4. Austen as Coda

This chapter on fiction has shown how the insensible oddly both fulfills and exceeds the stylistic expectations commonly associated with particular fictional projects through the long eighteenth century. In romance, the idiom amplifies the powers of love by suggesting how these may move so as scarcely to be felt. Inherited by the moralized sentimental novel, in parallel fashion, it allows a desiring heroine to be both guiltless and (in a special way) out of control. A final, brief reflection on a novel of courtship that appears after the eighteenth century’s end and critically engages the tradition I have been discussing will bring this sequence of examples to a close. The idiom appears only once in Jane Austen’s first published novel, where it helps reconcile what seems like the opposition announced in its title. *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) has often been viewed by critics as a retrospective commentary on sentimental attitudes of the so-called high sentimental period of 1745–90, though an ambiguous one.\(^ {115} \) It has been common, of course, to read the book as a rather schematic working out of the superiority of sense to sensibility, with the figure representing the latter, Marianne Dashwood, subdued by the former when she marries Colonel Brandon.\(^ {116} \) Maybe even more common have been attempts to break the title’s apparent opposition down (it refers, after all, to sense *and*, not sense *or* sensibility) and suggest that Austen here and throughout her career cares a good deal about feeling, even sentimental feeling.\(^ {117} \) The novel’s restricted but crucial use of the term *insensible*
exposes this mixed attitude toward sensibility while reflecting on the subtradi-
tion of the unfelt in the fiction of sensibility I have been describing. When
Austen’s career as publishing novelist began in the second decade of the nine-
teenth century, the special additive sense of the insensible and similar terms
had waned, and she will not use them much. The word *insensible* appears in a
purely privative sense seven times in *Sense and Sensibility*. But the one additive
instance, passing as it is, helps the novel partially redeem the language of sen-
sibility, again by means of that negating prefix, after it had apparently been
discredited.

This ambiguous redemption arrives in chapter 44, when a privative usage
of the word, denoting a cynical absence of sentiment, leads to a subsequent,
additive one that brings genuine feeling back. Willoughby arrives unannounced
during Marianne’s illness at the novel’s end to explain his behavior and feel-
ings to Elinor. He manages to make her believe he really felt for Marianne,
despite his abandonment of her. This rescues, after a fashion, sensibility for
the novel. It allows a kind of truth in evident feeling. Willoughby’s affection
for Marianne had not been dissimulated or cynically or casually performed,
but was as significant and real as it seemed to her as well as to Elinor, the fig-
ure of sense (or at least acute observation), and to other onlookers. If he can-
not convince Elinor of this, not only the affair but also the entire “sensibility”
part of the novel, its language and its ethos, could seem a sham, a mere ef-
fect of “the charms of enthusiasm and ignorance of the world” or a willful
projection of Marianne’s abstract “systems” of thought upon an indifferent
reality.118

At the start, Willoughby’s speech conforms to the latter reading: “Your
sister’s lovely person and interesting manners could not but please me; and
her behaviour to me almost from the first, was of a kind—It is astonishing,
when I reflect on what it was, and what *she* was, that my heart should have
been so insensible” (298). Here the term flatly signifies a lack, however “as-
tonishing,” of affective engagement. Pleased, Willoughby nonetheless does not
feel in his heart. The sentiment that seemed to overload their intimacy seems
only an amalgam of insignificant pleasures and “amusement” (298), supple-
mented with conventionalized sentimental performance, as well as his vanity
and self-indulgence. Elinor is ready to end the conversation there.

But Willoughby’s lack of true feeling, he says, was transformed by an un-
feeling of quite another sort. His sentimental attachment to Marianne, at first
a kind of disguise used to manipulate her, gradually becomes real, like Eliza
Haywood’s man in *The Female Spectator* who pretends to have taste until he
really does. Intending to trifle with Marianne because he thinks he cannot af-
ford to marry her, Willoughby finds himself in love: “To have resisted such
attractions, to have withstood such tenderness!—Is there a man on earth who could have done it!—Yes, I found myself, by insensible degrees, sincerely fond of her; and the happiest hours of my life were what I spent with her, when I felt my intentions were strictly honourable, and my feelings blameless” (299–300).

Given his confession of levity as he initiated his flirtation with Marianne, the “insensible degrees” help guarantee the veracity of his fondness and sincerity, not only to Elinor now, but to himself, as he “found” himself feeling. The insensible in its additive sense proves a vital, and in this case really the only, support to feelings. Again, the idiom is introduced in a retrospective first person that is able only to identify a special kind of blank that cannot be filled in with “realistic” details. Distinct moments of increasing intimacy—“degrees”—existed, but their insensible character makes writing to the moment impossible. Between the narration of his initial “libertine” intentions and his disgracefully mercenary departure, the unarrataetable process of the insensible serves to legitimate feeling’s irresistible truth and honor. Only the insensible can wear away the cynicism and callousness that obstruct and discredit sensibility and partially restore it as a language and a “system,” as it makes one man receptive to affection. The insensible allows feeling to be itself.

And in the clarified world of Austen, the gender of the person subject to the insensible matters. Of course, insensible degrees of feeling affect men in the sentimental tradition; as we have seen, Orville’s heart in Burney’s *Evelina* is stolen almost imperceptibly. But Austen’s Willoughby is a seducer and casual libertine (like Burney’s Willoughby, as it happens), bent on his own pleasure and amusement. His conversion to the world of deep feeling, which he at first only pretended with Marianne, means something. So the redemption of an earlier, worse libertine, Lovelace in Richardson’s *Clarissa*, had to be imagined by Lady Bradshaigh as coming about insensibly, but of course Richardson could not gratify her with such an outcome. In the decades of fiction preceding Austen, it is mostly women, and the desires that compromise them, who are subject to the sway of unfeelingly developed feelings.

Austen’s discovery of the power to seduce a seducer by insensible degrees thus represents a gender equalization of such powers and a partial redemption of the discourse of sensibility itself. Willoughby ends miserably, and Marianne marries outside the ambit of sensibility, but the affections between them were real, and their reality is what allows Marianne to finally get past him. She says after her recovery, “if I could be allowed to think that he was not always acting a part, not always deceiving me;—” and Elinor responds, “If you could be assured of that, you think you should be easy” (321). She happily obliges her sister with such assurance, relaying the gist of Willoughby’s account of his irresistible, insensibly grown attachment. So a culmination—
not the culmination, but one—of the tradition of insensibly seduced heroines in sentimental fiction comes at this moment in Austen when the unfelt advent of a man’s true feeling accredits not only him but the judgment of the sentimental heroine, who may now depart the dangerous world of sensibility for something more sensible.

The tradition of narrative functions of the blank motion and temporal scale of the insensible hence achieves a kind of end. It reforms a rake, if not plot-wise by turning him into the “best husband,” at least at the level of his moral sentiments. In the foregoing survey of diverse fictional examples over a very long period, the insensible has played a remarkably consistent role. It supports the passions that impel British fictional plots by offering an affective alternative to both—the passions and the plotting. Doing so requires that it offer writers narrative strategies that function differently from those commonly singled out in the critical tradition. The idiom supplements and qualifies the externally performed “rhetoric of love” of romance, as well as Fielding’s god-like master narration and Richardson’s writing to the moment, and the techniques, such as epistolary self-scrutiny and free indirect discourse, that explore gaps between narratorial assessment and first-person motive and feeling. And recent critical emphases on the external status of agency and moral will in some fictional contexts may be enhanced by attention to the insensible. While the former reconfigure subjective states and actions spatially, moving from inside to outside, the latter explores temporal processes in which such spatial distinctions drop away altogether. The days insensibly pass, submission insinuates itself without being perceived, and after these affective blanks, a new state of feeling has arrived. Some critical perspectives might view the use of the idiom as relinquishing the opportunity to provide a psychologically detailed account of unfolding feeling. But the withholding practiced by the insensible offers something positive: an opening up of feeling to the world.