

and with windows cut to the floor. There Catherine saves an outhouse from an improver, but her house-to-be represents a marriage of the picturesque and utilitarian: though 'well-connected' to her eyes (the specialist landscape term seems right for a recent initiate),⁶⁵ its walled kitchen-garden is the creation of the General (183-4, 175-6, 212-14).

Woodston Parsonage, that terminus of the courtship plot, reaches into the heart of Jane Austen's sense of how things come about – far from being the construct of a single will, it is the meeting-point of opposing influences. Her vision of history and of the society to which it gives birth, is along these lines also. As a novelist she is especially sensitive to what rival traditions exact, aware of their disjunction, suspicious of the supremacy to which they pretend. In *Northanger Abbey* she created a taut contrapuntal work that includes voices as disparate as those of Baretti and Sharp, Gilpin and Rumford. The inclusiveness is enabled by the play of an unsparingly critical intelligence, and it is here that her links to the sceptical historians with their refusal to underwrite the claims of clan are most enduring. No doubt this broad-minded outlook won her the championship of later liberal writers. Perhaps Macaulay, a notable architect of her nineteenth-century reputation, had *Northanger Abbey* at the back of his mind when he caricatured the blackballing of technology on grounds that were purely aesthetic: 'And what is this way? To stand on a hill, to look at a cottage and a factory, and to see which is the prettier.'⁶⁶ Jane Austen constantly switches from one perspective to another, and reserves her sharpest satire for characters who voluntarily reject part of the view.

⁶⁵ The term is Uvedale Price's, see above, p. 94.

⁶⁶ 'Southey's Colloquies' (1830) in Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays*, 3 vols. (1891), 1, 233. It was in 1831 that Macaulay 'praised Miss Austen to the skies'.

CHAPTER 4

Sense and Sensibility *and the philosophers*

On one site or another Godwin has been made to supply most of the shuttering for that dismal construct, Jane Austen the Anti-Jacobin. Remove the premiss that the two writers are so exactly opposed as to be complementary and such production should, in theory, stumble to a halt. If Austen is primarily a satirist who set out 'to emulate and refute' the radical fiction of the early nineties,¹ it makes good sense, admittedly, to fix on *Caleb Williams* (1794) as the anti-type to her work, and there are, indeed, some limited gains to be had from the move. Above the din of those warring typologies for the Austen and Godwin novel that Marilyn Butler draws from Godwin's early masterpiece, one or two narrative antiphonies do make themselves heard. Catherine Morland's discovery of a cotton counterpane gains in hollowness when set against the chest that gives away the secret of Falkland, and the process by which Elizabeth Bennet breaks through her first impressions of Darcy and Wickham recalls – while it reverses – the changing status of Falkland and Caleb.² But a few retorts like these hardly add up to a brief for political reaction, and to use Godwin's revolutionary classic as a yardstick for novels drafted in the late nineties is in any case to skew the record. Debate moved on rapidly through the decade, until – by its second half – Jacobin allegiances were so widely shunned that the term Anti-Jacobin becomes indefinite and misleading.

If Jane Austen is to be placed on the political spectrum, it should be borne in mind that Godwin himself underwent a number of broad shifts in outlook after 1795. These second thoughts, together with the fiction of his middle period, belong to the forefront in any comparison of the two writers that is alive to context. Between Godwin's *St Leon*, in particular,

¹ Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel, 1780-1805* (Oxford, 1976), p. 268.

² The question posed in each case is which of the two figures is the good man, and the answer runs contrary to general opinion. Congruence is further underlined by the fact that at Pemberley Wickham is the steward's son, while Caleb looks on Falkland's steward as his father. Though chests abound in gothic fiction, Godwin's novel was dramatized as *The Iron Chest* (1796).

and *Sense and Sensibility* – the novel often taken to be the most doctrinaire of the six – there exist a variety of striking parallels that point to the moderate, even liberal character of Jane Austen's stance among her contemporaries.

In practice, the Anti-Jacobin historicist readings have a way of resisting ordinary means of disproof. Typically, the focus on Austen as an active opponent of revolutionary ideology sets up a presumption of antagonism that overrides direct inference from fact. If Austen appears to resemble Godwin, for example, in her commitment to reason and objectivity, it is only because she assumes (mistakenly or perhaps cunningly) that sensibility and subjectivity are the heartland of the radical case.³ If Burke, on the other hand, champions sensibility it is because he 'adapts the characteristic tools of the progressive' in order to add lustre to the conservative case.⁴ This theory of political mimicry is stretched so far by Marilyn Butler as to give complete cover to her assignment of certain values to certain causes, principally her bracketing of sensibility with liberalism, though in fact the relation between these was complex, as we have seen, even by the 1780s.⁵ But the see-saw tactics continue to be applied when it comes to interpreting individual texts. In *Sense and Sensibility*, sense has it all the way, and sense, in a usage more restricted than Austen's, is seen to preside in all the other novels, where – for the majority of heroines – 'moral progress consists in discerning, and submitting to, the claims of the society around them'.⁶ It is interesting to see how closely the last summary matches Marianne's sarcastic account of her sister's 'doctrine', noting at the same time Elinor's reply:

'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 . . . I am guilty, I confess, of having often wished you to treat our acquaintance in general with greater attention; but when have I advised you to adopt their sentiments or conform to their judgment in serious matters?' (94)

The novels emerge from such reading as a row of Procrustes beds, each a member of that class of contemporary fiction designed to sap 'the individual's reliance on himself'. And against this paradigm of the conservative novel there is pitted a view of the radical novel as a vindication of self, a

³ Marilyn Butler, *War of Ideas*, see particularly p. 33. ⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

⁵ For a fuller and excellent account of this complexity see John Mullan's *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1988).

⁶ Butler, *War of Ideas*, p. 1.

vehicle for the 'steady championing of Individual Man against a corrupt society'.⁷ No mention in all this of the leftist revival of the 'public good', or of Rousseau's massively influential 'general will'.

In other ways also, the rage for polarity leads to damaging simplification. Butler treats *Caleb Williams* as 'the prototype of a series of six fictions so similar in their essential features that it is as meaningful to speak of the Godwin novel as of the Austen novel',⁸ but what makes Godwin's masterpiece of 1794 a persuasive standard for the radical novel on her terms – its formal endorsement of the rational thought-processes of its beset but steadfast hero – is far less true of the others: *St Leon* (1799) carries on its title page the subscript, 'Ferdinand Mendez Pinto was but a type of thee, thou liar of the first magnitude'; and the first-person narrator of *Fleetwood* (1805) exists for much of the time in a state of total delusion. The effect of this prototyping is to foreshorten the aftermath of Revolution, a period highly eventful by any reckoning. Novels like *St Leon* and *Sense and Sensibility* – which took shape more or less concurrently⁹ – need to be treated, however, as *Post-Jacobin*.

When Elinor protests to Marianne that she is guided not by the judgement of society but by her understanding, she falls back on a moral vocabulary that owes on the whole rather more to empirical philosophy than to the sermon. If Austen's use of keywords from the liberal tradition has not been widely recognized, the Anti-Jacobin cloak is chiefly to blame. But she does draw insistently on terms which, though used by latitudinarians or by outspoken churchmen like Sydney Smith, won their currency largely from writing of the Enlightenment. Phrases like 'unaffected benevolence' or 'general benevolence' – and pivotal they are to her work – are the butt of satire in the pages of the *Anti-Jacobin*,¹⁰ and much the same goes for her 'utility', or her 'liberty and independence' – that catchphrase so central to the historical writing of William Robertson and David Hume.

Jane Austen's engagement with the liberal tenets of a previous generation is fairly typical of writers of the centre in the years she began on her mature fiction, and seems to have been obscured by historicist criticism for two

⁷ Ibid., pp. 101, 32.

⁸ In her introduction to the *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, ed. Mark Philp, 8 vols. (1992), I, 26.

⁹ Godwin mentions 'The Adept', from which *St Leon* evolved, as early as January 1796. 'Elinor and Marianne' probably dates from 1795, but was radically redrafted after November 1797.

¹⁰ The only contributor to the *Review* ever mentioned by Austen was Anne Lefroy's brother Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges, about whom she is broadly dismissive. See letter to Cassandra, 25 Nov. 1798, *Letters*, p. 22. There is, in fact, no external evidence whatever to support the idea that Jane Austen held right-wing views.

chief reasons. First, there has been a tendency to trade-in the overt themes of the novels for an account of rhetorical warfare that treats ideas not as the stuff of war but as illusory and shifting, epiphenomena of the underlying conflict, a sort of street-theatre on the battlefield. Content is thus emptied so as not to meddle with the all-important business of contest, as when Butler – dismayed by the appearance of accord among rival camps – complains of the radicals, ‘their advocacy of reason and restraint often makes them read like their opponents’.¹¹ It takes a humbler kind of history to restore the perspective of the common reader, or to credit the idea that *Sense and Sensibility* ‘really is about the relations between Sense and Sensibility’: about the relations, that is, ‘between Head and Heart, Thought and Feeling, Judgement and Emotion, or Sensibleness and Sensitiveness’, as Gilbert Ryle once observed.¹² It was in language similar to this that Godwin introduced *St Leon* to his public, and we shall see that his probing of such terms not only runs in parallel to Austen’s but draws on many of the same cultural sources.

But a second cause of confusion has been a reluctance to admit how widespread the concern with social stability was in the post-revolutionary period, and how fully coexistent it was with an active belief in the need for reform. Austen has frequently been coupled with Burke on the grounds that she is a party to ‘the organicist political theory that was a counter to the radical ideology of the Revolution’.¹³ But theory of this type was by no means limited to Burke, and was far from being the exclusive property of reaction. It was the legacy of an Anglo-Scottish tradition in sociology that was sympathetic – indeed even integral – to the constitution of 1789. Nor for that matter was the spectre of social anarchy that Burke so deftly uses as a goad to his conservatism in the *Reflections* (and that Jane Austen deflates in *Northanger Abbey*) of his own making either. The view that a libertarian culture had been installed in France in a fashion needlessly destructive of the social fabric was broadly held, and reinforced daily by the received picture – often vehemently projected – of a strife-torn citizenry, haunted by distrust and fear. Wordsworth’s retrospective sketch of a Paris transformed nightly into a place ‘defenceless as a wood where tigers roam’ exactly captured this raw sense, and out of it there materialized a question. Was an absence of social order not actually implied by the individualism of

¹¹ Butler, *War of Ideas*, p. 45.

¹² ‘Jane Austen and the Moralists’, in B. C. Southam, ed., *Critical Essays on Jane Austen* (1968), p. 107.

¹³ Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (1979), p. 6.

the liberal creed? Writers who responded to this anxiety in a constructive way – and Austen is among them – returned to that central issue of debate in the Enlightenment, the problem of how sociability was constituted and engendered.

Unfortunately for Austen criticism, it has been the contribution of Burke that has monopolized attention here; and certainly the spirit of counter-revolution is never more clear in the *Reflections* than when Burke urges, in a revealing glide of metaphor, that ‘to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of publick affections’.¹⁴ But the ‘little platoon’ is his adaptation of a phrase repeatedly used by Adam Smith in a similar, though politically distinct, context when he defends local loyalties against the old Stoic suspicion of partiality:

By Nature the events which immediately affect that *little department* in which we ourselves have some little management and direction, which immediately affect ourselves, our friends, our country, are the events which interest us the most, and which chiefly excite our desires and aversions, our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows. (my italics)¹⁵

The passage was written for the final version of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) which came out in January 1790, not long before Burke began cogitating on his *Reflections*. Revisions for this edition included an entire new part, and comprised an important (and now oddly neglected) document in the Revolution debate. Strategically keyed into the controversy at a number of points,¹⁶ the fresh material is devoted largely to questions of self-transcendence. Starting from the proposition that ‘every man [is] first and principally recommended to his own care’, Smith argues that it is out of attachments that are primary and habitual that the habit of sympathy is born. While there is much that anticipates Burke on this score – particularly the stress on the benefits to be drawn from the natural process of becoming ‘endeared’ to the familiar, Smith both relativizes the idea of social bonding through a comparison of different kinds of social order, and acknowledges the need for periods of radical innovation. The caveats which he issues against instant ‘new-modelling’ have to be read in conjunction with his specific recommendations in *The Wealth of Nations* for wholesale reforms in France, many of which had already come before the National Assembly.

¹⁴ *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), p. 68 (*Works*, v, 100).

¹⁵ Adam Smith, *TMS*, vii.ii.44–5, 292.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, see vi.2.2.4, and 12–18.

Smith has uniformly been identified as one of Jane Austen's spiritual antagonists by her Anti-Jacobin interpreters: for Butler he epitomizes the spirit of intellectual independence which Austen is determined to oppose; for Duckworth he is the source of the 'sensibility' which she refutes.¹⁷ We shall see, however, that Smith is not only a pervasive presence in *Sense and Sensibility*, but that his understanding of sympathetic imagination, distorted in Marianne, is taken up and developed by the narrator. First, though, we need to return briefly to the issue of Austen's comparative position in the late nineties, and a good place to start is with the influence of Hume and Smith on *St Leon* (1799), Godwin's major work from the period.¹⁸

EMPIRICISM REVISITED

Even though Godwin was to claim that there was still 'too little given to the passions', three successive overhauls of his *Enquiry* left the stark rationalism of his original political theorizing modified almost beyond recognition.¹⁹ Basic to the first edition of 1793 is the axiom that the intellectual perception of truth carries a charge sufficient to motivate action.²⁰ But this confident belief in the power of reason and in its sweeping jurisdiction (moral concerns are compared to geometry) was soon to yield to strictures on its role as an instigator. The chapter 'Of Self-Love and Benevolence' added in 1796 revokes the view that altruism rises, fully formed, from 'the decisions of the intellect', offering instead an account grounded in empiricist psychology, and deeply indebted to Smith as reference to an 'impartial spectator' shows. Here benevolence is born in self-gratification, and grows, through habit, into a reflective faculty.²¹

For *St Leon* Godwin devised a plot that simultaneously turns on the frailty of reason and eulogizes, as he says in the preface, the 'culture of the heart'. The last phrase derives from Francis Hutcheson and was taken from

¹⁷ Butler, *War of Ideas*, p. xv; and Alistair M. Duckworth, *Improvement*, pp. 98–100.

¹⁸ Jane Austen's antagonism towards Godwin has frequently been inferred from her use of the word 'raffish' for one of his admirers. For a discussion of the contexts of this remark, lexical and otherwise, see my article 'What Jane Austen Meant by "Raffish"', pp. 105–8. Austen enjoyed the company of the man she so described, and *The Loiterer* deplores the snobbish dismissal of townsmen by gownsmen as 'raff', arguing that commerce is the cornerstone of civil society, and that collegiate existence depends on 'these very Raffs', many of whom have endowed the university only to be held 'in the most utter Contempt by the Objects of their Bounty' (no. 24, 11 July 1789).

¹⁹ Peter H. Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven, 1984), p. 199.

²⁰ *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, ed. F. E. L. Priestley (1946). For this section of the 1793 text – bk iv, ch. viii – see iii, 309; and for commentary on its replacement, iii, 90.

²¹ *Enquiry*, i, 427; iii, 315.

the posthumously published *The Wrongs of Woman* in which Wollstonecraft reinstated the claims of feeling, particularly of ready sympathy.²² Godwin encouraged the view that St Leon's long-suffering wife Marguerite was an elegiac portrait of Wollstonecraft, and his central couple embody the novel's major theme which is that 'the domestic and private affections' are the mainspring of a wider benevolence. Because these passions offer a training ground for every form of sociability, they constitute 'the true school of humanity'.²³ Twice St Leon and Marguerite approach the ideal of the simple good life when surrounded by their family in a country setting, but on each occasion St Leon, despite his determination to preserve his happiness, takes a decision that leads to misery for them all. The second of these self-betrays bears a striking resemblance to Willoughby's account of how he came to desert Marianne immediately after 'firmly resolv[ing] within myself of doing right', and a number of other textual echoes suggest that Austen invited her readers to notice the parallel.²⁴

Where St Leon's about-face dramatically undermines Godwin's earlier maxim that men always do that which they think to be correct, Willoughby's 'vindication' overlays and complicates Colonel Brandon's view of him as the typically demonized rake of the eighteenth-century novel. But in both cases it is something dispositional, the surfacing of a latent social ethos, that causes them to capitulate. Willoughby, who finds himself deeply injured to a life of fashion, comes from the same stable as St Leon who declares that 'vanity and ostentation were habits wrought into my soul, and might be said to form part of its essence'.²⁵ Godwin's switch to a passional system of motivation left his insistence on individualism problematic, for with it there came an associationist understanding of the *relational* matrix of most feeling – hence his comparison of the human mind to a barometer 'directed in its variations by the atmosphere which surrounds it'.²⁶ *St Leon* might be said, indeed, to be less concerned with the battle between Individual Man and Society than with the presence of society in the individual man, and the same perception was of long standing for Jane Austen.

²² See William Leechman's preface to Francis Hutcheson's posthumous *A System of Moral Philosophy*, 2 vols. (1755), i, xxxi; and see Mary Wollstonecraft, 'Mary' and 'The Wrongs of Woman', ed. Gary Kelly (1991), especially p. 115, also pp. 76, 79, 98.

²³ William Godwin, *St Leon*, ed. Pamela Clemit (Oxford, 1994), pp. xxxiii–xxxiv, 49.

²⁴ See *Sense and Sensibility*, pp. 321, 324, and *St Leon*, pp. 136–7. Apart from their sudden U-turns, Willoughby and St Leon share the same slang and a romantic obsession with the death-like features of those they have betrayed. For further details of the parallel, see my article 'Sense and Sensibility, Godwin and the Empiricists', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 27 (1998), especially pp. 188–95.

²⁵ *St Leon*, p. 99.

²⁶ William Godwin, *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr Parr's Spital Sermon* (1801), p. 9.

One crucial difference in the outlook of the two writers is pinpointed by their divergent relation to that most potent of eighteenth-century social theorists, Bernard Mandeville. Shortly after completing the first *Enquiry*, Godwin reread *The Fable of the Bees*,²⁷ and the 'Second Dialogue' attached to the fable seems to have contributed significantly to *Caleb Williams*, particularly to the figure of Falkland. Here Mandeville illustrates his view that pride is of all qualities the one most beneficial to society: he draws the picture of a nobleman who passes for a paragon of taste and virtue, but who turns out to be motivated entirely by the desire for social esteem, when – contrary to every principle of his devout and law-abiding character – he opts to duel rather than lose face. In *Caleb* Godwin similarly uses the duel (that 'vilest of all egotisms') to underline the way his aristocratic idol is no more than 'the fool of honour and fame'. So Falkland can afford to avoid a fight when the insult inflicted on him by Count Malvesi goes unseen, but, when subjected to public humiliation by Tyrrel, he resorts to murder; and though the deed is again unseen, he is poisoned by it, because it deprives him of the only rite that can remove his stain.²⁸ The parallel only holds over a certain distance however. For where Mandeville extracts a general human trait from the conduct of his nobleman, Godwin historicizes Falkland's love of praise as the passing afterglow of a vanished era. And if *St Leon* represents a more sympathetic reappraisal of the chivalric hero (as some contemporaries noted), the thirst for approval appears there as a universal motive only intermittently – as when the narrator remarks that 'self-applause is our principal support in every liberal and elevated act of virtue'.²⁹ Fellow-feeling is what now chiefly redeems knight-errantry, and the novel contrives through comparison of its many shifting settings to place a premium on the non-competitive passions.

In *Pride and Prejudice* the accent is different. When Wickham holds Elizabeth spellbound with his slander of Darcy, a cleverly modish part of his strategy is to pass Darcy off as a sort of Falkland figure, an aristocrat obsessed with the maintenance of image (72–3). Pride, on this reckoning, is a specific construct, a behavioural aberration, but Elizabeth brings a quite contrary understanding of it into play when she retorts that she is surprised that pride alone was not enough to keep Darcy honest and just. Though she

distinguishes between proper and improper kinds of pride, Elizabeth shares Mandeville's sense of the social benefits that derive from the virtuous vice, and this sense is endorsed by the novel overall.³⁰ In common with latter-day exponents of the 'experimental method', like Hume and Smith, Jane Austen upheld a pull-me push-you idea of motivation: the 'natural virtues', founded in sympathy, were one inducement to decency, but the care of self-image was the more familiar goad. So it is that sympathy and pride are twinned as motives when Jane Bennet exclaims of the evil fathered on Darcy by Wickham, 'No man of common humanity, no man who had any value for his character, could be capable of it', or when Elizabeth imagines Darcy's rescue of Lydia to be doubly inspired by 'compassion and honour', though it strikes the reader as no worse for being prompted by his attachment to herself (85, 327). This duality in Austen's vision – while it reflects her belief in a 'mixed' human nature – answers to two separate traditions which are reconciled (though still often distinct) in the writing of Hume and Smith, despite the last's much vaunted 'problem'. On the one hand, there is the view popularized by Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, that human nature is itself sufficiently benevolent to supply the foundation for morals; on the other, the insight, deriving chiefly from Mandeville, that the forces of self-love are capable of providing the groundwork of polity on their own. Sociability, according to this last account, depends on a spontaneously generated framework of conventions and laws, Hume's 'artificial virtues', or Mandeville's 'joynt Labour of many Ages' – in each case an ever-evolving system of codes honed by utility.³¹

Manners took on a central role in this evolutionary reading of society, for if, as Mandeville claimed, it was 'the Work of Ages to find out the true Use of the Passions',³² skilful control of their expression was of the essence. Pride, the *Fable* warns, is capable not only of blinding the self but also of inflaming the other. Both points were taken up by the Scottish school, and are put to the proof, together, when Jane Austen has Darcy brashly boast that 'where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation' (57). To function as a social cement pride had to be 'well-regulated' in Hume's phrase, or even well concealed, and in this connection Smith had noted that the high self-esteem of others, even when well-founded, 'mortifies our own' – a caveat turned by Elizabeth to

²⁷ See *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F. B. Kaye, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1924), II, 438.

²⁸ *Caleb Williams*, ed. David McCracken (Oxford, 1986), pp. 15, 97–88, 102, 120.

²⁹ *St Leon*, p. 137.

³⁰ For a fuller account of these themes in *Pride and Prejudice* see my essay, 'The Philosophical Context' in the *Commentaries* volume to the Cambridge edition of Jane Austen (forthcoming).

³¹ *Fable*, II, 128. ³² *Ibid.*, 319.

epigram when she says of Darcy, 'I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*' (20).³³ Though Darcy is right to point out later that Bingley's apparent humility in calling attention to the speed and careless rapture of his letter-writing is entirely deceitful, Bingley (unlike himself) proves to be a true adept at masking a show of what he takes to be a flattering trait (48-9). Typically this lively scene, though it glances at conduct-book material and at Dr Johnson's strictures on hurried composition, is true to 'the experimental method' in constantly returning to the question of human nature. Though Mandeville's ideas would have reached Jane Austen through many channels, it is quite likely that she was familiar with *The Fable*, and recalled its advice on how to deny pride so as to make ourselves 'acceptable to others, with as little Prejudice to ourselves as is possible'.³⁴

Jane Austen never grew tired of exposing the motives lurking behind social concealment, however habitual or necessary. One of her perennial goals as a writer of comedy was to leave her readers less deceived. Particularly rich in satiric reward were those polite affectations that seem designed to erase all trace of egoism, and throughout her career she specialized in dealing out the most self-sacrificial of creeds to the most assertive of characters. Following a lead from Hume, her brother James had noted a sort of commodifying of affect in the commercial society where reliance on external status had partly given place to the urge 'to make ourselves conspicuous by appearing to possess qualities in a superior degree to the generality of those around us'.³⁵ When Jane Austen turned her attention to the cult of fine-feeling in *Sense and Sensibility* it was to restore recognition of a tabooed competitiveness, and it is telling that Marianne is shown never to be more proud than when she declares that she has no pride at all (189, 191). True to the two-tiered morality of the sceptical Enlightenment, Jane Austen believed in fine-feeling nonetheless, and in Marianne's special capacity for it; and the novel, for all its overt mockery of sensibility, shares with *St Leon* the aim of celebrating the 'natural virtues'. It explores a crux at the heart of empiricist philosophy – how sociability is to be explained on the materialist premiss of a self-serving ego; and it develops in the process a comedy that has a constructive as well as a satiric dimension.

³³ *THN*, II.iii.ii, 600; *TMS*, vi.iii.22, 246. This last parallel was remarked on by Kenneth Moler, 'Bennet Girls', p. 568.

³⁴ *Fable*, II, 147. Mary Crawford's irreligious joke about the sacrifices performed by returning heathen heroes (108) tallies well with Mandeville's scoffing account of 'the many Hecatombs that have been offer'd after Victories' in his *Fifth Dialogue*, II, 214-17. Claudia L. Johnson in her dense essay, 'Jane Austen and Dr Johnson Again' notes the presence of Dr Johnson in this scene, see Littlewood, ed., *Critical Assessments*, II, 141.

³⁵ *The Loiterer*, 33 and 50; and pp. 60-1 above.

SENSIBILITY RECLAIMED

Comedy, by virtue of its form alone, deals in the interplay between individual and society, and this appears to have made the genre particularly attractive to writers of a liberal persuasion, as its remarkable hold on the nineteenth-century novel suggests. There is, however, an alternative account, implicit in the view that Austen's adoption of the 'standard courtship plot' proceeds from 'a limited, unduly acquiescent or unduly commercial outlook upon life', a course sidestepped in her time by such stalwart spirits as Maria Edgeworth.³⁶ What is glaringly missing from the attempt to read comedy as a covert means of shoring up the status quo, is an acknowledgement that comic endings are about fresh starts. An 'evolution of social sensibility within an accepted culture' – so Allan Rodway sums up Jane Austen's contribution to her age – but the phrase applies equally to the structure of the works themselves. All the mature novels answer, in some degree, to Northrop Frye's notion of the New Comedy as a mode that 'moves towards the crystallization of a new society', a grouping in which readers take an imaginative part.³⁷ Though the endings vary in regard to how much the lovers hold in common with their wider circle, and how far they deviate from external norms, the sense of a new-found social identity is basic to them all. In each, moreover, at least one central figure undergoes a process of enlightenment in which self-knowledge is tied to a widening recognition of adjacent lives. The reader's induction into the varied doings of the '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village' subtly counterpoints this internal course of discovery.

The limits that Jane Austen put upon her scope as a novelist belong with her commitment to an almost uniquely realistic mode of classical comedy, in which festive celebration is muted, domestic living far from golden, and individuality fiercely preserved. In this recalcitrant world it seems fitting that abstract nostrums about society should be exposed to scepticism, and for the most part they are. Hartley's theory that an associational mechanism does the work of converting self-interest into a love of mankind, comes under sceptical scrutiny as early as the juvenilia.³⁸ But, in one instance, Austen goes out of her way to build into her text a standard item from the store of contemporary social theory.

The idea is from the opening chapters of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759-90), and represents Adam Smith's particular refinement upon the

³⁶ Butler, *War of Ideas*, xxxvii.

³⁷ Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective* (1965), p. 92.

³⁸ See the discussion of 'Love and Freindship' above, p. 56.

powerful account of sympathy offered by Hume in the *Treatise* (1739). In that early work, sympathy stands primarily for an involuntary transfer of feeling, an almost magnetic influence that draws one person into the mental orbit of another.³⁹ Because it not only sustains all 'natural' moral activity but also reinforces the 'artificial' forms arising from self-interest, it is the great cohesive force responsible for social bonding. Smith, in his ethics, offers an account that is more orientated to the self, partly because he draws on a more stable sense of identity than that given by the *Treatise*.⁴⁰ He looks, particularly, at the way sympathy relates to approval, and he often uses the term, in a distinctive way, to denote a specific correspondence of feeling between individuals. But both writers resort to metaphors from music to express the operation of this all-important faculty. Hume describes the mysterious passage of fellow-feeling through the phenomenon of sympathetic vibration on a stringed instrument:

As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest, so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature.⁴¹

Smith, pursuing a relational model, speaks of concord and dissonance between his subjects, of falling in and out of time, of lowering and sharpening pitch. While his main interest is in the degree of accord established between subjects whose experience differs, he puts forward the simpler case of two people confronted by the same object. In such an instance a like response implies sympathy between the two, but also a reciprocal (if limited) approbation:

To approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them; and not to approve of them as such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them . . . He who admires the same poem, or the same picture, and admires them exactly as I do, must surely allow the justness of my admiration . . . On the contrary, the person who . . . either feels no such emotion as that which I feel, or feels none that bears any proportion to mine, cannot avoid disapproving my sentiments on account of their dissonance with his own.⁴²

Response to the object and judgement of the other go hand in hand. Reverting to his duo, Smith concludes: 'according as there is more or less

³⁹ *THN*, III.iii.ii; 592.

⁴⁰ For a valuable comparison of Hume's and Smith's idea of sympathy, see John Mullan, *Sentiment*, pp. 43–56.

⁴¹ *THN*, III.iii.i; 575–6. ⁴² *TMS*, I.i.3.1, 16.

disproportion between his sentiments and mine, I must incur a greater or lesser degree of his disapprobation'.⁴³

Austen works back to this formulation of Smith's in the opening chapters of *Sense and Sensibility*. Marianne, after itemizing Edward Ferrars's defects, spells out her own specifications for a lover – which turn out to be the ones usually found in a heroine of sensibility: not only must his taste coincide at every point with her own, but he 'must enter into all my feelings; the same books, the same music must charm us both' (17). Music – as is already clear from the order in which Edward's deficiencies are listed – proves to be Marianne's main touchstone of all that is meritorious. Though Willoughby makes his entrance in the approved way of romantic heroes, rescue is not the key thing – not at least to her eyes:

From Willoughby their expression was at first held back, by the embarrassment which the remembrance of his assistance created. But . . . when she saw that to the perfect good-breeding of the gentleman, he united frankness and vivacity, and above all, when she heard him declare that of music and dancing he was passionately fond, she gave him such a look of approbation as secured the largest share of his discourse to herself for the rest of his stay. (46)

Once Willoughby's considerable 'musical talents' are in evidence, the couple enjoy an intensity of feeling appropriate to their 'conformity of judgment' (47), and their total absorption receives added point from Marianne's recent experience of playing after dinner at the Middletons, where – for all the loud praise – only Colonel Brandon listens to her:

she felt a respect for him on the occasion . . . His pleasure in music, though it amounted not to that extatic delight which alone could sympathize with her own, was estimable. (35)

Though his rating may not be very high, Brandon stands out sufficiently from the rest of the party (whose inattention to the music spells out a 'horrible insensibility') to move Marianne into making some allowance, in his case, for the blunted faculties of age. But, in precisely Smith's terms, it is only the responses of herself and of Willoughby that entirely *sympathize*.

However wry its handling, the Smithian sympathy-assay does yield reliable results within its sphere. Though critics have argued that Jane Austen intended to discount the rapport that comes from shared tastes (along with physical attraction) as a proper criterion for marriage,⁴⁴ no such didactic goal appears to be in view. Far from being undermined, Marianne and Willoughby's special compatibility is kept resonating almost to the end, so

⁴³ *TMS*, I.i.3.1, 17.

⁴⁴ Butler, *War of Ideas*, p. 194.

that when Mrs Dashwood pleads that Brandon, despite being less handsome, will prove 'much more accordant with [Marianne's] real disposition', Elinor remains silent, withholding her assent (338). On one plane Brandon's own qualifications as a hero of sensibility – which include a temperament both warm and sympathetic (336) – easily outweigh those of his rival, but they do not displace them. Jane Austen is truthful in charting the motions of the heart, ruthless in witnessing the forces that lead to its betrayal.

Music and idiom drawn from it play a large part in *Sense and Sensibility*. The tense scene in which Lucy Steele tells Elinor of her betrothal as they sit in 'the utmost harmony engaged in forwarding the same work' owes much both atmospherically and dramatically to the *fortissimo* accompaniment of a 'very magnificent concerto' from Marianne, whose feelings about her sister's rival would be confirmed by Lucy's calculated use of the 'shelter of its noise' (145, 149). At her own piano she spends hours 'alternately singing and crying' after Willoughby's desertion of her (83), and the last stage of her recovery is signalled by her brave, though at first futile, attempt at practice (342). These poignant episodes give a special savour to the novel's concluding statement on the unholy alliance of Lucy and Robert Ferrars, Mrs Ferrars and John and Fanny Dashwood: 'nothing could exceed the harmony in which they all lived together' (377).

The Smithian analysis of emotional bonding carries over to those who are not noted for emotion, as when the narrator remarks of the curious tie that forms between Mrs John Dashwood and Lady Middleton (who gives up the piano once securely married) that 'they sympathised with each other', naturally attracted by a 'kind of cold hearted selfishness' (229). This 'selfishness' becomes a keyword, as Marilyn Butler has pointed out, in the closing volume of the novel, where a fault-line begins to open between the two sets of characters who are reported (with varying reliability, in view of Mrs Ferrars's volatile temper) to live happily ever after. The judgement that Willoughby is 'selfish', together with his confession to 'vanity' and 'dissipation', links him with the group who exclude themselves from the circle that takes shape round the Delaford living. The alignment is underscored, moreover, by a number of scenes which expose the mercenary outlook that governs every aspect of the Ferrars's world, above all marriage. These range from the comic hyperbole of Mrs Ferrars's notion that suitors are interchangeable but for status (297), to Robert's sordid ruminations on how the jilted Marianne stands in the market – 'five or six hundred a-year, at the utmost' (227). Within this social field, Willoughby's desertion of Marianne for a Miss Grey is a fact of no consequence.

To suppose, however, that Austen's attack on the money-grubbing set is a standard conservative rally against economic individualism, as Butler

does,⁴⁵ is to misconstrue the axis of debate. It is the gentry rather than Smith's commercial world who come under fire, as is clear from the readiness with which the nasty-Dashwoods accept Lady Middleton, and spurn her mother on the grounds that Mr Jennings's money was got by trade (228). Nor is Austen's criticism directed merely at decadence within the landed class, for it takes on board such persistent features of its economy as land enclosure, duelling, and the shirking of profession (225, 233, 102–3). The values sustaining this critique are of a liberal provenance, fairly summed up, in fact, by 'sensibility' – though at some distance from the modish idea of the term.

Crucial to the voicing of this ethos is the scene in which the Delaford living is first put on the map, and begins to assume its symbolic role as eye-of-the-needle. The humble vicarage with its poor pasturage, and still sparser stipend that so opportunely repels Lucy Steele, is a gift to Edward Ferrars from Colonel Brandon, who chooses Elinor as his go-between. On the meeting of these two friends, Jane Austen lavishes (in a way she was never to repeat) all the contrivance of a comic scene from Shakespeare, but the themes addressed are altogether contemporary. That Mrs Jennings is able to persist in reading what passes between Brandon and Elinor as a proposal of marriage, in the face of ever-mounting obstacles, shows the power of her sympathy; Colonel Brandon's scheme springs from association. His memory of Eliza Williams is revived by the news that Mrs Ferrars has cut off her eldest son for persevering in his engagement to Lucy Steele (282), and this old story, while it echoes the fortunes of the Ferrars sons, also reflects the violence done to Marianne (205), as does its sequel, the betrayal of the second Eliza by Willoughby. These histories run, palpably, into the ganglion of feeling that fires Brandon's generosity towards Edward whom he has met only 'two or three times', but this in no way modifies Elinor's respect for a sympathy (or improvidence, as Robert Ferrars calls it) that goes far beyond ordinary claims. And the extent of her own altruism is shown in the way her pleasure at Edward's good luck – intense enough to be mistaken for joy – outdistances the thought of Lucy's now improved hopes:

Her emotion was such as Mrs Jennings had attributed to a very different cause; – but whatever minor feelings less pure, less pleasing, might have a share in that emotion, her esteem for the general benevolence, and her gratitude for the particular friendship, which together prompted Colonel Brandon to this act, were strongly felt, and warmly expressed. (283)

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 194, 9–11.

Earlier, when John Dashwood mentions his wife's 'benevolence' in putting up the Steeles, we recall that they were invited to keep the Dashwood sisters at bay (266), but there is nothing equivocal about the motive that prompts the disposal of the Delaford living.

Austen's treatment of benevolence gives, in fact, a good sense of her whereabouts in the post-Revolutionary debate. Few qualities were regarded with greater suspicion, or more frequently targeted by the Anti-Jacobin camp, and what draws particular fire is the notion of a moral imperative that goes beyond personal or local loyalties. Typically, the dispersive aspects of benevolence are at the centre of attack. Canning in his deft and contemptuous portrait of 'French Philanthropy' shows a figure vaporously diffusing 'general love of all mankind': 'through the extended globe his feelings run / As broad and general as the unbounded sun!'⁴⁶ Behind this satire lies Dr Johnson's conceit on the impotence of 'general benevolence' which, if 'not compressed into a narrower compass, would vanish like elemental fire, in boundless evaporation'.⁴⁷ By 1800 the ideal was so beset that Dr Parr could back Godwin into a corner by merely citing his notorious remark about saving Fénelon from a fire in preference to his mother. So reluctant, indeed, is Parr to admit the possibility of even *wishing* well of 'those with whom we are not connected' that he was rebuked by Sydney Smith for passing off the desire for general good as 'a pardonable weakness, rather than a fundamental principle of ethics'.⁴⁸ Sydney Smith is moved to defend Godwin 'as unquestionably right', taking issue only over the matter of particular affections, so that his own position coincides with Godwin's revised one. In a field of argument so contracted, the essential point of difference is well exposed by Sydney Smith when he accuses Parr of leaving us 'to suppose that the particular affections are themselves ultimate principles of action, instead of convenient instruments of a more general principle'.⁴⁹ Jane Austen's reference, twice over, to Brandon's 'general benevolence', together with the distinction she draws between it and 'particular friendship', clearly place her with the expansionists, an outlook possibly masked by, but quite compatible with, her penchant for minute scale.

To apply the magnifying glass is second nature to the empiricist, and Austen shares a rationale with Adam Smith in her intentful focus on the family scene. In his *Theory* Smith had treated the sibling bond as the germ of all social relation, raising a model from those 'earliest friendships, the

⁴⁶ See 'New Morality', in *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin*, p. 238.

⁴⁷ *The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht Strauss (New Haven, 1969), no. 99, II, 166.

⁴⁸ Dr Parr, from *Edinburgh Review* (1802), in *The Works of the Rev. Sydney Smith*, 4 vols. (1839), I, 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 5, 7.

friendships which are naturally contracted when the heart is most susceptible', but he noted, at the same time, that such bonds could prove to be of no account.⁵⁰ There is a similar gist to the famous statement made in *Mansfield Park* about the potentially unique power of such ties: to Fanny Price it seems that the 'same first associations and habits' keep alive a 'sentiment in all its prime and freshness', providing an epitome of union, but the narrator reminds us that in other circumstances the attachment can be 'worse than nothing' (234–5).

Though Jane Austen makes a tough candidate for any school of sensibility, her concern with fellow-feeling in *Sense and Sensibility* is as all-pervading as it is hard-headed. The opening sequences of the novel – the pages that marked her debut on the literary scene (and include the caustic sketch of the newly endowed but stingy Dashwoods) – warn of the meagre yields to be expected from charity while they underline the need for principles and for law. Self-interest is the dominant fact in her fiction, but it is faced for the most part in a spirit of constructive acceptance. Energy is linked to self-assertiveness, and selfish intentions are seen to have ironic outcomes. Perhaps there is a playful, half-mocking glance at Adam Smith's concept of 'the invisible hand' in the way Lucy Steele's 'unceasing attention to self-interest' so obligingly precipitates the novel's happy ending (376). Certainly Austen's heroines move in that world memorably evoked by Smith's caveat to the soft-minded in the *Wealth of Nations*: 'it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest'.⁵¹ Her characters breathe an ordinary air, and the sensitivities they convey are the more robust for being free of the usual romantic ether. Typical in this respect is the choice of Mrs Jennings to illustrate the fine workings of sympathy; her feelings are brought into focus as she tends to the once-contemptuous Marianne at the crisis of her fever:

Her heart was really grieved. The rapid decay, the early death of a girl so young, so lovely as Marianne, must have struck a less interested person with concern. On Mrs Jennings's compassion she had other claims. She had been for three months her companion, was still under her care, and she was known to have been greatly injured, and long unhappy. The distress of her sister too, particularly a favourite, was before her; – and as for their mother, when Mrs Jennings considered that Marianne might probably be to *her* what Charlotte was to herself, her sympathy in *her* sufferings was very sincere. (313)

⁵⁰ *TMS*, vi.ii.1.4 and 7, 219–20.

⁵¹ *WN*, I.ii.2, 26–7.

Sentiment starts personal-specific and then can become general.

First, Austen underlines the natural transference of feeling that requires no particular 'interest'; second, she indicates how Mrs Jennings's feelings are intensified by manifold associations with the Dashwood family; and third, she shows that Mrs Jennings's grief is redoubled by the way she thinks herself into Mrs Dashwood's position. This last imaginative construction of 'what we ourselves should feel in the like situation' is Smith's special contribution to theory, though it coexists in his treatise with associative explanations and with Hume's idea of automatic influence.⁵² And indeed this mirror-like finding of the other in the self – so graphically mimed by Austen's syntax and italics – throws light on the form of *Sense and Sensibility* as a whole.

In his model, Smith posits an 'attentive spectator' to engage with the experiencing agent, 'the person concerned'.⁵³ To the end of maximizing the sympathy between these two consciousnesses, he extrapolates a set of virtues proper to each. So the bystander will have to be exceptionally sensitive, the sufferer unusually stoic in order for the optimum level of concord to be reached. The 'amiable virtues' appropriate to the spectator are summed up in the term 'sensibility'; to the agent, on the other hand, belong 'the awful and respectable virtues' most often shorthanded as 'self-command'.

The relevance of these categories to the initial placing of the two heroines is suggestive – we hear almost as much of Elinor's self-command as we do of Marianne's sensibility. But the plot works in such a way as to complicate and test these attributes. Each sister is, in Smith's terms, both an agent and a spectator of the other, and for each of them, the special endowment is complemented by its contrary, so that Marianne is 'sensible' as well as amiable, and Elinor has 'good heart' in addition to her sense. Each, moreover, on Smith's model, is to find herself out of role with regard to the evolving action. Marianne is soon to become 'the person concerned' for her sufferings turn out to be the more extreme, as Elinor sees, and more rapidly come to their height. Elinor's sympathies, on the other hand, are stretched from the moment she assumes the part of bystander, and our sense of her character is as much moulded by her mental and practical interventions as by her immediate affairs. But if Elinor emerges as almost a paragon of attentiveness, Marianne – on any *social* reckoning of the amiable virtues – gets off to a very slow start, hampered as she is by a received culture that puts a high premium on exclusivity, and by a plot that connives at her detachment from Elinor's real situation by masking it with a vow of secrecy.

⁵² *TMS*, I.i.1.2 and I.i.1.6, 9–11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, I.i.1.4, 10.

Sense and Sensibility centres, as its title signals, in the relationship of the sisters – hence no doubt the recurring criticism that its heroes are drawn, for once, short of full length. In place of the usually even-tenored ways of confidantes, Jane Austen unfolds a relationship that itself undergoes great strain, responding beneath its polite surface to the old Terentian maxim that lovers fall in only after they have fallen out. Things come to their lowest ebb between the sisters when Marianne blurts out her 'mortifying conviction', long held, that Elinor's feelings are weak, and her self-command, therefore, of little consequence (104, 263). Each accuses the other, at different times, of concealment (79, 170), and the pain of each is heightened by a privacy unbroken by the small change of daily contact. But here there is a significant distinction between them. Where Marianne, for the sake of the purest possible apperception, cultivates silence and absorption – or 'idleness' as the narrator, following Johnson, acidly remarks (104)⁵⁴ – Elinor busies herself, keeping up the usual pretences and civilities, without ever quite losing touch with her sorrow. In so far as Elinor finds solace by this route, she embodies Smith's type of the agent who 'exert[s] that recollection and self-command which constitute the dignity of every passion, and which bring it down to what others can enter into'.⁵⁵ Marianne, on the other hand, corresponds to the anti-type who, sacrificing 'equality of temper' to a 'sense of honour', is 'apt to sit brooding at home over either grief or resentment'.⁵⁶ Indeed the language applied to the sisters in this context is often highly reminiscent of the *Theory*, as is the gist of the narrator's clinching observation that by 'brooding over her sorrows in silence, [Marianne] gave more pain to her sister than could have been communicated by the most open and most frequent confession of them' (212).

Smith's notion of 'matching' emotional tone in the interests of promoting both social and individual harmony runs through the novel. After Marianne is rebuffed by Willoughby at the party, the sisters are described 'in joint affliction', Elinor's fits of tears 'scarcely less violent than Marianne's' (182). More vividly, at the climax of Marianne's illness, Austen produces a special prose, full of dashes and asyndeton, to convey the 'anxious flutter' of her unofficially sensitive heroine (314–15). While the obvious parallels that unfold between the two courtships make an irony of the emotional distance that subsists between the sisters for much of the time, they account also for the strength of their final intimacy. Marianne's cry of remorse – 'how

⁵⁴ To Mrs Thrale, 17 Mar. 1773, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1992), II, 21.

⁵⁵ *TMS*, I.i.5.3, 24.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, I.i.4.10, 23.

barbarous have I been to you' (264), her heroic intervention on Elinor's behalf in the Dashwoods' drawing room (235–6), or her later anguished reception of the misleading news of the Ferrars marriage (353), all carry the stamp of her own agony. But it is the differences in situation that draw out the rational, harder-sought aspect of the sympathizing faculty. Thus Elinor in London is moved to 'the deepest concern' when she perceives that Marianne's feelings of loss are troubled, as hers with respect to Edward are not, by Willoughby's destruction of all ground for esteem (179).

If Elinor emerges as the novel's chief exponent of sensibility, a point noticed by a reviewer soon after publication,⁵⁷ Marianne, whose natural tenderness is never in doubt, is only partially implicated in the satire of sensibility. Austen distinguishes between the social virtue and the reigning cult, which she observes, with relish, to have evolved into something like its antithesis, as the case of the two Ferrars brothers shows. Edward, who is deficient only in the parade of sensibility, has an 'open affectionate heart' (where Willoughby has 'open affectionate manners', 15, 48), and his values are very much of a kind with those celebrated by Godwin in the Lake Constance episode of *St Leon*. His neglect of fame, of 'great men or barouches', his inclination for 'low company' and his lack of ease among 'strangers of gentility' are backed by a high regard for the life of domestic affection (16, 94). The 'small parsonage-house' and the social duties that await him there provide his brother Robert with just the foil to show off his wit and 'sensibility' by turns – the last in a demonstration of his shock at Edward's disgrace (298–9). The 'delicacy' that Robert exhibits in his long-drawn-out choice of a toothpick-case is as much designed to impress as the trinket itself (220–1) – toothpicks and tweezer-cases are singled out by Smith to illustrate the cachet of useless purchases.⁵⁸ That the wealthy set think of the amiable virtue as a commodity indispensable to *bon ton* is clear not only from the obligatory simperings of Fanny Dashwood (a specialist in the art of shrinking sympathies), but from Robert Ferrars's verbal arabesques on the ideal cottage – which seats eighteen couples for dinner (252, 371). While such gross appropriation of Rousseauesque motifs is at some remove from the practice of Willoughby and Marianne, a continuity is nevertheless visible. Willoughby's boast that he would love to pull down Combe Magna and rebuild it on the plan of the Dashwoods' dwelling, smoking chimney

⁵⁷ The anonymous reviewer twice attributes 'sensibility' to Elinor, and compares her 'patience and tenderness' with the antisocial tendencies of her sister. *Critical Review* (Feb. 1812), in Southam, ed., *Critical Heritage*, [1], pp. 36, 38.

⁵⁸ *TMS*, IV.1.8, 182.

and all (72–3), is – like his protest against the few alterations intended by Mrs Dashwood – half a pretence, as his more serious scheme for revamping Allenhurst shows. Marianne flirts in a similar way with the same aesthetic. 'What have wealth and grandeur to do with happiness', she exclaims before admitting to a 'competence' that exceeds Elinor's modest idea of wealth (91). Included in her gloss of pastoral chic is all the equipage ('a proper establishment of servants, a carriage, perhaps two, and hunters') that Mrs Jennings imagines a reformed Willoughby doing without, in the cause of his devotion (194).

The ease with which 'sensibility' is divorced from its primary significances points to a fatal flaw in the sort of creed jointly upheld by Marianne and Willoughby. 'Sympathy', in their case, signifies correspondence of feeling – their own feeling, and it begins and ends – such is their boast – with themselves. Mrs Dashwood unwittingly supplies an intriguing clue to this deficit when she claims to recognize 'no sentiment of approbation inferior to love' (16). The discounting of esteem in all but the love relationship is basic to the outlook of Austen's self-adulatory couple, who trusting in their shared intuitions turn a blind eye to the outer world, and in doing so leave themselves peculiarly defenceless to its inroads. Marianne, after Willoughby's desertion, finds herself in a social context which she has emptied of all meaning, and which she continues to suppose more treacherous than her betrayer (188–9). Willoughby, for his part, gives away a split in his make-up when he admits, in his hour of remorse, that he put Marianne through their final meeting at the cottage because he shrank from the thought that the Dashwoods, 'or the rest of the neighbourhood', might guess that he had fallen out with Mrs Smith (324). This hankering after general esteem runs entirely counter to the lovers' self-assumed character, and proves to have all the more power for its suppression. Like St Leon torn from Marguerite by the force of disposition, Willoughby capitulates to a need that rises, so to speak, from an unconscious that is irremediably *social*. Readers would have had no difficulty in connecting this need to the drive for social status widely described (though by no means always applauded) by liberal theorists. Specially apt in view of the stress laid on Willoughby's worldly aspirations, is Smith's idea that the more exalted ranks of society naturally attract admiration and that social stability is born of such instincts. But though Smith stood by this view, he was increasingly struck by the corruptive effects of imitation, and in his edition of 1790 pictures the realm of wisdom and virtue as foreign to that of wealth and power – 'the road which leads to the one, and that which leads to the other, lie sometimes in very

opposite directions'.⁵⁹ Both Godwin and Austen begin where Smith leaves off. They observe his diverging roads, but enlarge greatly on his critique of a materialist ethos. Approbation emerges as a far from straightforward social instrument in *Sense and Sensibility*. In place of Smith's regulator and diffuser of social mores, Austen presents something uncomfortably two-edged. Mr Palmer, for example, is driven by his thirst for applause to a veritable vaudeville act of antisocial feats (115–16).

Though no warts are removed, the minor characters (barring the exclusive London set) make deeper claims on the reader's respect in the last volume. This 'softening' of attitude may well be the result of revision, as Roger Gard has noted,⁶⁰ but it has its strategic side. Satire and caricature recede, as Marianne is gradually brought into more extroverted relation to her immediate world. Solidity returns as she prepares to join that (briefly glimpsed) society in which she will soon be 'submitting to new attachments', and, as patroness, 'entering on new duties' (379). The change in her outlook is signalled by the phrase 'affectionate sensibility' and by her adoption of the word 'esteem' which she has previously considered taboo. What underlies her earlier social estrangement is that excess of sensibility noted at the novel's start, a trait that bears comparison with Adam Smith's term 'excessive self-estimation'.⁶¹ In ethics, self-approval was usually understood to make up for the experience of taking on others' pain. But Austen exhibits a school where the compensatory part seems poised to take over. Marianne prides herself on the intensities of her distress. She seeks out solitude to 'augment and fix her sorrow', savours an 'invaluable misery', or cherishes an 'irritable refinement' (104, 303, 201). Her self-absorption kills 'every exertion of duty or friendship' – 'scarcely allowing', as she later admits, 'sorrow to exist but with me' (346). This quality of self-enclosure is vividly captured when she takes her leave of Norland ('could you know what I suffer[!]'), or congratulates herself on having feelings sufficiently strong to love a sister whose affections are merely calm (27, 104). And her isolation in the first volume is comically exaggerated by the huge family web that Austen weaves round her in Devon – where Middletons, Dashwoods, Palmers, and Steeles are all interconnected. She meets her perfect anti-type in that overwhelming social convenor Sir John ('Benevolent, philanthropic man!'), who cannot bear to 'keep a third cousin to himself' (119). A refreshingly practical philanthropist, Sir John is among those characters

⁵⁹ Ibid., i.iii.3.8, 64. The tone of such discussion in *The Wealth of Nations* is often sterner still, see e.g. iii.iv.10, 418–19.

⁶⁰ Roger Gard, *Novels*, pp. 85–6. ⁶¹ *TMS*, vi.iii.31, 253.

who grow more likeable with rereading: his shocking geniality loses some edge.

Though unparalleled in its penetration and lightness of touch, Jane Austen's criticism of period 'sensibility' is by no means unique. Coleridge, for one, entertained a similar scepticism towards this peculiarly literary virtue. At the height of a short friendship he commended Charles Lloyd for a 'benevolence enlivened, but not sicklied, by sensibility'.⁶² But before Lloyd came to write his own portrait of corrupt sensibility in *Edmund Oliver*, his explicitly Anti-Jacobin *roman-à-clef*, Coleridge got in a parody of Lloyd's mawkish style in a sonnet that hinges on the phrase, 'But, alas! Most of *Myself* I thought'.⁶³ Closer in some respects, however, is Godwin's full-length study of the man of feeling in *Fleetwood* (1805).

This novel, though in its time widely (and in some quarters wilfully) misunderstood,⁶⁴ owing to the oblique irony of its first-person narration, charts the increasingly antisocial course embarked upon by a hero dedicated to the pursuit of fine-feeling. Fleetwood is haunted, from motherless childhood on, by the thought that he stands alone. He pictures himself at one point – with a surreal brilliance that looks forward to Dickens – as an empty and disused industrial plant (263).⁶⁵ Drawing on the language of empiricist ethics,⁶⁶ he singles out sympathy as the only force that can animate this dreary automatism (150). In line with liberal theory again, he admits to the part played by 'attachment and approbation' in the making of the self, adding the proviso that he needs to find 'other persons in the world of the same sect as himself' – and there lies the rub, for he has found none. Abandoning politics and reverting to the life of fashion, the connoisseur of feeling becomes a prey to ennui and to nausea (140, 263). His life enters a new phase in the Lake District, however, when he meets Macneil, a thoroughgoing 'philanthropist' who lectures him on the need for human attachment. After making up a parable about a 'fastidious misanthropist' who is shipwrecked only to find, to his surprise, every kind of resource in the company of a quite ordinary sailor, Macneil unwisely encourages Fleetwood to marry his daughter. Misanthropy dies hard, and Godwin's

⁶² To Thomas Poole, 24 Sept. 1796, *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs (1956–71) 1, 236.

⁶³ First of the 'Sonnet Attempts In The Manner Of Contemporary Writers', in *Coleridge: Poems*, ed. John Beer (1974), p. 124.

⁶⁴ See Walter Scott's brilliant but disingenuous piece on the novel in *The Edinburgh Review*, 6 (Apr. 1805), pp. 182–93.

⁶⁵ *Fleetwood*, in *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, v, ed. Pamela Clemit (1992); references are given in the text.

⁶⁶ Compare, for example, *TMS*, i.i.1.2–3.

anti-hero persists in one crass error after another, propelling his wife, through a third volume, to the brink of an early grave. A far cry from the public-spirited hero celebrated by Mackenzie, Godwin's 'man of feeling' is a creature in ever-faster flight from reason and all social relation.

In the aftermath of Revolution, sensibility drew fire generally, and the attack came, as has often been noted, from quite different quarters. That Austen's satiric treatment of it has been linked with the Anti-Jacobin front, says something about the great fame of Gillray, Canning and the *Review*, something too about the relative obscurity of other critiques, but precious little about her work. In a survey of the field Janet Todd remarks on the way the Anti-Jacobin satirists 'worked to bind sensibility to radicalism'.⁶⁷ Context is all-important in determining the direction of the many critical assaults that were then current. In *Sense and Sensibility* Marianne's doctrine is associated with wealth and a face-saving materialism, and found wanting when pitted against a classical account of the social virtues, conspicuously grounded in the Enlightenment. That Marianne is made vulnerable by her studied indifference to matters of contract (witness her disregard of engagement) tallies closely, at the same time, with Wollstonecraft's warnings to women on the blinkering of sensibility. But, for Austen, neither the amiable virtue nor its counterfeits are by any means specific to gender. In Gillray's cartoon of the Theophilanthropes (Coleridge and Godwin are among them) Sensibility, complete with tricolor, is flanked by the gross and menacingly swollen figure of Philanthropy. Austen and Godwin make their relative positions clear when they bring in 'philanthropists' (however distinct) to show just how lacking in sociability their official figures of fine-feeling are.

⁶⁷ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (1986), p. 130.

PART TWO

Engaging with the new age