

Zeitschrift: Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata

Herausgeber: Association suisse de littérature générale et comparée

Band: - (1997)

Heft: 25: From Rousseau to Wordsworth : what happened in European literature between 1770 and 1850?

Artikel: The moment as a form : Jane Austen and Chateaubriand

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006536>

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Robert Rehder

The Moment as a Form: Jane Austen and Chateaubriand

Perhaps the most surprising passage in *Sense and Sensibility* occurs near the beginning of Chapter XI in volume two. During their visit to London, Elinor and Marianne go to a jeweller's shop.

On ascending the stairs, the Miss Dashwoods found so many people before them in the room that there was not a person at liberty to attend to their orders; and they were obliged to wait. All that could be done was, to sit down at that end of the counter which seemed to promise the quickest succession; one gentleman only was standing there, and it is probable that Elinor was not without hopes of exciting his politeness to a quicker dispatch. But the correctness of his eye, and the delicacy of his taste, proved to be beyond his politeness. He was giving orders for a toothpick-case for himself, and till its size, shape, and ornaments were determined, all of which, after examining and debating for a quarter of an hour over every toothpick-case in the shop, were finally arranged by his own inventive fancy, he had no leisure to bestow any other attention on the two ladies, than what was comprised in three or four very broad stares; a kind of notice which served to imprint on Elinor, the remembrance of a person and face, of strong, natural, sterling insignificance, though adorned in the first stile of fashion.

Marianne was spared from the troublesome feelings of contempt and resentment, on this impertinent examination of their features, and on the puppyism of his manner in deciding on all the different horrors of the different toothpick-cases presented to his inspection, by remaining unconscious of it all; for she was as well able to collect her thoughts within herself, and be as ignorant of what was passing around her, in Mr. Gray's shop, as in her own bed-room.

At last the affair was decided. The ivory, the gold, and the pearls, all received their appointment, and the gentleman having named the last day on which his existence could be continued without the possession of the toothpick-case, drew on his gloves with leisurely care, and bestowing another glance on the Miss Dashwoods, but such a one as seemed rather to demand than express admiration, walked off with an happy air of real conceit and affected indifference. (220-21)¹

1 All references to the novels of Jane Austen are to the edition of R. W.

Here the quality of the attention changes. The summarizing narrative alternating with dialogue gives way to a more sharply focused, detailed examination of a single person in action in a particular setting for a relatively short period of time, something over “a quarter of an hour”. The moment is unique in Jane Austen.

After the gentleman has “walked off”, the story continues and it is with a slight shock that we note that he appears to have been forgotten. This is especially strange as his look served to imprint on Elinor the remembrance of his “person and face”. Otherwise, the encounter seems no more than a cameo portrait, a social vignette, a small fragment of the world or item of behavior presented for its own sake. Jane Austen never does this. Her novels do not include anything extraneous to the plot. There is nothing like Evelina’s sight-seeing in Fanny Burney’s *Evelina* (1778), where her London itinerary can be said to take the place of a plot. Austen does not describe the world or any of its objects in any detail. When Anne Elliot ascends the steps from the beach at Lyme in Chapter XII of *Persuasion* and catches the eye of the gentleman who waits for her party at the top, the question of identity is made a matter of suspense for the next six paragraphs before he is named as “a Mr Elliot”, but he is never lost sight of until he is identified (104-5). The gentleman in the jeweller’s shop in *Sense and Sensibility* disappears completely and it is only three chapters and some thirty pages later that he is introduced to Elinor as Mr Robert Ferrars. It is at this point that the episode has its full effect and we know that Austen has not changed her habits.

She does not set the scene in her books. The description of Mrs Jennings’ London residence is typical:

The house was handsome and handsomely fitted up, and the young ladies were immediately put in possession of a very comfortable apartment. It had formerly been Charlotte’s, and over the mantelpiece still hung a landscape in coloured silks of her performance, in proof of her having spent seven years at a great school in town to some effect. (160)

Chapman: *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1946 (third edition). The page numbers are given in parentheses in the text.

Nothing could be more general than *handsome* used twice, as noun and adverb, and *very comfortable*. The generality and vagueness is more marked by the fact that the location of the house is never fixed. We arrive with the Miss Dashwoods without any sense of London or the neighborhood. All we know is that it is in "one of the streets near Portman-square." (153). That this detail is given in the previous chapter is an indication that Austen does not think in terms of settings.

What is unusual is the focus on a single small object: the *landscape*, which receives more attention than the house and the apartment put together, but it is not *seen*. We are not told the subject, the colors or anything about the quality of the workmanship. The landscape is the occasion for irony at the expense of Charlotte, fashionable London schools and the education of women, and in no way helps to understand the action that takes place in either house or apartment. There is no idea of setting here, no vision of the room as a whole or as a set of objects, and although the detail of the landscape may be considered a primitive gesture in that direction, it is, nonetheless, a somewhat disconnected item. There is no physical scene – and to whom does the thought belong? It seems an intervention of the narrator rather than part of the consciousness of Elinor or Marianne.

The episode at the jeweller's is more carefully located in space and time. The Miss Dashwoods and Mrs Jennings go out "one morning" for a brief visit, "half an hour", "to Gray's in Sackville-Street", which being a short street is more precise an address than is given for Mrs Jennings' house. That Mrs Jennings knows someone "at the other end of the street" on whom she ought to call both suggests the shortness of the street and locates the neighbourhood in the social world. The shop is on the first floor. The purpose of the visit is clearly stated: "Elinor was carrying on a negotiation for the exchange of a few old-fashioned jewels of her mother." (220). Thus, the visit is part of an on-going process, "a negotiation". That the jewels are "old-fashioned" and belong to "her mother" further anchor the action in time and provide the moment with a history.

The episode's end is minutely delimited in the same terms as its beginning: street (represented by the carriage rather than by name),

door and stairs. Mrs Jennings' servant arrives to tell Elinor that "his mistress waited for them at the door".

Mr. Dashwood attended them down stairs, was introduced to Mrs. Jennings at the door of her carriage, and...took leave. (222)

The moment of time is given very exact boundaries in space. Unlike most of the visits in the novel, the purpose is not at all social. Perhaps the most striking thing, however, is that the major characters in the scene are involved with very small objects, Elinor with "a few old-fashioned jewels", and the unnamed gentleman with the choice of a toothpick-case.

What distinguishes the account of the visit to Gray's is, first, the careful delimitation of the moment in space and time, second, its organization and coherence, the degree to which the gentleman (and Elinor as observer) are embedded in the setting and, above all, the awareness of, and concern for small objects in all their details. The gentleman's character is defined not only by his interaction with other persons, as is usual in Austen, but also in terms of his involvement with the objects of the setting. Here the moment is a unit of form. This is, I suggest, an early example in the history of the novel of a form that becomes fully established with Scott and Balzac. The moment's internal coherence is a function of the careful definition of its boundaries in space and time. The sense of space is symbiotic with the sense of time. This is a structure that allows more of the world into the narrative.

To be seen clearly and more completely, an object must be apprehended in its context, understood in terms of the distinctive peculiarities of its locality and surroundings – and its history: change can only be perceived when objects are seen as existing in time, only then can the way in which the past acts upon the present be observed. The more precisely an object is located in space and time, the more accurately it can be seen. This is true whether the object is a person, a landscape, city, room, toothpick-case – or thought, because the use of the moment as a form makes possible a more accurate representation of mental events.

The moment as a form produces greater realism in every way. Here it is possible to state another general rule: the awareness of the

outer world is symbiotic with the awareness of the inner world. Self-consciousness increases with world-consciousness and vice versa². The awareness of perception, memory and consciousness itself as processes, which is one of the marks of the increased self-consciousness of this time, involves a greater attention to the objects of those processes. The concern for shades of feeling leads to a greater sensitivity to the lights and shadows of the world.

All this makes possible a simple definition of realism: *a text is realistic to the extent that the items in it are located in space and time*³.

Jane Austen also marks the space within the shop. Upon entering "the room" at the top of the stairs, the Miss Dashwoods wait at one end of one of the counters where "one gentleman only was standing". Although the distance is not specified, from the details given, they are close enough to see the various toothpick-cases that he examines and to overhear his comments. Many things, however, are left vague. The room is big enough to hold "many people" and more than one counter. Beyond this we know nothing.

The account of ordering the toothpick-case is an interesting and characteristic combination of summary, abstraction and detail. Events are not narrated as they happen. They have no sequence. We are neither told how many toothpick-cases are examined nor in what order "size, shape and ornaments" are determined, nor any details about "size, shape and ornaments" considered until the ivory, gold and pearls of the gentleman's order. This is as close as we get to the objects. We never see an individual case. The moment is present to the narrator as a whole: the "examining and debating" are presented as a block, as are the "three or four very broad stares" which

2 Robert Rehder, "Theory, History and Faith in the World", invited lecture, International Association of University Professors of English, Lausanne, 1989, unpublished. See also Robert Rehder, *Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry*, London, Croom Helm and Totowa, New Jersey, Barnes and Noble, 1981, 17-43, 217-21 [hereafter *WBMP*].

3 This definition is given in Robert Rehder, "Realism Again: Flaubert's Barometer and *The Unfortunate Traveller*", *Narrative Strategies in Early English Fiction*, ed. W. Görtzschacher and H. Klein, Lewiston N. Y. and Salzburg, 1995, 244-46.

interrupt this process. It is somewhat strange that there is any doubt about the number of these “very broad stares”, presumably this is to indicate that Elinor is not always watching the man.

There are many exclusions. There is no description of the interior of the shop. Scott or Balzac or Dickens probably would have found this irresistible as a subject, but not Austen. The setting is minimal in the extreme. The person waiting on the gentleman is invisible. The gentleman is “adorned in the first style of fashion”, but we are not told what he is wearing. His physical appearance is presented as a whole, despite the fact that his “person” is separated from his “face”. He is judged rather than described. There is nothing visual in the three adjectives ironically deflated by the noun: “a person and face, of strong, natural, sterling insignificance”. What we are given is the end result of Elinor’s perceptions after they have become a memory. We do not participate in her seeing. The man’s “three or four very broad stares” are condensed into “a kind of notice” which in turn “served to imprint on Elinor the remembrance of a person and face” of marked insignificance. That this is put in terms of being imprinted on Elinor’s “remembrance” suggests that Austen is already thinking of bringing the gentleman back later in the story.

The man does not touch the toothpick-cases in the narrative. His hands are not seen until he draws on his gloves “with leisurely care”, where *leisurely* confirms the fatuity of his prolonged consideration of the design of his toothpick-case. The man’s whole character is made to depend upon the attention he gives to this small, finally unseen and not yet existent object. Every detail of his lingering is a further indictment of his behaviour. His delay is contrasted with Elinor’s dispatch. She “lost no time in bringing her business forward, and was on the point of concluding it” when her brother appears.

Such physical details as occur in the passage are confined to the toothpick-cases. The anonymous gentleman is defined in moral terms. Austen’s novels are concerned with codes of behaviour. Her world is social not physical, but although the world of objects is sometimes barely adumbrated, it is more definite, coherent and connected in her work than in that of Richardson or Fanny Burney, as is shown

by the history of the events in Mr. Gray's shop. The psychology of the persons in her novels is a function of social facts and a more or less unchanging character rather than of the surroundings or environment. There is nothing in any way comparable to the shaping and forming landscape that Wordsworth describes in his autobiographical poem. Austen judges instead of seeing. The physical is used to crystallize the moral.

Austen moves into the description of the anonymous gentleman slowly. The "correctness of his eye" and "the delicacy of his taste" exceed "his politeness". The irony is subtle, but marked. At this point in the story it is very clear that the author places the highest value on good manners. The man's absorption in "examining", "debating" and "giving orders" is allowed to speak for itself, but it is clear that his "inventive fancy" is misplaced. He has chosen the wrong object and is decisively condemned for "insignificance". He is assigned the moral value of the toothpick-case. *Sterling* is a very nice choice in this context, a judgement of value appropriate to a jeweller's shop.

Austen is not content to leave it at that. The strength of this condemnation, more decisive for coming in the last sentence of the paragraph, is repeated when the man's deliberations and staring are taken up again. The first is judged as "impertinent", the second as "puppyism". Jane Austen does not pull her punches. Her aggression is freely expressed. Her strength is in the unambiguous clarity and definiteness of her moral judgements. She is skeptical, but does not doubt. We always know where we are in her novels, which is why they are so comfortable and reassuring. The introduction of Marianne, as if we were going to be given two points of view, is a pretext in order to keep the gentleman before us a little longer and to hammer him again.

As so often, the emotion is slightly removed or detached from the characters (including the narrator). We are told what Marianne does not feel. She "was spared the troublesome feelings of contempt and resentment". These feelings appear to be shared by Elinor and the narrator without being attributed to either. This is a way, along with strong, clear judgements, of coping with the troublesomeness. Although it fits neatly and easily into the story, the paragraph about

Marianne is self-contained and could be omitted without disrupting the narrative.

The number of days the man can live without his toothpick-case is a measure of his insignificance and puppyism. The heavy, formal phrasing of “the last day on which his existence could be continued without possession” increases the irony. “The ivory, the gold, and the pearls” are also measures of value, and juxtaposed with his inability to live without the toothpick-case, of his vanity. They, the components of the toothpick-case, are the smallest details in the whole episode. The moment as a form is predicated on the assumption, conscious or unconscious or both, that an infinite number of small details can go into the smallest space of time⁴. This is an assumption about the way the mind works and about language; it assumes that there is no end to perception and thinking – or to its representation: that the description of any thing is endless. One reason for this view is the feeling that language is incommensurate with experience, so that ever more words are needed for an accurate approximation. Again and again in the autobiographical poem, Wordsworth refers to the inadequacy of words to describe experience. There is virtually no sense of this in Austen. She believes in the adequacy of her language as she does in her moral categories. This is what separates her from Scott and why his descriptions (and novels) are so much longer.

The sentence that begins with “The ivory...” is the one in which the anonymous gentleman exits from the scene. Long and carefully balanced, it begins with the minute specifications of the object and ends with a devastating judgement on the man’s character. Having decided on the design of his case, he performs three actions: he names the day by which it is to arrive, draws on his gloves and bestows “another glance on the Miss Dashwoods”. Although the physicality of these actions is muted, these successive actions show a figure moving in time and in an almost real world. Each of the two final clauses depends upon an antithesis: *demand* versus *express* and *real conceit* versus *affected indifference*. The effect is of a deft right and left with a

4 WBMP, 215-6.

shotgun, but the abstraction of the language and the formality and artificiality of the structure gives the judgement an impersonal quality, at the same time as removing it somewhat from the physical details of the action.

Elinor's conversation with her brother that follows demonstrates the way in which a moment can be expanded so as to hold a number of diverse events. It is easy to imagine other things being added, for example, Marianne being included in the conversation with John, or Mrs Jennings coming upstairs to find them. Jane Austen's instinct is for brevity. Here again she is the opposite of Scott. She is concise where he is diffuse. Her preference is for carefully measured and balanced forms, like the paired antitheses of her final judgement on the anonymous gentleman. Her world is ordered in the syntax of each sentence.

The moment seems to have established itself as a form in poetry before it is established in fiction⁵. Coleridge appears to be the first major poet to take full advantage of the possibilities in the series of poems he wrote between 1795 and 1798. These poems, the so-called "conversation poems", are moments of personal experience carefully and definitely located in space and time. Coleridge in most cases uses the form in order to hold another past moment. The communion between the poet and Sara in "The Eolian Harp" is interrupted by the poet's memory of being on "yonder hill" earlier the same day. The poet's musings as he sits next to his baby son in "Frost at Midnight" open to include a moment from his childhood. Wordsworth develops the form in "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" and makes it the basis of his autobiographical poem (1798-1805). For him every moment potentially contains the entire past. Wordsworth's conception of the verse paragraph and his organization of the poem in blocks of verse separated by space is informed by the idea of the moment as a form, or, more precisely, by the idea

5 Although Sterne has an acute sense of short intervals of time and the various small actions that can fill them, the events in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767) are not very carefully located in space and none of the small objects mentioned are described at length.

that the life of each individual is composed of a unique series of unique moments. This is the definition of what it means to be an *individual*, the conception of the person that comes into being at this time.

There are very few moments in the autobiographies of Colley Cibber (1740, 1750) and Edward Gibbon (six versions drafted between 1768 and 1793), more in *Les Confessions* of Rousseau (part one published 1782, the whole, 1789), but almost none are as clearly defined and as definite as those in Wordsworth's autobiographical poem. Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* shares with Wordsworth's poem the conception of the individual life as composed of moments of experience⁶. The example of Chateaubriand is especially interesting, because, like Jane Austen, antithesis and parallelism are fundamental structures of his style and his standard response to the world is irony, however, his sense of history is even more vivid, specific and detailed than Wordsworth's. Both Wordsworth and Austen have a very limited focus, Wordsworth on himself, Austen on a small number of characters. The landscape in Wordsworth and the small scale and ordinariness of the events in Austen, and the way that so much in both is excluded, cause their worlds to appear as constant and relatively stable. Chateaubriand is inclusive where they are exclusive. His memoirs are crowded with people like the Waverley novels and *La Comédie humaine*, and the story of his life is for him inseparable from the major political events of his time. This is not simply because he was at times a major actor in those events, but because that is how he sees himself. The balancing and symmetries of his syntax, the constant irony and the repeated refrain that everything is vanity because we are mortal appear as his attempts to steady himself and to establish a fixed point in a world of radical and overwhelming changes. Where in Wordsworth the instability comes from within, in Chateaubriand it seems to come from without.

The first paragraph of the first chapter of Book Sixth of *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* shows Chateaubriand using the moment as a form in

6 WBMP, 178-80.

a somewhat different way from Austen in the episode in *Sense and Sensibility*, but with an analogous specificity of time and place, sense of particular objects, attention to detail and dawning awareness of the relations between the person and his surroundings:

Trente-un ans après m'être embarqué, simple sous-lieutenant, pour l'Amérique, je m'embarquais pour Londres, avec un passeport conçu en ces termes: "Laissez passer", disait ce passeport, "laissez passer sa seigneurie le vicomte de Chateaubriand, pair de France, ambassadeur du Roi près Sa Majesté britannique, etc., etc." Point de signalement; ma grandeur devait faire connaître mon visage en tous lieux. Un bateau à vapeur, nolisé pour moi seul, me porte de Calais à Douvres. En mettant le pied sur le sol anglais, le 5 avril 1822, je suis salué par le canon du fort. Un officier vient, de la part du commandant, m'offrir une garde d'honneur. Descendu à Shipwright-Inn, le maître et les garçons de l'auberge me reçurent bras pendants et têtes nues. Madame la mairesse m'invite à une soirée, au nom des plus belles dames de la ville. M. Billing, attaché à mon ambassade, m'attendait. Un dîner d'énormes poissons et de monstrueux quartiers de bœuf restaura monsieur l'ambassadeur, qui n'a point d'appétit et qui n'était pas du tout fatigué. Le peuple, attroupé sous mes fenêtres, fait retentir l'air de *buzzas*. L'officier revint et posa, malgré moi, des sentinelles à ma porte. Le lendemain, après avoir distribué force argent du Roi mon maître, je me suis mis en route pour Londres, au ronflement du canon, dans une légère voiture, qu'emportaient quatre beaux chevaux menés au grand trot par deux élégants jockeys. Mes gens suivaient dans d'autres carrosses; des courriers à ma livrée accompagnaient le cortège. Nous passons Cantorbery, attirant les yeux de John-Bull et des équipages qui nous croisaient. A Black-Heath, bruyère jadis hantée des voleurs, je trouvai un village tout neuf. Bientôt m'apparut l'immense calotte de fumée qui couvre la cité de Londres. (I.193-4)⁷

The chapter is entitled "Prologue" as if on the threshold of embarking for America, the most adventurous of all his journeys and the one that resulted in the works that first made his reputation, he needs to pause in order to gather his forces.

Although Chateaubriand begins with his departure for the United States (from St. Malo, 8 April 1791), which is the moment at which he has arrived in the narrative of his life, the chapter is organized as a contrast between two moments of arrival: as a poor refugee at

7 François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, ed. Maurice Levaillant and George Moulinier, Paris, Gallimard, 1946, I.193-4. All references are to this edition. The volume and page numbers are given in parentheses in the text.

Southampton, 17 May 1793 and as the French ambassador at Dover, 5 April 1822. The awareness of time, however, is still more complex and nuanced. At the head of the chapter is the note: "Londres, d'avril à septembre 1822/Revu en décembre 1846." Like Wordsworth's, Chateaubriand's autobiography includes the history of its own composition.

The first chapter of Book Sixth interrupts the narrative in order to tell the story of his resuming the composition of his autobiography. The last chapter of Book Fifth is dated: "Paris, décembre 1821", now, four months later, in London, he takes up his pen to continue his history. He begins by mentioning his embarkation for the United States, because that voyage is the next episode in the narrative. Chateaubriand then relates his disembarkation at Dover, because that has just happened and the contrast between his present grandeur and his former poverty is irresistible. He repeatedly devalues all achievement, and constantly needs to show himself as a great man. As its title suggests, antithesis is a fundamental structure in *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*. That death is the inevitable end of all glory is the refrain and counterpoint to the story of his life.

The time scheme of the chapter is complicated, because one set of moments has been superimposed upon another. Two chronologies are entangled: that of his life and that of his works. He begins by comparing his embarkation thirty-one years ago for America with his most recent embarkation for London, then he contrasts his arrival in Dover in 1822 with his arrival in Southampton in 1793 and subsequent stay in London 1793-1800, the two disembarkations separated by an interval of twenty-nine years. Finally, he goes back twenty-two years to contrast the end of that earlier period in London with his present residence there, because both are, or he hopes will be, major periods of composition. Formerly, he drafted *Les Natchez* and *Atala*, now he is about to resume his memoirs.

He begins the chapter by mentioning his departure for America, because that is what he is about to recount in his autobiography. This past departure is his present subject. The earlier period of composition in London is recalled in order to empower the present one. The imperative of the penultimate paragraph brings us to the brink of the future: "mettons-nous à l'oeuvre." (I.198).

The moment of Chateaubriand's arrival in Dover is neither so sharply delineated nor focused as Austen's description of the purchase of the toothpick-case, because it is longer, in a larger space and part of a complex group of moments. Virtually every sentence in Chateaubriand's description of his arrival in England partakes of a moment of perception. The form is second nature to him where Austen thinks in other units. Austen magnifies and details action occurring over a short period of time in order to establish a character. For her that character is a constant. Chateaubriand enumerates the details of his reception in Dover in order to show his glory and fame, and how his life has changed. He insists on the vicissitudes to which the individual is subjected, and although he is much less aware of his own character as developing than Wordsworth, for example, he has an extremely vivid sense of the historicity of every moment. By his description, he reaffirms both the world's and his identity within that changingness.

The boundaries of his moment of arrival are, nonetheless, clearly marked. He arrives from Calais on a steamboat chartered especially for him. The "pour moi seul", echoed in his being alone in the embassy at the chapter's end, can stand for Chateaubriand's sense of his own apartness and solitariness that informs the whole autobiography despite the crowds of other people whom we find there. The very first contact of his foot with English earth is marked, dated and as if confirmed by the salute of the canon. The firing of the canon is like the final click of a stop watch precisely locating this small physical detail in time. He is met by an officer and a guard of honour. He then proceeds to the Shipwright Inn where he stays the night. The next day he goes to London after distributing a considerable sum of money as gifts. The route is specified: Canterbury, Blackheath and Portland Place.

The sense of time is more pronounced than the sense of space. The paragraph is strongly organized as a sequence in which a small number of actions stand for many more. The entire progress of Chateaubriand from the ship to the inn is not recorded, nor are the details of the reception and dinner. The events are condensed, simplified. Every sentence contains a definite fact or small precision. "*Descendu à Shipwright-Inn, le maitre et les garçons de l'auberge me*

reçurent *bras pendants* et *têtes nues*". He goes to London "dans une légère voiture, qu'emportaient *quatre beaux* chevaux menés au *grand trot par deux élégants jockeys*" (my italics). What is remarkable is that Chateaubriand has chosen to describe such a large and complex scene in terms of so many relatively small details and with almost no vague, comprehensive words. Because of the size and diversity of the scene, the definiteness of the details may not at first be appreciated. The scene, moreover, like that in Gray's in *Sense and Sensibility*, is not especially visual. There are few adjectives, and virtually none that gives the look or physical quality of the thing described, except *ronflement* which gives the sound and *calotte*, the shape. *Belles*, *beaux* and *élégants* are very general. Chateaubriand's couriers wear his livery, but the colours are not given. There is no colour, light or shadow anywhere in the account.

There are three actors in the episode at the counter in Gray's (four, if we count the clerk who is not mentioned), and probably not more than a dozen or so persons in the shop. A hundred or more may be involved in Chateaubriand's reception in Dover: the officer, the guard of honour, the inn keeper, his waiters and his wife, M. Billing and the sentinels, two jockeys, couriers and the other members of Chateaubriand's entourage are mentioned, but there are also the steamship's crew, longshoremen, port officials, the other servants at the inn and all those present at the *soirée* and the dinner. We do not know how many people shouted *buzzas* under his window, received gifts of money or gathered to see him depart for London, but the impression is of crowds. None of these people are described in any detail. We do not know what they look like or how they are dressed, only that the "plus belles dames de la ville" were at the reception, that his couriers wore livery and that presumably the soldiers were in uniform. The only face that Chateaubriand refers to is his own. Except for Chateaubriand and Billing, the various persons mentioned are referred to by their social position or profession, that is, by the minimum necessary to understand their function in the scene.

The scene in the jeweller's shop in *Sense and Sensibility* is organized around the purchase of the tooth-pick case. This small object is at the center of the moment. Chateaubriand's description of

his arrival in Dover also focuses on a single small object capable of being carried easily in one hand: his passport (often at this period a single sheet of paper). Although its mention occurs before that of the chartered ship that takes Chateaubriand from Calais to Dover, that is, outside of the actual moment of arrival, it is nonetheless part of the account of the journey, following on from: "je m'embarquais pour Londres...". Again the object is seen in terms of smaller units, in this case, the individual words on the paper. Unlike Austen, the object in Chateaubriand is not used to organize the action, although without the citation from the passport, the reception would be meaningless.

In both narratives, the object is used to identify the moment's protagonist, in Austen to define the unnamed man's character, in Chateaubriand to name and define the author's rank. Here the author is the central figure: "Laissez passer sa seigneurie le vicomte de Chateaubriand, pair de France, ambassadeur du Roi près Sa Majesté britannique, etc., etc.", although his actions are not specified (only implied in the most general way) and his character is not at all in question. The object is included in the two texts as physical evidence of the truth of otherwise intangible entities – like a payment in cash. *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* is full of citations from a variety of primary sources. This obsessive need to document his narrative is part of Chateaubriand's effort to stay in touch with the reality of his life. Travelling to Switzerland in 1832, he writes: "En quête d'un asile pour achever mes Mémoires, je chemine de nouveau traînant à ma suite un énorme bagage de papiers, correspondances diplomatiques, notes confidentielles, lettres de ministres et de rois; c'est l'histoire portée en croupe par le roman." (II.574).

Chateaubriand carefully separates who he is, his physical self, from the grand words and many titles of the passport: "Point de signalement; ma grandeur devant faire connaître mon visage en tous lieux." The imperative, "Laissez passer", is there to clinch the argument of his grandeur. Everyone is to give way before him. His fame is irresistible and yet, his reputation is not himself. Although he insists upon it throughout his autobiography as if somehow it could fill up the inner emptiness, he is sufficiently unsatisfied to be permanently skeptical. The imagination and other intangibles cannot repair

what is missing and, therefore, provide any lasting solution. His loneliness is never entirely assuaged.

The other objects, besides the passport, in the description of his reception at Dover, the enormous fish and quarters of beef served at the dinner, are used to mark his apartness. Their purpose is to restore "monsieur l'ambassadeur, qui n'a point d'appétit et qui n'était pas du tout fatigué". He is physically and mentally at odds or out of phase with his hosts and their hospitality. The point is also made by the absence of any real communication between Chateaubriand and the people he encounters. This is a meeting of strangers. The narrative depends upon the actions and objects. Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* reads the actions of the unnamed man. There is no question but that she understands him. Although in the context of the ship, inn and city of Dover, the fish and beef are relatively small, within the moment of arrival they are large, *énormes* and *monstrueux*, for the same reason the toothpick case is small: to measure the central character of their respective passages.

Chateaubriand uses the entire chapter to mark the contrast between his stay in England in 1822 as ambassador with his previous stay as a poor refugee. The chapter, like the autobiography as a whole, tends to organize itself in terms of moments. His reception in Dover is balanced two paragraphs later by an account of his earlier arrival, with his travel papers as the principle item:

Le 17 mai de l'an de *grâce* 1793, je débarquai pour la même ville de Londres, humble et obscur voyageur, à Southampton, venant de Jersey. Aucune mairesse ne s'aperçut que je passais; le maire de la ville, William Smith, me délivra le 18, pour Londres, une feuille de route, à laquelle était joint un extrait de l'*Alien-bill*. Mon signalement porte en anglais: "François de Chateaubriand, officier français à l'armée des *émigrés* (*french officer in the emigrant army*), taille de cinq pieds quatre pouces (*five feet four inches high*), mince (*thin shape*), favoris et cheveux bruns (*brown hair and fits*)." Je partageai modestement la voiture la moins chère avec quelques matelots en congé; je relayai aux plus chétives tavernes; j'entrai pauvre, malade, inconnu, dans une ville opulente et fameuse, où M. Pitt régnait; j'allai loger, à six schellings par mois, sous le lattis d'un grenier que m'avait préparé un cousin de Bretagne, au bout d'une petite rue qui joignait Tottenham-Court-Road. (I.194)

Here there are two sheets of paper, “une feuille de route” and “un extrait de l’*Alien-bill*”, delivered the day after his arrival. These travel papers contain no list of titles. His military rank is not given and instead of the command to all concerned to allow him to pass, there is an extract from the Alien Bill specifying his legal status within the country, and a full, formal physical description. Obscurity needs to be more carefully monitored than grandeur. The original travel paper states that Chateaubriand’s face was marked by small pox⁸. Is it vanity that causes him to omit this?

This moment like the previous one is rich in specifics, it is composed almost exclusively of details. The two passports prove that it all happened. Documents, objects, are better than memory and other emotions. They also activate and organize memories. What is remarkable in both cases is that we are told almost nothing of Chateaubriand’s feelings. At Dover he is neither hungry nor tired, at Southampton he is “pauvre, malade, inconnu”. We do not know what he is thinking. The facts speak instead of the author. He keeps his thoughts to himself and from himself. If the story of Chateaubriand’s life seems to organize itself almost unconsciously and naturally into moments, this does not mean that he always gives us a clear view of his inner world, or that he has one himself. There is always an horizon to consciousness.

Turned back at the Austrian frontier, 21 May 1833, on his way to visit Charles X in Prague, because his passport does not have his “signalement”, is out of date and lacks the necessary visa, Chateaubriand observes:

Comment! Mon nom, qui volait d’un pôle à l’autre, n’était pas venu aux oreilles d’un douanier dans les montagnes d’Haselbach! Chose autant plus cruelle qu’on a vu mes succès à Bâle. En Bavière, j’avais été salué de *Monseigneur* ou d’Excellence; un officier bavarois, à Waldmünchen, disait hautement dans l’auberge que mon nom n’avait pas besoin du *visa* d’un ambassadeur d’Autriche. Ces consolations étaient grandes, j’en conviens; mais enfin une triste vérité demeurait: c’est qu’il existait sur la terre un homme qui n’avait jamais entendu parler de moi. (I.648)

8 *Ibid.*, I.1147, n.1.

His rejection by the custom's official causes him to review his entire journey. He remembers every word of praise and cherishes every vestige or hint of fame. They are major consolations, but, as much as he would like to, he cannot believe in them. Ultimately, he has to face the sad truth – the recognition is stated with heavy irony: there is someone who has never heard of him. Despite all his words, those on his passport, those of his works, he is sooner or later, unknown. Neither his fame nor his passport can prevail. Nothing lasts.

Chateaubriand's memoirs are constructed on this opposition: he states what he has done, what has been said to him and about him – and then that everything dies. His title, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, and his plan of posthumous publication is an attempt to go beyond death and outside of time. The moment as a form breaks the continuity of life, threatening the future at the same time as demanding an effort to recall the past. The *me, me, me* of autobiography is counterbalanced by the constant and abstract assertion that everything is transient, which is at once a summary and a defence against his experience of change and revolution, a proclamation of his disillusioned faith in impermanence. Anything that exists in time is temporary – in the full sense of the word. Chateaubriand's skepticism, detachment, disillusionment, need to believe, need of self-assertion, restlessness, conservatism and incapacity to be satisfied are all versions of his fundamental loneliness and inner emptiness.

All the warm welcomes of his journey from Paris in 1833 are negated by the refusal of a minor official in a small town, the chief of customs at Haselbach, (for very good reasons it should be emphasized) to allow him to cross the frontier. Surrounded by crowds at Dover and again in London, Chateaubriand insists on his separateness. The many details are of his reception, of what is done for him. There is no description of any interaction, with the owner of the Shipwright Inn and his wife, M. Billing, Madame the mayor or anyone else. When he distributes money, he does not say to whom. He is alone in the crowd. He empties the embassy in order to describe his residence there. As he tells it, he makes even less contact with those around him than the unnamed man in Gray's.

His American voyage also figures at the start of the chapter, because, as he tells us in the last paragraph (giving a full and formal

closure to the chapter), on his last visit to England, he drafts *Les Natchez* and *Atala*, writing up his American experiences as he is again about to do now. With the last two paragraphs of the chapter we are in the present of the composition of the work. The glamour and excitement of his reception were yesterday and have been recorded. After remembering his London stay of 1793 and developing the contrast between then and now, he tells us that he is alone in the embassy in Portland Place. His secretaries have gone to a ball. "Les gens, Peter, Valentin, Lewis allaient à leur tour au cabaret, et les femmes, Rose, Peggy, Maria, à la promenade des trottoirs; j'en étais charmé. On me laissait la clef de la porte extérieure: monsieur l'ambassadeur était commis à la garde de sa maison; si on frappe, il ouvrira. Tout le monde est sorti; me voilà seul: mettons-nous à l'oeuvre." (I.198).

As in the first paragraph of the chapter, he is surrounded by people, but this time in imagination. His solitary state, like his exalted state as ambassador, is defined in terms of a crowd. This would appear to be an analogous form of self-definition to that of comparing the events of his life to those of world history. There is the same combination of definiteness and indefiniteness as in the first paragraph. His location is very clearly given. We have his address: he is in the French embassy in Portland Place in London, but we do not know exactly where he is within the embassy, on what floor or in what room. As he is writing, we assume that he is seated at a desk or table, but there is no physical description of his immediate surroundings. This interior space has a definite boundary: "la porte extérieure" that is defined in terms of a small object, "la clef" and small, simple, possible actions: "si on frappe, il ouvrira". Those absent are divided into three groups: "Mes secrétaires", "Les gens", "les femmes" and the members of the last two are identified by name. Each group is at a different location within London. If the author is included, there are four groups, each in different places, doing different things. This sense of simultaneous action, of many things happening at the same time, is the same as when he relates the events of his life to the major political events of the time, and a distinguishing characteristic of his historical consciousness. For Chateaubriand, the present moment is very large, holding as it does the activities of every person in the world.

Despite the easy terms he wants us to believe he is on with his servants, the text maintains his rank. They are: "Peter, Valentin, Lewis", "Rose, Peggy, Maria"; he is "monsieur l'ambassadeur". The idea of the ambassador as "commis" unites at the chapter's conclusion, the extremes of insignificance and fame, poverty and riches that is the major antithesis of the chapter and one of the main organizing ideas of the autobiography as a whole. Moreover, he thus unites the past with the present.

Mémoires d'outre-tombe is a large and miscellaneous work of forty-four books, each composed of a varying number of chapters (from six to twenty-seven). The chapters are relatively short. Thus, each book, analogous to the books of Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, is composed of a number of more or less discrete sections, although both Chateaubriand's books and chapters are longer. Many of the chapters (but not all, and there is more variation in the manuscripts) carry notes of the dates of composition and revision, but despite all these formal divisions and numbering, the structure of the work is loose, irregular and somewhat haphazard.

The author's effort to order and control his material is not always successful. Chateaubriand is always ready to digress. He will stop the narrative in order to reflect on a topic that may or may not be related to his story, to include a bit of history, do someone's portrait or give an extract from letters or other documents. Some of these digressions are long, others, short. Four of the six chapters of Book Twelfth are devoted to a survey of English literature. The fifth contains some general remarks on English culture and in the sixth he resumes the narrative to relate his return to France. Books Nineteenth to Twenty-Fourth are an account of the career of Bonaparte, a biography within the autobiography. Hazlitt, Scott and Stendhal wrote biographies of Napoleon, but Chateaubriand is unable to completely separate Bonaparte's life from his own. It is as if by recounting Bonaparte's career he appropriates his power and fame. The fantastic (in the several senses of the word) strength of his ambition is shown by the constant measuring of himself against Napoleon. Book Twenty-Ninth is a biography of Madame Récamier. These two long digressions can also be seen as Chateaubriand working through his relations to the internalized figures of his father and mother.

Book Fortieth, which records a stay in Venice, contains a chapter on Rousseau and Byron in Venice (40.12) and an even more unnecessary one, on “Beaux génies inspirés par Venise” (40.13). Chapter two in Book Forty-First is a short biography of Tasso and chapters five and six in Book Forty-Third discuss briefly two women who did *not* play important roles in his life. They seem afterthoughts and appear to be entirely random. However weakly these various episodes are connected to the narrative of Chateaubriand’s life, they are for the most part strongly organized within themselves, more or less self-contained (like most of the chapters) and remarkable for the specificity of the details. Like the whole work, they are filled with proper names, dates, quotations. This definiteness is historical. These episodes seem an outgrowth, a version or transformation of the moment as a form. The individual life, Bonaparte’s, Madame Récamier’s, Tasso’s, is apprehended as a moment in history as well as composed of moments. The digressions belong because they are moments in the history of the author’s consciousness.

The disorder in *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* is, in part because it was written and revised over a period of some thirty-six years (1811-1847), but it is also a consequence of Chateaubriand’s conception of the work and of himself. His desire to get everything in and the obsession with documentation is related to his conception of his life as history, and, therefore, part of a continuum – which involves referring to events over the whole span of the European past. Each of these references is an act of self-definition. Nowhere is this demonstrated more clearly than in his summing up of his own life in the final book. As can be seen, his placement of himself in the history of his time appears as much an act of will as of vision:

Deux nouveaux empires, la Prussie et la Russie, m’ont à peine devancé d’un demi-siècle sur la terre; la Corse est devenue française à l’instant où j’ai paru; je suis arrivé au monde vingt jours après Bonaparte. Il m’amenait avec lui. J’allais entrer dans la marine en 1783 quand la flotte de Louis XVI surgit à Brest: elle apportait les actes de l’état civil d’une nation éclosée sous les ailes de la France. Ma naissance se rattache à la naissance d’un homme et d’un peuple; pale reflet qu’étais d’une immense lumière. (II.916)

Fifty years before his birth, his birthday (4 September 1768), twenty days and fifteen years after his birth – these dates seem more than a little arbitrary, like the collocation of Prussia, Russia and the United States (1783 is the year of the Treaty of Paris ending the American war of independence and marking the official recognition by Britain of the new nation), however, it is obviously necessary for Chateaubriand to locate his life in the largest context possible. This is at once a fantasy of omnipotence and a response to an intense and disintegrating sense of innumerable changes rather than simple egotism (if there is such a thing). Chateaubriand is aware that being a major actor is often a matter of chance. He states in his demolition of Talleyrand near the end of *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*: “Lorsqu’en occupant une place considérable, on se trouve mêlé à des prodigeuses révolutions, elles vous donnent une importance de hasard, que le vulgaire prend pour votre mérite personnel...” (II.901). That he feels himself a part of everything that happens around him demonstrates the complexity of his sense of cause and effect as well as the historicity of his awareness, that he needs the whole world in order to define himself suggests that his strong religious faith is not enough to order his life or give it significance, that he is pervaded in ways he does not know by the loss of religious belief in Europe at this time on which he so often remarks. Near the end of his autobiography, he states: “Ma conviction religieuse, en grandissant, a dévoré mes autres convictions; il n’est ici-bas chrétien plus croyant et homme plus incrédule que moi.” (II.932).

Chateaubriand’s need is not simply of the whole world, but of the whole historical world. He writes in the last chapter of his memoirs:

Si je compare deux globes terrestres, l’un du commencement, l’autre de la fin de ma vie, je ne les reconnais plus. Une cinquième partie de la terre, l’Australie, a été découverte et s’est peuplée: un sixième continent vient d’être aperçu par des voiles françaises dans les glaces du pôle antarctique, et les Parry, les Ross, les Franklin ont tourné, à notre pôle, les côtes qui dessinent la limite de l’Amérique au Septentrion: l’Afrique a ouvert ses mystérieuses solitudes; enfin il n’y a pas un coin de notre demeure qui soit actuellement ignoré. (II.936)

Again he chooses extreme limits: Australia, on the other side of the earth, Antarctica, the Arctic, the two ends of the earth, and darkest Africa, the most obscure, in order to get everything in. None of these places had any direct bearing on the life of the Breton nobleman, François-René de Chateaubriand. Their value is imaginary. They are signs of a desire for omnipotence, for a complete order in which nothing is left out or *ignoré*, unity and wholeness. The apprehension of experience as moments and their increasing definiteness demand more definite (and therefore stronger) comprehensive terms in order to hold and organize them. The sense of the whole changes. Chateaubriand imagines the entire world as a set of an infinite number of particulars. The allusions to Australia and polar exploration locate him in space in the same way that the mention of Corsica becoming French or the French fleet bringing the news of the Treaty of Paris to Brest connect him to the past. They define him in terms of larger, definite real entities. There is a similar use of proper names in *Leaves of Grass* (1855).

Chateaubriand's desire to comprehend everything is shown by his thinking in terms of "deux globes terrestres" and perhaps also by the restless travelling that filled so much of his life. The image of the globes is a way of reducing everything to a manageable whole, to objects that can be held in two hands, of making the large small and domesticating it, like the phrase, "notre demeure", which brings it all home (should we think of two breasts?). The strength and nature of this need for wholeness may be in large measure due to Chateaubriand's acute sense of living in a changing world, far beyond anything in the autobiographies of Rousseau and Wordsworth. The concluding chapter of *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* is entitled: "Résumé des changements arrivés sur le globe pendant ma vie." (II.936).

Buffon declares: "Le style est l'homme même." According to him, how we write is a function of who we are and that whatever we say, our way of saying it is distinctive and personal – as if we had put our fingerprints on it. The moment as a form appears to become established between around 1795 and 1814, between "The Eolian Harp" and *Waverley*. After Wordsworth and Scott, it becomes a primary mode of organizing poems, novels and autobiographies. That its establishment coincides with an explosion of autobiographies

(and a different kind of autobiography) suggests that it is part of a major change in the way that people think about themselves⁹. The form is European. Wordsworth's phrase "spots of time" indicates that he had some sense of what he was doing, but it is uncertain whether he saw them as a basic unit of form in the autobiographical poem, and unlikely that Austen and Chateaubriand, or Scott or Balzac or Stendhal were fully aware that they were using the moment as a form (and there is no discussion of this point that I know of in the criticism). Consequently, what these texts demonstrate is that there is such a thing as unconscious form, that the way we write is a function of what we are and of how we apprehend the world (including ourselves) – that "Le style est l'homme même".

The idea of unconscious form complicates our notions of form at the same time that it opens new areas to criticism. The idea is not entirely new. It is implicit in the work of Freud, and Derrida's deconstruction is a search for unconscious structures, especially those places in a text where the author unknowingly contradicts himself. Every text is a series of decisions made by the author. Some of these decisions are unconscious or half-conscious. There are certainly, as Barthes suggests, inertias and dispositions of language that shape all writing, nonetheless, there can be no question that when we read a text we are confronting a series of personal choices made by an individual (or individuals) that are the consequence of who the author is¹⁰.

Any such form must be clearly visible in the text. As can be seen in the cases of Austen and Chateaubriand, the identification of unconscious form does not depend upon knowing anything about their lives or their cultures, although it does cause us to look again and more carefully at their histories. To understand unconscious form our criticism will need to become more psychological and more historical. We look for a pattern in the iron filings scattered on the sheet of paper *and* for the magnet underneath.

9 WBMP, 74-80.

10 Roland Barthes, "La Mort de l'auteur", *Le Bruissement de la langue*, Paris, Seuil, 1984, 61-67.

The moment as a form is a way of holding on to, savouring and organizing the flow of events. It can be seen as a slowing-down of time or as a fragmentation of the act of perception, or, perhaps, more precisely, the recognition that an infinite number of things can be distinguished in each act of perception (including all the goings-on of the mind along with the taking-in of the external world). The moment as a form may indeed be a response to a new awareness of the complexity of both processes. Part of this awareness is the sense of many things happening everywhere at once, of the world as the sum of innumerable processes occurring simultaneously. The careful location of each moment in space and time is the recognition that causation is a continuous process and that the individual is formed, if not determined, by his or her surroundings.

The moment as a form appears to be dependent upon a new capacity to see the object, to isolate, distinguish and detail the things of the world for their own sake. The object is individualized at the same time as its perceiver. Small things loom large and nothing is so small that it cannot be the subject of an endless description. Descriptions become longer.

The significance of small details is, among other things, a function of a more subtle and nuanced view of cause and effect, thus small things not only stand for large things, but may be large in their consequences. Events can only be understood if analyzed in detail. The notion of ever smaller and more elusive causes is clearly stated by Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* (1817). He learned from James Boyer at Christ's Hospital "that Poetry, even...that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive causes"¹¹. The idea of more and more fugitive entities is at the center of Cauchy's reform of the calculus (1821-1829). He gives the idea of infinitely small quantities (which in Newton is somewhat vague) and all the fundamental concepts of the calculus a rigorous formulation. "Upon a precise definition of the

11 S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. J. Bate, Princeton, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Princeton University Press, 1983, I.9.

notion of limit, he built a theory of continuity and infinite series, of the derivative, the differential and the integral", and established the present form of the calculus¹². During this time, the very small is seen more precisely in both real and abstract forms.

To see objects as distinct and separate from each other as well as from oneself depends upon an increased differentiation of oneself from the world – a process of individualization which appears to be especially marked at this time. The establishment of democratic governments in the United States and France and the attempts to establish them in many other countries is one example of the working out of this process¹³. Perhaps, the most suggestive comment on the new importance of objects is by Jane Austen's nephew, James Austen-Leigh, in his memoirs of his aunt¹⁴. He was the youngest mourner at her funeral in 1817 and wrote his *Memoirs of Jane Austen* in 1869.

Austen-Leigh is at great pains to emphasize the great difference between his world and Jane Austen's. In her time, silver forks were not in general use. Table knives did not have rounded ends. The amount of furniture in a reasonably well-off household "would appear to us lamentably scanty", usually one uncomfortable sofa and no easy chairs. There was a "general deficiency of carpeting". The major difference, however, is the absence of small objects:

But perhaps we should be most struck with the total absence of those elegant little articles which now embellish and encumber our drawing-room tables. We should miss the sliding bookcases and picture-stands, the letter-writing machines and envelope cases, the periodicals and illustrated newspapers – above all the countless swarm of photograph books which now threaten to swallow up all space. A small writing-desk with a smaller work-box, or netting-case,

- 12 Carl Boyer, *The History of the Calculus and its Conceptual Development*, New York, Dover, 1959, 271-83, 200-01. See also I. Grattan-Guinness, "The emergence of mathematical analysis and its foundational progress, 1780-1880", *From the Calculus to Set Theory 1630-1910*, ed. I. Grattan-Guinness, London, Duckworth, 1980, 94-148, and David Berlinski, *A Tour of the Calculus*, New York, Pantheon, 1995.
- 13 R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, I (1959), II, (1964).
- 14 James Austen-Leigh, *Memoirs of Jane Austen*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1926, 32-3.

was all that each young lady contributed to occupy the table; for the large family work-basket, though often produced in the parlour, lived in the closet.

The gradual appearance of furniture used to store objects, cupboards, wardrobes, and chests of drawers, suggests a similar development in France. The *commode* (chest of drawers) was new in the household of rich Parisians in the 1690s (*Le Petit Robert* gives 1705 as a date for the word's currency) and unknown among the poor. It appears in a quarter of the inventories of poor households in the 1780s and 1790s. The *paysans* of Vexin (Ile de France) had few *buffets* (kitchen cupboards) before 1770 and no wardrobes before 1800¹⁵. We might think that the ability to see small objects created a need to have them around.

Certainly, this was the period of scientific expeditions, such as Cook's three voyages (1768-1771, 1772-1775, 1776-1780), Alexander von Humboldt's travels in South America (1797-1804, published 1815-1826) and the voyage of *The Beagle* (1831-1836, published 1839) whose purpose was to describe and measure the world with new exactitude and to collect as many of its objects as possible in order to study them in detail. Harrison's chronometers (1735-1772) and their many descendants in the 1780s and 1790s permitted more precise timekeeping than ever before and the determination of longitude by ships at sea, and hence their location. This made possible very much more accurate maps and charts. (Cook used an exact copy of one of Harrison's chronometers on his second and third voyages¹⁶).

A more accurate history based on a critical examination of the sources and an intensive and comprehensive search for primary sources, inscriptions, archives, records and documents of all kinds, also developed at this time. Berthold Niebuhr (1776-1831) and Ranke (1795-1886) are perhaps the two most important figures in this development, although many other scholars contributed¹⁷. This change

15 Daniel Roche, *Histoire des choses banales*, Paris, Fayard, 1997, 203-4, 197, and see the whole chapter, "Meubles et objets", 183-208.

16 Dava Sobel, *Longitude*, New York, Walker and Company, 1995.

17 G. P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1965.

in history is intimately connected with the change in the novel. Reading Scott's novels was a decisive event in Ranke's life. He declared, in one of the fragments dictated in old age, that his discovery of the differences between the portraits of Louis XI and Charles the Bold in *Quentin Durward* (1823) and Commynes constituted an epoch in his life:

I found by comparison that the truth was more interesting and beautiful than the romance. I turned away from the latter and resolved to avoid all invention and imagination in my works and to stick to facts¹⁸.

Ranke was 28. The next year in the preface to his first book (1824), he wrote his famous phrase that the aim of history is "merely to show how things actually had been" (*Er will bloss zeigen wie es eigentlich gewesen*)¹⁹.

According to Meinecke, the major characteristic of this new history "is the substitution of a process of *individualizing* observation for a generalizing view of human forces in history"²⁰. Austen and Chateaubriand are in the midst of this process of individualizing observation in which everything is individualized, perceptions, feelings, persons, events, objects, moments. The specialization in the factory system, both in labour and machines, occurs simultaneously in intellectual life and institutions. Individualization is another name for this specialization. The moment as a form is only one consequence of this complicated process.

18 Leopold von Ranke, *Sämtliche Werke*, Leipzig, 1868-1890, 53/54, 61 as quoted by Roger Wines in Ranke, *The Secret of World History*, ed. and trans. Roger Wines, New York, Fordham University Press, 5.

19 Gooch, *op. cit.*, 74.

20 Frederich Meinecke, *Historism* [*Die Entstehung des Historismus*], trans. J. E. Anderson, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, lv.

Résumé

Le passage peut-être le plus surprenant de *Sense and Sensibility* est celui où Elinor et Marianne se trouvent chez le joaillier Gray à attendre leur tour alors qu'un homme non identifié est en train de commander un étui à cure-dents. L'épisode est minutieusement délimité dans le temps et dans l'espace et nous montre les débuts du "moment" comme forme dans le roman. Il correspond à un changement dans la façon dont les Européens perçoivent le monde. La perception de l'espace est en symbiose avec celle du temps; la conscience de soi s'accroît avec celle du monde et vice versa. Le récit que fait Chateaubriand dans ses *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* de son arrivée à Douvres en 1822 en tant qu'ambassadeur de France constitue un "moment" analogue. Après Wordsworth et Scott, le moment devient un mode primaire dans l'organisation des poèmes, des romans et de l'autobiographie. Ce mode entraîne une relation nouvelle aux objets, que l'on peut rapprocher du processus d'individualisation qui apparaît particulièrement marqué à cette époque.

