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THE MATURING HEROINE

FROM JANE AUSTEN TO MURIEL SPARK



WHEN WE READ different genres of nineteenth and twentieth-century novel—neoclassical, romantic, modernist, or postmodernist—we can notice intriguing similarities as well as differences, even though each genre has its own ideology and aesthetic. If we limit ourselves to the novel that focuses on the heroine's journey into adulthood (*bildungsroman*) it becomes obvious authors represent aspects of the spirit of the age (*zeitgeist*) in which they live. Put another way—within the Anglosphere at least—the process through which a heroine matures, and how her maturity is defined and measured, changes. Before the mid-nineteenth century, the heroine was allowed to mature and still keep her religion. After the mid-nineteenth century—once the reasonable and the enlightened began telling the world Western religion was a form of immaturity—the heroine couldn't mature until she either abandoned religion or learned to live on its margins.

We can't avoid the question of philosophical or literary influences here. Once we notice a link between Locke and Jane Austen, Hegel and Charlotte Brontë, Feuerbach and George Eliot, Nietzsche and Henry Handel Richardson, or Freud and Iris Murdoch, we need to do some hard thinking. Influences in the last three authors are easier to explain, since Eliot and Richardson and Murdoch were familiar with contemporary philosophy; they took seriously the "crisis of belief" that dominated the late nineteenth and twentieth century; they assumed new empirical and scientific ways of knowing had rendered classical metaphysics unintelligible and obsolete. Influences are harder to explain with Austen and Brontë—who represent opposite sides of the same metaphysical coin—but we can make educated guesses about what they were exposed to within their families, and about what was floating around in their period, supported by close readings of their novels. Let's take a brief look at these conscious and unconscious influences.

LOCKE AND *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY*

IN EVERY AUSTEN novel her focus is on the family. Husbands and wives exercise joint headship, effectively or ineffectively; marriage and parenthood determine whether the domestic economy is ordered or disordered. Austen establishes each heroine in an effective marriage, as a means of promoting

ordered domestic economy, but this isn't an easy process, as most heroines have been raised in disordered families and lack necessary qualities in an effective

partner. None of these effective marriages is achieved by fate, accident or providence. They are the hard-won product of conflict, misunderstanding and growth. They are forged in difficult social, economic and moral circumstances. Everything depends on the heroine maturing. Their maturity depends on how they exercise their free will and learn from their circumstances and the consequences of their choices.

Each heroine's journey into maturity is a fictional representation of British Empiricism, an influential movement at Oxford, a university the Austen family was associated with. In particular, John Locke's theory of knowledge is noticeable. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) Locke proposed that each individual arrives at "correct" knowledge through an internal dialogue between reasoning, considering scriptural revelation, and reflecting on experience. Through this internal dialogue, an Austen heroine matures.

The central action of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) revolves around two young sisters whose future and wellbeing depend on negotiating effective marriages. Austen gives them different temperaments—Elinor has sense (neoclassical reason); Marianne has sensibility (romantic feeling)—which determine whether their responses to their circumstances are rational or irrational. Elinor's sense is portrayed as appropriate because it protects her and allows her to survive.

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Marianne's sensibility is portrayed as inappropriate because it makes her vulnerable and self-destructive. This doesn't mean Elinor can't feel and Marianne can't reason. Austen maintains an exquisitely symmetrical sense of the balance each sister needs to achieve, depending on whether she's destined for church or estate. After her trials, Elinor is rewarded with an effective marriage to a priest, Edward Ferrars, in which feeling balances reason. After her trials, Marianne is rewarded with an effective marriage to a squire, Colonel Brandon, in which reason balances feeling.

Early in the novel, Elinor's reason tells her Edward Ferrars, a candidate for ordination, is interested in and temperamentally suited to her. Her great drama is maintaining her faith in reason, even when it seems to have failed her, and the outcome of that faith is a hard-won vindication of her rationality. Early in the novel, Marianne's feeling tells her John Willoughby, a flawed Byronic character, is interested in and temperamentally suited to her. Her great drama is suffering the consequences of her misguided faith in feeling as it betrays her and leads her close to self-destruction. Both sisters suffer greatly—Elinor privately, Marianne publicly—as Austen leads them through their respective trials and tribulations before rewarding them as Mrs Ferrars and Mrs Brandon.

Reason is what will make Elinor an ideal priest's wife, in Austen's narrative scheme. Her discretion and caution, proportion and propriety, refusal to prejudge or misjudge, and repression of desire and will, are important because her future and wellbeing depend on them. That doesn't mean she's passionless. Elinor has deep feelings, even of anger, but she regulates her behaviour in a way Marianne refuses to. When Edward doesn't behave as she desires, she reasons that his life, like hers, might be full of difficult circumstances she may not be aware of. More importantly, she accepts that his happiness may not involve her and must take precedence. Her reason turns out to be right and—while her selfless behaviour requires great emotional forbearance and sacrifice—she's rewarded with Edward in the end.

Feeling is what will make Marianne an ideal squire's wife, in Austen's narrative scheme. Her abilities are in many respects equal to Elinor's and she embodies several necessary qualities in a young woman destined for the estate rather than the church. There are dangers, though, which Austen highlights by making her a damsel in romantic distress. Before Marianne can become a lady—elevated to her pedestal by Colonel Brandon, a kind of chivalrous knight in a flannel waistcoat—she needs to mature within Austen's critique of romanticism, since her feeling is a dangerous guardian of her conscience, and she's a romantic accident waiting to happen. When she meets the handsome Willoughby, he literally sweeps her off her feet, but she's unaware

he's a rake who has recently seduced, impregnated and abandoned a young woman much like herself in temperament.

Overcome by her desire for Willoughby, Marianne's feelings soon degenerate into an unhealthy passion fed by her will. Her personality alters. She starts believing social propriety, moral behaviour and ethical value can all be judged through a pleasure principle, hedonism, which Austen associates with romanticism and uses to strengthen her delusion, so the moral weight of her disillusionment—and the physical and mental breakdown it causes—will be more keenly felt. Once she recovers, she admits her errors of judgment and promises that her painful memories of Willoughby will be regulated "by religion, by reason, and by constant employment". This is her admission that for much of the novel she abandoned the three things that upheld Elinor in her darkest hour. Marianne's greatest mortifications, and greatest lessons, are realising how much emotional suffering she brought to those who love her, including her failure to see that Elinor was suffering as intensely over Edward as she was over Willoughby, and her inability to see Colonel Brandon as temperamentally suited to her.

HEGEL AND *JANE EYRE*

ONE OF THE watersheds in Western philosophy was Hegel's proposition, made in *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), that absolute knowledge—and hence one supposes maturity—can't come about until one's consciousness becomes self-conscious and recognises another self-consciousness. To illustrate this phenomenological movement towards a metaphysics of presence—which begins the nineteenth-century movement away from classical metaphysics—he tells the story of a master-slave dialectic, which can be about an individual's struggle for freedom as she tries to realise herself, or a society's struggle for freedom as it tries to realise itself.

In one interpretation of the dialectic, when an I encounters another I, its pre-eminence and control are compromised and it either ignores the other I or sees it as a threat to itself. Its only means of re-asserting itself is by entering into a struggle for pre-eminence, hence the two I's relate as master and slave, to preserve both their self-identities and recognition of each other. But, unless authority and responsibility are commensurate and reciprocal, no social identities—such as being committed, being responsible, or having social status—are possible.

While it's drawing a long bow to insist Charlotte Brontë was Hegelian, Hegel was part of her *zeitgeist*, and it's difficult to discuss *Jane Eyre* (1847) as *bildungsroman* without noticing how the heroine's maturity

hinges on the way she internalises Hegel’s master–slave dialectic in her idiosyncratic way. Academic critics have discussed Brontë’s use of the dialectic in ways that suit their different literary and cultural theories, but a close reading of the novel is all that’s really necessary, plus noticing that Brontë’s focus was on feeling rather than reason: and she disliked Austen’s novels intensely. Put another way, Austen was pre-Hegelian, and, had Brontë written *Sense and Sensibility* instead, Elinor’s sense (reason) would have driven her to a physical and mental breakdown and Marianne’s sensibility (feeling) would have allowed her to remain in control throughout the novel.

At the beginning of *Jane Eyre* the heroine is a young orphan at Gateshead Hall, an estate without a master to prevent it from squandering its inheritance and sliding into decay. Her late Uncle Reed was a kind man and had he lived he might have made her the focus of his estate’s renewal—much in the same way Sir Thomas Bertram made Fanny Price the focus of renewal at Mansfield Park—but without him Jane has no master to serve. Her Aunt Reed sends her to Lowood School, where she’s subjected to the malign influence of a low church Calvinist, the Reverend Brocklehurst. But Lowood isn’t all bad and, once the Calvinist influence is mitigated, Jane benefits from the education Lowood gives her. She eventually becomes a young teacher who prays for liberty, change and stimulus, but when her prayers aren’t answered she cries out desperately: “Then, grant me at least a new servitude!” This appeal to the master–slave dialectic frames the rest of the novel, as Jane explores the consequences of needing a master while having fixed ideas about the kind of master she needs. She resists giving herself to the unbalanced “knight”, Edward Rochester, and the unbalanced “priest”, St John Rivers, as she needs a master who is more balanced than extreme romanticism or extreme evangelicalism.

Jane becomes a governess at Thornfield Hall, a gothic metaphor for romantic decay, complete with a woman secreted away in the attic, whose madness is probably due to tertiary syphilis. Thornfield’s master, Rochester, senses the inadequacy of his estate, and perhaps he hopes marrying Jane will bring renewal. At first he appears to be the master Jane needs, so she’s tempted to submit to his apparently benevolent domination without realising the madwoman in the attic is his wife. Once she discovers who the madwoman is, Jane realises she can’t become his slave, no matter how much she loves him, as marrying him would be unlawful and

immoral. She flees Thornfield and abandons herself to divine providence.

After Jane travels through a place called Whitcross—literally, the spirit of the cross—where she experiences her dark night of the soul, she collapses on the doorstep of Moor House. Its residents take her in. They happen to be lost relatives, the family she’s always longed for, and soon she discovers she’s heiress to a mercantile fortune. Thus equipped with a family and a fortune, Jane is happier and more in control of her future than she’s ever been, but something is missing: the love she craves from a master such as Rochester. While there’s another master to serve at Moor House, Jane’s cousin St John Rivers, who pursues her as relentlessly as Rochester once did, she resists him, knowing his evangelicalism makes him the wrong master for her. She leaves Moor House, equipped with her mercantile fortune, and seeks out Rochester now that she can approach him on an equal footing.

When Jane arrives at Thornfield she discovers the hall burnt to the ground. The mad wife is dead and Rochester has been blinded and maimed as a result of trying to rescue her. There’s a scriptural allusion here, as the requirements of Matthew 5:27–31 have been fulfilled, and the impediments of divorce and the occasions of sin have been removed. Rochester is now the kind of master Jane can serve. His disadvantage gives her an advantage. They can now journey together as equals, although she’s in fact leading him. Of course, such a contrived ending wouldn’t ring true if the novel sought to imitate life, but the ending of the allegory is consistent with its moral.

Had Brontë written “Sense and Sensibility”, Elinor’s sense would have driven her to a breakdown and Marianne’s sensibility would have allowed her to remain in control throughout the novel.

FEUERBACH AND MIDDLEMARCH

AUTHORS CAN BE inspired in a way that transcends time and place but they are also creatures of their period. George Eliot was raised an evangelical but made her journey out of the church via radical politics, liberal theologies, demythologising hermeneutics, early attempts at the historical Jesus, and ideas that contributed to communism and evolutionary theory: that is, she left via all the events that contributed to the “crisis of belief”. These events determined the caste of mind we glean from her non-fiction: published translations of Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity*, an unfinished translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, and the assistant editorship of the *Westminster Review*, a quarterly journal for

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radicals published between 1824 and 1914. Feuerbach, for example, maintained that Christianity was a dream of the mind that fulfilled an inherent need in human nature.

Eliot uses *Middlemarch* (1871–72) to critique classical metaphysics: in particular, she describes the decline of scholasticism and rise of early modernism. While the critique became mainstream and dominated the twentieth century, it was relatively new when she wrote the novel, and it was certainly new in the 1830s: the period in which the novel is set. The novel is full of richly drawn characters and inter-woven sub-plots but its overarching frame of *bildungsroman* is Dorothea Brooke's journey into maturity. Within this frame the novel represents English provincial life during a period of clashing horizons. The central clash—at the heart of Dorothea's *bildungsroman*—is between an old-fashioned and supposedly outworn scholasticism (Casaubon) and an early modernism (Ladislaw).

Casaubon, a priest who has dedicated his life to researching the key to all mythologies, appears on Dorothea's impressionable radar at a critical point in her puritanical and idealistic adolescence. When it dawns on her that he might want to marry her, she experiences reverential gratitude, as if he were a guardian angel sent to protect her from a petty life that leads nowhere. She imagines that, as his wife, she'll study with him, learn from him, help him in his research, attain complete knowledge, and become his amanuensis. Eliot calls Casaubon's manor house Lowick (low + wick = low flame, little light, no passion). It has "an air of autumnal decline", is surrounded by "dead leaves"; as Casaubon has no "bloom" he can't make Lowick blossom. The reader is meant to view him as an antiquated horizon living in a decaying metaphor. It's no coincidence that Eliot gives Casaubon—a grave and humourless middle-aged priest—iron-grey hair and deep eye sockets which resemble a famous portrait of Locke.

Mr and Mrs Casaubon go to Rome on their honeymoon where, instead of doing what honeymoon couples do, he occupies himself with his research—at the Vatican, no less, the traditional home of scholasticism—and she spends her days alone, looking young and beautiful, clad in Quakerish clothes, frustrated because she isn't being allowed to help with his research, increasingly aware that her future, which she thought would be filled with joyful devotedness, isn't going to be what she thought. When they return from their honeymoon, Casaubon finds himself weighed down by an unfulfilled desire to render his research and his marriage "unimpeachable". According to Eliot's logic, though, he's worn out like his scholastic horizon; he's unable to complete his research for the key to all mythologies—because that key is only a dream of his mind—or cope with a passionate young wife. He's dying but still wants

to control her from beyond the grave. His will stipulates she shall forfeit his estate if she ever marries Ladislaw. During her widowhood, she becomes a patroness with an open cheque-book who can exercise a beneficial influence over Middlemarch during its struggle to adapt to the modern world, provided she remains a virgin martyr to his scholasticism. If she goes against his will, she forfeits the source of her influence.

Ladislaw represents those Continental discourses from the nineteenth century that evolved into the various posts of the twentieth century. Critics have noticed that, compared with Eliot's better-defined characters—those with a coherent system of belief the reader can accept or reject—Ladislaw is insouciant and insubstantial. Some see this as a weakness in Eliot's characterisation but, given the period in which the novel is set, it could equally mean Eliot wants Ladislaw to represent a fledgling horizon, somewhere at the turning point where romanticism became early modernism, which became more definitive as the century advanced. Since Ladislaw isn't characterised by what he believes, but by his objection to those who represent tradition and the status quo—and since all the reader sees is the assertion of his clever but immature will—he's as definitive as a pre-*übermensch* can be: more will-to-petulance than will-to-power.

Ladislaw's function in the novel is to rescue Dorothea from her vocation as a virgin martyr; a vocation that's failing not because she rejects its virtue but because she finally accepts she's no longer called to live it. For all his lack of substance, Ladislaw brings a level of contemporary reality to Dorothea's life, putting her in touch with the overall thrust of Continental thought, as she works through her thrall to her husband's scholasticism towards a fluffy and vague belief system that suits her. She marries Ladislaw, forfeits Casaubon's estate, and loses the influence it gave her; however, Dorothea chose to forfeit Casaubon's scholastic legacy of her own free will fully aware of the consequences. It's unclear what happens to that legacy, since Eliot's narrative intention apparently ends with the forfeiture. Perhaps she assumed scholasticism would simply wear out and disappear into the obviously superior mists of modernism and its posts. But scholasticism didn't disappear on cue, though, just as God didn't disappear with the proclamation of his death.

NIETZSCHE AND *THE GETTING OF WISDOM*

ETHEL FLORENCE (HENRY Handel) Richardson was born into a prosperous Melbourne family that fell on hard times. Her father, a prominent obstetrician, died of tertiary syphilis when she was nine. In 1883, when she was thirteen, Richardson became a boarder at Presbyterian Ladies' College (PLC)

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in Melbourne. In 1888, when she was eighteen, her mother took the family to Europe, so Richardson could study music at the Leipzig Conservatorium. In 1894, Richardson married a Scot, John George Robertson, an academic who specialised in German literature. Apart from a short period in 1912—when Richardson returned to Australia to research what would become her famous trilogy, collected as *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* in 1930—Richardson lived on the Continent or in Britain.

According to her biographer, Michael Ackland, the Richardsons were Spiritualists. Richardson herself became involved in psychic research; after her husband died, she sought to maintain contact with him via séances. She was also an ardent suffragette. Her mother's life had shown her the ills of female dependence; she had been introduced to feminist ideas at PLC, where she also started to develop the ability to credibly mix fact with fiction. This is another way of saying—while her life provided background for her work—her work wasn't autobiographical. The distinction is important, since twentieth-century readers had an unfortunate tendency to psychoanalyse authors through their novels, as if the reader knew more about authors than authors knew about themselves.

Richardson's ideology and aesthetic were influenced by Russian and Continental novelists, and by philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. One of the interesting things about *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910) as *bildungsroman* is how its heroine, Laura Tweedle Rambotham, represents Nietzschean thought, including the *übermensch* and the eternal return, with the death of God thrown in for good measure. If Ladislaw is pre-*übermensch*—since *Middlemarch* is set in the 1830s before Nietzsche was born—Laura is as *übermensch* as a literary character can be. Eight of the novel's twenty-five chapters have epigraphs from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), while the remaining seventeen have no epigraphs at all, and Richardson's formative years at PLC coincide with the period in which *Zarathustra* was published. In *The Getting of Wisdom* the relationship between *bildungsroman* and *zeitgeist* is strong.

Laura's journey into maturity needs to be compared with the journeys of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Jane Eyre, and Dorothea Brooke, because each is different, and because maturity means different things to their literary creators. If aspects of Laura are prefigured in Marianne and Jane, Austen and Brontë knew how to deal with Byronic excesses to achieve what was for them a necessary social and religious and psychological

stasis. There's no parallel stasis for Richardson—not even in the fluffy compromise Eliot allows Dorothea—there are only temporary setbacks imposed on Laura, while she exercises her adolescent will, before she finally and famously runs off into her adulthood, at the end of the novel, unburdened by any social obligations or moral strictures or religious beliefs. We in the twenty-first century tend not to make a negative assessment of Laura's maturity, and even cheer her on, because we've been conditioned to accept its underlying ideology and aesthetic, and because advances in social welfare and medical knowledge mean we no longer suffer the consequences of her freedom. There are safety nets now and we don't die of syphilis any more.

*Each time
Laura thinks
she's learned
a lesson and
adapts to what's
expected of her,
her will leads
her into an even
greater blunder.*

Mrs Rambotham is the widow of a barrister who supports her family in genteel poverty by embroidering. The reader can't avoid the impression of sacrificial motherhood and wanting a better life for her children than she's been allowed herself. She finds her eldest daughter difficult to manage, as Laura is forward and impulsive, clever and fanciful, and proud and sensitive, with a "natural buoyancy of spirit" which always reasserts itself. Driving this spirit is a strong will, the idea of which Nietzsche inherited from Schopenhauer and bequeathed to Freud.

At the age of twelve Laura is sent to boarding school in Melbourne, to learn how society works, to learn how to survive, to grow up. The experience is a humiliating shock, as boarding school isn't loving or indulgent like home. Critics like to say *The Getting of Wisdom* is about the destruction of innocence, and in many senses that's true, but it's equally true that Laura and Richardson are quite different, just as Laura's boarding school and Richardson's PLC are quite different, and perhaps Laura's mother and Richardson's mother are quite different as well.

From the moment she arrives at boarding school, Laura's will makes her life difficult, but she can't help herself, since she doesn't know herself, and her fate—determined by Richardson and Nietzsche—is a constant cycle of the *übermensch* (which is linear) blundering against the eternal return (which is cyclical). Each time Laura thinks she's learned a lesson and adapts to what's expected of her, her will leads her into an even greater blunder—including lying about her relationship with a clergyman and cheating at exams—as the cycle repeats itself with increasing oestrogen-charged passion, and increasing negative consequences: there's even an adolescent affair with an older girl. At the end of the novel, as Laura is leaving the boarding school for the last time, she's overcome by a desire to run. We last see her as

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a figure disappearing into the distance—into her own freedom and her necessity—embracing and loving her fate, which is curiously burdened, since the *übermensch* will always blunder against the eternal return, just as the linear will always be reversed by the cyclical. Nietzsche puts it thus in *The Gay Science* (1882–87):

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more” ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine”.

The implication here is that the God of classical metaphysics doesn't really exist and Laura is herself a god.

FREUD AND *THE BELL*

AS THE TWENTIETH century advanced, certain authors felt they were expected to do certain things: such as frame the human condition and reflect on its existential dilemma. While Locke had become invisible to the *zeitgeist*, the spirits of Hegel and Feuerbach and Nietzsche were very much evident in Freud, who had become a major focus of framing and reflecting, who gave every text a sexual sub-text, who shot down every passing *agape* with his cannon of *eros*. Iris Murdoch's philosophical-literary matrix has been called Platonic Freudianism, which isn't contradictory, since Freud's mythopoesis was never scientific and remained indebted to the Platonic model of the mind for its existence. Like Freud, Murdoch's framing and reflecting were also mythopoeitic, as she felt it was difficult for an author to be existential—and still keep her head—without working with the background myths provide. To keep her head, Murdoch gave each of her protagonists a horizon that represents a Western myth. The way these horizons relate to each other—or are unable to relate to each other—is Murdoch exploring “the whole question of what human nature most truly is”.

In a fundamental sense, *The Bell* (1958) is *Middlemarch* with a Freudian makeover, providing Murdoch with an opportunity to explore the mind of her heroine, Dora Greenfield, which usefully contrasts with the minds of Eliot's Dorothea and Freud's Dora. Murdoch gives Dora all the pathologies Freud diagnosed in—or projected onto—his Dora and adds a few more. These pathologies are due to the way that

classical metaphysics—here the reason attributed to the ancient Greeks and the revelation attributed to the ancient Jews and Christians—oppresses the red-haired Dora's pagan spirit.

As in *Middlemarch* there are several subsidiary frames within *The Bell* but its overarching frame is Dora's *bildungsroman*. Dora is an on-again off-again art student and wife, unable to complete her studies because she's always in a state of crisis and angst and can't apply herself. This is because she's in a master-slave relationship with Paul, her dominant and abusive and highly sexual husband, who's also her intellectual and academic superior. At the beginning of the novel, Dora is nervous and bumbling and insecure. She's estranged from Paul but can't live without him. She travels from London to Imber—a play on *umber* or *umbra* (shades or shadows)—where Paul is researching Imber's antiquities. Because the individual and collective Western imaginations are thought to reflect each other, Murdoch suggests that the red-haired pagan Dora can't come to terms with the conscious dilemma of her relationship with Paul until she comes to terms with the unconscious dilemma of classical metaphysics. Dora's trip to Imber is therefore the beginning of her journey into maturity.

On arriving at Imber, Dora confronts two architectural symbols that dominate the landscape and happen to represent classical metaphysics. There's a decaying Court, with its Palladian façade and Corinthian pillars, which is the site of a fledgling attempt to establish an Anglican lay community. There's a restored Abbey, with its Norman tower, which is the site of an enclosed order of Anglican Benedictine nuns. The Court (reason) and Abbey (revelation) are separated by a lake, the surface of which represents the divide between ego-conscious and id-unconscious: mental structures familiar to Plato and Freud and Murdoch. The inhabitants of the Court reach the Abbey by gliding across the surface of the lake. They don't swim, by which Murdoch suggests they aren't in touch with the id-unconscious and therefore aren't psychologically integrated. (Murdoch is a philosopher. A lot happens in this engaging story. Everything has symbolic meaning.) Fortunately, at least one of the nuns at the Abbey can swim. This allows her to save Dora from drowning at one point in the novel.

There's a turning point in Dora's dilemma, at the centre of the novel. She flees from the combined oppression of Paul's bullying and Imber's classical metaphysics and travels to London where she seeks refuge in the arms of Noel, a journalist friend who represents an extreme form of modernity: No + El = no gods of reason for the ancient Greeks; no God of revelation for Jews and Christians. Noel only complicates Dora's dilemma, once she realises that his seduction is just as bad as Paul's persecution, since he's the existen-

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tial alternative to there being no classical metaphysics. Noel wants to destroy everything the Court and Abbey represent.

On her return to Imber, Dora taps into her red-headed pagan power and conspires with a young man, Toby, to raise an old bell they've discovered at the bottom of the lake. Once the old bell is raised, some kind of spell over Imber is broken. The lay community at the Court disbands, because it was never integrated, while the Abbey remains untouched across the lake, because it is integrated, and a "curious dream-like peace" descends on Imber: a landscape that represents the Western mind.

Dora teaches herself to swim in the lake; as Murdoch campily puts it: "The depths below affrighted her no longer." She leaves Paul permanently, and, with the assistance of a male friend—Michael Meade, the homosexual leader of Imber's failed attempt at a lay community, whose story is the subsidiary frame within her *bildungsroman*—she obtains a small grant which allows her to resume her studies in art. Perhaps someday she'll become an artist or an art teacher who will mediate the truth art tells. According to Murdoch, this is the truth Western religion once told, which is no longer being heard, which now needs to be told again by the artist, and, of course by authors such as herself. By the end of the story Dora is no longer oppressed by classical metaphysics but neither is she liberated from it—she simply exists on its margins, both as a woman and as a trope. It's important to note, though, that her existential dilemma—her freedom and her necessity—aren't in any way representative of Murdoch's own life as a creature of the philosophical-literary establishment: as an author in control of her life as well as her novels. Where Murdoch was obviously an intellectual, Dora is and always will be dumb.

THE RETURN TO METAPHYSICS

MATURITY LOOKS DIFFERENT now that the "crisis of belief" has become cliché and it's no longer a badge of reason or enlightenment to believe religion is a form of immaturity. Freud has by and large disappeared into the ether whence he came and we are free to make more measured assessments of Hegel and Feuerbach and Nietzsche. We can even use Locke as a benchmark once again, as Austen once did, since he has a lot to offer us as we re-assess what the Enlightenment was really

about. In the novel where *bildungsroman* is influenced by *zeitgeist*, the heroine can once again mature and keep her religion.

Muriel Spark, an author who's been called the Austen of the Surrealists, demonstrated that in *Robinson* (1958), originally published the same year as *The Bell* but out of print until fairly recently. Using a theme taken from Robinson Crusoe, of a survivor stranded on an eponymous man-shaped island, Spark frames the human condition and explores the existential dilemma of her heroine, January Marlow. On this island, which like Imber is a landscape that represents the Western mind—and classical metaphysics—January is forced to mature, although she was never as infantile as Dora. She was never a victim either—of nature or individuals or classical metaphysics—as Spark doesn't believe in the victim-oppressor complex promoted by socially-conscious literature and art. Spark is more interested in free will and moral agency. In her novels, there are no red-haired victims like Dora because her own red-haired heroines give as good as they get.

Murdoch and Spark cover similar metaphorical territory but arrive at difference conclusions. The existential dilemmas confronting Dora and January are telling, as are their different responses to those dilemmas. Given Murdoch's power and control as an author, it's quaint she should frame the human condition around a heroine so unlike herself. It would have been better had Dora been allowed to achieve much more than leaving her husband, learning to swim, and returning to her studies once a homosexual friend sought a small grant on her behalf, because she was too dumb to apply for one herself. In stark contrast, January is a convert Catholic as well as a mother and a journalist; she teaches cats how to play ping-pong; she blows raspberries at the individuals who seek to control her. Spark's vision of maturity, rather than Murdoch's, seems more relevant to a twenty-first century Western imagination struggling to overcome its twentieth-century penchant for psychoanalytical introspection as it adapts to larger global realities. Where Murdoch is unable to think beyond the master-slave dialectic, can't get her mind off sex, and like Freud feels the need to shoot down every passing *agape* with a cannon of *eros*, Spark thinks in much broader and more relevant terms.

*Michael Giffin wrote on **Absence of Mind** by Marilynne Robinson in the December issue.*