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Comedy of Manners: Modernist Influences?

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Document A

She danced next with an officer, and had the refreshment of talking of Wickham, and of hearing that he was universally liked. When those dances were over she returned to Charlotte Lucas, and was in conversation with her when she found herself suddenly addressed by Mr.
 5 Darcy, who took her so much by surprise in his application for her hand, that, without knowing what she did, she accepted him. He walked away again immediately, and she was left to fret over her own want of presence of mind; Charlotte tried to console her.

‘I dare say you will find him very agreeable.’

10 ‘Heaven forbid! – *That* would be the greatest misfortune of all! – To find a man agreeable whom one is determined to hate! – Do not wish me such an evil.’

When the dancing recommenced, however, and Darcy approached to claim her hand, Charlotte could not help cautioning her in a whisper not to be a simpleton and allow her fancy for Wickham to make her appear unpleasant in the eyes of a man of ten times his consequence. Elizabeth made no answer, and took her place in the set, amazed at the dignity to which she was arrived in being allowed to stand opposite to Mr. Darcy, and reading in her neighbours’ looks their equal amazement in beholding it. They stood for some time without speaking a word; and she began to imagine that their silence was to last through the two dances, and at first was resolved not to break it; till suddenly fancying that it would be the greater punishment to her partner to oblige him to talk, she made some slight observation on the dance. He replied,
 20 and was silent again. After a pause of some minutes she addressed him a second time with,

‘It is *your* turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy. – *I* talked about the dance, and *you* ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples.’

30 He smiled, and assured her that whatever she wished him to say should be said.

‘Very well. – That reply will do for the present. – Perhaps by and by I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones. – but *now* we may be silent.’

- 35 ‘Do you talk by rule then, while you are dancing?’
 ‘Sometimes. One must speak a little, you know. It would look odd to be entirely silent for half an hour together, and yet for the advantage of *some*, conversation ought to be so arranged as that they may have the trouble of saying as little as possible.’
- 40 ‘Are you consulting your own feelings in the present case, or do you imagine that you are gratifying mine?’
 ‘Both,’ replied Elizabeth archly; ‘for I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds. – We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the éclat of a proverb.’
- 45 ‘There is no very striking resemblance of your own character, I am sure,’ said he. ‘How near it may be to *mine*, I cannot pretend to say. – *You* think it a faithful portrait undoubtedly.’
- 50 ‘I must not decide on my own performance.’
 He made no answer, and they were again silent till they had gone down the dance, when he asked her if she and her sisters did not very often walk to Meryton. She answered in the affirmative, and, unable to resist the temptation, added, ‘When you met us there the other day, we had just been forming a new acquaintance.’
- 55 The effect was immediate. A deeper shade of hauteur overspread his features, but he said not a word, and Elizabeth, though blaming herself for her own weakness, could not go on. At length Darcy spoke, and in a constrained manner said,
- 60 ‘Mr. Wickham is blessed with such happy manners as may ensure his *making* friends – whether he may be equally capable of *retaining* them, is least certain.’
 ‘He has been so unlucky as to lose *your* friendship,’ replied Elizabeth with emphasis, ‘and in a manner which he is likely to suffer from all his life.’
- 65 Darcy made no answer and seemed desirous of changing the subject.

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813, book I, ch. 18.

Document B

‘When I think of you, it’s always as in a room. How funny!’

To her surprise, he seemed annoyed.

‘A drawing-room, pray? With no view?’

‘Yes, with no view, I fancy. Why not?’

5 ‘I’d rather,’ he said reproachfully, ‘that you connected me with the open air.’

She said again, ‘Oh, Cecil, what ever do you mean?’

As no explanation was forthcoming, she shook off the subject as too difficult for a girl, and led him further into the wood, pausing every now and then at some particularly beautiful or familiar combination of the trees. She had known the wood between Summer Street and Windy Corner ever since she could walk alone; she had played at losing Freddy in it, when Freddy was a purple-faced baby; and though she had now been to Italy it had lost none of its charm.

15 Presently they came to a little clearing among the pines – another tiny green alp, solitary this time, and holding in its bosom a shallow pool.

She exclaimed, ‘The Sacred Lake!’

‘Why do you call it that?’

20 ‘I can’t remember why. I suppose it comes out of some book. It’s only a puddle now, but you see that stream going through it? Well, a good deal of water comes down after heavy rains, and can’t get away at once, and the pool becomes quite large and beautiful. Then Freddy used to bathe there. He is very fond of it.

‘And you?’

25 He meant, ‘Are you fond of it?’ but she answered dreamily: ‘I bathed here too, till I was found out. Then there was a row.’

At another time he might have been shocked, for he had depths of prudishness within him. But now, with his momentary cult of the fresh air, he was delighted at her admirable simplicity. He looked at her as she stood by the pool’s edge. She was got up smart, as she phrased it, and she reminded him of some brilliant flower that has no leaves of its own, but blooms abruptly out of a world of green.

‘Who found you out?’

35 ‘Charlotte,’ she murmured. ‘She was stopping with us. Charlotte – Charlotte.’

‘Poor girl!’

She smiled gravely. A certain scheme, from which hitherto he had shrunk, now appeared practical.

‘Lucy!’

40 ‘Yes, I suppose we ought to be going,’ was her reply.

‘Lucy, I want to ask something of you that I have never asked before.’

At the serious note in his voice she stepped frankly and kindly towards him.

45 ‘What, Cecil?’

‘Hitherto never – not even that day on the lawn when you agreed to marry me –’

He became self-conscious and kept glancing round to see if they were observed. His courage had gone.

50 ‘Yes?’

‘Up to now I have never kissed you.’

She was as scarlet as if he had put the thing most indelicately.

‘No – more you have,’ she stammered.

‘Then I ask you – may I now?’

55 ‘Of course you may, Cecil. You might before. I can’t run at you, you know.’

At that supreme moment he was conscious of nothing but absurdities. Her reply was inadequate. She gave such a business-like lift to her veil. As he approached her he found time to wish that he could recoil. As he touched her, his gold pince-nez became dislodged and was flattened between them.

60

Such was the embrace. He considered, with truth, that it had been a failure. Passion should believe itself irresistible. It should forget civility and consideration and all the other curses of a refined nature. Above all, it should never ask for leave where there is a right of way. Why could he not do as any labourer or navvy – nay, as any young man behind the counter would have done? He recast the scene. Lucy was standing flower-like by the water; her rushed up and took her in his arms; she rebuked him, permitted him, and revered him ever after for his manliness.

65

70

E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View*, 1908, book II, chapter IX.

75

Document C

They ate the melon in less than two minutes while the lads, instead of waiting out in the corridor, stood well back, near the door, fingering their bow ties and tight collars and fiddling with their cuffs. Their blank expressions did not change as they observed Edward offer Florence, with an ironic flourish, his glazed cherry. Playfully, she sucked it from his fingers and held his gaze as she deliberately chewed, letting him see her tongue, conscious that in flirting with him like this she would be making matters worse for herself. She should not start what she could not sustain, but pleasing him in any way she could was helpful: it made her feel less than entirely useless. If only eating a sticky cherry was all that was required.

To show that he was not troubled by the presence of the waiters, though he longed for them to leave, Edwards smiled as he sat back with his wine and called over his shoulder, 'Any more of those things?'

'Ain't none, sir. Sorry sir.'

But the hand that held the wine glass trembled as he struggled to contain his sudden happiness, his exaltation. She appeared to glow before him, and she was lovely – beautiful, sensuous, gifted, good-natured beyond belief.

The boy who had spoken nipped forward to clear away. His colleague was just outside the room, transferring the second course, the roast, to their plates. It was not possible to wheel the trolley into the honeymoon suite for the proper silver service on account of a two-step difference in level between it and the corridor, a consequence of poor planning when the Elizabethan farmhouse was 'georganised' in the mid-eighteenth century.

The couple were briefly alone, though they heard the scrape of spoons over dishes, and the lads murmuring by the opened door. Edward laid his hand over Florence's and said, for the hundredth time that day, in a whisper, 'I love you,' and she said it straight back, and she truly meant it.

Edward had a degree, a first in history from University College, London. In three short years he studied wars, rebellions, famines, pestilences, the rise and collapse of empires, revolutions that consumed their children, agricultural hardship, industrial squalor, the cruelty of ruling elites – a colourful pageant of oppression, misery and failed hopes. He understood how constrained and meagre lives could be, generation after generation. In the grand view of things, the peaceful, prosperous times England was experiencing now were rare, and within them his and

40 Florence's joy was exceptional, even unique. In his final year he had
 made a special study of the 'great man' theory of history – was it really
 outmoded to believe that forceful individuals could shape national
 destiny? Certainly his tutor thought so: in his view, History, properly
 capitalised, was driven forwards by ineluctable forces towards inevitable,
 45 necessary ends, and soon the subject would be understood as a science.
 But the lives Edward examined in detail – Caesar, Charlemagne,
 Frederick the Second, Catherine the Great, Neslon and Napoleon (Stalin
 he dropped, at his tutor's insistence) – rather suggested the contrary. A
 ruthless personality, naked opportunism and luck, Edward had argued,
 50 could divert the fates of millions, a wayward conclusion that earned him
 a B minus, almost imperilling his first.

An incidental discovery was that even legendary success brought
 little happiness, only redoubled restlessness, gnawing ambition. As he
 dressed for the wedding that morning (tails, top hat, a thorough drenching
 55 in cologne) he had decided that none of the figures on his list could have
 known his kind of satisfaction. His elation was a form of greatness in
 itself. Here he was, a gloriously fulfilled, or almost fulfilled, man. At the
 age of twenty-two, he had already outshone them all.

He was gazing at his wife now, into her intricately flecked hazel
 60 eyes, into those pure whites touched by a bloom of the faintest milky
 blue. The lashes were thick and dark, like a child's and there was
 something childlike too in the solemnity of her face at rest. It was a
 lovely face, with a sculpted look that in a certain light brought to mind an
 American Indian woman, a high-born squaw. She had a strong jaw, and
 65 her smile was broad and artless, right into the creases at the corners of
 her eyes.

Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach*, 2007, 11-14.

This set of documents is composed of an extract from the 1813
 novel *Pride and Prejudice*, a classic of British literature written by Jane
 Austen. Document A is a ball-room scene in which Elizabeth Bennett
 and Mr. Darcy dance together for the first time. The two characters are at
 daggers' drawn and yet, Darcy invites Elizabeth to dance with him,
 revealing an interest for her that Elizabeth is unprepared for. Document B

is an extract from *A Room with a View*, a 1908 novel written by E. M. Forster. The potentially passionate scene of the first kiss between two fiancés is turned into a comic moment, when Cecil's pince-nez prevents the kiss from being a success and reveals the ill-fitting nature of the relationship. Document C is an extract from the 2007 novella, *On Chesil Beach*, by Ian McEwan. It shows the wedding night of a couple who are staying in a hotel and fighting against each other's and their own reserve, while seduction remains a game that Florence plays on her own

The three documents relate a relationship between a man and a woman that is hindered by the conventions of the time the story is set in. Although all documents are English, they span almost two hundred years, and this will enable us to look at a possible persistence and/or evolution of the literary representation of love and friendship. In the three documents therefore, the authors probe the reasons why love fails to be the idealised moment of fulfilling complementation that popular knowledge would like it to be: two do not always become one. What is treated as light comedy in B disturbs the traditional or expected notions of love as a passionate encounter, especially in document C where passions are regarded as an object of study rather than experience. We are going to see in this essay how the hackneyed theme of love is revived in these extracts that portray the union of a man and his wife, promised, future or current, as a moment of embarrassment and discomfort and as a social construction.

After analysing the comic aspects of love, the collapse of ideals will be studied as a confrontation between a code of behaviour and experience calling for passion against rigid rules. This in turn will enable us to question why romance may be a fruitful theme to question the power of literature as working towards the possibility of a truthful union.

The three documents present us with the early stages of a relationship, two of which are ultimately going to fail. The texts are built on situational comedy that seems to undermine the possibility for feelings, emotions and affects to surface, other than negative ones.

The three documents present us with ill-matching couples: Darcy's reputation as well as his opinion towards Elizabeth have infuriated the latter who now 'is determined to hate' him (A, 11); Cecil is thought of 'as in a room' when he would like to be 'connected with the open air' (B, 1; 5) – the amusing aspect of this remark being somewhat homed in by the situation which sees Cecil and Lucy out in a wood, where the former is uncomfortable. Lastly, Edward's preoccupation with

his recently married wife leads him to reminisce his years at university, a strategy of substitution that is a bad omen to their relationship: he thinks about conflicts (C, 33) instead of evoking passionate romances. Documents A and C show the characters under the eyes of a third party that is here to both observe and judge, awaiting their mistakes. In Austen's text, Elizabeth is convinced by Charlotte that she should dance with Darcy (A, 13-17), and is not unimpressed by the idea that her dancing with him might be a source of wonder for those around her: 'amazed at ... reading in her neighbours' looks their equal amazement in beholding it.' (A, 18-20) Austen insists on the circularity of the act of looking and the mirror effect that prompts Elizabeth to agree to a dance she has every reason to refuse (A, 7-8). Likewise, in McEwan's text, the couple is under the scrutiny of the waiters serving them dinner, which is a breach of conventions ('instead of waiting out in the corridor' (C, 1-2)), and which makes everyone uneasy: 'Their blank expressions did not change as they observed Edward offer Florence... his glazed cherry' (C, 3-4) Unlike document A, the text seems to suggest that there is a mutual avoidance of passing judgement and yet the narrator indicates that there is more to see than meets the eyes in this situation. This takes us back to document B, because the very reason why Cecil dares to utter his request is precisely that the couple are on their own. And yet, Cecil's name means that he is blind, a notion underlined by the author's decision to deck him with a pince-nez that contributes to the fiasco of the kiss (B, 60-61). In other words, the situation of the lovers is still concerned with the question of seeing, but this time round the question of sight does not only serve to magnify the failings of the relationship, it becomes a literal means of exhibiting its necessary end.

Cecil's pince-nez points out that the tone of the text is that of light comedy. If in document B, it is a case of situational comedy, in documents A and C, the expected failure of love is similarly staged. The comedy is orchestrated in all cases: the ballet of waiters attending to the newly-weds in manners that fail (C, 22-24) recalls the strategy of the kiss in which Cecil wishes to 'recoil' in the very moment when he should want to step forward (B, 60), making the kiss itself physically impossible: 'She gave such a business-like lift to her veil.' (B, 58-59) The use of 'such', repeated in 'Such was the embrace' (B, 62), underlines the inadequacy of the encounter and with renewed vigour presents us with the key to understand Cecil's faux-pas, and the exaggerated nature of the description which is typical of comedy. In document A, Elizabeth immediately regrets agreeing to the dance, Austen playing with the very

word ‘want’ (A, 7) that she uses here in the sense of lack, when it should precisely be understood in terms of wish or desire. It is as if Elizabeth were as yet unaware of her true desire. Furthermore, the bodies that should be so central to a dance are replaced by the metaphor of the art of conversation, which turns the sensuality expected of such an encounter into a moment of small-talk ‘éclat’ (A, 46). The characters never seem to touch each other, and the fruitful metaphor this dance could offer is reduced to the basic, metaphorical use of the term ‘hand’: ‘Mr. Darcy, who took her so much by surprise in his application for her hand’ (A, 5). No hand has been touched, nor any hand been asked for. Instead, the steps at stake are the ones one takes in conversation, but this is treated as a piece of comedy too: ‘It is *your* turn to say something, Mr. Darcy. – I talked about the dance, and *you* ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples’ (A, 27-29). Elizabeth leads the show of conversation but she is faced with a reluctant partner, whose silence is overwhelming and almost jeopardises the possibility of a relationship (A, 56-57): ‘Darcy made no answer and seemed desirous of changing the subject’ (A, 66-67). Although this sentence reads like an attempt at talking about something different, it could also be understood at a different level, as the desire for a new partner. In *A Room with a View*, the characters may not be dancing, but there is a similar sense of staging and orchestration: Lucy leads Cecil ‘further into the wood, pausing every now and then at some particularly beautiful combination of the trees’ (B, 9-10). She then stops on top of a small mountain, in a little clearing of the wood (B, 15), while the solitude of the lovers, and the imagined absence of people around – linked in part to the story Lucy tells about the lake being a place of licence in the past – is constantly repeated to allow for Cecil’s cue (B, 46; 51). The wood as a place of liberty has long been established, since it is the site where Shakespeare’s comedies usually turn to (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, etc.). Lastly, document C also indicates some situational comedy: the dinner is served in the nuptial room where soon flesh is going to be consummated in a way that the dinner only anticipates. The dishes, together with the beverages, all follow a simple order that indicates moderation (‘Ain’t none, sir. Sorry sir’ (C, 15)) but Florence’s attempt at metaphorising the food into what is at stake only reveals Edward’s lack of interest: ‘If only eating a sticky cherry was all that was required’ (C, 10-11) is a fairly bold thought on the part of Florence, while Edward’s preoccupation lies with keeping up appearances with the waiters (C, 12).

All this presupposes some manners that must be respected, or should be, as if a relationship had to obey certain rules. What the comedy reveals in the negative is the lack of desire between the partners, or at least their failure to express it. Feelings in that respect are very infrequent, apart from frustration and anger. Darcy is impervious to any attempt made by Elizabeth to destabilise him. 'he replied, and was silent again' (A, 24-25). This shows that the narrator gives us no clue as to what his feelings may be. Both characters seem to find solace in some reserve or distance that is seen in the adverbs used: 'archly' for Elizabeth, and a deeper shade of hauteur for Darcy. Cecil's 'cult of the fresh air' makes him 'delighted' for a moment, but soon this is replaced by a feeling that we must comprehend as being less 'momentary', that is absurdities (C, 28). Just like in A, the positive feelings are expressed in indirect speech and never show, and the end of document C suggests that their exaggerated nature does not correspond to anything real: 'a gloriously fulfilled, or almost fulfilled, man' (C, 57-58). The qualification on the wedding evening is anything but a positive feeling, especially for someone as much interested in sculptures and historical characters renowned for their passions. Rules are firmly repeated, and each break inspires a smile or a surprise. In this context, one of the most identical strategies in the texts which is the use of modal verbs such as 'should' or 'ought to' could be interpreted as indicating permission and possibility (C, 8. A, 27, 28, 34, 35, 36) or as demonstrating that someone can, could or is impossible to do (C, 22), these strategic uses can be reframed into a contribution to the failure of these couples and their unions. It is true that Austen and Forster are often regarded as writers of comedies of manners and these texts seem to fit this category in as much as roman is used as a pretext to discuss other aspects of the social encounter.

The comedy therefore enables the three authors to interrogate ideals and to show how these ideals collapse because the encounter is a social construction.

Documents A and B exemplify the rules that society accepts for a relationship to unfold. Cecil's 'prudishness' (B, 28) is only temporarily abandoned because he wants to kiss Lucy, or perhaps because he knows this is something he should want, but it is soon replaced by a revision of the scene that bears little resemblance to the one that readers witness (B, 67): the comparisons to navy and labourers, while certainly questioning Cecil's masculinity and the foundation of his love for Lucy, also points to

the way in which the whole comedy is based on a vision of class. '[Passion] should forget civility and consideration and all the other curses of a refined nature' (B, 63-64): inspired by the failure of his kiss, Cecil resorts to what should have happened, in order to complement the lack inherent in his own experience of things. In document C, Edward muses about things that he has discovered and read about while at university. University stands for a discourse of interpretation and logic that runs counter to the passions perfunctorily expressed 'for the hundredth time that day', 'in a whisper' – the mention of which points to the mechanical aspect of this confession: all the elements of a popular romance or love song (C, 29-30) are gathered in this single sentence. This is also confirmed by Florence's response: 'and she truly meant it' (C, 30-31). The use of the conjunction and the adverb seems to suggest that Edward did not and that she may have said it before without meaning it, both fairly negative admissions in the context of a first night together. Edward's immediate escape into theoretical questions regarding the course of history (C, 43-44) gives little credit to the romance at stake and suggests that Edward indeed is interested in something else, that lies beyond the physical encounter. Not to mention Florence's flirtation that is as difficult for her as it is overlooked by him: the scene of her 'flirting with him' by 'suck[ing his glazed cherry] from his fingers' is told from Florence's perspective and Edward's response is not mentioned, but the structure of the text makes us ponder that there may be no reaction indeed because he is obsessed with the presence of the waiters. In document B, asymmetrical passions are also highlighted. Lucy's evocation of the lake is filled with unsaid connotations of nudity and pleasure that have been anticipated in the text by the narrative voice with feminine words of sensuality before: 'bosom' (B, 16), 'dreamily' (B, 25), or 'some brilliant flower that has no leaves of its own' (B, 31). These words are re-arranged when Cecil recasts the scene, probably according to what should or may have happened, had he not remained impervious to what was going on in reality (B, 68). What Lucy says suggests that she bathed in a way that was 'inappropriate' but Cecil misses the reference, or at least does not register it: 'he was delighted at her admirable simplicity' (B, 29). The same happens the other way around when she is surprised that he wants to kiss her: 'She was as scarlet as if he had put the thing most indelicately' (B, 52). This interrogates Cecil's manliness, a word repeated twice towards the end of the extract.

In Austen's text, gender stereotypes are also questioned. Men and women may seem to be divided along well-defined lines that are the

engines of comedy: the man does not speak, let alone of his emotions. Elizabeth, on the other hand, cannot stop speaking, lest Mr. Darcy be able to remain silent. Her pressing him with questions reveals that men fall short of being the people they should be, that men are failing so to speak. Elizabeth is used to manly men (as she dances with an officer first, A, 1). The vocabulary constantly opposes Elizabeth and Darcy along binaries: hauteur vs weakness (A, 56; 58) despite her wish to see them both as similar (A, 42-43). Darcy surprises her (A, 45) but remains mysterious even to the readers, being given few cues throughout the extract despite its being largely dialogic. In documents B and C, it is the woman who, this time around, fails to be the image of purity that their husband and fiancé want them to be: ‘At another time, he might have been shocked’ (B, 27) and it is Cecil who is described as prudish (B, 28). If one analyses the text according to gender stereotypes, one could almost say that it is Cecil who acts according to the manners expected at the time of a woman: ‘He became self-conscious and kept glancing round to see if they were observed. His courage had gone’ (B, 48-49). Set against the example of document C, it becomes clear that Cecil’s prudishness is a feminine attribute. Along these lines, one could also highlight that the titles of the novels from which documents A and B are extracted seem to be intent on working around these binary lines: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Like Rooms and Views*, seem to draw a line of fracture between the characters. Here in both cases, the one attribute most readily associated with masculine and feminine features is turned upside down and applied to the opposite gender. When Florence breaks from her reserve, she thinks ‘she should not start what she could not sustain’ (C, 8) after aping a sexual act. When Cecil thinks of kissing Lucy, he describes the situation as practical (B, 38) and Florence thinks of her act as making her ‘feel less than entirely useless’ (C, 9-10): just like Elizabeth who sees in the dance an opportunity to force Darcy to speak. The three couples here described show therefore that the encounter that is presented is one that enacts the social code rather than corresponds to the unruly nature of passion. When love fails, ‘rules’ take over in a manner that the three narrators disturb through irony.

‘The couple were briefly alone’ (C, 27): the brevity of the sentence together with the adverb suggests that this is a one-off chance for the groom to possess the bride, but Edward contents himself with repeating a sentence that he has said ever so often before and escapes into a musing about the future of History (C, 46) and the Great figures he has studied. His love for Florence, which he names ‘joy’ or ‘elation’, is thus

perfunctorily established without being shown: 'He had decided that none of the figures on his list could have known his kind of satisfaction. His elation was a form of greatness in itself. Here he was, a gloriously fulfilled, or almost fulfilled, man' (C, 55-57). In addition to the situation that takes readers by surprise and plays with our expectations, the sophisticated mode of naming Edward's happiness, in indirect speech, contrasts heavily with the situation itself where that happiness is more performative – in the sense that he says it in the hope that it shows – than based on 'experience' (C, 39). Edward, like Cecil, 'recasts the scene' and lives in a world that the narrative voice shows as sham: the description with which the passage ends echoes Lucy's description in document B. The face is however described in far from complimentary terms this time, when in document B the face was described through the flattering prism of works of art, but in both cases, the ironic narrative voice achieves the same goal. The narrator underlines the discrepancy between what is felt, what is seen and what is thought, in order to subvert the ideal and expose the fractures that may indicate that the union will not be the success Edward, Cecil, and to a certain point Darcy, might have anticipated or wished for. The narrators' irony, made visible in the structure of the texts as well as the comments, undermines the ready-made images about love: passion, profusion, complementation are all exposed as more difficult than one would think them to be. In Austen's text, Darcy's words are often reported in indirect speech. A, lines 51-55 is a perfect example of this lack of balance between Darcy and Elizabeth. Most of this is due to Darcy's silence, but most surely to Austen's amused glance at the asymmetry of this relationship, if not all. In Forster's text, the indication that the couple fail to understand each other (B, 25-26) is expressed throughout by the use of adverbs for Lucy while Cecil is given fewer indications of his understanding of the situation (B, 17; 25; 34; 58): Lucy lives through her reminiscences while Cecil remains pragmatic. In McEwan's text, the word itself appears (C, 5) as the narrator has just made fun of the characters who are said to be eating their melon quickly, when readers may wonder how long eating a melon can take...

So these texts all seem to jeopardise the rules of attraction and repulsion by showing couples that fail to unite and dance in unison. The question that remains to be seen therefore is how 'the embrace' can still take place and what effects it has upon the reader beyond the comic muse.

Indeed some action still takes place: ‘the effect was immediate’ (A, 56). Love can be seen as an affect that is self-centred rather than shared but which ultimately leads to an experience that is akin to the sensuality of reading. In the three documents, an event is bound to unfold; it is only a matter of surprise that the act has not been performed before. Elizabeth’s surprise (A, 5) leads her to ‘accept’ Darcy ‘without knowing what she did.’ (A, 6) In Austen’s and Forster’s texts, characters are well defined and so will act according to their temperaments: ‘I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds. – We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the éclat of a proverb’ (A, 42-46). This is some definite judgement that immediately echoes the pleasure of reading the novel itself: readers are bound to think that Elizabeth has stricken the right chord in the extract. And yet, Darcy’s suggestion seems to invite a metacommentary: ‘*You* think it a faithful portrait undoubtedly’ (A, 49). The art of the portrait functions in literature as a mode of access to the personality of the characters, to give it a semblance of psychology. Here the portrait is presented as faulty in the eyes of the beholders as of the object of the gaze – pride and prejudice are both expected here and reflect perhaps the attitude of the readers which Austen warns to be patient before they can form an image of who the character may be, or is. The complexity of a character is also reflected upon in document B in a more indirect manner: if Lucy thinks that Cecil’s association with a room is a subject that is ‘too difficult for a girl’ (B, 9), Forster takes this opportunity to comment on the function of these two characters in his plot. For this somewhat chauvinistic comment is a way of suggesting that Lucy is a girl – that is a woman who is still innocent about the relationships between men and women. More importantly still, it inscribes Lucy within a tradition of the Bildungsroman that was so prevalent in the 19th century. The ‘girl’ is a type of character, a ‘flat’ rather than ‘round’ character according to the typology that Forster presents in *Aspects of the Novel*. And yet, the scene makes of Lucy a rounder character than even her boyfriend could have expected (B, 28-29). Here Forster undermines the surprising nature of Cecil who ‘momentarily’ becomes someone else while Lucy herself is granted traits that she did not have till then: ‘Her reply with inadequate’ (B, 58). In document C, the characters seem to be very much disinterested in one another. And yet, we do notice the list of attributes that sounds very much like the blindness of a love description: ‘lovely – beautiful,

sensuous, gifted, good-natured beyond belief' (C, 18-19). The adjectives are all laudatory and sketch a character that borders on perfection. However, unlike in documents A and B, this is not the foundation of a relationship between the two characters. She is a character of paper for him as much as for us. In that respect, the metacommentary McEwan offers is on story-telling and the abstraction of this. Great terms blind Edward as to the reality of their relationship, in a sordid hotel room and surrounded by waiters.

However, these texts are only extracts of grander narratives and if we are to follow Forster's epigraph to his 1910 novel *Howards End*, 'only connect', we may infer that literature is not destabilised by the difficulty a girl could find in sketching characters, but rather propelled by a desire to try and make characters connect despite everything. One notices that in document A and B, the authors still resort to dialogues and direct speech, which is a way of emphasising the possibility for the characters to mate, to 'connect' (B, 5) and unite, even if transitorily. Austen's playing with the expectations of women's literature and the romantic tropes that had been firmly established during the 18th century enables her to comment on the stereotypical vision of certain unions in order to suggest that there might be a very singular or particular way of forming a couple for everyone. 'There is no very striking resemblance of your own character, I am sure,' said he. 'How near it may be to *mine*, I cannot pretend to say. – *You* think it a faithful portrait undoubtedly.' /'I must not decide on my own performance' (A, 47-50). In Austen's world, the performance of character is an essential impediment to the construction of a relationship. This elaboration or construction of the relationship as a whole is equally criticised by McEwan and Forster, who still try to show how the muddling of feelings and performance affects the relationship between a man and a woman.

To conclude, the three texts play with the characters' lack of affinity to show the difficulty of love and the romantic encounter so as to revive these typical scenes. In so doing, they present us with another level of understanding of love based on social codes and norms that relationships, even when failing, seem to jeopardise and 'recast.' Lastly, by placing these stories within reflections about storytelling itself (C, 43 ; 46-51) and literary tropes, these texts interrogate the possibility for literature to offer a counter narrative that makes us aware of these various factors that are replayed when a person meets another and thinks or wishes to *connect* with them. It seems that love and relationships remain

difficult even after two centuries in which British literature has explored them, but there are new settings and ways of representing the impediments that are encountered as couples form.

