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Prof. Richard Cronin, University of Glasgow

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I will be talking to you today about *Sanditon*, the novel which Jane Austen started in the last year of her life but was unable to finish because she was too ill. *Sanditon* was read by very few people before 1925 when the great Jane Austen scholar R. W. Chapman edited it for publication and gave it its title. And because many people, even those who love Jane Austen’s novels, have not read it, or don’t know it well, I will also be talking about the novels everyone will know, and in particular the two that were published and read in the year of her death, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, brought out in a single volume as neither was quite long enough to suit the expectations of the readers of 1817. Both of these novels, *Persuasion* which is so many people’s favourite, and *Northanger Abbey*, which has fewer adherents, but very fanatical ones, have things which poor little *Sanditon* does not, and I will be talking first about what it does *not* have, cannot have, at this stage of production, which is: rich and rounded characters, and that hard-to-define ‘air of reality’ which marks the great finished novels. Then I want to talk about what it does have and since my title is about suspense, I will leave you in suspense for a while about those qualities.

*Sanditon* is one of the few works which survive in manuscript in Jane Austen’s handwriting, but I’ll talk first about another surviving fragment, also in her own hand. Everyone will know that among the tantalizingly random scraps of Jane Austen’s writing is a chapter she wrote for the close of *Persuasion* and then dropped, replacing it with two more chapters which give us the end as we now have it. The survival of the cancelled chapter of *Persuasion* always makes me feel some of the woe that Mrs. Smith, late in that novel, expresses over the scanty paper trail left by her beloved husband on his death: “this [...] happened to be saved [...] while many letters and memorandums of real importance had been destroyed” (II ix 219). Here Mrs. Smith prefigures the
emotions of Jane Austen scholars over the centuries when faced with her fragmentary manuscript legacy.

In the case of the cancelled chapter, it is thought that, as with her proposal of marriage from Harris Bigg-Wither in 1802, Jane Austen said one thing, tossed and turned, and waked to change her mind. Or maybe it took a few sleepless nights, not just one, but it happened over a very short time in July of 1816, just a year before her death, and somehow that ‘cancelled’ version remained in physical existence, when every other manuscript trace of the six mature novels has vanished.\(^1\) There is some fascination in the fact that it is *Persuasion* that leaves this physical trace, since *Persuasion* begins with the unliterary Sir Walter Elliot poring over a book, and ends, in the final version, with Anne being wooed and won by a *letter* slipped to her by Captain Wentworth. Lots of reading and writing in *Persuasion*.

In the cancelled chapter, though, the one that didn’t make it past the final cut, Jane Austen has Anne and Captain Wentworth united in what can only be described as a *slapstick* style by Admiral Croft, who flings them alone together into a room in his rented house in Bath to have an awkward exchange about whether or not Anne is going to marry the man Wentworth thinks is his rival, Mr. Elliot:

‘The Adm. Madam, was this morning confidently informed that you were—upon my word, I am quite at a loss, ashamed—(breathing & speaking quick)—the awkwardness of giving Information of this sort to one of the Parties. You can be at no loss to understand me.’ (Appendix 1, p. 317)

Here, Captain Wentworth reverts to calling her ‘Madam’ as he did at Uppercross, and we watch the two of them blushing, stammering and ‘breathing quick’. It is possible to see that this scene was great fun for Jane Austen to write, and that it was necessary for her to jettison it after she had put them through such agonies and a long awkward speech from Captain Wentworth—which would have been his longest speech in the book had it remained, full of ‘it was said [...] it was added’, until

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finally Anne puts an end to both their miseries by mumbling almost inaudibly, “There is no truth in any such report” (Appendix 1, p. 318).

“No truth!” Captain Wentworth replies twice. It feels as if he is trying out for a scholarship to RADA, as it does when a moment later he takes her hand and murmurs, “Anne, my own dear Anne!” (Appendix 1, p. 318). The tone of exaggeration is palpable, and must have been, almost immediately, apparent to Jane Austen. Where else in her mature work would a hero say, while pressing the heroine’s hand, ‘My own dear Anne!’ Nowhere in Jane Austen’s finished novels would this sort of male hysteria flourish, although we saw lots of it in the youthful Love and Freindship, and in the phony emotionalism of Mr. Elton’s drunken pass at Emma in the snowbound carriage: the seized hand, the clumsy grope and the exclamation points: “Charming Miss Woodhouse! allow me to interpret this interesting silence” (I xv 142).² This sort of effusion has little in common with the restrained, embarrassed, deep feeling (also of course in Emma) of Mr. Knightley’s much later and more successful proposal, or with the final version of Persuasion. It is wonderful what a few sleepless nights can do for one’s prose!

In the rewritten denouement of Persuasion there is, instead, the infinitely subtler walk through Bath which Anne and Captain Wentworth take after ditching Charles Musgrove: ‘smiles reined in [...] spirits dancing in private rapture [...] words enough [...] passed between them’ (II xi 261). As usual with the profound mutual recognition of love which characterizes her happy endings, we don’t hear those words, we imagine them, we invent them. The cancelled chapter, though, whatever its weaknesses, never fails to charm me, because I feel as if Jane Austen, in writing it, was falling victim to her own talent and to the power of her imagination. Having got rid of the threat of Mr. Elliot in Chapter xxii she simply, at first, could not wait to bring the right pair of lovers together. So—slam! Bam! She gets Admiral Croft to shut them up in a room together to fight it out.

Soon, though, she regained her perspective, and rather than succumbing to the desire for instant gratification in this swift reunion of her young lovers—after all, they had waited eight years, they could wait a little longer—she describes this process of delay: not Anne stumbling

² For further discussion of this scene, see Chapter 9.
immediately into Captain Wentworth reading by the fire and resolving the situation in minutes as happens in the cancelled chapter, but two chapters and almost three whole days in which a jaded Anne endures one more evening of Mr. Elliot’s now utterly unwanted attentions, and a morning in which a desperate, but surprisingly scheming and artful, Anne elaborately demonstrates her indifference to her cousin before the party assembled at the Musgroves’ inn, then one last, long morning in the same room, filled with people, during which she and Captain Wentworth manage to find intricate and complicated ways to make their simple feelings known to one another. The delay deepens the meaning of what happens, keeps us waiting along with the lovers, as the short perspective is abandoned, in keeping with this love story’s unequalled eight-year trajectory, for the long.

And when we turn to discuss this fragmentary novel *Sanditon*, in which all of the action we have takes place over less than a month, it is valuable to note that the foreshortened perspective, the haste, the rapid-fire breathless telling, which characterizes that cancelled, abandoned chapter of *Persuasion*, is a central characteristic of *Sanditon* throughout. And *Sanditon* is a work which, like that chapter, comes from the last year of the life of a great author, but it is still the first part of a first draft of a never-to-be-completed seventh novel. Comparing this to the two different versions of *Persuasion’s* end enables us to note two things. First, that Jane Austen did not produce perfection every time she put pen to paper. Marilyn Butler perhaps goes too far when she says of *Sanditon*, ‘it is surprising that even a first draft by the author of *Emma* would be quite like this’—I think we should be more impressed, as I hope to demonstrate. But, second, as the rewriting of that chapter of *Persuasion* shows, when she was able to flesh out something that even to her most passionate admirers looks crude and sketchy, as the cancelled chapter does, she could swiftly produce something very like perfection. In the case of *Sanditon* that perfection is something that will hang forever out of our reach. There are completions of *Sanditon*. I don’t like completions. I don’t want to know what any ‘other lady’ will do with Jane Austen’s book. Let’s see what Jane Austen did with it in the little time she had.

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But first, something she didn’t do: and I will start with what I take to be the main problem with the novel fragment, which is that we don’t have a rich enough relationship with the central figure, Charlotte Heywood. It is not that Charlotte is not a promising character, though she is a new type of young woman for Jane Austen to place right at the heart of a story. It is often pointed out that, in nature as well as in name, she resembles the ‘unromantic’ Charlotte Lucas of *Pride and Prejudice*. Like many readers of that novel, I have always had a soft spot for Charlotte, who is clever and funny and kind—and a loyal friend to Elizabeth, ever her well-wisher, ‘rejoicing in the match’ to Mr. Darcy whatever the wrath of Lady Catherine or the tut-tutting of Mr. Collins (III xviii 425). And I would suggest that the problem with Charlotte Heywood is not so much those sober, level-headed, Charlotte Lucas-like qualities, her primness, her impatience with others’ absurdities; indeed, it seems to me a bold move on Jane Austen’s part to focus on the experience of such a downright, feet-on-the-ground young woman. No. The problem is that the point at which the writing has stopped is a point where we don’t have Charlotte Heywood’s experience in the powerful way in which other heroines’ is given to us.

Jane Austen did not have time or energy, in the six or eight weeks of deteriorating health which she had to give to this novel, to give us what in a film would be called ‘reaction shots’: we never really see Charlotte blink, or start, or blush in response to others. In all of the finished novels, and even in the unfinished novel *The Watsons*, the absurdity of characters, or their shallowness, or their moments of grace, are borne witness to by the instinctive reactions of the heroine, in little physical symptoms, often, but largely in her thoughts, in Jane Austen’s use of what has come to be called free indirect discourse, the duets between narration, and the thoughts of a character, which gives us the unparalleled sensation of knowing her. In *Sanditon*, except for tiny moments, we don’t have this. Instead we have a sketch of Charlotte’s reactions summarized in ordinary direct discourse, flat and somewhat toneless, as here when we are told in Chapter vii about the opinion she is forming of mercenary Lady Denham:

Charlotte’s feelings were divided between amusement and indignation—but indignation had the larger and the increasing share.—She kept her countenance and she kept a civil silence. She could not carry her
forbearance farther; but without attempting to listen longer, and only conscious that Lady Denham was still talking on in the same way, allowed her thoughts to form themselves into such a meditation as this:—

‘She is thoroughly mean. I had not expected anything so bad.’ (vii 180–81)

Here we know what Charlotte thinks and feels, and we respect her qualities of discernment by this time enough to feel she is probably right, but we are not with her as we are with Elizabeth Bennet as she forms a similarly negative opinion of the Bingley sisters in Chapter vi of Pride and Prejudice: ‘Elizabeth still saw superciliousness in their treatment of everybody, hardly excepting even her sister, and could not like them’ (I vi 23). One feels the weight on that ‘she still saw’ and ‘she could not like them’, that is Elizabeth’s inner voice mingling with the narrator’s, and there is little of that distinctive ventriloquism, little of that variety of tone in Charlotte’s reported indignation or in her quoted thoughts.

Jane Austen has not had time to invent a way of writing Charlotte which will give us full access to her, though the amused speaking voice in her dialogue with others is promising: one relishes her exchange with the hypochondriac Mr. Arthur Parker as he describes the effects on him of a single dish of strong green tea in the evening:

‘it would act on me like poison and entirely take away the use of my right side, before I had swallowed it five minutes.—It sounds almost incredible—but it has happened to me so often that I cannot doubt it.—The use of my right side is entirely taken away for several hours!’

‘It sounds rather odd to be sure’—answered Charlotte coolly—‘but I dare say it would be proved to be the simplest thing in the world, by those who have studied right sides and green tea scientifically, and thoroughly understand all the possibilities of their action on each other.’ (x 199)

‘Scientifically’ is a gem, I think, and this grave drollery, something like the tone of the juvenile History of England, and perhaps of some of the letters to Cassandra, has appeal. I will come back to Charlotte just before I close: to me it seems unarguable that she is not yet a lovable heroine; yet it is not her ‘character’ that is the problem, but the stage of writing at which her character has been necessarily abandoned.

Charlotte’s cool, wry comment—and, even more, the reason for the abandonment of Charlotte’s story, in Jane Austen’s fatal illness—should draw us on to the important topic of ‘those who have studied
[...] scientifically’, and the treatment throughout, throughout, the novel, of illness—so courageous in someone herself so ill! But before we look at that great positive quality of Sanditon, let us look briefly at another aspect, which is the vividness of the setting, and the nature of the setting, which has frequently and rightly been described as something new in Jane Austen, a new experimental direction her writing would have taken had she not fallen ill and died. I am speaking particularly of the depiction of the village of Sanditon itself, in a novel which, like Emma and Persuasion, shows that in these closing years of her life Jane Austen’s thoughts were running very much on the sea: Emma’s honeymoon spot, Anne Elliot’s reverence for the Navy and, of course, her visit to Lyme but that visit was out of season. Now, finally, we have an up-to-the-minute depiction of a fashionable seaside town, or a would-be fashion spot, and in season, the middle of July.

But let’s pause for a moment, before we dive in, at the slightly dry-land opening at Willingden (which turns out to be ‘the wrong Willingden’) and is an opening unlike any other in Jane Austen’s novels: ‘A gentleman and lady travelling from Tunbridge towards that part of the Sussex coast which lies between Hastings and Eastbourne [...] were overturned in toiling up its long ascent—half rock, half sand’ (i 137). To begin not with a self-mocking aphorism (‘a truth universally acknowledged’) nor with a family history (‘Sir Walter Elliot’; ‘the family of Dashwood’) but with an accident to unknown persons, ‘A gentleman and lady’, whose names we don’t learn for three pages—this suggests the experimental sparseness of this narrative, its almost harsh quality, lacking the reticence of the finished novels, and its location in a vividly sketched, sharply contemporary setting. It introduces the ‘very quiet, settled, careful’ Heywood family of Willingden to the Parkers of Sanditon, who are anything but quiet and settled (ii 149).

What is fascinating in the picture we have will soon have of Sanditon is that unlike rut-roaded, rural Willingden with its one gentlemanly house, Sanditon is so evidently a place in the process of transformation, but, like Willingden where Mr. Heywood is first seen making hay, it is a location for work, a distinctive kind of work, one intricately linked to commerce, in a village that revolves explicitly around economic expansion, rather than implicitly revolving around money by means of courtship and class, as every other village in Jane Austen does.
The windows in Sanditon’s houses are full of bills—rooms to let—the library sells parasols, we rapidly hear the names of local farmers, market gardeners, shopkeepers, all of whom seem to have been drawn into the speculative bubble which is most fully embodied by the ebullient boosting of Mr. Thomas Parker who has introduced himself to the bemused Heywoods as follows:

‘My name perhaps—though I am by no means the first of my family, holding landed property in the parish of Sanditon, may be unknown [...] but Sanditon itself—everybody has heard of Sanditon—the favourite—for a young and rising bathing-place, certainly the favourite spot of all that are to be found along the coast of Sussex;—the most favoured by Nature, and promising to be the most chosen by man.’ (i 142)

We might want to note that Mr. Parker, who is really a very sweet man, is ready to transfer any significance which might adhere to his own family name, to transfer importance to the name of Sanditon (compare this with Sir Walter Elliot and how little he thinks of the importance of place in comparison to that of the Elliot family name!) and also note the place-name’s importance for the novel. Though it seems to have been the editor, R. W. Chapman, who named it Sanditon—the intended title appears to have been The Brothers and the Austen family referred to it as ‘the Last Work’ in the 1870 Memoir—the concern here does seem to be with place, with atmosphere, with the ethical consequences of this type of public, fast-moving setting, rather than with any of the characters, even the heroine.

There is a moment towards the end of Northanger Abbey, which Jane Austen was revising for publication in the same period, when Catherine’s patroness, Mrs. Allen, who is really too stupid to be insensitive, does manage to say an insensitive thing: reflecting with Catherine on their ‘forlorn’ and friendless early days in Bath, she recalls how much meeting with the Thorpes had rescued them, and this in front of both Catherine and Mrs. Morland, apparently forgetting that Isabella Thorpe has only a few weeks earlier jilted James Morland, their son and brother, and ‘made [him] miserable for ever’ (II xiv 247; II x 207). But I want us to keep not only those shallow friends, the Thorpes, those drifters from Putney to Tonbridge to Bath, in mind, but also Mrs. Morland’s comments on friendships made in such fashionable watering places—“soon made and soon ended”’ (I xiv 244)—and to remember Mr. Knightley’s comment
about the kind of places Frank Churchill frequents: “‘the idlest haunts in the kingdom’” (I xviii 157). This gives us a perspective on the viewpoint of the ‘steady’ and ‘sensible’, a pair of adjectives Jane Austen likes to ring the changes on, about such fast-moving public places as Bath or Brighton or Weymouth—or Sanditon, though unlike long-fashionable Bath, the aspiring-to-fashion Sanditon is a queer combination, isn’t it, of a public place, a backwater and a building site?

But the most important thing about Sanditon, as Mr. Parker tells the healthy Heywoods, is its healthfulness: “‘finest, purest sea breeze on the coast [...] no mud—no weeds—no slimy rocks’” (i 143). The Parkers overturn their carriage in search of a surgeon to treat the illnesses that the sea breeze can’t take care of, many of which we will see even in the narrow compass of Sanditon’s sixty pages. I have already looked at the marvellous Arthur Parker, confining himself at twenty-one to the delights of cocoa and rheumatism. I won’t spend time with his poor sister Susan, who when we meet her has just had three teeth removed for what one suspects are largely whimsical reasons. But I think we all want to look at Diana, Diana who is marvellously introduced in a kind of slapstick race with Charlotte, which Diana, the thirty-two-year-old invalid, wins, of course, outrunning the healthy twenty-two-year-old farmer’s daughter. Charlotte has been walking by the sea when she sees a carriage arrive at the hotel:

Delighted to have such good news for Mr. and Mrs. Parker [...] she proceeded for Trafalgar House with [...] alacrity [...] but she had not reached the little lawn, when she saw a lady walking nimbly behind her [...] she resolved to hurry on and get into the house if possible before her. But the stranger’s pace did not allow this to be accomplished. (ix 185)

Strait-laced Charlotte sticks to the path but Diana takes a short cut across the lawn! And, perhaps like the Parkers’ overturning carriage—for almost everyone who has read Sanditon feels a little gloomy about the Parkers’ financial prospects—this speedy determination of Diana’s to get in first is symbolic. Though no one is more ill than she is, as she is fond of proclaiming, no one has more energy. Her style of invalidism is very different from Mary Musgrove’s plangency and whining. Diana, who proudly claims the title of invalid, is enjoying herself to the hilt: “‘my dear Miss Heywood, we are sent into this world to be as extensively
useful as possible, and where some degree of strength of mind is given, it is not a feeble body which will excuse us” (ix 189).

I do not know whether I prefer Diana’s insomnia—“[Susan] had not a wink of sleep either the night before we set out [...] and as this is not so common with her as with me, I have a thousand fears for her” (ix 191)—or her lack of appetite—“I never eat for about a week after a journey” (ix 186)—but I think I admire her most for her ready skills as a masseuse:

‘nothing would have been so judicious as friction, friction by the hand alone [...] Two years ago I happened to be calling on Mrs. Sheldon when her coachman sprained his foot [...] and could hardly limp into the house—but by the immediate use of friction alone, steadily persevered in (and I rubbed his ankle with my own hand for six hours without intermission)—he was well in three days.’ (v 163)

I won’t comment as I think that speaks for itself, though we might want to note that here we have another instance of the novel’s cheerful inclusiveness about class. Possibly too cheerful an inclusiveness for the peace of mind of the coachman.

Jane Austen is interested in wild imaginations, and one form this takes is her fascination with hypochondriacs, with malades imaginaires. I’ve already mentioned Mary Musgrove, and we’ll all remember many others, but in Sanditon we have a steady dissection of the condition of invalidism and its invention in relation to a consumer culture.4 This motif is present from the very start, when Charlotte’s father, Mr. Heywood, is described as someone who is ‘well-looking’ and ‘hale’ and a chapter later as someone rich enough ‘to have indulged [...] in symptoms of the gout and a winter at Bath’, but who is too busy, with his farm and his 14 children, to have realized what an opportunity he is missing (i 138; ii 149). It is as if the norm, once a certain social and financial status has been reached, is invalidism. In Sanditon the imaginary invalid constitutes an absurd, nonsensical kind of norm: people in this little novel use their bodies to tell the world something about themselves that they just cannot wait for others to find out.

In the earlier, rampantly burlesque Love and Freindship, a satire on the novel of sensation and sensibility, written when Jane Austen was a

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4 For further discussion of hypochondria, see Chapter 6.
teenager, a carriage accident kills off half the characters in one fell swoop; the milder one which opens Sanditon kills no one, but produces two weeks of intensive nursing. Here it is not so much a literary phenomenon which is being lampooned but a social one, the explosion of health resorts, and the preoccupation with health, in Georgian England. Now, nursing moves the plot in her other novels, too: Elinor and Mrs. Jennings nurse Marianne back to health in Sense and Sensibility. Edmund nurses Tom in Mansfield Park. Elizabeth would never have been invited to spend five nights at Netherfield—she goes there to nurse Jane. Mrs. Smith in Persuasion would never have found out so much about Mr. Elliot’s schemes for Anne had it not been for her friend Nurse Rooke, and in the same novel everyone agrees that they ‘love [Louisa] the better for having nursed her’—even those who, like Mary Musgrove, have never nursed her at all (II vi 179).

But there is something peculiar about Sanditon as far as nursing goes, and I cannot help thinking the imaginary surgeon—the doctor who never comes—is a wonderful match for this little novel’s huge cast of imaginary invalids—these strange, strange people who live to nurse, and doctor, themselves. I’ve mentioned Mary Musgrove, and everyone must be thinking, of course, not only of Persuasion and Mary Musgrove, but of Emma, and Mr. Woodhouse and Mrs. Churchill, those twin hypochondriacs sadly doomed never to meet. In Sanditon this condition has expanded with the same soap-bubble preposterousness that may be at work in the economy of this little not-quite-boom-town itself. Mr. Parker is surprised and delighted when he returns after a few weeks away from home to look into a shop window and find blue shoes, but there are characters in Sanditon in whom it would not surprise the reader, to find blue feet.

This propensity for exaggeration of symptoms is most notable of course in the three Parker siblings, but as the narrative tells us, their invalidism is an aspect of the enthusiastic temperament they share with their eldest brother, the Mr. Thomas Parker we meet in Chapter i. Perhaps, in these similar siblings, it should make us worry even more about Sanditon’s real prospects for economic survival when we note the capacity Diana Parker demonstrates to turn one small family of holiday-makers into two large ones, and her insouciance about the mistake, the generosity she shows in cheerfully apportioning blame to
others, ‘the trifle’ she bestows on herself. We are in a world which must make us think of the nonsense and exaggeration of Love and Freindship, where the two heroines travel huge distances by hackney coach—for no reason—rob, and are robbed, of large sums of money, and blithely and inconsequentially ruin the lives of many of those they meet. Jane Austen is certainly working here in this last fragment with some of the same qualities, including the prodigious, free-wheeling imagination, which gave her juvenile novels such verve and snap and wildness. And she also seems to be working within the great English nonsense tradition which stretches back to medieval riddles and forward to Lewis Carroll and Oscar Wilde.5

The ‘great’ Lady Denham, certainly, with her determination not to be ‘had’ even over the price of butcher’s meat, and her barefaced admission to a complete stranger that she married one husband for money and another for a title, looks forward both to Lady Bracknell and to the Red Queen in Alice. But—to end as I began—Lady Denham would be funnier if she had someone we knew better than Charlotte to watch her with. More needs to be done perhaps with Charlotte’s situation. She is not vulnerable, not trapped in London like Marianne or in Portsmouth like Fanny Price. If sturdy Charlotte wearsies of Sanditon, she only needs to write home, and that lumbering old carriage, with its faded upholstery, will be sent to pick her up. In the version of Charlotte we have now, she is a little like a grown-up Alice in Wonderland, one who doesn’t eat the wrong things, doesn’t weep floods of tears, doesn’t get called a ‘serpent’. Pert and cool, she walks about observing the grotesque antics of others. As experienced readers of Jane Austen we struggle with Charlotte; we need to invent a complicating, endangering situation for her, and we need to see her respond to it.

And here is where the zany, dreamlike world of Sanditon has to be examined for the signs of that quality so important in Jane Austen’s finished novels, and that is suspense. The aspect of Jane Austen which resembles Agatha Christie and resembles Alfred Hitchcock: suspense not so much of plot but of style. Earlier, in discussing the rewriting of Persuasion’s finale, I mentioned her use of delay, something she learned from the sentimental novel and from the Gothic novel, from Pamela and

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Evelina and the Mysteries of Udolpho, where characters dawdle and dither and hesitate far beyond the limits of the reader’s patience but which Jane Austen honed in her own writing into a taut, sharpened tool. And delay is only part of it: Jane Austen’s imaginary worlds are ordered by the elements of suspense. Think of the dramatic crises of all the finished novels and how they leave us in dreadful doubt, each time we read them: will Elizabeth marry Mr. Darcy or will she never see him again? Will Edmund propose to Mary Crawford? Will Captain Wentworth stop behaving like an idiot with Louisa Musgrove? We know, but we need to prove it to ourselves with another reading. This is technical suspense. As with Hitchcock, one aspect is the precise distance created by the uneasy layering of wit and deeper feeling, so that every time we tear open those two misdirected letters from Jane Bennet along with Elizabeth in the inn at Lambton and shake our heads over the muddle of Jane’s thoughts and even of her handwriting, our hearts are still in our mouths—“Oh! where, where is my uncle?” AND the door opens—AND it is not her uncle (III iv 304).

And there is concealment: who is that riding toward Barton Cottage? It should be Colonel Brandon—but it has not his height—it is Edward, whom we have been told is tragically mismarried to Lucy Steele. Concealment and delay: “‘Is Mrs. Ferrars at Long staple?’” asks Elinor, resorting to the good manners which help to get through but also prolong those agonising pauses (III xii 407). Wit and feeling, concealment and delay, and shift of perspective: Mrs. Morland goes up into the attic to get an essay to cure her daughter of the affliction into which she has apparently fallen at Northanger Abbey, of being a spoiled brat, but there are interruptions, ‘family matters [...] to detain her’, and then she has to find the blooming book—and when she comes downstairs, sermon in hand, there is a stranger in the parlour with Catherine (II xv 250). And Catherine is no longer inexplicably morose.

In detective fiction, in Hitchcock films, we know it’s all about something we call pace: in Jane Austen’s fiction we are so aware of the power and truth of the emotion and the dazzle of the comedy, that we don’t notice it is all about pace, until the pace starts killing us. When Jane Austen began Sanditon, she was already ill, and she was writing, though we don’t know how fully she knew it, against time, like T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land, shoring these fragments against her ruin. So if we look
over the events of this strange, event-filled, sixty-page novel, if it has aspects of nonsense, and aspects of classic suspense, it also has aspects of science fiction: what strange things happen when you transplant a healthy young woman into a world, in which everyone is ill! If we look at it again, we see it begin with an accident, introduce a mysterious surgeon, who is what Hitchcock might have called ‘a MacGuffin’—a plot device that goes nowhere—and then uproot its young heroine as *Northanger Abbey* uprooted Catherine, and place her, like Catherine, in an environment that stands in vivid contrast to her own family’s rural retirement, knowing, as Mrs. Allen is probably aware that ‘if adventures will not befall a young lady in her own village, she must seek them abroad’ (I i 9). And unlike Catherine, whom it takes several yawning days to meet with any adventures, Charlotte has plenty from the start—she encounters a great lady, a romantic orphan and many other strange figures, including a number of possible suitors, though her good sense, and ours, too, rules out most of them.

Until the vertiginous close of the fragment, halfway through Chapter xii, which leaves us gasping to know: will Lady Denham ever come into the drawing room? (is she upstairs with her throat cut?); why is Miss Brereton sitting alone with Sir Edward, that would-be rake (is she falling for his charms or giving him a swift tutorial about eighteenth-century poetry?). And that very last page that lies open before the end of the book introduces Sidney Parker, the man ‘with a decided air of ease and fashion, and a lively countenance’ who has been trailed enough to interest us, though we don’t know enough about Charlotte yet to know if he interests her (xii 207). I’ll just close with that scene, because it is charming, including one of the very few moments in Jane Austen when a child speaks. First there is the nice—suspenseful—approach of a carriage through the mist, and then the cheerful anti-climax of little Mary Parker’s pleased recognition of a favourite (well, how could he not be, given the competition?) relative:

> It was a close, misty morning, and when they reached the brow of the hill, they could not for some time make out what sort of carriage it was, which they saw coming up. It appeared at different moments to be everything from the gig to the phaeton,—from one horse to four; and just as they were concluding in favour of a tandem, little Mary’s young eyes distinguished the coachman and she called out, ‘’Tis Uncle Sidney, mama, it is indeed.’ And so it proved. (xii 206)
We leave Sidney a moment later, though first we do see him behave, unlike the wolfish Sir Edward or the piggy Arthur, in a gentlemanly fashion to Charlotte, with a ‘very well-bred bow and proper address [...] on her being named to him’ (xii 207). ‘First impressions’ are important in Jane Austen, aren’t they? But as with Charlotte herself, we don’t know what is going to be done with Sidney: will he break hearts, or mend them, and whose heart will it be?

Because of course the ultimate element of suspense about Sanditon, which nothing we can possibly find out will alter, is one which will go on forever. We are left forever clinging to Sanditon’s cliffs by our fingertips.