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JANE AUSTEN:

THE NOVELS AS SIX FICTIONAL METHODS

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Abstract

This study of the six novels looks for ways in which, though founded in a common set of ideas about the world, and methods of organising the ideas fictionally, they are also individual and separate attempts: not just as six 'subjects', or a discernible chronological development, but also because each is a different means of organising and exploring its material. To emphasise the differences, the focus will be in particular on their workings as novels, as they engage the reader's attention; the possibilities they allow for and the possibilities that can be brought into existence by the reader. Additionally, there are comparisons with other writers, a survey of the criticism, and some consideration of the literary and historical context.

In Northanger Abbey, varying forms of parody, satire and education-novel functioning individually, also combine to explore the workings of novels, by testing links between the fictional and the actual.

Sense and Sensibility, more obviously unified, is novel as formal argument, comparing concepts, as analysed in the abstract, with concepts working - or failing - in the everyday.

Pride and Prejudice is novel as informal argument: it treats the way actuality forces ideas and forms to a difficult continual shifting; accommodating or distorting.

Mansfield Park also treats the practicalities, though dealing with much smaller uncertainties. It has just sufficient incompleteness to induce the need for perpetual modification: it explores a pattern that is at once necessary and limited.

Emma is novel as more active mystery, with a seeming coherence, but it can never be completely accounted for, and explanations that are in conflict must also exist in some degree of mutuality.

Persuasion examines its own organising principle as a novel. It is a sequence of possible stories, but only when the sequence is completed is the actual story they make up revealed.

INTRODUCTION

... but All the Good will be unexceptionable in every respect—and there will be no foibles or weaknesses but with the Wicked, who will be completely depraved & infamous, hardly a resemblance of Humanity left in them ...

('Plan of a Novel')

It is probably no longer necessary to defend Jane Austen from the charge that she achieved her art unconsciously, and that in Henry James's celebrated phrase she was not much more than 'instinctive and charming': but it is worth recording just how fully she knew, artistically, what she was about, and also how early the knowledge came to her.¹ Among even the earliest surviving pages of the Juvenilia, there is evidence that she was as fully interested in the workings of novels as she was in their substance. What is more, the spirited imitation of fictional devices is often not merely a mockery of the clumsy or the improbable or the excessively stylized, on the surface, but is also a critical and amused questioning of some of the more fundamental aspects of the techniques and conventions available to a novelist for shaping a novel, and helping to determine a relationship with a possible reader.

Take the example of the first pages of 'Jack & Alice':

¹Henry James, 'Gustave Flaubert', 1902, p. 207. Elsewhere, in 'The Lesson of Balzac' (1905, pp. 62-3), he expands more fully on the point.

some of the burlesque looks to the methods and motives of characterisation, as in the portrait of a dazzlingly flawless hero exaggerated to the point of the nonsensical, or the sets of supposed antitheses that are no more than jangling synonyms; other elements go deeper still, and the opening of 'Jack & Alice' is also a joke about the workings of openings in general, and the problem of entering in medias res. Jane Austen starts her 'novel' by describing a Masquerade, but instead of using the opportunity, as so many of her predecessors did, to introduce low scheming and thuggery, or an elevated disquisition on truth and its disguises, her Masquerade is from the first regarded as a novelistic problem. She interrupts her account of it in order to describe the people who will be attending it, but does so with such thoroughness that the account of the Masquerade, when resumed, is largely unnecessary. Even when they are masked, we know who everyone is; and because we are, as it were, too well informed, we are also not well enough informed, so that the 'never failing genius' of the hero, demonstrated in the speed with which he penetrates the masks, comes to seem laboriously contrived.²

This strain of complex burlesque is also to be found,

²'Jack & Alice' was probably written at some time between 1787 and 1790: the 'Plan of a Novel', 'Jane Austen's late return to the extravagance of her earliest writing', was written in 1816. See B.C. Southam, Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts, 1964, pp. 16, 79.

at least intermittently, in each of the six novels Jane Austen wrote in adult life. Here it has become part of the novelist's pervasive struggle to establish and understand a workable mechanism for each novel in turn. One profitable way, therefore, of approaching the novels would be by way of a consideration of these mechanisms in themselves, these means employed by the novelist to establish, order and test her material.

It is of course true that any examination of Jane Austen's novels is, in some way, an examination of the narrative techniques used in them. The attempt to locate Jane Austen in a literary-historical context, or to relate her achievement to the intellectual and moral preoccupations of her contemporaries and predecessors; the working out of a consciously ideological argument about what W.H. Auden called her interest in 'the amorous effects of "brass"'; the drawing out of 'education' as a significant theme in the novels; the consideration of these novels in relation to a general description or theory of what novels can or ought to 'do': all will have occasion, in one way or another, to examine the effect of the dialogue, for example, or the functioning of the authorial irony.³ But then such

³These different approaches are all, of course, to be found in criticism of Jane Austen's novels. Marilyn Butler's Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (1975), for example, is an obvious illustration of the first; Auden's comment is to be found in his Letter to Lord Byron (1937, p. 41), and Arnold Kettle, though not overly concerned with 'brass', is moved

attempts are at best tightly limited, at worst entirely pre-determined, in what they reveal of the novels and their methods, by the particular nature of the approach being followed. To look at the techniques in a more than oblique or incidental way, there must be a greater emphasis on the techniques as techniques, and we must try to get between the words on the page, as it were, and the achieved reading; to look, on the one hand, at the means employed by the novelist to shape the material of the novel, and, on the other, at the inter-related but different question of the range of response which the novel makes available to the reader.

Now it must be said at once that the idea of focusing centrally on Jane Austen's techniques is not in itself new: but it would also be fair to claim that previous efforts have not, on the whole, been much concerned to get in between the written word and the completed reading. The practice has invariably been to treat the techniques as separate units that can be abstracted from the novels, and then analysed and classified. As a method, it has led to some valuable insights, but it has a number of limitations,

to protest at the seeming ignorance of the novels, on the question of 'class divisions' in the society they portray (An Introduction to the English Novel, 1951, I, p. 99); Darrel Mansell is one of the many critics who approach the novels by way of the question of 'how the heroines become prepared to take their places in the world' (The Novels of Jane Austen, 1973, p. ix); Wayne C. Booth's 'Control of distance in Jane Austen's Emma' is a small part of his The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961).

some that are particularly telling for Jane Austen's novels. The more completely we analyse the techniques as 'units', the less we can usefully say about the complex variousness of their interaction, or about the way they function within each novel as a whole. In order to establish general rules, exceptions are flattened out, variations are simplified, and the subtlety with which the techniques are used, on particular occasions, is blurred.

But it would be foolish to overlook what the approach has achieved. Mary Lascelles has lastingly enriched our understanding of the novels, in Jane Austen and her Art (1939), with the consideration of Jane Austen's mastery of tone and of dialogue, and the use she makes of her 'communicative' style (pp. 90-102); of the ways in which the novelist 'chooses to fashion and control, by the limitations she imposes on her subject, both its shape and its substance' (p. 133); of the analysis of the characteristics of Jane Austen's comedy (pp. 139-46); or of the investigation of the relationship between narrator and reader (pp. 173-200). In all this there is valuable thinking about the general principles involved, but it is constrained by the fact that it can do only a little more than generalise. So, for instance, it is true as a general rule that the link between reader and character depends on a sympathy that is 'compounded of liking and compassion in varying proportions' (p. 215), but we need more than this very general rule if we are to

consider how, in particular, for one character, the link is forged, or the way it varies through the course of the novel: and that 'more' is the means of testing how far this primary stress on 'sympathy' is actually justified. Some years later, in Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure (1953), Andrew H. Wright offered an analysis of the complex variations of point of view, in the six novels:

it is sly, often intentionally misleading - or at least very delicately subtle: quite unobtrusive transitions carry the reader from one viewpoint to another, and only the closest attention will enable him to ferret out the real intention of the passage in question.

(p. 46)

Wright goes on to acknowledge that 'to separate is to do violence both to the unity of each novel and to the contextual harmony of the passages examined', yet he still prefers to categorise the 'six characteristic points of view' - ranging from 'objective account' to 'interior disclosures' - and he confidently assures us that his method 'clears a hundred ambiguities and misapprehensions; it makes plainer the intention' (p. 47). Of course his approach makes for some clarification, but the limitations which he himself acknowledges, cannot be overlooked.⁴

⁴Essentially the same criticism is to be made against Graham Hough's 'Narrative and dialogue in Jane Austen' (1970), with its 'five kinds of discourse' (p. 203). Hough concentrates on Emma, and he does not see the question specifically in terms of 'point of view', but his categories are still very similar to Wright's. Mention could perhaps also be made of Q.D. Leavis's influential 'A Critical Study of Jane Austen's Writings' (1941-4): but this is not strictly relevant, since

Much more recently, Karl Kroeber's Styles in Fictional Structure (1971) examined Jane Austen's novels - and also those of Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot - in order to attempt an account of the concept, and the inherent difficulties, of 'style', and the merits of 'systematized studies of fictional structures'. As that suggests, he too looks for the general rule, whether in regard to 'vocabulary', or 'character', or 'point of view', or the way a novelist can develop stylistically, or the use of 'imagery', or the 'romance-novel distinction', or the different ways in which larger or smaller parts of a novel are linked to and reflect the whole (pp. 8-9). A little later Lloyd W. Brown's Bits of Ivory (1973) was to concentrate specifically on Jane Austen's methods. Interestingly, he argues for a move 'beyond the familiar categorization of the various components of the novelist's style. The full significance of each unit can only be grasped when it is analysed in relation to the themes and form of each novel' (p. 5). That sounds promising enough, until we discover that his aim is actually to substitute for the old 'categorization' a new one of his own devising: thus his units - and they are treated very much as units - are 'verbal disputes', 'imagery', 'symbolism',

it is an account of how things got into the novels and where they came from, rather than how they function in the novels and how we might respond to them. See also Southam (1964, pp. 136-48) for a sustained challenge to the 'Theory'.

'conversation', 'letter writing', 'dialogue' and 'parody'. That does not quite prevent him from treating the 'units' as intimately connected with the novels as wholes, but the degree to which the classification is successful is also the degree to which that other aim is frustrated. Later still, Barbara Hardy took up questions relating to Jane Austen's techniques, in A Reading of Jane Austen (1975). She was much less concerned with explicit categorising, but she still reflected different general approaches to the novels, in terms of 'the feelings and the passions', 'storytellers', 'social groups', 'properties and possessions'. Most usefully, perhaps, she examined what she called Jane Austen's 'flexible medium, a capacity to glide easily from sympathy to detachment, from one mind to many minds, from solitary scenes to social gatherings' (p. 14). Much of the preliminary mapping of this notion was done by Mary Lascelles, and it fits exactly the ground covered by Andrew Wright; but it is a measure of how far the thinking has advanced that the stress is now on the fluid movement from one position to another, rather than on defining the boundaries of each position. Even so, Hardy's remains an account of how, in general, the movement happens, and what in general, are its effects.

Most recently of all, there is John Odmark's An Understanding of Jane Austen's Novels (1981). This seems at first to be promisingly asking some of the questions which earlier approaches omitted, since it claims its theoretical framework in a 'theory of reception' that is concerned with

the 'relations among the component factors in the reading process: the author, the text and the reader' (p. xii). But unfortunately, this turns out, at least in Odmark's hands, to be among the least satisfactory of the attempts to deal with Jane Austen's techniques. Like earlier approaches, it works by generalizing, but does so to very little point. In his first two chapters, for instance, he takes up questions of 'irony' and 'point of view', but only to reach conclusions that were often anticipated, often indeed overtaken, by Mary Lascelles forty years earlier. He is equally uninforming when showing what it is exactly, in the novels, that calls for the application of his theory, since he always seizes on some old-fashioned commonplace - usually it is one that recent criticism, at least, has begun to question - and then sets that up as if it were the novel. Assuming that Northanger Abbey is weakly constructed (p. 4), or asserting that in Sense and Sensibility there is 'a schematic presentation of character' (p. 6) are not achievements that either illuminate the novels or vindicate the theory. Even less fortunate is the way that, though he evidently conceives of reading as a very active process, Odmark is so preoccupied with accounting for authorial control and guidance, that the reader seems, almost invariably, to be being led, passively, to pre-ordained conclusions (pp. 43-5, 52-4, 61, 63-4, 91, 182-3, for instance). It is hardly necessary to suggest that readers seem usually to

find the experience of reading Jane Austen's novels to be somewhat less lifeless and rather more ambivalent than this: if Odmark were right then all criticism other than the most elementary exegesis would be strictly unnecessary, and Jane Austen's novels would have no need of, would in no way illustrate or justify a 'theory of reception'.

It is the aim of this study to break with the tendency to generalize, and to examine the techniques of the novels as techniques at work, to see each novel in terms of the way it is put together, the questions it considers, the means it finds for exploring its material. Where general principles and patterns are incidentally revealed they will be incidentally commented on, but it is not the primary purpose to examine the techniques in order to look for the general principles from which they derive, or the set of rules which their general functioning constitutes. And once we view the techniques in terms of the specific effects they have at particular points in the novels, and the problems and pleasures of reading from page to page, then we will find it more and more difficult, especially with these six novels, to see anything beyond a quite elementary usefulness in trying to establish the general rules. It is obvious that the novels have a common basis in ways of thinking and seeing the world, and in ways of deploying that understanding; equally it is true that the novels represent a significant chronological development, both in terms of what they deal

in, and of how they do it: but it is as much the case that each novel has its own 'questions' to ask, and finds its own ways of asking them. Each, in short, has its own way of being a novel. Thus it will be a matter of reading each novel in order to understand the particular method, as it variously works through the course of the novel, so that in understanding the method we can more adequately read the novel. But it does not mean that each of the novels is merely a self-contained exploration of itself.

Another consequence of approaching the novels in this way, as we shall see, will be that we shall find that there is an unusual degree to which the novels do not deal in truths and certainties, but are, rather, the means of investigating and testing propositions and situations. That is not, somewhat anachronistically, to wish on Jane Austen a heady relativism, and there is no particular sense in which she was not possessed of the certainties and the doubts of her own age: but it is what she did with these that is striking, and it is this that can be missed if we search too impetuously for a theme or a pattern in the novels. What are often taken as the conclusions towards which the novels work, will begin to look more like the premises from which they start their investigations. It is not, for example, that Jane Austen leads us to some conclusion, however elaborate and sophisticated, about the ways in which 'prejudice' and 'pride' can limit or pervert the understanding, in Pride and Prejudice: this is the assumption from

which she starts, and in considering some of the difficulties and complexities of these concepts, she asks what, in a particular set of circumstances, if ...?

This takes us to the matter of existing criticism of the novels, by now a substantial body. As a record of previous readings of the novels, itself stimulating to later readers, and as an indication of those areas in the novels that have been most stimulating, or challenging, or rich, or difficult, or unpalatable, this substantial body is of crucial importance to an account of the novels that is also specifically and consciously an account of the reading of the novels. Therefore, the account of the functioning of each novel, that follows, will incorporate an account of its past treatment by the critics. That is not to suggest, though, that this is merely an attempt to provide a synthesis of established opinion; indeed, we will find that such a synthesis would be surprisingly difficult. It is of course to be expected, is even necessary, that a novel worth the effort of reading, should be susceptible of different, even divergent readings, but once that allowance is made, then the divergence associated with these novels is still surprisingly large - a consequence, no doubt at least in part, of the striking unresolvedness already noted. It is easy enough to find a consensus among the critics, about the novels, but this is only possible in the broadest and least cutting of terms; if we try to be more specific and

incisive, we must embark upon a particular 'interpretation', one which may borrow some credence from the novel, but which can never contain the novel. An examination of past accounts of the novel will thus yield a range of terms and ideas and judgements many of which, individually, make useful points: but it is impossible to render these terms and ideas and judgements into a composite and coherent account. We can all agree that Sense and Sensibility is 'about' the dangers of sensibility and the advantages of sense, or that Emma is 'about' the limitations of imagination: any move beyond these placid and obvious generalities is a move toward the particularity and the limitations of a specific 'interpretation'. This is not necessarily to imply that, as an activity, 'interpretation' is of no use, but it is to suggest some questions and doubts about its purpose and function.

Doubts about 'interpretation' take us straight into current theoretical debates about the novel and about reading. It must at once be said that this account of Jane Austen's novels does not include within its scope a general theory or description either of the novel as a form or of reading as a process; equally it is not, in any particular way, to apply an already existing theory or rhetoric. I have, to take an instance, found the work of Wolfgang Iser both instructive and stimulating, especially as elaborated in his The Act of Reading (1976): there he makes a comprehensive attempt to provide a Phenomenological account of

the business of reading, and the complex links between author, book and reader; he also includes his own striking account of the limitations of 'interpretation'. I do not attempt to endorse the larger claims made in recent years for the primacy of 'the text', or of 'the reading', nor do I attempt to justify the more extreme attacks on the idea of 'interpretation' which these have encouraged.⁵ But equally I make no particular attempt to put Iser's, or any other Phenomenological approach, into practice with Jane Austen's novels, and Iser's name will only occur elsewhere in these pages when he is making a specific point about a specific novel. In the same way, though Iser, and others, have developed the useful notion of the 'implied' reader - the reader whom the author seems to write for, the one who is part-created by the text - it is not a notion that will receive any extensive application here, since I am concerned also to reflect on the possibilities of the reader who is not 'implied'; and I am interested, not in the general theoretical implications of such a reader, but in the specific possibilities it suggests, in the reading of these six novels.

One means of focusing on particular instances of

⁵These are tendencies that can be easily and obviously illustrated by reference to Roland Barthes's S/Z (1970), for instance, and to Deconstruction and Criticism (1979), by Harold Bloom and others. And for a full-blooded attack on 'interpretation', in the light of these and other recent theoretical developments, see for example, Jonathan Culler's 'Beyond Interpretation', in his The Pursuit of Signs (1981, pp. 3-17).

methods or meanings, in the novels, to be used will be comparisons with examples from the work of other writers. These contrasts will primarily be critical in nature, and will point to similarities and differences in the workings of a method, the solution of a technical problem, or the achieving of a particular effect. Examples will come for the most part, but not entirely, from the eighteenth century, and for the most part but not entirely from novels. Thus while this study makes no claim to offer a literary history, even in sketch form, even in the background, it will imply some broad patterns of development, and some specific lines of descent: it will suggest ways in which Jane Austen was influenced by her predecessors, or herself influenced her successors. But the chief purpose of these contrasts will be to illuminate the six novels and their workings.

Similarly, there will be occasion to consider more closely something of the literary and historical context of the novels, the events and ideas out of which they grew, or which at any rate were a large part of the world in which they grew. Obviously, no amount of reading background or sources will make us see things quite as Jane Austen and her contemporaries did; obviously there is a real sense in which it is much more important to establish what she means in the last decades of the twentieth century, than what she meant in the first decades of the nineteenth. But what she

means now also incorporates, however vaguely or imperfectly, what she meant then. So, while making no pretence to a comprehensive account of 'background', and determined only by the exigencies of a particular problem in a particular novel, the questions formulated by the novels, and the means of dealing with them, will sometimes be examined in relation to the times of the novels. Everyone can see, for instance, that Mansfield Park is 'about morality' in some sense:

whether or not that morality is to be associated with the Evangelicals or some other contemporary group, is a question that, in the end, only Mansfield Park can answer. But it is an answer that we can only perceive if we already know something of the views and influences of contemporary moralists.

There are some obvious objections to the approach I am embarking upon: it could be said, for example, that there is a certain rather carefree eclecticism about the diversity of ways to the novels that I adopt; or that I am somewhat ineffectually attempting to provide a hold-all for saying all there is to say about the novels. Certainly, I have been suggesting that there are different means of considering the novels, and that some of these should be adopted simultaneously. But the different means all spring directly from the problems that arise when one attempts to consider the workings of Jane Austen's novels, and their effects. And I make no pretence to having made use of all such possible approaches, or even to having made exhaustive use of the approaches I do follow. This connects with what

must be the more serious charge that while I imply that there are limitations to the act of 'interpretation', and that I have found a means of passing beyond those limitations, I offer accounts of the novels that are themselves 'interpretations'. But that is both inevitable and obvious. Any attempt to make a coherent statement about a novel that tries to move beyond the obvious generalities, must be an attempt at interpretation, and all I can say of mine is that they are offered in something of the knowledge of the limitations by which any act of 'interpretation' is beset. I do not claim to have analysed every last and least possibility of meaning, or to have catalogued all the ways of Jane Austen's ambiguity. All I claim is that by considering the workings of the novels, and their effects, and the different ways in which these effects can be responded to, I have shed some light on what are the ambiguities, and what are the possibilities of interpretation, with these novels.

There is only one possible way of organising such a study, and that is to order the accounts of the novels chronologically, novel by novel. There is of course a special difficulty with Jane Austen, here, since the chronology of the first three novels remains uncertain. But since our interest is, in the first place, in the novels as they have come to us, rather than in the process by which they actually reached that condition, the date of first publication effectively orders all but one of the novels.

Northanger Abbey remains a problem because that would place it last, jointly with Persuasion, and yet it was, at least in an earlier version, the first to be sold to a publisher. I have therefore followed the modern convention of treating it as 'first', but always with the reservation that it is not necessarily entirely so, and that the possibility of late revisions can never be discounted.

CHAPTER ONE

NORTHANGER ABBEY

Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it. I assure you, if it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for all the world. - Catherine Morland on The Mysteries of Udolpho

Everybody knows that Northanger Abbey is a parody of the Gothic novel. Everyone sees that it is also, to borrow the sub-title of Fanny Burney's Evelina, the 'history of a young lady's entrance into the world'. And a well-established tradition insists that these two aspects of the novel are incompatible, even that the existence of each one is an active threat to the functioning of the other.

The history of the novel's composition and publication, replete as it is with false starts and incomplete conclusions, seems to endorse this sadly muddled state of affairs. Written originally after the earliest versions of what were to become Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice, it was sold to a publisher in 1803 but never subsequently brought out by him, and was eventually re-purchased by the author thirteen years later. After 1803, it was probably revised at least once by Jane Austen, but the nature of the revisions can only be guessed at, and in the last months of her life she wrote of having laid it aside, in an apparently unsatisfactory condition: it was published posthumously. In all this there is support for the idea that the novel is

both 'early' and 'unfinished'; that it is a not-quite-successful experiment by a novelist who was yet to achieve the coherence of maturity; that it is not much more than a bridge between the vigorous and percipient parodies of the juvenilia, and the substantial achievements of the later novels; and that it is to be compared favourably with those novels, in any significant way, only with Sense and Sensibility and then only insofar as it is less austere and less obviously schematic.¹

Of course, there have always been those who are ready to defend the novel in its own right, and not merely as an interesting piece of literary history. But the problem is that the successive attempts have the effect of seeming actually to emphasise an incoherence in the novel: again and again a satisfyingly complete pattern is detected, but only by including some, but not all of the novel's facets, and only by ignoring what is omitted, or by criticising it as irrelevant or crude. Nor is there any consensus about what is to be omitted.

One popular version insists that while the novel is

¹Cassandra Austen's Memorandum (Minor Works, facing p.242) gives some details of the composition of the novels (though part of this was in a state of some confusion until recently: see Southam, 1964, pp. 52-4). Jane Austen's late comment on Northanger Abbey appears in the Letters, p. 484. Both R.W. Chapman (Jane Austen: Facts and Problems, 1948, pp. 74-6) and Darrel Mansell ('The date of Jane Austen's revision of Northanger Abbey', 1969, pp. 40-1) discuss the question of revisions of the novel. On the matter of incompleteness, see pp. 374-382, below.

really concerned with the education of a young lady, it includes a number of fragments of high-spirited but not particularly relevant parody: thus the Abbey chapters are rejected as an implausible interruption of the otherwise straight-forward process of Catherine's development. Such an account, though, does little enough to redeem the novel. Not only does it omit much, but it also makes Catherine's development no more than a simple linear progression. A much less limited, and more sophisticated application of this version was offered by Walton A. Litz, in Jane Austen: A Study of her Artistic Development (1965). He suggested that the chapters primarily concerned with parody - he listed the first two, and the five concerned with Catherine's Gothic fantasies at the Abbey - 'form detachable units', but he does concede that 'the Gothic elements are a brilliant commentary on Catherine's general character and behaviour' (p. 59), and much of his discussion is devoted to the proposition that Catherine is at once the anti-heroine, created in reaction to the Gothic conventions, and a heroine being educated 'into reality' (p. 62). Yet while he can thus perceive strong affinities with the later novels, he nevertheless insists that the novel is obviously early and obviously flawed: for him, the expression of the novel's main themes is 'hampered by lapses in tone and curious shifts in narrative method', and he concludes that 'Jane Austen was experimenting in Northanger Abbey with several narrative methods she had not fully mastered, and the

result is a lack in consistency of viewpoint' (pp. 68-9).

Others have tried to challenge the idea that the novel is flawed and incoherent more completely, but no one has as yet entirely succeeded. Katrin Ristkok Burlin has insisted that the unity of the novel is to be perceived as a 'single, complex treatment of the theme of fiction' ('"The pen of the contriver": the four fictions of Northanger Abbey', 1975, p. 89), and the four kinds of fiction to which, she says, the reader is exposed are 'the absurd extravagance of sentimental Gothic fictions', 'the satiric, educative fictions of Henry Tilney', 'the manipulative, egotistical fictions of the Thorpes', and 'the satiric and realistic fiction of Northanger Abbey itself' (p. 90). But, whatever the merits of this scheme, Northanger Abbey is more than a novel about reading and fictionalising. Yet, if Burlin makes too much of this aspect, others do not really make enough. In The Romantic Novel in England (1972), for instance, Robert Kiely has usefully reminded us of the ways in which the novel 'embraces two worlds - the world of Catherine's subjective fancy and that of social convention' (p. 122), but that means that he must deal less than thoroughly with the questions the novel poses about reading, and not at all with the novel's links with non-Romantic literature. Similarly, Eric Rothstein has provided an interesting and complex argument about how 'the strength of Northanger Abbey, and its theme, emerge from the connections between Catherine's education and ours, and between the

social and literary modes in her experience' ('The lessons of Northanger Abbey', 1974, p. 14). But since his is a sophisticated extension of the contrast between high-flown Gothic improbabilities, and the ordinariness of the everyday, he too is silent on the non-Gothic literary links with the novel. Or, there is Frank J. Kearful's argument that the unity of the novel resides in a complicated interplay of satire and serious novel, an idea that makes him re-define the parody in the first two chapters, to make it into satire and thus a part of his formulation ('Satire and the form of the novel', 1965, pp. 514-7).

Paradoxically, Kearful also demonstrates another kind of danger that must be faced in seeking a unity in the novel, and that is the risk of simply making too much of it as a many-faceted thing. For him, Jane Austen

is writing what is not simply a novel or a satire, a burlesque or a parody, a comedy or a tragedy, a romance or an anti-romance. She is, rather, combining elements of all these in such a fashion as to make us aware of the paradoxical nature of all illusion - even those illusions by which we master illusion. (p. 527)

But that begins to sound a little like Polonius's recommendation of the Players; certainly it is more than Kearful's argument actually lends support to. Then too, his assumption that the differing 'methods' exist as large and sequential blocks, so that the novel may be divided, for him, into the opening chapters, the Bath chapters, the Abbey chapters, and so on, leaves very little scope (he begins to touch on it

only in his account of the novel's closing chapters - pp. 524-6) for dealing with the way that there can be a shift of 'method' from sentence to sentence, or even within one sentence.

It begins therefore to seem as if the novel is indeed attempting to pose important and difficult questions about the links between fictional and actual reality; but if we are not to conclude that the questions are muddled (a consequence, doubtless, of the novelist's relative inexperience ...), we must find a form in which the different elements of parody, satire and education-novel can each take their due part. Clearly, the old antithesis between the claims of ordinary life and suggestions of popular novels will not quite do, since no matter how elaborately we state it, it cannot be made to contain all there is in the novel: perhaps, then, we need to think in terms of a continuum rather than a dichotomy, since that will enable us to perceive the diversity of positions between the two extremes, and the complex interchange between the different positions, that are reflected in the novel. At one end, there are accounts of the Gothic, some so broad as to be pastiche, or even simple imitation, rather than parody; there are the occasions of genuine and cutting parody of the Gothic, and there are the echoes, often parodic, of non-Gothic literature; there is the shading of parody of novels into satire on the reading of novels, and that satire into a different but related satire on the social life of Bath, where art is

the stylized representation of life, and life can seem to be an imitation of the imitation; there is the more straightforward reading of books for entertainment and education, and there are the other means of education to be tried out, as a means of preparing for and coping with the exigencies and the commonplaces of everyday life. If the novelist is in fact frequently touching on different points along this continuum, singly and in combination, then it will be possible for the Gothic and the anti-Gothic to mingle as well as to contrast: and the Catherine Morland who is a heroine in her un-heroineness, can also come quite naturally, on occasion, to approximate the specifications of the high Gothic.

But if the changing perspectives between education-novel, satire and parody are thus working to examine the connections and the distance between actual and fictional reality, each one working in its own way, but to an end that is both circumscribed and informed by its varying conjunctions with the other two, then there are some large implications for the reading of this novel that must be drawn out. The reader will be constantly tempted to seize on a particular pattern of meaning, as the meaning, and yet it will prove to be no more than partial: an altogether more fruitful reading will be achieved, if the reader is able to keep changing and adjusting his attitude to the novel, in response to the changing sequence of patterns.

That is not to suggest that Northanger Abbey is actually the creation of a modern and perhaps too consciously experimental novelist. Some of the novelists who preceded Jane Austen had themselves in a large measure anticipated these possibilities. Smollett's Humphry Clinker offers differing combinations of epistolary novel and travel book, burlesque, picaresque and satire, though in a more rudimentary and less sustained fashion than we are looking for in Northanger Abbey.² Fielding and Sterne variously demonstrate how far a novelist can go in not dealing directly with his readers, but in teasing and mystifying, in digressing and explaining, and in seeming to argue with his readers about the way the novel should develop. If Northanger Abbey is a direct descendant of these novels, then we should expect it to declare its ancestry nowhere more clearly than in the opening pages. The opening pages of any novel are of course crucial, not only for the very literal and obvious reason that they 'introduce' the novel to the reader, but also because while no novelist can completely control the reader, all novelists consciously or unconsciously offer their readers the terms of a contract as a basis for their relationship, and the opening pages are a setting down of those terms, or at least the beginnings of the preliminary negotiations. When a novel is self-consciously

²Wolfgang Iser has already noted - though without developing the point very much - the way in which Humphry Clinker is made up of several different kinds of novel: The Implied Reader, 1972, pp. 60-4.

concerned with its existence as a novel, and its relations with its readers, the opening will be the opportunity for the first skirmishings with the reader, of the argument about the shape and function of the novel being introduced. The obvious example of this must be the first pages of Tristram Shandy; but for the purposes of Northanger Abbey, Tom Jones is probably more instructive. Fielding's interest in the problem of opening chapters turns out to be an elaborate and also instructive joke at the expense of the reader. At the start of Tom Jones he argues that authors should provide a 'bill of fare' before inviting readers to partake. The irony behind the seemingly reasonable suggestion becomes obvious when he tells us that his own bill of fare is 'no other than HUMAN NATURE', since this, he admits, tells us nothing at all: it is 'the subject of all the romances, novels, plays and poems, with which the stalls abound ...' But, he continues, it is not the subject which counts so much as 'the author's skill in well dressing it up'. And in extending his metaphor he is soon parodying the use of metaphor, so that we can smile with him while knowing that he is laughing at us. For he is still not usefully explicit about his novel, and all he offers is the broadest of declarations - that at first his will be the 'more plain and simple manner' and that he will later add 'all the high French and Italian seasoning'. But then in not answering the questions he sets himself, and in not giving away anything about the contents of his novel, Fielding's narrator

has actually demonstrated something significant about the way he intends to handle his material, and the kind of relationship he is seeking with his reader.

At the opening of Northanger Abbey Jane Austen, like Fielding, sets out to play on her reader's expectations, and like Fielding, she does reveal something of her narrator's functioning, but we are left less sure of what that functioning is, and of how her narrator stands, exactly, in relation to the material of the novel. If Fielding's narrator is ambiguous, he is at least a recognisable force, constantly and insistently drawing attention to his actuality and his opinions. Jane Austen's seems to be puzzlingly demure.

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard—and he had never been handsome. He had a considerable independence, besides two good livings—and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters. Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as any body might expect, she still lived on—lived to have six children more—to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself. A family of ten children will be always called a fine family, where there are heads and arms and legs enough for the number; but the Morlands had little other right to the word, for they were in general very plain, and Catherine, for many years of her life, as plain as any.

And so we move on through the list of all the ways in which

Catherine Morland is not a heroine. The effect, though, is to threaten any attempt by the reader to find a secure basis for his understanding. The difficulty presents itself in the first sentence: does it mean, as Norman Page has asked, that Catherine 'proved a heroine in spite of early appearances to the contrary, or that of course there never was any question of her becoming a heroine?' And he goes on to say that even 'the novelist's attitude to the reader is ambiguous: is the latter the sharer in, or the victim of, this gentle mockery?'³ The opening sentence appears to have behind it the authority of the axiom, yet it carries no actual endorsement from the narrator, and is no more than an appeal to the consensus that is yet to be established. The ambiguity centres on the word 'heroine', and if we glance down the page then it seems at first as if there is just a simple irony at work: Catherine is a straightforward inversion of some of the more hackneyed conventions of the popular novel. But such a formula soon fails to hold the novel, because if Catherine is not a typical heroine, then what is she? And there is, as Page notes, the persisting implication of the possibility that Catherine might, after all, become a heroine. What is more, by the third paragraph it begins to seem as if she has.

³Page's argument does not, though, go far enough. It is not merely, as he assumes, that 'conventional expectations are skilfully disappointed', but that the reader is left not knowing what to expect: The Language of Jane Austen, 1972, p. 15.

But these are not the only doubts that the first paragraph tries to induce in the reader, for it should also make us begin to wonder just how specific or general is the target of the mocking imitation. Usually this is taken to be the Gothic novel, but it has to be much wider than that, if we judge by the range of reference, which includes the unliterary privacy of an Austen family joke, and also some literary ideas that are so persistent as to rise to the universal. The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), so much discussed in the novel, is obviously one kind of source, but even it is not purely Gothic, having also a strongly sentimental strain. And Mary Lascelles (1939, p. 60) has shown that the signally unaccomplished Catherine Morland of the first chapters is much more like the opposite of Charlotte Smith's Emmeline (1788) than anything in the Radcliffe novels: she adds the wise proviso that there is 'great similarity among the heroines of that age'. This takes us further still from the purely Gothic, since Emmeline, though it has distinct Gothic and sentimental touches, is also, as Lascelles implies, the quite respectable daughter of a Fanny Burney novel.⁴ But the range of

⁴The reference to the name of 'Richard', in the first paragraph of the novel, has traditionally been linked with Letters, p. 15. The Gothic background is the most thoroughly researched aspect of Northanger Abbey. Michael Sadlier describes the novels on Isabella's list (p.40), and shows them to make up a representative sample of the different kinds of Gothic novel ('The Northanger novels: a footnote to Jane Austen', 1927, pp. 3-23). Chapman's edition of the novel includes an appendix on the links with Udolpho, and

reference extends even beyond this point: being locked up by one's father is an almost indispensable part of a Gothic heroine's career, and could enliven the experiences of a popular sentimental heroine as well. Yet it is also a practice common to the fathers of Sophia Western and Clarissa Harlowe. And it is an almost universal convention that a heroine be beautiful; entirely universal that a heroine be at least in some respect interesting. Yet other references have the appearance of an exact, if not openly labeled allusion to a quite specific source: when we are told that Catherine is so un-heroinely as to prefer cricket 'not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush' we have moved to the area of children's literature, and the pages of Thomas Day's Sandford and Merton (1783-9), or - even more likely - Sarah Trimmer's Fabulous Histories (1786): teaching children to be kind to animals was a part of Day's function and it was central to Trimmer's; both also showed themselves more than willing to

offers a passage from Radcliffe's The Romance of the Forest, closer, as he says, than anything in Udolpho to Catherine's early adventures at the Abbey (pp. 306-12). Lascelles begins to examine the complexity of the burlesque in the novel, finding the tradition of Fanny Burney, as well as that of the Gothic novels, though she also suggests that it 'is not subtly interwoven with the rest of the fabric' of the novel (1939, p. 59). A more recent critic, who takes a similar, if more discursive view to Lascelles is Kenneth L. Moler (Jane Austen's Art of Allusion, 1968, pp. 17-28).

combine this with some instruction in the practicalities of natural history.⁵

In other words, what is an elaborate parody of literary conventions as they are mechanically used by novelists, and unthinkingly expected by readers, is also an examination of the necessity and the limitations of literary conventions as such. We are faced with the engaging puzzle of finding a way of being interested in a heroine who is 'ordinary' and thus 'realistic', but also not 'real', is necessarily a heroine, even if a dull one, whose dimensions and functions can only be communicated to us by way of the dangerous and confusing and ridiculed literary conventions. Nor is it only that the realistic account of the education of an ordinary girl is beset by complicated jokes and questions about the way novels are written and the way they are read. The biographical details of this seemingly unsuccessful heroine are themselves, as biographical details, a tangled string of paradoxes and ironies, each requiring a slightly different kind of unravelling, from the one that precedes it, each weakening a little our grasp of what has already been revealed. A 'family of ten children' is 'fine', at least in the every-day conversational sense, but then this loose usage is criticised by the application of serious and good sense; serious, that is, until we realize that it is heads, as well

⁵See F.J. Harvey Darton (Children's Books in England, 1932, pp. 141-9, and 158-62), and Gillian Avery (Childhood's Pattern, 1975, pp. 40-50), for accounts of Day and Trimmer.

as arms and legs that must be counted. Then another ironic reversal brings us the information that the Morlands 'were in general very plain', so the word 'fine' is entirely inappropriate except in the already discredited conversational sense. And later when we are told that Catherine's abilities are 'extraordinary', it seems as if the narrator is operating with fairly simple reversals, since it is clear that she is 'extraordinary' only because she is ordinary. It is natural therefore that she 'never could learn or understand anything before she was taught', since this places her in direct opposition to the absurd literary convention by which heroines - Charlotte Smith's Emmeline illustrates the point exactly - acquire extraordinary knowledge and abilities by their own efforts. 'Ordinary' seems almost to be becoming 'realistic'. But then we are told that Catherine is also 'often inattentive, and occasionally stupid', and here no simple reversal seems possible: 'ordinary' may be 'realistic', but it is also apparently rather dull. It is only when we are offered two instances, of how she is stupid and how she is not, that we can begin to put that stupidity properly in perspective: and all that this actually reveals is that she had an early preference for John Gay over Thomas Moss, so therefore while the latter made her seem stupid, the former did not. But the reader is not left secure with even this fragment of something that is positive in Catherine, for there follows the account of how she failed, utterly, to distinguish herself in music, drawing, writing, accounts,

French ...

What a strange, unaccountable character!—for with all these symptoms of profligacy at ten years old, she had neither a bad heart nor a bad temper; was seldom stubborn, scarcely ever quarrelsome, and very kind to the little ones, with few interruptions of tyranny; she was moreover noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house.

Once again, this has to be interpreted in its own terms. A simple inversion makes the meaning of 'unaccountable' clear, but we cannot treat 'profligacy' in the same way since it is not that Catherine is innocent, but that her faults are slight and commonplace. Yet much of what the narrator then sets against her 'profligacy' is weakened because we are told negatively rather than positively; and when we learn that she was 'noisy and wild ...' it is difficult to know which side of the argument this is meant to support, since syntactically it appears to be a virtue and yet semantically it cannot be. It is only her love of 'rolling down the green slope' that can disentangle this confusion, and it is the vividness, the particularity of this small detail, given ostensibly in Catherine's favour but apparently operating against her, that has on re-interpretation to be seen to work for her, that fixes some secure basis for our interest in Catherine. If she is ordinary, then she is also refreshingly natural, and she possesses the natural vitality of a ten year old child. So it would seem that the reader needs a large measure of what Keats called 'negative capability': we must not

insist on reaching, too easily or quickly, for patterns of meaning; we must rather examine the changing possibilities as they are revealed. Thus, no sooner do we begin to appreciate the natural rather than heroic vigor of the ten year old Catherine, than she begins to become more 'heroic'. In the second paragraph, we are told with a telling irony that she is 'almost pretty'; and in the third, the narrator openly admits the contrast between Catherine's earlier tom-boyish behaviour, and Catherine at fifteen. 'But from fifteen to seventeen she was in training for a heroine; she read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives'. But does Catherine see herself as being 'in training for a heroine', or is it the way that the narrator, with more or less irony, perceives her?⁶ The quotations themselves offer few surprises, especially when we consider that in this family Sir Charles Grandison is read, but 'new books' are not easily come by (p. 41). The real point of significance, for us, comes with the comment on the last quotation: 'And that a young woman in love always looks —"like Patience on

⁶Rothstein (1974, pp. 17-18) argues, for example, on this point that from the start, Catherine sees herself as a Gothic heroine: that is a delusion of which she is to be cured, he says, and it is thus that he finds a unity in the novel. This will not hold, since, apart from anything else, Catherine knows nothing of Gothic novels until she meets Isabella.

a monument / "Smiling at Grief". For this is of course a momentary glimpse of the way Catherine sees things, and the naive assumption that lies behind the 'always' indicates something of her response to Twelfth Night and, by implication, to literature in general. It is also, though, a salutary warning of yet another 'problem' for the reader, and that is the way in which point of view can quickly and unnoticably change: we were not seeing things quite as Catherine saw them, when we were told that she was 'in training for a heroine': now we are.

.....

In many ways, the opening chapters of Northanger Abbey are the most challenging and disconcerting for the reader. Elsewhere the separate workings of the parody, the satire and the education-novel, and the different ways in which they combine, can be as complicated and surprising (can even surprise because we have lapsed into a false security); but it is, inevitably, when the novel is, as it were, first setting out on its enterprise, that the effects are most frequently and diversely felt, and the later chapters tend to be a more thorough exploring, or an adding to possibilities that have already been sketched in. But before we look at the changing patterns as they work through the course of the novel, it will be useful to consider a little more on some of the individual aspects of the parody and the satire; to

reflect further not only on the likely targets, but also on the models of satire and parody from which they can be said to derive. And in establishing a context in which we can better understand the satire and the parody, we will also more adequately perceive the connections with the education-novel.

In eighteenth century writing, the omnivorous tradition that charts an excessive pre-occupation with reading, and demonstrates its consequences for characters whose expectations of reality are too much governed by the conventions of literature, became, itself a stock part of the literary landscape, so conventional indeed, that it could be economically invoked by a few hints. In The Rivals (1775) Sheridan's Lydia Languish illustrates the point exactly: we know, quite precisely, what to make of her, as soon as we know of her voracious delight in novels (pp. 79-80), and it becomes natural that she should have 'very singular taste' (p. 78), or that her behaviour should recurrently be described as 'caprice' (pp. 82, 111, for example). We can anticipate, before she reveals it, that she would hugely enjoy an elopement, and we can even guess the terms in which she would understand the experience: '—so becoming a disguise!—so amiable a ladder of Ropes!—Conscious Moon—four horses—Scotch parson' (p. 135).

But Northanger Abbey has been connected by the critics, at least as a sophisticated variation, with a particular

strand within the tradition.⁷ This is made up of the many rigid imitators and adaptors of Don Quixote, a line of succession that would, no doubt, have much amused Cervantes by the ironic fact of its existence. For these, the delusions generated by popular literature are the theme, rather than merely a theme, and they borrow Cervantes's shape, to suit their own purposes, varying only in the exact nature of their targets. Thus Charlotte Lennox's The Female Quixote (1752) looks back to the heroic French romance of the previous century. Richard Graves treats Methodism, and the life and writings of John Wesley in The Spiritual Quixote (1773). When Maria Edgeworth published her Moral Tales in 1801, it included Angelina: or, L'Amie Inconnue, aimed as the title might suggest, at the excesses of the sentimental novel. And Eaton Stannard Barrett's The Heroine (1813) is directed at the Gothic novel, but also ranges widely through the previous sixty years, and includes references to works as diverse as Sir Charles Grandison (III, pp. 227-30), Johnson's Lives of the Poets (I, pp. 115-27), and Madame de Staël's Corinne (II, pp. 214-25). Often the results are amusing enough: Jane Austen herself responded with 'very high' pleasure to The Female Quixote, and she found The Heroine to be a 'delightful

⁷Lascelles (1939, pp. 57-64) and Moler (1968, pp. 17-21, 37-41) both argue for ways in which Northanger Abbey is in part a sophisticated Quixotic imitator: Litz (1965, pp. 61-2) is inclined to reject the notion. For Emma's links with the tradition see pp. 336-350, below.

burlesque' (Letters, pp. 173, 377). Something of this can be glimpsed if we consider a passage from The Heroine. Cherry Wilkinson is convinced that she is a 'Heroine', and that her real name must be Cherubina de Willoughby; so her father, a mere farmer, cannot be her father. She writes to her confidante - the novel is very loosely epistolary - telling of an argument with the man she tends to address only as 'Wilkinson' or 'farmer'.

'What! cried I, 'can nothing move thee to confess thy crimes? Then hear me. Ere Aurora with rosy fingers shall unbar the eastern gate—'

'My child, my child, my dear darling daughter!' exclaimed this accomplished crocodile, bursting into tears, and snatching me to his bosom, 'what have they done to you? What phantom, what horrid disorder is distracting my treasure?'

'Unhand me, guileful adulator,' cried I, 'and try thy powers of tragedy elsewhere, for—I know thee!' I spoke, and extricated myself from his embrace.

'Dreadful, dreadful!' muttered he. 'Her sweet senses are lost.' Then turning to me: 'My love, my life, do not speak thus to your poor old father.'

'Father!' exclaimed I, accomplishing with much accuracy that hysterical laugh, which (gratefully let me own) I owe to your instruction; 'Father!'

The fat farmer covered his face with his hands, and rushed out of the room.

I relate the several conversations, in a dramatic manner, and word for word, as well as I can recollect them, since I remark that all heroines do the same. Indeed I cannot enough admire the fortitude of these charming creatures, who, while they are in momentary expectation of losing their lives, or their honours, or both, sit down with the utmost unconcern, and indite the wittiest letters in the world.

(I, pp. 16-18)

Barrett's version is of particular interest in relation to Northanger Abbey, because of the way it does not confine its attentions to a single brand of popular literature,

but will work its parody on anything that can be read. But it must also be clear that the kind of parody achieved will only work, for any length, in superficial and crude ways, and in this respect Barrett is typical of this strand of the tradition. What it points to is a certain lack of skill and confidence, and there is always a rather uneasy interaction between the 'fancy' and the 'reality': in the passage from The Heroine, for instance, the joke about heroines writing elegant accounts of horrible experiences is apt, but only if we are not made - as we are - to think too closely of Cherubina actually sitting down to write this account. So, in general, the frequent and earnest reminders of the realism of the setting are self-defeating, and require as frequent explanations of the elaborate mechanisms at work in sustaining the illusions of the central character. That means, inevitably, that the sustained illusion will become progressively less likely, less interesting, less entertaining. Similarly, there is an over-eagerness in emphasising the moral: usually there is a solemn invocation of Cervantes, and the moral lesson he can teach; usually too there appears a worthy and wordy doctor of divinity, at the end of the novel, to lecture the character into a proper understanding of himself, and to ensure that the reader also gets the point.⁸

⁸So, for example, The Female Quixote, pp. 368-82; The Spiritual Quixote, pp. 432-70, intermittently. Maria Edgeworth substitutes Lennox for Cervantes, and omits the doctor of divinity, though this, as she makes quite clear,

It is worth noting, by contrast, that Cervantes himself never allows these problems to obtrude in Don Quixote. He relies, rather, on his mastery of our sympathetic laughter, and he trusts to the workings of the burlesque. There is none of the over-fussy and muddling preoccupation with the problems of realism, and we always know the measure of the Don's 'folly' and 'madness': when he sees giants, we know they are windmills. Consequently, also, Cervantes shows no felt need to preach illusions out of the reader, can afford to suggest, even, as he does at the end of the First Part, that religious discourse is an ineffectual means of curing the Don. And an early attempt to exercise priestly functions in order to aid his understanding, becomes the joke of a 'great and pleasant Inquisition' of the Don's books; turns quickly into parody, in the pedantic debate of the merits, literary and otherwise, of each book; then becomes a satire on the careless zeal of such Inquisitions, when the priest loses interest,

is not because she has a less didactic aim, for character and reader, but simply because she aims to be more subtle (pp. 81-2). Barrett reverts to the earlier pattern, and Cervantes, a sententious clergyman, and an even more sententious husband-to-be join in a triple alliance to defeat Cherubina's folly (III, pp. 267-94). See also J.M.S. Tompkins, The Popular Novel in England 1700-1800, 1932, pp. 113-4, 207.

and the books are indiscriminately burned.⁹

Now, it would be perfectly correct to argue that Jane Austen has a share in this tradition: what is uncertain is the part Northanger Abbey plays in it, and here we must move with some care. Jane Austen was of course from the first a very accomplished burlesquer of popular novels, and it is in the Juvenilia, in something like Love and Freindship, that there is the single-minded burlesquing of the Lennox or Barrett kind. But the young Jane Austen shows herself, unlike them, to be fully able to achieve the burlesque, and to let it work to its end. There is no distracting pre-occupation with the need to ensure that the picture is 'real' and the character 'deluded'. And, again as in Cervantes, she evidently feels no need to incorporate a substantial and solemn moral injunction; indeed she turns the moralising into a target for more burlesque. When Sophia dies - she is 'carried ... off', we are told, by 'a galloping Consumption', the result of fainting on damp ground - it is as one heroine speaking to another, not as someone cured by her desperate plight of the fanciful illusions generated by

⁹Don Quixote, (pp. 434-45, 56-63). There is, of course, Quixote's deathbed recantation, but this is a matter of paragraphs, not pages, and it has only a little to do with the conventional pieties of the deathbed, since the bystanders do not so much rejoice at this proof of his established sanity, as weep because it shows that he must be dying. And, on another level, the death itself is simply another literary joke, since it is an easy way of stopping the novel, and also of putting an end to the schemes of literary pirates (pp. 936-40).

novels, that she utters her last words to her friend.

Beware of swoons Dear Laura ... A frenzy fit is not one quarter so pernicious; it is an exercise to the Body & if not too violent, is I dare say conducive to Health in its consequences—Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint—.

(Minor Works, p. 102)

But there is another strand of the tradition that links Cervantes with Jane Austen, one that will occasionally borrow something from the approach that is concerned simply to warn against the delights of popular fiction, but is itself much more broadly interested in the relationship between fiction and truth. Fielding acknowledged his debt to Cervantes on the title-page of Joseph Andrews, and in Parson Adam's Classical reading, in Joseph's link with Pamela, he made what he had borrowed into something that is very much his own. Smollett and Sterne are both under the influence of the same tradition, and Scott connects interestingly with it when, at the start of Waverley, he gives a detailed account of the reading habits of the young Edward Waverley, especially of the heroic legends, and the way they colour his mind: in hinting at the consequences, Scott deliberately repudiates any link between his novel and the simple burlesques in imitation of Don Quixote. And the contrast he draws with Cervantes is put in terms which could be applied, almost exactly, to Catherine Morland. His subject, he says, is not

such total perversion of intellect as misconstrues the objects actually presented to the senses, but that more common aberration from sound judgement, which apprehends occurrences indeed in their reality, but communicates to them a tincture of its own romantic tone and colouring.
(I, p. 43)

It is after all the mere sight of the furnishings of Mrs Tilney's room that destroys Catherine's most fervid Gothic imaginings (pp. 193-4). Henry's subsequent lecture is instrumental only in helping to fix the lesson. So in making its own distinctive contribution to this more elevated strand of the tradition, Northanger Abbey is also showing how it fulfils the promise of its opening chapters. Catherine is the 'heroine' deluded by reading who must be brought to her senses, and yet she is also, more subtly, the young girl who has been somewhat confused by the difference between appropriate and inappropriate ways of understanding the world. She is put right by the pedagogically inclined 'hero'; but Henry, as well as being several kinds of literary functionary, is also an occasionally pedantic young man, yet one who is more than a little partial to his own wit. And he can teach her so well, and she be so effectively taught, not only for the sound literary reason that he is the wise hero and she the erring heroine, but because they are, albeit unequally, in love. There is also a final twist: we can see the way parody shades into satire, and the way both are intimately bound up with the education-novel, but the parody is also a parody of parody, and Henry, the exhorting clergyman who

has just come back from attending to affairs in his parish, and who finds Catherine outside his mother's room, is also Jane Austen's mocking echo of the wordy divine who so often dogs the closing pages of the lesser burlesques.¹⁰

That should alert us to the way that the relation between Northanger Abbey and its sources and targets is constantly varying, so that no one formula, however elaborate, will quite do. Eric Rothstein (1974, p.20), for example, suggests that there is a pattern in the variation of treatment from character to character.

Mrs Allen is the null version of the chaperone. Isabella is a genuine but corrupt confidante, and her brother a

¹⁰Henry's remarks, and especially the allusion to the 'voluntary neighbourhood of spies' have of course been the subject of much discussion, especially since D.W. Harding focussed on them in his 'Regulated hatred: an aspect of the work of Jane Austen', 1940, pp. 347-9. Later efforts have been made to connect the remarks with the repressive anti-jacobin measures of the British government, in the last years of the eighteenth century, and the first decades of the nineteenth, by which people were indeed encouraged to spy on their neighbours (B.C. Southam, '"Regulated hatred" revisited', 1976a, pp. 122-7; Warren Roberts, Jane Austen and the French Revolution, 1979, pp. 22-3, 27-32). But both give a very distortingly large emphasis to the matter in relation to the novel, and both are rather more shocked by the repressions than the majority of Jane Austen's contemporaries, and almost all of her first readers would have been. See E.P. Thompson (The Making of the English Working Class, 1963, pp. 84-7), for instance, for an account of the pervasiveness of anti-jacobin sentiments in the period. It is probable that Jane Austen did mean to refer to political spying, as not being conducive to the custom of wife-murder, but then it is clear that she also has the purely domestic spying in mind as well, as an even more effective deterrent. Consider the way in which Mrs Bennet keeps herself informed on the supplies of poultry to the kitchens of Netherfield (Pride and Prejudice, p. 331).

shrunk but certainly genuine unwelcome suitor. The General, finally, is a reasonable facsimile, within a social world, of a Montoni or Schedoni.

But this only partially holds. Isabella is a 'confidante', but she also sees herself as a 'heroine', and as such she is a much closer and more consistent approximation to the Gothic model than Catherine herself. John Thorpe is the 'unwanted suitor' of course, but he also comes close, on occasion, to displacing the General as 'villain'; while the General's 'villainy' is a little modified by the fact that he is the dupe of John Thorpe. Even Mrs Allen is not only the 'null version of the chaperone', though she often promises nothing more: it is clear that she in no way fits the Gothic requirements of her role, and it is as clear that she cannot properly fulfil ordinary everyday expectations about chaperones, since she is incapable of giving Catherine almost any useful guidance.¹¹ But there are occasions when she much more actively inverts her role. Barbara Hardy has pointed out (1975, pp. 21-4), that the account of Catherine's first ball is notably like that of Fanny Burney's heroine in Evelina, but there is also a suggestive connection in the matter of chaperones. Evelina's

¹¹But even the incapacity is not quite complete: it is she who early points Catherine to the essential unreality of a Gothic novel, by noticing the gross insufficiency of servants in the abbeys and castles of novels (p. 184). And it is characteristic of the irony of the novel that Catherine does not heed this one useful lesson.

entrance into fashionable society is threatened with delay by her chaperone until the heroine has 'Londonized' her dress (p. 25): by contrast, Catherine's entrance to Bath's Upper Rooms is delayed until Mrs Allen, herself, is provided with 'a dress of the newest fashion'; they enter late because it is Mrs Allen who is 'so long in dressing'; and then Mrs Allen does so with 'more care for the safety of her new gown than for the comfort of her protegee' (pp. 20-1).

The range of variation in the use of literary devices is most obvious with Catherine herself. After her first meeting with Henry, for example, she is puzzled by his apparent disappearance from Bath.

This sort of mysteriousness, which is always so becoming in a hero, threw a fresh grace in Catherine's imagination around his person and manners, and increased her anxiety to know more of him.

(pp. 35-6)

A perfectly understandable response, but one which does not allow for the perfectly ordinary explanation which in fact exists, but also only just begins to match the excitement that a genuine Gothic heroine could have wrung from the situation. Sometimes her response is an apparently straightforward and sensible one, even though she has had only limited opportunities to exercise her judgement. When she does see Henry again, he is in the company of a young lady, and Catherine immediately concludes that this is his sister, 'thus unthinkingly throwing away a fair opportunity of considering him lost to her for ever', and 'falling in a fit on

Mrs Allen's bosom' (p. 53). On the other hand, the progress of her 'unhappiness' later that evening turns out to be a series of variations on the Gothic-sentimental standard: 'a violent desire to go home', 'extraordinary hunger', 'earnest longing to be in bed', 'sound sleep' (p. 60). Conversely, when John Thorpe carries her off in a carriage, away from the interesting Tilneys, and towards the delightful horrors of Blaize Castle, the parody seems obvious enough, especially when we realize that though Catherine thinks it genuine, Blaize is sham-Gothic; especially when John Thorpe's bluster ('But Mr Thorpe only laughed, smacked his whip, encouraged his horse, made odd noises, and drove on', p. 87) is almost too clearly like the caricature of a typical Gothic villain. But in fact the moment brings together a rich diversity of literary and social patterns. The business of the heroine being abducted in a carriage is a familiar enough Gothic cliché, but what has to be the most famous literary abduction, at least in eighteenth century terms, is that recorded in the exemplary pages of Sir Charles Grandison, with the melodramatic entry of Sir Charles into his novel, to rescue the heroine from the carriage of the Lovelace-like Sir Hargrave Pollexfen (I, pp. 163-8). And in Northanger Abbey, part of the force, and part of the comedy, derives from the fact that Catherine is, on this occasion at least, entirely unresponsive to literary parallels, whether Richardsonian or Gothic and resolutely and volubly insists on regarding John Thorpe's

behaviour as no more than rude and deceitful. At the same time the event is a useful reminder of the difficulties of any young person's entry into the world, in Catherine's doubts about the propriety of accepting Thorpe's invitation to ride in the carriage, doubts that range from the all-but metaphysical to the merely meteorological. And while Mrs Allen is of course useless as an advisor, we cannot make too much of Catherine's untutored condition, because she later elicits a statement from Mr Allen on the im-propriety of riding about with young men (pp. 104-5). But even this does not quite resolve the matter, and Mr Allen may be doing little more than warn Catherine that John Thorpe is not particularly desirable as a more than 'common' acquaintance for her: Mr Allen is very quick to abandon his wife and her charge, when they enter public rooms, but he is as quick to establish that Henry Tilney is suitable, at least as a 'common acquaintance' of Catherine's (p. 30). And while, in any event, he makes it clear that riding about with young men is a minor offence, even to be condoned as long as it is infrequent, Catherine, eager for any 'ruling', but happy to have her own judgement and inclination confirmed, turns it immediately into an absolute moral injunction, and has to be dissuaded from writing to Isabella to inform her of this discovery. Later she is puzzled, but not quite for the right reasons, when the General insists that she share Henry's carriage for the last part of the

journey to the Abbey (p. 156).

There is at least one other important way of looking at the writing and reading of novels, employed in this novel, and that is in the conscious discussions of the matter, between character and character, between narrator and reader. The most obvious instance, outside the opening and closing chapters, must be the 'defence of the novel', and here as elsewhere, what might appear plain and simple turns out to be difficult and divergent. It is difficult to treat the 'defence' entirely seriously as Jane Austen's credo as a novelist, because it is not itself uniformly serious. Is it perhaps a light-hearted reminder that a criticism of some novels and some readers is not a rejection of the novel as a form; that it is as much a matter of a kind of reading as it is a species of novel? This is, after all, an important point, and it is one that none of the simpler burlesques make with completeness of conviction. But then if Jane Austen is setting up the novels of Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth in defiance of the practice of scorning all novels because some are silly or dull or improbable, and specifically in defence of the term 'novel', then it is a little strange that the Edgeworth novel named by Jane Austen should itself rather scornfully decline the label 'novel', as debased. Indeed, while the 'defence' makes some serious and supportable claims about the 'extensive and unaffected pleasure' that novels give, about

the 'capacity' and the labour of the novelist, above all about the intellectual achievement represented by some novels, it is difficult to know what weight to attach to each, because each is made from a slightly different perspective, and suggests a slightly different tone. At the outset, comments on the 'ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers' of condemning the reading of novels in the pages of their own novels, lead easily to the joking irony of the picture of a heroine who takes up a novel only to turn 'its insipid pages with disgust', and so to the appeal for sisterly support between heroines. When it is the turn of the reviewers, the spirited mockery of their 'threadbare strains' promises a treatment similar to that already meted out to the foolish novelists. Instead though, we are led into a polemic on the value of novels, one that seems intent on catching and reversing the terms and intonations of the carping reviewers. But then this pose is itself only held for some four or five sentences, until the narrator is carried away by enthusiasm, and takes up the role of a too consciously partisan novelist, defending her art a little too vehemently, and the polemic seems at once to be serious and a self-parody. The novel is, we are told,

only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.

(p. 38)

The real ground for the defence of the novel must lie a little lower than the heights of these superlatives. And there is a curious omission. It is decidedly odd, given the narrator's strong desire to say every good thing that can be said about novels, that there should be no more explicit reference to the positive moral influence of novels. Or is this a covert but still deliberate taking up of an argument with Maria Edgeworth over the tactical advantages and disadvantages of a declaration for didacticism. But then, what too of the implied need in the 'defence' for some means of discriminating between novels: Cecilia can perhaps be more usefully instructive, can perhaps be more substantially entertaining, than, say, The Castle of Wolfenbach.¹² But on what basis, exactly, do we judge this? Perhaps even more important for Northanger Abbey is the supplementary question of how the naive reader can learn to make the discrimination.

For there is Catherine, herself a 'heroine', and one given to picking up novels. Indeed, though the 'defence'

¹²As Sadlier notes (1927, p. 13), The Castle of Wolfenbach is inferior even by the standards of Isabella's list. C. Linklater Thomson (Jane Austen: A Survey, 1929, pp. 45-6) was the first to notice that Maria Edgeworth's 'Advertisement' to Belinda explicitly rejects the label 'novel', and to suggest that a part of Jane Austen's 'defence' was 'probably provoked' by it; that she 'smiled at Miss Edgeworth's "fastidious" attitude to her own profession'. Edgeworth does not reject the ideal of 'novel' as such, and has special praise for the novels of, among others, Fanny Burney; all she is doing is dissociating herself from the efforts of the inferior practitioners who, she feels, have debased the label.

has all the appearance of a digression into generalities, it is sandwiched between the first mention of the fact that Catherine and Isabella read novels, and an account of their pleasure in reading The Mysteries of Udolpho and so it is fair to ask how the 'defence' connects with Catherine. In fact, she is something of an embarrassment to it: true, she does not scorn novels, true, she does derive a great deal of the promised pleasure from reading them; but what of the high claims about 'the most thorough knowledge of human nature'? Everett Zimmerman has pointed out that Cecilia, Camilla and Belinda are all honourably in the tradition of Sir Charles Grandison, and he goes on to observe that while Isabella is interested only in Gothic possibilities, Catherine also reads Richardson, and so, 'unlike Isabella ... is interested in the kind of novels recommended by the narrator' ('The function of parody in Northanger Abbey', 1969b, p. 59). But this leaves out of count the fun which the narrator also has at Richardson's expense, and it gives no measure of the kind of interest Catherine has in him: and all that she actually says is that while Grandison is quite different from Udolpho, it is still 'very entertaining' (p. 42). Yet this apparent refusal, or inability, to think of novels as more than entertaining, so at odds with the 'defence', is also at odds with her not infrequent - though not quite conscious, and not, as we have seen, invariable - practice of taking instruction from novels, and finding illuminating parallels in them: thus

she rather credulously acquires a 'great store of information' (p. 16) about the ways of love, and the contours of French and Italian landscape, and the behaviour to be found in abbeys. But there is yet another complication, because though she sometimes assumes that life is like literature, she has a firm enough grasp, again one not quite consciously understood, of the idea that literature is not like life, and her intense delight in 'Laurentina's skeleton', her insistence that she should not be told what is 'behind the black veil' (pp. 39-40), both show that she considers them to belong to the province of fiction and not reality. Similarly, when faced with different kinds of response to literature, she can begin, though often not much more than begin, to perceive what this suggests about reading and about novels. When Henry satirises the typical response of an enthralled reader of Udolpho (p. 106), when he offers for her terror and delight a pastiche Gothic novel (pp. 157-60) it is clear that she at least half understands what he is about. And when Isabella declares that 'were I mistress of the whole world, your brother would be my only choice', we are told that Catherine is as much struck by the 'novelty' of this utterance, as she is by the way it reminds her of 'all the heroines of her acquaintance' (p. 119). What this seems most cogently to point towards, is a need to consider the ways in which these various complex half-perceptions can be made whole.

.....

So we return, finally, to Northanger Abbey as an education-novel. In many ways, this is the most persisting of the novel's differing forms, and it is most tempting to take this as the form of this novel. But of course it is incomplete, and must be taken in conjunction with the other less persistent forms: what is more, as with those other forms, this one presents what at first seems to be something that in itself is single and simple in outline, but what turns out to be a sequence of complex and shifting possibilities. Thus, at the start, when we are told that Catherine 'never could learn or understand anything before she was taught', this, as has already been noted, is the pillorying of one of the conventions of the sentimental-Gothic novel. But it is also a statement of the Empiricist contention that experience is the prime source of all knowledge, summed up in John Locke's famous notion of the 'tabula rasa', and widely and profoundly influential through the course of the eighteenth century and beyond. And of course it is an assumption that underlies much of the novel.¹³ It is obvious that Catherine is handicapped by a lack of experience, and that as her experience, direct and indirect, widens, so she begins to build, sometimes usefully and sometimes not, on her understanding. So, for example, Isabella introduces her to the pleasure of Udolpho, a pleasure which she at first

¹³For an account of the novel that treats it as if it were wholly and unquestioningly founded on a Lockean epistemology, see Peter L. De Rose, Jane Austen and Samuel Johnson, 1980, pp. 15-35.

assumes to be universal. John Thorpe's brash and muddled assertions about novels, persuade her to revise this assumption, and so she hesitates to mention this favourite topic to Henry because 'gentlemen read better books' (p. 106). Henry's response, though she does not fully understand it, does persuade her to make another assessment.

But then, the Empiricist pattern, like all the others, does not hold completely, and Catherine is often moving, if not always unprofitably, beyond the realms of her experience, or at least suggesting that she has the potential to do so. Were she no more than the application of Lockean principles then there might be more justification than actually exists for those critics who find her 'dull', or who claim that her mind is a 'somewhat implausible blank', because then the development of her understanding could be a steady and mechanical progression, as experience widens and knowledge grows.¹⁴ But no such orderly structure exists. Catherine's relationship with Isabella is illuminating, here, because Isabella is four years older than Catherine, and 'at least four years better informed' - at least in the matter of balls,

¹⁴For Marvin Mudrick (Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery, 1952, p. 53) Catherine's 'naïveté begins to resemble dullness'. And Marilyn Butler (1975, p. 178) claims that 'Catherine's mind is a somewhat implausible blank', and adds by way of compensation, that the presentation of the Tilneys and Thorpes 'virtually forces the reader into a series of ethical comparisons between them on the author's terms'. But this is surely wrong. The contrasts between the Tilneys and Thorpes should be so obvious as not to require compulsion: the whole point is to see what Catherine makes of the contrast.

fashions, flirtations and quizzes (p. 33). It is hardly necessary to warn the reader of the selfishness, the false intensification, the constant reliance on trick and deception, that make up Isabella's behaviour; but it is interesting to notice how the 'naïve' Catherine responds. We might expect that she would tend to accept Isabella's version of the world, at least until experience proved it false, but in fact what happens is rather more complicated and less predictable. In their first long conversation in the Pump-room (pp. 39-43), she sometimes does respond unquestioningly, but at other times she is more critical, even if the criticism is not always quite consciously made. At some points, she rejects what Isabella says for reasons that are firmly based on her own experience, as when she questions Isabella's opinion of Sir Charles Grandison because she has herself read it. At others, though her criticisms are no less appropriate, they are much less the result of anything that she has had experience of, most apparently when, for instance, the talk turns to the interesting subject of young men. Henry Tilney's name is mentioned, and Isabella offers some sisterly support but Catherine, while losing none of her uninformed diffidence, is able to reach something rather more profound.

'Nay, I cannot blame you—(speaking more seriously)—your feelings are easily understood. Where the heart is really attached, I know very well how little one can be pleased with the attention of any body else. Every thing is so insipid, so uninteresting, that does not relate to the beloved object! I can perfectly

comprehend your feelings.'

'But you should not persuade me that I think so very much about Mr Tilney, for perhaps I may never see him again.'

(p. 41)

Catherine's objection to Isabella's 'perfect' comprehension emphasises, exactly, what are the uncertainties of her situation, since there is the recognition both that she is very susceptible to persuasion on this point, and that she is capable of resisting at least some of the easier persuasions. We know already that she has been toying fancifully with the fact of Henry's absence, and this indicates the quite precise limits that she actually sets herself. And though her only experience, in this area, comes from novels, she is not using that experience, or she would more readily assume the inevitability of a happy ending. Even Harriet Byron, despite her much-prolonged doubts, does finally become Lady Grandison.

The arrival of John Thorpe brings another combination of possibilities and difficulties. It is, admittedly, easy not to like him, but it is worth noting how far Catherine moves towards an active dislike of him, since, as the narrator observes, she does not 'understand the propensities of a rattle' (p. 65), yet she almost immediately gets a sufficient idea of his measure. Then, and it is another reminder of her vulnerability, her dislike is bought off by the fact that he is James's friend and Isabella's brother, so there is a complex interaction of 'friendship' and 'flattery', of 'diffidence' and 'youth' (p. 50).

Equally, though the dislike is soon nevertheless fixed, this is not entirely a proof of the soundness of her judgement, since it has as much to do with the way he threatens her contact with Henry, as with anything he is in himself. He is welcome as a partner at a ball when there is no certainty of any other; once Henry re-appears, Thorpe is, in her eyes, merely in the way (pp. 50, 59).

And with Henry, the links and the contrasts are most various. For Catherine, he is the desirable suitor, who is also a useful instructor, as well as being a habitual and sometimes puzzling wit; just as, for the reader, the different aspects of Henry, as a character, have also to be assimilated with his role as narrator-substitute. At times, the different elements achieve a kind of harmony, as in some of his satirical analyses of the social life of Bath, or of Catherine's attitudes and ideas. On others though, each aspect seems to be undermining one or more of the others. His delight in his own wit is frequently at odds with his functioning as a teacher, and both are sometimes complicated and compromised as he becomes increasingly a lover; and there are times when though he seems to be reaching the heights of a narrator-like detachment, he is himself firmly under the ironic scrutiny of the narrator.

Inevitably, critics have tended to see this either as further evidence of the incoherence of the novel, or else have tried to regularise and simplify his functioning.

But he is actually an integral part of the process by which the reader is led away from easy and straightforward conclusions, and towards a way of finding different patterns that can exist simultaneously.¹⁵

Catherine herself, in her view of Henry, is not merely the ingenuous admirer. After their first dance, she finds him

as agreeable as she had already given him credit for being. He talked with fluency and spirit—and there was an archness and pleasantry in his manner which interested, though it was hardly understood by her.

(p. 25)

and this is entirely predictable from an open, good-natured and ignorant girl of seventeen: we need, it seems, only pause to note how similarly Catherine is quickly delighted with Isabella's friendship, and so to record how vulnerable this tendency makes her. Yet, there is more. The distance between Henry and Catherine is never greater than when he gently but still pointedly satirises the ways of Bath that she is just beginning tentatively to understand, and uses a way of thinking and talking that is quite beyond the reaches of her experience (pp. 26-7, 65-6). But she still perceives

¹⁵Litz for example (1965, p. 69) is discomforted when Henry is subjected to the narrator's irony, and argues for an incomplete competence on Jane Austen's part. On the other hand, Howard S. Babb (Jane Austen's Novels: The Fabric of Dialogue, 1962, pp. 87, 106-11) too unquestioningly accepts Henry's role as assistant to the narrator; and in seeing him too easily as Catherine's teacher, and too quickly and completely as her lover, leaves out of account much of the effect of his wit.

a good deal of his meaning, and though she is uncertain, her impulse is to laugh with him. And when he exercises his wit on a subject so well-known to her as Mrs Allen, she can even wonder whether 'he indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others' (p. 29), a view that is not entirely without justification, but is also probably coloured by the fear (not, perhaps, fully thought out) that just as the quite unwitting Mrs Allen is being teased, so she might herself have been unwittingly amusing him. It is only later, when she is completely enthralled by him, that she more confidently, if a little confusedly, assumes that

Henry Tilney could never be wrong. His manner might sometimes surprize, but his meaning must always be just:—and what she did not understand, she was almost as ready to admire, as what she did.

(p. 114)

And having thus discovered the beauty of his perfection, it is, by an ironic reversal of the conventional love story, that she is eventually able to admit to herself the possibility, at least in theory, that he may be flawed in minor ways (p. 200).

Then, in himself, Henry stands for a succession of differing possibilities. In the early encounters with Catherine, he is obviously charmed by her frankness and innocence, but he is also highly amused by her, and will laugh secretly at her, for example, when he talks of the country dance as an emblem for marriage, and she insistently refuses to see an emblem as an emblem (pp. 76-8). But later,

some of the laughs at least are against him: on the walk round Beechen Cliff, for instance, the narrator dwells pointedly on the advantages to a young woman, at least if she is 'good-looking', of being ignorant, and then goes on to describe one of Henry's more serious attempts to lessen that ignorance by way of a lecture on the picturesque,

in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in every thing admired by him, and her attention was so earnest, that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste.
(p.111)

so that each is, to a degree, unwittingly duping the other and the self. Yet it is also not clear, at least for Henry, whether this is more than a momentary lapse, since he soon appears to be complete master of the conversation again, and he presides with a narrator-like amusement over the confusion generated by Catherine's vision of the unreal Gothic horror, and Eleanor's knowledge of the real violence of the Gordon riots or the Terror.¹⁶ Later still, just at

¹⁶As with the question of the 'neighbourhood of voluntary spies' (p. 45 n, above), this is a point that has been rather too laboriously researched by those who would connect the novel more immediately with its times. See Southam (1976 a) and Roberts (1979, pp. 22-7); Roberts is decidedly the more laborious. It is surely obvious that the Tilneys are thinking of something that could actually happen in the real, contemporary world, and that their expectations are well-founded: that is what makes the contrast with what Catherine has in mind, so incisive. And once this is established, it is quite unnecessary, indeed it is distorting, to sift through all the possible insurrections and the public disturbances that Jane Austen may have been thinking of.

the point when he begins to find her 'irresistible' (p. 131), the ironist in him is muted and may even be silent: when Captain Tilney asks Isabella to dance, and Catherine assumes that he is motivated only by kindness, Henry tells her that she is 'superior in good-nature ... to all the rest of the world' (p. 133), and it is not certain how this large compliment is to be taken. Is it a very gentle reminder of his satirising powers, or to what extent are these the words of a young man who is beginning to be decidedly in love? When Catherine becomes alarmed at the interest Frederick Tilney continues to show in Isabella, we can notice how Henry gently leads her to re-appraise the situation - it is because Isabella admits Frederick's attentions that James is hurt; if there is a real attachment between Isabella and James, then no lasting harm will be done (pp. 149-53). But there is still an uneasy discrepancy between what the reader can discern in Henry's formulations, both about what he thinks of Isabella, and about what he does not reveal of Frederick, and the simple comfort that Catherine derives, in the end, from the reminder she gives herself that 'Henry Tilney must know best'.¹⁷

All of which suggests that the events at the Abbey, far

¹⁷As an instance of how selective interpretation can be on this point, and how far it can go, there is Darrel Mansell's suggestion (1973, pp. 39-40) that in responding as he does to Catherine's concern, Henry shows himself to be 'capable of sharing a few sniggers with his brother over the brandy', and to have affinities with Pandarus.

from being a tiresome interruption, are a natural, indeed crucial part of a complex whole, and the competing and incomplete structures of parody, satire and education-novel are each at their most intense, as the novel works to its conclusion. Thus it is entirely appropriate that Henry, who delightedly adds further fuel to Catherine's Gothic expectations, on the way to the Abbey, should also be the one to ask her, insistently, what 'ideas' she has 'been admitting' (p. 198) when she has taken things ludicrously too far. And Catherine enters the Abbey in ignorance, but with high literary expectations, and at first assumes an easy access to the superficial trappings of the Gothic - bloody daggers, lost manuscripts, hidden recesses, and so on. When that proves illusory, she makes the second but much more interesting mistake of actually trying to apply the psychology of the Gothic. And in trying to make the Abbey Gothic, she treats it as if it were something in a novel; her excited 'terrors' are much more like those induced by 'Laurentina's skeleton' than anything she would actually feel if Northanger really were the place she imagines it to be. So when the 'visions of romance' are over, when she is 'awakened' (p. 199) she has at last a firm hold on much that has previously been close to her understanding but has never before been properly in perspective about life and about novels. In this way she makes the decisive step into adulthood.

Or so it would seem. Certainly there is a lesson clearly learned, but how exactly is Catherine transformed? The novel does not, in point of fact, resolve its complexities quite so easily. It is not just the way that Catherine immediately qualifies what she has learned, and refuses to extend her generalizations beyond 'the central part of England' (p. 200), for that could be said to be no more than a display of the kind of caution that shows that the lesson has been learned. But while the way she immediately sees through Isabella's letter (p. 218) might suggest an advance in her understanding, it is one that is all but forced upon her by the fact that she already knows James's side of the story. And there is the moment when Catherine, having resisted all the Gothic blandishments of a stormy night, a late, noisy and unexpected arrival at the Abbey, and mysterious noises outside her bedroom door (pp. 222-3), finds that Eleanor has come to tell her that she must precipitously leave the Abbey, in what looks like the best Gothic tradition. There have always been those who find the General's behaviour merely improbable, and one response to this view has been the suggestion that this is an intrusion of the Gothic as it might actually be found in real social life: that way we can say that though Catherine was wrong to think that he had murdered his wife, she had actually fastened on to something ugly in his nature. But this will not quite do, since her ideas about him are based only subliminally on what could have been

the useful evidence of the discomfort she feels in his presence, despite his ponderous courtesy, a discomfort which seems also to be felt by his children; and her thoughts derive much more from nonsensical pseudo-literary speculations about the General's relationship with his wife ('He did not love her walk:—could he therefore have loved her?', p. 180). Equally, it is possible to argue that the General exhibits no more than the social vice - about which there is nothing especially Gothic - of rudeness. If we believe that he is the dupe of John Thorpe, then the General will regard Catherine, such is the irony, as a kind of Isabella (p. 246); and given that he is irascible and forceful, his treatment of Catherine could almost be said to be reasonable. But then, whether we opt for Gothic nastiness, or mere rudeness, either interpretation is a little strained, on its own.¹⁸ And, there is Catherine's solitary journey home which, since she copes, could be said to point to her newly-acquired maturity, except that she seems too stunned by the suddenness of her departure, to worry about its consequences (p. 230), and the thing seems to point as much to the ordinariness of the everyday, or even to be an

¹⁸Maria Edgeworth, in a letter of 21 February 1818, found the General's behaviour 'quite outrageously out of drawing and out of nature' (Frances Anne Edgeworth: A Memoir of Maria Edgeworth, 1867, II p. 5). Lionel Trilling has argued for Gothic possibilities in real life (Sincerity and Authenticity, 1972, p. 77). Marilyn Butler is one of the few to assert that the General is merely rude (1975, pp. 178-9).

opportunity for the narrator, while seeming to apologise for the unnovelistic nature of the event, to be making jokes about a 'heroine in a hack post-chaise' (p. 232).

And so the matter of the exact change in Catherine finally evades us and comes to be something that we can merely speculate about, something that is still to be negotiated with a future that is outside the pages of this novel. The novel has examined ways of understanding the world, and the links between these ways as they exist in fiction and in reality, but it will not resolve itself into a too-easy aphorism about moral or psychological or social development that Catherine's progress could be said to demonstrate, and the reader who needs such a thing must devise his own. So too, this novel about an ordinary unheroinely heroine, ends, fully in the spirit of the opening pages, with the narrator deliberately reminding us that this is, itself, a novel, shaped by art, rather than necessarily determined by reality, and there is a resolution of the difficulties of heroine and hero that is so contrived as to be a joke about the clumsy unreality and the necessity of endings in fiction. After which, the novel concludes by way of claiming a 'perfect' future happiness for the participants that can have no more actual significance, than the terms of the spurious debate about what it is this novel can be said to 'recommend', that is initiated in the closing words of the novel's last sentence.

CHAPTER TWO

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

At my time of life opinions are tolerably fixed. It is not likely that I should now see or hear anything to change them. - Marianne Dashwood on first attachments

After Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility presents itself as a very different enterprise, but many of the differences are no more than can be expected when any novelist moves from one work to another. Though there are fleeting similarities between Catherine Morland and Marianne Dashwood, for instance, they also represent very different ways of being seventeen: and yet, the significance of each, in their respective novels, can also be informed by the existence of the other. Similarly, of the two novels, Sense and Sensibility is much less obviously comic - some would say that it actually lapses into tedious solemnity - but this too does not make the difference strange: it is one of the more surely founded notions about the composition of the six novels, that Jane Austen liked to have contrasting projects simultaneously in hand, and if we start with Northanger Abbey and then consider the other novels as they were published, there is an unmistakable alternation between what could be called the 'cheerful' and the 'serious'.¹

¹In fact, for Sense and Sensibility, Jane Austen would have had not only Northanger Abbey and also Pride and Prejudice somewhere in her mind for almost all of the fifteen or so years between first drafting and publication: Mansfield Park

The significant difference between the novels is that Sense and Sensibility seems to abandon, entirely, the playing with different kinds of novel which makes for the entertaining and puzzling diversity of possibility contained in Northanger Abbey. Instead it appears to declare itself to be singly, straightforwardly, conventionally, a particular kind of novel; one that offers its readers a much more passive engagement, an engagement in which, rather than being invited to take part in an exploration, we will have something demonstrated to us. Our opinions, like Marianne's, will soon be 'tolerably fixed': unlike hers, they will remain so. Thus there is what strikes so many readers as an unyieldingly schematic antithesis, declared in the title, and made rather too obviously explicit in the persons of the two sisters at the centre of the novel. Nor is it that the novel even seems to make much use of the dynamics inherent in the antithesis, since it is concerned always to show the superiority of Elinor's Augustan sense over Marianne's Romantic sensibility. It is Marianne who learns the so-obvious lesson, and in doing so, becomes distinctly more like her sister. Indeed, no other Jane Austen heroine makes a more thoroughly detailed (or, for that matter, explicitly Christian) act of repentance

was begun about nine months before Sense and Sensibility came out. See Cassandra Austen's Memorandum (Minor Works, facing p. 242): she records that Sense and Sensibility was 'begun Nov. 1797'; J.E. Austen-Leigh claimed that an even earlier version existed (Memoir, 1870, p. 49). The novel as we know it was published towards the end of 1811 (Sense and Sensibility, p. xiii).

and confession (pp. 264-5, 344-52). Inevitably, many have asked whether, for all her sense, Elinor is not dull, or too easily conforming; whether or not Marianne's sensibility is too quickly undermined, and its capacities overlooked: whether in short the novel is just unengaging, the laboured working of a mechanism that achieves a much more competent and convincing blend in Pride and Prejudice.²

What is more, this rather insistent tracing of a pattern is to be found with almost every person, object and event in the novel. So Edward and Willoughby are very neatly balanced in their links with the sisters, and their very different temperaments embody once again the distinction between sense and sensibility. Equally, their situations are bluntly and consistently matched, right down to the fact that both depend for their fortunes on the whim of an elderly and irascible female relative. And, as with the sisters, the preference that we cannot escape making, however unsatisfactorily, must be for the honourable if confused Edward, rather than the charming and selfish Willoughby. Even the smallest details echo and reinforce the similarity and the contrast, so there are, for example, two incidents involving locks of hair, and

²These are of course much stated criticisms of the novel. Mary Lascelles (1939, p. 157-9) sees the characters standing 'formally grouped as for a dance', and suggests that the plan is 'a little stiff'. Alan D. McKillop ('The context of Sense and Sensibility', 1957, pp. 67-9) compares the novel very unfavourably with Pride and Prejudice. A. Walton Litz (1965, pp. 72-4) notes that the 'rigid antithetical form' is 'never escaped from'.

each time the sisters draw reasonable but mistaken conclusions. Willoughby acquires a lock of Marianne's hair, but this is not, as she and Elinor assume, a binding token of his love, a symbol of the unstated engagement (p. 60). Edward has a lock of hair set in a ring; Elinor does not know how he acquired it, but she and Marianne both conclude that it is hers and take it as a proof of his love: in fact the hair is Lucy Steele's (pp. 98-9, 135).³

But then such careful thoroughness might make us begin to ask if the practice is really no more than mechanical; even if, though obviously contrived, it is not sometimes effective and subtle. And further reflection should teach us that it is only on the most superficial level that the novel functions as a simple antithesis, for Elinor and against Marianne. If we consider Marianne's attitudes and actions, only the most devotedly ingenuous defender of Romantic practices would find her hectic and uncritical insistence on her own feelings to be wholly admirable; would not immediately see, when she lists the attributes she expects in a lover (pp. 17-18), or when her response to what she understands to be no more than a temporary parting from Willoughby is strained to the utmost heights of excess (p. 83), that she must grow in maturity and curb this dangerous abuse of feeling. After all, it is because of this abuse that she is

³W.A. Craik (Jane Austen: The Six Novels, 1965, pp. 52-5) is one of the critics who has drawn out something of the fullness of these patterns in the novel.

quite defenceless against the debased and opportunistic sense pretending to be sensibility that, by his own admission, is Willoughby (pp. 319-30). The point is surely so obvious that it can hardly be said to constitute a 'lesson' that Jane Austen would impart to the reader, and beyond this point it is very difficult to see the novel as being didactic in any straightforward way. The account of 'sense' and of 'sensibility' offered by the novel, is frequently put by its characters in terms of the defining and pursuing of happiness, and we might feel strongly reminded of Johnson's Rasselas: but Sense and Sensibility offers no ordered and progressive analysis, designed to lead characters and readers alike through the stages of an abstract argument that tests a sequence of propositions. Equally, Jane Austen's novel is not, like Hannah More's Coelebs in Search of a Wife (1808), a sermon masquerading as a novel, in which a particular version of Christian life is exemplified, and deviations from this version are animadverted upon. Even the example of Richardson's instructive moral debates can be considered only with marked circumspection, as tending rather too decisively to particular conclusions than Jane Austen seems to envisage.⁴

⁴Specific sources for Sense and Sensibility have been suggested among contemporary didactic novelists. J.M.S Tompkins ('Elinor and Marianne: a note on Jane Austen', 1940, pp. 33-43) has argued that Jane West's A Gossip's Story is the primary influence: McKillop (1957, pp. 65-8) and Moler (1968, pp. 46-58) argue that there are several sources. But such sources can only be of minor and local relevance to the novel, unless we assume that didactically and artistically it is as straightforward as these 'sources'.

Because, once we recognise the point about the extremity of Marianne, it is hard to perceive the workings of an antithesis, even a very complicated one, through the whole of the novel. Some critics still insist (unconvincingly, it must be said) that the novel is no more than a piece of didacticism that relentlessly separates the admirable sense from the dangerous sensibility, but there has long been a trend, gradually growing in confidence, that recognises the ideas of the title as pointing as much to a synthesis as they do to an antithesis.⁵ The case has probably been most fully stated by Ruth apRoberts ('Sense and Sensibility, or growing up dichotomous', 1975, pp. 351-65). For her the novel works thus:

Historically, it appears to use and to criticise the abstract intellection of the Enlightenment, and at the same time anticipates the novelistic realism of the nineteenth century. Austen would have us beat our dichotomies into pluralities, as more closely adapted to what will be felt to be the variety of reality, the relativistic view of life. When she departs from simple antithesis into the triplet, I think she moves significantly closer to relativism.

(p. 357)

⁵The movement towards a combination as well as a distinction goes back at least to the tentative beginnings offered by Andrew Wright (1953, pp. 40-1), and since then it has been gradually but steadily advancing: see for instance Joseph Wiesenfarth, The Errand of Form, 1967, pp. 52-5, and Lloyd Brown, 1973, pp. 22-3. Marilyn Butler (1975, pp. 190-1, 194-6) rejects any notion of a combination. With a distinct liking for the circular argument, she claims that the novel is characteristically anti-jacobin, a typical product of a conservative mind, in its relentless attack on sensibility - often nothing but 'sentimental (or revolutionary) idealism'.

And she argues that Jane Austen 'takes her contraries or antitheses not as ends, but as means, to a kind of progression or education' (p. 355). But even this is not so much a decisive move beyond the limitations of the antithetical mode, but rather a view of the novel as an elaborated and modified series of antitheses, tightly argued and sharply juxtaposed; she also writes of the 'mathematical kind of thoroughness in the way Austen wrings each aspect of the irony from the dialogue' (p. 361). And this never allows her to respond to the subtlety and flexibility that is actually to be found in the novel: in short, though seeking nineteenth century contents, the argument has much more to do with the complicated and distinctly eighteenth century machinery by which we are to suppose that it functions.

But it is as easy to go too far in the other direction, and underemphasise the eighteenth century elements in the novel. Tony Tanner ('Introduction' to Sense and Sensibility, 1969, pp. 7-9) has noted how widespread was the use of antithesis, in the poetry and prose of the eighteenth century, and he also records some of the limitations of the technique, because of its tendency to 'produce polarized abstractions, the confrontation of stereotypes, and the automatic opposition of extremes'. But, he insists, Sense and Sensibility does not quite work in this way: 'Marianne has plenty of sense and Elinor is by no means devoid of sensibility'. And he makes some large and impressive claims for the

novel's nineteenth century-ness, in its preoccupation with 'secrecy and sickness', and the 'tensions between the potential instability of the individual and the required stabilities of society'. But in thus rejecting the conception of the novel as 'an eighteenth-century matrix containing ... the embryo of a nineteenth-century novel which struggles but fails to be born', Tanner is able to pay little more than cursory attention to the 'eighteenth century matrix'.

And, in point of fact, it should not actually be necessary for Tanner to insist that there is a mixture of sense and sensibility in both the sisters: this is not the conclusion toward which the novel moves, but the point from which, explicitly, it departs (p. 6). The same thing happens throughout the novel: when antitheses are stated or implied, they mark what is no more than the beginning in an argument that then moves beyond the confines of the antitheses. It is as though Jane Austen assumes that the reader already knows the workings of the argument by antithesis, as a method for contrasting and defining ideas, and can at least begin to see beyond this stage, to the point where the ideas are actively integrated again, as 'working' abstractions. So the novel becomes a complex debate that ranges over a territory in which the two most prominent features, connected and yet separate, have been identified as 'sense' and 'sensibility'; features which have to be seen not only in themselves and as they relate, but also in terms of notions of morality and economics and aesthetics; of individual psychology, and the

requirements of family and society. What we are presented with is a succession of more and less coherent statements and disputes about the nature of the world of the novel, in terms of these ideas. And while the successive adjustments make for some resolution, this is never complete.

Unlike Northanger Abbey, then, where the space between novel and reader is consistently mediated by questions about the novel, as a novel, and by contrasting fictional possibilities, Sense and Sensibility cuts straight across this area for doubt and exploration, and presents itself singly and singularly as a particular novel. There are elements of parody and satire that might remind us of Northanger Abbey: when Willoughby so dramatically enters the novel, and Marianne immediately discovers that his 'person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story' (p. 43), we have both in this glance at the source for at least some of Marianne's ideas, but that is of little more than passing interest in this novel, and the focus is much more on the ideas as Marianne applies them; how this contrasts with the usage of others. In this way, though this novel is much less self-conscious about itself, as a novel, it does not actually reveal its significance to the reader any more straightforwardly. We find ourselves continually being offered the opportunity of adopting revisions of the argument, and its terms, only to find that the revisions have themselves to be adjusted and changed, from the simplest antithetical distinction to the most elaborate combination of unity and

opposition. To arrive at a reading which could, at least for practical purposes be called final, is to arrive at a position where the earlier versions are in perspective, and where we can be said to have a much surer grasp of the questions it posed; it is not to have reached a solution, in the way that one could be said to have solved a mathematical equation. Thus though this novel does not make the kind of appeal for a negative capability in the reader that is to be found in Northanger Abbey, it is still an appeal for negative capability.

And the opening of the novel is no less telling than Northanger Abbey, though much less obviously, in revealing the characteristics of its own distinctive voice, its way of engaging and also of confounding our interest. No other Jane Austen novel opens so quietly and unironically, or proceeds with such seeming directness of purpose, to an unadornedly biographical account of the background to the novel: all the other novels open by offering the reader the chance to look askance, even before we can begin to know what it is that we are looking at. And where, in the first paragraphs of Sense and Sensibility, the orderly surface of the narration is broken by an irony, the effect tends to be localised: old Mr Dashwood's will, 'like almost every other will, gave as much disappointment as pleasure'. But before we conclude that this novel is simply untypical of Jane Austen, in its calm outlining of an instructive argument, we should look again at these opening sentences. For there are, in fact,

hidden in these placid-seeming utterances, a series of pervasive ironies that are no less telling because they are to such an unusual degree concealed; often, indeed, the effect can only be properly perceived retrospectively. The example of Fielding's Amelia is useful here. The reader who approaches it after Joseph Andrews or Tom Jones is likely to be struck by a significant change in tone. Most noticeably, Fielding's narrator is much less in evidence, and much more subdued when a felt presence. It is not that the novel is without paradoxes and ironies, but that these are often presented directly and without much intermediate commentary. Even the first chapter, though it is given over entirely to the narrator, as is usual in a Fielding novel, has nothing like the boistrous satirising of Richardson and Colley Cibber, which is the source of so much of the directing energy at the start of Joseph Andrews; and there is nothing of the obvious and deliberate playing with the reader's expectations, as in Tom Jones. Instead we seem to be embarking on a simple and unambiguous narrative enterprise. Consider the first sentence: 'The various accidents which befel a very worthy couple after their uniting in the state of matrimony will be the subject of the following history'. It is tempting to follow this quiet statement, to the succeeding revelation that the couple's distresses were 'exquisite' and the causes 'extraordinary', and then the general reflection that 'Fortune' is often too easily blamed for what is the consequence of purely human

strengths and weaknesses, and on into the novel. But a number of uncertainties have already been quietly introduced: if 'Fortune' is not to be blamed for their misfortunes, then must we seek for the weaknesses of this 'very worthy couple'? And once we know the couple better, another kind of doubt is felt, since worthiness is to be rather unequally found in them. Amelia's merits might strike the modern reader as being too passive, but cannot be doubted in any other respect.⁶ But her husband is recklessly unthinking: and though it soon becomes apparent that their unhappiness can very easily be explained by the viciousness and greed of other people, we have also to consider how much it is precipitated by these impetuosities. Fielding's narrator is less obtrusive therefore, but not actually more direct.

Something similar is happening in Sense and Sensibility. Hardly are we told of the Dashwood family, and their long and secure establishment at Norland, the centre of a large estate in Sussex, than we find that the Dashwoods in whom we are principally interested are being denied this heritage; and before the novel has advanced twenty-five pages, they are transported to the relative penury and confinement of a cottage in Devonshire; for the rest of the novel Norland is little more than a fond memory. Then, if we look back at the

⁶Despite Johnson's celebrated dislike of Tom Jones and his liking of Clarissa, he was said to prefer Amelia even to Clarissa as a literary example of female virtue (Hester Lynch Piozzi: Anecdotes of Dr Johnson, p. 134).

brief account of old Mr Dashwood, and his dealings with his nephew, on the first page, we will find more to doubt where at first there seemed certainty. In its beginnings, it is little enough.

The constant attention of Mr and Mrs Henry Dashwood to his wishes, which proceeded not merely from interest, but from goodness of heart, gave him every degree of solid comfort which his age could receive; and the cheerfulness of the children added a relish to his existence.

But, rather than denying it, this concedes that there is 'interest' in the Henry Dashwood's ministrations. It is, admittedly, 'interest' of the most allowable and honourable kind: theirs is undoubtedly an affectionate concern, and Henry Dashwood, the natural heir, desires the estate principally for the security it would bring to his wife and daughters. Still, there is 'interest', and it is just this 'interest' that is thwarted by the reading of the will. And questions of money and property loom unusually large in this novel, constantly being debated, analysed and schemed over, and constantly seen in terms of 'interest', 'competence' and 'independence', of 'will' and 'duty'. Henry Dashwood's honourable 'interest' is at one end of a line of graded contrasts that takes in every character in the novel, and has at the other end the appropriately paired figures of Mrs Ferrars and Lucy Steele.

And there is yet another kind of doubt being subtly engendered. The narrator seems to be impartially getting on

with the business of setting out the background; but after the admission of 'interest', there is a shift, unobtrusively, away from impartiality and towards a thorough championing of Henry Dashwood's case. To argue that because John Dashwood is rich in his own right, and richer still by his wife's, 'the succession to the Norland estate was not really so important as to his sisters' is to claim what in absolute terms is no more than reasonable: but it is also the view that his father, with a less than absolute detachment, must take, and it is a view which is almost entirely contrary to that of John Dashwood himself, as his famous debate with his wife, in the second chapter, indicates. And what of old Mr Dashwood's will? Its contents are described in an even more partisan way, almost suggesting that the narrator is endorsing, uncritically, the opinions of Henry Dashwood. The old man, though not quite 'unjust', still ignored what in fairness was due to his niece and her daughters, both because of their constant affectionate 'attention' and because of their needs, and thus did not follow the dictates of true affection. But this begins to suggest that affection can actually be measured by some monetary standard, and that brings Mrs Ferrars uncomfortably to mind again because she carries this argument to its logical conclusion. At the same time, this explanation seems to vie with another, also apparently but not explicitly the property of Henry Dashwood, also apparently but not explicitly endorsed by the narrator, to the effect that the principle of affection was not too much in abeyance

in the old man, but had become debased into a senile doting, not unlikely in someone of 'very advanced age', on the occasionally visiting son of John Dashwood. But there is irony after all, and of more than one kind, in the novel's opening sentence: the most likely explanation of the will lies in the principle of primogeniture, the principle that must have made for the conditions by which the 'family of Dashwood had been long settled in Sussex', and which makes the hold of Mrs Dashwood and her daughters on the estate a slender one.

These possibilities are held only momentarily before us. The fourth paragraph shows the 'cheerful and sanguine' Henry Dashwood hoping that time and large profits from the estate will improve his fortune. And we can hardly accustom ourselves to this pleasing opportunity, before it is peremptorily removed by the fact of his death; and the question of his daughters' fortunes is left in the hands of John Dashwood, a man who 'had not the strong feelings of the rest of the family'. But the antithesis this implies, begins to soften and change as soon as it is made. John Dashwood is 'not an ill-disposed young man', but then this muted praise is weakened by the fact that he is 'rather cold hearted, and rather selfish'; that in turn is balanced to some extent by the statement that 'he conducted himself with propriety in the discharge of his ordinary duties': and in the end it is his wife, that 'strong caricature of himself' who most determines the exact scope of his nature. Yet even when they seem together to be

most obviously at their worst, as when she argues him out of doing anything for his sisters, and he is much too ready to be convinced, they cannot simply be read as cyphers on a chart of antithesis. Rather, they come to embody slightly different combinations of corrupted sense and debilitated sensibility. Nor can we even assume, necessarily, that the result is uniformly unpleasant; Marianne herself eventually concedes that her brother and his wife may be 'not entirely without merit' (p. 372).

At the same time, the 'strong feelings' which he does not possess, and which are to be found in his step-mother and her daughters, are themselves never regarded as an unquestionable merit, are in fact under close and critical scrutiny within a page, when the unfeeling assertiveness of Mrs John Dashwood tempts her mother-in-law to a response that, though understandable, is also extreme and rigid; for 'in her mind there was a sense of honour so keen, a generosity so romantic, that any offense of the kind, by whomsoever given or received, was to her the source of immoveable disgust'. It is Elinor who restrains her mother, and this leads naturally to the statement about the mixtures of sense and sensibility in the sisters: Elinor, with the remarkable 'strength of understanding, and coolness of judgement', and the markedly 'strong' feelings which 'she knew how to govern', while Marianne is 'sensible and clever; but eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation'. It is as though the

abstract distinctions have already been made, and we must now see what happens to these abstractions, in differing combinations, and in practice.

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But in order properly to appreciate the blending of the ideas of sense and sensibility offered by Jane Austen, we need to know a little more about their context. Most obviously perhaps, they connote the distinction between Augustan and Romantic modes of thought, not of course as a crude and absolute contrast, but rather as showing two complex and different, but related, ways of seeing the world. Nor is it that we can see the distinction primarily as a chronological one, as between conceptions that were dominant at the end of the seventeenth, and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries: rather that the combinations and differences themselves existed and developed throughout the eighteenth century. It is, for example, as much a matter of connecting and distinguishing between Wordsworth and Pope, as it is between Locke and Shaftesbury, or Johnson and Rousseau.

That, though it may begin to suggest some of the complications of the topic, is not to embark upon a complete account of the origins and development of eighteenth century thought. We can begin to form a useful idea of where Jane Austen's novel stands in relation to the difficult history of these concepts, as they combined as much as they existed separately

and in opposition, if we focus briefly on the concept of 'Taste'. Inevitably it is a meeting point for sense and sensibility as concepts, often it is a battleground. And the concept is an important one in all Jane Austen's novels: one remembers the question of Catherine Morland's 'great deal of natural taste', on Beechen Cliff and elsewhere; in the later novels, it is probably Persuasion that treats the concept most sustainedly. In Sense and Sensibility it is a key term, for Elinor and for Marianne in themselves, in their dealings with each other, and with Edward, Willoughby and Colonel Brandon. Indeed almost everyone in the novel is judged, at least at some point, in terms of 'Taste', and often it is the particular conception of 'Taste' underlying the judgement, as much as the judgement itself that is interesting. Examining 'Taste' in this way will not mean, of course, that we touch every slightest nuance of 'sense' and 'sensibility' recorded in the novel, but it will mean that we can grasp the ideas both as they function in the novel and as they exist in the context outside its covers.⁷

⁷As Walter Jackson Bate, for example, has shown (From Classic to Romantic, 1946, pp. 7, 160), neo-Classical assumptions at the start of the eighteenth century that Taste was concerned with the apprehension of universals in terms of reasoned judgement, had given way, by the end of the century, to the notion of Taste as an individual emotional response. The question of Jane Austen and Taste has not hitherto been satisfactorily treated. Lloyd Brown (1973, pp. 28-30) suggests a connection between Jane Austen and Burke, but fails to provide any context either in terms of Burke's own arguments, or as they link with those of others. Martin Price notes, but only in passing, that Jane Austen stresses the moral element in Taste ('The picturesque moment', 1965, p. 268). And Hermione Lee expands on Price's point, but in a distinctly

One useful starting point for a consideration of Jane Austen and 'Taste' is to be found in two essays on the subject by David Hume. There is no evidence that she actually read them, though a filtered version of their contents would doubtless have reached her; in any event, their relevance here is not as sources, but as a useful analogy in terms of means and conclusions. Hume's first essay, 'Of delicacy of taste and passion' (1741, pp. 25-8), argues that this extra-sensitivity 'enlarges the sphere both of our happiness and misery'. He insists that of the two delicacies, the former is as desirable as the latter is not. 'The good or ill accidents of life are very little at our disposal; but we are pretty much masters what books we shall read, what diversions we shall partake of, and what company we shall keep'. He goes on to suggest that delicacy of taste will actually moderate a delicacy of passion, or at least that it 'improves our sensibility for all the tender and agreeable passions; at the same time that it renders the mind incapable of the rougher and more boistrous emotions'. Delicacy of taste is,

unhelpful way, since she suggests that Shaftesbury was influenced by Hume (he died when Hume was two years old), and then misdates both Hume's essay 'Of the standard of taste' and Burke's 'On taste', though not by a sufficient degree to explain the error over Shaftesbury. She assumes a simple line of development between Hume and Burke where there is actually a complex reaction (see p. 90n, below). And she points to the links that Archibald Alison made between Taste and morality, without acknowledging that the thing that most informs his linking of it with morality, is that he saw Taste as an emotion (see p. 91 below). "'Taste" and "tenderness" as moral values in the novels of Jane Austen', 1976, pp. 82-5.

for him, as much a matter of 'strong sense' as it is of 'sensibility of temper'; and 'temper' can be improved by studying the beauties of 'poetry, eloquence, music, or painting. They give a certain elegance of sentiment to which the rest of mankind are strangers'. By way of concluding, he notes that a delicacy of taste must make one more discriminating about other people. In almost all of this, Hume could be said to be speaking for Elinor Dashwood; just as, at almost every point Marianne Dashwood contradicts him, either by her stated principles, or the effects of its practice. The only point on which Sense and Sensibility, as a whole, is at odds with Hume's speculations, and here it is inclined to be more pessimistic, is on the question of the degree of choice open to the individual, in the matter of tasteful pursuits, and then in the necessary efficacy of these pursuits. It is significant that it is of Elinor that we are told - and the phrasing is telling - that her 'mind was inevitably at liberty; her thoughts could not be chained elsewhere' (p. 105), and, despite the elegant and available occupations of reading and drawing, she cannot resist musings that are sometimes sad, sometimes fretful, sometimes pointless.

Hume's later essay, 'Of the standard of taste' (1757, pp. 3-24), is even more relevant. Here Hume enters fully into the difficulties of the concept. First and most obviously there is the 'great variety of Taste' that exists: there are, he says, general aesthetic or moral principles which can be stated with general assent, but particular instances will

be a matter of individual variation and preference. Yet he claims that it is 'natural' to seek a standard of Taste, and that there are some distinctions which hold generally; similarly that though the 'rules of composition' cannot be stated with a mathematical accuracy, it is still possible to establish some general propositions. He argues that time is the best test of an object's value, since time will expose it to the Taste of many: for the individual, the exercise of Taste can very easily be rendered false, since it requires a 'perfect serenity of mind, a recollection of thought, a due attention to the object'; a 'delicacy of imagination' in order to 'convey a sensibility of those finer emotions', and a 'delicacy of taste' if we are to perceive every detail and measure every proportion. He insists on the importance of 'practice in a particular art, and frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty'; that several perusals are necessary in the examination of any one object; that the observer's mind should be equipped to make comparisons, that he should be free from prejudice, and that he must seek to establish the 'point of view' from which it is best and fairest to examine the object. Finally, he requires a 'good sense' in the observer, in order to detect prejudice in the self, to estimate the purpose of the object, and the degree to which the purpose is fulfilled, to test the 'chain of propositions and reasonings' of which every work consists. It is hardly surprising that he comes to the conclusion that few individuals, if any, can satisfy on all or most of these

points, since

though the principles of taste be universal, and nearly, if not entirely, the same in all men; yet few are qualified to give judgement on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty. The organs of internal sensation are seldom so perfect as to allow the general principles their full play, and produce a feeling correspondent to those principles.

And these are very close to the standards, and the difficulties, marked out by the dramatised debate between the sisters in Sense and Sensibility. Hume and Jane Austen are not, of course, embarking on exactly the same enterprise: Hume argues for at least the theoretical possibility of a universal principle, which is probably more than Jane Austen actually commits herself to; Hume offers a comprehensive account of a general concept, while Jane Austen considers how aspects of the concept are likely to occur in particular sets of circumstances. But they are at one in resisting the temptation to seek a partisan and over-simplifying theory, in trying to thoroughly survey the difficulties and confusions which the concept engenders in practice.

The similarities in their approaches are the more marked when we consider how pervasive was the tendency to reduce the problem to a too-easy theory. In 1759, for example, two years after Hume's later essay was published, Edmund Burke brought out a second edition of his Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, and he added an introductory essay 'On Taste' (pp. 11-27), at least partly,

it would seem, in response to Hume.⁸ Burke argues that 'the standard both of reason and Taste is the same in all human creatures', and for him what is usually called a 'difference in Taste' is actually a 'difference in knowledge'. The differences that he will allow for are only of 'degree' in 'natural sensibility', or 'from a closer or longer attention to the object'. Thus Taste, though not, he allows, itself a 'simple idea', can quite quickly be reduced to a formula:
Taste is

partly made up of a perception of the primary pleasures of sense, of the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusions of the reasoning faculty, concerning the various relations of these, and concerning the human passions, manners and actions.

At which point he re-iterates Lockean principles, and declares that since all is founded in sensory perception, this is ultimately the basis for a general standard of taste: deviations from this standard are no more than individual limitations in 'sensibility', or 'errors' in judgement.

Similarly, when Joshua Reynolds devoted his seventh Discourse (1776, I, p. 127-61) to the question of Taste, he too rejected the idea that it was simply 'intuitive', he too looked for a Lockean model: what is essential, he said, is

⁸For a full account of the background to Burke's 'On Taste', and its connection with Hume, see J. T. Boulton's Introduction (1958, pp. xxvii-xxxix) to his edition of the Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful.

the 'knowledge of what is truly nature', and this as a 'general idea', rather than as individual and imperfect instances, which are merely 'capricious'. Taste, he stipulated, has to be 'cultivated', and must 'on every occasion' be founded on reason.

But others were much less decisively in favour of reason and a universal standard, much more ready to push the claims of feeling. Hugh Blair - whom Henry Tilney was fond of quoting - turns Burke's formula inside-out in his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783, I, pp. 15-33). For him, Taste is 'ultimately founded on a certain natural and instinctive sensibility to beauty', though he also conceded that reason 'assists Taste in many of its operations, and serves to enlarge its power'. Likewise he also allowed that a 'good heart' and the possession of 'the virtuous affections' are also necessary adjuncts: but in the end, he claimed that the only real standards are the 'concurring sentiments of men', and that in matters of Taste, 'reasonings appeal always, in the last resort, to feeling'. Others went even further in connecting Taste with feelings: Archibald Alison's Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste (1790, pp. vii-xiii) actually treats Taste simply as an emotion, his object being to establish how its functions differ from 'every other Emotion of Pleasure'.⁹

⁹Later still, Wordsworth, in his Preface to the second edition of the Lyrical Ballads (1800) scorned the merely trivializing notion of 'a taste for Poetry ... as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or

Inevitably, the debate about Taste made itself felt in the developing notions of the picturesque. William Gilpin propounds his set of rules, in Essays on Picturesque Beauty (1792), and then begins to justify them in terms of a conception of Taste, but soon rather airily abandons the attempt on the grounds that there are already too many theories for a satisfactory result (pp. 30-3). Henry Austen's 'Biographical Notice' assures us that his sister was at a 'very early age ... enamoured of Gilpin on the Picturesque' (p. 7), and we can assume that so too was her Marianne Dashwood: it need not be the case that either acquired too much of his irresponsibility in the face of matters theoretical. Later practitioners and theorists who followed Gilpin, or reacted against him, were also participating, often more actively than Gilpin, in the argument about Taste. Humphry Repton, copied by Henry Crawford in Mansfield Park, tended to favour a wholesale revising (or 'improving') of nature to render it properly picturesque: Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight aimed, not always quite in the same way, at a more moderate compromise between natural and picturesque forms, a combination of 'beauty and utility', along the lines

Frontiniac or Sherry' (Poetical Works, p. 737), but then went on to echo Reynolds approvingly, in stating that 'an accurate taste in poetry, and in all other arts ... is an acquired talent, which can only be produced by thought and a long-continued intercourse with the best models of composition' (p. 741). Yet Blake, in his 'Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynold's Discourses' (about 1808) specifically denied Reynold's central argument about Taste, asserting that 'Taste & Genius are Not Teachable or Acquirable, but are born with us' (Complete Writings, p. 474).

advocated by Edward Ferrars in Sense and Sensibility, or Elizabeth Bennet in her first response to Pemberley in Pride and Prejudice, or Fanny and Edmund in Mansfield Park. Yet, and it is a warning against any too hasty simplification of the debate, or categorising of the participants, it is Repton who is decidedly on the side of Taste as founded principally on reason, and Knight who sees it as based almost entirely on 'feeling and sentiment'.¹⁰

In the midst of this rush to take sides on different aspects of this complex debate, therefore, Jane Austen clearly stands for something rather different. For her, it is not, finally, a matter of asserting that Taste is founded, entirely or in some relative way, on reason; entirely or in some relative way on feeling: what she suggests to her readers is the possibility that reason and feeling must be held to equally and simultaneously. And this does not mean that, as a concept, Taste has been made, as it were, to disappear,

¹⁰Gilpin also claimed, interestingly, that though a link between Taste and morality is desirable, it is not necessary or even particularly likely (1792, p. 47). For an account of the differences of opinion between Gilpin, Repton, Knight and Price, see the exchange of letters included in Price's Essays on the Picturesque (1794-8, III, pp. 3-180). For Repton on Taste see Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, 1803, p. 123: for Knight see An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste, 1805, p. 256. Marilyn Butler (Peacock Displayed, 1979, pp. 30-7) provides an outline for the controversy, and she also notes the parallel with Mansfield Park; she does not, though, find a wholly satisfactory explanation for the paradoxical linking of the 'radical' Knight with the 'conservative' Fanny Price (Butler's labels). It must also be said that the argument was not wholly new: see Pope's plea that 'Nature never be forgot' (Moral Essays, IV, lines 39-70).

that it is really no more than the expression of a happy blend and contrast of sensibility and sense. Taste becomes one of the significant expressions of an unending struggle, one that does not only denote the always-felt tension between sense and sensibility, or even this tension as it is given dramatic meaning in terms of the harmony and discord between the needs of the individual and the needs of the society. Taste is also to be perceived as the perpetual attempts by individuals, more or less successfully to balance the risks of a response, to the world or one of its features, that is personal to the point that it is inanely idiosyncratic, with those of a merely secondhand effusion: to find a middle ground between the declarations of a sluggishly reasoned piece of indulgence, and the sterilities of a too merely reasoned abstraction. What the novel offers, in a sense, is a sequence of such attempts.

.....

It remains to consider how in the course of the novel this way of treating with these concepts is, as it were, fictionalised from page to page, how it offers itself to the reader's attention through the length of the novel. Certain technical difficulties soon become obvious, because even if we move beyond the elementary proposition that Elinor is 'right' and Marianne 'wrong', the way that the novel is focussed so centrally on two such obviously contrasted

protagonists puts it in danger of coming down too readily on one side of the argument; of offering no more than a fixed adjustment, not a continually changing and blending process. And many readers continue to feel inclined to opt for one or other of the sisters, often while blaming the novel for not making them feel more comfortable in this posture. Even the most articulate and sensitive accounts of the novel tend to some kind of bias: Stuart M. Tave, for example (Some Words of Jane Austen, 1973, pp. 96-8), insists that the novel is Elinor's; while Tony Tanner, though he writes convincingly of 'the loving tension' (1969, p. 27) between the sisters, still writes more, and more convincingly about Marianne than he does about Elinor. This may be saying no more than that the terms in which the novel deals are such that perhaps every reader, though adjusting his thoughts, will in the end take up his own position in the debate: but the question is not so much about the bias or the conclusions of particular readers, it is whether the novel fulfils its promise to openness sufficiently, or whether, itself, it becomes one-sided, or at least that its different sides remain unsatisfactorily incompatible.

One of the difficulties in the way of seeing the sisters equally lies in the way that Elinor, without ever doing it as obviously or self-consciously as Henry Tilney does in Northanger Abbey, is very often fulfilling the narrator's function. And in some respects this difference compounds the problem with Elinor because it is also much less obvious,

than with Henry Tilney, that she is herself subject to the narrator's irony. Consider her assessment of Mr Palmer, soon after she first meets him.

Elinor was not inclined, after a little observation, to give him credit for being so genuinely and unaffectedly ill-natured or ill-bred as he wished to appear. His temper might perhaps be a little soured by finding, like many others of his sex, that through some unaccountable bias in favour of beauty, he was the husband of a very silly woman,—but she knew that this kind of blunder was too common for any sensible man to be lastingly hurt by it.—It was rather a wish of distinction she believed, which produced his contemptuous treatment of every body, and his general abuse of every thing before him. It was the desire of appearing superior to other people. The motive was too common to be wondered at; but the means, however they might succeed by establishing his superiority in ill-breeding, were not likely to attach any one to him except his wife.

(p. 112)

This account remains wholly within Elinor's consciousness; and it is later modified, both by her better understanding of her subject, and by the changes in his behaviour, in London (p. 279) and then afterwards at Cleveland (pp. 304-5). But it is a judgement functioning very similarly to the narrator's, moving as it does from the simple contrast between Mr Palmer and his wife to a much fuller and subtler account of the man; indeed, using methods and terms of analysis that could almost be said to have been borrowed from the narrator. And this is characteristic of many of Elinor's stated judgements. This of course can encourage the assumption that Elinor is a representative for Jane Austen, or the example of what the novelist takes to be an ideal, and even the more sophisticated readers can incline this way: Tave's argument about the

centrality of Elinor, rests heavily on the fact that much of Marianne's story is contained within Elinor's, and told as Elinor sees it (1973, p. 97).

Yet of course such an arrangement need not commit us wholly to a view of the primacy or the perfection of Elinor. And there are also some clear advantages for the novel in thus working partly through Elinor. Once we grasp the obvious point that Elinor has made the necessary adjustment to adult life which Marianne has yet to make, once we know something of Elinor's impressive sense, Elinor becomes an obvious and useful part-narrator. Clearly, we would learn almost nothing about Elinor from Marianne (the point is emphasised by the occasional glimpses we do have of Marianne's view of things). And clearly, Elinor as part-narrator is not simply an illustration of the workings of sense: Edmund Wilson was surely right to claim that the 'most passionate thing in Jane Austen' is not Marianne's love for Willoughby, but 'the emotion of Elinor as she witnesses her sister's disaster' ('A long talk about Jane Austen', 1944, pp. 202-3).

And to argue that Elinor has limitations does not, though it introduces a degree of uncertainty, completely undermine her sense, or make her functioning as part-narrator entirely untrustworthy. Some of the recent criticism of the novel has actually begun to move in this direction, but the novel seems to allow rather more than has yet been assumed. It is not sufficient or even accurate to claim, as Mansell does (1973, pp. 65-6) that Elinor functions as a crude parallel to her

sister, learning the value of sensibility at Cleveland, just at the point when Marianne's illness forces her toward sense: Elinor may discover a little about sensibility, while at Cleveland, but she has always known its value, and has been making further discoveries about it throughout the novel. The notion of Elinor as continually adapting has been taken up by Susan Morgan ('Polite lies: the veiled heroine of Sense and Sensibility', 1976, p. 200) for example, and advanced a little. Elinor, Morgan claims, is

a flawed heroine, not in the simpler sense of Marianne, through making mistakes and learning to see them, but in the more interesting sense of using an awareness of her own failings as a factor in maintaining a continuing and flexible process of judgement.

This is exactly what we can see exemplified in the way Elinor's opinion of Mr Palmer adjusts, in the course of the novel; but it is hardly the striking thing that Morgan's claim suggests, and is in reality no more than we might expect from any character not over-confident or omniscient. It is surely much more interesting that there are occasions, unobtrusive but not infrequent, when Elinor does not quite see her own failings and limitations. Elinor is a splendid instance of sensibility and sense, whenever she has a sufficient degree of calmness and detachment, but it is quite possible for the reader to detect some examples when her poise is under sudden or serious threat, and when though she appears to be doing no more than maintain the balance between thinking and feeling, in reality both are awry.

For, as with (in their different ways) Fanny Price and Anne Elliot after her, Elinor is not a figure who stands in obvious need of a lesson, but one whose method of functioning, while sound and consistent in itself, is not in complete accordance with the world in which it is placed. And it is a function of the novel to suggest to the reader that there are ways in which this 'system' is incompatible, quite as much as it is to demonstrate its strengths: but it is not to demolish the 'system', in the way that, for instance, Emma Woodhouse's successive visions of Highbury and her own place in it are successively demolished.

How though is Elinor Dashwood's 'system' scrutinised without being quite undermined? Samuel Richardson, who always portrayed the virtuous individual with rather more thoroughness than Jane Austen attempted, himself shows an awareness of the problem.¹¹ In Sir Charles Grandison he establishes a copiously detailed portrait of the heroine, Harriet Byron, as unrivalled in her virtue, wit, beauty, intelligence; the equal only of the good Sir Charles. The major movement in the novel is marked by the slow progress through which this ideal marriage comes to take place, and yet once the elaborate machinery is set in motion, we can

¹¹Jane Austen's admiration for Richardson, and Sir Charles Grandison in particular, is well documented: see for instance J.E. Austen-Leigh (1870, p. 89). But then Jane Austen also records the opinion, of heroines in novels, that 'pictures of perfection ... make me sick & wicked' (Letters, pp. 486-7).

detect that there is some strain and inconsistency. As Harriet becomes increasingly sure of her love for the hero, and increasingly unsure of its being returned, her letters betray a fretfulness, some strongly marked (and strongly curbed) jealousy, and a recurring wish to terminate the connection with him. All this, though natural enough, still mars this figure's otherwise unquestioned perfection. At one point, she records having read an account of Sir Charles's past life, and she shows herself restlessly, even a little irritably, trying to read differing meanings into the account, in terms of her own situation.

But, dear Lucy, have you any spite in you? Are you capable of malice—deadly malice?—If you are, sit down, and wish the person you hate, to be in Love with a man (I must, it seems, speak out) whom she thinks, and every-body knows, to be superior to herself, in every quality, in every endowment, both of mind and fortune; and be doubtful (far, far worse is doubtful than sure!) among some faint glimmerings of hope, whether his affections are engaged; and if they are not, whether he can return—Ah, Lucy! you know what I mean—Don't let me speak out.

But one word more—Don't you think the Doctor's compliment at the beginning of his Letter, a little particular?—'Delight of EVERY-ONE who is so happy as to know you.' Charming words!—But are they, or are they not, officiously inserted?—Am I the delight of Sir Charles Grandison's heart? Does he not know me?—Weak, silly, vain, humble, low, yet proud Harriet Byron!—Begone, paper—mean confession of my conjecturing folly—Ah, Lucy, I tore the paper half thro', as you'll see, in anger at myself; but I will stitch it to the Doctor's Letter, to be taken off by you, and to be seen by no body else.

(I, p. 465)

In allowing this minor distortion to the picture of virtue, Richardson has actually fleshed out the life of the thing; has made those moments when Harriet is able to accept the

doubts, can even pity her 'rival', the more striking than any mere piling up of virtuous instances. The distortion has become a useful adjustment.

But while there is a superficial and obvious similarity in the situation and treatment of Harriet Byron and Elinor Dashwood, there are notable differences. Richardson relies on a single aberration from the pattern to make the pattern clearer: Jane Austen seems intent on going further. Not only does she demonstrate that Elinor's 'system' has natural limits, against which she struggles: her novel also reveals that this 'system' can itself actively mislead, so the risk of aberration and flaw tends towards the continuous rather than the occasional. In this regard we can perhaps find as instructive an instance as Richardson's, in the very different situation envisaged by Moll Flanders. Defoe's problem, as he partly acknowledges in his preface, is to maintain our sympathetic interest in this woman, and 'all her vicious Practises' (p. 1). The difficulty lies of course in retaining the vivacity without becoming merely salacious, in allowing a sharp moral focus without moralising. The solution lies in the way Moll tells her story: she is frank but also ingenuously self-revealing. From her first words, it is clear that she is not entirely trustworthy, but then we can also see that the deception is at least partly self-deception, as she continually adjusts her account of things. Thus, the 'Felony' which places her mother in Newgate, where Moll is born, is

a certain petty Theft scarce worth naming, (viz.)
Having an opportunity of borrowing three Pieces of
fine Holland, of a certain Draper in Cheapside. The
Circumstances are too long to repeat, and I have
heard them related so many Ways, that I can scarce
be certain which is the right Account.

(p. 8)

But if we find an obvious and habitual duplicity in her, even a smugness in the duplicity, we are also faced with the often compelling needs that make this duplicity hard to avoid: we cannot criticise Moll without also criticising the society in which she is placed. Thus in creating a rounded picture and changing perspectives, Defoe does not make judgement any simpler for the reader, or moral sense any easier to establish. What he makes possible is a more thorough grounding of the reader's understanding in the nature of the problem.

If Richardson does not go far enough for Jane Austen's purposes, though, then perhaps Defoe goes too far. The doubts and incompatibilities of Elinor's 'system' are certainly in frequent danger of revealing themselves; and they do invite the reader to make, not a quick judgement, but an attempt to understand the circumstances that make them inevitable. But the weaknesses are so quietly stated that they can easily be missed in a way that the much more obvious and rather more substantial faults of Moll and of her society cannot. Often, in fact, Elinor's compelling sense, and her expressed but controlled sensibility, seem all-sufficient, even when a little investigation reveals that they are not. In an early discussion with Marianne, for example, about whether or not Edward is sufficiently endowed with Taste,

Elinor offers what appears to be a detached assessment, but it ends thus:

His abilities in every respect improve as much upon acquaintance as his manners and person. At first sight, his address is certainly not striking; and his person can hardly be called handsome, till the expression of his eyes, which are uncommonly good, and the general sweetness of his countenance, is perceived. At present, I know him so well, that I think him really handsome; or, at least, almost so.

(p. 20)

And this is the language of sense being momentarily and unwittingly overtaken by the energies of sensibility, with the attempt only in the hesitation of the last words, to regain control. Elinor sounds, and thinks she sounds, like no more than her sensible self, but is talking, for a few sentences, like someone who has just found herself in love.

Of course, we cannot see this without also seeing the difficulties of Elinor's situation. We know that Marianne, like her mother, denies, absolutely, any distinction between liking, esteeming and loving, and at the same time that Elinor must speak as warmly as she can, if she is to convince her sister that she means anything at all. So there is the irony in the way that even this very high praise is no more than the decidedly moderate recommendation that Marianne could herself bestow. Equally, though, while Marianne picks up more than Elinor means to convey, that is still not less than the truth about Elinor's feelings: and when Elinor attempts to moderate her statement, to make it accord with her understanding of her situation, all she does

is make Marianne indignant with her for being 'worse than cold-hearted'. Then too, there is the real ambiguity in Edward, perceived by Elinor (p. 22), which makes her feel that she ought to restrain the emotional aspect of her attitude to him, until it is satisfactorily resolved, while already revealing that this restraint is perhaps beyond her.

And it is surely not merely by accident or mistake that some characters in the novel - notably Edward, Willoughby and Colonel Brandon - are rather more potent as ideas in the minds of others, and especially in the minds of the sisters, than they are in the flesh.¹² With Edward, it is particularly appropriate that he should be so. It is not only the difficulties, as Elinor perceives, of the question of his future and the doubts of his heart: once we properly understand his position, caught between the demands of his mother and the obligations to Lucy Steele, further entangled by an unexpected love for Elinor which seems unfulfilable (a love as unwilling and unreasoned as hers is for him - p. 368), it is easy to see why he should so often appear sadly and mutely static, passively waiting for a function to be assigned to him. But even this is not all there is to him: when he visits Barton Cottage, his 'low spirits' (0. 96) alternate with a quite lively cheerfulness, as when he joins spiritedly with Marianne in the current debate about landscape and the

¹²Tave (1973, p. 281) is one of the many to argue that the conception of Edward is unsuccessful.

picturesque (pp. 96-8), and his mocking depreciation of his own ignorance of the terms and objects of picturesque Taste actually shows him possessed of a skill in lightly but effectively parodying them. Nor can we build too much on the implied dichotomy between him and Marianne: when for example Edward admires the general beauty of the countryside, but also notices the likely problems of a 'very dirty lane' (p. 88), much to Marianne's astonishment, we cannot merely assume that he is doing no more than opt for tidiness and practicality and sense. Even William Cowper, beloved by Marianne though he is, recorded his own preference for a 'cleanlier road'. And the difference between Edward and Marianne is perhaps best contained in the resolution achieved by Wordsworth in 'Tintern Abbey'. It is with Marianne that we associate the first stage of the poet's experience, when

like a roe
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led:

(lines 67-70)

while Edward, more in sympathy with the maturer vision, is more able to value

These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
'Mid groves and copses.

(lines 11-14)

For, however differently they do it, they are admiring the

same landscape.¹³

But if this is a glimpse at an aspect of Edward that helps to illumine, for us, the nature of Elinor's attraction to him, then it also makes her understanding of his inconsistencies the more perplexing. Given that Elinor does not yet know of the secret engagement, we cannot blame her for judging incorrectly, but the insufficiency of her judgement is interesting nevertheless, for she places all the blame on the unknown Mrs Ferrars (pp. 101-2), rather too easily as the narrator points out, and in doing so she momentarily borrows a way of thinking from her mother.¹⁴ Thus she simplifies the question to one, put with an entirely uncharacteristic vehemence, of the 'old, well established grievance of duty against will, parent against child'. She plainly finds this an unsatisfactory explanation, yet it is not entirely to be wondered at that she does not acknowledge how,

¹³Tanner (1969, p. 25) is one critic who is close to taking Edward too literally at his word on this occasion: Edward, he says, 'admits that his vocabulary is based on a sort of unemotional empiricism, neutrally descriptive'. In The Task (III, lines 17, 1-10) Cowper provides a vivid account of a traveller who 'having long in miry ways been foil'd', is much cheered when at least he comes upon 'a greensward smooth'. Neither Edward nor Marianne is of course the neat half of one complete Wordsworthian, and Edward would probably be happier if the 'vagrant dwellers' ('Tintern Abbey', line 20) were under the proper care of the parish; the point is that aspects of Wordsworthian thinking should be found in both.

¹⁴Lloyd Brown (1973, p. 23) also notes this borrowing from Mrs Dashwood of a tendency to find too-easy solutions. Ironically, of course, Mrs Ferrars proves to be just as unpleasant as Elinor assumes.

even from her own point of view, some of her assumptions are very shaky, since this would also be to admit the despairing possibility that her love will never be fulfilled or that its object is unworthy. Thus she feels no conscious wish to state the obvious criticism of Edward, as she must see him, that he is temporising, deferring too much to his mother, doing nothing to establish his independence. And, if Elinor is thinking rather like her mother here, then, by another irony, it is Mrs Dashwood who thinks rather like her daughter on this occasion, who points directly to the practical solution of his difficulties, in the suggestion that he needs a profession. But this too founders before long, since Mrs Dashwood too eagerly puts the argument in her own terms, arguing that 'patience' can easily be called 'hope', and concluding with an excessively optimistic account of what she takes to be Mrs Ferrars's 'will', 'duty' and 'happiness' (pp. 102-3).

Once Elinor is made to share Lucy Steele's confidence, we can see her 'system' at its strongest and also at its weakest. Nothing could be more commendable than her attempts to treat both Lucy and Edward fairly, even in the face of Lucy's dishonourable strategies. But her behaviour also has some curious elements: not only is there a considerable sharpening of her judgement and a sharpening of her sense of her own intellectual and moral superiority ('illiterate, artful and selfish' - p. 140); there is also her assumption that though Edward is engaged to Lucy, his love is hers alone. Of

course, once she knows of the engagement then his past behaviour becomes much more comprehensible to her, but it is significant that in clinging (understandably, though too tightly) to the assumption of his love for her, she relies a little too much on the opinions of people whom she would never normally trust, uncritically - her mother, Marianne, even her ill-natured sister-in-law (p. 139). And, though it appears on the surface to be a piece of well-reasoned sense, the way that she subsequently takes up the matter with Lucy is really nothing but unbalanced sensibility and misguided sense. She is of course trapped by Lucy, and cannot either speak or remain silent without playing the 'game' according to Lucy's terms: but to find that she cannot 'deny herself of endeavouring to convince Lucy that her heart was unwounded' (p. 142), is to ignore the jealousy which she already knows to be motivating Lucy, and which will leave Lucy unconvinced. We can, if inclined, admire the smooth workings of Elinor's 'system', in the contriving of the encounter (p. 145); but the encounter itself is productive only of an awkward and edgy duelling that tends to provoke, in each, 'an unsuitable increase of ease and unreserve' (p. 150).¹⁵

Similarly, when there is an embarrassing encounter in London - Lucy has just come to boast of Mrs Ferrars's

¹⁵Barbara Hardy (1975, pp. 72-5) treats this encounter in a way that is notably more favourable to Elinor.

amiability to Elinor, when Edward arrives - Elinor's successful struggle to keep her composure begins to look like a complete vindication of her 'system', and yet ...

Her exertions did not stop here; for she soon afterwards felt herself so heroically disposed as to determine, under the pretence of fetching Marianne, to leave the others by themselves: and she really did it, and that in the handsomest manner, for she loitered away several minutes on the landing-place, with the most high-minded fortitude, before she went to her sister.

(pp. 241-2)

The fetching of Marianne is so very obviously a pretext, and in any event Marianne has been excused almost all social duties: her entry produces all the embarrassment which Elinor would, in a cooler moment have foreseen and avoided. Marianne enthusiastic, even in the midst of her own grief, over what she not unnaturally takes to be her sister's happiness, is open and warm in treating Edward as if he were engaged to Elinor, and contemptuous in treating Lucy as an insignificant acquaintance: indeed she is even indifferent to a spiteful remark from Lucy (it is Elinor who is 'very angry'), and insists on praising Edward, quite unaware of the irony, for being 'most scrupulous in performing every engagement however minute, and however it may make against his interest or pleasure' (pp. 243-4).

And there are the events at Cleveland, when fever, that pre-eminently Romantic condition, brings Marianne un-Romantically to sense, and at the same time threatens, at least for a while to overthrow the sense of everybody around her. Her 'infection', with its 'putrid tendency'

(p. 307) so taints the air that the silly Mrs Palmer actually stops laughing, and rushes away with her baby to the safety of Bath; Mrs Jennings, for all her kindness and practical usefulness, entertains a luridly tragic vision of Marianne's impending death, and she infects Colonel Brandon, made partial by his love, with her forebodings: even Elinor, calm at first, is made to fear that she was too calm, and to dread the worst when, during the night of crisis she watches her sister, and it is a night 'of almost equal suffering to both' (p. 312). Only the apothecary is unperturbed, but then as a professionally detached observer, that is no more than we might expect. And no sooner does Marianne begin to recover than Willoughby appears, and Elinor finds yet more unexpected ways in which her sensibilities are worked, even against the inclinations of her sense, and in which her judgement must admit at least a partial adjustment. Then, at the end of the novel, there is the violent and noisy burst of 'tears of joy' with which she greets the unexpected news that Lucy has married Robert Ferrars, and by which she turns the implications of that event into a statement of fact. There is nothing, in all these incidents that is unnatural, and very little that suggests her culpability: but it has become clear that her 'system' is by its nature always struggling with the world, always trying to establish and maintain a shifting set of compromises; and that it is seldom more than partially successful.

And Marianne? If these are the complexities with which

the reader deals in relation to Elinor, then it might still seem that Marianne is rather obviously a foil: someone whose single, gross error is made the more gross because the world has been shown to consist of such a complex shading of greys, rather than the single line between black and white, that she assumes. Of course, the case against Marianne is clear enough, but is it sufficient to see her only as insisting on an extreme of sensibility that leads her into unreason and selfishness, so she has to be brought close to death before she learns her lesson? All this is true, but not sufficient. For one thing, it is as easy to argue that Marianne is naturally given to intensity, whatever the form its expression takes, rather than that she simply and recklessly puts strong feeling above everything else: that while Elinor constantly struggles to hold to the middle ground, Marianne tries always to push to the outer limits. At the start she is intensely mourning the death of her father, soon she is intensely in love, and then she grieves as intensely at parting. She is intensely shocked, when betrayed, and her almost overwhelming pain becomes mixed with some intense regrets when she learns that Elinor's private sufferings have almost matched her more public ones.

Marianne was quite subdued.—

'Oh! Elinor,' she cried, 'you have made me hate myself for ever.—How barbarous have I been to you! —you, who have been my only comfort, who have borne with me in all my misery, who have seemed to be only suffering for me!—Is this my gratitude!—

(p. 264)

That is another way of saying that, except by her own extraordinary standards, she was not subdued at all. This mixture of intensities becomes the 'pain of continual self-repreach' (p. 270), and turns, as her thoughts return to Willoughby, to 'moments of precious, of invaluable misery' (p. 303), a combination that soon renders her so intensely sick, as to make her, for a while, intensely passive, then intensely penitent; and the promise at the end of the novel is that having, inevitably acquired a little of the moderation of maturity, she marries Brandon, 'and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby' (p. 379). One could wish that this last stage was no merely dry assertion, had been rather more compellingly described, but the sequence as a whole convinces.

Even this, though, is not all. For, if the novel, and especially Marianne's part in it, can often be seen as approximating to tragedy, and sometimes veering towards melodrama, then it is also mixed with a deep strain of comedy. In the awkward encounter in London between Elinor, Lucy and Edward, for example, when Elinor leaves the room 'under pretence of fetching Marianne' (p. 242), we admire her self-control, but we also smile at her. This, though, is as nothing to what happens when Marianne enters, and at once the maker of comedy and one of its targets, works with her usual forth-rightness and by the light of an untruth which she not-unreasonably takes to be true, to illuminate,

dazzlingly and unwittingly, the untruths and less-than-truths by which the other three, with more or less compliance, have been operating.¹⁶ This complex linking between character and comedy in Marianne is perhaps clearer if we think about the way we are made to treat with Beatrice in Much Ado About Nothing. Of course, Beatrice deals in wit rather than sensibility, but the question is one of differing levels of response and differing aspects of an individual. On one level, we delight in the vigour and shrewdness of her wit, and the firmness of her confidence. On another, we are rather more detached, and we savour the trick played on her and Benedick. But of course we also recognise that the trick is not just designed to see that the 'time shall not go dully by' (II, i, 340-1) until the marriage of Hero and Claudio, and we see the appropriateness of matching such equals as Beatrice and Benedick, that their disputes can be loving or wounding exchanges quite as much as competitive exercises in wit. Thus we are always moving between a laughter at them and a

¹⁶Even those critics who admit to smiling at this point, are still anxious to find occasion for condemning Marianne's part. Tave, for example (1973, pp. 92-5), acknowledges that this is 'one of the most comic scenes in Jane Austen', but all the force of his argument is actually directed towards demonstrating Marianne's culpability.

laughter with them.¹⁷

For there is a similar way in which Marianne can seem to engage and disengage our sympathetic interest: just as there is a conflicting urge to laugh at and to censure her extremes, so we can also find ourselves pitying her, even at times actively sympathetic to her attitudes. Her feelings can at times be cultivated to the point of unfeeling or of derangement, but we have also to note that they are the consequence of a natural and attractive vigour. And her selfishness can often be the result of ignorance, as much as self-regard, and ignorance that though sometimes cavalier, is also sometimes unavoidable. Then, when she is generous (that of course means very generous) we cannot always assume that it is mis-applied: when Edward arrives at Barton Cottage (pp. 86-7) we can see her turning instantly from a bitter disappointment to which she is preparing to give fullest vent - she had assumed at first that he was the returning Willoughby - to a heartfelt happiness on her sister's behalf, and a 'warmth of regard' for Edward that, contrasted with his coolness, points

¹⁷The discrepancies between Beatrice and Benedick actually ensure that in practice it is difficult not to laugh at them even as we laugh with them. Thus, for example, when Benedick has been tricked, and Beatrice - who has not - is sent to summon him to dinner (II, iii, 238-51), we laugh at his attempts to find a 'double meaning' in her scornful remarks: but the joke also works against her, since she is still playing 'Lady Disdain' (I, i, 109) while he is one step ahead, and is trying, however ineptly, to see what lies behind that mask.

directly to the as yet unexplained deficiency in him.

What is more, in a novel where feelings are so often suppressed, corrupted or entirely absent, Marianne offers a significant reminder of their importance and power. If one line of the argument tends to the conclusion that feelings in isolation and excess can be dangerous, then another suggests that there can also be too much suppression. Even Elinor, who so sensibly contains and yet expresses her feelings, who often in fact feels it necessary to additionally restrain her own feelings just because her sister will not be moderate, is also illustrative of this other proposition; in her dealings with Lucy Steele, for example, she can be so entangled in the contrived superficialities of decorum, and of hidden meanings beneath these superficialities, as to be in a position that is all-but false. Elinor teases her sister about the rapidity with which she and Willoughby become acquainted; we can recognise the force of Elinor's comment, and we will discover, exactly, the risks of Marianne's impetuosity, when we see that Willoughby can seem to be sharing her Taste, while merely mimicking it (and that the quiet but genuinely appreciative Colonel Brandon is dismissed by her as being without, among other things, 'genius, taste, nor spirit' - p. 51). But her reply to Elinor's teasings also has its own resonance.

'Elinor,' cried Marianne, 'is this fair? is this just? are my ideas so scanty? But I see what you mean. I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank. I have erred against every common-place

notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful:—had I talked only of the weather and the roads, and had I spoken only once in ten minutes, this reproach would have been spared.'

(pp. 47-8)

But above all it is the fact of her youth which we ought not to underestimate. Elinor, two years older, has a wisdom which is exceptional: that Marianne at seventeen, under the occasionally unreasonable influence of her mother, is the possessor of some ill-judged notions should not surprise us, should indeed partly charm and amuse us. Ironically, it is Colonel Brandon, whom it is only too easy to see as Marianne does, who is most aware of this view of Marianne, and it is this that makes him decisively more than Marianne's estimate. In an early discussion with Elinor about her sister, he expresses his delight in the 'prejudices of a young mind' (p. 56). We can understand why Elinor is much less enthusiastic, but there is also in her tone the hint of the impatience of an elder sister. And Brandon is right, to a point, to value even the 'prejudices', as an expression of the remarkable energy that Marianne cannot quite contain, an energy which, he knows, must change in time, and which can all too easily be transformed into the unpleasant or the ugly. For Brandon, though he exemplifies that abomination, the second attachment, and though as readers we might feel that his story could have been better, and better told, is still the man who has lived in the fullness, though not the fulfilment of his sensibility. And

his tale of the two Elizas (pp. 204-11), while it has all the marks of a careless and unfortunate borrowing from the pages of popular fiction, is still necessary for the background it reveals about Willoughby and about himself. But the real wonder for the reader is that it is told at all: it is the breaking out of an inner passion and confusion in which the concerned interest in Marianne is mixed with painful memories of his past; in which every powerful reason and feeling that works towards revealing the story is countered by its opposite.

And there is one other point about Marianne. Whatever her faults, it is her openness in a society that will not deal openly that exposes her; it is the duplicity of Willoughby that betrays her. And Willoughby? If by Brandon's account he is a Richardsonian villain, a scaled down Lovelace, then by his own he is to be considered as much less designing, much more feeble, caught between his mercenary urgings and the feelings he is surprised to find that he possessed: to be censured, certainly, but also to be a little pitied. Elinor herself finds his version moving and persuasive, without being convinced on every point.

.....

It is easy to deduce from the fact that a work is 'early' the conclusion that it is inferior to the later

efforts of the same pen.¹⁸ But in Sense and Sensibility these defects, such as they are, are obvious: even if he is more than he at first seems Brandon remains insufficiently real, a figure that has only roughly been sketched out, so that there is inevitably something a little unconvincing about the way Marianne is despatched into his arms. Other defects are less serious. Some of the plot mechanisms, like Willoughby's visit to Cleveland, are unnecessarily clumsy. Sometimes the narrator's irony is a little too quick and easy and so achieves a blunted effect. Sir John is delighted that the sisters will visit London: 'for to a man, whose prevailing anxiety was the dread of being alone, the acquisition of two, to the inhabitants in London, was something' (p. 157); of course he is indiscriminate in his friendships, but even he would acknowledge the difference between the number of inhabitants of London, and the number of his acquaintances there. And the dialogue, even in passages where it is brightest and wittiest, has the occasional dead phrase. Elinor offers a lively defence of Brandon, which unfortunately includes the observation that he is 'capable of giving me much information on various subjects' (p. 51). These though are slight faults, and they are faults of execution rather than conception.

¹⁸Recently, F.P. Lock ('The geology of Sense and Sensibility, 1979, pp. 246-55) has argued against any too easily assumed inferiority in the novel, and has claimed that the passages usually cited as being the unrevised fragments from an earlier draft can all be satisfactorily explained. See also pp. 374-382, below.

D.W. Harding has noted the blemish in Elinor's defence of Brandon, and he takes the matter of the dialogue in the novel somewhat further ('Two aspects of Jane Austen's development', 1970, pp. 1-4). If we remove the blemish, he says, then Elinor's remarks are an early example of the kind of dialogue that Jane Austen was later to use with such rich effect. But he points out that much of the dialogue in Sense and Sensibility is not of this sort, that it is 'stilted and unnatural'; and the characters frequently exchange 'little oral essays'. There is clearly some ground for this charge, but there is also a certain appropriateness, for this novel, even in the 'little oral essays'. For Sense and Sensibility is in some ways the most consciously cerebral of the six novels. That might indicate simply that in the other novels, the ideas are more fully and harmoniously incorporated, but we must also allow for a deliberate choice that the ideas should be out in the open. We set out to examine conceptions of head and heart, the bonds and the distinctions between them. Soon the argument becomes increasingly complicated as it is mediated through such notions as Taste: and we find a succession of differing versions of the ideas in terms of wealth and occupation, of honesty and propriety, of will and duty, of selfishness and selflessness. If Northanger Abbey is, in some ways, a testing of the different ways in which a novel can function, then Sense and Sensibility is a testing of the different ways in which some of these functionings can engage with ideas.

CHAPTER THREE

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

... but intricate characters are the most amusing.
They have at least that advantage - Elizabeth Bennet

Pride and Prejudice is usually regarded as a distinct advance on its two predecessors, and at least some of this advance is taken to derive from the way that the 'light, and bright, and sparkling' surface of this novel gives away relatively little of its inner workings.¹ But the mechanisms, by being more completely concealed, are also less immediately a part of the debate between novelist and reader; what is more, when we can discern them, we find that they are noticeably different. This novel is not a more sophisticated form of Northanger Abbey, in which different structures compete, no less vigorously perhaps, but much less obviously. Neither is there, as in Sense and Sensibility, the formal link between ideas in the abstract and ideas in practice: to connect Darcy simply with 'pride', or Elizabeth with 'prejudice', even if only as a way into the novel, is to be very reductive;

¹Letters, p. 299. Cassandra Austen's Memorandum (Minor Works, facing p. 242) indicates that First Impressions was written in 1796-7. In turning First Impressions into Pride and Prejudice (published early in 1813), Jane Austen writes of having 'lop't and crop't' (Letters, p. 298), but as with Northanger Abbey and Sense and Sensibility, the exact nature of the revisions can only be guessed at. If, though, Chapman is right in supporting the suggestion that Jane Austen was using the Almanac for 1811-12 (Pride and Prejudice, pp. 400-8), then that would indicate that the final revisions were late and substantial.

to seek a useful antithesis or synthesis in the title is to be mistaken.

Indeed, the most striking difference with Pride and Prejudice is the decided lessening of the formality, whether in the structures through which it works, or in the ideas it embodies. Elizabeth Bennet's preference for 'intricate characters' has a local significance as part of her debate with Bingley, and as part of her attempt to stop her mother from demonstrating how very un-intricate she is, but it can also be taken as a statement that, in general, the reader of this novel is invited to endorse. And the intricacy is of a kind that can only be properly and fully stated, as it reveals itself in the actual and everyday occurrences of dinners and arguments and card parties and dances. As readers, therefore, we engage with the novel, not by way of an introduction to an investigation of the possibilities of life in novels and life in actuality, or about the connections and the differences between ideas in the abstract and ideas in practice. Rather we find ourselves observing a dispute among the Bennets, about the practical means that are available for shaping their future: a debate that is already in progress, and has been going on for some twenty-three years. We might feel that, by the end of the first chapter, we can form some firm understanding at least of Mrs Bennet (and even here the actual shape that her folly takes, remains successively in doubt throughout the novel), but it is clear that as an un-intricate character she marks what could be described as the lower threshold of

interest in the novel, and its major focus is on those who are markedly more complex, who are least reducible to an abstraction or a formula, or a diagram.

This comparative lack of formality is also reflected in the critical debate about the novel, and agreement is, to a significant degree, less easy to achieve. Though of course there is no ready and satisfactory consensus for the first two novels, there is at least some considerable agreement, in general, about what and how they are, and about what to disagree over; disputes tend to arise over the more specific kinds of emphases. But even this measure of order in the critical thinking has not been attained with Pride and Prejudice. We might look for a key in the title, especially when the words it contains are, at least at first, much less daunting and ambivalent than those, say, of Sense and Sensibility, but each individual critic has tended to find his own individual key. Some find a single meaning, located in a specific context. Marilyn Butler (1975, p. 206) for instance:

The subject of Pride and Prejudice is what the title indicates: the sin of pride, obnoxious to the Christian, which takes the form of a complacency about the self and a correspondingly lower opinion, or prejudice, about others.

But this is a simplicity that is belied by almost every usage in the novel, and anyway a less austerely moral version has generally been preferred. A very common form is an approximation, or a variation or an inversion of the statement

offered, for example, by Everett Zimmerman ('Pride and prejudice in Pride and Prejudice', 1968, pp. 65-6), when he says that pride is 'a detachment from other human beings', in which the self is seen as 'superior to them, as unconcerned': and with prejudice, 'the self is completely involved with others, and everything is interpreted as it affects the self'. Yet other critics attend rather to the sheer variety of meanings. Lloyd Brown (1973, p. 32) for instance suggests that 'the ambiguities of "pride and prejudice" connote conflicting and parallel meanings that are as varied as the complexities of Sense and Sensibility'.

Even more bewildering are the ways critics have found of connecting 'pride' and 'prejudice' with other patterns of ideas that give significance to the novel. Samuel Klinger suggests that the antithesis between 'art' and 'nature' is of telling importance. Marvin Mudrick stresses the distinction between simple and intricate people. Donald Greene argues for the rise of the middle class, and the resulting conflict with the upper class. Dorothy van Ghent finds the irrational behind the rational in the novel, and she emphasises the 'reconciliation of the sensitively developed individual with the terms of his social existence'. For Howard Babb, the novel 'argues that the individual must mitigate the demands of personal feeling ... and reconcile them with the claims of sense'. Tony Tanner detects two significant oppositions: impressions and ideas; Enlightenment and Romanticism. Marilyn Butler insists that the important distinction is

between 'sceptical intelligence', and 'charity' and 'humility'; between 'satire' and 'candour'. Susan Morgan sees the novel as a 'study of the links between intelligence and freedom', in which the importance of intelligence, functioning with rather than without emotional involvement, is stressed. Julia Brown shows it dealing with the problem of accepting 'an irrational and absurd' world.²

This outline is not meant simply as a tribute to critical ingenuity. Any novel as rich and as written about as this one will inevitably attract a wide variety of interpretation. But in this case we are confronting a central area of difficulty with Pride and Prejudice: we can all agree that most, if not all, of these terms and distinctions are of significant relevance to the novel, even if we do not agree with the exact usage to which they are put by individual critics; the problem is in adequately accommodating the whole range of terms; and while it can be illuminating to concentrate on a small cluster, that is to sacrifice the connection with and the perspective created by the others. Walton Litz (1965, pp. 104-6) puts it thus:

²Kliger, 'Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice in the eighteenth-century mode', 1947, pp. 357-70: Mudrick, 1952, pp. 94-108: Greene, 'Jane Austen and the peerage', 1953, p. 1028: van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function, 1953, p. 125: Babb, 1962, pp. 113-4: Tanner, 'Introduction' to Pride and Prejudice, 1972, pp. 11-12, 45: Butler, 1975, p. 212: Morgan, 'Intelligence in Pride and Prejudice', 1975, pp. 54-68: Brown, Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form, 1979, p. 71.

As Darcy and Elizabeth are first presented to us they sum up most of the conflicting forces in Jane Austen's early fiction. Elizabeth possesses the illusion of total freedom; she looks to nature, rather than society or traditional authority, for the basis of her judgements. She is self-reliant and proud of her discernment, contemptuous of all conventions that constrict the individual's freedom. Darcy, on the other hand, is mindful of his relationship to society, proud of his social place, and aware of the restrictions that inevitably limit the free spirit. Together they dramatize the persistent conflict between social restraint and the individual will, between tradition and self-expression.

And even that turns into a rather too easy formulation, valid as a general statement, but less if we consider particulars.

As Litz himself acknowledges:

The first two volumes of Pride and Prejudice are so complex that no one set of antitheses can define the positions of the hero and heroine, and any attempt to establish rigid patterns leads to absurdity. Under such schematizing Darcy's ambivalent attitude is reduced to the pomposity of Mary's extracts, while Elizabeth's wit becomes as sterile as her father's.

And there is another difficulty with this novel: it is not only that it is very difficult to find a single formula that will include all the terms and distinctions, but also that the novel is, to an unusual degree self-contained, so that while these ideas point to concepts and constructions outside this novel, a large part of their meaning, the exact nature of their significance and the precise shading of differences, depend upon internal rather than external points of reference. We can find the terms worked, just as briskly as in Northanger Abbey, by way of parody, satire or education-novel, but the existence and the interplay of

these different fictional possibilities is now of merely secondary significance. The difference with Sense and Sensibility is even more striking: we can disagree over how Elinor Dashwood functions in practice, in relation to 'sensibility' or 'sense', but there is only a little room for differences over how she stands in relation to these notions as abstractions (except merely on questions of plausibility) after the first chapter. No such certainty is vouchsafed us in Pride and Prejudice, and though we can turn to philosophy or theology or psychology or philology, for amplification of its meanings, it is in the novel itself, and as the terms appear in it, in their everyday practical garb, that they matter most. In some respects, the problem of reading Pride and Prejudice is not unlike that which is to be found with Pope's The Rape of the Lock: we all know that the poem is 'mock-heroic', the question is how in particular it is so. If we painstakingly link each device in the poem with its original in epic poetry, if we mechanically apply the notion that what is heroic in one context is comic in another, then we are merely risking the scorn of Pope himself. Only by responding to the resonances within the poem can we establish the context in which we can judge and yet also delight in Belinda and her world.

Not with more Glories, in th'Ethereal Plain,
The Sun first rises o'er the purpled Main,
Than issuing forth, the Rival of his Beams
Lanch'd on the Bosom of the Silver Thames.
Fair Nymphs, and well-drest Youths around her shone,

But ev'ry Eye was fix'd on her alone.
 On her white Breast a sparkling Cross she wore,
 Which Jews might kiss, and Infidels adore.
 Her lively Looks a sprightly Mind disclose,
 Quick as her Eyes, and as unfix'd as those:
 Favours to none, to all she Smiles extends,
 Oft she rejects, but never once offends.
 Bright as the Sun, her Eyes the Gazers strike,
 And, like the Sun, they shine on all alike.
 Yet graceful Ease, and Sweetness void of Pride,
 Might hide her Faults, if Belles had Faults to hide:
 If to her share some Female Errors fall,
 Look on her Face, and you'll forget 'em all.

(II, lines 1-18)

Of course, one effect of the grandly heroic description is reductive: the limitations of the 'Fair Nymphs, and well-drest Youths' are measured by their inability to fill the heroic mould. But there is also a way in which the description is appropriate, and despite their superficialities, partly indeed because they are so ephemeral, this vital and colourful array of youth and beauty has its own relevance in these terms. It is therefore a question of being sensitive to exact possibilities of meaning at any one time. We might take the description of the cross on Belinda's 'white Breast' simply as a tribute, excessive to the point of absurdity - and Pope himself recorded the dangers of an overly elaborate interpretation of this couplet - but we have also to note that it also contains the hint of a doubt about her spiritual qualities. And if, in the lines that follow, we find a straight analogy between the outer and the inner, then that too comes to reveal more than the merely flattering: 'lively Looks' connect with a 'sprightly Mind', which is 'Quick as her Eyes, and as unfix'd as those'. But this in turn is set

against the at least outward appearance of 'graceful Ease, and Sweetness void of Pride'. Thus it is only at the end of the passage that there is an actual statement about her faults, and that is only of possibilities, and one that reflects us back to a consideration of her unquestionable beauty. We have to be alert to the different levels and shadings, and to the fact that the way we arrive at an interpretation must vary as the effects themselves vary. The potency of Belinda's beauty at once acknowledges and masks her limitations, and charm and defect are thus mutually in balance: we cannot stress the one without feeling the tug of the other. And this elaborate tribute which is also an elaborate joke at her expense, is also a 'naturalistic interpretation of the elaborate and courtly conventions under which Belinda fulfils her natural function of finding a mate'.³

So Pope's 'mock-heroic' is most tellingly so in the way in which it connects with tensions within the poem. Jane Austen's novel is the more enclosed because it is without

³ Cleanth Brooks (The Well Wrought Urn, 1947, p. 84). Under the name of 'Esdras Barnivelt', Pope suggested that Belinda and her cross was an allusion, on the one hand, to 'GREAT BRITAIN, or (which is the same thing) her late Majesty', by its plain reference to 'the Ensign of England'; on the other, to 'the Whore of Babylon ... coming forth in all her Glory upon the Thames, and overspreading the Nation with Ceremonies'. ('A Key to the Lock', 1715, pp. 185-6, 200). Reuben A. Brower has already suggested some general ways in which Pope's poem and Jane Austen's novel can be linked, in terms of being 'novelistic', and in demonstrating a precise 'control of sentence rhythm, or ironic play on words' ('From the Iliad to Jane Austen, via The Rape of the Lock', 1975, pp. 53-4).

such an obvious thread, and meaning depends to an even greater degree on internal connections and pressures. Consider the way that a concept as important as 'pride' is treated. It enters the novel in the mouths of Meryton, at the assembly, when Darcy is discovered to be 'the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world' (p. 11): and Mrs Bennet, part maker and part transmitter of Meryton opinion, next day reduces the account of his behaviour to the statement that 'every body says that he is ate up with pride' (p. 19). But the fact that this is the only point in the novel at which there is an easy and unqualified agreement between Elizabeth and her mother ought to warn us that the question is actually a good deal more complicated. Charlotte Lucas offers some defence of Darcy's 'pride', since he is 'so very fine a young man, with family, fortune, every thing in his favour' (p. 20). This is of course somewhat pragmatic, and once Charlotte shows herself willing to marry a man who is completely and obviously a fool, merely for the sake of the establishment he provides, once she reveals that among her not ungenerous wishes that Darcy may marry Elizabeth there is also the knowledge that 'Mr Darcy had considerable patronage in the church' (p. 181), we might feel safe in dismissing her as too merely the heartless materialist. But that does not quite do away with her defence of Darcy, and even before we come to the semantics of 'pride', as Charlotte uses the term, we have to notice that she offers the one plain statement of a set of principles that underly a great deal that is said and thought

in the novel; thus she can be seen, not so much the crass materialist, as the clear spokesman for the crass materialism in her society. Mrs Bennet offers her own stupidly literal version of it, and she implies the terms of Charlotte's defence of Darcy, at the start of the novel, when she declares of the new tenant of Netherfield: 'A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!' (pp. 3-4). And the first impression created by Darcy at the Meryton assembly, before his 'fault' is discovered, depends as much on the striking largeness of his fortune as it does on the striking handsomeness of his appearance (p. 10). These are the principles that mark the only agreement between that otherwise ill-matched pair, Darcy and Caroline Bingley, and it is this that makes them act together in separating Bingley from Jane (p. 198). And of course it is a factor in Darcy's thinking about Elizabeth: even Elizabeth herself, so often the spirited rejector of these values, comes to be much less certain that her own views are anything more than personal, when she understands her own potential for loving Darcy (p. 361). We might feel that Charlotte is being too uncritical of what she sees, but she is also the one to see it plainly.

But the argument does not rest here. Before we can begin to consider other aspects of Darcy's nature which might or might not justify his 'pride', we are turned back to a consideration of the specific reason for applying the term to him, and the merely pejorative meaning invoked by Mrs

Bennet. Elizabeth answers Charlotte by asserting that 'I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine' (p. 20). And here of course 'pride' has two distinct meanings, neither of which approximates to Charlotte's, since by her own she means a natural self-esteem, and by his she means, as she later tells him, 'your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others' (p. 193): later still, she comes to plead that he has 'no improper pride' (p. 376). But while we might expect that this early debate will at least fix some of the important meanings of the concept of 'pride', there is actually no more than a canvassing of possibilities; and the argument between Charlotte and Elizabeth, rather than pointing toward useful conclusions, tails off and is lost in the general and increasingly trivializing chatter. Mary Bennet, 'who piqued herself upon the solidity of her reflections', offers an entertaining instance of yet another form of pride, when she solemnly remarks that pride is 'very common indeed', and explains why 'vanity and pride are different things': but this, though it manages to be both simplistic and ponderous, also has the effect of complicating the issue, since Elizabeth's reaction to Darcy has already implied that Mary's distinction can be more apparent than real. And the debate ends in the childish wrangling that ensues when 'a young Lucas' claims that to be proud is to be rich and to 'keep a pack of foxhounds, and drink a bottle of wine every day', and is challenged by Mrs Bennet.

But this begins also to suggest something else about

Pride and Prejudice. It is not only that the argument is especially enclosed, but also that there is an unusually large degree of uncertainty and incompleteness in it. In some ways the uncertainty is reminiscent of one of the kinds of incompleteness in which Laurence Sterne dealt, somewhat more thoroughly, in Tristram Shandy. The major dislocation there is of course a temporal-spatial one, and the reader has consistently to suspend the usual processes of response and interpretation, as we find ourselves working through a succession of digression and circumstantial detail; we never arrive at a point where the picture is complete if fragmented. But within this, there is another kind of disordering, and here Sterne is close to Jane Austen: frequently, Tristram attempts to cut a path through the incompleteness and the unfixity, just in order to fix something in the reader's mind. Thus he makes several attempts to 'explain' his father. He considers, at length, why Mr Shandy should entertain the odd idea that names 'irresistably impressed upon our characters and conduct' (p. 77); or, the fact that he 'would see nothing in the light in which others placed it' (p. 160). These explanations themselves have continually to jostle with other digressions, and they are never quite capable of containing Walter Shandy. The sudden arrival of Dr Slop, on the night of Tristram's birth, for instance, sets off a series of comments, randomly and at cross-purposes, which leads Toby into a lengthy discourse on the 'science of fortification'. We know that he is wont to turn

any topic in this direction, and we know that his brother finds the habit tiresome, but nothing that Tristram has already told us about them can quite prepare us for what happens.

Toby is now well into his subject:

I own, continued my uncle Toby, when we crown them,—they are much stronger, but then they are very expensive, and take up a great deal of ground, so that, in my opinion, they are most of use to cover or defend the head of a camp; otherwise the double tenaille—By the mother who bore us!—brother Toby, quoth my father, not able to hold out any longer,—you would provoke a saint;—here have you got us, I know not how, not only souse into the middle of the old subject again:—But so full is your head of these confounded works, that though my wife is this moment in the pains of labour, —and you hear her cry out,—yet nothing will serve you but to carry off the man-midwife.—Accoucheur,—if you please, quoth Dr Slop.—With all my heart, replied my father, I don't care what they call you,—but I wish the whole science of fortification, with all its inventors, at the devil;—it has been the death of thousands,—and it will be mine, in the end.—I would not, I would not, brother Toby, have my brains so full of saps, mines, blinds, gabions, palisadoes, ravelins, half-moons, and such trumpery, to be proprietor of Namur, and of all the towns in Flanders with it.

My uncle Toby was a man patient of injuries;—not from want of courage,—I have told you in the fifth chapter of this second book, 'That he was a man of courage:—'—And will add here, that when just occasions presented, or called it forth,—I know no man under whose arm I would sooner have taken shelter; nor did this arise from any insensibility or obtuseness of his intellectual parts;—for he felt this insult of my father's as feelingly as a man could do;—but he was of a peaceful, placid nature,—no jarring element in it,—all was mixed up so kindly within him; my uncle Toby had scarce a heart to retaliate upon a fly.

(pp. 130-1)

The violence of Walter's interruption, the quibbling aside to Dr Slop, the striking gentleness of Toby's response, the speedy reconciliation that ensues, the way Toby then immediately reverts to the dangerous subject of Stevinus (dangerous because

it was that, with the help of a few digressions, which led him into his discourse on fortification) 'but my uncle Toby had no resentment in his heart, and he went on with the subject, to shew my father that he had none' (p. 133): all this leaves Tristram explaining after the event. And the explanation will not serve more than partly to prescribe for any other situation, partly because we are too dependant on chance observation, chance mood, chance association, but also because the brothers represent more than can be covered by any single explanation. Tristram is doubly at the mercy of his subject.

By contrast, the world of Pride and Prejudice appears to be precisely defined and clearly ordered. But it would be more accurate to say that it is a world with strict and clearly defined limits, and the appearances of order, but one which demonstrates the difficulties of establishing any real order, even within such limits. Too often, like Tristram, we can explain safely only after the event. Consider the way that there are significant inadequacies and contradictions even in the witty and intelligent Elizabeth Bennet.⁴ Of course much of the novel (and its best comedy) works to demonstrate the ways in which a clever heroine's understanding is less complete than she realizes: but the reader can grasp

⁴Some critics merely see a muddle in Jane Austen here: Marilyn Butler (1975, p. 214) finds it 'strange that she allows Elizabeth's intermittent reflections on the subject of prudent marriage to be so disconnected and (from the general ideological point of view) so pointlessly inconsistent'.

the full meaning, and extend his own understanding, only when he too has been confounded. Elizabeth's connection with Charlotte Lucas is a useful starting point. We have already seen how easy and unhelpful it is to place Charlotte by some such term as 'crass materialist'; one of the difficulties is that this implicates Elizabeth herself in an unwarrantably damaging irony, since the narrator introduces Charlotte as a 'sensible, intelligent young woman', and as 'Elizabeth's intimate friend' (p. 18). So we must seek for some more subtle explanation, in which though the friends are genuinely compatible, they are forced to the discovery of a difference between them, and what Elizabeth takes at first to be no more than a cynical edge to her friend's wit is actually its substantial foundation. But even such a formula has no more than a passing adequacy, and must constantly be adjusted. Thus Elizabeth passionately disapproves of her friend's marriage, and assumes that Charlotte's motives must be mercenary (Charlotte herself reveals that this is so - p. 122), and her reasoning appears to be incontestable. Discussing the matter with Jane - who, with her usual 'candour' tries to put the matter in the most favourable light for all - Elizabeth concludes:

You shall not defend her, though it is Charlotte Lucas. You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger, security for happiness.
(pp. 135-6)

But is this quite fair? In seeking a balance between friendship and principle, Elizabeth blinds herself to the difference in circumstances between her friend and herself, that make it much less easy for Charlotte to do anything but accept Mr Collins.⁵ And then, when we see something of Elizabeth's easy and unquestioning delight in the company of Wickham, it comes to seem that she is as extreme in her disregard of questions of prudence, as Charlotte is in her concern for them. Yet, even when her posture is least moderate, as when, in opposition to the views of Mrs Gardiner and her father, she doubts whether any prudential concern is wise, her argument has some force. She acknowledges the practical difficulties that any serious attachment between herself and Wickham would generate, yet goes on ...

but since we see every day that where there is affection, young people are seldom withheld by immediate want of fortune, from entering into engagements with each other, how can I promise to be wiser than so many of my fellow creatures if I am tempted, or how am I even to know that it would be wisdom to resist?

(p. 145)

And she concludes merely by promising to 'try to do what I think to be wisest', having already doubted whether wisdom is possible, and so whether it can be more than the minimal

⁵As Tanner (1972, pp. 37-8) points out, 'Charlotte is only doing what the economic realities of her society - as Jane Austen makes abundantly clear - all but force her to do'. And Elizabeth does not make a sufficient allowance for the degree to which her point of view and Charlotte's must be different: Charlotte is, by her own reckoning, 'at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome' (p. 123); Elizabeth is twenty and she is attractive.

caution of agreeing 'not to be in a hurry'. Elizabeth speaks with her customary liveliness, but there is nothing to suggest that she is also not being unduly serious.

This, though, begins to suggest that Elizabeth's limitations are no more than a mark of her humanity in the face of almost insoluble difficulties, and that takes no account of the active inconsistencies she allows herself, as when she tries to explain Wickham's defection to Miss King, the young lady who is rendered suddenly attractive by the 'sudden acquisition of ten thousand pounds'. Elizabeth now suspends the principle she so resoundingly stated, as the narrator points out, on the question of Charlotte's marriage, and she justifies Wickham's action in terms that could much more fairly be applied to Charlotte Lucas: 'handsome young men', she tells her aunt, 'must have something to live on, as well as the plain'. There is an elaborate logic that compels her to this conclusion, but one which compounds the inconsistencies of her position, because the realization that she was never really in love with Wickham combines with a flattering proposition that rests entirely on the fact of his mercenary interest: 'her vanity was satisfied with believing that she would have been his only choice, had fortune permitted it' (p. 149-50).⁶

⁶Ironically, Charlotte has none of Wickham's advantages. She is most disadvantaged by her sex, and her view that marriage is 'the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune' (p. 122) contains an irony that operates more tellingly against her society than it does

Even this, though, does not entirely demonstrate how far the novel goes to undermine what it sets up. When Elizabeth and Charlotte talk about Jane and Bingley, and the degree to which a woman ought to make her feelings plain to a man (pp. 21-3), it seems that Elizabeth's is the juster case in principle, but that Charlotte's is more apt in practice. But this formulation itself looks more and more frail when we see how far the novel goes to question and invert both sides of the argument, point by point. Elizabeth's is a partial account, since it is founded on a sisterly concern, and while she is clearly right to suggest that Jane and Bingley must have time to develop a mutual understanding, she is also a little muddled about the grounds for that understanding, and the feelings which she claims are obvious to Bingley, are just those feelings which, half a page later, she suggests Jane is uncertain about; what is more, the novel makes it clear that the process of developing this understanding will not be left unhindered. Charlotte's is an equally partial version, because although she admirably understands the conditions of their meetings, where levels of noise and standards of coquetry make expressed feelings rather more significant than feelings themselves, where candid and quiet charm may

against herself. Wickham, by contrast, can choose between the three professions traditionally open to gentlemen: and, having thought of the church, and attempted the law, he is now trying the army. But Elizabeth remains a little fascinated by him, at least until Darcy's proposal - and so blind to his faults - so that when she is enjoying the admiration of Colonel Fitzwilliam, she is reminded of 'her former favourite' (p. 180).

not suffice, she is intent on the process by which Jane could secure Bingley's attention, and denies the relevance of any mutual understanding.

The argument grows out of Elizabeth's thoughts about the Bingleys, and even there what seems to be simple and certain is actually doubtful and complicated. She detests 'superciliousness' in Bingley's sisters, and the opinion which we know they hold of Mrs Bennet and her younger daughters would seem to confirm this: except that Mrs Bennet is 'intolerable', and the younger sisters are 'not worth speaking to'. Elizabeth assumes that their liking for Jane shows the 'influence of their brother's admiration' (p. 21), yet the narrator has already suggested (p. 17) that the opposite is more likely. Even Bingley's 'generally evident' (p. 21) admiration for Jane can seem, as Mrs Gardiner later shows, to be no more than a passing infatuation (pp. 140-1). And Elizabeth is certainly unwise to be pleased that Jane's feelings will be secret, both for the reason that Charlotte advances, and because Jane does not have the protection her sister envisages: the 'match' is, from the start, the talk of Meryton and the boast of Mrs Bennet (inevitably, given the premise of the first chapter); and it is the 'exposure' of Jane that comes to be a large part of Elizabeth's anger with Darcy (pp. 190-1).⁷

⁷Elizabeth later actually admits that Jane's demeanour can conceal too much (p. 208). The phrase 'violently in love', used by Elizabeth to describe Bingley's feelings, and found 'so hackneyed, so doubtful, so indefinite' by Mrs Gardiner

Equally, while Charlotte's remarks might seem to be an exact foreshadowing of what happens to Jane and Bingley, there are several important differences. Bingley is soon strongly attached to Jane, without any of the encouragement that Charlotte feels he needs; and though he underestimates the extent of Jane's love for him, it is Darcy who persuades him that it is minimal (pp. 198-9). And Bingley does have 'great natural modesty', an essential part of what makes him attractive to Jane, but a quality that also lays him open, to an unusual degree, to the arguments of his friends. To the 'gratitude or vanity' which Charlotte finds in 'almost every attachment' must be added 'diffidence', at least for this particular one. And what, to take the most obvious example in the novel, of Darcy's un-encouraged 'attachment' to Elizabeth? There we must ponder the peculiar combined effects of his pride and her charm. Then too, while we might join Elizabeth in doubting the merits of Charlotte's 'plan' for getting a husband, we have to notice that Elizabeth herself is prepared to use it in order to secure a desired attachment. When she prepares for the Netherfield ball, she is pre-occupied with Wickham.

She had dressed with more than usual care, and prepared in the highest spirits for the conquest of all that remained unsubdued of his heart, trusting that it was not

(p. 140), is later used unironically by the narrator, while no doubt remembering the earlier ironic usage, when describing Darcy's feelings at the end of the novel (p. 366).

more than might be won in the course of the evening.

(p. 89)

And, though we might agree with Elizabeth that Charlotte's plan is, as she concedes to her friend, at least pragmatically sound, we must also wonder why, since Charlotte is one for whom 'nothing is in question but the desire of being well married', she has not yet succeeded. Then, while there is the hint of an unfulfilled past experience that may have encouraged her to formulate such a plan, when she observes that 'a slight preference is natural enough; but there are very few of us who have heart enough to be really in love without encouragement', this is balanced by the ironical fact that the man she does marry is one for whom such a 'plan' is strictly unnecessary, because for him all social and personal considerations are contained in pompous and inane gestures.

In other words, what the novel contains is too complex and diverse for the terms of the argument, not just because the terms are limited, but also because of the very nature of the complexity and diversity. To recognise that Charlotte is mercenary, or that Elizabeth is intelligent but not always quite adequate, is to see but half the problem: too often we are left, readers and characters alike, trying merely to align our attempted explanation with what is actually there.⁸

⁸For a quite contrary view of the novel, see Ronald Paulson. Comparing the novel with Tom Jones, he argues that Fielding 'shows how mixed people's motives are and how difficult it is to judge them', whereas Jane Austen stresses the acceptance of others' motives and faults: he concludes, curiously, that Fielding's is the 'more complex conception of human character'. But surely the two novelists are not so different on this

Of course, this characteristic of the novel has not hitherto gone quite unnoticed; but the attention it has received has been tangential, or at best selective. Reuben Brower has offered a perceptive account of the dialogue of the novel ('Light and bright and sparkling: irony and fiction in Pride and Prejudice, 1951, pp. 167-75), in which he showed that while it is vitally dramatic it is also complicatedly novelistic: 'No speaking voice could possibly represent the variety of tones conveyed to the reader by such interplay of dialogue and comment'. Yet even if the complexities are 'enough to delight the most pure Empsonian', they are still rather easier than we have found them, since Brower suggests that the 'sense of variability is balanced by a vigorous and positive belief'. And Brower seems, here, to be confusing beginnings with endings: the novel starts in 'vigorous and positive belief' and then sets out to test how this functions in practice, how far it must be modified and adapted.⁹ But if Brower has not, perhaps, gone far enough, then others have shown themselves willing to go rather too far. Everett Zimmerman (1968, pp. 68-9), for example,

question, and they differ only in the way it is approached, and the degree to which it is made explicit by the narrator (Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England, 1967, pp. 304-5).

⁹Robert B. Heilman has provided a similar argument - and, similarly, has it the wrong way round - about the functioning of the variety of meanings of 'pride' in the novel ('E pluribus unum: parts and whole in Pride and Prejudice', 1975, pp. 130-3).

suggests that in parts of the novel 'judgement is impossible; only amused spectatorship is possible', and the reader 'must constantly skip from attitude to attitude just as the participants do'. This can, certainly, be the reader's plight, but he is not actually obliged to be quite so helpless, and if complete understanding eludes him, he can at least improve upon what he understands by a concentrated attention to the different shades and kinds of revealed meaning.

Others have treated the novel as an illustration of some aspect of the theory and practice of novel-writing. Thus, in Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction (1978, pp. 129-58, 137) Meir Sternberg argues that the novel is a 'complex, thematically and normatively polyphonic exploration of human fallibility from a number of complementary viewpoints - in terms of its constant and variable causes, manifestations, and effects on the characters'; and he points to the ways in which the reader is actively involved in this exploration. Even so, he still sees the question rather too simply, and rather too simply in terms of Elizabeth. And he is intent on classifying the processes of the exploration, rather than on observing the varied functionings of these processes: too often it is the classification rather than the novel that determines his reading; too often he has the advantage, without acknowledging it, of a second reading. So, for example, it is not sufficient to claim, as he does, that the first chapter contains a 'striking cluster of ... explicit or generalized warnings' to the reader, against

'failures of insight' (0. 135). The failures of insight, there, are so largely Mrs Bennet's that we are really only being shown what is obvious: stupid people are not perceptive. And that is a point that will, if anything, lull rather than alert the reader. Similarly, while it is obvious that Elizabeth is better at detecting prejudice in others than in herself (who is not?), it is perversely over-insistent to argue (p. 146) that her first impression of Bingley's sisters is compounded equally of objective judgement and prejudice, because she is 'too unassailed by any attention' (Sternberg's italics): that is, she is annoyed by a lack of 'social "attention"' (p. 146).¹⁰

The most comprehensive account of the problem has been offered by Karl Kroeber ('Pride and Prejudice: fiction's lasting novelty', 1975a, pp. 144-55). Kroeber considers the reasons for the novel's continued popularity, and he notes that its terms are very much its own, that it has a large dependence for its effect on the reader's imaginative response. We have, he says, to attend to the 'moving balances' between 'patterns of language', and 'representations of reality'. And he argues that the 'complicating, amplifying, and intensifying of originating disequilibria set up in the

¹⁰There is, interestingly, a small element of prejudice in Elizabeth's opinion, but it is because she is concerned for Jane's interest: when she knows the sisters only slightly better, she begins to like them when she sees the concern they evince for the sick Jane (p. 33), but recovers 'the enjoyment of all her original dislike' (p. 35 - the phrase is revealing) when she sees how insubstantial that concern is.

reader's mind', from the first sentence of the novel, allows it to offer us an 'enrichment of our apprehensive powers'. But while this is an explanation of why the novel continues to excite interest, it indicates more about what we do with the novel, than how we do it. And Kroeber's is sometimes a considerable under-estimation of the complications contained by the 'moving balances', as is shown by the inadequate label of 'tidiness' which he attaches to 'Jane Austen's fictional structuring': thus to assert that 'from the time of Darcy's letter, the reader has been sure that Darcy and Elizabeth will meet again', is to claim more than any careful reader will affirm, since he will have noticed how frequently and how variously his expectations are frustrated; and this contingency is so obviously a novelistic convention of the type Jane Austen is apt to laugh at.

What emerges therefore is that these several attempts to account for the problem are actually dealing with aspects or consequences of the problem, rather than with the problem itself. In order to see, more exactly and completely, the various ways in which the novel generates and contains these uncertainties, we must scrutinise its workings a little more carefully.

.....

We can usefully begin with some of the questions provoked by the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy: this has an obvious centrality in the novel, and it also touches on matters that are of significance in all six novels, matters that could even confuse some of her contemporary readers, and are the more confusing to us because of our remoteness from Jane Austen's times. Everybody knows that Walter Scott's account of Pride and Prejudice (in an unsigned review of Emma, 1815, pp. 194-5) contains a misreading, but in correcting him it is all too easy to be only a little less partial. Explaining how Darcy comes, in spite of himself, to love Elizabeth, Scott goes on to give Elizabeth's view:

The lady, on the contrary, hurt at the contempt of her connections, which the lover does not even attempt to suppress, and prejudiced against him on other accounts, refuses the hand which he ungraciously offers, and does not perceive that she has done a foolish thing until she accidentally visits a very handsome seat and grounds belonging to her admirer. They chance to meet exactly as her prudence had begun to subdue her prejudice; and after some essential services rendered to her family, the lover becomes encouraged to renew his addresses, and the novel ends happily.

This actually makes it very difficult to perceive how Elizabeth has 'done a foolish thing' in refusing Darcy, and the events of the novel give the lie to such a narrowly prudential account of the way her 'prejudice' is subdued which reflects nothing of her hesitations and fears. But is that sufficient? Elizabeth's initial response is curious, after all. She is 'delighted', and she entertains the thought that 'to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!'

a sensation which persists, and which approaches a 'something like regret' (pp. 245-6). And this is the first occasion on which she feels anything as distinct as 'regret': perhaps Scott was not, after all, so very wrong.¹¹ But once again we find ourselves drawn not to make any simple distinctions, but to order a picture of increasing complexity and obscurity. Whatever the material significance of Pemberley, Elizabeth's thoughts about its owner are already decidedly complex. And whatever else there is in her response to the place, it is also partly and powerfully an aesthetic response, one she shares with her uncle and aunt. Then too, while we might speculate about Elizabeth's unconscious wishes, consciously she approaches Pemberley believing Darcy to be absent, believing also that neither her feelings nor his would permit any renewal of the acquaintance. So there is a significant way in which her feelings and reflections are detached, and when she is first 'delighted' with Pemberley, it is securely in the knowledge that what might have been cannot now be. In any event, a major part of the meaning of Pemberley is symbolic: it is an exemplification of its owner's taste and manner, and it reveals some essential truth about the man to Elizabeth.¹² All we can perhaps say, in the end, is that

¹¹At least one critic has attempted a sophisticated defence of Scott's account (Charles J. McCann, 'Setting and character in Pride and Prejudice', 1964, pp. 73-4).

¹²See Mansell (1973, pp. 92-3), for example, for a development of this point. He goes so far as to claim that the scene is 'almost purely symbolic'.

while Elizabeth is aware of the material significance of Pemberley - how could she not be? - there is no evidence to suggest that this plays any real part in making her wish to marry its owner: at the same time, that it is the material substantiality of Pemberley that represents the greatest obstacle to what would otherwise be a well-suited match. As Tony Tanner observes (1972, p. 24) Elizabeth's response to Pemberley does not mean that 'at heart Elizabeth is just another materialist in what is shown to be a distinctly materialistic society'; and he adds the qualification that 'such a remark could only be made in the context of a society which shared certain basic agreements about the importance and significance of objects, domiciles, and possessions'. That is certainly true, and it might have been sufficient were it not for the fact, one the modern reader can easily miss, that Jane Austen makes Darcy so very rich. We may have largely exonerated her heroine, but what of Jane Austen herself?

Because, while there is an obvious point in making the contrast between Darcy and Elizabeth partly in terms of the fact that he is great in the eyes of the world, that purpose would easily have been served with rather less abundance of greatness. With ten thousand pounds a year, Darcy is not merely rich, but decidedly richer than every other major character in the six novels. And a brief glance back to Sense and Sensibility should make it clear just how well-favoured Darcy is. At one point the Dashwood sisters discuss

the distinction between the necessity of a 'competence' and the luxury of 'wealth' (p. 91). Of course, one irony here is that any such discussion must be relative: another is that Marianne fixes her 'competence' at two thousand pounds a year, just the income that Willoughby aspires to, and that Brandon actually receives; that Elinor thinks in terms of something less than one thousand, and this too most accurately foretells their income when she and Edward marry. But Darcy is five times as rich as Brandon, and more than ten times richer than Edward Ferrars. The point is even more striking if we look to a contemporary source of comparison outside the novels. G.E. Mingay's English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century (1963, pp. 19-26) provides figures which, though they are for 1790 and are therefore rather early for our purposes, still offer the means for useful and precise distinctions: and by Mingay's figures, Darcy's income puts him very comfortably within the 'top' category of 400 families who constitute the 'great landlords', while Edward Ferrars is decidedly amongst the lowest of the gentry.¹³

¹³Wickham and Lydia actually make an even more stark contrast with Darcy, and their income when they marry is less than half that of Edward and Elinor (see p.185n, below). For actual and anticipated incomes in Sense and Sensibility, see also pp. 196, 369, 374. Chapman (1948, p. 188) notes that Darcy's name, family, and property make him a 'Northern magnate'. W.A. Craik (Jane Austen: The Six Novels, 1965, p. 90) and Alistair M. Duckworth (The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels, 1971, pp. 86-8) both note the great substance of Darcy's wealth: Duckworth also cites Mingay as a source for external comparison, but he insufficiently allows that Mingay's figures are rather early.

Does this mean that Elizabeth's so substantial reward is not merely fortuitous? Does it even imply that an ideological conception of society, and wealth, is not merely being examined, but that it is also being supported, even actively defended? In the past, such questions did not seem troublesome, and if one could not simply invoke 'luck', then one simply saw an instance of Jane Austen unwittingly or uncritically endorsing the values of her class. Jane Austen's was famously the example of an artist with a strictly limited range, confining herself to the more individual and personal events within a tightly defined single area of society. There was, of course, always a good deal to be got from the traditional defence that the lack of breadth is made up for to some degree by depth and subtlety, but this had always to concede that there is only a very limited perspective on anything outside the narrow limits of the focus; most obviously, this was found in the way that the six novels seemed so little touched by events, changes, crises of the times in which they were written. Arnold Kettle's much noted objection to Emma, balanced as it is by the warm assent he gives to the novel's strengths, might seem to be a fair statement of the case against all six novels: the 'inadequacy', he says, 'is not Jane Austen's failure to suggest a solution to the problem of class divisions but her apparent failure to notice the existence of the problem' (1951, p. 99).

Or so it used to be. The last thirty years have seen

a steady exploring of the connections between the novels and their times, and Kettle's view is now almost, perhaps entirely untenable. Graham Hough (1970, p. 228), while elaborating his own sense of what Jane Austen did not do, also records something of the significance of her achievement, by pointing out that the 'class whose ethos she is enforcing was to be culturally dominant throughout the nineteenth century'. And Julia Brown (1979, pp. 4-24, 113-7) offers a closely argued rejection of Kettle's claim, and the assertion that Jane Austen took domesticity and its limitations, for women in the ranks of the gentry, as her subject, rather than the wider 'masculine' themes to which she could have had only limited access. Others have argued, in growing numbers and force, that Jane Austen was actively partisan, in writing what amounts to a defence of her class, in times that were unsettled and threatening. Thus the argument runs (and such blunt summarising does less than justice to the particularity and variety with which the case has been put) Jane Austen was never entirely uncritical of her kind, but was concerned to refurbish their values and so reinforce their position. Pride and Prejudice is, like Emma, naturally taken to be a more optimistic version; Mansfield Park and Persuasion are seen to be much more pessimistic, and showing the class being defended as most gravely in decline.¹⁴

¹⁴This is a line of argument that was probably first given developed utterance by Joseph M. Duffy Jr. ('Structure and idea in Jane Austen's Persuasion', 1954b, pp. 272-89). Of the

But if it is now impossible to argue that the Jane Austen who, by her own admission, focused on '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village' (Letters, p. 401), was blind to the larger national concerns that would have touched these '3 or 4 Families' - one has only to remember Avrom Fleishman's striking observation that the Price family in Mansfield Park are war victims (A Reading of Mansfield Park, 1967, p. 7) - then it is less clear what else has been achieved. We now have a Jane Austen who is more aware of her society and its changes than was previously thought possible, but (and this 'but' is in spite of the recent firm declarations offered by critics) we still have no fixed basis for an understanding of how exactly Jane Austen viewed her society and its changes. Of course, some of the declarations have inevitably been simply unreliable or over-zealous.¹⁵ But there is also a more generally located

many subsequent versions, the most sustained are Duckworth's (1971) and Butler's (1975). Butler later produced a brief re-statement of her case, which strikingly reveals both the strengths and the limitations of this kind of argument (Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries, 1981, pp. 98-109). Here we move from the declaration that Jane Austen is 'the gentry's greatest artist', to the assertion that her novels have typically anti-jacobin plots, and on to the claim, meant to be clinching, that 'she is writing defensively', and that she 'never allows us to contemplate any other ideology'.

¹⁵See for example Fleishman (1967, p. 21), for instance, on Mansfield Park: 'During the very years in which the novel was written ... the issue of multiple incumbency was a cause célèbre of English national life'. Of course the matter was discussed, publicly and privately: but a cause célèbre, quite? For other examples, see pp. 45, 62 above.

unsatisfactoriness with these arguments, one that, ironically, is also found in the argument they were meant to supersede, represented by Arnold Kettle. One of the necessary arguments against Kettle is that the contrasts and the barriers to be perceived between Longbourn and Rosings in Pride and Prejudice, or Mansfield and Portsmouth in Mansfield Park, or Hartfield and the Martins' farmhouse in Emma, are as telling, in their way, as anything Jane Austen could have revealed about the lives and crises of the servants to whom she grants, only infrequently, the individuality of a name. But, even more than this, the broad class distinctions in which Kettle would have us think, and which he criticises Jane Austen for failing to notice, are themselves inappropriate to the material and the times of the novels, since the form of society he envisages was only just beginning to come into existence. By the same token, those who too readily insist that Jane Austen was rushing to the defence of a class that was tottering on the brink of extinction are, as Graham Hough's argument implies, achieving a strange foreshortening of a process that actually took place in the succeeding hundred years. Even those historians cited by the critics in support of their arguments, do less rather than more. J. Steven Watson, for instance, notes that while substantial changes occurred in society in England during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and they presaged further changes, little enough was obvious or even visible by 1815. The only change, interestingly, that he allows had actually taken place is in

literature, in the writings of the Romantic poets. But he also points out that some aspects of society were as they had been in the middle of the previous century: and before noting the changes, he points out that 'the hold of the old ruling classes had not been broken'. Thus

the foundations of social life, mirrored in the way men approached literature, philosophy, in their religion, manners, and dress, were already under drastic revision before the end of the war. France for long enjoyed a reputation as the home of revolutionary ideas of government. But it was in England that forces which were to re-shape all the rest of the world were generated. The new attitude to life was, save in literature, little more than a vague feeling in 1815. It was felt in uneasy hearts, mirrored in hectic gaiety or sullen misery; it was marked boldly on the face of some areas of the countryside, but it was not fully understood. Even in retrospect while its progress may be charted its causes remain difficult to assess.

(The Reign of George III 1760-1815, pp. 503-4)

Then, G.E. Mingay and F.M.L. Thompson, in their histories of the gentry, have broadly concurred in showing the slow decline of the class, through the course of the nineteenth century, and even into the twentieth: the first years of the nineteenth century were an important part of that history, but no more than a part; indeed Thompson has argued that the economic crises in the twenty years after the war may actually have been more telling, since, during the war, 'despite inflation and war taxes, landowners on the whole enjoyed great prosperity and great opportunities either for liquidating old debts or making new savings'. From a very different viewpoint, too, the picture remains substantially the same. Harold Perkin offers an account of the 'birth of

class' - he means the nineteenth century forms of working and middle class - and he dates the 'birth' as taking place in the five years after Waterloo; he also adds that this was merely the birth, and it had 'a great deal of growing up to do before it became the viable class society of mid-Victorian England'. And in E.P. Thompson's account of the formation of the English working class in the period 1780 to 1832, though he shows it as a growing force, and one that could, on occasion, threaten the established order, he never claims to be depicting more than the early and often tentative beginnings.¹⁶

But it is not only history that refuses to support the argument: if we view the six novels without assuming that their most prominent significance lies in what they say in defence of the gentry, then we will find that this significance is not very striking. The novels are actually an interesting reflection of their times in the way that though they concentrate on a single and tightly defined part of society, they also show a continual social movement, in and out of the group and also within it. But there is little to suggest that Jane Austen is, consciously or unconsciously, preoccupied with defending this group, or that she seeks to

¹⁶Watson, The Reign of George III 1760-1815 (1960, pp. 503-49); Mingay, The Gentry (1976, pp. 73-9); F.M.L. Thompson, English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century (1963, pp. 269-91, 212-37, 213); Perkin, The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880 (1969, pp. 87-106); E.P. Thompson (1963, pp. 111-203). For an account of the obvious difficulties of defining the gentry as a class, and for some solutions, see Mingay (1976, pp. 1-17).

establish a simple moral-social value for positions or movements within the group. Rather we seem to have a dispassionate account of one aspect of society; a critical appraisal, one might say, of an ideology. And only the most extreme opponent of that ideology would, in the normal course of events, be likely to mistake the six novels for a defence of that ideology.

Thus, in Northanger Abbey, it is General Tilney who is the most obvious representative of a prospering landed gentry, and neither he nor the son who is his heir is in any way worthy of our respect. And, at the other end of the scale there are the Thorpes, aspiring very insecurely to a place in the lowest reaches of the gentry. But what simple moral-social message is to be wrung from the fact that the Morlands are morally much more admirable than either of the other groups, but socially only a little higher than the Thorpes? In Sense and Sensibility there is Mrs Jennings, fat, jolly and unrefined, prospering on an 'ample jointure' (p. 36), who has risen, socially, above the origins of that jointure, yet she still retains a link with those origins in the shape of 'a few old city friends', a link which her daughter Lady Middleton deplures, and which might even, we are told, 'discompose the feelings' of the Dashwood sisters (p. 168): and Lady Middleton is herself proof of an even larger movement. But there is nothing to suggest that this movement is either a threat to the class into which the two women have moved, or that it necessarily reflects any particular merit

in them. Mrs Jennings can be too merely blunt, but she has a solidity and a warmth that makes her obviously preferable to her shallow, cold and correct daughter. Neither can we find any obvious moral significance from the way that the Dashwood sisters move downward, socially, from the dignity of Norland to the limitations of Barton cottage; or that the Steeles seem to be only a little less fortunately placed, socially. And if we consider the good-humoured but quite inane Sir John, if we think of the not very honourable hands into which Norland passes, if we remember that Willoughby is in possession of one estate and somewhat ruthlessly in pursuit of a second, if we reflect on the typical behaviour of Robert Ferrars, or his mother, then it is difficult not to see this novel as being, if anything, an attack on the gentry rather than a defence of what they stand for. Only Brandon could be said to represent any easy balance between social position and personal merit, but there is no compelling invitation to see this single and not always fully drawn figure as some kind of prototype for a social class.

Darcy, in Pride and Prejudice is certainly revealed to possess fine qualities, but his defects are those which are given a fully expressed development in his aunt: and he exists in a novel in which the only house of unquestioned merit is that of Mr Gardiner, a man who 'lived by trade, and within view of his own warehouses' (p. 139), and who is the brother of Mrs Bennet and Mrs Phillips. And the Gardiners, like Wickham, like the Bingleys and the Lucasses

and indeed the Bennets, are part of a demonstration that social movements, up or down, are endemic, and happen indiscriminately to the vicious and the virtuous, the wise and the foolish. Mansfield Park, it is true, has the Price children, who start so unpromisingly and end, by their own merits so promisingly, while some of the Bertrams move the other way; but the whole force of the novel works to deny any necessary connection between social and economic status, and intellectual and moral worth. And if Mansfield were meant to stand, at any point in the novel, as a place that embodies an ideal to be striven for, then the novel would be a failure even as propaganda. Emma is fuller than ever of amoral social movement: the Woodhouses and the Knightleys may be relatively fixed, but almost everybody else is moving or has recently moved, from the absent Mrs Churchill (an 'upstart' if we are to believe Mr Weston) through the growths and declines of the Westons, the Eltons, and on to the newly enriched, never present, but unspeakable Sucklings of Maple Grove, who themselves, as Mrs Elton assures us, find 'upstarts' to be most 'provoking' (p. 310). And though Knightley can reasonably be said to represent Jane Austen's most sympathetic portrayal of one of the landed gentry, he exists not so much as a crude exemplar to the rest of his kind outside the novel, but as the focus for a vital opposition to Emma, Emma who with her too easy pleasure in being mistress of Highbury, and her meddling

ways and little snobberies, is frequently a caricature of what he represents, and a demonstration of how his strengths and advantages can so easily be misapplied. Then, if we are compelled to view Persuasion simply in terms of what it says about the gentry, it is difficult to find much support for the class in the way that the vain and effete Sir Walter is superseded by Admiral Croft, just as, in his own way, his unadmirable heir is by Captain Wentworth; both naval men having risen to prosperity by their active participation in the just-concluded war.¹⁷

In none of this is there any consistent, or distinct concern for the future of the gentry. We may reasonably surmise that Jane Austen would not have relished the complete overthrow of the order that she knew, but there is nothing to suggest that she saw this as imminent, or that in writing her novels she was doing what she could to champion the cause of her class. Rather she seems to be examining, with no particular sense of discomfort or insecurity, the situation of a class, its merits and demerits, its more and less permanent features, the way its composition is susceptible to alteration, the degree to which it can adapt to change. Equally, though, only someone already wholly committed to finding the larger social patterns reflected in the novels, would see these as the primary

¹⁷For fuller accounts of the question see, for example, Mansfield Park pp. 233-8, below.

meanings in which they deal, would not see them as secondary, or at any event less than unshakably central. Indeed, such assumptions tend to encourage the search for generalizations that Jane Austen habitually does not make. Of course she shows an awareness of how the features of a group can be represented in an individual, but she does not, in any sustained way, present us with an individual, and mean to invoke a group at its widest sense: she does not say 'Here is a baronet', and mean 'This is the gentry as it can least incisively be defined'. Habitually what she does is to present her readers with particular individuals, each with his own background, status, capacities, tendencies, and then she asks us to consider them in terms of the propositions with which she is working.

This is exactly the point which we found the so fortunate marriage of Elizabeth Bennet leading to: any insistent tracing of an ideology actually thwarts the way that the novel works to treat the question in its full complexity, as a social question; indeed it becomes difficult to offer any useful improvement to Walter Scott's formulation. Worse still, this obscures the dimensions other than of 'class' in which the question is perceived. To assert that the novel is committed, in any serious way, to the defence of the gentry, is to allow for what can never be more than a limited apprehension of the way that the novel works so thoroughly to assert its many-faceted nature, and to

assert this nature, not as abstractions or ideals, but in terms of the actual and the practical.

.....

And of course the novel works this way from the first. We might expect that the narrator will assist or at any rate challenge us, but the narrator seems primarily concerned to direct us to the propositions in which the novel deals, in the novel itself, as they occur in combination and in practice. The much remembered first sentence actually contains such an assortment of ironies, in its assertion of a general truth - not least that this 'truth' will be enacted with literal completeness by the end of the novel - that the only thing we can really know from it is that the narrator has a decidedly ironic turn of mind. And, unlike the earlier two novels where the narrator, though no less ambivalent, is allowed some sustained commentary, at least in the opening pages, here the narrator is strictly curtailed. The second sentence lodges the idea, in a one-sided version, in the minds of Meryton, and after that it functions in a still more specific form in the silly mind of Mrs Bennet. Similarly, at the end of the chapter, the narrator's comments do little more than sum up and confirm what Mr and Mrs Bennet have already demonstrated about themselves; indeed we are offered less than appears. It is tempting to see the cause of much that follows in this

demonstration of parental folly and irresponsibility (and, to a limited extent, that is true) but this is also to rely too unthinkingly on the advantages of hindsight: and what this swift movement, from a 'truth universally acknowledged' to the minuter particularities of one version, most vividly suggests is the reason why a marriage of sense with non-sense must, after twenty-three years, have developed ritual battlefields where 'quick parts' do a light combat with 'nerves'. The joke remains, at this stage, a gentle one, enjoyed by Mr Bennet, not just against his wife, but, as the succeeding chapters show, against his family as a whole.

By the third chapter, when Bingley seems so promisingly to fulfil Mrs Bennet's hopes about rich young men, and Darcy seems equally to frustrate them, Elizabeth (already singled out by her father for 'quickness') begins to command our attention, as a witty and intelligent heroine. The Meryton assembly is strikingly like the ball described in The Watsons, in its bustle and its schemings, its gossip and its overhearings; and it is not unreasonable to suppose that this is a re-working of some of that material.¹⁸ Emma Watson, though she is never 'insulted' as obviously as

¹⁸ Minor Works, pp. 327-37. Southam (1964, p. 64) suggests that The Watsons was probably written in 1804-5. Q.D. Leavis (1941, pp. 76-8) connects it slightly with Pride and Prejudice, and more particularly with Emma: Mudrick (1952, pp. 153-4) links it with Sense and Sensibility and Mansfield Park: Litz (1965, pp. 86-7) suggests that thematically, and because it has a single heroine, it looks forward to the last three novels. But in terms of its style, it is surely pre-Pride and Prejudice.

Elizabeth is, does overhear some rudely patronising remarks about herself, and the amused but quite detached irony with which she views the events of the evening must put us in mind of Elizabeth Bennet, telling the story of Darcy's rudeness 'with great spirit among her friends'. Except that, and this is where Elizabeth becomes at once more interesting and more difficult, Emma's is actually the much more secure detachment, and even as Elizabeth charms us and engages our attention by her witty poise, there are hidden signs that this poise is uncertainly founded. She cheerfully recounts Darcy's snub, 'for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous': but there is nothing that actually deserves the label of 'ridiculous' in the incident, and had there been she would probably not have been left with 'no very cordial feelings' towards Darcy. In re-telling, though, she can turn the situation, and the man, into the ridiculous, with no more than slight distortions. Indeed, we can never tell exactly how much she is actually helping to found, rather than simply lend further support to a general dislike that is created in the course of the evening.¹⁹

That also, of course, makes Darcy a figure of some uncertainty. For even if we accept Elizabeth's view of him

¹⁹Paulson's account of the complex relationship between heroine and reader, in this novel, is perhaps closest to the truth: he detects 'the illusion of being outside Elizabeth and seeing her errors and at the same time seeing the world largely through her ironic intelligence' (1967, p. 297).

unquestioningly, then we have a man who is so abrasively rude as to be, as Mary Lascelles (1939, p. 22) claims, 'quite inconsistent with the Darcy who is described and developed in the rest of the book'. Yet if we make the assumption that Darcy does not know he has been overheard - reasonable enough on an occasion when rumour and gossip are circulating freely, and when there are several other interesting overhearings - then his behaviour is neither intolerable nor inconsistent. But, do we assume that he is simply unimpressed by Elizabeth or is it that he really is, as his remarks later that evening seem to suggest (p. 16), just too easily disdainful? Is it an expression of his subsequently revealed dislike of dancing ('Every savage can dance', p. 25)? Does this dislike combine with the unease in dealing with people that he much later admits to, or is this all - as Elizabeth takes it - no more than another sign of his 'pride' (p. 175)? Once we begin to see the ambiguities, then he is never very easy to place, and too much depends on how the light is seen to fall on his abilities and inclinations. Thus it is possible for two critics to develop two instructive but entirely opposite interpretations, each taking a particular perspective on him and his functioning in the novel. Babb (1962, pp. 119, 124, 130) shows that there is much more to him than Elizabeth's view suggests, and finds a man who changes only in manner; while by Babb's account it is Elizabeth who changes significantly, and who in doing so becomes more like Darcy. But Moler (1968,

pp. 75, 101, 94) argues that Darcy is actually a parody (and a substantial criticism) of the concept of 'patrician hero' to be found in Sir Charles Grandison or Evelina; and the Darcy he discovers is one who undergoes a major change, who 'under Elizabeth's influence, gains in naturalness and learns to respect the innate dignity of the individual', who repents his 'pomposity and pride'.

What is more, because the characters are changing and developing, the instability is perpetuated. The first volume gives us the advantage over both characters, since we see something of the workings of both minds, but that only means that we are made less rather than more secure. Darcy, having so decidedly pronounced his opinion of Elizabeth, soon finds her face to be 'rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes', and is struck by the 'easy playfulness' of her 'manners'; while Elizabeth continues to think of him merely as 'the man who made himself agreeable no where, and who had not thought her handsome enough to dance with' (p. 23). As she builds on her version of him, he becomes 'bewitched' by her (p. 52); and when her opinion is strengthened by Wickham's story and she is deliberately offensive to Darcy - more offensive even than she realizes - he is most ready to pardon her, because in his 'breast there was a tolerable powerful feeling towards her' (p. 94). And while we are caught between these two points of view, recognising that each is partial, but without being able to establish the degree of

partiality, we can begin to notice other difficulties. However struck he is by her, Darcy has significant reservations. Even when he feels himself to be 'bewitched', he apprehends no 'danger', because of the 'inferiority of her connections' (p. 52). Equally, while Elizabeth would scorn such thinking, would find it consolidating her opinion of him, it is still interesting to note how sensitive she is to the 'inferiority' of her family, as when for example her mother visits Netherfield (pp. 42-5). But the kind of inferiority demonstrated by Mrs Bennet is intellectual and psychological rather than social, a distinction which remains less than clear for characters and readers alike, until we encounter Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and even then it is implied rather than stated.²⁰

This also points to the way that the lesser figures, though usually less complex, are seldom quite easy to place exactly - consider the case of Charlotte Lucas. Caroline Bingley appears to be an even more straightforward instance: at first the narrator seems bent on confirming, exactly, Elizabeth's impression of her, since we are told that she and her sister are 'proud and conceited', that they are 'in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and

²⁰Lascelles (1939, p. 162) has suggested that Mrs Bennet's behaviour at Netherfield 'disturbs Elizabeth in such a way as to suggest that she had not been embarrassed by it before'. It is worth noting also that Mrs Bennet's behaviour toward Darcy is actually a crude parody of Elizabeth's, and 'knowing' him to be disagreeable, she takes every opportunity to prove it.

meanly of others', and that they have conveniently forgotten their own connection with 'trade' (p. 15). Yet they soon show themselves to be in reality much more unpleasant than this suggests, when they are so maliciously delighted by their 'dear friend' Jane's 'vulgar relations' (p. 37). But then much of Caroline's malice is weakened, when we discover how silly she is, as, with only a little more subtlety than Mrs Bennet could muster, she devotes her flattering attention to Darcy, and betrays her jealousy of Elizabeth. And when she insistently echoes Darcy on questions of social distinction (p. 37) or of 'accomplishments' (pp. 39-40), she seems simultaneously to be providing support for Elizabeth's view of Darcy, and to be an unwitting parody of Darcy's argument. So too, her brother is more than he might seem. From the start he appears as the masculine counter-part to Jane, but his deference to Darcy and his sisters (pp. 16-17) makes him seem, as Elizabeth later puts it, 'the slave of his designing friends' (p. 133). Yet when his sisters dwell on Jane's 'vulgar relations' he ebulliently refutes what they say as irrelevant (p. 37) - a gesture that has little to do with slavishness. And neither theirs nor Darcy's views have any noticeable effect on his developing interest in Jane. He can also be surprisingly sharp. When Caroline attempts to flatter Darcy by suggesting that balls are 'insufferably tedious', and that it would be 'much more rational if conversation instead of dancing made the order of the day', it

is he who points, with a force and accuracy we expect from Elizabeth, to the fatuity: 'Much more rational, my dear Caroline, I dare say but it would not be near so much like a ball' (pp. 55-6). Neither is Jane merely the bland foil to Elizabeth's acuity and wit. As Elizabeth herself says: 'to be candid without ostentation or design—to take the good of every body's character and make it still better, and say nothing of the bad—belongs to you alone' (pp. 14-15). Nor is it simply by chance that she is right, sooner, about Bingley, Darcy, even Wickham (pp. 95-6) and Charlotte Lucas (p. 135), than Elizabeth. For she possesses a quality which Elizabeth has not attributed to her; a useful capacity for doubting her own judgement. Speaking of Bingley's 'desertion', she finds comfort in the fact that 'it has not been more than an error of fancy on my side, and that it has done no harm to any one but myself' (p. 134). Even if, as it happens, this is neither true nor adequate, it does save her from the harsh bitterness which the much less involved Elizabeth expresses.

Nor is it only a matter of the complexities of individual characters. Jane Austen also deliberately adopts a variety of contrasting modes, which add to the dislocating effect. Often we find the comedy functioning at quite different levels. The simple humour that such figures as Mrs Bennet or Sir William Lucas generate, is connected with but also quite remote from the sophisticated probing of ideas and roles represented by Elizabeth and Darcy: it is

as though we have moved from the devisings of Sir Toby Belch, in Twelfth Night, to the elaborate interplay of love and grief displayed in Orsino, Viola and Olivia. Equally, when the comedy is at its most sophisticated, it can function in quite different ways. Sometimes it seems closest to the sustained witty exchanges of, for instance, Congreve's The Way of the World, and the delicate balance between wit, feeling and ideas, to be found in Millamant and Mirabell. Millamant claims to be pleased at having pained Mirabell:

MIRABELL

You would affect a cruelty which is not your nature; your true vanity is in the power of pleasing.

MILLAMANT

Oh I ask your pardon for that—one's cruelty is one's power, and when one parts with one's cruelty one parts with one's power; and when one has parted with that, I fancy one's old and ugly.

MIRABELL

Ay, ay, suffer your cruelty to ruin the object of your power, to destroy your lover—and then how vain, how lost a thing you'll be! Nay, 'tis true; you are no longer handsome when you've lost your lover. Your beauty dies upon the instant; for beauty is the lover's gift; 'tis he bestows your charms: your glass is all a cheat. The ugly and the old, whom the looking-glass mortifies, yet after commendation can be flattered by it and discover beauties in it; for that reflects our praises rather than your face.

MILLAMANT

Oh the vanity of these men! Fainall, d'ye hear him? If they did not commend us, we were not handsome! Now you must know they could not commend one, if one was not handsome. Beauty the lover's gift! Lord, what is a lover, that it can give? Why, one makes lovers as fast as one pleases, and they live as long as one pleases, and they die as soon as one pleases; and then, if one pleases, one makes more.

(II, i, 342-63)

And while they use the debate as a vehicle for their mutual

dissatisfaction, there is also the sheer pleasure they take in thus vigorously 'out-witting' each other: just as their playful sketching of possibilities for their relationship, each disadvantaging the other, implies the real bond and tension between them that offers an equitable resolution between 'beauty' and 'lover'. Both remain, vitally, between seriousness and frivolity, and this persuades us, more than anything else, to set these two characters apart from the others. It is just the balance that is missing, one way or another, in Fainall's cynical plotting, in Lady Wishfort's lively rages and her blunt comparisons, in Witwoud's insistent 'similitudes', in Petulant's bluster. In Pride and Prejudice, too, we can sometimes find this balance between wit, feeling and idea, and the dialogue creates its own angles and planes over which the light plays rapidly. Of course we have to recognise the complex pressures and connections which lie behind what is being said, but it is often the witty surface which gives shape to that substance, and allows it a controlled expression. Consider the discussion Darcy, Bingley and Elizabeth have of Bingley's character (pp. 48-50). We are already aware of the complicated associations that link and separate all three, but it is at his peril that the reader seeks for simple or literal meanings, or even looks for a subtlety that is too divorced from the play of wit. Darcy accuses Bingley of being 'proud' (an interesting word, itself, here) of doing things quickly:

'...When you told Mrs Bennet this morning that if you ever resolved on quitting Netherfield you should be gone in five minutes, you meant it to be a sort of panegyric, of compliment to yourself—and yet what is there so very laudable in a precipitance which must leave very necessary business undone, and can be of no real advantage to yourself or any one else?'

'Nay,' cried Bingley, 'this is too much, to remember at night all the foolish things that were said in the morning. And yet, upon my honour, I believed what I said of myself to be true, and I believe it at this moment. At least, therefore, I did not assume the character of needless precipitance merely to shew off before the ladies.'

'I dare say you believed it; but I am by no means convinced that you would be gone with such celerity. Your conduct would be quite as dependant on chance as that of any man I know; and if, as you were mounting your horse, a friend were to say, "Bingley, you had better stay till next week," you would probably do it, you would probably not go—and, at another word, might stay a month.'

'You have only proved by this,' cried Elizabeth, 'that Mr. Bingley did not do justice to his own disposition. You have shewn him off now much more than he did himself.'

'I am exceedingly gratified,' said Bingley, 'by your converting what my friend says into a compliment on the sweetness of my temper. But I am afraid you are giving it a turn which that gentleman did by no means intend; for he would certainly think the better of me, if under such a circumstance I were to give a flat denial, and ride off as fast as I could.'

'Would Mr. Darcy then consider the rashness of your original intention as atoned for by your obstinacy in adhering to it?'

At the same time, Jane Austen recognises, like Congreve but in her own way, that the balance is fragile, so we have also to be alert to those occasions when, as happens later in this same discussion, it is broken. Elizabeth attempts too insistently to use the discussion to 'fix' an aspect of Darcy's character, as revealed in his relationship with his friend; he replies, equally insistently that there must be more particularizing, and we are only saved from what has all

the appearance of a sterile argument, by a vigorous thrust from Bingley, one that turns back, decisively, to the witty mode, and one that should make us wonder how much deference he really pays to his friend. One of the particulars, he insists, must be 'comparative height and size':

'... I assure you that if Darcy were not such a great tall fellow, in comparison with myself, I should not pay him half so much deference. I declare I do not know a more awful object than Darcy, on particular occasions, and in particular places; at his own house especially, and of a Sunday evening when he has nothing to do.'

At other times, we see characters deliberately rather than accidentally resisting the impulse to be witty, and embarking rather more seriously on an explanation of themselves and their world. Here the mode is reminiscent of The Rambler, and the 'contributors' who work so assiduously to reveal particular truths, or aspects of general truths. In Pride and Prejudice it happens, for instance, in the discussions between Elizabeth and Charlotte Lucas (Charlotte's views on happiness in marriage could almost have come from The Rambler²¹); in Elizabeth's conversations with Jane and

²¹There is at one point, for example, the argument that 'marriage is not commonly unhappy, otherwise than as life is unhappy', and mention of the 'ancient custom of the Muscovites' whereby couples did not meet until they were married, since courtship merely allows individuals 'to hinder themselves from being known, and to disguise their natural temper, and real desires, in hypocritical imitation, studied compliance, and continued affectation' (Works, III, pp. 243-7). And there is Tranquilla, long a spinster by choice, though she later marries happily (Works, V, pp. 120-5), who describes 34 of her former lovers, each of whom was rejected because he had some fault (Works, IV, pp. 270-5).

with her aunt, at least when they can persuade her to be 'serious'; and in Elizabeth's reflections, especially in the latter half of the novel, on her own situation and that of her family. But most of all it is Darcy who displays this tendency, and he often does so even when the general tone of the conversation is one of lively wit, as the discussion of Bingley's character slightly suggests. Often the point of these expositions, for Jane Austen as for Johnson, is that whatever completeness they may pretend to, however illuminating they may be, they remain partial rather than total. And while it must be said that Johnson works variations within one mode, and Jane Austen treats it as one of several modes, seldom unmixed and seldom sustained for any length, the effect remains very similar. So we see Darcy, caught between the rich fulsomeness of Miss Bingley's compliments, and Elizabeth's resolution to laugh at him, and choosing at least briefly to be honestly self-revealing rather than witty. Elizabeth suggests, with pointed irony, that he 'has no defect' (pp. 57-8), and in replying he works towards his proposition, Johnsonian even in its phrasing, that there is 'in every disposition a tendency to some particular evil, a natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome'.

'No'—said Darcy, 'I have made no such pretension. I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding. My temper I dare not vouch for.—It is I believe too little yielding—certainly too little for the convenience of the world. I cannot forget the

follies and vices of others so soon as I ought, nor their offences against myself. My feelings are not puffed about with every attempt to move them. My temper would perhaps be called resentful.—My good opinion once lost is lost for ever.'

Elizabeth of course labels this an 'implacable resentment': but the reader is allowed the opportunity of reaching some more moderate conclusions, of seeing that Darcy is being both honest and accurate, but also of noting the hint of complacency as a likely source of error. One passage in The Rambler is of particular interest here: it too demonstrates this capacity for thorough and competent analysis, but one that is also made with more confidence than is really warrantable; and just as Darcy is to discover that he can be 'ungentlemanly', so Johnson's 'correspondent' learns to regret a match made solely for the sake of fortune. But much more striking even than this is the way that Johnson seems almost to be anticipating the view that Darcy must have of Meryton and its doings; indeed it is not improbable that Jane Austen had the passage somewhere in her mind. Johnson offers us the situation of a young man who seeks a wife and, known to be rich and frugal, finds that no other 'virtue' or 'testament' is required of him.

I saw not without indignation, the eagerness with which the daughters, wherever I came, were set out to show; nor could I consider them in a state much different from prostitution, when I found them ordered to play their airs before me, and to exhibit, by some seeming chance, specimens of their musick, their work, or their housewifery. No sooner was I placed at table, than the young lady was called upon to pay me some civility or other;

nor could I find means of escaping, from either father or mother, some account of their daughter's excellencies, with a declaration, that they were now leaving the world, and had no business on this side the grave, but to see their children happily disposed of; that she whom I had been pleased to compliment at table, was indeed the chief pleasure of their age, so good, so dutiful, so great a relief to her mamma in the care of the house, and so much her papa's favourite for her chearfulness and wit, that it would be with the last reluctance that they should part; but to a worthy gentleman in the neighbourhood, whom they might often visit, they would not so far consult their own gratification, as to refuse her; and their tenderness should be shewn in her fortune, whenever a suitable settlement was proposed.

(Works, III, p. 192)

There are only two points at which Johnson's account does not fit the Bennets, and for those correspondences can be found elsewhere in the novel: the Bennet fortune is decidedly a small one, and it is Mrs Bennet's boast that her daughters are not involved in 'the care of the house' (p. 44). In every other regard, the Bennets are an apt approximation. But if this informs and to a degree vindicates Darcy's motives and attitudes, then it should also be a warning to us: not all such 'expositions' in Jane Austen's novel are necessarily made explicit; some can exist in no more certain or clear condition than as implications, in the background.

If there are continuous variations in mode, though, then we have also to attend to the shifts and changes in theme. There are, for example, points at which the whole seems to fit, almost comfortably, within the framework suggested by the ancient opposition between 'town' and 'country'; subsuming, as that does, the questions of rank,

understanding and ethics that predominate in the novel. It is a theme that finds significant expression throughout, but comes into sharpest focus in the contrast between Caroline Bingley and Elizabeth. It is Caroline who is the most consistent defender of London values and standards, and it is by these that she consistently criticises Elizabeth, that she implies her own merit. The several variants of the debate then current would of course have been familiar to Jane Austen's contemporaries. Fanny Burney, blending the instances of Richardson and Fielding, shows heroines who are imbued with simple rural virtues, in Evelina (1778) or Cecilia (1782), and who battle not unsuccessfully with London sophistications, London fashions, London vices. Robert Bage's Hermsprong (1796) takes an aggressively Rousseauistic line, and his hero, having spent his youth in the company of North American Indians, professes that in every essential theirs is the superior way of life to anything he has found in France, Germany or England. He is placed, by his assertion that individuals should be judged and categorised only by 'virtue', in lively opposition to an irrasible peer, obsessed with his own dignity and power, whose health has been vitiated by London pleasures. Maria Edgeworth is less radical though following a no less significant line in The Absentee (1812), where she shows the plight of an Irish family, attempting to gain acceptance in London society, and to ape London manners, but succeeding only in acquiring

expensive London habits. They have to learn to 'leave all the nonsense of high life—scorn the impertinence of these dictators of fashion' and return to 'an unsophisticated people—to poor, but grateful hearts' (Tales and Novels, IX, p. 289). And Edgeworth's example was to encourage Scott to attempt his own version of the provincial novel with Waverley (1814, II, p. 419). It was also a question which Wordsworth and Coleridge made the subject of a notable disagreement.²²

The general tendency - with the exception of Coleridge - is obviously towards a preference for 'country' over 'town': Pride and Prejudice is an intriguing variant on that tendency. Put simply, Caroline is the not always adept defender of 'town' conventions and values; Elizabeth, by what she is and what she does, provides an entertaining challenge to these conventions, and suggests vitalized alternatives. Together they embody the conflict that Darcy has to resolve. But though Elizabeth's is an important challenge, it does not provide a framework that can contain everything in the novel. The 'unconventional' conditions

²²Wordsworth's claim that 'humble and rustic life' was made the subject of the Lyrical Ballads, 'because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language' (Poetical Works, pp. 734-5), was found in several ways to be untenable, by Coleridge (Biographia Literaria, pp. 188-200). Bage's argument loses much of its thrust when he reveals that his hero is, even with the best of motives, pursuing his rightful claim to a baronetcy.

that allow Elizabeth to be what she is, are also the conditions which are quite unable to curb or harness Lydia's 'high animal spirits' (p. 45); and though Elizabeth defends country life by claiming that 'people themselves alter so much' (p. 43), that is not so in such typical inhabitants of Meryton as Mrs Phillips or Sir William Lucas: what is more, the existence of the Gardiners mars the argument, which ever way we put it.

It will be noticed that while these variations in mode and theme maintain a steady dislocating effect on the reader, constantly reminding him that what he is examining is not simple, and cannot too easily be submitted to coherent judgement, the effect is most intense and concentrated in the first half of the novel. For, once established, they resonate throughout, keeping us alert to complex rather than simple meanings, up to the closing pages. And it is appropriate that the effects should be most striking during the gradual progress by which two systems as elaborate and as opposed as Darcy's and Elizabeth's are developed: once they are, and while the opposition lasts, they will themselves help to perpetuate the dislocation. In other words, it is not, as is usually argued, that the latter part of the novel is less interesting, less intense, less subtle. Lloyd Brown, one of the few opposed to this general tide of opinion, has observed that in the second half 'external confrontation has been

replaced by the less sensational, but equally important, drama of internal conflict', and it is worth being a little more precise about the working of this subtle change.²³

Once Elizabeth and Darcy discover doubts where there had been certainties, once they begin the slow and tentative movement towards new attempts at understanding and communication, they are confronting the dislocations, the possibilities for conflict and confusion that for us have been amplified and sustained from the start of the novel. Now there are new ways in which we can share their experiences.

Darcy's proposal, coming at the centre of the novel, marks a natural and obvious divide: Elizabeth's dislike of him has just been intensified by the certain knowledge of his part in separating Bingley from her sister, and is made stronger still by his confession of having struggled in vain against his love for her. The subsequent invigorating quarrel, his letter and her meditations on it, make for a thorough and repeated examination of the

²³Lloyd Brown (1973, p. 168). Those who argue as Brown does tend, like him, to be tentative, or to comment merely in passing. So Litz (1965, p. 110) suggests that the change at Hunsford 'internalizes the drama'; while Walter E. Anderson claims that Jane Austen 'richly enhances the moral scope of the novel' ('Plot, character, speech, and place in Pride and Prejudice, 1975, p. 370). The detractors tend to be more vigorous: Brower (1951, p. 180) asserts that the second half is without the 'richer texture' of the first half; Mudrick (1952, pp. 119-20) echoes Brower, and claims that Jane Austen is 'routed by the sexual question she has raised'; Butler (1975, p. 217) declares that 'everyone notices that the second, less satirical and extrovert half ... is less enjoyable than the first'.

differences between them; at first hectically declaimed, then re-considered, then reflected on. For the first time there is a statement, something like complete, of both positions. But the moment of illumination is brief indeed, and even before all has been revealed, the participants are adjusting and re-defining their positions. Even the letter, though it is later said to begin 'in bitterness', ends in 'charity itself' (p. 368). And by the time that she comes to re-read that letter (p. 205), Elizabeth has already moved away from angry and confident opposition, and is far into new uncertainties. Then because we no longer have, as we did in the first volume, privileged access to Darcy's thoughts, but have only his direct statements to go on, we have, exactly as Elizabeth does, to attempt an imaginative re-construction, to guess and predict his meaning. And since Elizabeth proves - for very natural reasons - to be less than reliable, we have also to attempt a measure of that unreliability: for the Darcy she attempts to comprehend is already the Darcy of the past tense.

A comparison with Fanny Burney's Cecilia sheds some light on Elizabeth's problem. Cecilia is a young woman whose move to London brings her into contact with new manners and new moral dilemmas. She is not so unsophisticated that she cannot adapt; neither is she so unperceptive that she does not smile at the conventions which are trivial or unnecessary, or frown at the vices

they encourage. What makes her condition most like that of the rather more obviously confident Elizabeth Bennet is that Cecilia has so often to devise hypotheses about her relationship to the world, and is continually having to amend these hypotheses, not just because she finds that her own understanding has hitherto been inadequate, but also because she has to learn to allow for the preconceptions and the deviousness of others. The problem is rendered dramatically at a masquerade: as she is staying at the house, Cecilia is almost the only one who is unmasked, and we watch her attempts to penetrate the masks of those around her. She disapproves of the whole enterprise as a needless expense, yet she is also excited by the novelty of the experience, and she also laughs at some of its more absurd manifestations.

'To own the truth,' said Cecilia, 'the almost universal neglect of the characters assumed by these masquers, has been the chief source of my entertainment this evening: for at a place of this sort, the next best thing to a character well supported, is a character ridiculously burlesqued.'

(I, p. 191)

But there are significant exceptions that baffle her, one way or another, and which leave her guessing and surmising: similarly, there are points at which, unmasked though she is, and despite her best efforts, she cannot make them understand what she is.²⁴

²⁴Cecilia has of course long been known as the probable source for the title of Jane Austen's novel: see Chapman's

It is a tentativeness, bred out of something like these difficulties, that we can begin to trace in Elizabeth after Hunsford. Even before she leaves, she finds herself taking a new view of her own family, one that leaves her 'depressed beyond any thing she had ever known before' (p. 209): and she also reflects on her own 'blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd' behaviour (p. 208). And yet, while she is able to think of Darcy now with 'gratitude', 'compassion' and 'respect', she also finds that she 'could not approve him' (p. 212). Then, on her journey home, she is met by her younger sisters, and she finds herself freshly pained by their folly and indiscretion. When she reaches Longbourn, she comes to the decision not to expose Wickham (p. 226), a decision which seems natural enough at the time, but one that she comes to regret, bitterly and perhaps unreasonably. Other remedies are more actively pursued: she tries to persuade her father to prevent Lydia's expedition to Brighton, and she argues eloquently of the dangers Lydia poses to the whole family. 'Our importance, our respectability in the world, must be affected by the wild volatility, the assurance and disdain of all restraint which mark Lydia's character' (p. 231).

comment (Pride and Prejudice, pp. 408-9). Q.D. Leavis (1941, p. 71) goes so far as to claim that, at least in an earlier form, Pride and Prejudice was partly a burlesque of Cecilia, an attempt to 're-write the story ... in realistic terms'. And Southam has suggested that 'Jack & Alice' (p. 2, above) is a parody of the masquerade in Cecilia (Minor Works, p. 458).

Likewise she reflects on what her father might have done: 'she had never felt so strongly as now, the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage' (p. 236). But the matter is actually even less simple and certain than this suggests, and though Mr Bennet later acknowledges her 'greatness of mind' on this point (p. 299), there is also the force with which he rejects her original plea, to be remembered. Asking whether Lydia has already 'frightened away' some of her lovers, he suggests that 'such squeamish youths as cannot bear to be connected with a little absurdity, are not worth a regret' (p. 231): and that, after all, is the view which Darcy himself comes sensibly to adopt. Of course we can recognise his culpability, in merely observing the situation, and making no effort to change it; but it is also as easy to condemn him as it is difficult to suggest practical alternatives. The difficulties are, as Elizabeth herself partly acknowledges, those of twenty-three years of unequal marriage, and there is no little truth in his observation that 'Lydia will never be easy till she has exposed herself in some public place or other' (p. 230). And if we take a wider perspective, though the Bennets are, for some weeks, spoken of as being 'marked out for misfortune', they are soon pronounced to be 'the luckiest family in the world' (p. 350).²⁵

²⁵Mr Bennet's argument is generally sound, if we allow that he does not have the advantages of hindsight: there is also nothing to suggest that Lydia would not have eloped from

The journey to Derbyshire takes Elizabeth away from the immediacy of family cares, and revives questions about Darcy. She is struck by Pemberly, and more struck by the housekeeper's report of a Darcy who is 'most opposite to her ideas' (p. 248). Then the man himself, his evident desire to renew the acquaintance, to meet her aunt and uncle, to introduce his sister, all speak of a man who is, to Elizabeth, wonderfully changed, and to us rationally softened. As she tries to understand the 'new' Darcy, she finds that her own feelings for him now include 'respect and esteem', and a much-strengthened 'gratitude' (p. 265): she attributes the change she sees in him, to 'ardent love' on his part (p. 266), without quite recognising the effect of her own shifting attitude. But if there is the powerful suggestion that resolution is at hand, then Lydia's elopement seems, as Elizabeth assumes, to crush the possibility decisively: she finds that 'her power was sinking; every thing must sink under such a proof of family weakness'. At the same moment she learns to 'understand her own wishes; and never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be in vain' (p. 278). This inevitably darkens her view of subsequent events.

Longbourn, had circumstances so arisen. But many critics have been very quick to damn him: Mary A. Burgan provides a detailed catalogue of his faults ('Mr Bennet and the failures of fatherhood in Jane Austen's novels', 1975, pp. 536-43); see also Mudrick (1952, pp. 113-4) and van Ghent (1953, pp. 132-3), for example.

The return to Longbourn initiates an elaborate process of guessing about Lydia and Wickham, and the possible effects of their actions. Elizabeth feels that only Jane 'could flatter herself with such an expectation' as that Lydia is married (p. 279), and then her uncle provides very cogent reasons for supposing that Jane is right (pp. 282-3). They arrive at Longbourn to fresh rumours and speculations, and only very gradually do the real facts emerge. Wickham and Lydia are found in London, and a suspiciously small settlement is required to expedite the marriage. Mr Bennet is left wondering how he will repay the unstated debt to Mr Gardiner: 'Wickham's a fool, if he takes her with a farthing less than ten thousand pounds' (p. 304) - and it will be remembered that this was exactly the sum which had earlier rendered Miss King so attractive to Wickham. Later still it is revealed that it was Lydia rather than Wickham who worked most actively for the elopement, then that it was Darcy, 'exactly among people, where he had apparently least to do, and least temptation to go' (pp. 318-23) who had arranged the marriage and the settlement, at a cost less than a third of the amount Mr Bennet anticipated, and in terms which ensure that Wickham can only benefit indirectly. As a scheming and seducing villain, Wickham has become not only paltry but also incompetent.²⁶

²⁶The settlement consists, in the first place, of an annual allowance for Lydia of £100 during the life of her father, and £50 when he is dead (p. 302). To this Darcy adds a sum

And all through the crisis and its resolution, Elizabeth continues to probe her sense of Darcy, her feelings for him. No sooner is it known that Lydia is to marry, than she is 'most heartily sorry that she had, from the distress of the moment, been led to make Mr Darcy acquainted with their fears for her sister'. And yet with Wickham about to become her brother, she sees what she calls a 'gulf impassible' between herself and Darcy.

She was humbled, she was grieved; she repented, though she hardly knew of what. She became jealous of his esteem, when she could no longer hope to be benefited by it. She wanted to hear of him, when there seemed the least chance of gaining intelligence. She was convinced that she could have been happy with him; when it was no longer likely they should meet.

(p. 311)

Even when she knows of Darcy's part in arranging Lydia's marriage, she concludes, despite her own wishes and her aunt's encouragement, that it is easier to believe his own ostensible motive - the 'endeavour to remedy an evil, which had been brought on by himself' (p. 322). Again (and her choice of words is interesting) she is 'humbled; but she was proud of him' (p. 327). It is in this mood that she encounters Wickham; and when he attempts, on the

'considerably more than a thousand pounds' to pay Wickham's debts, another thousand settled on Lydia, and he buys Wickham's commission as an ensign (p. 324). At the time of the Peninsular War (1808-12) an ensign in the infantry paid £400 for his commission and drew £80 a year in pay (Elie Halevy, England in 1815, 1913, p. 80). The whole affair therefore cost Darcy about £3000, and the Wickhams' annual income is £230. It is not merely because they are thriftless that they are always in need of money (p. 387).

strength of their new relationship, to renew their talk of Darcy, she goes as far as propriety will allow in showing that she knows his real past, and she succeeds to the extent that Wickham never again 'provoked his dear sister Elizabeth, by introducing the subject' (p. 330). But she is now also able to acknowledge, formally, her new relationship to Wickham (p. 329).²⁷

The return of Bingley and Darcy to Netherfield renews other speculations. And, while attention is focused on Jane and Bingley, it is Elizabeth and Darcy that are the most perplexing. She waits to 'see how he behaves' (p. 335), and even as she endures an intense 'misery of shame' at her mother's general vulgarity, and her particular ungraciousness to Darcy, she can only see that he is 'silent, grave, and indifferent' (p. 339). Subsequent attempts to communicate are no more successful (pp. 340-2): and the meeting with Lady Catherine, spirited though it is, and though it subsequently proves to be as useful as Lydia's elopement in giving each a better understanding of the

²⁷Mansell (1973, p. 106) notes the significance of Elizabeth's formal acknowledgement, but completely misses the meaning of Elizabeth's words before she gives Wickham her hand, and their effect, since he concludes that she 'has let her critical temper relax to keep the family together, and so has her author'. But the concept of the family is important in the novel, and by the end every character of any note is connected with every other, by blood or marriage: equally, though, we have seen how precariously that is achieved, and some restrictions and reservations remain - some members of the 'family' are much more welcome than others at Pemberley, and one is excluded.

other, actually leaves her fearing his aunt's influence, and anticipating that he will not re-appear (pp. 360-1).²⁸

He does, and as they move toward a resolution, each in humility and doubt and embarrassment, they also do so with as anxious an expediency as even Charlotte Lucas would have approved, and they are both equally determined to find or make a pretext (pp. 365-6, 381). That too is a salutary instance, because they are trying to fix and stabilize at least some part of a meaning that has hitherto been fleeting and changing.

²⁸Even at this stage there are still a variety of doubts and puzzles. When Bingley returns to Netherfield, it is some time before Jane stops talking of her 'indifference' (p. 345); and Elizabeth studies for signs of Darcy's influence on his friend (pp. 340, 346), and even at the end she can only guess at the exact relationship between the two men (p. 371). Then, after Darcy proposes, Elizabeth has to justify her feelings to Jane and her father, to show that she has truly lost her prejudice, and so enable them to shed theirs (pp. 372-3, 376-7). And when she prepares to tell Mrs Bennet she is uncertain how her mother will respond, and dislikes the possibilities she can imagine (p. 375): to the end she fears the effect of the 'vulgarity' of her mother and Mrs Phillips on Darcy's tolerance (p. 384).

CHAPTER FOUR

MANSFIELD PARK

Fanny, on being summoned back to Mansfield: 'She was, she felt she was, in the greatest danger of being exquisitely happy, while so many were miserable. The evil which brought such good to her!'

If Mansfield Park is worth reading at all then, of all the six novels, it is the one which appears most readily to invite an approach concerned with narrative techniques and with reading strategies: with the way that the material of the novel is organised, and the consequent questions and choices that are put to the reader. That way at least, we are not immediately committed to taking one of the sides in the noisy critical argument. For this is the novel which readers are least able to admire without significant qualification, and about which there is least agreement.

Chapman (1948, p. 194) has succinctly put the problem presented by the novel in terms of the difficulty of being 'sure of the writer's general intention', and of the 'almost blatantly didactic' moral tone: that seeming contradiction is central. Critic after critic remarks, with fortitude or dismay or outrage, that this novel is unlike the other five in being less likely to engage and puzzle the reader, indeed in its tendency to mix its analysis with a harsh statement of an unpalatable and often unconvincing message. In particular, it is found to be strikingly and inexplicably different from Pride and Prejudice and Emma, the novels

which precede and follow it. The problem of Mansfield Park is not merely that it is unusually 'serious'; it is the problem of why Jane Austen, 'at the height of her powers' as everyone says, should have written this particular novel. It is but a short step from here, to the conclusion that this novel is aesthetically a failure; or to the almost opposite view that its merits have to be specially, and as they have sometimes been, ingeniously argued.

One line, followed especially by the depreciators, is that we can find an explanation for the novel in the state of Jane Austen's mental, spiritual or physical health, when writing it. Much favoured is the view that she was persuaded temporarily but explicitly to reject some element in herself and her art. The argument, even in the best of hands, has a suspicious circularity about it, since defects or shadings in the novel are connected with the presumption of some crisis in the life of its author, a crisis which, at once, cosily explains and is explained by the existence of the novel: often this becomes no more than an easy means of explaining away aspects of the novel which one does not like.¹ A broader approach, taken by most critics at least

¹The most sustained recent version of this argument comes from Darrel Mansell (1973, pp. 108-45). Noting 'a falling off in technique', finding the narrative 'leaden and witless' (p. 109), discovering 'a dismaying amount of direct or diaphanous sermonising' (p. 111), he goes on very selectively to provide biographical and literary details in support of his claim that when she wrote Mansfield Park, Jane Austen was herself rejecting wit and liveliness; and in censuring Mary Crawford, was chastising herself.

some of the way, offers a specific label for the crisis, and also looks for links between the novel and the issues and ideas of its time. In particular, there is the matter of the Evangelicals: the obvious preoccupation in the novel with more and less appropriate modes of behaviour and of education, and with contrasting ideas about society, nature, religion, has been connected again and again, detail for detail, with the views of Hannah More or Thomas Gisborne or William Wilberforce. But almost all of these concerns were with Jane Austen from the first, and the only difference that could be claimed for their treatment here, is that it has an unwonted lack of cheerfulness: and if we remember Sense and Sensibility then we can hardly find the seriousness quite unwonted.² Some have seen the Evangelical question only secondarily as a matter of morality in itself, and primarily as a means for Jane Austen to re-furbish the principles of her class; and very much has been said about the significance of Mansfield Park as a place. Yet others have sought elucidation of the process of re-furbishing not in the thinking of the Evangelicals, but in that of

²For an outline of the history of the argument and its present state, see Peter Garside and Elizabeth McDonald ('Evangelicalism and Mansfield Park' 1975, pp. 34-50), who affirm the Evangelical influence on the novel: and David Monaghan ('Mansfield Park and Evangelicalism: a reassessment', 1978, pp. 215-30), who denies it. Both studies present Jane Austen as anxious to preserve the more worthwhile values of the gentry. For Garside and McDonald, this makes her a natural ally of the Evangelicals: for Monaghan the Evangelicals were 'a part of the forces of change' (p. 230) and so incompatible with her thinking.

such figures as Johnson, Burke or Cowper, even of Humphry Repton and Uvedale Price. But the general effect of all these attempts is to make the novel peculiarly a novel of its time and not of ours.³

And at the centre of the dilemma presented by the novel there is Fanny Price, the heroine for whom 'good' comes out of 'evil', and happiness out of the misery of others. For many readers she is meant to be flawless, and for them she is either a species of 'insufferable prig' or a kind of saint; in the same way, Mary Crawford becomes either the character whose vitality and wit are too much put upon by the moralizing inclination of the author, or the representation of a wicked and sly charm. These are divisions of opinion which do not admit of any useful debate, and the gap has not been much bridged, as yet, by those who have begun to notice that Fanny is not untouched by authorial irony: acknowledging that the heroine has natural flaws does not necessarily make her any more interesting, and in any event such concessions have hitherto

³See Lloyd Brown on the novel and Johnson, Shaftesbury (1973, pp. 49-50), Swift (pp. 90-1), Burke, Cowper, Addison (pp. 94-6). And, on the question of 'improvements', consider Alistair M. Duckworth's extended discussion (1971, pp. 38-55) in which he places Jane Austen on the side of Burke and Cowper, against Repton and Godwin; opposing large-scale Reptonian 'Improvements' as having 'dangerous consequences for the continuity of a culture' (p. 45). See p.93n above, for the suggested connection with the debate between Repton and Uvedale Price. There is nothing at all improper in placing Mansfield Park in such company; but if we are too dependent on the company then there is, surely, something wrong either with the novel or the criticism.

been small, so that the contrast between Mary's charm and Fanny's virtue remains uncomfortably complete; a preference for one, even if it is shaded a little with uneasiness, still forces a rejection of the other.⁴

But for all its difficulties, and its supposed remoteness, Mansfield Park continues to attract eager if varying attention. The visit to Sotherton is much exclaimed over, though while everybody notices the relevance of Maria Bertram passing round the side of the locked gate with Henry Crawford, accounts of the visit as a whole are most to be noted for the ways in which they disagree. And more has probably been written about the theatricals than about any other episode in Jane Austen's fiction, but here it is even more the case that opinions diverge. Henry Crawford's proposal, and Fanny's return to Portsmouth have also not suffered from critical neglect, but once again there have been few signs of a broad consensus.

In short, it would seem that any attempt to provide

⁴At one extreme there is Kingsley Amis ('What became of Jane Austen?', 1957, p. 439) who finds Fanny to be a 'monster of complacency and pride': at the other there is Tony Tanner, for whom she is 'never, ever, wrong' ('Introduction' to Mansfield Park, 1966, p. 8), is indeed an example of 'Anglican sainthood' (pp. 35-6). Amis and Tanner agree in finding Mary to be a striking creation, but Amis claims that Jane Austen allows her to exist too much as a foil for Fanny, while Tanner finds that she is 'frankly selfish and ambitious' (p. 20). For attempts to occupy the middle ground, which nevertheless end up on one side or other, see David Ellis ('The Irony of Mansfield Park' 1969, pp. 107-19) or Kenneth L. Moler ('The two voices of Fanny Price', 1975, pp. 172-9).

an account of Mansfield Park requires an unusual degree of circumspection. For the novel appears to do, pre-eminently, what all art does in some measure: to turn the reader back on himself, to baffle him, to leave him revealing more about himself than the thing he would explain.

.....

Forewarned though, we may at least try to proceed with due care. And we can begin by questioning the claim that this novel is in some way unique among the six novels. It is often noted that Mansfield Park is the first of the Chawton novels, the first to be written wholly in Jane Austen's maturity. We know from Cassandra Austen that it was begun 'somewhere about' February 1811, and finished 'soon after' June 1813 (Minor Works, facing p. 242), but there are significant bonds with the novels that were started in the late 1790's: a letter in April 1811 mentions Sense and Sensibility, Jane Austen's 'sucking child', which she is preparing for publication - she also refers to 'my Elinor' much as she does to 'My Fanny' in the more noted instance at the end of Mansfield Park (Letters, p. 273). Nor is it merely by conjunction that the two novels can be linked, for just as many readers find Mansfield Park to be a gloomy and obtrusive interruption of the connections between Pride and Prejudice and Emma, so Mansfield Park would less often have been found untypical

had it followed Sense and Sensibility consecutively. Both are marked by the same generally serious tone, and both conclude with a happiness that is decidedly muted. Fanny, like Elinor, is less in need of education herself, than the quite passive observer of the attempted learnings of others. That is not to say that either heroine is perfect, or made wholly in the image of Jane Austen: Fanny has, interestingly, something also of Marianne's 'enthusiasm' (though not quite her 'passion') for Cowper in particular, and Nature in general.⁵ Indeed, it would not be unreasonable to claim that part of the conception of Fanny Price is an attempt to contain, in a subtle combination, some of the qualities and the differences reflected in the two sisters in Sense and Sensibility, and that begins to give us a measure of the technical and psychological advance achieved by Jane Austen in the later novel.

But what of Pride and Prejudice? The movement from this novel to Mansfield Park is surely more than a shift from the cheerful to the serious; so much more, in fact, that one can appreciate the temptation to look for something in Jane Austen herself that persuaded her to allow moral pre-occupation to override aesthetic considerations. But

⁵Also, like Catherine Morland, Fanny's reading has given her a taste for Gothic architecture, as she shows in the chapel at Sotherton. Fanny's expectations may not be quite so excited as Catherine's, but they are distinct, and they are almost as misplaced. See also Susan Morgan, In the Meantime, 1980, pp. 133-6, for more suggested ways in which Fanny is like rather than unlike other Jane Austen heroines.

outside the novel itself there is nothing to support this contention. The letters are frequently ransacked for clues, and too often their characteristics, as letters, are ignored: they are almost always personal, even intimate; they are typically - and sometimes bafflingly - allusive and elliptical; and they have a persistent tendency to switch lightly from topic to topic. Then of course the letters, as we have them, are far from complete, and none at all survive from the period, crucial to the present question, of early June 1811 to late November 1812.⁶ In the surviving letters that coincide with the writing of Mansfield Park there is nothing to suggest convincingly the doubts and perplexities that we might have anticipated. What is more, if the existence of the earlier novel invites a 'biographical' explanation of the later, then it also stands as something of an embarrassment to that explanation. If it is correct to assume that the revisions of Pride and Prejudice were both late and substantial, then there must have been a considerable period when Jane Austen was at work on both novels, and it is difficult to see how one novel should be so deeply marked by a crisis which left the other so unscathed. Pride and Prejudice was published only in January 1813, by which time

⁶The process by which some letters were lost, and others suppressed, can of course only be guessed at: even the existence of this substantial gap can only be the subject of idle conjecture; there are several other gaps of about the same length, and one (May 1801 to September 1804) is considerably longer.

Jane Austen had been working on Mansfield Park for two years, had written at least half of it (Chapman, 1948, p. 82) and was within six months of completing it. Nor is there anything in her response to the publication of the earlier novel to suggest the weighty moral pre-occupations that are supposed to have determined the shape and contents of the latter: rather, the opposite. Two days after receiving a copy of the published novel, her 'own darling child', she writes to Cassandra in a mood, natural enough, of high elation, and mentions that she and her mother have been reading the novel aloud: Elizabeth Bennet is 'as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like her at least I do not know'. She goes on to remark on some minor faults in the text, dismisses them vigorously as unimportant, in a two-line parody of Marmion, and then makes the troublesome reference to ordination, which is often taken as referring to the subject of Mansfield Park:

Now I will try to write of something else, & it shall be a complete change of subject—ordination—I am glad to find your enquiries have ended so well. If you could discover whether Northamptonshire is a country of Hedgerows I should be glad again.

(p. 298)

But surely Hugh Brogan is right in arguing that this is a change of subject within the letter, rather than a statement about the subject of her next novel. There can have been no point anyway in telling Cassandra the subject of Mansfield Park, since the letters show that she was intimately familiar

with the half that had already been written (Chapman, 1948, p. 82). The mention of ordination then, like that of hedge-rows, probably relates to certain details in the novel which she is checking for accuracy.⁷

Six days later, having received a letter from Cassandra in which there is praise of Pride and Prejudice, she writes that the praise 'came at a right time'. The elation had been followed, equally naturally, by doubts.

Upon the whole, however, I am quite vain enough and well satisfied enough. The work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story; an essay on writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparté, or anything that would form a contrast, and bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and epigrammatism of the general style.

(pp. 299-300)

And despite attempts to see this as a rejection of wit, in favour of the pursuit of wisdom, or principle, it seems to me to mean little more than it says. She now feels more aware than she was of the novel's limitations. 'Upon the

⁷Brogan's point was made in a letter to the TLS (19 December 1968, p. 1440). Previous attempts to see ordination as the subject of the novel foundered because while ordination is not unimportant, it is also not the subject of the novel. The most usual and satisfactory explanations were therefore those either of Chapman, who argued that Jane Austen's statement 'cannot mean what it seems to mean' (1948, p. 82); or of Trilling, who claimed that the question of ordination is crucial in the novel, but that it 'is not really a religious question, ... rather, a cultural question, having to do with the meaning and effect of a profession ('Mansfield Park', 1954, p. 498).

whole', however, these limitations are not thought to be serious. There is for her, now, a certain sameness in the sparkle: in much the same way she had praised her mother's style of reading aloud, in the first letter, and in this finds a sameness in it, an inadequate distinction between the characters. But even if her doubts are more than temporary, her discussion of the remedies is clearly in part a lively joke so we cannot in reason go much beyond the simple conclusion that at this point she felt that the style of the book wanted a little in contrast. We can surmise also that she recognised that there are other ways of exploring and refining meaning as important and as interesting, if less immediately entertaining: Jane Austen herself observed, when she was completing Mansfield Park, that it was 'not half so entertaining' as Pride and Prejudice (Letters, p. 317). But it is difficult to see in this a Jane Austen who was suffering the agonies of some personal crisis; who was crushed under the graver interests of Hannah More; or who, with profound sorrow, was contemplating the decline of the gentry.⁸

⁸The case for linking Jane Austen's criticism of Pride and Prejudice with Mansfield Park has been most clearly stated by Walton Litz (1965, pp. 112-31). Pride and Prejudice, he says, inherited its 'essential dynamism - its gaiety and vitality ... from the youthful First Impressions': Mansfield Park, though, reflects 'the problems of her middle life', complete with confirmed spinsterhood, other personal uncertainties, and a turning towards Evangelicalism (p. 114). So, he sees the novel as uncompromisingly didactic (p. 116), and a 'necessary catharsis' (p. 131) for its author, enabling her to go on to write Emma. But it remains

What is more, the differences between Mansfield Park and Pride and Prejudice, though striking tonally, can actually often be seen to be no more than different ways of treating the same questions. Though it is less substantially a part of its argument Pride and Prejudice, too, has important things to say about education, and Darcy's admission - 'I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit' (p. 369) - reveals a scheme that is less limited in degree but not in kind than that of the Bertrams. And, though it does not pivot quite so neatly about a proposal scene, Mansfield Park does have its own scene, almost exactly in the middle of the novel; it too is a proposal that comes as a notable surprise, it too is one in which the man is, in every worldly sense, much superior to the woman. Both novels reach their conclusions by way of an elopement, and the similarity here is more than can be explained because elopement is a common novelistic subject - consider its different and altogether more conventional treatment in Sense and Sensibility. Mr Bennet has to be persuaded from his resolve that Lydia will not be allowed to visit Longbourn, while his neighbours happily anticipate that she will be 'secluded from the world, in some distant farm house' (p. 309): in not being so persuaded, Sir Thomas is merely the stern

difficult to see how something so apparently serious, with such a capacity to shape one novel, should affect only that novel, and should also be of so brief a duration: Emma was begun on 21 January 1814.

enforcer of conventional morality that we expect. And it is when we have properly attended to the similarities, that we can fully appreciate the differences. Elizabeth, poised, articulate and intelligent, is very well suited to scorn Darcy and then to love him. Fanny has none of Elizabeth's advantages, since even her intelligence is brought into doubt by some of the duller remarks she makes. What she possesses is an acute moral sensibility, and that itself makes for more differences between the novels: Elizabeth enters her novel replete with her capacities, while with Fanny we see a good deal of the process by which she acquires that moral sensibility, so we can evaluate the morality she exemplifies as we examine the process by which she comes to exemplify it. And the distinctions between the novels are the more apparent when we consider some of the central relationships in each. Darcy is struck by Elizabeth's wit and independence; Crawford by Fanny's virtue and her subservience. Darcy's 'faults' are, as Elizabeth believes (p. 248) and as he acknowledges himself (p. 58), faults of 'temper'. Fanny does not criticise Crawford for faults of 'temper' but want of 'principles' (p. 317). And there is Mary Crawford who, with her demonstration of how irresponsible wit and sparkle can be, is a qualification to much of the mode and substance of Pride and Prejudice, most particularly of its heroine. Here of course Jane Austen is often thought to have erred most seriously, or else to be in need of specially reinforced argument: but the link

between Elizabeth and Mary is surely not so straightforward as to imply that what is generally recommended in the earlier novel, is largely rejected in its successor. Elizabeth's wit is, after all, rather different from Mary's, and though she certainly laughs with her father over the follies of Mr Collins, the conclusions she is likely to come to are conclusions about fools in general, not clergymen; and even Elizabeth finds that wit is not all-sufficient. What is more, if Mary may be said to have her origins in Pride and Prejudice, then we must also note her complex association with other characters; with Caroline Bingley, and her defence of town values and town manners, with Charlotte Lucas, and her materialistic view of marriage and of life.

So, in shifting the focus from wit to morality, Mansfield Park does not seek to deny wit. If the novel urges the necessity of morality, if it lays out particular sets of principles, then it examines the defects as well as the merits of these principles. It becomes, in fact, a means for considering the limitations of morality in individual lives and in their mutual dealings, as scrupulously as the limitations of wit were considered in its predecessor. If Mansfield Park was written under the strong influence of the Evangelicals - the question remains doubtful - then it is about the limitations of those doctrines, about the points they cannot touch. In summing up the achievements of Mansfield Park, Mary Lascelles (1939, p. 35) has suggested

that it 'excelled Pride and Prejudice in its subtler conception of human relations - by as much Pride and Prejudice had excelled Sense and Sensibility in its more subtly planned construction'. It would perhaps be fairer to say that the two later novels both represent a simultaneous advance in psychological and technical subtlety. Sense and Sensibility is concerned with ideas as ideas, and we see individuals in complicated and rather formal relation to them. Pride and Prejudice concentrates on ideas as they function in relationship with people in practice, through continually shifting emphases and changing possibilities. Mansfield Park gives up the wholesale undermining of certainty, and substitutes the doubts and ambiguities of a much smaller scale. The picture seems, almost completely, to say one thing, but just enough does not fit to make us hesitate a little. The instances of obvious immorality in the novel are so very obvious that they scarcely require a judgement to be pronounced: the real point is that the kinds of judgement which the novel does offer for our consideration are almost but not entirely adequate. We can respond, as many readers do, either by sticking with the judgements or by rejecting them; we can, in short, side wholly with or against Fanny and Edmund. But that is an unsatisfactory choice, since neither side can be made to yield sufficiently to the other: a more promising stance would be one in which we observed, with greater detachment, the elaborate debate which the novel sets out.

That begins to suggest the possibility of a kind of relationship between novel and reader that is new to Jane Austen. It is right to praise Mansfield Park for its psychological subtlety, and this is not only in terms of individual beings, but also of social groups as social groups, even of a more pervasive sense of society at large. In Pride and Prejudice, for example, we can sometimes catch the voice of Meryton as a community, but we much more often hear the distinctive voices of its individual members; in its successor there is a much finer conveying of the links between individual and group. This gives the people and events of the novel a greater measure of what could be called autonomy, and they exist, much more, in their own terms: and the reader has the chance to adopt a more detached stance, a wider perspective, in viewing the material of the novel. Where in the earlier novels we saw more or less what the heroine saw, now we have a more substantial opportunity to survey, as the narrator surveys. Once again, the contrast with Pride and Prejudice gives a measure of the change: that presents an enclosed world, one in which meaning took much of its primary force from within, and our experience parallels Elizabeth's, as we gradually acquire a conception of a picture that is complicated and composite. Now it is as though we are presented with a picture that is already completely, complexly, formed, one that obliges us to move from a sense of the whole to an understanding of the working of its parts.

The complexity is hinted at even at moments that seem to invite the most straightforward judgement. Consider the case of Mrs Norris: from the first pages of the novel when we see her angry bustle in promoting the breach between Mansfield and Portsmouth, it is as easy to judge her as it is to dislike her - indeed the narrator allows us only a little time to formulate an opinion before briskly supporting us with a sharply uttered judgement. Thus when Mrs Norris claims to be a 'woman of few words and professions' (p. 6), she does so in the midst of a flow of verbose and unreliable professions: and she no sooner sets herself up to be selflessly concerned for the troubles of others, than the narrator confirms our darkest suspicions, detail for detail, concluding

Under this infatuating principle, counteracted by no real affection for her sister, it was impossible for her to aim at more than the credit of projecting and arranging so expensive a charity; though perhaps she might so little know herself, as to walk home to the Parsonage after this conversation, in the happy belief of being the most liberal-minded sister and aunt in the world.

(pp. 8-9)

The same device is used, a little later, against the Bertrams as well. The girls are shown enjoying their superiority over their cousin: they scorn her poverty ('but two sashes'), her ignorance, her lack of ambition to be 'accomplished'. Their aunt encourages them, while also claiming that the charity to Fanny is her own doing. Then the narrator actually states the strictures we are beginning to formulate, and even extends them to Sir Thomas.

Such were the counsels by which Mrs Norris assisted to form her nieces' minds; and it is not very wonderful that with all their promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility. In every thing but disposition, they were admirably taught. Sir Thomas did not know what was wanting, because, though a truly anxious father, he was not outwardly affectionate, and the reserve of his manner repressed all the flow of their spirits before him.

(p. 19)

After this we glimpse Lady Bertram, comfortably ensconced on her sofa, preoccupied with her needlework and her pug; Tom Bertram is revealed, a page later, to be 'careless and extravagant'; and we can guess that even Edmund, not lacking in merit, is culpable to the extent that he is his father's son. The defects and the limitations of the whole family are thus economically set before us. And of course, at the end of the novel, there is a severe re-iteration of these strictures as when, for example, Sir Thomas sorrowfully reviews his 'plan of education' for his daughters. Not only does he find that the combination of repression and indulgence has had the reverse effect to the one he intended, but 'principle, active principle, had been wanting'.

They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments—the authorised object of their youth—could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them.

(p. 463)

That points to an obvious contrast with Fanny, and might begin to suggest that the novel really is comprised of some distinctly flat-footed moralizing. But in fact such moments happen quite rarely in the novel, and the narrator only gives utterance to judgements of this scope and firmness on those few occasions when such judgements are safe. It is almost as if the narrator is leading us into a consensus about those matters so simple that they do not warrant lengthy attention, as a clearing of space for those that do. And even the most austere of the summary judgements is seldom unmixed: there are, for example, enough scattered clues in the opening pages to make it possible for us, as well as judging Mrs Norris, to undertake the rather different task of understanding her. The less than obvious fact that she is the oldest of the three sisters can help to illuminate the striking difference between her and her passive sisters, just as it underscores the irony by which the younger sisters both attain positions which though strikingly different, are beyond their 'managing' capacities, but well within that of their under-employed sister. And the irony expands as the novel opens out: it is Miss Maria who is 'raised to the rank of a baronet's lady' but it is Miss Ward who takes the more active pleasure in enjoying the 'comforts and consequences'. Then, her pre-occupation with the rights of eldest daughters is reflected in her decided preference for Maria Bertram, and it is she who does most to assist her niece into an ambitious and disastrous marriage. Similarly, it is she who chooses

the eldest Portsmouth daughter, rather than any of the 'fine boys' Mrs Price is more concerned about, as the child most suitable for Mansfield charity; and once Fanny is in the context of Mansfield, it is naturally Mrs Norris who is most busy to ensure that she is 'lowest and last' (p. 221).

At other points, though, the methods of summary judgement are actually little in evidence. Lady Bertram, for instance, is only very lightly touched, and would have had all the little life crushed out of her, had she been subjected to the treatment so bluntly meted out to Mrs Norris. Instead, while we never lose sight of her almost perfect indolence, and of the way that helps to make Mansfield Park the place it is, we also never lose sight of her vitality, minimal though that is: and throughout the novel we have to re-adjust our sense of her, as further details about her are lightly and unobtrusively sketched in. She can, for example, be surprisingly 'candid' in acknowledging that some of her demands on Fanny are unreasonable, even if that does not quite stop her making the demands (p. 74). For someone whose mind is so little in evidence, she has a notable memory for her own path to matrimony, and her career as a beauty, so she notes with 'astonishment' the fact that Mrs Grant is 'so well settled in life without being handsome' (pp. 31-2). And Crawford's proposal to Fanny so animates her that she suddenly perceives her niece to be a beauty who is repeating her own history, and she goes to the lengths of offering her niece a puppy, 'which is more than I did for

Maria' (p. 333). On at least one occasion she is so touched by 'an affecting sermon', that she weeps - though it must be acknowledged that she 'cried herself to sleep' (p. 453).

One of the most substantial additions to the picture, her capacity as a letter writer, comes so late that it has been thought unconvincing (p. 425): but her letters are, surely, very like an extension of her needlework - 'long' pieces, 'of little use and no beauty' (p. 19). And of course Fanny's return to Mansfield brings her to her feet, and out of the room, to welcome her niece (p. 447).⁹

At other points, the method of summary judgement is itself made to look rather dubious. This questioning of judgement is actually the novels' most typical mode, and it is to be found principally at first in the treatment of Sir Thomas, and the way that we are confronted with the man as a whole, his tendencies, his values, his judgements. Though the narrator is almost silent, offering only the occasional oblique irony, perhaps indeed partly because the reader has,

⁹Some large claims have been made for Lady Bertram. Mary Lascelles (1939, p. 156) found a 'startlingly direct correspondence between her reaction to events and their emotional reality'. But if that makes too much of her - one thinks of what is 'almost the only rule of conduct' she gives her niece (p. 333) - then other accounts are apt to over-emphasise her passiveness. Trilling (1954, pp.508-9) suggests that Jane Austen was 'teasing herself', offering 'her mocking representation of her wish to escape from the requirements of personality'. Yet others have been vigorous detractors: for Q.D. Leavis (1941, pp. 136-9) she is a piece of 'self-indulgence' by Jane Austen, and her letter-writing is an inconsistency, is 'only an opportunity to work in a satiric account of conventional letter-writing, and belongs to the early satiric letters' of the Minor Works.

so much, to decide for himself, it is difficult to get an entirely adequate grasp of the man, and we can even find ourselves smiling where we expected to be most solemn. From the first, he is a figure of undoubted but uncertain authority and principle. He finds difficulty (no doubt genuinely) in helping a brother-in-law who is a Lieutenant of Marines:

Sir Thomas had interest, which, from principle as well as pride, from a general wish of doing right, and a desire of seeing all that were connected with him in situations of respectability, he would have been glad to exert for the advantage of Lady Bertram's sister; but her husband's profession was such as no interest could reach ...

(pp. 3-4)

But what is there to the motivating 'principle', beyond the so general indication given: what, in point of fact, is there beyond an extension of self-interest? And how exactly does 'principle' combine with 'pride'? Then, though it subsequently becomes more and more clear that he is a man of principle, it is almost easier for us to get his measure by what he is not. We see him giving weighty consideration to the suggestion that Fanny be brought to Mansfield, and to the responsibility that implies for her, for the Prices, for his own children, and this is not merely the expression of conventional doubts: if he argues that there must be a 'proper' distinction between Fanny and his daughters, then he also acknowledges that it is a point of 'great delicacy' (pp. 10-11), one on which there should be no rigid enforcement. Everyone notices the larger irony in this; it is because Fanny is not like her cousins, and because the

distinction is maintained, that she eventually becomes more truly his daughter than either of her cousins. But there is also a smaller irony that is almost as telling, since his lofty speculations carry little real weight against Mrs Norris's verborities here, or against the rigid distinctions between her nieces that the aunt does so much to support.

The question of his eldest son puts Sir Thomas in an even stranger light. Tom's 'extravagance' costs his brother one of the two livings being held for him, and we might expect that, as with the question of his sister's education, a few pages before, the narrator will take the opportunity to condemn him roundly, and through him, his family. But instead, it is Sir Thomas who passes judgement; and though he has right on his side, unmistakably, he also looks rather ridiculous.

'I blush for you, Tom,' said he, in his most dignified manner; 'I blush for the expedient which I am driven on, and I trust I may pity your feelings as a brother on the occasion. You have robbed Edmund for ten, twenty, thirty years, perhaps for life, of more than half the income which ought to be his. It may hereafter be in my power, or in your's (I hope it will), to procure him better preferment; but it must not be forgotten, that no benefit of that sort would have been beyond his natural claims on us, and that nothing can, in fact, be an equivalent for the certain advantage which he is now obliged to forego through the urgency of your debts.'

(pp. 23-4)

These abstractions, at once weighty and pompous, reinforce Sir Thomas's position as the most conspicuous figure of moral authority in the novel, while also undermining it by making him something of a figure of fun. The effect is

compounded and made more difficult to penetrate by the response of Tom: he is genuinely touched, but then he also tries to shrug aside the feelings of guilt as quickly as possible, so that we can see both the necessity for, and the unworkability of, his father's 'most dignified manner'. What is more, and it is an odd effect in a novel that seems so preoccupied with morality and authority, Tom's response begins to generate a quite rough comedy. It is with 'cheerful selfishness' that he rationalizes himself away from the little understanding he possesses of what he has done, and focuses, in three easy steps, on the death of Dr Grant as a means of making good to Edmund what he himself has lost his brother. And when Dr Grant's appearance ('a hearty man of forty-five') seems likely to upset Tom's calculations, he is unperturbed: '... no, he was a short-neck'd, apoplectic sort of fellow, and, plied well with good things, would soon pop off' (p. 24). The vigorous colloquialisms are entertaining enough; but the question of Dr Grant's health actually becomes a sustained and somewhat macabre joke, one that makes up a minor but not insignificant thread in the novel: the doctor proves to be not only irascible, but also very eager to be 'plied well with good things', and so provides telling support, by way of example, for Mary Crawford's views on marriage and on clergymen; and at the end of the novel he brings on 'apoplexy and death, by three great institutionary dinners in one week' (p. 469), thus allowing Edmund to acquire the Mansfield living conveniently

at a point when he has been 'married long enough to begin to want an increase of income' (p. 473). We may have expected to be pushed towards the side of high principles, and we have in fact been encouraged a little in that direction; but we have also had to question the efficacy of the principles, and we have even been tempted to smile at them.

This also illustrates the way in which principles are being examined, in so large a measure, by being set in particular contexts, and by being caught up in the inner workings of the novel: we know that the narrator is surveying, but we do not hear the narrator's opinions directly stated. This is a method that we can perhaps best see, in outline, in the work of one of Jane Austen's contemporaries. In some of Crabbe's Tales of 1812, 'Arabella' for example, almost nothing except for general reflections comes direct from the poet, almost everything reaches us in the form of views and ideas of Arabella, and her friends and neighbours. So, Arabella is studious, and this fact is most vividly conveyed by the attitude of the townsfolk, who regard her as 'the wonder of the town' (line 33). Mothers recommend her 'as a pattern' (line 10) to their daughters; the daughters, though, are too envious to be impressed (lines 13-22). Central to the interest of the poem is the 'discretion' (line 53) with which she deals with men as lovers: one man is generally thought likely to succeed, and the history of his courtship, the pleas and debates, the arguments when he proves morally unsound and Arabella rejects him, are all

rendered directly in the words of the lovers and their friends, with almost nothing in the way of commentary from the narrator. Thus Arabella's decision is supported, but only from a source within the poem.

First to admire, to praise her, and defend,
Was (now in years advanced) a virgin friend:
(lines 184-5)

And though Crabbe himself acknowledges, a little later, that such support is ambivalent, and could spring either from 'joy' or from 'envy' (lines 266-75), he also leaves the ambivalence unresolved. Similarly, he makes general observations on

the gradual change in human hearts,
That time, in commerce with the world, imparts;
(lines 212-3)

but we must judge for ourselves exactly how Arabella herself comes to change, and twelve years later is wooed by one

Who offer'd terms so fair, against his love
To strive was folly, so she never strove.—
(lines 236-7)

The Tale ends with the 'virgin friend' angrily warning Arabella that her present lover is much stained, more so than previous contenders: we are offered nothing to support this accusation, but we have also to consider the way Arabella chooses to ignore it

If false the charge, I then shall show regard
For a good man, and be his just reward:
And what for virtue can I better do
Than to reclaim him if the charge be true?
(lines 329-32)

By now the narrator has become so profoundly ironic an observer, that in order to understand we must ourselves attempt to achieve the resolution. Crabbe recognised something of the difficulty he was creating, since he attached a footnote explaining that his 'purpose in this Tale may be mistaken', so he emphasised that Arabella's behaviour was meant as 'an instance of ... self-deception'. Even then, Crabbe is more interested in the relative and the possible, than in the actual and the absolute, as the wording of his note shows.¹⁰

Jane Austen does not use footnotes to make clear her 'purpose', and we have to depend the more on the internal working of her novel, rather than the narrator's view of these workings. Thus while sound principle is of course being advocated, it is also being questioned, as with the example of Sir Thomas, even when it appears most necessary. By the same token, when Sir Thomas appears to represent a principle that is most vitiated, when he seems most obviously open to censure, we should hesitate before condemning him. It seems at first easy to measure his culpability when,

¹⁰As the author's purpose in this Tale may be mistaken, he wishes to observe, that conduct like that of the lady's here described must be meritorious or censurable just as the motives to it are pure or selfish; that these motives may in a great measure be concealed from the mind of the agent; and that we often take credit to our virtue for actions which spring originally from our tempers, inclinations, or our indifference. It cannot therefore be improper, much less immoral, to give an instance of such self-deception.'

for instance, we see his attitude to Maria's marriage. He discovers, very soon after his return from Antigua, that Rushworth is a fool, and he also begins to understand his daughter's view of the man: 'She could not, did not like him' (p. 200). Yet blinded, apparently, by the worldly advantages of the match, he seems to make no very strenuous efforts to prevent it. But such a view does not account for the complicated pressures and circumstances that exist. He does not begin to understand the mixture of passion and wilfulness that is his daughter, or the way that she is too little governed by 'active principle', and that must be a measure of his inadequacy as a father, but he can know nothing of the part Henry Crawford has played in her feelings, and he cannot know that it is because she has been waiting agitatedly for Crawford to declare his love, that it is easy for her father to detect her dislike of Rushworth.¹¹ And it has to be acknowledged that Sir Thomas does make a serious effort to talk to her; he does so with 'solemn kindness' and that is at once a measure of his sincerity in his wishing that 'her happiness must not be sacrificed' (p. 200), and an indication that he will fail to communicate with her, just as he failed earlier with Tom: there are striking parallels in the two encounters, even if there is

¹¹See pp. 191-4. Henry's going away, not declaring himself, can help us to see him as a heartless trifler: but it could also be the consequence of his sister's plan to send him away 'as soon as the play is all over' (p. 162).

less, in the second, to amuse us. And Maria's formal, concise statement of her wish to marry Rushworth matches, closely, the formal tones habitually adopted by her father, and doubtless adopted on this occasion.

But if he is 'satisfied' with this, then the narrator's comment offers us no sure standpoint from which to judge his satisfaction. Employing a device that is characteristic of the novel, and especially the middle volume, the narrator speaks only in conditionals and possibilities.¹² Sir Thomas is, we are told, 'too glad to be satisfied perhaps to urge the matter quite so far as his judgement might have dictated to others' (p. 201). On that uncertain note he is abandoned to his lofty and muddled thoughts, and we have to make what we can of them: thoughts in which the desirability of the match and the awkwardness of breaking it off, the hope that Rushworth will improve, the belief in Maria's self-confidence, the notion - Edmund makes the same mistake about his sister (p. 116) - that her feelings are not strong anyway, and the idea that she will be happy at Sotherton because it is close

¹²As at the parsonage, when Sir Thomas advises his wife to play Speculation, not Whist: 'He was a Whist player himself, and perhaps might feel that it would not much amuse him to have her for a partner' (p. 239). Or, at the end of the ball, when he approaches Fanny, 'advising her to go immediately to bed': 'In thus sending her away, Sir Thomas perhaps might not be thinking merely of her health. It might occur to him, that Mr Crawford had been sitting by her long enough, or he might mean to recommend her as a wife by shewing her persuadableness' (pp. 280-1). In each case, the possibilities, some more honourable than others, remain only possibilities.

to Mansfield, all jostle uneasily together.

Nor is that the end of speculation. Sir Thomas's talk with his daughter is also crucially dependent (in a way that he can know nothing of) on its timing, for its effect. Had he spoken to her a few days earlier, that is 'within the first three or four days after Henry Crawford's leaving Mansfield', then 'her answer might have been different' (pp. 201-2). By the time he does speak, she has become 'cool enough to seek all the comfort that pride and self-revenge could give'. And her thinking, though remote from anything he imagines is in her mind, is as muddled as her father's. She feels that she should not be seen, at least by Crawford, to be rejecting 'independence and splendour for his sake', and that she 'must escape' from her father and from Mansfield 'as soon as possible, and find consolation in fortune and consequence, bustle and the world, for a wounded spirit'. Maria is one of the few indubitably 'wrong' people in the novel, and the narrator's much-cited judgement of her might seem to say all:

In all the important preparations of the mind she was complete; being prepared for matrimony by an hatred of home, restraint, and tranquility; by the misery of disappointed affection, and contempt of the man she was to marry. The rest might wait. The preparation of new carriages and furniture might wait for London and spring, when her own taste could have fairer play.

(p. 202)

But this detached and general view, with its strikingly balanced ironies, tells us much more about what she is not

than about what she ought to be: and if we are to understand how she comes to make this considerable amplification of her early felt 'moral obligation' (p. 38) to marry Rushworth, then we must go back to the interior workings of the novel.

.....

So the presentation of morality in Mansfield Park is neither uncomplicated nor uncritical: but what is that morality? The insistence on 'active principle' makes it temptingly easy to see the novel as a sophisticated advocacy of the Evangelicals' cause, and there have been loud claims that Jane Austen herself was, albeit briefly, inclined to their thinking. But there is almost no real evidence to support this. A couple of years before writing Mansfield Park, she is decidedly against them: her response to Hannah More's Coelebs in Search of a Wife (1808), before even she has read it, is the blunt 'I do not like the Evangelicals' (Letters, p. 256). And she went back to her own Juvenilia, to insert More's title in 'Catherine' (Minor Works, p. 232), in a context that heartily satirised its didacticism. Then, not long after completing Mansfield Park, she writes in a distinctly unEvangelical way to complain of a Mr Cooper's 'new Sermons;—they are fuller of Regeneration & Conversion than ever—with the addition of his zeal in the cause of the Bible Society' (Letters, p. 467, 8 September 1816).

The one favourable reference to the Evangelicals comes in a letter of 18 November 1814, and that itself is awkwardly late for Mansfield Park, being six months after it was published, and only four before Emma was finished. It also does little to suggest a fervent personal commitment to their principles, and even less to suggest that her last-published novel was founded on them. She is writing to a niece who is uncertainly in love, and she is careful to explore all the areas of uncertainty, but on one point she is firm: the young man's 'goodness', even his tendency towards Evangelicalism should not, itself, be disparaged.

And as to there being any objection from his Goodness, from the danger of his becoming even Evangelical, I cannot admit that. I am by no means convinced that we ought not all to be Evangelicals, & am at least persuaded that they who are so from Reason and Feeling, must be happiest & safest.—

(p. 410)

In the circumstances, this calm recommendation of a moderate and rational Evangelicalism cannot be taken as meaning much more than that the aunt would be happier if her niece married a man of firm religious principle. The letter goes on to advise a preference for wisdom over wit, to urge that there be no 'marrying without Affection', and to suggest alertness to any 'deficiencies of Manner' in the man: all of this could be applied to Mansfield Park, but just as easily to any other of the six novels. And if Jane Austen were, even briefly, wholeheartedly Evangelical at this time, then it is strange that only two months before she should express a decisive preference for the sermons, not say of the recent,

Evangelically inclined Bishop of London, Beilby Porteus, but of one of his predecessors, Thomas Sherlock (Letters, p. 406), whose death in 1761 makes him entirely pre-Evangelical, many of whose sermons, indeed, were preached in the first years of that century.¹³

Of course, to test their principles in a novel (especially given that the test is not uncritical) Jane Austen need not herself have been an Evangelical. The matter of 'active principle' is at the heart of William Wilberforce's A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System (1797), and of his distinction, fundamental to Evangelical thinking, between 'professed Christians' and 'real Christianity'.¹⁴ Professed Christians are not only those

¹³Editions of Porteus's Works came out in 1811 and 1813: there was a new edition of Sherlock's Several Discourses in 1812. Some impressive-looking structures have claimed support from Jane Austen's single favourable reference to the Evangelicals. Marilyn Butler (1975, pp. 62-3) uses it to get from her general account of the ideas and novels of the times, to her specific treatment of Jane Austen's novels, by way of the claim that Richard Whately's review of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion (1821, p. 359) links Jane Austen with Hannah More (he does, but only to say that unlike Hannah More, Jane Austen does not make her religion 'obtrusive'); by declaring 1814 to be 'the year of Mansfield Park', when it is much more properly that of Emma; by quoting Jane Austen's favourable comment, but without giving the context; and by explaining away the later unfavourable comment, as a rejection not of Evangelicalism but of that 'wing' of the Evangelicals influenced by Calvinism and Methodism - influences which Butler herself later summarily denies, when the needs of her own argument have changed (pp. 285-6).

¹⁴For a full account of the Evangelicals, their aims and achievements, see Ford K. Brown (Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce, 1961, especially pp. 4-6 and 26-30).

who are Christian in name only, but also those who mean well but are insufficiently instructed.

If we listen to their conversation, virtue is praised, and vice is censured; piety is perhaps applauded, and prophaneness condemned. So far all is well. But let any one, who would not be deceived by these 'barren generalities' examine a little more closely, and he will find, that not to Christianity in particular, but at best to Religion in general, perhaps to mere Morality, their homage is intended to be paid. With Christianity, as distinct from these, they are little acquainted; their views of it have been so cursory and superficial, that far from discerning its characteristic essence, they have little more than perceived those exterior circumstances which distinguish it from other forms of religion.

(pp. 7-8)

But this is really to suggest differences rather than similarities with Jane Austen, who does not, even in Mansfield Park, embark upon the vigorous and single-minded proselytising that Wilberforce calls for. Certainly, she argues that principle must be properly inculcated, but where is that special sense of the Christian religion which, for Wilberforce and the other Evangelicals, demanded articulation? The Evangelicals could only have regarded Jane Austen as a professed Christian; a little enlightened, perhaps, but still with a dangerous tendency even on the too-few occasions when Christianity is being explicitly discussed - as when Edmund Bertram defends the role of clergyman (pp. 92-3, for example) - to confuse Christianity with 'mere Morality'.

But it can still be argued that there are links between Jane Austen and the Evangelicals, in terms of specific applications of principle. Thomas Gisborne, for example, in

his Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex (1797), notes how when a woman is insufficiently instructed in religious principles, she can very easily lose the little grasp she has of them (pp. 53-6). And he warns, emphatically, against encouraging 'emulation' when educating the young. Mrs Norris encourages emulation in Mansfield Park, and it is one of the things in which she finds Fanny to be deficient (p. 19): at least some of the many dire consequences Gisborne attaches to emulation can be found in Mansfield Park:

It stimulates and nourishes some of the darkest passions of the human mind; and subverts those motives, and undermines those sentiments and affections, which it is one main purpose of Christianity to inculcate and enforce. Self-conceit, a supercilious contempt of persons supposed, and often falsely supposed, of inferior attainments; proneness to suspect teachers of being prejudiced and partial, and assiduous endeavours to conciliate their favour by finesse; a secret wish that it were possible to retard the progress of successful competitors; an envious desire to detract from their merits; and a gradually increasing aversion to their society, and indifference to their welfare, are among its usual effects.

(p. 71)

Gisborne also expresses a characteristically Evangelical disapproval of 'ornamental accomplishments' (pp. 80-3), which, it could be argued, is echoed in Mansfield Park. And his views on acting, in particular his disapproval of private theatricals may have influenced Jane Austen.¹⁵ Then, his opinion of how marriage ought to be regarded agrees very

¹⁵Gisborne, pp. 183-4. The possible connection with Mansfield Park is noted by Bradbrook (Jane Austen and her Predecessors, 1966, p. 36).

closely with Fanny Price's views, just as it encompasses almost everything which Maria Bertram leaves out of her thinking. Comparing marriage with friendship, he says:

Unless the dispositions, the temper, the habits, the genuine character, and inmost principles were mutually known; what rational hope, what tolerable chance of happiness could subsist? And if happiness should not be the lot of the two associates, would not their disquietudes be proportionate to the closeness of their union?

(p. 239)

Equally, he is critical of the usual pre-occupation, where marriage is concerned, with wealth and rank (pp. 246-8).

Almost all these points are expanded upon by Hannah More, in her Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education (1799). There is, for example, her argument that the system of education then current tended to encourage 'vanity, selfishness and inconsideration'; just the vices it ought to be attacking (pp. 43-4). Equally interesting are the habits which, she asserts, education should be helping to form: 'humility', 'sobriety', 'meekness', 'attention', 'industry'. These will, she says, make for 'future virtue and self-government' (pp. 98-9). And, while arguing for 'discipline' and 'restraint', she warns against 'severity' on the part of the parent: 'The dread of severity will drive terrified children to seek, not for reformation, but for impunity' (p. 111). There is her scorn for the business of 'coming out' (p. 123) - a subject dwelt on by Mary Crawford (pp. 49-51); and for the practice of learning by rote, at which the Bertram sisters are so adept. 'The names of the

renowned characters in history thus become familiar in the mouths of those who can neither attach to the ideas of the person the series of his actions, nor the peculiarities of his character' (p. 132). And at least one critic has noted how her notions on 'the religious and moral use of history and geography', in particular, some of the examples she uses, is strikingly close to some of Fanny Price's conversation, and especially to her effusion on the stars, and her praise of the evergreen (More, pp. 142-57; Moler, 1968, pp. 114-5, 123-7).

There is one area, though, in which Jane Austen and the Evangelicals must part company decisively. The Evangelicals are united in their disapproval of novels, and it is quite likely that their objections were among those Jane Austen had in mind when she wrote her 'Defence of the novel' in Northanger Abbey. For the Evangelicals, even the 'best' novels, those which most accurately depict the world, depict a world which is notably un-Evangelical, but do not adequately acknowledge that defect. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that when one of their number chose to write a novel - Hannah More - she should choose to embody so much of her own strictures, thinly disguised as fiction. Coelebs in Search of a Wife, immediately and enormously popular,¹⁶ shows Coelebs surveying the world, and delineating it, to

¹⁶For the Evangelicals' view of novels, see Wilberforce, pp. 383-5; Gisborne, pp. 226-30; More, pp. 22-6. On the popularity of More's novel, see M.G. Jones, Hannah More, 1952, p. 193.

borrow Wilberforce's distinction, in terms of the way many individuals are merely 'professed Christians', and the manner in which a few are imbued with 'real Christianity'.

An early encounter with a family in which the daughters exercise their 'accomplishments' - just of a kind to be found at Mansfield Park - moves Coelebs to a heart-felt denunciation:

The piano-forte, when they were weary of the harp, copying some indifferent drawings, gilding a set of flower-pots, and netting white gloves and veils, seemed to fill up the whole business of these immortal beings, of these Christians, for whom it had been solemnly engaged that they should manfully fight under Christ's banner.

(p. 45)

But such a dogmatic assertion of principle and practice is remote from anything in Mansfield Park, however similar may be the areas of interest. Equally, it would be absurd to argue that the Evangelicals were the sole discoverers of these interests. William Law's A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life (1728, pp. 246-67) includes an account of the education of daughters, the necessity for sound principles, and the dire consequences if they are insufficiently instilled - the unwholesome preoccupation with dress and beauty, and the tendency to pride. Like the Evangelicals, he saw these results as coming from a plan of education that was well-intentioned but mis-conceived. Similar concerns are to be found repeatedly in the pages of The Rambler, for example, or in the lengthy discussions about principled

and unprincipled behaviour in Sir Charles Grandison. On the other hand, James Fordyce's Sermons to Young Women (1765) did not only recommend dancing, in moderation (I, 234-8), needlework, drawing, music (I, 254-62), which seems to put him on the side of the Bertram sisters, but also the reading of history, biography, travel, geography, astronomy, natural and moral philosophy, poetry, which seems to put him even more firmly on the side of Fanny Price (I, 274-85). Fordyce also fired off an attack on novels, as lively as anything the Evangelicals offered; and he made a laudable exception of Clarissa (I, 147-9).¹⁷

Nor would it be right to assume that by the end of the century, these concerns had become wholly the property of the Evangelicals.¹⁸ Even someone so utterly un-Evangelical as Mary Wollstonecraft, anticipated the Evangelicals to a quite surprising degree, in the details she examined and

¹⁷Monaghan (1978, p. 218) also suggests that similarities between Jane Austen and the Evangelicals can be ascribed to the influences common to them both, and he makes a particular case for Cowper. Certainly Hannah More, like Jane Austen, admired Cowper: she found him to be 'what I have been looking for all my life, a poet whom I can read on Sunday' (M.G. Jones, 1952, p. 90). But the passages actually cited by Monaghan from The Task in fact suggest only a quite remote affinity to Jane Austen's novel.

¹⁸Consider, for example, the efforts of the Rousseau-inspired Thomas Day (see p. 32n, above): or Maria Edgeworth's Belinda (1801, Tales and Novels XI and XII), and the account of false distinctions between the sexes, the 'rights of woman'; the corruptions which life in society encourages (I, pp. 317-31), and the contrast with a not-uncritical account of an upbringing on Rousseauistic principles (II, pp. 131-222).

the remedies she proposed in her Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) - an agreement noted with amusement by at least one contemporary (M.G. Jones, 1952, p. 115). For her central argument, entirely at odds with Evangelical thinking, is that in being treated as inferiors women suffered great wrong, and that it was because they were treated as inferiors that they became so: to change the situation she sought 'a REVOLUTION in female manners' (p. 317); and she looked forward to the abolition of the distinctions of rank in society as a whole, as a means of doing away with yet wider grievances (pp. 147-50). The Evangelicals, conservative in all that she was revolutionary, never thought but that women were inferior, and quoted Biblical authority to prove it; the question of rank interested them, but largely because they felt that education should provide an adequate preparation for the responsibilities as well as the privileges that rank entailed.¹⁹ Yet it is precisely when we consider the particular grievances she lists, and the specific ways in which she would achieve her revolution, that we can find Mary Wollstonecraft to have some common ground with the Evangelicals. From the first page of her 'Author's Introduction', she launches an attack on current educational practices:

a false system ... gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather

¹⁹See Gisborne, for example, on the differences between the sexes, pp. 239-42; on rank, pp. 90-1. See, by contrast, Wollstonecraft, pp. 174-5.

as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers.

(p. 79)

And her conception of what education ought to be is

an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent.

(p. 103)

'Modesty' is strongly recommended; albeit, of a kind to be found in both sexes, and to be distinguished alike from the timidity of the merely humble, and the presumptuousness of the vain: and 'purity of mind' is singled out for special praise as 'the delicacy of reflection' - an informed maturity (pp. 227-30). Her condemnation of the business of 'acquiring a smattering of accomplishments', as actively preventing this end, is as forthright as anything the Evangelicals could muster.

... meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves - the only way women can rise in the world - by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act - they dress, they paint, and nickname God's creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio!

(p. 83)

Equally interesting are her comments on the duties of parents. Unlike Hannah More, she advises 'severity'; but then she uses the word in a different sense, and is, like Hannah More, advising discipline and restraint (p. 161).

So she warns that parents who simply 'extort a show of respect' from their daughters are likely to be bringing up daughters who will become 'adulteresses' (p. 269). She also offers a heavily ironic defence of the practice of making girls learn by rote: 'If they be not allowed to have reason sufficient to govern their own conduct - why, all they learn must be learned by rote!' (p. 221). She notes that common practice makes it all too easy to confuse 'virtue' with 'reputation' (p. 241). She scorns the practices associated with 'coming out' (p. 289). Like the Evangelicals, she contrasts the function of the clergy, as it ought to be, with what it all too often is (pp. 275-8). Like them also, she is deeply suspicious of the influence of novels (pp. 306-9).²⁰

And, as a very practical demonstration of Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas on education, there is her Original Stories from Real Life (1788). This is a selection of stories designed to instil sound principles in the young, and a demonstration of what is deemed to be their most efficacious telling: Mrs Mason, the governess-figure, seizes every opportunity offered, for instance, by a walk round a garden. Snails and sky-larks alike bring forward the question of kindness to animals, which leads to a

²⁰Inevitably, given these similarities, there have been attempts to turn Jane Austen into an ally of Wollstonecraft's, on the same terms that others have tried to make her an Evangelical: see, for example, Lloyd Brown, 'Jane Austen and the Feminist tradition', 1973a, pp. 324-38.

consideration of the Divine Plan, of the part her charges are to take in it, and of how they can best be fitted to fulfil that part. She offers herself to them as an example of the great things which can flow from kindness to animals: the fervid conclusion of her observations almost makes it necessary for us to remind ourselves that this is the writing, not of Hannah More, but of Mary Wollstonecraft.

This employment humanized my heart, while, like wax, it took every impression; and Providence has since made me feel an instrument of good - I have been useful to my fellow creatures. I, who never wantonly trod on an insect, or disregarded the plaint of the speechless beast, can now give bread to the hungry, physic to the sick, comfort to the afflicted, and, above all, am preparing you, who are to live for ever, to be fit for the society of angels, and good men made perfect.

(p. 17)

But the fact that two minds as opposed as those of Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft, under such different inspirations, and striving for ends that are so often contradictory, could nevertheless share this much common ground, suggests only one thing. That both were drawing from a common stock of ideas and topics which were the subject of a widespread, and doubtless controversial debate in the last years of the eighteenth and the first of the nineteenth centuries. It is hardly necessary to add that Jane Austen, and other contemporaries, had access to the same stock. Byron, for example, made use of it to his own ends, in his repeated satirical attacks on 'Blue stockings' in Don Juan: in Donna Innez's mock-weighty conversations,

for instance, her bogus learning, her theories about education (I, 10-18, 38-52). Hannah More was of course among the original Blue Stockings; and she wrote a poem in celebration of the delights of conversation, entitled 'The Bas Bleu' (1786). Consider also Byron's mischievous suggestion that an interest in religion was but one of a list of 'accomplishments':

... fits or wits or harpsichords,
Theology, fine arts, or finer stays
May be the baits for gentlemen or lords ...
(XII, 53)

And once we perceive that Jane Austen is herself examining some of the issues of her time, rather than merely purveying an already established doctrine in relation to these issues, we can begin properly to appreciate the originality of her contribution. Where Hannah More or Mary Wollstonecraft lay the greatest weight on the consequences of an insufficient instruction, in order rigorously to enforce the proposition that instruction should be more sufficient, Jane Austen does no more than concisely offer an instance: she takes the conclusion of More or Wollstonecraft as her starting point and, rather than belabouring the point to make the lesson clear, she indicates that while the grosser implications are obvious, it would still be useful to examine and test some of the finer possibilities. This at once has her making points that would, almost certainly, not have been endorsed either by

those who sought to justify the rights of women, or those who aimed to reform 'professed Christians'. The necessity of sound principle is but half Jane Austen's argument: the other, more difficult, and more important half concerns the problems and dangers to be faced in almost any attempt at a practical application of principles, and she looks for the occasions when principle, however sound and however completely digested, may not entirely suffice.

This has a significance for the novel that is beyond the question of the influence of the Evangelicals. It is not merely that the principles Jane Austen would teach, and the ideals she would defend are not especially Evangelical; it is that she is not inclined, in any especial way, to teach or to defend principles and ideals. One of the critical commonplaces about the novel is that Mansfield Park, as a place, is the physical embodiment of some kind of ideal: sometimes this is no more than an application of the Evangelical case, sometimes it is more straightforwardly put in political or social terms as a statement about the future (or the past) of the gentry. But like so many other arguments about Jane Austen's tendency to defend her class, it does more to obscure than to illuminate the novel. It is almost impossible to see anything beautiful or ideal, even in the most shadowy of implications, in the place as it exists in the novel, since its limitations and faults are held under such tight scrutiny. And to argue, as some have tried, that the rightful inhabitants are defective but

the place still represents an ideal, is to try to reconcile the irreconcilable. Fanny Price, of course, is usually supposed to be the preserver of the ideal, the redeemer of its virtue, but that notion does not stand much weight, since, as we shall see, her own merits are not unambivalent: and she has actually very little to do, either by way of action or inspiration, with making the place what it becomes. Nor, indeed, do the novel's closing chapters offer much to support the notion that it is now meant to be an established ideal, whether pre-lapsarian or of any other kind.²¹ It is a place where there are patches of light, but where there are also distinct shadows: where memories of guilt and misery linger on in the minds of the characters, however much the author may wish to 'quit such odious subjects' (p. 461). And a place, incidentally, where Fanny has an accepted and honoured position, but where Susan is becoming 'the most beloved' (p. 472), at least in the eyes of Lady Bertram. The one allusion, in these pages, to something like an ideal comes from Sir Thomas and it is applied to those products of Portsmouth squalour, the Price children. Not merely to Fanny, or even to Fanny, William and Susan, but also to 'the general well-doing and success of the other members of the family, all assisting to advance

²¹See Tanner (1966, pp. 10-14) on Mansfield as an ideal; David Lodge (Language of Fiction, 1966, pp. 96-9) on Mansfield as an ideal of which the inhabitants are unworthy; Fleishman (1967, pp. 65-6) on Mansfield as a Garden of Eden.

each other' (p. 473).

The most cogent and persuasive statement about Mansfield as an ideal, in the novel, comes from Fanny herself. That a young girl who is welcomed, not entirely graciously, into a home much grander than her parents' should, in the course of time, come to be an enthusiastic supporter of what she sees as the merits of the place, is hardly surprising. But we should surely be wary of an interpretation of her view that is overly literal, that fails to take adequate account of the complicated internal pressures at work, or of the ironic scrutiny of the narrator. Consider Fanny's view of Mansfield; it is formulated - once again the question of timing is crucial - one week after her arrival at Portsmouth.

At Mansfield, no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence was ever heard; all proceeded in a regular course of cheerful orderliness; every body had their due importance; every body's feelings were consulted. If tenderness could be ever supposed wanting, good sense and good breeding supplied its place; and as to the little irritations, sometimes introduced by aunt Norris, they were short, they were trifling, they were as a drop of water to the ocean, compared with the ceaseless tumult of her present abode.

(pp. 391-2)

It is easy to see why, given the shock of Portsmouth, Fanny should take this view of Mansfield: but it is a version of the place that exists nowhere in the novel outside Fanny's dreams here. Not only is there the obvious and substantial under-estimation of the daily pain inflicted on her by Mrs Norris. Few, if any, of the virtues she ascribes to it

are much felt in anything she experiences there, or we read of the place; either in the joyless repression occasioned by Sir Thomas's presence or in the boistrous self-indulgence which occurs in his absence. And if the virtues of Mansfield are to be doubted before, then how much more so when we see what becomes of Tom, Maria, or Julia, and how Sir Thomas and Edmund respond. What is more, it is only twice that Fanny actually experiences the orderly tranquility which, the vision implies, is perpetual, and both occasions emphasise the way that the usual is decidedly less happy for her. The first occurs just after Sir Thomas's departure, and is reserved for those evenings when the others are out enjoying the 'festivities of the season', while she is alone with Lady Bertram:

She talked to her, listened to her, read to her; and the tranquillity of such evenings, her perfect security in such a tête-à-tête from any sound of unkindness, was unspeakably welcome to a mind which had seldom known a pause in its alarms or embarrassments.

(p. 35)

The second happens when her uncle returns, and the house becomes the scene of a 'sombre family-party' (p. 196), and Fanny, alone among the young people, is pleased with the change. Doubtless, she welcomes the calm, after the agitation of the theatricals: but then she will also approve of the fact that Henry has fewer opportunities to flirt with Maria; and she must realize that Edmund will now see less of Mary.

Fanny's vision of Portsmouth is equally understandable,

but here too we must note the biases and the exaggerations:

Here, every body was noisy, every voice was loud, (excepting, perhaps, her mother's, which resembled the soft monotony of Lady Bertram's, only worn into fretfulness.)—Whatever was wanted, was halloo'd for, and the servants halloo'd out their excuses from the kitchen. The doors were in constant banging, the stairs were never at rest, nothing was done without a clatter, nobody sat still, and nobody could command attention when they spoke.

(p. 392)

It is this shock and this disappointment, at coming 'home' that blots out so successfully the unhappinesses of Mansfield, even that of her recent confrontation with her uncle. And that is natural enough, given that the 'home' into which she is given no very warm welcome, and in which she can see little opportunity of being 'useful', is a place of such noisy and often unnecessary confusion. But there is also a real sense in which, at least for the first part of her stay in Portsmouth, she wants the Prices to be what they are not, and will not see them as they are. She may wish (to take a slight example) to pet and talk to her schoolboy-brothers on her first day home, and that is understandable. But it is also reasonable and natural that Tom and Charles, 'just released from school', should prefer to 'run about and make a noise' (p. 381). And, on a deeper level, there is a more profound confusion in Fanny's thinking. Sir Thomas intended Fanny to learn from the contrast of the two homes, and he intended the lesson to be, explicitly, an economic one (p. 369). We do not have to

adopt his standpoint to see that while she is struck by the contrast, she fails to understand the economics of that contrast. She is very quick to see that her mother is incompetent, but she sees very little beyond that. She does not recognise, consciously, that Mansfield has elegance, and the spaces for privacy and retreat, and that Lady Bertram's voice has no occasion to be 'worn into' the fretful tones of her sister, because Mansfield is wealth, while Portsmouth is poverty. Certainly it takes her some time to begin to understand that the problem of an incompetent servant is more, merely, than a question of bad housekeeping (p. 385). The subject is a serious one, handled seriously; but since the proposition exists so palpably, and Fanny grasps so little of it, we could also say that Jane Austen is enjoying a gentle joke at the expense of her heroine.

.....

If that suggests that Mansfield has little ideal about it, outside Fanny's rather confused imagination, then it also suggests a Fanny who is rather ill-matched to some of the popular critical assumptions about her, as an exemplary heroine. Fanny's moral sense is important, but only because in relative terms it is more pronounced and more comprehensive than that of anyone else in the novel. What we must do, surely, is observe the difficulties she encounters, the

way she attempts to match that moral sense with private wishes and needs, with public requirements. There is nothing to suggest that she is invincible, or indeed that it is possible ever to be invincible; and like everyone else, Fanny is caught in the tangle of interior tensions. She is, by her mother's report, 'a very well-disposed, good-humoured girl', yet 'somewhat delicate and puny' (p. 11). Transported to Mansfield, it is little wonder that she remains shy and subservient, unsure of herself and of her place, except in respect of its being 'least and last'; or that, since Mrs Norris reminds her continually of the importance of 'gratitude', she comes to rate it very highly indeed.²² But consider also the practicalities: the news that Sir Thomas is to go to Antigua brings her a feeling of 'relief' as it does her cousins. Unlike them, she also thinks that 'her feelings were ungrateful, and she really grieved because she could not grieve' (p. 33). But it is her uncle's hard parting words that actually reduce her to tears, plainly showing also why she has difficulty in grieving at his going; and then 'her cousins, on seeing her with red eyes, set her down as a hypocrite'.

The single most important influence on Fanny is of course her cousin Edmund, and here too things are not as clear or as straightforward as they might seem. Edmund is

²²So, for example, ingratitude is the serious charge she makes against Mary Crawford (p. 63).

blind to the real nature of her feelings for him; while she soon loves him 'better than any body in the world except William'. In the circumstances, it is only to be expected that he should be the teacher who 'encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgement' (p. 22): or that she should also acquire a good deal of his youthful solemnity, and something even of his occasional priggishness. Indeed, their relationship comes closely to resemble that of Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney, as demonstrated in their walk around Beechen Cliff. The cousins' initial and rather ponderous discussions of Mary Crawford, for example, show Edmund still directing and shaping Fanny's opinions, though by now his services as a teacher are required only for a minor 'adjustment' and 'correction'. Equally, while a notable irony attaches to the large area of agreement between them, Fanny has advanced so far beyond Catherine Morland, in applying her lessons, that she can begin to prepare for a disagreement with her teacher.

Having formed her mind and gained her affections, he had a good chance of her thinking like him; though at this period, and on this subject, there began now to be some danger of dissimilarity, for he was in a line of admiration of Miss Crawford, which might lead him where Fanny could not follow.

(p. 66)

But that is to present us with a dilemma: the opinion of neither character can be wholly relied upon, once Edmund begins to see Mary through the eyes of a lover, and Fanny to use her principles in the service of her feelings and

wishes, as she considers and judges her rival.

We must move carefully here: Fanny can be unreliable, and she can reveal a surprising degree of hidden aggression, but those critics who descry a Fanny Price, turning her principles into weapons, in her position of weakness and dependence, to be used aggressively against her situation, and the people with whom she has to live, are usually confusing a part of the picture with the picture as a whole.²³ This is, after all, only one of the several consequences that are to be seen in her attempts to connect her 'active principle' with the world in which she lives. Take the matter of the riding lessons for Mary Crawford: we can see Fanny as fretful, self-pitying and hyper-critical: we can concentrate, rather, on the way the situation points to Fanny's lonely, dependent and unhappy condition. Both aspects are to be found in evidence, but they are only two of a number of threads tangled together, which we have to pick out. There are the complexities created by Fanny's established but secret love for Edmund: it was Edmund who reasoned Fanny out of her own fears when she began to ride and a later reminding of that help is sufficient to convince Fanny almost that he can be reasonable and right about

²³A detailed version of this view is offered by Fleishman (1967, pp. 43-50). Taking his model from Alfred Adler, he argues that Fanny is a 'weak woman with self-defensive and self-aggrandizing impulses'. So, as a 'compensation for the psychic costs of submissiveness, Fanny's hostility expresses itself in moral aggressiveness'.

anything, even about Mrs Norris, when he is actually wrong (pp. 25-9). It was Edmund who later acquired a horse, himself, for her use (pp. 35-7). It is easy to imagine how, emblematically, she will see his wish to use this same horse, to teach her rival to ride. But it must also be noted that she does not immediately see the emblem. When Edmund mentions the project to her, she is 'almost overpowered with gratitude that he should be asking her leave' (p. 66). The 'pain' comes later, when she is kept waiting half an hour for the horse.

It is as easy to judge Mary's part in the affair, and as easy to be wrong about her. We could take her actions, and her frank admission of selfishness as proof of her blighted and wilful nature. But that is to see things as Fanny does, rather than as they are; and it is a view which the circumstances do not actually support. For Mary (as it is, surely, 'objectively') the half hour delay is no more than a minor piece of discourtesy. Certainly she cannot, at this stage, understand Fanny's situation, as Edmund does, and so cannot be expected to realize how it will affect, or strike Fanny. Equally, when the horse is handed over to Fanny, she does not, like Edmund, make gratuitous excuses, thought up after the event, about 'time' and 'shade' (p. 68). Instead, she apologises simply and directly: then, and this too is characteristic, she turns the matter into a joke against herself. Whether the joke works for us depends on whether or not we find Mary charming. But more than anything

else, if we look at what Mary does here, in itself and not as Fanny is affected, her actions and attitudes seem understandable and indeed natural.

Active and fearless, and, though rather small, strongly made, she seemed formed for a horsewoman; and to the pure genuine pleasure of the exercise, something was probably added in Edmund's attendance and instructions, and something more in the conviction of very much surpassing her sex in general by her early progress, to make her unwilling to dismount.

(pp. 66-7)

That surely is as clear as the 'probably' allows; and it is difficult to see it even as venial.

In fact, though, the passage works to reveal all the points of view. The two sentences that follow this, take us forcibly back to Fanny's plight, and the consequence for her of Mary's 'genuine pleasure':

Fanny was ready and waiting, and Mrs Norris was beginning to scold her for not being gone, and still no horse was announced, no Edmund appeared. To avoid her aunt, and look for him, she went out.

(p. 67)

Yet, while that is a powerful appeal for us to ally our sympathies entirely with Fanny, there is something in her stance that makes this a little difficult, and can actually make us smile at her. When she goes out, she sees Edmund and Mary, both on horseback, with Henry and the Grants standing by, in a meadow at the other end of the park.

A happy party it appeared to her—all interested in one object—cheerful beyond a doubt, for the sound of merriment ascended even to her. It was a sound

which did not make her cheerful; she wondered that Edmund should forget her, and felt a pang. She could not turn her eyes from the meadow, she could not help watching all that passed. At first Miss Crawford and her companion made the circuit of the field, which was not small, at a foot's pace; then, at her apparent suggestion, they rose into a canter; and to Fanny's timid nature it was most astonishing to see how well she sat. After a few minutes, they stopt entirely, Edmund was close to her, he was speaking to her, he was evidently directing her management of the bridle, he had hold of her hand; she saw it, or the imagination supplied what the eye could not reach. She must not wonder at all this; what could be more natural than that Edmund should be making himself useful, and proving his good-nature by any one? She could not but think indeed that Mr. Crawford might as well have saved him the trouble; that it would have been particularly proper and becoming in a brother to have done it himself: but Mr. Crawford, with all his boasted good-nature, and all his coachmanship, probably knew nothing of the matter, and had no active kindness in comparison of Edmund. She began to think it rather hard upon the mare to have such double duty; if she were forgotten the poor mare should be remembered.

(pp. 67-8)

At the start there is the understandable sense of being excluded from others' pleasures; but Mary attracts none of the bitter criticism we might have anticipated. Instead, and more honestly, Fanny notes her quick competence on horseback: the cross jealousy will be felt subsequently (p. 69), when she listens to the coachman's lengthy praise of Mary, and his pointed comparisons with her own nervous first attempts at riding. But it is the contact of hands - seen, or else easily imagined - which swiftly concentrates her attention now. Of course she cannot bring herself to blame Edmund for what happens, and so she obliges herself to see his part in its most favourable light: Edmund is 'making himself useful, and proving his good-nature' - a

convenient explanation that does not commit him to any particular interest in the object of his usefulness. Yet the emotion generated in her by the touching of the hands is such that it can only momentarily be contained. Deflected from the principals, it is concentrated in a remarkably ill-tempered attack on Henry; and whatever defects he may elsewhere reveal, Henry is innocent enough here. Then there is a brief flash of self-pity, too brief to be properly apprehended by her, and quickly turned into the more respectable, if also rather ludicrous, concern for the 'poor mare'.²⁴

Now the point is not that Fanny's 'active principle' is in abeyance: it is there still. But she gets relatively little help from its functioning presence, and it is her emotions which play a large part in shaping her interpretations and her response. Nor is this a momentary aberration, the result of a rare, intense pressure, since the effects survive long after the tension has apparently been dissipated. Everyone notices that Fanny is 'the only heroine to get a headache cutting roses', and while conventional explanations

²⁴Even those who are not unaware of the difficult balance between Mary and Fanny tend to betray their prejudices here. Susan Morgan (1980) is interesting, for instance, just because she is attempting to avoid one-sided simplicities, but her preference for Fanny still betrays her. She concedes, rather too solemnly, that Fanny is behaving 'self-deceptively' in pitying the mare (p. 155): and she is also compelled to some excessive, indeed rather unconvincing, criticisms of Mary. 'Good horsemanship', we are told, is usually connected with 'the wrong sort of mind' in Jane Austen's novels, and this leads to the proposition that 'Mary's physical health and courage are a sign of her mental disease' (p. 142).

either point to this frailty as a weakness which is meant to make Fanny endearing, or remark that she is part of a long tradition of frail heroines, it is perhaps more important to understand the degree to which this frailty has an emotional, rather than a merely physical basis.²⁵ Typically, Fanny's situation, and her feelings, are obscured in the four succeeding days when she gives up her claim to the horse, by the rather more importunate Bertram demands, and it is only as a result of one such demand that we are reminded of her. On the fourth evening Maria, out of temper because she was excluded from an invitation to the parsonage, succeeds in putting her aunt even more than usually out of temper; and so Mrs Norris shrilly scolds Fanny for 'idling away all the evening upon a sofa' (p. 71). Julia, just back from the parsonage, good-humouredly defends Fanny; Edmund notices that she is ill. Then the story of the roses comes out, and of the walks to and from Mrs Norris's house, and as cause and blame are debated, it would seem that Fanny has more than enough reasons for her headache. It is only at the end of the chapter though, when every other explanation has been fully canvassed, that we are introduced to the 'possibilities' that relate to Fanny's emotions.

²⁵Mansell (1973, p. 125), for example, makes the point about the rose cutting. Butler (1975, p. 248) suggests that Fanny's 'feebleness' was meant to make her 'more "human" and therefore more appealing'; Butler also suggests that the attempt failed. Trilling (1954, p. 498) states that as a passive, sick and saintly heroine, Fanny is part of a tradition that stretches from Clarissa Harlowe to Milly Theale.

Fanny went to bed with her heart as full as on the first evening of her arrival at the Park. The state of her spirits had probably had its share in her indisposition; for she had been feeling neglected, and had been struggling against discontent and envy for some days past. As she leant on the sofa, to which she had retreated that she might not be seen, the pain of her mind had been much beyond that in her head; and the sudden change which Edmund's kindness had then occasioned, made her hardly know how to support herself.
(p. 74)

Similarly at Sotherton, it is when Edmund appears to be completely engrossed with Mary, and Mary to be at her most worldly, that Fanny becomes aware of how 'tired' she feels (p. 94). So too, her arrival in Portsmouth, after a long journey, and to a very noisy household, are circumstances that more than sufficiently explain her 'aching head' (p. 382). Yet it is the effect of the unfriendly welcome that is most significant: Susan's kind words and considerate actions soon dispel much of the pain in 'head and heart' (p. 384).

Now it would be to miss the point almost entirely, if we were to see these as attention-getting devices on the part of Fanny. Probably this is a slight and unconscious element in her, but then the pain, both to head and heart, is also real enough. Equally, while it is interesting to find this account of 'psychosomatic illness' to be one of those cases where a novelist has prefigured the psychological theorists, that is itself less important than our seeing what Jane Austen is doing here. It is hardly necessary to assert that Mansfield Park has a deliberately constructed moral

framework: and yet it is within that framework, where, at least for the heroine, the importance of 'active principle' is granted and understood, that feelings are given this large scope. It is emotions that so often give shape to the meaning of events and situations. 'Active principle' is doubtless essential, but it is not always fully active, and it is feelings, half understood and muddled as they are, which are often more fully in control. Nor is it that this happens only at moments of high crisis. Almost any attempt at understanding has the potential for skirmishings between feeling and principle.

That is one kind of answer to Charlotte Bronte's famous claim that, to Jane Austen, 'the passions are perfectly unknown'. Indeed, it goes to show that despite the obvious differences between the two novelists, there are also interesting similarities: a consideration of the ways in which emotions can give shape to the world, is after all more like than unlike the task performed by Charlotte Bronte. The point becomes clear when we compare Mansfield Park with Jane Eyre; clearer still when we notice - it must have happened by accident - some of the close similarities in the subject material. The condition of both heroines is a dependent and inferior one; from the very opening pages of the later novel, Jane's aunt is a Mrs Norris figure, harsher and more simply drawn; the active hostility of Jane's cousins is echoed in the selfish thoughtlessness of Fanny's; and the

problems of love and of jealousy faced by Fanny, are closely akin to those encountered by Jane in her relationship with Rochester. Of course the two girls respond very differently: Jane sometimes tries to deny, to herself, the nature of her feelings for Rochester, but that is a much less pervasive form of repression than we find in Fanny. And we certainly do not associate with Jane the only occasional (and then often muted) expression of strong feeling, which we find in Fanny. But that is surely only because the two novelists are examining the workings of 'the passions' from different standpoints, and in relation to different personalities.

It would clearly be absurd to suggest that Charlotte Bronte conceives of a world that has no noticeable use for 'active principle', or one that is conceived wholly in emotional terms: but emotional terms are predominant, and they give first meanings to ideas and to actions. It is also a world of strong contrasts in primary colours, rather than one of more minute variations and shadings: even more, perhaps, it represents an attempt to render these poetically. It was just on this point that Charlotte Bronte considered herself to be fundamentally different from Jane Austen. When G.H. Lewes suggested to her that Jane Austen was 'one of the greatest artists', without being poetic, her pointed reply was not, of course, a claim to greatness herself; but it was an emphatic denial of the title to the earlier

novelist. 'Can there be a great artist without poetry?'²⁶ But whether or not Jane Austen is a great artist, whether or not she is 'without poetry', there is one important sense in which her scope is larger than that of her successor. It is Jane Austen who makes the detached novelistic survey. She registers the functioning and the impact of emotions in Fanny Price, as effectively as Charlotte Bronte does with Jane Eyre; even if, unlike Charlotte Bronte her emphasis is not only on extremes and intensities. Where the earlier novelist goes further is in her perception of emotions within the context of a total picture: of head and of heart, of feeling and of principle. Likewise, while she sees the possibilities for a harmonious and unified whole, she also recognises the more powerful potential for conflict and confusion. Mansfield Park has its avowedly moral framework, its more and less adequate sets of principles, more or less fully applied: yet it is within that seemingly rigid framework that we find Jane Austen observing - not, let it be said, legislating for - the shaping influence and the sometimes chaotic effects of emotions.

And as it is with Fanny, so it is, in different ways,

²⁶Clement Shorter; The Brontes: Life and Letters, 1908, II, p. 127; I, p. 388. It would appear that Charlotte Bronte had read no Jane Austen, until G.H. Lewes wrote to her, praising Jane Eyre, but also recommending Pride and Prejudice (Shorter, I, p. 387). She makes no mention, whatever, of Mansfield Park. Other responses to Charlotte Bronte's claim have been made by Juliet McMaster ('Surface and subsurface in Jane Austen's novels', 1974, pp. 5-24) and Barbara Hardy (1975, pp. 36-40).

with everyone at Mansfield: Lady Bertram's emotional range is like her ethical reach in only occasionally stretching beyond her sofa and her pug; Sir Thomas is principled but also worldly, loving but also austere; Mrs Norris has her active and ill-tempered bustling, Tom his unthinking and self-centred pursuit of pleasure; Julia forms a self-centred conception of the future as soon as she meets Henry while her sister's thinking is 'more confused and indistinct' (p. 44) both about Henry and about Rushworth; Edmund is often solemn and yet also sympathetic, and he becomes almost a parody of the young man conventionally in love, doing it 'without studying the business ... or knowing what he was about' (p. 65). And the Crawfords are particularly interesting, in this regard, once we learn not to see them simply, in Fanny's terms, as the spreaders of corruption, or else, and equally simply, as the bringers of vitality and fun to a staid Mansfield. They enter the novel declaring their 'wickednesses' more openly than any other Jane Austen characters: Henry is named, is criticised by the narrator, as a 'flirt' (p. 45), while his sister as quickly states her hard-headed ambition to achieve a mercenary marriage. But no other 'villains' also leave us so unsure of what they will do and what they will become. With Henry, for instance, we find that just at the point when we expect to be able to label an active vice, we find mere thoughtless selfishness; and he can even appear, engagingly if not unambivalently, as the reformed trifler, so that his attempts

to make Fanny a little in love with him leave him in love with her and - ironically - with the most complete sense in the novel of her merits, and the difficulties of her life at the Park. Even as he confuses us, Henry is himself caught in the confusion between principle and feeling.

In a more complicated way, so is Mary, and though she is continually set in contrast to Fanny, the distinction (as became clear in the matter of the horse) is almost never absolute or clear, is almost always in terms of nicely differing shades of grey. If we are told that Mary, unlike Fanny, is unresponsive to Nature, has 'none of Fanny's delicacy of taste, of mind, of feeling', then we have also to remember that 'her attention was all for men and women, her talents for the light and lively' (p. 81). And her liveliness is valuable, even if it is sometimes misplaced, just as Fanny's admirable seriousness can turn all too easily into solemn moralizing. If Mary confidently (and perhaps complacently) attaches a saying from 'the court of Lewis XIV' to her finding herself in the shrubbery of a country parsonage, then that is not necessarily better or worse than Fanny's prolix and second-hand response to that same shrubbery (pp. 208-9).²⁷ If, in the much-noted matter

²⁷See p. 225, above, for a possible source in Hannah More. See also Fanny's effusion on the stars (p. 113), which has a distinctly sub-Wordsworth flavour. Bradbrook (1966, pp. 78, 107-8) claims a Wordsworth influence, and assumes also that The Merchant of Venice and The Mysteries of Udolpho are sources. Moler (1968, pp. 147-8) suggests, without arguing it, that there is a 'Burkean' influence.

of the necklace and the chain (pp. 257-71) we condemn Mary for the trick she plays on Fanny, then we must also acknowledge that, cynically knowing though she is, she also makes the mistake of assuming that Fanny is almost equally so ('You were as conscious as heart could desire', p. 362). We may be inclined to praise Fanny for only dimly guessing at (and then after a pointed hint) what Mary takes to be obvious; but what of Fanny's crudely sentimental response to the gift of a chain from Edmund? It is, as the narrator suggests, understandable, but then it is also uncomfortably amusing: and for all Fanny's 'heroism of principle' and sense of 'duty', it is suggestive of the behaviour of Harriet Smith, in Emma.

We can be shocked by Mary's repeatedly expressed intention to marry ambitiously, until we realise that she is merely stating explicitly the principles that are elsewhere implicit, and further that she wants to be provocative in exaggerating, and contrasting them with those of Edmund (pp. 212-4, for example). When she states her belief in the 'true London maxim, that every thing is to be got with money' (p. 58) we can take this, as many critics do, to be the ultimate proof of her corrupted and mercenary nature: until, that is, we see that all she is doing is acknowledge she does not understand country customs. The 'London maxim' is nothing but the statement of an elementary fact of economic life in a large city: money can do 'every thing', because, in a real sense, only money can do anything. Her

mercenary principles are, in general, the same as those advocated by Sir Thomas Bertram until the closing pages of the novel, just as they accord exactly with 'almost the only rule of conduct' which Lady Bertram offers her niece (p. 333). And if she is more sophisticated than the younger Bertrams then the contrast between them nevertheless usually works in her favour. This is especially so in the case of Maria: it is clear that Mary regards Maria's 'captivation' of Rushworth as natural and appropriate, but it is also clear that she would never herself be tempted by a Rushworth, however rich. And if she is prepared to contemplate the winning of Tom Bertram, that is after she knows that his 'person', as well as his 'situation' are unobjectionable (p. 42). Further, when Tom eludes her, we find Mary noting that Edmund is 'agreeable to her', despite the fact that he is a younger son, and, in addition, 'not pleasant by any common rule'. She can 'hardly understand it', but then she does 'not think very much about it' (p. 65). She, too, is caught up in the emotional confusion, and in her case, the confusion is actually a sign, albeit uncertainly, of grace.

What, though, of the Crawfords' context, their background? Such a question obviously yields a rich and diverse complexity when applied to Fanny, or the Bertrams, but only rather thin returns for the Crawfords. Neither the passing direct reflections of London life supplied by the Crawfords, nor the more substantial account of the place and its delights, offered by Mary in her conversations with Fanny

and her letters to Portsmouth (pp. 359-62, 393-4), are more than decidedly secondhand renderings, conveying only a little more than a sense of meretricious glitter, shallowness, selfishness. It could be argued that the delicate balance elsewhere held between Fanny and Mary is lost: Mary appears to be a fool to trust to such dubious pleasures, while no great virtue can be ascribed to Fanny for not being tempted by them. But that is to exaggerate, and the picture in fact has unexpected complexities. The most likely models for Jane Austen's London are those of Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth, but there is actually only a fairly remote connection with Mansfield Park, and the perspectives are rather different. In a Burney or an Edgeworth novel, fashionable London society is presented as the outsider's view, seen and rendered as a life of profligacy and dissipation, actively to be countered by a Cecilia or a Belinda. Fanny Price remains quite remote from urban sophistication, and to the extent that she opposes its influence she does so passively for the most part, and by being what she imperfectly is. What is more, the view of London society is almost entirely that of the insider; inevitably complacent and assured, and while not blind to defects and blemishes, too ready to assume that these are merely aspects of the way of the world. It is a picture which is surprisingly like that of Byron's Don Juan. His London is, almost exactly, the London of the Crawfords, the London where Tom Bertram learns his idle ways, and where his sisters find the opportunity to practise theirs. We at

once recognise this 'world' with its edgy exclusiveness and its mixture of cynicism and complacency, as the one in which Byron places his hero, on arrival in England.

In the great world - which being interpreted
Meaneth the West or worst end of a city
And about twice two thousand people bred
By no means to be very wise or witty,
But to sit up while others lie in bed,
And to look down on the world with pity -
Juan, as an inveterate patrician,
Was well received by persons of condition.
(XI, 45)

A world where

Daughters admired his dress, and pious mothers
Inquired his income, and if he had brothers.
(XI, 48)

A world part-created by

The milliners who furnish 'drapery Misses'
Throughout the season, upon speculation
Of payment ere the honeymoon's last kisses
Have waned into a crescent's coruscation,
(XI, 49).

Then, there is Byron's vivid rendering of the interminable bustle, and real boredom, of a grand ball (XI, 67-70). There is his advice to the man who

hath higher views
Upon an heiress or his neighbour's bride,
Let him take care that that which he pursues
Is not at once too palpably descried.
(XI, 71)

There is his sense that few are wholly safe from the equally-dreaded scandal and poverty (XI, 80), and that the inevitably mercenary ambitions are only too apt to be disappointed.

Some who once set their caps at cautious dukes
Have taken up at length with younger brothers.
Some heiresses have bit at sharpers' hooks;
Some maids have been made wives, some merely mothers;
Others have lost their fresh and fairy looks.

(XI, 81)

And Byron could almost have had the ending of Mansfield Park in mind, when he reflected on the doings of newspapers, and the 'evidences which regale all readers'.

For 'tis a low, newspaper, humdrum, lawsuit
Country, where a young couple of the same ages
Can't form a friendship but the world o'erawes it.
Then there's the vulgar trick of those damned damages.

(XII, 65)

There is, interestingly, Byron's observation that it is the 'raw beginners' who 'blunder thus' (XII, 66). And his opinion is the opposite of Sir Thomas Bertram's, when he suggests that while Society usually banishes the fallen, this does

But aggravate the crime you have not prevented,
By rendering desperate those who had else repented.

(XII, 80)

Equally, though, it is important to note how differently the effect is achieved in the novel and poem. Byron speaks, himself, as an 'insider', though one who is more percipient than those he describes; one whose acumen is perhaps sharpened by his sense of exile from that community, and enriched by some of the livelier autobiographical details he includes in his argument. And he is constantly shifting his relationship to his material: sometimes the matter is personal and even intimate, at others it is public and general; at points he is

convivial and partisan in his attitudes to those he is describing, then he can also be remote and austere. The overall effect is to create a picture that is three-dimensional, and to allow the reader to see things both from the inside, and (more detachedly) from the outside. Jane Austen was never an 'insider' herself,²⁸ but this should not obscure from us the extent to which she herself achieved a three-dimensional picture, by recording the ambivalences of Mary Crawford's connection with London. It is perhaps more appropriate to consider not why Mary is so attracted to the shallows of London life, but why this intelligent and articulate defender of London life is not more completely attached to the values that are so obviously a part of her. Then, we might begin to notice something of the complexity of her position. Attached though she is to fashionable London society, her partiality is not blind; nor is she blind to other possibilities, and she is capable of considering, seriously, the alternatives represented by Mansfield and by Edmund.

The internal and external conflict - and the muddle - with Mary is seen most clearly perhaps with the question of religion, and, more specifically, of Edmund's ordination.

²⁸It was Virginia Woolf's suggestion that, had she lived longer, Jane Austen would have become more familiar with fashionable London society. 'She would have stayed in London, dined out, lunched out, met famous people, made new friends; read, travelled, and carried back to the quiet country cottage a hoard of observations to feast upon at leisure' (The Common Reader, 1925, p. 182).

The matter first comes up during the visit to Sotherton; and, appropriately, it is in the disused chapel, when Mary expresses her doubts about the value of family chapel services, and her suspicions about the attitudes of those who attended them (pp. 86-7). Some critics find this shocking; or feel, at least, that the reader should be shocked by it: yet there is nothing very outrageous, or even very new, in what she says. A hundred years before Mansfield Park was published, The Rape of the Lock offered an amusing picture of the kind of confused irreligiousness Mary Crawford has in mind. Among the many items on Belinda's 'Toilet' are 'Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux' (I, line 138); and one of the effects of the 'Cave of Spleen' is to '... send the Godly in a Pett, to pray' (IV, line 64). The question of inappropriate behaviour, often decidedly flirtatious, in churches, was a recurrent theme, not always handled with due seriousness, in the pages of The Spectator. It was a topic which Richardson took up in his single, ponderous, contribution to The Rambler: and if his treatment is serious enough to satisfy the most delicately minded of critics, then it also does nothing but confirm Mary Crawford's sense of the scope and nature of the problem.²⁹ Lionel Trilling has suggested that Mary's speeches strike us at first as

²⁹See The Spectator, I, pp. 86-8, on starers; 227-8, on peepers; II, pp. 120-1, on giggling and ogling; 508-10, on greetings; II, p. 600 and III, pp. 8-9, on flirting; IV, pp. 284-7, on attention-getting. See The Rambler, II, pp. 153-9 (No. 97). Jane Austen had already poked fun at this number of The Rambler, albeit not on the question of behaviour in church, in Northanger Abbey, p. 30.

'delightful', but that when we are more familiar with them, we begin to find them 'disagreeable'. This is, he says, 'the peculiarly modern bad quality which Jane Austen was the first to represent - insincerity'. And he goes on to argue that Mary's 'intention is not to deceive the world but to comfort herself; she impersonates the woman she thinks she ought to be' (1954, p. 502). That is an important point, but it seems to me that Trilling overstates it a little. One kind of response to her views on family devotions, actually represented in the novel, is that of Fanny: she feels 'too angry for speech'. Edmund's response is much less extreme; is indeed the most appropriate, even if it is a compromise between his sense of Mary's attractions, and his dislike of her opinion. 'Your lively mind can hardly be serious even on serious subjects' (p. 87). And that is surely the problem presented by Mary: it is not merely that she is frivolous when she ought to be serious, or that she is 'insincere', but that we can never be sure that she will be duly serious about anything. But then it must also be said that it is all too easy to find Fanny to be exactly and not always pleasantly the opposite.

And Mary does have a quite acute sense of the world as it is: her account of the 'Mrs Eleanors and Mrs Bridgets', in the chapel at Sotherton and 'starched up with seeming piety' is apt enough, as Edmund himself admits. Equally, it is not clear what value Edmund or Fanny place in the chapel, beyond its literary-Gothic significance; or what

importance they attach to family devotions, that is more than a respect for a useful social custom. When Edmund is drawn to defending the function of the clergyman' (pp. 92-3) Mary's sense of the religious life, such as it is, of fashionable London society, makes her reject his larger claims, acknowledging only the role of the preacher, and suggesting repeatedly that he would find a larger scope for his abilities in parliament or the law or the army. The Crawford notions of clergymen, and of sermons, are very close to those attacked by Cowper in The Task (II, lines 430-1), in his account of foppish pulpit manners:

... avault all attitude, and stare,
And start theatric, practised at the glass!

And when Wordsworth noted similar techniques, in The Prelude (VII, 543-65; text of 1805-6), these were 'follies' which he connected specifically with the churches of London. The argument between Edmund and Mary actually turns, briefly, on Wordsworth-like distinctions between urban and rural values (p. 93), but Edmund is most concerned to stress the general significance of the clergyman's role. In his view, the clergyman

has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively considered, temporally and eternally - which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influence.

(p. 92)

And when challenged by Mary, he elaborates on the question of 'manners':

The manners I speak of, might rather be called conduct, perhaps, the result of good principles; the effect, in short, of those doctrines which it is their duty to teach and recommend ...

(p. 93)

And it is little wonder that Mary's view of fashionable life in Regency London should so clash with Edmund's thinking, when we see that he is all-but invoking the authority of the Book of Common Prayer. Part of the 'Form and Manner of Ordering of Priests' includes a lengthy exhortation, to be read by the bishop to those who are being ordained, and the pre-occupation with 'great importance' of 'this Office ... whereunto ye are called' matches, exactly, Edmund's argument. For example:

... and see that you never cease your labour, your care and diligence, until you have done all that lieth in you, according to your bounden duty, to bring all such as are or shall be committed to your charge, unto that agreement in the faith and knowledge of God, and to that ripeness and perfectness of age in Christ, that there be no place left among you, either for error in religion, or for viciousness in life.

There is also, quite precisely, Edmund's sense of 'manners':

And seeing that you cannot by any other means compass the doing of so weighty a work, pertaining to the salvation of man, but with doctrine and exhortation taken out of the holy Scriptures, and with a life agreeable to the same; consider how studious ye ought to be in reading and learning the Scriptures, and in framing the manners both of yourselves, and of them that specially pertain unto you, according to the rule of the same Scriptures ...

At the same time, the claims, as Edmund puts them, are uncomfortably high, and they are rather sententious. Edmund is speaking with the naive and idealistic enthusiasm that is typical of any young man who is willingly entering a profession: it may indeed be a part of the narrator's irony that his enthusiasm is of a kind more usually excited by the professions that Mary would have him enter.

Certainly, we can share at least something of Mary's rather impatient joke, when she later wonders at his delay in coming to London: 'There may be some old woman at Thornton Lacey to be converted' (p. 394).

There are also complications on the emotional level, even when the debate appears to be a formal and intellectual consideration of appropriate morality. The exchange of words contains (and sometimes masks) a strong emotional charge, not always understood and not always controlled, and which we can detect in the thrust of the debate, the tension between the participants. When Mary provocatively declares on the nothingness of clergymen, she does so not only because this is actually her opinion, but also because her more than ordinary interest in Edmund makes it natural that she should wish him to be something she can more easily esteem. So too, Edmund, shocked though he sometimes is by her, is still securely caught by her attraction: while Fanny disapproves of Mary so strongly, of course, partly because she fears that Edmund does not do so sufficiently.

And it is this capacity for words, as for actions and events, to take on metaphorical meaning that is of crucial significance to the reader, because of the way it reveals, or adds to the meaning of conflicts and confusions, unities and disunities between the characters. The visit to Sotherton is, indeed, a part of the novel that is particularly rich in these allusions: almost every action, every slight event counts, both literally and metaphorically, in registering the course of the elaborate, and rather uneasily played out game of the Bertram sisters, Crawford and Rushworth; the constant pullings together and apart of Mary, Edmund and Fanny. When Mary and Fanny sit side by side in the carriage, watching Edmund as he follows them on horseback, we have a neat demonstration of the balance and the contrast between the two girls; a reflection on their mutual interest in Edmund, which in turn points, as the narrator observes, to the fact that this is the only thing they have in common. When Maria finds the journey to be an unhappy one, at least until they come 'within the influence of Sotherton associations', that is because 'her prospect always ended in Mr Crawford and her sister sitting side by side ...' (p. 81).

A little later we find that it is no longer the narrator who points to the metaphorical significances: the characters themselves begin to understand, even to exploit this level of meaning. There is a moment in the chapel which vividly dramatises the tensions that make this group

a cohesive unit, and also a set of individuals. Maria and Rushworth stand, by chance, together in front of the altar, and Julia (who has, of course, her own reasons for reminding Crawford, and perhaps her sister, of Maria's engagement to Rushworth) remarks that they appear 'exactly as if the ceremony were going to be performed' (p. 88). To ensure that her meanings are not lost, she repeats the observation, and then suggests boisterously to Edmund that it is a pity that he is not yet ordained; this happens of course conveniently at the point when Mary has been disparaging family devotions to him. Fanny feels a not-unambiguous pity for her rival, while Mary herself has to observe lamely that had she known of his intention to take holy orders, she would 'have spoken of the cloth with more respect'. Later she returns to the subject, and argues with him at length, in the Wilderness, and through the rest of the novel, about his choice of profession. Henry, meanwhile, takes the opportunity to whisper suggestively into Maria's ear, and will later talk more explicitly at the ha-ha: and there, it is not only that the metaphor contains an accurate foreshadowing of events to come, but also the way in which the characters are so fully and consciously aware of the metaphor, and are close to sharing a full knowledge of the irony. When Maria chooses to distinguish between 'literally' and 'figuratively' meaning something, when she speaks of 'a feeling of restraint and hardship', when like the starling she 'cannot get out'; when Henry talks of 'a very smiling

scene', of 'Mr. Rushworth's authority and protection', when he shows her the means of being 'more at large', and tempts her to accept the offer of his 'assistance' by suggesting that she might feel 'prohibited', both are conspicuously manipulating figurative meanings, Henry enticing, and Maria inviting the enticement (p. 99). And the irony which remains, the one which they do not fully share, concerns the inevitable discrepancies in understanding the metaphor. Maria surely takes the meaning further than does Henry; for him the existence of this level of meaning does little more than augment his sense of fun.

The episode of the theatricals is an extension of the process of exploring the connections between literal and figurative meaning. When Maria hopes for, and obtains the role opposite to Henry's, she is committing herself to playing the part of a 'fallen woman', and that is of course another significant foreshadowing of later events. But the connection between Mansfield Park and Lovers' Vows is not merely as straightforward as this might suggest.³⁰ Agatha (the part played by Maria) is destitute and despised at the start of the play; by the end she has gained acceptance and even honour; Maria's fate, in the novel, is almost exactly the opposite. There is also the way in which Henry and

³⁰It is of course generally accepted that there are interesting though incomplete analogies between the characters in the novel and the characters in the play: see Litz (1965, p. 124) for instance. And see Mansell (1973, pp. 126-9) for a concise indication of the many diverse interpretations which the episode of the theatricals has inspired.

Maria deliberately exploit their roles. They play the parts of mother and of long-lost son. Their much-rehearsed embraces are meant to represent maternal and filial love, in the play: they do, in the context of the play, what they could never so easily do outside it, and the mere attempt to move in this direction, later in London, bundles them impetuously into an elopement. Further, it is unlikely that propriety would have permitted them this degree of freedom of physical expression, had they been playing the parts of lovers in the play. It is by another irony that the lovers of the play are enacted by Mary and a rather reluctant Edmund, and they offer a brisk caricature of their own roles and debates in the novel. It is Edmund who plays Anhalt, the clergyman, who has to talk to Mary's Amelia of marriages happy and unhappy, compatible and incompatible: Mary who must talk of love with a frankness that even she finds a little embarrassing (p. 168). Here too, though, a merely straightforward connection between play and novel is not to be found: at the end of the play, Amelia and Anhalt are about to marry.

Then there is the question of the theatricals as a moral or immoral activity. Here we see 'active principle' at work, at least in those who oppose the theatricals, and it is significant that it is not a wholly convincing performance; that we see the need for 'active principle', at the same time as we actually see 'active principle' being cast about ineffectually. It is easy enough to find

objectionable elements in what actually happens; in the quarrels and the jealousies, the idleness and the bustle, the scheming and the extravagance: but then this is no more than an intensification of what the novel has already demonstrated as typical. More particularly, one does not have to be either a prig or a prude to recognise that the flirting of Henry and Maria is unwholesome: but the theatricals are an occasion, as the visit to Sotherton testifies, rather than a cause. Nothing in the stated opposition is wholly coherent or convincing. Partly, it is the result of an ambivalence in the arguers themselves: Edmund's lengthy arguments against the project, against the play chosen, lose much of their conviction when he realizes that Mary takes a different view (pp. 129). Even his absolute refusal to act, himself, is turned about out of consideration for her (p. 154); nor is it insignificant that Mary should view this as a psychological rather than a moral triumph for herself, her will succeeding over his (p. 358). Fanny too is strongly opposed to the enterprise, and yet her refusal to act probably has more to do with a feeling of embarrassed shyness, than it has with any real moral conviction. It cannot be said that she regards the business of acting, in itself, as dangerously corrupting, else why should she take such pains to help Rushworth master his part, indeed, master it for him (pp. 224-5)? Why should she take such a thorough general interest in the proceedings? 'For her own gratification she could have wished that something might be acted, for she had

never seen even half a play, but every thing of higher consequence was against it' (p. 131). That catches, nicely, the ambivalence in Fanny's attitude; just as the characteristic slight self-pity makes the 'higher consequence' a little doubtful.

And while of course she and Edmund are right in claiming that Sir Thomas would disapprove, they are, all three, on very uncertain ground, when considering the basis of this disapproval: instead of there being a single compelling principle to invoke, there is a dubiously large and mixed collection of quite good reasons, advanced by Edmund. There is the objection to amateur acting as amateur; there is the question of a 'want of feeling' for Sir Thomas, at a time when he is 'in some degree of constant danger'; there is Maria's 'very delicate' situation; there is the suggestion that it would be 'taking liberties' with the house, in its master's absence; there is the point that it would be 'wrong as an expense' (pp. 124-7). Sir Thomas does indeed echo most of these arguments: but what seems to be foremost in his mind is a dislike of Mr Yates, and, by implication, of aristocratic habits and pleasures (Chapman, 1948, pp. 198-9). And nothing more secure or absolute as a moral structure is to be founded on the sadness which predominates in his feelings, a sadness at the way his family seem so easily to have forgotten him and his dangers. What is more, the reader who inclined to take matters only and wholly seriously, will be thwarted a little by the narrator's sense

of the comic potential to be found, even in moments that are very painful to the participants, as they argue, manipulate, justify. It is a potential which increases as the tensions rise, and the performance approaches; and it becomes actual with the sudden arrival of Sir Thomas, and his unwittingly dramatic appearance, with rather bemused dignity, on the stage. Once again we are being invited to stand back, to observe the differing sets of interests and principles at work, the more and the less sound, the more and the less successfully defined and applied. In such a context, the fact that those people least possessed of sound and active principle are likely, in the end, to fare ill, is so obvious as to be hardly worth saying.

After the theatricals, after Maria's wedding, when Fanny comes to be at the centre of life at the Park, there is a further opportunity for the reader to note the contrast between those who are more, and less possessed of 'active principle'. When Henry plans 'to make Fanny Price in love' with him, the narrator devotes an unusually long and detailed comment to the matter, one which notes that Henry is blamable, without specifying the degree to which he is so (pp. 231-2). Equally significant is the way in which so much of the emphasis falls on the possible and actual effects on Fanny. Here too, there are ambivalences, and strong though Fanny's moral objections to Henry are, they make her by no means invincible to his charms. It is her love for Edmund which secures her from their effects, and

even then, she is not untouched. As the narrator observes;

With all the security which love of another and dis-
esteem of him could give to the peace of mind he was
attacking, his continued attentions- continued, but
not obtrusive, and adapting themselves more and more
to the gentleness and delicacy of her character, -
obliged her very soon to dislike him less than
formerly.

(pp. 231-2)

And later, albeit once there is no chance of Henry marrying
Fanny, the narrator goes further still.

Would he have persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must
have been his reward - and a reward very voluntarily
bestowed - within a reasonable period from Edmund's
marrying Mary.

(p. 467)

What is more, as that last quotation might begin to
suggest, while there are many sombre and oppressive moments
associated with Henry's attempts to court Fanny, they can
be not a little (and rather surprisingly) lightened by the
comedy. When Henry first begins to notice Fanny, when he
first tries to draw her into a conversation, he lights,
unluckily for him, on the subject of the theatricals, and
of his great happiness during the time of the rehearsals.
Fanny's first response is unspoken, and it perfectly com-
prehends the differences between them.

With silent indignation, Fanny repeated to herself,
'Never happier! - never happier than when doing what
you must know was not justifiable! - never happier
than when behaving so dishonourably and unfeelingly! -
Oh! what a corrupted mind!'

(p. 225)

And the comic effect tells equally against both, keeping us

once again from taking sides or making easy judgements. He is shown, confident of his charms, ignorant of how ill they are succeeding; she, over-reacting, and being a little too self-righteous. Then, as we watch him attempting to awaken her interest, finding this an unusual challenge, becoming engrossed, and then himself in love, so we can see how he appears to be rapidly acquiring 'active principle': equally, we can never be sure of the measure of his sincerity, of the extent to which he is responding to emotional pressure or moral conviction. And if the reader doubts thus, how much more does Fanny, how little is she moved beyond that lessening of dislike, secure as she nevertheless remains in her disapproval, and sure of her love of Edmund. In the few weeks Henry allows her, not the change in him, not William's promotion, not even Sir Thomas's bullying manners, or his kindness, persuade her to accept the proposal or marriage.

This last point must be stressed. The confrontation between Sir Thomas and his niece (pp. 312-25) has rightly been identified as being of key significance, in marking a notable point on Fanny's journey to maturity and independence. In standing by her preference for love, rather than money, Fanny has to challenge the authority of her uncle, and to imply that his principles, though active enough, are insufficient to the degree that they are merely materialistic. Yet it is all too easy to over-emphasise the significance of Fanny's challenge, to be overly struck by the fact that she

is capable of making it.³¹ Of course it takes courage on her part; of course the narrator makes it clear how close she is to being crushed (p. 321). But it would surely be rather surprising, if, in fact, she did not resist the elsewhere-compelling authority of Sir Thomas on this occasion, given that everything else morally and emotionally that she is makes her completely antithetical to his advice. And there is another point. The encounter between uncle and niece is a striking and painful instance of the functioning of the interior tensions: Fanny's reasons for refusing Crawford are sounder than her uncle can know, but she cannot vindicate her decision in his eyes, she cannot say that Crawford has faults, not of 'temper' but of 'principle' (p. 317), because to do so would also be to blacken her cousins. Equally, Sir Thomas gets very little by way of return for his comments and advice: we do not have to share all his values to see that from his point of view, Fanny's explanation must appear thin, her decision wilful. The apparently amiable relations that exist between Park and parsonage, between Henry and his niece, are quite contrary to the spirit in which she makes the curt and resolute rejection of the proposal.

Now, this capacity on Fanny's part to hold back, to give so little away, which makes it possible for her to defy her uncle, is a strength derived, ironically, from weakness, from

³¹As is, for example, D.D. Devlin (Jane Austen and Education, 1975, pp. 104-9).

the early-learned habits of submission and suppression. It stands her in good stead in resisting Henry's charms: it could also be said to play a part in determining the way the novel ends. It means, as Henry discovers, that wooing her is a very unrewarding task for any man who is not Edmund. Even when Henry is most careful, most assiduous, most delicate in the exercise of his charms, as when he reads Shakespeare, as when he talks of sermons (pp. 336-44), she can reveal only minimal interest, however much her attention is caught. And, on an 'uncommonly lovely' day in Portsmouth (pp. 409-12), when she is unusually happy, and happy in his company, when even the comparison she inevitably draws between Henry and Edmund tells less weightily against Henry, she is able to reveal so little of this that when they part her formal reserved manner and cold tone jars against his enthusiastic warmth, is indeed a distinct rejection of what that offers. It is not necessary to repeat Mary's error (p. 437), and blame Fanny for what follows: but it is surely entirely understandable that Henry should return to London frustrated and disappointed; and, being Henry, should be too easily tempted by the diverting prospect of Maria's company.

Indeed, the Portsmouth episode, generally, provides us with an opportunity to estimate Fanny's more mature functioning, morally and otherwise. There are the small but significant acts she makes, in borrowing library books, in buying a silver knife, that show her in the business of

becoming fully a part of the active world. And she has a new found capacity to re-assess and re-think, shown in her fairer second thoughts on her sister's methods of coping with the confusion of the house (pp. 395-8). And yet, though we know also that this period of misery for her, unhappy as she is in being away from Mansfield, and more actively unhappy in being at Portsmouth, deeply anxious as she is, in addition, about the connection between Edmund and Mary, all of which must mitigate for her; still we have to note how often she is on the edge of muddle, how much she demonstrates the problems and the paradox of 'principle' that is 'active'.

Thus, her response to Tom's illness is a decided mixture: there is her lack of 'any particular affection' for her cousin, but there is also her 'tenderness of heart'; yet there is also the uncompromisingly severe, if primly qualified, review of his life, in which the 'purity of her principles' directs her to notice 'how little useful, how little self-denying his life had (apparently) been', and in which she happens to find him wanting in the two virtues she can most easily claim for herself (p. 428). There are her later musings on Tom's suffering, apprehended only insofar as she can imagine Edmund's ministering to them: 'Edmund was all in all. Fanny would certainly believe him so at least ...' (pp. 429-30). Or, there are her thoughts about returning to Mansfield, in which she can see the situation there, but entirely in terms in which she can see herself being 'useful' (p. 432). We must notice her response to Mary's letter

about Tom (pp. 433-6) in which she is so quickly and surely outraged by what is little more than Mary's habitual lightness, a little, perhaps, misapplied.³² And she has to perform some dubious distortions in order to justify her refusal of the Crawfords' offer of the means of returning to Mansfield, while not quite acknowledging the extent to which she is under the impulse not to receive a favour from Henry, and the even more distinct wish not to bring Mary and Edmund together. Then the news of the elopement leaves her on the verge of a shrieking hysteria, offering a moral condemnation that is itself grossly inappropriate.³³

She passed only from feelings of sickness to shudderings of horror; and from hot fits of fever to cold. The event was so shocking, that there were moments even when her heart revolted from it as impossible - when she thought it could not be.

³²Is Mary's letter 'remarkably indiscreet', as Lascelles claims (1939, p. 175)? Only really so if we remember the rather dubious use to which Fanny puts it (p. 459: see also Fleishman, 1967, pp. 79-80, for a sensationalized rendering of Fanny's dubiety). It is surely characteristic that Mary should write to Fanny, expressing genuine concern for Tom, yet also mindful of Edmund's chances of inheriting a baronetcy: and she and Fanny have already playfully considered whether or not Edmund's name sounds better unadorned (p. 211).

³³Joel C. Weinsheimer ('Mansfield Park: three problems', 1974, pp. 193-4) notes appropriately that this is the 'language of Gothic sensibility'. But the problem is, surely, not that 'Maria's sin exceeds the range of evils which Fanny's nervous sensibility can assess': rather, as Fanny's words suggest, she can begin to grasp the meaning intellectually, but is slower to understand it emotionally. And her response contrasts nicely with that of her father: '... by G— if she belonged to me, I'd give her the rope's end as long as I could stand over her' (p. 440). There is comedy, even at the moment of 'catastrophe'.

... it was too horrible a confusion of guilt, too gross a complication of evil, for human nature, not in a state of utter barbarism, to be capable of! - yet her judgement told her it was so.

(p. 441)

And this very quickly and easily dissolves into a guilty, but scarcely suppressed happiness, when she discovers that the elopement is also the means of getting her, and Susan, to Mansfield (p. 443).

By the same token, we can find that Edmund and his father respond to the elopement with all the 'active principle' one could desire, but do so a little too fiercely and rigidly; do so also in a way that leaves us with a residual doubt about the value of the principle that informs their actions. Sir Thomas seems, for example, to be too pre-occupied merely with the matter of not offering 'an insult to the neighbourhood' (p. 465), and his son is rather too apt to emphasise the 'dreadful crime' (p. 457), as his last encounter with Mary shows. If Mary is wrong to see only 'folly' where there is 'guilt' (and it must be said in her defence that one of her motives is, doubtless, to keep open the possibility of a relationship between herself and Edmund), then he is wrong to see 'guilt', only and always. It is understandable that he should feel, at this point, that the differences between them are greater than anything that there is in their mutual attraction, that he must separate himself from her. We can even begin to anticipate that he will soon be in his cousin's arms. But we can also wonder about the kind of sermon he might preach on the subject

of the woman taken in adultery.

That Mansfield Park finds such a resolution, less than perfect and less than perfectly happy as it is; that the novel also allows us to conceive of other resolutions, perhaps more satisfactory, and as real possibilities; that it is pre-occupied less with recommending a particular set of principles to its readers, more with considering the nature and function of principle in general, and the dangerous difficulties of practical application: to the extent, and it is substantial, that Mansfield Park achieves these ends, it is not a novel that is obstinately and defensively a novel of its times. It is also, provocatively and even disturbingly, a novel of our time.

CHAPTER FIVE

EMMA

'What an air of probability sometimes runs through a dream! And at others, what a heap of absurdities it is! - Mr Weston, when his son 'blunders', and forgets which story he is telling to whom (p. 345)

The detective story is the focus of some critical attention, at present, especially from those who are exploring current theoretical questions: no doubt Emma will get a due share of the interest. But the resemblance of Jane Austen's novel to a detective story has long been recorded, and it has become commonplace to observe that when we read it, we try to solve a set of connected mysteries; there are plenty of clues, some of them misleading, and we will very likely go wrong, we can only be certain we will not be wholly right. But there are important ways in which the label is insufficient for Emma, not merely because this novel is more substantial than the label normally suggests, but also because the novel is not formed by the organising and limiting principle of a specifiable 'crime', a focus for the detecting energies. The mysteries here are far more diffusely and pervasively connected with the patterns, actual and potential, of human relationships, and almost everybody in the novel has his or her own description of the mysteries, and explanation of their workings.¹

¹Robert Liddell is one who notes that the novel is 'among other things, a detective story', and he finds the 'pattern

The business and the difficulty of making sense of the world is, of course, crucially the subject of all Jane Austen's novels. It is the pre-eminence of mystery that points to a special link between Emma and Northanger Abbey. Of course Northanger Abbey finds its own way of penetrating mystery: we see quite straightforwardly what Catherine sees, and we can quite simply contrast our response with hers; at the same time, the novel functions as a deliberately constructed literary experiment, a mixture of different kinds of novel. In Emma we also see things as the heroine sees them, but we are also made aware, in much more complex ways, of other points of view, other perspectives; and this is very much less a novel about novels, is much more directly pre-occupied with the inner workings of the characters, the possibilities and the limitations of their world. But to the extent that they are linked, they are to be distinguished from the three novels that Jane Austen published before Emma.² In all three, problems of understanding are important, but they are not the primary subject, and it is rather as they

of the mystery' in Emma and her relationships: 'Highbury thinks Mr Knightley is her brother, but he is her future husband; Highbury thinks Frank Churchill is her future husband, but he is her brother' (The Novels of Jane Austen, 1963, p. 94). Even this reduction shows how much the label has to be stretched if it is to fit.

²Cassandra Austen's memorandum tells us that Emma was begun in January 1814, and finished in March 1815: it came out at the end of the year (Emma, p. xi). Persuasion was started in August 1815, and there are also overlappings with Northanger Abbey and Mansfield Park (see p. 20n and pp. 194-5, above).

relate to an aspect of the world, a set of questions, a defined vocabulary. Thus, sensibility and sense, for instance, or prejudice and pride, morality and wit; these are the terms that most economically illustrate the point. Emma deals in all these terms, but there is much less of the selective process that fixes on a particular set as the subject of this novel: like Northanger Abbey it is concerned with what is in a sense the antecedent question of what actually constitutes understanding.

And in Emma, there is a way in which the novel seems to operate on the assumption that we are already familiar with something of the range of meanings that attach to these terms: the novel stands, of course, perfectly well on its own, but there are ways in which our response can be enriched, if we know its predecessors. That accords exactly with the process of development we have been tracing in Jane Austen's novels. Each novel is at once an extension or a re-application of methods and materials from its predecessors, and also a reaction against what has already been achieved. So, for example, Emma tests, again, many of the assumptions that were examined in Mansfield Park, but does so in a more general context: the necessities and the limitations of the moral life are again considered, but they are treated, much more, in relation to other kinds of necessity and limitation. Similarly, the chance, first to be found in Mansfield Park, of being invited to survey with the narrator, is further accentuated, here, by the way the characters exhibit, more

fully still, that capacity for autonomous existence, both as individuals, and as a microcosm of society; as sets of values, ways of viewing the world and of being in it, complete with their own compatibilities and contradictions.

The world of Highbury exists thus, self-defining, and yet not quite coherent. Some of the accounts of that world, supplied by its inhabitants, are compelling (even if they do not quite convince) by their very simplicity. Mr Woodhouse, 'having been a valetudinarian all his life' (p. 7), with his 'habits of gentle selfishness', and his complete inability to 'suppose that other people could feel differently from himself' (p. 8), provides a version of this world that makes it consist, almost entirely, of threats to his own health and happiness. His is a confined, rather airless world, too little varied, and one in which appetites are too easily satisfied by basins of 'nice smooth gruel, thin, but not too thin' (p. 105). But it is a version of the world that is not subjected to too many severe challenges, and those who are too sharply critical are apt to sound merely churlish.³ By contrast, his daughter Emma's rich and varied creations are almost as large as the novel, and would perhaps have been the novel were it not that they are often manifestly incomplete, and that they exist in competition with the

³As Marvin Mudrick does, for example, when he insists that we must see Mr Woodhouse as, among other things, an 'annoyance', an 'idiot', and as resembling a 'parasitic plant' (1952, pp. 195-6). In the novel itself, there is John Knightley's not always amusing impatience with his father-in-law.

conceptions of other people, or else, as in the case of her father, in treaty with them.

And yet, despite these rendered difficulties the novel is likely to appear, at least to a casual glance, to be striking in its lucidity and coherence. There are special ways in which we see what she does not, but we are still most powerfully aware of Emma's large pre-eminence in the novel, unique in Jane Austen, and reflected, as is often noticed, uniquely in the title: she exists in her own right and not as one of a pair of contrasted 'heroines'. Jane Fairfax, Mrs Elton, even Harriet Smith can challenge Emma's position in Highbury, in some way, but none can touch her position in Emma; each invites nice and significant contrasts with her, reflecting different aspects of her self and her situation, reinforcing her position in the novel. It is something that the structure of the novel also helps to emphasise, as it subtly yet unmistakably marks out the stages of Emma's experience, etched in the pattern of the successive details in the three volumes, and in the growing shape of the whole. And there is the delicate underlining achieved by the skilled use of balance and repetition, neither contrived nor dull; so that, for example, the three young men who are centrally important in the novel all make a much-misunderstood trip to London, each later seeks, at a time when confusion is at its height, to make a 'declaration' to Emma, one she tries, each time, to suppress. For all these reasons, it is clear (though not in any limiting sense,

simple or obvious) what Emma is about, and there is that degree of consensus among the critics, which is so obviously lacking in regard to Mansfield Park. Emma is generally regarded as being at the summit of Jane Austen's achievement, and it is usually said to be about the education of Emma Woodhouse: the processes by which she blunders, and the means by which she comes to adjust her perceptions and her understanding.

Beyond that very general formulation, though, there is little enough by way of comfortable agreement. Emma Woodhouse's education has been seen as a matter of intellectual, or moral, or social, or emotional, or sexual development; indeed, for some readers, there is a strain of half-hidden Lesbianism in her, that neither Emma nor her creator can quite acknowledge. Some have insisted that Emma does learn and that she does become fully adult, others that she learns and changes little. For some, her affection and her concern for her father show her saving grace, while others take it as a sign that, to the end, she is unwilling to give up childish ways. Her schemes and devices for ordering the lives of her friends are of course 'wrong', but have been regarded as little more than misguided attempts to apply an impressive creative vitality, or as wilful faults and follies of an over-indulged young woman. So too with Mr Knightley: he is the wise and mature force of correction, the spokesman for Jane Austen; he is flawed, but only enough to make what he is seem the more convincing; he is notably flawed. So

too, we could continue, with the other characters ...⁴

All of which would be fine and appropriate, but for the fact that the argument has tended to become self-preoccupied and to be less than fully responsive to the potential of the novel as a brilliantly enlivening and enlightening comedy about understanding and misunderstanding. For Emma is a novel about theories and explanations of the world, at least the world of Highbury; and the characters are pre-occupied with the business of establishing their sense of the world, of attempting to modify the world to match their sense of it, of being obliged, on occasion, to modify their sense to

⁴Julia Brown makes large claims for the proper functioning of intelligence (1979, p. 125); Mark Schorer provides an elaborate formulation for the interplay between social and moral schemes ('The humiliation of Emma Woodhouse', 1959, pp. 170-87); Howard Babb emphasises Emma's need to dominate, and to prove herself unique (1962, p. 177), and he notes the extent to which she has to learn to understand her emotions (pp. 187-91); Joseph M. Duffy Jr. argues that the novel is about 'the awakening of a normal, intelligent young woman to the possibilities of physical love' ('Emma: The awakening from innocence', 1954a, p. 40); Edmund Wilson was the first to suggest Lesbian inclinations; Joel C. Weinsheuner sees a significant positive value in Emma's love for her father ('Duty and desire in Emma', 1975a, pp. 93-4); Darrel Mansell argues that Emma's growing up is to be seen in terms of her being forced into a 'pulling away from her father' (1973, pp. 151-2); for Lionel Trilling, Emma is often directed to 'a very engaging and, a very right purpose', her actions are 'meant to be truly creative', the demand she makes of life is 'in its essence, a poet's demand' ('Emma and the legend of Jane Austen', 1957, p. 53); for Marilyn Butler, Emma's acts are to be much more censured, much less praised (1975, pp. 251-4). On Knightley, Ronald Blythe is full of his praise ('Introduction', 1966, pp. 16-17); Andrew Wright finds him flawed, but only in quite minor ways (1953, pp. 155-9); J.F. Burrows claims that his flaws are more substantial, and more significant (Jane Austen's Emma, 1968, pp. 9-13).

match the world. Nor, as readers do we buy our laughs too cheaply: we too must set about the business of 'conjecture', we too must venture our own explanations, and we must assess and co-ordinate the often contradictory explanations we are offered, we must match them with our own. Emma, herself, shows us what we must do, just as she can show us how not to do it. She declares herself to be 'an imaginst ... on fire with speculation and foresight' (p. 335): she is also one who 'sets up', however mistakenly on occasion, 'for Understanding' (p. 427). To read Emma is to chart a course between imagination and judgement; to attempt the very necessary means of accommodating to both.⁵

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⁵The terms 'imagination' and 'judgement' have of course often been linked with this novel. Usually though, the connection is seen in terms of a simple antithesis between the two, and the course of the novel is said to be marked by Emma's progress from the first to the second, from the silly and dangerous efforts of her 'fancy' to the more solid achievements represented by the mind of Mr Knightley. See, for example, Moler, 1968, pp. 155-6 (though he also makes a small allowance for 'romance', pp. 184-5); or Mansell, who talks of 'illusion' and 'fact' (1975, pp. 146-51). Some of those who are prepared to allow a little more to the imagination, like Trilling (1957, p. 53), do no more than point out that imagination is not necessarily unhealthy: others consider it only in terms of the ways it can deceive and the ways it must be curbed, trained, directed (Litz, 1965, pp. 136-43; David Lee Minter, 'Aesthetic vision and the world of Emma', 1966, pp. 49-59). For the recent beginnings of attempts to take a more balanced view, see p. 350n, below. Little has hitherto been done, though, to see the question in any more broad context than as it immediately impinges on the heroine; and almost nothing has been established about the way the reader is implicated in that question.

Everyone knows that Jane Austen declared of Emma: 'I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like' (J.E. Austen-Leigh, 1870, p. 157), and any testing of this claim takes us at once to some of the more complicated workings of the novel. Wayne Booth's much cited account of Emma (1961, pp. 243-66) offers the most sustained attempt, to date, to explain Jane Austen's handling of her material, and our response to it. Booth rightly points to the need to keep the reader at once critically aware of Emma's faults, and sympathetically engaged with her; this, he notes, is achieved by ensuring that we see a great deal of the novel through her eyes, but that other characters, chiefly Knightley, provide a corrective to her views. But if we move beyond the generalities, then Booth's conception proves to be too simple and too stylized. He argues that sympathy for Emma depends also on withholding the view of others, and insists that 'any extended view' of Jane Fairfax 'would reveal her as a much more sympathetic person than Emma herself' (p. 249). At the same time, though, he is unhappy about the process by which the reader is 'mystified', especially about the secret engagement of Jane and Frank, and he observes that this 'inevitably' (p. 255) reduces the dramatic irony. For him, the reader is, at least in a first reading of the novel, less than sufficiently aware of Emma's faults.

At once, though, this begins to ring false. Booth's formula for connecting mystery and irony has nothing to do with the actual experience of reading Emma, since there is

never this simple and crudely mechanical trading between the two. Rather, we deal in what we partly know and what we partly guess at, in what we must actively seek to understand and imagine, not in what we are plainly told. And if, like Emma, we are mystified by Frank and Jane, that does not directly limit our ironic understanding of the heroine, since we do not have to establish the precise measure of her error, to know or at least to guess at a good deal of its substance. We have the history of her blunders and surmises, we know the methods she habitually employs, and we have the contrary opinions of other characters.

The most useful answers to Booth's case have come from W.J. Harvey ('The plot of Emma', 1967, pp. 48-63), and he also notes the way Emma's blunders bring ironic meanings to us (pp. 52-3). For him, the novel is 'binary':

Around the visible star, Emma herself, circles an invisible planet whose presence and orbit we can gauge only by measuring the perturbations in the world we can see The written novel contains its unwritten twin whose shape is known only by the shadow it casts.

(p. 55)

That is a useful point, but it must be qualified: the novel is very rich in fictions and in truths, in possibilities and in versions of reality, and the story of Frank and Jane, though important, is only one of them. Harvey is most useful on the problems of actually reading the novel: here he comes much closer to the experience, as it must strike most readers, than Booth.

... we, too, share the frailty of the characters, not merely by being human, but also, in a special sense, by being readers. In other words, Emma is a novel which constantly tempts us into surmise, speculation, judgement; the process of reading runs parallel to the life read about. Hence the need for mystification and hence the delayed revelation which shows how we, too, are liable to mistake appearances for realities and to arrive at premature conclusions. The novel betrays us to ourselves.

(p. 57)

Even this, though, is limited. It takes no adequate account of the actual functioning of the imagination; for Harvey, the whole experience occurs between the doubts of the first reading and the certainty of the second.⁶ Indeed, for the special pleasure of subsequent readings, he can only offer us - the point he makes is a frail one, meagrely argued - the possibility that 'our attention is so diversified and diverted by the thick web of linguistic nuance that we do not concentrate single-mindedly on the ironic results of the mystification' (p. 63).

But the most striking point about the accounts of both Harvey, and Booth, and the thing that most clearly shows the limitations of their arguments, is that while they describe mechanisms for reading Emma that are actually quite elaborate, this does not match their sense of what is in the novel, which is deemed, by both, to be essentially simple and

⁶Harvey also argues that 'if we had been let into the secret from the start, then the irony must have seemed so insistent and obtrusive as to have become mechanical and oppressive' (p. 53). Yet, as he himself acknowledges, this is not at all the usual experience of those who read the novel for a second time (p. 54).

straightforward. Harvey sees it as the portrayal of a heroine whose faults are snobbery and pride; faults which result from her 'failure to control an over-active and perverted imagination' (pp. 49-50), a claim which, as well as being simplistic, is also awkwardly at odds, in a way which is never resolved, with the 'surmise' and 'speculation' he expects from the reader. And Booth states the substance of the novel, choosing his own terms, but making it no less simple. Emma has, he says,

intelligence, wit, beauty, wealth, and position, and she has the love of those around her. Indeed, she thinks herself completely happy. The only threat to her happiness, a threat of which she is unaware, is herself: charming as she is, she can neither see her own excessive pride honestly nor resist imposing herself on the lives of others. She is deficient both in generosity and in self-knowledge. She discovers and corrects her faults only after she has almost ruined herself and her closest friends.

(p. 244)

Both versions, it must be said, are also a little too insistently grim.

And we discover why Booth is so pressingly opposed to the mystification when he reveals his conception of Jane Austen's narrator as a 'friend and guide' to the reader, one who, by definition, should not be trying to mystify the reader; one who also has 'learned nothing at the end of the novel that she did not know at the beginning' (p.265). This 'cherished illusion' is certainly a common one, but that does not make it any less dangerously misleading. It is an

illusion which, from the first pages of Northanger Abbey onwards, Jane Austen surely creates in order to destroy. Reading her novels is not actually an easy, comfortable and soothing experience, through which we are carefully guided by the friendly, genteel, aunt-like figure of the narrator; and the world of her novels is not one in which all is knowable, because all, in a sense, is already known.⁷

Booth's objection to the mystification leaves him actually shying away from some important questions about Jane Austen's novels, and especially about Emma. His pre-occupation with what the narrator 'knows', and what the narrator reveals, leads him to conclude that, but for the mystery of Frank and Jane, all would be easy and obvious. Harvey offers an apt corrective on this point, when he suggests that Booth 'assumes a rather too sophisticated first reading to be the norm' (pp. 53-4). Indeed, it is surely the case that no first-time reader can arrive at more than a very partial apprehension of the revealed truths of the novel, wholly by his own efforts. One is much too dependent on the revelations as they are made, in the course of the novel, and it is only on a second,

⁷Booth cites Katherine Mansfield's observation that 'the truth is that every true admirer of the novels cherishes the happy thought that he alone - reading between the lines - has become the secret friend of their author' ('Friends and foes', 1920, p. 304). Booth is not, of course, incapable of conceiving of a 'narrator' who is 'unreliable'; but his categories are such that they determine when he can form the conception. Thus, he discusses the notion in relation to Henry James (1961, pp. 339-46), but this is in explicit contrast to what he sees as an earlier and much simpler state of affairs.

or subsequent readings that a more complete apprehension is possible. Nor, though it is a particular problem with this novel, is it specific to it. None of the six novels yields up its significances quite as easily as Booth envisages Emma doing, to a first-time reader. With each, the material is too complicated and too unclear; and in almost every case, though not perhaps as prominently as in Emma, there is an element of mystery.⁸ Pride and Prejudice is the most obvious point of comparison, with the deliberately maintained mystery of the real nature of Darcy and Wickham. Why, since we are allowed into Darcy's mind, in the early chapters, are we allowed to know only of his feelings for Elizabeth? Why are we given no clear glimpse of his virtues and strengths? Why are we kept so much in ignorance of Wickham? If we were better informed on these points then we would, obviously, be much more able, fully, to savour the ironies of Elizabeth's mistakes about both men.

But then if we are invited to consider both Emma and Pride and Prejudice as vitiated by Jane Austen's desire to set up and maintain mysteries, we might well want to consider whether these mysteries are perhaps actually performing some

⁸The only exception is Mansfield Park, which, though it is a complicated and ambivalent piece, has no very large 'mystification': but this does not mark the deliberate rejection of 'mystification', so much as the deliberate adoption of a different narrative strategy. Where it is important that we see what Fanny sees, we watch with her as Henry and Maria flirt; where it is useful that we know what she cannot know, we observe Henry and Mary, as they discuss Henry's 'plans' for Fanny.

important function, other than that of beguiling the reader. Booth makes it clear that he thinks Jane Austen regarded mystification as a desirable end in itself, and he goes on:

It is a commonplace of our criticism that significant literature arouses suspense not about the 'what' but about the 'how'. Mere mystification has been mastered by so many second-rate writers that her efforts at mystification seem second-rate.

(p. 255)

Now it is nonsense to suggest that the 'mystery' in Emma does not have more to do with the 'how', and indeed the 'why', than merely the 'what': but, where mystification is an end in itself, Booth's objections are entirely legitimate. If the object is merely to conceal, except for obscure hints, the true history of a set of circumstances, and if the ideal is achieved when it is still theoretically possible for the reader to arrive by his own efforts at the substance of this history, but very unlikely in practice, then we need hold neither the method nor the achieved art in very high esteem. An obvious, if extreme, instance would be Agatha Christie's notorious The Murder of Roger Ackroyd: notorious, not least, because genteel mystification gives way to unmannerly deceitfulness, and the narrator, who appears in the first person, and who seems in every respect to be what Booth would call 'reliable', conceals from us, until the end, the fact that he is the murderer of Roger Ackroyd. But it is strange that Booth seems incapable of conceiving of a mystification that serves some higher end. He concedes rather casually, that 'every author withholds until later what he "might as well"

relate now' (pp. 254-5), but the emptiness of that gesture can be seen if we turn the proposition around. It is quite impossible for a species of novel to exist, which reveals everything at once: it is a baldly axiomatic truth that the novel, as a form, is the recounting of an, in some sense imagined experience, one that is, in some sense, unknown to the reader; that it implies a series of choices by the author, of what will be told, of how and when, of what will be revealed early and what will be concealed till late. The reader who would avoid mystification should avoid novels, should confine his reading to something like the Dictionary of National Biography. Even that reveals sequentially; but it does not deliberately mystify.

That is not to say, of course, that every novel necessarily includes a large element of mystification. There is a kind of novel, in which every character is introduced by a tidy biographical summary, with a neat underlining of significant details; where events are steadily and scrupulously mined of their significance. It is one of the kinds of fiction which Jane Austen herself parodies in the Juvenilia. And it is exemplified, interestingly, in Scott's Waverley; here, the very orderly process of unravelling and explaining actually works by the mystification of the hero, a mystification which the reader will at once penetrate, unless he is historically illiterate, or incapable of performing a simple arithmetical subtraction. Scott subtitles his novel 'Tis Sixty Years Since; he dwells on this fact in the opening

pages, and he tells us that he is taking his retrospective view from the year 1805; he gives the novel a romantic-military flavour, and he sets it principally in Scotland. In such circumstances, it is not possible for any reader to take as long as Edward Waverley does to discover that 1745 is the year of the coming of Charles Edward Stewart. But even Scott mystifies the reader on some points. We are given some considerable insights into the 'bold, ambitious, and ardent, yet artful and politic character' of Fergus Mac-Ivor, the Highland Chief, as soon as he is introduced (I, pp. 200-6). But the part he actually plays in the business of deceiving and persuading the hero into an exchange of Hanoverian for Stewart loyalties, is never fully revealed: and the explanation we do get comes only at the end of the novel (II, pp. 308-11, 342-52). This mystification generates a kind of suspenseful curiosity, of course, and it means that the narrative flow is not too impeded by explanation. But also, and much more important, it means we see as and what Edward Waverley sees. Because we share his point of view on this matter, because we too are mystified, we have an uninterrupted view of his capacities: a more complete understanding on our part would make that assessment more difficult. Knowing only what he does, seeing what he does with this knowledge, we can see that he is open and brave, a little impetuous, rather too trusting, somewhat naive. We can see that he is not merely careless, or fickle, or foolish. Or worse: Scott

is careful to show how easily a much more sinister interpretation may be placed on Waverley's actions.⁹

This can, I think, shed an interesting light on the much more substantial mystification in Emma, especially if we consider it in relation to the 'remedy' that Wayne Booth proposes. Even a first reading, he says, could have been full and complete, had Jane Austen 'been willing to sacrifice her mystery. A single phrase in her own name - "his secret engagement to Jane Fairfax" - or a short inside view of either of the lovers could have made us aware of every ironic touch' (p. 255). True, but at what a cost? For it is not merely that by freeing the novel of a tiresome piece of mystification that the reader can, theoretically at least, delight in an unrestricted share in the irony, can know exactly how wrong Emma's guesses and assumptions are. One important consequence, already pointed to by Harvey, is that without the mystery. the reader would not have to risk his own guesses and interpretations: the novel would be a much safer, blander, even duller experience for him. But, equally, the more precisely we can note each wrong assumption of Emma's, the more accurately we can measure each false judgement, the less we will be able to perceive, as it were, from inside Emma: the less we will be able to sense the degree to which Emma's views are reasonable, or even just

⁹So there is a version of Waverley's story that Scott puts into the mouth of Major Melville (II, pp. 29-34).

understandable, given what she can see. The very balance which Booth himself found to be of such importance between sympathy and judgement, would be destroyed.

And what of second readings? Consider the example of a novel where the degree of mystification is even larger than in Emma. Great Expectations offers what in Booth's terms is an even graver betrayal of the reader's trust, an even more prodigal waste of irony. For here the narrator is the older Pip, giving an account of the younger Pip's experiences, and offering a commentary on that account: he judges and he justifies, he adds supplementary information, gives a perspective, points to an irony. But it is this narrator who also dupes us exceedingly by concealing the real source of Pip's 'expectations'; who could have given us an early indication of the real significance of Magwitch and Miss Havisham, but who actually prevents us from appreciating, on a first reading, the full irony of Pip's misplaced hopes. And yet of course that also means that we can much more fully perceive things as the younger Pip sees them. Knowing all would mean apprehending less. We can most fully appreciate the shocking gap between Pip's 'expectations' and the 'reality' of Magwitch if we have, largely, shared the expectations: we can savour most completely the fact that Magwitch is Estella's father, if Magwitch's role has been long obscured, if we have been concentrating on Pip's experiences, as he sees them, if we know his feelings for Estella, and the humiliations he suffers. A similar effect is achieved

in Emma, when the secret engagement is revealed, and we are shown Emma's confused and anxious reflections about Frank and Jane, about Harriet, about Mr Knightley, and about herself (pp. 395-414). The fullest, and most devastating irony can reach us only if we are suddenly and vitally made aware, much as Emma is, of the significant discrepancies between her thinking and the reality in which she exists. And once we come back to Great Expectations, knowing the significance of Magwitch, we can begin to trace a pattern of meaning that was quite hidden from us at a first reading: we can, for example, begin to understand the 'look' which Magwitch gives Pip, early in the novel, when he is recaptured, a look which the younger Pip does not understand (p. 69): But the real difference between first and second readings is likely to be less substantial than we might have anticipated. We are still likely to recall and re-discover the vividness of Pip's experiences, as he saw them: we can again participate in the making of Pip's mistakes, even while knowing them to mistakes. What is more, it is only then that we can properly recognise the psychological verisimilitude offered us by the older Pip, and which depends crucially on the mystification. What the older Pip concentrates on is what the younger Pip did know and feel and think.

The functioning of the narrator, in Emma, is less central, of course, but here too the second reading should find us seeking a balance between making it a new experience, given that we are now possessed of so much more knowledge

than at the first reading, and of making it an opportunity to repeat the experience of the first reading, to recognise that the actions and thoughts of a character should not necessarily appear, to us, to be more unreasonable or foolish just because we now have a much more complete context for these actions and thoughts. The privileges of a second reading are not, after all, extended to the characters; they remain bound by the same limitations and liabilities that contained them when first we opened the novel.¹⁰

And there are special uncertainties that remain, even at a second reading of Emma. This is exactly the kind of difficulty we find, for instance, in The Portrait of a Lady. In James's novel, the mystification of the reader is a slighter matter than in Emma, but it is no less necessary, no less telling. James, of course, allows us some significant glimpses beyond the reach of Isabel Archer's consciousness: even on a first reading we are able to understand better and more fully than she does, the points on which she is mistaken. We can, for example, make more than Isabel very tentatively does, of the 'anomaly' of one day finding her husband together with Madame Merle, she standing and he sitting (II, p. 164). But it is merely that we are a little

¹⁰It has become commonplace, indeed almost universal, to assume that Emma's errors, about Elton for example, are so completely obvious, that they should be obvious to her (Babb, 1962, pp. 182-3; Litz, 1965, pp. 136-7; Tave, 1973, p. 217, for instance). But, as Norman Page has observed, Elton is often 'genuinely though unwittingly ambiguous' (1972, p. 43), and Emma's assumptions, though proved wrong, are not unreasonable, given what is before her eyes.

ahead of the heroine, not that we are completely informed of a level of ironic meaning. We may early begin to suspect Gilbert Osmond, but we have only isolated details, and scraps of opinion on which to base our assumptions. Even though we know, and Isabel does not, that he and Madame Merle are in collusion (I, pp. 341-9) we know insufficient about the nature of the collusion, and we can never do more than guess at the actual history of their relationship. The point at which apprehension can be complete is reached neither on first nor on subsequent readings. Always, we are caught between the possibilities of knowing more than Isabel does, and of knowing as she does. And the experience of a second reading includes the recognition of those not insignificant elements that are unresolved; elements which increase the range of possible interpretation and response, and should keep us still guessing at, feeling for, seeking to imagine a comprehensive and comprehensible pattern.

In Emma, this measure of the unfixed and the incomplete is much larger, and much more deliberately placed before us. The compacted fragments of actual and possible meaning, of clues and hints and doubts that inform us of the people and events of the novel, can never be completely resolved into a single and articulate totality, and it is open to us to make a different selection of what we think is significant, on each reading. For second and subsequent readings, we will of course have the advantage of foresight: but it is only a reading that is mechanical and mindless that will be

wholly determined by that foresight.

Reginald Farrer was probably the first to record something of this quality in the novel ('Jane Austen', 1917, pp. 23-4) when he claimed that

while twelve readings of Pride and Prejudice give you twelve periods of pleasure repeated, as many readings of Emma give you that pleasure, not repeated only, but squared and squared again with each perusal, till at every fresh reading you feel anew that you never understood anything like the widening sum of its delights.

It must be said that there is a little more to the reading of Pride and Prejudice than this suggests, but it is still significant that Farrer should have recognised the special endowment of Emma. His point was later to be taken up by Lionel Trilling, who commented also on the 'difficulty' of Emma, a difficulty which, he argued, was different from and greater than the 'literal' difficulty of Proust or Joyce or Kafka, since with them it diminished with 'each sympathetic reading'. With Emma, he suggested, there can be no such progressive resolution, and we can never fully understand it. 'The effect is extraordinary, perhaps unique. The book is like a person - not to be comprehended fully and finally by any other person' (1957, pp. 45-6).

And Virginia Woolf (1925, p. 174), writing in general about Jane Austen's novels, has noted something that especially applies to Emma, and to this characteristic of the novel. Jane Austen is, she says,

a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial.

This is a point which connects significantly with some recent attempts to provide a Phenomenological account of the reading process in general, and to account precisely for the reader's part in that process. Wolfgang Iser (1972, pp. 274-94, 276), for example, acknowledges his debt to Husserl and Ingarden, in the version he offers, but he also has Jane Austen, and Virginia Woolf's comment on Jane Austen in mind. Expanding on that comment, he observes that as the reader's imagination supplies or completes the unwritten details, so, what he contributes will 'influence the effect of the written part of the text'.

Thus begins a whole dynamic process: the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy, but at the same time these implications, worked out by the reader's imagination, set the given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own. In this way, trivial scenes suddenly take on the shape of an 'enduring form of life'.

Iser is, of course, moving from the case of Jane Austen to a much more general account of the process of reading. But it is worth noting how the example of Emma is specially illuminating, specially appropriate, in supplying a neatly comprehensive demonstration for his argument, from the

ranks of 'traditional' (p. 280) texts. Indeed, to the extent that Iser has identified something that is specific to Emma, Emma is not a useful example of what can, in general, be applied to 'traditional' texts.

Emma is also an interesting example - though not one he actually cites here - in connection with Iser's views on second and subsequent readings of the same text. A second reading, he notes,

often produces a different impression from the first. The reasons for this may lie in the reader's own change of circumstances, still, the text must be such as to allow this variation. On a second reading familiar occurrences now tend to appear in a new light and seem to be at times corrected, at times enriched.

(p. 280)

He also observes that a second reading is not necessarily 'truer', but simply different; and he points out that 'even on repeated viewings a text allows and, indeed, induces innovative reading' (p. 281). This must, I think, be qualified, a little. Obviously, the point of perfect understanding is not achievable, and it is always possible to perceive new patterns, to imagine new connections. But there is likely to be, to some degree, a cumulative effect, not only of our own past imaginative contributions, but also of our understanding of the 'written' elements, of the boundaries they mark, and of what is contained by those boundaries: if not quite 'truer' then, the readings we make after the first, are at least likely to be more comprehensive. And once again Emma is not merely a typical, but a specially appropriate instance of Iser's argument; in that

it makes an unusually large allowance for variations from reading to reading.

That is not meant as a claim that the uncertainty in Emma is wildly and chaotically unlimited. As Iser suggests in general, so with this novel, the felt pull lies between what the text specifies and what the reader imagines. And indeed the substantial uncertainty of Emma exists in a paradoxical relationship with a measure of certainty that is unusually high, and unusually high for Jane Austen. The settings in time, in place, in social class are all precisely and strictly limited; and the events and circumstances of the novel are small and are rendered with a degree of particularity that seems to allow for only the minutest variations in possibility. Nevertheless, it is within this apparently rigid and clear structure, that so much flexibility, so much conjecture, so much doubt is allowed to exist.¹¹ It could even be said that this is a new and special application of the traditional defence of Jane Austen's limited scope - that we have depth instead of width - since within the defined there is so much undefined. It is with this novel that Jane Austen turns the 'limitation', triumphantly, into a crucial part of what she achieves. She can say and do so

¹¹The very location of Highbury, and the topography of the place, are given with an apparent precision and comprehensiveness. Yet, as Chapman notes (Emma, p. 521), we cannot actually locate where it would be, on a map of Kent, or ourselves draw a map of its streets and lanes. The picture is not, actually, sufficiently complete.

much about 'understanding' and 'imagination', she can present so intense a 'reality', because so many possibilities are seen to exist within the seemingly determined: because she has managed to combine the maximum of certainty with the maximum of doubt.

.....

This play between certainty and doubt is declared from the novel's opening words, and it is something that has been strangely under-noticed. Many readers seem to see only the certainties, and to be content to echo Booth's assertion (1961, p. 257) that nothing in the opening paragraph 'could have been said by Emma'. Even those who disagree have been rather tentative: Mansell (1973, p. 148) for example suggests that the opening sentence 'seems slightly coloured already by Emma's own vanity ...'. And he takes the point no further. In fact, while all Jane Austen's novels start by introducing the reader to a kind of uncertainty, this is usually less radically so than in Emma. Only Northanger Abbey goes as far, and rather different effects are being sought there; the doubts generated are of a consciously literary nature, prompting us to ask what Northanger Abbey is, as a novel, and Catherine as a heroine, how she regards herself in that role, what the narrator makes of her, how we relate to her as a literary convention. The opening of Emma also contains an element of parody and

satire, in its concern with a heroine, and the way she is to be described, but the active preoccupation with the novel as a form which contains the entity we provisionally label 'heroine', is now secondary. It is not on what Emma is as a heroine that our interests and doubts are focussed, but on the question, as important and as difficult, of what she is.

And the very introduction of the subject is an introduction to the difficulties it presents: our approach to the subject requires the aid, seemingly, of not one narrator merely, but of four or five narrators, all trying, in turn, to give their individual senses of what we are to examine, each choosing a perspective, and a preferred method of introducing us to the subject. It is almost as if this is a selection of Jane Austen's tentative early drafts of an opening chapter; as if the writer knows, with some sureness, where to go, but has not yet decided exactly how to start the journey, and makes several hesitant tries.

Jane Austen has of course long been acclaimed for the subtlety and the effectiveness with which she shifts the point of view in her novels. But that is usually perceived as a movement from narrator to character, or from one character to another. In Emma she makes us much more aware of another kind of movement, the one that is, as it were, from narrator to narrator. The process and the consequence of these different movements can perhaps best be understood

if we contrast it with the practice of some of her successors. Middlemarch, for example, shows George Eliot to be no less skilled in handling multiple points of view, but it is a rather different kind of handling. She too can show us, fully and fairly, both the inner life of a character, and the way that character connects with, and is perceived by other characters, but these distinctions are always much more distinctly marked than in Emma. The much noted instance, at the start of Chapter 29, for example, takes us through a series of steps, from the mind of Dorothea, her hopes, ideas, beliefs, and her growing awareness that her marriage is not at all what she had anticipated, to the views of Casaubon himself, by way of comments of the narrator, deliberately, about the shift, and the necessity for the shift.

One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea - but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble ...

(p. 312)

All the time, as we move from one mind to another, or as we explore the ground between them, we know where we are in relation to them and to the narrator.¹² With Jane Austen

¹²A similar point could be made about Henry James. He can be quite specific about the relationship between the narrator, and the narrator's subject. In his Preface to The Ambassadors, for instance, he writes of 'employing but one centre and keeping it all within my hero's compass'. And he goes on to explain more about that 'compass': 'Other persons in no small number were to people the scene' but only Strether's sense of them 'should avail me for showing them' (p. xv).

the shifts in narrative perspective are almost never as clearly defined, either when it is from character to character, or when examining the ground between them. We become aware of the complexity of the material, and of its ambivalence, just because we are made uncertain of exactly how we are examining it. Of course George Eliot creates her own discrepancy between doubt and certainty - albeit much less pervasively, much more under the hand of the wise and far-seeing narrator - just because there are several fully explored centres of interest. Dorothea matters to us, as she sees herself, and as she is seen by Casaubon and Ladislaw, by Mr Brooke, by Celia, by Sir James, by Mrs Cadwallader. But she must also matter to us as readers, in relation to the way Lydgate matters, that the Vincys and the Bulstrodes and the Garths matter. Jane Austen has fewer 'centres of attention', but she also ensures that we are to a considerable degree more uncertain about them. We are obliged, forever to be asking or deciding where we are, in relation to the novel; to be alert to the most minute shift in perspective.

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

She was the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father, and had, in consequence of her sister's marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period. Her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses, and her place

had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection.

Sixteen years had Miss Taylor been in Mr. Woodhouse's family, less as a governess than a friend, very fond of both daughters, but particularly of Emma. Between them it was more the intimacy of sisters. Even before Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of governess, the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint; and the shadow of authority being now long passed away, they had been living together as friend and friend very mutually attached, and Emma doing just what she liked; highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgement, but directed chiefly by her own.

The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her.

Sorrow came—a gentle sorrow—but not at all in the shape of any disagreeable consciousness.—Miss Taylor married. It was Miss Taylor's loss which first brought grief. It was on the wedding-day of this beloved friend that Emma first sat in mournful thought of any continuance.

(pp. 5-6)

And so we enter Emma's musings on the night of the wedding.

One process of development represented by these paragraphs is simply linear: the portrait of Emma becomes more and more complete, with the gradual accretion of detail, the shading and qualifying of that detail. But this process exists in conjunction and in opposition to another. Each of the paragraphs can be assigned to a different narrator, who is in different relation to the subject: the complexity and the contradictions are such that no single point of view can accommodate all.

The first paragraph, should begin to alert our suspicions, with its slightly complacent string of adjectives and qualifying phrases, its air of having been a little too

carefully and consciously chosen. Clearly, it is a point of view that is close to Emma's, but how close exactly, and how sympathetic is it? Then, as we begin to seek for the authority from which it derives, to wonder how much narrator and character coincide, where they differ, we should notice and pause over the word 'seemed'. If it makes the whole paragraph a little ambivalent, then it does so in a way that, of itself, generates more doubt still, since it could either be that the terms do not quite apply to Emma, or that the terms are a not-quite-appropriate formula for the 'best blessings of existence'.

The second paragraph requires a change in thinking from us. We must retain a sense of these doubts, but they must be consigned, momentarily at least, to the back of our minds. The narrator, in this paragraph, is a significant distance from Emma and has, very much, the appearance of a conventional narrator at the start of a conventional novel, composedly and rather detachedly setting out the biographical details of the heroine. Here too, though, the description begins to edge into implied comment, as the sense of comfort is stated and reiterated: here too, the comment has its own ambivalence, and we can either welcome the placid and secure context for the heroine, or we can find it to be too easy, too undemanding, too unchallenging. The overall effect is to offer a perspective, different from that of the first paragraph, but also building on what the first paragraph offered: to assimilate but also to look a little

questioningly, a little askance, at what is being built and on what it is founded.

In the third paragraph, the process is repeated, but in its own way. The narrator is again very close to Emma, but not quite in the position of the narrator of the first paragraph, since the line of vision is differently angled. This narrator is connected with and responsive to the relationship between Emma and Miss Taylor, and can give us a sense of how each views the relationship, can begin to search out the range and the limitation of each perspective, can reflect on the ironies of the interaction. But the general attitude remains quite friendly, quite indulgent to the principal subject, like almost everything else in Emma's world.

There follows, at the start of the next paragraph, an almost violent jolt away from Emma, the more striking since it follows so closely the line of argument at the end of the previous paragraph, but from such a decidedly different standpoint. This narrator has a liking for crisply decisive judgements; and, if not actively hostile to Emma, is certainly determined not to be too easily charmed and delighted by her, one who seeks to achieve a not-uncritical detachment about her, and who will err, if at all, on the side of severity.

Now, we could go further: we could attempt to name these narrators. We could suggest that, with the addition of a little authorial insight in most cases, the narrator

of the first paragraph is Emma herself, the second is Jane Austen, the third is shared by Emma and Miss Taylor, and the fourth is Knightley. But then the extra authorial insight is an awkward contrivance: it is also, in the circumstances, too simple an explanation. Indeed, the whole notion that there are only four points of view, each more or less fixed within its own set of perspectives, is altogether too straightforward and stationary a concept for these paragraphs. A more apt and accurate explanation would be that there is one narrator, constantly moving in relation to the material of the novel, constantly shifting and adjusting the perspective, without necessarily giving a clear and formal notice of change. The effect is very complex: it goes a long way in helping to create the sense of a fully three-dimensional picture; it makes for a subtle and comprehensive exploration of that picture, so that the seeming order and tidiness of the picture is only seeming; it ensures that the progressive movement forward is also a shifting retrospective view of what has already been established; and it persuades us to an active concern for the way that even a slight change in perspective or distance can make for a significant change in what is perceived, in what can be understood, and in the nature of the promptings to our imagination. It is to be seen, most obviously at first, in the movements between Emma and Miss Taylor in the third paragraph, and in the striking movement away from Emma that follows immediately after: but it is to be found even in

the first sentence when the word 'seemed' is arresting just because it is a movement of greater detachment that makes us question what has been revealed and what is still to come.

By now we are prepared for the experience of the novel. We are already in the presence of Emma's musings on the evening after the wedding of Mr Weston and Miss Taylor, of her reflections on what she takes to be her part in the making of the events of the day. Then, while she and her father, later joined by Knightley, talk over these events, each begins to give shadowy substance to a particular sense of the world's reality. Soon, we will become party to the notions shared by the Westons, and to the alluring possibility of a visit from Frank Churchill: soon we will meet and participate in the conjectures about Harriet and about Mr Elton. Sometimes the alternatives are only faintly implied; sometimes they are quite combatively put, as when Knightley and Mrs Weston debate about Emma, or when Emma and Knightley talk and argue, and there is a clash between their ideas and conceptions, their beliefs and their feelings.

It is never again, after the first four paragraphs, that the narrator is quite so sustainedly busy, moving back and forth over the ground between characters, exploring the possibilities of differing perspectives that are within and also beyond their capacities. But it is also a movement that never ceases for very long. The visit to Box Hill, for

instance, is memorable partly because it is a period of increased movement for the narrator, exploring the individual perspectives and the way they combine, the different levels and possibilities of meaning within and between the characters. It is thus that we measure not only the workings of the simpler links, as between the Eltons, Miss Bates and Mr Weston, but also those more complicated connections, actual and possible, between Emma, Knightley, Harriet, Frank Churchill, Jane Fairfax: it is thus that we acquire a sense of the whole. So we can begin to apprehend the full significance of Emma's rudeness to Miss Bates, and of the consequences of that rudeness: and surely the frequent attempts simply to find here a ponderous moral significance, one that provides a key to the whole episode, indeed to the whole novel, are over-zealous and insufficiently subtle.¹³ For Emma's action is at once witty and apt, and a piece of gratuitous cruelty to one who has no defences; we can smile at it, but we must recognise that it entirely deserves Knightley's rebuke. But we should also recognise that the sequence of events forms another pattern, one that, perhaps, we can never wholly comprehend. Knightley's words gain a particularly cutting edge because it is Emma to whom he is speaking; because it

¹³As Graham Hough has observed, Emma's 'thoughtless speech is a sin against charity': but, as he says, Miss Bates is not put into the novel to function 'as a moral try-your-strength machine for Emma to measure herself against. She exists for her own sake ...' (The Dream and the Task, 1963, p. 47).

is she who has been cruel, but also because it is she who has just been flirting so 'excessively' with Frank (p. 368). And likewise, though the shame Emma feels is certainly penitential, it is also in part a response to an only slightly apprehended connection, bond, between herself and Knightley, and to a sudden sense that the relationship is in some way at risk. It is striking of this very complicated chord that has Emma leaving Box Hill with 'tears running down her cheeks', tears that are 'extraordinary' (p. 376).

.....

But Emma also contains a more substantial mystery, and that of course is the one presented by Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. Jane is often considered to be something of a failure on Jane Austen's part, but it would be more appropriate to say that she is sufficiently interesting, as she is, just because her existence poses so many large questions that are not completely answered or completely answerable. It is even tempting to seek outside the novel for the 'facts' about Jane and her relationship with Frank that might allow us to get a useful hold on what is so elusive, in the novel. Thus we could go to the tradition that records events of the novel after it ended, as revealed by Jane Austen to her family circle. This tells us that Jane Fairfax lived only 'nine or ten years' after her marriage (William and Richard

Arthur Austen-Leigh: Jane Austen, 1913, p. 307), and we could follow Chapman in concluding that Jane Austen means us to understand that 'Jane Fairfax was too good for Frank Churchill (1948, p. 186n). Only it is odd that if Jane Austen intended so decided a moral judgement, she should have left the matter imprecisely in the novel, and should have offered the judgement casually, and far from its pages: equally, if this is the point being made, then one must doubt the wisdom of going to the lengths of killing Jane off, in order to make it. In any event, Jane's death is much more easily ascribable to the ill-health which is one of the most fully established facts that we know about her.

But even that measure of sureness quickly dwindles away if we reflect on its basis: almost all the discussion of Jane's health comes from the doting Miss Bates and the officious Mrs Elton, while the narrator offers, by contrast, only the briefest and least alarming account, in the course of introducing Jane, by telling us that she 'had never been quite well' since the time of the Dixons' marriage (p. 165). And what are we to make of that? Emma quickly discovers a secret and perhaps unrequited love for Mr Dixon (pp. 160, 168); and whatever we think of Emma for making this supposition, we must recognise the way in which it is not entirely inapposite. We could manufacture our own surmises, based on what the narrator observes, by proposing some connection between her frailty, and her understandable

dread of the business of becoming a governess, a business which begins to impend weightily, after the marriage of the Dixons (p. 165). Then, once we know of it, we can recognise that the period of her illness coincides, almost exactly, with the period of the secret engagement (pp. 161, 395): but even if, in the end, this last strikes us as the most significant, then we still have no means of measuring that significance exactly. We can say only that her illness is both an aspect of the general distress she has to master, and, since it can be accentuated by her other concerns, a measure of that general distress: we can be exact about neither. We learn, eventually, that she loves Frank deeply, but we also know that she fears the prospect of being a governess: and we know, equally, that this prospect is never far from her mind, as long as the secret engagement offers her so uncertain a future. We discover that the secret, itself, generates a powerful sense of guilt in her; we find also that she feels that Frank is too cavalier and too frivolous about the secret: yet she can, on occasion, share the joke (pp. 242-3); and she can be not a little touched by jealousy, when she feels that Frank goes too far in his 'flirting' with Emma. At times her frailty is little more than an interesting symptom of a wider problem; at times it appears as an exact counterpoint, as when she terminates the engagement and even the reliable Mr Perry finds that her 'health seemed for the moment completely

deranged' (p. 389); but even at such times it becomes a fiction as much as a truth, a metaphor which Jane herself can manipulate. Thus when she is emphatically determined to reject favours from Emma, and claims to be too ill to ride in a carriage, she is also seen on the same day, 'wandering about the meadows, at a distance from Highbury' (pp. 390-1). Indeed this confusion of physical and mental states is such as to place her in the company of Mr Woodhouse, and, by an even more interesting irony, of Mrs Churchill. And because Jane's situation is so complexly but so incompletely rendered, her behaviour admits to no single coherent explanation. Too much depends on how we decide to see things; and we understand, we judge and we imagine what, very largely, we choose to understand and judge and imagine.

Frank offers us a repetition and an enlargement of these difficulties, and we have to try to balance his naturally high spirits with his careless wilfulness. The problem is the more striking, when we consider the ways in which he is typically a Jane Austen 'villain'. Her 'villains' invariably are at first apparently charming, and each appears to be rather more wicked, when his villainy is first revealed, then later when other perspectives have been offered.¹⁴

¹⁴Andrew Wright, for example, has correctly observed that Frank is 'villain' only nominally, and that even by the standards of the other Jane Austen novels, his defects are less than substantial. 'Frank Churchill is devious, hypocritical, "slyding of corage", and occasionally quite unkind; but he seduces no innocent young girl, elopes with no scatter-brained matron, neglects no indigent widow, betrays no monstrous dishonesty' (1953, p. 156). But even these mild strictures remain possibilities only.

Frank strikingly fits this general pattern, but he also differs notably, not only in being so slight a villain as not to commit any large and nameable sin, but also in never losing so much of his ambivalence. Thus we do not have to be blind adherents to the manners of Regency England to see why secret engagements are regarded as wrong and foolish: but if we consider this engagement, then we encounter a never-resolved ambivalence. Frank's love is obviously genuine enough, but how much can actually be built on it? And is the engagement a secret because he is pusillanimous or irresponsible? Is it even a justifiable course of action, in the face of at least temporarily unresolvable circumstances? Is the delight he takes in duping Highbury the result of an occasionally excessive high spirits; or does it reveal a deep and sinister tendency to deceive? When he appears in the very worst light - as on the visit to Box Hill - there are still too many hidden possibilities, too many visible complications, for us to be sure what to make of him. When Emma and Frank try to enliven the untoward dullness of the company, Emma herself recognises that the phrase 'flirted together excessively' (p. 368) will be used by some of their observers to describe what she and Frank are doing: but there is also a sense in which they are both 'innocent' because, imperfectly though they understand each other, they both know that neither is seriously attached to the other. Their 'flirting' may be offensive to some of their observers, but for them it really is no more than a trivial game. At

the same time, of course, Frank and Jane are covertly continuing a quarrel begun the previous day. But even here, when we can be almost sure that he is behaving petulantly and meanly, and taking too little account of the invidiousness of Jane's position, we can never be quite sure of the measure in which this is so. Too much about him, as about Jane, and the history of their relationship remains hidden. In the same way, when Jane translates her words into actions the next day, we can never know, exactly, the degree to which she is complying with what she takes to be his wishes, and the degree to which she is expressing her own. The more we understand, the more we discover we do not know, and cannot be certain of; the more we must venture forth imaginatively.

And, symbolising the fact that certainty and fixity will never be achieved by us, there is the daunting figure of Mrs Churchill, a much-mentioned person, who plays an important part in all the versions of Frank's story, and about whom we actually know very little. She never appears in person: she exists for much of the time remotely from Highbury, in Yorkshire, and the closest she comes is to Richmond, still a crucial nine miles away; all we can say, with any confidence, is that she is a dominant figure, predisposed to mercenary marriages (a not-uncommon habit of mind, after all). Apart from Frank, the only person in the novel who actually knows her, is Mr Weston, and he, of course, is naturally prejudiced in favour of his son, just

as he has a strong prejudice against Mrs Churchill. We can view Mrs Churchill in a number of different ways: her illness is genuine, and it naturally makes her fretful and demanding: her illness is largely a thing of her imagination, and a device for her to get her own way. Likewise we can combine, variously and with varying results, Mrs Churchill's ill-temper, and her tendency to dote on Frank. None of these different possibilities are, after all, very much more than the conjectures of Mrs Weston, or Emma, or Knightley (pp. 121, 145-51). And on what we make of her depends, absolutely, what we make of Frank himself: whether we judge that his difficulties are real, perhaps even insoluble, or whether we think him careless or cowardly.

There is, though, a point at which the mystery of Mrs Churchill, and so of Frank, seems to be decisively resolved, and the question of whether she is a genuine Yorkshire ogress, or whether, as an ogress, she is merely the ad-hoc creation of her nephew's imagination, is apparently settled unexpectedly by her sudden death.

It was felt as such things must be felt. Every body had a degree of gravity and sorrow; tenderness towards the departed, solicitude for the surviving friends, and, in a reasonable time, curiosity to know where she would be buried. Goldsmith tells us, that when lovely woman stoops to folly, she has nothing to do but to die; and when she stoops to be disagreeable, it is equally to be recommended as a clearer of ill-fame. Mrs Churchill, after being disliked at least twenty-five years, was now spoken of with compassionate allowances. In one point she was fully justified. She had never been admitted before to be seriously ill. The event acquitted her of all the fancifulness, and all the selfishness of imaginary complaints.

(p. 387)

Highbury is shocked, solemn, curious: Highbury begins to understand that Mrs Churchill was an invalid after all. But the startling flippancy with which the narrator canvasses other possibilities should put us on our guard. And the medical evidence, such as it is, does nothing actively to support Highbury's new interpretation; points, indeed, equally to the persisting ambiguity. It is a 'sudden seizure of a different nature from any thing foreboded by her general state' (p. 387) that kills her. She may, or she may not, have been really ill before: her mind and her temper may, or may not have been affected.

And the taking off of Mrs Churchill is supremely to Frank's advantage, gives a grimly ironic particularity to the label of 'child of good fortune' (p. 443) that Emma gives him. For, whatever its actual nature, his aunt's death removes the chief obstacle to Frank's marriage, just exactly at the point where its removal is most useful to Frank: she is dead a convenient two or three hours before he receives the letter from Jane that terminates the engagement. For his response to the letter we have only his version to rely on, in his letter to Mrs Weston, and that is an entirely characteristic piece, elegantly told, plausible, incomplete. Yet, even the details that are revealed, show other ways in which he is a 'child of good fortune'. It is because Jane is compelled to write a second bleaker letter, one that so commandingly requires

an immediate reply, that he is forced to broach the matter with his uncle: and, while it would have been all but unthinkable for him to do so, within hours of his aunt's death, it is entirely conceivable that he should do so three days later, when the second letter arrives.¹⁵

Other important consequences follow from this death, and it could indeed be said that the novel is able to resolve itself into an ending only because Mrs Churchill dies when she does. Because Frank acknowledges his engagement, Emma is made to understand Harriet, and doing that makes her understand herself: and Mr Knightley is moved to propose to her, just at the point when she is most anxious that he should, least sure that he will. Even Harriet is directly touched by this death, since one of its consequences is that she is allowed to re-discover her love for Robert Martin. In the hands of a lesser novelist, this use of coincidental death to tie matters up, would, doubtless, appear as a

¹⁵Crucially, it is a matter of timing. Had Mrs Churchill's 'seizure' happened a little earlier (and it need not have been very much since she is dead within thirty-six hours of his return from Box Hill) then he would not have been at Box Hill and quarrelling with Jane, and Jane would have had much less reason to write and terminate the engagement: without that spur, we can only guess at how long it would have taken Frank to find the courage to mention the subject of his engagement to his uncle. Equally, while it is natural, in the circumstances, for Frank to write a reply to Jane and forget to post it, we can only guess at what that reply contained, at how Jane would have responded, at whether she would have been moved by anything less than an unequivocal statement that their engagement need no longer be a secret. The timing of every detail in the sequence works, directly or indirectly, to Frank's advantage.

clumsy piece of plot machinery. In Jane Austen's hands, it operates, on one level, as a sharply focused parody of such practices: on another it is used, deliberately, to make an important point. It is a signal that Frank is never going to be an unambivalent figure, to us: dying when she does, his aunt relieves him of the responsibility of ever facing the major test of a choice between submitting to her will, or insisting on his right to marry Jane: such a useful method of fixing and settling, substantially, the matter of Frank Churchill, is not going to be used.

It is not even that we can settle matters to the extent of placing Frank as a cunning manipulator of facts. He does of course enjoy spinning out versions of his world, but he also holds to a version of the world, the one which he actually understands to be the world. And, much though he generates muddle and misconception, he is himself subject to muddle and misconception. The picture he has of the world is doubtless a self-indulgent one; but it is also a picture in which some elements reflect to his credit, ironically, just because they show him to be less than all-knowing. Preoccupied as he is with plots and schemes, with deceptions and concealments, it is almost inevitable that he should anticipate, much too quickly, that Emma guessingly comprehends the existence of the secret engagement, and is prepared to join in the game of flirting, as a means of helping to keep the secret. But equally, the circumstances

are such as to make this a not-unwarrantable assumption.¹⁶ And that puts him in a tolerably sympathetic light, making him much less the merely careless and too-unfeeling schemer.

Then, we must notice the way in which others in the novel, quite independent of Frank's efforts, are quick to attempt versions and interpretations of his reality. Before ever he appears in Highbury, Highbury is busy speculating about him. He is 'one of the boasts' of the place; and it is generally agreed that his father's marriage will bring him to Randalls. 'There was not a dissentient voice on the subject, either when Mrs Perry drank tea with Mrs and Miss Bates, or when Mrs and Miss Bates returned the visit'. The letter he writes to Mrs Weston excites considerable - if repetitious - discussion (pp. 17-18), and it even penetrates the consciousness of Mr Woodhouse, at least to the extent that he remembers the superscription and signature (p. 96). It is Mr Woodhouse who later pronounces him to be 'very thoughtless', and 'not quite the thing!' (p. 249), a judgement that jars with the dreams of others in the novel, and that has been taken by readers to be a significant hint about the way we should assess and respond to him. But of course Mr Woodhouse judges in relation to Frank's habit of casually giving admittance to the perilous cold air. We

¹⁶As, for example, when Emma innocently (but not unmaliciously) suggests that Frank is 'ungrateful', if he dislikes Mrs Elton, a remark which he connects, wrongly but not unreasonably, with Jane (p. 324).

can take this as a metaphor for Frank's general carelessness, or of Mr Woodhouse's pervasive fussiness, or as reflecting to some degree on both.

It is, therefore, not merely a matter of the complex range of versions, but also of their complicated co-existence. The Westons have early but substantial dreams of connections between Frank's future, and Emma's (p. 41). Mr Weston has the natural pride of an easy and genial man, in the doings of his son; Mrs Weston, just as naturally, mixes her expectations with her apprehension of meeting this newly-acquired son, of what he is and of what he will make of her (p. 189). Emma herself, has her own dreams about Frank, long before he sets foot in Highbury, and 'the name and the idea of Mr. Frank Churchill ... always interested her'; she frequently thinks that 'if she were to marry, he was the very person to suit her in age, character and condition'; she has 'a decided intention of finding him pleasant, of being liked by him to a certain degree'; even 'a sort of pleasure in the idea of their being coupled in their friends' imaginations' (pp. 118-9). Then, though she never doubts that she will refuse him, she busies herself 'forming a thousand amusing schemes for the progress and close of their attachment, fancying interesting dialogues, and inventing elegant letters' (p. 264). When she learns of the secret engagement, her vigorous strictures seem to have the force of objective comment, and yet they are also rather too high-minded.

It has sunk him, I cannot say how it has sunk him in my opinion. So unlike what a man should be!—None of that upright integrity, that strict adherence to truth and principle, that disdain of trick and littleness, which a man should display in every transaction of his life.

(p. 397)

And her words actually have as much to do with what have been her own dreams and speculations about herself, about Jane, about Frank, about Harriet, even her unconscious thoughts about Knightley, as they do about Frank's actions. 'She was extremely angry with herself. If she could not have been angry with Frank Churchill too, it would have been dreadful' (pp. 402-3).

Frank is the subject of a spirited disagreement between Emma and Knightley, a clash between different versions of his past and his future (pp. 145-51). And Knightly is pre-disposed to dislike Frank, almost to the same extent as Emma is to like him, before either has seen him. His dislike is soon fixed (p. 206), and it is the existence of this prejudice, of course, that alerts him to his feelings for Emma (p. 432). By the end, his understanding of Frank is governed entirely by his understanding of his relationship with Emma. He has just joined Emma, after returning from London:

He had found her agitated and low.—Frank Churchill was a villain.—He heard her declare that she had never loved him. Frank Churchill's character was not desperate.—She was his own Emma, by hand and word, when they returned into the house; and if he could have thought of Frank Churchill then, he might have deemed him a very good sort of fellow.

(p. 433)

But then, it is not just Frank and Jane who excite speculation of one sort or another. Rather it is that they help to focus our attention on a process that happens continuously and everywhere in the novel. It is a necessary part of the means by which the uncertainty is resolved, but even with it, resolution is not complete. It is carried out, sometimes with propriety, sometimes entirely without: its results can be startlingly apt, or they can be embarrassingly wrong. Emma's first act, in the novel, is to congratulate herself on what she imagines to be her part in forming the Westons' marriage; soon her powers are concentrated on the prospect of making something of her friendship with Harriet, and we glimpse, also, what others make of her makings. When she paints Harriet's portrait, she paints an idealised version (p. 48). She finds Robert Martin to be in the way of becoming a 'thriving' man, but 'illiterate and coarse' (p. 34), and she and Knightley have their fiercest argument over their differing senses of Harriet and Robert (pp. 60-66). Emma fashions a match between Harriet and Mr Elton, and she persuades Harriet into a fanciful contemplation of the man. One consequence is that Harriet preserves, as secret and 'most precious' treasures, a piece of court plaister, and 'the end of an old pencil,—the part without any lead' (pp. 338-9). The dream comes to nothing, of course, and it is one of the most obviously ludicrous elements in the Box Hill visit, that Emma should contemplate the prospect of educating Harriet to be Frank's wife (p. 373)

while what Harriet has actually learnt is to imagine that Knightley is in love with her (p. 407). Mr Elton has had his own early and ambitious dreams, dreams that are entirely at odds with Emma's - and neither he nor Emma are merely careless or foolish, since each works from a likely interpretation of what each sees. And Elton makes his entirely unwelcome proposal to Emma, just at the point when her dreams about Frank are re-activated by the news that he is to come to Highbury.

Nor is this process confined to the principals. Indeed, Emma makes the mortifying discovery that the collective speculations of Highbury have neatly circumscribed the possibilities of her relationship with Elton, possibilities that she had liked to think of as secret. And Miss Bates, who inadvertently allows Emma to make this discovery, acts as the very capable spokesman for Highbury conjecture, even as she denies that she is 'quick at those sort of discoveries' (p. 176). She is interesting, also, in this regard, because she is uniquely and unshakeably, good-humoured in her conjecturing; and because her loquaciousness is also so fragmented that, as at the ball (pp. 322-3), she can give us the whole scene, and also the particular and incomplete glimpses, that are suggestive of the range of differing perspectives.¹⁷ Mrs Elton's arrival generates almost as

¹⁷Mary Lascelles has shown that Miss Bates's utterances usually consist of two habits of speech, 'so contrived as to counterbalance one another'. One is that her sentences

much conjectural interest as does Frank Churchill (p. 267). And, in pointed caricature of Emma herself, she brings an active sense of the world and of her place in it, one she will rudely assert, as she does in an early encounter with Emma (pp. 272-9), an encounter that leaves Emma veering between rage at her impertinence, and delight that Mr Elton should have sunk so low. In a gentler moment, we find Mrs Elton taking a still active and specific hold of the possibilities offered by Knightley's invitation to Donwell, when she explains to him the significance of his own invitation.

It is to be a morning scheme, you know, Knightley; quite a simple thing. I shall wear a large bonnet, and bring one of my little baskets hanging on my arm. Here,—probably this basket with pink ribbon: Nothing could be more simple, you see. And Jane will have such another. There is to be no form or parade—a sort of gipsy party.

(p. 355)

Knightley appears with significant frequency in Emma's speculations, even though she does not notice the significance: so, for example, his arrival at the Coles' party is especially noticed by her, and she observes that he comes as he 'should', in his carriage, 'like a gentleman': later she discovers that he comes in his carriage in order that Jane and her aunt may be fetched in it. This is the occasion when Mrs Weston gives breath to her idea that he is in love

are usually incomplete, though we can normally see how each would have been completed: the other is that there is often only a tangential link between sentences (1939, pp. 94-5).

with Jane, an idea that so disturbs Emma, and one that we later find Mr Cole has independently formed (pp. 213, 224, 288). Knightley himself is imaginatively active: he shows, in the opening pages, how he can master and even exceed Emma's range (pp. 12-13); and alone of those in Highbury, he suspects - and it is a measure of the man that he doubts his suspicions as he entertains them - a hidden connection between Frank and Jane (p. 344). Of course his apprehension is not perfect, nor is it only with Frank that his limitations are revealed. Indeed his view of Frank depends only too obviously on his understanding that Emma is in love with him. And when he tries to explain Jane's tolerance of Mrs Elton in a way that will put an end to Emma's rather unkind puzzlings on this question, he arrives at an interpretation which, while a sensible account of the way things ought to be, has little to do with the way they are, as is soon revealed (pp. 286-7, 295-6, 299-302). But he is the most competent apprehender in the novel.

And what of Emma, sorrowfully contemplating a marriage between Knightley and Harriet, and reflecting on likely changes in her own circumstances, in the course of an evening that is 'very long, and melancholy'? The sense of the physical aspect of the day allows us to glimpse imaginatively, the workings of her imagination.

The weather added what it could of gloom. A cold stormy rain set in, and nothing of July appeared but in the trees and shrubs, which the wind was despoiling,

and the length of the day, which only made such cruel sights the longer visible.

(p. 421)

Even on the last page of the novel, we can find strong evidence for the power of conjecture. Mr Woodhouse can reconcile himself to Emma's marriage because of, and not despite, the workings of his mind.

Mrs. Weston's poultry-house was robbed one night of all her turkies—evidently by the ingenuity of man. Other poultry-yards in the neighbourhood also suffered. —Pilfering was housebreaking to Mr. Woodhouse's fears. —He was very uneasy; and but for the sense of his son-in-law's protection, would have been under wretched alarm every night of his life.

(pp. 483-4)

Again and again, then, the novel offers us a collection of ways of viewing the world and the self; each self presenting a different perspective, different biasses and prejudices, different acuties of vision, different blind spots. And yet each attempt to order the world is also necessarily in some measure, an imaginative reaching out, an attempt to complete a pattern that would otherwise remain partial, an attempt to establish the obscure or missing details: and all attempts exist in a noisy simultaneity. In the circumstances, all we can expect, all we get, are rash or brave skirmishings for the truth, some more well-armed than others. And for the reader, too, to understand is also to imagine; in considering the different versions, we too must reach out, must reconstruct what is merely implied, and we must venture to choose between them: and, in seeking a

pattern for the whole, we must find our own ways of making it wholly explicit, of finding all the details.

This is an experience that is of course common, to some degree, to the reading of all six novels, but it is only with Emma that it is rendered with such pervasiveness and with such intensity: elsewhere it remains largely a question of method, here it is also, substantially, one of subject. In this regard, reading Emma can be compared with reading The Ring and the Book. Browning's poem, indeed, offers us a greater measure of certainty, at its core, perhaps, than Emma does, and the central 'fact' is never disputed - Count Guido killed his wife and her parents. It is as we consider motive and justification, and as we come to weigh circumstantial details, that we move, more and more, into uncertainty. Guido is a brutal murderer or a wronged husband or something in between. Pompilia, his wife, is more or less a saint, more or less an adulteress. Caponsacchi is exercising his priestly function appropriately, if unconventionally, in rescuing Pompilia from the tyrannical Guido; he is seduced by her; he seduces her. And so on, and on. We move through the contrasting versions of the story as it exists in public opinion, through those in which the principals themselves choose the words in which they would describe the events, and on to the accounts of the story, as it touches the law and the church.¹⁸ So Caponsacchi, for

¹⁸That is not to suggest that the result is a chaotic muddle. As Robert Langbaum has said of the poem: 'In recognising the

instance, who has one whole book in which to persuade us to his view of the circumstances he wants us to take, nevertheless appears, from the first and even as Browning outlines the subject at the start of the poem to be a richly ambivalent figure, one who does not imply a single, composite and actual truth, so much as several possible ones.

Also hear Caponsacchi who comes next,
Man and priest - could you comprehend the coil! -
In days when that was rife which now is rare.
How, mingling each its multifarious wires,
Now heaven, now earth, now heaven and earth at once,
Had plucked at and perplexed their puppet here,
Played off the young frank personable priest;
Sworn fast and tonsured plain heaven's celibate,
And yet earth's clear-accepted servitor,
A courtly spiritual Cupid, squire of dames
By law of love and mandate of the mode.
The Church's own, or why parade her seal,
Wherefore that chrism and consecrative work?
Yet verily the world's, or why go badged
A prince of sonneteers and lutanists,
Show colour of each vanity in vogue
Borne with decorum due on blameless breast?

(I, 1016-32)

It is precisely this sense of a contained and yet restless uncertainty, one which we must attempt to resolve, and can never wholly resolve, that is so close to the problem of Emma: it is tempting to seize one or other of the presented versions of the truth, as the truth, only we are likely to

the inevitability of personal distortion, Browning does not mean ... that there is no truth, but that truth depends upon the nature of the theorising, and ultimately upon the nature of the soul of which the theorising is a projection' (The Poetry of Experience, 1957, p. 115). On the other hand, the sense of The Ring and the Book as a 'relativist' poem - to use Langbaum's word - has been challenged: see, for example, Ian Jack, Browning's Major Poetry, 1973, pp. 298-9.

come away with half-truths or less; yet, to arrive at any 'reading', to make any attempt at coherence, it is necessary that we commit ourselves and that we choose, and thus inevitably risk being wrong. Indeed, Browning goes so far as to declare that his point is to make us discover the size of the risk: his 'lesson', he says at the end, is

... that our human speech is naught,
Our human testimony false, our fame
And human estimation, words and wind.

(XII, 834-6)

But the ways in which the poem works differently from the novel must also be recorded. The Ring and the Book exists as a succession of more or less completely imagined possibilities and versions, each having essentially the same status. In Emma, the heroine is centrally important, and however significant the other characters are, or other versions of reality, they remain secondary to those in which she is a part, and to those she generates. That in turn points to a difference that is not so much of scope or depth, as of materials and methods. Browning is recovering the past, is attempting to give life back to a complicated mess of truth and rumour. But it is dead and past and forgotten: we can join the argument over how to interpret what has happened, but it has all happened; it is, in a sense, finished and fixed. Jane Austen's novel exists, by contrast, in the present tense; where things are still happening. To understand is to explain the past and predict the future as well as to comprehend the present: and the attempts within

the novel to explain its meanings are so completely enmeshed, that they can, whether accurate or not, influence or even determine what the reality becomes. What is more, there is a sense in which we have to work rather harder, as readers, than we do with The Ring and the Book: we must rather more actively establish the differing versions, and catch the hints and allusions. And while there are occasions on which we are offered too many possibilities, there are also the occasions when we are offered almost nothing. Jane Fairfax, for example, gives us only a few clues: an occasional and almost hidden smile, a habitual and rigid self-suppression, a plaintive acknowledgement on one occasion that she is 'wearied in spirit' (p. 363), a single instance of an angry rejection of a belated offer of friendship (pp. 389-91). Yet even these fragments can tell us a good deal about the possible ways in which life appears to her, once we are alert to the significance of their existence.

.....

So, Emma demonstrates that 'understanding' and 'imagining' are, both of them, continual and essential activities, that their work is never quite finished. But what exactly are these activities? From what, if anything, do they derive? Usually, with Emma, the questions are perceived quite straightforwardly, to be a matter of literary sources. Mary Lascelles

(1939, pp. 68-9) suggests that Emma is 'more elaborately deceived than Marianne Dashwood, betrayed further into active folly than Catherine Morland ... by the false notions current in the world of illusion': and she goes on to insist that 'Such a young woman as Emma, so constituted and so circumstanced, could have become acquainted with illegitimacy as an interesting situation, infidelity as a comic incident, only in her reading'. Lionel Trilling (1957, p. 53) locates Emma's mistakes in the context of a long and established literary tradition, by observing that, 'like Don Quixote and Emma Bovary, her mind is shaped and deceived by fiction' - even though he actually seeks, almost uniquely among the critics, to identify something that is 'impressive' and 'right' in what Emma does. Walton Litz (1965, p. 136) makes Emma's position in the tradition a pivotal one, by suggesting that Emma is 'deceived as to the outside world (Don Quixote) and deceived as to her own emotions (Emma Bovary), and ... the two kinds of deception are related'. And Kenneth Moler (1968, pp. 155-81) has offered a detailed account of the scope of the tradition, and the ways in which Emma can be connected with it: by which time, the notion had acquired the status of incontrovertible dogma.

Yet, every attempt to be specific on this point has brought the inevitable acknowledgement that there is actually no named and defined source that will support these

claims; there is no equivalent to the functioning, say, of The Mysteries of Udolpho in Northanger Abbey. The most favoured explanation has been that provided by Mary Lascelles: 'Jane Austen had no particular novel or comedy of intrigue in mind', and that, in order to exist, the 'bookish origin of such follies does not need to be stated explicitly' (pp. 68-9). But, by itself, that is a weak assertion; and the idea, crucial to Lascelles and to those who follow her, that it is only through novels that Emma would have found illegitimacy and infidelity entertaining, will not stand very much scrutiny. Emma is young, and she knows little enough of the world outside Highbury. But she also has an unusually large scope (for a young woman of her time and class) for action and independence, and has had from an unusually early age. Then, the first two decades of the nineteenth century could hardly be described as a period noted for the practice of high and austere virtues, or even of a merely polite discretion. The remarkably sordid doings of the Prince of Wales, later the Prince Regent, and of Princess Caroline, his estranged wife - indeed of most members of the Royal family - were frequently regaling the nation at large. A letter from the Princess to her husband, which was made public early in 1813, makes pointed allusion to the long-standing rumours that she had an illegitimate child, and to the way these charges were investigated. She also suggests that the Prince Regent's advisers are, among other things,

'wicked and false'. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the letter was the subject of long and noisy debate in the Privy Council, the Cabinet, the House of Commons, in the newspapers and across the land. Jane Austen herself - it was about a year before Emma was begun - commented very freely on the letter, and declared her support, not quite unqualified, for the Princess, her 'hate' for the Prince Regent.¹⁹

Nor of course would it be at all accurate to say that such scandals were only connected with the Royal Family. The newspapers were capable of greatly shocking Fanny Price - and of annoying Lord Byron - by publishing the details of breaking marriages. It is easy enough to conceive of a sensibility, a little more robust than Fanny's, that would find such revelations amusing, rather than shocking, especially given a less intimate acquaintance with the unfortunates than Fanny enjoyed. Jane Austen was herself only about four years older than her Emma, when she

¹⁹For the very public treatment of scandals connected with the Royal Family, and especially the Prince Regent and the Princess, see Halevy, 1913, pp. 6-8; Watson, 1960, pp. 447-8. For the Princess's letter, and a detailed account of the response it generated, see Robert Huish, Memoirs of Queen Caroline, 1821, pp. 442-7, 448-88 (the letter is incorrectly dated 1814 instead of 1813, on p. 447). For Jane Austen's response to the Princess's letter, see Letters, p. 504. Her attitude to the dedication of Emma to the Prince Regent is very ambiguously indicated in her letter to the Prince Regent's librarian (Letters, p. 429): it could be taken to indicate a hidden unwillingness; equally it could simply mean that Jane Austen wanted to be sure that she actually had the Prince Regent's permission. She did though show herself willing to take advantage of the dedication, once made (Letters, p. 432).

cheerfully noted the 'conjecture' of her sister that a friend, a widow of some seven years, is secretly pregnant. Jane Austen actually rejects the 'conjecture', but only because it seems unlikely to her, not out of any moral repugnance (Letters, p. 114). Less than four months later, she is congratulating herself for having 'a very good eye at an Adultrous', one she exercised in the Upper Rooms at Bath. She also mentions that on the same occasion

Mrs. Badcock & two young Women were of the same party, except when Mrs. Badcock thought herself obliged to leave them to run round the room after her drunken Husband.—His avoidance, & her pursuit, with the probable intoxication of both, was an amusing scene.
(Letters, pp. 127-8)

All of which suggests that a young woman need not have been entirely dependent on novels for a full and lively understanding of the possibilities of life. Highbury is certainly no Bath, but there is no reason to suppose that its inhabitants are especially imbued with decorum and virtue. And as for Emma's curiosity about Harriet Smith's origins, the question all but asks itself: it is the only interesting thing about her, the only thing that is not rather trivial. Nobody in Highbury is shocked by her illegitimacy, except for Mr Elton, and then only when he is forced to think of her as a possible wife. Emma's fanciful speculations about her high birth could derive something from her reading, but have a great deal more to do with the honour that Emma deems her friendship to bestow on Harriet (p. 62).

And if we consider dispassionately the tradition from

which Emma has been supposed to derive, then it should be obvious that Emma depends, even less than Northanger Abbey, on the inspiration of Charlotte Lennox or Eaton Stannard Barrett: and the tradition of more sophisticated borrowing from Cervantes to which Northanger Abbey does belong, and which is alluded to in other Jane Austen novels, the tradition we find developing through Fielding and Smollett and Scott, and on into the nineteenth century, also has little enough to do with Emma. Trillings' attempts to link Madame Bovary with Jane Austen's novel should, much more properly, have gone to one of Scott's. It is Scott, who distinguished his own efforts from the simple imitators of Cervantes, who is also the teller of high heroic stories that come themselves to be the source of delusions for the characters of other people's novels. One of the authors that the young Emma, in Flaubert's novel, avidly reads, is Scott: it is part of her later experience to reflect on the difference between words in literature and words in life.²⁰ Of course in Madame Bovary, the connections with Scott and Cervantes are no more than one element in a complex mixture. But it is an element that is not in Emma: there are other connections to be drawn with Madame Bovary and it is perhaps

²⁰Madame Bovary, pp. 33-7, 32. 'Et Emma cherchait à savoir ce que l'on entendait au juste dans la vie par les mots de félicité, de passion et d'ivresse, qui lui avaient paru si beaux dans les livres'. For a fuller account of the connections of Jane Austen, and of Scott, with the eighteenth century traditions, see pp. 43-5, above.

easier to connect Jane Austen's heroine with that of her successor than with anything she sprang from, in the way she sets about understanding herself and her world - even if the experiences of her successor are somewhat darker. But the question of a heroine who is unduly influenced by literature does not apply in any significant way to Emma. There is no named source for Emma's more fanciful notions, and it is Harriet Smith who is known to delight in the novels of Ann Radcliffe and Regina Maria Roche (p. 29). Jane Austen's subject is the workings of the understanding and the imagination, but it is not in any special sense in this novel that there is a study of the way literature can shape or deceive the understanding and the imagination.

And without actually stating the point explicitly, Jane Austen goes a long way toward emphasising it. Knightley, for example, supplies an early warning that Emma is to be noted more for her general than for her particular knowledge of literature; for knowing what ought to be read, but not for having read it. Typically, of course, what he says, indeed, reveals a tendency in him to be rigorous, perhaps unduly so, where Emma is concerned; this betrays a special, long-standing interest in her, and it must qualify the significance we attach to his words: but we can still recognise something of their appropriateness.

Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing up at various times of books that she meant to read regularly through—and very good lists they were—

very well chosen, and very neatly arranged—sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. The list she drew up when only fourteen—I remember thinking it did her judgement so much credit, that I preserved it some time; and I dare say she may have made out a very good list now. But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding.

(p. 37)

That is certainly not incompatible with what we already know of Emma, with her tendency to make matches, a little too airily, for others; with her high-flown ideas of helping and raising Harriet, which turn out to be 'an endeavour to find out who were the parents' (p. 27), and to encourage her new friend to think more of Mr Elton and less of Robert Martin. Indeed Knightley's assertions are given a substantial confirmation a little later, when we have seen more of Emma and Harriet.

Her views of improving her little friend's mind, by a great deal of useful reading and conversation, had never yet led to more than a few first chapters, and the intention of going on tomorrow. It was much easier to chat than to study; much pleasanter to let her imagination range and work at Harriet's fortune, than to be labouring to enlarge her comprehension or exercise it on sober facts; and the only literary pursuit which engaged Harriet at present, the only mental provision she was making for the evening of life, was the collecting and transcribing all the riddles of every sort that she could meet with, into a thin quarto of hot-pressed paper, made up by her friend, and ornamented with cyphers and trophies.

(p. 69)

Once again, this contradicts the notion of a strong and sustained literary influence on Emma, and it directs us rather to the people and events of the novel, the difficulties they pose in the matter of imagining and understanding, even to

the ways imagining can be too casual and too easy. No-one could argue that even Harriet's mind suffers from a too extensive reading of riddles, even though there is one riddle that is specially misleading, both to Emma, and, when she is finally brought to 'understand' it, to Harriet (pp. 71-3).

And, for a Jane Austen heroine, Emma makes remarkably few literary allusions. Apart from a reference to Elegant Extracts, as the source for a riddle (p. 79), there are only three made by her. What is more, two of them tend to confirm her habit of not getting beyond first chapters. One takes her no more than 134 lines into the first Act of A Mid-Summer Night's Dream (p. 75): another, to Madame de Genlis's Adelaide and Theodore, gets her no further than pages eleven and twelve of the first volume, before preliminary introductions have been completed, before Madame de Genlis has properly begun to outline her copious theories of education, or to set out her practical advice on the subject.²¹ Of course, it does not have to be the case that all Emma's reading is of opening pages, for the argument to stand, and in fact the third allusion she makes is to the fifth Act of Romeo and Juliet, to the scene in which Romeo buys poison from the apothecary (p. 400). But it is also the case that Emma is not making an excessively literal application of

²¹Emma, p. 461. The de Genlis page references are to the first (anonymous) English translation, in three volumes, of 1783: Emma gives the English title. In the first edition of Adèle et Théodore (1782), the passage occurs on pp. 14-15 of the first volume.

literature to life. When, for instance, she quotes Romeo and Juliet - she has just been told of the secret engagement - she does not merely make a simple and direct analogy between Romeo's situation, or the apothecary's, and that of Jane Fairfax. Rather, her use of the quotation is a measure of the quite surprising degree to which she is able, sympathetically and imaginatively, to understand Jane's situation: even her anger with Frank, part justified and part irrational as that is, does not blind her.

It should be noted, though, that both passages from Shakespeare are included in Elegant Extracts. Now, we must be careful not to make too little or too much of the links between Emma and Elegant Extracts. For one thing, though Emma gives it as the source for 'Kitty, a fair but frozen maid', the riddle is not to be found, as Chapman points out (Emma, p. 79n), in Elegant Extracts. Equally, even if we assume that Emma reads all her poetry in Elegant Extracts, then that does not mean that she turns the pages of a slight, pocket-sized collection of puzzles and quotations: there are a selection of riddles and epigrams, but the collection as a whole deserves the status of a long and comprehensive anthology of poetry.²²

²²There is a good deal of confusion about Elegant Extracts, and it is often assumed to be a merely 'frivolous' collection (Jane Nardin, for example, 'Jane Austen and the problem of leisure', 1981, p. 135). In fact the British Library Catalogue lists no fewer than five different collections with this title, all first published between 1770 and 1815, and none of them 'frivolous'. Two are, entirely, selections of

And there are other things to be said about Emma and Elegant Extracts. One irony that links Emma with Robert Martin is that he too is a reader of Elegant Extracts (Emma, p. 29). Then, since everyone points to the parallels between Emma and Mrs Elton, it is interesting to note that she too is a likely (not, in her case, a certain) reader of Elegant Extracts, which includes both 'L'Allegro', and Gray's 'Elegy'. But even more telling, where Mrs Elton is concerned, is the one other literary allusion she makes; and that is also to be found in Elegant Extracts (Emma, pp. 308, 282, 454; Elegant Extracts, pp. 522, 8, 69). When she seeks to refer, in a pointedly covert manner, to Jane's engagement, she acknowledges that she has forgotten the source, but nevertheless proceeds to quote

prose and can therefore be eliminated; but none of the remaining three appears to contain 'Kitty, a fair but frozen maid'. Ronald Blythe (1966, p. 467) appears rather uncertainly to choose Elegant Extracts in Miniature (1796); but that is a collection mainly of prose, and is also not inclined to amuse its readers with riddles. The most likely of the three - it is also Chapman's choice, and it has the most substantial collection of riddles and epigrams - was compiled by Vicesimus Knox (1789), and by 1816 had gone through ten editions. And even in this collection, the riddles and epigrams are a very small proportion of the whole: they are confined to 25 of its 720 double-columned and close-printed pages, and almost all of the rest are given over to 'serious' poetry. As in a modern anthology, shorter poems are usually printed complete; and there are generous extracts from long poems, and from plays. The poets most substantially represented are Homer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and Cowper; but there are many lesser figures as well, especially from the eighteenth century. The passages from Shakespeare which Emma quotes are to be found on pp. 360 and 441.

For when a lady's in the case,
You know all other things give place.

And though Chapman gives the source and quotes the context in the footnotes, it is perhaps worth spelling out the significance of that context. The poem, one of Gay's Fables, is 'The Hare and Many Friends' (the poem Catherine Morland learned with such ease); Mrs Elton's borrowing puts Jane's marriage, inadvertantly, into a rudely agricultural context. The Hare has just asked for help, from the Bull, who excuses himself thus:

Love calls me hence; a fav'rite cow
Expects me near yon barley mow:
And when a lady's in the case,
You know, all other things give place.
(Fables, p. 172)

When quotations are being used to such precise and telling effect, then the very scant evidence that Emma herself presents of a knowledge of literature must be taken as evidence that she is not widely read. Jane Austen is making the point that though Emma's imagination and her mind are the subject of the novel, it is not a mind and an imagination that has been too richly fed on literature.

But if the imagination, as Jane Austen conceives of it, is not merely that ability to indulge in fanciful speculations, and if it is not merely that part of the mind that can become easily infected by an indiscriminate reading, if indeed it can perform some necessary part in the process of understanding, then how, exactly, does she conceive of its

functioning, and from what does she derive her idea? The concept of imagination is of course a crucially important landmark in the intellectual and ideological battlefields of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it is a notoriously problematical one. The word has one cluster of meanings, largely pejorative, largely to do with the wrong or the false: it has another set of meanings, usually favourable, to do with useful and pleasing acts of creation, or creative interpretation, an act of coherent selection and ordering. Traditionally, though, Jane Austen has been regarded as being distinctly on the side of an Augustan 'sense', rather than a Romantic 'imagination': certainly, late in her life she expressed the decided opinion that an excess of 'imagination' could easily be inimical to good judgement (Letters, p. 486).

But then of course the matter is not as simple as this implies. Yes, Jane Austen is on the side of 'sense'; yes, she tends to be briskly dismissive of the excesses of 'feeling'; yes, she can reflect on some of the dangers of an unrestrained 'imagination'. But no, she is not all and always for 'sense', all and always against 'feeling' and 'imagination'. What we have seen, indeed, should suggest that she would be inclined rather to make a dispassionate examination of all three; to consider the strengths and the limitations of each; to reflect on some of the more and less appropriate ways of combining them. She had, in fact, already done so quite comprehensively, in Sense and Sensibility:

and her practice there was to set out formal distinctions, in order to initiate a process of modification and combination. To see Emma just as an elaborately constructed warning against the deceptions of the imagination, is to be disastrously simple-minded. For one thing, it is a point that is so completely obvious. Can there be any doubt, by the time that we reach the end of the first chapter, that Emma is playing a game that has its dangers? That rather than trying to understand her world, she is merely making of it what she pleases? If we cannot see it for ourselves, then we can hardly avoid seeing (without, necessarily, committing ourselves slavishly to his views) the force of Knightley's objections. And, if the novel is preoccupied with the errors of the imagination, then it is strange, as several critics point out, that the imagination is never wholly routed. Emma is chastened, certainly, and she acquires a sense of the ways in which her imagination can play her false, but there is, equally, nothing to suggest that she is going to stop making errors of the imagination. Part of the comedy of the concluding chapters, after all, comes from her successive attempts to dream up a solution to the problem of Harriet, attempts which are always thwarted, attempts which are made even as Emma claims to be forswearing the arts of the imaginist. And the novel shows imagination to be a universal activity, one that of course can mislead: but it also becomes an 'of course' that imagination is an essential part of the process of understanding. Properly

therefore to establish Jane Austen's sense of the concept, we need a more subtle account of its history.²³

It is of course true that in the century before Jane Austen there were some immensely influential attacks on the imagination. John Locke's An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690) allowed little enough for it. He declared, famously, that it is in 'Experience' that 'all our Knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives it self' (p. 104): experience that is either, directly, from 'Sensation', or indirectly, when 'the Mind comes to reflect on its own Operations, about the Ideas got by Sensation' (p. 117). But equally that does not mean that as a concept imagination was more or less in abeyance, until the onset of the Romantic poets. Indeed, in Imagination (1976, pp. 13-130), Mary Warnock starts her account of the

²³Tave (1973, pp. 205-37) and Morgan (1980, pp. 23-50) illustrate a recent trend towards larger claims for the imagination, in Emma: both stress the usefulness of an accurate intuitive understanding, but it is not clear whether this is any more than a re-statement of one of the novel's obvious themes. Indeed, for each, the argument is rather too simply about Emma's limitations and Knightley's strengths. And neither actually makes very large claims for the imagination: Tave, for instance, argues that Knightley has 'the right kind of imagination', but that turns out to be little different from simple good sense: 'What touches him, what he will speak to, is what he has seen' (pp. 232-3). Tave also claims a link with Johnson, but relies rather too largely on the side of Johnson's argument that condemns or restrains imagination. Morgan argues Wordsworthian affinities, but her instancing of the 'Immortality' ode is sadly uninforming ('Both the ode and Emma are centrally concerned with the growth of a person's consciousness ...', p. 44): while the notion, central to Wordsworth, that the imagination can achieve an organically unified understanding - something that could conceivably be usefully connected with Jane Austen - is not touched on.

subject by a consideration of the degree to which Hume thought of the faculty as creative in his A Treatise of Human Nature (1739-40). There is, as she acknowledges on her first page, an arbitrariness about choosing to start with Hume: she could, as she says, have gone back to Descartes. But it is interesting that she should even go back as far as Hume. From him, she traces a line of development through Kant and Schelling, to Coleridge and Wordsworth, and on to Wittgenstein and Satre.

That is to outline a fascinating pattern, but, unfortunately, it can tell us almost nothing about Jane Austen. We have no indication that she read the philosophical writings of Hume, or indeed of his predecessors, though she would doubtless have encountered some of their thinking, at least at a second hand. But she would have known little, if anything, of Kant and his German followers; and Biographia Literaria, which might have informed her, was published only in the month of her death. She knew of Wordsworth, but there is no way of telling what she knew of him.²⁴ So unless, despite the evidence of Emma, we are wrong to attribute these quite advanced ideas to Jane Austen; or unless we are willing to countenance the possibility of some species of intellectual virgin birth in her case - a

²⁴ She makes only one reference to Wordsworth, and that is in Sanditon: since it is an enthusiastic allusion by Sir Edward Denham, it is of doubtful significance (Minor Works, p. 397).

possibility that would be displeasing not merely to those who are rigid empiricists - we must find some way of extend-
ind still further the application of the concept among Jane Austen's predecessors.

Coleridge's distinctions between fancy and imagination are the most influential of such attempts in English thought, but they are by no means the first; and independent of anything he borrowed more immediately from Kant, have been shown to be part of a developing line of thought that goes back at least as far as Dryden.²⁵ Indeed, throughout the eighteenth century, we can find large claims being made for the imagination. Shaftesbury is a notable early instance: he sees the limitations of the imagination (Characteristics, 1711, I, pp. 106, 201-9), but he also has high praise for its products, can see literature as something that will actively civilize and educate nations (I, pp. 143-7, 154-7). At almost exactly the same time, Addison and Steele, in the pages of The Spectator, showed themselves to be always ready to recommend education and restraint for the imagination of the common man; but they are not intent on killing the thing, or even, usually, on a too-confining imprisonment; are concerned rather with the health of the imagination and of

²⁵See John Bullett and W. Jackson Bate, 'Distinctions between fancy and imagination in eighteenth-century English criticism', 1945, pp. 8-15, for example.

the individual.²⁶ And when he turns from a consideration of the imaginations of the readers of The Spectator to a more theoretic account of that of the poet, Addison makes surprisingly large, surprisingly unempirical claims for creativity.

It shews a greater Genius in Shakespear to have drawn his Calyban, than his Hotspur or Julius Caesar. The one was to be supplied out of his own Imagination, whereas the other might have been formed upon Tradition, History and Observation.

(II, pp. 566-7)

In the middle of the century, Johnson shows himself to be perhaps even more assiduous, in warning that the imagination can deceive, and in insisting that it should be trained and curbed.²⁷ But then just to read Johnson, to see what he says on one side of an argument, is usually to misread Johnson; and we can also find him forcefully observing that 'men of study and imagination' are not troubled by 'that weariness which hangs always flagging upon the vacant mind'

²⁶The Spectator, I, pp. 54, 421; II, pp. 36-40, 157-60, 396, for example. Several attempts, none more than conjectural, have been made to connect Shaftesbury with Jane Austen: see, for example, Gilbert Ryle, 'Jane Austen and the moralists', 1966, pp. 118-22; Devlin, 1975, pp. 52-63.

²⁷Thus, for instance, he notes the way imagination can mislead (The Idler, Works, II, pp. 39, 181): he argues the way it can lead to 'irresolution and mutability'; or to idleness (The Rambler, Works, III, pp. 16, 337, 356-8): and he is severe on those who 'give themselves up to the luxury of fancy', and who 'slumber away their days in voluntary visions' who are 'hypocrites of learning' (Works, IV, pp. 105-6).

(Works, IV, p. 58). He also asserts that 'All joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an act of the imagination' (Works, III, p. 318). Likewise, he asserts that the artistic imagination is not to be rigidly proscribed; indeed, for him it is a vital, growing force, the despair of those who would categorise, or define, or explain, always seeking the new and the unknown. Nor can we suppose that Johnson would have it otherwise; rather, we can see why, at least in ordinary minds, the imagination should be trained and directed, when we see the force he attributes to it here.

Imagination, a licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations, and impatient of restraint, has always endeavoured to baffle the logician, to perplex the confines of distinction, and burst the enclosures of regularity. There is therefore scarcely any species of writing, of which we can tell what is its essence, and what are its constituents; every new genius produces some innovation, which, when invented and approved, subverts the rules which the practice of foregoing authors had established.

(Works, IV, p. 300)

And in Rasselas, there is Imlac, the wise and informed guide to Rasselas and his sister, who discourses on the 'dangerous prevalence of imagination' but who, nevertheless, when moved by the 'enthusiastick fit', makes such extraordinary large claims for poetry as to make it seem impossible, as Rasselas points out, to be a poet (p. 269). But the claims are very striking, even so, because they are not wild and impossible assertions, but are part of a serious argument that

has become something of a parody of itself, by going a little too far. And if parts of that serious argument are straight-forwardly empiricist, others are decidedly not. Some of what Imlac says is simply the orthodox answer to the question: What kind of animal is an empiricist poet? A poet, he claims, must have mastered, completely, the study of nature and of mankind: and when challenged with the notion that nature and mankind are manifestly too various for this to be possible, he asserts that the poet must examine 'not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances'. But he also makes points that are strikingly unempiricist. The poet approximates to the 'Angelick', he says; and a little later he expands on some of his grander functions.

He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same He must write as the interpreter of nature, and the legislator of mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations; as a being superior to time and place.

And what is perhaps the most remarkable thing about this remarkable passage, is its similarity to some of the ideas advanced by Shelley in his 'A Defence of Poetry'. The language of poets, Shelley says, is 'vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension'. Poets 'imagine and express' what is an 'indestructible order'; they are

the institutors of laws and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion ... Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets; a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time ... A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not.

(pp. 278-9)

That is not to suggest that Imlac is possessed of the ability or the inclination to write Prometheus Unbound. Shelley argues the matter more fully, and he goes a good deal further. Johnson sees the poet as having a greater reach for the permanent truths: Shelley sees in the creative imagination a capacity actually to reform the perceptions of truth. And the differences between them are accentuated by the fact that Shelley is making a serious declaration of his position, while Johnson's Imlac is asserting something that is justly founded, but seen to be grown to excess. That said, though, it is still true that the similarities are very striking; and they show that while Johnson was, as it were, with one arm reaching back to the last decades of the seventeenth century, he was, with the other, stretching forward to the first decades of the nineteenth.²⁸

²⁸We should not, of course, make too much of the similarities between Johnson and Shelley: they would have had Classical

And after Johnson it became easier to resolve the tension, widely felt, between an imagination that is in some sense artistic, and is to be encouraged, and that of ordinary people, in whom it is to be restrained. Cowper, for instance, can function as the poet who shows his readers how to exercise their imaginations. Thus in Book IV of The Task he describes the delight he feels when he sits comfortably at home, by the fire, ranging widely, in his imagination. In this, he is an interesting precursor of the Coleridge of 'Frost at Midnight', where in addition to the common theme of the imagination's journeyings, there is the similarly deployed imagery of a winter's evening. Both describe the imagined but unperceivable transformation of the landscape, by the weather: Coleridge writes of the frost's 'secret ministry' (line 1), while for Cowper there are the 'meadows green' and the fields of 'mellow brown', seen in the fading light of evening, and then at night enduring the 'silently performed' change of a fall of snow (lines 312, 314, 323, 326). Both reflect also on the sligher dreams induced by a low-burning fire; both connect it with the superstition that it foretells the coming of strangers (Cowper, line 295; Coleridge, line 26). Cowper dreams of

houses, tow'rs,
Trees, churches, and strange visages, express'd

sources in common, and they would have had Sir Philip Sidney. The striking thing, is that on occasion they make such similar use of these sources.

In the red chinders, while with poring eye
I gaz'd, myself creating what I saw.

(lines 287-90)

And he goes on to observe

'Tis thus the understanding takes repose
In indolent vacuity of thought,
And sleeps and is refresh'd.

(lines 296-8)

While Coleridge is moved to dream of his 'sweet birth-place,
and the old church-tower'; and he sees the slight flame

Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.

(lines 20-23)

Coleridge actually records high praise for Cowper, particularly for the way he 'reconciled the head and heart': his own poems are, undoubtedly, more cogent and comprehensive accounts of the workings of the imagination, but it must be said that Cowper was seeking a more relaxed meditation.²⁹

Thus, Cowper starts Book IV with the sound of 'the twanging horn', that brings into his mind the vivid and particularised picture of a bridge over the river, the moon, and a man

²⁹Humphrey House (Coleridge, 1953, p. 79) has also noted this similarity between Cowper and Coleridge, but he notes only the immediate context of the Cowper, and so concludes that there is a significant contrast in mood between the two. That is to ignore the fact that Cowper's mind has already done its work. His 'indolence' is in explicit contrast to the active venturings of the mind which he has just described: it is something that he knows to be trivial, but, he suggests should nevertheless not be scorned. See also Biographia Literaria, p. 13.

bringing the post,

the herald of a noisy world,
With spatter'd boots, strapp'd waist, and frozen locks;
News from all nations lumb'ring at his back.

(lines 5-7)

That, in turn, leads him to speculate about letters bringing joy, letters bringing sorrow (lines 14-22); and of the contents of that day's newspaper, 'a map of busy life, / Its fluctuations, and its vast concerns' (lines 55-6), one that he proceeds to interpret, and give life to (lines 58-87). But he is all the time aware of his own comfortable detachment from this busy life:

'Tis pleasant through the loop-holes of retreat
To peep at such a world; to see the stir
Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd
(lines 88-90)

Cowper, of course, was a favourite of Jane Austen's.

And we can assume that Knightley liked Cowper, since he quotes the words 'Myself creating what I saw', from Book IV of The Task: indeed he is the only poetry reader in the novel who, we can be sure, does not read his poetry in Elegant Extracts.³⁰ He applies the quotation to his own suspicions of a secret connection between Frank and Jane, because he doubts his suspicions: therefore he does not quote from Cowper's accounts of the imagination actively

³⁰ Elegant Extracts includes a large section from Book IV of The Task, and the first 193 lines are given complete. That, of course, does not include 'myself creating what I saw'.

going out to interpret the world, but of his description of the slighter, much more trifling activity of mechanically toying with an assortment of images, in a state of 'stupor', in 'indolent vacuity of thought'. Knightley knows that the imagination can deceive: and he is consciously seeking to avoid Emma's 'errors of imagination' (p. 343), so for him it is not an irresponsible game in which one can assume that something is, just because the possibility of it being so has entered one's imagination: he also recognises something of the way his own feelings and prejudices are tangled up in the whole question. But though he doubts his suspicions, he is right about Frank and Jane. He has imaginatively conceived of, and imaginatively interpreted their relationship.

Thus, Jane Austen inherited from her eighteenth century background, not the narrow and restrictive conception of the imagination that popular critical belief allows her, but an altogether larger version, and one that she herself steadily enhanced. By the time she came to Emma, in fact, she had reached a version that was not very different from some of the versions of the poets who were her contemporaries. Where she differs most notably, is in the kind of question she asks about it, and hers are, properly, novelistic questions. She is not preoccupied with those who have a super-abundance of imagination; who are poets, and who will, as a matter of course, define themselves, their world and their function. It was, naturally, as a poet that Wordsworth

defined a poet as

a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.

(Poetical Works, p. 737)

Jane Austen concerns herself with those who are less completely endowed, with those to whom Wordsworth, as a poet, addressed himself. Those in whom the imagination is no less crucial, in the business of understanding the world, but those who have not climbed Snowdon, or Mont Blanc, those who will regard it as a special expedition to spend the day on Box Hill. And it is with the concept as a shaping, organising power that she concerned herself, rather than simply as something that could be 'right' or 'wrong'. It is true that with this less elevated, more every-day imagination, there is the problem of the way it can mislead, but then that is obvious. Jane Austen's questions are directed, rather, to the fundamental paradox from which this tendency derives - the fact that the imagination is, essentially, an expression of the self, a matter of individual colourings and shadings and interpretations: but that it is just this individual choice and perspective that can distort and deceive. At the same time, this necessary combination of understanding and imagination, which determines what we 'make' of the world,

can help, itself, to determine what the world will become. And the most substantial test of what we 'make' of the world, is the degree to which the interpretation is comprehensive, is a unified whole that functions harmoniously; or the ways in which it consists of incompatible fragments, of the partly understood and the inadequately imagined, of fanciful muddle, or half-formed dreams.

On all these points there are significant contrasts to be drawn between Knightley and Emma - though the distinctions are to be felt everywhere in the novel, and Knightley could as interestingly be contrasted, for example, with Frank Churchill. Knightley's version of the world is notable in being the most complete, and in representing the most apt combination of understanding and imagination, in the novel. It is hardly surprising, indeed, that so many critics treat him as if he were meant to represent an ideal; but this, surely, is to go too far, and his faults and limitations, though minor, are obvious. He is not perfect, he is merely better at living than others. Of course, it could be argued that he has certain natural and coincidental advantages, that it is much easier to be good at living, in his circumstances, than say in those of Miss Bates. But that is to miss the point, as Miss Bates herself demonstrates, since though her outward means are limited, and her situation confined, that is not reflected commensurately in the range of her imagination and her understanding: the matter is one of inner not outer competence, of what we make of our

circumstances. And Knightley is remarkable for the flexible and full sense he has of the world and his place in it; a point which should strike us forcefully, if we compare him with other characters in the novels, in roughly similar positions - General Tilney for example, or Sir Walter Elliot, or Sir Thomas Bertram, Lady Catherine de Bourgh: only Darcy comes to approximate what from the first he stands for. Knightley is continually to be seen actively administering his estate; he is even, it is hinted, subject to the petty tyrannies of his housekeeper, and of William Larkin (pp. 238-9). Naturally, he must be judged in terms of his class and his times, and we should not expect to imagine him helping to dig manure into his strawberry beds; but, with that proviso, we can see that his conceptions are large and accommodating. He is proud to be the friend and adviser of his tenant-farmer; he is active, but not too predominately, and never autocratically, in the affairs of Highbury and Donwell; he is open and amenable, not unaware of social niceties, but not too bound by them, and with a tendency to think, rather, in terms of need, or merit, or ability, or virtue. He is to be found walking everywhere, and mixing rather more freely than Emma likes - she would also have him make much greater use of the ceremony and parade of the carriage (p. 213). He is able to listen to the unsolicited, if well-meant, advice from a rising tradesman about the affairs of his own heart, without seemingly taking offence (p. 288). He can deal amicably with almost all his fellow

creatures, without compromising his integrity, even when they are tediously loquacious, or meddlesome and mean-minded.

And the contrast with Emma is so telling just because he is 'better' but not 'perfect'. Though some readers, especially those given to Freudian thinking, try to see theirs as an unhealthy 'father-daughter' relationship, that is to ignore the strong evidence, never more apparent than in their not-infrequent quarrels, that they are vitally connected equals. The important difference between them is not one of ability, or even of sex: it is the difference Knightley himself points to, the sixteen years difference in their ages; and, as Emma points out, that is of diminishing significance (p. 99). But it does make for other differences: her relative youth expresses itself in her tendency to be a little self-centred and self-indulgent, as we can tell from the first page of the novel. She sees the world, and she draws distinctions in what she sees, too much in terms of her own importance, or else too much on the basis of idle guessing, guessing that she trusts merely because it is hers. She does speak, habitually, with a vigour and confidence that can mislead the unwary: and some of her notions, though 'wrong', have a decided prevalence, so that it is possible to find, even in the second half of the twentieth century, critics who write Emma-like nonsense, in defence of Emma's views, about the inherent kindness of the English 'caste system' because it means that everyone knows their

place in society.³¹ But the real problem with Emma's views is not one of whether or not she is seeking to defend the indefensible; it is that her arguments are often so feeble. Debates about tradition and change, arguments for and against egalitarianism were not then new, but the decades before Emma was written, with the revolutions in America and France were calculated to give these matters a certain vivid topicality that ensured that they were fully and ably explored. About twenty-five years before the composition of Emma, Edmund Burke, in his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) takes the side of tradition. Without it, he says

No part of life would retain its acquisitions. Barbarism with regard to science and literature, unskilfulness with regard to arts and manufactures, would infallibly succeed to the want of a steady education and settled principle; and thus the commonwealth itself would, in a few generations, crumble away, be disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality, and at length dispersed to all the winds of heaven.

(pp. 193-4)

And he thinks of society as a contract and a partnership:

As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who

³¹Robert Liddell does (1963, p. 111). Ronald Blythe is less crass on the question of rank, but he does appear to think that Emma's ideas, even her worst excesses are reflections of views actually held by Jane Austen (1966; p. 19). More generally, it is worth noting how even those critics who claim a first-name familiarity with Henry Tilney or Edmund Bertram, tend to be sufficiently in awe of Emma's strictures on Mrs Elton (p. 279) to take care always to refer to Knightley as 'Mr Knightley'.

are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primaeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place. This law is not subject to the will of those, who by an obligation above them, and infinitely superior, are bound to submit their will to that law.

(pp. 194-5)

But, within a year, Tom Paine had issued a vigorous challenge to this notion of society as a contract. He argues, in Rights of Man (1791-2), for the rights of the living, not the dead or the unborn.

Those who have quitted the world, and those who are not yet arrived at it, are as remote from each other, as the utmost stretch of mortal imagination can conceive: What possible obligation, then can exist between them; what rule or principle can be laid down, that of two non-entities, the one out of existence, the other not in, and who can never meet in this world, the one should control the other to the end of time?

(pp. 64-5)

He also rejects Burke's notion of tradition, especially as it relates to France, and the revolution:

But men who can consign over the rights of posterity for ever on the authority of a mouldy parchment, like Mr. Burke, are not qualified to judge of this revolution. It takes in a field too vast for their views to explore, and proceeds with a mightiness of reason they cannot keep pace with.

(pp. 69-70)

It would of course be unreasonable to judge Emma's arguments, simply in terms of the competence and range of Burke and Paine - indeed, Jane Austen herself never mentions either. The point is, though, that Burke and Paine were the leaders in a debate that was spread across the nation, and their

terms were to become a part of the general currency of thought. Jane Austen's part in it, as we saw in relation to Pride and Prejudice, was not insubstantial: and she was less close to Burke's position than we might have expected, had achieved her own more central point of view, which without achieving a radical fervour, enabled her to be quite sharply critical of some conservative notions. And her Emma's attempts to espouse some elements in conservative thinking, are slight indeed. They also put her in the company of Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Sir Walter Elliot, in precisely the ways in which Knightley is not.³²

But even without these unfortunate comparisons, we should be able to glimpse something of the way her thinking includes a large element of what Knightley describes, aptly if intemperately, as 'Nonsense, errant nonsense, as ever was talked!' (p. 65). It is 'nonsense' which derives not so much from the excesses of a deceiving imagination, as from an insufficient and improper use of the imagination. But clearly this is not a problem that reflects a lack of ability: it is a problem of a wasted ability. Instead of facing the

³²The very words 'rights of man' were, of course, highly charged, and it is impossible to imagine anyone using them in 1814 or 1815, without being aware of their connotations. But Jane Austen's usage is a strange one, so strange that it probably often goes unnoticed. The possibility of holding a ball at 'the Crown' is under discussion, and Mrs Weston's suggestion that there be 'no regular supper' is rejected, as 'an infamous fraud upon the rights of men and women ...' (p. 254). Doubtless this is partly at the expense of the phrase as a cliché, but it is also at the expense of Emma and Frank.

rigours of imaginative thought, she sometimes prefers to toy with fanciful possibilities: instead of attempting a complete and imaginative interpretation of her world and her place in it, her preoccupation with her own self-esteem is sometimes such that her thinking breaks up into confused and contradictory fragments, of the half-thought-out and the half-imagined. Thus it is that she sets out on the improper course of finding a wife for Elton. Then, the chance introduction of Harriet, just at the point when she feels the need for a daily companion, seems to offer her the 'material' she needs. And she has already moved from a complacent and condescending interest in the Martins, before she knows that Robert is unmarried ('... amused by such a picture of another set of beings', p. 27) to the decided disclaimer of any interest, once she knows that the son is unmarried, by uttering the tired cant of

A young farmer, whether on horseback or on foot, is the very last sort of person to raise my curiosity. The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me; I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or another. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore in one sense as much above my notice as in every other sense he is below it.

(p. 29)

For almost the whole novel, she blinds herself to anything in Robert Martin that does not fit her conception of him as 'illiterate and coarse' (p. 34): it is only right at the end that she is able to admit that it would be 'a great pleasure to know Robert Martin' (p. 475). As a measure of her general

wrong-headedness, she is wrong even on the question of mercenary marriage, and she applies the right principle to the wrong case: and, as she does so merely to support her casually preconceived scheme, she comes to be a parody of Elizabeth Bennet's spirited assertions, or of Fanny Price's agonised reflections, when she declares that a man 'always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her' (p. 60). Likewise, we are told that Emma 'still thought herself a better judge of such a point of female right and refinement than he could be' (p. 65), despite Knightley's angry but sensible assertions that Robert Martin 'had encouragement' from Harriet, and that Harriet should have felt grateful and fortunate when he proposed (p. 63).

There are even wider inconsistencies in her thinking. Her objections to the Martins are, we can suppose, allied to her objections to the Coles. They, she feels, are tainted by their connections with trade, and they need to be put in their place - that is, put 'down' - because their rising prosperity encourages them to pretensions above their deserts. Yet it turns out that she is notably inconsistent about the Coles. And Mr Weston, who has himself only very recently broken his direct links with trade, is allowed by her, almost unreservedly, to be a gentleman. That, presumably, has something to do, for her, with the fact that he has already completed the upward movement, has purchased a gentleman's residence, and so on - a dubious enough piece of

reasoning. But his status, in her eyes, also has a great deal to do with the fact of his marriage to her dear Miss Taylor. And even the mostly commendable warmth of the mutual feelings between Emma and Mrs Weston leads Emma to see her friend sometimes as an adjunct of herself rather than as an independent individual, with a background and a history. So she can make a pointed allusion to the destined 'situation in life' of Jane Fairfax, as a governess, with a clear implication of its relative inferiority, while actually in the company of Mrs Weston (p. 201). The occasion is one of those wonderful and recurrent moments in novel when individuals bring together, inadvertently, different possibilities of meaning and misunderstanding: Mrs Weston is concerned that Emma might be embarrassing her newly-acquired step-son, by such a reference to governessing, which seems to touch herself; Frank is embarrassed, but only because he is anxious to avoid being too closely questioned about Jane, and uncertain how much Emma knows; and Emma makes her remark because she is intent on pursuing her Dixon theory. Of course, Emma is shown up on the matter of Mrs Weston, with the arrival of Mrs Elton, who, noting that she was Emma's governess, speaks of being 'rather astonished to find her so very lady-like!' (p. 278), a comment which leaves Emma feeling a mixture of rage and malice, and reveals how Mrs Elton is a caricature of Emma herself. And it is on those occasions when Emma is reflecting on the great glory

of the Woodhouses, exactly as Mrs Elton extols the grandeur of Maple Grove, that we can appreciate just how slightly Mrs Elton is an exaggerated version of herself. As when, for instance, she receives an unexpected and entirely unwelcome proposal of marriage: in support of her indignation, she insists to herself that Elton must know

that the Woodhouses had been settled for several generations at Hartfield, the younger branch of a very ancient family—and that the Eltons were nobody. The landed property of Hartfield certainly was inconsiderable, being but a sort of notch in the Donwell Abbey estate, to which all the rest of Highbury belonged; but their fortune, from other sources, was such as to make them scarcely secondary to Donwell Abbey itself, in every other kind of consequence; and the Woodhouses had long held a high place in the consideration of the neighbourhood which Mr Elton had first entered not two years ago, to make his way as he could, without any alliances but in trade, or any thing to recommend him to notice but his situation and his civility.

(p. 136)

These are stolid enough musings; but they do contain two obvious and telling ironies: one is the great attention Emma gives to the importance of Donwell, in her scheme of things; the other is that before he proposed to his wife, Elton offered Emma the chance of becoming 'Mrs. Elton'.

But then, if Emma lacks the completeness of a Knightley, at least in the novel, then she also lacks the completeness of a Mrs Elton, and that is the completeness of the irredeemable.

For Emma goes on, immediately, to attempt fairer assessments of things: and her imagination, which can only have been soundly asleep while she sifted uncritically through the hackneyed phrases of a second-rate genealogist, in the first

part of her thinking, comes, by the end of the paragraph, to be alert and probing.

But he had fancied her in love with him; that evidently must have been his dependence; and after raving a little about the seeming incongruity of gentle manners and a conceited head, Emma was obliged in common honesty to stop and admit that her own behaviour to him had been so complaisant and obliging, so full of courtesy and attention, as (supposing her real motive unperceived) might warrant a man of ordinary observation and delicacy, like Mr Elton, in fancying himself a very decided favourite. If she had so misinterpreted his feelings, she had little right to wonder that he, with self-interest to blind him, should have mistaken her's.

And she goes on, with due seriousness, to forswear match-making. Of course it is true that, barely half a page later, she is beginning to conjecture again about a husband for Harriet, and that is a question she returns to. But equally she does stop, here, to 'blush and laugh' (p. 137) at herself: and that is a capacity that is considerably enlarged by the end of the novel. Of course she is not going to stop imagining, or to stop committing errors of the imagination: of course she will not always make full and proper use of her imagination. But there are reasonable grounds for hope.

And that, surely, is the point we should arrive at. It is probably all too easy to notice and dwell on Emma's faults: certainly critics have spent more than enough time cataloguing and annotating them. Such efforts, even the moderate and sensible ones, inevitably muffle the comedy, and that must be a blunder, since the most striking thing about the novel is its comedy. It is by amusing us, not by moralizing at us

that Jane Austen explores her material: and we do not have solemnly to record each error or potential error, if we can laugh at them and at their consequences. But reading Emma also means that we must commit ourselves to the risk of finding that we must laugh at ourselves, and at our own lazy or mistaken imaginings. If we laugh at Emma, then we must also laugh with her. Thus too perhaps, the moments that can touch us most effectively are those few but memorable occasions when Emma can conceive of a possible set of consequences to her own folly, can see a future that is bleak, contracting, unvaried. At these moments, the 'fact' of being 'handsome, clever, and rich' seems to be devoid of consoling meaning; and the opportunity to 'take to carpet work' when she grows older (p. 85) appears to lack any human significance. We are touched because we have laughed so much.

CHAPTER SIX

PERSUASION

There is a quickness of perception in some, a nicety in the discernment of character, a natural penetration, in short, which no experience in others can equal, and Lady Russell had been less gifted in this part of understanding than her young friend.

There are special difficulties in the way of getting a hold on the scope and substance of Persuasion, and they are typified in the late and slow-coming vindication of Anne Elliot's 'quickness of perception'. In the earlier novels there are doubts about the future of the heroine, of course, but there are seldom doubts about whether that future will be worth recording; this degree of security is Anne's only remarkably late in her novel. And for as long as Anne is less than central, there are other things claiming more of our attention than in the end they entirely deserve: of necessity, therefore, there are preliminaries to be worked out before we can come to the real substance of this novel.

Some of these preliminaries we actually impose upon the novel ourselves, perhaps unnecessarily. Persuasion shares the fate that to some extent befalls any 'last' work: the word 'valedictory' is rather too easily applied, and its pages are searched for any sign of an abjuring of rough magic; sometimes, too, it is assayed for evidence of new

and sadly unfulfilled beginnings.¹ But even if we avoid these self-imposed quests, there still remains one problem to be dealt with before we get to the novel itself:

Persuasion is unfinished. It is, of course, no mere fragment like The Watsons; it has not been perfunctorily rounded off, as was Lady Susan. But, like Northanger Abbey, it has not come to us in a form which we can be sure Jane Austen would have been happy to send to her publisher.²

It is indeed possible that Northanger Abbey suffered less in being 'unfinished'. Jane Austen thought it fit for publication in 1803, and there was the opportunity for substantial revision later: Persuasion would have been disadvantaged simply by the fact of its lateness. In the

¹See Nina Auerbach, 'O brave new world: evolution and revolution in Persuasion', 1972, p. 113, for example: she tries to link with The Tempest, on the grounds that the 'tragic motifs' in Persuasion are re-workings from the earlier novels. Auerbach also claims a connection with Shelley and Keats, 'whose poetry dwells on the inward complexities that accompany a release of passion and vision' (p. 128).

²It is often assumed that even the choice of title for Persuasion was Henry Austen's, rather than his sister's, but the note in Jane Austen's hand, giving the dates of composition of her last three novels (reproduced in Chapman's edition of Plan of a Novel, p. 36) has her using the title Persuasion: and the part of Cassandra Austen's Memorandum that deals with these novels was apparently copied directly from this note. This seemingly incontrovertible proof was used by Chapman himself to reject the idea that Henry Austen chose the title (1948, p. 81n) and then strangely denied later, when he said of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion that 'we cannot be sure that they were her titles' ('Jane Austen's Titles', 1954b, p. 238). But he gives no evidence to justify this change of mind, and it may simply have been an oversight.

letter in which she mentions that Northanger Abbey is 'put upon the Shelve for the present', Jane Austen goes on to mention Persuasion as 'a something ready for Publication, which may perhaps appear about a twelvemonth hence' (Letters, p. 484). A bare five days after writing this letter, she stopped working on Sanditon, and in the remaining four months of her life it seems that she never again attempted any serious literary work. But even as we try to specify the incompleteness of Persuasion, the question begins to slip out of our grasp. The letter was written six months after, by her own record, the novel was 'finished': on the other hand, a year is much more than would have been necessary for the process of publication. So 'ready for Publication' and 'finished' must mean 'complete but not completely revised'. The history of the other novels tells us that Jane Austen subjected them to a long period of testing in reflection, before publication, though the period had shortened significantly for the novels just before Persuasion: Mansfield Park was published about a year after being 'completed', Emma after only nine months.³

³Persuasion was begun on 8 August 1815, finished 6 August 1816 (Minor Works, facing page 242). About the time usually taken for publication, there are several indications: Henry Austen managed to get Northanger Abbey and Persuasion published within six months of his sister's death; Pride and Prejudice came out within about three months of being sold to a publisher, but to that must be added the time taken for the preliminary negotiations (Northanger Abbey, p. xiii, Pride and Prejudice, p. xi). For details of what and when Jane Austen wrote in the last six months of her life, see Southam, 1964, pp. 101-2.

Internal evidence for the unfinished state of Persuasion seems easier to find. Most obviously, there is the treatment of Mrs Smith: the way she is clumsily jerked into the novel, and the apparent muddle about her nature and function. Is she the enduring sufferer who has learned cheerfully to make her all of the little life has left her: or is that the necessary mask for a sick, angry and helpless woman? What too is the point of the story she so lately tells Anne about Mr Elliot? Anne has always known of the doubts about his past, and has herself suspected that his present reformation is less than complete (p. 161); has already discovered a retained preference for Wentworth that makes her perceive that she could never marry Mr Elliot, has also found that her cousin's hitherto not-unwelcome attentions are such that their 'evil was incalculable' when she sees the effect on Wentworth (p. 191). Mr Elliot himself, and Mrs Clay, are also often regarded as having come to us a little too unformed, and their joint departure at the end is held to be the careless telling of a thing improbable. But once again, the matter is less simple than it seems, and though these objections are very popular ones, they are less than wholly secure: all six novels have something of this hastily improvised air in their concluding chapters, this brisk reminder that the story is told and the minor details can be left to fend for themselves; this assertion that the consolations of a neat and comprehensive resolution are easy, and will not be offered here, unmixed with an irony that

threatens, laughingly, to expose the easiness, and unresolve the resolution.⁴

In any event, as we try to separate the deliberately under-formed from the accidentally unfinished, we have to remember that if there are faults then they are nothing more than minor - consider the finely coherent way in which the novel resolves its central preoccupations. The novel presents us with a picture in which the main subject has been vitally and tellingly conveyed, and the fact that some of secondary figures are less than complete, and a few of the minor patterns somewhat smudged, even that some of the details at the edges of the canvas are in different stages of being worked at - all this matters, but it does not matter very much. And there is another point. If we must concede that we cannot know that the novel is finished, then we must also acknowledge that we cannot know how or what Jane Austen would have revised. We can probably accept, given the almost universally expressed dissatisfaction with Mrs Smith, that something would have been changed here, though what aspect and to what degree can only be guessed at; any other items on a list of potential revisions can only be arrived at by a similarly idle conjecture. And if we approach the novel with too large and secure a sense

⁴The abruptness and the uncertainty is to be seen most obviously in Northanger Abbey (see pp. 65-67).

that it is unfinished, it is fatally easy to find faults in everything we do not immediately assimilate. In Andor Gomme's much-noted declaration of his unpersuadability, for example, he acknowledges that the novel has some fine things, but is much too readily taken up with the task of noting all the things that may be unfine, is consequently unbalanced, sometimes careless and sometimes obtuse. To find that Lady Russell's attitude to Anne's friendship with Mrs Smith is significantly different to her attitude to Elizabeth's friendship with Mrs Clay is not to find a noteworthy inconsistency in Lady Russell, and one that indicates a confusion in Jane Austen's thinking. To record a persisting doubt about whether Anne was right to take Lady Russell's advice is not to have found evidence that the novel is so badly flawed that we must doubt whether Jane Austen could ever have revised it. It is rather that the novel deals subtly with complex material, in ways that preclude straight answers to simple questions, and that it works to make us notice this.⁵

⁵Gomme, 'On Not Being Persuaded', 1966, pp. 170-84, 178, 181-3, 175. On the matter of Mrs Clay and Mrs Smith, only the most momentary reflection should teach us that, whatever ambivalences there are in Lady Russell's judgement, there is nothing muddled in Jane Austen's thinking. Anne makes no attempt (how could she?) to place her friend securely in the Elliot home, or in any way to treat her as her sister. And nobody, not even Gomme, could argue that Mrs Smith has it in mind to seduce Sir Walter. Other reasons for disputing with Gomme have been provided by Southam, and answered by Gomme (1966, pp. 480, 481), and by Malcolm Bradbury ('Persuasion again', 1968, pp. 383-96).

But if the detractors of the novel have often been betrayed into comfortably circular arguments then the few who have tried to deny its unfinished nature, and to explain away the blemishes, have fared no better. Several more or less ingenious attempts to account for the functioning of Mrs Smith as wholly coherent and necessary have been made; none has convincingly succeeded. Paul N. Zietlow, for instance, has argued that there is a very large dependence on luck and chance in the novel, and in this he finds, among other things, an explanation for Mrs Smith. He justifies her partly on the obviously fallacious ground that as Jane Austen chose to revise the adjacent chapter but not the one containing Mrs Smith's revelations, she must have been content with that chapter; but he also concludes that Mrs Smith functions as a 'deus ex machina', brought in 'at a crucial moment to avert catastrophe': and Darrel Mansell, working along the same lines, argues that there is a new and daring use of coincidence. But there is nothing here that is more daring than, say, the arrival of Darcy at Pemberley (mentioned but undervalued by Mansell), and besides there is little point in invoking either chance or the gods: we can only assume, with Zietlow, that Mrs Smith functions as a 'deus ex machina', or with Mansell that she supplies the key 'fact' that destroys the heroine's illusion, if we ignore, with disastrous completeness, the way in which Mrs Smith makes her revelation only when she is sure, beyond

reasonable doubt (p. 199), that Anne does not intend to marry Mr Elliot. There is no catastrophe to avert and no illusion to dispel, and Mrs Smith exists to bring a so-important message that turns out not to matter.⁶

So the argument about incompleteness is a dangerous one but we cannot do without it. We cannot challenge it except by assertion, or by taking up the endless and impossible task of 'justifying' the novel. Yet the argument, once accepted, is itself a breeder of doubt and muddle: the novel will then be forever slipping from our grasp, and each time we clutch at something we must wonder whether or not it had been checked, tested, refined. But then it is also obvious that no novel is 'perfect', and that the 'completeness' of any novel must in some sense be arbitrary: it can never be the point beyond which no revision is possible, it is always the one beyond which the novelist decides, for whatever reason, that further revision can be left undone.

⁶Zietlow, 'Luck and fortuitous circumstance in Persuasion: two interpretations', 1965, pp. 179-95, 193. Mansell, 1973, pp. 191, 195-6, 198-204. Zietlow's account seems merely to be the result of a careless mis-reading; Mansell's is the more deliberately perverse, since he acknowledges that Anne has already begun to decide against Mr Elliot, but grossly underestimates the degree to which this has happened, ignores the 'evil' that Anne finds to be 'incalculable' (p. 191), and is blind to the telling 'just' (which is not included in the words he chooses to quote from the sentence) in Anne's estimate of the chances of her marrying her cousin: 'It was just possible that she might have been persuaded by Lady Russell!' (Persuasion, p. 211; Mansell, pp. 196 and 202). For some other attempts to 'explain' Mrs Smith, see Donald Rackin ('Jane Austen's anatomy of persuasion', 1972, pp. 52-80) and K.K. Collins ('Mrs Smith and the morality of Persuasion', 1975, pp. 383-97). Collins also notes the fault in Zietlow's argument for a deus ex machina (p. 384).

And, once that decision has been taken, readers can enter into their dealings with that novel, with the surety that however difficult or obscure or unsatisfactory it is, it is not going to be for ever sliding into the teasing indeterminacy of the 'might have been revised'. Apparently this decision was not taken for Persuasion - or, for that matter, for Northanger Abbey - but there is also no gross sense in which either is incomplete: we should not forget the incompleteness but we should also take care to invoke the argument only when our grounds are surest; and then, perhaps to temper but never to establish our judgement. We should, in short, treat Persuasion and Northanger Abbey as far as we can as if they were as 'finished' as the four 'finished' novels.

But no sooner do we come to terms with the unfinished nature of Persuasion, than the vexed question of its background begins to assert itself. Naturally, because the heroine is less than securely central, the question of her context assumes a larger importance: but with this novel the background seems important anyway, in its own right. Not only is there a much more obvious connection with some of the more stirring events of its times, but it is also the case that this is the only one of the six novels to be fixed in time, and it is fixed decisively in its first page with the stating of the heroine's date of birth: Jane Austen began writing the novel some eight weeks after the battle of Waterloo, and the novel has hero and heroine renewing

their engagement three and a half months before the battle. The first substantial attempts to develop the argument about Persuasion and its times was made by Joseph Duffy (1954b, pp. 274-89), when he argued that the novel works in terms of growth and decay, and that it is a distinct advance over its predecessors in being 'romantic', especially in its attitude to nature. The novel, he said, contrasts an 'effete' and 'static' aristocracy - in the person of Sir Walter - with a 'class' of naval persons, in the process of supplanting them. Since Duffy's piece appeared the argument, especially as it contrasts the aristocracy with the navy, has hardened into an orthodoxy to be reiterated with what is often only minimal variation. Yet it is an argument that creates difficulties rather than resolving them; and as we saw with Pride and Prejudice, this concept of a conflict between classes squares with neither the novel nor its times. Not only was Sir Walter's class not under particular threat, but the difficulties faced by Sir Walter have very little to do with the future of his class, and a great deal to do - as the novel makes abundantly clear - with his constitutional inability to live within his income. Indeed, within six months of Duffy's piece being published, Chapman offered a brief and sadly unheeded 'Reply' (1954a, p. 154) in which he pointed out that Sir Walter was not a member of the aristocracy; that neither the aristocracy nor the gentry were especially 'effete', or in danger of being superseded in 1815; that there was no such thing as 'an "energetic

naval class", rising in opposition to the old privilege'; that the naval officers were likely, themselves, to be the sons of gentry or even aristocracy; and that there is nothing in the treatment of nature in Persuasion that is more 'romantic' than elements in Sense and Sensibility or Mansfield Park.

And just as we have seen that there is ample support for Chapman's conception of the gentry, so it is equally easy to substantiate his views on the navy. The Austen family itself supplies instances of naval captains who were the sons of gentry: many of her naval details must have come to Jane Austen from her brothers Francis and Charles, and Francis has been thought of as a model for Wentworth, while he himself thought that he helped with the formation of Captain Harville (Chapman, 1948, p. 125n). More general evidence is to be found in something like Michael Lewis's A Social History of the Navy 1793-1815 (1960, pp. 23-58): he clearly shows how naval officers could make very large claims for being 'gentlemen', and how so many were the sons of titled persons, gentry or professional men. Yet more evidence is to be found in Persuasion itself, and if Jane Austen intended the navy to be seen as the symbolical repository of national strength and virtue then it is difficult to see why she included the account of Dick Musgrove (whatever one makes of his treatment by the narrator) since his is clearly (p. 51) the description of a typically unsatisfactory midshipman; or why, at the other end of the profession, we

should be told of the existence of Admiral Brand and his brother, 'Shabby fellows', who played a 'pitiful trick once' on Admiral Croft, in order to deprive him of some of his best men (p. 170). Further, it is impossible to extract from the four centrally important naval figures, the sense of a naval type, that is in any way distinct from a gentry 'type'. In point of fact, all four are, in differing degrees, 'gentlemen', at least as Anne uses the term, though not as her father understands it, or in a form to which Lady Russell could give unqualified support (pp. 23, 97, 127). Two of the four have notably prospered at sea, and are relatively rich; two have as notably not prospered. All have been united in testing and vigorous activity, and are linked by a warm fraternal bond: but they are also four very distinct individuals, as we can see if we but for a moment compare the other three with Wentworth. Harville, the un-literary, the practical contriver who is also sensitive and sympathetic, the one who makes a cheerful best of limited means and confined spaces; Admiral Croft, straight-seeing and plain-speaking, whose every gesture shows his strong good nature and his plain unsubtle sense; Benwick, gentle and quiet, full of the literary sensibilities of love and grief, and yet also sometimes strangely insensitive. Indeed Benwick is an embarrassment to any attempt at drawing a line between navy and gentry, for though Admiral Croft says that he is 'a very active, zealous officer', he also speaks of him as being 'rather too piano' (pp. 171-2)

and he is a figure who remains more appropriate to a drawing room than a poop-deck.

But unmindful of these many objections, those who hold to the orthodoxy, continue to declare its terms. Some, like Malcolm Bradbury (1968, pp. 383-96) or Tony Tanner ('In between - Anne Elliot marries a sailor and Charlotte Heywood goes to the seaside', 1981, pp. 180-94) insist on the primary importance of the conflict between aristocracy and navy; and though that is to mistake Sir Walter's rank, it does mean that the argument has a certain simple consistency, and it is possible, with Bradbury, to ignore the existence of the Musgroves; or merely, with Tanner, to note them as briefly as being something of which Anne is not a part (p. 181). But once we try to apply the argument using the terms of social distinction more accurately, then it simply will not work. David Monaghan (Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision, 1980, pp. 143-6), for example, attempts to re-state the orthodoxy more appropriately, in terms of gentry and navy. But then what about the Musgroves? The Musgroves are cheerfully, sufficiently, even thrivingly of the landed gentry (p. 28): they are possessed of none of the Elliot faults, just as the Elliots, with the obvious exception of Anne, have none of their virtues. It is possible, by leaning very heavily on every fault, actual or potential, that they display in the first half of the novel, to work up an argument for their needed reform, but the second half of the

novel makes the argument impossible to sustain.⁷ And so Monaghan founders: his account of the novel shows us a Jane Austen trying to 'cobble together a somewhat fantasised version of the future', one in which the Musgroves are, like the naval persons, the representatives of what he labels as an 'idealised bourgeoisie' (p. 144); yet also not so ideal, since they 'lack any sophisticated knowledge of the language of manners', for which, we are to believe, they are duly criticised in the first half of the novel, and then unduly praised in the second (p. 145). It is, thus, Jane Austen's fault, rather than that of the orthodoxy, that the orthodoxy does not work, and Monaghan concludes with a damningly easy circularity: the society in which Jane Austen lived was 'finally falling apart', and so too, at least in some degree, was her 'art' (p. 162).

Indeed, it is one of the commonest effects of the orthodoxy to encourage a reading of the novel that is pessimistic about its society. And yet a 'pessimistic' reading is a half-reading, one that is overly responsive to the first volume, and under-estimates the second: a

⁷It is true that one of the Musgrove daughters marries into the navy, but that is hardly proof that the Musgroves are in decline, and about to be supplanted; even if it were, then Benwick is the least likely of supplanters. It is also true that there is talk of Mr Musgrove being short of money, but this is not a sign of the times or of his profligacy, but the inevitable consequence of having two daughters who marry at the same time (p. 218). For more on Jane Austen and the gentry, see pp. 148-60, above.

too-easily optimistic reading would be equally destructive of the balance which the novel in fact represents.

Alistair Duckworth (1971, pp. 180-2) exactly illustrates the problems of such an approach, since he takes the metaphor of the estate and its treatment to be central to the meaning of the relationship between Jane Austen's characters and their society. So, inevitably for him, Persuasion is the novel in which responsibility for the estate is 'abandoned', and in which 'society never really recovers from the disintegration evident at the beginning' of the novel; and its 'typical experience is one of loss'. Anne's marriage at the end, therefore, is a marriage in a world that is of significantly diminished order and security. But Duckworth can only sustain his solemn prognostications by a very dubious reliance on some of Mary Musgrove's peevish reflections. Mary finds 'powerful consolation' for the fact of her sister's marriage in the view that 'Anne had no Uppercross-hall before her, no landed estate, no headship of a family' (p. 250). Is this the condition, newly perceived by Jane Austen, in which the world is suddenly made strange and perilous? No. Landed estates and headships of families have never been, in Jane Austen's novels, the inevitable reward for the heroine, or the sign that she has achieved security. True, they are obtained by Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, in a lesser way, too, by Marianne Dashwood. But they do not go to Catherine

Morland or Elinor Dashwood or Fanny Price.⁸ Each heroine is placed, at the end, in a group that has at least the potential to become sound and balanced, but one that is also made up of varying strengths and capacities. Anne certainly faces a special risk in the 'tax of quick alarm' demanded of the wife of a sailor, and which we are told of, significantly, in the novel's concluding sentence: but this significance can be over-done, especially if we fail to remember that it is only part of a comprehensive statement of the advantages and disadvantages of Anne's position. And a properly responsive reading of the penultimate chapter should show us that Anne is already placed in what has the makings of a workable and worthwhile group. As the company gather in the Elliot drawing rooms - and it is a gathering of almost everyone in the novel - Anne is supremely happy, and the glow of her happiness warms everything that she sees: but her vision is certainly not unrealistic, and what it encompasses is a coherent life in society, one in which some relationships are in decline, and others merely static, but some in which there is the hope of fruitful growth.

⁸Duckworth later qualifies his point about headships of families, by claiming parsonages as the alternative reward for the earlier heroines (p. 184). But this is much too easy a distinction since it ignores the insecurities that a parsonage can imply, and it makes rather more of place and rather less of people than Jane Austen actually suggests. For other pessimistic versions of the novel see Litz (1965, pp. 153-4) who finds that the novel finally stresses human isolation; or Julia Brown (1979, p. 149) who claims that, even when we view its ending, the novel 'possesses the grace of despair, the grace of giving way to despair'.

There are reminders of ways of living that are confined and barren, but also of hints of more promising possibilities.

Glowing and lovely in sensibility and happiness, and more generally admired than she thought about or cared for, she had cheerful or forbearing feelings for every creature around her. Mr. Elliot was there; she avoided, but she could pity him. The Wallises; she had amusement in understanding them. Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret; they would soon be innoxious cousins to her. She cared not for Mrs. Clay, and had nothing to blush for in the public manners of her father and sister. With the Musgroves there was the happy chat of perfect ease; with Captain Harville, the kind-hearted intercourse of brother and sister; with Lady Russell, attempts at conversation, which a delicious consciousness cut short; with Admiral and Mrs. Croft, every thing of peculiar cordiality and fervent interest, which the same consciousness sought to conceal;—and with Captain Wentworth, some moments of communication continually occurring, and always the hope of more, and always the knowledge of his being there!

(pp. 245-6)

When Anne complains that, in exchange for all his friends and family, she has 'but two friends in the world to add to his list' (p. 251), she is reflecting on the fact and the irony of her seriously impoverished past, and there is the added shading, given that one of her 'two' is Lady Russell. But she is also acknowledging that they are already in a community, one in which they have friends and ideas and experiences in common.

But it is not just that the gentry and navy argument has no secure foundation: it can actually limit our understanding of what the novel is doing. Any attempt to argue that Jane Austen is criticising in order to defend her class, or that she despairs of its future, is apt to blunt the

criticisms that she is in fact making. It is no mere pedantry, for example, to insist that as a baronet, Sir Walter is not a member of the aristocracy: it is an essential part of the sharp irony under which Anne discovers, when she sees 'her father and sister ... in contact with nobility', that she wishes 'that they had more pride' (p. 148). As D.W. Harding has said ('Introduction', 1965, p. 18), the story is 'embedded in a study of snobbery:

Jane Austen created the perfect starting point for her satire by giving Sir Walter Elliot a baronetcy, thus putting the family in a twilight region between the nobility and the gentry - still no more than gentry but distinguished among them by the hereditary title. His scorn for those beneath him and his anxious toadying to 'our cousins, the Dalrymples' who are of the nobility (Irish), provide a good deal of the astringent comedy of the book.

(p. 18)

And it is the fact that the Dalrymples are Irish that clinches the matter (p. 158). Situated as the Elliots are, and only too anxious to claim the relationship to their noble cousins, they are precluded by their particular snobbery from participating in the more general snobbery by which the Irish peerage was regarded as greatly inferior to that of England. Maria Edgeworth's The Absentee appeared only a few years before, in 1812, and from its opening pages, it vividly showed how fashionable London society in general regarded the Irish peerage, and its representative in the person of Lady Clonbrony as inferior to a degree only a little short of clownish.⁹

⁹Jane Austen seems to have borrowed at least one joke from Maria Edgeworth's novel. The Duchess of Torcaster does not

Of course, to a full-blown radical reformer, polemically insisting on how things should be, any account of how they are, however critically put, is doubtless apt to sound merely palliative. We might prefer to declare with William Godwin that the principle of inherited rank and authority is such that no other could 'present a deeper insult upon reason and justice'; we could join his approval of the way Tom Paine challenged the notion of hereditary power by pointing out that the concept of 'an hereditary poet-laureate' is 'ridiculous' (Rights of Man, p. 105); we could, with Godwin insist that 'He that monopolises to himself luxuries and titles and wealth to the injury of the whole, becomes degraded from the rank of man' (Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, 1798, pp. 467-71). But every good satirist knows that a freshly and sharply observed account of things, as they are, can be as devastating as any prophetic dream or speech from the barricades. In Book Four of Gulliver's Travels, for example, Swift achieves a doubly cutting effect when Gulliver attempts to explain the ways of life in the England of Queen Anne to the Houyhnhnm: he tries to excuse what can be excused, but is careful not to be blind to

know that Lord Colambre is the son of the woman whose very Irishness she has just been disparaging, indeed she assumes because of his fine 'manner' that he is not Irish (p. 4). In Persuasion Jane Austen inverts the joke: her Lady Dalrymple has no qualms about her own Irishness, seems to feel actually that only the best can be Irish, and she takes Wentworth by his fine 'air' to be Irish (p. 188).

faults, and still there is the jolting shock when the Houyhnhnm gives his calm appraisal of this account of things as they are. Humanity, he concludes, is

a Sort of Animals to whose Share, by what Accident he could not conjecture, some small Pittance of Reason had fallen, whereof we made no other Use than by its Assistance to aggravate our natural Corruptions, and to acquire new ones which Nature had not given us.
(p. 259)

And in Persuasion, on the matter of rank, there is some of the most cutting satire in all Jane Austen - cutting just because it is manifestly and calmly a statement of things as they are. Once we have got the measure of Sir Walter Elliot, then we do not even have to argue that this conceited, mean-spirited, stupid, idle baronet is in any way typical of his rank, in order to say that the concept of inherited rank is indefensible. What the novel presents is an element of its society that is at once almost unshakable, and absurd. And it surely is not by chance that Anne Elliot expresses so decided a preference for earned rather than inherited privilege; or that it is she who argues that 'good company ... is the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation', while it is her father's heir-presumptive who insists that her standards are too high, and who says that good company 'requires only birth, education and manners, and with regard to education is not very nice' (p. 150).

.....

Once we have got the matter of the background properly into perspective, does the novel a little more easily reveal its shape? Certainly there is an almost universal consensus about what are the strengths and beauties of the novel. Everybody admires the skill and delicacy with which Persuasion finds connections between feeling and understanding; the way that the material is shaped to fit the seasonal progression, from autumn to spring, and its heroine's movement from a state of 'desolate tranquility' (p. 36) to one in which she is 'glowing and lovely in sensibility and happiness' (p. 245). Everyone remembers the pain and the awkwardness of the first meetings of Anne and Wentworth; the moment at which he relieves her of the attentions of an over-lively nephew; the walk to Winthrop; the visit to Lyme; the gradually achieved reunion and the sensitively and precisely worked final adjustments. Nor is it only that these are things that interest and please the sensibilities of our own time. They are, almost all, the things that its first readers praised in the novel. About two months after it was published, Maria Edgeworth noted, in her letter of 21 February 1818, that she had read almost to the end of the first volume of Persuasion, and had found much that was 'exceedingly interesting and natural'.

The love and lover admirably well-drawn: don't you see Captain Wentworth, or rather don't you in her place feel him taking the boistrous child off her back as she kneels by the sick boy on the sofa? And is not the first meeting after their long separation admirably well done? And the overheard conversation about the nut?

(II, p. 6)

And Richard Whately (1821, pp. 368-75) was similarly full of praise for the walk to Winthrop, and the scene at the White Hart.

But unfortunately there has been an equal readiness to pick grounds for quarrel and dispute over the novel, and here too the practice was initiated by the first readers. In the month after Maria Edgeworth wrote her letter, an anonymous review in the British Critic was very severe on what it took the 'moral' of the book to be:

that young people should always marry according to their own inclinations and upon their own judgement; for that if in consequence of listening to grave counsels, they defer their marriage, till they have wherewith to live upon, they will be laying the foundation for years of misery, such as only the heroes and heroines of novels can reasonably hope even to see the end of.

(n.s. IX, p. 301)

This may seem eccentric, but is really no more than the heightened rendering of a conception of the novel that is still being attacked and defended. Whately's review, three years later, offered an opposing, and by now equally familiar notion when he insisted that though Anne's early prudence led to all her 'distresses', prudence as such is not being rejected (p. 374). Thus began the still unfinished debate about whether the lost years were inevitable, whether we can 'blame' Wentworth or Anne or Lady Russell or the 'Elliot pride' or anything else. We can try, as is often done with Jane Austen's novels, to see the question in terms of a process of education; but then who does the

learning - is it Anne, or Wentworth, or do both adjust? Or is it rather a matter of instructing the reader? And what is the lesson learned? The critics have supplied an impressively various list of possible syllabuses: persuasion and persuadability, or advice and evidence, or growth and decay, or dignity and duty, or reason and feeling, or perception and feeling, or memory and feeling.¹⁰

But then we have encountered this kind of diversity in the critical thinking about a Jane Austen novel before: and, as before, most of the terms are relevant to the novel, but to an aspect of the novel rather than to the novel as a whole. Anyway such attempts often reduce the novel too much to a simplistic homily, summed up in one easy formula, to be very useful. As R.S. Crane has said of the question of morality in Persuasion, the novel is

¹⁰On the question of who is wrong and who changes, the majority verdict points to Wentworth, and finds Anne in varying approximations to what W.A. Craik for example (1965, p. 167), or Stuart Tave (1973, p. 256), find to be all but perfect. At least some critics, though, insist that there is some significant development in Anne, and some, like Bradbury (1968, pp. 388-91) and Mansell (1973, pp. 193-6), see the possibilities of Kellynch as a significant temptation and test for her. On persuasion and persuadability see Donald Rackin, 1972, pp. 53-4, 77-9 (but he sadly and thoroughly mars his argument by insisting that 'persuasion' in itself, is a 'virtue'). On 'advice' and 'evidence' see K.K. Collins, 1975, pp. 383-97). On Anne's 'subjectivity' and the search for ways of exploring that 'subjectivity', see Butler, 1975, pp. 276-83. On growth and decay see Duffy, 1954b, pp. 274-6. On dignity and duty, see Wiesenfarth, 1967, pp. 139-66. On reason and feelings see Susan Morgan, who though denying that the novel is specifically about the education of the heroine (1980, p. 167), still turns it into the testing of a simple formula (pp. 171-6). On perceptions and feelings, see Kroeber, 1971, pp. 79-84. On memory and feelings, see Gene Ruoff, 'Anne Elliot's dowry: reflections on the ending of Persuasion', 1976, p. 347.

pervaded with morality of what seems to me a very fine sort, however, it has no moral and argues no thesis. It is a novel of personal relations: the relations of two persons who had once been everything to one another, then apparently nothing, and finally everything again, but on a higher level of affection and understanding. It is a love story, in short, which moves us as all good love stories do, not because its hero and heroine are embodiments of abstract values, ideological or social, larger than themselves, but simply because they are particular human persons who have fallen in love and suffer and are happy in the end.

(The Idea of the Humanities, II,
1967, p. 287)

Equally though, Crane's account cannot really help us come at the difficult questioning offered by the novel. The idea of Persuasion as a love story with a happy ending - even one in which Jane Austen faced large and special technical problems (pp. 289-98) - does not adequately grasp the unresolvable debate in and about the novel. The arguments about Anne and Lady Russell and Wentworth have persisted and will continue because they deal with problems that are never shaped into the form of a balance sheet of 'rights' and 'wrongs'; are much too tentatively and partially put. At the end all we are left with is a significantly qualified defence of her past actions from Anne, and a statement from Wentworth, not necessarily convinced that Anne's version is wholly right, but conceding that he is himself blamable for part, though only for part of the past. In the circumstances, all that we can do, perhaps, is agree with Anne that Lady Russell's advice was 'good or bad only as the event decides' (p. 246). Any further and more extensive resolution must be reached by our own efforts, and

by going beyond what the novel specifies. That means that we must recognise that we are venturing on possibilities, not looking for certainties: else we may find ourselves pushing the novel into what is for this novel the sadly reducing tidiness of a moral.

But if, in one sense, the 'problem' of Persuasion is such that it can tempt its readers to find less in it than there actually is in the novel, then in another sense, the history of the past and present of Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth can remain always vividly alive to us, just because it is not all told, and cannot be finished, analysed, parcelled up, but must always be partly guessed at. And this marks a significant change in method for Jane Austen: Emma showed how far she had developed her skill in suggesting and using the uncertain and the incomplete; almost every character has a version of the 'reality' that is Highbury. But the structure of the novel means that, inevitably, there is a certain degree of simplification and stylization. Other versions exist, but they are relevant largely as versions of a novel that is about Emma, or as in the case of Mrs Elton for instance (and here the determining principle remains the same) of a novel that is avowedly not about Emma. These other versions, by their existence, warn us of the inadequacies of Emma's versions, but they are not usually much more powerful than that. Frank Churchill is the single dazzling exception, quite unfixable, always hinting at the possibility of other versions of himself,

and utterly destroying the illusion of an Emma-centred world. But given that we work so much through the large and accommodating consciousness of Emma, Emma remains an Emma-centred novel, one in which, paradoxically, the more we find out about her limitations, the more we reinforce our sense of Emma as heroine. There is, thus, in spite of the stress on alternatives and variations, an inevitable artificially heightened sense of coherence, pattern, unity. Persuasion seeks for conditions in which this structuring and focusing is, if not eliminated, then at least tightly limited; and its context appears to be one in which there is, radically, less order and shape.

Principally it is a matter of heroineship. Persuasion is a novel that is very significantly less heroine-orientated, one in which versions other than the heroine's loom much more portentously. Partly the difference between the two novels is one of social setting, and Anne has almost nothing of Emma's opportunity for large actions that make her world, at least to a degree, what she wants it to be. But it is also a matter of psychological disposition, and even more of novelistic treatment. In order the more effectively to get at the doubts which the structure naturally tends to render peripherally, Anne's consciousness, no less adequate than Emma's in itself, must be more passive, more confined and more obviously under the threat of competition from others' consciousnesses. Similarly, the heroine must be much less predominantly the object of the

narrator's attention; and from the opening pages, this difference is strikingly apparent. The earlier novel starts with the utterance of the name of the heroine, and proceeds to make immediate and large claims for her; before the end of the first paragraph we can begin to sense that shifts to the consciousness of others will be largely in order to make explicit contrasts with the heroine's. In the later novel, we have to read some twenty-three pages before we know much more than the bare facts of Anne's existence - and that as the drily recorded detail on the page of the Baronetage - or before she begins to function properly even as a minor character, one whose story is already history to be summed up as a piece of background information.¹¹

As everyone notices, she is a telling twenty-seven, and her unhappiness has, at the point when the novel starts, already been of long duration. She has had time to settle into a sad calm neutrality, in which she can watch the events of others' lives, and in which her own life can be regarded as a minor detail in those other lives. For half

¹¹Pride and Prejudice is an interesting comparison here, since Elizabeth Bennet is, after Anne, the slowest to reach the centre of the stage. Just because this is so, she gives us an idea of the extremity of Anne's position: Elizabeth begins to move to the centre even in the first chapter, and we are no more than ten pages into the novel when we reach the point where Darcy snubs her. In another way, Mansfield Park makes an equally striking comparison. Fanny is often under-noticed by the other characters, but almost never by the reader: when we do occasionally lose her voice - as in the bustle of the first arrival of the Crawfords (pp.40-8) - it is for no more than a few pages, and while it emphasises her isolation, it also helps us to register something of the qualitative differences in her judgement.

the novel, in a word, it does not seem to be her novel: that such are the paradoxical workings of Persuasion is the way that we come to discover that it splendidly is her novel.

Again the contrast with Emma is instructive. The concept of 'imagination', for instance, recurs, but Anne obviously does not have Emma's lessons to learn, could even be said to have learned them too well: Anne is almost too ready to conceive of other people and other people's views, as they themselves might; and she is also in danger of doing what Emma never does and that is efface herself.

Anne had not wanted this visit to Uppercross, to learn that a removal from one set of people to another, though at a distance of only three miles, will often include a total change of conversation, opinion, and idea. She had never been staying there before, without being struck by it, or without wishing that other Elliots could have her advantage in seeing how unknown, or unconsidered there, were the affairs which at Kellynch-hall were treated as of such general publicity and pervading interest; yet, with all this experience, she believed she must now submit to feel that another lesson, in the art of knowing our own nothingness beyond our own circle, was become necessary for her;—for certainly, coming as she did, with a heart full of the subject which had been completely occupying both houses in Kellynch for many weeks, she had expected rather more curiosity and sympathy than she found in the separate, but very similar remark of Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove—'So, Miss Anne, Sir Walter and your sister are gone; and what part of Bath do you think they will settle in?' and this, without much waiting for an answer;—or in the young ladies' addition of, 'I hope we shall be in Bath in the winter; but remember, papa, if we do go, we must be in a good situation—none of your Queen-squares for us!' or in the anxious supplement from Mary, of 'Upon my word, I shall be pretty well off, when you are all gone away to be happy at Bath!'

(p. 42)

But if this indicates a significant connection with Emma then it also shows that we cannot establish the connection merely by turning Emma inside-out; that Persuasion has its own questions to ask, and ways of looking for answers.

Part of the irony implied by the questions here works notably on the pompous and idle vanities of Sir Walter and his eldest daughter, part looks to the noisy but usually healthy self-regard of the Musgroves, and to Anne's wan and quiet presence among them, part reflects on the sheer number of possibilities, and the way they elaborate, part traps us just at the point where we want to insist that Anne has learned Emma's lesson much too well, since we find that Anne herself admits that she must remind herself of the details.

But then, 'imagination' is not quite the subject of Persuasion. It is characteristic of the novel that the subject should be a good deal less than emphatically marked: that insofar as it is statable, it should centre on a quality much less active and doing than 'imagination', should have much more to do with 'taste'. As in her earlier treatments of it, Jane Austen tries to render it in its complex and sometimes contradictory entirety: what Anne exemplifies is one that has as much to do with ideas and feelings, indeed also with morality, as it does with aesthetics. What is new is the way the limitations of the concept are explored, and here the bond and the contrast

between Anne and Wentworth is of prime significance. Here we find an important point being made about the disadvantages of women in the society of the novel, one that is the more compelling because it is plainly and unsententiously put: Wentworth has the opportunity to go abroad in bold and testing action, while Anne has to be stationary, passive, contemplative, in the exercise of her 'elegant' mind.¹² But we should also not lose sight of the way that the inadequacies of both postures are being examined. Wentworth has a large and not unjustified self-confidence, he is always in search of sweeping and decisive action, always impatient of mere convention; he will where necessary defy authority, and he has an understanding that is as quick, emotionally, as it is in every other way. When Benwick returned to Portsmouth, for instance, unaware that Fanny Harville had died, it was Wentworth who left his own ship, who

stood his chance for the rest—wrote up for leave of absence, but without waiting the return, travelled night and day till he got to Portsmouth, rowed off to

¹²Anne's plight has special causes, of course, but it is also in a large measure what would in any event be her fate as a younger, unmarried daughter of less than ample means. For any move greater than the distance from Kellynch-hall to Kellynch-lodge she is dependent on the willingness and the company - often too the carriages - of other people. It is no accident that, at the end, one symbol of her marriage and the freedom it bestows is that she becomes 'the mistress of a very pretty landaulette' (p. 250). On the question of taste, see also pp. 84-94, above.

the Grappler that instant, and never left the poor fellow for a week.

(p. 108)

It is true that when he leaves it, Wentworth's ship is in 'no danger of ... being sent to sea again', but then the point is that the risk should be nicely calculated. Yet, it is also Wentworth who, because of his nature and because he assumes too completely that Anne's nature is different, takes so very long to discover that the engagement is renewable.¹³

Similarly, it is just when Anne claims her 'seniority of mind', and tastefully recommends that a taste for Romantic poetry should to some degree be balanced by a taste for the prose of the moralists, that she must also admit that she has been 'eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination' (p. 101). And throughout the novel, where she evinces, as she constantly does, a

¹³It is possible that Jane Austen actually had Nelson in mind, in part of her drawing of Wentworth, especially in his liking for decisive action and his scorn for any too craven or unthinking deference to authority. Southey's Life of Nelson (1813, I, pp. 56-67, 108-15, 134-8; II, pp. 20-1, 55, 73-4, for instance) amply shows how very deeply his subject was marked by these traits, and Jane Austen would not have needed Southey to tell her this. Of course, the modelling is not complete - any more, presumably, than it was in the case of Harville and Francis Austen - and Wentworth does no more than reflect a few Nelsonian features, in some aspects of his nature, on a smaller and more ordinary scale. But the point is also that this is not actually a naval 'type': a few such individuals would doubtless make for naval prosperity, but a navy in which too many captains were eager to demonstrate their independent minds, would have lost all coherent force.

response that we could call aesthetic, it is constantly a response that is tinged also by circumstance, mood, desire, idea. That, of course, is reflected in the fundamental movement of the novel, which has Anne finding the world to be a place of blank sorrow at the beginning, and fulfilling joy at the end. And it is nowhere more clearly displayed than on the autumnal walk to Winthrop, when Anne half-overhears the conversation of Wentworth and Louisa Musgrove, and tastes the 'sweets of poetical despondence' (p. 85). For, it must be stressed, it is the narrator, not Anne, who perceives that Anne is actually in an unspoken debate with the more hopeful farmer. And at times, even the highest and noblest claims for taste seem to be wan and frail: when Anne contrasts herself with the Musgrove sisters, she seems, almost, to be drawing attention to her own taste and elegance as a standard.

Anne had always contemplated them as some of the happiest creatures of her acquaintance; but still, saved as we all are by some comfortable feeling of superiority from wishing for the possibility of exchange, she would not have given up her own more elegant and cultivated mind for all their enjoyments; and envied them nothing but that seemingly perfect good understanding and agreement together, that good-humoured mutual affection, of which she had known so little herself with either of her sisters.

(p. 41)

Except, of course, that this also sounds like someone who is a little desperately clinging to a shred of dignity and self-regard, and is perhaps making a not quite balanced assessment of that shred. And while, obviously, there can

be no simple rate of exchange between taste and happiness, we must wonder whether Anne's resolution is a sound one - just as we can speculate about whether Anne's superior taste will the more adequately provide her with consolation for her sorrow, or whether it will give her a super-awareness of that sorrow. That in turn points to the implication that, given the state of isolation, or un-communication which is Anne's for almost half the novel, her taste (good though it undoubtedly is, and except for the doubtful consolation it can offer her) is irrelevant. De gustibus non est disputandum had come to be at once a well-worn cliché, and a proposition about which there was still considerable disputing. Jane Austen suggests that where there is no disputing possible, then it is also the case that taste - whatever it is - ceases very largely to matter.

But that also suggests that though the concept of taste is an important one in the novel, it does not actually provide a key to it. Just because this quiet heroine is so quiet, just because for so long she seems to be ineffectual, we have continually to be asking whose story it really is, and which version is to be the version: we find ourselves apprehending the method and the means as they are in the act of becoming novel. Consider the problem of first and second readings of this novel: provided we do more than wait passively for the end to be achieved again; provided we re-appraise the workings, and consider those elements which at a first reading were, necessarily, hidden from us,

we will find much to interest us. As Emma demonstrated, there are gaps in the texture of every novel, and a second reading allows for the gaps to be differently perceived and differently filled by the reader: as Emma especially showed, some novels have an unusually large element of the imprecise, the incompletely rendered. In these cases a second reading is essential if we are to obtain even an adequate measure of the range of diversity, a reasonably adequate sense of the possibles that we can set against what is actually specified. And Persuasion, in its own special way, presents just such a problem.

Or is that to make unnatural claims for the novel? After all, Anne has absolutely no need to learn Emma's lessons, does not, consequently need to discover that her assumptions about the world are flawed, that other versions bewilderingly exist. Even those critics who make large claims for the novel, often suggest that what the novel is 'about' in this sense, is clear enough. Sheldon Sacks, for example, is actually contending that Jane Austen's novels are 'crucial and even experimental developments in expanding the bounds of morally serious comic plots in comic novels', when he asserts that

when, at the end of the third chapter, Anne says, 'with a gentle sigh, "a few months more, and he, perhaps may be walking here,"' only an imperceptive reader would fail to recognise the traitless 'he' as her future husband, though until the subsequent chapter, 'he' is nameless and exists only in Anne's single passionate remark.

And that, of course, is to suggest that whatever else Persuasion achieves, it does offer, even to the first-time reader, a large measure of unambiguous security.¹⁴

But that makes the reading of Persuasion much too safe and unchallenging an experience. Doubtless the perceptive reader will recognise the unnamed Wentworth as a possible husband for Anne, but the perceptive reader who sees Wentworth, at this point as, unqualifiedly, her future husband, will be the same perceptive reader who saw Willoughby, as certainly, as the future husband of Marianne Dashwood, or Wickham as the future husband of Elizabeth Bennet. And surely it is dangerous, at least with Jane Austen, to have this uncritical reliance on fictional conventions. Nobody could deny that Jane Austen recognised the inevitability of fictional conventions as a means of connecting novel with reader, but then nobody could deny that Jane Austen knew - had known as a child - that such conventions could be turned into hilarious parody, if mechanically or ineptly invoked, that the use of conventions depended crucially on being done creatively, to further some other end, and that it had to be understood merely as a convention. If she sought, sometimes, to invoke a particular convention, it would often be simply in order to

¹⁴Sacks, 'Golden birds and dying generations', 1969, p. 288. On the same point, Wayne Booth has claimed that 'all the conventions of art' favour the very early belief, in the reader, that Wentworth never ceases to love Anne (1961, p. 251).

frustrate our expectations of their fulfilment, to remind us that precedents in art, as in life, are never infallible, and that a mindless stereotyping of the possibilities of existence is no substitute for a careful investigation. If too, she sometimes invokes a convention and then actually fulfils the promise it implies, we should still not be surprised to find that the convention has a less than certain authority when applied to a vividly and particularly imagined set of circumstances, that it represents one 'solution' but only one of several likely ones.

That is why it is not needlessly complicating, but essential to ask whose novel is Persuasion: it is certainly Anne's, once her future with Wentworth is secure, and it is almost as clearly hers once we begin to approach that point more closely. But it is also a very gradually attained state, the result of a slow movement from the condition in which Anne is there to reflect only on other people's stories, and through a consideration of the varied possibility these stories represent. That is why even a second reading of Persuasion need not simply be a processing through a pleasant interim, before the anticipated happy ending is confirmed, but an opportunity, once we know what the resolution is, to re-examine the means of reaching it, to see how far we travel along paths that seem to be alien to it, to consider just how many paths there are.

Certainly, at the start of the novel there is very little

to show that it is Anne's novel: Anne who is, whatever her merits, 'of very inferior value', who is 'nobody', who has 'no weight', who is 'only Anne' (p. 5). It is not merely that she does not matter at Kellynch-hall, but that she does not seem to matter in Persuasion. None of her views on the payment of the debts are made known to her father; none of her wishes for the future are noticed or heeded. We begin to learn that she has had a past that might be 'interesting', but then it seems to be a past that is finished and irretrievable, so the news that Wentworth is likely to be at Kellynch again, after Anne has felt that 'time had softened down much, perhaps nearly all of peculiar attachment to him' (p. 28), brings the 'revival of former pain' (p. 30), but is in no particular a cause for her to hope or us to expect.

No, for the first five chapters, it is the Elliots as a group who are the subject of Persuasion, and Anne has the minor role of passive observer in that story, as the only Elliot with any promising potential, but a potential that is never seemingly going to be fulfilled. And of course the contrast works to expose how fine Anne is, potentially, and how appalling are her family. Is that all: is that enough? We might ask, as some of the critics have done, whether the Elliots are not just simply and crudely drawn abstractions of vanity and folly, at once lifeless and too

easily dislikable.¹⁵ If they are, then they are certainly out of place in a novel that contains the complexity and depth of an Anne Elliot, and any comparison between Anne and her family must either be tiresomely obvious, or false. But that is to argue the case too far, and to overlook the significance of what they are. It is not, after all, entirely unusual for Jane Austen to scrutinise some of her characters with an unremitting severity, so that their faults can be summed up in a single damning sentence. When we first meet Mrs Rushworth in Mansfield Park, for example, we find that the conventional merits ascribed to her are immediately drained of any residual positive meaning: she is a 'well-meaning, civil, prosing, pompous woman, who thought nothing of consequence, but as it related to her own and her son's concerns' (p. 75). Nor is it only the very minor characters that are thus summarily treated: Mrs Bennet in Pride and Prejudice, it will be remembered, is allowed only a couple of pages in which to demonstrate her capacities, before the judgement that we are beginning to form is confirmed in the most rigorous terms, when the narrator tells us that she 'was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper' (p. 5). Of course, Mrs Bennet is also a substantial physical presence; we know what she is but we can only guess at how she will

¹⁵This is a line of arguing that goes back at least to Marvin Mudrick (1952, pp. 215-18): Mudrick goes some way, though only a little, towards excusing the figure of Sir Walter (p. 213).

be it. And it could be said that, by contrast, Sir Walter and Elizabeth are lifeless machines, existing only to demonstrate, wearisomely and simply, what they are, with only the occasional cursory gesture towards the question of how they are it. But perhaps they are not a failure of conception, something that the novelist has been unable to bring adequately to life; perhaps they are a striking success, a disturbing picture of life that is notably less than lived.

Dickens's last completed novel presents a similar problem. In Our Mutual Friend it is often said that the Veneerings and their friends come from a Dickens who was decidedly less than at his best; a Dickens who was not merely creating 'flat' characters in the way that E.M. Forster said he always did (Aspects of the Novel, 1927, pp. 46-9), but who was doing it tiredly, incompetently, mechanically; was making mere jottings, mere lists of traits. But it is rather that the Veneerings and the people they assemble round their dinner table are all people who, as people, are deficient in life; who, as they view themselves and each other, have become fractured and distorted, and who cannot make coherent statements about themselves but merely dubious assertions. The truth about 'charming' Lady Tippins is that she is a painted and animated corpse: the truth about people in general, at the table, is that they are likely to turn out to be little more than 'stuffed Buffers'. The picture - and it comes to us with the frozen stasis of a picture, reflected and framed in the mirror -

shows us, not the declining powers of the novelist, but the comprehensive vision he has of life in the society he portrays. The mirror

Reflects Veneering; forty, wavy-haired, dark, tending to corpulence, sly, mysterious, filmy—a kind of sufficiently well-looking veiled-prophet, not prophesying. Reflects Mrs. Veneering; fair, aquiline-nosed and fingered, not so much light hair as she might have, gorgeous in raiment and jewels, enthusiastic, propitiatory, conscious that a corner of her husband's veil is over herself. Reflects Podsnap; prosperously feeding, two little light-coloured wiry wings, one on either side of his else bald head, looking as like his hair-brushes as his hair, dissolving view of red beads on his forehead, large allowance of crumpled shirt-collar up behind. Reflects Mrs. Podsnap; fine woman for Professor Owen, quantity of bone, neck and nostrils like a rocking-horse, hard features, majestic head-dress in which Podsnap has hung golden offerings. Reflects Twemlow; grey, dry, polite, susceptible to east wind, First-Gentleman-in-Europe collar and cravat, cheeks drawn in as if he had made a great effort to retire into himself some years ago, and had got so far and had never got any farther. Reflects mature young lady; raven locks, and complexion that lights up well when well-powdered—as it is—carrying on considerably in the captivation of mature young gentleman; with too much nose in his face, too much ginger in his whiskers, too much torso in his waistcoat, too much sparkle in his studs, his eyes, his buttons, his talk, and his teeth. Reflects charming old Lady Tippins on Veneering's right; with an immense obtuse drab oblong face, like the face in a tablespoon, and a dyed Long Walk up the top of her head, as a convenient public approach to the bunch of false hair behind, pleased to patronise Mrs. Veneering opposite, who is pleased to be patronised. Reflects a certain "Mortimer," another of Veneering's oldest friends; who never was in the house before, and appears not to want to come again, who sits disconsolate on Mrs. Veneering's left, and who was inveigled by Lady Tippins (a friend of his boyhood) to come to these people's and talk, and who won't talk. Reflects Eugene, friend of Mortimer; buried alive in the back of his chair, behind a shoulder—with a powder-epaulette on it—of the mature young lady, and gloomily resorting to the champagne chalice whenever proffered by the Analytical Chemist. Lastly, the looking-glass reflects Boots and Brewer, and two other stuffed Buffers interposed between the rest of the company and possible accidents.

(pp. 52-3)

And surely Sir Walter and his eldest daughter represent, in their own way, the same kind of unlived life. We have already seen how, being as they are, they make all questions of rank, as rank, absurd. What they stand for as individuals is equally significant in its insignificance: quite consumed by vanity, they are totally preoccupied with the trivial surface detail of dress and cosmetic and social distinction, and beyond this they have almost no existence. They are without the capacity to discriminate, beyond the point of telling whether or not attention is being paid to them, and so they are prey to the grossest flattery, and are pathetically easy dupes. They are quite unable to conceive of any real notion of self-respect, and when, at the end, they are deprived of the soothing attentions of Mrs Clay and Mr Elliot, it is entirely appropriate that they should console themselves by paying yet more craven deference to the broad-backed and slight-minded Viscountess, and her dull daughter.

They had their great cousins, to be sure, to resort to for comfort; but they must long feel that to flatter and follow others, without being flattered and followed in turn, is but a state of half enjoyment.

(p. 251)

That comment might seem actually to be undeservedly light, but then it is actually being made in the terms which father and daughter might conceivably understand. But the chief point about the Elliots is that their essential nullity is conveyed just because at the start of the novel,

and more briefly on occasion later, they are at the centre of our attention, and it is seemingly their novel. By giving them, even only for a while, a significance in the novel that is equivalent to the significance they claim in the society of the novel, their claims to significance are shown to amount to nothing.

Now, if we think of Anne in relation to what her family represent, then we will find that the opening of Persuasion has a sufficiently rich complexity, because if Anne does not seem to count, then we can get a full measure of the potentially tragic irony, if we properly see that this is her context, and the reason for her not counting. Anne, whose intelligence and sensibility are vitally evident in the first words she utters, words that are surprisingly forthright, but are also quite useless: Anne, who, however we interpret the difficult events of eight years before, has helped determine her own situation. For Anne to waste the length of her years in the splendour and nothingness that is Kellynch-hall, with its copy of the Baronetage, its too-many mirrors, doubtless its bottles of 'Gowland' (p. 146), would, without exaggeration, be tragic. And for as long as the novel appears to be 'about' the Elliots, that does seem to be her fate. Equally, we have to recognise that Kellynch and the story of the Elliots is not merely the dull blank barren point from which we move to more promising scenes.

One way of viewing the novel, as Mary Lascelles suggests, is as the 'bursting open' for Anne of the 'prison' that is Kellynch (1939, p. 181): but it is also the case that the threat of a re-imprisonment remains real if muted, until comparatively late in the novel. We may often almost forget the existence of Sir Walter and Elizabeth - though Mary is a potent reminder of family characteristics: we may find, as Anne herself does, that the concerns of her father and eldest sister, which seemed so bulky at the start of the first volume, have shrunk decidedly by the start of the second. But the possibility remains that the novel will turn back into the Elliots' story, with Anne having seen brighter and more hopeful futures but back at the point where there is no grounds for hope. It is, after all, quite late in the novel when she has to listen to her father's obnoxious remarks about her friend Mrs Smith ('a mere Mrs Smith, an every day Mrs Smith, of all people and all names in the world, to be the chosen friend of Miss Anne Elliot ...' - p. 158). We cannot blame Anne for seeing but not pointing to the way her father is being inane and contemptible; we cannot blame her for leaving it to 'himself to recollect' the obvious comparison with Mrs Clay: but we must also see that this is a wasted charity, and that the measure of her father is that he will not 'recollect'.

Equally, though the threat that the novel is the Elliots is real enough, it is soon pushed somewhat to one side by

other possibilities, and the subject on which Anne first speaks, the debts of her family, becomes the occasion for these possibilities. Soon Anne is among the noisy warm-hearted bustle and occasional fractiousness of the Musgroves, who supply a telling contrast to the Elliots. They take over the novel, and it becomes Anne's function to assist in the telling of their story. From the novelist's point of view, of course, Anne is supremely well fitted to the task, since her disposition and her training at Kellynch make her the ideal focus as the passive observer and neutral recipient of others' confidences. And her position takes on a certain very muted colouring, because she herself has a very minor role in the story of the Musgroves, as, for example, the woman to whom Charles Musgrove first proposed, and the woman his family rather wish had accepted him. So, similarly, there is a certain point to the fact that Anne has an interest in the Crofts, both as tenants at Kellynch and because of their link with Wentworth; but the principle function of the Crofts, in the novel that is the Musgroves is that through Wentworth they will bring reminders of Dick Musgrove to his mother, and the opportunities of being in love to her daughters.

But the arrival of Wentworth changes the novel again: still it is seemingly the property of the Musgroves, but Anne has grown a little in importance in herself, as well as in the function of reflector on the stories of others. For Anne is watching Wentworth mixing with the Musgroves, in the

knowledge of a love that has apparently dwindled into no more than the awkwardnesses of a slight acquaintance. Later still, it seems increasingly to be the case, and this is in many ways the most poignant of the stories, that Persuasion is the novel about Anne's reflections on the growing attachment of Wentworth and Louisa Musgrove. But that too turns out not to be the story either of the novel or even of Wentworth and Louisa; and we begin to discover, partly because regardless of the subject, it is always the subject as reflected on by Anne, partly because Anne grows (though very gradually) with each successive version of the story, that the different versions are not different stories on which Anne passively reflects, but different facets of a story that is Anne's. Thus, in the second volume it is the Musgroves who recede, and even Wentworth is temporarily eclipsed, as it begins to seem - though never more than briefly and remotely - that Anne's story might connect significantly with Benwick's; then later, and somewhat more sustainedly, as if it is going to be the story of Anne and her cousin. Only at the end do we find that the story has become the best and happiest of Anne's stories.¹⁶

¹⁶Others have touched on the way Persuasion is a story that is made up of many possible stories, but no one has taken it very far as yet. Paul Zietlow, for example, while exploring some of the fortuitous circumstances of the novel, finds Mrs Smith to be 'a kind of metaphor for one of the possible extreme consequences of Anne's and Wentworth's alliance' (1965, pp. 185-6) - always assuming, of course, that they had married first time round, that Wentworth then

We could seek a model for this process in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Marlow sets out to tell the story of Kurtz, and so tells of his search for Kurtz, and his involvement in Kurtz's doings. The obvious indeed traditional question to ask is whether and to what degree the story becomes Marlow's as much as Kurtz's. Anne Elliot, it is true, is not formally a narrator, but she certainly has several of the aspects of one, and there are broad resemblances in the methods of the novel and the novella. But they remain no more than broad, and Marlow does not match the scope of development and change in function that Anne undergoes: she starts distinctly less than Marlow and she ends as discernably more. Similarly the earlier work makes for a more various set of possibilities of who is the focus of the story and so what the story is. Conrad offers paradoxical accounts and contradictory versions, but these are all paradoxes and contradictions of the same story: and though he allows us to doubt whether Marlow is telling Kurtz's story, or telling a story that has become, in a measure, his own, the doubts do not stretch much beyond these alternatives.

went 'to the bottom' with the Asp (Persuasion, p. 65), and that several other contingent developments had occurred. This structure is erected by Zietlow as a possible means of justifying Lady Russell's advice, but is too much founded on frail supposition to bear the weight he would have it take: and because he fails to take adequate notice of the supposititious nature of his argument, he fails also to recognise how many other possibilities the novel also allows for. See also Tave (1973, pp. 280-2).

To see the rather larger range of Persuasion, in this regard, and the way it addresses itself to questions of 'what', as much as of 'who' (where for Heart of Darkness, the question of 'who' will largely suffice), it is perhaps more useful to consider the example of James's The Wings of the Dove. With this novel, even more daringly than in Persuasion, there is a holding back of the heroine: she is of course frail, but in no sense insubstantial, yet two of the novel's ten books elapse before we know anything of her existence; and we find her sitting on the 'dizzy edge' of a mountain path in Switzerland (and it is also typical of the novel that we do not get directly to Milly herself, but to Mrs Stringham's guessing attempts to understand her friend) 'in a state of uplifted possession... She was looking down on the kingdoms of the earth, and though indeed that of itself might well go to the brain, it wouldn't be with a view of renouncing them. Was she choosing among them or did she want them all?' (I, p. 118-9). For this, the first two Books are not just a preliminary setting of the scene in which Milly will be placed as a result of her 'choosing': the characters peopling that scene have dreams and visions quite as large as anything vouchsafed to Milly, and seldom in compliant harmony with hers. Kate's conception, at the start of the novel, of the possibilities represented by her future, and of her father, her aunt, her sister, of Merton Densher are so elaborate, and so enmeshed

with the conceptions of others, that we can only dimly glimpse and guess at their entirety. In such circumstances, to talk of differing possible stories, is obviously to make a very large simplification; but it is a means of enabling us to perceive that the psychological drama that makes up the novel is a conflict between stories. Given the range and the fullness of versions that each individual holds, given that different individuals will have different versions of the same possible events, specific versions will only survive by fighting or accommodating. That leads, inevitably, to the kind of double and triple thinking so common in the novel, by which Kate or Densher, or Mrs Lowder or Mrs Stringham, or even Milly, will build into their sense of the world and the future, an attempt at approximating or circumventing a sense of how others view that prospect. Consider, by way of an example, the metaphor by which Densher conceives of the powerful Mrs Lowder, and her relations with her niece. The account gains in depth and complexity if we realize that in the pages just preceding this, Kate has begun to give Densher her ideas of Milly's future, how it might connect with his and so also her own; and has reflected also on what she thinks her aunt's views on such points are, and on the degree to which her own version will appear to coincide with her aunt's and that to which it will do more than her aunt realizes. And we must remember that Kate and Densher, in their different ways, already occupy not-unimportant places in Milly's thinking. Densher starts by considering Kate's position.

That was the story—that she was always, for her beneficent dragon, under arms; living up, every hour, but especially at festal hours, to the 'value' Mrs. Lowder had attached to her. High and fixed, this estimate

ruled on each occasion at Lancaster Gate the social scene; so that he now recognised in it something like the artistic idea, the plastic substance, imposed by tradition, by genius, by criticism, in respect to a given character, on a distinguished actress. As such a person was to dress the part, to walk, to look, to speak, in every way to express, the part, so all this was what Kate was to do for the character she had undertaken, under her aunt's roof, to represent. It was made up, the character, of definite elements and touches—things all perfectly ponderable to criticism; and the way for her to meet criticism was evidently at the start to be sure her make-up had had the last touch and that she looked at least no worse than usual. Aunt Maud's appreciation of that to-night was indeed managerial, and the performer's own contribution fairly that of the faultless soldier on parade. Densher saw himself for the moment as in his purchased stall at the play; the watchful manager was in the depths of a box and the poor actress in the glare of the foot-lights. But she passed, the poor performer—he could see how she always passed; her wig, her paint, her jewels, every mark of her expression impeccable, and her entrance accordingly greeted with the proper round of applause. Such impressions as we thus note for Densher come and go, it must be granted, in very much less time than notation demands; but we may none the less make the point that there was, still further, time among them for him to feel almost too scared to take part in the ovation. He struck himself as having lost, for the minute, his presence of mind—so that in any case he only stared in silence at the older woman's technical challenge and at the younger one's disciplined face. It was as if the drama—it thus came to him, for the fact of a drama there was no blinking—was between them, them quite preponderantly; with Merton Densher relegated to mere spectatorship, a paying place in front, and one of the most expensive. This was why his appreciation had turned for the instant to fear—had just turned, as we have said, to sickness; and in spite of the fact that the disciplined face did offer him over the footlights, as he believed, the small gleam, fine faint but exquisite, of a special intelligence. So might a practised performer, even when raked by double-barrelled glasses, seem to be all in her part and yet convey a sign to the person in the house she loved best.

(II, pp. 34-5)

It is of course obvious that Persuasion does not quite have this scope, but it must be said that the earlier novel is not simply making less use of the method, that it is actually making the method work to an end that is a little different. The Wings of the Dove plunges us directly into the middle of things, with the differing versions already

fully in existence, already in conflict. Persuasion, on the other hand, introduces us stage by stage to the different aspects of the debate, starting with the smallest least interesting fragment of a page from the Baronetage and building from there to something which has complete utterance only at the end. It never renders the possibilities of its individual consciousnesses as comprehensively as the James novel does, but Jane Austen is able to explore the process as it grows, from a point of inception, and can show the gradually widening set of possibilities, so that each new detail or version will do something to break the pattern previously formed: it is only when all the voices have sounded their full range that we can properly begin to seek out the more enduring patterns. Persuasion directs us to the analysis of the process of becoming what, in a sense, Kate Croy and Milly Theale already are, for us, when they first appear in their novel.

And once we begin to comprehend this, it becomes clear that attempts to discuss the functioning of Persuasion in terms simply of such concepts as 'point of view' are inadequate. Wayne Booth is interesting in this regard, just because though his account is an insufficient one, it does begin to make some qualifications. He compares Persuasion with Emma, and says that Emma's point of view is much more unreliable, much more in need of correction, while Anne's is limited in only one specific way - 'her ignorance of Captain Wentworth's love'. Thus Anne's 'consciousness is sufficient, as Emma's is not, for most of the needs of the novel which she dominates'. And, apart from the narrator's interpolations at the very beginning and the very end,

Booth finds only two occasions on which Anne's view is insufficient. But this is simplistic, and the 'only' deviations that Booth finds, are 'only' the most obvious ones. Later attempts have taken things a little further. Marilyn Butler, for instance, finds two planes of reality in the novel, the one in the 'subjective', the 'emotional' identification with Anne, the other 'near-objective', and 'presented to the reader dramatically rather than refracted through Anne's consciousness'. However Butler is unable to perceive a way in which the two can combine satisfactorily, so she falls back on the assumption that this is simply 'a failure to integrate the novel's two planes of reality'.¹⁷

Actually the whole matter is rather more complicatedly that we know at the same time how important and revealing is Anne's view of things, but also what its limitations are, and what other possibilities exist outside her. Take the walk to Winthrop: there we see a functioning that can be found everywhere, though not always as intensively, in the novel. First, there is Anne's view of the whole episode. She sets out on the walk, not unwillingly, but primarily, she thinks, to be useful in preventing Mary from being a nuisance to the Musgrove sisters: she probably also shares, though, with the narrator, the perception that their invitation to herself is 'much more cordial'

¹⁷Booth, 1961, pp. 250-3; Butler, 1975, pp. 278-9. Booth's two other 'occasions' on which we depart from Anne's consciousness, are p. 61, when we see why Wentworth said that he found Anne 'so altered', and pp. 177-8, just after Anne and Wentworth have parted in the streets of Bath, when we linger momentarily with the ladies of Wentworth's party, as they comment on Anne's prettiness. Thomas Lockwood ('Divided attention in Persuasion', 1978, pp. 309-23) attempts a rather too schematic distinction between 'moral' and 'emotional' truths, as an extension of Butler's argument.

(p. 83) than that to Mary. When they are joined, at the last moment, by Charles Musgrove and Captain Wentworth, Anne acknowledges that if she had known that this was to happen, she 'would have staid at home'; but it is the narrator, not Anne, who has the better measure of Anne's doubt and confusion, and who notes of Anne that 'from some feelings of interest and curiosity, she fancied now that it was too late to retract' (p. 84). She feels her own pleasure to be confined to a private poetic musing on the sad beauty of the autumn day - although 'praises of the day' are 'continually bursting forth' from her companions (p. 84): and she studies Wentworth, wondering which of the Musgrove girls he prefers, detecting an increasing preference for Louisa. At the same time, she continues to probe, in her own mind, the way she thinks Wentworth thinks about her, and so takes his talk of firmness and nuts to imply a rebuke to herself (p. 89): that is modified again a little later when on the return walk he perceives her to be tired and arranges for her to have a place in the Croft's carriage:

She understood him. He could not forgive her,—but he could not be unfeeling. Though condemning her for the past, and considering it with high and unjust resentment, though perfectly careless of her, and though becoming attached to another, still he could not see her suffer, without the desire of giving her relief. It was a remainder of former sentiment; it was an impulse of pure, though unacknowledged friendship; it was proof of his own warm and amiable heart, which she could not contemplate without emotions so compounded of pleasure and pain, that she knew not which prevailed.

(p. 91)

Taken as a whole the walk to Winthrop seems to bring Anne

only reminders of her sorrow and her isolation, and when she happens to ask, by way of rousing herself from a moment of especial sadness, whether they are on the path to Winthrop, it seems entirely characteristic of her situation that 'nobody heard, or, at least, nobody answered her' (p. 85).

Anne's view of the situation is both useful and understandable: but it also begins to be clear that Anne's view, on its own, is less than completely adequate; and a little reflection, a little hindsight, will bring us things that are outside the scope of her view, and that have nothing to do with her significance. Winthrop is, very much, the destination of the walk for at least three of Anne's companions, but as their reasons are covert, it is unlikely that they would be anything but silent, when Anne makes her question: and the other two are unlikely to answer it anyway, since Mary is no doubt in her usual neurotically self-preoccupied state, while Wentworth will not know the answer to her question. But for Charles Musgrove, and his sisters, the going to Winthrop is crucial. Charles, in opposition to his wife's petty but insistent snobbery, would greet his aunt, would even try to persuade Mary to join him in going down to the farmhouse, once it comes in sight; Charles, who may also be party to the scheme - principally Louisa's - for the reconciling of Henrietta and Charles Hayter, the cousin who was rendered jealous and sulky by the presence of Wentworth. For, as the narrator rather laconically observes 'young men are, sometimes, to be met with, strolling about near home' (p.85).

So the Musgroves have more than one reason, especially since Mary (who disapproves of Charles Hayter, on Elliot principles) is with them, for remaining silent about their intended destination. And it is Louisa, most active in attempting to ensure that it is her version of the events that the events most fit, who, having turned her sister's thoughts away from Wentworth and back to Hayter, seizes the opportunity of the short absence of her brother and sister, to take Wentworth aside and tell him what she has done, thus economically demonstrating the kind of 'firmness' that he claims to admire, and also showing him that her sister is committed to another, and is less possessed of firmness. In doing so she is, of course, overheard by Anne, overheard giving utterance, among other things, to the Musgrove version of Anne's relationship with Lady Russell (p. 81); a version which we know is less than correct, and yet one which we can see, as Anne does, will help to confirm Wentworth's own conception of Anne and her friend.

The novel, therefore, does not consist, more than partly, in what is refracted through Anne's consciousness: it would indeed be more appropriate to see it as a set of negotiations between what is and what is not in Anne's consciousness; one that is the more complicated by the fact that it takes place in a context in which the unity of what is, is constantly being threatened and re-made by the diversity of what might be; one in which while some 'versions' of the novel seem so confidently to be the novel, and then come to nothing, other 'versions' seem to be no more than incomplete fragments, until we can see

the pattern in the novel as a whole. We can only properly appreciate why Anne so dislikes Bath, and thinks of existence there as an imprisonment, and the despair of all peace and happiness, we can only measure properly the irony by which Bath brings her freedom and happiness, when we remember that it was to Bath that Lady Russell took Anne, just after the engagement to Wentworth was terminated, in the unfulfilled expectation that change and variety might lift her friend's spirits, might even, we can surmise, bring the consoling happiness of a 'second attachment' (perhaps one more suited to Lady Russell's own taste - p.28). And it was to Bath, just after her mother's death, that Anne was sent to school, and where she found the comfort and the kindness of the person who was to become Mrs Smith (pp. 14, 152). It cannot completely explain the presentation of Mrs Smith, but there is a certain usefulness in keeping her and her connection with Anne back till relatively late in the novel: for Anne to appear, too soon, as a figure with the substance and circumstance of one who actually went to school and formed a friendship and received comfort when grieving, will be to make rather more of her than the insubstantiality with which she at first necessarily appears. She will have too much and too various a past.

And the very event on which the whole novel is founded, the terminated engagement, is ambiguous not only because it is finally unresolvable, but because there are so many possible resolutions. There is the disapproval, founded on the conviction of what it is to be an Elliot, of Sir

Walter and Elizabeth. There is Lady Russell, genuinely concerned for Anne, genuinely fulfilling the maternal role, yet also motivated by her notions of what Anne might become, and too rigidly certain of what Wentworth will not become. There are the conceptions and contradictions in the views of the young couple themselves: the way Anne is persuaded to terminate the engagement, among other things, for Wentworth's sake, and the speed with which she comes to regret that decision, as she and Lady Russell develop different and incompatible senses of the past and the future; there is the way that Wentworth, not without justification, but prompted also by his anger and wounded feelings, does not properly understand Anne's actions, even less the way that her view of those actions changes. And, even eight years after the events, Anne is capable, on notably different occasions, of giving notably different accounts of her sense of them. At the beginning of the novel, when Anne's life is saddest, and her future most blank, we are told that she

did not blame Lady Russell, she did not blame herself for having been guided by her; but she felt that were any young person, in similar circumstances, to apply to her for counsel, they would never receive any of such certain immediate wretchedness, such uncertain future good.—She was persuaded that under every disadvantage of disapprobation at home, and every anxiety attending his profession, all their probable fears, delays and disappointments, she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been in the sacrifice of it; and this, she fully believed, had the usual share, had even more than a usual share of all such sollicitudes and suspense been theirs, without reference to the actual results of their case, which, as it happened, would have bestowed earlier prosperity than could be reasonably calculated on.

(p. 29)

But in the novel's concluding sequence, when Anne knows of

the happy ending of her story, she takes - can afford to take - a rather different view of the past, and the influence of Lady Russell's advice on that past.

It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides; and for myself, I certainly never should, in any circumstance of tolerable similarity, give such advice. But I mean, that I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience. I have now, as far as such a sentiment is allowable in human nature, nothing to reproach myself with; and if I mistake not, a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman's portion.

(p. 246)

The move to Uppercross brings Anne a whole new range of possibilities with the Musgroves and the Crofts, as much a question of what as of who. If the Crofts seem reasonably content to tell the same story, then it is one which both actively co-operate in the telling: and the Musgroves, for all their appearance of unity, are constantly dividing over possibilities and versions, between Uppercross-hall and Uppercross Cottage, between Uppercross and Winthrop, even, at one point, between that otherwise close and happy pair, Louisa and Henrietta. Then there is Wentworth who as well as the complications of past and present with Anne, is to be seen as a potential lover or husband, a rival, a good sportsman, a potential son-in-law, or as the brave and adventurous sailor who has lived through high dangers and acquitted himself well. And, in counterpoint to that last, there is the bathos by which he comes, at least for Mrs Musgrove (p. 64), to represent what worthless Dick Musgrove might have been. Surely that is the point of this much-discussed episode: it is another vividly dramatic instance of the way differing versions of a story can exist

together, often uneasily, and be understood in different ways and on different levels. There is nothing that is in itself cruel and unpleasant in the fact, recorded by the narrator, that the dead son of the Musgroves was, and was generally perceived to be, 'thick-headed, unfeeling, unprofitable' (p. 51): or in the not unusual circumstance by which the worthless dead are accorded a late and sentimental mourning. But it does mean that there will be a nicely shaded variety of ways of telling the story of Dick Musgrove, from one that is founded on inaccuracy and the grossest sentimentality, to one that has the thrust of an all but brutal frankness.¹⁸ And it is one thing, clearly, for the narrator to reveal to us something of what we can take to be the 'truth' about Dick Musgrove; or for Anne to perceive - or think she perceives, founding her perception on what she feels has survived of her special relationship with Wentworth - that his view of Dick Musgrove is not unlike what we already know to be the narrator's (p. 67): it is quite another when it becomes a matter of treating with the Musgroves and their grief; of doing as Wentworth does and, concealing his real feelings, offering what he

¹⁸This is of course a much-discussed episode, perhaps too much discussed, especially by those who have disapproval to air. Typically, Andor Gomme finds in the episode a 'callousness' which he finds unequalled anywhere else in the six novels, and for which, he says, the nearest approximation is Emma's justly rebuked rudeness to Miss Bates on Box Hill (1966, pp. 171-2; see also p. 319n, above). This though is no more than a measure of the degree to which Gomme is wrong: Knightley rebukes Emma, not because she finds Miss Bates tiresome, but because she reveals to Miss Bates that she finds her tiresome (*Emma*, p. 375). For a later but not much more convincing attempt to explain how Jane Austen suffered a 'loss of control' here, see Julia Brown (1979, p. 133).

can of genuine consolation (pp. 67-8). Because, in the novel that is Mrs Musgrove's, it is as a genuinely consoling figure that he will appear.

The visit to Lyme offers yet more potential stories. Harville is a variation on the possibilities of fortitude, Benwick on grief and poetry. Both men add further to the 'naval' aspects of Wentworth, and together the three men represent a strong and healthy bond of friendship, from which Anne can feel excluded (p. 98). But Lyme also brings the chance encounter with Mr Elliot during which he looks admiringly at Anne, and Anne is flattered into thinking about him, and about the way Wentworth responds to his interest in her (p. 104). And Benwick also seems to find Anne unusually interesting, so that for weeks after she returns from Lyme, she has the expectation, never actually fulfilled, but caught also by Lady Russell, that he will 'visit' her; and Charles and Mary Musgrove come to Kellynch-lodge, partly in order to argue over their own differing accounts of Benwick, of whether he is attracted to Anne, of whether he will come to Kellynch (pp. 130-3). But, most of all at Lyme, there is the drama of the Cobb and Louisa's fall, the opportunity that brings for Anne to assert herself, the jarring shock it gives, not only to Louisa's head, and ultimately to her future prospects, but also to Wentworth, his conception of himself, and his understanding of Louisa and of Anne.

Anne's journey to Bath brings her to the new preoccupations of her father and her sister; brings her also to her cousin, and into his schemes and devisings; brings her,

before very long, to the almost offered temptation to become Lady Elliot. That is in some ways the most surprising of the possible developments, because it seems to imply that she is more like her family than she appears, and that she might have her own share of the 'Elliot pride' (see Mansell, 1973, pp. 319-20, for instance). But this possibility has no particular fixity, and no sooner do we see that the temptation, even if only as a dream, is real enough, is indeed 'bewitching' (p. 160), than we are obliged to consider what exactly the dream implies. To be 'Lady Elliot' is for Anne to be in every sense, as Lady Russell points out, like Anne's mother; and everything we know about Anne's mother (little though that is - p. 4) points decisively to the fact that Lady Elliot was as unlike her husband and her other two daughters, as she was like Anne. To become 'Lady Elliot' is not therefore to become Elliot in any sense that has predominance in the novel. And there is another point: we know already, and it is confirmed here, that Anne has a high aesthetic esteem for Kellynch, and clearly, to become 'Lady Elliot' is to admit the 'charm' of having the place as a 'home for ever'. But it must also be noted how Anne avoids obscurity and confusion, and the various aspects of her response, though closely inter-connected, are not allowed to become smudged. The possibility of 'Kellynch', like that of 'Lady Elliot', can be grasped, even delighted in, but will also, in 'a few moments' be put appropriately in perspective. For then, the 'charm of Kellynch and of "Lady Elliot" all faded away', and Anne comes to the key realization, in part a re-discovery, that 'her feelings were still adverse to any

man but one', and that, even if this were not so, then she still could not bring herself to trust her cousin.

This of course is a crucial point in the novel's development. The significance of 'Kellynch' and of 'Lady Elliot' are in no way diminished by what Anne's mind decisively achieves, but what she decides in choosing for Wentworth and against her cousin, is that the significance is not going to be a part of the story that is hers. This does not mean that no new possibilities or interpretations will be presented of the story that has become Anne's - it must be remembered that Anne makes her decision while still assuming that Wentworth will marry Louisa Musgrove - but that we can begin more clearly to rank the different possibilities in terms of their actual or potential significance to Anne. The ending of the novel is approached by what, in one sense, is a gathering coherence. Where once they seemed to be disparate stories, they now seem increasingly to be different perspectives on the same story. Hence, for example, the story that Mrs Smith tells. Whatever one thinks of its contrived nature, or of its belatedness, it is also a stunning revelation of the complacent, paltry, showy world of Bath in which Anne has taken her place, stunning just because it is the view as seen by servants and nurses, or laundresses and waiters (pp. 155-6, 193). It is a point of view that Jane Austen had never before considered in any detail, and in using it to reconstruct the version of the story held by Mr Elliot and his friends the Wallises,¹⁹ Jane Austen is able to shine a new and

¹⁹Mr Elliot's version of the story reaches Mrs Smith - and so is passed on to Anne - by a line that, as Mrs Smith says,

rather harsh light on the folly and the pride of Sir Walter and his daughter, the schemes and petty intrigues of his heir, even -insofar as they connect with it - the doings of Anne Elliot, because she makes this the subject of the idle gossip of the back-stairs.

And even before we learn of this version of the way Mr Elliot sees the world, and wants to see it, another pattern of possibilities begins to emerge. No sooner has Anne made the sure re-discovery of her feelings for Wentworth, than news comes to Bath (pp. 164-5) of the surprising engagement of Louisa Musgrove to Benwick; almost immediately after, Wentworth himself comes to Bath, and Anne's hopes are suddenly renewed. That is not to say that, even here, there is a straightforward and easily achieved resolution, since there is the halting and awkward development of the relationship in successive chance meetings, with the dangers of precipitance on one side, or a holding back on the other that might wreck the best chances. Thus it is that Anne, desperately anxious to communicate with Wentworth, and aware of the advantages and the disadvantages of the jealousy he has begun to feel, is more than ready at the White Hart to make her passionate defence of the constancy of women to Harville: and because by chance Wentworth overhears her, he is compelled to the

'takes a bend or two, but nothing of consequence. The stream is as good as at first; the little rubbish it collects in the turnings, is easily moved away' (pp. 204-5). And of course Mrs Smith's principal informant is nurse Rooke, who is told by Mrs Wallis, of what her husband has told her of his discussions with Mr Elliot, of Mr Elliot's version of the story, and of Colonel Wallis's fears that it may be thwarted.

dangerous means of his letter to her. Hence the great and resounding irony that sets off the last chapter.

Who can be in doubt of what followed? When any two young people take it into their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so little likely to be necessary to each other's ultimate comfort.

(p. 248)

That can only be said, and with such confidence, because it is said with the knowledge that there once were two young people, who were Anne and Wentworth, and who somehow did not have the 'perseverance to carry their point': that it is also perilously late before Anne can express some reasonable hope.

Surely, if there be constant attachment on each side, our hearts must understand each other ere long. We are not boy and girl, to be captiously irritable, misled by every moment's inadvertence, and wantonly playing with our own happiness.

(p. 221)

And still as she says it, she doubts.

Then at the end, we can perceive that the movement within which the differing possibilities of Anne's story are explored and ordered, the movement between bleak autumn and warm and colourful spring, is also of course a movement between tragedy and comedy. It is a link that the novel makes perpetual, for we cannot think of the very happy resolution, without noticing how largely the other less happy possibilities have loomed; and we cannot remember the eight sadly wasted years, even though they do come to an end, without seeing how easily they could have turned into the waste of a lifetime, and how wonderfully they do not. If we want to invoke a late Shakespeare play then it is perhaps not the often-made allusion to The Tempest that we

should be thinking of, but The Winter's Tale. That works, one could say, in whole tones when Persuasion is in half-tones. There the shift is from the depths of winter to the height of summer; there the blank period lasts for sixteen years: in Persuasion the movement is merely from autumn to spring, and its blank is only eight years. But both show ways in which jealousy and misunderstanding can lead either to the bitterest of sorrow, or be resolved into an unexpected happiness, one that yet remembers the sorrow. And both pivot crucially on central scenes that point, at once, back to the tragedy at its grimmest, and forward to a richly enlivening comedy that is not without, even a trace of the absurd. The Winter's Tale has the scene in which Antigonus, compelled to the task of abandoning the infant Perdita, is pursued offstage by a bear, and then eaten. That could be taken as an apt conclusion to the events in Sicilia, but since the events are also described in comic detail, by a 'clown' we are also prepared for the pastoral comedy of the second half of the play. And Persuasion has the Cobb, and Louisa's fall; dramatically and even melodramatically making a crucial and serious point, yet also finding one point of view from which the proceedings seem to be of more comic interest.

By this time the report of the accident had spread among the workmen and boatmen about the Cobb, and many were collected near them, to be useful if wanted, at any rate, to enjoy the sight of a dead young lady, nay, two dead young ladies, for it proved twice as fine as the first report.

(p. 111)

Of course Jane Austen was always capable of finding comedy in the most unexpected places, and so of radically changing our perspectives. But nowhere else is it a more fundamental

or general shift.

In one respect, though, play and novel do seem to differ notably. The play ends with art being brought to life with the statue of Hermione, while the novel ends in a way that has, in a sense, life turning into art. Here, the questions which the novel most suggests, are novelistic rather than dramatic questions. As the diverse meanings of the material of the novel are successively revealed, as we move gradually to the finally achieved coherence; as Anne's life, at first peripheral, is placed more and more at the centre of our attention, so we can perceive the novel being actually formed around her. So her process is towards the condition of a heroine, and she comes slowly to dominate over her setting, which comes to be the background to her novel. And, increasingly, towards the end, the process becomes a conscious one. At one moment, at the concert when she is caught between the attentions of her cousin and the jealousy of Wentworth, she finds herself very anxious to give Wentworth a large opportunity to join her, and she seizes the chance to 'place herself much nearer the end of the bench than she had been before, much more within the reach of a passer-by'; and though it is a moment of great anxiety for her, she can also see that this has, very much, the air of flirtatious opportunism, that reminds her of 'Miss Larolles, the inimitable Miss Larolles' (p. 189). Miss Larolles is an inanely chattering girl in Fanny Burney's Cecilia, who seems intent on bringing to life the conventions of flirtations of a novel, and who, herself, fully knows the advantage of a seat at the end of the bench,

if one wants to catch the attention of a passer-by.²⁰ Momentarily, then, Anne is laughing at the comic literariness of her behaviour: it is a laughter in which the heroine, the narrator and the reader have joined, in complicity. It is a laughter to which we can attach even more significance, if we realize that she is behaving as much like a young lady who flirts by the book in Fanny Burney's London as in Jane Austen's Bath, and the Jane Austen character Anne most resembles at this moment is Isabella Thorpe - such is the irony by which Anne's plight reduces her to the devices much more usually employed by the merely heartless triflers who think mistakenly that they are heroines. But it must also be emphasised that the conscious complicity between heroine, narrator and reader is only momentary, since Anne's advance toward heroineship is now so far that no comic challenge of a merely pseudo-heroinely nature can be sustained. By the next morning, Anne, made more happy and more anxious by the evinced jealousy of Wentworth has also become, unquestionably, a heroine in a novel, to be talked of, a little stiltedly at first (but then it is an unaccustomed form for this just-created heroine) as a heroine in a novel, in conventionally literary terms.

²⁰Cecilia, II, p. 161. It is an allusion that would probably have been instantly caught by most of Jane Austen's contemporaries, and is all but lost to us. Chapman does all that can be done, by giving the source in the notes to the novel, and a brief quotation from the conversation of Miss Larolles, which will hint at something of her nature. But fully to get at the point that Anne and her narrator are making, it is probably necessary to have read Cecilia.

Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy, could never have passed along the streets of Bath, than Anne was sporting with from Camden-place to Westgate-buildings. It was almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way.

(p. 192)

And where is she going? To hear the story of a man who is 'black at heart, hollow and black!' (p. 199), a man who looked set to play either hero or villain to her heroine, but whose potential has already been almost entirely neutralised. And, though we must still wait to know exactly what Anne's fate will be, exactly what her measure of happiness or sadness will be, it is now clear that she has, as it were, passed out of life, has become the heroine of the novel that is called Persuasion, and so has a story that will come to an end.

It was to be that Jane Austen, who started her first novel by asking, emphatically, what is a heroine, turned her last into the formal consideration of what is a novel, and so of the process by which a person called Anne Elliot becomes heroine of that novel. Both novels give us a conventionally happy ending that is at once no more than a happy ending, and a laugh at the conventions that require and achieve happy endings in novels. And in Persuasion, even more than in Northanger Abbey there is the last irony by which, simultaneously, we have the illusion created for us that we are dealing with living, breathing life, and the active sense of the polishings and refinings necessary for the creation of what is art. In short, it reminds us what it is and how it works, as a novel, and it re-states its relationship with us as readers, whereby it is only graspable because it is also ungraspable, just at the point when it is also terminating that relationship with us, as readers.

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