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"Italian Light on English Walls": Jane Austen and the Picturesque*

> Together o'ver the Alps methinks we fly,
> Fir'd with ideas of fair Italy.
> Pope, *Epistle to Mr Jervas*

1.

> I have read all Mrs Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure. "The Mysteries of Udolpho", when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again.
> *Northanger Abbey*, I, XIV

In *The Task*[1] Cowper, along with Crabbe Jane Austen's favourite poet, expresses his admiration for painting, which he calls the 'magic skill', explaining that through the 'light' of the great masters and their disciples he is allowed to see a far-away country he would otherwise be unable to visit. Cowper is simply adding his voice to a debate on the sister arts - *Ut pictura poesis* – which, started at the end of the 17th century, with Dryden's *Essay on Painting,*[2] and then influenced taste so profoundly that, by the end of the 18th century, it had become a universally acknowledged commonplace.

Jane Austen was not a poet (another universally acknowledged truth) and she had no other means to leave England and visit the mythical foreign land (Italy) than through the art of her sister novelists[3], in particular, the 'great enchantress'[4] and 'the most illustrious of the picturesque writers'[5], Ann Radcliffe. In effect *Sense and Sensibility, Northanger Abbey* and above all *Mansfield Park* are fraught with impressions and memories Austen drew from her "travels"[6] in *A Sicilian Romance*, *The Italian*,

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[1] W. Cowper, *The Task*, 1785, Bk I, ll, vv. 421-425: "I admire — / None more admires — the painter's magic skill, /Who shows me that which I shall never see, / Conveys a distant country into mine, /And throws Italian light on English walls". See E. Wheeler Manwaring, *Italian Landscape in Eighteenth Century England. A Study Chiefly of the Influence of Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa on English Taste 1700-1800*, London, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, (1925), 1965, ch. IV.

[2] See *Ibidem*, ch. II. For a well-documented introduction to the Eighteenth-century debite, see R. Zacchi, *La penna e il pennello secondo Dryden*, in E. Sala Di Felice, L. Sanna, R. Puggioni, eds., *Intersezioni di Forme letterarie e artistiche*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2001, pp. 185-196.

[3] On Italian settings in the Gothic novel, see M. Summers, *The Gothic Quest*, London, The Fortune Press, 1968. Of course Austen also read travel literature; in the letter to Cass., dated 20 February 1807, she mentions Baretti, probably *A Journey from London to Genoa* (1770) and *An Account of the Manners and Customs of Italy* (1768).

[4] W. Scott, *Prefatory Memoir to Mrs Ann Radcliffe*, in *The Novels of Mrs Ann Radcliffe*, Edinburgh, Ballantyne's Novelist'a Library, 1824, vol. 10, p. xx.

[5] C. B. Brown, "On a Taste for Picturesque", *Literary Magazine and American Register*, 2, No 9, June 1804, pp. 163-165.

[6] The metaphor of the journey through Radcliffe's *romances* is used by Catherine Morland in *NA*, vol. I, ch. 14.

and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. It is in this romance, in the fascinating setting of a Venetian palace on the Grand Canal, that the future authoress met the most well-known Italian character of the time, Montoni, and was so deeply impressed that she would give life to realistic English doubles of this character in *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey*[7].

However, before going into detail on the comparison between Montoni and Sir Thomas (whom recent postcolonial criticism rightly identifies as a key character for an understanding of both Austen's novel and her ideological stance), I would like to underline how the traces of Radcliffe's picturesque Italy[8] in Austen's novels only represent the most apparent and exterior aspect of her relationship with, or rather, her metabolization of the picturesque.

It is in Austen’s metabolization of Gilpin’s principles and rules that her narrative technique is rooted—a narrative technique for which she was recognized by Victorians and modernists alike as "an artist of the highest rank" and "the one consummate artist that the English 19th century produced"[9].

Austen does understand and develop the philosophical and epistemological premises of the picturesque. With the ‘open’ form of her novels she clearly demonstrates what recent critical studies have aimed to show: that the picturesque is not simply an Eighteenth-century fashion or an aesthetic category, but rather something larger and deeper, a “mode of perception” [10], a way of seeing and conceiving reality, and, ultimately, a “life style” [11]. Therefore Austen's metabolization of the picturesque principles is to be looked for much more in the formal structure of her novels than in the scraps of conversations scattered throughout them[12], which, taken as a whole and set against the ironic context of the "open endings", sometimes seem to acquire undertones of Foucaultian awareness.

2.

> your first consideration is to get in the best point of view.
> A few paces to the right, or left, make a great difference.
> W. Gilpin, 1792[13]

> In this period of change, it mattered very much where
> you were looking from. Points of view, interpretations,
> selections of reality, can now be directly contrasted.
> R. Williams, 1973[14]

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[7] If it is true that *NA*, considering its conception and first draft, is to be seen as the first of her six novels, it is also true that Austen continued to work on it as late as 1815, as the letters and textual analysis show. For example Gen. Tilney, compared to Sir Thomas, appears to be treated with a more detached and gentle irony which is very close to humour. See B. Battaglia, “*Female imagination* e *romance* nei romanzi di Jane Austen”, in *Atti del V Convegno A. I. A.*, Bologna, Clueb, 1983.

[8] On Radcliffe’s picturesque Italy see my “L’Italia pittoresca di Ann Radcliffe”, in *Imagining Italy. Literary Itineraries in British Romanticism*, ed. by L. M. Crisafulli, Bologna, Clueb, 2002, pp. 81-134.

[9] The two quotes are respectively from G. H. Lewes, anonymous review of *The Novels of Jane Austen* in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, July 1859 repr. in B. C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen The Critical Heritage*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968, pp. 168 and from F. M. Ford, *The March of Literature,* (1938), Normal, Dalkey Archive Press, 1994, p. 785.

[10] See. C. Hussey, *The Picturesque. Studies in a Point of View*, London, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, (1927), 1967; D. Punter, “The Picturesque and the Sublime: Two worldscapes”, in S. Copley and P. Garside, *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 220-239.

[11] See. A. Bermingham, “The Picturesque and ready-to-wear femininity”, in S. Copley and P. Garside, *cit*, ch. 4.

[12] See Manwaring, *cit*., pp. 221-223.

[13] W. Gilpin, *Three Essays, on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; on Sketching Landscape: to which is added a poem, on Landscape Painting*, London, Blamire, 1792, p. 63.

[14] R. Williams, *The Country and the City*, 1973, Frogmore St Albans, Paladin, 1975, p. 135.

Austen’s resorting to the metaphor of the brush to describe her own art — “the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine brush as to produce little effect after much labour”[15]—, was not fortuitous, but rather in line with well-established conventions. However, we should not allow the quoted “ivory” to mislead us into accepting uncritically the recurrent comparison with miniatures or Flemish painting. This comparison, prompted by the reference to one of the typical materials of contemporary miniature[16], is meant to highlight (as in Pope’s famous garden[17]) the relation between the small size of the work and its complex composition and refined execution, rather than the minuteness of detail. Suffice it to say that no visual information is given about the characters’ physical traits, clothes and manners or about the furnishings and decorations of the interiors[18]. To paraphrase the title of Sabbadini's well-known essay[19], Austen's *ivory* is psychological and the 'little effects' are produced in evoking the ultimate elusiveness of reality: Austen's realism, in fact, is not so much a mode to be found in the external descriptions of scenes and characters as an effect, an impression she manages to produce on the reader.

It is quite natural, therefore, that the style of Austen's 'social painting' is just as contemporary as its settings and themes. The effect her technique has on the reader intends to be, *mutatis mutandis*, similar to that produced by a landscape painting by Constable or the young Turner. Even the most convinced supporters of Hogarthian parallelisms have to admit (not least because of the variety of critical responses) that the ‘happy endings’ of her novels, open in their ironic conventionality, involve the reader by appealing to his sense and sensibility, and thus inducing him to question the human and moral depth, the true nature, and the ultimate knowableness of the characters encountered in the reading. When applied to the social and psychological context, Austen’s techniques, like those of the famous landscape painters of her time[20], give rise to a potential multiplicity of prospects and contrasts of light and shade that are equivalent to what in painting is called *indeterminacy*, that is to say ambiguity. So, as M. Schorer wrote of *Emma*, “the reader is allowed to take only as much as he wishes to take” [21] under the happy illusion that “he, alone, reading between the lines has become the secret friend of the author” [22].

Just as Constable and Turner started their career by studying the picturesque at the school of Richard Wilson —‘Italian Wilson’, as he was called because of his travels and style — so it is clear (even without her explicit admission in *Northanger Abbey*) that Jane Austen learned from the writer who, according to Margaret Oliphant[23], may be considered as the literary equivalent of Wilson, that is, Ann Radcliffe. Radcliffe was the first, or at least the best, at applying Gilpin's lesson by translating the picturesque into literature.

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[15] Letter to James Edward Austen, 16-17 December, 1816.

[16] J. Mee, “Austen’s treacherous ivory. Female patriotism, domestic ideology, and Empire”, in Y. Park and R. S. Rajan, *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 74 - 92.

[17] As Walpole wrote: «A little bit of ground of five acres… Pope had twisted and twirled and rhymed and harmonized this, till it appeared two or three sweet lawns opening and opening beyond one another, and the whole surrounded with thick impenetrable woods» (quoted in E. W. Manwaring, *cit*, p. 128)

[18] See W. Gilpin, p. 118: “Scorn thou then / On parts minute to dwell. The character / Of objects aim at., not the nice detail. “ Idem, *A Catalogue of Drawings and Books of Drawings…*, London, 1802, p. 32: “We always conceive the detail to be the inferior part of a picture”.

[19] S. Sabbadini, “L’avorio ideologico di Jane Austen”, in *Paragone*, 249, agosto 1974, pp. 90 -112.

[20] It is worth noticing that Turner and Constable were respectively born in 1775 and 1776.

[21] M. Schorer, *The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse*, in «The Literary Review», vol. II, n. 4, Summer 1959, pp. 547-563.

[22] K. Mansfield, *The Letters of Katherine Mansfi*eld, 1888-1923, ed. by J. Middleton Murray, London, Constable & Co Ltd, 1928, p. 335

[23] M. Oliphant, *The Literary History of England in the End of the Eighteenth and Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*, 3 vols., London, Macmillan, 1882, pp. 277 - 278: “ Perhaps of all others Mrs Radcliffe’s art is most like that of the gentle painter whom people call Italian Wilson”.

Jane Austen “was enamoured of Gilpin at a very early age", the family biographers tell us[24]. She was seventeen when *Three Essays*, the most theoretical of Gilpin's four works on the picturesque written over ten years, was published. Two years later, in 1794, the year when *The Mysteries of Udolpho* appeared, Richard Payne Knight published *The Landscape* and Uvedale Price *Essays on the Picturesque*, to mention only the most combative exponents of the 'Picturesque School' in the "paper war" against the supporters of ‘Capability’ Brown and Humphrey Repton.

Gilpin's importance lies in the fact that he was able to respond to a spreading taste for the picturesque by theorizing its principles in a clear and simple fashion in both prose and poetry, thereby divulging it outside the restricted elite of connoisseurs and dilettanti. As a matter of fact, in 1811, Marianne Dashwood could rightly complain that "…admiration of landscape scenery has become a mere jargon. Everybody pretends to feel and tries to describe with the taste and elegance of him who first defined what picturesque really was"[25].

The growing popularity of the picturesque at the turn of the century was of course a reaction to the transformation of the countryside brought about by social changes and particularly by the new moneyed aristocracy; at the same time, it was also an expression of the new commercial and urban wealth as well as of its patriotic-nationalistic spirit, or *domestic ideology* at large. Under this respect too, Gilpin’s work reflects the spirit and needs of the contemporary leisured class. As is well known, the picturesque taste is rooted in 17th and 18th century travel literature, and in the admiration for the style of Italian painters (from the Renaissance masters to Domenichino, Claude, Rosa, Tiepolo, Canaletto and many others). Manwaring rightly devotes a long chapter to "The creation of Italian landscape in England"[26]. Indeed, Gilpin managed to produce an English translation of the ‘Italian’ and continental principles of the picturesque by drawing his theory and examples exclusively from British nature, limiting to Great Britain his “travels in pursuit of picturesque beauty" and ending up modelling those principles on the British landscape[27].

Through this important work, which however Wilson had already initiated in his painting, Gilpin established and popularized a ‘way of seeing' which Austen sums up in the so called Tilney’s lesson on the picturesque in the chapter XIV of *Northanger Abbey*:

> They were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste. [...] He talked of fore-grounds, distances, and second distances – side-screens and perspectives – lights and shades...

Though it is evident that Austen knew Gilpin so well as to make spontaneous comparisons based on his principles as, for example, in *Pride and Prejudice*[28], the above summary is extremely significant as it demonstrates how unfounded the argument (so much debated in the 1960s and 70s) on Austen's technical awareness really was. Here, as in the rest of the novel, which always seems to verge on a meta-novel, Austen clearly shares the technical awareness of the *rules of composition* — the choice of point of view and perspective, the necessary balance among the various levels of composition, the contrast of light and shade, the function of the figures, etc. — which was part of the cultural currency of her time. This spontaneous, almost natural, awareness is the effect of the central importance of painting and drawing in the contemporary daily life[29], and of the century-old debate *Ut pictura poesis*, which just then was reshaping the relation between the verbal and the visual both in literature and painting[30].

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[24] “Biographical Notice to *Northanger Abbey*, 1818: “At a very early age she was enamoured of Gilpin on the Picturesque”. *Love and Freiendship* also quotes *Observations, relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, made in the year1778, on Several parts of Great Britain, particularly the Highlands of Scotland* (1789).

[25] *S. & S.*, I, XVIII (Oxford World’s Classics, p. 83).

[26] See note 1.

[27] See the titles of Gilpin’s works (in Manwaring, *cit.*, p. 185): the river Wye, South Wales, the lakes in Cumberland and Westmoreland, the Highlands, the New Forest, the Isle of Wight, le coasts of del Hampshire, Sussex e Kent, Cambridge, Norfolk, Suffolk e Essex, North Wales.

[28] *P. & P.*, I, X. (Oxford’s World Classics, p.46): “You are charmingly group’d […] The picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth”.

Austen's technical awareness, like Radcliffe's or Smith's, is not inferior to that of writers who a century later would boast their *art* or *craft of fiction.* Writing about the Pre-Raphaelites[31], the author of *The Good Soldier* takes for granted that the search for rules and professional techniques had been a constant and consolidated characteristic in England ever since the *Grande Stile* began to be imitated. It is significant therefore that he should consider Austen as the most consummate artist that the nineteenth century produced, "greater than the author of *Le Rouge et le Noir*" and with a greater delicacy of touch than the Master himself, Henry James.[32]. Furthermore, Ford, the acknowledged theorist of the *new form* (of the novel), valued *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* so much as to put them at the top of the list of his twelve favourite books[33].

In fact, Ford, who in his critical writings warns us against trusting the Narrator's voice whomsoever it belongs to, owes this very lesson to *Mansfield Park* where the unreliability of the narrative voice progressively emerges till it becomes flagrant in the final chapter. *The Good Soldier,* where, in spite of his continual claims to truthfulness, the Narrator is in fact as unreliable as in *Mansfield Park,* has quite an Austenian ending, as it leaves the reader full of unresolved doubts – one of which is whether these doubts are really worth following up.

In an earlier study[34], through a close textual reading, I highlighted a distinction in Austen's narrative technique between the points of view of the Narrator, the Author, and the Heroine. I was well aware then that I would have to face more or less tacit objections, particularly to the distinction between the Author and the Narrator, on the ground that such an advanced narrative technique might appear historically unfounded for that period. I now believe that the degree of technical inventiveness and innovation attributed to the "impressionist" or modernist novel should be reconsidered, since they are already embryonic in Gilpin's works (just to quote one of the best known names). We may just consider briefly how the rules for the positioning of *figures* in a painting and the function they are given (in order to produce the desired effect on the spectator) indicate Gilpin's awareness that various points of view do exist and that their interaction may be manipulated for greater effect:

> "[Figures] break harsh lines – point out paths over mountains or to castles."[35] "Their chief use is to mark a road – to break a piece of foreground – to point out the horizon in a sea view – or to carry off the distance of retiring water by the contrast of a dark sail, not quite so distant…"[36] "*If […] we can interest the imagination of the spectator, so as to create in him an idea of some beautiful scenery beyond such a hill, or such a promontory, which intercepts the view*, we give scope to a very pleasing deception. It is like the landscape of a dream…"[37]

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[29] At the time people went to exhibitions of paintings, prints and engravings as today they go to the cinema. Some travellers, including Gilpin himself, liked to carry with them in the carriage some pictures or prints to be changed. See Manwering, *cit.*; A. Bermingham, *Learning to Draw, Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2000; J. Barrell, ed., *Paintings and the Politics of Culture, New Essays on British Art, 1700 – 1850,* Oxford and New York, Oxford U.P., 1992.

[30] S. Pugh, "Introduction", *Reading Landscape: Country-City-Capital*, ed. S. Pugh, Manchester and New York, St Martin's Press, 1990, e A. Birmingham, *Reading Constable*, in *Ibidem.*

[31] F. M. Ford, *The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood,* London, Duckworth, 1907.

[32] F. M. Ford, *The March of Literature*, cit., p.786.

[33] F. M. Ford, *Mighter than the Sword,* London, George Allen & Unwin, 1938, p. 26.

[34] *La zitella illetterata: parodia e ironia nei romanzi di Jane Austen*, Ravenna, Longo, 1983.

[35] W. Gilpin, *Instructions for Examining Landscape; Illustrated by 32 Drawings*, 20 pp. MS, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, pp. 14-15.

[36] W. Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 77.

[37] W. Gilpin, *Instructions.* (italics mine)

Clearly various perspectives may be distinguished here: the spectator's, the figure's in the picture, the painter's, that which the painter would like the spectator to attribute to the figure, that which the spectator does actually attribute to the figure and which changes according to the spectator himself.

When translating these different 'perspectives' into the narrative field — where one has to deal with far more articulate *characters* than Gilpin's sketchy *figures*, since they are endowed with speech and thought allowing them to contradict any perspective given them by the Narrator, the reader or even by themselves —, the number of possible points of view may increase enormously. This is the case with Austen's *mixed characters*, who cannot be given a precise and definite description unless we leave aside some contradictory detail (which indicate a further different perspective). This applies also to the minor characters, who appear as such only because they are flattened into the 'distance' according to the rules of the main narrative point of view. This is why, as Forster wrote in *Aspects of the Novel*, Austen's flat characters, like Lady Bertram, *are* all "capable of rotundity"[38].

With respect to narrative rhetoric, in the passage quoted above it is relevant to stress the manipulation of the spectator (or reader) on the part of the painter (or writer), particularly at the moment when he promotes the identification of the spectator (or reader) with the figure in the picture (or character in the novel) by arousing his desire to share that figure's perspective. Both novel and painting can therefore turn into a sort of trap for the reader, a device designed by the author to exercise his power over him.

Incidentally, it is worth recalling the device of *the play within the play* in *Mansfield Park*, which is to be read not simply as a choice in keeping with contemporary taste[39], but also as a means of juxtaposing different worlds and contrasting outlooks, which comment on one another, thus opening up a multiplicity of possible perspectives that reproduce the ambiguity and variability of reality.

Some of Ford's fundamental impressionistic techniques — such as the *juxtaposition of situations* or the *progression d' éffet*, which, though on a different scale, recur in Austen's novels — may be regarded as a development of the very terms which stand out in Gilpin's *Three Essays* in their characteristic italics: *variety ... contrast ... combination ... gradation ... effect ... love of novelty ... new combinations...* etc.[40]

The function given to animated non-human figures is also significant: Gilpin uses them to animate the distances in an effort to enlarge space in conformity with that yearning for novelty ('new objects', 'new combinations') which pervades his theory and pictures, and is at the basis of the great vogue of travel literature and painting as illustrations and visions of new places.

If we consider that Gilpin succeeded in both arousing and fulfilling that desire within Britain, by replacing the *grand tours* to Mediterranean Europe with domestic tours and trips – which is exactly what Pope did in his small garden –, it is no wonder that Austen, in her *little bit of ivory*, tried to reproduce the same sense of movement and openness, of indistinct and receding distances, thus succeeding in encompassing, within the limited frame of *Mansfield Park*, a view of the complex social history of Britain at the turn of the century by "distillating a fifty years'debate on improvement"[41].

Austen in fact proves to be a 'social historian', in spite of any unfounded complaint about the limitations of her social settings[42] and the absence of references to Napoleon and the History of her time, (which is philologically untrue, because *Trafalgar* does appear, and not fortuitously[43], in S*anditon*). Jane Austen is a ‘social historian’ simply because she portrays the social history of her time. She is very sensitive towards the social changes leading to the transformation of the countryside by staging in her novels the contemporary debate on landscape and improvement. She depicts the slow evolution of manners which was then affecting both the individual and society under the pressure of the new urban and commercial values that were “colonizing” the old traditional values by preserving their outer importance and authority, while changing them in their essence**.**

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[38] All of Austen's characters appear ambiguous and elusive, just "like a person not to be comprehended fully and finally by any other person" (L. Trilling, "*Emma* and the Legend of Jane Austen" (1957), in *Jane Austen's* Emma, ed. by D. Lodge, London, Macmillan, 1968, p. 152.

[39] The interpolation of theatrical scenes was a fashionable device (see M. Butler, "Introduction", *M. P.*, Oxford World's Classics, 1991, pp. xxi – xxii).

[40] See pp. 20, 75, 76.

[41] See N. Everett, *The Tory View of Landscape*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1994, p. 188.

[42] The choice of a specific point of view as well as the freedom to add or move out some parts of the landscape is a feature of Gilpin's aesthetic. Looking out from the inside of her house, Austen is perfectly legitimized by Gilpin to change

I hope I will not be charged with indifferentism if, agreeing with Edward Carr[44], I maintain that the importance of Austen as a social historian is not at all affected by her ideological stance. As Ford rightly wrote, “she is neither romanticist nor realist, she was just a *novelist*”[45]; and more precisely, as A.W. Litz would later add, “a *literary* novelist”[46]. Her main interest in fact lies in the *composition* of her novels, as she herself wrote in her letters. Thus, as it has been said, her response to Gilpin’s lesson is first of all to be searched in the narrative form and technique of her novels. However, there is no denying the fact that a narrative technique represents in itself an ideological choice since form reflects ideology as well as ideology determines form.

Therefore her ideological stance comes through her narrative technique rather than through her characters’ or the Narrator’s speeches. In fact, both the perspective and narrative space allotted to each character is determined or dictated by the main narrative point of view. Yet the main point of view cannot be Austen’s free choice either, since, being a parodist, she has to stick to the conventions of the novel she is parodying and, consequently, she must play the role of its conventional Narrator.

3.

> “Don’t be affronted” said she laughing; “but it [Sir Thomas’s return] does put me in mind of some of the old heathen heroes, who after performing great exploits in a foreign land, offered sacrifices to the gods on their safe return.” (*Mansfield Park*, I, 11).

Comedy, wit, humour, irony, burlesque, parody: the whole spectrum of comic categories has been exploited to provide a definition of Jane Austen’s talent and genius, as well as to explain her laughter

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her sketch according to what her taste and imagination require, yet without being accused of the inability to see (see R. Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 140).

[43] *Trafalgar* is the name of the new house Mr Parker is building according to the fashion of Repton’s ‘improvement’.

If we take into account that Mr Parker is establishing what we call a business speculation and consider the social and economic situation both of his partners and expected future customers (rich families who made their money in the West Indies or by keeping boarding schools), we can clearly see how many implications are included in this denomination: behind the patriotic reference, the other side of the domestic ideology is shown rooted in the spasmodic profit-seeking and the exploitation of any resources. Trafalgar House, entirely new even in its name (“a light elegant Building, standing in a small lawn with a very young plantation round it”), aims to become “the favourite spot for Beauty & Fashion”, obviously for profit. Here, in *Sanditon*, Austen is describing Jameson’s “great mechanism” just beginning to toddle (See “The Market” in F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of late Capitalism*, London and New York, Verso, 1991). Her point of view is that of the so-called *pseudo-gentry*, that is a gentry without land nor money: nowhere else in her novels Austen was so explicit on the subject (See P. Poplawski, *A Jane Austen Encyclopedia*, London, Alnwick Press, 1998, pp 259 - 266).

[44] E. A. Carr, *What is Histor*y, London, Macmillan, & Co Ltd, 1961.

[45] F. M. Ford, *The March of Literature*, cit., p. 784.

[46] A. W. Litz, “Recollecting Jane Austen”, *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (1975), p. 682. This is a perfect definition which would deserve more attention. (italics mine)

or smile as both a defensive and an offensive weapon—a weapon which, according to her biographers, may be ascribed to various sources such as a maternal inheritance, an inbred shyness, her financial situation and a social milieu that were limiting and oppressive for a woman writer endowed with so keen an eye and so sharp a tongue.

In defining her style as the outcome of "a cunningly chameleon-like faculty", Mary Lascelles captured at best the characteristic indirectness and elusiveness of Austen's parodic writing. It is a fact that no assertion or opinion in her novels can be unquestionably ascribed to the Author, since it is totally dependent on the narrative point of view it comes from, and any comment on it derives from the interplay of the various perspectives within the fictional world.

To the many reasons given so far to explain Austen's penchant for parody and irony we cannot help adding the lesson of Gilpin's picturesque, whereby the process or the succession and varying of prospects, rather than the single prospect, is stressed. A single prospect is felt only as a momentary stage in the unfolding "pursuit of picturesque beauty", where any enjoyment is no final fulfilment, but a spur to continue the search for new points of view, in "the expectation of new scenes continually opening, and arising to the view" [47].

Hutcheon's concept of *ironical parody*, which implies this very "sliding" from one perspective into another, without clearly choosing one for ever, perfectly applies (as I argued elsewhere)[48] to a technique which coherently developed from the *literary* burlesque of her juvenilia. Neither true burlesque, therefore, nor satirical irony can be found in the mature novels but by "such dull elves"[49] who believe they possess the truth, for having caught Austen in the open. Obviously, this kind of parody implies a moral relativism which does not clash with Austen's outlook, if we read morality in accordance with that concern for self-assertion and "the hygiene of the self"[50] which (in *Mansfield Park)* produces, for example, Fanny's hypocrisy as a strategy for social survival.

Indeed Jane Austen's attitude to morals is not far from ours, but, for a number of reasons[51], recent criticism, attracted more by her "cultural image" than her novels, has been engaged mainly in exploring her morals and ideology according to that "either-or" paradigm"[52] which, to some critics, appears less and less useful not only in Austen criticism but also in philosophical sciences in general.

In this respect, the fault lies probably with Edward Said , since he made use of the conventional Victorian image of Jane Austen without any reference to its origin and development, and, above all, without feeling the need to listen, in confirmation, to what is to be seen as the novelist's most characteristic language, that is her formal language. It is in this context that the Narrator should be placed, instead of being happily identified, as Said did, with Jane Austen *tout court*, as if *Mansfield Park* were really the monological moral tale he needed to support his thesis[53]. However, it is a fact that Jane Austen's morals still constitute an unclear matter, as the debate on her ideological stance continues to be open.

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[47] Gilpin, *Three Essays*, p. 47. On the *openness* implicit in Gilpin's theory and its characteristic "gradual progressive unfolding of space" see A. Bermingham ("System, Order, and Abstraction. The Politics of English Landscape Drawing around 1795", in *Landscape and Power*, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1994, pp. 86-93).

[48] "Jane Austen's 'Chameleonic' Art and *A Poetics of Postmodernism*", in B. Battaglia, ed., *Jane Austen Oggi e Ieri*, Ravenna Longo, 2002, pp. 38-46; see also *La zitella illetterata*, cit.

[49] Lett. to Cass., 13 Jan. 1813.

[50] L. Trilling, "Mansfield Park", in *The Opposing Self*, New York, Viking Press, 1955.

[51] See J. Wiltshire's essay on Austen's biographies in J. Wiltshire, *Recreating Jane Austen*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 13 - 37.

[52] P. Buck, "Tender Toes, Bow-wows, Meow-Meows and the Devil: Jane Austen and the Nature of Evil", in *A Companion to Jane Austen Studies*, ed. by L. C. Lambdin and R. T. Lambdin, Westport and London, Greenwood Press, 2000, p. 202.

[53] E. W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, London, 1994, p. 104: "Austen here synchronizes domestic with international authority, making it plain that the values associated with such higher things as ordination, law, and prosperity must be grounded firmly in actual rule over and possession of territory. She sees clearly that to hold and rule Mansfield Park is to hold and rule an imperial estate in close, not to say inevitable association with it. What assures the domestic tranquillity and attractive harmony of one is the productivity and regulated discipline of the other.". .See S. Fraiman,

This controversiality, which I described as a significantly conscious product of Austen's parodic strategy, is rooted in the dense picture she gave of the society she lived in. The picture, thanks to biographical and cultural studies, has become more and more complex and articulated as it has been shown to include aspects of, or hints at such (hitherto un-Austenian) matters as colonialism, imperial discourse, domestic ideology, consumerism, and so forth. These aspects of the large-scale transformations of the social structure of Regency Britain are variously dramatized by Austen, while the focus is kept on the present, as they affect the social class to which Jane Austen, though marginally, belonged, that is, the gentry[54].

The forces at play in the social setting of *Mansfield Park* are emblematically represented, as is well-known, by Sotherton Court, Mansfied Park and the town in a double version, London and Portsmouth. Of course these places come to life and exist through *the families* that inhabit them and that are made up of single individuals; however, it is by their behaviours and relations taken as a whole that the social class they belong to (mostly the upper middle class and the lower upper class) is staged and represented in the interplay of its subtlest shades.

Sotherton Court, with its Tudor origin, "all its rights of Court-Leet and Court-Baron" [55], its ancient characteristic disregard for site and view, its age old avenue, "the noblest old place in the world" [56], represents what remains of the old landed aristocracy of feudal origins. Mansfield Park, with its new, modern, luxurious and imposing Great House:

> …a park, a real park five miles round, a spacious modern-built house, so well placed and well screened as to deserve to be in any collection of engravings of gentlemen's seats in the kingdom[57],

reflects the rise and values of the class that made Lancelot Brown's fortune, the new moneyed aristocracy, which values appearances in order to strengthen its recently acquired power[58]; and which was anti-Jacobin because it did not like to be reminded of its past and wanted to avoid any comparison with what was happening in France. At the same time, it aimed at merging beyond recognition with the old, "true" aristocracy.

"Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism", in *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*, ed. by D. Lynch, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 221, n. 2.

[54] See N. Everett, *cit.* Also E. P. Thompson in T. Lovell, "Jane Austen and the Gentry: A Study in Literature and Ideology", in *The Sociology of Literature: Applied Studies*, Monograph 26, ed. by D. Laurenson, Keele, University of Keele, 1978, pp. 15-37. See also the chapters on *Class* and *Money* respectively by J. McMaster and E. Copeland in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, 1997.

[55] *M. P.*, I, VIII, (p. 74). V. G. Myer (*Obstinate Heart: Jane Austen, a Biography*, London, Michel O'Mara Books, 1997, ch. 13) suggests Stoneleigh Abbey in Staffordshire as a model for Sotherton Court. Built in Henry II's time, it was in the possession of the Leigh family since 1561. Mrs Austen and her daughters visited Stoneleigh Abbey in August 1806.

[56] *Ibidem*, I, VI, (p. 47).

[57] *Ibidem*, I, V, (p. 42).

[58] As well known, the baronetage was a recent and unstable title. It was created by James I in 1611 and it benefited mainly families from Salisbury and Northamptonshire, Sir Thomas' county. Originally intended as a hereditary title, it soon became goods to be sold to the highest bidder. This practice was particularly frequent in the period following the foundation of Antigua in 1632 (see L. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1588-1641*, London, Oxford University Press, 1967; C. Tuite, "Domestic Retrenchment and Imperial Expansion: The Property Plots of *Mansfield Park*", in *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*, cit., p. 103). Given the complexity of the social structure, the Bertrams' social identity has been much debated: whether they belong to the old aristocracy or to "middle class aristocracy" (N. Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 160) ; whether they are "an old established landed elite, a linearly ordered model drawing nourishment exteriorly; or […] a ' new' commercial family, inward-looking and defensive" (K. Sutherland, "*Jane Eyre*'s Literary History: the Case for *Mansfield Park*", *English Literary History*, 59 (1992), pp. 409-40). See B. Southam, "The Silence of the Bertrams", *Times Literary Supplement*, Feb. 17, 1995 (repr. in *Mansfield Park*, ed. by C. Johnson, Norton, 1997, pp. 493-498).

This is what Sir Thomas seeks to achieve with his children, yet he fails. The fault is to be laid mainly at his door: he carries the infection himself, as he never seems aware that noble countenance and manners can only be nourished by inner principles rooted in a dutiful and active interest in the land and the community, while neither can be bought by money and worn like a dress at one's own liking. Indeed, to Sir Thomas, the ruling values are wealth and consequence, and all that is entailed by the new commercial outlook represented by the attractive and disenchanted Crawfords. In defining the magic wand of this 'brave new world' by the true London maxim that "everything is to be got with money", Mary Crawford is clearly echoing Moll Flanders' "with money in one's pocket, one is at home everywhere".

Auden was certainly right[59]: money is at the heart of *Mansfield Park*. It is money that both requires and allows itself to be celebrated through the improvements of the great mansions, their grounds and gardens, the destruction of villages, the enclosures, the exploitation of the colonies and the empire. Money is the protagonist which infects and corrupts the old values, reduces them to empty appearances and replaces them with egoism and greed. Money then shapes the plot and the lives of the characters in its clash with the antagonistic great force which Jane Austen stages in *Mansfield Park*, the everlasting 'Gran Nimico' of capitalistic ethics, that is sex and love. The happy ending too is brought about by the triumph of a moral code founded on worldly consequence and appearances.

As with the majority of Austen's endings, also the happy ending of *Mansfield Park* is not convincing[60] to those readers who have not yielded to the rhetoric of the Omniscient Narrator suggesting that Fanny will inherit Mansfield Park[61]. But if we consider that Fanny is the only one to live up to Sir Thomas's standard of female behaviour (outer passivity and inner egotism and pride) so much so as to be recognized in the end as "the daughter of his heart", the suggestion of the Omniscient Narrator is fully coherent with the moral point of view implied by the whole narrative – the same as Sir Thomas's and Mrs Norris's ("a part of himself"[62]). The omniscient Narrator of *Mansfield Park* is in fact the mouthpiece of the aspirations and values of the most energetic and active (or rather the most rapacious) class then present on the British social scene. Consequently, this class must be given the foreground in the novel. As Claudia Johnson has noted, the placid final chapter of *Mansfield Park* is far from being supported by the narrative structure, "[which] never permits paternalistic discourse completely to conceal or to mystify ugly facts about power"[63]. Other prospects are suggested in the 'distances': told from the point of view of Maria, *Mansfield Park* would be a gothic romance, in which Sir Thomas, sensitive only to wealth and consequence, would play the true villain bringing disorder and suffering, since – and in this we quite agree with Said – at Mansfield Sir Thomas does exactly the same things, on a larger scale, as in his Antigua plantations [64]. He avails himself of every means at his disposal – severity, mildness, cruelty, and self-deception – in order to reach his aim.

We realize that if there is an obsession (we cannot say "target", since her technique is too complex) haunting Austen's fictional world, that is money, the very source of her domestic, daily gothic. The scene where Sir Thomas informs Fanny about Crawford's marriage proposal, with its evident and significant parallels, re-enacts the scene in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (vol. II, cap 2) where Montoni, in trying to force Emily to marry Count Morano, becomes the embodiment of male despotic power and, as such, the overt target of a feminist discourse.

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[59] W. H. Auden, "A Letter to Lord Byron" (1936): "It makes me most uncomfortable to see/An English spinster of the middle class/ Describe the effects of 'brass', / Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety/ The economic base of society."

[60] See C. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel*, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1988; also J. Pat Rogers, "The Critical History of *Mansfield Park*", in *A Companion to Jane Austen Studies*, cit., p. 83.

[61] See R. Sales, *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, pp. 87-131.

[62] *M. P.*, III, XVII, (p. 424).

[63] C. Johnson, *cit.*, p. 102

[64] E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, cit., p. 104. It has long been disregarded the important fact that the link between *M.P.* and slavery is explicitly posed in the very title, where the name of the house recalls the famous Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, who was the author of the first step towards abolition in 1772.

In comparison, Austen's 'villain' is made even more dangerous by being concealed under a contemporary and familiar appearance: his legitimate and undisputed authority is matched with a kind of diplomatic reasonableness and affectionate caring which make him appear as an interpreter, both mentor and emissary, of the Great social Mechanism and its ruthless economic logic, according to which leisure is dispensed and sacrifices must be required. Thus, in the unpredictable play of personal interests and chance, a sort of malleable morality is produced – an art of interpretation and adaptation which it would be somewhat excessive to call hypocrisy, since, through constant exercise, it has become unconscious and almost natural.

Sir Thomas's characterization is far more complex than appears from the one-sided tale of the Narrator. It has that very Shakespearean quality highlighted by Macaulay and Richard Simpson.

If Sir Thomas, like Gen. Tilney, may be considered Austen's Montoni, it is not to be forgotten that Montoni was openly associated with power by the epigraphs to the chapters drawn from *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. Placed against this Radcliffean background, Sir Thomas stands out as a complex embodiment of bourgeois power, in which economic motivations automatically find self-justifications and self-approbations to produce morality by a constant dialectical and verbal exercise.

In *Mansfield Park* words are as important as facts: is any evidence provided, besides the Narrator's assertion, that Fanny is the humble, generous and self-denying "evangelical" heroine, whose behaviour is always dictated by deep-rooted principles, and not, as it is really the case, by the fundamental fact of being in love with Edmund, whose slightest hints or suggestions are more powerful to her than any moral principle?

Likewise, Edmund's principles might be as solid as the Narrator asserts; but the novel shows us an ordinary young man ready, in spite of his verbal professions, to adjust his principles to his sentimental needs, or, even worse, to measure the intellectual value of people on their wealth[65], as well as to base the choice of a professional vocation on wise economic considerations. Similarly Sir Thomas as the exemplary head of the family, even capable of admitting his slight errors, is supported by the Narrator, but the novel shows us a husband *happily* married to Lady Bertram[66] and a father whom nobody loves, whose absence is felt as a 'relief' and liberation and the return as a nightmare, and who can destroy the young people's green curtain without a word, and force them all into a far harder daily acting. It is undeniable that Maria's tragic acting begins with the return and the approval of her father, who is really the main player.

Since, in a world run by money, appearing is equivalent to being, acting could not but be a central theme in *Mansfield Park*, where the relation between the theatre and reality is enacted, and the theatre is exploited as a means to unmask rather than to mask. In fact, in relation to the Jacobin comedy *Lovers' Vows*, the story told by the Omniscient Narrator of *Mansfield Park* may be read as part of a meta-play in the form of a novel. If, according to Roger Sales, *Mansfield Park* is "a highly theatrical critique of theatricality,"[67] Austen is certainly its Director and not simply one of its voices or players. Only as a Director could she fully express her true vocation which, as proven by her Juvenilia and the most memorable passages in her novels[68], was that of a Dramatist. In its complex ambiguity *Mansfield Park* seems to enact a conflict between Austen as a Dramatist and Austen as a Novelist, or between what Austen would have wished to be and what, in Sir Thomas's society, she could be. The ability to evoke the potential coexistence of various motives, which emerge in the dialogues of this novel, only belong to the great Dramatist, who, in the final chapter, with a superb ironical *coup de théâtre* beats the conventional Narrator who is so adverse to the freedom of the theatre: the omniscient Narrator is left alone on the stage, like Mr Yates, to expose herself by ranting her tautological moral "strictures"[69] and then to take leave of the audience, in the usual role of the main Actress! [70]

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[65] *M.P.*, I, IV, p. 35: "…nor could [Edmund] refrain from often saying to himself, in Mr Rushworth's company, 'If this man had not twelve thousand a year, he would be a very stupid fellow'".

[66] It is worth noticing that the text suggests that it was not Lady Bertram's physical beauty that 'captivated' Sir Thomas, since her sisters, Miss Ward and Miss Frances, were commonly thought of as 'quite as handsome as Miss Maria', but they had far less passive dispositions and tempers. Lady Bertram fully incarnates the total passivity recommended by the conduct books. Like all Austen's fools, she is a key to the parodical irony of the novel (see my "Le forme della *conduct literature* nell'Inghilterra di Jane Austen", in S. Bonaldi, ed., *L'educazione femminile in età romantica*, Firenze, Alethea, 2002).

[67] R. Sales, *Jane Austen and Regency England*, cit., p. 131.

There is not enough space here for an adequate illustration of *Mansfield Park*'s subtly pervasive parodic style; therefore I will simply draw attention to the potential complexity of this most ambiguous of Austen's novels, and argue that such complexity can be better substantiated and explained, even enriched, as the parodic hints are made perceptible and visible by the contribution of cultural and social studies , which alone can eradicate the still rooted Victorian stereotype[71]. The broader our historical knowledge of the Regency period, the clearer the fact that Austen was a woman of her time: a woman, as evidenced by her letters, perfectly acquainted with what was going on in Europe and the world at large, which she chose to stage or to depict from *her* point of observation and in the language available to her by her situation in life as a woman and as part of what some commentators have called *pseudo-gentry*.

Only as precise an analysis as Ann Bermingham's on the 1790s can adequately show how deeply Austen's historical awareness is inscribed in her texts, thus allowing us to perceive that her gothic parody extends from literature to social reality, and that such a well-known allusion as that to "a neighbourhood of voluntary spies" [72] has to be read as something more than a simple gibe at her neighbours' nosiness.

As the dimension of the text widens to suggest ambiguous trespassings on political ground, a kind of transparency seems to invest social rites and fashions, such as clothes or the picturesque, as if to highlight the fact that social behaviours *have roots and motivations*. As an example, I will quote a passage from Bermingham evincing Austen's historical awareness, as well as the political implications of her narrative strategy of ambiguity and silence:

> Upon reaching the summit of Beechen Cliff, Henry Tilney proceeded to instruct Catherine Morland in the rules of picturesque beauty. "He talked of fore-grounds, distances, and – side screen and perspectives – lights and shades […] and by an easy transition from a piece of rock fragment and the withered oak which he placed near the summit, to oaks in general, to forests, the enclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government, he shortly found himself arrived at politics; and from politics it was an easy step to silence". In a landscape where all the signs of picturesque nature lead to politics, politics leads to silence. Henry 's description of the scenery around Bath serves to underscore the fact that in Eighteenth century Britain landscape – even picturesque landscape – was a mode of political discourse. *What is* therefore *striking* about the description *is not the inevitable linking of landscape with politics but the silence that follow their connection*, which the text also assumes to be inevitable. Jane Austen began writing *Northanger Abbey* in 1797, when

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[68] Austen's life-long passion for the theatre has been fully demonstrated by Paula Byrne and Penny Gay in their recent books, both entitled *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, 2002 (Humbledon and London; and Cambridge University Press, respectively) and not yet published when I was writing this essay. Both studies highlight an extremely significant aspect of Austen's art which can no longer be ignored when considering her parodic and ironic techniques.

[69] By this word, which refers to Hannah More's well known *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, (1799), I mean to underline an ironic suggestion that runs throughout *Mansfield Park*: the omniscient Narrator plays the part of a female moralist such as Jane West or Hannah More, who are very successful mouthpieces of the patriarchal Establishment

[70] See P. Gay's "Epilogue", pp. 166-7.

[71] See D. Nokes, *Jane Austen A Life*, Fourth Estate, London, 1997; also Myer, *cit.*, pp. 2-3.

[72] *N. A.*, II, IX, (Oxford World's Classics, p. 159).

> anti-Jacobin paranoia was at its height in Britain. Political silence was legislated by Parliament, watched over by government spies, and enforced by the courts…[73]

The silence at Beechen Cliff recalls another which has become a topic in postcolonial criticism: the 'dead silence' invading Mansfield's drawing-room at Fanny's "slave-trade" question. From Jane Austen we cannot expect more than this exposure, implicit in the dead silence which captures and fixes Sir Thomas and his family as in a picture or a photograph.

Among the various functions ascribed to silence as a narrative "language", it is worth mentioning Angela Leighton's interpretation of these silences as Austen's conscious declaration that the language allowed to a woman writer in the Regency period did not include the expression of a whole range of subjects such as politics and social justice at home and abroad[74]. In such circumstance silence may become a "language" that completes the actual language by functioning as a Gilpinian figure, that is, drawing the reader to *imagine* what is not said and cannot be said. In this case, beside the official portrait by the omniscient Narrator in the conventional language, the reader is invited to visualize another picture of Sir Thomas: as the representative of a social "class" which, by the exploitation of colonial possessions and enclosures at home, could buy seats in parliament, and from there legislate and facilitate their policy of profit at any cost, while silencing any protest through imprisonment and executions[75].

If we have a glance at the "Historical Chronology:1750 -1820" in Paul Poplawski' s *Jane Austen's Encyclopedia*[76], we may realize that Austen (not least because of her brothers' professions) could not possibly ignore what was going on in her society in the name of the new "Gods":

> …a mob of three thousand men assembling in St George's Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood, a detachment of the 12th Light Dragoons, (the hope of the nation,) called up from Northampton to quell the insurgents, and the gallant Capt. Fredrick Tilney, in the moment of charging at the head of his troop, knocked off his horse by a brickbat from an upper window.[77]

By means of a "cinematograph-picturesque" technique, very similar to Radcliffe's[78], Austen flickers before her readers' eyes a vivid picture which is immediately discarded or mocked by the official point of view. The same technique used by Radcliffe to produce her famous suspence is employed by Austen to produce ironic resonance, as in the following well-known passage where "atrocities", "connive" and the newspapers' power of information are clearly related to a social context which is larger than the setting of the gothic romance, though not at all more reassuring. Tilney is not defending his father's character nor denying that such atrocities may happen in England; he is simply arguing the possibility of such atrocities being discovered, tolerated or even promoted.

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[73] A. Bermingham, "System, Order, and Abstraction", cit., p. 77 (italics mine). For the political dimension of the picturesque in this passage see D. Warrall in Copley and Garside, *cit.*, ch. 10.

[74] A. Leighton, "Sense and Silences: Reading Jane Austen Again", in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. by J. Todd, New York and London, Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1983, pp. 128-41.

[75] B. Southam suggests a very convincing portrait of Sir Thomas as "a second-generation absentee", modelled on James Langford Nibbs, owner of an Antigua plantation of which George Austen was principal trustee ("The Silence of the Bertrams", cit.).

[76] See *A Jane Austen Encyclopaedia*, pp. 25-48: legal intimidation of radical newspaper printers and bookseller; taxes on newspaper increased and import of foreign newspapers prohibited; radical suspected imprisoned for long periods without trial; general food shortage, rising prices, nationwide food riots; naval mutinies, ringleaders executed, Luddites executed; General Enclosure Law simplifies process of enclosing common land while the Corn Law sets artificially high price on wheat.

[77] *N. A.* I. XIV, (p. 88).

[78] C. Hussey, *cit.*, p. 236.

Why flicker the idea of connivance between such atrocities and the laws before the readers' imagination?

> Does our education prepare for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?[79]

J.M.S. Tompkins's analysis of Radcliffe's romances, can be conveniently applied to Austen's novels:

> Mrs Radcliffe […] made her landscape the centre of her plots. Her great innovation was that with her the landscape […] acquires a personality and suggests the plot. The most important actors in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* are Udolpho and Chateau-le-Blanc. The fates of the human beings merely illustrates the nature of these places.[80]

If *landscape* is replaced by *social setting,* then Austen's novels will appear as 'economic romances'[81] and the domestic gothic will become visible in all its threatening reality. Austen's gothic castles are the country houses, which are even more threatening at least as long as they can't be looked at with a mistress's eye.

More courage is needed for a writer to enter these real houses than Radcliffe's imaginary castles and spy around there without being caught, particularly if she has no language to render the prospect from below, from the point of view of the poor and the outcast people of no importance. So Jane Austen, who was never the lady of the house, had no other way of expressing her point of view, than to parody the masters' language.

Ford used to say that Austen's art made him feel "actually sitting in an armchair in Mansfield Park […] with the characters"[82], meaning that he felt attracted inside the picture to watch and listen to their conversations and gossip, and share their perspectives; in a word, he felt personally involved in the fictional world. This effect, which is truly Gilpinian, explains why a true Austenite, in spite of any scholarly rigour, sooner or later cannot help expressing personal impressions; and, coming to my conclusion, so will I. I believe that Jane Austen would have considered today's lively debates about her ideological stance as indelicate and improper, or even an indication of dullness, since she always did her best to avoid any clear statement about such issues, while letting her critics enjoy the characteristic picturesque pleasure of pursuing new and different views of her novels.

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[79] *N. A.*, II, IX, (p. 159).

[80] J. M. S. Tompkins, *Ann Radcliffe and her Influence on Later Writers* (1921), New York, Arno Press, 1980, p. 74.

[81] See E. Copeland, *cit.*, p. 133.

[82] F. M. Ford, *The March of Literature*, p. 787.