding – the sentence. Vague references to "one of the group" and "another" render every subject other than Car just as anonymous as the narrator who, without name or body, provides an omniscient third-person account of Car's clothing and appearance that intercedes in the dialogue. That the mechanics of the back allow these companions to achieve a status effectively on par with that of the narrator underscores a fundamental attribute of the back, which has the capacity to put any viewer on par with, or on the same plane as, a narrator – or, conversely, to put anyone with a viewed back on par with a character.

Likewise, the description and dialogue following "All looked at Car" imply the authority of the subjective viewer over the object being viewed, an authority manifest in the power to

identify (however inaccurately) and to describe (however uncertainly). The authority, and its corresponding superiority, is perhaps emphasized precisely by the delay in factual information about what is on Car's back (we are made to imagine “a Chinaman's queue,” “hair,” “a black stream of something,” and “a slimy snake” before we are finally told that what is trickling is “treacle”). This unapologetic delay, rife with uncertainty, enhances the superiority of the viewers, including the narration, since it implies ironically a certain conceited *disregard* about Car. Even the final, correct identification is delivered with a combination of authority and indifference (“‘Tis treacle,’ said an observant matron”).

Car's back transforms her into an object vulnerable not only to seemingly universal viewership and proliferating descriptions, but also to ridicule. With its unambiguous expression of her abruptly subordinate position, this ridicule eventually pushes the indignant Car's silenced subjectivity out of herself and into action.

By this time there had arisen a shout of laughter at the extraordinary appearance of Car's back, which irritated the dark queen into getting rid of the disfigurement by the first sudden means available, and independently of the help of the scoffers. She rushed excitedly into the field they were about to cross, and flinging herself flat on her back upon the grass, began to wipe her gown as well as she could by spinning horizontally on the herbage and dragging herself over it upon her elbows. (111)

Car's inability to see her own back, subjecting her first to visual objectification and then to ridicule, causes a pain and humiliation so intolerable that she is willing to risk *even further ridicule* to seize control of its appearance. In so doing, she makes herself ever more a spectacle, with laughter ringing ever louder. But the point is just that: she makes herself. She may be no less the object of the narration's gaze than before, but now she – and not her back or things on it – is also its grammatical subject. And as she rushes and wipes and spins, she claims ownership not only of her possessions and body parts (“*her gown*” and “*her elbows*”) but of her very self (“*flinging herself*” and “*dragging herself*”). She seizes control of her body such that it becomes

her proprietary (and grammatical) object, no longer at the disposal entirely of others.

Car manages, in this way, to escape the sudden depersonalization and general vulnerability effected by her back. But doing so requires an extreme physical performance, requiring no less than the protection of her back by the earth, a surface with a reliably nonexistent backside.²⁰ And we sense that the only thing that really allows her escape from the focus on her back might be that she is a minor character. The primary focus of the narrative, and therefore of its narration and characters, must turn eventually, inevitably, back to Tess.

Unsurprisingly given this narrative rule, the first thing Car does, after she has displaced everyone's attention from her back to her *self*, is to “hear the soberer richer note” of Tess's particular laugh from among the general, anonymous laughs of everybody else; and just as immediately, “She sprang to her feet and closely *faced the object* of her dislike” (112, my emphasis). If we notice that the back of a person has the capacity to turn her into an object, then we may also see that the face – and its ability to perform the act, as here, of facing – implies both a subjectivity and corresponding subject-hood. And what completes Car's escape of her back, or the vulnerability suggested by her back, is to transfer that vulnerability onto a different object – onto Tess. With cruel poetic justice, Tess laughs at the vulnerability of another's back only to become, as a direct consequence, vulnerable herself – vulnerable first to the vitriol of her companions and then, as a result of that, vulnerable to Alec's rape,²¹ the defining episode of her

²⁰ Hardy is actively aware of the earth as having no backside. One example: “Towards the second evening she reached the irregular chalk table-land or plateau, bosomed with semi-globular tumuli – as if Cybele the Many-breasted were supinely extended there...” (355).

²¹ Whether or not Tess and Alec's sexual encounter in the woods is *really* a rape or whether it is instead a “seduction” or still something else has been debated extensively by critics. I use the word “rape” not to underscore Tess's lack of agency – indeed, this “section” will detail precisely Tess's errors – but mainly for simplicity. To me there is no doubt that a certain vulnerability is exploited, and “rape” seems most concisely to capture an exploitation that happens to have a sexual dimension (even if, as I argued in Part 2, that isn't its only dimension).

backstory.

Part Four – Tess's Laughter (Back View)

"She went on *without* turning her head."

The significance of Tess's laugh at Car's back as the crucial event leading to the rape cannot be denied. Even in a domino-like Naturalist plot whose every event seems an apparent consequence of the previous one, the causal link between these two is emphatically underscored. Nothing else could explain the presence or meaning of the narration's explicit declaration immediately following and describing the laugh: "It was a misfortune—in more ways than one" (111). We discover but one of these "ways" in the ensuing conflict with Car. The other can only mean Alec's subsequent "rescue," as he takes Tess from that conflict and into the woods where he takes advantage of her.

The events leading to the woods are artfully designed as a series of interwoven twists that highlight, structurally and thematically, the precarious, unpredictable status implied by the human back, along with Tess's problematic relation to this status. First, thinking that a walk alone might prove dangerous, Tess decides to walk home from Trantridge with companions. The (first) twist, then, is that the (first) danger of the evening originates from her companions themselves. This reversal, whereby her imagined friends become her apparent enemies, is an antecedent that might warn Tess of a future reversal whereby Alec's rescue will transform into attack. And the corollary twist – her own shift from being his potential target to his confirmed victim – is equally predictable, since it too has an antecedent. Earlier, as the villagers transform from friend to enemy, Tess transforms from invulnerable to vulnerable, as she laughs at Car Darch's back and elicits her anger. This transformation, because among other things it is her

own, constitutes an even more tragically missed opportunity for Tess to come alive to her potentially perpetual vulnerability to unpredictable threats.

Instead, as she fatefully jumps onto Alec's horse, Tess expects that her “fear and indignation at these adversaries could be *transformed* by a spring of the foot into a *triumph* over them...” (113, my emphasis). Perhaps this expectation derives from what she witnesses of Car – namely, that while Car may transform “suddenly” from “(D)arch” leader to ridiculed spectacle, she also goes quickly back from mocked object to bullying subject. Since Tess, the object of that bullying, has transferred with similar suddenness from the offensive to the defensive, she assumes perhaps that she too will switch back to a position, as she imagines, of “triumph.” The distinction Tess misses is that Car does not “abandon herself”²² as Tess does. Instead, she enacts an active seizing of herself that, though it may resemble an epileptic seizure, turns out to be effective in securing her triumph over the moment. She does so in an overwhelming recognition of what is unseen and vulnerable about herself – in a profound alertness to her back. Sadly, Car’s triumph, though it is the very thing to enable her subsequent aggression toward Tess, does not make Tess similarly alert to her own back. Her inability to notice the significance of antecedence – to use antecedent events in the prediction of future ones – is matched by her inability to notice the significance of her back – to become alert to the perpetual vulnerability suggested by her body, not simply in its sexuality (a fear that leads her to walk home with companions in the first place) but in its humanity.

For indeed, Tess’s ignorance to the similarity between what is behind her and what is before her *temporally* is matched, perfectly, by her ignorance of the similarity between what is

²²“But coming as the invitation did at the particular juncture when fear and indignation at these adversaries could be transformed by a spring of the foot into a triumph over them, she *abandoned herself* to her impulse, climbed the gate, put her toe upon his instep, and scrambled into the saddle behind him” (113, my emphasis).

behind her and what is before her *spatially*. When her intoxicated companions follow Car's (reassumed) lead and "[bring] down a torrent of vituperation... upon fair Tess's unlucky head," the latter is so defenseless as to be "unfairly browbeaten" in a "war" of mounting tension: "They were all now inside the field, and she was *edging back* to rush off alone when a horseman emerged almost silently from the *corner* of the hedge that *screened* the road, and Alec d'Urberville looked round upon them" (112, my emphasis). Tess's movement as if toward a literal "edge" puts into spatial terms her state of becoming figuratively "cornered" by the choices of staying or leaving. But it is the literally backward direction of this movement that emphasizes its most troubling aspect – that Tess can fully see and evaluate only one of these choices. She cannot see, does not so much as consider, that the danger on *this* side of the "edge" is matched (indeed far surpassed) by the potential consequences on *that* side. And her continued ignorance even after Alec sinisterly "emerges" is abetted precisely by this emergence, since it sustains her belief that all potential threats can be, and are, in front of her: visible and known.

Thus Chapter X of the novel (remarkably left out of the original edition of the novel²³) constitutes the felt start both of Tess's traumatic backstory with Alec as well as of the contiguous story that is about Tess's back. Tess's laugh at Car's back is represented as a point of no return – the event that is presented as leading most directly to Tess's abduction and violation. And it is also the first move in the story that is told, behind the ostensible one, about Tess's back. In this early stage of that evolution, we see that Tess's relation to her own back, as it represents the dual significance of antecedence and perpetual vulnerability, is improper: she is effectively ignorant of the significance, and is necessarily unaware of her own ignorance. The effect of her subsequent, apparently consequent, trauma is to begin to enforce upon her that significance.

²³J.T. Laird, *The Shaping of Tess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Already we may see what will become more apparent as we continue to follow the story of Tess's relation to her back: that the relation embodies Tess's relation to her status as a fictional character – the relation between Tess-the-person and Tess-the-device. Tess's lack of sensitivity to antecedence in this phase underscores her ignorance of her formal participation in a designed, teleological narrative that, though it is written, she cannot and does not read, let alone *reread*. It is striking, after all, that in a novel obsessed from its first page with origins, we encounter a protagonist completely oblivious to the potential importance of causality and antecedence. Their placement on her back literalizes that oblivion and the vulnerability they suggest: the vulnerability, that is, to being determined. This is a narrative that not only decides what will happen to Tess, but, equally unbeknownst to her, helps constitute her very being, just as her back helps constitute her very body.

Part Five – Alec's Laughter (Back View)

“...[C]ontinuity between... earlier and present existence....”

Alec's earlier “loud laugh from behind Tess's back” as she watches the dancing couples reinforces the extent to which the troubled sexual history between Alec and Tess is also a story about Tess's back. It does so in two ways. First, it foreshadows his imminent threat in a manner that explicitly spatializes their relative degrees of power and vulnerability, locating the latter on Tess's back, which derives its vulnerability, here as later, from its lack of ocular power. Second, its foreshadowing raises to further prominence Tess's own subsequent laugh behind Car's back, what I have argued is the felt origin of Tess's sexual encounter with Alec, which in turn is the central event of her sexual history with him.

Tess's laugh behind Car's back has an all too clear antecedent in Alec's laughter behind

Tess's back (which is likewise behind Tess's laugh in time). Tess herself, who is not even aware that her laugh behind Car's back will be the crucial antecedent to her own body becoming vulnerable to Alec, can hardly be aware that Alec's laugh will be an antecedent to hers. But we are not presumed to be aware of it either, at least not when we read the novel for the first time. Its significance as an antecedent becomes clear only on reading it backward from Tess's laugh, and more truly even after that upon reading Tess's laugh backward from the subsequent events that render it significant by becoming themselves significant with respect to the novel's plot as a whole.

Through Alec's laugh, antecedence begins projecting its significance onto Tess's back long before the first-time reader can suspect it. It beckons us, later, to look backward. And if, as in Peter Brooks's formulation, plot is a "reading backward," then the elucidation of *this* plot – this secondary narrative about Tess's back that transpires in the background of the novel's ostensible plot – involves a backward reading that imposes on the reader an education like that of Tess.²⁴ In coming to see both that and how antecedence is important, we learn both to look *back* as well as to look *at Tess's back* – that is, to pay attention to it. As we have already seen, these are precisely the things Tess does not know to do prior to the sexual trauma that comes about as if because of that ignorance. And as we will see, they are precisely what she learns in its aftermath: the following two sections and the spine between them will trace how Tess's relation

²⁴ Later in *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks describes repetition as a phenomenon that "can take us both backward and forward because... terms... become reversible: the end is a time before the beginning." We see this movement, as well as the necessary "reading backward," in the example of the two laughs and what is required for us to perceive the significance of the first. But really, it requires a *rereading* backward because, as I imply in the previous paragraph, the reading of the "secondary plot" is impossible until one knows the primary plot in full, and impossible without a kind of close reading that, on a first reading, would be "too close" – that would, in other words, threaten the "sense-making" of the text. (Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*; "too close reading" and its discontents are described in D.A. Miller, "Hitchcock's Hidden Pictures," *Critical Inquiry*, Summer 2010.)

to her back evolves such that she becomes alert to her back – in conjunction with the narrative exigencies it embodies, from the primacy of antecedence to the indeterminate vulnerability to gaze and utterance that it demands.

Part Six – Before Alec’s Back

“It *intensified her consciousness* of error to a practical despair....”

Backs are not supposed to be able to feel the physical gazes that might be directed at them, since even if such gazes assumed the materiality of actual “beams” of light, they would still be intangible. What allows our imaginations to bear the fancy, so easily and probably unnoticeably, that Tess’s body can sense an unseen gaze?

In the totality of her ontology as a character, Tess is both a written thing and an imagined person who “exists,” is reconstituted, in our minds as we process what is written. Narrative practice not only determines but also helps constitute that very totality: unavailable to her perception, it determines what happens to and in “her” to the extent that she is a person, and it constitutes the part of “her” that is nothing more than a written thing. It is linked to her back because that is the dimension of her body that effectively allows a duplication of this practice for her consciousness: her back constitutes a portion of her being even as it remains both impossible to determine and inaccessible to her visual perception. This section will show how, in a slow development from the night of her trauma to the moment of our “spinal” passage, Tess’s back increasingly imposes on her, such that it engenders her growing awareness of, the parameters of narrative practice.

Unlike Tess, who cannot “look back” to read the text up to this point, we, in our privileged position as readers, can. Such a backward (and therefore second) look would reveal

that Tess's "almost physical sense" of the past and her corresponding sense of being viewed – are not groundless paranoid delusions or the signs of an ill-affected physiognomy. In fact, this "spine" moment is closely preceded by a pair of scenes that seem directly to engender these heightened sensibilities and thoughts. The second scene appears discursively in the chapter immediately before (in Chapter XLIV), and the first one appears a few chapters before that (in Chapter XLI).

The first, an episode so painful that it causes Tess literally to run and hide, occurs when she is on her way to Flintcomb-Ash farm and hears "footsteps behind her back" that soon overtake her. They belong to the "well-to-do boor" from Trantridge who, much earlier in the novel, accuses Tess of promiscuity in front of Angel.²⁵ As he steps "up alongside Tess" and then "turn[s] and stare[s] hard at her," he recognizes and immediately addresses her acquaintance with Alec, as if that relation were equivalent to her very name,²⁶ impossible not to address in his address of her: "Why, surely, it is the young wench who was at Trantridge awhile – young Squire d'Urberville's friend?" (350). This moment of deep anguish for Tess is a mutual and double "recognition," as Tess confronts and is confronted by the appearance of her shameful sexual history, recapitulated by an utterance that is itself a recapitulation of an earlier utterance. The

²⁵ Notably, after this accusation is countered by the "full force of [Angel's] fist" and thereby forced into being retracted, we encounter a brief, rare moment of leaving Tess's point of view and going behind her back. (Such moments are generally restricted, in the novel, to the chapters that detail Angel's point of view while he is away from Tess and of course to the near entirety of Phase the Seventh ["Fulfilment"]. Also notable about this moment, therefore, is that we go behind Tess and Angel's backs simultaneously): "As soon as Clare had taken the reins from the ostler, and the young couple had driven off, the two men went in the other direction. 'And was it a mistake?' said the second one. 'Not a bit of it. But I didn't want to hurt the gentleman's feelings – not I.' In the meantime, the lovers were driving onward" (274). In other words, prior to the post-abandonment and pre-"Spine" period under consideration in this section, Tess's real "radius of repute" thus extends outside her periphery *unbeknownst* to her – before, as I hope to demonstrate, she begins to be alert to its full circumference.

²⁶ Indeed, as I argue, the name "Tess" is synonymous with the novel's title *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, whose plot is finally made to be synonymous with, or characterized cardinally by, the dominating, subsuming relation between Tess and Alec.

significance of antecedence is thrown into sharp relief, as multiple previous events, previously hoped to be permanently behind her, instead emerge from that location to thus verbally surround her – the symptom of an inescapable “radius of repute” that, like the spiraling reaping-machine in Part 2 gradually closing in upon animals that flee to a center where it eventually traps and tramples them, seems to “engirdle” Tess in the completeness and tightness of its circumference. The physical nature of the provocation (he appears from behind her) is matched by the physicality of her response: she makes no verbal reply, but instead flees away from the *scene*, textual and spatial.

Tess’s back raises in her mind the potential, here, of being spoken of not just in locations where she can see and hear it – as, for example, in the previous version of this man’s utterance (or in the church scene even earlier, when she deliberately sits in the back-most pew [the rape having apparently alerted her to her back] and sees then hears whispered commentary about herself, made by fellow church-goers – but also behind her back, without her knowledge). This potential is later crucially realized by the scene that immediately precedes the “spine” passage, occurring only one chapter and moments before it. There, Tess is walking not helplessly away from a destination but actively toward one: specifically, toward the home of Angel’s family. Suddenly, two members of that family are not before but behind her. She hears their voices as “they [draw] nearer” and her “one dread” is that “they should overtake her now, in her disorganized condition, before she was prepared to confront them” (375). Tess’s fear of facing Angel’s brothers, of being *before* them *before* she is ready, converges conceptual and material exigencies of time and space. They do so such that Tess’s will is subordinated – her behavior wholly determined – by Angel’s brothers. “The more briskly they walked the more briskly walked she” (375-376). The chiasmic syntax, designed as if to resemble a linearized mirror image

that looks back upon itself, also features four doubles of the same word (“the,” “more,” “walked,” “briskly”). Variant words – one pair – are used only to distinguish the subjects of the clauses (“they,” “she”); this, combined with the erased comma that would be expected to separate these clauses, underscores the apparently natural(ized) fluidity of a strange dynamic: Tess is wholly *controlled* by an external activity of which she provides the *duplicate*. Angel’s brothers thus act here as perfect analogs to the authored narrative, which both determines Tess’s behavior and presents a perfect duplicate – that is, presents a “double” that constructs (by pretending to reconstruct) an undeviating “original.” We are not supposed to imagine a Tess that deviates from the one offered by the narrative; likewise, Tess is compelled in this scene, by her dread of a potential confrontation, not to deviate from the course and pace set by Angel’s brothers.

By the rules of fiction, Tess is supposed to “confront” neither the narration nor the corresponding fact of her narrated-ness. But just as Tess is gradually unable to walk as quickly as Angel’s brothers, thus risking confrontation, so their increasing proximity approximates for her the un-confrontable (and deeply uncomfortable) condition of being narrated: “...[T]he speed of her brothers-in-law brought them so nearly behind her back that she could hear every word of their conversation,” which soon takes her on as its object: ““Ah! Poor Angel, poor Angel! I never see that [Mercy Chant] without more and more regretting his precipitancy in throwing himself away upon a dairymaid, or whatever she may be. ... Whether she has joined him yet or not I don’t know; but she had not done so some months ago when I heard from him”” (376).

The unwilling subject of their utterance and object of their potential gaze, Tess feels understandable mortification that then worsens as she watches her boots become the object of their gaze, touch, misunderstanding, and disdain. This mortification eventually reaches such unbearability that Tess can no longer proceed toward her original destination. Instead, she walks

away, “looking back” upon them a final time (they have outpaced her by then) though all the while she knows it is her “baseless *impressibility*, which had caused her to *read the scene* as her own condemnation,” and eventually thinking again of her boots and feeling “how hopeless life was for *their* owner” (377, my emphasis). This final reference to herself in the third person, in imitation of the narrative stance to which she is becoming aware, precedes her “plod[ding] *back* along the road by which she had come..., full of a conviction that a crisis in her life was approaching” (378, my emphasis). Tess’s experience of herself as a narrated character is materialized in these moments with increasing palpability. She is now able to read ahead into the text with conviction, prescient to the imminent crisis that will begin in only a few moments, with the resumption of her contact with Alec. And she looks back, retraces her steps, reversing their movement, alert now to the importance of reversal and anteriority, reading over the scenes – by the text’s explicit description – in which she has been the principal figure, and understanding her impressibility as a tissue, a character, on which the narrative impresses its “characters.”

Indeed, by the end of this scene, as we are led straight into the “spine” passage, Tess’s sense of her own status as narrated and determined is so strong that, to make itself felt, it need no longer rely on human agents. The sense of a speaking, determining narrative is imposed by a gaze that requires no embodiment in its attachment to a past that, she now realizes, will never cease to follow her.

The Spine

She went on without turning her head. Her back seemed to be endowed with a sensitiveness to ocular beams – even her clothing – so alive was she to a fancied gaze which might be resting upon her from the outside of that barn. All the way along to this point her heart had been heavy with an inactive sorrow; now there was a change in the quality of its trouble. That hunger for affection too long withheld was for the time displaced by an almost physical sense of an implacable past which still engirdled her. It intensified her consciousness of error to a practical despair; the break

of continuity between her earlier and present existence, which she had hoped for, had not, after all, taken place. Bygones would never be complete bygones till she was a bygone herself.

Tess goes on without turning her head at this turning point of the novel: now, not before or after, there is a singular “change in the quality of her heart’s trouble.” We have discussed, “All the way along to this point,” what comes before. I will now address what comes after so that we may look back at this moment from within the novel.

The subsequent paragraph begins:

Thus absorbed she *recrossed* the northern part of Long-Ash Lane at *right angles*, and presently saw before her the road ascending whitely to the upland along whose *margin* the remainder of her journey lay. Its *dry pale surface* stretched severely onward, unbroken by a single figure, vehicle, or *mark*, save some occasional brown horse-droppings which dotted its cold aridity here and there. (385, my emphasis)

We are asked by this passage – by Tess's perspective itself – to remember that Tess is brought into existence by Hardy's etchings on an otherwise “dry pale surface” of paper. The suggested conflation of Tess and *Tess* into a single material does not require a great stretch of our imaginations, since Tess's real-world material (her literal material in our world) is nothing if not the tangible unit – the book, with its “margins,” “pale surfaces,” and “mark[s]” – that brings her into existence. But what is striking here is that Tess *herself* senses this one-to-one identification between herself and the material text that *we* sense. Hers is a double-vision that, like the free indirect style that represents it, registers not only the direct objects of her sensory perception but also the fact of its being transcribed. As Hardy writes Tess into existence, he sees with her the “surface” of a “road” (or *page*) that is “pale” (or *blank*).²⁷ His written lines on the page cross and

²⁷ I might have rendered this sentence in the past tense; such is the peculiarity of the phenomenon I am describing. Critical convention asks that I use the “literary present tense” to describe Tess's perspective in the *diegetic* reality, but because what she is registering here is the *actual* reality of being written by Hardy, the historical past tense would be just as apt. Either way, there seems to be no single perfect tense for describing the collision of the literary present with what is literally past.

“recross” at “right angles” to the blank “margin” along which “the remainder of her journey lay;” and Tess likewise “recrosse[s] the northern part of Long-Ash Lane at right angles, and presently [sees]” this. Tess experiences herself in *her* world as the written lines that constitute her in *ours*.

Thus we confront no less than four kinds of *passage*: the lines that walk up to the edge of the page’s margins are the constituents of the textual passages (paragraphs) which then constitute – and represent – both Tess’s formal (figurative) passage through the novel as well as her peripatetic passage down the lane. The etchings here lie with their backs to the page and their front to us – as usual – only Tess, from inside that page, seems capable of reading their faces.

The previous “spine” passage, we then understand, marks the completion of Tess’s hitherto gradually developing consciousness of her status as a fictional character, as that status is made felt by her back. Her back registers a physical sense of her “implacable past” with Alec – that is, of the sexual history with Alec that has always been her most significant backstory.

This backstory’s assumption, at this moment, of seemingly physical power, is precipitated by Alec’s resumed physical presence in the vision both of Tess and the narrator. Though the importance of his reappearance is clear during and after the “spine” passage, it is already foreshadowed earlier by the narrative’s theatrical emphasis on Tess’s protracted emotional response at the moment this reappearance becomes certain: “...the strange enervating conviction that her seducer confronted... her..., was at last established as a fact indeed” (380). This is the final line of Phase the Fifth, the Phase whose conclusion immediately precedes the chapter featuring the “spine” passage. Alec’s reappearance in the narrative means that the sexual history that up until this moment could have been a mere backstory – an episode sequestered in Tess’s increasingly distant past – has resumed, and has in so doing become the whole story. For his reappearance, formally and thematically, instantly effects a reading backward across the long period of his absence. Suddenly, that period is bracketed and made secondary to its starting- and

end-points, which, in being the same, reign supreme. Everything was leading back to Alec all along.

Afterward, the remainder of the novel simply resumes and concludes this sexual history, rendering it, retroactively, the *whole* story. Alec's reappearance thus precipitates the merger of the “backstory” with the “actual story.” And they merge such that we realize they *have always been* one. If we have not known it until our arrival at this moment in the plot, it is because we have missed the signals of a discursive frame that were centralizing that sexual backstory/story with unwavering focus long before Alec's reappearance – long before, even, his initial appearance. Those signals made the appearance and appeal of Tess's body its subject from the first moment of introducing her (before even offering us her name), extended it to the chapter titles (“Maiden,” “Maiden No More”), and further out, all the way to its front-most cover, where the name of both the novel and the heroine are defined instantly, without break, in terms of the sexual (back)story: “A Pure Woman.” But even if we have missed or ignored the significance of those signals, we (along with Tess) realize with Alec's reappearance that Tess has always been – was always going to be – the protagonist of an Alec-story.

Tess reads here into the significance of that sexual history as a story that cannot be escaped, that “engirdles” her in constituting the remainder of – the meaning of – her entire story. The moving language of the “spine” passage's final line captures her felt experience of herself as thus captured: “Bygones would never be complete bygones till she was a bygone herself.” The “bygone” events of her sexual backstory will only ever be “bygone” to the extent that *she* is “bygone” as well. This is Tess's hopeless recognition that she is nothing but her backstory. Her existence is synonymous, *literally*, with the Alec-story, which in never ceasing to “confront” her, in refusing to stay behind her, enforces on her psyche her ontology as a Naturalist heroine. That Tess's bygones being bygones require Tess being bygone means that (the story of) Tess's bygones

constitute(s) Tess. Because they also constitute *Tess*, the novel, what Tess is conscious of, here, is her status as synonymous with *Tess*.

The “spine” passage is triply significant: it is the point of convergence for two different pairs of “stories,” as well as for the merging of *each* of those pairs. The first pair is the Alec-story that has seemed until now to be a sub-story (*only* a backstory) of the “real,” larger story that encompasses, for example, Tess's father's conversation on the road before we even meet her. Alec's reappearance marks the moment that the hitherto sub-story resumes, and in so doing subsumes, the (hitherto seemingly larger) “real” story. This merger is simultaneous with the merger of the second pair, which is comprised of the Tess-Alec story (“primary narrative”) and the “secondary narrative” about Tess's relation to her back. Because this relation completes its process of making Tess feel like a character, it also “meets” the primary narrative. By achieving recognition in Tess's consciousness within the diegesis, the “secondary narrative” develops from being a meta-diegetic, symbolic pattern of antecedence-vulnerability into an element of Tess's felt reality, and therefore, of the primary narrative.

Part Seven – Phase VI, or Tess Unfazed

As Tess walks away from the church where the sight of Alec has confronted her anew, she feels on her back what the text calls “a fancied gaze.” Crucially, the gaze Tess feels on her back is not described as an embodied one because the “ocular beams” she senses belong not to a human but a narrative gaze. This is why she does not bother to run away. Instead, she walks slowly, even allowing him to overtake her: “While slowly breasting this ascent Tess became conscious of footsteps behind her, and turning she saw approaching [Alec].... There was not much time, however, for thought or elusion, and she yielded as calmly as she could to the necessity of letting him overtake her.” Tess no longer feels the fiery spirit of rebellion and

escape that, earlier in the novel, might have made her run and hide. She “yields” because she understands, as she has not before, the “necessity” of doing so. She understands, in other words, the necessities of her ontology. Her vulnerability is not to him but to the inescapable, all-determining narrative that insists on putting him in her way. He, like poverty, her father, or even Angel, is only a threat insofar as he is an agent of the *novel* to which she is ultimately, inescapably beholden. Indeed, Tess, after Alec's reappearance and for the rest of the novel, shows remarkably minimal sensitivity to his presence – a stark contrast to her fear of him in early chapters (before, ironically, he had proven how severe a threat he could be). It is clear, in other words, that her sensitivity is no longer to elements within the diegesis but to the diegetic existence that imposes upon her those elements.

The shift is further evident in the new power dynamic between her and Alec. No longer is Tess under Alec's power; indeed, his vulnerability is equal to, if not greater than, hers: “The effect upon her old lover was electric, far stronger than the effect of his presence upon her.” The relation is a sharp reversal of earlier in the novel, when Alec exerted a power over Tess that obtained force through superior wealth, social class, and physical strength. Tess's subjection was thorough, catalyzed by her position of financial want and crystallized in the sexual encounter. But the dramatic transformation here cannot be explained simply by her no longer needing employment (or for that matter anything) from him. This cannot explain what is not simply a change but a dramatic asymmetry of power. What can explain Tess's relative freedom from feeling “effect” is, as discussed above, her understanding that her vulnerability is not to Alec but to the narrative; this is the insight she has come to learn from her back – from the development of her relation to it. Meanwhile, Alec, who has *not* received such an education, has been left vulnerable to the consequences of not understanding his ontology as a character whose body is

constituted by a text that he cannot even read, let alone write.

Part Eight - Alec's Backsliding

Alec's attempts to write what cannot be written by him are, indeed, captured in his interim attempt to transform his identity as if by “rewriting” the meanings of his body's appearance.

Both the attempt and the result confirm Hardy's conception of the body as a text – of the text as the closest thing a character has to a legitimate body, and of this body's problematic status as being beyond the jurisdiction²⁸ of its possessor's will. We learn of Alec's change that

It was less a reform than a transfiguration. The former curves of sensuousness were now modulated to lines of devotional passion. The lip-shapes that had meant seductiveness were now made to express supplication; the glow on the cheek that yesterday could be translated as riotousness was evangelized today into the splendour of pious rhetoric; animalism had become fanaticism; Paganism Paulinism; the bold rolling eye that had flashed upon her form in the old time with such mastery now beamed with the rude energy of a theolatriy that was almost ferocious. Those black angularities which his face had used to put on when his wishes were thwarted now did duty in picturing the incorrigible backslider who would insist upon turning again to his wallowing in the mire.

Alec has undergone not a “reform” of internal character but a “transfiguration” of external appearance. The contours of this face – broken into its constituent features the way Tess's are on our first acquaintance with her – have not actually transformed either (“transform,” after all, would be little removed from “reform”). The formerly seductive mouth is now *made to express* supplication; the cheek that *could be translated* in one way is now *evangelized* in another. Concealed in these features and the passive voice is the active effort of a man who has exerted himself to edit the language of his existence. And the success of the effort is no less real for

²⁸Both the “juris” and the “diction” built into this word are apt: “diction,” because characters cannot really speak – unless of course they are quoted, still a situation whose existence and appearance they cannot *dictate* – and because there is an inequality, or *injustice*, built into this relation to the narrator/author.

being tentative. The sequence of verbs, from “modulated” to “made to express” to “evangelized” to “had become,” tells a tale of revision whose incremental successes mean the gradual receding of he who has enacted them, because the “he” who self-revises wishes, through the revision, precisely to disappear – to be substituted by a newer edition. With “Paganism Paulinism,” the gradual diminishing of agency in the previous phrases is crystallized: we confront a transfiguration seemingly so complete that neither verb nor agent lingers, so successful that all trace of the effort has seemingly vanished.

Yet the very grammatical absence that denotes successful self-editing – an exertion whose success means its invisibility – also discloses here that exertion's failure to escape the earlier draft. The alliterative, rhymed, syllabically symmetrical “Paganism Paulinism” makes the first seem like a backside of the second, embodying the clingy persistence of a past that creeps ever closer the harder Alec tries to push it behind. For Alec, (re)determining his character equates to (re)determining his body, which in turn equates to attempting to determine the text that both represents and embodies him. But the body, like the text – the body as text, and the text as Alec's body – cannot escape its backside, let alone be written by the thing it represents and constitutes. And this inescapability guarantees that Alec will *backslide*.

If the person is that component of the character that has a will, then the body is that component of the character which is predetermined. Thus, the person and the body in Hardy are frequently set at odds. As Alec begins his backsliding, the reversal of his reform – his return to his previous form – Tess senses “some indescribably quality of difference from his air when she last saw him. They seemed to be the acts of which the doer was ashamed.” The divorce of the person/his will from the body/its actions puts on the diegetic plane the rupture between fictional person and textual ontology. Here is a person able to escape no less his body than the text that

constitutes and determines this body. Backsliding, submitting internally to the will of the narrative to revert backward, becomes the only way for Alec to achieve continuity between his dual status as person and character. It is no wonder that soon enough, “It was obvious at a glance that the original wetlust had come back; that *he* had restored *himself*, as nearly as a man could do who had grown three or four years older.”

Alec and Tess’s mutual helplessness against backsliding, despite their being such divergent personalities, is striking, and speaks to the sheer force of narrative will that seems to cause it. When Alec asserts before Tess, ““You have been the cause of my backsliding,”” her response of instantly throwing a glove violently into his face occurs “without the slightest warning” for either him or the reader. But even this apparently self-willed gesture is attributed, however irrationally, to a form of backsliding: “Fancy might have regarded the act as the recrudescence of a trick in which her armed progenitors were not unpractised.”²⁹ But third-person explanations for Tess’s internal workings, even in such vague, hypothetical forms, disappear altogether for the final Phase of the novel, “Fulfilment.”

Part Nine - Fulfilment, or Tess Without Tess

Many readers and critics consider the title of the novel’s final Phase to be an ironic one. Up until this section of the novel, Tess’s most problematic moral decision is the one not to tell Angel about her history with Alec. It is a choice, moreover, considered by some to be not at all problematic. That this protagonist should then commit cold murder and then be hung for it

²⁹ Remarkably, though perhaps unsurprisingly, given the novel’s insistence on teleology and recurrence, this moment is later made out to be something of the root of her eventual murder of Alec: she says to Angel, ““I feared long ago, when I struck him on the mouth with my glove, that I might do it some day for the trap he set for me in my simple youth, and his wrong to you through me” (Chapter 57). Moments later, Angel wonders “what obscure strain in the d’Urberville blood had led to this aberration – if it were an aberration” (Chapter 57).

seems hardly a “fulfilling” ending, for her or for the reader.

I would argue that the title is in fact unironic – that it refers to Hardy’s fulfillment of Tess’s wish, articulated in the final moments of the previous Phase, when she wonders while leaning on a funeral vault etched with “d’Urberville” on its surface, ““Why am I on the wrong side of this door!”” (448). This is the last time we hear the voice of Tess in real-time – Tess, that is, as we have known her.

Tess’s fantasy reads on the surface-level as a simple death-wish, but her articulation of it in the context of “sides” invites us to read the exclamation in a front-back narratological sense: why, she wonders, is she on the wrong side of the narrative? Why is she not on the author’s privileged, out-of-time, out-of-reach, invulnerable, bodiless side? Instantly, from the start of the following Phase of the novel, this narrative fantasy has been fulfilled. The pluperfect here is crucial, for Tess’s actions for much of the final Phase occur in the pluperfect: they happen, that is, temporally behind our backs. Tess escapes the real-time gaze of the reader/author, while also making significant, primary narrative decisions (notably, both reuniting with and murdering Alec), as though she were in sudden, total authorial control of her life. Uncharacteristically too, her point of view is no longer represented. These belated actions occur without explanations or views into her motivations or thoughts. Tess’s thoughts become entirely her own, and this remains the case through the end of the novel.

*

In sleep, consciousness is withdrawn from the body. Not by accident do several significant events in Tess's story occur while she is sleeping: the death of her family's horse, which sets into motion the poverty and guilt that leads Tess to the D'Urberville estate; the rape, the central event of her backstory; and her arrest, our final contact with her before her death. At

these moments, Tess is pure body, so to speak. Her existence is a purely social one, in the sense that her body, abandoned by its consciousness, becomes a pure object – available for ownership by circumstance or by others who might perceive her.³⁰

But the “fulfilment” of Tess's wish to be no longer vulnerable to the narrative does not entail the sort of departure or withdrawal of personality that would leave her body vulnerable to others. Rather, her body is rendered precisely the opposite of vulnerable: its movements, far from being captured, need to be tracked – followed – by the narrative that has hitherto determined and constituted her. It entails the enlargement of her consciousness beyond the limitations and reaches of that body – its removal to a place behind her body, from where she can push it ahead. She, the person, becomes its driving force, the driving force of a narrative that must go where it goes, must keep up with it. In the pluperfect, we find that she is not only capable of doing things without our knowledge, but has in fact already been doing such things. We thus fall behind her not only in space but in time. Likewise, Tess gets far ahead of the narrative and Angel. Most the final section involves his literal tracking of her movements, the narrative's tracking of her decisions. By the time Angel gets to Tess's friends, she is already gone. By the time her landlady gets to Alec's corpse, his murderer is already gone. Tess is no longer *Tess*; instead, *Tess* struggles to capture Tess.

Not a moment is wasted: the Phase's very opening obeys these new narrative conditions. “It was evening at Emminster Vicarage” (453). We might think we were at the beginning of a new novel for which all else has suddenly become sequestered backstory, and which has found its protagonist in the form of Angel. Indeed, most of the Phase occurs in his point of view, and

³⁰ The authorities in the final scene at Stonehenge choose, upon Angel's request, not to arrest Tess because she is sleeping. This gesture supports the notion I suggest below: that it is precisely by leaving her body that Tess is able to control what happens to it.

both he and his movements are strikingly subordinated to those of Tess. She, meanwhile, wields incomparable power by virtue of her absence (like any third-person narrator). Having been a victim to a past tense text throughout the narrative, Tess has now run ahead to the future, and it is the text that has been drawn backward. As Angel goes in search of her, tracking her movements from Flintcomb-Ash to Marlott to Sandbourne, he retraces the temporal and spatial footsteps of one who has thus begun to elude husband, reader, and text together.

When he does finally find her, he along with the reader is obligated to reconstruct retroactively her story up to this point. The major decision of reuniting with Alec, so actively and continually suggested and postponed in the previous Phase, holding the reader in suspense, is completely elided by a text that has apparently surrendered all power over and access to Tess. Its belated telling is evacuated of climactic appeal; the act of Tess's will is kept private, unexploited for readerly satisfaction. The same is not quite true of Alec's murder. But it too is narrated indirectly and belatedly. In the overwhelming obligation to fulfill Tess's wish and abstain from representing her action in real-time or through her subjectivity, Hardy introduces out of seeming thin air an entirely new character: Mrs. Brooks, the arbitrary landlady, who is by all appearances given a name and personality simply so she can lend her subjectivity to the cause of narrating Alec's murder in something closer to real-time. The detail and nuance of her thoroughly rendered subjective experience feels forced – incongruous to a character introduced in the final section of the novel and for purely the brief space of the murder scene. The contrived nature of her placement is impossible to ignore. With her inclusion, the text appears ready to go to any length not to have to represent Tess's temporal or otherwise subjective experience.

As I suggest above, this severance of Tess-the-person from the gaze and control of Tess-the-novel is allied to her simultaneous severance from her body. She reasons, it would seem, that

the only way to escape the limitations implied by her back is by escaping her body itself. By going out of everyone's view and going ahead in time, to a future that for everyone else is mysterious and uncertain, Tess seizes all the advantages that would be attendant on being a back, or imagined differently, having no back.

The temporal escape – the renunciation of a linearly restrictive time that precludes the reversibility of events – is captured in both her choice to commit murder, a choice that (unlike any other she makes in the novel) is crucially irreversible, as well as in her open declaration soon after, “Don't think of what's past! ... I am not going to think outside of now. Why should we! Who knows what tomorrow has in store?” (480). Knowing that acknowledging a front would mean acknowledging a back, Tess uses a corollary logic to use the uncertainty of the future as an excuse for ignoring the past. Such assertions over temporality coincide with assertion over narrative movement, which she controls, amazingly, with physical movement. When she and Angel are reunited post-murder, “By tacit consent they hardly once spoke of any incident of the past subsequent to their wedding-day. The gloomy intervening time seemed to sink into chaos, over which the present and prior times closed as if it never had been. Whenever he suggested that they should leave their shelter, and go forwards... she showed a strange unwillingness to move” (480-481). The uniting of the distant past with the present so as to forge a narrative thread which thereby crushes into irrelevance the intervening time is here a powerful, advantageous deployment of the very mechanics that once caused her so palpably to feel her back: the mechanics by which Alec's reappearance automatically resumed her backstory as if it had never ended, rewriting the intervening time as having always been oriented in his direction.

The notion that it is Tess's departure from or renunciation of her body (such that it is no longer vulnerable) that underlies and makes possible all such terms of her narratological

fulfillment is articulated by Angel himself, in language that notably deploys the very vocabulary of front and back that I have suggested unites the temporal, spatial, and narrative problems at work. When, after finally tracking her down, Angel first sees and speaks to Tess in this Phase (and therefore when we first see her as well, since all up to this point has been from his point of view and he has not yet found her), “he had a vague consciousness of one thing, though it was not clear to him till later; that his original Tess had spiritually ceased to recognize the body before him as hers--allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will.” So wholly does the narration agree with this estimation of Tess’s relation to her body, that it cannot refer to it as such; Tess-the-person’s disassociation from Tess-the-body(/text) is confirmed by the language that refers to it as “the body before him” rather than “her body.” The word “direction” metaphorically spatializes this new dynamic, and placed in the sentence so near to “living will,” reinforces the fact that Tess’s “living will” is very much alive and directing things. In fact, it is more alive than ever, because it has detached itself from the body (now corpse-like and upon a current) that has until recently constrained and rendered her vulnerable, and rendered impossible her narratological fulfillment.

Ubiquitously in the novel, the back has been a location on which potential eyes are ineffectual. Tess has at times been the single exception to this rule, and the singular accessibility of that privilege to Tess is underscored by its pronounced inaccessibility to Angel. During his hike to the train station in the antepenultimate chapter of the novel, Angel is initially unable to see that Tess is behind him.

He had traversed the greater part of this depression... when, pausing for breath, he unconsciously looked back. Why he did so he could not say, but something seemed to impel him to the act. The... road diminished in his rear as far as he could see, and as he gazed a moving spot intruded on the white vacuity of its perspective.

It was a human figure running. Clare waited, with a dim sense that

somebody was trying to overtake him.

The form descending the incline was a woman's, yet so entirely was his mind blinded to the idea of his wife's following him that even when she came nearer he did not recognize her under the totally changed attire in which he now beheld her. It was not till she was quite close that he could believe her to be Tess. (473)

The paragraph breaks dramatize the incredible length of time Angel requires to identify Tess.

Even after he turns around to “look back,”³¹ even after he looks directly at her “figure,” even after he recognizes her “form” to be that of a “woman,” he is still “blinded” by his mind. It seems Hardy’s involvement is required – acting through the “dim sense that somebody was trying to overtake him” and the “something” that “impel[s] him to the act” – helps Angel decide to look back. Such as if external agents are brought to bear on a character who seems all the more “dim” for not himself having the insight – all the less powerful for doing it all “unconsciously.” Angel is brought as close as possible to having “a pair of eyes in the small of his back,” the gift of a benevolent author, but like the twinkling buttons on the backs of the male binders' trousers, which are “rendered useless” by the leather straps that do their imaginary job for them, so any such eyes Angel would have are destined to be ineffectual.

As I mentioned above, Tess in the Phase of “Fulfilment” becomes the exception to the rule of back-vulnerability across the novel. Of course, now, in her freedom from the vulnerabilities of a body, narrated or otherwise, this privilege is moot. But it is perhaps precisely in this lack of a need for it that she instinctively arrives at a location that would dissolve the vulnerability of her back if she still had one, as though spatially fulfilling the long-cherished fantasy of a life without an uncontrollably expansive and encompassing, spatial, temporal, and narrative “radius of repute.”

³¹We may note, here, his distinction from Tess, who goes on, in this paper's introductory passage, without turning around.

Stuck profoundly in its location, Stonehenge offers a circumference of safety with a fixed radius. Its stubborn circularity allows for no front-back tricks: no asymmetry or vulnerability. Ancient and timeless, it is ““Older than the centuries; older than the d’Urbervilles”” (484). Far from having its own backstory, it is instead the place where any and all local backstories, followed relentlessly backward to their origin, might be forced, eventually, to stop. And on a spatial level, its circularity suggests the comforts of having no backside, equivalent to what only seems to be its polar opposite: having only backsides. It is this paradoxical condition that comes with the declaration of the authorities when they have closed in upon Tess: “And the whole country is reared” (486). The total obliteration of hope here may seem like the apex of tragedy, but it brings with it what only seems to be its total opposite: the apex of comfort. The equivalence of this polarity (no backside/only backside) is intuitively understood by every reader at the moment that Tess lies down at Stonehenge, fixing upon it as the place she will rest, though the ““spot is visible for miles by day”” (484). And it is why no reader is shocked when, upon waking, Tess is not distressed that she will now be arrested. Her lack of distress is accompanied by the feeling that underlies it – a lack of surprise (she guesses without looking up that the police have arrived), a freedom from uncertainty regarding the future, or the role that the past will play in it. The total hopelessness of no escape (all backs) is accompanied by a freedom (no backs) from the temporal vulnerability that has haunted her so long.

Stonehenge, the open air, circle-shaped, backless refuge chosen by Tess at the conclusion of the novel recalls the motion made by Car Darch when she negates the vulnerability of her ridiculed, treacle-covered back by “flinging herself flat on her back upon the grass” and “spinning horizontally on the herbage” (111). This deployment of circularity as a counterpoint to the spatial, temporal, and narrative problems of front-back asymmetry occurs in a context that

extends beyond the covers of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, figuring in both *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, written right before *Tess*, as well as in *Jude the Obscure*, written right after. Indeed, Michael Henchard, having suffered all the trauma of resurfacing backstories (Susan and his [step-]daughter reappearing from his past) and the uncertainty of the future (failing correctly to predict the outcome of his corn harvest), leaves Casterbridge at the conclusion of the novel only to find that he “gradually, almost unconsciously, deflected from that right line of his first intention; till, by degrees, his wandering... became part of a circle of which Casterbridge formed the centre.” Here, circularity presents an alternative to the vulnerability of the back as Henchard experiences it. But in *Jude the Obscure*, the motion of spinning provides not so much an antidote to back vulnerability as a maximization of it. Jude, in the novel’s opening scene, is struck repeatedly on his backside as he is swung in a circle; “the blows, which were delivered once or twice at each revolution,” cause him, “under the centrifugal tendency of his person as a hooked fish swinging to land,” to see “the hill, the rick, the plantation, the path, and the rooks going round and round him in an amazing circular race.” These convergences between circularity and back vulnerability, occurring of at the *end* of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and the *beginning* of *Jude the Obscure*, serve as bookends to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, a novel written in between the two, and featuring such convergences throughout its entirety.

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