

JANE AUSTEN AND THE ECONOMY OF SALVATION: RENEWING THE DRIFTING CHURCH IN *MANSFIELD PARK*

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Abstract

One obstacle in literary criticism of texts written by our forbears is the wide gap in our understanding of the history, sociology, philosophy and theology of previous generations. Literary criticism in the twentieth century has been highly secular in character, and this has made it difficult for the academic critic to glimpse into the horizons of the 'religious' author and text. This is perhaps why, when critically reading nineteenth and twentieth century novels, often literary texts do not reveal the theological subtexts they might well contain, precisely because the reader—whether secular or 'religious'—is ill-equipped or unable to recognise those subtexts. Bridging this gap between contemporary reader and 'historical' literary text is the most urgent task of Literature and Theology.

This thesis is demonstrated through a reading of *Mansfield Park* which questions several strongly-held beliefs prevailing in academic literary criticism. It suggests that in the novel there is a connecting thread of (fairly systematic) theological discourse which can only be accessed through the cultural context of Austen's theological world-view.

I. JANE AUSTEN AS THEOLOGIAN: *MANSFIELD PARK* AS A THEOLOGICAL NOVEL

READING THE variety of Austen literary criticism is a fascinating experience. Much of it is driven by an inability, or an unwillingness, to apprehend the theological world of ideas that belong to her early-modern post-Enlightenment period.

Most critics have clear limits when it comes to a theological reading of Austen's novels. For example, Douglas Bush warns us against reading too much into her work:

At times in modern criticism what one may think philosophical over-reading translates Jane Austen's instinctive concreteness into large abstractions or social

parables which she would have hardly recognised: we hear, for instance, of her epistemology and ontology and, more commonly, of that master-key to all social phenomena of the past twenty-five centuries, the rise of the middle class.¹

It is unclear just what Bush means by Austen's 'instinctive concreteness', and why we must be thought incredible for interpreting Austen as the author of 'large abstractions' or 'social parables'.

Austen is a complex author, and this complexity is due as much to her theology as it is to our coy sense of her intuition, irony, or small canvas. If it is possible that an infinite number of angels can dance on the head of a pin—a proposition yet to be disproved—then it is possible that Jane Austen can carve large theological abstractions and social parables onto her little bit of ivory two-inches wide.

Austen wrote in a didactic tradition rooted in social parable, and behind every social parable there are large abstractions. To deny this is to place a caveat upon literary criticism that tries to prevent us from exploring what would have been more obvious to her early readers than it ever can be to us. As Marilyn Butler observes: 'The superb draughtsmanship of the opening chapters of *Mansfield Park* makes it easy to forget that they present a set of themes which are entirely commonplace in the period'.² Given the nature of English society at that time, it is impossible to subtract theology from those themes without distorting them.

Austen's age was an age of strong theological opinions, and some of those opinions inhabit *Mansfield Park*. She grew up in a rectory, in a particular theological milieu. She was serious about her Anglican faith and, as Butler suggests, her later work responded in subtle ways to the influential Evangelical Reform Movement of the early-nineteenth century.³ These influences inform *Mansfield Park*, a novel which can be read as a manifesto that outlines Austen's awareness of the modern Estate in disorder, and the established Church in need of spiritual renewal.

Austen's literary style in *Mansfield Park* represents a tension, or rather a transition, between an allegorical style that preceded her and a psychological (and increasingly secular) style that comes to dominate after her. One key to understanding this tension, and the uniqueness of *Mansfield Park* within the Austen canon, is to notice how in this particular novel as opposed to the other novels, characters are tropes as much as they are psychological characterisations of contemporary human beings. It is this allegorical dimension that sets *Mansfield Park* apart and makes it starkly different (and highly unsatisfactory) to many secularised twentieth-century readers.

In noticing that Fanny Price is one of the most unlovable and unattractive heroines in English fiction, Tony Tanner throws out the challenge:

What, then, was Jane Austen doing in this book? The question is worth asking because if Fanny Price is her least popular heroine, it is arguable that *Mansfield*

Park is her most profound novel (indeed, to my mind, it is one of the most profound novels of the nineteenth century).⁴

Here Tanner is not alone, for this profundity has been noticed by several others, as Douglas Bush suggests:

In recent years *Mansfield Park* has been increasingly considered Jane Austen's most profound work. It has also been called, for example by Mrs Leavis, the first modern novel, an anticipation of George Eliot and Henry James.⁵

This profundity, because it touches upon weighty theological considerations, can make the novel unsatisfactory to those who are looking for the deceptively light-hearted (but no less profound) style of the other novels, where religion and theology appear as real absences. Because most readers these days are suspicious of and resistant to theological texts and subtexts, so they are likely to be dissatisfied with *Mansfield Park*. This is, perhaps, a problem that belongs to the reader, rather than to the author or to her novel. Certainly there is no shortage of academic critics who remain more comfortable reading *Mansfield Park* as a problematic literary work, when in fact the problem is more the huge gulf that divides Austen's age from ours.

Why might this be so? Because Fanny is a 'let down' for those readers who want her to be something else; something other than what she was intended to be; something closer to what we have come to assume characters ought to be in a 'modern' novel. However, in wanting her to be other than what she is, we can easily forget that Fanny is first and foremost an archetype in an allegorical novel that is essentially about social reform and spiritual renewal. In the cultural context of the age, Fanny is a Christ-like character.

II. PARADISE LOST: THE ESTATE AND CHURCH IN DISORDER

The primary theme of *Mansfield Park* is that of establishing harmony in an Estate which, while it appears very calm and serene on the surface, is disordered within; and this necessitates, first and foremost, re-establishing the spiritual and pastoral focus of an established church which had become too worldly and unable to withstand the assaults of evil; not an ontological evil, but an evil inherent to the human personality. In fact, 'evil' is a term widely used in Austen's novels, where it describes not an other-worldly evil but an absence of a variety of social, moral, psychological and economic attributes that might be called 'good'.

The origin of this disorder is outlined in chapter one, where it becomes analogous with the myth of the fall, a myth which explains the propensity for human beings to keep falling. As human beings—as well as archetypes—Sir Thomas is a distant father and Lady Bertram is a self-absorbed and indolent mother, and in this parental vacuum of emotional absence some elemental and perennial human sins are allowed to flourish in their children, for want

of a properly-formed Christian conscience. Their sister, Mrs Norris—whose meanness of character is of metaphysical proportions and importance in this parabolic story—is established as the novel's most pervasive and consistent mischief-maker.

Certainly she makes as much mischief in the novel as Tom, Maria and Julia Bertram—or Henry and Mary Crawford—and in fact there is a sense in which it is *her* mischief that predisposes theirs. (Salvation in the novel depends upon how one is able to withstand the attentions of Aunt Norris and still grow as a human being.) In the last chapter Sir Thomas, who has given her free reign for most of the novel—'she seemed a part of himself, that must be borne forever'⁶—finally recognises the extent of her malevolent influence and banishes her from the Mansfield estate. So, in a curious way it is the arrival of Mrs Norris, and her ultimate expulsion, that frames the action of *Mansfield Park*.

Within that framework, which represents its own mythology (and psychology) of creation, fall and redemption, the action of the novel unfolds on several levels that are interwoven. In chapter two there is Fanny's arrival; the introduction of the theme of education and what is lacking in Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram as educators of their children, especially in the formation of a Christian conscience in Tom, Maria and Julia; the theme of Edmund—representing the Church—as Fanny's chief champion and protector; and the theme of Fanny's unreserved spirit of 'brotherly-love' for William, a spirit wanting in most characters in the novel.

In chapter three there is the consequence of this miseducation and want of spirit in Tom's extravagance, which effects the economic necessity of Sir Thomas's disposal of the Mansfield living away from Edmund; there are Sir Thomas's losses in Antigua, and his need to go attend to his affairs there (an action fundamental to the wider social and theological message of the novel); there is the presentation of the Mansfield living to Dr Grant, an event which has the evil consequence of bringing Henry and Mary Crawford into the Estate; and there is the establishment of Fanny as the possessor of an authentic Christian spirit that allows her to perceive some fundamental psychological and theological truths about what is happening within the Estate and to its inhabitants, something which even Edmund, as representative of the Church, is not able to perceive.

These themes do not unfold in a vacuum, rather they are part of a carefully constructed commentary on the state of England in the early modern period. We know this because Austen suggests that Mansfield is a 'modern' estate, and equally that Sir Thomas represents 'new' money—colonial money—struggling to establish and strengthen his position in a social, economic and moral order that itself is in a state of flux and change. Clearly the Bertram estate is not as secure as its façade, or Sir Thomas's serene demeanour would indicate, and he is not a man of unlimited means. This becomes obvious early in the novel

where the reader is told that Sir Thomas, because of his eldest son's extravagance, is not able to keep the Mansfield living open for his second son (p. 21) and because 'recent losses in his West India Estate' made it 'not undesirable' to be relieved of supporting his niece Fanny (p. 22). To a truly secure estate, and to a truly serene gentleman, these things would be less significant.

The 'estate' incorporates Sir Thomas's plantation in Antigua, which is clearly signalled to the reader as the place of his 'modern' income; and that income is acknowledged to be limited, precarious and subject to different social, economic and moral imperatives. There were several reasons for this precariousness: the colony was an old one and its ability to produce income was diminishing in the face of soil exhaustion and competition from more recently settled French colonies;⁷ and there were capitalist economic imperatives that were calling into question the viability of slave labour.⁸ There were moral imperatives as well, since slavery ... itself had been long since declared illegal in England, and the question of British involvement in the slave trade (a question intricately bound up with colonial imperatives) was urgent in Austen's period as: 'the change of Christian opinion in England was steadily brought about, as all Christian groups were forced to declare themselves' on slavery, in a movement 'that coincided with the first full-blossoming of upper-class evangelicalism'.⁹ Sir Thomas, Edmund and Fanny, who between them represent the novel's Christian conscience, would like to have the question of the slave trade discussed openly; but 'there was such a dead silence' when Fanny brings the subject up (for reasons that are difficult to precisely interpret) that it is dropped (p. 166).

This latter piece of Christian history is interesting, because it gives a much-needed historical context to the theme of spiritual renewal in the novel, and because it allows us to propose that Sir Thomas was morally as well as economically engaged with the dilemmas represented by his Antigua estate. Certainly we can suggest this with as much textual evidence as the post-colonialists suggest him to be an oppressive slave-owner who represents Austen's tacit approval (in the absence of her explicit disapproval) of colonialism, capitalism and the cultural imperialism of dead white males. Whatever we project upon the text the facts are: that Sir Thomas's income was diminishing (and in some years the plantation would have run at a loss);¹⁰ that he had to personally go and attend to the management of the plantation; that he was gone for longer than expected; that this engagement affected him profoundly, making him a greatly altered person on his return to England; and that while he was away the inner fabric of his estate in England fell apart, largely *because* of his absence.

III. GOD THE FATHER: SIR THOMAS AND A CRITIQUE OF ENLIGHTENMENT DEISM

Nearly every event in the novel has, as its first cause, an action—or an inaction—on the part of Sir Thomas Bertram. This is because, in Austen's

scheme of things, he is at the pinnacle of a 'symbolic' social order which imitates a 'natural' divine order; and he holds this position in a particular context that is both historical and eternal at the same time. In such an allegorical novel Sir Thomas represents a particular apprehension of God the Father as much as he represents a modern patriarch of reason, enlightenment, colonialism and capitalism, for better and for worse; and because he is not himself God, but is only imitating his image of God, he can and does make mistakes, and he cannot read the minds of his children or his niece.

Why should Jane Austen describe the novel's focus of absolute authority as an 'absentee landlord'? This is significant because—along with 'celestial clockmaker'—it is a description of God, his nature, and his relationship with the world, that belongs to Enlightenment Deism. Was she simply imitating a convention of her time, or was she carefully disguising a critique of Deism in this novel? The question deserves to be asked, and we should not be accused of over-reading or misreading in asking it.

Deism was a complex classical marriage between the Enlightenment and Platonic thought. Essentially Deism holds that there is a supreme being who is the ultimate source of reality and ground of value, but this being does not intervene in natural or historical processes.¹¹ Encouraged by a Platonic paradigm that had already separated matter from spirit, body from soul, and mind from body, Deism drew a further wedge between God and creation by insisting that God is the creator who, having created, remains separated from and has no further interest in his creation.¹² The novel is careful to critique the essentially negative and destructive consequences of this Deist paradigm and, in countering it, Austen appears to take a more orthodox position of scriptural Theism. Whether she consciously intended to conduct this critique is another question, which perhaps matters less than recognising that a critique of Deism was (and remains) part of the great post-Enlightenment critique of the Enlightenment. In theological terms, this is what makes Austen an early literary modernist.

Sir Thomas either inherited or created Mansfield Park—it is not clear which—but either way the estate is described as 'modern' and so we can assume it was built in the neo-classical style of the eighteenth century. In the modern novel architectural structures often have metaphorical significance, and so it is possible that Mansfield Park is a symbol of the Classical Greek underpinning of the Enlightenment, with its Platonic tastes and distastes, its dualism, its focus on reason and order, and its fear of the irrational. The Estate then is Sir Thomas's attempt to imitate an Arcadian paradise, as distinct from the Edenic paradise of scriptural record, and this encourages him to adopt a Deistic attitude towards his family that is quite different to the Theistic relationship that God has with his creation in Genesis. In a theological context this makes Sir Thomas the first cause of the malaise at Mansfield Park.

The malaise is focused on the lack of a properly developed Christian conscience in most of his children. For example, in their youth Maria and Julia were in 'awe of their father, who addressed them on the occasion with rather an injudicious particularity'. He gave them the best formal and 'modern' education, according to the wisdom of the age, but as the narrator notes:

... it is not very wonderful that with all their promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity and humility. In every thing but disposition, they were admirably taught. Sir Thomas did not know what was wanting, because, though a truly anxious father, he was not outwardly affectionate, and the reserve of his manner repressed all flow of their spirits before him (p. 18).

Because Austen tells us 'there was no positive ill-nature in Maria or Julia' (p. 18), so she is proposing a problem with their *nurture*—'where the excessive indulgence and flattery of their aunt had been continually contrasted with his own severity' (p. 381)—leaving us to wonder whether, as adults, they fall into disgrace through a spiritual deficiency in their relationship with their 'absent' father (and by analogy, in their relationship with an 'absent' God). At the end of the novel Sir Thomas laments the consequences of his Deist mistake:

Here had been grievous mismanagement; but, bad as it was, he gradually grew to feel that it had not been the most direful mistake in his plan of education. Something must have been wanting *within* ... They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. ... He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them (p. 382).

However, because of the nature of human free will, he cannot solve the problem by himself. Social transformation must come from a spiritual and moral renewal *within* the Estate, *within* the Church, *within* the hearts of its inhabitants. According to the logic of the novel that can only be accomplished through a new epiphany, as the Bertram family learns to focus on its Fanny; and as Fanny herself learns to accept the mission given to her as saviour of the Estate. There are many events that need to unfold before this can happen, and they unfold according to authorial design and allegorical pattern.

There is enough evidence in the novel to justify such a theological reading. At the end of volume one Sir Thomas, who has been absent for most of the volume, returns to interrupt the final rehearsals of 'Lovers Vows' and prevent the scandal of its production; at the beginning of volume two he focuses on Fanny, the only character who resists the staging of the play, as the source of spiritual renewal in his Estate and he keeps his focus on her for the rest of the novel, although he may not be conscious as to why he is doing so; at the middle of volume two (which is also the geographical centre of the novel) he initiates a

game of Speculation, during which he makes what the author calls his 'little harangue' against Henry Crawford; and at the beginning of volume three Sir Thomas confronts Fanny in the cold attic of Mansfield Park, tells her she does not know her own mind—which in one fundamental sense is true—then orders a fire to heat the cold attic, and thereby inaugurates the emotional drama that culminates in the extended Lent of her pre-Easter 'wilderness' experience. By the end of volume three the post-Easter Fanny has been vindicated and she returns to Mansfield Park risen, ascended and glorified as a clergy wife. Behind this essentially theological scenario we are invited to consider what guiding hand Sir Thomas Bertram plays, whether consciously or unconsciously it is difficult to know.

We do know that after the game of Speculation, Sir Thomas willingly hands his niece over to Crawford, where she is tempted and tested, as part of some authorial plan to engineer the salvation of an estate he cannot himself save. Not many readers these days will easily notice (or easily accept) this highly allegorical reading unless they are sympathetic to theological subtexts and biblical parallels with the Old and New testaments. In the second chapter of the Book of Job we discover that it is actually God who commits Job to Satan in order to test his faith; and while Satan inflicted terrible suffering upon Job, his only response was: 'What? shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?' As the biblical narrator reminds us: 'In all this did not Job sin with his lips'; and as Austen reminds us, neither does Fanny sin with her lips. This quality of sinlessness about Fanny is important to the action the novel, because it is Christ-like.

In the Gospel of Matthew we learn that after his baptism: 'Then was Jesus led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil'. In Job it is God who commits his servant to Satan; in Matthew it is the Holy Spirit who leads Jesus into his temptation. Given this kind of scriptural precedent there is no reason why, in such an allegorical novel, the commitment of Fanny to Crawford should not be part of a design to force her to experience the same temptation and passion that her (fully human) Saviour experienced before her. Among the parallels between Jesus and Fanny, the most significant is their shared humanity: because both are fully human (like us in all things except sin) neither one of them can be completely aware of their own future. They are only aware that God's will must be done, whatever that might be; and this involves—for both of them—coming to a kind of maturity, and making the kind of journey, that not many human beings are able to make.

IV. GOD THE SON: FANNY AND A WAY OF THE CROSS

When considering Fanny having a mission at Mansfield Park we must look at how that mission—and her sense of that mission—gradually evolves, and how it is woven into the theme of education in the novel.

As Tanner notes, a concern with education is central to Jane Austen's work, and the risk and dangers of miseducation and diseducation are always present in various forms: 'All of Jane Austen's heroines have to be educated or tutored—by men, an older woman or sister, experience, or themselves (never a parent). Or they in turn act as educators.'¹³ Tanner observes that early in *Mansfield Park* Fanny is mocked for her lack of formal education, but equally 'she has more real moral intelligence than anyone else in the book and finally turns out to be the "teacher" of them all—apart from those who are, morally speaking, irredeemably ineducable'.¹⁴ And yet Fanny too must be educated, in the same sense that the young Jesus had to be educated.

As the bringer of spiritual renewal, the uneducated Fanny teaches Mansfield Park about the difference between a formal 'modern' education and the very basis of a Christian conscience. While she comes to the Estate with a lack of education, she brings with her something more important, her enduring love for William. Quite obviously she brings a spirit of brotherly-love to a place where there is a great deal of education but little spirit, that 'something' which 'must have been wanting *within*' that Sir Thomas eventually comes to recognise. Fanny shows that loving spirit to Sir Thomas and to Edmund without reserve; to Sir Thomas because he is the patriarchal law-giver who deserves her loyalty and love simply because he is who he is; and to Edmund because he is the only character who gives Fanny human affection and pastoral consideration. But while Fanny's love for William becomes the spirit upon which the renewal of Mansfield will be effected, before that spirit can do its work many things must happen.

Even with her spirit of brotherly love, Fanny has not yet evolved a fully-matured Christian conscience, even if that spirit is a necessary prerequisite for the formation of one. Rather, Fanny must trust that spirit as she is subjected to many emotional trials on her journey into maturity. These are trials which focus on stripping her of all egoism; on reminding her that everything she has been given is a gift she does not deserve and to which she is not entitled; on reinforcing her position at the bottom of a social order as a family member who has a status little above that of a servant. (Fanny, like Jesus, has come to serve, not to be served.) All these humiliations are necessary for developing the kind of conscience that will save Mansfield Park.

What emerges from this crucible is a conscience unique to Fanny (the closest conscience that approximates her conscience is Edmund's) as a Christ-like character in a pre-eminently Christian allegory. If we follow the logic of Fanny's emotional development, on her journey into maturity and empowerment, we can see similarities between that journey and the one followed by Jesus who—because of his humanity—had to be educated and had to experience life in order to grow into his maturity and empowerment, before turning his face towards Jerusalem and making his way through an emotional

wilderness to the passion of the cross. Proposing such an analogy between Fanny and Christ is not saying Fanny *is* Christ, nor suggesting Austen is trivialising the nature of Christ's birth, death and resurrection. It is saying that Christ is an exemplary model for Christians in every age; and that in Austen's age such a model takes on particular human social and psychological characteristics which may seem unrecognisable to our age (and perhaps even to Christians in our age).

If we look at the prevailing logic of Austen's novels, emotional maturity—the prerequisite for an informed conscience—has something to do with establishing a balance between the life of the mind (reason) and the life of the heart (feeling)—usually with reason bringing feeling under a kind of necessary control—and the way a heroine achieves this harmony in an Austen novel represents what some critics have noticed as the modern(ist) tension between the classical and the romantic imaginaries. This is something that Fanny shares with other Austen heroines, whose maturity is measured by the degree to which they control their feelings (because feelings are associated with irrationality) with a degree of Stoic rationalism that seems remarkable (and undesirable) to the twentieth-century mind accustomed to questioning rationalism and accepting the integrity of the irrational. Austen took the classical (Greek) view which places a negative value upon the irrational, and so in her psychological universe the heroine is always struggling to subject unconscious feelings to conscious reason.

This struggle is pre-eminently represented in the novel by Fanny's seduction at the hands of Crawford (who can offer her the unbridled materialism and excess of feeling that characterise the 'world') which contrasts with her more sublimated and ostensibly altruistic love of Edmund (who can offer her the other-worldly mission of the Church). Fanny has always resisted Henry's advances as emotional onslaughts that cannot be compared with Edmund's polite solicitudes. That is why, in the middle of the novel, when the game of Speculation is over and Fanny prepares to go home, she will feel an acute disappointment when 'the shawl which Edmund was quietly taking from the servant to bring and put round her shoulders, was seized by Mr Crawford's quicker hand, and she was obliged to be indebted to his more prominent attention' (p. 259). Crawford knows he cannot win Fanny with love (simply because they cannot love each other any more than Jesus can love Satan), so he tries other means to persuade her: through a sense of obligation and gratitude for having had her brother promoted; through the emotional pressure of her family, friends and peers; through an excess of pure feeling untempered by pure reason.

Austen is clear about this stark choice—one associated with good, the other with evil—when she has William give Fanny a cross to wear, but prevents him from affording a chain to put it on. The symbolism is quite obvious, the cross

gives Fanny's mission christological overtones which Edmund wants to encourage (naturally enough) but which the evil Crawford is intent on subverting. Hence they both contrive to give Fanny a chain on which to put her cross, and this will determine under whose banner she will fight, the banner of the Church or the banner of its worldly enemy. Tanner expresses this in a less theological way when he observes how suggestively the author exploits the matter of Fanny's cross and chain for her first ball:

The question is, which chain will Fanny wear to carry her cross? Henry slyly forces a fancy chain on her, while Edmund later gives her a tastefully simple one. She is persuaded to wear Henry's (just as they are trying to force her to accept him as a husband), but fortunately it will not go through the cross, so she can wear Edmund's with a good conscience. Thus the two tokens of the two people she loves most are linked together round her neck when she leads her first ball: and in that moment the final emotional situation at the end of the book is foreshadowed.¹⁵

That final emotional situation, the banishment of the forces of worldly evil and the renewal of the Mansfield Estate, cannot be resolved until Fanny, now fighting under the banner of William's cross and Edmund's chain, experiences further tribulations.

The great tribulation comes during the confrontation between Sir Thomas and Fanny in cold attic of Mansfield Park—*attic* having the double significance of Greek thinking or the life of the mind—where Sir Thomas subjects his niece to the kind of emotional pressure (to marry Crawford) that he would never subject his own daughters; and she responds to him in a way that Maria and Julia could not, with a strength of moral conviction (or conscience) they do not have. Because of this conscience she stands up to her uncle on principle—and she is the only character in the novel who does so—but this causes her great pain, because she honours her uncle above all earthly things; and she is mortified that she has unwittingly given him cause to be angry with her, and ashamed that she cannot in all conscience accept or act out what is (apparently) his will.

The passage is complex and ambiguous, for when Sir Thomas is told that his niece does not want to marry Crawford, he admits somewhat cryptically: 'I am half inclined to think, Fanny, that you do not quite know your own feelings' (p. 261). Sir Thomas is perfectly right. Fanny does not yet know her own feelings, for when he goes on to wonder aloud whether she might be in love with someone else, Fanny evades him with an ambiguous silence, thereby hoping to avoid admitting to herself and to her uncle that she loves Edmund; that she is unsure that Edmund could ever love her; and that she is afraid her uncle would not want such a love match.

Fanny senses that 'she would rather die than own the truth, and she hoped by a little reflection to fortify herself beyond betraying it' (p. 261) but the reader

is not sure what the actual truth is in Fanny's mind, beyond her sense of Mary being the wrong wife for Edmund and Henry being the wrong husband for her. Sir Thomas makes this more difficult by glancing at Fanny and making the further cryptic observation that Edmund has lately 'seen the woman he could love' then asks Fanny whether she agrees. He does not mention Mary Crawford's name, and so we are free to detect an ambiguity here: does he mean Mary Crawford, or is he referring, in fact, to Fanny herself?

Confronted with the emotional suffering of his niece Sir Thomas relents, and asks Fanny not to collapse under the weight of her erupting passion, not to 'give way to these emotions but to endeavour to reason yourself into a stronger frame of mind' (p. 265). Significantly, on discovering that Fanny was never allowed to have a fire in the attic—on realising it was his sister-in-law who made his attic cold—he has one lit, and he ensures that it will remain lit for Fanny's well-being, and for the metaphorical well-being of Mansfield Park.

This image of lighting the fire in the cold attic is loaded with Kantian symbolism that was current in Austen's age: the cold attic is pure reason and the life of the mind, while the fire is pure feeling and the life of the heart. Here, because Sir Thomas has ventured into the attic (and by analogy, God has become involved in his creation) the tension between reason and feeling; between classical and romantic, are reconciled in a particular theological context that I would call Theist. Once the fire has been lit and the attic is warmed Sir Thomas's composure and solicitude towards Fanny returns. This convinces Fanny that 'she had done right, that her judgement had not misled her; for the purity of her intentions she could answer' (p. 267). Perhaps more than anything else it is the fire in the attic, a sign that within the Estate the coldness of pure reason has been tempered with the embers of pure feeling, which makes Fanny able to cope with her feelings reasonably and confront her destiny at Mansfield Park, knowing that she is being guided, however strangely and painfully, by the author's sense of Providence.

V. GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT: EDMUND AND A WORLDLY CHURCH IN NEED OF SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

For a time it was thought, because of a reference Austen made in a letter to her sister, that the novel was about ordination; thinking that was probably reinforced by an obvious religious subtext pervading the novel. Critics have considered this question, and most have decided against the ordination theme, I suspect, because they either don't *want* the novel to be about ordination, or because they tend to belong to a culture in which ordination has a marginalised cultural insignificance. These days we would rather write politicised essays about Sir Thomas's affairs in Antigua—implicating him (and Austen) in the horrors of British imperialism—than about Edmund's vocation the priesthood, even

though both themes are fundamental to the novel and we cannot ignore either without distorting the whole.

On his return from Antigua, Sir Thomas turns his gaze upon Fanny and keeps it there for the rest of the novel. But his gaze is also upon Edmund; for while Edmund is his second son, Sir Thomas appears to hold him more accountable for the moral lapse of staging 'Lovers Vows' than his first son Tom. The fact that Tom is not held more to account than Edmund (given that staging the play was *his* idea) does not make sense until we realise that in this novel Edmund is supposed to be his brother's keeper. Edmund nominally represents the moral authority of a Church which is supposed to—but is not able to—preserve the moral integrity of the Estate. In this sense, in the author's particularly British context, renewing the Estate and renewing the established Church are two necessarily inter-dependant things.

If the novel is about ordination, and there are several senses in which it is, then we need to understand that in the apostolic tradition of the Anglican Church ordination is about bestowing the gift of the Holy Spirit on an ordinand, to empower them to exercise a sacramental priestly ministry in the Church. But before ordination there is the testing of *vocation*—the calling to the priesthood—and certainly it is the testing of Edmund's vocation that dominates the novel; and this is so intricately intertwined with the character of Fanny that we really cannot think about the testing of *his* vocation without thinking of the testing of *hers*, any more than we can think of the mission of the Church without thinking of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ.

When Austen sketched the dominant themes of the novel in the first three chapters, a central theme is the extravagance of Tom which necessitates the presentation of the Mansfield living to Dr Grant (which has the evil result of bringing the Crawfords to Mansfield); and these things directly affect the economic and spiritual wellbeing of the Estate. Sir Thomas's words of admonition to Tom are: 'You have robbed Edmund for ten, twenty, thirty years, perhaps for life, of more than half the income which ought to be his.' Edmund was to hold two livings attached to the estate—one on it and one near it—both within the patronage of Sir Thomas or his heir. There is an economic consideration here, in that Edmund has the prospect of reduced circumstances for the foreseeable future.

But there is a spiritual consideration as well, which has to do with Austen's sense of the role and mission of the established church within the (e)state. She was against, if not pluralism per se—Edmund will eventually hold two livings that are part of the same estate—but the kind of pluralism that encouraged the abuse of absentee livings by clergy who were clearly more interested in being worldly than being pastor of a cure of souls. This background is what gives meaning to Edmund's infatuation with Mary Crawford, because her interest in Edmund as a husband is contingent upon making him one of the worldly clergy

Austen (as well as Fanny and Sir Thomas) objects to. Mary Crawford tells him he has 'limited means and indifferent connections' with relations 'who are in no situation to do anything for you' (p. 178), and from her worldly perspective this is true. She would like to marry him and see him become a relatively wealthy pluralist clergyman holding many absentee livings—and this ambition represents the real threat of evil in the novel: preventing Edmund from clerical residency. Because presentation of the Mansfield living is not possible during the life of its incumbent, Thornton Lacey is the only living left for Edmund, and establishing his residency there is fundamental to the novel's spiritual resolution.

This can be demonstrated at the geographical centre of the novel, during that game of Speculation, where we discover that Henry Crawford (because of a *fall* no less) stumbles upon the church and the parsonage of Thornton Lacey. Crawford knows that this church and parsonage are intended for Edmund once he is ordained, and this is something he wants to subvert. Crawford wants to rent the parsonage and 'improve' it, and he hopes that Edmund can be convinced to supply the parish as a non-resident. His harpy sister conspires in this plan, as her asides during the card game reveal, for it is her hope that Henry's plan will realise her desire to: 'shut out the church, sink the clergy, and see only respectable, elegant, modernised, and occasional residence of a man of independent fortune' (p. 206). Henry suggests that his own residency in the parsonage is desirable so that: 'he might find himself continuing, improving, and *perfecting* that friendship and intimacy with the Mansfield Park family which was increasing in value to him every day' (p. 206). His ultimate aim is to gain access to Mansfield Park, and his intentions there are just as subversive. Here is Satan tempting Edmund, in the presence of his Father, with two things the author feels are wrong, the 'improvement' of Thornton Lacey and absentee livings which materially benefit the clergy rather than pastorally benefit the parish.

At this point the proper, polite and circumspect Sir Thomas goes out of his way to make it perfectly clear to Henry Crawford that he is not welcome to occupy the parsonage of Thornton Lacey. After a short homily on the necessity and virtue of a resident priest, in which we should not underestimate the depth of Sir Thomas's awareness of the importance of this living (and to its clerical residency) to the future of his Estate, the author writes:

'I repeat again,' added Sir Thomas, 'that Thornton Lacey is the only house in the neighbourhood in which I should *not* be happy to wait on Mr Crawford as occupier' (p. 206).

This is an obvious threat and its implications are quite large because it establishes Sir Thomas's ambiguous attitude towards Crawford—and by implication his sister—who both want to 'improve' the Estate by destroying the Church.

VI. PARADISE REGAINED: THE ESTATE AND CHURCH RESTORED

Austen concludes her novel with an authorial intrusion that brings narrative resolution to several themes within a few paragraphs, reminding us she is perfectly aware of her novel as a metafiction: as a story conscious of itself as a story.

The final chapter is delineated with broad strokes in which the moral of her story is revealed, and where the forces of evil are banished (but not conquered) and the forces of good reign over them. The paradise that has been lost is regained, but that paradise was always a frail and worldly thing, and is still very much a social and symbolic construct that has the potential to fall again and again. This is consonant with Christian soteriology: being saved does not protect self and world from continual falling; and clearly the salvation of Mansfield Park is achieved, not by a Miltonesque struggle between the forces of mythological good and mythological evil, but by a struggle between these same forces that exist within every human being, in every age, as part of human psychology. (This too is what makes Austen an early literary modernist.)

For Fanny, that means struggling with a man who is 'too much a man of the world not to see with the eyes of the world' (p. 83); a man 'ruined by early independence and bad domestic example, indulged in the freaks of a cold-blooded vanity a little too long'; a man in whom 'the temptation of immediate pleasure was too strong for a mind unused to make sacrifice to right' (pp. 384–384). For Edmund, that means struggling with a woman whose lack of conscience or moral feeling represents the evil of a mind which is not cruel, but rather is totally ignorant and unsuspecting of there being such moral feelings. This is described as a 'perversion' that is 'natural' to a character who has 'blunted delicacy and a corrupt, vitiated mind'. Put quite simply, Henry and Mary Crawford are godless, because of their lack of a properly formed Christian conscience, and because of their upbringing in a dysfunctional family—two things Austen represents as interconnected—and their reward for this godlessness is to continue living in a godless state, not overly concerned by their exclusion from the godly or 'happy' ending of the novel.

I think the most interesting thing about the 'happy' ending of *Mansfield Park* is the unique situation in which the author leaves her heroine, in mark contrast to how her other heroines are placed in their happy endings. First Fanny returns to the estate as a niece—companion to Mrs Bertram; then she becomes a clergy wife by marrying Edmund and moving to Thornton Lacey; then ultimately they move to the Mansfield parsonage when Dr Grant finally dies the death of a dissolute absentee pluralist, thus restoring to the Estate both livings within its patronage. This is rare happiness indeed in an Austen novel, where it is axiomatic that the heroine will—after a series of trials, misfortunes or misunderstandings—marry her handsome hero and be elevated to the position of mistress of the highest estate possible in each particular novel. This does not happen in *Mansfield Park*, which might be another source of dissatisfaction to

the late-twentieth century reader who is likely to have the same attitude towards the priesthood, and the Church, as Mary Crawford has.

Instead, the heroine marries a second son and lives happily thereafter in a parsonage on the Estate; not in the great house itself; and not as mistress of it. There is no indication that Tom, who makes a full recovery of health and improvement of disposition, will not marry and provide an heir for Sir Thomas; and there is no indication that the Reverend and Mrs Edmund Bertram will ever be elevated beyond their position of clergyman and his wife. That is their ultimate position in a symbolic order which still imitates a natural order, and the action of the novel has been completely dedicated to *establishing* them in a parsonage on the Estate, and nowhere else.

This tells the reader what *Mansfield Park* is really about as a novel that never invokes Providence to resolve a narrative resolution, because it is a novel about human maturity, not about divine intervention or fairy-tale romance. And if all Austen's novels are about human maturity, and I think they are, then this novel—her most serious and religious—is about *how* that maturity comes about the context of human fallibility in the 'modern' world. For Austen, humans do not mature simply by education; they mature by the formation of a Christian conscience that belongs pre-eminently to familial relationships, and to the teaching authority (and example) of the Church. In the novel these things are interdependent, and so if the novel makes any enduring point at all, it is that parents must be a real presence for their children; and that the Church loses its moral authority when it forgets it is betrothed to Christ, not to the world, and cannot marry both.

In such a psychological and theological scheme there is a divine as well as human economy represented by the three persons of Sir Thomas, Fanny and Edmund in the novel, inasmuch as they signify God, Christ and the Church within a social order that imitates a divine order. That, more than anything, is why these three characters are so closely connected, and come to be more closely connected, throughout the novel. This is of course a theological consideration likely to be widely misunderstood or ignored by readers who, like Mary Crawford, would like to either marginalise or destroy the Church, and will refuse the theological reading of novels that would have clearly appeared to be theological in the age they were written.

Jane Austen is now widely held to have written novels that contain complex and powerful social commentaries. She wrote of an imperfect world and offered her opinions about what was wrong with society and the people who constitute it, and how this might be put right. She wrote her novels in the context of her strong religious beliefs, and she also wrote prayers, one of which reads in part:

Above all blessings oh! God, for ourselves and for our fellow creatures, we implore thee to quicken our sense of thy mercy in the redemption of the world, of the

value of that holy religion in which we have been brought up, that we may not, by our own neglect, throw away the salvation thou hast given us, nor be Christians only in name. Hear us almighty God, for his sake who has redeemed us, and taught us to pray. Our Father which art in heaven &c.¹⁶

Clearly then Austen's novels, and her prayers, explore the same territory, but the highly secularised post-Christian reader, so vastly distanced from world of the author and her novel, is not going to accept this easily.

Recognising this is not insisting that a Christian reading is the only true reading of *Mansfield Park*. It is simply recognising that we cannot divorce theology from the author's personal and literary worlds without distorting our understanding of those worlds. Ultimately it is a question of negotiating our integrity as interpreters in a critical-academic world that has become so accustomed to interpreting the modern novel in terms of psychology instead of theology (as if psychology is something antithetical to theology) it has lost a real sense of what theology actually is, or where theology might be present, in the world of the modern novel. Quite possibly, in the world of interpretation, there are some problems that belong to the critical reader rather than to the author or to the text.

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