

## **MANSFIELD PARK - A FLAWLESS MASTERPIECE**

by

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**"My Mother - not liked it so well as P. & P. - Thought Fanny insipid. - Enjoyed Mrs. Norris". 1**

Many and various are the opinions of *Mansfield Park* which the author herself collected just after its first publication, but we can now look back upon Mrs Austen's reaction as prophetic of the majority view in most of the 165 years which have passed since that date. Even committed Austenians have shaken their heads over this book. It was indeed Lord Macaulay's favourite, but he is an exception which probes the rule. Reginald Farrer calls it "Jane Austen's *gran rifiuto* ... alone of her books ... vitiated throughout by a radical dishonesty, that was certainly not in its author's own nature".<sup>2</sup> D.W. Harding speaks of "The priggishness of *Mansfield Park*" which "is the inevitable result of the curiously abortive attempt at humility that the novel represents".<sup>3</sup> And Edmund Wilson's defence of it is of a sort that leaves all the objections unanswered :

"It is true that I have not read it for thirty years, so that I have had time to forget the moralizings that bother Miss Kaye-Smith and Miss Stern, but the sensations I remember to have had were purely

aesthetic ones : a delight in the focussing of the complex group through the ingenuous eyes of Fanny, the balance and harmony of the handling of the contrasting timbres of the characters, which are now heard in combination, now set off against one another. I believe that, in respect to Jane Austen's heroines, the point of view of men readers is somewhat different from that of women ones. The woman reader wants to identify herself with the heroine, and she rebels at the idea of being Fanny. The male reader neither puts himself in Fanny's place nor imagines himself marrying Fanny any more than he does the nice little girl in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*, a novel which *Mansfield Park* in some ways quite closely resembles. What interests him in Miss Austen's heroines is the marvellous portraiture of a gallery of different types of women, and Fanny, with her humility, her priggishness and her innocent and touching good faith, is a perfect picture of one kind of woman". 4

It is not only Kingsley Amis who denounces "that Jane Austen (if she ever existed) who set out bravely to correct conventional notions of the desirable and virtuous. From being their critic ( if she ever was ) she became their slave. That is another way of saying that her judgment and her moral sense were corrupted. *Mansfield Park* is the witness of that corruption."5 C.S. Lewis, who might be supposed to welcome the book's Evangelical elements and its four-square commitment to a very strict, even narrow interpretation of traditional morality, himself asks "How, then, does Fanny Price fail? I suggest, by insipidity... One of the most dangerous of literary ventures is the little, shy, unimportant heroine whom none of the other characters value. The danger is that your readers may agree with the other characters. Something must be put into the heroine to make us feel that the other characters are wrong, that she contains depths they never dreamed of ... In Anne [Elliott of *Persuasion*] Jane Austen did succeed. Her passion (for it is not less), her insight, her maturity, her prolonged fortitude, all

attract us. But into Fanny, Jane Austen, to counterbalance her apparent insignificance, has put really nothing except rectitude of mind; neither passion, nor physical courage, nor wit, nor resource. Her very love is only calf love - a schoolgirl's hero-worship for a man who has been kind to her when they were both children, and who, incidentally, is the least attractive of all Jane Austen's heroes". 6

It is Fanny of course who is the heart of the problem; so that all agree E.M. Forster ( that warm admirer and best disciple of Austen's art) was taking a swipe back at the whole book with his bon mot "I always thought Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* a mouse-trap, and that in Edmund Bertram she caught a nice fat mouse ." In making this young woman, who is much the least lively and most introverted, the most censorious and self-pitying of her heroines, the speculum and focus of her novel's debate, Austen can easily be felt to have placed this in a very restricted and imprisoning compass.

In my own view the novel is as perfect as need be and there is not enough space here (or perhaps anywhere) to canvass all its beauties and merits; so I fix upon three major cruxes as a way of opening out what I take to be the issues of the work and in vindication of the author's handling of these : the theatricals at Mansfield, the Henry Crawford-Fanny Price relationship, and the ending. There are other things in this text which have disturbed or divided the critics, but these sequences have all been deemed the most perplexing or annoying.

Firstly, however, a recapitulation of the story.

Fanny Price, the daughter of a penurious Portsmouth-based Lieutenant of Marines, is introduced at Mansfield Park and brought up, from her tenth year, in this the Northamptonshire house of her

uncle-in-law and her younger aunt, Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, through the officious charity of her mother's older sister Mrs Norris, who is soon left the widow of Mansfield's vicar and who spends most of her time at the manorial Bertram home. Quietly despised by her two female cousins, Maria and Julia Bertram, and teased by the heir to the baronetcy, Tom, Fanny is lonely until befriended by Edmund, the younger of the two boys of the family ( then 16 and on holiday from Eton), for whom ordination and the livings of Mansfield and Thornton Lacey, in his father's patronage, are designed. Fanny is the Cinderella of the family. Mrs Norris turns out to have recruited her only to persecute her with perpetual bad temper, reproofs and aspersions upon her dependent status as a poor relation. In her accommodation and her role she is neither really a servant at the hall, nor a full member of the family. It is rather like that terrible fate, being a governess. When the other girls, as the years move on, go to dances, Fanny is left behind as a companion to the supine and almost mindless Lady Bertram. But this retired and quiet life she prefers to any other.

Sir Thomas's estate in Antigua giving cause for concern ( for this - 1800 - is the time of the slave-riots and abolitionist legislation in the British West Indies ) he and Tom sail there personally to supervise their holdings. During his absence Maria, now in her twenty-first year, contracts a mercenary engagement to a neighbouring squire whom she does not love or respect, Mr Rushworth ( and of whom Edmund rightly remarks "If this man had not twelve thousand a year, he would be a very stupid fellow". ) But matters become much livelier with the return of Tom Bertram, a spendthrift playboy, and the visit of Henry and Mary Crawford, the brother and sister of Mrs Grant, the wife of the new vicar of Mansfield, Mr Norris's successor. The Crawfords are witty, handsome, gay young Londoners of property who soon have

developed a busy social life with the siblings of the Park. Both the Bertram girls encourage Crawford to flirt with them - even on an expedition to Sotherton Court, the country mansion of Maria's husband-to-be; and Mary Crawford begins to reciprocate a growing attachment to her on Edmund's side. As they progress through the final summer before Sir Thomas's greatly delayed but now actually promised return in November (1802), Tom and a visiting friend, the Hon. John Yates (who "had not much to recommend him beyond habits of fashion and expense" ) propose that they recreate with a play. After much squabbling over a choice of vehicle in which each may shine the best, *Lovers' Vows*, a "hit" of the time, is fixed upon, and even Edmund's warmly urged scruples being ultimately overcome, the only thing which intermits the project's entire prosecution to a public performance is Sir Thomas's premature return home.

The theatricals episode has given trouble to every reader. We all know that the teenage Jane Austen herself, her family ( a clerical household of strict principles) and friends performed plays in the barn at her home - and some of them plays no less "dubious" than *Lovers' Vows*; she even indeed wrote some for such exhibition. Yet Fanny who at first " looked on and listened, not unamused to observe the selfishness, which, more or less disguised' seemed to govern them all " ( 14, 131 ) in the matter of the choice of text, moves from feeling that "For her own gratification she could have wished that something might be acted, for she had never seen even half a play, but everything of higher consequence was against it" (ibid.) to a revulsion of sick indignation at the very idea of this amateur show.

Are her reactions hysterical, are Austen's out of scale? Is the author advocating a supremely punctilious decorum for young people of the upper middle class such as never existed in her own life : and if so,

why with such passion?

To this problem Lionel Trilling returned again and again during his career. He deemed *Mansfield Park* one of the works of Literature most seminal to a true understanding of the whole current Occidental cultural phase ( the Romantic Era of the eighteenth century to the present day ) and yet his defence of Austen's handling of the theatricals has a note of strain. As late as 1970 he speaks of "the unequivocal judgement the novel makes that the enterprise is to be deplored,"<sup>8</sup> reiterating the argument of his famous 1957 paper "Jane Austen and *Mansfield Park*" : 9

"What is decisive is a traditional, almost primitive, feeling about dramatic impersonation. We know of this, of course, from Plato, and it is one of the points on which almost everyone feels superior to Plato, but it may have more basis in actuality than we commonly allow. It is the fear that the impersonation of a bad or inferior character will have a harmful effect upon the impersonator; that, indeed, the impersonation of any other self will diminish the integrity of real self."<sup>10</sup>

Yet this is wire-drawn by way of defence, for Plato's argument is unconvincing in itself and what the reader meets with in this text is a repugnance towards the scheme, which seems out of scale with what is proposed. Beginning the theatricals episode, Austen specifies that "a love of the theatre is so general, an itch for acting so strong among young people"(13,121), yet what they are meditating at the Park might, from the attitudes and language of the opposition, be a robbery or a murder. Edmund, who " begins to listen with alarm" to the scheme and, "determined to prevent it" (13,124), says "I think it would be very wrong", (125) speaks of it to Fanny as "a great evil" (adapted from 128). Fanny, conning the chosen text for the first time, is astonished "that it could

be proposed and accepted in a private theatre! " with its two main female roles "so totally improper for home representation" (15,137). Yet the only version of this German play (1791, of which the original title means "The Love-Child", ) Austen and the Mansfield personages know and use is Mrs Inchbald's heavily bowdlerized translation of 1798. 11

Kingsley Amis is not irrelevant in reminding us that "a cursory reading will show *Lovers' Vows* is in fact innocuous rubbish", 12 and as R.W. Chapman remarks in the Note prefatorial to his valuable reprinting of the version in question, it "had a great vogue and was frequently reprinted; a twelfth edition is recorded of 1799" (474). If it was so much accepted in Society ( with a large "S" ) generally, if "the Right Hon. Lord Ravenshaw" and his family could have undertaken it at Ecclesford, that peer's Cornish seat and in a company which comprised " a large party assembled for gaiety", not simply the closest blood-relations of his house, it adds to our giddy sense, characteristic of the whole episode, of participating in a moral debate of which some of the terms of reference are occluded, when we are told "Lord Ravenshaw ... is one of the most correct men in England" (13,122). It is as though one were to step into another country where, for example, the marriage of first cousins were deemed a disgraceful perversion, like incest - but only by one-sixth of the population (Edmund and, much more tenaciously, Fanny are here effectually opposed against the three other Bertram siblings, Mrs Norris, Mrs Grant, the Crawfords and Mr. Yates), and where these objectors do not sufficiently amplify and substantiate their case. Faced by Fanny's paroxysms of wretchedness at being pushed into undertaking the small part of the Cottager's wife makes one recall T.S. Eliot's remark about *Hamlet* : "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear." 13

Of course, just as Queen Gertrude's suspected adultery is very horrible ( our problem is that "the guilt of a mother" 14 does not seem to account for all of Hamlet's motivating psychology) so there is here a strong case against this enterprise. Edmund states it early:

"In a general light, private theatricals are open to some objections, but as we are circumstanced, I must think it would be highly injudicious, and more than injudicious, to attempt any thing of the kind. It would show great want of feeling in my father's account, absent as he is, and in some degree of constant danger; and it would be imprudent, I think, with regard to Maria, whose situation is a very delicate one, considering everything, extremely delicate." (13,125) .

The modern reader must remember the danger of a sea-voyage in those days and across an ocean divided by maritime powers, Britain and France, then at war. It will take the head of the family several weeks to make the crossing and if he meet with mishap, the news of it can arrive no fester. So there is the bad taste of holding high festivity at his home at such a time. (However would they live down the scandal, let alone digest their self-reproach, at having been acting a play, without his known permission, the very day their father was later reported to have died at sea ?! )

Then the choice of play is provocative, and Austen's artfulness in selecting this particular drame - which is, with all her usual marvellous naturalness, the unforced easy likelihood of her supremely substantial realism, one of the recent successes of the London stage (1798-9) has a motive which ramifies. Kotzebue, its author (1761-1819) was a Romantic, one of the early Socialists, and a freethinker. He believed in free love and was only a Deist in religion, if not an atheist outright. Trivial as the play artistically is, therefore, it is unthinkingly treacherous on the part of



these young people to the codes by which they are supposed to live, to have chosen it, and that can so be easily, thoughtlessly disloyal, as Fanny is not, is also of course part of the author's meaning. How much *Mansfield Park* is, at the deepest level, in agreement with the politico-economic basis of the Bertrams' way of life, is a nice question; but Kotzebue's ethics, in this play, and still more in his life and other writings, were directly opposed to those Austen - at the deepest level - is concerned to justify with this book. One thinks forward to the exchange on Romantic poetry between Charlotte Heywood and Sir Edward Denham in *Sanditon* :

I have read several of Burn's [sic] Poems with great delight, said Charlotte as soon as she had time to speak, but I am not poetic enough to separate a Man's Poetry entirely from his Character; - & poor Burns's known Irregularities, greatly interrupt my enjoyment of his Lines. - I have difficulty in depending on the Truth of his Feelings as a Lover. I have not faith in the sincerity of the affections of a Man of his Description. He felt & he wrote & he forgot. 15

The fault in the choice of text is much compounded by the way the four major *dramatis personae* use the play as a means of being dishonest with each other in the real world, of developing covert feelings and not making these explicit; of entering upon relationships without being properly committed to and responsible for them. It is (again) of the excellence of Austen's art, her so presenting the episode that no reader misses anything greatly material by not being acquainted with *Lovers's Vows*. Yet many among her contemporaries did know it. That it had been a best-seller in polite society as a printed text and a great success among fashionable theatre audiences not so very long before, made her book all the more necessary in refutation.

And many readers would quickly see how badly compromised are Maria and Edmund Bertram, Mary and Henry Crawford by their respective roles of Agatha, Anhalt, Amelia and Frederick.

Fanny has justified misgivings about this. The play, in prolonged rehearsal, carries forward these principals considerably farther in the process of self-deceit and deception of each other. "Frederick"-Crawford meeting "Agatha" Maria, does a lot of warm embracing with her in their extended first scene (hence its being undertaken "so needlessly often" between them, as Fanny perceives:) (18,165). He speaks to her as her natural child; and there is a fine sad irony in the fact that Maria, indulging herself in the role of "Agatha", will like her fictitious counterpart in the end also be a "ruined woman". She addresses him as his poverty-stricken mother. But lines like "I cannot speak, dear son! [Rising and embracing him.] My dear Frederick! The joy is too great - "(483), or Frederick's "Ill, and I was not with you? I will, now, never leave you more. Look, mother, how tall and strong I have grown. These arms can now afford you support. "(484) or accompanying actions as "[Frederick with his eyes cast down, takes her hand, and puts it to his heart.]" (487) are being used by this woman who is engaged to marry another man and this man who is only trifling with her affection, for purposes of self-indulgence quite other than the merely Thespian.

In this more advanced degree, then, and under a correspondingly "better" cover, the *Lovers' Vows* rehearsals, like the day-trip to Sotherton earlier (chs.8-10), take Maria's feelings so much the further forward towards a mad passion, while neither compelling an honest proposal from Crawford nor self-knowledge in his acting partner; who "in all the important preparations of the mind" is shortly to be "complete; being prepared for matrimony by an hatred of home, restraint, and tranquillity; by the misery of disappointed affection, and contempt of

the man she was to marry. The rest might wait." (21,202)

The same criticism is to be made of Mary's and Edmund's participation in the treatricals. As Amelia and Anhalt they too can play at being in love, in this case can both fall more deeply for each other, without being obliged rigorously to examine where these feelings are leading them - what real possibility they have of making a happy marriage. The matter is more complex here, since neither is simply trifling with the other, and the role of Amelia in the play, that of a woman who is forward in expressing her feelings and herself proposes to the man she loves, might seem one proper to Austen's sympathy. Mrs Leavis well remarks that she behaves:

"in defiance of the Richardsonian canon that a lady cannot with propriety entertain a sentiment for a man until he has made her an offer ... the distress of Edmund at finding that the lady he wishes to marry is willing to make Amelia's shameless avowals is well grounded in conventional notions of decorum. We should be resigned to this in Fanny Burney, but Miss Austen is elsewhere noticeably in advance of the conventions - not of course "advanced" like a novelist-philosophe such as Bege but compared with novelists within the pale - and likes to represent such features of the age as cant or unwholesome affectation, as she had in *Pride and Prejudice*."16

Mrs. Inchbald acts as a spokesman for the age's sentiments, when in the preface to her translation she remarks "Amelia's love, by Kotzebue, is indelicately blunt, and yet void of mirth or sadness:" and she congratulates herself upon having, as adapter, made this

"a very particular object of my solicitude and alteration: the same situations which the author gave her remain,

but almost all the dialogue of the character I have changed; the forward and unequivocal manner in which she announces her affection to her lover in the original would have been revolting to an English audience: the passion of love, represented on the stage, is certain to be insipid or disgusting unless it creates smiles or tears ... [Do we feel the heroines of, for instance, Shakespeare's late plays to be certainly "insipid or disgusting"? ] I have endeavoured to attach the attention and sympathy of the audience by whimsical insinuations, rather than coarse abruptness..." (477-8)

And we may well start at seeing so much of Mary Crawford's dialogue in *Mansfield Park* inadvertently so well described. Julia Bertram speaks merely out of angry jealousy when she denounces the role - "I am not to be Agatha [which would mean playing opposite the Henry Crawford who has kindled amorous fires in her also ], "and I am sure I will do nothing else..." But there is an element of truth in her strictures upon Amelia immediately following:

"It is of all parts in the world the most disgusting to me, I quite detest her. An odious, little, pert, unnatural, impudent girl." (14,136)

Though it may be one of the brightnesses of Mary Crawford that she is willing to take the initiative in this courtship, she does not after all want to be married to a clergyman - upon which career Edmund is resolved. With the tendresses her theatre-role permits, Mary prosecutes all the more her basic attempt merely to seduce Edmund from his chosen profession and into a life entirely on her terms; which is dishonest. So that in this case too all the divisions of ethos and ambition between the partners are not aired and resolved by these rehearsals, but rather inspissated under the development of infatuation which the theatricals promote.

In all four main actors, in short, this recreation does not provoke "lovers" vows".

The worst eventually befalls: Maria Bertram is carried off on the wave of one more dalliance, sudden and temporary, with Henry Crawford, into complete and permanent wretchedness; Mary and Edmund achieve only each other's hurt. But all this lies in the unknown future as yet, and therefore by no means fully accounts for the almost morbid detestation with which Fanny reacts to the project as it unfolds at the time. She is "most frightened" (15,145) when the others ask her to participate as Cottager's wife. "To be called into notice in such a manner" is bad enough, yet this has been "but the prelude to something so infinitely worse, to be told that she must do what was so impossible as to act" (16,150) - and this reaction is not specifically represented simply as a function of her shyness, her social embarrassment. After Edmund has capitulated and, taking on the part of Anhalt, has left her in lone opposition, in "a scheme which ... she must condemn altogether" (17, 160) "it was all misery now." (16,157)

She has now a motive for feeling like this, at this later time, which is not absolutely virtuous - her jealousy of Mary Crawford's opportunities for developing Edmund's attachment in their acting together. But Fanny's - and Edmund's - general objections were so ardent even before he joined the cast, we may indeed feel there was an element of "scrupulousness run mad" in them, as the Bertram sisters expressed it, remonstrating with their brother then. - "There could be no harm in what had been done in so many respectable families, and by so many women of the first consideration..."(13,128)

In fact the concessionary pledges given by Maria, Julia and Tom are not honoured. The project does not ultimately "comprehend only

brothers and sisters, and intimate friends" ( adapted, *ibid* ), the alterations and expense to which they put their father's house are not conducted "on the simplest plan" or within a budget of "twenty pounds" (127), and Edmund's earlier remonstrances - "I am convinced that my father would totally disapprove it ... His sense of decorum is strict." (126 - 7 ) - are proved as totally correct as all inwardly anticipate. Sir Thomas is angered and hurt in his discovery of the venture when he comes home.

Yet what is the value of this disapproval and strict decorum, intrinsically?

"Sir Thomas's return made a striking change in the ways of the family, independent of Lovers' Vows. Under his government, Mansfield was an altered place. Some members of their society sent away and the spirits of many others saddened, it was all sameness and gloom, compared with the past; a sombre family-party rarely enlivened. There was little intercourse with the Parsonage. Sir Thomas drawing back from intimacies in general, was particularly disinclined, at this time, for any engagements but in one quarter. The Rushworths were the only addition to his own domestic circle which he could solicit." (21,196)

This is pretty damning in itself, but that such sobriety does not feed back into social health we are immediately made to observe in Austen's account of the conference now following between Maria Bertram and her father on the subject of her forthcoming marriage to Rushworth. Faced with the imbecility of his prospective son-in-law and but "little observation being necessary to tell him that indifference was the most favourable state her feelings could be in" towards this man ( adapted

21,200), the father does remonstrate with his daughter; yet he is quickly satisfied by her reassurances; "too glad to be satisfied perhaps to urge the matter quite so far as his judgment might have dictated to others." (201) The return of Sir Thomas, in sum, does not make for "a striking change" in the calibre of Mansfield Park's moral life. It is now once again much more dull and gloomy than under the influence of the Crawfords' lively spirits and the play-acting, but ethical compensations do not come forward. The restored baronet presides over one of the saddest pieces of self-delusion in which a parent and child could indulge. The girl persists in, and her father endorses her engagement, on each side from motives very unworthy. Generally Sir Thomas knows himself, by the end of the Rushworth marriage, to be convicted of having been an almost complete failure as a parent.

"the anguish arising from the conviction of his own errors in the education of his daughters, was never to be entirely done away.

Too late he became aware how unfavourable to the character of any young people, must be the totally opposite treatment which Maria and Julia had been always experiencing at home, where the excessive indulgence and flattery of their aunt had been continually contrasted with his own severity. He saw how ill he had judged, in expecting to counteract what was wrong in Mrs Norris, by its reverse in himself, clearly saw that he had but increased the evil, by teaching them to repress their spirits in his presence, as to make their real disposition unknown to him, and sending them for all their indulgences to a person who had been able to attach them only by the blindness of her affection,

and the excess of her praise." (48,463)

What greater instance of this "stop-go" policy do we find in the whole story but the project of the theatricals during Sir Thomas's and his inability to tolerate them on his return? The suppression of the scheme itself is not the consequence of communicated sentiments between father and children, the reasoned dialectic of people who open their hearts to each other, but another cold fiat in a relationship where so much is outward show.

Our feelings towards the theatre-enterprise should be mixed, therefore; and Fanny's rejection of it, by the same token, also needs a complex response. Indeed that is of the essence of the book, it seems to me. The whole work is a series of complex intuitions - albeit not mediating a paralysed or merely disabling sense of life's alternatives - and we do not pick up more than a small fraction of what it has to offer unless we are willing so to ponder its debate. In Fanny's reaction to the stage-venture at the Park we see yet another function of her dividedness - as partly the healthiest (in the sense of being morally the most responsible) character in this community, partly a personality considerably crippled. But Austen's point is - and it is at least semi-tragic: these are two aspects of one unitary competence; you only find responsibility growing beside or out of disablement.

Before I consider Fanny's role more largely, let me stipulate that, when using the term "Austen" I am doing so in a specialized (though in literary appreciation I think it is the only significant) sense. In "Anonymity: An Enquiry" E.M. Forster has this to say :

"... modern critics go too far in their insistence on personality.  
They go too far because they do not reflect what person-



ality is. Just as words have two functions - information and creation - so each human mind has two personalities, one on the surface, one deeper down. The upper personality has a name. It is called S.T. Coleridge, or William Shakespeare, or Mrs. Humphry Ward. It is conscious and alert, it does things like dining out, answering letters, etc., and it differs vividly and amusingly from other personalities. The lower personality is a very queer affair. In many ways it is a perfect fool, but without it there is no literature, because unless a man dips a bucket down into it occasionally he cannot produce first-class work. There is something general about it. Although it is inside S.T. Coleridge, it cannot be labelled with his name. It has something in common with all other deeper personalities... As it came from the depths, so it soars to the heights, out of local questionings; as it is general to all men, so the works it inspires have something general about them, namely beauty. The poet wrote the poem, no doubt, but he forgot himself while he wrote it, and we forget him while we read. What is wonderful about great literature is that it transforms the man who reads it towards the condition of the man who wrote, and brings to birth in us also the creative impulse."<sup>17</sup>

This, which harmonizes well with Coleridge's own "conclusions on the nature of poetry" (c.f. especially "The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity"),<sup>18</sup> certainly answers to my experience of imaginative writing. So for my own credo about the psychology of creative literature I can do little more than paraphrase these positions. - Our minds are brought to new wakefulness, a hitherto unanticipated amplitude of awareness and discrimination by the *Dichtung*, *poesis* to which we open ourselves - call

it what you will, since one wants a term for imaginative verse and prose. And it is only logical to assume that the author's powers were similarly stimulated during the act of creation. The physical basis for thinking in this way of the nature and value of the artistic imagination is not hard to guess. Science informs us that an undamaged brain has not only millions of cells it does not utilise, but retains every experience, encoded in "memory-banks", by which the individual is assailed from not long after conception until death - even death at greatly advanced age. We are beings who in ordinary diurnal living are using only a tiny fraction of the capacity for perception and intellection that we possess. The excitement we feel reading *Oedipus at Colonus* ( and Sophocles seems to have written that in his ninety-first year) is two-fold. It derives from the sense, is the process of our intellectual faculties being quickened and liberated by the grafting-on of a new limb or organ of perception to the pre-existing range of our sensibility; in this case the new range of the humanly feelable and thinkable into which we are enfranchised is the mental/verbal idiom idiosyncratic to the Sophocles-of-this-play. And it also arises out of the author's resolving - even if such resolution is "only" the relief afforded by his handling into complete articulateness - the large human problems with which he here engages.

The *afflatus* of inspiration, to which our elation as recipients of the created work is analogous and complementary, brings the whole soul of the writer into activity. Austen the novelist is drawing on vastly greater powers - for vision and discrimination - than the Austen anybody can ever have met; even her so close and beloved confidante her sister Cassandra, even the alter ego who could talk to herself. The full resources of our brains and minds are not mapped out before us in our waking, or our sleeping, hours. "The deep well of unconscious cerebration" as Henry James so finely called it is a huge subterraneous

sea; and into this ocean, of which the riches are far greater than can be seen through its perspicuous upper waters, the artist sends down his "bucket" much deeper than those using words for other purposes.

"The fine delight that fathers thought; the strong  
Spur, live and lancing like the blowpipe flame,  
Breathes once and, quenched faster than it came,  
Leaves yet the mind a mother of immortal song."

Once fired by the initial impulse, "sired" by "the one rapture of an inspiration" as Hopkins thus puts it,<sup>19</sup> the artist's "muse" or creative talents jump to a region of power where language is capable of being "esemplastically" deployed (so that Shakespeare can think of light "thickening" as, in *Macbeth*, "the crow/Makes wings to th' rooky wood"<sup>20</sup>); and where, all the intellectual faculties being so extended and galvanized, *pari passu* the moral sense of the writer, operating from a far more comprehensive view of human experience than he might reach out to at his dinner-table, becomes the much more subtle and refined.

"Peace" says Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*, "And let them be, in their exaltation./ They speak better than they know..."<sup>21</sup> Just as his handling of language is distinguished by an originality he can summon but not himself achieve solely by calculation or taking thought, so this must always be true of the poet/novelist/dramatist's human or social discriminations, when he is creatively employed, (and where his genius is at all impressive, new, richly talented).

In putting forward the argument that follows, then, I am not supposing that Austen herself would have responded, were she to have read my paper, with an "Ah, yes! That is just what I had in mind when I penned this passage!" or "Yes, I fully meant to say that", or "I was quite

conscious of meaning to imply that" as she considered one aspect and then another of my reading of her book. Rather, that neither she nor I nor anyone can do other than look at the finished product, her achieved work, and ask "What, at its most finely discriminative, is this novel saying? When we have fully subjected ourselves to the whole, and carefully pondered all the parts, what intimations - about human life - do we derive?" And the seemingly super-subtle case will be legitimate so long as it is not super-subtle, so long as it can be shown substantiated by the novel's every phrase. (I have argued in another place<sup>22</sup> that attempts to impose a meaning on Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* are just that. On its own internal evidence that novel is not a unity.)

Why is Fanny at Mansfield Park at all? We may share the slight surprise of Mrs Price, early in the tale, at the Portsmouth household's domestic economy being relieved by the choice of a girl and not a boy-child to go and live with her highly-placed and well-to-do Northamptonshire relations(1,11). After all, a boy can rise, as does her brother William, by native talent, some little influence and hard work, to a very respectable and well-provided way of life on, as it were, his own terms (in such a manner one of Austen's own brothers became an admiral); but as Sir Thomas conscientiously reflects - "a girl so brought up must be adequately provided for, or there would be cruelty, instead of kindness in taking her from her family." (1,6) Unless in the coming years, with no name or fortune comparable to the Bertram sisters, this woman is lucky enough to make a good marriage during the brief period of female eligibility *de rigueur* in that epoch (look how in *Persuasion* Anne Elliott at 27 and her sister two years older are practically "on the shelf", will they, nill they) her uncle will have to lay aside a small fortune to provide her with such an annuity as will afford her a life less harrowing than that of the poor or a governess. One can think forward to Austen's next novel, *Emma*, and the predicament of Miss Bates.

whose "youth had passed without distinction, and her middle of life was devoted to the care of a failing mother, and the endeavour to make a small income go as far as possible."(3,21)23 - or worse still, to that of Jane Fairfax. -

"When I am quite determined as to the time, I am not at all afraid of being long unemployed. There are places in town, offices, where inquiry would soon produce something - Offices for the sale - not quite of human flesh - but of human intellect."

"Oh! my dear, human flesh! You quite shock me; if you mean a fling at the slave-trade, I assure you Mr. Suckling was always rather a friend to the abolition."

"I did not mean, I was not thinking of the slave-trade," replied Jane; "governess-trade, I assure you, was all that I had in view; widely different certainly as to the guilt of those who carry it on; but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies."(35,300-01)

By being brought to Mansfield Park Fanny has been rescued not only from the real squalor and meanness of her childhood home in Portsmouth but also from a probably quite grim future, by her benefactors' generosity. Her debt to Sir Thomas Bertram and his household, therefore, is immense. Yet this household is, like any other human group (and here we have the universality and centrality of Austen's subject-matter) a society of "the bossers and the bossed".<sup>24</sup> Mrs Norris, another poor relation and dependant, who has "never been able to attach even those she loved best" (48,466) has brought Fanny in, we can see, to be one notch lower than herself in the pecking-order of this family group. The whole novel is organised around showing us the radical

viciousness and despoliation inherent in a social organism where status and rank exist to make some feel dominant and others dependent; namely, one of the great wounds at the heart of the only world we know. So the aunt's perfect victim in turn is a girl who is neither a fully-fledged member of the family nor of the servants' hall. Fanny is crippled by her lack of status in this ménage. When afflicted with insult or injury from any other inhabitant of the Park or visitor to it, she has no right to react, as with open hostility and criticism, that is recognised either by society or by her own moral sense. She is just too lucky to be here in the first place. When Mrs Norris attacks her frontally with

" I am not going to urge her ... but I shall think her a very obstinate, ungrateful girl, if she does not do what her aunt and cousins wish her - very ungrateful indeed, considering who and what she is." (5,147).

she is, though cruelly and wrongly, touching upon a bond of obligation which cannot be simply waived away as **totally** irrelevant.

So Fanny then, and always, is thrown back in upon herself, and retreats once more to her cold East Room to think out the episode, to digest it, assimilate and in that, the only method open to her, mitigate its hurt. In so doing, over the years, she has become morally the conscientious member of the family and aware, as others are not, of many essential features of their relations to their world; because all her intellectual power and emotional energy have been directed into thinking out conduct - the others', her own - on every side. But this same process which makes her the only really responsible person in her social group is also an invidious one. It can, and must, too easily fall over into a mode of revenge, vindication which is also vindictiveness, of defining her own

identity always at the expense of others.

This is the inescapable dilemma not only for Fanny Price but for Everyman. We regularly see resurfacing Austen's theme of how suffering, gainsaying, deprivation develops the personality in morally creative ways. This is true of Julia Bertram's as against her sister Maria's fate. Denied her chance of acting with Crawford in theatricals and of developing a flirtation with him at her sister's expense, her elopement (with Yates) and future can be patched up for her far better than for Mrs Rushworth.

"There was comfort also in Tim, who gradually regained his health, without regaining the thoughtlessness and selfishness of his previous habits. He was the better for his illness. He had suffered, and he had learnt to think, two advantages that he had never known before..." (48,462)

In the significantly named "wilderness" at Sotherton, as one deluded couple after another circumambulate past the stationary and central Fanny, she alone observes, weighs, estimates, scruples over their behaviour - partly out of her impotence to do anything else, to have any social role of her own which permits delinquency. This gives her an ethical gravity which the others badly lack, yet her physical debility derives from it too, I think; and all this is represented as early as the horse-riding episode. That whole scene (ch 7) compresses Fanny's loneliness, the importance to one powerless as herself, in all her human relations, of the conduct of others who disregard her, the honing of her moral discriminations which such fascination with their deeds achieves and which itself is also morbid; the censorship which is accurate and just, yet adds to the habit of spiritual ungenerousness. Jealousy - even her simple sexual jealousy of Mary Crawford, the better horsewoman (significantly), the cynosure of Edmund's attentions - becomes inseparably one thing

with just censure:

"The houses, though scarcely half a mile apart, were not within sight of each other; but by walking fifty yards from the hall door, she could look down the park, and command a view of the parsonage and all its demesnes... 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...After a few minutes, they stopt entirely, Edmund was close to [Mary Crawford], he was speaking to her, he was evidently directing her management of the bridle, he had hold of her hand...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." (7,67-8)

All her objections are just; but her solicitude for "the poor mare" ( which it is anyway a high privilege and unique kindness in Edmund, among his family, to let her ride daily for exercise) is inextricably interwoven with an enforced meanness of spirit, She has to be out of doors watching them in case they are waiting for her to appear for her "turn" on the horse; but this very looking-on is demoralizing and destructive.



Being the morally most aware person here and throughout the story, yet the most "politically", socially, impotent, is a strain, makes an ever-developed tension to which I attribute her shown debility of body, and of heart. She does not cry easily and does not know how to (because she cannot wholly, legitimately) answer back. When we compare the very natural spontaneous little girl who first arrived at the Park (and who did cry, quite normally, that first day from bewilderment, fear, fatigue), we see someone behaving with an immediacy and innocence which this same Fanny never has again.

Immediacy-and-innocence of this kind is one thing. Spontaneity as such - the arch, essential virtue, principal *raison d'être* of the Romantic philosophers and of their whole age in the "Western" world, is another. Spontaneity as the leading value in living this novel thoroughly exposes and damns, but it acknowledges as much as any book anywhere the need for immediacy and innocence as the central core and bloom of vitality, wit, social grace, livingness - and in the contrasted characterisations of Fanny Price and Mary Crawford, for neither of them has it. Marvin Mudrick in his valuable, notorious book<sup>25</sup> has railed upon Fanny and against her author for the treatment of Mary. He quotes from Austen's own letters again and again, aptly pointing out - "This is Mary as we know her in the novel, unmasking cant in others, free of it herself, driven to no false system: very like Elizabeth Bennet;...And we come finally to be convinced that both Mary and Jane make such continual demands upon their wit in order to protect a certain depth of privacy, to avoid a full commitment."<sup>26</sup> He lambasts Fanny's cattiness towards her rival and Jane Austen's falsifying - as it seems to him - Mary Crawford's role at times in order to blacken it. -

'Tom has become ill, and Fanny concludes at once that Mary will wish him dead so that Edmund may succeed to

the baronetcy:

'...Miss Crawford gave her the idea of being the child of good luck, and to her selfishness and vanity it would be good luck to have Edmund the only son.' (45,430)

"...I put it to your conscience, whether 'Sir Edmund' would not do more good with all the Bertram property, than any other possible 'Sir'..." (434)

We are asked to believe, therefore, that a worldly, intelligent girl - even if excited by the not uncommon selfishness that comes with the anticipation of a windfall - would confide her feelings unreservedly to a stiff moral object, an obsessed partisan of the Bertram code, like Fanny.'<sup>27</sup>

He puts the case against this characterisation as well as it can be stated - vividly and with an element of truth. - Austen's book is great precisely because she is not writing about lay-figures, devils swathed in green lights to be comfortably hissed and easily rejected out of hand, but dramatising complex alternatives of which her own nature lives all the different attractions and justifications. Yet his argument is a perfect statement of the dominant modern view of human psychology which **Mansfield Park** exists to confute.

The Crawfords are all spontaneity; and it makes them infinitely more pleasing, some of the time, than Fanny, as well as embodying in them powers and energies which life is sadly grey without. We see Edmund's, let alone Fanny's, stolidness if mind by comparison, in the conversation on the Church between him and Mary Crawford during their Sotherton day-visit. All his sentiments show for perhaps worthy but certainly ponderous beside Mary's witty, apt and true comment on their morning at Mr Rushworth's home:

'That [Fanny] should be tired now, however, gives me no surprise; for there is nothing in the course of one's duties so fatiguing as what we have been doing this morning - seeing a great house, dawdling from one room to another - straining one's eyes and one's attention - hearing what one does not understand - admiring what one does not care for. - It is generally allowed to be the greatest bore in the world, and Miss Price has found it so, though she did not know it' (9,95-6)

Yet the Crawfords have their spontaneity and vitality as a consequence of not having been suppressed or gainsaid in their lives; they have been so much 'the children of fortune' they are spontaneous in the extreme, erratic. Mary's conversation is to be pondered not in particular parts but as a whole across the entire book. There is the marvellous kindness of her treatment of Fanny when it is proposed she should play Cottager's wife and, not wanting to, is attacked by Aunt Norris (ch.15) Here Mary shows herself for more sensitive and actively, almost courageously, helpful than any other member of the Bertram circle. Yet we are given the extravagant vulgarity of her 'Rears and Vices' pun on the admirals she has known at her uncle's (6,60). There is the clever, and considerate, wittiness of the remark just quoted about people being fatigued by sightseeing; yet the easy cheapness of her "Every generation has its improvements," to Edmund when they are told in the chapel at Sotherton, "Prayers were always read in it by the domestic chaplain, within the memory of many. But the late Mr Rushworth left it off." (9,86)

By letting themselves be carried about by each gust of their psychic energy, by speaking to every impulse; in not having had their thinking and being disciplined into reflection and restraint by denials and thwartings, the Crawfords have become people each without, really, a

personality at all. They are chameleons, non-existent in the sense of having an identifiable centre to which and from which loyalties can be made - which are the very staple of relationship as of identity.

Fanny interests Henry Crawford at first as the one and only woman he is unable flirtatiously to attach in this Mansfield scene. But drawn in, he becomes sincerely interested in her, and as deeply as in his nature it is possible for him to be. By comparison with his rakish handling of the trip to Sotherton and his caddish performances with the Miss Bertrams, his treatment of the Prices at Portsmouth is a marvel of sustained fine tact (chs 41, and 42). Fanny notices a 'wonderful improvement in Mr Crawford' (end of ch 42 ) and actually moves well within the orbit of accepting his marriage-proposal:

'Poor Susan was very little better fitted for home than her elder sister; and as Fanny grew thoroughly to understand this, she began to feel that when her own release from Portsmouth came, her happiness would have a material drawback in leaving Susan behind. That a girl so capable of being made, everything good, should be left in such hands, distressed her more and more. Were she likely to have a home to invite her to, what a blessing it would be ! - And had it been possible for her to return Mr Crawford's regard, the probability of his being very far from objecting to such a measure, would have been the greatest increase of all her own comforts. She thought he was really good-tempered, and could fancy his entering into a plan of that sort, most pleasantly.' (43,419)

Her suitor is so much (genuinely) influenced by her, as well as

anxious to please, that his new schemes of improvement for his tenants and at Thornton Lacey are earnest of a possible fine future for them both. Yet what we are is the consequence of what we have been drilled into being, or trained ourselves to be, over many years. Fanny's long career of hurts, insults and denials at Mansfield Park has forced her upon self-definition, the creation and maintenance of a consistent coherent identity. The weakness in Plato's original argument ( in the **Republic**) against dramatic art is that it has too simple-minded a notion of deception. When we adopt any social role or persona off the stage, (this I think is Austen's theme) that then constitutes or assails our selfhood radically, according as it persisted in or varied. But a man dressing up as Frederick in the Kotzebue play, or reading the part of Henry VIII in Shakespeare's drama at a family entertainment, is deluding neither himself nor other people into really believing he is either of those gentlemen. Though a fine skill in such representations may betoken a self which is dangerously fluid or unfixd, great acting is not to be hoped for only from men and women with weak personalities.

Nevertheless it is significant that

'in Mr Crawford's reading there was a variety of excellence beyond what [Fanny] had ever met with. The King, the Queen, Buckingham, Wolsey, Cromwell, all were given in turn...and whether it were dignity or pride, or tenderness or remorse, or whatever were to be expressed, he could do it with equal beauty,' (34,337)

(and there is also dramatic irony in this choice of play. What was Henry VIII but, supremely, a man incapable of a sustained relationship with a woman?)

Carried off by the next strong impulse, Crawford's habits, his

creation of this new consistent self which has been oriented towards Fanny, are still too weak, and the possible marriage between them tragically lapses. I say tragically, because we cannot but feel how much better it would be if to respective espousals the partners from Mansfield Park brought their steadying influence, their sobriety, and the Crawford siblings brought vitality and the free-flowing of (albeit now well-regulated) bright spirits. The best possible marriages - those of Edmund and Mary, Henry and Fanny - are frustrated, and in their place we see the kind of wedding people make in the real world often enough where matters, following the delinquency and vagrancy of so many human minds, have to be patched up. It is appropriate therefore that the ending should read as relatively scamped as it does. Austen cannot, though she approves the match as well enough - make of Edmund's and Fanny's union a grand passion or matrix of the kind of liveliness that **should** be there. All along she has dramatised her story through Fanny's consciousness, partly because that is the kind of artistic process congenial to her (showing the world through the eyes of an unattached young woman). but more radically because everything in her book is deployed to register the inescapability of being a limited human outlook, an if partly strong, also partly marred individual. If we are competent, responsible and good, this will be because in certain respects we have been thwarted - and mutilated, permanently. Her book is again and again critical, (sometimes very sardonically), of Fanny's **manques**. When Mrs Norris finally leaves Mansfield we are slyly told 'Not even Fanny had tears for aunt Norris - not even when she was gone for ever.'(48,466) The book is positively spattered with such criticisms, but its method, its *procédé* enforces the recognition at a much deeper level that grand options like being marvellous and perfect, standing outside all the major possible human inadequacies, scarcely exist. We can be discriminative and responsible, if we will, as Fanny is; but that too will have been bought at a 'Price' (isn't that

why she is so named? I'm not sure the idea is a fanciful one.)

At the end, Fanny is once again a dependent at Mansfield, this time in Mrs Norris's position ( though she occupies it doubtless very differently, we have seen that this is not healthy), Edmund has accepted two livings after having spoken earlier against plurality. Generally order, decency, responsibility, have been won, and that is all-important. But at a high cost.

## Notes

- 1 — R.W. Chapman (ed.), *The Works of Jane Austen*, vol. VI - Minor Works - Oxford 1975, section V, p. 432.
- 2 — In *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 228 (July 1917), conveniently accessible in *Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice and Mansfield Park - A Selection of Critical Essays* (in the Macmillan "Casebook" series), ed. B.C. Southam, London 1976, p. 207. I refer whenever possible to this volume and to the equally handy and worthy *Jane Austen - A Collection of Critical Essays* (in the Prentice-Hall "Twentieth Century Views" series), ed. I. Watt, New Jersey 1963, which also collates at low price and in good format some of the most significant critical comment on Austen in little space.
- 3 — Southam (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 214
- 4 — Watt (ed.), *op cit.*, pp. 37-8
- 5 — Southam (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 246
- 6 — Watt (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 31
- 7 — All quotations from the novel itself are from the standard edition by R.W. Chapman (very slightly modified over more recent years by M. Lascelles), vol. III of his *Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*, 1978 impression. I give the chapter number first, so that other editions may be consulted, and then the page number in the Chapman text. Succeeding editions after this of Chapman's (originally 1923) from a scholarly-critical point of view have been works of the purest supererogation. Consult



the scanty leaves of Textual Notes recording but a handful of variants, all told, from Chapman, in all five volumes of the recent "Oxford English Novels" editions of Austen (1969-71) solemnly worked up by conscientious individuals ( one recalls Dr Johnson's words on Theobald - ' a man of heavy diligence') and one has cause to feel that the republic of letters, with financial resources so much slenderer than the spheres of munitions or commerce, the taxation departments of governments or spendthrift millionaires in casinos, can also be guilty of serious extravagance, whereof the means could have been far better deployed.

There are fine introductions to the Austen volumes in this otherwise very valuable series, but what need the editing from scratch and setting-forth anew of these texts on expensive paper at a costly press, when they already exist equally authoritatively in the Chapman hardbacks and the Penguin soft covers? The commentaries could have been housed in other cheap reprints or in the learned journals.

Much better is the attitude of Mrs A.H. Ehrenpreis in the 'Note on the Text' of her expert edition of *Northanger Abbey* ( for Penguin books, Harmondsworth, 1972 ): "The only text for *Northanger Abbey* is the 1818 edition published after Jane Austen's death. I have followed this, adopting in seven places the emendations noted by R.W. Chapman, all of which seem to me sensible... It is a (quite superfluous) tribute to Chapman's accuracy that I have found in his text only half a dozen errors - all are of punctuation and none of them significant. They are given here, since Chapman's text is (rightly) taken as gospel. It is doubtless too much to hope that my own text will be as clean...My indebt-

ness to the notes in Chapman's fine editions of the novels and the letters is manifest.' (op.cit., pp 25-6).

Why then have the Syndics of the Oxford University Press - one of the greatest bastions and best servants of literature - been putting forth into the world of late both their Chapman and their newer so adscititious "Oxford English Novels" editions of Austen? Have they no other employments for the many hands and scholarly brains associated with them? Let them only send a round robin through the citadels of learning - or rather, wherever imaginative literature is prized at its true worth; as a way of living, a mode of consciousness not less than all-important - and they will be overwhelmed with suggestions for 'wondrous necessary' projects. When ( for instance ) are we going to get a complete, up-to-date Langland or a satisfying *Jubilate Agno*?

- 8 — L. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, London 1972,p.75
- 9 — In B. Ford (ed.), *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Harmondsworth, 1957
- 10 — Ibid. (1969 reprinting, revised), p.121
- 11 — Reproduced from its fifth edition, with Mrs Inchbald's Preface, etc., in the text of *Mansfield Park* used here. My quotations from this material give the page numbers in this volume.
- 12 — Southam (ed.), op.cit., p.245
- 13 — F. Kermode (ed.), *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, London 1975, p.48
- 14 — Ibid., p.47

- 15 — Chapman (ed.), **Works of Jane Austen** vol. VI, pp. 397-8
- 16 — Southam (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.237
- 17 — **Two Cheers for Democracy**, ed. O. Stallybrass, London 1972, pp. 82-3
- 18 — **Biographia Literaria**, ed. G. Watson, London 1977, p. 173
- 19 — All these foregoing quotations are, of course, from his sad, marvellous sonnet 'To R.B'.
- 20 — Act III, scene 2 (p. 89, Arden edition of 1962)
- 21 — Fourth edition (1938), p.21
- 22 — **Reality and Comic Confidence in Charles Dickens**, London 1979, ch.1, *passim*
- 23 — My quotations from **Emma**, (vol.IV of the Oxford Illustrated Austen), follow the same rule as those from **Mansfield Park**.
- 24 — E.M. Forster, *op. cit.*, p. 67
- 25 — **Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery**, Princeton University Press 1952
- 26 — *Ibid.*, pp. 169-70
- 27 — *Ibid.*, p. 167