Leaves #3

L'ensemble des métadonnées est accessible en cliquant sur le lien suivant :
http://dx.doi.org/10.21412/leaves_0304

Vulnerability as socio economic check, ethical move and aesthetic proposal in *Sense and Sensibility*

Nathalie Jaëck

That in all her six novels, Jane Austen poses the fact and satirizes the ways in which late 18th century England politically organized the conditions for the vulnerability of women is a well-known fact. Vulnerability is forcefully presented not as a natural attribute of women, but as a "product of injustice" (Gilson 2), as a "politically induced condition" (*Frames* 26): indeed, the legal system assimilated them to minors; primogeniture could lawfully deprive them of any inheritance; lack of access to education, as it was most compellingly lamented by Mary Wollstonecraft, maintained them in a state of inferiority and dependence. In Jane Austen's fiction then, country gentry women are definitely liable to harm, and the plots revolve around whether and how social endangerment will be avoided–marriage usually securing for women a position of lesser vulnerability.

In *Sense and Sensibility,* though, Jane Austen stages female vulnerability in a more violent way, but also in a more dialectical way than in any of her other novels. While in *Pride and Prejudice* for example, vulnerability remains a *theoretical* liability, an imminent *susceptibility* to harm–the absence of an heir in the Bennet family makes it urgent that the girls, five sisters in all, should find a way out of danger by securing husbands–*Sense and Sensibility* opens on the instant and violent activation of vulnerability. As early as chapter one, Mrs Dashwood and her three daughters, Marianne, Elinor and little Margaret, are brutally ousted from their own house by their elder half-brother, as the legal system of male entail allows him to: they are deprived from the outset, left utterly dependent on others, not vulnerable but actually wounded.

But what I would like to prove in this paper is that the novel stages an unexpected shift: as it confronts the readers with the blunt violence of social vulnerability, it also proposes a revaluation of the concept. Instead of being seen as "exclusively negative, equated with weakness, dependency, powerlessness, deficiency and passivity" (Gilson 4), vulnerability by the end of the novel becomes a positive ethical alternative, and even an ethical disposition. Jane Austen disengages vulnerability from the usual determinant binaries of rank and gender and untypically distributes it among all the major characters. Though they should be shielded by their status as rich heirs, the principal male characters who will eventually marry the heroines in *Sense and Sensibility* are no invulnerable heroes, clearly no almighty Darcys.

They are unsettled by their own vulnerability but decide to turn it into an ethical resource, a shared basis for learning and for empathy, connection and community.

What is very interesting is that this ethical move is backed by a rather daring aesthetic proposal, by an invitation of vulnerability right inside the stronghold of narrative omniscience. The narrator of *Sense and Sensibility*, whose *persona* is quite similar to that presented by Henry Fielding in his preface to *Joseph Andrews*, is endowed with all the securities of narrative invulnerability: a vertical panoptic position, retrospection and omniscience should guarantee a highly settled narration. But the first sentence, "The Family of Dashwood had long been settled in Sussex" (Austen 3), armed with secure nominal determination, unquestionable retrospective past perfect, factual precision and unmodulated affirmative mode, reads like a narrative decoy. The text proposed by the omniscient narrator crucially organizes the technical conditions for its own vulnerability, and such covert vulnerability behind a show of power is one of the author's major narrative strategies. It reads as if the whole point in Austen's narrative choice were to subject omniscience to vulnerability, to make it porous to other voices, to accommodate other versions and rewritings, to delay and disturb its own supremacy. Vulnerability does become a textual strategy, a way to measure the validity of narrative omniscience through its capacity to be exposed to and to incorporate other versions.

The socially organized vulnerability of women

In *Pride and Prejudice*, a twin-novel to *Sense and Sensibility* written in Austen's very early years at Steventon Rectory, and published two years later in 1813, we could say that the vulnerability of women remained potential: though the novel exposed vulnerability as a product of social injustice, the two heroines were allowed to be exceptions to the rule, sampled out as Darcy and Bingley ensured their protection. More than that, one could even say that Austen manipulated the threat of vulnerability as part of some conservative moral logics of patriarchal retribution: though equally vulnerable, the five sisters in the novel were treated differently as harm *did* come to Lydia, the undutiful daughter and potentially dangerous female, while the good sisters could enjoy the safety provided by their incorporation within protective patriarchy, behind the safe walls of Pemberley and Netherfield. In *Pride and Prejudice*, fiction thus played the role Paul Ricœur called: "le secours du monde" (189). It "rescued the world" (my translation) and rectified reality and kept vulnerability at bay.

Yet, vulnerability is no potential threat in *Sense and Sensibility*, and heroines experiment it for real: it irrupts as soon as the very beginning of the novel, as an inexorable consequence of the inheritance system. The sense of continuity conveyed by the past perfect of the first sentence of the novel, the sense of belonging and solidarity established by the collective singular, "The family of Dashwood," as well as the sense of security inscribed in the main verb "settled" are cruelly ironic. It will not take more than the first four pages for Mrs Dashwood and her daughters to suffer mourning in the death of their husband and father, and consequent immediate dispossession of their family home, and to be "degraded to the condition of visitors" (Austen 9) in Norland. Potential vulnerability is ruthlessly acted upon by their half-brother and his greedy wife to appropriate the place, as they are entitled: "No sooner was his father's funeral over, than Mrs John Dashwood, without sending any notice of her intention to her mother-in-law, arrived with her child and their attendants" (Austen 5). The position of the narrator here suffers no ambiguity: the vulnerability of women is not a natural attribute: Elinor possesses "strength of understanding, and coolness of judgement" (Austen 6), Marianne is "sensible and clever" (Austen 6) and Mrs Dashwood bears the situation with calm, strength, decision and dignity. It is produced by "a system ensuring that women are deprived" (Doody xxiii), it is a *function* of a political organization of society based on required hierarchies and on a differential distribution of vulnerability. Through primogeniture and male entail, the aristocracy could ensure that properties would not be split, wealth would remain concentrated in a few hands and statuses would not be weakened. Austen inscribes the systematic exclusion of women in a very efficient embedding of possessive forms that copies the ineluctable exclusion of women, the linear logics of male inheritance: "to his son, and his son's son [...] it was secured" (Austen 4).

"Secured" is the right word: the legal system of inheritance ensures the security of some, while decreeing the vulnerability of others. That there is nothing personal in Mrs Dashwood's and her daughters' situation is made clear by the narrative choice of anonymity to refer to the man whose will decided of their deprivation: the individual story is told like a standard tale, Mr Dashwood's responsibility is annulled by his being referred to as a mere function, through impersonal mentions: "the late owner," or, repeatedly, "the old gentleman" (Austen 3-4). The anonymous, unspecified "old gentleman" is a random sample of traditional empowered patriarchy, and the individual story of the Dashwood women is an instance of a much wider narration. As Judith Butler has it, vulnerability is thus the "politically-induced condition in which precariousness is maximised for some populations and subjects and minimised for others" (*Frames* 26). In *Sense and Sensibility* then, Austen does not wave vulnerability as a potential risk of narration, as a frightening possible outcome. There is no room for suspense there, and she marks vulnerability as a major structural dysfunction that cannot be assuaged by fiction.

An aggravating circumstance is perhaps that the vulnerability of women is actuated by women themselves, who can be staunch allies to patriarchal law. Sisterhood solidarity does not weigh much against a motherly desire to fully provide for the interests of a son, as the case of Mrs John Dashwood proves. She is far fiercer than her husband in her desire to utterly deprive her sisters-in-law, and would gladly have them leave Norland with nothing at all: "I am convinced within myself that your father had no idea of your giving them any money at all" (Austen 10). In *Pride and Prejudice*, such "patriarchal women" threatened to harm the heroines, but they were invariably kept under control, ultimately deprived of their power: Lady Catherine de Bourgh was not allowed to stand in the way of Elizabeth's happiness, her potentially ruinous intervention remained a virtual threat. The case is completely different in *Sense and Sensibility*, where susceptibility of being hurt by a female relative is turned into instant reality, once more not so much as proof of personal wickedness, but as an illustration of a socially encouraged pattern, and Fanny Dashwood is an instance of the type of the greedy unsympathetic sister-in-law Mary Wollstonecraft identified: "jealous of the little kindness which her husband shows to his relations [...] she is displeased at seeing the property of *her* children lavished on a helpless sister" (Wollstonecraft quoted in Sutherland 146).

So in her first extremely fierce chapter, Jane Austen makes it clear that vulnerability is socially organized, that "there are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others" (Butler, *Precarious* xii).

Yet, the immediate violence of the blow to the heroines themselves is not the end of the story: vulnerability as it is activated in this first chapter spreads to other characters, and Jane Austen soon separates vulnerability from the apparently prevailing logics of hierarchy; she redistributes it more widely, irrespectively of the binaries of rank and gender, and she redefines the concept, as the characters seem to appropriate vulnerability and to turn it into a chosen practise. Vulnerability is thus emancipated from its purely negative connotations; it is reassessed as an ethical disposition, and leads to a re-composition of social intercourse, based on care and community.

The redistribution of vulnerability

That women are targeted by a socially produced vulnerability is thus the starting-point of the novel, the reason why vulnerability needs to be reconsidered. And *Sense and Sensibility* stages a remarkable step, a decisive redistribution of vulnerability that reaches up to the seemingly most invulnerable characters, those protected by rank, wealth and gender, the powerful husbands-to-be, Edwards Ferrars and Colonel Brandon. Such redistribution beyond the usual safeguards illustrates the idea that "vulnerability is pervasive, fundamental, shared" (Gilson 2).

What is remarkable is that status is no longer enough to protect the characters. Though both Edward and Brandon are endowed with all the guarantees of social invulnerability–Brandon is the rich owner of Delaford, an independent bachelor, while Edward is "the eldest son of a man who had died very rich" (Austen 12), and should thus be, as the superlative and the masculine forms suggest, immune to social danger–both characters are presented in terms of lack, they are defective heroes, not quite up to standard, definitely no unchallenged Darcy or Bingley, both endowed with tremendous good looks, huge fortunes and impeccable status: "Edward Ferrars was not recommended to their good opinion by any particular graces of person or address. He was not handsome" (Austen 13).[1] As for Colonel Brandon, "he was neither very young, nor very gay" (Austen 26). Both characters present further cracks in their already deficient armour. Elinor can see, through the appearance of security and the "serious" manners of Colonel Brandon, the traces of a past trauma: "Sir John had dropt hints of past injuries and disappointments, which justified her belief of his being an unfortunate man, and she regarded him with respect and compassion" (Austen 38). As for Edward, his immunity as "the eldest son" does not seem guaranteed, since "except for a trifling sum, the whole of his fortune depend[s] on the will of his mother" (Austen 12). Elinor deals with Edward's security in the conditional mode, as a kind of fictive future: "[…] and I am very much mistaken if Edward is not himself aware that there would be many difficulties in his way, if he were to wish to marry a woman who had not either a great fortune or high rank" (Austen 17).

Status is thus fragile for men as well: Brandon's misery originated in the fact that he is the second son, and thus, primogeniture prevailing, he was forced by his father to give up Eliza, his father's ward and the woman he had loved from childhood, to his roguish older brother, so that he, the first son and legitimate heir, could inherit her fortune as well and thus reinforce the family: "She was married—married against her inclination to my brother. Her fortune was large, and our family estate much encumbered" (Austen 153). Financial deprivation was aggravated by personal loss, as he came back from the East Indies (the army was a respectable alternative for second sons) only to find his beloved abandoned by his brother, dying, and encumbered with an illegitimate child—which left him a broken man: "What I endured in so beholding her—but I have no right to wound your feelings by attempting to describe it—I have pained you too much already" (Austen 155). As for Edward, he is the eldest son, but as such, he needs to comply with the role, and marry into rank and fortune to secure his mother's will. The discovery of his being engaged to Miss Steele will lead his mother to disinherit him in favour of Robert, his cad of a brother—Edward's eventual marriage to Elinor and Robert's elopement with Miss Steele will not change the deal, and Edward will be reduced to taking orders "for the sake of two hundred and fifty [pounds] at the utmost" (Austen 284). What is crucial in Edward's position is that he makes the explicit choice of vulnerability, he challenges "the normative construct of invulnerability as desirable and vulnerability as undesirable" (Gilson 6): he allows and desires his being destabilized out of his invulnerable status to embrace vulnerability as "a virtue one develops to contest injustice" (Gilson 2), to protect others.

---

[1] The information provided by the narrator is reinforced by Marianne's less diplomatic portrait: "But yet—he is not the kind of young man—there is something wanting—his figure is not striking; it has none of that grace which I should expect in the man who could seriously attach my sister. His eyes want all that spirit, that fire, which at once announce virtue and intelligence. And besides all this, I am afraid, Mama, he has no real taste" (Austen 14).

In this respect, Edward is backed by Colonel Brandon who recodes vulnerability as positive, who is able "to reimagine and rebuild the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss" (Butler, *Frames* 20). Instead of trying to guard himself from further loss or distress, to entrench himself in the protection of self-command and aloofness, he runs the risk of openness, and vulnerability becomes what we could call a practise, a skill in recognizing and accommodating fellow vulnerability. Suffering leads him to empathy: "Colonel Brandon [...] was on every occasion mindful of the feelings of others" (Austen 47) and it becomes ground for positive personal and social obligation. To him, Marianne's story of vulnerability, her being abused by an unscrupulous young man, is an echo of Eliza's fate, and it leads him to propose his help. Mr John Dashwood typically considers that exposed vulnerability is a badge of shame that has made Marianne less desirable, literally less valuable since her rate on the marriage market has decreased: "She was as handsome a girl last September, as any I ever saw; and as likely to attract the men. [...] I question whether Marianne *now* will marry a man more than five or six hundred a-year, at the utmost, and I am very much deceived if *you* do not do better" (Austen 171). Vulnerability is understood in threatening terms of hierarchy, power struggle and retribution.

As opposed to that dominant view, the confrontation to vulnerability generates responsibility in Brandon, it leads him not to call for public retribution, but on the contrary to offer private reparation, to sympathise with Marianne's predicament: "Her own sufferings proceed from no misconduct, and can bring no disgrace. On the contrary, every friend must be made still more her friend by them. Concern for her unhappiness, and respect for her fortitude under it, must strengthen every attachment" (Austen 157). He does exactly the same thing for Edward, whose vulnerability he identifies with: as he learns that he was disinherited by his mother because he decided to remain true to his word to Lucy Steele, Colonel Brandon once more takes responsibility, and corrects the injustice by offering him the living in Delaford Rectory, though he has only met him briefly, and only knows he is a dear friend of Elinor's: "'The cruelty, the impolitic cruelty,'—he replied, with great feeling,—'of dividing, or attempting to divide, two young people long attached to each other, is terrible. […] I understand that he intends to take orders. Will you be so good as to tell him that the living of Delaford, now just vacant, as I am informed by this day's post, is his, if he thinks it worth his acceptance'" (Austen 213). Edward's story obviously rings a bell, and reactivates the story of two other, but similar, people—himself and Eliza. By being injured himself, Brandon has had "the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out who else suffers from unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways" (Butler, *Precarious* xii). Delaford thus becomes an alternative and dissident proposal: as opposed to self-barricading and eviction of the weaker elements, Brandon there builds a community that recodes vulnerability as positive dependence, as trust in connectedness and interplay.

In their liminal essay *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar interpreted the ending of *Sense and Sensibility* as Marianne's surrender, "dramatizing the necessity of female submission for female survival" (155), especially flattering to male readers because it stages the taming of an independent girl. But it seems on the contrary that as she finds an ally in Brandon, it is her own vision of vulnerability that prevails. Indeed, one of the main differences between the two sisters, beyond the rather misleading binary inscribed in the title, is their utterly different conceptions of the self—self-command vs. effusion, or "protection against vulnerability" vs. "militant embracing of vulnerability." Elinor is certainly not lacking in sensibility, but she shelters it behind a discipline of "self-command": "the self-command she had practised since her first knowledge of Edward's engagement" (Austen 196), or "Elinor's security sunk, but her self-command did not sink with it" (Austen 99). She warns her sister against opening up to Willoughby, against betraying her intimate feelings, because it amounts according to her to dangerous exposure of the self: "'Pray, pray be composed,' cried Elinor, 'and do not betray what you feel to everybody present'" (Austen 131).

Such practise of imperviousness to being affected, in order to protect the self from potential dispossession, is the exact opposite of Marianne's conception: "to be composed at such a moment was not only beyond the reach of Marianne, *it was beyond her wish*. She sat in an agony of impatience which affected every feature" (Austen 131, my italics). Her self is unguarded, she unfailingly reaches out to those she loves: she rushes to Willoughby the moment she sees him in the ballroom, "holding out her hand to him" (Austen 131), without any calculation of the risk involved. Indeed, she defines Elinor's attitude as "the business of self-command" (Austen 79), insisting that such guarded presentation of the self amounts to the illusion that you can control risk through self-management and self-control ("she knew how to govern her feelings" [Austen 6]), as well as to a petty notion of poorly understood "self-interest." Marianne not only accepts but desires to be unsettled or discomposed by the intervention of others, by being "affected by forces outside her control" (Gilson 3), by invariably reaching out. The narrator makes it clear that what really opposes the two sisters is that one is prudent, while the other one is "everything but prudent" (Austen 7), isolating that crucial characteristic, that crucial lack. Marianne's many effusions are to be interpreted literally: she refuses any kind of self-containment; she makes the choice of vulnerability because she understands it differently from her sister, not as a potentiality for harm, but as a means to be affected by others, in a variety of ways. Brandon and herself, despite "First Impressions," are thus two of a kind, who have practised vulnerability ("a man who had suffered no less than herself under the event of a former attachment" [Austen 288]), who both centrally mark as a dangerous illusion the fantasy of an invulnerable self.

The permeability of the omniscient narrative voice

Finally, such vindication of a redefined vulnerability finds a parallel in Austen's treatment of the narrative voice in *Sense and Sensibility*. She makes the narrative choice of an omniscient persona, only to propose a narrator who seems to contest or to challenge his own position. This is achieved in numerous elaborate ways: by providing the reader with quite unstable statements, to be progressively rephrased or rectified, by making this reliable position highly porous to other voices, by contrasting it with other, embedded versions, inside parodies that reflect upon the main text and unsettle it. Permeability thus becomes the unexpected, alternative mode of narration as if the authoritative stronghold of omniscience sometimes became an open unguarded space, to be occupied by furtive alternative narrators who challenge the autonomy of the narrative voice: the usual *Panopticon* authorizes clandestine intrusions.

The omniscient narrator occupies, by status, a function of narrative invulnerability, buttressed by retrospection, extraction from his own story, impersonality and vertical control. Now, the major mode of narration is obviously in agreement with that status, as the narrator is allowed all licence and exerts that control to the full, framing characters and situations in authoritative and arbitrating statements: "However dissimilar in temper and outward behaviour, they strongly resembled each other in that total want of talent and taste which confined their employments, unconnected with such as society produced, within a very narrow compass. Sir John was a sportsman, Lady Middleton a mother" (Austen 25). In a statement that is typical of the major mode of narration, the omniscient narrator closely identifies and classifies the characters. He reduces to the full the interpretative gap (assertive indicative mode, state verbs, and static definitions) and captures people and situations in the close frame of sentences that have the status of stable definitions: "[Marianne] was sensible and clever; but eager in everything: her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent" (Austen 6). The verb "to be" dominates the sentence, and provides the reader with an objective identity card, propped by so many outlining adjectives. As Philippe Hamon has it, in these situations that are contractual with the mode of "Domestic Realism" Austen was writing into, the narrator fulfils the role of the immune warrant: "Il n'est plus fonction romanesque, "fiction," mais *fonctionnaire* délégué de l'énonciation réaliste" (Hamon 141). The thing is that this invulnerable narrative position often opens up to contrary tendencies, and builds its own permeability.

A first, frequent technique is to have the narrator wilfully and strategically misuse his prerogative and mystify the reader by a statement that seems reliable, but that is progressively un-written. The example of the presentation of John Dashwood, in the first page of the novel, is prototypical of this widespread practice: "By a former marriage, Mr Henry Dashwood had one son: by his present lady, three daughters. The son, *a steady respectable young man*, was amply provided for by the fortune of his mother, which had been large, and half of which devolved on him on his coming of age" (Austen 3, my italics). Inserted in the middle of this reliable presentation, shielded by a list of secure statements, the apposition that concerns the son will soon prove highly ironic, eminently unstable. A couple of lines down, the narrator proposes a rewriting, a very shifty anti-definition that leaves room for interpretation and destabilizes the steadiness of the initial statement: "He was **not an ill-disposed** young man" (Austen 5), until the uncertainty of the statement is fully exposed by the concessive clause, a line of escape that totally unsettles meaning: "unless to be rather cold hearted and rather selfish is to be ill-disposed: but he was, in general, well respected; for he conducted himself with propriety in the discharge of his ordinary duties"

(Austen 5). The concession sheds light upon the word “respectable” that was present in the initial statement, and makes it highly unstable, as the change in suffixes highlights: John is not respect**-able** as the omniscient narrator seemed to have established; he is only respect**-ed**, and this repetition with a minute variation makes all the difference. The steady *definition* is rewritten, devalued as a mere *quote*, as the ironic narrator borrows from gossip and general opinion, and taints his own reliable statements with the contamination of hearsay. As for the other adjective in his now vulnerable definition, “steady,” it is annulled in the most burlesque way in chapter too, where a conversation with his wife, and her highly efficient “if I were you,” suffices to completely turn his convictions around, and lead him to disobey the promise he made to his father of helping his sisters. The inconspicuous glide in the text from “respectable” to “respected” is a way for the narrator to switch from a statement he validates and vouches for, from an invulnerable statement then, to a quote he merely transmits, and neglects to ascertain.

Another very efficient technique of the narrative persona to destabilize what we could call his own textual self-command is to implicitly delegate to characters the task of stabilizing information. This is very frequently the case in *Sense and Sensibility*, but nowhere is it more obvious than in the treatment of the character of Willoughby. Though the narrator remains technically in control of Willoughby’s presentation, since it is all narrated in indirect style, he covertly switches to subjective internal focalisation and withdraws from the task of providing guidance and stable judgement: “[Willoughby] apologized for his intrusion by relating its cause, in a manner so frank and so graceful that his person, which was uncommonly handsome, received additional charms from his voice and expression” (Austen 33) or “his manly beauty and more than common gracefulness were instantly the theme of general admiration” (Austen 33). Willoughby is “received” by the Dashwood family, he is “the theme” of general admiration, and so the personal interpretation of Elinor, Marianne and Mrs Dashwood is substituted for the narrator’s objective verdict. Until Willoughby comes to tell his own story, all the information is thus mediated, thus *transferred* by a narrator who abandons his panoptic prerogative, deserts his position as deliverer of invulnerable truths. Information gets highly partial, as Sir John is referred to as authority of the subject. Since Elinor wants tangible facts (“‘But who is he?’ said Elinor. ‘Where does he come from?’” [Austen 34]), Sir John’s answer proves rather fractional and unsteady, as the comparative form inscribes: “On this point Sir John could give more certain intelligence; ‘He is as good a sort of fellow, I believe, as ever lived,’ repeated Sir John. ‘I remember last Christmas at a little hop at the park, he danced from eight o'clock till four, without once sitting down’” (Austen 34). This seems to be enough for Mrs Dashwood to validate the information, and to stabilize Sir John’s modals and conditionals into assertive, and even compulsory, indicative mode: “I am glad to find, however, from what you say, that he is a respectable young man, and one whose acquaintance will not be ineligible" (Austen 34). The simple present is further validated by the future, and Willoughby's case is presumably settled, while the absence of the omniscient narrator makes it highly ironic. Even the final stabilization is undermined: once Willoughby has been exposed by Brandon's narrative, he himself comes to Elinor in the night to provide her with his own explanation, filling in the blanks, correcting and amending the previous text. The level of unreliability of that new narrative is of course rather high since Willoughby is "very drunk" (Austen 241) and pleads his own cause, but he also makes it explicit that no authoritative, "true" account can be reached, that every version of his behaviour is tainted with every narrator's interests and partial comprehension: "'Remember,' cried Willoughby, 'from whom you received the *account*. Could it be an impartial one?'" (Austen 244), and "'ONE person I was sure would *represent* me as capable of any thing'" (Austen 251). Willoughby is of course absolutely right: all the reader can get is a palimpsest of unfitting versions where every new voice is vulnerable to the next one. As he systematically delegates authority to describe Willoughby, as he never validates any version with a single endorsed statement, the narrator generates the vulnerability of his own text, and forces the reader to confront its vacillations. He makes omniscience highly ironic, in a very subtle way, and such a narrative choice highlights the fact that narrative power depends upon the organisation of narrative vulnerability.

This is further achieved by the fact that *Sense and Sensibility* is a highly parodic novel, a novel that embeds, quotes and manipulates its own literary references, and uses such internal echoes to unsettle its own positions, to make them mobile. Lurking behind *Sense and Sensibility*, one can still catch distorted scraps of the original title, *Elinor and Marianne*, the two opposed sisters being a direct quote from the typical trick of the sentimental novel Jane Austen was commenting upon—Maria Edgeworth's "Julia and Caroline," in *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), or Jane West's *A Gossip Story* (1799). *Sense and Sensibility* accommodates between its more autonomous lines a true sentimental novel, namely the embedded narration of Brandon, and his typical tale of not one but two fallen women seduced and abandoned by rakes, one of them being Willoughby, who is thus both the typical rake of Brandon's version and the more ambiguous, less easily decipherable lover of Marianne, caught in the specific dynamics of Austen's text. Brandon's narration reads as internal echo and narrative foil, as a possible alternative the novel accommodates and reads against. Marianne is not Eliza, but her character is vulnerable to the character of Eliza, she is a palimpsest indeed, and the reader, just like Brandon, can see Eliza through Marianne: they are the same and different, belonging to different literary genres. Jane Austen's decision to change the original title from *Elinor and Marianne* to *Sense and Sensibility*, to move from individual characters to general complex concepts, is a way to inscribe such essential textual vulnerability, to show that literary identities are iridescent, and that characters do have literary ancestors that condition our reading.

It is not only a way to address the fact that, as we saw it, the story of the two sisters does reach beyond a minor story of individual vulnerability to acquire general political relevance, and to mark vulnerability as a political construct. It is also a way to announce textual variability, since sense and sensibility are two eminently mobile concepts. In the novel, matters are much more complicated than Elinor vs. Marianne, much more dynamic and multiple than a static dual opposition. The plot works in such a way to complicate, distribute and test these apparently dual attributes—sense for Elinor, sensibility for Marianne. The change in titles highlights and inscribes the intention of the novel to diffract and challenge these positions, and sense and sensibility circulate among all the characters who connect and separate, ally or oppose according to their similar or different conceptions of the two concepts. Sense and sensibility are not positions in the novel, they are not fixed definitions that statically identify people. They are forces of displacement, dynamic and not static, they are the exact opposite of what Gilles Deleuze called "ready-made signifiers:" "But above all, what we don't want is a structure, with form oppositions and ready-made signifiers. One can always establish binary relationships [...]; this is stupid as far as one cannot see where and towards what the system evolves, the way it becomes, and what element is going to play the role of heterogeneousness, a saturating body that springs a leak in the organism, and shatters the symbolic structure" (Deleuze 15, my translation).[2] As he manipulates these unanchored concepts and allows them to vary, as he relinquishes his authority and narrative self-command, the narrator thus proposes a text that is constantly susceptible to being rewritten, that does not allow meaning to settle—certainly an interesting paradoxical way to address the demands of Realism.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. 1811. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

Barthes, Roland, Bersani Léo, Hamon Philippe, Riffaterre Michel, Watt Ian. *Littérature et réalité*. Paris : Seuil Points, 1982.

---

[2] "Mais surtout nous cherchons encore moins une structure, avec des oppositions formelles et du signifiant tout fait : on peut toujours établir des rapports binaires [...] ; c'est stupide tant qu'on ne voit pas par où et vers quoi file le système, comment il devient, et quel élément va jouer le rôle d'hétérogénéité, corps saturant qui fait fuir l'ensemble, et qui brise la structure symbolique."

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.

------. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Kafka*. Paris : Minuit, 1975.

Doody, Mary Anne. Introduction to *Sense and Sensibility*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. vii-xxxiv.

Fielding, Henry. *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*. 1742,1741. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

Gilson, Erinn C. *The Ethics of Vulnerability*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Gilbert, Sandra and Gubar, Susan. *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.

Ricœur, Paul. *Temps et récit*, t. 1. Paris : Seuil, 1983.

Sutherland, Kathryn. *Jane Austen's Textual Lives*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.