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A Novel Handbook
Narrative Techniques In
Northanger Abbey¹

Critics have often dismissed *Northanger Abbey* as Austen's "earliest and least perfect"²(Dwyer, 43); claiming that "it lacks the narrative sophistication of the later works"(Litz, 59). Briefly, and within the usual Gothic parody context of such opprobrium, Frederic R. Karl, in *A Reader's Guide to the development of the English novel in the eighteenth century*, suggests that the Gothic genre operated as an antithesis ". . . to the main tradition of the realistic novel in Fielding

¹My perhaps surprising choice of *Northanger Abbey* stems from two imperatives: first, I have always found the narrative to be Austen's liveliest and most neglected; second, undue focus on the Gothic parody has often resulted in a parsimonious estimation of the novel's deserved worth.

²Questions of revision notwithstanding, *Northanger Abbey* was actually begun in 1798, *after* the first drafts of both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

[and] Richardson"(237). Austen's response, particularly when we consider its conception as concomitant with the height of Radcliffean³ popularity, demonstrates something of a literary landmark. And yet this only partly explains *Northanger Abbey's* importance, for it achieves much more than simply debunking sentimental Gothic. Certainly, Austen sets out to depose the chimerical with a narrative technique that synthesises Richardson's stress on character and Fielding's omnipotent control; but Austen's realism is offered not only as an alternative to Gothic, but as the beginnings of a new tradition of realism. *Northanger Abbey* through a variety of narrative techniques, which ironically disturb the realistic flow, not only offers realism but realism in a self-reflexive light, effectively producing not only a novel but a novel handbook. *Northanger Abbey* then is, amongst other things, a discursive description of what, precisely, a novel might be and how, precisely, a novel might be read.

Perhaps the most striking narrative feature of *Northanger Abbey* occurs in the novel's opening pages: Catherine, we are

³Devendra Varma, distinguishing between types of Gothic, suggests,

. . . the School of Terror initiated by Mrs. Radcliffe, and maintained by a host of imitators, perhaps the most extensive Gothic type in which superstitious dread is aroused by constant, dim suggestions of the supernatural--as constantly explained away.(qtd Karl, 138)

told, despite initial indications, was born to be a heroine. In addition to the prolepsis created by this assertion, which effectively requires the narratee to re-examine the meaning of heroine and the kind of narrative to which she might belong, the self-reflexivity that has Catherine "in training for a heroine"(3), initially presents her memorising quotations of Pope, Gray, Thompson and Shakespeare. Her inability to write sonnets, besides offering a connotative hint of meta-narrativity, reveals both her romantic proclivities and limitations. Indeed, when we notice the examples she has gleaned from Shakespeare:

"The poor beetle, which we tread upon
 In corporal sufferance feels a pang as great
 As when a giant dies,"(4)

we discover a collection of clichés and mundane meditations. This then is the introduction of *Northanger Abbey's* primary theme: the appropriation and practice of reading skills. Catherine's misreading the real world is perhaps indicative of her sense of personal insignificance, a prospective heroine who initially welcomes her status as someone "almost pretty today"(3) with a satisfied exclamation mark. Her yearning for *heroineship* is, in effect, a desire to achieve significance, and her significance is realised not by becoming a heroine *per*

se, but rather by becoming a good reader.⁴ For the present, however, Shakespeare exists not as the *creme de la creme*, but as the prosaic skimmed off the top.

If Catherine is described in terms of textual heroines, her domain is similarly narrated in the context of novel: a world in which Fielding's *Tom Jones*--"There was not one family among their acquaintance who had reared and supported a boy accidentally found at their door"(4)--would find himself doubly orphaned; where Richardson's *Clarissa*--"she neither insisted on Catherine's writing by every post, nor exacted her promise of transmitting the character of every new acquaintance(6)--would lack a correspondent. Chapter XI's excursion to Blaize Castle quickly turns into a Richardsonian parody of abduction, though results not in an emblematic Möbius strip but in mud caked shoes. The importance of this allusion arises from the rewriting of the more likely dangers of misreading.⁵ Indeed, such allusions indicate that *Northanger Abbey* will provide something of a break with literary precedence, a prescience of,

⁴As an interesting point of comparison, Emma's own misreading stems conversely from a sense of her own significance.

⁵Prior to their departure, the caballing John Thorpe offered Catherine a yarn of thinly veiled deceptions which she failed to properly read, and with which she ultimately bound herself to misadventure.

"Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything."(*Persuasion*, 237)

Finally, Catherine's world is one barren of Gothic horror, though perhaps abounding in those of the everyday. With allusions to literature forming the exposition of Catherine's character and her world both, metalepsis,⁶ not surprisingly, is soon employed, and with auto-schediastic veracity:

. . . and shut themselves up, to read novels together. Yes, novels;--for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by the contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding--joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! if the heroine of one novel be not patronised by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard?(21)

⁶I follow Genette here in allowing metalepsis to include "the narrative figure the classics called *author's metalepsis*"(234).

The narrative metalepsis here is twofold: firstly--in the sense of author's metalepsis--the narrator becomes, now *in propria persona*, something of a puppeteer, "allowing" her heroine to read novels; secondly, although unspecified, there is interaction between the heroines of different novels.

Such subtle examples of the extra-diegetic narrator entering the diegetic universe are numerous, and the effect is both comic and fantastic:

And now I may dismiss my heroine to the sleepless couch, which is the true heroine's portion; to a pillow strewed with thorns and wet with tears."(68)

This particular example, in addition, highlights the peculiar temporal shifts which take place in such narrative strategy. Although the sense of past tense is underlined from the novel's very opening, the narrator's diegetic presence nullifies such temporal convention to the point of contemporaneity. Here we find the narrator in the heroine's world, yet simultaneously outside that world, in the act of composition someplace else, dismissing her heroine with a penmanship that Tristram Shandy might very well toast with a brimful bottle of ink.

Although the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* is, above all else, playful, there are thematic implications for the meta-narrative created by such instances of metalepsis:

The most troubling thing about metalepsis [is] that the extra-diegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratee--you and I--

perhaps belong to the same narrative. (Genette, 236)

In the context of *Northanger Abbey*, the implication seems clear: the narrator repeatedly reveals the novel as a construct, as a text that must be read analogously just as Catherine herself must learn to read the real world in which she lives rather than misread the fictional world in which she fancies. Further, and with reference to the didactic utility of literature--which we often sense in Austen's novels and which is actualised in *Northanger Abbey*--a parallel is created between Catherine's reading and our own reading of the textual world and so, by implication, of the real world. Indeed, the reader is soon implicated in the text: "Every reader acquainted with Bath may remember the difficulties of crossing Cheap-street at this point"(27). The verisimilitude, normally challenged by such narrative metalepsis, is here ironically strengthened for the simple reason that *Northanger Abbey* is all about reading, what to read and how to read.

The danger of an incessantly ironic narrator becoming irksome lead to recondite changes in narrative technique, particularly in *Emma*, *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasions*; but even here Jane Austen employs various moderating strategies. Perhaps the most delightful and endearing irony of *Northanger Abbey* stems from an almost Shakespearean use of high language for low subject:

To be disgraced in the eye of the world, to wear the appearance of infamy while her heart is all purity,

her actions all innocence, and the misconduct of another the true source of debasement, is one of those circumstances which particularly belong to the heroine's life, and her fortitude under it what particularly dignifies her character. Catherine had fortitude too; she suffered, but no murmur passed her lips.(36)

The subject of this ethical conjecture is, in fact, the want of a dance partner, though the self-reflexivity points to a need not so much for a capering companion as a new venue and definition for heroine.

The ironic narrator, however, is not always so delicately eloquent, and more drastic measures are often required. Lengthy--and ultimately characteristic--sections of serried dialogue allow the ironic narrator to etiolate, and ironic comment consequently burgeons as autocarp. This, to wax simplistic, is often achieved by the narratee's superior knowledge, revealing a secondary, usually inadvertent, meaning in the dialogue's diction. On other occasions, the narrative is entirely self-contained and self inflicted:

"You are so like your dear brother," continued Isabella, "that I quite doted on you the first moment I saw you. But so it always is with me; the first moment settles everything. The first day that Morland came to us last Christmas - the very first moment I beheld him - my heart was irrecoverably gone. I remember I wore my yellow gown, with my hair

done up in braids; and when I came into the drawing-room, and John introduced him, I thought I never saw anybody so handsome before.”(93)

Contrasting these techniques, narrative structure combined with dialogue sometimes supplies the irony, as when Isabella offers,

“Now, Mr. Morland,” for he was close to her on the other side, “I shall not speak another word to you for all the rest of the evening”(50).

The narrator, on the following page, provides conclusion devoid of ironic diction, though nevertheless making an ironic closure: “Isabella smiled incredulously, and talked the rest of the evening with James”(51). But there is one particularly startling modification to this technique: when Eleanor Tilney misunderstands Catherine’s reference to a horrid new novel, believing that social disturbance is imminent, Henry interrupts:

My dear Eleanor, the riot is only in your brain . . .
. You talked of expected horrors in London--and instead of instantly conceiving, as any rational creature would have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she immediately pictured to herself a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. Georges Fields, the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood . . . (88)

The irony here is entirely extra-textual, for Henry describes

details of the actual 1780 Gordon Riots.⁷ Again the importance of reading the real world is juxtaposed with reading fiction. When we contextualise this with the dramatic irony of General Tilney's Gothic expulsion of Catherine, we discover a narrative clearly demonstrating that there is enough of the monstrous in the quotidian to furnish realism with all the horrors it might need.

We move now to focalisation,⁸ which, although less evident in *Northanger Abbey* than Austen's other novels--*Pride and Prejudice* immediately springs to mind, where Elizabeth's ignorance of Darcy's true nature is vital to the novel's development--does nevertheless play an important role. The fusion of satirical narrator and reading instructor--". . . his manner might sometimes surprise, but his meaning must always be just"(191), as an example of the latter--tends to distance and alienate the characters from the narratee, as well as from each other: by intermittent and variable focalisation, this tendency is partially moderated. Such is

⁷The allusion is pointed out by R.W. Chapman in his "Introductory Note to *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*."

⁸Although the term itself seems self-explanatory, Gerald Prince, in *Narratology* reveals quite the reverse. For the purposes of this paper, I adopt Genette's definition which, simply stated, refers generally to a restricted point of view based upon one or multiple characters.

the case during the formative stages of Catherine's relationship with Isabella. Isabella, four years senior to Catherine, displays talents of reading a crowd which Catherine cannot match:

These powers received due admiration from Catherine, to whom they were entirely new; and the respect which they naturally inspired might have been too great for familiarity, had not the easy gaiety of Miss Thorpe's manners, and her frequent expressions of delight on this acquaintance with her, softened down every feeling of awe, and left nothing but tender affection.(18)

At this point, if we have some slight insight into the actual impotency of these powers, we are unaware of the shallowness of Isabella's true feelings, and this passage is told with a gentleness and generousness which is owed to Catherine and her present inability to read character. Although the narratee quickly finds Isabella onerous, such focalisation nonetheless lends legitimacy and credulity to their relationship.

Besides this, focalisation is also consequential to characterisation, blurring the line between showing and telling:

It seemed to her that Captain Tilney was falling in love with Isabella, and Isabella unconsciously encouraging him; unconsciously it must be, for Isabella's attachment to James was as certain and well acknowledged as her engagement. To doubt her

truth or good intentions was impossible; and yet, during the whole of their conversation her manner had seemed odd.

Certainly, this account belongs to the narrator, but the focalisation is revealed in the naiveté, and the irony of that naiveté appears, just as we saw in direct discourse, auto-dactic.

Similarly, focalisation is offered as a sympathetic and non-intrusive means of delineating Catherine's increasing abilities to read correctly: "Was it part of a friend to thus expose her feelings to the notice of others?"(75) Here we notice Catherine's uncertainty, though she is now able to question her initial perceptions.

It has been variously noted⁹ that Mr. Henry Tilney frequently offers exemplary advice normally associated with the narrator as, for example, when Henry suggests, "'Man has the advantage of choice, women only the power of refusal'"(57). If the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* provides a moral epicentre, it seems clear that Henry offers recurring oscillations; and this is often viewed as a narrative misdemeanour. If, as Genette points out, Plato's adoption of this technique in *The Republic* seems insufficient justification, we might further recollect the particular

⁹See for example Dwyer and Mudrick, who suggests Henry ". . . may come to seem himself no more than an arbitrary self-projection by the author"(50).

problems engendered by an ironic narrator virtually as manifest as character. Just as direct discourse and focalisation provides some means of moderation, so too such mimesis allows the presentation of ideas, perhaps located epistemologically within the narrator's field, to be thus disassociated and so reducing what we might term narrative stress. Concurrently, we must recall also that *Northanger Abbey* is indeed a handbook of novels and reading--and even morality: if the narratee learns, in part, such lessons from the narrator, Catherine in turn learns from Henry. Once again then we see the strong ties between fact and fiction, a parallel between the extra-diegetic and diegetic.

In addition to the conventional examples of focalisation which respond to specific problems, *Northanger Abbey* also offers particularly unusual treatment:

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard - and he had never been handsome. He had a considerable independence, besides two good livings - and he was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters. Her mother was a woman of useful

plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as any body might expect, she lived on.(1)

If we inquire who might indeed anticipate paternal abuse and maternal death--amongst all the rest--we may discover the narrator identifying himself¹⁰ with the reader of "unrealistic" or lachrymose fiction, for which Gothic is emblematic. In this respect, although the assertion might prove irregular, it seems a peculiar focalisation is here employed in which an imagined reader rather than an imagined character is the subject. Indeed, as Genette suggests, such openings are a topos of the novel, producing either an initial state of mystery or ignorance. A similar example soon follows:

It is now expedient to give some description of Mrs. Allen, that the reader may be able to judge, in what manner her actions will hereafter tend to promote the general distress of the work, and how she will, probably, contribute to reduce poor Catherine to all the desperate wretchedness of which a last volume is capable - whether by her imprudence, vulgarity, or jealousy - whether by intercepting her letters,

¹⁰Although the convention here seems inapplicable, it does at least serve to firmly differentiate between author and narrator.

ruining her character, or turning her out of doors.

Again there is the focalisation of gothic reader and a continuation of mystery derived from exaggerated expectations--Mrs. Allen's actions in respect of the wretchedness of the last volume; but now the narrator draws more zealous attention to the novel being narrated. Note also that the announcement of the description contains more lines than the description itself, and that the possibility of her causing the heroine distress is immediately negated. The self-reflexivity here then is almost emblematic of the whole novel, creating conventional expectations drawn from the focalisation of the imagined narratee and ultimately--here immediately--replacing such expectations with more rational and realistic models.

If Austen progressively abandoned her ironic narrator, the same cannot be said for focalisation; indeed, it seems that focalisation reached complete fruition in *Mansfield Park* where it became the germinate of free indirect discourse. In *Northanger Abbey*, however, it becomes a hermeneutic device fundamental to thematic development .

This unusual focalisation of romantic/Gothic reader points, of course, towards intertextuality. Although there are indeed specific allusions to other works, as we noted with *Tom Jones* and *Clarissa*, generally *Northanger Abbey's* allusions, as mentioned above, are directed towards generally perceived conventions. Dwyer is correct in pointing out that Catherine's "infatuation"(45) with Gothic, her "craving to be frightened"

resembles a "romantic crush"(46); and that both "stimulate the emotions and suppress the reason"(Dwyer, 46). And it is this potential pitfall to which *Northanger Abbey* points a critical finger. However, perhaps the most interesting--at least the most unexpected--instance of intertextuality looks towards the picturesque aesthetic.

. . . a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in everything admired by him, and her attention was so earnest, that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. He talked of foregrounds, distances and second distances--side-screens and perspectives--lights and shades; and 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.(86-87)

The eloquent command of picturesque idiom is turned ironic and foreshadows, "I do not like crooked, twisted, blasted trees. I admire them much more if they are tall, straight and flourishing"(*Sense*, 89). Such explicit diction alludes to Gilpin's picturesque treatise which, although seeming an excursion outside the novel's thematic realm, in fact offers various correlations. In terms of narrative, Bradbrook suggests Gilpin's picturesque theories provided an exemplar:

Some artists, when they give their imagination play,

let it loose among uncommon scenes--such as perhaps never existed: whereas the nearer they approach the simple standard of nature in its more beautiful forms, the more admirable their fictions will appear. It is thus in writing romances. The correct taste cannot bear those unnatural situation in which heroes and heroines are often placed, whereas a story *naturally* and, of course, affectingly told, either with pen or pencil, though known to be a fiction, is considered as a transcript from nature; and takes possession of the heart. The *marvellous* disgusts the sober imagination: which is gratified only with the pure characters of nature.(qtd. Bradbrook, 54)

Allusion to Gilpin's then is more than playfulness. Austen, as her personal correspondence reveals,¹¹ was a Gilpin aficionado and the aptness here, for all its mocking qualities, stems not merely from the narrative relevance of Gilpin's conceptions, but from the development of landscape reading intrinsic to the aesthetical theory and the reading theme of *Northanger Abbey* both. Catherine's concluding enthusiasm further reveals her mimetic tendencies: here she learns to read the picturesque scene, yet her understanding is pure imitation. If the ironic treatment generates censure, this is by no means comprehensive but directed at such

¹¹See Bradbrook's *Jane Austen and her Predecessors*.

excesses of picturesque theory, which implores the appreciation of a real scene for its likeness to art, rather than art for its likeness to a real scene; and is, in addition, a lesson from narrator to narratee that such mimetic translations are inscribed with falsehood. In addition, inclusion of such picturesque passages once again extends the range of Austin's novels to include not only the life of the drawing room, but external contemporary issues that were discussed therein. *Northanger Abbey*, then, for all its self-confessed status as a novel is supremely concerned with matters real.

Although the overall unity of *Northanger Abbey* provides a possible source of concern,¹² the division of Bath and Northanger Abbey effectively proves only another form of narrative metalepsis, a sort of geographical metonymy, for we find the same actual mendacity in both locations; and the Northanger Abbey section is actually a continued exposition of Catherine's learning to read reality.

We might note also the numerical exactness of the division between volume one and two: with only five pages variation, this is highly suggestive of a conscious and deliberate determination. The Gothic material--which, with the possible exception of General Tilney's monstrous behaviour, is largely immaterial--is not merely grafted onto a romantic narrative

¹²I make particular reference here to class discussion.

but organically develops according to fabula: Catherine, initially isolated from society, a superficial reader, is unable to read the superficiality of Isabella, who provides an introduction to Gothic romances and thus the possibility of further misreading. Indeed, the Gothic allusions form a constant sub-narrative throughout volume I, with the initial departure to Bath thus described:

When the hour of departure drew near, the maternal anxiety of Mrs. Morland will be naturally supposed to be most severe.

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Under these unpromising auspices, the parting took place, and the journey began. It was performed with suitable quietness and uneventful safety. Neither robbers nor tempest befriended them, nor one unlucky overturn to introduce them to the hero.(5-6)

In addition to the consistent Gothic subtext, an acute awareness of unity is offered close to the novel's conclusion, when the narrator informs us, ". . . aware that the rules of composition forbid the introduction of a character not connected with my fable"(204); and promptly provides the unifying link with an ironic flourish of the pen. Here the narrator offers a meta-textual awareness of conventional form. Further, the manner of this "justification" reveals once again the playfulness with which the narrator not only narrates but creates. Dwyer offers curious conjecture as one possible

source of general dissatisfaction with conceived disunity: "The title *Northanger Abbey* may not have been Austen's final choice either, for it tends to give undue emphasis to that location of the story"(51). The truth, it seems, is quite the reverse, for the title creates certain expectations which fail to be realised in a manner entirely typical of the narrative methodology: as we saw in narratee focalisation, such expectations lead to more rational and realistic transformations which underscore the necessity of careful reading.

The "curious shifts in narrative method"(68), which Litz find so awkward, is perhaps something of a prejudiced analysis depicting *Northanger Abbey* as a conclusion of juvenilia rather than a commencement of mature fiction. Adoption of narrative prolepsis, metalepsis, meta-narrative, intertextuality, parody, temporal shifts, extra-textuality, variable focalisation and, of course, irony--already an impressive though incomplete catalogue--seems to suggest a work of particular narrative skill whose richness is only matched by management. Further, these varied narrative strategies are not supplied as a smörgasbord of variety for variety's sake, but more as the smörbröd solutions to particular requirement. For all the narrative variety, for all the narrative amusement, there is above all a narrative discipline rooted in rationalism, producing a work that sparkles in its diversity;

and a rationalism which lead Sara Coleridge to relate:

. . . Mr. Wordsworth used to say that though he admitted that her [Austen's] novels were an admirable copy of life, he could not be interested in productions of that kind; unless the truth of nature were presented to him clarified, as it were, by the pervading light of imagination, it had scarce any attraction in his eyes.(qtd. Wright, 17-18)

Perhaps above all else, narrative in *Northanger Abbey* constantly reminds us of narrative, that we are involved in reading a novel. Catherine's task--perhaps to belabour the point--is to learn accurate reading of the outside world; the outside world is the inside world of *Northanger Abbey* and so the syllogism points very clearly towards a didactic design. Quite simply, *Northanger Abbey* asserts that experience in factual society and experience in the societies of the novel are two avenues of instruction, and that both should be guided by reason rather than unfettered fantasy. Narratee focalisation, which is often crucial to revealing the novel as a novel, also allows the burlesque/parody in *Northanger Abbey*; and provides a self-reflexive footnote that sunders the pages of romantic convention showing its elements as mere marks of fancy.

Finally, if *Northanger Abbey* generally receives only qualified critical treatment, we should recollect that "Austen's counter-novel is moving against an entire wave of fiction dominant in the 1780s and 1790s"(Karl, 241).

Catherine's own abandonment of Gothic, shortly matched by the contemporary reader, reveals not the limitations of *Northanger Abbey* as a novel relevant only to its time, as even Austen suggested, but its chief strength, as a novel that was right for ours. Beside outlining the kind of fiction, the kind of varied narrative, and the kind of character she will make her own, *Northanger Abbey* effectively explains away Gothic Romanticism and reveals it to be nothing more than a ghost of reality. Indeed, the "alarms of romance" and "anxieties of common life", when conflated with, "Catherine . . . in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife . . . had scarcely sinned against his character nor magnified his cruelty"(201) suggest that Austen's first novel, *Northanger Abbey*, is as clear a social animadversion as her last, *Persuasions*.

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