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Chapter 5: Walter Scott and Jane Austen

Not long ago, it was popular to read the development of the novel from the eighteenth century to Jane Austen and beyond as itself a kind of narrative. On this theory, the novel starts out as a rather crude kind of literary form, which can handle plot (Fielding) or psychology (Richardson), but not both at the same time. If, like Fielding, it is concerned with formal design, it has to sacrifice psychological realism to do so; whereas the novel of psychological realism finds it hard to launch a shapely narrative. By the time of Jane Austen, so the story goes, the novel form has finally come of age, and the fullest degree of social realism and psychological intricacy can co-exist with an exquisitely well-balanced form. It is this which Austen will bequeath to the great realist novel of the nineteenth century.

The story of the novel, in short, reads rather like a realist novel itself. First there is disunity, then integration. There is something in this case, but it is more misleading than illuminating. For one thing, it makes the eighteenth-century novel sound like a dummy run for Jane Austen and George Eliot, whom it could not have known about, rather than a phenomenon in its own right. For another thing, it tends to overlook just how many losses as well as gains were involved in this process. For realism to triumph, a great deal that was valuable had to be sidelined and suppressed.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was one of the most fertile, diverse and adventurous periods of novel-writing in English history, as Gothic fiction, romance, regional and national tales, Jacobin and anti-Jacobin novels, novels of travel, sentiment, abolitionism and the condition of women, stories of foreign and domestic manners, and works derived from ballad, myth and folk lore, tumbled copiously from the presses. The literary situation was exceptionally fluid, and the realist novel as we know it crystallized only gradually in this crucible of ingredients. Once that novel was up and running, it did not simply suppress these competing forms; on the contrary, it incorporated them, as a glance at the Gothic or romantic elements in, say, the Brontës would suggest. But in the act of assimilating them, it also tended to defuse them. The English novel gained in 'civility' and sophistication, but lost out to some degree in vision, passion and fantasy. [1] Not until the modernist fiction of the twentieth century would some of this ground be made up, as the novel was once more set free from the constraints of what was considered 'plausible'.

That this period should have witnessed such an extraordinary burst of novelistic experiment is hardly surprising. It was, after all, an epoch of dramatic social and political upheaval: revolution in France and North America, the Napoleonic conquests, the massive expansion of empire, Britain's dominance of the seas, the prosperity reaped from the slave trade, the rise of the European nation-state, the increasing capitalist 'rationalization' of the countryside as common rights were uprooted by so-called enclosures. The period saw the beginnings of the industrial revolution, the consolidation of middle-class power, and the first stirrings of the organized, politically vocal working class. It was a time of radical movements and ideas, which found themselves confronting what in the heyday of Scott and Austen was effectively a British police state. The new experiments in fiction had some of their roots in this era of vision and anxiety, in new liberations of energy and new forms of repression.

They also had many of their roots in the Gaelic margins. Writers of Scottish or Irish origin bulk remarkably large in eighteenth-century 'English' literature, and for a while Dublin and Edinburgh were probably more vital literary centres than London. It was on the colonial peripheries that questions of history and cultural identity, tradition and modernity, the archaic and the enlightened, romance and realism, empire and anti-colonialism, community and individualism, were inevitably at their keenest. The father of the realist historical novel is often said to be Walter Scott; and it was certainly Scott, with

his pop-idol-like fame throughout Europe and America, who played a major role in establishing the novel as a genuinely 'serious' literary genre. He won for the form a new prestige and authority, so that now, the critics could console themselves, it was no longer just a genre for fantasizing females. His novel *Waverley* attracted the kind of celebrity that even today's literary superstars would envy.

Yet behind *Waverley*—the work of an author who pokes fun at the excesses of Gothic, sentimental, chivalric and female fiction—lies an obscure novel by an Anglo-Irish Gothic author, Charles Maturin's *The Milesian Chief*. Behind it more generally lies a hinterland of women writers, so-called national tales, romances, folk material and nationalist antiquarian research from which the reputable Sir Walter derived rather more than he was always prepared to acknowledge. In this sense, the canonical had its roots in the non-canonical, as is often the case. Irish women like Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), Maria Edgeworth and others were intensively involved in fiction about national and cultural identity, and its complex relations to gender, in a way which gives the lie to the prejudice that while the expansively 'masculine' Sir Walter wrote novels about the public world, female writers were all as domestically restricted as a Jane Austen.

The novel, Sydney Owenson remarked, is 'the best history of nations'. Cultural nationalism at the time of Scott and Austen involved myth and fantasy, popular customs and sentiments, the exploration of identity as well as the struggle to tell your own story. It was thus the kind of politics which lent itself particularly well to the novel, which also trades in such matters. At the same time, however, partly because of this colonial turbulence, there was a need for the British state to consolidate its power; and the novel played an indirect role in this project as well. If it was a vehicle of radical, Gothic, colonial, abolitionist or feminist dissent, it was also a sturdy instrument of political authority. It could play an invaluable role in defining the true meaning of Englishness or Britishness, at just the moment when these notions was coming under fire from cultural nationalisms at home and political revolutions abroad.

Scott's novels pay full heed to the trauma and devastation of Scotland's colonial past; but they see the need, precisely because of this tragedy, to move all the more swiftly towards an 'enlightened', thoroughly 'modernized' Scottish nation. It is a nation which has thrust its tribal 'savagery' and futile Romantic dreams behind it, accepting that its future lies in a peaceable political and economic integration with the British parliament and the British crown. The anarchic past has a drama and energy which is admired; yet it is one which the realist novel must tame and 'normalize'.

In this sense, Scott is one of the first great spokesmen of modern British conservatism. Those with experience of civil war, military rebellion and political disunity, which a Scottish writer of the time was likely to have, are always the most persuasive in their championship of order, hierarchy, authority and tradition. Much the same is true of Scott's contemporary Edmund Burke, an Irishman who threw his formidable eloquence behind the need to uphold the British state. Burke had known enough civil unrest in his native Ireland to warn the English of its horrors when it broke out in France. The renowned 'moderation' of the English spirit does not spring from a history of peace and civility; it is rather a reaction to a British history of bloodshed and sectarian strife. It is with such figures as Scott and Burke that modern English conservatism, with its belief in maintaining a middle way between the 'fanaticisms' of both left and right, was born. The values cherished by Scott—liberty, tolerance, moderation, progress and commercial enterprise, all within a firm framework of rank, deference, loyalty, tradition, imperial order and a strong military state—have set the tone, by and large, for the politics of the British establishment ever since.

It is this refusal of both reaction and revolution which is often praised as the English spirit of compromise. Yet this 'middle way', like the so-called Third Way in today's politics, is in reality no such thing. It is not a middle path between Toryism and radicalism, but one between a backward-looking, increasingly clapped-out form of Toryism and a more updated, enlightened version of the creed. It is the difference in Scott's eyes between the Romantic Jacobites who are still loyal to the House of Stuart, and those more modern, moderate, pragmatic Tories like himself who accept the so-called

Glorious Revolution of the House of Hanover. From a radical viewpoint, this stout commitment to capitalism and monarchy is scarcely a matter of being middle-of-the-road.

It is true, of course, that most of us instinctively see ourselves as somewhere in the middle, flanked on both sides by fanatical extremists. It is natural to see oneself as in the centre and others as on the peripheries. It has to do, among other things, with where Nature has seen fit to locate our eyes. The only problem is that most of the fanatical extremists, whose eyes are in much the same place as our own, see themselves as being in the middle too. Not many people regard themselves as frenzied zealots or rabid bigots. Zealots and bigots are always other people. Extremism is usually a matter of where you happen to be standing. Those today who believe they have the right to wreck international agreements, maintain millions in poverty, or flatten other nations who are not even proposing to attack them, would no doubt be stung to hear themselves described as fanatics.

Liberals are prone to the belief that the truth usually lies somewhere in the middle—from which it might follow, for example, that the truth lies somewhere between the extreme of racism on the one hand and the extreme of anti-racism on the other. Or between wife-beating patriachs on the one hand, and those who run women's refuges on the other. Or between those impoverished peasants who can no longer support themselves because their land has been poisoned, and the giant corporations who have poisoned it for the sake of profit. It is therefore not hard to see why, for some radical commentators, the idea that the truth invariably lies in the middle is itself an 'extremist' position to take up.

As one from north of the English border, Scott was peculiarly well-placed to recreate the way in which history was supposedly evolving from a backward clan society to a modern nation-state. In Scotland, this process had happened recently enough to provide the British as a whole with a lively reminder of the importance of a 'civilized', modernized political state. Ireland was still too embroiled in revolutionary turmoil to provide any such object-lesson. Yet Scotland was also a graphic reminder of the terrible price which had to be paid for such 'civility' in bloodshed, rancour and the destruction of the old clan society. Such an unflinching recognition lent Scott's voice an authority beyond the more complacent champions of progress of this time, as well as underlining the urgent need for such evolution.

Officially, Scott subscribed to the Enlightenment notion that 'barbarism' is a stage *en route* to civilization. In fact, he knew that in Scotland these two conditions were more synchronous than sequential, in the co-existence of the Highlands with the Lowlands. The contrast could hardly have been sharper: Scotland had witnessed an unprecedented period of economic and intellectual progress in the Lowlands, while the more backward Highlands had been politically crushed and economically devastated. Scott, then, was able to see history almost literally before his eyes, with the persistence of the Highland past into the present, in a way that an English writer of the day might well have found more problematic.

The key period of England's own bloody transition from the old regime to the modern nation-state is the seventeenth century, which was hardly as fresh in the historical memory as the failed Jacobite uprising of 1745 or the so-called 'clearances' in which Highlanders were driven from their land to make way for more profitable capitalist farming. The finest historical fiction tends to spring from periods in which history is visibly in the making—in which you can feel the ground shifting under your feet, and are capable of making new sense of the past in the light of the rapidly changing present. To grasp your present, not just your past, as historical is the litmus test of the historical sense. And this is easier when the 'past', as in Highland society, is still alive and kicking on your doorstep.

This model of gradual evolution from one historical stage to another plays an important part in modern English ideology. It is reflected in the nineteenth-century realist novel, with its characteristic movement from a state of displacement and disarray to one of settlement and resolution. In the eighteenth-century novel, by contrast, the unfolding of the narrative is still criss-crossed often enough by digressions, diversions, pauses for reflection or documentation, parodies, sermons, authorial interventions, interpolated tales and literary set pieces. It is as though there is a plurality of forms within a novel, of which realist narrative is merely one. There is no particular sense of being in a hurry to wrap up the

plot. By the time of Jane Austen, almost all that agreeable clutter has been pared away so that plot can unfurl in all its purity.

Increasingly, then, the realist novel describes a single arc, from a sedate past through a fragmented present to a felicitous future. It is at root an optimistic form, for which breakdown and suffering are simply conditions which you may have to pass through in order to arrive at self-knowledge and self-fulfilment. There are, to be sure, many problems in the world; but reality is not problematical in itself, as it will be for some modernist writing. The nineteenth-century English novel is not a tragic art form. Tragedy may overshadow its conclusion from time to time, as with *Wuthering Heights* or *The Mill on the Floss*, but this is not the full-dress tragedy of a *Clarissa* (a novel which predates fully fledged realism) or of countless novels which come after it, from *Jude the Obscure* to *Under the Volcano*. Up to about 1880, the novel is a predominantly comic form; only after then is it mostly a tragic one. You cannot have genuine tragedy if you nurse a deep-seated faith that you are in a 'middle march' of human affairs from the cave dwellers to Queen Victoria. The fact that Queen Victoria, or at least the social order she ruled, was unimaginably more violent than the cave dwellers can be laid quietly to one side.

What this smoothly evolving time-scheme sets its face against is political revolution. As Franco Moretti has argued in *The Way of the World* [2] the great realist novel is basically a response to the French revolution. In its preoccupation with the solidity of the everyday world, its shyness of absolute crises or ruptures, its nervousness of the political, its fascination with the individual, its preference for the normative over the extreme, its concern for settlement and integration—in all these ways, the realist novel can be seen as a cultural solution to a political problem. In its thickness of social texture, it portrays a world so substantial—so richly, irresistibly there—that the idea that it could ever be radically altered becomes almost unthinkable. From Burke and Thomas Carlyle to Wordsworth, Tennyson and Dickens, the French Revolution cast its long, chilling shadow over most of the English nineteenth century; and if you wanted to point to a single phenomenon which signified an alternative set of values, and signified them, moreover, in persuasively flesh-and-blood form, you could do worse than point to the realist novel.

Some of the literary forms which that novel shouldered out of the way were not quite so sanguine in their view of historical progress. It was no particular consolation to the bards and scribes of cultural nationalism to hear that the destruction of their communities was an essential (if regrettable) price to pay for progress. They were more likely to see such change as springing from the violent irruption of historical forces into those communities, rather than as some inevitable evolution. Gothic novel, national tale, balladic writing, historical romance and other 'non-canonical' forms were more inclined than realism to the elegiac and melancholic—to visions of ruins, ghosts, lost hopes, baulked dreams and unappeased desires.

What these forms registered was a culture in fragments, an identity in permanent crisis, and a history marked by disruption and dispossession. Much of this found its way into the 'official' novel, if only as local colour. Once politically subjugated, the Celtic nations could be 'aestheticized'—turned into a source of misty sentiments, quaint customs and agreeable archaisms. Irish and Scottish fiction were all the rage among fashionable readers in early nineteenth-century England, as polite fiction came to ransack the Celtic fringes for cultural icons and exotica, 'primitive' passions and folksy sentiments. And just as the canonical novel plundered its poor relations, so those poor relations gathered a good deal from more orthodox ideas.

Yet the two types of writing, canonical and non-canonical, were nevertheless very different, not least in their views of time and place. Time for the realist novel tends to be linear and one-dimensional; whereas time for the Gothic or Gaelic text is often doubled, as the novel delves into the ancient past as a way of illuminating the present and future, or as that past lingers fearfully on within the present in the form of spectres, hauntings, past crimes clamouring for vengeance, corpses which won't lie down. With the advent of modernism, time in the novel will once again become doubled, complex, synchronic. As for place, this for the realist novel is what you move through, exchanging one spot for another in a steady temporal process. All places are now provisional and unstable. Arrivings and leavings, entrances

and exits, provide the inner rhythm of realist fiction. Much the same goes for the picaresque novel of the eighteenth century. For those on the threatened colonial margins, by contrast, place is where you are rooted, part of your identity, a spot through which time or history flows. Jane Austen, who has her own reasons to be suspicious of metropolitan mobility, shares this traditionalist attachment to the local.

If Walter Scott plays so immensely important a role in the symbolic business of nation-building, it is partly because of his sense of region, margin and locality, not in spite of it. Scott has a genuine emotional attachment to these besieged enclaves: he has no desire to see their cultural specificity steamrollered by an abstract, uniform, modern nation-state. His genius, from the viewpoint of modern British nationalism, is to recognize that local cultures must as far as possible be preserved within a greater whole. The nation is a harmony of differences, not an homogeneous entity. The United Kingdom itself is a medley of nations peaceably co-existing. Like a work of art—indeed, like a novel—the nation is polyphonic, internally differentiated, a chorus of many voices orchestrated into one.

The empire must be like this too, as Britain seeks to govern its colonial peoples, not despite their customs and beliefs, but through them. Just as the bard had once bound together his clan or tribe into symbolic unity, so the modern novelist now inherits this role, forging a whole out of contending national interests. Realist fiction, which cultivates a diversity of voices and viewpoints within its overarching unity, is in this sense a paradigm of the liberal state. The difference-in-identity of the one reflects the difference-in-identity of the other. A nation thus fortified is then all the better furnished for its imperial role in the wider world.

In fact, the novel and the nation have always been closely allied. Just as novels are both unified and diverse, so nations are made up of individuals who are both different and akin, both strangers and colleagues. Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* sees the daily newspaper as a sign of this, gathering into community at roughly the same moment millions of men and women who will never actually meet. [3] But the realist novel plays more or less the same role, as an account of the nation's life which the technology of printing places in exactly the same form into thousands of different pairs of hands. In a disturbingly atomistic society, in which each individual is becoming his or her own yardstick, this is a crucial political task. But it is economically vital as well. If you are going to profit from printing such labour-intensive objects as bulky novels, you will need a good many consumers who speak the same vernacular language and share a world of cultural assumptions; and this implies the form of life we call a nation. Each reader consumes the text alone, but can do so only because he or she shares a national language, along with a whole freight of conventions and understandings, with countless, faceless colleagues. The idea that you could share the same experience with thousands or even millions of other people in this way would have been astonishing to anyone who lived before the age of print.

The novel depends on this community of meaning, but it also helps to consolidate it. It may help, for example, to standardize a national language, rather than just to reflect it. It is a vital way in which a nation speaks to itself, manufactures shared myths and symbols, fashions collective narratives and hammers out moral values. It is the mythology of the modern age. English villages joyfully ringing their church bells to celebrate the wedding of Samuel Richardson's character Pamela is simply a bizarrely literal version of this symbolic solidarity. In this secular world, which as time goes on will have fewer and fewer sacred truths or spiritual practices to hold it together, print and the novel play their part in creating a community of the anonymous. In its fullest reach, this community is what we know as the nation.

In this sense, the novel does for the modern nation what the epic did for ancient society. Yet there is a vital difference. The classical epic is a form largely confined to the warrior nobility of the ancient world, whereas the novel must reflect something of the mixed, hybrid, heterogeneous nature of modern civilization. It must embrace the language of the common people as well as that of the elite. With the novel, a conception of 'the people' enters into literature, just as it enters into the politics of nationalism. The novel mingles high and low, the central and the marginal, offering a composite picture of a social world which is increasingly fragmented and diverse.

As the anarchy of the market-place grows in modern society, the need for unifying political and cultural forms is ever more keenly felt. The novel must provide a *lingua franca* for individuals who are growing increasingly solitary, and whose social relations with others are becoming more and more functional. Symbolic solidarity must cut across the social classes. Because the novel began life as a popular form, and because it belongs to its technological nature to be widely distributed, it can perform this task more effectively than poetry or drama, both of which are more minority pursuits involving social rank or classical learning.

Despite his Romantic leanings, Scott was averse to the exotic and outlandish, putting his faith instead in reason, good sense and the rule of law. He was a child of the Scottish Enlightenment, one who rejected dogma, fanaticism and social revolution in the name of temperateness and civility. His heroes, as Georg Lukács famously points out in *The Historical Novel*, [4] are distinctly unheroic, mediocre characters. As with Dickens, it is the minor figures who have all the life. This, however, is a device which allows his middle-of-the-road protagonists to mediate between extremes and bring a clash of opposing forces into focus. In *Waverley*, it is a contention between Jacobites and Hanoverians; in *Ivanhoe* one between Saxons and Normans; in *Rob Roy* a conflict between clans and Lowlands, and in *Old Mortality* a fight between the Stuart monarchy and seventeenth-century Scottish Calvinist dissenters. The colourless nature of Scott's heroes is also a realist reaction to the Romantic 'great man' vision of history. These much-mythologized figures are humanized by Scott's realism, cut down to size and rendered more credible.

Yet Scott is also aware of just how much precious Romantic aura is dispelled by the modern state, as well as by the realist novel. The ideal is thus to combine Romance and realism—rather as the English nation-state combines the necessary but drab world of politics and economics with the glamour of empire, heritage and monarchy. In this way, Scott can reap the artistic benefits of portraying bold Highland rebels, dashing Jacobites and bible-spouting Calvinists, while nevertheless ensuring that their political causes are quashed in his conclusions. In setting out to write what he called historical romances, he hoped to weave together the realistic or historical with the colourful and exotic. Or, to put it another way, to bring together the swashbuckling military, religious and political drama of the Scottish past with the rather less eye-catching politics of the Williamite present.

Romance trades in the marvellous, and realism in the mundane; so that by blending these two narrative forms into one, Scott hoped to forge a literary style true to both the revolutionary drama and the everyday experience of his age. Or, if one prefers, true to a noble but barbarous past, and true also to an unglamorous but civilized present. As such, his Romantic realism provides a kind of parallel to the nationalism of his day. For nationalism is a Romantic brand of politics, casting a nostalgic glance back to a noble past, at the same time as it is a thoroughly modern movement.

Nationalism is much taken by myths, heroes and lofty ideals; yet it is also popular, in the sense of being anchored in the life of the mass of the people. It is thus a kind of mixture of Romance and realism, and much the same is true of Scott's own fiction. We have seen already how the novel starts out from the conviction that everyday life can be grippingly dramatic. But this is easier to demonstrate if, like Scott, one is dealing with a past in which everyday experience is one of crisis, disruption and upheaval—of gallant deeds, heroic suffering and tragic disaster. The novel can then be true to this everyday world without fear of monotony or banality.

There is another aspect to this blending of Romance and realism. Scott's novels are thronged with larger-than-life, flamboyantly individualist figures; but rather than standing gloriously alone, as they would no doubt do in conventional romance, they usually have their roots in the popular life of the common people. And this lends them a realistic edge which they might otherwise lack. Outlaws, rebels, smugglers and deserters who in the hands of Defoe or Fielding might be no more than individual rogues belong here to a broader social and political life.

With Scott and his contemporaries, the idea of characters as representing social forces enters the major novel for the first time. We still encounter the noble figures typical of previous literary genres, but these knights, chieftains and high-born ladies are now integrated by Scott's realist techniques into the

mainstream of everyday life. They are not just bits of costume drama, but part of a collective historical action which involves the common people as well. With Scott and the historical novelists who came before him, the novel has found a way of representing abstractions like nation and culture, church and state, sovereignty and rebellion—and it does so by ‘embodying’ these ideas in plausible, flesh-and-blood individual figures.

This is indeed an innovation, since the very idea of ‘social forces’ or significant historical currents, of the kind we will come across later in George Eliot or Joseph Conrad, was pretty well unknown to the eighteenth-century novelists. Fielding, Defoe and Richardson simply did not think in such collective historical terms. Scott, by contrast, who lived at a time when history was visibly changing, and in a place where this was particularly evident, cannot really avoid seeing the world in such terms. And this is certainly one of his most vital contributions to the evolution of the novel.

Realism, one might claim, at least had the virtue of showing life as it is, rather than escaping into a world of chivalrous knights and black-hearted villains. Yet it is not clear just what counts as showing life as it is. Take, for example, the Gothic novel which flourished at the time of Scott and Austen, which hardly seems a mirror of everyday existence. It is a world of fantasy and paranoia, shock and violation, power and oppression, spectacle and excess. It lingers on in the current language of youth: gross, weird, bizarre, scary, wicked, evil. There are times when it allows us to indulge our fantasies so shamelessly that we laugh at its very barefacedness.

As such, Gothic represents the shadowy underside of Enlightenment reason, exposing the family as a cockpit of murderous loathings, and society as a tainted legacy of guilt and crime through which the unquiet spectres of the past still stalk. There are murky inheritances, skeletons in cupboards, concealed savagery and unspeakable secrets. It is a world of kitsch and sensationalism, full of creaking plot machinery and outrageously improbable devices. Like the Gaelic antiquarianism which influenced it, it is obsessed with texts, documents, testimonies. In this sense, it, too, is a literary form which owes much to the colonial margins. It is also one of the first great imaginative ventures into what we might now call sexual politics—a kind of social unconscious in which the sedate text of our everyday lives is suddenly flipped over to reveal the appalling disfigurements which silently inform it.

Gothic is by no means always a politically radical form. But it is worth considering whether, for all its extravagances, it might not be in some sense a more faithful portrait of a society in crisis and turmoil than, say, *Pride and Prejudice*. It is significant that Jane Austen launches her writing career with a splendid spoof of the Gothic form, *Northanger Abbey*, a work which also famously contains an eloquent plea for the novel itself to be treated as a serious form of art:

I am no novel reader—I seldom look into novels—Do not imagine that I often read novels—It is really very well for a novel’. Such is the common cant. ‘And what are you reading, Miss —?’ ‘Oh! it is only a novel!’ replies the young lady ... or, in short, 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. (*Northanger Abbey*, vol. 1, ch. 5)

‘I never watch television’ is perhaps the modern snob’s equivalent of ‘I seldom look into novels’. In today’s terms, it is as though Austen is claiming that there can be an artistically reputable kind of soap opera. Those who pride themselves on their superiority to such trash, she implies, are simply ignorant of the precious potential of the form, thus betraying their philistinism in the act of appearing to rise above it.

Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, is a gullible devotee of Gothic who, rather like Scott’s *Waverley*, lives in a perilous domain of fantasy; and the novel, like several of Austen’s works, will bring her to a sober but salutary disenchantment. To establish the novel as an estimable art form, then, Austen must begin with an act of exclusion. Catherine’s fervid daydreams are rebuked as un-English: such Gothic horrors, Austen reflects in prototypically English ‘We don’t do that kind of thing here’ vein, might be found in Italy or France, but surely not in ‘the central part of England’.

Fantasy is all very well for foreigners. Gothic, Jacobin, feminist, sentimentalist and other bogus breeds of fiction must be clearly demarcated from the genuine article. The novel now has vital moral tasks to perform, and must not be contaminated by these aberrations.

If realism is to be defended against these extravagances, it is because it is in Austen's eyes a moral as well as a literary stance to the world. As a classical moralist, Austen believes that the ethical life is primarily about action, not about feelings, intuitions, inner states or intentions. This belongs with her opposition to Romanticism, as well as her distaste for the subjectivism and individualism she observed around her. Woolf and Lawrence, for example, did not exactly see moral questions in this way. Instead, the modern age fell into the mistake of thinking that morality was mainly about inner states, intentions, sentiments and the like. Austen, quite rightly, adheres to a more traditional conception of morality as primarily a matter of what we do, not what we feel.

For Austen, the foundation of all right conduct is true judgement, which depends in turn on being able to see things for what they are; and she is far from underestimating the extreme difficulty of this achievement. In a world of secrecy, self-deception and manipulation, few projects could be more fraught. Realism in the literary sense is in Austen's eyes an expression of this deeper moral belief; and her fear is that to violate literary realism can then involve you in a more fundamental kind of transgression. For her, the true opposite of realism is not Gothic or fantasy but egoism. The characters she commends are those who are able to see beyond their own private fantasies, opening themselves to the reality of others and their situations. Those she condemns selfishly indulge their own feelings, or brutally pursue their own interests. To attend to others' needs is a matter of decorum; but like most matters of decorum in Austen it runs much deeper than manners.

Catherine Morland is reproached by the narrator for her dangerous disingenuousness, but gently so. The tone is one we recognize instantly as Austenite: shrewd, amused, controlled, oblique, ironic, understated, though capable of sharpening from time to time into a rather more devastating dig. It is an accent which belongs to the society it criticizes, but which also maintains a certain cool distance from it. Perhaps it needs this distance in order to preserve its very notable air of symmetry and equipoise. It is a quintessentially 'English' tone, of which we shall hear reverberations all the way from George Eliot and Henry James to E. M. Forster and Malcolm Bradbury. It is the tone of those who are sufficiently worldly wise to be well-versed in human vice and folly, but also sufficiently worldly wise not to be naively scandalized by them. It chides and tolerates at the same time.

Austen's irony is both worldly and unworldly, finding nothing to be surprised at in human immorality, but nothing to be cynically indulged about it either. It suggests a fairly low view of humanity, as befits an author who is a conservative Christian moralist, but not a misanthropic one. It implies that moral improvement is better secured by good-humoured satire than moralistic hectoring. It also suggests an equipoise and self-assurance in the face of others' defects, which hints at the secure, well-founded nature of one's own principles. It is the tone of those who wish to appear less rattled by the loose behaviour of others than they probably are.

Irony of Austen's kind is clearly different from the scabrous, virulent satire of a Pope or Swift—though like them she is concerned to defend a traditional way of life against outside interlopers and inside subversives. Her tone is less bluff and breezy than Fielding's, her irony more subtle but also on the whole less genial. It is the tone of one who is criticizing from the inside, constrained by the proprieties of the very social set-up she is taking to task, but also by the fact that the targets of her satire are for the most part her own kind. Or rather she is, like so many of the novelists who came after her, inside and outside at the same time, and the nature of her irony, which is reproving but not abrasive, reflects this ambiguity.

Austen was the daughter of a clergyman of limited financial means, finished her formal education at the age of nine, and earned £1,000 at most from her writing. Her family, however, had a number of connections with the wealthier gentry. She hailed, then, from a subaltern section of the gentry, one which identified strongly with that class's values and traditions but found itself exposed and insecure. She is no great admirer of the high aristocracy, as we can see from her portrait of the appalling Lady

Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*. Such *grandes dames* and their over-privileged menfolk bring out her rebellious middle-class instincts. Rather as later nineteenth-century novelists find themselves marooned between the upper-middle class and the common people, so Austen lives out a similar conflict a few social notches higher, caught between patrician magnates and the middle classes.

One can glimpse something of this divided consciousness in the character of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, the impoverished outsider who champions the values of the aristocracy more fervently than they do themselves. There are several examples in the ranks of English novelists of outsiders who prove more loyal than the insiders themselves. Indeed, we have just witnessed something of this paradox in the case of Walter Scott, non-English apologist for English ideology. Like Fanny, Austen herself, as a semi-outsider, can see rather more than the insiders can.

One should not be misled by Austen's good-humoured irony into imagining that she is, in the modern sense of the word, a liberal. It is here that she differs from Eliot, James, Forster, Bradbury and a whole lineage of English authors. The realist novel, as we shall see in the case of George Eliot, is in some ways a liberal form. Austen, however, is much more of an absolutist in her unswerving toughmindedness. The fact that the principles to which she clings are so universally flouted by her characters is in her view no argument against their eternal validity. She can be complex and circumspect in her judgements, but this does not prevent her from bluntly suggesting in *Persuasion* that the death of Dick Musgrove is no great loss to humanity. It is hard to imagine George Eliot taking so severe a line. Mr Elliot in the same novel is unequivocally a heartless scoundrel, and the same kind of sternly unqualified judgement is made on a whole set of characters in the novels, from the callously philandering Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* to the obnoxious Mrs Norris of *Mansfield Park*. These moral ruffians are by no means cardboard cut-outs, but we are not invited to make subtly shaded judgements on them, as we might be by Eliot or James.

Austen's moral thought occupies a kind of transitional point between the eighteenth-century Christian divines she looked to for inspiration, and the moral sense of a George Eliot or Henry James. On the one hand, there are absolute moral principles on which you sometimes have to take a stand regardless of circumstance. This, indeed, is what 'absolute' in this context means. There are duties and obligations which we become aware of not by consulting others, but by withdrawing to our rooms to consult our private consciences. There is, in other words, a distinctly Protestant dimension to Jane Austen. In her own period, this sense of the absolute nature of duty, regardless of context or consequence, is associated with the moral thought of Immanuel Kant. It is a case for which the moral is more or less the opposite of the pleasurable. This, in effect, is the position of Fanny Price, who in order to remain faithful to her principles is forced to disappoint her friends, irritate her beloved patron and incur charges of dullness, obstinacy and ingratitude.

Refusing to fall in with the desires of her friends, Fanny is made forcibly aware of the loneliness of virtue in a society which derides it. But this itself is an irony, since the virtues which Fanny advocates are social ones. They include deference, sociability and a respect for the wishes of others. Conversely, those who are most superficially sociable, like Mary Crawford, are frequently those who are also most self-seeking. Fanny is one of a long line of actual or metaphorical orphans who troop their way through the English novel, some of whom come to a sticky end (Roxana, Becky Sharp, Jude Fawley), but most of whom make good (Moll Flanders, Colonel Jack, Tom Jones, Jane Eyre, Oliver Twist, David Copperfield). Orphans are particularly vulnerable figures; indeed, they act as a focus for social anxieties as a whole; but their lack of history and freedom from family ties is also a kind of opportunity, which is one reason why such forlorn figures are especially adept at ending up happy and well-heeled. Fanny Price is far too diffident and passive to aspire, so that the plot has to step in, so to speak, and grant her the fulfilment which she is too submissive to seek for herself.

If morality in Austen involves lonely, uncompromising duty, it is also viewed in a rather different light as closely bound up with social conduct. Since it is about conduct, it can be turned into a code; but since it concerns the fine-grained quality of such behaviour, it requires the eye of the novelist more than that of the moral philosopher. It is a matter of tone and nuance, of the telling gesture and the revelatory

detail. It concerns small yet critical matters like remembering to light a fire for someone in their room, failing to wait for a companion who has gone off to fetch you a key, dragging a man's furniture around in his absence, or making a sarcastic remark to a spinster. All of this would figure as no more than the merest smear on the broad canvases of Fielding and Smollett, where skulls can be casually split open or beds set on fire without the author or even the characters turning a hair.

On this view, the moral life, ideally at least, is an agreeable affair, not an austere one. As with the elder Bennet sisters of *Pride and Prejudice*, it is all about warmth and liveliness, quick sympathies and enjoyably intricate acts of intelligence. It is true that there are times when all this has to be sacrificed to duty, as Fanny Price discovers; but it is better if this is not necessary. Fanny is an object-lesson in the fact that you can be too demure, as well as too scatty. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to see in her surname an indication of the price she must pay in sheer Elizabeth Bennet-like *joie de vivre* for sticking to her moral guns. Situated as she is, Fanny is simply not able to cultivate such morally admirable qualities as a keen sense of the ridiculous, not least of male absurdities, and this is bound to be something of a drawback in the eyes of her mischievous creator. Emma Woodhouse could probably write a good novel, but Fanny could not; and while this is a limitation, we are also expected to understand why it is so. Like Catherine Morland, but unlike the mercurial Crawfords, Fanny is incapable of acting—of being anyone but herself. If this testifies to her moral integrity, it also illustrates how restricted she is.

Morally upright conduct is inseparable from respect, compassion and sensitivity, and thus from manners, civility or propriety in the true senses of those terms. Civility means not just not spitting in the sugar bowl, but not being boorish, arrogant, conceited, long-winded and insensitive. Propriety includes not just how to wield a fish knife, but, as the word suggests, a sense of what is proper to others and to oneself—of what is due, fit and proportionate, rather than mean, incongruous or grotesquely excessive. A more weighty word for what is fit, due and proper is 'just'. The idea of propriety is bound up with notions of prudence, considerateness and respect: it would be improper to leave a young woman alone with a young man in certain circumstances, since she might be vilely slandered as a result, and so might unjustly suffer. Fanny Price reflects on how the decorous, orderly nature of Mansfield Park means that 'everyone's feelings were consulted'. This is not actually true—Fanny, as usual, is idealizing her adopted home—but it is how life ought to be. In the best of all worlds, to behave with social grace should involve a dash of divine grace as well. The fact that this is relatively rare in Austen's world does not mean that it is to be abandoned as an ideal, for then there would be no regulatory principles to guide one's behaviour at all.

For the champions of duty and conscience, we have an innate moral sense—a kind of inner light which will instruct us in the difference between right and wrong conduct quite independently of the opinions of others. For a more sociable idea of morality, this is not enough: we must be educated into virtue by the good influence of others, and this requires a degree of self-discipline and self-transformation. It is no wonder that Austen wrote a novel, *Persuasion*, which investigates the question of whether it is right to allow oneself to be morally persuaded by another. It is a question which goes to the heart of the conflict between simply following one's own conscience, and allowing oneself to be shaped by social pressures; and the novel's answer to the question is suitably shaded and ambiguous.

The question also touches on the issue of how much of an autonomous person you are, or should be. In Austen's world, where there are so many corrupting influences abroad, it is vital to look to your own principles and take your own decisions. Yet there is sometimes only a thin line between being bravely independent and being, like Louisa Musgrove in *Persuasion*, too stubborn and headstrong. If you must avoid too docile a conformity to others' cajolements, you must also beware of a wayward individualism. One problem with Catherine Morland's naivety is that it forces her to depend on morally unsavoury women like Isabella Thorpe. She simply does not have enough knowledge of the world to make her own judgements; and judgments in Austen are in any case notoriously frail, as with Elizabeth Bennet's too-hasty condemnation of Mr Darcy. If you pride yourself on your soundness of judgement, as Elizabeth does, you are likely to judge too swiftly and thus fall into prejudice. If this is one irony, the fact that her judgement on Darcy is not wholly mistaken is another.

One reason why judgement is so difficult is politeness. This is a culture of reticence, which conceals at least as much as it reveals. It is indecorous to exhibit your inner life for all to see, in some brash, Marianne Dashwood-like cult of the expressive ego. You should not assume that something is valid or significant simply because it is you who feel it. At the same time it belongs to good manners not to be secretive, aloof and evasive. You must nurture an inner life, but not to the point of subjectivism or unsociability. Social forms and conventions are ways in which the self comes into its own, not just artificial restrictions on its freedom. They help to mould the self into a shape most useful and congenial to others. Yet if such conventions are not *just* restrictions, they are that as well: being useful and pleasant to others inevitably involves some sacrifice of one's own gratification.

If you have to be educated into virtue, then being good is hard work, in contrast to the Romantic or sentimentalist view that it is a matter of spontaneous impulse. One reason why it is hard to be good is that if you are, you will tend to attract predatory characters, as Fanny's integrity attracts the louche Henry Crawford. As far as the moral life goes, Austen seems to believe in both innate dispositions and the importance of education. Some people just are naturally vain and selfish; but a lot of immoral behaviour in the novels flows from weak or irresponsible parenting, not least on the part of fathers. She rejects the sentimentalist delusion that morality is simply a question of doing what comes naturally—though she also seems to consider that when you *have* successfully disciplined and transformed yourself, you will find, like the two elder Bennet sisters, that you do what is proper without needing to think too much about it. This is the right kind of instinctiveness, rather than, like Romantic impulse, the wrong one.

You need, then, to develop a spontaneous sense of what is morally appropriate—though it will not, to be sure, be an infallible one. The ideal situation is to be, like Richardson's Clarissa, so governed by what is proper that you could not even think a vulgar or unworthy thought, let alone give voice to one.

In a similar way, a well-bred manner is an easy, natural one, not a matter of some frigid formalism. It belongs to good breeding not to be constantly thinking about it, like the dreadful Mrs Elton. In fact, to keep thinking about it is a sign that you haven't got it, rather as reflecting on what a wonderfully modest person you are is an indication that you are not.

Too much feeling or fantasy, then, is improper because they get things out of proportion. For a novelist to be suspicious of fantasy is in one sense as odd as for a physician to faint at the sight of blood. Even so, fantasy is to be treated warily, despite one's professional investment in it. It makes impossible, for example, a just proportion between how much you think about yourself and how much you think about others. It is 'sense' or reason which is here on the side of human warmth and compassion, and 'sensibility' which for all its frissons of sympathy and sentiment is covertly self-regarding. Austen does not subscribe to the new-fangled bourgeois prejudice for which reason is bloodless and calculating. She sees that this is an impoverishment of the traditional depth and richness of the faculty. To be reasonable means not to ride roughshod over others' wishes, embark on a loveless marriage, or insult a defenceless woman simply for your own frivolous amusement, as Emma Woodhouse does on Box Hill.

Emma has an excess of imagination, which involves causing damage to others. If you are too rich and socially prominent you are likely to be idle, not least if you are a woman banned from having a profession; and idleness can lead to imaginative self-indulgence, which in turn can result in harm to others. There is thus an indirect route from being extremely well-heeled to being morally irresponsible, which is the opposite of the paternalist ethic of noblesse oblige—the doctrine that wealth and high rank bring with them responsibilities to others. Emma is at the summit of her society, but exactly because of this she is a kind of transgressor. Those in control of the conventions can always bend the rules. Endowed with an excess of high spirits, she works them off by fashioning imaginary scenarios for others, rather as the indolent occupants of Mansfield Park amuse themselves by staging a play. She is like a bungling novelist who keeps concocting narratives for her various characters only to find that she has overlooked some crucial subplot, mishandled a relationship or left some vital thread dangling in the air.

Because of her social privilege, Emma sees others as actors in her own private theatre, rather than as they really are. She cuts reality to the shape of her own fancies, just like a novelist, but she lacks her author's sense of the recalcitrance of the real world. It is Knightley who embodies that reality for her, and marrying this gravely moralizing figure is both her reward and her comeuppance. There is something both fitting and incongruous in the alliance. Knightley is of course a deeply honourable character, but he also has the exasperating quality of those who are always in the right. As superego to Emma's id, he is a man who talks like a sermon, and for whom the novel expects us to have more admiration than affection.

If Emma's authorial schemes are foiled, it is partly because other people's lives turn out to be not as legible as she thinks. Sexuality in particular is a field of misperceptions and misinterpretations. And Emma, who does not know that she is in love with Knightley, proves to be in some ways as opaque to herself as others are to her. She talks Harriet into being attracted to the snobbish and self-seeking Mr Elton, which is a version of art (or imagination) creating reality; but reality strikes back stealthily to thwart her plotting. Here as so often in the history of the novel, design and real life don't quite slot together. Emma has too much freedom to improvise gratuitous schemes and experiment whimsically with other people's lives, while Fanny Price has too little. Austen herself, unlike her heroine, is a very English empiricist for whom judgement and reflection must be founded upon facts, and must be constantly corrected in the light of them.

The question, as often in Austen, is how to reconcile vivacity of spirits with sobriety of judgement. Or, as Henry James might have put it, how to be both fine and good. You need sprightliness, but not levity. It is best if virtue is also stylish, but this is not always a realistic expectation. The good, like Catherine Morland and Fanny Price, are admirable creatures, but one would far rather pass an hour over a cappuccino with Emma than with Fanny. Fanny and Edmund will no doubt have a loving marriage, but one suspects that it will not be quite the kind of household in which guests are generously plied with the whisky bottle. The point, however, is that the novel is aware of this too. If Fanny's dullness and timidity are a kind of irony, it is because the novel recognizes that this is the price which virtue, not least that of a dependent woman without resources, has to pay in a predatory social order. It is hardly virtue's fault that it is forced on the defensive. Fanny would like to affirm rather than refuse, but the profligacy of others makes this impossible.

To those who understandably feel dissatisfied with such an anaemic protagonist, the novel contains an implicit caution that if we would have her more vivacious, we might make her more vulnerable as a result. *Mansfield Park* does not really work unless we feel the genuine liveliness of the morally brittle Mary Crawford, who for all her faults can be notably kind to Fanny, rather as *Emma* does not work unless we sympathize with the heroine's skittishness as well as seeing its defects. We are made to appreciate that some of Emma's faults arise from being too animated for her narrow social sphere, a fact for which she is scarcely to be blamed. Austen believes like Fanny in a placid, tranquil rural existence, if only because there are fewer chances for vice in such situations; but she is shrewd and self-assured enough to be able to subject her own values to ironic criticism, allowing this placidity to look sluggish in contrast with Mary Crawford's sophisticated zest. It is the same bland self-ironizing which inspires her to present Mr Knightley, who speaks up for her own values, as such a sententious old stick.

For all her aversion to fantasy, Austen is not a rationalist, in the sense of one who trusts in the supremacy of reason. For one thing, her Tory Christian pessimism, with its sense of the irreparably flawed condition of humanity, would hardly allow her to be so. It is this sense of human imperfection which fuels her hostility to Marianne Dashwood's cult of sensibility, since Romantics like Marianne and her mother tend to trust to the innate goodness of human nature. For another thing, Austen is well aware that there are human situations in which reason or good sense are not much use, and says as much in *Northanger Abbey*. She sends up rationalism in the person of Mary Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, who talks as pompously as she does only because she is almost entirely inexperienced. Unlike most characters in books, Mary talks like a book. Catherine Morland may start off as a credulous ingénue with a Marianne-like faith in human nature, but it is a faith she will finally come to shed along with her

Gothic illusions. Men and women are exposed as more cynical, egoistic and self-gratifying than she thought them. And though General Tilney may not be a Gothic villain, he is unmasked as a callous domestic tyrant. As far as patriarchy goes, England is not, after all, free from some of the most typical forms of Gothic horror.

If morality matters so much to Jane Austen, it is partly because of an historical crisis. It is not a crisis which enters her novels directly; indeed, it is not one which Austen is aware of as such, though she was certainly conscious of its symptoms. Unlike Scott, she does not think in historical terms. It is a commonplace that her novels have few comments pass on the great social and political events of the day. Nobody asks where Louis Napoleon is in Dickens, but plenty of people seem to ask where Napoleon Bonaparte is in Austen. In fact, Austen does allude to public events of the day, and her unfinished novel *Sanditon* raises colonial issues. So does *Mansfield Park*, in which Sir Thomas Bertram's elegant country estate is funded by his slave plantation in Antigua. In any case, as Raymond Williams points out in *The Country and the City*, [5] Austen's novels concern the social history of the landed gentry, and it is hard to find a topic more central to English history than that. Jane Austen did not write about the family rather than society; on the contrary, the family in her day was society, or at least the governing sector of it. In the eighteenth century, a few hundred families owned a quarter of the cultivated land of England.

Yet the class which these families composed was morally failing, and it is part of the business of Jane Austen's writing to recall it to its traditional sense of duty. Throughout the eighteenth century, the gentry had been a superbly self-confident class, one whose political dominance over English society as a whole went largely unquestioned. As Austen is writing, it is about to confront a formidable rival in the form of the urban middle class, which is being ushered over the historical horizon by the industrial revolution. But this is still largely in the future; and even when industrial capitalism has arrived on the scene, the landed gentry will come to strike an historic bargain with it. They will continue to exercise political and cultural power themselves, even if, as the nineteenth century wears on, they will find themselves governing increasingly in the name of their middle-class inferiors.

What concerns Austen is not so much these challenges from outside, but threats to the governing bloc of gentry and aristocracy from within. The English landed gentry was a capitalist class—in fact, it was the oldest capitalist class in the world. We are not dealing, then, with a case of 'traditional' versus 'modern'. On the contrary, it is precisely because the rural gentry had long been a 'modern' as well as a 'traditional' class, involved in rent, capital and property as well as in balls in Bath and ceremonies at court, that the moral rot had set in. Land had long been a commodity, and it is certainly that in Austen's fiction. She has a notably quick eye for the size and value of an estate, along with the likely social status of its proprietor. But she is not generally so entranced by an estate's physical and natural appearance, and we rarely see anyone working in its fields. 'Land' is more a monetary abstraction than an expanse of soil. It is seen as property, not as a working environment, as it is in Thomas Hardy. The English countryside had long since been reorganized by market forces. In Austen's own day it was living through a particularly devastating phase of that process, in the enclosure of land for the purpose of increased profits.

Yet the class of rural gentry to which Austen belonged—a class of which she is both an astringent critic and an ardent champion—did not quite see itself in these crudely economic terms. Even though it was investing more and more in overseas trade and the financial markets, it could still regard itself as a paternalist, traditionally minded squirearchy. Its privileges, so it maintained, brought with them responsibility for the welfare of the lower orders. Hence the regulation trips to poor tenants' cottages and dutiful tendings of low-life sick beds which figure in Austen's writing. The gentry was not just a group of entrepreneurs but the apex of a whole rural way of life, one which was thought to embody the finest values of English society. Culture in the sense of the cultivation of the land—agriculture—generated rents, which in turn gave birth to culture in the sense of elegance of manners and nobility of spirit. In some ways, then, these landed aristocrats and country gentlemen continued to cultivate a

traditional rural lifestyle, even if this cultural self-image was increasingly at odds with their economic base. It is this kind of rural order which Austen admired and upheld.

Yet the business dealings of the gentry were in danger of corrupting their traditional values from within, as well as bringing them into closer contact with the tainting influences of commerce, finance and the city. And this, in Austen's eyes, was at risk of insidiously undermining their moral standing. She drew, then, on the cultivation which genteel society afforded her, in order to criticize something of the material base which made that cultivation possible. Social mobility, for example, was on the increase, which posed a threat to the rural tranquillity which Austen esteemed so highly. Urban wealth, restless social ambition, moral frivolity and metropolitan manners were infiltrating the countryside. They were doing so not least through the marriage market, as landed capital sought a new lease of life by assimilating through marriage the children of urban capitalists and financiers.

Daniel Defoe comments on this process in *The Compleat English Gentleman*, where he writes of ancient families not scrupling to form alliances through marriage with what he calls 'bred' gentlemen: 'the heirs (of ancient families) fly to the city as the last resort, where by marrying a daughter of some person meaner in dignity, but superior in money ... estates mortgaged and in danger of being lost ... are recovered, the fame and figure of the family restored'. Conversely, Defoe adds, the gentry can become merchants with no loss to their 'blood'. It is the traditional English alliance between urban and agrarian capital, one which was later to be pursued in so-called public schools where the sons of both classes were able to rub shoulders. It played its part in securing for England an enviably resilient ruling class, one fit for its role in running an enormous empire.

All this, however, seemed to more conservative gentry like Austen to be in dire danger of lowering the moral and cultural tone of English rural life. It was not just upstarts, blow-ins and social climbers like Mr Elton in *Pride and Prejudice* who were causing the trouble; Fanny Price, after all, is a kind of outsider too. It was moral laxity, social irresponsibility and poor stewardship in the rural ruling class itself which lay at the root of the problem. The governing order is not so much under siege as in danger of imploding. So much is clear from the Bertram *ménage* of *Mansfield Park*, with the emotionally cold Sir Thomas, the inert, obtuse Lady Bertram, the insufferable Mrs Norris, the dissolute Tom and his disreputable sisters. Somewhat lower down the social scale, there is the ironic detachment of Mr Bennet, the empty-headedness of his wife and the scattiness of his man-mad younger daughters.

Some of these social developments are obvious enough in the novels themselves, in which we can watch a two-way traffic between landed and urban capital. Sir Thomas Bertram, as we have seen, is a colonial proprietor as well as a rural magnate. The Crawfords of *Mansfield Park*, despite their fashionable metropolitan ways, have income from landed property, while the land-owning Dashwoods of *Sense and Sensibility* are rural capitalists who are busy enclosing common land and buying up farms. Sir Walter Elliot of *Persuasion* is a landed aristocrat, but needs to regenerate his precarious income from non-landed sources. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* is a rich land-owner of a venerable family who has inherited his estate, whereas his friend Bingley is looking to purchase an estate since he will not inherit one. Sir William Lucas in the same novel has risen from trade to a knighthood, while Mr Bennet has some landed wealth but has married into the professional middle classes. Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey* is a middle-class woman who marries into an ancient land-owning family.

Jane Austen was by no means opposed in principle to trade or the professions. On the contrary, it is greatly in Edmund's favour in *Mansfield Park* that he is a clergyman, and one who robustly defends the idea of a professional vocation to the sceptical Mary Crawford. Austen is not against mobility within the class system, as is plain when Catherine marries into *Northanger Abbey* and Fanny into *Mansfield Park*. Neither is there anything inherently shameful about urban or mercantile capitalism. The danger lies at the moral and cultural level, not at the material one. For it was on their culture, in the broad sense of values, standards, ideals and a fine quality of living, that the land-owning classes had relied for so much of their authority. Their purpose had been to achieve hegemony—to win the loyalty and assent of their underlings by their moral example—rather than simply to rule them by force. And the English landed classes had been on the whole remarkably successful in this project. If this hegemony now started

to crumble from within, in a society already shaken to its roots by riots, spy scares, agrarian discontent, economic depression, working-class militancy, the threat of revolution abroad and invasion at home, then the situation could scarcely be more serious.

‘Manners’, wrote Edmund Burke, ‘are more important than laws’. This, in a word, is the creed of the kind of gentry whom Austen commends. It is by translating laws and codes into beguiling forms of behaviour that men and women come to appreciate their force. What secures the allegiance of the lower orders is not simply a set of abstract precepts from on high, but the graceful, well-ordered, socially responsible forms of a whole way of life. It is culture, nor coercion, which is the key to sound government. Indeed, what else is the realist novel but a way of translating abstractions into living characters and dramatic situations? As such, it is a small model of political hegemony in itself, winning our approval for its values not through abstract argument, but by transforming those values into lived experience. The common people may scarcely make a showing in Austen’s novels, but they are bound to figure implicitly in any reflection on a decline in ruling-class standards. Not just the common people of England, either: if English upper-class ‘character’ is flawed and defective, how can one govern the empire?

Nothing could be more ominous, then, than a governing class which is plagued by moral misrule. The custodians of English culture have become infected by various forms of anarchy, from the disowning of parental authority to the giddy pursuit of fashion, from vulgar self-seeking to heartless economic calculation, from sexual flightiness to the worship of money. And Austen, as we have suggested, raises her voice to recall them to their true vocation. It is one of the limits of her vision, however, that she portrays the problem chiefly as a moral one, rather than grasping its historical and political roots. If this sounds too exacting a demand, as though one is asking Jane Austen to write like Karl Marx, we should recall that this was among the achievements of Walter Scott.

Whatever his political blind spots, Scott did not imagine that what had gone awry was simply a matter of morals and manners. He was therefore sceptical of the idea that it could be repaired simply by a change of individual heart. He was aware that powerful historical forces were at work in society, moulding the values and moral qualities of individual men and women. And he was able to see this because of the history to which he himself belonged, which was very different from Austen’s. It is hardly surprising that a politically powerless woman sequestered from the public sphere should see matters primarily in moral and personal terms. Austen was in fact too hard-headed a realist to have any great faith in the likelihood of moral regeneration; but she could not conceive of a political dimension to questions of moral conduct, in the way that, say, Mary Wollstonecraft could.

Even so, this limited viewpoint captured a good deal of the truth, and did so because of its limitations rather than despite them. It is sometimes pointed out that the English have a deep-rooted tradition of moral thought, but not so well developed a heritage of political, sociological and philosophical ideas. Morality rather than sociology is the English forte, from Samuel Johnson to George Orwell. And this is one important reason why the novel has flourished so abundantly in England, since the novel (as we shall see when we come to look at George Eliot, Henry James and D. H. Lawrence) can be seen as a supremely moral form. In fact, the evolution of the nineteenth-century realist novel is bound up with a sea-change in the very idea of morality—roughly speaking, from morality as a matter of timeless codes and absolute principles, to morality as a concern with qualities of lived experience.

In English culture, then, the moral has acted in one sense to displace social and political thought. This is evident enough in the fiction of Jane Austen, whom we admire among other things for her extraordinary moral intelligence. Only Henry James is her equal here. On the whole, the English have preferred to preach rather than to analyse, to attend to sins and solecisms rather than social structures. Yet moral values, as we have argued, were indeed vital to the continuing authority of the English upper classes—so that this preoccupation with morals and manners was not simply a displacement of more fundamental questions. Morals and manners were part of high politics. And since they were primarily the concern of women, women being stereotypically supposed to be specialists in such matters, this

meant that so-called women's issues lay very close to the heart of the public sphere, even if they were rarely acknowledged to do so.

If one way in which women can help regenerate the gentry is by writing about it, another is by marrying into it. Both Catherine Morland and Fanny Price bring precious resources to the upper classes by grafting their sound qualities on to it through marriage. Marriages in Austen do not need to involve material equality: a woman with a small marriage portion can marry a much grander man, as the elder Bennet sisters do. The affluent Henry Crawford courts the penniless Fanny Price. These, to be sure, are all transactions within the larger class of gentlemen and gentlewomen; you can marry outside your class, but not beyond the pale of polite society as a whole. It is wrong to disdain the lower orders, as the snobbish Emma does, but it is equally wrong to encourage them to aspire beyond their station, as Emma does too.

A title and a spectacular fortune are of no value to you if you do not love their possessor. Indeed, few things are more morally appalling in Austen's world than marrying for social or financial gain. All the same, the fact that you should not make a fetish of wealth and status does not mean that you should cavalierly ignore them. Some of Henry James's characters can forget about wealth, but this is because they have enough wealth to do so. You need love for marriage—but it must be a rational love, one based on a sound judgement of the material situation. Austen rightly rejects the Romantic prejudice that love and reason are incompatible. It would be unreasonable to marry on a pittance. You cannot enjoy a true harmony of minds with someone whose social background is simply too different from yours. Material goods, so the tough-minded Austen recognizes, will not make you happy in themselves, but properly handled they can be mightily conducive to it. As Virginia Woolf insisted in her materialist wisdom: nobody can love well unless they have dined well.

When Elizabeth Bennet remarks that she first became aware of her affection for Darcy when she set eyes on his elegantly laid-out estates, we suspect for a moment that her author is being ironic, as though Elizabeth were to confide that she fell in love with him when she first clapped eyes on his bank balance. But the comment is not of course intended as ironic, since the material or external can and should be an outward sign of the inner or moral. The taste, sound judgement, sense of proportion, and blending of tact and imagination which went into the fashioning of Darcy's estates testify to a morally estimable character. It is not surprising in this light that Jane Austen should have remarked that she could imagine marrying the poet George Crabbe even though she had never met him. Ideally, there is a correlation between the moral and the material, of which marriage is the consummation. In choosing a marriage partner, both the inward or spiritual (love) and the external or material (rank, property, family) must be given due weight. Marriage is the union of the subjective and objective. It is the place where social forms and moral values most vitally intersect. If you can overemphasize the material dimension of marriage, as Samuel Johnson did when he claimed to believe that the whole process should be nationalized and organized by the Lord Chancellor, you can also make the opposite mistake.

In reality, though, the moral and the material are far from harmoniously unified. It is possible, for example, to be both poor and generous-minded, like Miss Bates in *Emma*. Material impoverishment by no means entails moral impoverishment, just as social grandeur by no means entails moral magnificence. If it did, the word 'gentleman', which hovers ambiguously between a social and a moral sense, would be less of a fraught term in English social history than it is. The tenant farmer Robert Martin in *Emma* is a gentleman, and a man morally esteemed by Mr Knightley, but this does not mean that Knightley would invite him on a shoot or propose marriage to his sister. Aristocrats can be ill-bred, and some of those like Willoughby who have excellent manners have atrocious morals. The problem with manners is that they can run deep, but are nevertheless easily counterfeited.

It is appropriate to have such outward signs of inward grace, despite the naive Romantic assumption that forms and appearances do not matter. The drawback is that such essential outward signs can always be used to dissemble. Austen herself was a great believer in forms, even though she was aware that it was not always easy to mark off this creed from a vapid formalism. Like Roland Barthes, she knew that the way to avoid such formalism was not to fight shy of form altogether, but to take it with immense

seriousness. She was also a deep believer in the materiality of social and moral values, in contrast to some high-minded denigration of the material world. Moral states should make their presence felt in material ones.

We are not yet at the historical stage where the moral and the material, or 'culture' and 'society', will be at daggers drawn, as they are for the later Coleridge, Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin. It is still possible for Austen to see links between these two spheres—between, for example, a courteous social manner and a generosity of spirit, or between high social rank and moral responsibility for others. But she also knew that it is sometimes hard to draw the line between a proper materiality and a self-interested materialism.

The English have traditionally admired balance, symmetry, moderation and sound judgement, and there is plenty of these qualities in Austen. They are present not only in the values she speaks up for, but in the very formal design of her fiction itself. Form in Austen is already a moral position. Yet she is not, any more than Walter Scott, a devotee of the middle way. Sense is more trustworthy than sensibility; objectivity more precious than subjective feeling; deference, hierarchy and tradition more to be prized than dissidence or individual freedom. Like Scott, she is a 'modern' conservative rather than a Romantic reactionary, believing as she does in the need for reform and improvement within the status quo. But this does not make her a middle-of-the-road liberal any more than it makes Scott one. At a time when the novel form was at its most fertile and innovatory, capable in principle of taking many different paths, the path that was, so to speak, 'selected' for it by literary history was that of a conservative realism. Of this, Scott and Austen were the major representatives.

It is true that some later writers in this tradition were to be far more liberal or radical in their vision than Austen and Scott themselves. Yet a certain tone, and certain definitive limits, had nevertheless been set. The English novel was *en route* to becoming a marvellously subtle medium of psychological truth and social investigation. Such achievements, however, rarely come without a price. A certain norm of what was possible, reasonable and desirable in fiction had now been established, which for the most part involved excluding the 'non-realist'. It was because this norm was to prove so powerful that it was hard even to raise the question of what exactly counted as 'realist', and what did not. Not to speak of who got to decide.