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NORTHANGER ABBEY, OR, THE PASSIONS OF ANTI-STRUCTURE: LIMINAL POLITICS AND POETICS IN JANE AUSTEN

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ABSTRACT. *This essay attempts a political reading of Jane Austen's* Northanger Abbey *through its treatment of Gothic imaginaries. By working through an associative coupling of social naivety and literary sensibility, it is argued that the novel articulates a counter-model of interpersonal ethics whilst implicitly staging a criticism of hegemonic values and power relations. In this context, the notion of communitas – as developed by British anthropologist Victor Turner – offers a valuable tool for the critical examination of Austen's text and historical conjuncture.*

Keywords: Jane Austen; Gothic novel; communitas; liminality; utopia.

NORTHANGER ABBEY, O LAS PASIONES DE LA ANTI-ESTRUCTURA: POLÍTICA Y POÉTICA LIMINAL EN JANE AUSTEN

RESUMEN. *Este ensayo ofrece una lectura política de* Northanger Abbey *de Jane Austen y, más concretamente, de su tratamiento del imaginario gótico. Se argumenta que esta novela articula, mediante una vinculación asociativa de ingenuidad social y sensibilidad literaria, un modelo ético alternativo, así como una crítica a los valores y relaciones de poder hegemónicos. En este contexto, la noción de communitas – tal y como la desarrolló el antropólogo británico Victor*

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Turner – ofrece una valiosa herramienta crítica para el análisis tanto del texto novelístico como de su coyuntura histórica.

Palabras clave: Jane Austen; novela gótica; communitas; liminalidad; utopía.

1. INTRODUCTION

My aim in this article is to examine the ideological implications of Catherine Morland's alleged naiveté, or at least what has been customarily read as this character's Gothic-influenced lack of touch with reality in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817). Through a set of interpersonal associations – namely, through her initial friendship with Isabella Thorpe (and acquaintance with her brother John) and later befriending of Henry and Eleanor Tilney (which ultimately climaxes in her marriage to the former), Catherine exposes two contrastive modes of sociality. One, which privileges social compliance, adherence to the hegemonic values of instrumental rationality and economic gain as they are collectively embraced by the late-eighteenth century middle-classes; and another, which steps back from this consensus and alternatively seeks refuge in the "other" scene of literature and aesthetic sensibility. Catherine's initial approximation to the Thorpes confronts her with a model of social subjectivity, an ethics, so to speak, which principally values position and status. Yet it is also through her acquaintance with Isabella Thorpe that the *other* formula of relationality, which she is then to develop in the company of Henry and Eleanor, is first tested: a *community* of aesthetic identification where the normative injunctions of the "real" world no longer apply, and where the fantastic ingredients of Gothic literature compel a parallel system of feeling and understanding.

Reading Gothic novels furnishes, in *Northanger Abbey*, the "primal scene" or even the excuse of a retreat from the pressing urges of social life. Withdrawing into one's cabinet, or, better still, sharing with another person the pleasures of reading, grants a momentary suspension of public scrutiny, a level of privacy whereby social normativity is acceptably (even ritually, in so far as a certain "ritual" quality accompanies this reading *à deux*) alienated or estranged from individual concern. Thus, what is an eminently private act of consumption provides the key to an interpersonal alliance – to a minor social formation within the overarching social structure. A shared passion for Radcliffean adventure lays the ground for intimacy, for the constitution of the first passionate attachment in *Northanger Abbey*. Indeed, the affective principle of this bond is defined in almost programmatic form by Isabella. Friendship, she claims, in a way which sets the very standards by which her behaviour will then be judged unacceptable, is not bounded by interest or calculation, but rather fleshed out, and modelled on the radical immediacy of

a steadfast attachment: "I have no notion of loving people by halves; it is not my nature. My attachments are always excessively strong" (Austen 1995: 39). The defining trait of Gothic characterisation (namely, extremity of feeling, but also psychological simplicity) is thus borrowed from the ideological universe of the genre and turned into a value of social integration: indeed a value which collides with the normative or structurally hegemonic set of social values, and which is nevertheless repositioned in the new communal arrangement of Catherine's associations (with Isabella, first, and then with the Tilneys) as originary and foundational.

I will try to demonstrate that these alliances or attachments of Catherine's, articulated as they are around Gothic imaginaries – whether literary, pictorial or architectural –, work towards a politically significant denunciation of Austen's contemporary social universe. Gothic functions in the novel as a trope, or indeed a narrative "excuse", whereby the ideological profile of a certain social paradigm is defamiliarised, confronted with the otherness adumbrated by one of its most successful cultural productions. I will furthermore argue that the strategic repudiation of society which Austen enforces (even if parodically) bears the formal traces of a middle passage: Catherine Morland, and the set of interactions which her naïve impersonation induces, can be described as a liminal figure – a figure, that is, excluded, for purposes that will become apparent, from the normative textures of social organisation. In that sense, her much-criticised dysfunctionality, her inability to relate socially at the same level that the other characters do, permits an anti-structural – that is, a counter-normative, heterogeneous or marginal – re-creation of sociality itself. This re-creation is significantly fleshed out in association: shying away from social convention, Catherine's characteristic attempts at community figure a utopian dissolution of the corrupt realities which "real" society has spawned. A new, unblemished community of equals, of readers, of aesthetes, sets out to replace it with authentic sociality, i.e. with a utopian re-creation of the world and the rules she is compelled to accept. My term for Catherine's utopian model of sociality is *communitas*, and I borrow it from Victor Turner (1969).

2. *COMMUNITAS*

Defined by British anthropologist Victor Turner (1995: 126) as the mode of social emergence instituted "where social structure is not", the notion of *communitas* implies a fundamental dimension of otherness, of estrangement or alienation from socio-symbolic normativity, associated with the liminal or middle phase in rites of passage: these are, according to Franco-German folklorist Arnold Van Gennep (quoted in Turner 1995: 94), "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age". All such mechanisms of ritual transition comprise

three phases or stages: one of *separation*, involving detachment of the ritual subject, neophyte or otherwise, from a previous attribute, state or position in the symbolic arrangement of the social structure; a second moment of *margin* or *limen* wherein the individual (or collective undergoing the ritual "passage") experiences a suspension of all features defining both his initial position *and* the state of being to which s/he is "travelling". And finally, a phase of reaggregation into the social fabric whereby a symbolic transformation has most probably been secured.

Communitas is invested with the notional attributes of an interstitial formation, a mode of sociality which – either genetically or strategically – ceases to partake of the organisational principle sustaining the social structure. With this notion, Turner seeks to highlight the generative potential of that which cannot be integrated into the positive textures of a given social arrangement – that which is, by definition, excluded from the homogeneous space of norms, pacts and openly accepted values. In saying "homogeneous", of course, we are indirectly acknowledging a complementary dimension, namely "heterogeneous", where positive sociality is glossed over in coded fashion: that is, a territory of social action and cognition where rules encounter their temporal suspension, where social pacts are "displaced" by local breaches of conduct, and generally, where the normative profile of the social body is reformulated, reinvented, and made "other". The positivity of society is suspended at those points where spontaneous aggregation, where immediacy and affectivity make themselves manifest. In other words, *communitas* arises where normalised conduct fails.

This breakthrough of a primary component in social organisation (this "bursting forth" of something which the community always already had, but managed to control, to code and ritualise into patterned and situation-bound behaviour) could at the same time be said to betray a wish-fulfilment or utopian resolution of the palpable tensions in "official" society. Turner (1995: 127) hints at this utopian dimension of *communitas* as he quotes Martin Buber for support of his formulation:

> Community [Buber's term for what Turner calls *communitas*] is the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but *with* one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*. Community is where community happens.

In Buber's inflection, *communitas* thematises the proximal element of interpersonal association regardless of institutional distinctions or discriminations: *communitas* is thus immanent to the individuals who "make" it; it does not occur in an externally imposed gesture but in the very act of association. *Communitas* is thus founded upon the energies which normative sociality represses – it is made up of the very materials which social reason would disparage as wasteful, unproductive or otherwise noxious to the ordinary functioning of institutional life.

What this para-structure (or anti-structure, in Turner's words) valorises is precisely the minimal bond – that is, the basic unit – upon which the social contract is established and which the latter then proceeds to revoke in order to become hegemonic. Turner insists that *communitas* is not an independent or evolutionary state of society, but a dialectical requirement of social structure itself, which demands it as an internal mode of negativity. In other words, "structure" (i.e. normative, positive sociality) cannot function without *communitas*, that is, without the kernel of excess – of anti-sociality – pulsing at its core. Both are genetically inter-related and dependent in a way that "[m]aximization of communitas prokoves maximization of structure, which in its turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed communitas" (Turner 1995: 129).

The social body is thus confronted, in liminal processes, with radical negativity, with the possibility of being totally other – that is, of suspending the symbolic injunction to embrace a pre-figured identity, a position or a set of attributes – with the social sanction of ritual behaviour. In this sense, the realm of being (liminal or "sacred", as opposed to secular, in Turner's ethnological emphasis) which surfaces in rites of passage can be said to offer an alter-image of society, to induce a *ritualised* (that is, socially-scripted and therefore, symbolically acceptable) "defamiliarisation" of normative values, assumptions and practices. The "realm of being" which emerges in such processes is characterised by a desertion of socially hegemonic distinctions and categorisations. The communitas resulting from liminal passages or traversals (or rather, the *communitas* which inhabits such processes) is a highly provisional re-creation of social bonds which "re-invents" sociality across its margins.

3. *COMMUNITAS* AND FRIENDSHIP

Catherine's progress to maturity is defined, as we have already announced, by her symptomatic encounter with two antithetical paradigms of feeling. Coinciding with her arrival at the fashionable world of Bath, her meeting with Isabella and her brother John confronts the young inexperienced girl with the apparent extremes of Gothic passionate idealism, on the one hand, and anti-Gothic utilitarianism, on the other. The Thorpes occupy, as it were, a central position in the symbolic economy of Bath and the school of sociality it represents for Catherine. In Isabella, she encounters that principle of association, that bond of intimacy which first signals a departure from maternal attachment. In this primal imagination of social experience beyond the confines of parental control, novels mark a bridge of intimate communication – a promise, so to speak, of adult privacy:[1]

1. In other words, a mode of interiority no longer guided by maternal vigilance or subjection.

> They called each other by their Christian name, were always arm-in-arm when they walked, pinned up each other's train for the dance, and were not to be divided in the set; and, if a rainy morning deprived them of other enjoyments, they were still resolute in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt, and shut themselves up to read novels. (Austen 1995: 36)

Isabella's reading tastes seem to backdrop and sanction her principles of interpersonal affect/conduct. First, and according to the tenor of her avowed intentions,[2] in terms of an extremity of feeling that would not allow, on account of its "purity" and Gothic heroine-style innocence, for duplicity or betrayal. And secondly, in a gesture that displaces her initial and, so to speak, programmatic character, by betraying Catherine's blind faith in her and her words. It is then Isabella Thorpe who not only introduces Catherine to a (for her) hitherto unexplored sphere of social existence, but effectively rehearses the modes and paradigms of ethicality which will govern her development throughout the novel: by declaring her wholehearted attachment to friendship, she lays the, as it were, "theoretical" foundations upon which Catherine's affective life will stand. Likewise, in betraying her friend and her own avowed system of values, Isabella unwittingly lectures Catherine on the counter-principle which rules supreme in real life. Pure innocence and duplicitous villainy are thus, in a sense, the combined modes which Isabella presents to Catherine, both in their literary, utopian form (in so far as she introduces Catherine to the genre), and in the lived dimension of interpersonal action.

The Gothic formula (the combination of innocence, practical ignorance of the workings of society and the more tortuous human mind, as well as environmental threats jeopardising the heroine's pure attachments) is tested in what we could almost term meta-narrative fashion. Catherine is thus, in a sense, the helpless heroine the narrator ironically suggests at several points, whilst Isabella ends up impersonating a mode of villainy (combining duplicity and treachery) which finally confronts them as antagonists. Hints of Isabella's untruthful embrace of Gothic innocence already occur in the early stages of their acquaintance, where Isabella is shown to be endowed with notions and ideas which wholly escape Catherine's untrained social "intelligence". Thus, it appears that the latter is taken aback by her friend's suggestion that she, Catherine, might, under certain circumstances – namely, upon meeting a man rather of Isabella's liking – come to betray her:

> '[…] I prefer light eyes; and as to complexion, do you know, I like sallow better than any other. You must not betray me, if you should ever meet with one of your acquaintance answering that description.'
> 'Betray you! What do you mean?'

2. "There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends. I have no notion of loving people by halves; it is not my nature. My attachments are always excessively strong" (Austen 1995: 39).

> 'Nay, do not distress me. I believe I have said too much. Let us drop the subject.' (Austen 1995: 41)

Catherine's reaction to the suggestion is one of utter bewilderment. She is simply not equipped with the dialectical ability or referential background to symbolise Isabella's words as part of a socially-established code of conduct.

Her lack of social know-how confines Catherine to a kind of symbolic limbo where the sole ruling principles – of ethicality, judgement, etc. – are those dictated by the Gothic convention. Both impaired and protected by her "ignorance", Catherine retreats into a realm of ideational solipsism: even if it is true that she is duped into a friendly fiction with Isabella, whereby the latter seeks to advance her position through marriage to her brother, and which signifies Catherine's first revelation of social ignominy, it is no less true that this dysfunctional quality of hers acts as a preserve against compliance with that very code of conduct. Her symptomatic immaturity, identified by the narrator as emotional self-engrossment, effects a paradoxical displacement or suspension of socially hegemonic values. It could thus be argued that Catherine's symbolic stature in the novel is that of a liminal impersonation responding to structural requirements of estrangement or distancing from ordinary normative life, and consequently introducing an element of ritual defamiliarisation of those social contents regarded as functional, appropriate or even "natural". This liminal quality is cemented both by the marginal archetypes of sociality which her allegedly "engrossed" subjectivity cultivates, and also by the properly anti-structural or anti-social nature connoted by (especially female) readers' privacies.

Indeed, an image of young sensibility-ridden middle-class women readers, presumptively isolated from their social surroundings, and deep in self-indulgent reverie, underpins what is without doubt the traumatic primal scene of eighteenth-century literacy. Bourgeois notions of privacy thus secure an especially productive ideological matrix, which both underpins the social necessities of an emergent reading culture and fosters ambiguous psychic by-products. Solitary imaginings can be perceived as problematical from the viewpoint of propriety, as well as potentially threatening to the mechanisms of normalisation instituted by the dictates of class and gender. As Patricia Meyer Spacks (2003: 10) has pointed out:

> [T]he possibility of feeling and thinking without witnesses readily evoked danger. Especially when commentators imagined young people or women reading alone, reading in privacy, they often imagined dark contingencies: uncontrolled, uncontrollable fantasies leading inevitably to disaster […] Reading was vicarious experience, which could only be undergone by individuals. But experience needed rationing, especially for female consumption […] The kind of vicarious experience generally considered most dangerous involved the imagining of other people's privacies.

Such dark contingencies constitute a clear source of social anxiety: by expanding beyond the limits of respectability; that is, by reaching – in solipsistic self-alienation through fantasy – the outside of acceptable sociality, the very legitimacy of the distinction acceptable/unacceptable is indirectly questioned and problematised. The dysfunctional subject – the young and naïve girl entering a world and a system of values she is not adequately steeped in – thus introduces a rule of estrangement whereby normal or hegemonic "reality" is confronted, from an internal point of otherness, with its hitherto unchallenged claims to naturalisation. In that sense, it is Catherine's encounter with different characters throughout the story, and more specifically, her naïve and inexperienced approach to them, which comes to reveal or expose the contradictions which each of them harbours. Her bewilderment at Isabella's petty – yet symptomatic – banter about betrayal, for example, calls our attention to a feature which would have otherwise passed unnoticed as discursively "normal" or "natural". Similarly, it is a lack of understanding of John Thorpe's social tactics which "estranges" the latter from unquestioning acceptance by the reader. His undisguised interest in the financial aspects of personal connections is exposed in conversation with Catherine, and even highlighted by her inability to conceive of such matters in equally unromantic (or, in the sense we have suggested, anti-Gothic) terms:

> A silence of several minutes succeeded their first short dialogue. It was broken by Thorpe's saying very abruptly, 'Old Allen is as rich as a Jew, is not he?' Catherine did not understand him, and he repeated his question, adding in explanation, 'Old Allen, the man you are with.'
> 'Oh! Mr Allen you mean. Yes, I believe he is very rich.' (Austen 1995: 62)

Such calculations are part of an emergent prototype of middle class "reason" according to which, private interest is promoted by all means available. "Vanity", a term which comes to symbolise many of the features of social *savoir-faire* that Catherine finds (especially through John's impersonation) disagreeable, is perhaps the semantic watershed between her initial blindness to the Thorpes' duplicity, and her ensuing identification of a core of falsity which ends up alienating her "dearest" friend Isabella from her unwavering affection. Her early unveiling of John's true nature introduces a basic yardstick of "impudence", double talk and mendaciousness which will then prove applicable to his sister: Catherine "had not been brought up to understand the propensities of a rattle, nor to know to how many idle assertions and impudent falsehoods the excess of vanity will lead" (Austen 1995: 64).

Measured against the hieratic or flat psychological – and indeed ethical – profiles offered by Gothic characters (note that Catherine's actions are often judged or compared with Radcliffean standards: her own "adventures" are tentatively mapped onto Emily St Aubin's, for example), the Thorpes and other ambiguous yet characteristically late

eighteenth-century middle-class individuals, such as General Tilney, come in for a considerable amount of criticism. In that sense, the Gothic paradigm which the novel seems to chastise for lack of adjustment to reality (that is, to the hegemonic or "ideological" system of values), offers a paradoxical glimpse on the moral authenticity (that is, the taxonomical or typological transparency of the different characters: villain, heroine, servant, hero, etc.[3]) which the world of Bath and her socially proficient relations are desperately lacking in.

In effect, the question of authenticity is characteristically apposite to the emergent Romantic mood and its quest for an original purity to which to ascribe the present virtues of any given social impersonation.[4] Catherine's acquaintance with Eleanor Tilney – which simultaneously opens a door to further contact with her brother Henry – marks a shift in the novel from the prevalent inauthenticity of the Thorpes to a new stage of Catherine's socialisation, in which interpersonal affections are finally placed above the petty calculations of selfish interest and the rhetorical twists of mendacity *à la* Thorpe.

Catherine's almost immediate liking of Eleanor stems from a recognition in her of precisely that "something" which the fashionable world of Bath is gradually revealed to be deprived of:

> Miss Tilney had a good figure […] and her air, though it had not all the decided pretension, the resolute stilishness, of Miss Thorpe's, had more real elegance. Her manners shewed good sense and good breeding; […] she seemed capable of being young, attractive, and at a ball, without wanting to fix the attention of every man near her, and without exaggerated feelings of extatic delight or inconceivable vexation on every little trifling occurrence. (Austen 1995: 54)

Miss Tilney's balanced character strikes a sharp contrast with the "excessively strong" passions avowed by Isabella. Eleanor's balance is a measure of her disregard for covert and egotistical interest; a fundamental mark, as the course of the narrative will reveal, of authenticity, which Catherine will immediately recognise as kindred to her liminal position amongst social conventionalisms and received codes of behaviour.

4. TOWARDS AN AESTHETIC *COMMUNITAS*

Catherine Morland's dysfunctionality places her, as we have seen, in a structurally anti-hegemonic position which both estranges her character from the social norm

3. It could be argued that a neat specialisation of functions or character typologies, such as that which we encounter in folk-tales, encapsulates a core of primordial simplicity synonymous with truthfulness.

4. For a sustained discussion of this notion in the broad context of the so-called Romantic age and its eighteenth-century precedents, see Berman (1970).

(initially portraying her as ignorant, naïve or self-engrossed) and achieves a critical distance from where the natural assumptions of social functioning are relativised. Her "eccentricity" with regard to the structural imperatives of sociality introduces a realm of detachment, a liminal state which offers a relatively stable – and structurally required – cancellation of normativity. Turner, as we know, identifies this modality of structural defection with the term *communitas*.

Communitas appears where the system of symbolic presuppositions, where the causal structure of social life is brought to a standstill, and a spontaneous articulation of interpersonal affects and collective energies is allowed to crystallise. Catherine's instinctual search for authentic bonds of friendship and association can be explained as an embrace of *communitas*, as a re-foundation of inter-subjectivity upon a set of principles or values (namely those markers of *authencity)* which the hegemonic norm does not recognise, or seems, at least, to have depreciated. Her encounter with the Tilneys re-awakens a sense of veracity, of truthfulness and naturalness which only the "virtual" *communitas* of novel-reading had hitherto managed to secure for her. What Eleanor – first, and then Henry – conveys is a substantial – rather than purely gestural – embodiment of those qualities which, for Catherine, effectively signal a recuperation of past values and *whole*, as opposed to duplicitous or divided, characters.

It is worth noting that the beginning of her acquaintance with Eleanor is marked by a physical substitution of Bath's rustic surroundings for the vilified urban setting of her tentative friendship with Isabella. The opening of chapter fourteen brings with it a reversal or counter-action of preceding moments in the novel where the Thorpes had commanded Catherine's attention. Chapter thirteen had already witnessed the reproachful comments advanced by Isabella regarding Catherine's "having more affection for Miss Tilney, though she had known her so little a while" (Austen 1995: 94). Catherine's reaction to such language is, again, one of puzzlement, whilst differences of character and manner between the increasingly oppositional figures of Eleanor and Isabella begin to form in her mind.

> Was it the part of a friend thus to expose her feelings to the notice of others? Isabella appeared to her ungenerous and selfish, regardless of everything but her own gratification. These painful ideas crossed her mind, though she said nothing. (Austen 1995: 94)

Against such demanding egotism, which Catherine had heretofore misinterpreted as unfailing devotion to friendship, the counter-image offered by the Tilneys introduces a salutary source of considerateness far away from the baroque excesses of civility *à la* Thorpe (whether full of pathos, as is the case of Isabella, or saturated with boorish tastelessness, in the case of John).

Her excursion with Henry and Eleanor to Beechen Cliff adumbrates a new mode of interpersonal empathy whereby literacy grows out of the socially scripted

circuit of mechanical consumption: her gentle quibbles and increasing complicity with Henry in the endearing presence of his sister, sharply contrast, for example, with her routine, and, in retrospect, essentially *inauthentic* sampling of Gothic novels in the company of Isabella. Moreover, Catherine's assumption that Henry will prove no less dismissive of the Gothic canon than John Thorpe is proven wrong. She is surprised to learn that the latter's insight into novel-reading in fact reaches beyond stereotypical gender ascriptions. Henry's knowledge demonstrates a degree of understanding and sure-footedness in literary and generally intellectual matters which comes to displace the prevalent archetypes of masculinity in the novel. Henry Tilney does not appear to partake of the hegemonic injunction to social promotion and financial gain which underpins an expanding bourgeois mentality. On the contrary, his affinity with an "old-fashioned" sense of taste, which carefully concerns itself, for example, with original – and hence, pure and uncorrupted – meanings in words,[5] pitches his ideological imaginary, so to speak, at the antipodes of Bath's mundane preoccupations.

A genuine blend of unaffected simplicity (in Eleanor) and genuine taste (in Henry) figures the Tilney siblings as a repository of excitement and naturalness – as an incarnation of all those qualities which the reified world of marriage engineering and fashionable salon show lightly dispense with. In a sense, Beechen Cliff stands for Catherine's entry into a new domain of sociality which actualises, in flesh and bone, the purity – the moral authenticity/simplicity – of Gothic fictions. As Fred Botting (1996: 7) has observed, the genre was not only an occasion for stylistic excess: on the contrary, they "presented different, more exciting, worlds in which heroines in particular could encounter not only frightening violence but also adventurous freedom". Gothic novels thus stand, symbolically, against a backdrop of instrumental rationality where egotistic advancement had apparently abolished the aristocratic virtue of foregone social schemata. As such, they come to represent a symbolic negation of the real world Catherine is forced to inhabit.

Henry's preoccupation with literacy, with the plastic qualities of the scenery, as well as his modulated disregard for political issues,[6] makes his latent aristocratism all the more patent. In a way, his distance from the *worldly*, and indeed tasteless, concerns of a John Thorpe is commensurate with the gulf separating bourgeois valorisations of self-interest and aristocratic notions of social harmony. As the

5. See the way he mocks Catherine for her expansive use of the word "nice" (Austen 1995: 96).

6. Note how conversation leads Henry from the aesthetic qualities of the countryside they are walking through to politics, which almost instantly precipitates interlocutors into silence: "Henry suffered the subject to decline, and, by an easy transition from a piece of rocky fragment […] to forests, the enclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government – he shortly found himself arrived at politics; and from politics it was an easy step to silence" (Austen 1995: 100).

Earl of Shaftesbury (quoted in Eagleton 1990: 35) had once observed in a "long-gone" past (the seventeeth-century[7]) where petty interests were still kept at bay by "good" traditional sense, a developed sensitivity to beauty is "advantageous to social affection, and highly assistant to virtue, which is itself no other than the love of order and beauty in society".

Chapter fourteen, then, marks a turning point in *Northanger Abbey* at the same time that it introduces a utopian frame of reference, that is, a modality of interaction predicated on a set of principles different from those which "civility" and "sociality" had raised to normative status. A *communitas* of aesthetic sympathies is thus to replace the rule-governed (secular, we could say in Turner's anthropological language) programme of social interaction, infinitely sullied and corrupted by financial fetishism and status obsession. Shielded by her ignorance and lack of social ability (as the narrator ironically observes, she fails to exploit her lacunae as a lure for "attracting a clever young man"), Catherine is wholly absorbed by the Tilneys' aesthetic insights and capacity to expand her social referents beyond the debilitating patterns of Bath's middle classes:

> They were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing; and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste. Here Catherine was quite lost. She knew nothing of drawing – nothing of taste. (Austen 1995: 106)

Her lack of cultural competence in these matters proves nevertheless a considerable advantage. Thanks to it, and beyond the more or less cynical reasons adduced by the narrator (namely, that "imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms" (Austen 1995: 106)), her intellectual virginity comes to enact a liminal state – according to Turner's characterisation of the same[8] – in which sociality is itself freely reinvented upon new, and arguably better, foundations. Thus, she does not hesitate for a minute when it comes to physically disparaging Bath as visually – and perhaps ideologically – incompatible with the newly discovered realm of authenticity upon Beechen Cliff: "Catherine was so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape" (Austen 1995: 107).

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7. That is, the time of "moral sense" theory, the English Revolution and a whole series of events retrospectively loaded from the standpoint of the late eighteenth-century with mythical value. See, in this respect, Edmund Burke's contrastive analysis, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), of both English and French Revolutions.

8. "The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status" (Turner 1995: 103); "liminal phenomena offer [a blend] of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship" (Turner 1995: 96).

An aesthetic-cum-ethical *communitas* is thus implicitly formed between the Tilneys (especially Henry) and Catherine Morland on the day of their countryside excursion. Her Gothic-inspired naïveté, which in the symbolic universe of fashionable society transacted as social inadequacy (or illiteracy, even), is granted a first glimpse of possibility beyond the seemingly compulsory – i.e. hegemonic – modes and rituals of socialisation and courting. The world of Bath is thus confronted, as it were, with its natural obverse. The rules of social show, of duplicity and calculation, which the Thorpes are revealed to master, fail to account for the sublime truthfulness of a landscape which towers in front of one's eyes without further sanction than its frontal (i.e. uncorrupted and genuine) aestheticism. Those urban "Rooms" in which the newer middle-classes forge their economic promotion, those spaces of normative sociality in which John Thorpe can dismiss Gothic literature as proof of his "hav[ing] something else to do" are precisely what this aesthetic compact between social dysfunctionality or "illiteracy" (as represented by Catherine) and "sensibility" (as represented by Henry, and to some extent, Eleanor) manage to estrange.

5. NORTHANGER ABBEY, OR STRUCTURAL RECOMPOSITION

Catherine's invitation to Northanger Abbey arrests the book's drift of social criticism in a way which prepares the narrative and its readers for a reinscription of marginality or liminality (that is, those elements of anti-hegemonic *communitas* valorised through the aesthetic renunciation of Bath and its ideological referents) into the social structure. In that sense, the *explosion* of anti-structural affect which the Beechen Cliff episode bears witness to, is given an "excessive" twist: Catherine's unrestrained fascination with her new friends, the Tilneys, reaches a summit of fantasmatic fruition upon her arrival at the Abbey. Her imaginative readiness for Gothic distortions of reality, which in the said episode opened the door to a utopian cancellation of compulsory sociality, is now taken to the anti-structural (that is, to the fanciful, aesthetic or "literary") extreme of dreaming up a hidden plot whereby Henry's father, her adored General Tilney, would have murdered his wife under the "gloomy" vaults of Northanger. This excessive and unacceptable flight of the same imagination which, a few chapters earlier, had *imagined* Bath *out* of the scenic picture upon Beechen Cliff[9] calls for a riposte from her fellow associate in the anti-social *communitas*, Henry, which may redress the balance necessary for narrative closure. It is evident that the latter cannot be articulated outside of social normativity, that marriage – which is soon to follow – presupposes the stage of reaggregation

9. The "imagination", that is, which had, over the preceding chapters, exposed the failings and hypocrisies of a social body infected with utilitarianism and lack of sensibility.

which rites of passage conclude with. Thus, the anti-structural component of Catherine's characterisation, and the Tilneys' affective pact with her, is, in a sense,[10] demanded by Austen's *implicit* vindication of sociality as an indispensable principle of individual maturation.

It may be worth expanding briefly on the ideological consequences deriving from this narrative contortion. Austen's unequivocal judgements on prevalent middle-class ways are disseminated throughout the novel in a way which prepares the reader to countenance Catherine's journey to maturity as a challenge to mere ideological compliance. On the other hand, the author's politics appear to rely, ultimately, on a reinscription of individuality, no matter how dysfunctional or, for that reason, utopian – i.e. anti-conventional, oppositional or liminal –, in the global pattern of social structure. In that sense, her solution, her response, to the undeniably fallen state of current affairs could not consist of a definitive embrace of the anti-social temptation. Sociality is structurally required; even if the present incarnation offers a poor archetype on which to model one's actions and interactions.

This qualification is fundamental as it spells out the – for that matter, abyssal – difference between, say, a Rousseaunian (that is, a French-radical) and a Burkean (i.e. British-conservative) analysis of the ills affecting social organisation. For the latter, the problem resides in the corrupting dynamic of historical evolution, which is generally synonymous with a wholesale dismantling of the traditional affections sustaining the social pact. The loss of a moral outlook on sociality has thus engendered a host of lowly passions where individual interest (taken in its degenerate, middle-class inflection) seems to command the primary moves of social activity. The spirit of the nation, of the collectivity, suffers from a depreciation of the immaterial traits which had given it its substance, its inalienable identity. What truly defines a social body is not the positive structure of a juridical system or state apparatus, but the *spiritual* essence which underlies and ultimately accounts for its symbolic order. According to Burke (quoted in Tanner 1986: 26-27):

> Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend. The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex and soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarise or refine us […] They give their whole form and colour to our lives. According to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them.

10. In the precise sense in which Turner pre-figures liminality and communitas as ultimately dependent on a structural reinscription.

A radical individualist approach such as Rousseau's would, on the contrary, argue that society is, by definition, inimical to the free development of individuality.[11] Only the caring, the affectionate protection catered by a maternal presence may immunise the individual from the festering poison of society:

> Man's nature is like a young tree which, by chance, has been born in the middle of a great highway. If it were left to itself the traffic would crash into its every limb, mutilate all its senses, and kill it before long.
> Tender, anxious mother, I appeal to you. You know how important it is to separate this newborn tree from the great highway, to protect it from the crushing force of social conventions! Cultivate and water the young plant before it dies; one day its fruit will reward your care. First of all, you must build a wall around your child's soul […] (Rousseau, quoted in Berman 1971: 165)

Rousseau's appeal in *Émile* to the nurturing safeguard of man's organic/natural originality is necessarily incompatible with a sanctioning endorsement (through marriage, for example, as *Northanger Abbey* does) of social conventions. The Rousseaunian image of a defenceless originary nature accosted by the socialising machine resonates with the possibility of securing *communitas* as a permanent state beyond social normativity: a state of human development ontologically liminal, and in that sense, free from the processual constraints of ritual reaggregation. Austen's ideological universe cannot conclude on the same note. Both narrative form and political programme thus agree upon the necessity of a stable synthesis between what is (social structure) and what radically, that is – in the novel's terms –, fancifully or excessively, negates it.

Henry's rebuke of Catherine's fanciful speculations about his mother's fate connects, to some extent, with the anti-hegemonic impetus which had led him to revel in the reading of Gothic novels and to expatiate on the pictorial qualities of Bath's rural surroundings: it is indirectly critical of a nation which has substituted a social reality of "voluntary spies" where "roads and newspapers lay everything open" (Austen 1995: 186) for the harmonious organicity of traditional bonds and relations. The realisation that "in the central part of England there was surely some security for the existence even of a wife not beloved, in the laws of the land and the manners of the age" (Austen 1995: 188), and other such *loaded* observations may effectively contribute to the defamiliarising effects achieved by Catherine's fanciful (i.e. romantic, Gothic or simply novelistic) conceits upon ordinary reality. However, no definitive rejection of available structures can ensue, no permanent

11. For that matter, Rousseau's English followers, amongst whom William Godwin features most prominently, would go to great (even novelistic) lengths to denounce the universally corruptive potential of social organisation as such. See, for example, Seamus Deane (1988).

liminality can be secured. *Communitas* (that of Gothic-reading, of anti-instrumental aestheticism) is scripted as a self-distancing effect *of* the positive structure, internal to it, rather than a wholesale renunciation. That is the precise sense in which Turner claims that achieving *communitas* most frequently involves reinforcing the structure – that is, the positive set of institutional apparatuses – from which the liminal formation originally signalled a defection.

It is fair to maintain, then, that Austen's overall effect in this novel is one of ideological adherence to sociality and its institutional components. This is certainly not to deny the fundamental core of utopian estrangement to which the Gothic (and in a broader sense, aesthetic, anti-social or *communitarian*) trope of opposition to normalised conduct subjects the latter. On the contrary, it is precisely thanks to this internal or structurally requisite quality of anti-social *communitas* that – what I have called – the Gothic "trope" of *Northanger Abbey* emerges in a dialectical light: fanciful excess ("Gothic imagination") is a salutary function of self-estrangement whereby the social contract is safeguarded. Confronted with *what* we *are not*, the ideological profile of that pronoun is conveniently reinforced at the same time that a utopian beyond, that a radically "other" image of the social pact, is adumbrated.

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