

Introduction

On Criticism and Other “Middle Subjects”

A work of literary criticism and philosophical theory in equal parts, *Jane Austen and Other Minds* demonstrates the standing of Jane Austen’s fiction as a philosophical investigation in its own right, as well as a resource to ordinary language philosophy in the twentieth century. The book locates in Austen’s fiction a kind of “linguistic phenomenology” available to the everyday world of the novelist, but not permitted her in intellectual history. The study also strives to honor the thought and teaching of Stanley Cavell (1926–2018). Though these two primary goals are inextricably bound together, the event of reading Cavell (reading Austen, and others) necessarily irrupts into the middle of a neater and all-English Jane Austen with J. L. Austin pairing that also concerns me at length. I take up the charge found at a relay-point in Cavell’s late book, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (2005), where Cavell connects the “passionate exchanges” and rational play found in Jane Austen’s novels to the figure of J. L. Austin, his mentor in the field of ordinary language philosophy, in the following way: “Because it is not to my hand here, or perhaps ever, to lay out a fuller geography of the courses that ‘endless’ passionate exchanges can take in satisfying the conditions of perlocutionary utterance, and because I think of myself here as wishing to honor Austin’s work, I cite one brilliant source of such passionate exchanges that I imagine Austin would feel quite happy to be associated with, indicated in his announcing one of his once famous courses of lectures at Oxford, the one on the foundations of empirical knowledge, in roughly the following form: SENSE and SENSIBILIA. J. AUSTIN” (P, 188). This book seeks to answer a question raised for Cavell by the play of endless passionate exchanges within the constraints both of manner and time: Why would Cavell honor his philosophical teacher through homage to Jane Austen and in terms of the critique of the “foundations of empirical knowledge”?

This is a question that requires dealing with various modes, moods, and levels of performativity: literary and philosophical; intimate and public.

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The inset question about the foundations of knowledge, of course, is not to be easily answered; surely not in any final way by a work of literary criticism. But the reassessment of our education in foundational knowledge occasions less ultimate registers of “passionate exchange.” These are properly in reach. From the midst of things, such relations press meaningfully upon philosophical concerns as Austin understood them in *How to Do Things with Words*. Where the alliance with Jane Austen signaled by J. L. Austin’s choice of the title *Sense and Sensibilia* may be imagined as acerbic, authoritatively witty, and coolly cultured in his own terms, Cavell’s complex homage to Austin is more earnestly warm and more generous – if tortuous – in its involvement. It offers to make Austin posthumously happy by fully welcoming passionate (perlocutionary) utterance into classic illocutionary speech-act theory, and by extending Austin’s range and circle of association beyond the lectures and famous Oxford Saturday mornings. Explaining why Cavell chooses Jane Austen as the means to make this enlargement around “passionate exchange” – when her writing and person have for so long been taken as examples of various confinements: Regency manners, heteronormativity, country estates – is equally this book’s argument and performative task.

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J. L. Austin argues that sense data and material things “live by taking in each other’s washing” (SS, 4). It is an image drawn from domestic life, though class-distanced from Jane Austen, the writer from whom he adapts the title of his 1947–1948 lecture series on modern sense-perception philosophy, *Sense and Sensibilia*. According to Austin, the ideas of both “sense-data” and “material things” trade on preoccupations found repeatedly in western theory of knowledge from Berkeley to Hume (on one track of this tradition from the eighteenth century), and from Bertrand Russell to A. J. Ayer (in another related line from the twentieth century). Austin thinks these ideas thrive insidiously by their pairing. “What is spurious,” he claims, “is not one term of the pair, but the antithesis itself. There is no *one* kind of thing that we ‘perceive’ but many *different* kinds, the number being reducible if at all by scientific investigation and not by philosophy” (SS, 4).¹ In parallel with his contention that “[t]here is no one kind of thing that we ‘perceive’,” there is no one act of perception but a manifold of perceiving, sensing, and receptive activities: a plurality that is indicated but hardly exhausted by Austin’s careful attention to the differences of usage among words like looks, appears, and seems.

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One of Austin’s most winning papers is entitled after the event of a small upset in the study, “Three Ways of Spilling Ink.”² (The three ways and dimensions of ordinary-language analysis are: intentionally, deliberately, and purposefully/on purpose.) In *Sense and Sensibilia*, Austin objects to the narrow use of the “moderate-sized specimens of dry goods” that so often serve as the constituents of a small rotating cast of “material objects” when philosophy presents narrative examples. Austin sharply criticizes the furnishings both as philosophical exempla and as language use. He also targets the metonymic thinking behind them, countering the picture of the world of things as a dry-goods store from an affirmatively critical vantage *within* the same “moderate” world (the world of William Wordsworth’s “spousal verse” of “common day”).³ In doing so, Austin harkens back to one of John Locke’s foundational metaphors for the mind and ideation, less famous only than the *tabula rasa*, and linked to it by Locke’s own slippage of metaphor: “Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, a white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store”?⁴ How indeed is a flat sheet of white paper furnished? Austin contrasts to the prop-like dry goods an alternate middle range of experiential entities that we would not usually call “material things” – a liquid grouping of streamy, fuzzy, and re-mediated phenomena. Austin contends that sense-data philosophy in general, and Ayer’s approach in *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* in particular, employs an impoverished and hollowly tasked concept of the “material thing,” as he reflects on the experiential omissions from the day’s standard philosophical list of objects (chairs, tables, pens) that “the ordinary man” is said to perceive:⁵ “We may think, for instance, of people, people’s voices, rivers, mountains, flames, rainbows, shadows, pictures on the screen at the cinema, pictures in books or hung on walls, vapours, gases.”

I will back up for a full run through the extraordinary passage at hand:

1. It is clearly implied, first of all, that the ordinary man believes that he perceives material things. Now this, at least if it is taken to mean that we would *say* that he perceives material things, is surely wrong straight off; for “material thing” is not an expression which the ordinary man would use—nor, probably, is “perceive.” Presumably, though, the expression “material thing” is here put forward, not as what the ordinary man would *say*, but as designating the general way the real *class* of things of which the ordinary man both believes and from time to time says that he perceives particular instances. But then we have to ask, of course, what this class comprises. We are given, as examples, “familiar objects”— chairs, tables, pictures, books,

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flowers, pens, cigarettes; the expression “material things” is not here (or anywhere else in Ayer’s text) further defined.⁶ But *does* the ordinary man believe that what he perceives is (always) something like furniture, or like these other “familiar objects”— moderate-sized specimens of dry goods? We may think, for instance, of people, people’s voices, rivers, mountains, flames, rainbows, shadows, pictures on the screen at the cinema, pictures in books or hung on walls, vapours, gases—all of which people say that they see or (in some cases) hear or smell, i.e., “perceive.” Are these all “material things”? No answer is exactly vouchsafed. The trouble is that the expression “material thing” is functioning *already*, from the very beginning, simply as a foil for “sense-datum”; it is not here given, and is never given, any other role to play, and apart from this consideration it would surely never have occurred to anybody to try to represent as some single kind of things the things which the ordinary man says that he “perceives.” (SS, 8)

The passage transitions from the genre of comic philosophical satire to something like the lyric arts of performative attention. When Austin thinks of “familiar objects,” he presents not a static, disconnected list of “material things,” but a dynamic association moving from people to their voices to the flowing river to the mountain through which it cuts, to flame, to shadows and the flickers of cinema.

What the so-called “ordinary man” perceives and experiences is best made available when sourced in the resources of ordinary language. It is a world of moderately vibrant materialism and of the variously medium-scaled. We might call it a garden-variety Romanticism. This notion of the garden draws on its ordinary idiomatic phrasing, though it does make reference to the thought-picture of the garden as a picture of mind, as in the privileged setting of the “other minds” problem in an English backyard: “There is a goldfinch in the garden” (*PP*, 77). Despite the role Cavellian perfectionism will play in this book, this is not the garden of the William Godwin-Erasmus Darwin-Percy Bysshe Shelley line of Romantic perfectibility, where kings, priests, and statesmen eliminated, “A garden shall arise, in loveliness / Surpassing fabled Eden.”⁷ For Austin, the garden is a locale and figure of an original – not sin – but ordinary mistake, where one encounters a songbird misrecognized. Lecture II of *Sense and Sensibilia* begins: “Let us have a look, then, at the very beginning of Ayer’s *Foundations* – the bottom, one might perhaps call it, of the garden path” (6).

The likely allusion to the English popular author Beverley Nichols is a hint. In the English phrase, to lead someone down (or up) the garden path is to mislead, to deceive them. But, redoubling the play of the idiom and its allusion, Austin’s philosophical dispute with Ayer’s *Foundations*

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is precisely over the role of deception as providing a key of misguidance in the theory of knowledge. For Austin, “at the very beginning” of Ayer’s theory and at the “bottom” of the garden is not a truth about the perception of objects (indirect and misperception), but an intellectual muddle and social mistake, a philosophical education in misleading (6). Austin’s ready-to-hand garden metaphor preserves the sense of entanglement in the history of philosophy, but denies inherent philosophical profundity to Ayer’s tradition. The beginning, the origin, is the root of the problem, its bottom. The garden here is not the mythic site of transcendental origin or utopian recovery, but of immanent, though fraught and even mysterious, communication. The garden path denotes a place of daily discovery and error. Knowledge in the garden is ready-to-hand and available. To cite from the everyday and conversational narrative poetics of the overlooked modernist novelist Henry Green, “[t]he argument ... is that we cannot go outside everyday life to create something between reader and writer in narrative. The communication between the two will be on a common or garden plane.” But, as Green goes on to note, in its premise of immanent exchanges of contact, “the common or garden plane” of communication is not free of mysteries and miracles. Rather, he wonders at the prior fact of language as an asset and means of exchange: “the mere exchange between two human beings in conversation is a mysterious thing enough. The mere fact that we talk to one another is man’s greatest asset. That we talk to one another in novels, that is between complete strangers ... is nothing less than miraculous if you once realise how much common experience can be shared.”⁸

Cavell’s major early essay “Knowing and Acknowledging” asks what we are doing to the precondition of embodiment by giving the standing of myth to this version of “other minds” skepticism. Cavell also thinks through the metaphor of accessing another’s mental life as that of contemplating a garden (*Must*, 260–261; *Claim*, 368). He cites John Cook and the analogy that we may not be able to see our neighbor’s crocuses (*Must*, 259). Indeed, there is a wider motif of thinking about flowers and about what we might call living walls and their fissures in ordinary language philosophy, including in John Wisdom’s symposium on *Other Minds* (*In Quest*, 68–70). Cavell reconsiders the garden analogy so as to gain a clearer vantage upon the human “abilities” and “inabilities” of knowing that this picture of thought may help us to grasp, when Cook calls it a “circumstance” that conditions our knowledge, that we are not the other in pain. Cavell ponders what may count as the meaning of such a “permanent circumstance” as embodiment. In his most identifiably

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Romantic and lurid mood regarding the thorns of life, Cavell invests in a Shelleyan allusion to the garden space, as he offers a kind of lyric paradigm of suffering transposed into the philosophical third person of Jamesian narrative: “the analogy captures the impression that I am sealed *out*; but it fails to capture the impression (or fact) of the way in which *he* is sealed *in*. He is not in a position to walk in that garden as he pleases, notice the blooms when he chooses: he is *impaled* upon his knowledge” (*Must*, 261). At a closely related moment in Part 4 of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell writes amidst discussion of various thought pictures: “[a]nother such description which arises in thinking about other minds is that of a garden which I can never enter. But this expression is really (mythologically) about a particular quality of the other’s mind (it is not, say, a jungle, or dump yard or haunted house), and about a particular position I am in relative to it (say one of envy or disgust or fear). Such descriptions emphasize that I do not enter another’s mind the way I enter a place. This is so far not much help; it does not distinguish either from entering, say, into marriage” (*Claim*, 368). Here the various locutions of *entering into* (a mind, a place, a marriage) serve as a relay of metaphors we live by in the metaphor of mind as location. They may structure alternatively dramatic or comedic possibilities of relation and insight. But more often they go unregarded. An additive troping declines into a subtractive trope, then hardens. Syllepsis is one of the resources of “the fierce ambiguity of ordinary language” (*Claim*, 180).

Admittedly rough-cast, these working concepts of the middle subject and the garden plane carry significant philosophical implications for the phenomenologies of reading and writing. Cavell’s arrestingly melodramatic Romanticism departs from J. L. Austin’s tone but draws from his tenacity in making distinctions. The dryly satirical mode of Austin contrasts to his colleague Gilbert Ryle’s harangue on the “Myth of Descartes” as a wholesale “category mistake” in *The Concept of Mind*, the work (Austin says) of a “*philosophe terrible*” who “has chosen therefore to cast his work in the form almost of a manifesto.”⁹ Austin – who describes his method as “linguistic phenomenology” in the essay “A Plea for Excuses” (*PP*, 182) – offers something like a phenomenologically attuned list to counter his chagrin for positivist nomenclature: “pens are in many ways though not in all ways unlike rainbows, which are in many way though not in all ways unlike after-images, which in turn are in many ways though not in all ways unlike pictures on the cinema-screen – and so on, without assignable limit” (*SS*, 4). Austin makes such distinctions without limiting dualities. He advances by a plurality

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that finds its method through examples and distinctions that search past pseudo-metaphysical binaries (including the insurgent opposition to binaries). After reading Austin at any length, one wonders why one, two, and three are the only philosophical numbers. Despite his “installing monogamous heterosexual dyadic church- and state-sanctioned marriage at the definitional center” of *How to Do Things with Words* at both a rhetorical and social level, in this way Austin’s work throughout evinces the reformist’s challenge to entrenched intellectual practices.¹⁰ His non-dualistic project in linguistic philosophy and social performativity anticipates the ampler spatial poetics found throughout Eve Sedgwick’s late work – a positionality of the “beside”: “Beside is an interesting proposition also because there’s nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them. Beside permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object.”¹¹ In J. L. Austin’s writings beyond *How to Do Things with Words*, we often find a companionable interest phrased differently. His important paper, “A Plea for Excuses,” makes use of a Sedgwick-like nonce concept or “weak theory” to trace a bushy “ramiculated branch of philosophy” into the “coverts of the microglot.” Here Austin bridles even at excuses as his announced subject beyond the title, since it is “unwise to freeze too fast to this one noun and partner verb.” He voices his sometime preference for “‘extenuation’ instead” (*PP*, 175).

Austin’s philosophical writings contain no sustained literary criticism and very few direct references to novels, beyond the allusion to Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*. But an aside in “A Plea for Excuses” – “[a] course of E. M. Forster and we see things differently” (*PP*, 194) – casually indicates Austin’s sense that the English novel may provide a resource to philosophical quandaries, serving at what he calls, with the tactical caginess of one who has served in intelligence during war, “the stage of appreciation of the situation.” In his 1950 paper, “Truth,” Austin urges philosophers at once to quit bullying their subjects and “take something more nearly their own size to strain at” (*PP*, 117). If perception, sizing things up, is an implicitly warlike act in this idiom, right-sizing philosophical observation may be irenic. In giving such focused critical attention to the compelling and problematically rendered middle scale, Austin may be seen to draw philosophical resources from the critical history of the modern novel and its imagined interdisciplinary courses. An enriching preoccupation with experience, perception, and an associative

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“life” beyond just the sense of sight runs from Henry James (whom Max Beerbohm parodied in “The Mote in the Middle Distance”) to Virginia Woolf (“The Mark on the Wall,” “Solid Objects”).¹²

Austin demonstrably owes something to the I. A. Richards of *Practical Criticism*: “There are subjects – mathematics, physics and the descriptive sciences supply some of them – which can be discussed in terms of verifiable facts and precise hypotheses. There are other subjects – the concrete affairs of commerce, law, organization and police work – which can be handled by rules of thumb and generally accepted conventions. But in between is the vast *corpus* of problems, assumptions, adumbrations, fictions, prejudices, tenets; the sphere of random beliefs and hopeful guesses; the whole world, in brief, of abstract opinion and disputation about which civilized man cares most.” The history of criticism, summarizes Richards, is a history of “middle subjects.”¹³ William Empson, Richards’s precocious student, says this about the interaction of “Sense and Sensibility” in *The Structure of Complex Words*: “A mathematician will often take an absurdly small context — ‘me seeing a stick’ — and argue from what is inherent in that to a theory of continuity; a philosopher commonly takes ‘my seeing my table’ and finds inherent in it his theory of knowledge. You do not know his real context till you know what he has to say. It is the distinguishing mark of the expert of sensibility that he does the same; from the small specimen he leaps to the universal truth, commonly with references to infinity, and when he is wrong you do not want to introduce a larger context but a middle-sized one such as the human creature really knows about.”¹⁴ The challenge to bring dynamic, unscripted forms of thought to the shuttling acts we perform as literary theorists and critics, between theory of knowledge and the “small specimen,” is the task of criticism outright. For Austin, the reductions of sense-data philosophy traffic in a world of moderately sized dry goods scripted into roles as “material thing” dummies. Yet the importance of consulting ordinary language is, as Cavell maintains, pursued *In Quest of the Ordinary*, that is, in recognition of the uncanniness and strangely receding distance of the ordinary.

“We may think, for instance, of people, people’s voices, rivers, mountains, flames, rainbows, shadows, pictures on the screen at the cinema, pictures in books or hung on walls, vapours, gases.” In the generativity of excess understanding, Empson’s enthusiastic “expert of sensibility” stands not in contrast to but aligned with the mathematician and philosopher. All stand in need not of a new “larger context” but of the re-introduction of “middle-sized one[s]” such as other human creatures experience and

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about which “material objects” themselves may afford knowledge, through greater working intimacy with their capacities, constraints, and limits.¹⁵

Austin’s brilliant debunking of typecast “material things” is phrased at once in the form of a critical countermand, a kind of poetic reverie, and a list. It is offered in *Sense and Sensibilia* to remind readers of what they already practice as their knowledge of the world, grasped through ordinary natural language, delivered from the world-as-undertaken. Austin’s critique of the positivists’ rendering of “material things” offers a prescient challenge to the philosophical habits of phrase – but also of thought and exemplification – that evoke such concepts as “matter,” “objects,” and “things.” His stubborn persistence in not allowing the convenient reduction of the “material thing” as a token of discourse is especially noticeable in light of the recent critical turn to new and vibrant materialisms of many stripes. In this instance, Austin fashions a type of sentence found increasingly in writings by new formalist literary scholars and by practitioners of object-oriented ontology: an ontologically level, syntactically straight, but philosophically careening list of disparate objects.

At their best, such lists generously distribute agency. Acknowledging entities as “autonomous forms,” Graham Harman says these irreducible entities exist “all the way up and down the ladder of the cosmos.” Then Harman enumerates the entity-forms of “lemon-meringue, popsicles, Ajax Amsterdam, reggae bands, grains of sand.”¹⁶ With comparable heterogeneity, Caroline Levine writes in a definitional passage of *Forms*:

To capture the complex operations of social and literary forms, I borrow the concept of *affordance* from design theory. *Affordance* is a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs. Glass affords transparency and brittleness. Steel affords strength, smoothness, hardness, and durability. Cotton affords fluffiness, but also breathable cloth when it is spun into yarn and thread. Specific designs, which organize these materials, then lay claim to their own range of affordances. A fork affords stabbing and scooping. A door-knob affords not only hardness and durability, but also turning, pushing, and pulling.¹⁷

There is something at once delightfully ingenuous and soliciting of criticism about these lists that include “things” like reggae, soccer teams, popsicles, transparency, fluffiness (a predicate found in both meringue and in cotton), breathability, pushing and pulling. The total effect depends upon defamiliarization, but not simply to make us feel the primitively obdurate

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or hard modernist version of things – to “*make the stone stony*,” as Viktor Shklovsky once memorably claimed.¹⁸ These lists of one-off “things,” and increasingly the listicles in which they appear, might put us in mind, as Jacques Lezra recently notes, of the polyamorous love of all things in a poetic effusion like Pablo Neruda’s “Oda a las Cosas” (“Ode to Things”). Yet affordances assume their human usage. When such concepts of objecthood or materiality are misapplied to the scope of today’s “matters” without a critical sense of how things are mediated, materialized in forms of philosophical, cultural, and economic exchange, the amassed things and their essences or affordances can well cause the concept-laden feeling Lezra calls “deep dissatisfaction.”¹⁹

Austin identifies the philosopher’s original sin in the thought-picture that sacrifices ordinary language to *sensa* as the basis of an account of perceptual knowledge. That move amounts to the abandonment of the world as a garden. Throughout the *Sense and Sensibilia* lectures he pursues this case, most philosophers think unsuccessfully, as “the illusion of the so-called ‘argument from illusion’” (SS, 4), and casts the world it has lost in the storied shape of a garden. Sandra Laugier observes of this passage in her summary of the lectures:

At the beginning of *Sense and Sensibilia*, Austin takes issue with the notion of “sense datum,” which Moore and Russell introduced in order to avoid the problems raised by the notion of sensation, by thus specifying its “content” (an absolute premise that would, in a way, except the relativity of sensation). The idea that we can examine our sensations (or strip them down in such a way as to be able to obtain sense data, which for Austin amounts to the same thing) is “the original sin (Berkeley’s apple, the tree in the quad) by which the philosopher casts himself out from the garden of the world we live in.” The illusion Austin condemns is twofold: first, it is the illusion that I have a better chance of reaching “the real” by speaking about sense data than by speaking about objects and following the ordinary rules of language, and second, the illusion that there is a univocal definition of “real.”²⁰

In the substitution of sense data theory for the plurality of midsized and medium-zoned experiences, Austin laments not the loss of the Garden of Eden (he mentions the quad, keeping in mind he is a professor at Oxford). Rather, he laments the ruse of a knowledge production-and-validation by means of an exile from human scaled receptivities of knowing. The sense data account alienates what Austin imagines to be the very donation of knowing.

Unknowing, too, can be a distributed and inflected position. Austin alleges of the tradition of indirect perception that it utilizes and bequeaths