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JANE AUSTEN

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such thing as perpetuall Tranquillity of mind, while we live here; because Life it self is but Motion, and can never be without Desire, nor without Feare, no more than without Sense'). But without wishing melodramatically to turn the novel into something darker than it is, we can note that there has been a distinct shadow cast across the comedy. And, if General Tilney is unique in Catherine's experience, he would most surely not be unique in even as small an area as the English Midlands. His 'anger' is there until almost the very end, to shock even his son:

> The General, accustomed on every ordinary occasion to give the law in his family, prepared for no reluctance but of feeling, no opposing desire that should dare clothe itself in words, could ill brook the opposition of his son, steady as the sanction of reason and conscience could make it. But, in such a cause, his anger, though it must shock, could not intimidate Henry.

When he *does* give his 'consent' – he has to, there aren't many pages left – it is meaningless: 'his consent, very courteously worded in a page full of empty professions'. By pointing up the 'empty' words which make possible the 'perfect felicity' of the ending, Jane Austen is not only revealing her own contrivance of the perfunctory neatness of the conclusion. She is also indicating that the General has not changed, and that, while there may be satisfactory arrangements and joining of couples and at least a temporary satisfaction of 'desire', the irrational cannot be truly eradicated (if temporarily mollified), and total stability and security are not – not really – ever finally attainable. There is always the possibility of anger in the Abbey – or, indeed, in any structure in the social edifice. The novel ends with a truce between anger and desire. But the war can always be rejoined elsewhere.

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Secrecy and Sickness: *Sense and Sensibility*

Sense and Sensibility is, of course, about sense and sensibility, but it is also about secrecy and sickness. It opens with considerations of property and concludes with the symmetries of marriage, the two phenomena which determine the territorial divisions and the familial continuities of society, and this is entirely characteristic of what we take to be the Jane Austen world. But there is a muffled scream from Marianne at the heart of the novel (almost literally at the centre, in the twenty-ninth of fifty chapters), and the cause and subsequent suppression of that scream are quite as important in the book as the more or less delicate jostling for partners, property and power, which would seem to occupy the foreground of the action. That the scream is a symptom of the sickness, and the sickness intimately connected with the prevailing secrecy, is an aspect of the complex meaning of the novel which I shall try to indicate. In attempting to approach the novel in this way I am not trying to be merely, or perversely, original. But some extension of the customary vocabulary used in assessing this novel by Jane Austen seems to me to be necessary if we are to comprehend some of the most important issues of a book which seems to hold little interest for many of Jane Austen's most perceptive critics. For example, Walton Litz, who has written what is surely one of the best books on Jane Austen (*Jane Austen: A Study of her Artistic Development*), maintains that 'most readers would agree that *Sense and Sensibility* is the least interesting of Jane Austen's major works'. He sees it as being caught uneasily between burlesque and 'the serious novel' and graciously half exculpates it by saying that 'many of the difficulties in *Sense and Sensibility* can be explained, if not excused, by an examination of its evolution'. It is true that we know that there was an early version of the novel called *Elinor and Marianne* written some time around 1795–6 as a series of letters (like *Lady*

Susan, which it followed in order of composition); that *Sense and Sensibility* was started in November 1797; that, however much of the novel was finished then, it was worked on or considerably reworked in the next decade, finally to be published in the form we now have in 1811. There is no doubt that certain manifest unevennesses of technique may be ascribed to this prolonged evolution and one can see the point of Litz's summary that the novel is 'a youthful work patched up at a later date, in which the crude antitheses of the original structure were never successfully overcome'. What Litz means by 'crude antitheses' is the schematic separation of qualities indicated by the title, a fictional strategy which lingers on in *Pride and Prejudice* and which looks back to such eighteenth-century moralistic fictions as Mrs Inchbald's *Nature and Art*. (Litz also points to Maria Edgeworth's *Letters of Julia and Caroline*, published in 1795, in which two sisters also speak up in turn for sense and sensibility.) The use of antitheses as an instrument for separating out qualities to achieve ever greater clarification through ever finer differentiation is a predominant feature of eighteenth-century prose at least from the time of Locke, and it provides much of the energy of the dominant poetic form of the Age of Reason, the heroic couplet, which was made to yield its full analytic potential by Pope. Antitheses were a source of strength for much eighteeenth-century literature, but, so Litz would argue, something of a hindrance for the emergent novelist Jane Austen, because, as a habit of mind, the use of antitheses tends to produce polarised abstractions, the confrontation of stereotypes, and the automatic opposition of extremes. These make against the flexibility, and that sense of the unclassifiable in people and their actions, which are desirable in the novel. To achieve that flexibility and that sense, Jane Austen has to move beyond antitheses.

Clearly much of this is true and we could note a comparable development within a genre by recalling how the bold schematic bareness of the morality play gave way to the dense dramatic richness of Shakespeare's mature works. Jane Austen's later works, to say nothing of the novels of such a writer as George Eliot, when compared with eighteenth-century moralistic fictions, clearly mark a great extension and deepening of the possibilities of the novel form. But in regarding *Sense and Sensibility* as an eighteenth-century matrix containing, as it were,

the embryo of a nineteenth-century novel which struggles but fails to be born, I think we miss a lot that the book actually contains (Litz gives it some ten pages in a 180-page book, which is tantamount to a dismissal). Admittedly the title and the use of the two sisters does seem to indicate a fairly primitive schematisation, but the stuff of a novel may well belie the apparent simplicity of its structuring. The fact that Marianne has plenty of sense and Elinor is by no means devoid of sensibility should alone convince us that Jane Austen was already enough of a novelist to know that nothing comes unmixed, that qualities which may exist in pure isolation as abstractions only occur in people in combination, perhaps in confusion, with other qualities, in configurations which can be highly problematical. Indeed, the drama precipitated by the tensions between the potential instability of the individual and the required stabilities of society is in some ways as much the subject of this novel as it is of more celebrated fictions concerned with the opposition between individual energy and social structures. Which is another way of saying that, besides looking back to Maria Edgeworth's *Letters of Julia and Caroline*, *Sense and Sensibility* may be said to look forward to Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*. This is not to suggest – rare thought – that Jane Austen was an early Freudian, but rather to insist that *Sense and Sensibility* touches on some matters of perennial importance which tend to be obscured if we regard it as an early casualty in an evolving genre.

(To trace the history of the deployment of the word 'sensibility' – and the words 'sense' and 'Sensible' – in eighteenth-century literature would be to trace the history of the evolution of changing attitudes to, and evaluations of, a whole cluster of feelings and attitudes and dispositions which became a major preoccupation and concern of many eighteenth-century writers. Many books have been written on the subject. The only point we need to note here is that the connotations of the words, and the relationship between what they referred to, had become exceedingly problematical and labile by the time Jane Austen was writing. Their meanings were the reverse of fixed. Briefly we may say that for Richardson, and for Henry MacKenzie, 'sensibility' was to be equated with virtue. It denoted a fineness of feeling and disposition which took one out of the arena of more brutal and

abrasive appetites and desires which constituted 'the world', or society at large. It was a privileged sign of superior delicacy and morality. However, it was not only too sensitive and fine to operate in the world, too frail to engage in its crude competitive struggles: it also carried with it its own potential dangers. Even in Richardson it can become destructively – or self-destructively – excessive, as in the figures of the demented Clementina and the suicidal Laurana in Jane Austen's favourite novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*. That is to say that from the start of the cult of 'sensibility' – particularly in the tradition we think of as comprising the 'sentimental novel' – sensibility was always potentially, and often actually, ambivalent. It might permit of dangerous affective excitations as well as promoting the most refined virtue. Taken to excess – and how or where to draw the line? – it could lead to hysteria instead of exquisite morality, physical and mental collapse instead of an almost other-worldly composure. It was a mark of privilege always capable of turning into an affliction or ailment. That is to say it could signal a positive desocialisation – too exalted and committed to exquisite emotional integrity to function in the base world; or a negative desocialisation – too sick, uncontrolled and disordered to engage in any sane, sustained relationships. Almost exclusively, of course, the main ambivalences of 'sensibility' were localised and displayed in the figure of the – usually unmarried – woman. The story of 'sensibility' and the 'sentimental novel' has been told many times. One of the best recent accounts of it I know is by Dr John Mullan in an as-yet-unpublished thesis, 'Sentiment and Sociability'; and see also *Sex and Sensibility* by Jean Hagstrum. But it is enough for our purposes to have a sense of how shifting and ambivalent – and how important – the notion of 'sensibility' was when Jane Austen came to explore it, and its cognate terms, in her fiction.)

Seen in bare outline the plot displays a good deal of geometry. Elinor and Marianne move gradually towards desirable marriages with worthy men, Colonel Brandon and Edward Ferrars. This progress is variously complicated by the unscrupulous behaviour of two selfish people – Lucy and Willoughby. In pursuing their self-advancing ends these two remove themselves by opportunistic marriages which will provide suitable punishments in the form of domestic misery. At

the end two parallelograms are formed which demonstrate on the one hand true harmony (Elinor and Edward, Marianne and Brandon), and on the other a merely apparent, superficial harmony (Lucy and Robert, John and Fanny Dashwood); as is often the case, Jane Austen helps to make us appreciate the value of the real thing by juxtaposing a travesty or parodic version of it. It is this geometry which provides the formal resolution to the novel, and we shall return to it. But the body of the novel concerns itself with those things which complicate and cloud the emergence of that or any other geometry and it is in this connection that I want to consider the secrecy and sickness which, I suggested, are matters of some importance in the book.

'Come, come, let's have no secrets among friends', cries the incorrigibly inquisitive Mrs Jennings, and her less than courteous demand takes an added significance when we consider just how much secrecy there is among the few, and closely related, characters in the book. Colonel Brandon has to take a sudden departure, thus disrupting the planned excursion to Whitwell, but he cannot give any explanations. Lucy only lets Elinor know about her secret engagement to Edward Ferrars to silence her as a potential rival – 'it was always meant to be a great secret'; while Willoughby's inexplicably cruel conduct to Marianne begins to fall into place when his plan to marry Miss Grey is made known – 'it was no longer to be a secret'. Concealment obviously befits the calculating designs of these two cool self-seekers, but there are more secrets than the unavowed deeds and previous commitments of the main eligible males in the novel. For one thing, the idea of secret relationships was built into the social banter as a sort of game – thus the good-hearted but insensitive Sir John goes out of his way to create 'secrets' to bring a somewhat vulgar piquancy to his dinner table. ' "His name is Ferrars", said he, in a very audible whisper; "but pray do not tell it, for it's a great secret." ' One can imagine that the motives behind such social games as the masked ball were similar: if a society finds itself too utterly illuminated and everyone too boringly familiar, it may well seek to reintroduce some shadows, masks and screens if only to restore the stimulus and *frisson* of a rudimentary sense of mystery – or, at least, the titillating atmosphere of erotic conspiracy. But there is a much more important kind of secrecy which Jane Austen makes us aware of: the secrecy of everything

the heart may not enforce with the hand, display with the face, or express with the voice; that is, the secrecy of those things within, which are struggling to get out and meet with different kinds of restraints or suppressions. Such concealments may be admirable, or sly, or simply all that is possible in the circumstances, but in one form or another they recur throughout. There is the 'extraordinary silence' and 'strange kind of secrecy' maintained by Marianne and Willoughby; and later, in London, Marianne is secretive even to Elinor, manifesting 'a privacy that eluded all her watchfulness'. Elinor herself, when she hears of Lucy's engagement to Edward, manages 'a composure of voice under which was concealed an emotion and distress beyond anything she had ever felt before'. The phrase 'the necessity of concealing' gives some indication of Elinor's sense of responsibility towards the codes of formal behaviour; as a result no one would suppose 'that Elinor was mourning in secret over obstacles which must divide her for ever from the object of her love'. When Colonel Brandon seeks confirmation from Elinor that his love for Marianne cannot be returned he feels that 'concealment, if concealment be possible, is all that remains'. Examples could be proliferated, but the recurrence of such phrases as 'ill-judged secrecy', 'the appearance of secrecy', 'promise of secrecy' suggests how prevalent is the vocabulary of all kinds of concealing, whether the secrets are those kept by the individual from society or those the private self must try to keep from the public self. Elinor, who is made the repository of other people's secrets without anyone to whom she can tell her own, experiences to the full the burden and torments of secrecy: 'For four months, Marianne, I have had all this hanging on my mind, without being at liberty to speak of it to a single creature.' And, if silence is often required in the interests of honour and dignity, there may be another justification for secrecy, something more like self-survival. This is hinted at in the revealing letter written by Mr Dashwood after Lucy has been secretly married to Robert Ferrars. 'The secrecy with which everything has been carried on between them was rationally treated as enormously heightening the crime, because had any suspicion of it occurred to the other, *proper measures* would have been taken to *prevent the marriage*' (emphasis added). In this instance no one will suppose that the scheming Lucy married for love – love of Robert, at least; but the

italicised phrases which come so easily to the heartlessly respectable Mr Dashwood hint at the cruel coercive powers of society and the ruthlessness with which many of its members were willing to manipulate or 'correct' the aberrations of individual passion in the interests of wealth or some illusory hierarchical propriety. So, if secrecy is often a painful obligation imposed by the forms of a rigid society, it may also be a strategy against or around them.

By the end all the secrets have come to the surface and, with no more mysteries to cloud the emergent geometry of the book, the appropriate marriages can all be solemnised. But not before Marianne has been very ill indeed. As a person who believes in letting the emotions use the body as an expressive vehicle, it is hardly surprising that she cultivates tears as often as Elinor strives for composure. But what happens after Willoughby first leaves her and then treats her with such incomprehensible cruelty goes beyond the affectations of an emotional girl. Jane Austen traces the progress of her illness with such detail that we get some idea of the language of symptomatology and diagnosis of the time. She suffers from melancholy and has 'headaches, low spirits, and over fatigues'. Later she is 'wholly dispirited, careless of her appearance, and seemingly quite indifferent whether she went or starved'. For a while she is almost catatonic, 'without once stirring from her seat, or altering her attitude'. When she shows Elinor the letter which Willoughby sends disclaiming any understanding between them, she 'almost screamed with agony'. After this Marianne gets worse. 'Faint and giddy from a long want of proper rest and food'; 'an aching head, a weakened stomach, a general nervous faintness'; 'she moved from one posture to another, till growing more and more hysterical, her sister could with difficulty keep her on the bed at all'; so it goes on at intervals until she contracts the fever which nearly kills her. Here we are given a whole chapter describing the course of the illness from the time the doctor pronounces 'her disorder to have a putrid tendency', through the accelerations of her pulse, the incoherence of her mind, her 'rapid decay' and 'stupor', until the crisis is past, the pulse slows down, and Elinor, when 'Marianne fixed her eyes on her with a rational though languid gaze', knows her sister is better. We may note that it is precisely at this point when her long illness has passed its peak and Marianne is

returning to health and reason that Willoughby suddenly appears at the house – not as a threat but as a penitent; no longer the swaggering huntsman with a gun as he first appeared, but cowed and full of recriminations and regrets. It is as though, exactly at the moment when Marianne finds the reserves to rally from her fever, Willoughby's potency is vanquished and he appears out of the night to concede not only his mistake but also his defeat.

I have stressed the detailing that goes into Marianne's illness because it seems to me to be something much more serious than the amazing burlesque on excessive sensibility to be found in such pieces as *Love and Friendship*. For Marianne's illness is clearly psychosomatic and in many of its symptoms – the incoherence of mind, the catatonic trances alternating with restless demands for 'continual change of place', her periods of complete absence from and unawareness of the immediate world around her – her behaviour is pathological in a way which for the late eighteenth century could have been construed as madness. (Many of the early Romantic poets went mad, including Cowper, one of Marianne's – and Jane Austen's – favourites.) I want here to introduce some quotations from Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*. He gives evidence to show how in the later part of the eighteenth century there was a great increase in 'nervous diseases': of the causes of these diseases Tissot wrote, 'I do not hesitate to say that if they were once the rarest, they are today the most frequent.' And Foucault quotes another contemporary physician, Matthey, to show the growing sense of the precariousness of a reason which may at any moment be undermined by some inward disorder.

> Do not glory in your state, if you are wise and civilized men; an instant suffices to disturb and annihilate that supposed wisdom of which you are so proud; an unexpected event, a sharp and sudden emotion of the soul will abruptly change the most reasonable and intelligent man into a raving idiot.

It is interesting that Foucault has occasion to record that at this time the English were thought to be unusually prone to madness and melancholia. This was partly ascribed to the fact that they were a nation of merchants, anxiously preoccupied with financial

speculations, which not only led to more tyrannical families but in general to a state 'in which man is dispossessed of his desires by the laws of interest'. (These observations are extremely relevant to *Clarissa* as well.) It was also related to the equivocal liberty enjoyed by the English ('every man is left to his own uncertainty'), of which Foucault writes, 'liberty, far from putting man in possession of himself, ceaselessly alienates him from his essence and his world; it fascinates him in the absolute exteriority of other people and of money, in the irreversible interiority of passion and unfulfilled desire'. Still writing about this period, Foucault continues (in a section aptly entitled 'Madness, Civilization, and Sensibility') to give his account and explanation of the high incidence of nervous–mental disorders of the time. 'It is not only knowledge that detaches man from feeling; it is sensibility itself: a sensibility that is no longer controlled by the movements of nature, but by all the habits, all the demands of social life.' In particular those women who nourished themselves on literature (particularly novels) were prone to nervous disorders: 'it detaches the soul from all that is immediate and natural in feeling and leads it into an imaginary world of sentiments violent in proportion to the unreality, and less controlled by the gentle laws of nature'. (One contemporary cure for nervous disorders was to expose the sufferer to landscape so that the tendency to subjectivity might be somewhat corrected by a sense of those 'gentle laws': this is what Elinor tries with Marianne in, for example, chapter 16.) Foucault concludes this particular section of his book with the following somewhat sweeping but suggestive generalisations:

> In the second half of the eighteenth century, madness was no longer recognized in what brings man closer to an immemorial fall or an indefinitely present animality; it was, on the contrary, situated in those distances man takes in regard to himself, to his world, to all that is offered by the immediacy of nature; madness became possible in that milieu where man's relationships with his feelings, with time, with others, are altered; madness was possible because of everything which, in man's life and development, is a break with the immediate.

I have gone to some lengths to introduce Foucault's

imaginative perspectives on the later eighteenth century, not to advance the absurd theory that Marianne is actually a raving lunatic, but to invite the consideration that 'sensibility', besides being a psychological phenomenon connected with the early Romantic movement which was sometimes characterised by the kind of unironic excess easily ridiculed by satirists, should also be seen as symptomatic of a certain kind of society and as such an indirect comment on it. It is clear, for instance, that Marianne is well aware of, or perhaps we should say suffering from, that condition characterised by Foucault as a sense of 'the absolute exteriority of other people' and the 'irreversible interiority of passion and unfulfilled desire', and much of her later behaviour does indicate a 'break with the immediate'. She is indeed sick, sick with the intensity of her own secret passions and fantasies. What is the nature of the society in which this sickness breaks out, at least as Jane Austen depicts it? It is a world completely dominated by forms, for which another word may be screens, which may in turn be lies. For Marianne forms are equated with falsity; she will not join in the social masquerade. Her 'usual inattention to forms' is noted throughout. Society is for her as trivial as the endless whist that others delight to play; characteristically 'she would never learn the game'. A typical moment occurs when an insincere compliment to a cold lady invites corroboration. ' "What a sweet woman Lady Middleton is," said Lucy Steele. Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor, therefore, the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it always fell.' The astringent realism of Jane Austen's vision is clearly in evidence in the latter part of the sentence for society is indeed maintained by necessary lies. Marianne is one who demands that outward forms exactly project or portray inward feelings; this is that demand for sincerity, that loathing of hypocrisy, which is one of the most sympathetic characteristics of the Romantic movement. The difficulty here is that, while every individual may have a different inner world of feelings and thoughts, there is only one concrete external world in which we must cohabit. No one knew better than Jane Austen that people who were as remote foreigners to each other mentally might very well be very close neighbours physically. And, while she saw with unsparing clarity just how

much cruelty, repression and malice the social forms made possible, how much misery they generated, she knew that a world in which everyone was totally sincere, telling always the truth for the sake of their own feelings and never any lies for the feelings of others, would be simply an anarchy, everybody's personal 'form' cancelling out everybody else's.

More subtly Jane Austen perceived that it was often those people who claimed to be impatient of forms who were in some ways most reliant on them. Willoughby at first seems like a daring young lover, 'slighting too easily the forms of worldly propriety' in Elinor's sober eyes; yet he readily abandons his passional sincerities to secure the wealth and social position which will maintain him in his idleness and self-indulgence. Marianne's feelings go much deeper, yet it is worth noting that all along she expects more opulence and comfort from marriage than the supposedly too prudent Elinor (she calls £2000 a year a mere 'competence', while Elinor would regard £1000 as 'wealth'). In many ways both these lovers live at the expense of other people: Willoughby very literally, and Marianne more subtly in that, while she indulges every mood, making few concessions to social forms, she is in fact leaving Elinor with the task of covering up for her. It is one of Jane Austen's deft touches that Elinor should be very good at screen-painting, for she it is who is constantly trying to smooth and harmonise potentially abrasive and discordant occasions, giving the raw social realities a veneer of art. It is also an example of the complexity of Jane Austen's vision that, when Elinor's painted screens are being so cruelly insulted by the unspeakable snob Mrs Ferrars, Marianne refuses to 'screen' her personal outrage and anger and expresses her contempt for such malicious manners. We cannot fail to sympathise with her outburst if not positively applaud it, which means that Jane Austen has brought us to the point of feeling some positive approbation and appreciation for both the maintainer of screens and the discarder of screens. Clearly no very simple verdicts are being invited in this early novel. (It is interesting to compare Virginia Woolf's use of the word 'screen', for she also saw it as crucial in the description of life-with-others, but in a notably different way from Jane Austen. In her diary she refers to the 'screen-making' habit of the human personality, and goes on to acknowledge that 'this habit is so universal that probably it

preserves our sanity. If we had not this device for shutting people off from our sympathies we might perhaps dissolve utterly; separateness would be impossible.' Nevertheless she adds, 'the screens are in the excess, not the sympathy'. A part of Virginia Woof wanted to break down all the screens and discover and affirm the fluid interrelatedness and unity of all our separate-seeming lives. The 'screens' erected by the personality to preserve a sense of identity – and thus separateness – were an unfortunate social necessity: ideally the all-penetrating tides of 'sympathy' would break them down. Jane Austen envisaged no such ideal possibility. For her, for Elinor, the 'screens' are necessary to conceal and mitigate some of the ugliness and abrasiveness of society. At its best 'screen-making' was a form of social decorum. Virginia Woolf's characters put up screens to preserve the self; Elinor paints and makes screens to preserve society. Yet Jane Austen too might have felt that, if society were composed of more sensitive people, it would be a relief to do away with some of the screens, in the interests of a more direct interchange of sympathies. But, given the society she knew and depicted, Elinor's screen-making *is* a form of sympathy – and 'selflessness'.)

At one point Marianne cries out with some 'energy' to Elinor, 'Our situations then are alike. We have neither of us anything to tell; you, because you do not communicate, and I, because I conceal nothing.' This is not in fact fair to Elinor, who has to keep silence because she has promised to honour a secret, but the remark does point to a crucial difference between Marianne, who 'abhors all concealment', and Elinor, who is willing to contain private feelings in the interests of preserving some order among the necessary social coverings. Where Marianne seeks to express herself, Elinor works to compose herself, and Jane Austen has caught this difference between them even in contrasting their figures. Marianne's 'form, though not so correct as her sister's . . . was more striking'. I shall add some more comments on the two sisters later, but at this point I think one can see that through them is brought into focus a problem right at the heart of that, or indeed any other, society: namely, how much of the individual's inner world should be allowed to break out in the interests of personal vitality and psychic health; and how much should the external world be allowed to coerce and control that inner reality

in the interests of maintaining a social structure which does provide meaningful spaces and definitions for the lives of its members? When Elinor says to her mother of Marianne and Willoughby, 'I want no proof of their affection . . . but of their engagement I do', she is showing her awareness of this problem. 'Affection' is a personal disposition, and 'engagement' is a social act – the one a matter of unsocialised inwardness, the other a subscribing to the fixed impersonal symbolisms of the public world. What Elinor wants is that Marianne's love affair should be brought out of the formlessness of feeling into the defining forms of society. Otherwise she fears it might have no real continuity – and in the event she is right, though we cannot by the same token say that Marianne is wrong. What I want to suggest is that much of the drama of the book (which includes the comedy) is concerned precisely with that point at which the energies, desires and needs of the private world impinge on, or are impinged on by, the public. When Edward Ferrars, that victim of his parents' social ambitions who has led a life of '*fettered* inclination' (emphasis added), finally comes to Elinor both free and determined to marry her, he reveals something of both his nervousness and resolution by an unconscious act which makes one begin to think that Jane Austen would not perhaps have been so very surprised by Freud's formulations as we may at first suppose. 'He rose from his seat and walked to a window, apparently from not knowing what to do; took up a pair of scissors that lay there, . . . spoiling both them and their sheath by cutting the latter to pieces as he spoke. . . .' There are times when the scissors will destroy the sheath just as there are times when the sheath will contain the scissors. Edward's feelings can break from the sheath at this point to some purpose because he is directing them towards marriage. Marianne's passions are stronger and less prone to be 'fettered'; it is not surprising that a characteristically disruptive vocabulary attaches to her upsurges of emotion – 'Marianne's feelings had then broken in, and put an end to all regularity of detail', 'Marianne's indignation burst forth': in her we see clearly an example of the instinct to annihilate the forms that constrict her – of the extreme impatience of the scissors with the sheath. And, because her strong feelings do not find the free play they desire, they disrupt and undermine her body until she utters that scream at the centre of the book in

the centre of London. It is a muffled scream because the sheath is everywhere tight around her, but an inarticulate cry more eloquent than any language she might have used. And, between Marianne's compulsion to scream and Elinor's instinct to screen, Jane Austen brings home to us some of the problems and paradoxes involved in life in society as she knew it.

One of the paradoxes I have been suggesting is that it was a society which forced people to be at once very sociable and very private. Elinor withdraws to reflect in private as often as Marianne does to indulge her moods; and even in the company of others the 'effect of solitude' may be produced. 'Her mind was inevitably at liberty; her thoughts could not be chained elsewhere; and the past and the future . . . must be before her, must force her attention, and engross her memory, her reflection, and her fancy.' This mental solitude, which as often as not means mental suffering, is stressed in the last line of the Book I: 'Elinor was then at liberty to think and be wretched.' With this cameo Jane Austen is stressing how often interior freedom amounts to interior distress. At the same time it is clear that there are many people in this society who are all but devoid of any inner life. Sir John Middleton, for instance, is a good-natured man 'whose prevailing anxiety was the dread of being alone': such people are responsible for many of those organised contiguities which can be such a strain for sensitive people whose anxieties are of a much more inward and personal nature. The stress of being involved in private and social realities at the same time means that a lot of the important activity takes place in that small area where inner and outer realities meet – the eyes. Marianne 'turned her eyes towards Elinor, to see how she bore these attacks'; 'they all sat down to look at one another'; 'he eyed them with a curiosity which seemed to say . . .'; 'nothing escaped *her* minute observation and general curiosity; she saw everything'; 'Edward . . . gave her a look so serious, so earnest, so uncheerful, as seemed to say . . .'; 'Elinor . . . could not restrain her eyes from being fixed on him with a look that spoke all the contempt it excited'; 'she watched his eyes, while Mrs Jennings thought only of his behaviour'; 'even *her* eyes were fixed on him with the same impatient wonder': the whole vocabulary of vision is much in evidence throughout, indicating just how much goes on in that most sensitive organ which both connects and separates

consciousness and world. And in a world of so many secrets and imposed suppressions the eyes have to be unusually busy, not only encountering surfaces but also having to penetrate them, not only deciphering the signs but also interpreting them.

Inevitably in a world of screens the information any one individual receives is likely to be imperfect, and the misreading of insufficient evidence can lead to confusion. People with good intentions may in fact work to secure bad ends: Mrs Jennings is happy to think that Colonel Brandon is proposing to Elinor, but in fact he is offering to help Edward and Lucy, quite unaware of the pain this must cause Elinor. Misleading signs can produce more direct pain too, as when Elinor takes the empirical evidence of Lucy's ring on Edward's finger as indicative of his true emotional attachment. One can share a good deal of Marianne's abhorrence for all forms of 'concealment' when one sees something of the mischief and misery that can ensue in a world where the truth of things is usually not to be found on the surface. And it is Marianne who perhaps suffers most from the false face which the social world can put on when she receives that devastating snub from Willoughby at the party in London. The setting is important: it is a crowded room 'splendidly lit up, quite full of company, and insufferably hot', and the two sisters mill in to 'take their share of the heat and inconvenience'. Then Elinor sees Willoughby, and the drama commences.

> She soon caught his eye, and he immediately bowed. . . . Elinor turned involuntarily to Marianne, to see whether it could be unobserved by her. At that moment she first perceived him, and her whole countenance glowing with sudden delight, she would have moved towards him instantly, had not her sister caught hold of her. 'Good heavens!' she exclaimed, 'he is there – he is there. Oh! why does he not look at me? Why cannot I speak to him?'

Marianne would move directly and candidly towards the man she loves and whom she thinks loves her. But direct movement in accordance with the emotions is not so easy in this society; there is the intervening crowd, the glaring light, the constriction of 'good manners' and decorum, the overall oppressive heat – in all a sufficient analogue of the society as a whole. This is the sheath

at its most constricting. They are all in a sense trapped and immobilised and as a result all the activity goes into the eyes. And the severest indictment one can make of the social game is that at this point it lends itself entirely to Willoughby's designs – he can use the respected forms to compound a profound emotional falsity at the expense of Marianne. Marianne however cries out against this treachery of appearances. 'Her face crimsoned over, and she exclaimed in a voice of the greatest emotion, "Good God! Willoughby, what is the meaning of this?" ' No request for enlightenment could be more justified. Marianne, her face full of blood (and blushing here is as indicative of passion under pressure as it is in Racine), is protesting with bewildered outrage against the betrayal of all emotional integrity not only made possible but also concealed by the accepted rules of the social game. As such she is a self-authenticating figure of protest with a complaint which nothing and no one in the novel can ever really answer. She reveals her agony through symptoms of illness and faintness which she does nothing to hide, while Elinor, typically, 'tried to screen her from the observation of others'. There is a quintessential truth about the conditions of life in society expressed in that quiet struggle between screaming and screening. Meanwhile Lady Middleton, for whom the surface of society and its appurtenances are the only reality, carries on with her card game. The overall tableau at this point seems to me to be tolerably profound for such a supposedly deficient and unsatisfactory novel.

But, if the rules and forms of society inhibit much expressive action, particularly uncensored passional gestures, so that the eyes move more than the hands, that does not mean that action has been curtailed or completely banished to the inner world. It means rather that much of it has shifted to the more abstract but no less intense realm of language. Of all the defining structures erected by society, language is the most important, not only because we use it to transmit and inherit information, but also because it is with language that we give shape to our feelings and identity to our values. It is through language that the consciousness of man derives meanings and projects purposes from his encounters with otherness. And the quality of life in a society is dependent on its language – the way it has formulated its priorities and guiding concepts. But of course there is another

aspect to this perfecting of a language. For one thing it is available to the unscrupulous person who wishes to project a completely false model of reality, to fabricate or invert any state of affairs. She 'talks very well, with a happy command of language, which is too often used I believe to make Black appear White'. That is said of Lady Susan, one of Jane Austen's supreme manipulators. It indicates how vulnerable we all are to any unscrupulous person who has a complete command of the terms of our language. And there is another kind of possible linguistic victimisation in that our conduct is always at the mercy of other people's interpretative descriptions. Thus Marianne makes a very heartfelt retort to Elinor's warning that she is 'exposing' herself to the risk of 'impertinent remarks': 'If the impertinent remarks of Mrs Jennings are to be proofs of impropriety in conduct, we are all offending every moment of all our lives.' This is not just a witticism at the expense of a trying but well-meaning gossip. It is a protest of the sincere heart against the distortions of social language, which continually threaten to submit the individual's feelings and actions to derogatory redefinitions. One of the most important aspects of the Romantic movement was the refusal of the intensely feeling individual to have the meaning of his experience settled by other people's language. Indeed, there is a notion running through Romantic thought that all language is to some extent a falsification, since it involves transposing unique inner feelings into public terms and forms: there is even the feeling that, just as the laws and taboos of a society determine how a man acts, so its language determines how he feels. When Marianne says at one point, 'sometime I have kept my feelings to myself, because I could find no language to describe them in but what was worn and hackneyed out of all sense and meaning', she is speaking like a Romantic, preferring to keep her feelings intact and silent inside her rather than have them betrayed by the stale forms of the available language of the world around her. The language she prefers is that of the early Romantic poets, a language of solitude rather than society, a language which is more set on lending itself to the expressing of emotions than addressing itself to the problems of conduct. And, in case we think that Jane Austen is setting up a simple opposition between social and 'poetic' speech, we should remember that Marianne's favourite writers were also Jane Austen's.

There is a great deal of sympathy, then, with Marianne's conviction that language should be used to express private feelings rather than to preserve social forms. But Jane Austen could see perfectly well that if everyone limited language to the expression of sincere emotions there would be an anarchy of speech comparable to the anarchy of behaviour which would result from allowing action to be wholly determined by honest impulse. If we are to live together (and Jane Austen does not conceive of the alternative of the 'world elsewhere' of the hermit, the expatriate, the recluse, and so on), then it is essential that there should be some agreement about conventions of speech as about conventions of behaviour. This is why there is so much stress in Jane Austen's work on the necessity to call things by their right names. She was well aware of the relativity of individual vision, how different people can take away a different impression and interpretation of the same scene according to their particular perspective and preoccupation (for instance, 'Mrs Dashwood, not less watchful of what passed than her daughter, but with a mind very differently influenced, and therefore watching to very different effect'), but she could see the danger of this relativism affecting language so that everyone might have his or her own definition of the same word. Much of the energy and effort, not only of Elinor but also of Jane Austen herself, is aimed at the attempt to arrive at a terminological exactitude which would be subtle, comprehensive and authoritative. A ready example of her concern can be found in the way the book opens. In chapter 1 she establishes a vocabulary adequate to describe and assess the various qualities and attendant excesses or possible weaknesses of Marianne and Elinor. In the next chapter there is the devastating account of the conversation between Mrs Dashwood and her husband, in which, with the most specious abuse of the language of 'reason' and balanced consideration, she persuades John to do absolutely nothing for his sisters – a complete inversion of the intention of his father's will. In this incomparable rationalisation of meanness and selfishness we have an unexcelled example of Jane Austen's comprehension of the power of language to make black appear white. So it is that a good deal of the struggle in the book is between the proper use and the misuse of language; among the things we can learn from this book is the subtle lesson that a good deal of our happiness

can depend on what we call things and how we name our experience. Elinor's 'wealth' is much less than Marianne's 'competence' – one takes the point. Similarly Barton Cottage is a different thing according to what you call it: 'as a house, Barton Cottage, though small, was comfortable and compact; but as a cottage it was defective, for the building was regular, the roof was tiled, the window shutters were not painted green, nor were the walls covered with honeysuckles'. If we demand cottages when we are confronted with houses we have an endless capacity to secure our own discontent; a change of vocabulary may serve to bring our preconceived images more into line with the existing realities, and Jane Austen was sufficiently before our time to think that with an effort words could be made to coincide with things and that, moreover, a good deal of our dignity and peace of mind depend on making them do so.

Careful distinctions are thus being made throughout. 'Motives of interest' can be distinguished from 'prudence'; 'insipidity' is not to be confused with 'gravity'; 'calmness of manner' is not necessarily the same thing as 'sense'; the mere noise of a social evening is not to be confused with real 'conversation'. Characters who are foolish or worse give themselves away by their abuse of language. Robert Ferrars considers an individual 'valuable' only because 'her house, her style of living, all bespeak an exceeding good income' – a crass but common confusion of the commercial and the spiritual. John Dashwood regards his wife as having 'the fortitude of an angel', which is perhaps as inappropriate a simile as any in the book. Miss Steele thinks someone 'very genteel' because 'he makes a monstous deal of money', but of course the comparative vulgarity both of her and of Lucy's perceptions and values has been revealed by their grammatical lapses and conversational crudities. Willoughby is, like the traditional seducer, smooth of tongue and shows an effortless mastery of the appropriate persuasive modes of talking. Like Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, he has a gift for role-playing which is indicated in a passing allusion to his prowess at reading parts in plays, though he doesn't stay long enough with Marianne to finish reading his part of *Hamlet*. (One guesses that he had perhaps arrived at the part where Hamlet inexplicably rejects Ophelia.) But even his fluent exploitations and improvisations can reach a point of dumbness, as he reveals when he admits to Elinor that,

when he received a note from Marianne still avowing her affection and trust, 'I could not answer it. I tried, but could not frame a sentence.' His unconsidered dexterity with speech and his duplicity have brought him to the point where he forfeits the ability to speak truly. Where Marianne occasionally submits to the silence of sincerity, this is the silence of shame.

Elinor and Marianne are often having differences of terminological opinion, as might be expected, as each tends to give definitions based on the particular bias of her temperament. Elinor pronounces Brandon to be 'a sensible man, well-bred, well-informed, of gentle address, and, I believe, possessing an amiable heart'; Marianne prefers the negative mode: 'he has neither genius, taste, nor spirit . . . his understanding has no brilliancy, his feelings no ardour, and his voice no expression'. In this Marianne may be said to be not entirely just, yet, speaking as a young high-spirited girl, her comments cannot be entirely negated by Elinor's terms. Another example of how language changes with point of view is to be found in the exchanges between Marianne and Edward Ferrars on the local landscapes. Marianne responds to the whole panorama of hills, woods and plantations and speaks of 'grandeur'; Edward looks at the condition of the lane, thinks of winter and speaks of 'dirt'. Later Edward admits that his vocabulary is based on a sort of unemotional empiricism, neutrally descriptive: 'I shall call hills steep, which ought to be bold, surfaces strange and uncouth, which ought to be irregular and rugged; and distant objects out of sight, which ought only to be indistinct through the soft medium of a hazy atmosphere.' He sees and speaks more in terms of 'utility' than of natural beauty – 'I know nothing of the picturesque.' Similarly Elinor is rather dry about the 'passion for dead leaves' which can produce such enthusiasm in Marianne:

> with what transporting sensations have I formerly seen them fall! How have I delighted, as I walked, to see them driven in showers about me by the wind! What feelings have they, the season, the air altogether inspired! Now there is no one to regard them. They are seen only as a nuisance. . . .

The question may arise, should they be seen as anything else? But it would be wrong to think that Jane Austen's sympathies are wholly with Edward and Elinor in this linguistic debate.

Although the cult of effusing over the pictorial and aesthetic merits of natural scenery was responsible for some very affected responses by Jane Austen's time, she could see that there *was* 'grandeur' as well as dirt in that natural scene, and a delight in nature only slightly more moderate than Marianne's is in evidence throughout Jane Austen's work. The point is that, however foolish Marianne's enthusiastic address to leaves and hills may sound to the utilitarian ear, it is she who bestows aesthetic value on the natural environment by the quality of her response. What value dead leaves, or any other object, may have in the absence of a human eye to perceive them is a philosophical problem too large to admit here; but the very fact that Jane Austen can allow it to intrude into this early work shows that she would have well understood Coleridge's famous address to Nature:

> O Lady! we receive but what we give,
> And in our life alone does Nature live:
> Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!
> ('Dejection: An Ode')

By the time Jane Austen was writing – which was the time of Coleridge and Wordsworth – there was a sharper awareness that the way an individual responded to nature was at the same time a revelation of the dispositions of his or her inner landscape, that nature is what we see her to be and name her to be. Marianne would at least bestow wedding-garments on nature, and, even if some of her responses are motivated by her literary enthusiasms, they do also indicate a generosity and warmth of spirit, a capacity for appreciation and sympathy, which Jane Austen unquestionably valued. (Marianne is said to have imagination, Elinor limits herself to fancy – an appropriately Coleridgean distinction.) Edward, one would have to admit, is more likely to put nature in a shroud. (This whole exchange reminds me of Ruskin's response to a lecturer who maintained that from the scientific point of view there is no such thing as a flower. Ruskin responds by having recourse to deliberately unscientific language. 'And when the leaves marry, they put on wedding-robes, and are more glorious than Solomon in all his glory, and they have feasts of honey, and we call them "Flowers". In a certain sense, therefore, you see the lecturer was quite right. There are no such things as Flowers – there are only – gladdened

leaves.' That is, he counters the scientific vocabulary with the powerful biblical responses of his own style, and in the event one feels one would happily prefer to be 'wrong' with Ruskin than 'right' with the scientist, because of the superior power of his incomparable sensibility and language. There is no doubt that Marianne would.) Here, well this side of epistemology, we should stop; it is enough to realise that Jane Austen by no means intended an unqualified justification of the perspective and vocabulary of reason. As in behaviour, so in language, Marianne gives an added dimension of warmth and vitality to the world of the book and Jane Austen was well aware of it.

One final observation about the part played by language in the book. Aware of centrifugal and contrary tendencies in self, society and language, Jane Austen clearly saw balance as a prime virtue to be aimed at, and so when characters achieve equilibrium their speech also tends towards balance. For instance, when Marianne's illness brings her to a more 'balanced' awareness of things her speech reflects this change. 'Do not, my dearest Elinor, let your kindněss dĕfēnd whăt Ĭ knŏw yŏur jūdgmĕnt mŭst censure.' By adding the scansion one can see her sentences starting to stabilise and balance themselves; the syntactical and metrical harmony of the speech are symptoms of a mind more in harmony with itself. It is the way Jane Austen herself often writes; thus, of Elinor: 'ĭmpātiĕnt tŏ sōothe, thŏugh tōo hōnešt tŏ flāttĕr'. The prose, like the plot, tends towards, and even acts out, those steady symmetries which Jane Austen regarded as indispensable for a truly civilised existence.

Let us finally return to the two sisters, for the loving tension between them, the ongoing debate as to 'how to be' which is precipitated simply by their juxtaposition in any set of circumstances, provides the real subject of the novel. We might start by considering the telling differences in their response to the arrival of the unknown male, Willoughby, in the neighbourhood. Sir John, who has a tendency to assess a man by the canine company he keeps, tells them first that Willoughby has 'the nicest little black bitch of a pointer I ever saw'. Elinor, however, is not content with this somewhat marginal information. She wants to know who he is, where he is from, and 'has he a house at Allenham?' This in turn is of small importance to Marianne, who is much more interested in Willoughby's taste for excessive

dancing and hunting; that is what she likes in a young man, that 'his eagerness in them should know no moderation'. Elinor wants to know about the social man – man the house-builder. Marianne is interested in the more primitive, even the more Dionysiac, man – man the dancer. The one activity is the transforming of energy into structure, the other the stylised releasing of energy as gesture. Both are, of course, essential to any sort of social life, but clearly a disposition to one or the other may preponderate. Just so, Elinor has an instinct for stillness and composure, while Marianne has a decided taste for rapid movement (it is when she falls while running that Willoughby finds her, and she takes to horse-riding as keenly as Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*), and what shows through her eyes is 'a life, a spirit, and eagerness'. We remember that Elinor's form was more 'correct', Marianne's more 'striking'. Clearly some combination of the two forms would most appeal to Jane Austen; yet, as clearly, she could see that they have an inherent tendency to separate. It is perhaps a weakness in the book, or a severity in the author, that no compromise between the two sisters seems countenanced, just as we miss in this book any notion of a man who might be something between the notably unexciting 'house-builders', Brandon and Ferrars, and the rather second-rate 'dancer' that Willoughby turns out to be (worthy neither of his predecessor, Lovelace, nor of his remote successor, Heathcliffe).

If the sisters differ in their attitude towards stability and energy, they also differ in a subtler way about the factors which should determine conduct. Here is a crucial exchange:

> 'I am afraid,' replied Elinor, 'that the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety.'
>
> 'On the contrary, nothing can be a stronger proof of it, Elinor; for if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure.'

Elinor belongs to that school of thought which considers that virtuous conduct can be an arduous business, involving painful adjustments to the controlling forms of society, and unpleasant frustration of personal proclivities. Such a school of thought we

may identify as Christian, or Stoic, or even, vaguely, Classical. But another school of thought came out of the rationalism of the Enlightenment, a more optimistic view of man commonly associated with the French *Philosophes* but with many English adherents. John Stuart Mill characterised this school of thought with admirable clarity and brevity in his essay on Coleridge.

> The error of the philosophers was rather that they trusted too much to those feelings [of morality]; believed them to be more deeply rooted in human nature than they are; to be not so dependent, as in fact they are, upon collateral influences. They thought them the natural and spontaneous growth of the human heart; so firmly fixed in it, that they would subsist unimpaired, nay invigorated, when the whole system of opinions and observances with which they were habitually intertwined was violently torn away.

The Rousseauistic idea that innate human impulses are good and that it is society that obstructs or corrupts these has certainly reached Marianne, and she too would be happy to 'tear away' much of that 'system of opinions and observances' which more sober spirits such as Elinor (and indeed Mill himself) see as the necessary 'collateral influences' on good conduct. Marianne is a woman of whom it may be said, 'her motives are just her passions', as Henry James said of Hedda Gabler; the point is that she also believes that the feelings that well up spontaneously inside a person are inherently moral and therefore the best possible motives for action. Here again we can see Jane Austen bringing into focus an issue which materially determines the sort of society we live in – the virtues of 'freedom' opposing themselves to the necessities of 'control'. Elinor, with her unselfish tact, her instinct for arranging and keeping up appearances, and her modifying and reconciling powers, is clearly an indispensable member of society; indeed, in terms of the book she may be said to be one of the maintainers of it. Yet we surely respond very positively to Marianne's guileless sincerity, and we cannot fail to find attractive her generous capacity for feeling, nor fail to sympathise with her in her genuine suffering and sickness. We see quite plainly that much of the work of keeping society as truly civilised as possible falls on Elinor – and Jane Austen knows what a thankless task that can be. Yet this in

no way serves to make less attractive the girl who, like Keats, believes in 'the holiness of the heart's affections'.

Two sisters then, though not a simple dualism. They are *not* simply ciphers for passion and reason, impulse and restraint, feeling and form, poetry and prose. Yet it is true that they do seem to project some basic division or rift in civilisation as Jane Austen knew it, perhaps as we know it. Throughout the nineteenth century you can find writers using brothers and sisters as ways of projecting different aspects of the single composite self. The most famous example is the Brothers Karamazov, who, with their differing emphases on body, mind and spirit, seem to be the three parts of one total individual – the collective son of their father, perhaps Man himself. Jane Austen is hardly attempting anything so ambitious as Dostoyevsky. Yet she makes it clear that Elinor and Marianne do embody slightly but crucially different notions about how to live and that society will only tolerate one of those notions (just as George Eliot does with Maggie and Tom Tulliver). It is abundantly clear that she put quite as much of herself into Marianne as into Elinor, so from one point of view we can imagine this to be a psychological parable written partly at least for her own benefit – the two sisters adding up to one divided self. And, if the ideal state of affairs would be that pointed to by E. M. Forster's phrase 'Only connect' – connect the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes, the poetry and the prose, the sensibility and the sense – the actual condition of social living as Jane Austen saw it was that they could not be fully connected but rather one was, and had to be, subordinated. This is why I introduced in passing the title of Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*, for Marianne does suffer from neurosis brought on by repression and her sickness is precisely the cost of her entry into the sedate stabilities of civilised life envisaged at the end. Before her illness her eyes are bright, eager, full of wayward spirit; after her illness – it is the very sign of her recovery – she looks up at Elinor with a 'rational though languid gaze'. 'My illness has made me think', she says, when apologising for her previous 'want of kindness to others'; it is as though social virtue and debility are closely connected. Freud could scarcely have hinted more succinctly at the price paid in sickness for the acquisition of 'reason'. Her vision is now clearer; but her energy is turned to languor. She is tamed and ready for 'citizenship'.

This points to what is certainly the weakest part of the book – the way Marianne is disposed of at the end. She is married off to Brandon to complete a pattern, to satisfy that instinct for harmonious arranging which is part of the structure both of that society and of the book itself. Her energy is sacrificed to the overriding geometry. Jane Austen even hints at coercion – albeit an affectionate pressure – involved in this resolution. Edward and Elinor want to see Marianne settled in Brandon's 'mansion-house' just as Jane Austen wants to see her firmly placed in the edifice of her novel. All the characters agree that Brandon has many virtues and has suffered sorrows, 'and Marianne, by general consent, was to be the reward of all'. 'With such a confederacy against her', Jane Austen continues with an appropriately ambiguous word, 'what could she do?' She capitulates; or one could say that the 'confederacy' of society *and* the author against her prove to be too much. And Jane Austen's summary of the change in Marianne is almost harshly curt. 'Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims.' And, one paragraph later, 'she found herself, at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village'. She is now safely 'placed' – in society, in the book. One can have at least two reactions to this. One can feel that there is something punitive in the taming of Marianne and all she embodies – indeed, one might think that something is being vengefully stamped out. It is as though Jane Austen had gone out of her way to show that romantic feelings are utterly non-viable in society. Looking back through the book one can see that very often the validity of Marianne's responses is subtly undermined by giving them an edge of caricature – as though Jane Austen was defending herself against her own creation. As her creator she is certainly fond of Marianne, but is she also a bit frightened of her? What is certainly true is that Jane Austen does not undertake a full exploration of 'sensibility' – as for instance George Eliot (a great admirer of Jane Austen) did with Maggie Tulliver, another figure irreconcilably at odds with society because of her passionate intensities. What George Eliot does have the courage to show is that Maggie can only die; constituted as she is there is literally no place for her in society. The same insight is to be found

in the case of another of Marianne's descendants – Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*. Jane Austen stops well short of this kind of investigation. And yet Marianne does, in effect, die. Whatever the name of the automaton which submits to the plans of its relations and joins the social game, it is not the real Marianne, and in the devitalised symmetry of the conclusion something valuable has been lost. She 'dwindles' into marriage with a vengeance – to take up the phrase of another spirited lady, Congreve's Millimant. The novel has at least shown the existence and power of the inner subterranean life of the emotions, but it returns to the surface at the end and is resolved with such brusque manipulation of plot that one wonders if Jane Austen intended that as a last bitter irony. It is certainly hard to know how exactly to respond to the end. Among other things it reminds us that Jane Austen is also a beautiful screen-maker and it is hard not to feel that with this ending she is almost wilfully screening something off from herself. One is left with the lurking suspicion that one of the things hidden behind the screen is a potentially tragic ending.

On the other hand one might, at the end, applaud the hard-headed realism which recognises that the consolations of society are only achieved at the cost of a more or less rigorous curbing of the intensities of impulse and a disciplined diminishment in the indulgence of solitary emotional fantasies. Yet one may well wonder what consolations society will have for Marianne after her shattering experience – the real Marianne, like Ophelia, might well have opted for the blessed unconsciousness of the river. 'Had I died, it would have been self-destruction', she says, as though well aware of the capacity for suicide she carries inside her. Of course one must recognise here that for Jane Austen the structure of society was more powerful than the structure of feeling in any one individual and would always contain it – though, as this novel shows, she was well aware how painful that containment could be. But it would be for later novelists, such as Emily Brontë, to reveal how that state of affairs could be inverted and show social structure dissolving before the unanswerable force of individual passion. It is not that Jane Austen necessarily valued society more than the fate of individuals: on the contrary, no one before her showed so piercingly the possible miseries of a compulsory social existence. But for her it was the unalterable given, and whatever life sense

and sensibility were going to have, whatever space and satisfaction intelligence and sensitivity were going to secure for themselves, would have to be within society.

There is perhaps more wisdom in the way the novel concludes than a post-Romantic generation – and we are all post-Romantics – can immediately recognise. But it would certainly not go against the spirit of the book if, while deferring to that wisdom, we remember the scream behind the screen, the scissors straining against the sheath. There is every evidence that Jane Austen intended a complex and not a complacent response.

For in a book which, at root, is about to what extent 'nature' has to be reshaped and 'pruned' to make 'society' possible, the resolution can only be a temporary pause in an endless dialectic. At one point we hear that John Dashwood, a fair example of the fatuous, selfish and stupid people who can thrive in society, is cutting down trees so that he can erect a greenhouse. 'The old walnut trees are all come down to make room for it.' It is just another minor example of his general insensitivity, and Elinor allows it to pass with an inward wince. Yet in a tiny way even this episode points to the abiding paradox of civilization. Man does continually devastate the magnificent wildness of nature in order to put up his little social hot-houses in the clearings; just how stifling and false life can be in that hot-house we have been shown in the scene at the party where Willoughby snubs Marianne. And Jane Austen would not be the first person to feel that there are some trees better left standing, and some greenhouses better left unbuilt. But she was not sentimental about wildness and she recognised that society is necessarily a more or less continuous depredation of unchecked nature. What is implied in all her work is that human society ought to be very good indeed to justify the inroads made on 'nature' – the feelings within us as well as the trees around us – to erect and secure it. To this end sense and sensibility should work together as closely as possible. But – it is another lesson of her novels – the work is not easy and there is the chance of pain at every step of the way. For a perfect balance between the two must remain an artist's dream, and meanwhile many houses serve merely as prisons for once-brilliant dancers, and the greenhouses continue to go up where once the great trees swayed in the more liberal air.

4

Knowledge and Opinion: *Pride and Prejudice*

> Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point. . . . I had not seen *Pride and Prejudice* till I read that sentence of yours, and then I got the book. And what did I find? An accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses.

Thus Charlotte Brontë expressed her dissatisfaction with one of the most enduringly popular of all English novels, in a letter to G. H. Lewes written in 1848. I shall return to the terms of her criticism later, and the significance of their connotations, but the directness of her negative response prompts us to reconsider the reasons for the lasting appeal of the novel and what relevance, if any, it can still have for people living in very different social conditions. I want to suggest various approaches to the novel, which may help to clarify its achievement in terms of its own time and also suggest why the form of that achievement could become distasteful to a Romantic such as Charlotte Brontë. I also hope that by showing the different ways we may look at the novel, its abiding relevance for all of us may become more readily apprehensible.

It is indeed possible to call its relevance to the society of the time into question, for, during a decade in which Napoleon was effectively engaging, if not transforming, Europe, Jane Austen composed a novel in which the most important events are the fact that a man changes his manners and a young lady changes her mind. Soldiers do appear, but in the marginal role of offering distractions to young girls, which in one case goes as far as to