Jane Austen and the War of Ideas

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M. S. B.

St. Hugh's College, Oxford.
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INTRODUCTION

JANE Austen is by common consent an author remarkably sure of her values. She skewers a moral solecism as confidently as a verbal infelicity. At the end of her novels the standing of the heroine's soul in the light of the next world seems as decisively settled as her future financial security in this. The familiar Austen moral abstractions avoid seeming abstract, so closely are they bound up with an orderly pattern of behaviour, a set of assumptions imposed by the material circumstances of leisured middle-class life. The nouns which convey her positives—'powers', 'grace', 'elegance', 'understanding'—are general, but the effect is never cloudy. The syntax Jane Austen gives to those characters she favours is decided and clear, revealing that, for her, personal merit is bound up with perspicuity—the power to discern general truths. What those truths are is never spelt out, and yet the very last impression left by an Austen novel is one of doubt.

It is by virtue of her certainties that Jane Austen is called Augustan. Certainly satirical writers before her time had criticized manners or behaviour they deplored by confident reference to an understood standard, such as that of Christian doctrine, or of certain classical literary forms. But these are criticisms of the actual by reference to an ideal; whereas Jane Austen finds her ideal within a world she deliberately makes resemble the actual. By implication she is far less critical of contemporary society in its essence than Ben Jonson, Dryden, Swift, Pope, or Fielding had been. For at least four of her heroines, moral progress consists in discerning, and submitting to, the claims of the society around them. This is certainly not the moral position of the authors of *Volpone*, *Gulliver's Travels*, or *The Dunciad*. In fact it is not a typical neo-classical position at all.

If Jane Austen's moral goals seem nearer at hand, more realizable, than Pope's, how are they to be defined? The essence of her certainty is that the reforms she perceives to be necessary are within the attitudes of individuals; she calls

for no general changes in the world of the established lesser landed gentry. Most modern commentators on Jane Austen assume that her reasons for adopting her matter and manner are aesthetic rather than moral: she writes about '3 or 4 families in a Country Village' because she knows she can do it well, not because she wishes to validate a way of life. Yet it is always dangerous to make unhistorical assumptions, and in the period itself it would have been customary to think in very different terms about what such preferences showed. Critics of the novel, from Samuel Johnson to Clara Reeve and Henry Mackenzie, all ponder thoughtfully the moral impression the novelist makes upon the reader, and (in print at least) give cursory attention to the means he employs to do it. Jane Austen's twentieth-century reader will probably exclaim that this is precisely where she differs from the rest. If so, he must explain why her naturalism operates only within carefully defined limits. Her style, confident and generalizing, and her openly apparent arrangement of character and plot, all suggest an ideal order, which at the same time they present in terms of an actual order. It is not demanded of a Charles Musgrove that he should aspire to be a good man in any very lofty or spiritual sense. '. . . A more equal match . . . might have given more consequence to his character, and more usefulness, rationality and elegance to his habits and pursuits.'[1] It would have been enough if he had realized his capacity to be a gentleman.

This is not to suggest that Jane Austen is merely a snob, as a crass vein of criticism of her novels has held. Her distinctions between true gentlemanliness and the shell of it are keen, perhaps because—like Elizabeth Bennet—she has experienced social rebuffs at first hand.[2] She is certainly no sycophant of wealth or rank, and she does not deal intimately with—or apparently much like—the great aristocracy. The class she deals with has local and not national importance: in eighteenth-century terms, she is a Tory rather than a Whig. She believes that the gentleman—as her words 'consequence' and 'usefulness' imply—derives his personal dignity from the

[1] *Persuasion*, ed. R. W. Chapman, Oxford, revised ed. 1965, p. 43.

[2] Cf. D. J. Greene, 'Jane Austen and the Peerage', *PMLA* lxviii (1953), 1017–31.

contribution he makes at the head of an organic, hierarchical, small community. It is for such a community, ideally perceived, that her novels speak.

The novel of Jane Austen's day was not just didactic. It was also seen as relevant to contemporary issues, and, since these issues were unusually deep and clearcut, inevitably partisan. Indeed, at the period when Jane Austen began to write, literature as a whole was partisan, in England as well as on the Continent: so were the other arts, as Kenneth Clark observes in drawing a general parallel with painting. 'Doctrine was found in works which seem to us very harmless. We may think that *The Marriage of Figaro* was written solely to give us pleasure, but in 1785 it was considered a political bombshell, for from 1780 to 1790 every play and every ballet was interpreted in a political sense.'[1] To qualify this a little, at the very least a representation of man in a setting which resembled the natural world would be seen as making certain statements about man's nature and about his social role, all of which were capable of translation into the political sphere. There may well have been artists who thought relatively little about politics. But some artistic forms implicitly seemed to convey certain general principles or prepossessions about man, and if, in this sensitive period, an artist did not care much what they were, his critics and readers were liable to care for him. As it happens, Jane Austen's novels belong decisively to one class of partisan novels, the conservative. Intellectually she is orthodox: more orthodox than a contemporary with whom she has otherwise much in common, Maria Edgeworth. Her important innovations are technical and stylistic modifications within a clearly defined and accepted genre.

In order to determine Jane Austen's values it is necessary to survey partisanship in other novels of the period, a neglected and fascinating area of intellectual history. Modern literary criticism, so often narrowly aesthetic, has patronized eighteenth-century 'didacticism', and in the process obscured the pressure of ideas that helped to give contemporary fiction its form. No doubt a great novel, a *Tristram Shandy* or an *Emma*, can also be understood on our terms: each has a vitality that transcends its genre. But no book is improved by being

[1] *The Romantic Rebellion: Romantic versus Classic Art*, London, 1973, p. 26.

taken out of its context. Every book, even a masterpiece, yields a little more if its assumptions, its language, are understood. And whatever may be true of *Emma*, it is open to question whether *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park* can in fact ever be fully independent of their historical context. The hope with which this study sets out is that by placing Jane Austen within her genre, we help to define her meaning; and, in the process, to isolate what is unique in her work, its ultimate originality.

PART I

THE NOVEL AND THE WAR OF IDEAS

All well-written books, that discuss the actions of men, are in reality so many histories of the progress of mind.

Thomas Holcroft, Preface to *Hugh Trevor*, 1794.

[In 1797] the cry spread like a general infection, and I have been told that not even a petty novel for boarding-school misses now ventures to aspire to favour unless it contains some expression of dislike or abhorrence to the new philosophy.

William Godwin, quoted by H. N. Brailsford, *Shelley, Godwin and their Circle*, 1913, p. 156.

CHAPTER 1

SENTIMENTALISM: THE RADICAL INHERITANCE

THE received view of the English novel in the latter part of the eighteenth century is hardly encouraging. 'Between the work of the four great novelists of the mid-eighteenth century and that of Jane Austen and Scott there are no names which posterity has consented to call great.'[1] If the general reader or undergraduate of today were required to name a novelist writing two hundred years ago, he would be hard put to it to find one he had read: Fanny Burney; Henry Mackenzie, perhaps; from a little later, Ann Radcliffe. Yet even in a decade which Miss Tompkins identifies as particularly arid, the 1770s, minor writers, intellectuals, and dilettantes were tentatively staking out new ground in a highly significant area. The middle of the eighteenth century was a period of growing insight into the subjective mind, so that when, for example, its novelists became engrossed in the triangular relationship between hero, author, and reader, they were reflecting an intellectual innovation of great importance. With few really good novels to its credit, the movement known as sentimentalism is nevertheless fascinating for the contribution it makes towards the representation of the inner life, and its active engagement of the reader's imaginative sympathy.

Both man's moral nature, and his mental processes, were the subject of much general intellectual inquiry, and some controversy, in the middle of the century; of bitter partisan strife in the French Revolutionary period. By the mid-1790s reaction against all that Revolution stood for encompassed most of the important features of sentimental narrative writing. Writers of the 1790s looked back on their predecessors of the earlier generation, and saw subversion in work that in

[1] J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England, 1770–1800*, London, 1932, p. v.

its day was at most mildly reformist. Even progressives in 1790 had their doubts about some of the disturbing implications of mid-century psychology. But by far the most numerous and influential of the attacks on sentiment came from the swelling ranks of political and religious orthodoxy. With some justice, and much exaggeration, the sentimentalists came to be read as moral relativists who threatened to undermine established religion and society. The anti-sentimental writing of Jane Austen has been taken as primarily burlesque of a *style*; but essentially it was the absorption of the earlier movement in the conscious and unconscious mind which offended, because implicitly it put the individual before the group. Sentimentalism has received a bad press in our times because the rigorous philosophical impetus behind it is misunderstood; in the 1790s it was understood only too well. At the same time it was simplified, as a form or idea will be caricatured in a second, changed generation. For the purposes of this study, which is concerned with Jane Austen and her contemporaries, the sentimentalists are significant less for what they first intended than for what they shortly afterwards conveyed. Almost every novelist of Jane Austen's day is in some degree or other in the most literal sense a reactionary. To understand the nature of the reaction, it is necessary to turn the perspective of a nervous era upon its sentimental inheritance.

Among the most controversial positions of the sentimentalist—in the eyes of the next generation—was his proposition that man's instincts were good. This tenet has often been attributed to the influence of Shaftesbury and of his Scottish disciple Francis Hutcheson; but it is probably more helpful, as R. S. Crane suggests, to look back to an earlier period and a broader, more popular influence, that of the latitudinarian divines of the Restoration.[1]

Eighteenth-century optimism about the nature of man had its earlier equivalent in the sermons and writings of Tillotson, Barrow, South, Parker, Burnet, Clarke and Bentley. Most

[1] 'Suggestions towards a Genealogy of A Man of Feeling', *ELH* i (1935), 205–30. For a discussion of the special importance of Thomas Burnet, and his possible influence via Shaftesbury on eighteenth-century theories of human nature, see Ernest Tuveson, 'The Origins of the Moral Sense', *HLQ* xi (1947–8), 241–59.

clearly in these early stages, its reading of man's nature challenged the basic conceptions of some very diverse types of Christian. The latitudinarians began in strong reaction to that harsh Puritan pessimism, according to which post-lapsarian man was too sinful to be redeemed by his own unaided efforts. But the Puritans were not the only Christians to take a gloomy view of man's depravity, as Swift's writings amply illustrate.

Broad Church belief in man's goodness and rationality confronted the pessimism which remained a live tradition on both wings of Christian thought. As the eighteenth century advanced, discussion about man's nature became increasingly secular in tone. Confidence in the innate soundness of the natural instincts was so general that at least in Britain it largely lost its power to offend. The new philosophy of the human mind that flourished in mid-century Scotland was ostensibly without theological prior assumptions. It claimed to be a science, based on empirical evidence of how the human animal behaved. Hume and Hartley on the workings of the mind, Smith and Ferguson on the workings of society, all wrote in the dispassionate spirit with which Newton had uncovered the laws of an organic universe. Their tone implied that they were offering not controversy but fact. And yet, across the Channel in authoritarian France, the *philosophes* used these very 'facts' as political dynamite.

Even in England, there was a long-standing connection between the 'natural' view of man and political liberalism. In the reign of William III the latitudinarian divines supported Whig policies and sided with the liberal philosophy of Locke, while opposing the case for a strong monarchy advanced by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes had taken the pessimistic view of human nature and drawn political conclusions from it. If man was naturally self-seeking and depraved, it followed that an enlightened despotism might be the wisest form of government. Without strong external curbs, men's passions would lead them to seek to master or destroy one another. 'Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man.'[1] Latitudinarians such as Isaac Barrow

[1] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 13.

waged a ceaseless war against Hobbes' 'monstrous paradox', and urged instead, as Matthew Tindal afterwards put it, that man 'is a social creature, who naturally loves his own species, and is full of pity, tenderness, and benevolence'.[1] Throughout the next century a kindly view of man's nature tends to go hand in hand with a belief in the safety and indeed wisdom of political liberty. Among the Scots, Hume alone expresses faith in man's impulses together with scepticism about the wisdom of giving him scope to practise them.[2] Ferguson and Gibbon both believe that the health of a nation depends upon the personal liberty and voluntary participation of its citizens.[3] Adam Smith takes entrenched power as his favourite target, and berates the self-defeating tactics throughout history of landed aristocracies and merchant guilds, together with their typical tool, an oligarchic central government. Despite Hume, the consensus links faith in the individual with impatience of constraints imposed upon him from without.

In broad terms the novel is associated from the beginning with the more individualistic, optimistic, and politically liberal strands in eighteenth-century thinking. It is true that Fielding seems unusual in openly preaching a latitudinarian theology, and that at first glance Defoe and Richardson put forward an opposing faith, the old Puritan concept of man's sinfulness and his need for grace. But more important than this difference is the fact that over a broad area the form of the novel itself pleads for the individual, for his innate well-meaningness and for his value. Ronald Paulson has observed that the ethics of the novel are more relativist than those of satire. The novelist concentrates on the man or woman, the satirist on the deed. The novelist is in effect engaged in explaining and understanding a chronological sequence of actions in terms of the man who performs them; the satirist judges the single objective fact.[4] The intrinsically progressive

[1] From 'Christianity and the Creation': quoted by Crane, op. cit., p. 226.

[2] Hume's sceptical treatment in his *History* of the libertarian arguments of seventeenth-century parliamentarians aroused anger and dismay among his Whig readers. Cf. Duncan Forbes, introduction to Hume's *History of England*, Pelican Books, 1970, pp. 18 ff.; and below, pp. 34–6.

[3] See below, p. 35.

[4] R. Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth Century England*, New Haven, 1967, pp. 3–11.

element in the novel, which distinguishes it from earlier forms, lies in the unique dominance over the action of the personality of the hero or heroine, for this in itself implies a subjective attitude to reality. But if a tendency towards relativism is present in the novel from the beginning, it becomes conscious and explicit in the 1760s and 1770s.

The broad characteristics of the sentimental movement—its conscious intellectuality, its belief in man, its dislike of dogma, and its political liberalism—are well illustrated in the work of Henry Mackenzie (1745–1831). This versatile and representative man of letters ('our Scottish Addison', as Walter Scott called him) grew up in an Edinburgh dominated by the two greatest figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, Hume and Smith.[1] He inherited the concerns of that gifted group, especially its interest in psychology and its observation that in practice the mind is governed by irrational associations rather than by the conscious will. He also inherited its liberalism. It is possible to miss this vein in Mackenzie, for he has none of the campaigning zeal of his fellow-Scotsman Smollett, as manifested in the brilliant assault on naval inefficiency in *Roderick Random*. Yet, despite its more muted expression, Mackenzie's sympathy with the victimized individual and his dislike of the system has the same general connotation as Smollett's—or, at least, has every ingredient that is seen as tendentious a generation later.[2] After Harley, the Man of Feeling, is deceived by the ex-footman pretending to gentility, he reflects that 'the fault may more properly be imputed to that rank where the futility is real, than where it is feigned'.[3] Later Harley hears a lecture from the misanthropist, denouncing British rapacity in India. Throughout, Mackenzie shows the woes of victims of the rich and powerful, from Miss Atkins, seduced by the squire's son, to the old soldier Edwards, who is successively the pawn of a heartless landlord, a partial magistrate, a press-gang, brutal naval discipline, and a generally unfeeling society.

[1] Both figure in Mackenzie's entertaining and far from egotistical *Anecdotes and Egotisms*, ed. H. W. Thompson, London, 1927.

[2] See below, pp. 88 ff.

[3] *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers, Oxford English Novels, 1967, p. 89.

Yet, although the element of social criticism so typical of the 1760s and 1770s is present in Mackenzie, his real radicalism lies elsewhere. His psychology has deeper implications than his politics for the traditional ethical system. He goes far further than writers of any earlier generation in finding artistic expression for the authentic psychology of Hume. His presentation of human consciousness is fleeting, impressionistic, emotional rather than rational. He does not attempt to realize the social scene by objective means; truth for Mackenzie is essentially subjective. Both the formalized social structure—the State—and the formalized ethical structure—the Church—are diminished not by being attacked, but by being ignored. The entire action is located in Harley's feelings, the external world appears to exist only in so far as it makes an impression on him, and value exists not in any predetermined code of ethics, but in Harley's intuitive sympathy for his fellow-man.

Mackenzie is neither the first of his movement, nor the most brilliant. He lacks Sterne's humour, his originality, most if not all of his outstanding literary talent. Nor does he have the peculiar personal radiance which Goldsmith communicates in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. He is, however, more useful for our present purpose because he is more representative than either Sterne or Goldsmith. The eccentricity and exuberant play of fancy in *Tristram Shandy* partly obscures the book's intellectual point, although this can certainly be seen as characteristically sentimental: the vindication of Toby's simple and benevolent human instincts by comparison with the systematizing of Walter, the inhumanity of the Catholic Dr. Slop, even the calculation of the Widow Wadman. Like Sterne, Goldsmith casts his book in a characteristically sentimental mode, one in which a highly sentient, sympathetic family is assailed by a hard fate, and harder world. But Goldsmith blends his sentimental theme with some orthodox moralizing, and his other purpose, of schooling the Primrose family in Stoic or Christian resignation, is untypical of the movement. Mackenzie is plainer, more direct and consistent than either of them.

He is so partly because he is the most fully steeped of the three in the contemporary body of thinking for which senti-