

A Paradox at the Heart of Jane Austen's Defense of the Novel

Trevor Cribben Merrill

California Institute of Technology

1

Perhaps the novel's current status as an imperiled form explains why I find Jane Austen's vision of it so compelling and relevant, almost as if she intended her famous "defense of the novel" in chapter five of *Northanger Abbey* expressly for us. At a time when we too often flounder in our attempts to defend the humanities, her "defense" grants the lowly novel an intellectual and artistic stature that was not yet universally recognized as its due in the early nineteenth century and that I fear it may have lost today. Yet for all its power, the "defense of the novel" is no straightforward manifesto¹, but rather a complex and witty interpolation, which must be read within the wider context of the book in which it is embedded.

For those who have not recently read Austen's novel, a brief plot summary is in order: *Northanger Abbey* tells the story of Catherine Morland, a pretty girl of a marriageable age thrust into the midst of all the seductions of that most dangerous of spa towns, Bath. There she encounters two brother and sister pairs: designing Isabella Thorpe, with whom she indulges her passion for Gothic fiction, and Isabella's uncouth brother John; and the Tilneys, guileless Eleanor and intelligent and eligible Henry, scion of Northanger Abbey, where the novel's action reaches its climax. Catherine, "in training for a heroine," as Austen puts it, devours Gothic novel after Gothic novel, and hungers so much for her staid middle-class English existence to resemble a book by Ann Radcliffe that when a few suggestive clues—a mysterious chest, a wing of Northanger Abbey declared off limits, and the unexplained demise of Henry Tilney's mother—come to her attention, she fabricates from them a lurid scenario of foul play. The unsettling General Tilney, though no murderer, is not exactly an angel either: for purely mercenary reasons he has determined that Catherine—whom he mistakenly thinks is immensely rich—must marry his son, only to learn (and yet again he is misinformed) that her family is utterly destitute, whereupon he turns her out of the Abbey with disgraceful rudeness. All seems lost, but in the novel's last pages, a rich husband is found for Eleanor and the true circumstances of Catherine's modestly comfortable financial situation come to light, freeing Henry to marry her. The story ends with wedding bells and smiles all around.

¹ "It is hardly the straightforward defense it seems to be" (*Bits of Ivory*, Lloyd W. Brown, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1973, p. 211).

2

The novel is rife with literary allusions and discussions about literature, and the Chapter 5 defense is merely the most direct and explicit statement about fiction in a book where characters are often defined by what they like to read. In the defense, Austen seems to be doing two things at once. On the one hand she praises the novel for its widespread appeal and capacity for entertainment: "...our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world..." she writes. On the other, she underlines the genre's combination of intelligence, humor, and wisdom: the novel combines "the greatest powers of the mind" with "the most thorough knowledge of human nature."

Critics have noted this apparent dichotomy between entertainment and redeeming intellectual content. In his study of Austen, *Bits of Ivory*, Lloyd Brown writes: "This apology is actually an ironic combination of two different views of the novel which are pitted against each other [...] The first half is very similar to arguments advanced by Charles Jenner in his novel, *The Placid Man* (1770)." Jenner, Brown writes, sees novels as "'pleasing and innocent amusements'". Austen likewise emphasizes the "unaffected pleasure" offered by the novel. "But from here," writes Brown, "Jane Austen's thesis diverges from that of her eighteenth-century forerunner [...] in the second half of her apology, the view shifts unobtrusively to a defense of literary and moral standards."

Brown concludes that Austen joins these two conceptions of the novel's value and purpose the better to distinguish them: "[...]Austen's narrative viewpoint emphasizes the distinction between literature as escape and literature as the reflection of life [...] the seductive powers of the novel make it more imperative that the genre adhere [to high moral standards]."

I am ready to accept this analysis, at least up to a certain point. Austen does seem to be distinguishing between the kind of purely diverting fiction that Catherine Morland and her friend Isabella Thorpe delight in reading in *Northanger Abbey*—Gothic novels with titles like *Necromancer of the Dark Forest* and *Horrid Mysteries*—and another kind of fiction with altogether higher intellectual aims, represented in the "defense" by Fanny Burney's *Cecilia* and *Camilla*, and by Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*, three novels by authors (that they are both women is, I think, of secondary importance) whom Jane Austen held in high esteem. But there is a moralizing tenor to Brown's analysis that strikes me as foreign to Jane Austen's conception of literature. Where Austen speaks of "unaffected pleasure," Brown speaks of "seductive powers"; where Austen speaks of the "greatest powers of the mind," Brown speaks of "moral and literary standards."

For Brown, in other words, not only are the two kinds of literature distinct, but one is also morally superior to the other—escapist entertainment exerts a dubious influence on the reader without providing any moral and poetic nourishment as compensation, while serious high literature redeems the genre’s frivolous trappings by using them as a vehicle for more serious content.

As we shall see, in chapter ten of the second volume of *Northanger Abbey*, which may be looked upon as an extension of or appendix to the “defense,” Austen openly critiques Ann Radcliffe, author of the prototypical Gothic novel, for her imperfect grasp of human nature, apparently confirming Brown’s view of high literature as a redeeming corrective to genre fiction’s trashy tendencies. Yet what I ultimately find noteworthy about Austen’s defense is not its enforcement of the division between low “genre” fiction and high “literary” fiction, but rather the extent to which she makes the pleasure of reading novels such an integral part of her apology for them.

3

The most obvious manifestation of this indulgence for the pleasure of reading comes at the very beginning of the defense, where Austen reproaches her fellow novelists for rarely, if ever, allowing their heroines to pick up a book with anything but a sigh of boredom:

I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding—joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust.

As an example of what Austen is talking about, here is a passage about reading from Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*:

the Countess, attended by Mademoiselle Bearn, retired to an apartment on the modern side of the chateau [...] Here, while she reclined on a sofa, and, casting her languid eyes over the ocean, which appeared beyond the wood-tops, indulged in the luxuries of *ennui*, her companion read aloud a sentimental novel (Chapter 11).

This languid boredom bears little resemblance to the excitement with which Catherine and Isabella read and discuss novels together in *Northanger Abbey*. Nor does it have much in common with what the unquestionably intelligent Henry Tilney describes as the hair-raising thrill of reading *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. “The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid,” says Henry. “I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe’s works, and most of them with great pleasure. The *Mysteries of Udolpho*, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again;—I remember finishing it in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time” (p. 1013).

It is more than a little surprising to hear Henry Tilney speaking in this way of the very kind of literature that leads Catherine Morland astray. It is Tilney, after all, who will rebuke her in volume two for her extravagant suspicions of homicide. But in the conversation between Tilney and Catherine in chapter fourteen on the subject of novels, Austen is suggesting not that Gothic fiction's "seductive powers" are dangerous in themselves, but that to make such fiction one's *only* reading material is unwise: "You are fond of that kind of reading?" asks Tilney. "To say the truth, I do not much like any other" is Catherine's reply. "Indeed!" says Tilney, in what one imagines is an ironic exclamation of surprise.

Already, we begin to discern the nuance and complexity of Austen's opinion of the Gothic novel. On the one hand, she seems to reproach it for failing to give sufficient due to the pleasures of reading, while on the other she acknowledges its role as a valid and even valuable source of entertainment. And yet if we read between the lines of the conversation between Catherine and Henry, we see that she amends this purely positive judgment by frowning upon a steady diet of Gothic fiction, to the exclusion of more serious reading matter, like history.

Austen's critique of Radcliffe and company, then, is no unilateral attempt at expulsion. She includes Radcliffe, Burney, Edgewood, and, by implication, herself under the same umbrella; all belong to the "injured body" of novelists. In other words, Austen refuses to make Gothic "genre" fiction, and the "unaffected pleasure" it gives, into the scapegoat of either her novel or her poetics of fiction. She will not, to use a colloquial phrase, throw Radcliffe under the bus.

4

In the latter and most famous half of the defense, Austen opposes to the "unaffected pleasure" of reading a hypocritically "affected" attitude of indifference to the novel. She creates a little fictional scene to drive home this point, first with an ironic chorus of demurrals, in which a variety of voices protest their disinterest in novels, and then by asking us to imagine a young woman caught *in flagrante delicto*, novel in hand:

there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labor of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them. "I am no novel reader—I seldom look into novels—Do not imagine that I often read novels—It is really very well for a novel." Such is the common cant. "And what are you reading, Miss---?" "Oh! it is only a novel," replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame.

The pretense of indifference stems from the spurt of shame occasioned by being caught in the act of reading. Perhaps it is the very intensity of the "unaffected pleasure" of fiction that makes a cover-up necessary when prying eyes intrude on the reader's seclusion. And if the young lady in question were not only a novel reader but also a novel writer, as was Jane Austen, she might

well conceal the evidence of her vocation from outsiders, much as Austen was said to have concealed the sheets of paper on which she wrote her manuscripts from surprise visitors, of whose presence she was warned by a squeaky door whose hinges she refused to have oiled. Transferred into fiction, the affected indifference of the reader becomes an implicit self-criticism of the very “performance” in which one is engaging—either by disparaging the novel indirectly, via one’s heroine, who yawns whenever a novel is read aloud, or by distancing oneself from the lowest, most embarrassing forms of fictional diversion, like Radcliffe’s novels, by subjecting them to satirical ridicule.

The very “defensiveness” of Austen’s defense of the novel may hint at her inescapable embarrassment about her passion for reading and writing fiction in an age where neither pursuit was looked upon with unambiguous favor, yet the boldness with which she sings the genre’s praises suggests a transcendence of shame:

“Oh! it is only a novel,” replies the young lady; [...] It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda,” or, in short, only some work 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 humor are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.

5

In the novel’s second volume, Catherine, under the influence of Gothic fiction, allows her imagination to run wild during her visit to Northanger Abbey. If we compare the defense of the novel in Chapter 5 to this, the intellectual and emotional climax of the story, a seeming paradox emerges. If it is bewildering that novelists who obviously think highly enough of the novel to want to write one themselves should implicitly censure the genre by refusing to allow their heroines to partake of it, it is, at least at first glance, equally odd that Jane Austen, who expresses utmost solidarity with her novel-reading characters (“Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body”) should do so in the very book where novels play an explicit part in fueling the heroine’s illusions. It seems inevitable that here, the distinction between high and low fiction will finally prevail, and that Austen will separate the wholesome wheat—what we would today call literary fiction—from the frivolously seductive chaff.

And this is precisely what happens, at least at first. In Chapter 9, Catherine reveals to Henry the extent of her dark suspicions about his late mother’s death. He reprimands her sternly, and, disabused, and then mortified, she runs to her room weeping “tears of shame”. Chapter 10 begins with the following words: “The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened. [...] Her folly” now seemed “even criminal.” And a paragraph later:

She saw that the infatuation had been created, the mischief settled long before her quitting Bath, and it seemed as if the whole might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had there indulged.

In the paragraph that immediately follows this passage, we find language recalling the earlier defense of novels in Chapter 5 of Volume 1: “Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe’s works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for.” On the one hand, this sentence constitutes a characteristically understated rebuke to Gothic fiction’s lack of realism, suggesting that one of the principal virtues of the novel in Austen’s conception—the “most thorough knowledge of human nature”—should be sought elsewhere. Equally striking, however, is its acknowledgement of the pleasures to be had from reading Gothic novels, its generous (I don’t think she is being merely patronizing) description of Radcliffe’s works, and even the works of her imitators, as “charming.” At the very moment we might expect to find Austen’s satirical bite at its most remorseless, she concedes to Gothic fiction a measure of charm that saves it from irremediable damnation. Far from suggesting some lingering attachment to the allurements of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Austen’s gentleness implies the full extent of her (and Catherine’s) liberation, which precludes ambivalent denunciation.

6

A deep irony awaits the reader in the conclusion of *Northanger Abbey*: while Catherine may have been wrong to suspect the General of murdering his wife, her intuition that something is amiss in his home, and that the General’s conduct is far from praiseworthy, proves to have been on target. “The true climax of *Northanger Abbey* comes not when Catherine realizes she has been mistaken about General Tilney,” writes Terry Castle, “but at the moment at which (to put it as paradoxically as Austen does), she realizes that she has not” (Terry Castle, p. xvi). And Rachel Brownstein underscores the delicate balance that Austen achieves between a parody of Gothic fiction and the ultimate vindication of her heroine’s suspicions: “We are persuaded to think her absurd for having horrific ‘visions of romance’ about the General—but then, on the other hand, they prove to be substantially correct. No wife-murderer, he is evil in a commonplace way—a greedy, scheming, rude social climber” (Brownstein, p. 40). Having read nothing in her life but Gothic fiction, Catherine cannot help being mediated by it. In suspecting General Tilney of murder she is merely translating into Radcliffian terms the unnerving, even chilling, effect he has on her—an effect which, in itself, is quite real and does her credit (especially insofar as the rest of the world seems to have only good things to say about the General). Thus, while Catherine’s humbling at the hands of Henry Tilney destroys in her what might be called the Manichean illusion, it does not remove all suspicion of evil, but rather recalibrates her understanding of a world where evil is very real, if much more mundane than she at first imagined.

For Austen, the fault does not really lie with the books one reads, but with human nature itself. In Chapter 6, Isabella and Catherine are sharing with each other their delight in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and are consulting a list which Isabella has drawn up of the books they will tackle next: “Castle of Wolfenbach, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries.” Upon hearing this list, Catherine exclaims, with great excitement: “but are they all horrid, are you sure they are all horrid?” In her girlish innocence she *wants* to be frightened and appalled by these books—in other words to experience the very emotions least likely to be produced in her by the tame lives of the middle-class English people around her. This already suggests that while the books themselves may aggravate the illness, they are not in themselves intrinsically pernicious. The responsibility for Catherine’s self-deception lies as much with Catherine herself, with Isabella Thorpe, and with the families of both, as it does with Ann Radcliffe, who, one imagines, was herself quite capable of distinguishing between reality and fiction, and knew perfectly well that she was writing diverting novels, and not moral treatises or factual histories.

Ultimately, Austen seems to postulate an originary tendency to become carried away by fiction of any sort, a powerful human need for identification with strong models. And that she does so becomes even clearer when we consider that in her unfinished novel *Sanditon*, one of the main characters, Sir Edward Denham, who is a sort of male version of Catherine Morland (and, let it be said in passing, a fine comic creation), manages to twist a different kind of novel into a source of delusion. Sir Edward had, Austen writes, “read more sentimental novels than agreed with him. His fancy had been early caught by all the impassioned, and most exceptional part of Richardson’s; and such authors as have since appeared to tread in Richardson’s steps, so far as man’s determined pursuit of woman in defiance of every feeling and convenience is concerned, had since occupied the greater part of his literary hours, and formed his character. [...] Sir Edward’s great object in life was to be seductive. [...] He felt that he was formed to be a dangerous man—quite in the line of the Lovelaces” (p. 191). This is not so much a critique of Richardson, or for that matter of Choderlos de Laclos, as it is a send-up of Sir Edward’s very own “perversity of judgment” (191). No matter the impetus or lack thereof for their fanciful flights, certain romantic souls, like Sir Edward Denham, are unstoppable. They can make a substitute reality even out of the very fiction that denounces their temptation to do so—we need only think of all the romantic interpretations of *Don Quixote* through the ages, from Unamuno to Dale Wasserman.

By way of conclusion, let me offer some brief suggestions about what we can take away from Austen's defense, and from *Northanger Abbey* more generally, today. I would like to read three stanzas from Auden's *Letter to Lord Byron*—stanzas well known to lovers of Jane Austen:

Then she's a novelist. I don't know whether
 You will agree, but novel writing is
 A higher art than poetry altogether
 In my opinion, and success implies
 Both finer character and faculties
 Perhaps that's why real novels are as rare
 As winter thunder or a polar bear.

I must remember, though, that you were dead
 Before the four great Russians lived, who brought
 The art of novel writing to a head;
 The help of Boots had not been sought.
 But now the art for which Jane Austen fought,
 Under the right persuasion bravely warms
 And is the most prodigious of the forms.

You could not shock her more than she shocks me;
 Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.
 It makes me most uncomfortable to see
 An English spinster of the middle-class
 Describe the amorous effects of 'brass',
 Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
 The economic basis of society.

--Auden, *Letter to Lord Byron*

I conclude with this excerpt not only because it paints a delightful portrait of Austen, but also because of the point it makes about the novel and its changing stature through the ages. It is not impossible that when Auden says that Jane Austen “fought” for the art of the novel, he is thinking of the very passages we have examined today. For Auden, whose poem was published in 1937, Austen's fight has been won. The four great Russians—we can assume he means Gogol and perhaps Turgenev, and then Tolstoy and Dostoevsky—elevated the novel to a pinnacle of greatness, so that Auden could deem it “the most prodigious of the forms” and assert that “novel writing is a higher art than poetry”—affirmations that would no doubt have been as shocking to eighteenth and early nineteenth-century ears as are Jane Austen's revelations about the economic basis of society to Auden's.

A danger lurks in this elevation of the novel, however. For Auden, “real novels are as rare/As winter thunder or a polar bear.” No doubt, the “powers of the mind” and “thorough knowledge of human nature,” not to mention the wit and writing ability, needed to create fiction at Fanny Burney’s level, never mind Austen’s, are exceedingly uncommon, and that is why what Auden calls “real” novels come along so rarely. Yet I cannot help detecting in Auden’s use of the word “real” a tiny vestige of the “affected indifference” of which Austen accuses young ladies surprised in the act of reading a novel. It is as if, having made the novel into a great, high thing, he has cornered himself into disparaging all novels but the “real” ones.

This Austen never does. Even when she is making fun of Catherine or Sir Edward for taking literature too seriously, she continues to acknowledge the pleasure to be had from the very escapist literature she satirizes. I would suggest, then, that we take away from Austen’s defence some of her tolerance for novels we wouldn’t classify as “high literature.” “For the French, the opposite of real art is entertainment,” writes Milan Kundera in *The Art of the Novel*. “The opposite of serious art is light, minor art. But for my part, I never minded Agatha Christie’s detective novels.” To Kundera’s words I would add, for the French, but not only for the French. In 2003 the National Book Award foundation gave its annual award for “distinguished contribution” to Stephen King. “Perhaps next year,” wrote Harold Bloom with devastating sarcasm in *The Boston Globe*, “the committee should give its award for distinguished contribution to Danielle Steel, and surely the Nobel Prize for literature should go to J.K. Rowling.” His article singles out a handful of worthy American authors: “Today there are four living American novelists I know of who are still at work and who deserve our praise.” And he goes on to name Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, Cormac McCarthy, and Don DeLillo. Jane Austen would surely counsel against making J.K. Rowling or Stephen King into one’s sole source of knowledge about the world, but perhaps neither would she have any objection to sampling the “unaffected pleasures” those two authors supply. And it is by no means certain that of the four novelists mentioned by Bloom, more than one or two of them would be a completely reliable guide to contemporary reality. Let us do as Jane Austen suggests, then, and be wary of indulging our human impulses, but also of stifling them too much.