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IMAGINATION IN *NORTHANGER ABBEY*

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I

Northanger Abbey is not only a bold parody of the Gothic-sentimental fiction popular at the time of its composition but also, as many critics agree, a complex parody. In fact, A. Walton Litz claims it would be a mistake to read the novel as a "straightforward drama in which...the disordered Imagination is put to flight by Reason"; paraphrasing Lionel Trilling, he asserts that Catherine's suspicion of violence and uncertainty lurking beneath the surface of English society is "nearer the truth than the complacent conviction, shared by the readers of Mrs. Radcliffe, that life in the Home Counties is always sane and orderly."¹ Andrew Wright concludes that though we must dismiss the Gothic world as inadequate and false, "we cannot altogether apprehend the real world by good sense alone. Good sense, ironically, is limited too."² More recently, Alistair Duckworth argues that although *Northanger Abbey* undercuts Catherine's "imaginative fantasy," the novel also dramatizes "the fallibility of the rational outlook."³ Implicit in each of these positions is the assumption that the Gothic (or sentimental) and real worlds are not altogether different, and that together Imagination and Reason will discover this similarity. Such an assumption, however, should not be made because it misrepresents the Lockean epistemology that underlies the literary burlesque in *Northanger Abbey* and, equally significant, because it misinterprets Jane Austen's moral intention, shared by writers like Samuel Johnson, to portray realistically the social dangers of everyday life.

To claim, as Wright does, that there is "more on earth than mere common sense," or as Duckworth claims, that Catherine's "imaginative responses" lead to an "undefined recognition" of the truth, or to suggest, as Litz and Trilling do, that Catherine's imagination comes closer to the truth than her reason does, not only places the primary burden of knowing on the mental activity of reason or imagination, but also attributes to the imagination more truth-finding functions than Jane Austen and most other writers of her age would have believed possible.⁴ It is more accurate to say that in the properly

balanced mind, *all* mental activity—whether imaginative, rational, judgmental, or volitional—is secondary to the direct experience of sensory reality, and is, apart from experience, seriously suspect.⁵ Applied to *Northanger Abbey*, this distinction leads to important conclusions about the parodic and realistic dimensions of the novel. First, Jane Austen's burlesque goes far beyond parody of mere literary form—whether Gothic or sentimental—to expose what Samuel Johnson calls in *Rasselas* the “dangerous prevalence of imagination.”⁶ Second, by teaching heroine and reader alike to see things not as they are imagined but as they actually are, the comic-realistic episodes of *Northanger Abbey* serve a genuine moral purpose—to provide “the young, the ignorant, and the idle,” as Dr. Johnson characterized the readers of popular fiction, with “lectures of conduct, and introductions into life.”⁷

II

To appreciate fully Jane Austen's burlesque of the imagination, we must recall the two philosophical premises on which John Locke's highly influential epistemology is built—that the mind at birth is a *tabula rasa*, which possesses no innate ideas, and that all our ideas (and all our knowledge) originate in inescapable human experience, either through sense-perception or reflection. “All those sublime thoughts which tower above the clouds, and reach as high as heaven itself, take their rise and footing here,” Locke formulates in one of the most famous sentences in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; “in all the great extent wherein the mind wanders, in those remote speculations it may seem to be elevated with, it stirs not one jot beyond those ideas which *sense* or *reflection* have offered for its contemplation.”⁸ Since the mind, in all its rational thinking, can contemplate “no other immediate object but its own ideas” offered through sense-perception and reflection, all knowledge is “nothing but the perception of the connexion of and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas.”⁹

Jane Austen may or may not have read Locke's *Essay*, but she was familiar with Samuel Johnson's essays and with Boswell's *Life of Johnson*.¹⁰ Heavily influenced by Locke's theory of cognition, Johnson's thought reflects the philosophical importance Locke attached to the experiential basis of ideas and of knowledge. Johnson once told Boswell: “Human experience, which is constantly contradicting the-

ory, is the great test of truth."¹¹ He is also reported to have told George Staunton, who was about to travel to America for scientific purposes: "Trust as little as you can to report; examine all you can by your own senses."¹² Again and again, whether speaking casually or writing formally, he asserts that we do not know anything except what we have learned from direct or vicarious experience.¹³

In acquiring knowledge, that is, in the process by which ideas and images are presented to the mind, and are arranged, classified, abstracted, and compared, the faculty of imagination (synonymous in the eighteenth century with "fancy") plays a necessary, if somewhat humble, function. Primarily a visualizing power, "imagination" is defined in Johnson's *Dictionary* as "Fancy; the power of forming ideal pictures; the power of representing things absent to one's self or others."¹⁴ Imagination, however, frequently leads us into error, for although it can accurately represent images or ideas to the mind, it can also rearrange their parts in ways that do not correspond with the experienced nature of things—thus the distinction in Locke's terminology between "real" and "fantastical" ideas. "By *real ideas*," Locke explains, "I mean such as have a foundation in nature; such as have a conformity with the real being and existence of things, or with their archetypes. *Fantastical* or *chimerical*, I call such as have no foundation in nature, nor have any conformity with the reality of being to which they are tacitly referred, as to their archetypes."¹⁵

Dr. Johnson's distrust of the imagination derives, therefore, from the traditional belief that by so transforming real images or ideas this mental faculty entices man to escape reality (and to avoid action) by withdrawing into an illusory world. In *Rambler* no. 125, Johnson refers to the imagination as a "licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations, and impatient of restraint" (*Works*, 4:300). In *Rambler* no. 89 he draws the brief portrait of the dreamer, who "retires to his apartments, shuts out the cares and interruptions of mankind, and abandons himself to his own fancy." In his solitude "new worlds rise up before him, one image is followed by another, and a long succession of delights dances round him." When at length he returns to society, the dreamer becomes peevish "because he cannot model it to his own will.... The infatuation strengthens by degrees, and, like the poison of opiates, weakens his powers, without any external symptom of malignity" (*Works*, 4:106). The dreamer later reemerges in *Rasselas* with a slightly fuller characterization as the obsessed, paranoiac astronomer, who personifies "the dangerous prevalence of imagination." As Imlac explains to Rasselas:

There is no man whose imagination does not sometimes predominate over his reason, who can regulate his attention wholly by his will, and whose ideas will come and go at his command. No man will be found in whose mind airy notions do not sometimes tyrannize, and force him to hope or fear beyond the limits of sober probability. All power of fancy over reason is a degree of insanity; but while this power is such as we can controul and repress, it is not visible to others, nor considered as any deprivation of the mental faculties: it is not pronounced madness but when it becomes ungovernable, and apparently influences speech or action.

* * *

In time some particular train of ideas fixes the attention; all other intellectual gratifications are rejected, the mind, in weariness or leisure, recurs constantly to the favourite conception, and feasts on the luscious falsehood, whenever she is offended with the bitterness of truth. By degrees, the reign of fancy is confirmed; she grows first imperious, and in time despotick. Then fictions begin to operate as realities, false opinions fasten upon the mind, and life passes in dreams of rapture or of anguish.¹⁶

In all her novels, Jane Austen dramatizes the imagination's "dreams of rapture" and "luscious falsehood," which Imlac with such alarm describes to Rasselas. When Elinor Dashwood, in *Sense and Sensibility*, refuses to speculate about the fragments of Colonel Brandon's mysterious narrative, for example, her sister Marianne, we are told, would have speedily and mistakenly fabricated an entire story "under her active imagination." In *Pride and Prejudice*, the high-spirited Lydia Bennet, who marries a charming rake, tends to see the world through "the creative eye of fancy." Edmund Bertram, in *Mansfield Park*, for a long time forms an illusory conception of Mary Crawford, who he eventually tells Fanny has been "the creature of [his] own imagination." Emma Woodhouse, an extraordinary "imaginist" who can take "an idea and make every thing bend to it," learns after many blunders the necessary "subjection of the fancy to the understanding." Even Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*, the most rational of all Jane Austen's heroines, recognizes with embarrassment, "What wild imaginations one forms, where dear self is concerned!"¹⁷

° Catherine Morland, more than any other Austen heroine, is par-

ticularly susceptible to the imagination's "luscious falsehood" and "dreams of rapture." A few days after her introduction to Henry Tilney, for example, she searches for him all over the Upper and Lower Rooms of Bath, but her inquiries are futile, for Henry has unexpectedly left the city, without even leaving his name in the social register. "This sort of mysteriousness, which is always so becoming in a hero," Jane Austen comments, "threw a fresh grace in Catherine's imagination around his person and manners, and increased her anxiety to know more of him" (35-36). Unable to learn anything of Henry's absence from her friends, the Thorpes, but encouraged by Isabella to think of him, Catherine indulges her imagination on Henry's character, and "his impression on her fancy was not suffered to weaken." John and Isabella's plan to ride to Blaize Castle is especially delightful to Catherine's imagination, disappointed as she has been by her interrupted engagement with the Tilneys. "The delight of exploring an edifice like Udolpho, as her fancy represented Blaize Castle to be," Jane Austen explains, "was such a counterpoise of good, as might console her for almost anything" (86). General Tilney's invitation later to visit Northanger Abbey is even more delightful in Catherine's imagination, for her "passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney—and castles and abbeys made usually the charm of those reveries which his image did not fill" (141). Even after Catherine is disabused of all her fancied expectations about Northanger and the General, she looks forward with still greater imaginary delights to Henry's humble parsonage at Woodston: "What a revolution in her ideas! she, who had so longed to be in an abbey! Now, there was nothing so charming to her imagination as the unpretending comfort of a well-connected Parsonage, something like Fullerton, but better" (212).

Although Catherine is particularly susceptible to "dreams of rapture," no one in *Northanger Abbey*, save perhaps Henry Tilney, really escapes the deceptions of an active fancy. When her social climbing friend Isabella receives James's letter announcing his parents' approval of their engagement, she (mistakenly) "knew enough to feel secure of an honourable and speedy establishment, and her imagination took a rapid flight over its attendant felicities" (122). Even as reliable a figure as Eleanor Tilney acknowledges her susceptibility to the deceptions of the fancy. Though she recognizes, in one of her many conversations with Catherine, that historians are as capable as literary writers of "flights of fancy" and of "imagination," she claims, "I am

fond of history—and am very well contented to take the false with the true” (109). As for the imaginary “embellishments” with which historians sometimes write, Eleanor concludes: “They are embellishments, and I like them as such. If a speech be well drawn up, I read it with pleasure, by whomsoever it may be made—and probably with much greater, if the production of Mr. Hume or Mr. Robertson, than if the genuine words of Caractacus, Agricola, or Alfred the Great.” Although Eleanor knows that the historian’s pleasurable “flights of fancy” are not true, Catherine does not.

Thus far, Catherine’s imagination has been responsible for relatively harmless sallies of unreality. It is capable of much worse. As Dr. Johnson never tired of pointing out, “All power of fancy over reason is a degree of insanity.”¹⁸ A faithful representation of the prevailing Lockean epistemology, the poet Imlac’s discourse to Rasselas on the ideas that despotically take hold of the mind recalls the passage in Locke’s chapter “Of the Association of Ideas,” in which he observes: “I shall be pardoned for calling [an unreasonable association of ideas] by so harsh a name as madness, when it is considered that opposition to reason deserves that name, and is really madness; and there is scarce a man so free from it, but that if he should always, on all occasions, argue or do as in some cases he constantly does, would not be thought fitter for Bedlam than civil conversation.”¹⁹ Some of our ideas, in Locke’s theory, have a “natural” correspondence “founded in their peculiar beings.”²⁰ Yet they become so united in men’s minds that it is very hard to separate them. “The ideas of goblins and sprites,” Locke explains in a characteristic example, “have really no more to do with darkness than light: yet let but a foolish maid inculcate these often on the mind of a child, and raise them there together, possibly he shall never be able to separate them again so long as he lives, but darkness shall ever afterwards bring with it those frightful ideas, and they shall be so joined, that he can no more bear the one than the other.”²¹

Jane Austen, it would be fair to say, considers Catherine Morland’s chance association of ideas in her imagination as a “degree of insanity.” In a comic but significant conversation with Eleanor and Henry Tilney, for example, Jane Austen anticipates the “madness” to which Catherine’s imagination eventually leads when the young heroine informs her friends that “something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London,” that she does not know who the author is, that it is to be “more horrible than any thing we have met with yet,”

and that she "shall expect murder and every thing of the kind" (112). Misinterpreting Catherine's rather obvious references to the publication of a new Gothic novel, Eleanor imagines instead a large-scale social riot. Henry therefore steps in to clear the air, and reminds his sister of the danger of mental imbalance: "My dear Eleanor, the riot is only in your own brain. The confusion there is scandalous." Asserting that Eleanor has not rationally conceived that "such words could relate only to a circulating library," Henry describes for the two young women Eleanor's imaginary horrors—"a mob of three thousand men assembled in St. George's Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood, a detachment of the 12th Light Dragoons, (the hopes of the nation,) called up from Northampton to quell the insurgents, and the gallant Captain Frederick Tilney, in the moment of charging at the head of his troop, knocked off his horse by a brickbat from an upper window" (113). Although Eleanor is the immediate object of Henry's ridicule, the larger butt of irony here is the naive imagination, which functions without commonsense attention, observation, and experience. To credit Henry's rebuke of imaginary terrors with a larger and "subversive" dramatic irony which ultimately vindicates the imagination, since his description is constructed out of the actual details of the 1780 Gordon Riots and since the entire scene foreshadows the metamorphosis of Catherine's imaginary horrors at Northanger Abbey into the real social dangers of Bath—as several critics have done—is to misread the pervasive, fundamental irony that imagination, in operating independently of real, factual experience, has led the individual to a kind of intellectual disorder, which Henry calls a "riot" in the brain.²²

Surely the principal meaning emerging from Catherine's experiences at Northanger Abbey is that her imagination—like Eleanor's in this scene—has led to an aptly described mental "riot," in which Gothic expectations are thoroughly entangled in her mind. Her premature ideas about the abbey, for example, are a disturbing collection of Gothic ramparts and cloisters, "long damp passages," "narrow cells and ruined chapel," "traditional legends," and "some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun." So active are Catherine's thoughts that even after her inquiries are matter-of-factly answered by Eleanor, Catherine is assured of Northanger Abbey conforming to her imaginary expectations. Teasing Catherine about these expectations on the drive to the abbey, Henry smiles and inquires if she has "formed a very favourable idea of the abbey" (157). "To be sure I

have," she replies, "Is not it a fine old place, just like what one reads about?" But a "fine old place" and "what one reads about" are hardly the same thing. Entering the grounds of the abbey along a smooth and level road of fine gravel without obstacle or alarm of any kind seems to her "odd and inconsistent" with her preconceived ideas (161). She does not expect to see furniture that displays only modern elegance. The fireplace of her imagination, with its ample and ponderous carvings of former times, proves to be only a "Rumford, with slabs of plain though handsome marble, and ornaments over it of the prettiest English China." The Gothic windows, too, all "so large, so clear, so bright," are "yet less what her fancy had portrayed." In fact, "to an imagination which had hoped for the smallest divisions, and the heaviest stonework, for painted glass, dirt and cobwebs, the difference was very distressing" (162).

Catherine's habitual association of Gothic structures with the Gothic horrors she has read about is, however, not easily disentangled. Her imagination presses forward to find something distressing in her situation. In her room she finds a large chest, which to Catherine's imagination is very strange. It does not occur to her that the remains of its silver handles have been worn with age. On the contrary, her fancy suggests that they have been prematurely broken "by some strange violence" (163). On the lid is clearly painted the letter "T," which she might reasonably assume represents "Tilney," but to Catherine's imagination it is a "mysterious cypher." She opens the chest only to find a white cotton bedspread. On her return to the room after dinner, the sight of the old chest is an embarrassing reminder of the "causeless fears of an idle fancy," yet the sudden discovery of an antique black cabinet only generates her fanciful associations once more. The following morning's examination teaches her the "absurdity of her recent fancies"—the corrective to her imaginary ideas being the actual material evidence before her eyes (173). Glancing over the page with a startled look, Catherine wonders, "Could it be possible, or did not her senses play her false?—An inventory of linen, in coarse and modern characters, seemed all that was before her! If the evidence of sight might be trusted, she held a washing bill in her hand" (172).

Though humbled by such an experience, Catherine fabricates an even larger train of ideas about General Tilney. On the flimsy basis of the General's unwillingness to show her a part of the abbey and of his refusal to join her and Eleanor on his wife's favorite walk, Catherine is

convinced that the General must have tortured and murdered her, or at least permanently immured her. Learning that the General was dissatisfied with Mrs. Tilney's portrait and that it hangs in Eleanor's bedroom, instead of the drawing room where it was intended, Catherine most unreasonably surmises, "Here was another proof. A portrait—very like—of a departed wife, not valued by the husband!—He must have been dreadfully cruel to her!" (181). When the General calls her hastily from one end of the house, his "evident desire of preventing such an examination" is an additional piece of proof in her mind. "Something," she concludes, "was certainly to be concealed; her fancy, though it had trespassed lately once or twice, could not mislead her here" (186). As though in mockery of the reasonable exertion of a balanced mind, Catherine imagines "in all probability" that the General has never entered his wife's room since his dreadful torture of her. Horrible ideas spring into Catherine's mind, and she finds many examples to justify her blackest suspicions. At length Catherine decides to explore the rooms and find material proof to satisfy her suspicions, but all she discovers is a "large, well-proportioned apartment, an handsome dimity bed, arranged as unoccupied with an housemaid's care, a bright Bath stove, mahogany wardrobes, and neatly-painted chairs, on which the warm beams of a western sun gaily poured through two sash windows"—metaphorically shedding on Catherine's mind "a ray of common sense" (193). Henry Tilney's pointed reminder to her, when he discovers her in the empty room, emphasizes the significant aspect of her cognitive awakening. "What have you been judging from?" he asks; "consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation, of what is passing around you.....Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?" (197-98). Judgment, understanding, observation, a sense of the probable—all play a significant role in Catherine's release from the associations of her imagination. The "visions of romance," we are told, are now over. Completely awakened, Catherine now opens her eyes to the "extravagance of her late fancies" and to the "liberty which her imagination had dared to take." That evening, before she retires, she reflects on the foolishness which "had been all a voluntary, self-created delusion, each trifling circumstance receiving importance from an imagination resolved on alarm, and every thing forced to bend to one purpose by a mind which, before she entered the Abbey, had been craving to be frightened" (200). Far from being a source of truth, Catherine's imagination, because of its exaggeration and false

association of Gothic-romantic ideas with reality, is invariably the locus of deception.

III

Complementing the broad parody of the imagination in *Northanger Abbey* is Jane Austen's comic representation of real life, which draws bold attention to the way character and behavior actually or commonly appear, and not the way they are imagined in fictional romances. Running counter to the reader's expectations, the comic-realistic narrative of Catherine Morland's life is an anti-romance, in which, as Johnson explains in *Rambler* no. 4, "life [is exhibited] in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind" (*Works*, 3:19). "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy," Jane Austen opens her anti-romance, "would have supposed her born to be an heroine" (14). Not only are her family ordinary and "plain matter-of-fact people" who experience the "common feelings of common life," but Catherine herself has "by nature nothing heroic about her." Her father is not a domestic tyrant, and her mother did not die—after the fashion of romances—in childbirth. Catherine is not beautiful, and she is not prodigiously accomplished. There is no heroic youth in the neighborhood to fall in love with, no young lord, foundling, squire's son, no ward brought up in her family.²³ Catherine's entry into the public life of Bath, moreover, is marked by nothing unusual or romantic. At her first dance, she is not, in the hyperbolic language of romance, called "a divinity" by anyone (23). Her first conversation with Henry Tilney in the Lower Rooms involves "such matters as naturally arose from the objects around them" (25). Her conversation with Eleanor Tilney involves "common-place chatter," and Eleanor's manner during this exchange shows none of the "exaggerated feelings of extatic delight or inconceivable vexation on every trifling occurrence" (56-57).

For all Catherine's impressionability to her friend Isabella's affectations and recommended reading, she possesses a common degree of common sense. When Catherine sees Mr. Tilney speaking with a fashionable, attractive young woman, who is leaning on his arm, for example, she immediately assumes the woman is his sister, thus losing, in a characteristically anti-heroic manner, an opportu-

ity of considering him lost to her for ever, by being already married. Jane Austen contrasts the falsifying romance version of such a situation with the realistic version, founded on probabilities and facts:

Guided only by what was simple and probable, it had never entered her head that Mr. Tilney could be married; he had not behaved, he had not talked, like the married men to whom she had been used; he had never mentioned a wife, and he had acknowledged a sister. From these circumstances sprang the instant conclusion of his sister's now being by his side; and therefore, instead of turning a deathlike paleness, and falling in a fit on Mrs. Allen's bosom, Catherine sat erect, in the perfect use of her senses, and with cheeks only a little redder than usual. (53)

Often, in fact, guided not by her active imagination but by what is "simple and probable," by "circumstances," by observation and remembrance, and by the "perfect use of her senses," Catherine's life is used to demonstrate, as Jane Austen says, that "strange things may be generally accounted for if their cause be fairly searched out" (16). Consequently, after a bewildering and short-lived excursion among the fantasies of romance at *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine resolves to act with "the greatest good sense" and learns to accept the "anxieties of common life" instead of the "alarms of romance" (201). When General Tilney dismisses her from the abbey, having learned of her ordinary background, Catherine realizes that the anxiety thus caused is "mournfully superior in reality and substance" than any she has encountered in Mrs. Radcliffe's romances, for it has "foundation in fact" and "in probability." With her mind now focused on "actual and natural evil," she returns to her home in a hack post-chaise "without [heroic] accident or alarm." A "probable circumstance" (Eleanor's marriage to a man of fortune placates the General's greed) facilitates her wedding with Henry (25). Henry's affection for Catherine, moreover, we are told, has originated in "nothing better than gratitude" for Catherine's affection for him. "It is a new circumstance in romance, and dreadfully derogatory of an heroine's dignity," Jane Austen reminds us, "but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own" (243).

The comic realism in *Northanger Abbey* serves an obvious moral purpose, best described by Johnson's *Rambler* no. 4, in discussing novels that "serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life." Unlike romances, in which "every transaction and sentiment [is] so remote from all that passes among men, that the reader [is] in very

Peter L. DeRose

73

little danger of making any applications to himself" and in which "virtues and crimes [are] equally beyond his sphere of activity," novels which portray the life of an adventurer who is "levelled with the rest of the world" and who "acts in such scenes of the universal drama, as may be the lot of any other man" can be morally instructive (*Works*, 3:21):

The purpose of these writings is surely not only to show mankind, but to provide that they may be seen hereafter with less hazard; to teach the means of avoiding the snares which are laid by Treachery for Innocence, without infusing any wish for that superiority with which the betrayer flatters his vanity; to give the power of counteracting fraud, without the temptation to practice it; to initiate youth by mock encounters in the art of necessary defence, and to increase prudence without impairing virtue. (*Works*, 3:22-23)

The "mock encounters" that the innocent Catherine experiences in her relationships with her false friends, the Thorpes, and with General Tilney illuminate for her and for the reader at once that real people are more complex than imaginary heroes and that real life situations ironically can be more deceptive and treacherous than those encountered in fiction.

That Catherine is the innocent in this moral paradigm is evident from her naive, uninformed responses to lifelike situations. When she first leaves home, she goes "looking forward to pleasures untasted and unalloyed, and free from the apprehension of evil as from the knowledge of it" (237). Almost at the close of her story, too, Henry is referring to Catherine when he asks Eleanor to be ready to welcome a sister-in-law who is "open, candid, artless, guileless, with affections strong but simple, forming no pretensions, and knowing no disguise" (206). At every turn in her development, Catherine displays her innocence, as when with childlike simplicity, she tells John Thorpe that to marry for money is "the wickedest thing in existence" (124). Estimating character and behavior in terms of her own naive imagination, she imputes nothing but good nature to the impudent, conceited, and disingenuous Thorpe and to his selfish, shrewd, and calculating sister Isabella; and for a while she is completely deceived by the smooth social hypocrisy and mercenariness of General Tilney.

Catherine and the reader alike learn two significant lessons from her encounters with the Thorpes and General Tilney. Both learn what Johnson calls the "art of necessary defence" against the real fraudu-

lence and treachery of human society. More significantly, their introduction to the ways of the world teaches them that human nature is more complex and difficult to understand than one naively imagines.²¹ They both recognize, to use Johnson's words, the limits of "virtues and crimes" that exist within the probable "sphere of [human] activity" (*Rambler* 4, *Works*, 3:21). For a time both Catherine and the reader believe, for example, that the General is one of those "unnatural and overdrawn" characters of the imagination, who are represented in fictional romances like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and who are capable of unalloyed evil (181). As Dr. Johnson observes, however, "to imagine that every one who is not completely good is irrecoverably abandoned, is to suppose that all are capable of the same degree of excellence; it is indeed to exact, from all, that perfection which none can attain" (*Rambler* 70—*Works*, 4:6). Catherine's awakening into the real world of experience gives the lie to this imaginary assumption:

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....Among the Alps and Pyrenees, perhaps, there were no mixed characters. There, such as were not spotless as an angel, might have the dispositions of a fiend. But in England it was not so; among the English, she believed, in their hearts and habits, there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad. Upon this conviction, she would not be surprised if even in Henry and Eleanor Tilney, some slight imperfection might hereafter appear; and upon this conviction she need not fear to acknowledge some actual specks in the character of their father, who, though cleared from the grossly injurious suspicions which she must ever blush to have entertained, she did believe, upon serious consideration, to be not perfectly amiable. (200)

Though there is much irony at Catherine's expense, in believing that unnatural characters may yet live in the Alps and Pyrenees, Catherine's reflections, thoroughly consistent with her unsophisticated character, nevertheless represent a major advance in her moral education. Catherine acquires the Johnsonian view that the heroes and villains of imaginary romances are really "beings of another species" whose actions are "regulated upon motives of their own, and who [have] neither faults nor excellencies in common" with humanity (*Rambler* 4—*Works*, 3:21). Recognizing through experience the complexity of human character and behavior, Catherine, as well as the

reader of *Northanger Abbey*, learns that real people are not usually murderers, but are more frequently mercenary, cunning, hypocritical and vain—and sometimes, as with Eleanor and Henry, even habitually, though not perfectly, good.

Common sense, experience, and observation, then, are ultimately what rescue Catherine Morland and the reader from the illusory world of the imagination, and restore them to a sobering apprehension of reality. To say more than this—that Jane Austen's irony, directed primarily against the active imagination and the Gothic-sentimental romances that nurture it, turns upon itself to undercut even the direct experience of sensory reality—is to misrepresent the Lockean epistemology upon which her parody is built, and to misconstrue her evident moral intention. In *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen narrates the amusing story of an ingenue encountering and learning from the deceptions of the real world; with a traditional moral purpose and an eighteenth-century epistemology she achieves a complex fusion of bold parody and broad comic-realism.

NOTES

¹ A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (New York, 1965), p. 63.

² Andrew H. Wright, *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure* (New York, 1967), p. 96.

³ Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore, 1971), p. 98.

⁴ Wright, p. 102; Duckworth, p. 99; Litz, p. 63. Raymond D. Havens, "Johnson's Distrust of the Imagination," *ELH*, 10(1943), 246, notes that Johnson "never assigns to [the imagination] the profoundly important role which Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth attributed to it by virtue of its creative, plastic or modifying, and unifying or 'esemplastic' power. Nor is there any suggestion that the imagination is a means of insight into truth."

⁵ See Jean H. Hagstrum, *Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism* (1952; rpt. with new preface, Chicago, 1967), p. 7.

⁶ Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford, 1927), ch. xliii, p. 189.

⁷ Samuel Johnson, *Rambler 4*, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Allen T. Hazen and John H. Middendorf (New Haven, 1958-), 3:21. Subsequent citations of Johnson's works in my text, unless otherwise indicated, are to this edition.

IMAGINATION IN *NORTHANGER ABBEY*

⁸ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York, 1959), 2:i, 24; hereafter cited as Locke, *Essay*.

⁹ Locke, *Essay*, 4:i, 2.

¹⁰ See *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (1952; rpt. London, 1964), pp. 32-33, 49, 181.

¹¹ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. and enl. by L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1934-64), 1:454.

¹² Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 1:367.

¹³ See Joseph Wood Krutch, *Samuel Johnson* (New York, 1944), p. 322.

¹⁴ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London, 1755).

¹⁵ Locke, *Essay*, 2:xxx, 2.

¹⁶ Johnson, *Rasselas*, ch. xliii, pp. 189-191.

¹⁷ Citations in this paragraph are to *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (1933; rpt. London, 1969), 1:57; 2:232; 3:458; 4:335, 37; 5:201. Subsequent citations of *Northanger Abbey* in my text are to this edition.

¹⁸ Johnson, *Rasselas*, ch. xliii, p. 189.

¹⁹ Locke, *Essay*, 2:xxxiii, 4.

²⁰ Locke, *Essay*, 2:xxxiii, 5.

²¹ Locke, *Essay*, 2:xxxiii, 10.

²² See, for example, Litz, p. 64.

²³ See also Alan D. McKillop, "Critical Realism in *Northanger Abbey*," Ian Watt, ed., *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), p. 56.

²⁴ See also Kenneth L. Moler, *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (Lincoln, 1968), pp. 28-31.