Story and History: Jane Austen and the Politics of Fiction

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Si el poder político del texto narrativo depende de la capacidad que éste pueda tener para crear empatía, tranferir la experiencia de un personaje al lector y motivar el deseo de imitar a tal personaje, las novelas de Jane Austen pueden ser consideradas, y de hecho suelen serlo, como vehículos ideológicos que subscriben el ideal de feminidad descrito en los conduct-books. Por una parte, tanto su sentido común como su formación ética provocaban su rechazo de todo aquel texto ficcional cuya fábula o mundo posible no estuviese relacionada con la historia o mundo real, de todo texto que promocionase la fantasía de la lectora. Por otra parte, Jane Austen fue capaz de integrar un final feliz e incluso romántico en sus fábulas realistas porque deseaba transmitir a sus lectoras su fe en el ideal burgués de una esfera doméstica y familiar, deseaba convencerlas de la felicidad que dicha esfera podía proporcionar. Sin embargo, el modo representacional realista utilizado por esta escritora suele deconstruirse a sí mismo, y su reacción en contra de las novelas que provocan cierta evasión de la realidad no señala necesariamente planteamientos conservadores o burgueses. Este trabajo sugiere que Jane Austen advierte sobre el poder de seducción y persuasión de un género literario que a través del realismo crea la ilusión de un mundo posible. Mediante esta representación transparente y supuestamente objetiva la novela adquiere mayor eficacia política que el viejo discurso político o religioso. Jane Austen prefiere la novela a otros géneros, pero sus textos narrativos llaman la atención sobre su propia ficcionalidad.

Critics often interpret Jane Austen's novels as moral guides tliat support the established hierarchy: Austen is a conservative teacheré;óf prudence,sense, obedience and responsibility, for whom imagination is'an inadequatemeans of interpretingreality and romances are dangerous beéaüSe

they may encourage women to indulge in dreams of passionate love, pleasure and emotional happiness instead of preparing them for their *real* place in society.[1] Marriage is the central theme of her work, as if choosing the right man were the most important decision in a woman's life. Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, who are initially not interested in getting married, learn such a lesson; they realize that Darcy and Mr. Knightley embody English gentlemanliness. Emma stops novelizing the world. After all, why should she when there is so much true male heroism around? Therefore, Austen's novels seem to vindicate the traditional opposition of the sexes: a woman's place is in a man's home.[2] Her realist fiction teaches women to accept their social duties, whereas romances encourage solipsistic daydreaming. But some of the reasonings that are often used to justify Jane Austen's conservatism may be rewritten to prove her progressive views.

EMPATHY AND THE TRANSFERENCE OF EXPERIENCE

The status of fiction is one of the major subjects of Austen's first novel, *Northanger Abbey*. Both the ignorant John Thorpe and the learned Henry Tilney, despite their very different attitudes towards novel reading, value fiction for the pleasure it produces. Thorpe likes only those novels that are «amusing enough» and male-centred (e. g., *Tom Jones*), and he considers Richardson's and Mrs. Radcliffe's fiction «so full of nonsense» that Catherine runs away with the idea that «gentlemen read better books». It is Henry Tilney, the hero of the novel, who refutes such gender-genre equations. Despite being actually fond of more serious and androcentric stuff such as books on history, he has a very different opinion: «[t]he person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid». It is not novels but rather people like Thorpe that are «the stupidest things in creation».[3] And yet, Henry does not look for anything but entertainment in novel reading. When he realizes that Catherine is captivated by gothic fiction to the extent that she believes Northanger Abbey may be like Montoni's Udolpho, he mocks her fantasies, but he also encourages her «to use her own fancy in the perusal of Matilda's woes» (160). It is later, when Catherine reads her own life as if it were Emily's in the villain's abode, that Henry takes the dangers of Quixotic delusion more seriously. He tries to awaken Catherine to reality, to the English and Christian world she lives in (197): she has confused gothic story with history, the mental world of the book with the material context of her life. Jane Austen

seems to share Henry Tilney's judgment: the reader's uncontrolled fancy, rather than fiction itself, is what one must warn against. Or to put it in Coleridge's terms: the reader's temporary suspension of disbelief has nothing to do with actual delusion (*Letters*, IV, 641-2.). But does this mean that, provided the transference of heroic experience from text to reader does not get out of hand, Jane Austen approves of novels as mere commodities for the leisured? The narrator of *NA* defends a realist kind of fiction

> in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. (38)

According to this passage, the prime purpose of the novelist cannot be to entertain, even though fiction affords «more extensive and unaffected pleasure» than any other literary product (37).[4] The narrator's allusion to the communication of knowledge and Henry's warning against the excesses of fancy suggest that Jane Austen is interested in the ideas fiction may convey, not just in the affective consequences of rhetoric. The last paragraph of the novel, in which the narrator «leave[s] it to be settled by whoever it may concern» whether the text «recommend[s]» a particular ideological attitude (252), points to the possibility of literature as an ideological vehicle.[5]

The main purpose of this paper is to suggest that Austen's reaction against romance and the cult of sensibility does not spring from their subversive consequences, but from their tendency to vindicate traditional gender values and to perpetuate a historical stage devoid of egalitarianism. Even though «[t]he continuing appeal of romance within the women's novel can be seen as a covert protest against the neglect and tedium of women's lives» (Spencer 1986: 187), the temporary relief from reality that romance provides is also a safety valve for women's doubts and demands. The transference of pleasant and thrilling experience from the heroine to the woman reader does not necessarily encourage desire and discontent. On the one hand, reading romances may disrupt the «natural» order because women may conceive expectations above material conditions. Parodies like Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* warn against this effect: Arabella has read too many tales of chivalry to comply with her father's wish to marry her to Mr. Glanville and, despite living in «perfect retirement», she expects «a crowd of adorers to demand her of her father» and requires heroic feats of her suitor.[6] On the other hand, letting women fancy while reading in their

rooms is the best way to keep them quiet and easy at home, to alleviate any eagerness for active participation in historical decisions. Letting them appropriate the story is the best way to keep them off history, man's

Austen's Fanny Price reads travel books and, by making her own experience, -Lord Macartney's account of China-, she is contented even though she does not travel anywhere. The spirit transcends the body and, although she is the Cinderella of the house and her room is cold, Fanny finds «immediate consolation in some pursuit, or some train of thought» (*MP*, 151). Still, imagination cannot substitute for material circumstances that well. The mental experience, the lyrical reverie in the East room, is not gratifying enough and Fanny would like to see Sotherton (56) and be loved by Edmund. As Lennard J. Davis points out, reification is lessened by the reader's awareness of the loneliness of reading and of the inaccessibility of the object she wishes for, which is only «a cluster of signs» (1987: 134). Carole Fabricant comments that domestic tourism served the interests of the ruling classes: visiting the estates of the wealthy satisfied the «voyeuristic delights and vicarious pleasures» of the people that did not own them (1987: 257). However, the tourism therapy does not work well enough on Fanny when she visits Sotherton because, ironically, another kind of therapy, reading, has made her look forward to seeing «something grander» than Mr. Rushworth's chapel (*MP*, 85). Sir Thomas teaches his daughters male stuff, geography and history (18-9), but only the Bertram men travel. The two girls cannot overcome their desires, which have been nourished by the tedium of e family home and by Mrs. Norris's flattery. They are less willing than Fanny to live in a purely mental world because they have not been taught «a sense of duty», «the necessity of self-denial and humility» (463). Sir Thomas, who exiles Fanny to Portsmouth so that she may realize how comfortable living as a polite lady is when compared with the domestic chaos of the working class, would agree with Keats: «Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place Where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways» (*Letters*, II, 102). Both Christian virtue and Romantic genius are matters of the soul and depend on the individual's inner life, on the sacrifice of the body. Terry Eagleton (1983: 26-7) has suggested that the growth of English studies in the later nineteenth century has much to do with the enfeeblement of religion as a form of ideological control: «[t]he actually impoverished experience of the mass of people, an impoverishment bred by their social conditions, can be supplemented by literature». Eagleton believes that «you can vicariously fulfil someone's desire for a fuller life by handing them *Pride and Prejudice*», probably implying that such a novel embodies the

bourgeois, liberal dream of the individual's success in spite of material circumstances (being just a Miss Bennet). But the fact that the Victorian ruling class considered Jane Austen's novels well-written romances appropriate for such an important political mission does not mean that their interpretation of her novels as innocuous to the status quo -the official interpretation for years- should not be questioned.[7]

The point is, therefore, whether Jane Austen approves of idealist and essentialist concepts of both history and literature. The feminism that depreciates Jane Austen on the grounds that she centralizes women's lives through a common destiny, marriage, takes for granted a romantic, transhistorical reading of her fiction, the notion that her novels propose ultimate ideas and universal truths; it does not take into account the fact that the texts are written at a time when many feminist demands concern freedom of choice and equality in marriage, rather than question wedlock.[8] Does Austen believe that art is disengaged from the historical context to the extent of becoming an autonomous object that transcends the writer's and the reader's lives, or does she have a concern with historical utility and the material world? Does she address a universal woman or the readers of her age? Does she uphold that art and the pleasure of reading can and should replace political action, that the universals of a story are more important than the particular events of history? To what extent does she approve of the Christian promise of Heaven and the insistence on the world being a passage that men and especially women -Eve's daughters- must endure while they are in it? Or does she consider such Christian beliefs, as well as Romantic idealism, a weapon mobilized against social change and historical progress?

Bearing in mind the development of an eighteenth-century *useful* literature dedicated to the moral transformation of the audience, critics have often considered Jane Austen the most important successor of Richardson, who in the Preface to *Clarissa* hopes that readers «will not enter upon the perusal of the piece before them, as if it were designed only to divert and amuse». The personal and particular -a hero or heroine's story- and the social and universal -Christian values- are united in a text that presents the moral dilemmas of characters with whom readers in similar circumstances will identify. The action reveals the existence of God's designs and the need to be virtuous and prudent. *Clarissa*, says Richardson in the Preface, will

> investigate the highest and most important doctrines not only of morality, but of christianity, by showing them thrown into action in the conduct of

> the worthy characters; while the unworthy, who set those doctrines at defiance, are condignly, and, as may be said, consequentially, punished.

Many other eighteenth-century writers conceive fiction as useful and try to make the reader think over certain issues by telling him or her a story that is close to his or her own experience.[9] Narrative is suitable for the representation of ideology because, as Michael McKeon puts it, questions of virtue and social mobility «have an inherently narrative focus because they are concerned with genealogical succession and individual progress, with how human capacity is manifested in and through time» (212). Jane Austen inherits a didactic tradition that has overcome Richardson's need to validate fiction, that has evolved beyond the «probationary awkwardness» of the early stages of novel-writing.[10] The moralist need not be worried by her loss of personal contact with the addressee. The claim to historicity (the overt rejection of the narrative as story) and its devices of authentication, as well as the presence of moral reflection, are no longer necessary: verisimilitude and mimetic illusion, the notion of story as the transparent and objective representation of the referent (life, the world, history), grant the readers' identification with the virtuous and, consequently, their acceptance of the ideological message. The account of the story is efficient enough, provided the novel supplies a causal explanation of events. William Ray argues that «the novel's promotion as a representational vehicle is linked to the increasing conviction that both individual and social truths [...] are beyond the scope of traditional historical accounts».[11] It is not the documentary account of historical events but the causality of verisimilar events that provides the readers with a set of values and codes with which they may interpret history itself. Reading novels is an epistemological encounter. The story does not need the support of meditative discourse because it is, writes the narrator-protagonist of Mary Hays' first novel, «a more striking and affecting lesson than abstract philosophy» or «cold declamation» (*Emma Courtney*, pp. 5, 97). Jane Austen may write to anonymous women readers without being worried about the compromise between an entertaining story and the moral lesson.

Following this reasoning, Jane Austen's irony and wit do not undermine the Christian values the text conveys; that is, a neoclassical love for amusing discourse does not affect the message supplied by the causality of the story; denotation is not necessary to close the text from undesired interpretations. But there appears a paradoxical situation: the denouement of the story contradicts the discourse, for Elizabeth Bennet and Emma

Woodhouse, the wittiest of Austen's heroines, learn to be prudent and not to speak rashly. It is highly ironical that a witty writer should ask her heroine to renounce discourse. Wit, like gossip and malicious talk, is a dangerous weapon that should be used very carefully because, through the irony of effects, it may hurt the speaker in the long run: Elizabeth falls in love with the man she once mocked and cannot bear her family insulting him, just as Miss Bingley and Lady Catherine encourage such a man to love and pop the question a second time to the woman they dislike most and that they verbally abuse before him. Besides, Frank Churchill's word-games and Mr. Elton's charade are instances of the dangers of *double entendre* and reveal the need to follow some kind of maxims of openness and literalness. Mr. Elton's charade is wrongly interpreted not only because the addressee expects something different from what the writer means, but also because it is not explicitly addressed to somebody in particular. The written text, as Plato would say, is dangerous: if Mr. Elton had spoken his love to Emma, as he does later in the carriage, the confusion would not have taken place. And yet, if Austen is fond of verbal explanations, how come there is so much ambiguity in her fiction? Or is her irony a mere rhetorical device easily understood so that whatever seems ambiguous springs from our asking the text questions it does not expect at all? Are we as bad readers of her novels as Emma is of Mr. Elton's charade? According to Darrel Mansell, Jane Austen became aware of the dangers of wit through the years and, therefore, wrote *Mansfield Park* with a sermon-like style. It is her longest novel and the closest to the conduct-book tradition.[12] For Lionel Trilling, D. W. Harding and Marvin Mudrick, the discourse is straight, hardly ironical; the weight of the author's moral intentions has made the novel inferior to *Pride and Prejudice*, which is an artistic achievement because *there* Jane Austen is less dependent on her moral upbringing. These readers may be disappointed because they prefer the aesthetic to the ethic, paradox and irony to literalness.

NARRATIVE VS. LYRICAL REVERIE

From a Romantic, bourgeois perspective, both writing and reading are transcendental experiences. Charlotte Brontë's and George Henry Lewes' views of Jane Austen, however different, reflect Romantic criteria. Both share a preference for the lyrical and are interested in the affective or aesthetic consequences of Austen's fiction. According to Brontë, Jane Austen is not visionary and does not transcend her humdrum existence; she is good

at «delineating the surface» but ignores «the unseen seat of Life» and, therefore, does not have «the divine gift». «Can there be a great artist without poetry?», she wonders. Instead, Lewes admires Austen for keeping «the perils» of the genre at bay: though she does not «transcend her own actual experience» and writes only about «her quiet village», Jane Austen achieves «the exquisite art» that only the cultivated will appreciate and charms the reader with «subtle distinctive traits». Despite their realism, her novels are aesthetic objects that have been relieved of «the tedium of reality».[13] Up till recently, twentieth-century critics have usually considered art autonomous and transcendent, the story isolated from history. But Jane Austen expects her readers to recognize in the causality and development of the action an ideological stance. Lewes considers Austen's choice of genre an aesthetic decision, but Jane Austen's realism, her portrayal of the commonplace, reveals a consciousness of women's compulsory immobility. Janet Todd argues that both reactionary and radical women-writers of the 1790s abhor «escapist, self-indulgent, immoral fantasy». While the Romantic poets «move from direct political expression into a realm of the aesthetic», women's fiction is «resolutely *not* transcendental» (1989: 227-9). Both conservative and progressive writers believe that the individual may influence the mass by giving example; the former try to infuse old values society may have forgotten, the latter try to inject doubt and scepticism concerning such values. However, conservatives consider rational feminism synonymous with romantic self-centredness and self-indulgence. As Mary Hays' Emma Courtney puts it, people «who are accustomed to consider mankind in masses - who have been used to bend implicitly, to custom and prescription - the deviation of a solitary individual from *rules* sanctioned by usage, by prejudice, by expediency, would be regarded as romantic» (80). But radical and feminist discourse is not solipsistic. Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays use autobiographical data in their fiction to raise political consciousness, just as conservatives like Hannah More turn the novel into a vehicle of moral instruction and, through it, of social reform. Jane Austen seems to agree with both conservative and progressive parties: if women are out of political action, at least their stories (autobiographical or not) have some power over the material environment, that is, may cause historical change. Neither literature nor a woman's life should be contemplative.

Though Jane Austen is interested in women's subjectivity and emotional struggles, in the stream of thought in moments of solitude, her narrative tends to move outward into dialogue, into comic or dramatic scenes in balls and tea-parties. Social, spoken discourse replaces personal,

mental discourse, as if Jane Austen were afraid of the lyrical. Pointing to the dangers of lyrical reverie, Austen seems to insist that moments of solitude should be employed in reflection and careful examination of social reality. The thought is to be followed by the spoken word: the Self must always be in touch with the Other. Anne Elliot recovers part of her bloom as soon as she stops crying over spilt milk and becomes the leading voice of the group that attends the unconscious Louisa, who after the accident disappears from the main action and falls for gloomy James Benwick. Austen seems to believe in the need of sociability maintained by Plato and Shaftesbury: personal satisfaction and social harmony depend on the individual's awareness of both the self and social duties. Many of Marianne Dashwood's misinterpretations are caused by her reluctance to talk and listen to her sensible sister Elinor, and her impoliteness to Mrs. Jennings and Colonel Brandon reveals her unawareness of the Other. Marianne has ears only for Willoughby, who, having seduced Eliza, knows how to make a girl like Marianne fall for him and says to her just what she wants to hear. The isolation and retreat epitomized by the Romantic artist leads to derangement or blindness to the social world. For conservatives, women must accept their mission, which is to harmonize a world that has become a market place. For progressives, solipsism implies a different kind of irresponsibility: the individual should not ignore, for his and other people's sake, the oppressive and inegalitarian methods through which, in the name of the common good, the powerful pretend to harmonize society. If both Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft, though for different reasons, stress the need of an education in virtue and reason and of a kind of fiction not separated from public life, then the politics of Jane Austen's novels are not easy to interpret. Whose party is she in?[14]

TAKING SIDES IN *MANSFIELD PARK*

In *Mansfield Park* Jane Austen seems to have realized that the humour of her previous novels cannot be reconciled with the gravity of the subject. David Monaghan argues that after writing *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Austen lost confidence in landed society, and that Fanny is in charge of saving Mansfield Park, of restoring its moral significance (1980: 93-114). Fanny epitomizes the Evangelical ideal of the guardian of the home, of the woman with a moral mission.[15] Therefore, Fanny's rebellious rejection of Henry Crawford may be interpreted as a practical moral lesson, rather than

as a sign of emancipation.[16] As nobody in Mansfield Park will listen to her, Fanny is forced to come out of her protective shell and even dare to defy the patriarch's will. However, this Christian redeemer is far from being the perfect angel. Actually, she does not want to redeem the Crawfords, the black sheep in the story, because such an action would imply her losing Edmund: her egoism interferes with her missionary role. She wants Henry Crawford to stay in London so that he may forget her, though she knows that in town his moral regeneration, which she has started unconsciously, may be spoilt. The Crawfords may be redeemed, but Fanny, conscious of her moral superiority, is always distant from them.[17] It may be argued that Austen sacrifices the Crawfords because it is Sir Thomas that Fanny delivers from the egoism of market economy. Still, if Jane Austen meant to support the Evangelical ideal, she could have done it much better. But did she? After all, Fanny's success as either redeemer or happy wife at the end of the novel is hardly convincing. Though Fanny becomes «the daughter» of the Bertrams, her sister replaces her in Sir Thomas's Eden, «becom[ing], perhaps, the most beloved of the two» (472-3), and the reader is not told when Edmund gets over his passion for Mary Crawford (470). Moreover, although «poor Sir Thomas» is no longer interested in «mercenary connections», he is «chiefly anxious» to restore *his* own «comfort» and «domestic felicity» (461-2, 471): *that* is the main reason why he approves of Julia's and Edmund's unprofitable choice of spouse. And he does not modify his patriarchal philosophy: though he realizes parental severity is a mistake, he still founds (his) domestic comfort on power relations and believes that the individual must accept the fact that he has been «born to struggle and endure» (462-3, 473). In the same way Yates and the other actors are more interested in their own performance than in the success of the play itself, Sir Thomas is not interested in the common good. The small family circle of Mansfield has neither power and moral rights to save all, nor readiness to try to save a few, of the urban sinners. While conservatives have faith in the patriarch's domestic sphere, which is androcentric, and believe women have an important social role to play, that of giving good example by adhering to traditional values, feminists, on the contrary, denounce «the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society».[18] Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays warn against the excesses of sensibility not because they praise a conventional ideal of women's virtue, but rather because they are aware that society is on the watch and will not forgive a woman's mistake. Does Jane Austen ask women to be sensible because she believes, like Rousseau, that women are emotional and weak by nature? That is, does she consider women's education necessary because men must

be protected from women like Maria Bertram and Mary Crawford? Or does she consider reason a defence against male-dominated society? Actually, what undermines the conservative moral of *Mansfield Park* most is that both the respectable characters and the hedonists pursue their own benefit and tempt the heroine one way or other. Jane Austen reveals Sir Thomas's egoism through the methods he uses to persuade Fanny. In a covert way, the novel denounces a patriarchal ideology that, in the name of social or domestic harmony, asks women to sacrifice their desires.

THE LITERARY ARTIFACT

As plot patterns are ideological vehicles, irony need not be located in the discourse: the message of the story can be ambiguous even when no verbal irony undermines it. *Mansfield Park* is an example of it, since the story is and is not like those of previous didactic novels. But many readers do not see any ironic distance. Some even charge Jane Austen with not being conscious of or serious enough about the social problems of her age. Her comedy is interpreted as an escapist alternative to reality: her stories are divorced from history.[19] But escapism is, as this paper tries to prove, an attitude Jane Austen, like many other women writers, does not approve of. Besides, she does not turn her heroines into tragic victims of patriarchy not because she is blind to such situations in real life, but because she believes that tragic stories perpetuate the sentimental myth of the poor virtuous girl in distress;[20] that is, they turn historical oppression into an aesthetic object that raises the emotions, not any repairing actions, of the audience. Jane Austen, unlike Henry Tilney or Lady Russell, does not try to cheat her addressee into believing that her fiction *is* history. Her happy endings are overtly conventional; they point to the literary artifact, therefore warning the reader against confusing art with life, the story with history. Walter Nash writes that, as rhetoric is «distractive», moralists may «object that persuasive rhetoric often operates by coaxing people into looking at things as they are not, rather than as they are» (1989: 99). This is what romance and parody always do: construct an alternative story to the real one. Even texts that, like Austen's own realist novels, are supposed to be transparent representations that convey «the most thorough knowledge of human nature» (*NA*, 38) rewrite subjectively the extratextual world. They become dangerous when there is no aesthetic distance; that is, whenever the reader is not able to distinguish between fiction and reality and is oblivious to the fiction-making

process inherent in any narration of events. All narratives, including historical accounts, are subjective and fictional. Although Catherine Morland takes for granted the cognitive value of gothic fiction and novelizes domestic life in Northanger Abbey, she is conscious of the fictional nature of the discourse of historians. This contradictory attitude shows that any reader, however sensible he or she is, can be seduced by a story sooner or later.[21] History is knowable through subjective interpretation, through *stories*, since human intervention in the causality of the documented events, the «thoughts and designs» of the protagonists of the past, «must be invention» (*NA*, 108). Catherine's comment not only subverts the reliability of historical accounts, written by and for men, but also the gender-genre equation itself: both women novelists and male historians write stories.

IMAGINATION STIMULATED

When Catherine Morland and Emma Woodhouse sit in their rooms and go over the events of the day, most of which are produced by social intercourse, they turn the civilized world of English country-house comedy into a world of villainy, melodrama, and romance: General Tilney is a gothic monster, Harriet a gentleman's daughter, and Jane Fairfax a woman desperately in love with a married man. Both heroines are taught to recognize these stories as mere fiction and to come to terms with the «real», of which Henry Tilney and Mr. Knightley are in charge of reminding them through all the novel. But, however rational they may be, both men make up stories themselves. Mr. Knightley is jealous of Frank because he believes that Emma loves him, and Henry Tilney's parodies of gothic fiction (*NA*, 157-60) and of the riots of the mob (112-3) are also alternatives to the real. In both cases Henry tries to enlighten the heroine, to point out the difference between «such words [that] could relate only to a circulating library» and «horrors in London» (113), but he makes up a burlesque story with particular elements taken from the historical and real (names of streets and facts associated with the Gordon Riots, the furniture in Catherine's room) and, therefore, he trivializes reality.[22] His witty discourse suggests that nothing dreadful can ever happen in the story, but domestic reality may be worrisome enough. Instead of looking for skeletons in the closet, Catherine had better take into account the General's fits of ill-humour, and Emma, instead of fancying love stories, should look into Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill's discourse and manners much better. Gothic novels may give the reader to

understand that evil is exotic and can be associated only with French, Spanish or Italian names, but not all the Tilneys in Austen's world are gentlemanly. For some readers, the real circumstances of Austen's civilized world are even more dramatic and worrisome than the heroines' fictions, but most critics underrate the subversiveness of this irony. After all, the heroine can overcome the materialism and hypocrisy of some members of the upper and middle classes and marry a nice man; that is, the status quo does not disallow the individual's claim for happiness. According to Henry Tilney, there cannot be skeletons in any English closet because there is always «a neighbourhood of voluntary spies» that protects people from evil (198). And yet, it seems that General Tilney's coldness to his late wife and his rudeness to Catherine are never gossiped about and, as far as stories of seduction and adultery are concerned, it is the woman who suffers from «the public punishment of disgrace», not the man (*MP*, 468). It seems that gossip, the voice of society, cannot protect a woman from seduction, but it certainly contributes to her ruin. Male-dominated stories (either written by men or women) are dangerous to women; they persuade, seduce or disgrace them. Sir Thomas tries to persuade Fanny by making up a story in which he is the victim of an ungrateful protégée (*MP*, 318-9), and his son Edmund tells her that marrying Crawford is the best way to achieve her mission in life, to prove she is actually «the perfect model of woman» which he believes she was «born for» (347). Lady Russell is another persuasive story-teller who tries to convince Anne of marrying Mr. Elliot by providing her with «[t]he idea of becoming what her mother had been» (*P*, 160). Lady Russell manages to transport Anne into a reverie, and «[f]or a few moments her imagination and her heart were bewitched», but the enchantress stretches Anne's imagination too much -she suggests «what Anne did not believe»- and her addressee is brought «to composure again». «The charm» of imagination disappears because Lady Russell suggests an image Anne does not like, that of Mr. Elliot proposing marriage. Had the image been much more pleasant, Lady Russell's magic spell might have been efficient and would have led Anne into a wrong decision.

Women's imagination is also stimulated in order to satisfy their anxiety: the imagined story substitutes for the actions necessary to improve the material conditions they live in. Catherine Morland does not like history because it is dull and there are «hardly any women at all» (*NA*, 108), but gothic fiction provides her with the knowledge of the French countryside (106), as if the reader could make the protagonist's experience her own. Though Edmund is kinder to Fanny than anybody else, he seems to support

this metonymic substitution: «*You* in the meanwhile will be taking a trip into China, I suppose» (*MP*, 156). He believes that his cousin may «sit comfortably», though the room is cold, and enjoy the travelling. But, though Fanny is easily contented because she values things and actions -however trifling or unfair- for the «interesting remembrance» she has linked to them (152), imagination cannot always make up for the «unwelcome news» of real circumstances: «there was no reading, no China, no composure for Fanny» (156). Her situation reveals the impossibility of actual transcendence through reification; it proves S. Lesser's argument that «[w]hen anxiety or instinctual pressure becomes too urgent, however, no form of fiction is likely to engage or hold one's interest» (1957: 47). Though Fanny turns Edmund's two-line note into a «perfectly gratifying» treasure (265), in a similar way to Harriet's «treasuring up» relics (*E*, 337-40), she still has emotional needs; that is, the written text cannot substitute for the object of her desire. Jane Austen neither approves of the stimulation of women's imagination nor seems to consider the appropriation of experience through reading actually possible. She seems to agree with John Locke's theory of knowledge as developed in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), whose pedagogic consequences were brought out in France by Claude Adrien Helvétius and contributed to the French Revolution. According to Locke, a man that has never eaten an oyster cannot have any idea of its taste, and a man living in a black and white room since his childhood has no idea of colour (Book II, Chapter I, Section 6); that is, the individual's ideas are limited by his experience or contact with the material. Challenging Locke, Edmund Burke states that a poet blind from his birth may describe physical objects and move his audience better than many that have had visual experiences, and a learned blind man may teach others about the theory of colour.[23] Burke's philosophy endorses bourgeois ideology: any individual, through genius or work, may rise to the highest levels of society, regardless of the material conditions of his existence. Language is powerful because it produces a kind of experience superior to any that life may provide and, even when the writer does not receive any material benefit (for instance, a cure to blindness), he is gratified by the aesthetic experience of writing. Jane Austen seems to accept the notion that language provides women with some power of transcendence: though imprisoned in their homes, they may write stories and participate in public life. However, she also warns against fantasies of power: Elizabeth Bennet's rhetorical skill may give her control over a rich, powerful man like Darcy, but only the latter has any actual influence on public affairs.

The aestheticians of idealism are, whether consciously or not, in league with the conservative insistence on conformity to the world of penance man has fallen to. As reality cannot be what the artist sees in his vision, the imagined experience and the pleasure it gives is what really counts. When in Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1796) young Henry asks his rich and powerful uncle why this world cannot be as egalitarian as Heaven, the ambitious dean answers that «it is utterly impossible: God has ordained it otherwise». Through Henry's naïve remarks, Inchbald points to the difference between human laws and divine ones: «How! has God ordained a distinction to be made, and will not make any himself?» (325) The status quo, comments Basil Willey, is «the last word of divine wisdom and goodness» and, therefore, to demand changes «is in fact impious». Willey defines conservative, liberal and revolutionary ideologies depending on their attitude concerning «the degree of human participation which is supposed to be needed to produce the best world». For the revolutionary, «the maximum of human action» is necessary (1986: 55, 207). The preference for the lyrical and visionary implies an interest in stasis and universality, since the essence of both story and history, of narratives in general, is their cause-effect temporal progress. William Hazlitt writes that

> [i]n the *ideal* there is no fixed stint or limit but the limit of possibility: it is the infinite with respect to human capacities and wishes. Love is for this reason an *ideal* passion. We give to it our all of hope, of fear, of present enjoyment, and stake our last chance of happiness wilfully and desperately upon it.[24]

According to Mary Poovey, «[o]ne of the most persistent dilemmas of the woman writer during this period proved to be the problem of controlling her own attraction to ideal compensations». Mary Wollstonecraft is «wary of the products of the creative imagination because [...] they feed wishful fantasies instead of initiating political action», but her narrator «repeatedly lapses back into sentimental jargon and romantic idealism» (38, 104-6). Mary Poovey's interpretation of Wollstonecraft's work is convincing, but her reading of Austen's reaction to idealism differs from that given here. Poovey believes that Jane Austen assimilates romantic love to conservative ideology, that she wants to «engage our imaginations by offering us flattering images», and that, by «freezing the narratives precisely at the height of emotional intensity», she endorses happiness in a domestic sphere «as compensatory substitute for other kinds of unavailable gratification»; that is, her art provides «a symbolic experience of fulfillment»

(239-40, 244). Rounding off the story, interrupting it just when the wedding bells ring, seems to suggest that Austen converts such a scene into a lyrical or visionary still moment, which actually contradicts the dramatic quality of all the previous scenes in the novel. The narrator's summary of events displaces the dialogical nature of the story, the confrontation between opposing speakers and ideological attitudes, giving to understand that there is eventually, at least as far as the lovers are concerned, peace and harmony. The reader does not see any scenes of the married couple's future life, which might undermine the effect; he is left smiling at the happy couple. And yet, Jane Austen's closure of the texts always seems contrived.[25] The narrator points out the artificiality of the merry, comic denouement by alluding to the «tell-tale compression of the pages» and the «perfect felicity» of the couple (*NA*, 250), by mentioning her preference for a happy ending (*MP*, 461), by insisting that several important facts «need not be particularly told» (*SS*, 361), and by asking the reader to fill in the missing data «at liberty» (*MP*, 470). If the dramatic development of the action is supposed to lead the reader into believing that «conjugal felicity» (*PP*, 236) is possible despite the many examples -such as the Bennets - that suggest the contrary, why are there so many loose ends in the final chapters? Moreover, if stories may convince readers of the benefits of moral rectitude only when they are governed by laws of causality such as the divine laws of providence that order *Clarissa*, why does the reader feel that chance has taken over? Efficient causes are replaced by final, teleological causes that undermine the representational quality of the story: the reader wonders why the author has chosen a certain denouement, since the heroine's happiness is not the effect of her own behaviour. Besides, if Fanny epitomizes the Angel-of-the-House myth, why does her future happiness as Edmund's wife seem less desirable than Elizabeth Bennet's or Emma's? Readers that consider Austen conservative may reply that Fanny's story is more realistic or that it promotes self-denial, but then it would seem that Austen does not illustrate the bourgeois dream of social rise that they recognize in her novels. Although in some literary texts «a narrative element becomes desirable whenever a character is observed to desire it» (Jameson 1981: 156), both Edmund's love and life in Mansfield Park, however «perfect» in the heroine's eyes (473), do not seem to encourage the reader's wishful fantasies. If the power of art depends on *imitation*, Edmund Burke's term for the illusion of transparent representation, and *sympathy*, the attraction towards the referent of the representation, then *Mansfield Park* undermines such power more than any other novel by Austen (see Burke, pp. 49-50).

CONCLUSIONS

By closing her texts in a hurry, Jane Austen leaves them more open to the reader's questions. Through self-conscious narration and a subversive and parodic use of the patterns and stock characters of the didactic novel, such as questioning the either/or paradigms with which men tend to judge women (the contrast between the perfect wife and the coquette which Hannah More uses in *Coelebs in Search of a Wife)*, Austen reminds the reader that he or she is reading just another cluster of signs and, therefore, she undermines any mimetic illusion or poetic faith that might encourage reification and the transference of experience. Though for different reasons, she agrees to the affected reader's statement that «it is only a novel!» (*NA*, 38), a cultural construct. This does not mean that Jane Austen renounces any guidance of the reader's response. As Ross Chambers puts it, «renunciation of one form of narrative seduction may merely mask another form of reader recruitment» (217). But Austen's own ideological programme is progressive; it denounces the means by which the ruling order secures its hegemony. Both women's fiction and men's historical records, however transparent and objective, are stories that, through an interpretation of the world, may disseminate the teller's ideas. Though Austen prefers the novel to lyrical poetry, she also warns against the genre by revealing how stories that flatter (Willoughby's, Wickham's), charm (Lady Russell's), teach (Henry Tilney's) or reproach (Sir Thomas's) may seduce and persuade the listener into dangerous lines of action or into mere stasis. Sentimental fiction aestheticizes real seduction into a sublime, attractive image, and didactic fiction upholds the patriarch's right to persuade. The reader should read novels, but also be aware that the narrative object is a powerful political weapon that may cast a dangerous magic spell on whoever accepts its message at face value.

NOTES

1. Others may believe, like J. M. S. Tompkins, that Austen is not that alarmed by the effects of romance reading, since Catherine Morland's «perversion» is just «a phase of adolescence that will not incapacitate her for mature life» (1932: 218), which is, after all, the same point: women must come to terms with everyday life. Concerning the reaction against novel reading, see Taylor.
2. Still, however much we believe that Austen upholds the bourgeois view of marriage, can we imagine Mrs. Knightley imitating her sister Isabella?
3. Northanger Abbey, pp. 48-9, 106. This and all subsequent references (cited in text by page number) are to Chapman's edition. Abbreviations, used on occasions, are as follows: NA (Northanger Abbey), SS (Sense and *Sensibility*), PP (Pride and Prejudice), MP (Mansfield Park), E (Emma), P (Persuasion).
4. According to Lee Erickson, as books were expensive and most readers considered novels «disposable pleasures to be read once and forgotten» (1990: 578), all kinds of books, but novels in particular, were hardly ever purchased: women borrowed them from circulating libraries. However, as we will see later, not only the novels that bridge the gap with religious guide-books but also those that are meant to be read once and forgotten may work as political vehicles.
5. According to John Odmark, Austen mocks the didactic close of romances, in which the moral themes are not well integrated into the story (1981: 119-21).
6. pp. 7, 45. Another parody in the Quixote tradition is E. S. Barrett's The Heroine. See Kelly.
7. Why should Jane Austen, of the many women-writers of the two opposing discourses of the 1790s, be the chosen one? After all, if «the cultural monuments and masterworks that have survived tend necessarily to perpetuate only a single voice in this class dialogue, the voice of a hegemonic class» (Jameson 1981: 85), it is not surprising that the dominant class should prefer Austen's fiction to, say, Mary Hays', but why not Hannah More's or Jane West's, whose ethical concerns are more obvious than Austen's? The reason may be, not simply that Jane Austen is more entertaining, but rather that she seems to appropriate and rewrite feminist discouse. If love and self-assertion are the claims of feminist voices, and marriage as duty is the subject of conservative discourse, Austen seems to turn marriage into the epitome of women's felicity. We will come back to this point later.
8. See Brown (1990) and Steeves (1973).
9. According to Nancy Armstrong, conduct books and polite novels shifted the struggle for political power from the level of physical force to the level of language and education: reading shaped the individual. Initially novels created «a cultural fantasy» that promised new possibilities for the individual,

his or her liberation from the old status distinctions, but by the end of the eighteenth century they «came to be used as techniques of social control» (1987: 98; concerning Austen: 156-60).

10. Eagleton 1982: 29. Jameson (155) argues that the presence of a narrator restored «face-to-face storytelling». In McKeon's terms, the mind of the character was replaced by the mind of the author (418-9).
11. Ray 1990: 4. Ray studies the evolution from personal narration to impersonal, detached narrative bearing in mind the relationship between the Self and collective authority.
12. Mansell 1973: 109-24. For a similar view, see Litz 1965: 112-31. And also Fowler.
13. Both Lewes and Brontë are cited from Southam 1968: 126-8, 130, 140-1.
14. Jay Clayton (1987: 72-9) writes that Austen frustrates all lyric expectations: Fanny Price's visits to the East room or her looking at the sky turn soon from the lyrical to the dramatic; that is, they never lead to visionary still moments but to turning points in the action. Though he sees similarities berween Austen's and Mikhail Bakhtin's preference for narrative motion and casuality, Clayton considers her concern with ethical values a conservative trait.
15. Concerning the development of such an ideal, see, for example, Spencer, pp. 14-8; and Todd, pp. 215-7.
16. Several critics have insisted on Fanny's rebellious behaviour. See, e. g., Burroway (1967) and Smith (1983: 111-28).
17. Fanny is often charged with priggishness or egoism. See Fleishman (1970: 78-80) and Brown (1979: 96-100).
18. Mary Wollstonecraft in her Preface to The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria (1798); quoted from G. Kelly's edition, p. 73. Concerning Hannah More's advocacy of women's claim to moral authority, see Anderson & Zinsser (1988: II, 125-8).
19. Arnold Kettle warns readers of Emma against this attitude. Though he finds Austen's world narrow and her attitude rather complacent, he eventually praises her for her materialism, for her rejection of «philosophical sanctions». At least, she presents us with a concrete society, not Life or «a fundamental truth». The fact that Kettle should recognize Austen's emphasis on the historical and changeable, her rejection of stasis and universality, is very illuminating.
20. See Johnson (1989). Susan Morgan considers Austen's rejection of traditional and sexually defined gender roles -male dominance, female submission- her greatest achievement.
21. Another example is Elinor's response to Willoughby's sentimental account of his own suffering (SS, 333-5).

22. Henry performs what Fredric Jameson defines as «a symbolic action»: through it he encourages «the illusion that the situation itself did not exist before it, that there is nothing but a text» (81-2). Several critics have pointed to Henry's pedantic nature and to his not being a reliable teller. For a recent example, see Loveridge.
23. Burke, *Enquiry,* Part V, Section V (especially pp. 168-9).
24. In his essay On the picturesque and the Ideal: A Fragment; quoted from Works, vol. 8, p. 321.
25. For an interesting discussion of the method, see Brown, Lloyd (1973: 220-9).

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