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Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism

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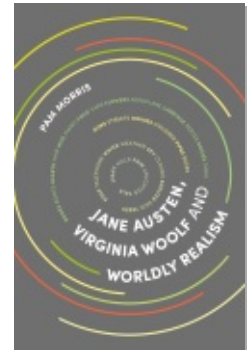
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Conclusion

In so many ways, there has been a prising away of life from place, an abstraction of experience into different kinds of touchlessness. We experience, as no historical period has before, disembodiment and dematerialisation [. . .] We have in many ways forgotten what the world feels like [. . .] We have come increasingly to forget that our minds are shaped by the bodily experience of being in the world – its spaces, textures, sounds, smells and habits. (Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*, p. 203)

What Robert Macfarlane describes here can be thought of as a redistribution of the perceptible, a turning away from the tangible experience of physical existence. Macfarlane's concern is the very modern one of the threat posed by this distancing and abstraction of our experience of the world to its ecological survival. Much earlier, at the turn of the eighteenth century, Jane Austen is also writing in reaction to this same redistributive formation, albeit still in process of emergence and consolidation. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the term 'society' retains for her the immediacy of personal interaction and shared feelings, even while its meaning is in process of change as part of the shift towards abstraction and aggregation as a way of knowing the world.

Struggles of representation as to what is noteworthy, what is above or below the horizon of visibility, are equally aesthetic and political. I have argued that both Austen and Woolf come to maturity as writers in periods of radically contested values in the eras respectively of the French Revolution and the First World War. In addition, their materialist understanding of reality and the writing practices they fashion from that understanding draw upon a tradition they share of British Enlightenment scepticism. The thinking of David Hume,

Adam Smith and David Hartley substantiated a position of dissent from what became, increasingly, a consensual aesthetic and political regime, an ideology sustaining the hierarchical ordering of the mental above the material. For both Austen and Woolf what is at stake in this disembodiment of experience is the pushing out of sight of our shared existence as creaturely beings, beings subject to the same physical needs and vulnerabilities. It is recognition of this commonality that underlies the immediacy of Mrs Jenkins's response, in *Sense and Sensibility*, to threat of hardship, 'I must see what I can give them' (p. 241). Yet already, the novel notes, this reactive sympathy is giving way to privatised gentility. In *Persuasion*, the characterisation of Anne Elliot charts the harm endured by those regarded literally as nobodies, rendered physically and socially invisible and unheard.

For Woolf, too, the common life is that felt upon the pulse and not the little individual life of the private drawing room. For Woolf, though, writing a hundred years later, embodiment has become a problem as well as a means to embrace the universe. In *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves*, the body is the site of conscription into coercive and regulatory social and cultural systems, systems that utilise idealist rhetoric to render invisible or contemptuous the material lives brought under subjection. In *The Years*, Woolf explores the force of bodily repugnance as a source of hatred and violence to any class or race or gender deemed unclean. Does increase in bodily privacy exemplified in access to bathrooms intensify feelings of distance and abstraction from the bodies of others? Eleanor practises philanthropy at a safe remove, providing housing for the poor, but the life of her servant Crosby who shares the intimacy of her home remains invisible to her. Not until Crosby leaves does Eleanor notice how dark and low the basement is; up to that moment class distribution of the perceptible has ensured the invisibility of Crosby's material existence.

Disembodiment aids the process of abstraction, whereby real lives, in the particularity of their needs, feelings, hopes and fears, become depersonalised. They become aggregates to be used as a means to achieve ideas, mental systems, the greater good. Harriet is exactly the 'something' that Hartfield needs, Emma thinks. Tenant farmers and the poor can be removed from land for its 'improvement', progress and civilisation require the 'working of hands and feet' to one disciplinary will, national well-being is served by the removal of 'superfluous youth' and a heterogeneous world is taught to see through the unitary vision of Western capitalism. From the Olympian perspective of authority, men dying in war are as

distanced and disembodied as matchsticks. The process of conversion, as Woolf suggests, renders the flesh invisible, of no account. It is, as Derrida points out, the process of idealisation itself (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 226).

Against the homogenising vision of the scopic drive, Hannah Arendt asserts the multiplicity of viewpoints that constitute a public world (Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 57). Austen and Woolf do likewise, experimenting constantly with innovative motility of focalisation. Above all, they dethrone human exceptionalism, the sovereign subject of rationality and interiority. It is this lonely being that provides the model for and credence to claims of divine, scientific, or visionary knowledge, elevating that mental totality above any challenge from empirical experience. In all three novels discussed here, Austen opposes the energy and heterogeneity of a shared world of horizontal relationships to the static uniformity and hierarchy of Olympic privilege and exclusion. Hartfield has to be integrated with Highbury if it is to become part of the processes of national change. The class-bound claustrophobia of Kellynch gives way to the variety and energy of Bath. 'So much novelty and beauty!' Anne Elliot cries in appreciation of movement and change (p. 200). She is surely speaking for most other women trapped invisible and unheard within small regulatory domestic worlds.

In Woolf's fiction, moments of shared being lead to dissolution of the competitive and individualistic self. Fleeting experiences of the world without an 'I' in it allow characters like Martin in *The Years* to lose consciousness of the boundaries of self and feel dispersed into the physical world around him. In *The Waves*, Bernard is 'unmoored' from his sense of 'I' to merge into the life of his fellow beings. In some ways, Austen's experimental writing in *Persuasion* most radically undoes the notion of the unitary self. Anne Elliot's consciousness simultaneously comprehends things (doors slamming), other people as voices and bodies, socio-cultural attitudes involved, and subjective feelings and rationalities experienced as bodily sensation. Things, others, culture and embodied self are inseparable within that compound experience. From such a full perspective any notion of privatised subjectivity seems thin and impoverished.

Things, for both novelists, constitute the shared world. Elinor, in *Sense and Sensibility*, recognises the power of ordinary things to challenge with their material tangibility the charm of wishful thinking. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus Warren Smith is released from the grip of visions when he realises that things are not symbols of a hidden, purer reality but simply the stuff of ordinary shared life.

As this suggests, things, imbued with metaphorical meaning, provide a powerful means of giving spurious substance to abstract ideas and value systems, even while these idealist forms of thought disavow the material and fleshly. Thus, guns in *Persuasion* are shown as constitutive of masculine and class identities. Powerful cars, in *Mrs Dalloway*, make tangible, for Peter Walsh, the ideal of Western progress and civilisation. In *The Waves*, the paraphernalia and rituals of cricket constitute a sense of English identity. Even subjective interiority, Austen suggests, depends upon the props of material objects. Harriet needs her 'precious things' to make tangible her romantic dream of Mr Elton; Marianne articulates a broken heart by playing the piano.

At a macro level, things produce the lived reality and infrastructure of national and global existence. Pipes and wires underneath our homes, Woolf suggests in *The Years*, are material testimony to our shared needs as fleshly creatures but equally they facilitate an increase in domestic privacy, consumer competitiveness and hence a disavowal of the shared life that encourages fellowship. Sanitary and toiletry products exported around the world take with them a Western distribution of values, converting global variety and difference into a unitary economic place. More invisibly, technology makes a reality of scopic ambition that Emma Woodhouse could not even have dreamed of. Cables and telephones already provide Louis, in *The Waves*, with the means to abstract himself from a shared world he has always feared as disorderly and perversely fleshly. He becomes disembodied authority, a voice issuing commands, to discipline the heterogeneity of embodied lives into a regulated conformity. By such material means is physical and social existence converted into the ideal of abstract schemes and visions.

Neither Austen nor Woolf is a revolutionary. They do not envisage or seek a redistribution of wealth or of social order. They articulate a redistribution of the perceptible. Sharing a scepticism deriving from British Enlightenment's quarrel with idealism, and from their outsider's view as women, they challenge the pervasive consensual orthodoxy that privileges the mental above the material. In particular, they reject the rhetorical elevation of abstract systems and beliefs that veil over fleshly needs and vulnerability and the shared life such recognition fosters. As such, their critique is not of any one particular vested interest or class or location of power. What they recognise is the danger inherent in one of the most basic impulses shaping human thought: idealism. The capacity to look beyond the restrictive codes of the actual and probable is vital. Without the power to

imagine, both writers show, human life would be enclosed and mean. Their fiction is energised by their worldly vision of the wide possibilities of human existence. Yet any vision or system of belief needs the constant challenge of empirical realities lest it convert ‘all this fever of living’ into a depersonalised abstraction. It is the enduring temptation and danger of rendering the stuff of material existence imperceptible that makes the critiques of Austen and Woolf so continuously relevant and never more so than at present.

The experimental writing practices they develop to convey their oppositional views, I have termed worldly realism. As opposed to the idealist sanctioning of individualism in much psychological realism and the restrictive actualism of social realism, worldly realism evokes horizontal, interactive, mutually determining relationships between embodied people, things, social world and physical universe, an egalitarian writerly space in which potentially nothing is mute or invisible. It is an approach to Austen’s fiction that recognises the grounds and the achievement of her artistic radicalness. Am I also suggesting that Woolf is a realist rather than a modernist? These are not mutually exclusive aesthetics. As Brecht said, we do not have to position them as binary oppositions. Literary criticism should perhaps heed Woolf’s condemnation of the adversarial mentality of the public school ‘where there are “sides”, and it is necessary for one side to beat the other’ (*Room of One’s Own*, p. 80). Far from adversaries, Woolf and Austen share an experimental energy that produces new representational regimes that expand the perceptibility of all aspects – hair, dirt, tides, clouds, laughter and poetry – of material existence. Against coercive orthodoxy, they demonstrate the liberating blasphemy of mocking irreverence.