The Sexual Market: Three Romantic Moments

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Freedom of response to the unfree imperatives of sexual desire, over against various sacral inhibitions thereof, was perhaps aspired to earlier and more persistently than other freedoms in the emergent human market place. Certainly stories of great and greatly transgressive lovers, of Tristan and Iseult or Abelard and Eloise, or of a multitude of more recent romantic strainers against social interest and religious control, including latterly loves daring to speak their own polymorphous (if thus no longer authentically perverse) names, have rather outpaced accounts of the transcendent energies of Captains of Industry, and at least kept up with myths of political and national liberation. And yet, in an endlessly bemusing paradox that has emerged less bluntly for the other categories, it is almost of necessity to the refuge or at least the metaphor of the sacred that the outcomes of such freedom must have recourse. Or so it would seem from the testimonies commonly available. (If Girard and others have dismissed this recourse as “deviated transcendency,”(1) there are many to retort that the deviation goes precisely in the other direction. “If this is a religious experience,” cry such skeptics before, say, Bernini’s Ecstasy of Saint Theresa, “We believe we have had it!”) At any rate, liberalization in this area of human experience, as it expanded in the forefront of the transformations of the European eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, increasingly represented itself as a resistance to the profanely mimetic forces now operative around the peripheries of an emptying ritual center. As they plunged below or soared above the horizontality of market exchange, however, the celebrants of unmediated love contributed immeasurably to the language with which that market created itself. It is not perhaps an exaggeration to say that proclamations of one’s right and power to follow the arbitrary dictates of romantic desire in the choice of a spouse or sexual partner, and by the same token to resist any and every form of external influence on or limitation of that choice, modeled a posture for the establishment of all subsequent constructions of individual identity and rights. This surely would help explain the early predominance and continuing prominence of the marriage plot in literature and other narrative art throughout the modern period. Given the stakes and intensity of interest

involved, it is not surprising that the best artists would also gravitate to this theme and, from the beginning, help articulate the paradoxes and even potential tragedies inherent in this putative emancipation, even while they for the most part accepted its inevitability. This paper will attempt to sketch, from this perspective and in a necessarily preliminary manner, three such accounts, “moments,” little crises in the evolution of desire.

Generative Anthropology has had some powerful and distinctive things to say about the fundamentals of the sexual love-relation, about the asymmetrical caring of heterosexual unions and the tenderness towards the beloved’s vulnerability.(2) It is in no way to diminish them to observe, though, that the resulting conceptualization of marriage or monogamous “relationship” as an at least quasi-sacral shelter from the competition and resentments of the modern world is widely shared, and probably even more widely and perennially sought for. (To those who resent by word or practice the apparently compulsory nature of such desires, and succeed in achieving similar goals in “friends with benefits” arrangements or other social forms we must, of course, offer our congratulations and good wishes, even while retaining a right to assess outcomes over the *longue durée* of modern lifetimes.) Nor would it be a stretch to identify this, as the *soi-disant* “Bronx Romantic” himself might concede, as a broadly Romantic position. If such physical and emotional unions offer to provide their participants with such protection, however, those still seeking or selecting a spouse or partner presumably have not the benefit. Because, now at least, even the most ideal tenderness must firstly have passed through the mimetic flux of attraction, or we should say, of attractions in the plural, of rivalrous claims on the potential lovers’ attention and desires—have passed, in short, through the market. One might therefore expect the tensions or contradictions of a project whose aim is, through the free exercise of market choice, to escape the market, to be particularly acute in these stages. Representations of the processes leading, or failing to lead, to the choice, to the establishment of the couple, to the falling into authentic love, even, might seem to promise direct access to certain core ethical issues. Besides, romantic narratives are notoriously silent on the condition of achieved and sustained love. If more recent narratives no longer so often cease at a wedding, they still have difficulty finding traction in ever-extending sessions of unmediated consummation. There are, there must be, problems, *others*. Mediation, or as Girard might say, triangularity, is the story, still.

Moment One – “Corinne at the Capitol”

This is firstly a shining moment, or a deeply silly one, in the history of the emergence of the second sex onto the public scene. Corinne is the heroine of Germaine de Staël’s celebrated 1807 novel of the same name. She arrives at the Capitol in Rome in a chariot drawn by four white horses and led by a crowd of noble male admirers. “Beautiful, striking music” sounds, girls in white run beside her, everyone “lavishly throws perfumes.” Breathless bystanders murmur:

> She receives homage from everyone, but she gives special preference to no one. She is rich and independent; they even think, and she certainly looks it, that she is a woman of noble birth who wants to remain incognito. Whatever the truth may be, . . . she is a goddess surrounded by clouds.(3)

Mind you, Madame de Staël reminds us, these are Italians—one must make allowances. For her own part Corinne is no passive object of worship. She *performs*, is famous for it, plays a lyre, improvises poetically, sings, acts, even sometimes lectures. Today she celebrates Italian culture and artistic genius, and is given a crown, to immeasurable acclaim. The female laureate receives not just abstract admiration, nor even just the hotter, more intimate solicitations of what is clearly an early instance of modern popular celebrity, but is very clearly also the object of intense sexual desire, to which, in the safety of her artistic enthusiasm (or perhaps her aristocratic incognito), Corinne is either oblivious or indifferent—at least initially. This of course strengthens her desirability, her grip on centrality.

If everyone *in* this scene concedes this, though, we are far from expecting that their modeling will successfully inculcate all those reading the book, especially in latter years. It is the modern feminist critic Ellen Moers who calls it silly, this "performing heroinism."(4) Denouncing it as "raw fantasy" (183), Moers summons up the deleterious precedent of

> the admiration on which little girls are fed, in treacly spoonfuls, from their earliest years . . . praised, fondled and petted for giving pleasure with the amateur entertainment girls are required to provide in the domestic circle, just as Corinne provides it for all European civilization on the Capitoline Hill (197).

There's obviously justice in this. We may take "raw fantasy" as paradigmatic for the second phase of the originary aesthetic moment, and if subsequent fantasies are sometimes more thoroughly cooked than this one, they are still consumed in the *sparagmos* which predominates in this highly popular work. We may also observe that the half-life of fantasies is usually shorter than that of paradoxes, and that the category of silliness is largely a function of changing fashion. Fashion, a feature of market societies, is of course bound up with the fraught project of projecting private superiority into public spaces—and this is clearly what Corinne is doing. It's fraught because the public has something to lose, as well as to gain—namely their own share of the center—and will eventually fight back. The centralization of Corinne's inner beauty, her inner scene, is now too easily decoded for its appeal to our desires, producing critiques like that of Moers. But apparently not for most readers in 1807.

Even so, hints of the paradoxes of desire are not entirely absent from Corinne's triumph.

She does experience a twinge of something that most little girls don't, quite yet.

In the hypnotized crowd is a chilly English lord, one Oswald Nelvil. Corinne from on high detects his chill, and improvises some verses on death, whose effect is to provoke in Oswald some entirely un-English raptures. Their eyes meet.

> Oswald, keenly touched, stepped out from the crowd . . . but an insurmountable embarrassment held him back. Corinne looked at him for a while, taking care, nevertheless, not to let him notice she was paying attention to him. But [as she is led absent-mindedly to her chariot], under various pretexts [she] looked back several times to see Oswald again.
>
> He followed her and, as she was descending the stairs escorted by her retinue, she looked back to catch one more sight of him; the movement made her crown fall off. Oswald hastened to pick it up and, as he handed it back to her, said in Italian a few words, whose meaning was that humble mortals laid at the feet of the gods the crowns they dared not place on their heads (II.IV.34).

"Anyway," as Randy Newman has it in one of his songs, "she dies."(5) That descending, that crown falling off? Foreshadowing. It takes a while—it's a long novel. Dies for love, and because Oswald can't stop being English, is ultimately governed by the wishes of his dead father, that he marry a vacuous blonde Englishwoman. A thousand girl readers may fling aside the book at the latter's literal appearance, as George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver does. "Take back your *Corinne*," she tells the friend who'd proffered it for modeling purposes,

> "you were wrong in thinking I should wish to be like her. . . . As soon as I came to the blond-haired lady reading in the park, I shut it up. . . . I am determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. . . . Give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs. . . ."(6)

But the rest persist because if you hang in, Corinne's death is just as consumable a fantasy as her Capitoline apotheosis—or really, pre-apotheosis. Maggie is actually being a bit disingenuous, or obtuse, and indeed she herself dies a death very much as heroically romantic—or triumphant—as that of her equally dark-haired sister Corinne. How paltry, by comparison, those blonde "winners"!

Still, one cannot quite ignore the sense that the perfection of Corinne's public triumph, living or dead, the uncontested power of her identity, is genuinely menaced by a private

desire which, despite her much insisted-upon self-origination, her purity, is clearly reflected back by her from its peripheral source in a male gaze. The public triumph was revolutionary, rebellious even, precisely because it transcended such desires—Corinne was not in this to get a *husband*! If one puts centrality to use, especially this use (if one is a woman), one of course risks losing it. (How disappointed the worshipers when, for example, the screen goddess marries, if she marries well and retires into obscurity and child-raising, a condition which they imagine, with horror, might even be satisfying to her. *Without them*.)

In Corinne's case, her Roman admirers are easily imagined tearing their hair, in particular, to think of Corinne choosing this one miserable Englishman from the plenitude of perfectly good, if largely interchangeable Italians. Does she not see he's just playing hard to get? It is market behavior like this that makes psychologists mythologize about self-destructive tendencies and so forth. Choosing an anonymous Italian, she would not lose the center—or so it looks, from afar. Such a pairing would replicate the structure of her admirers' own relationship with her, and thus be no threat to her dominion over them.

But Corinne, and de Staël, apparently see wider fields of struggle, and thus potentially greater triumphs. From that first, half-volitional glancing back, Corinne chooses fatal desire. From the moment of its possibility, the choice is to follow, or wither. Which is to say, that de Staël can hardly be accused of achieving here the Girardian *romanesque*, of revealing the *mensonge romantique.* It is impossible to be more romantic than *Corinne.* Nor can she be advocating the death-wish of Denis de Rougemont's Tristan, longing for obstacles in their own right.(7) Rather, the paradox apparently conceded here is pragmatic, and belongs firmly in the realm of anticipated market effects. Indeed, it might be more accurately identified as a (perhaps reckless) embracing of *risk*. The calculation is that the superiority of a woman's inner scene is most persuasively witnessed by romantic sexual love—how else but in such passion can it be truly known?—but that this in its fulfilment is inauthentic unless it is *seen* to hazard the total destruction of the centrality that superiority has won her. This we may suspect to be operative whether there are crowds of lovers ranged on the steps below her monumentality, or only one, who, as in the case of Corinne's Oswald, threatens to manifest what Eliot elsewhere memorably called "an equivalent center of self."(8) In the market, all equivalences are at best only "rough"—even the most apparently satisfactory exchange may lead to uneven outcomes. To individual desire, there is no equivalence at all—only negotiations and oscillations, between model and subject positions, virtual and real appropriations. To engage sexually with an equivalent other, with his own equivalent self, as this narrative features it, is to enter upon the most contingent of all ventures, to risk everything.

But retreat seems worse. Even at the Capitol, as the bystanders' hushed speculations testify, the public Corinne would not be so compelling were she able or willing to rule out sexual love entirely: such a posture would surely be an even more serious liability than that of married and child-bearing domesticity (except perhaps to the little girls in her audience).

Implicitly *opposing* any model of sexual love as an asymmetrical refuge from bourgeois competition, Corinne’s story figures submission to that asymmetry as a heroic gesture of victimary self-sacrifice, and thus also of rivalrous transcendence—a continuing of the competition by other means. Needless to say, Oswald comes to rue his choice, is first to bear witness to his own defeat. The novel is in the vanguard of modern accounts of the formation of marriages which narrate the process in this way, making the private political, not merely exalting resentment over love, but even resenting love for its curbs *on* resentment. No asymmetry on the other’s terms! No sacrifice of our truest self, or any of its claims! If modern marriage is indeed a refuge, competition is ever battering at its gates, exhorting women and men alike to ever more strenuous efforts, to defy the siren’s call, never to abandon the dream of total victory.

In his account of the first “star couple,” Heloise and Abelard, Eric Gans suggestively situates the rise of what others call “companionate marriage” or, in his terms “the modern ideal of marriage” as simultaneous with and caused by the rise of bourgeois competition. The key element is even then a facilitating, rivalry-blocking embrace of asymmetry, that of male and female. The acceptance of *this* asymmetry, the awe-inspiring grace of this gesture “for love,” will defer the resentment generated by *other* kinds of asymmetry—for example, that between Abelard and Heloise’s respective levels of learning and fame. But it is surely to be noted that this “first modern love affair”(9) is between a man and a woman who, in unprecedented fashion, are *able* to compete in these terms, even if one is certainly stronger. If there was anything the pre-modern world had in abundance, it was gender asymmetry. What is new is Corinne’s possession of the Capitol, so to speak, to spend on what could be either a heroical-victimary gesture, or the deliberate sacrifice of centrality apparently essential to the establishment of a modern marriage. The latter would presumably have been operative had things “worked out” with the dismal Lord Nelvil—a consummation hardly to be wished for, at least in the terms established by de Staël’s overwrought bestseller. But then, there are other stories to be told, and other paths to felicity.

Moment Two — Anne Elliot Pops the Question

The heroine of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1817) is no Corinne, to put it mildly. Anne Elliot largely avoids the public scene, even in the form it manifests itself in the English gentry life of Austen’s fiction: the balls, the brief duels of drawing-room conversation, the muted demonstrations of superior adherence to a conventional English class-morality or, call it, taste-as-morality, the avoidance of vulgarity as the summum bonum. These are not, despite the intense and surely diagnostic investment the many admirers of Austen’s novels have made in her heroines’ social prowess, the grounds upon which to establish a Corinne-like inner life—they are not Romantics, these women. Except perhaps Anne, who struggles interestingly, as many readers have agreed, at the border of two worlds, or even, two aesthetics.

Anne's dilemma is very much about the arrival of the market in the domain of romantic love, as against sacral, or quasi-sacral, inhibitions thereof, the usual allies or tools of an Austen heroine.(10) Quasi-sacral, more often, perhaps, as in the conservative social codes of the landed gentry— religiously motivated curbing of desire hardly features here. Readers respond still, at any rate, to the way Austen and her women defy that market: "We can only appreciate Jane Austen's opposition to the values of her society," claims critic Barbara Hardy, a fairly representative voice, "if we look hard at the apparent balance of cause and effect. The society that markets sexual feeling, markets other kinds of feeling too; the feeling for nature, for religion, for the poor, and for learning and art are all suspect."(11) What Hardy does not acknowledge, however, is that those older, putatively pre-market codes might also be a central "value" of Austen's society. Nor does she hint at any alternative to the marketing of feeling, although this is something her author is not nearly so shy about doing, as in her enthusiastic embrace of country-house mythology in *Pride and Prejudice*. So one-sided a reading, of course, is closely allied to the current Austen book-and-movie industry and its fairy-tale appeals to its audience's own sense of an inner superiority needing no marketing whatsoever.

But here too *Persuasion* is a bit different. In the previous novels it is generally not the marketing per se that is to be deplored, but the vulgarity of allowing one's marketing to be seen as such. The serenity of the endowed class, of a Darcy or a Knightly, is to be sought because it occludes the action of desire. But these novels *are* about desire, above all about successful strategies of desire—it is the mainspring of their power and the source of their continued popularity. For Anne, though, the graceful models of inhibition are increasingly unreliable, indeed are sliding perceptibly into their own form of vulgarity, although neither she nor one feels Austen is entirely prepared to say this openly, even if it seems clear they see it. Yet the proofs are unpleasantly overt—in, for example, the person of Anne's vain and irresponsible father, Sir Walter Elliot. Unlike the appallingly vulgar Lady Catherine de Bourgh of *Pride and Prejudice*, Sir Walter does not owe his title and position to the operations of the market, to trade. He is as blue-blooded as Darcy. Even in the absence of such authentic modeling, however, the prospect of independent response to the market world's proffered desires, sexual desires at that, is still not easy to contemplate. Anne is smitten by Captain Frederick Wentworth, a handsome naval officer on shore leave from the long war against Napoleon. And he with her. But once young gentlewomen start falling in love with brave young sailors without a fortune, the maw of chaos yawns. There is something distressingly *random* about such transactions, and a discomfort with this seeps unmistakably into Austen's language:

> He was . . . a remarkably fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit and brilliancy; and Anne an extremely pretty girl, with gentleness, modesty, taste, and feeling. —Half the sum of attraction, on either side, might have been enough, for he had nothing to do, and she had hardly any body to love; but the

> encounter of such lavish recommendations could not fail. They were gradually acquainted, and when acquainted, rapidly and deeply in love.(12)

"He had nothing to do, and she had hardly anybody to love"—Austen's famously ironic tone and unlocatable point-of-view may serve here, as so often, to defend English decencies against encroaching frivolity. But even to a true Romantic, the narrative implied by this paragraph is queasy-making. To a Romantic the random is actually the *fated*, an opportunity to demonstrate the inner scene's independence from the calculations and influences of the outer scene. The random is freedom, even. Not this apparently automatic conversion of boredom and limited choice into rapid, deep "love."

More than Austen's other novels, *Persuasion* engages directly with the specifics of history, and there is a hint here of the speeded-up, coarsened world of war. The market on octane, strange, shifting imbalances of supply and demand, shortages and surpluses, a sexual seller's market, impulse buying, a flight from long-term thinking. Anne Eliot's mother is dead and her father is too selfish to care, so parental control is exercised by a family friend, Lady Russell. This too is part of the moment, showing something amiss—this absence of effective fathering is a sign of the times. More to the point, perhaps, as ineffective fathers do occur elsewhere in Austen novels, is the absence of any effective replacement for such fathers. Lady Russell persuades Anne to reject Captain Wentworth, mainly for fiscal reasons. Wentworth goes off to sea again, offended. Anne sinks into loneliness, rejects other men Lady Russell champions, loses her bloom, suffers, is exploited by her family. Years pass. As Austen comments, she "learns romance" (IV.21).

Romantics justly enough accuse arranged marriage of being a market transaction amongst parents, usually fathers trucking in daughters, for financial or social gain. But then the same critique is leveled at those who truck in themselves, arranging their own marriages for such reasons—the quote from Hardy above is an example. Romantics require, at least in principle, that the true souls, the Annes and Wentworths, immolate themselves in their contingencies. If Anne's gentility, for example, with so impecunious a husband, would most certainly be destroyed in an onslaught of children and poverty, Romantics profess not to mind this, to the degree they admit it as a possibility. He never loved, who planned ahead.

Austen's earlier novels have made abundantly clear the folly of such principles—the misery of Fanny Price's mother in *Mansfield Park* is an obvious result of them.(13) Sense trumps sensibility. Life is hard in any case, but stoical practicality is best—in the other novels there is no apparent prospect that the Romantics, en masse, might be able to change the whole equation, bend the market to their collective, spontaneous will. But *Persuasion* cannot quite bring itself to acknowledge the complete emptiness of the Romantic posture, or of its potential power.(14) Its terms must be restated, though. The choice, Austen's last novel implies, is not so much between a brutalizing market and sacrally pure inner authenticity, as

between a debased sacral authority and the first stirrings of meritocracy.

Because Wentworth turns out rather an expert sailor, as various French (and perhaps American) captains discover to their rue. In the semi-privatized military of his day, he exploits the Napoleonic cataclysm to get rich quick. Military prowess, as Gans has noted, is the earliest field in which rival centers of value can emerge.(15) War ever after retains its potential to accelerate market development. And Romanticism depends, we must also surmise, on expanding economies, of every sort.

If a Wentworth's inner superiority can manifest itself in enemy captures, a fortune of twenty-five thousand pounds and upward mobility in the English class system, is there scope for an Anne too in this changing world? But for her, for a woman of her moment and situation, the dramatization of the inner scene's place in public cannot be vocational. She has *been* proving her superior competence, as nurse and general organizer and sustainer of her crumbling family. This has been noticed, too, and credited. But it is not enough. Wentworth has returned, newly moneyed and eligible. It seems he may no longer be interested. Other choices beckon. In the climactic scene of the novel, Anne makes a public speech, within his hearing if not directly to him. "It would not be in the nature of any woman who truly loved," she claims, given a conversational opening, to abandon her object of affection. "We certainly do not forget you, so soon as you forget us" (XXIII.155).

She continues for the better part of three eloquent pages. For all its neo-classical balance and restraint, for all its being the least overtly victimary of plaints—Anne carefully gives men credit where due, hardly hints of injustice in the disposition of things, is to the end politely respectful of the mores of her society—still, this is unmistakably a paean to the authenticity conferred by inner suffering. She's no Lord Byron, doubtless, but this is the speech of a Romantic.

It is also a marriage proposal.(16) Wentworth feverishly scribbles his acceptance, furtively slips her the note. Hers is public, his private. Even if, to be fair, hers is not fully understood in its public assertion and his certainly *will* be, in the usual ceremonies and distribution of property. Nonetheless, the great field now for an Anne Eliot is this: making a love-choice for marriage. Claiming for her sexual desires—or perhaps more precisely, for their sphere of operation—a radical autonomy in the world.

It remains fully to account, however, for the pervasive cast of melancholy much observed by readers of this beautiful novel. Anne's sadness, her long loneliness are perhaps more memorable than her ultimate felicity, and this, finally, may be the most interesting thing about *Persuasion*.

Rather than have recourse to standard-issue ideas of Romantic melancholy or agony, to

Byronic posturing and so forth, we might want to continue to focus on the predicament of sexual desire in an emergent market situation. Again, this really is the novel's issue. Let us freely grant Romanticism some of its premises by stressing the "emergent," with all attendant inefficiencies, ambiguities, uncertainties and discomforts—they're still with us, undoubtedly. (Perhaps indeed no market can ever be said to have fully emerged, even if some have emerged further than others.) Still, in an *emergent* market, emerging gradually from a system of ritually established values and curbs on the free operation of desire, and however the Romantic imagination itself may find it gratifying or useful to characterize such a market's harshness, one is more likely, finally, to encounter *persuasion* than *prohibition*. Austen's title presages a long litany of "social pressures" and "stigmas" and "guilt trips," the lamentable warping of else-wise bilateral desires by the hellish gravitational influence of other people. But thus, at the same time, it hints at the weakening of ritual controls, and at a certain ominous passing of accountability to the desiring ones.

Anne does feel guilty—not that this is the end of it. She feels guilty with regard to Lady Russell, and to Wentworth, and to herself. For much of the novel her own potential happiness sadly reproaches her—as it would of course *not* have done if her father had locked her in a room, or dragged her weeping to a sacrificial altar of some sort. Not that such fathers were ever more than a mixed blessing, but they did provide a certain kind of stability. The Romantic emancipation from the obligations of the public scene confers new obligations, or say, awakens new imperatives—then tends rather to*abandon* the poor, freed slave of self, to flux and ambiguity, to fending for *it*self in a daunting field of possibilities some indeterminate proportion of which are generated from within, by the self's own behavior.

Of course, there is more to it than this. It's too familiar and simple, this crazy-from-too-much choice diagnosis. Anne and her creator are strong enough never to be caught singing along with Leonard Cohen's Joan of Arc:

> I'm tired of the war
> I want the kind of work I had before:
> A wedding dress, or something white
> To wear upon my swollen appetite.(17)

Nonetheless, to be subject to persuasion rather than control does make more difficult, more acute, the discomforts of the market participant who must weigh such rhetoric and those who utter it not so much *against*—as in the pure Romantic ideology—as *amidst* the intensifying and somewhat cacophonic representations importuning her even in the well-regulated fastness of English gentry-land. Anne finds she absolutely must make discriminations, must make her separate peace, even after the pragmatic issues have been resolved. "I have been thinking over the past," she tells Wentworth, once their renewed

engagement has been announced and approved by everyone, including Lady Russell, “and trying impartially to judge of the right and wrong, I mean with regard to myself; and I must believe I was right, much as I suffered from it”(XXIII.164).

She *must* have been right to allow herself to be persuaded, she means, even if she now believes that Lady Russell was wrong. One might scoff at such views as incoherent, a self-contradicting conservative nostalgia, timidly unwilling to confront the implications of its own deepest desires. But this would be a bit hard—we’re all entangled in such contradictions. So is Romanticism itself. Anne believes she was right to listen to Lady Russell partly because of her *sincerity*—that is, the authenticity of her own inner scene—because of her ultimate disinterestedness, her desire for Anne’s well-being. If one loses one’s belief in the *selfishness* of the prohibitive Other, what grounds remain by which to discriminate one’s own inner scene from anyone else’s? I presume this is why so much Romantic art tends to slide into melodrama as the nineteenth century wears on—melodrama, with its stark oppositions between oppressive society and transcendent individual and other such comfortingly stable discriminations. The “victimize[d] superior individual,”(18) otherwise, starts to look neither superior, nor victimized, nor for that matter individual. Now, Anne Elliot unquestionably *is* all three of these things. But neither she nor Austen is entirely happy about it. Austen, for example, commented disparagingly on her heroine’s excessive goodness.(19) From the perspective being developed here, though, this is perhaps a pleasing feature of her last novel, as is the discomfort it illustrates and creates. Elizabeth Bennet, the brilliant and never truly nonplussed heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, seems much more a fantasy. *Persuasion* is wrestling with issues more germane to the future, to us. Us the intuitively good, trying to decode the implications of that goodness for our own clashing desires.

One other discomfort of the market world highlighted by the novel is the way *time* works in it. This can perhaps be put quite succinctly, although much more could be said. Desire, which in *this* world is instantaneous, encounters nothing but delay. In the pre-market world, to generalize the difference, desire itself is delayed, but fulfilment, once permitted, is closer to instantaneous. Hence earlier marriages in the latter, heavy use of veils, restriction of carnal knowledge until the wedding night and so forth. Anne’s sufferings, by contrast, belong with Petrarch’s. It is to say nothing new to note that the market world is a world of longings, of desires produced faster and more variously than they can ever be satisfied. In the sexual domain, serial monogamy only temporarily dams up the flood of market desire—although for such respites we remain grateful, one trusts. But if only Lady Russell had been able to persuade Anne not to *want* Wentworth!

Moment Three – Wordsworth and Lucy

William Wordsworth is a great Romantic who, rather unusually, says fairly little about romantic love. But if we visit him for our purposes, it’s not because we think he’s hiding

something. Biographically, his secret came out a good while ago—a passionate liaison in Revolutionary France, an illegitimate daughter, a prospective marriage destroyed by war. We choose him because he helped develop one of the most persuasive and lasting strategies of defiance to the market, making him a considerable market success, of course, but also quite rightly attracting our attention to the details of that strategy. Anything he says, or doesn't say, is of interest.

And of course he does produce some quite significant poems about love: the "Lucy poems."

The Wordsworthian inner scene, the "egotistical sublime" as fellow-Romantic John Keats famously called it,(20) in potent alliance with a fundamentally benign natural world, has enriched and continues to enrich many lives. Mainly English-speaking lives, no doubt, and of course we may concede the primacy of Rousseau and the plurality of natural prophets. Granting these parameters, what the Wordsworthian scene or strategy provides is a path to respite from desire and resentment in a contemplation of nature clearly enough extended from earlier aesthetic models, in the calm of which may be fashioned an identity capable of returning to social interaction with a reduced measure of rivalry and an enhanced one of sympathy—the capacity to hear "the still, sad music of humanity."(21) This is worked out with sufficient explicitness, especially in his masterpiece, *The Prelude*, as almost to render unnecessary the current author's habitual reference to Gans's diagnosis of the "constitutive hypocrisy of Romanticism."(22)

But can sexual desire be compatible with such sympathy? Wordsworth is too good a poet to suppress this question in the interests of his greater vision. He does not retreat, as others might have done, to pastoral pieties—he clearly acknowledges the creep of market choice even into the Lake Country or other such fortresses of authenticity.

She dwelt among th'untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love.

A Violet by a mossy stone
Half-hidden from the Eye!
—Fair, as a star when only one
Is shining in the sky!

She *lived* unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her Grave, and Oh!
The difference to me.

Those who do not know or praise or love Lucy, who do not register her death, are everywhere in this exquisite poem. Silent rivals, vanquished rivals one might have thought, were it not for the association of Lucy's isolation, the speaker's solitary appreciation of her, and her "ceasing to be." This is surely as beautiful an evocation of love's desire to be free of the market as anyone has written: the beloved, "fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky!" But of course it betrays its own insecurity—fair *because* the only one visible. And even more, in the pregnant phrase, "the difference to*me*." Has Lucy's role in her lover's struggle for identity in a plural world cost her life? Even or especially in sorrow, it apparently *has* delivered difference to him.(23)

An early Gans Chronicle provides this statement of the fundamental paradox of love: "Were my love's aim fulfilled and my beloved rendered invulnerable to death, the scene of my love would vanish."(24)

This may lead us on to another poem in the sequence:

> I traveled among unknown Men,
> In lands beyond the Sea;
> Nor England! did I know till then
> What love I bore to thee.
>
> 'Tis past, that melancholy dream!
> Nor will I quit thy shore
> A second time; for still I seem
> To love thee more and more.
>
> Among thy mountains did I feel
> The joy of my desire;
> And She I cherished turned her wheel
> Beside an English fire.
>
> Thy mornings shewed—thy nights concealed
> The bowers where Lucy played;
> And thine is, too, the last green field
> Which Lucy's eyes surveyed!

Here, the scene of his love has *not* vanished—indeed its beauty, its meaning, like his Englishness itself, is guaranteed, against the myriad unknown men, by Lucy's retrospective and permanent vulnerability. This is a profoundly tender poem, and profoundly asymmetrical—deeper than the male-female asymmetry, but significantly parallel to it here, is that between the living and the dead. But the tenderness and the meaning, again, are

dependent on absence. Lucy's absence, and the absence of others, of the whole "melancholy dream" of otherness, one might even say.

Although the order of their composition is uncertain, any successive reading of these poems strengthens the connection between the poet's social monopoly of Lucy, and her corollary association with, indeed, domination by his ultimate ally and rival, the truly heedless model, the coldly tender seducer, Nature.

> Three years she grew in sun and shower,
> Then Nature said, "A lovelier flower
> On earth was never sown;
> This child I to myself will take;
> She shall be mine, and I will make
> A Lady of my own.
>
> "Myself will to my darling be
> Both law and impulse: and with me
> The Girl, in rock and plain,
> In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
> Shall feel an overseeing power

Space lacks to quote the whole poem.(25) The final two stanzas:

> "And vital feelings of delight
> Shall rear her form to stately height,
> Her virgin bosom swell;
> Such thoughts to Lucy I will give
> While she and I together live
> Here in this happy dell."
>
> Thus Nature spake—The work was done—
> How soon my Lucy's race was run!
> She died, and left to me
> This heath, this calm and quiet scene;
> The memory of what has been,
> And never more will be.

Ally against the social world, making Lucy what *he* could never hope to make her, a Nature Child immune from mediated desire. Rival, though, denying him anything but her memory,

and the natural scene forever qualified by her loss.

Clearly, Wordsworth understood he was wrestling with paradox. We need not quote all of "Strange Fits of Passion Have I Known"(26) either to appreciate the power of this poor, merely human lover's sense of his own culpability in these effects. Because, without his own only too jealous desire, and the rivalries it thus contains within it, would she not have been safe? This, Wordsworth seems to say, is the dread truth *all* lovers know. The first and last stanzas:

> Strange fits of passion have I known:
> And I will dare to tell,
> But in the Lover's ear alone,
> What once to me befel.
>
> . . .
>
> What fond and wayward thoughts will slide
> Into a Lover's head—
> "Oh mercy!" to myself I cried
> "If Lucy should be dead!"

This sense of implication—no longer wayward but inexorable—even more famously and beautifully informs the great quatrains:

> A slumber did my spirit seal;
> I had no human fears:
> She seemed a thing that could not feel
> The touch of earthly years.
>
> No motion has she now, no force;
> She neither hears nor sees,
> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
> With rocks and stones and trees.

It is doubtless risky to go much further here, with such deep material, but perhaps we might venture the observation that in some manner or other Wordsworth is encountering, and with typical honesty exploring, the difficulties his larger modeled strategy of desire encounters in the specific instance of sexuality. In such an alliance with nature—senseless rocks and stones and trees after all—the protected self, the secured identity, seems to require a dangerous degree of isolation. Gans is among other critics of the Romantics to notice the

penchant among male poets for tributary female figures, protected but at the same time diminished by the sublime poetic ego, unable to achieve an equivalent centrality of self, or even, in Wordsworth's radically undisplaced version, to sustain life itself. It is all very well, one might say, to retreat into the protection of heterosexual romance, but if one brings another living human being with one, even an unsymmetrical woman, one brings the desires of others too, implicitly, their rivalries, the market. Even if one has retreated to the high country, one brings them in imagination. Wordsworth is both unveiling and reproaching this tendency here. To imagine such security, to imagine one's love free of the touch of earthly years, is to slumber in spirit, to seal oneself off from that which gave vitality, motion, force, to such love in the first place.

As an even more imperiously Romantic and solitary lover, Byron's Manfred, has it:

> If I had never lived, that which I love
> Had still been living; had I never loved,
> That which I love would still be beautiful—
> Happy and giving happiness.(27)

Other Moments, Unrepresented

It seems rather a dilemma, although of course one may simply hold Romantics like Wordsworth and Byron incapable of the necessary humility or wisdom. Still, the embrace of the beloved's asymmetry, of her vulnerability, seems almost a screen, with them at least, for an ultimately destructive unwillingness to let go of the desire to vanquish rivals, individual or collective as the case may be—the lover herself or those whose desires flow through her. The Romantic longing to fly free of the gravity of others' desires thus rebounds upon itself, enslaves and destroys the very passion it seeks to protect. Is there no alternative, then? Perhaps, by a logic of inverse implication, one might arrive at one. A choice *not* to substitute vulnerability for desire, or to build in a stabilizing asymmetry, but rather to harness deliberately the equally mediated desires of both—a calculated exposure, one might call it, to the mediations of the world, of others, even other potential human lovers, and thus to the mimetic energy they might bestow upon the union. Might this be the half-hidden lesson of all three moments? Not celibacy or friends-with-benefits, but what we may perhaps call an *alliance* with the beloved.*Alliance:* an arrangement, merely, whereby internal competition is to some perceptible degree less intense than in the ambient market. A less-than-forceful, partial, *tactical* (not strategic) embrace, one might also construe it, of the sacral inhibition of resentment and desire. Oswald Nelvil under such a regime would need to accept his lover Corinne's continued prominence upon the Capitol, fawning Italians constantly at his dinner table. Captain Wentworth, even as he sallied forth again to prey upon French shipping, would ruefully but manfully acknowledge his own wife's having closed upon him and

persuaded him to strike his colors. And Wordsworth be induced now and again to bring Lucy up to London . . . to be admired, or not.

But of course, if arrangements of this ilk *were* to have been tried, even to have thrived, no true Romantic would ever admit to having been involved, and no Romantic art have recorded it.

Notes

1. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. 289. (back)

2. See, to begin, "Chronicles of Love and Resentment," numbers 6, 20, 31, 56, 94, 104, 109, 128, 156, and 220. http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/Chronicles_home.cfm. (back)

3. *Corinne, or Italy*. Trans. Sylvia Raphael. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Book II, Chapter 1, page 22. Italics in original. (back)

4. "9. Performing Heroinism: The Myth of Corinne." *Literary Women*. New York: Doubleday, 1976. 173ff. (back)

5. "They Just Got Married," from *Born Again*. Warner Brothers, 1979. (back)

6. *The Mill on the Floss*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980. Book Fifth, Chapter IV, page 332. (back)

7. *Love in the Western World*. Trans. Montgomery Belgion. New York: Pantheon, 1956. 45. The proto-Girardian analysis of the model-obstacle of desire is developed in the first Book, "The Myth of Tristan," 15-55. (back)

8. *Middlemarch*. New York: Norton, 1977. Book II, Chap. XXI, page 146. (back)

9. All Gans quotations in this paragraph are from "Abelard and Heloise," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* no. 13, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/view13.htm. (back)

10. Mark Shorer long ago pointed out the pervasive language of "commerce and property" and called *Persuasion* "a novel about marriage as a market, and about the female as marketable." Ian Littlewood, ed. *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*. Vol. IV. Mountfield, East Sussex: Helm Information, 1998. 393, 395. (back)

11. *A Reading of Jane Austen*. New York: New York University Press, 1976. 41. (back)

12. *Persuasion*. Ed. Patricia Meyer Spacks. New York: Norton, 1995. Chap IV, page 18. (back)

13. Fanny's memorable visit to her Portsmouth home, "the abode of noise, disorder and impropriety" pointedly reminds her and the reader of the consequences of her mother's "imprudent marriage" to her own, albeit lower-ranking sailor. *Mansfield Park*. New York: Bantam, 1983. Chapter 39, pages 316-17. (back)

14. Laurence Lerner agrees with a number of others when he terms *Persuasion* Austen's "one romantic novel: the one book in which love is not the product of gratitude and esteem. . . . [A novel] shot through not with the praise of prudence, but with that of impulse" Littlewood, ed. 438. (back)

15. *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. 240. (back)

16. Some have disputed this—for example, again, Barbara Hardy: "Anne's rhapsodic defense of woman's constancy [is] overheard by Captain Wentworth but not designed for his ears." Before Anne begins to speak, however, Austen notes her observe Wentworth pointedly listening to the conversation, and the two share "one, quick conscious look" (154). To claim that her subsequent speech is not for him is to claim for the heroine an implausible immunity to desire, a Corinne-like higher calling, and thus to give voice to the resentment of desire—and those who attract it— which has so often accompanied the rise of women to their current political and vocational freedoms. Anne, as the creation of the indisputably great Austen, must be defended against precisely the sort of aspersions made by the current paper. *A Reading of Jane Austen*: 55. (back)

17."Joan of Arc," from *Songs of Love and Hate*. Columbia, 1971. (back)

18. Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993. 167. (back)

19. Anne Elliott, Austen writes in a letter to a confidant, "is almost too good for me." Cited in Patricia Meyer Spacks's "Preface" to *Persuasion*. x. (back)

20. In a letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818. *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*. New York: Random House, 2001: 500. (back)

21. "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," line 91. (back)

22. *Originary Thinking*. 166. (back)

23. An earlier version of the poem begins, "My hope was one, from cities far / Nursed on a lonesome hearth." (back)

24. "Paradoxes of Love and Resentment," September 9, 1995,

http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/view9.htm. (back)

25. But see: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174828 (back)

26. But see: http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww146.html. (back)

27. *Manfred*, Act 2, Scene 2, lines 193-96. (back)