Mansfield Park

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'At the still point of the turning world.'
T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

MANSFIELD PARK tells the story of Fanny Price's rise from insignificance to importance. When we first meet her — timid, in tears and physically weak — she is the poor relation, the adopted child in the great strange house. By the end of the novel she has moved from the fringe to the centre and is needed by everyone. The book shows us a complete reversal of position; and the dramatic irony and distinctive shape of the narrative lie in this reversal.

The first chapter makes plain to us the special interests, the 'areas of experience' that Jane Austen will deal with, and the chapter begins with a reminder of the importance of money:

> About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income. All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it.

Her sister, Mrs Norris, was less lucky: 'Miss Ward, at the end of half a dozen years, found herself obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr Norris, a friend of her brother-in-law, with scarcely any private fortune . . .' 'Felt herself obliged to be attached': the words sum up the attitude of Charlotte Lucas towards Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*. The difference between the two novels is that while for Charlotte freedom to marry for love is difficult for economic reasons, in *Mansfield Park* people are not free to make successful marriages because of faults in their moral education. At once we reach one of the great issues of the novel — the question of freedom. The reference to Mrs Norris cannot be

dismissed as a simple piece of sarcasm. She married without affection and for money (what there was of it), but Sir Thomas Bertram in the great climatic scene of the book tries to force a similar marriage on Fanny. One of the ways Jane Austen directs our judgement of Sir Thomas and the ethical basis of his world is to make him echo, however faintly, in word and deed, the extreme and nasty opinions and attitudes of Mrs Norris.

Sir Thomas holds mistaken views on education, but in this first chapter he raises the crucial question: what can be done to change a person for the good, and what factors — disposition (that key word in *Mansfield Park*) environment, example — are most important in the education of anyone.

> 'There will be some difficulty in our way, Mrs Norris,' observed Sir Thomas, 'as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up: how to preserve in the minds of my *daughters* the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin; and how, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*. I should wish to see them very good friends, and would, on no account, authorize in my girls the smallest degree of arrogance towards their relation; but still they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different. It is a point of great delicacy, and you must assist us in our endeavours to choose exactly the right line of conduct.' (Ch. 1)

What Sir Thomas chiefly wishes to see altered in Fanny is her chief virtue, her freedom of spirit; he recognizes, in theory, that a bad disposition can be 'dangerous' for those who are in contact with it, but is blind to the possibility that this bad disposition might be found in his daughters. Sir Thomas may not 'authorize' in his daughters any arrogance towards Fanny, but the word betrays the shortcomings of his own authoritarian and remote relationship with them. Fanny 'is not a Miss Bertram' and 'cannot be the equal' of Maria and Julia. The moral insight of the novel is that whole movement of the narrative which takes us from a literal reading of these words to an awareness, by the end, of their echoing irony when we come to see that, indeed, Fanny Price is *not* a Miss Bertram, and that they cannot ever be 'equals'.

In the second chapter Fanny arrives, 'somewhat delicate and puny . . . small of her age, and with no glow of complexion nor any other striking beauty'. She is timid, shy, unhappy and is

found one morning by Edmund crying on the attic stairs. Edmund alone takes some interest in Fanny; he establishes a personal relationship with her, a warm human contact very different from that which Sir Thomas and his daughters show either to her or to one another. In return she 'loved him better than anybody in the world except William'. Moral education — and Jane Austen scarcely distinguishes between education and moral education — is possible only where there is love, a real personal regard for one person by another.

Throughout the novel the question of moral education is repeatedly raised by marriage: marriage is the touchstone by which we are to gauge the quality of a person's disposition and character. Maria Bertram's view of marriage is briefly sketched and placed:

> Being now in her twenty-first year, Maria Bertram was beginning to think matrimony a duty; and as a marriage with Mr Rushworth would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father's, as well as ensure the house in town, which was now a prime object, it became, by the same rite of moral obligation, her evident duty to marry Mr Rushworth if she could. (Ch. 4)

Maria wants a house in London. London, in the novel typifies rootlessness, triviality and a licence which is mistaken for freedom; and Maria sees freedom as escape from external restraint. Later her attitude is presented more sharply. Henry Crawford has flirted with her and left her, and marriage to Mr Rushworth becomes more important.

> She must escape from him [Henry Crawford] and Mansfield as soon as possible, and find consolation in fortune and consequence, bustle and the world, for a wounded spirit . . . In all the important preparations of the mind she was complete: being prepared for matrimony by an hatred of home, restraint, and tranquility; by the misery of disappointed affection, and contempt of the man she was to marry. The rest might wait. (Ch. 21)

What happens to her later is inevitable. She is not free; her education, disposition and principles make freedom impossible, and she and Mrs Norris come together at the end to pass the rest of their days in the existential hell of eath other's company.

Maria may wish to escape, but Fanny loves Mansfield Park and 'everything in it'. Several times, in the opening chapters, she

expresses her love for the place, for the house, but does not mention the occupants. And except for Edmund she has no reason to love these people. She is terrified of Sir Thomas; she is bullied by Mrs Norris, and her mind 'had seldom known a pause in its alarms and embarrassments'. Mansfield Park may represent the truer values of the country, as opposed to London, and a finer way of life of custom and ceremony. But the values of the great country houses are threatened and collapsing; from the custom and ceremony of Mansfield Park neither innocence nor beauty is born, and at Sotherton we learn that the chapel is no longer used for morning prayers. Everyone at Mansfield Park contributes to Fanny's unhappiness; everyone has been corrupted by a false education. For Jane Austen blood and heredity count for nothing; the traditional pieties cannot be inherited. Maria and Julia, Tom Bertram and Sir Thomas are, like Fanny's family at Portsmouth, victims of environment and bad education.

Henry and Mary Crawford are central to the aim of the novel, and Jane Austen's treatment of them has been often misunderstood and condemned. Mary, with her liveliness and charm appears to many as another Elizabeth Bennett, and her brother as a perfectly respectable young man who would never have run off with Maria, and who was genuinely and obviously in love with Fanny and more than worthy of her. Marvin Mudrick makes the point sharply: 'The author betrays Mary as an author must always betray a character . . . eluding the moral situation.'[1]

Mary Crawford is the most subtly drawn of all Jane Austen's characters and we are not responding to the art of this novel if we fail to see the realism and firmness of the moral insight in the portrait of Mary.

Miss Crawford intends to marry, 'provided she could marry well'.

> 'I would have every body marry if they can do it properly; I do not like to have people throw themselves away; but every body should marry as soon as they can do it to advantage.' (Ch. 4)

Marriage is for her a 'take-in'; if one is going to be taken in it might as well be on the most favourable financial terms, and Tom Bertram, the elder son, looks as though he can provide them. In

[1] Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen*, Princeton, 1952, p. 165.

nearly all Mary's conversations Jane Austen suggests a false note to her talk. There is a restlessness in her talk, a wish to be bright, a constant suggestion of insincerity that is hard to define but is certainly there. This kind of chatter is Jane Austen's most effective because least intrusive way of suggesting some failing, some deficiency in Mary.

Mary Crawford is a very different person from Elizabeth Bennett. Elizabeth Bennett does not talk for display. Her wit is her moral intelligence; it is a means of examining conduct and making moral distinctions. Her charm is her intelligence; Mary Crawford's charm is her abuse of her intelligence. She assumes that charm atones for selfishness, and there is a good deal of egoism in the assumption: 'Selfishness must always be forgiven, you know, because there is no hope of a cure.' Elizabeth Bennett is the only free person in *Pride and Prejudice*. She feels shame at Charlotte's marriage with Mr Collins; she is not tied by the outlook and attitudes of her society. Her walk through the mud of the fields to visit Jane shocks Darcy's sisters (but not Darcy) and the episode neatly points to the central interest of the book — the freedom of the heroine who freely chooses in marriage. Elizabeth Bennett would probably shock Mary Crawford. For what gives pathos and interest to Mary Crawford is that she considers herself emancipated, free from convention, from belief, from everything that restricts the growth of personality. The tragic irony of Mary's position, her deep ignorance of herself are summed up with memorable exactness; Mary Crawford shows 'a mind led astray and bewildered, and without any suspicion of being so; darkened, yet fancying itself light'. Jane Austen has earned the right to make this comment by her demonstration of its truth throughout the novel. Mary Crawford is judged but not condemned; the hardness that some readers find here and elsewhere does not come from the hardness of Jane Austen's judgements on her characters, but from the force with which she registers the constrictive power of environment and faulty education. For Mary brought up in her uncle's home, for the Price children in the mean house in Portsmouth, for Maria and Julia in Mansfield Park freedom is equally impossible. But Fanny is free, just as Elizabeth Bennett and, after much trouble, Darcy and Ann Elliot are free. At the end of the novel the

values of the reformed Mansfield Park are not restrictive, but alone make freedom possible.

Sir Thomas departs for Antigua. Jane Austen wishes to show us how Maria and Julia will behave when the external restraint, which alone has any power to control and direct their behaviour, is withdrawn. The visit to Sotherton in Chapter 10 is the first scene where the true natures of the young people, gleefully free from the constraining presence of Sir Thomas, are allowed to show themselves.

At Sotherton, Fanny, Edmund and Mary walk in the wilderness. Fanny soon becomes tired, and all three rest on a bench 'well shaded and sheltered and looking over a ha-ha into the park'. In the scene that follows we see Fanny literally 'at the still point of the turning world' as, in a series of complicated movements, all the others move round her while she sits still.

The many exits and entrances which follow suggest the meaning of the scene and focus the total movement of the book; that Fanny stays still as the others restlessly go round and round performing their vain movements and coming to seem more and more like puppets. As the novel progresses the movements become more frenzied (Julia's elopement with Tom Yates, Maria's adultery with Henry Crawford) but Fanny remains always the 'still point'. She alone is free.

Readers of *Mansfield Park* do not instinctively like Fanny. And this, of course, is the point. It might be interesting to trace Fanny's genealogy and find her in direct line of descent from the heroines of sensibility with their aptitude for submission and humility and their endless filial obedience. But in the present case the individual talent is more interesting than the tradition. The point about Fanny Price is that at the crucial moment she does not submit, she does not obey. We are not asked to like Fanny Price; we are asked to admire her and the toughness with which she overcomes the social pressures that are always at her elbow.

Sir Thomas's sudden return from Antigua is for his children a 'moment of absolute horror'. To say this is not, of course, to suggest that Jane Austen is behind Sir Thomas, cheering him on and backing his judgements to the hilt. (Sir Thomas, we recall is given to 'dignified musings'.) He represents the orthodox

morality of the country gentleman at its finest. Obviously a bulwark against modern encroachments, he is against vulgarity, against the flashy, against vice of all kinds. Or is he? What we see from now on in the novel is how Jane Austen offers Sir Thomas at first as the inflexible guardian of all that is good and proper, of all that is 'accustomed, ceremonious', and then draws our attention to his radical limitations, to the deficiencies in the plan of education he has drawn up for his children, to his moral blindness and the vulgarity, even, of his attitudes, and to his responsibility for his family's failings and his own failure to preserve and strengthen all those things which Mansfield Park symbolizes for Fanny and which ideally it ought to possess. What Fanny loves so much is 'this place', and Sir Thomas is not a fit guardian of the values which should prosper in such a place.

Sir Thomas has been aptly sketched in Chapter 17 by Mrs Grant, a reliable, neutral observer: 'He has a fine dignified manner, which suits the head of such a house, and keeps every body in their place.' Sir Thomas restrains others; but he restrains not only all displays of bad behaviour but all free exchange between himself and his children — that free exchange which is shown to be the source of all moral growth. Thomas is much impressed by the improvement in Fanny's appearance — 'Your uncle thinks you very pretty' — but cannot appreciate those qualities of mind and character which have been quietly growing in the novel and which her increased beauty symbolizes. This obvious point needs to be stressed because it has often been misunderstood. 'It is always clear to Fanny,' says Marvin Mudrick, 'that Sir Thomas and Edmund are godly and just.'[1] But the total shape of the narrative compels an entirely opposite view — our's and Fanny's increasing awareness of Sir Thomas's unjustness and worship of Mammon. *Mansfield Park* is not a 'novel vindicating the ethical foundations of Jane Austen's world';[2] it examines those foundations and finds them rotten. This misreading extends and Marvin Mudrick can assert that 'Jane Austen has conditioned the entire course of the narrative upon our acceptance of Sir Thomas's code',[3] when in fact at the

[1] Ibid., p. 157.
[2] Ibid., p. 173.
[3] Ibid., pp. 175–6.

climax of the book — Fanny's refusal of Henry Crawford — we are led, like Fanny, to reject his code, and we come to see in the book's catastrophe the implications and inevitable results of that code. There is no excuse for identifying Jane Austen's values with those of Sir Thomas. It is Sir Thomas who is her chief target. For some readers it is confusing that the chief target should have so many admirable traits. But, as with the many different qualities of Mary and Henry, these are shown to be not enough. 'Neither Sir Thomas's world nor his religion has charity, sweetness, compassion, forgiveness.'[1] How should they have, since Jane Austen carefully denies them these virtues? Sir Thomas is not the hero of the novel; and he is not the hero because he fails in these respects.

The second half of the book begins with Henry Crawford's determination to make Fanny love him, and this leads to his genuine wish to marry Fanny. Henry's flirtation stems from idleness and folly, and Mary Crawford does nothing to check her brother. Mary, in fact, 'left Fanny to her fate — a fate which, had not Fanny's heart been guarded in a way unsuspected by Miss Crawford, might have been a little harder than she deserved'. The way unsuspected by Miss Crawford — and Henry — is Fanny's love for Edmund. Jane Austen does not underestimate the pressures on Fanny nor has any wish to make her a heroine of unreal or extravagant prowess. Not even Fanny could withstand the addresses of Henry Crawford unless she loved elsewhere. This might have seemed to the ordinary novel reader of the day as a slur on the heroine; but the qualification is central to the book. It is only through love that there is freedom from the conventional social and economic pressures.

Henry Crawford, like Mary, is given many attractive qualities. He may be a gadabout and a flirt, but his manners, like his sister's, are lively and pleasant. Henry is 'a young man of sense, of character, of temper, of manners, and of fortune'; the description is Sir Thomas's, but there is no need to dispute it. He is a man of taste; he has taste in reading Shakespeare and the Prayer Book and laying out grounds; and he also has 'moral taste'. Moral taste is a mere velleity and does nothing to alter 'his own habits of

[1] Ibid., p. 177.

selfish indulgence'. More valuable is the fact that he finds himself genuinely in love with Fanny. All the world loves a lover, and many readers find it hard that Henry should not win Fanny and intolerable that he should destroy his chances — and Jane Austen insists that the chance is there — by running off with Maria. The rightness of Jane Austen's treatment of Henry Crawford will shortly appear.

Sir Thomas tells Fanny that Henry Crawford has asked for her hand in marriage. Fanny is too confused to speak, but is forced to say something when Sir Thomas explains that Henry Crawford is waiting downstairs for an answer:

> 'You are mistaken, sir,' — cried Fanny, forced by the anxiety of the moment even to tell her uncle that he was wrong — 'you are quite mistaken. How could Mr Crawford say such a thing? I gave him no encouragement yesterday. On the contrary, I told him — I cannot recollect my exact words — but I am sure I told him that I would not listen to him, that it was very unpleasant to me in every respect, and that I begged him never to talk to me in that manner again. I am sure I said as much as that and more; and I should have said still more, if I had been quite certain of his meaning anything seriously; but I did not like to be — I could not bear to be — imputing more than might be intended. I thought it might all pass for nothing with *him*.'
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> She could say no more; her breath was almost gone.
>
> 'Am I to understand,' said Sir Thomas, after a few moments' silence, 'that you mean to *refuse* Mr Crawford?'
>
> 'Yes, sir.'
>
> 'Refuse him?'
>
> 'Yes, sir.'
>
> 'Refuse Mr Crawford: Upon what plea? For what reason?'
>
> 'I — I cannot like him, sir, well enough to marry him.' (Ch. 32)

These are the words which focus the moral insight of the novel; they illustrate Henry James's dictum that 'the art of the novel is above all an art of preparations'. All that has gone before has helped to prepare for this; and this in turn directs the meaning of what is to come. The verbal exchange is quiet and undistinguished. Fanny stammers; she has very few words at her command, but she has enough; and her 'I — I cannot like him, sir, well enough to marry him' is the central moment in the book and in all Jane Austen's work. The words may not reverberate, but the total scene does. Sir Thomas 'with a good deal of cold sternness' turns on her and bullies her. The 'cold sternness' is in

every word of his attack as he betrays all the values by which he really lives and which his children have imbibed. Here is the uncomprehending orthodoxy of the day confronted by someone who cannot accept its basic tenet, that marriage is primarily a matter of social and economic convenience. There are few more nasty episodes in Jane Austen's work than Sir Thomas's brutal attempt to force Fanny into the pattern. There is an irony in some of his remarks that gives force to what has gone before and to what will follow:

'I had thought you peculiarly free from wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit, which prevails so much in modern days, even in young women, and which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offence.'

We have seen, and will see this independence of spirit in Mary Crawford, Maria and Julia, though Sir Thomas has been blind to it; but the novel shows that their independence is chimerical; they are chained by their environment and education. Mary Crawford cannot make the necessary sacrifices to marry Edmund: Maria marries Mr Rushworth from pique and runs off with Henry Crawford from vanity and lust — and Julia marries Mr Yates from selfish fear. Fanny, has indeed, true independence of spirit, and Sir Thomas is right to hate it and be dismayed by this expression of freedom, for it threatens his whole world.

The three worlds of the novel, Portsmouth, London and Mansfield Park have been often mentioned. London is the world of amoral behaviour and rootlessness; Portsmouth is the world of economic struggle that leaves people morally stunted; Mansfield is 'the fortress, the repository of the solid virtues of the Established Church . . . the strength of rural conservatism against the encroaching sophistication of the city'.[1] The three worlds are there, but apparently it is easy to mistake their purpose. Marvin Mudrick writes:

In Mansfield Park . . . the individual can no longer act without locating himself. Place and group have, indeed, become central: the individual faces, not a choice of action, but a choice of allegiance; and the action of the novel is a collision of worlds.

The thesis of *Mansfield Park* is severely moral: that one world, representing the genteel orthodoxy of Jane Austen's time, is cate-

[1] Ibid., p. 173.

gorically superior to any other. Nowhere else does Jane Austen take such pains to make up the mind of her reader . . . The author never lets us doubt that Fanny's only freedom is to choose among worlds.[1]

Fanny chooses Mansfield Park; it is better than London or Portsmouth but it is not the best of all possible worlds. The aim of the novel has been to show the inadequacy of Mansfield Park as a way of life, and how little qualified the people in it are to think themselves superior. Mansfield Park is the home of the paranoid Mrs Norris, the blitheringly selfish Lady Bertram, the vain, ill-educated Maria and Julia, the irresponsible Tom; its guardian is Sir Thomas, capable (as we have seen) of cruelty and bullying and is directed largely by considerations of money and rank. There is no 'collision of worlds' in the novel; all three worlds are sharply and critically presented. Place and group are central only in that Jane Austen makes us see their corrosive force. Fanny's only freedom of choice — and this is her triumph — is to reject all worlds and assert a value that is found in none; the value of love that is free from all social and economic pressures. The clash in the novel is between the individual and all the worlds that the authoress knows.

These three worlds of London, Portsmouth and Mansfield Park focus the main interests of the novel. The worlds of London and Mansfield, that is the environment and education of those who have been brought up there, have been shown to be responsible for the moral deficiencies of the Crawfords and the Bertrams. Portsmouth can do no better. It may be hard for those born with silver spoons in their mouths to be good; it is even harder for those born without them. The Price family struggling to keep their heads above water cannot have freedom of choice; but in this they are no worse off than Mansfield or London. Jane Austen is raising the question of education — moral education — and freedom at all levels of society, and no other English novel offers so bleak a view.

Sir Thomas is determined that Fanny shall marry Henry Crawford, but does not think that Henry is a model of all the virtues: 'He wished him to be a model of constancy, and fancied the best means of effecting it would be by not trying him too

[1] Ibid., pp. 155–6.

long.' To further his scheme he decides to send Fanny to Portsmouth for a holiday. He wishes her to appreciate more the comforts and luxuries she takes for granted, and he believes that faced with the meanness of life at Portsmouth she will be inclined to value more highly Mr Crawford's offer: 'It was a medicinal project upon his niece's understanding, which he must consider as at present diseased.' That Sir Thomas can think it is Fanny's mind which is diseased is Jane Austen's sharpest comment on him, and the clearest indication of the moral topsy-turvydom which characterizes the world of Mansfield.

Fanny's welcome at Portsmouth is very like her initial welcome at Mansfield: in both places her job is to be useful. Two things oppress her — the noise and confusion of the house, and the absence, as at Mansfield, of any personal interest in herself. She is as alone, as much an outsider as when she first came to Mansfield Park. The Portsmouth scenes make vivid the power of environment to shape character and make our decisions for us: Portsmouth reinforces the lessons of London and Mansfield. Yet Fanny escapes from Portsmouth and from Mansfield Park as well. And not only Fanny; in spite of all that circumstances and upbringing can do, three members of the Price family escape — Fanny, William and Susan. There is no point in saying, as Marvin Mudrick does, that symbolically all three come under the protection of Sir Thomas. Sir Thomas does little for William and can gain no credit for his 'good principles'. And 'protection' is an odd word to use since the novel shows how incapable Sir Thomas is of protecting anybody, and shows, too, how Sir Thomas at the end learns this truth about himself. Fanny was not saved by being brought to Mansfield Park; this is clear not only from the failure of the same place to save the Bertram daughters, but also from what we learn about Susan. At first the 'determined character of her general manners had astonished and alarmed' Fanny. But 'Susan saw that much was wrong at home, and wanted to set it right', and Fanny soon comes to admire 'the natural light of the mind which could so early distinguish justly'. Again, we learn that Susan has 'innate taste' and Fanny's greatest wonder on the subject (like the reader's) soon becomes '. . . that so much better knowledge, so many good notions, should have been hers at all; and that, brought up in the midst of negligence and error,

she should have formed such proper opinions of what ought to be — she, who had no cousin Edmund to direct her thoughts or fix her principles' (Ch. 40). Susan's temper is 'open'; and, whatever her faults, Fanny is able to understand 'the worth of her disposition'.

Susan, in many ways, is in the position of Fanny before she left Portsmouth, but Fanny finds that Susan is more admirable than herself. Fanny has 'natural delicacy'; natural qualities exist (and not only in Fanny and Susan) but will not of themselves go far. Mary Crawford, too, has natural gifts — 'how delightful nature has made her, and how excellent she would have been, had she fallen into good hands earlier'. The 'good hands' (education and environment) are everything; but these are to be further explained.

Fanny joins a circulating library, but it is not the 'biography and poetry' which will educate Susan and enable the 'natural light' of her mind to shine, but the personal interest Fanny takes in her, Fanny's affection for her and her treatment of her as a person and not a thing. It is this that will give Susan a moral education and fit her at the end of the novel to become a substitute for Fanny at Mansfield. This is how Fanny herself escaped from the environmental influences of Portsmouth and Mansfield Park.

Henry Crawford is in love with Fanny; Jane Austen allows us no reason to doubt the genuineness of his feeling. Like Fanny we find that we like him more and we are dismayed when we hear of his sudden disgrace. Those 'rears and vices', the 'bad domestic example' that were matter of comedy to Mary have destroyed him, and the love he feels for Fanny comes too late. What offends the reader is not Jane Austen's inconsistency but her terrible consistency which sees how environment and faulty education have this power to destroy. A few more years and it would be too late to rescue Susan.

Mary Crawford does not meet with the same fate as Henry. She, too, is in love, but cannot accept a marriage that will make her the wife of a country clergyman of small income. She is not free. So strong is the inclination of some readers to fall in love with Mary that even this can be turned into a virtue. She is not free because she has never known love; and because she does not know love she cannot now be free.

The last chapter opens with these words:

Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerate comfort, and to have done with all the rest.

The words are, of course, a joke. Jane Austen has been writing about guilt and misery for four hundred pages; about the adulterous guilt of Henry and Maria and their consequent misery; about the less dramatic but more important guilt of Sir Thomas from whose failures in the bringing up of his children much of their misery stems; about the imagined guilt of Fanny — her constant fear of being ungrateful — and the misery caused her by this, by her jealousy of Mary and by her humiliating and sometimes cruel treatment in Mansfield Park.

Sir Thomas rightly takes all the blame to himself, since he provided the only environment and education that his family could know. Their dispositions had not been formed by 'principle, active principle'. Their upbringing had excluded all possibility of free exchange, mutual love and interest: '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 the flow of their spirits before him.' (Ch. I).

The narrative shape of the novel becomes finally clear and complete when we read that 'Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted'.

The title of the novel has suggested to some readers that Mansfield Park is being offered as a sort of ideal place where alone virtue can prosper. But the novel scrutinizes the world of the gentry and rural conservatism; Mansfield Park is not an admirable bulwark against the corruption of the great city, but is itself corrupt, and must change, must be cleansed as the novel progresses. In Fanny Burney's *Cecilia* we read that 'the rank of Lady Honoria, though it has not rendered her proud, nor even made her conscious she has any dignity to support, has yet given her saucy indifference whom she pleases or hurts, that borders upon what in a woman is of all things the most odious, a daring defiance of the world and its opinions' (Bk. VI, Ch. 6). It is a measure of Jane Austen's originality and insight that in *Mansfield Park* it is not the equivalent of Lady Honoria (Mary Crawford)

but Fanny, diffident and meek, who offers this daring defiance. Mary Crawford does not defy the opinions of the world; she exemplifies them.

In the last chapter the narrative completes its curve; all the ironies stand revealed and take us back to the opening chapter: the reversal of accepted values is complete. If the encompassing irony of the novel is that Fanny alone is free, the stress is always on the difficulty of achieving such freedom against the formidable pressures of time and place and circumstance.

Below the Ghat

Below the ghat where the bodies
are burnt on the funeral pyres
the turtles slowly glide and dream
lazily beneath the water,
replete with remnants of flesh
not consumed by the flames.

Inside the Tower of Silence
the gluttonous vultures savagely
tear at their prey, while high
above them eagles, kites and buzzards
wheel, anxiously waiting to seize
the meagre leavings of the feast.

Under the churchyard the worms
softly perform in the darkness
the same service as turtles and birds.
For one expecting a Christian burial
their blind insidious infiltration
seems the most disquieting of all.

RAYMOND TONG