

Jane Austen and the Limits of Freedom

JOHN LAUBER

THE continuing objections to Jane Austen's novels have nowhere been summed up more succinctly or more tellingly than by Emerson (not a likely reader of Jane Austen, one would have thought!) in his *Journal*: her novels are "vulgar in tone, sterile in invention, imprisoned in the wretched conventions of English society, without genius, wit or knowledge of the world. Never was life so pinched and narrow." Her only subject, he goes on, is "marriageableness."¹ That final comment smacks of sexism — because "marriageableness" is presumably of greater concern to women than to men, therefore it cannot be a subject of primary importance — but leaving that point aside, while Emerson's language seems somewhat dated, his attitudes do not. The Romantic mind, whether in the nineteenth century or the twentieth, has difficulty in coming to terms with Jane Austen's work. From the viewpoint of extreme Romanticism (flourishing vigorously a century after Emerson) social conventions are *necessarily* wretched, because they repress the human spirit, and a life lived in obedience to them cannot be anything but "pinched and narrow."

A modern critic reinforces the argument: "Comedy exhibits the individual as eccentric and makes society triumph over him. It thus tends to a realistic form with a strongly satiric social emphasis which is not particularly congenial to Romanticism. Jane Austen's novels are an example of such comedy."² But comedy can be a liberating art as well as a corrective one, and such a generalization breaks down immediately when applied. Elizabeth Bennet is certainly considered eccentric by Miss Bingley or Lady Catherine de Bourgh, but she triumphs over them instead of being forced to conform to their standards. In fact, with the exception of Marianne Dashwood, the Jane Austen heroine always triumphs over society, or to speak more

precisely, within it. She triumphs by discovering, asserting, and finally satisfying her own needs and desires, and by protecting her integrity against hostile pressures. This kind of success is possible within the limits of social convention because those limits are not as constrictive as they may seem. While the Lady Catherines, the petty tyrants and repressors of individuality, claim to speak for society, in fact they do not. They are part of it, but not the whole, and because they are not, "the upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune"³ can be realized. To accept Lady Catherine's own evaluation of her authority, as Mr. Collins and Sir William Lucas do, is the mark of a fool.

The social world of Jane Austen's novels is ordinarily the world of the village or the country house, of Highbury and of Mansfield Park. This is the world of her personal experience, and much has been said about its narrow scope. Yet this narrowness may be a necessary condition for her comedy. Comedy is play, and "All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally."⁴ The "playground" of each novel is not only geographical and social; it is delimited also by the firm order of syntax and vocabulary, and by constantly felt governing principles, both of morals and of manners. The field on which the heroine plays for a desirable marriage is marked off precisely and the rules are clear — what pleasure would there be for either participant or spectator in a game without rules? "The conflict with the world whereby a living being maintains its own complex organic unity is a delightful encounter...The feeling of comedy is a feeling of heightened vitality, of challenged wit and will."⁵ Our response to Jane Austen is frequently a sense of exhilaration at the heroine's successful exertion of her wit and will to overcome these challenges, and this response in itself is proof that the life which the novels present is far from being "pinched and narrow." (This sense of heightened vitality constitutes what one might call the therapeutic value of the novels.)

The modern reader is likely to be struck not only by the smallness of the society presented, but by its intimacy. It is a

world of compulsory closeness in which everyone knows, or at least knows about and talks about, everyone else, a world in which "every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies."⁶ There is no real bitterness in that statement, rather an ironic acceptance of one of the conditions of life. Escape is impossible; no matter how difficult relations with a neighbour may be, they must continue on some basis or other. So the Dashwoods must submit to being bored by the Middletons, so Fanny Price cannot avoid the disagreeable attentions of Henry Crawford, so Emma and Harriet must be painfully embarrassed by meeting Mr. Elton after the collapse of Emma's disastrous attempt to capture him for Harriet. "Their being fixed, so absolutely fixed, in the same place, was bad for each, for all three. Not one of them had the power of removal, or of effecting any material change of society. They must encounter each other and make the best of it" (*Emma*, p. 143). From such encounters can spring intense drama when the mask of civility is finally thrown off and anger speaks directly, as in Emma's insult to Miss Bates at Box Hill or Elton's cruelty to Harriet at the ball. Freedom of movement is unknown to Jane Austen's women (even Mary Crawford, rich and unattached, must establish herself in a substitute home with relatives), and severely limited for her men by family ties, the sense of duty, and local attachment. Knightley is inconceivable without Donwell Abbey; it is part of his identity. The solidity of Darcy's character, in contrast to the flightiness of Bingley, arises to a considerable degree from his ownership of Pemberley, whereas Bingley is free to settle wherever he will and remove himself whenever he pleases.

But the world of the heroines is even narrower than these limits of place would suggest. Highbury is small enough, but Emma's range of acquaintance is limited to a fraction of the village, the "respectable" professional and commercial families. Relations of a kind are also possible with the very poor, who can receive charity, but with the remainder she has no meeting ground. Social value in such a world appears to depend on money and rank, although the claims of the two may conflict. Except in *Emma*, the heroine invariably loves a man who is

either above or beneath her (usually above) in one or both of these attributes. Hence the social obstacles which must be overcome, providing much of the action of the novel.

Finally, both behavior and belief seem to be tightly controlled. Manners and morals are firmly established; society knows what is right and enforces its code, particularly on women. (The code is enforced largely by women as well.) Fundamental beliefs concerning religion, morality and the social order may sometimes be violated or ignored, but they are not questioned.

In such a society, to an unsympathetic mind freedom might well seem impossible, and rebellion or slavery to convention the only alternatives. And yet, the novels demonstrate, significant possibilities for free action exist. "There is one thing, Emma, that a man can always do, if he chuses, and that is, his duty," says Knightley (*Emma*, p. 146). And women too, we might add. Right action, then, is always possible, and a knowledge of what is right cannot be dictated by convention, for sometimes moral and worldly principles clash; it must depend finally on individual judgment based on understanding of one's self and others and on a free choice of principle over prudence. More important still, in the decisive choice of a heroine's life, the choice of a husband, a limited freedom is possible — and not merely the freedom to refuse, as Elizabeth Bennet or Anne Elliot demonstrate. (We must resist the familiar romantic prejudice that a limited freedom is equivalent to no freedom at all.)

Unlike some of her romantic contemporaries, Jane Austen never looks to an idealized past or an apocalyptic future. The novels accept the necessity of social controls without regret or cynicism, and recognize their positive value in shaping and giving meaning to life (without them we would waste ourselves in the pursuit of every transient impulse); they accept without question the particular society of her time and place. In an England threatened not only by a hostile France but by subversive ideologies and social upheaval, Jane Austen's work must have seemed to contemporary readers a rock against the

waves of revolution, assuring them that their society was not only irremovably *there*, but that it was ordered, comprehensible, and good.⁷ Good not only because it provided an indispensable structure for individual human lives, but because, as the novels demonstrate, it allowed for the exercise of free choice and action, thereby increasing the possibilities of one's life.

In her novels, men and women find their happiness in the social world, or find it not at all. But as we have seen, this world is not a monolith composed of Lady Catherines. Tightly structured as it appears, it still leaves a certain space to each individual, to make of it what he or she will. (It is precisely this insistence on the possibility and importance of freedom that distinguishes Jane Austen's work from the "anti-Jacobin" novel of the time.) This question of the possibility of free choice and free action in apparently closed situations is a major concern of the novels. The discovery and exploration of these possibilities is carried out by the heroines — most notably Elizabeth Bennet, which may account for the unique vitality of that heroine and of the novel in which she appears.

Freedom in itself, absolute freedom regardless of the use made of it — this obviously is not a value of the novels. The question always arises: "Freedom for what?" Henry Crawford might seem to be the freest character in Jane Austen's novels. Intelligent, agreeable, wealthy, of good birth, orphaned, and unrestricted by any particular regard for principles and decorum — surely Crawford can do just what he will and only what he will. In fact, all his actions are either trivial or positively hurtful, both to himself and others. Mr. Yates, in the same novel, stands for absolute freedom and defiance of the tyrannical authority of morality and of parents — but Yates is so patently a fool that no reader is likely to take his side even against the heavy authority of Sir Thomas Bertram. There are other apostles of freedom in the novels — Lydia Bennet (by her actions) and Sir Edward Denham of *Sanditon*, but both are discredited. Lydia's total disregard for both morality and decorum brings great suffering and the possibility of social disgrace upon her family, and she throws away her own life in a loveless marriage. ("His affection for her soon sunk into

indifference; her's lasted a little longer" — *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 387). Her independence of convention results from total thoughtlessness, a blank refusal to consider the consequences of her own actions. Sir Edward's challenge to the conventions is potentially more dangerous, based on (perverted) principle rather than mere obedience to impulse. Sir Edward is an ideologue of passion (of "high Conceptions, Unbounded Views, illimitable Ardour, indomtible Decision." — *Minor Works*, p. 403). Sir Edward is a fool, however, a Quixote in reverse (reading novels has inspired him to play the villain), and he offers no real threat to society. Clara Brereton, whom he has decided to seduce, "saw through him and had not the least intention of being seduced" (*Minor Works*, p. 405). Sir Edward's apparent freedom, in fact, might be considered as exactly the opposite; he is as rule-bound as any moralist could be. Because Clara is "young, lovely & dependant" he *must* seduce her; "Her situation in every way called for it" (*Minor Works*, p. 405). The potential danger of Sir Edward's reasoned subversion of morality is cancelled by his dubious folly.

If freedom is defined as defiance of moral principle, of decorum, of parental authority, then plainly the novels reject it by revealing with convincing logic its absurd or disastrous consequences. This "freedom" is invariably used for trivial, harmful, or self-defeating purposes. And although the point is not made explicitly (to do so would be most uncharacteristic for Jane Austen), it is perhaps implied that the freedom which consists in obedience to every impulse might be the worst slavery. Jane Austen, as a true novelist, is essentially a pragmatist: obedience to principle is justified, and violation of it condemned, by the results. The value of freedom, then, is potential rather than intrinsic, depending entirely on the use that is made of it.

In Jane Austen's novels the oppressive power of society is likely to be embodied in the "great lady" (made great by money and rank). Lady Catherine is the most conspicuous example, but the type occurs through the works, from the juvenile "A Collection of Letters" ("It is not my way to find fault with people because they are poor, for I always think they are more to be

despised and pitied than blamed for it" — *Minor Works*, p. 157) to Lady Denham of *Sanditon*, vigorously exercising the power of her purse over Sir Edward Denham and Clara Brereton. One remembers also Mrs. Churchill, whose presence is so strongly felt in *Emma* and whose death at last permits Frank Churchill to reveal his engagement to Jane Fairfax. (General Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, as unreasonable and arbitrarily despotic as any, plays a male version of the role.) The most brutally tyrannical of them all is undoubtedly Mrs. Ferrars of *Sense and Sensibility*, whose ferocity toward a disobedient son reaches the limits of comedy: "His own two thousand pounds she protested should be his all; she would never see him again; and so far would she be from affording him the smallest assistance, that if he were to enter any profession with a view of better support, she would do all in her power to prevent his advancing in it" (*Sense and Sensibility*, p. 267). But her anger is futile and its result is only to injure her own pride when she transfers Edward's inheritance to his brother Robert and thus enables Robert to marry the despised Lucy Steele. In Jane Austen's comic world, tyranny is always stupid.

The great ladies are essentially ridiculous. There is an absurdity in the image of Lady Catherine scolding her villagers into harmony and contentment, that prevents the reader from considering her a serious threat. She can be defeated by anyone who has the wit to recognize the emptiness of her pretensions and to resist her commands. After all, her power is limited; it is only to herself and a few fools that she embodies Society. Elizabeth knows better. When Lady Catherine charges that "you are determined to ruin [Darcy] in the opinion of his friends, and make him the contempt of the world," she is quite sure that "the world in general would have too much sense to join in the scorn" (*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 358).

The role of the great lady is played most vigorously and viciously by Mrs. Norris in relation to Fanny Price. Although not a great lady in the literal sense, she outdoes the great in eager officiousness and petty tyranny, made more oppressive by her intimate relation to Fanny. Of all Jane Austen's novels, *Mansfield Park* is closest to the fairy-tale pattern (Fanny

making an admirable Cinderella), and Mrs. Norris is the model of a wicked stepmother — the position that she actually fills, with Lady Bertram's abdication of all responsibilities. She is an archetypal figure who is yet completely individualized and thoroughly credible, so credible, in fact, that she becomes the most hateful of Jane Austen's characters. But although she can and does render Fanny unhappy, and provides an indispensable testing of character, she does not really block Fanny's winning of Edmund — rather, she aids it, as her cruelty arouses Edmund's sympathy for Fanny. Although she does great harm to Maria Bertram, in regard to the heroine she is finally as ineffectual as Lady Catherine toward Elizabeth Bennet.

The great lady threatens to frustrate the desires of the heroine and hero. In *Emma* there can be no such role in relation to Emma Woodhouse and Mrs. Knightley — the most influential woman and man in their social world. There is no conflict between Emma and her society; there is no question of society interposing any barrier between her and whatever she might desire. Unlike any of the other heroines, Emma herself has social authority, and this authority proves dangerous to herself and others. Given her fondness for flattery (Harriet Smith's ignorance constitutes, as Knightley points out, the most insidious and delightful flattery), her love of being "useful" to her social inferiors and her passion for matchmaking, she comes close to being a domineering, officious great lady herself. Her consummate egotism is more dangerous than open tyranny — Harriet is almost literally devoured: "She read the concluding lines [of Elton's charade] and was all flutter and happiness. She was not wanted to speak. It was enough for her to feel. Emma spoke for her" (*Emma*, p. 72). That she is capable of social tyranny, her insult to Miss Bates reveals. Perhaps only her marriage to Knightley prevents Emma from becoming the Lady Catherine of Highbury.

The novel that deals most directly and continuously with the issue of freedom is *Sense and Sensibility*. Here Jane Austen created a heroine whom Emerson himself could have admired, who shares his disgust at the "wretched conventions" of English society. Marianne Dashwood is an extreme romantic, claiming

total freedom of action and of self-expression, regardless of social inhibitions. Her "sensibility" is not simply a matter of swoons and raptures, like those undergone by the heroines of the juvenile *Love and Friendship*; rather it is a comprehensive attitude toward life, involving several distinct yet inseparable elements. The capacity to feel, deeply and immediately, becomes the criterion of personal value. Correspondingly, the value of any experience — viewing a landscape, listening to music, conversation — depends entirely on the intensity of feeling which it arouses. Feeling must be expressed fully and immediately, without regard for "manners" and "decorum". The social lie is rejected under any circumstances; if Marianne cannot express her feelings, she withdraws into silence or music. Right action is to be determined not by principle but by impulse, intuition, feeling.

For her sister Elinor, "the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety." For Marianne, "On the contrary, nothing can be a strong proof of it. . . for if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it . . . and . . . could have had no pleasure" (*Sense and Sensibility*, p. 68). The differences between the ethic of principle and the ethic of feeling cannot be reconciled. Unlike any other character in the novels (the farcical Sir Edward Denham hardly makes an exception), Marianne challenges the fundamental values of her fictional society and also, from all available evidence, of Jane Austen herself. Such a principled rejection of the authority of principle is more threatening to society than the impulsive acts of any of the semirakes who are Jane Austen's anti-heroines. No compromise, no triumph within the system is possible, and Marianne must finally submit.

The novel demonstrates beyond any doubt the disadvantages of sensibility — its intolerance of human differences, the inconvenience and actual distress which it may cause. Marianne is unreasonably difficult in society: "It was impossible for her to say what she did not feel . . . and upon Elinor, therefore, the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell" (*Sense and Sensibility*, p. 122). So when Lucy Steele observes "What a sweet woman Lady Middleton

is!", Elinor "did her best when thus called on, by speaking of Lady Middleton with more warmth than she felt." But is there any real need for this particular lie? Why must Elinor agree that the insipid Lady Middleton is a sweet woman? These little dishonesties come too easily, and Elinor is made too conscious of the opinions of the Steeles — as if their opinion really mattered. Such consciousness becomes, as Marianne calls it, "subservience".

"But I thought it was right, Elinor," said Marianne, 'to be guided wholly by the opinion of other people. I thought our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of our neighbours. This has always been your doctrine, I am sure.'

'No, Marianne, never. My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behavior.' (*Sense and Sensibility*, pp. 93-4).

But behavior and understanding are not so easily separated, and in a novel one must judge characters by their behavior (including their own words) because finally there is nothing else. Elinor is the most passive of the Jane Austen heroines, much more so than Fanny Price, who makes a series of heroic refusals (refusing to act in *Lovers' Vows*, refusing Henry Crawford's proposal, refusing the demand of Sir Thomas Bertram that she accept Crawford). Elinor does not act, she does not refuse, she only endures, and although we may realize (as a piece of abstract knowledge) that such endurance must be painful, that kind of knowledge is not enough. Because Elinor is never *shown* to feel, we feel very little interest in her or sympathy for her situation. It is no use for the author to assure us in the first chapter that "She had an excellent heart; her dispositions were affectionate, and her feelings were strong, but she knew how to govern them" (*Sense and Sensibility*, p. 6). They are governed so thoroughly that we get no proof of their existence. Jane Austen undertook to create a heroine who would serve as an embodiment of propriety, principle, prudence, decorum and reserve, displaying these qualities under all circumstances, and who would nevertheless convince us that "she had an excellent heart, her dispositions were affectionate, and her feelings were strong." She fails, because the qualities

attributed to Elinor are contradicted by those she actually displays.

"Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained;" writes Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "and the restrainer or reason usurps its place and governs the unwilling. And being restrain'd, it by degrees becomes passive, till it is only the shadow of desire." Elinor appears to belong to this class: "Even now her self-command is invariable. When is she dejected or melancholy? When does she try to avoid society, or appear restless and dissatisfied in it?" (*Sense and Sensibility*, p. 39), remarks Marianne after Elinor has lost her home and apparently her lover, and this is exactly the difficulty. Invariable self-command is Elinor's most distinctive quality, and it necessarily prevents her from displaying the strength of feeling which must be demonstrated if her sense is to seem a desirable alternative to Marianne's sensibility, and her regard for convention a reasoned compliance rather than "subservience." "The trouble is not merely that, for all the author's artistic tact, the cumbrous framework and enforced contrasts remain. . . . Marianne is drawn with strong feelings which the reader is accustomed to sympathize with. . . . Right or wrong, she has our sympathy . . . our responses to her are outside Jane Austen's control."⁸ Inevitably — most readers have a bias toward feeling and freedom, even if they never claim as much as Marianne. The author has committed the error, fatal to her didactic purpose, of seeming to define "sense" as "constraint".

It is hardly necessary to demonstrate the importance of freedom in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*. No one is likely to deny that Elizabeth Bennet is a free spirit or that this freedom, deriving from her intelligence and vitality rather than lack of principle, and expressing itself through her iconoclastic wit and self-assertion, is the source of her unique charm. It naturally gives offence to those whose pretensions are hollow, or who are enslaved by convention. "To walk three miles . . . above her ankles in dirt, and alone, what could she mean by it? It seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum"

(*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 36). But any Austen character who condemns independence in itself becomes, at least momentarily, a fool (as his or her language demonstrates). By comic justice, it is precisely Elizabeth's independence which fascinates Darcy (disgusted with the servility of Miss Bingley and her like); Darcy's fascination establishes his own worth and entitles him to the position of hero.

Anne Elliot is the only Jane Austen heroine who actually yields to social pressure, or "persuasion", to the extent of breaking her engagement with the hero. By the time the novel begins, she has come to realize and regret her mistake: "How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been . . . on the side of early warm attachment, and cheerful confidence in futurity . . . She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older — the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning" (*Persuasion*, p. 30). Extreme prudence in youth — the prudence of an Elinor Dashwood, for instance — has now become "an unnatural beginning."

The Jane Austen heroine, then, possesses a substantial (though of course limited) freedom, without exercising which she could win neither the hero nor the sympathy and interest of the reader. Thus the exhilaration of reading *Pride and Prejudice* results in large part from our delight in seeing the heroine rise superior to social barriers and prejudices. But in *Mansfield Park* we find a heroine, and a novel, which seem to contradict all that has just been said, and a critical hypothesis about Jane Austen's work which is flatly contradicted by one of her major novels cannot be of much use. Even sympathetic readers have found in *Mansfield Park* a positive bias against freedom and in favor of purely conventional behavior: "Its impulse is not to forgive, but to condemn. Its praise is not for social freedom but for social stasis."⁹ Fanny Price, it has been said, is a heroine who employs "the technique of lying down and going limp."¹⁰ And *Mansfield Park* has been described as "The most imaginative and accomplished of anti-Jacobin novels."¹¹ The anti-Jacobin novel, in turn, is characterized as being deeply suspicious of subjectivity; of assertions of the superiority of individual insight to social conventions and of feeling to reason and judgment; of

the alleged innate goodness of human nature and of any action or attitude which might conceivably undermine marriage, religion, established morality, community — in favor of a selfish individualism which simply pursues self-gratification.¹² But *Mansfield Park* is far too complex a novel to be neatly categorized, or enlisted in ideological crusades. It is true that the Crawfords abundantly illustrate the dangers of "selfish individualism which simply pursues self-gratification." But the Crawfords are not in the least subjective — it is Fanny who displays the deepest feeling in the novel, not only in loving Edmund and her brother but in her response to poetry and landscape, and this depth of feeling helps to establish her moral superiority. In making her refusals, Fanny is guided entirely by her individual insight into the real nature of the situations, of the personalities involved, and of the relation of moral principle to actuality. Freedom itself is not condemned, because (as we have seen) Henry Crawford's apparent freedom is shown to be useless, even injurious to others. It is necessarily misdirected, because Crawford is guided by neither principle nor self-knowledge. It is certainly true, as we already have seen, that unconditional freedom is never an absolute value in the novels, and Jane Austen is ironic at the expense of characters who consider any restraint whatever as oppression. After Sir Thomas Bertram has put an end to the Mansfield theatricals, Mr. Yates reflects that "He had known many disagreeable fathers before . . . but never in the whole course of his life, had he seen one of that class so unintelligibly moral, so infamously tyrannical, as Sir Thomas" (*Mansfield Park*, p. 191). Yates's condemnation is the highest praise.

Mansfield Park, one might say, is not concerned with freedom but with integrity. But of course the two are inseparable, and Fanny Price exercises her freedom in preserving her integrity — first by refusing to take part in the theatricals, then by refusing to marry Crawford (which involves refusing Sir Thomas Bertram as well, when he urges her to accept). *Mansfield Park* presents not the development of a personality but its conservation, and it is a mistake to consider the novel as a "dramatization of Fanny Price's education."¹⁸ Fanny's struggle

is not to become a particular kind of person, but to remain what she is against various pressures and temptations. By the time the major action commences she has learned almost everything she needs to know. She has learned the lessons of Mansfield Park, and has surpassed her teachers. She is as principled as Edmund or Sir Thomas and more consistent than either (Edmund being blinded at times by his love for Mary Crawford and Sir Thomas by a concern for worldly interests), as well as keener in her judgment of character.

Fanny's refusal of Crawford (refusals, one should say, since he is persistent) does not seriously test her, as she has no liking or respect for him. Her refusal to act in *Lovers' Vows* is more difficult, for it involves not only denying a request from Edmund, whom she loves and profoundly admires, but implicitly condemns his decision to participate. It is the refusal of Sir Thomas that is hardest. This is a negative action to be sure, but it seems to achieve moral heroism when we consider Fanny's genuine humility and lifelong training in submissiveness, the awe in which she holds her uncle, her complete dependence on his goodwill, and the cruel dilemma in which she is placed. The explanation which would satisfy Sir Thomas completely — her observation of Crawford's behavior with Maria and Julia — she cannot give. We must remember that to Fanny Sir Thomas personifies Society (as far as she knows or cares about Society) and Principle. His authority is far-reaching and, to her, legitimate.

Nevertheless she refuses, and in refusing asserts her own freedom, and Sir Thomas becomes absurd in his denunciation: "I had thought you peculiarly free from wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit . . . which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offense. But you have now shown me that you can be wilful and perverse, that you can and will decide for yourself" (*Mansfield Park*, p. 318). Exactly — against all urgings. That she can and will decide for herself is the saving of Fanny, in her fictional world and as a heroine too. No interest in or sympathy for her would be possible if she were only the patient Griselda that she sometime seems, if we did not know that, as Mrs. Norris

says, "she likes to go her own way to work; she does not like to be dictated; she takes her own independent walk whenever she can; she certainly has a little spirit of secrecy, and of independence and nonsense about her, which I would advise her to get the better of" (*Mansfield Park*, p. 323). Although his language is more dignified, Sir Thomas's speech is basically as absurd as Mrs. Norris's. Only a fool condemns independence.

Although Fanny's principles are formed, she does have one lesson to learn before she can win the hero. She must overcome her excessive humility and learn to rate herself and her claims to consideration at their true value. A carefully arranged series of episodes teaches this lesson: dinner at the Grants, with the unprecedented circumstances of the carriage being sent for her; the ball at Mansfield which she leads; Crawford's proposal; the visit to her family and assumption of responsibility for guiding her younger sister, Susan. When Fanny subscribes to the Portsmouth circulating library, she is "amazed at being in *propria persona*, for the first time in her life" (*Mansfield Park*, p. 398), but in reality she has already acted far more significantly *in propria persona* by her refusals.

Mansfield Park, then, dramatizes not the education but the individualization of Fanny Price, which might be defined as the conscious recognition of what already exists and the defense of its integrity. Integrity and self-defense, in the deepest sense, are the major concerns of the novel, but freedom is essential, and for all her timidity Fanny judges freely and acts upon her judgments. And at last, by exercising her freedom in holding firm to her principles, Cinderella wins the Prince (that is, Fanny marries Edmund Bertram). It is arguable, indeed, that Fanny Price enlarges her sphere of action more than any of the other heroines. Given the social level from which she begins, her eventual union with Edmund is a greater triumph of personality over circumstances than Elizabeth's union with Darcy.

To play the role of primary heroine, and hold the reader's interest while doing so, a character must possess a certain minimum of freedom, must be able to *act*. Elinor Dashwood's complete passivity accounts for the partial failure of *Sense and*

Sensibility; she is the totally passive character that Fanny Price sometimes appears to be. The examples of Jane Fairfax and Emma Watson (in the fragmentary *The Watsons*) are relevant here. Without rank or money or family, without even the security that Fanny derived from *Mansfield Park*, Jane Fairfax's social position is at the opposite extreme from that of Emma, the primary heroine. As Emma is entering the world, Jane — at exactly the same age — is preparing to withdraw from it: "With the fortitude of a devoted novice, she had resolved at one-and-twenty to complete the sacrifice, and retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification forever" (*Emma*, p. 165). After the one action of entering into a secret engagement with Frank Churchill, she can only wait for a miracle, which in due course happens. Two miracles, in fact, are needed to save her: first, Frank's falling in love with and engaging himself to her, and second the lucky death of Mr. Churchill, who never would have permitted their marriage. Jane is the almost helpless victim of her society; the odds against her are insuperable and can be overcome only by an act of Providence, not by any possible action of her own. For this reason, among others, she never challenges Emma's position in the reader's interest, although she is undoubtedly the more "admirable" character. Emma Watson, if *The Watsons* had been completed, would have been a primary heroine as helpless as Jane (her position would have been rather like that of Fanny Price, had Fanny remained at Portsmouth with her family instead of being taken back by the Bertrams). A heroine suffering continuously "from the dreadful mortifications of unequal Society, & family Discord — from the immediate endurance of Hard-hearted prosperity, low-minded Conceit, & wrong-headed folly" (*Minor Works*, p. 361), with no power to relieve those conditions by her own actions, is not an appropriate heroine for a Jane Austen novel. Comedy is hardly possible under such conditions. (Elizabeth Bennet suffers to some extent from unequal society and family discord, but to a lesser degree — the difference in degree is all-important — and what is more, can exert herself against those evils and largely escape them. Fanny Price endures them

at Portsmouth, but on a visit which she knows will end.) The family tradition that *The Watsons* was abandoned because Jane Austen felt she had placed her heroine in too low a position looks plausible. Some power to act seems essential to a heroine of comedy; passive endurance seems more appropriate to pathos or sentimentality — more appropriate, in short, to the Victorian novel.

If such characters as Emma Watson and Jane Fairfax have been deprived of their freedom by the circumstances of their situation in society, there is another class who have, in a sense voluntarily (though not consciously), deprived themselves of freedom in some or all circumstances. These might be called the rule-bound characters. Miss Bingley provides a convenient example: a lady must never under any circumstances muddy her petticoat. Mr. Elton is rule-bound in his proposal to Emma: "she found . . . her hand seized — her attention demanded, and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her: availing himself of the precious opportunity, declaring sentiments which must be already well known, hoping — fearing — adoring — ready to die if she refused him; but flattering himself that his ardent attachment and unequalled love and unexampled passion could not fail of having some effect," etc. (*Emma*, p. 129). This is love by the book — emphasized by the technique of direct discourse, which reduces the declaration to its basic clichés — and Elton presumably has learned it from plays or novels (bad ones, no doubt). Taken literally, almost every word it contains is a lie (instead of dying, for example, he marries Augusta Hawkins with ten thousand pounds), but for Elton love-making is a ritual with its established procedures and language. One does the expected thing (seizing the lady's hand) and pronounces the expected words, and assumes that the desired result will follow. Mr. Collins, on a similar occasion, will not be convinced that Elizabeth means her refusal, because for him it is a rule that "elegant females" say no at first to increase their lovers' suspense (*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 108). The language of sincerity, when Knightley proposes to Emma, is rather different: "If I loved you less I might be able to talk about it more . . . I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it

as no other woman in England would have borne it" (*Emma*, p. 430). Collins is a fool: Elton is ordinarily rational, but in his lovemaking has made himself a fool by the use of formulaic language entirely inappropriate to the real situation, and by doing so has surrendered his own freedom.

The fool, of course, cannot enjoy freedom in any true sense (even when there are no external constraints on his acts) because he lacks the power of free and intelligent choice. A life devoted wholly to social ritual and governed entirely by its rules results in the total inspidity of Lady Middleton in *Sense and Sensibility* or the "heartless elegance" of Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot in *Persuasion*, which is so vividly contrasted with the spontaneity and emotional freedom of the naval characters — Wentworth, Harville, and the Crofts. (Knightley displays the same qualities; and it is his ability to rise above social rules, to act and speak freely and spontaneously, that makes him the most interesting of Jane Austen's heroes.) A life lived purely in accordance with the rules is a life of "elegance," "prosperity," and "nothingness" (*Persuasion*, p. 9). Lady Catherine de Bourgh obviously is rule-bound (young women should always be deferential and yielding, for example). Charlotte Lucas, though not a fool, behaves most foolishly. She accepts Mr. Collins because she has already accepted as an absolute rule that a single woman *must* find a husband. Even Mary Crawford, who appears to possess an intellectual freedom wider than Elizabeth Bennet's, in fact accepts without question the standards of fashionable London society. (Thus, her dislike for Edmund's intention of becoming a country clergyman is based entirely on the low social rating of that occupation by her own set.)

Jane Austen's heroines possess a real, although limited, freedom. It must be guided by principle if it is to be of value to anyone, and to live according to principle requires the exercise of free judgment and free choice, and the ability to resist social pressures. The novels contain only one example of a heroine who yields to such "persuasion" — Anne Elliot, who has realized her mistake. As one might expect, however, a balance is enforced. Although Anne had surrendered unwisely to "persuasion", the

novel does not unreservedly recommend the opposite quality of "resolution". It distinguishes, in Johnsonian diction and syntax, "between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of selfwill, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind" (*Persuasion*, p. 26), and Wentworth must learn the difference. Louisa Musgrove (a kind of vulgarized Marianne Dashwood, lacking her sincerity and passion) elevates resolution into a principle in itself, in large matters and small, and makes her dangerous jump down the stairs to the Cobb simply because "I am determined I will" (*Persuasion*, p. 109). The "universal felicity and advantage of firmness of character" (*Persuasion*, p. 110) is clearly to be doubted.

Certainly Jane Austen would never endorse the "firmness of character" which consists of following every impulse without regard for consequences. Carrying this principle to its logical conclusion identifies us with the foolish Sir Edward Denham, trying to live in obedience to "the sovereign impulses of illimitable Ardour" (*Minor Works*, p. 398). Life cannot be lived on a basis either of always giving in to impulse or of always resisting it, and neither *Persuasion* nor Jane Austen's work in general supports either side of such a ridiculous and unnecessary dichotomy. But *Persuasion* clearly demonstrates how misleading it is to say such things as "What Jane Austen most admired was the ability to resist impulse; what Lawrence most admired was surrender to it."¹⁴

The novels are on the side of freedom and of emotion, although not the unconditional freedom admired by extreme Romantics. The liberty enjoyed by Jane Austen's heroines is of a very English kind, hedged and bounded by morality, by social convention, and by status as determined by money and family. That is why the financial position must always be explained; it defines the scope of action and the kind of husband society is prepared to allow the heroine. But she is not confined to that definition. Each heroine has an area of freedom which she significantly enlarges in the course of the novel (or, in the case of Emma Woodhouse, achieves a self-understanding which gives meaning to her initial freedom). There is, of course, a necessary minimum of comfort and independence. Jane Austen's pen does

not dwell on scenes of guilt and misery, or of grinding poverty either. It is no wonder that in *The Watsons* the husband-hunting game is played so ferociously when the penalty of failure appears to be a lifetime of wretchedness. But the stakes are too high for comedy.

The limited freedom which the heroines of the completed novels possess is no less real because of its limits; in fact, they make it credible (and in life the possibility of *unlimited* choice usually bewilders and frustrates). The social world of the novels may be narrow, its manners and morals may seem rigid, but it is a world on a human scale and it is comprehensible. Knowing its restrictions, the heroines are able to act appropriately within those limits and occasionally to go beyond them, to preserve or in part create their individuality and to satisfy their desires.

NOTES

- ¹*The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. E. W. Emerson and W. E. Forbes (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1909-1914), v. 10.
- ²Laurence Lerner, *The Truth-tellers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 166.
- ³Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (in *The Works of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, v. 2), p. 356. All references to the novels are to this edition.
- ⁴J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 10.
- ⁵Suzanne Langer, "The Great Dramatic Forms: the Comic Rhythm," in *Theories of Comedy*, ed. Paul Lauter (New York: Anchor Books, 1964), p. 521.
- ⁶Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 198.
- ⁷For a full discussion of the ideological relevance of Jane Austen's novels to the great political and social issues of her day, see Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).
- ⁸Butler, 195-196.
- ⁹Lionel Trilling, "Mansfield Park," in *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), p. 127.
- ¹⁰Patricia Beer, *Reader, I Married Him* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 46.
- ¹¹Butler, p. 219.
- ¹²For a full characterization of the "anti-Jacobin" position, see chapter 4, "The Anti-Jacobins," of *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*.
- ¹³Butler, p. 298.
- ¹⁴Lerner, p. 137.