

God and Jane Austen

by Mary Watts

It is a truth universally acknowledged that in private life Jane Austen was deeply religious. Henry Austen's *Notice* stresses her charity, 'Faultless herself, she always sought, in the faults of others, something to excuse, to forgive or forget. . . . She never uttered a hasty, a silly or a severe expression.' Her devotion is the other prominent aspect. 'She was thoroughly religious and devout; fearful of giving offence to God, and incapable of feeling it towards any fellow creature.'

But critics have generally held that her religion has not influenced her novels in any major way and have given it little attention. An exception was Angus Wilson in his series of broadcast talks on *Evil in the English Novel*,¹ in which he maintained that religious belief and practice influenced Jane Austen's art directly, though his suggestion that the material of her novels, 'Three or Four Families in a Country Village', reflects a belief that the salvation of one's soul can best be achieved in retirement from 'the world' seems to me to be mistaken. The more one reads the novels the more one becomes aware that they are written from an essentially religious outlook on life but that this is so absorbed and taken for granted in her thinking that it is only occasionally made explicit. And, of course, it is an outlook profoundly influenced by the reading and preaching available to her in the early nineteenth century, characterized by a reticence in the expression of faith and a keen interest in the moral life—'By their fruits ye shall know them'.

Mansfield Park is the novel in which religious concern is most apparent and not only in the crucial fact of Edmund's ordination. Yet even here critics have avoided admitting that the chief effect of the book is to assert the primacy of religion over ethics. The key to the novel is 'principle' and it becomes obvious that the author means by this, not merely a knowledge of what is socially or humanly right, but such a knowledge based on religious belief. This is made explicit in Henry Crawford's inability to find the right words to explain Fanny's character.

'Henry Crawford had too much good sense not to feel the worth of good principles in a wife, though he was too little accustomed to serious reflection to know them by their proper name; but when he talked of her having such a steadiness and regularity of conduct, such a high notion of honour, and such an observance of decorum as might warrant any man in the fullest dependence on her faith and integrity, he expressed what was inspired by the knowledge of her being well principled and religious.'

Later, when Tom Bertram is in danger of death after a mis-spent

¹Jane Austen is referred to in the first talk. *Listener*, 27th December, 1962.

youth, Fanny reflects on his possible fate in the next world. 'The purity of her principles added yet a keener solicitude when she considered how little useful, how little self-denying his life had (apparently) been.' Here 'principle' is related to an unequivocally supernatural end. Again, principle is what would have prevented the catastrophe by enabling Maria Rushworth and Henry Crawford to overcome their feelings but 'his unsettled affections, wavering with his vanity, Maria's decided attachment and no sufficient principle on either side' bring about the elopement. And finally, Sir Thomas Bertram's bitter reflections on his own mistakes in the education of his children lead him back to 'principle' and so to religion.

'He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting; they had never been taught to govern their inclinations and tempers with that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments—the authorized object of their youth—could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them.'

Fanny may have principle but she has very little else and this has been at the root of most of the dissatisfaction with the book. As a heroine she is not engaging and in her passivity, diffidence and lack of vitality, extending to marked physical weakness, contrasts unfavourably with Mary Crawford, as Edmund, to a lesser extent, contrasts with Henry. There is no reason to think that Jane Austen was not fully aware of this and intended to show how 'principle' based on religious belief could help a stunted character like Fanny's to make the best of itself, to be rewarded with the peaceful happiness of life in a country parsonage, while the more talented and attractive characters are condemned to the restless pleasures of vanity fair.

Fanny is a penetrating study of an introverted, emotionally starved, over-diffident girl who directs her emotions into religious channels, and this religion has an element of escapism. She is disappointed in the chapel at Sotherton because 'there is nothing awful here, nothing melancholy, nothing grand'. She naturally turns to prayer in distress and obtains relief. In one of her most despondent moments she 'could not subdue her agitation; and the dejection which followed could only be relieved by the influence of fervent prayers for (Edmund's) happiness.' As the author does not use unnecessary words we must take it that the 'influence' of Fanny's prayers means their efficacy—her calmness is a grace received in response to prayer.

The inadequacy of humanism alone to the good life is illustrated in the crucial question of the nature of the priesthood which is the

rock on which Edmund's romance founders. Mary Crawford is perfectly acceptable as far as secular morality goes. She is genuinely kind to Fanny and her attitude to life, though worldly, is sensible, but she cannot understand the values by which Edmund and Fanny live, and a clergyman to her is 'nothing'.

'Men love to distinguish themselves in either of the other lines in which distinction may be gained, but not in the Church. A clergyman is nothing.'

To Edmund and Fanny a clergyman 'has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively, temporally or eternally'. Mary's worldliness is placed in immediate contrast with Fanny's purity in the incident of the cross which is of the utmost importance to Fanny but is the subject of light-hearted trickery to Mary.

Emma and *Persuasion* are also specifically Christian in that the way of life demanded of the heroines goes far beyond the dictates of reason, good sense and harmonious social relations. It is love which is required—a love which gives and does not count the cost and which is so taken for granted that it is accepted as merely a duty. It is worth remembering that the life of 'Three or Four Families in a Country Village' in the early nineteenth century, with its lack of mobility and freedom, particularly for women, its sameness, its strict, if unwritten, laws governing hours, employments and social intercourse is unlike anything we know today except perhaps in religious or other institutional life. And the kind of sanctity it requires is the unexciting but exacting kind which consists in extending unlimited love to the community in which one lives, the immediate family first and then the wider circle. Angus Wilson's claim that 'this quiet country life . . . was a way of acquiring the maximum amount of time and ease in which to prepare oneself for the next world' is quite misleading in its suggestion of a selfish and inward-looking religion at the very opposite pole to the moral athleticism that such a life in fact demands.

Lionel Trilling says of Emma that she is 'quite given over to self-love, wholly aware of it and quite cherishing it' and he notes her 'capacity for unkindness, which can be impulsive and brutal'.¹ But this is far too harsh a judgment of Emma who eventually triumphs completely over self-will and very human weakness. Her goal must be entire self-forgetfulness and she is reminded of it by Mr Knightley in the very first chapter. She knows that the marriage of Miss Taylor will make an aching void in her life.

'The want of Miss Taylor would be felt every hour of every day.' But Knightley expects her to be selfless.

'It is impossible that Emma should not miss such a companion . . . but she knows how much the marriage is to Miss Taylor's

¹*Encounter*, Vol. 8.

advantage . . . and therefore cannot allow herself to feel so much pain as pleasure.'

Emma's failures are all ultimately of charity. Her attitude to Harriet is wrong because it is too proprietary. Harriet is a subject for experiment, to figure in a plan of Emma's and the plan is at first more important to her than the true welfare of Harriet. With regard to Jane Fairfax, Emma has a strong feeling of temperamental incompatibility, but she later acknowledges that it was her duty to overcome this feeling, largely founded on vanity, and to force herself to offer to Jane the friendship she effortlessly gives to Harriet. And her failure with Miss Bates is of the same order. It consists in omitting to extend a warmth and charity which goes beyond the dictates of reason and the promptings of her own heart, and this steady neglect of duty is just as serious as her thoughtless flippancy on Box Hill. But Emma is touchingly honest with herself, accepts reproof humbly and rises to genuinely heroic heights when it seems as if, through these very faults, she has lost every hope of happiness for herself. At this point, the climax of Emma's reformation, the rhythm of the sentence beautifully conveys the turbulent emotions, striving for and achieving composure in a high level of spiritual maturity, the courageous acceptance of a desolate future and the resolution to profit from it.

'When it came to such a pitch as this, she was not able to refrain from a start, or a heavy sigh, or even from walking round the room for a few seconds; and the only source from which anything like consolation or composure could be drawn, was in the resolution of her own better conduct, and the hope that, however inferior in spirit and gaiety might be the following and every future winter of her life to the past, it would yet find her more rational, more acquainted with herself, and leave her less to regret when it were gone.'

Emma's most serious obligation is in her relation with her father and her success here counts more than anything else in her favour.

The individual efforts of the heroines to achieve the good life are presented in an implied framework of belief in a divine purpose in human life, a belief which is lacking in later great novelists. One thinks of the malignant fate of Thomas Hardy, the arbitrary coincidences of Dickens and the purely human patterns in the work of, for instance, Antony Powell. Jane Austen adopts the comic view of the universe in the sense of Vincent of Beauvais who, in the twelfth century, calls comedy 'a kind of poem which transforms a sad beginning to a happy ending'. This view implies that 'all things work together for good for those who love God', that is, virtue is rewarded and vice punished. This sounds simple, even naïve and, of course, can become so in second-rate writing. But to portray this pattern of events in brilliantly realistic fiction where human nature is studied in depth and for its own sake demands a conviction on the author's part that the comic sequence, from trouble to joy, is the pattern

not only of the events he is describing but of ultimate reality, a belief in fact in the resurrection. It is this type of comedy which critics of Jane Austen have largely ignored in their pre-occupation with the older, classical type satirizing folly and vice and which is, I think, blended with romantic comedy by this author in a way unique in English fiction.

Jane Austen is fully aware that life does not always display the qualities of order, harmony and justice which belong to the ultimate nature of things. As Emma says when contemplating the possibility of a marriage between Mr Knightley and Harriet Smith, 'was it new for anything in this world to be unequal, inconsistent, incongruous—or for chance and circumstances (as second causes) to direct the human fate?' But in the world of the novel the inconsistencies are avoided and events pan out in the ideal way of the unnamed First Cause and though the novelist is not true to the apparent messiness of life she is faithful to a deeper sense of its ultimate order. This is the point where comic convention coincides with traditional Christian belief about the nice balance between man's free will and the omnipotence and providence of God. Herbert Butterfield in *Christianity and History*¹ compares the close relation and interaction of the two to an orchestra playing a score for the first time without having seen the whole beforehand. The composer, God, is constantly re-writing, just a fraction ahead of the players, taking into account their mistakes and deviations and working them into a more harmonious whole, so that, on looking back, a pattern can be discerned. The believer who has some such image of the divine purpose in human affairs, does not necessarily see what the purpose is but must use human wisdom to discover it. And divine purpose is intimately bound up with 'the way things are' at any given time so the Christian must learn to understand himself and the possibilities open to him. The acquisition of self-knowledge is more or less important in all of Jane Austen's novels. It is unlikely to lead, in the majority of cases, to attempts to change the course of history but to an alertness to perform the good that is immediately before one. That this is not individualism but a truly social morality I hope has been shown above. One remembers, too, that concern for the community involves Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot in regular and successful social work in the modern sense. Those who cannot forgive Jane Austen for not being George Eliot do not recognize that she too was trying to transform the social structures of her time, but from within, with love as the leaven.

Faith in providence is tested most clearly in *Persuasion*, which is, among other things, an exploration of the problem of an erroneous conscience. Such a conscience must be followed but one cannot escape the consequences of flouting what is objectively right. Anne

¹Chapter V.

Elliot's early decision not to marry Frederick Wentworth, in opposition to every natural instinct, is objectively mistaken but forced on her by her conscience.

'I have been thinking over the past, and trying impartially to judge of the right and wrong—I mean with regard to myself; and I must believe that I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend whom you will love better than you do now. To me, she was in the place of a parent. Do not mistake me, however, I am not saying that she did not err in her service. It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides; and for myself, I certainly never should, in any circumstances of tolerable similarity, give such advice. But I mean that I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience.'

The consequences of the mistake are dealt with movingly and convincingly. In wrenching her will from its true objective, Anne loses all natural happiness. Her youth and beauty vanish in a thin, solitary existence, without relief and without hope for more than seven years. The kind of goodness which she develops in this period of trial is mature and practical. When she is living with her sister Mary we feel the tensions involved, the constant strain on the temper, nerves and emotions of one who is the confidante of different groups living in close and irritable intimacy.

"I wish you could persuade Mary not to be always fancying herself ill", was Charles's language; and in an unhappy mood thus spoke Mary: "I do believe if Charles were to see me dying, he would not think there was anything the matter with me. I am sure, Anne, if you would, you might persuade him that I really am very ill—a great deal worse than I ever own". . . .

'How was Anne to set all these matters to rights? She could do little more than listen patiently, soften every grievance, and excuse each to the other; give them all hints of the forbearance necessary between such near neighbours, and make those hints broadest which were meant for her sister's benefit.'

The tact and skill required in these situations needs experience as well as goodwill and can only be provided by a fully developed heart and a well-balanced personality.

The stroke of fortune by which Wentworth comes back into Anne's life is only one of several coincidences in this short novel and could easily have been made less fortuitous had the author wished. Their reunion is helped partly by their own previous actions—the former goodness of Captain Wentworth to young Musgrove brings him early to the notice of the Musgrove parents, and Anne's goodness in going to Mary, 'glad to have anything marked out as a duty', enables her to meet him again. But there is still something over and above which is not fully explained, the action of providence, taking them by surprise, exceeding their narrow conceptions of what is

probable and transforming their lives in ways they had not dreamed of but which are intimately felt to be right. The error in the early prudent persuasion of Lady Russell was precisely its distrust of providence.

‘How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been! How eloquent at least were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust providence.’

The author is not attempting to give the last word or to suggest that there is one. Her optimism co-exists with a strong sense that suffering is inexplicable and unjust and one of the things the novel is doing is examining different ways of meeting suffering. From this point of view Mrs Smith is more than a piece of machinery.

In looking for comparisons with Jane Austen’s art one is, I think, inevitably led backwards. *The Great Tradition* has shown her influence on later writers and one is apt to forget, in the purity of her form, that the only great novelists who preceded her are the ‘big four’ of the later eighteenth century, none of whom was writing quite the same kind of work. Walter Allen¹ calls her work the ‘pure novel’, concentrating on human beings and their reactions to each other and to situations. It is not outrageous that a comparison with Shakespeare was a nineteenth-century commonplace, though the nineteenth century concentrated mainly on the creation of an apparently infinite variety of life-like characters. An early *Quarterly Review*² makes these points and testifies to the moral value of her work.

‘In Miss Austen’s hands we see into (her personages’) hearts and hopes, their motives, their struggles within themselves; and a sympathy is induced which, if extended to daily life and the world at large, would make the reader a more amiable person; and we must think it that reader’s own fault who does not close her pages with more charity in his heart towards unpretending, if prosing worth; with a higher estimation of simple kindness and sincere goodwill, with a quickened sense of the duty of bearing and forbearing in domestic intercourse and of the pleasure of adding to the little comforts even of persons who are neither wits nor beauties.’

This is not a particularly subtle piece of criticism but it is talking about love and is truer to the experience of reading the books than the ‘Regulated Hatred’ of twentieth-century criticism.

As far as the creation of recognizable and varied characters is concerned, and the ability to understand and present action and motive while keeping the author’s own personality entirely in the background, her only other predecessor is Chaucer. One has only to compare Chaucer with Langland, Shakespeare with Milton and Jane Austen with George Eliot to see that all three share the rare ability to portray human life without putting anything of themselves

¹ *The English Novel*, Chapter 3.

²No. 48.

(directly) into it, or having an axe to grind, or having something else in which they are more interested. They are not limited in the type of human being they can depict and they project a clear comment which the reader accepts as just, wise and tolerant. Chaucer and Jane Austen do it by means of irony and perhaps this comic detachment is their limitation when compared with Shakespeare.

The comparison with Shakespeare is valid not only in the warmth, acceptance and tolerance of the comedy but also in the value given to romantic love. Like Shakespeare's, her comedies end in marriage and, like his, her marriages have a symbolic quality. She is the first major writer since Shakespeare to give romantic love something of the value, the aura, the idealism which makes his heroines represent more than themselves and his heroes, in loving them, act in accordance with their highest selves. When a Shakespearean hero casts out love, as Hamlet does in bidding farewell to Ophelia, his disintegration has set in. Jane Austen's marriages are symbols of harmony and they all, except for that of Edmund and Fanny, bring together contrasting and complementary virtues to create a richer harmony. For Shakespeare it is the heroine who represents the beauty and moral value of love, but for Jane Austen, writing from the woman's point of view, it is the women who develop and suffer by means of a relation with a man who is relatively 'fixed'. George Knightley's very name invites us to see him as an idealized figure, and it is surely more than convenience that makes more than half her heroes clergymen for whom she considers moral guidance an essential function.

If one is writing the sort of comedy which depends on why people behave as they do and not on the performance of a complicated action, the plot will tend to be simple, and Jane Austen's is always the same. A young woman of marriageable age has two suitors, a good and a bad. She rejects the bad and chooses the good, and because these individual cases illustrate an underlying order of things they partake of fable. The titles of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* hint at allegory while the strong Cinderella theme in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* provides mythical undertones. So that, although I would not want to claim that *Emma* has a great deal in common with *Everyman*, I do believe that Jane Austen shares with the medieval writers a deeply religious outlook on life and, like Chaucer and Shakespeare, she expresses it entirely through her interest in human behaviour, while the standards which she brings to bear on that behaviour are those of the gospels.