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The Silence of the Bertrams

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> “Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?"
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> "I did and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther."
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> "And I longed to do it but there was such a dead silence!"

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Lionel Trilling's 1954 essay on Mansfield Park has played an important part in shaping modern opinion of the novel, in helping to define its greatness and to identify what Trilling termed "its power to offend". Trilling had much to say about the significance for Jane Austen of "profession" and "duty", and why the amateur theatricals in the Bertram household were regarded as so reprehensible. Forty years on, attention has returned to Mansfield Park in a way which Trilling would never have anticipated, "its power to offend" now overshadowed by a different power. Recent accounts (by Edward Said, for example) have placed the novel in the canon of colonial fiction, with slavery, literal and metaphorical, at its heart. This line of interpretation, which seems likely to become established, is distinctively and ambitiously historical. Its plausibility depends very considerably upon the accurate dating of events within the novel and in the world contemporary with its story. Unfortunately, to everyone's disadvantage, despite much guesswork and many calculations, the chronology of Mansfield Park remains an area of misunderstanding. Equally, there is general misunderstanding about the circumstances of the slave trade and its abolition, an issue central to the slavery/colonial approach; and without a firm historical base, any attempt at historical interpretation is liable to run aground.

But when we return to the text, we find that this confusion is entirely needless. We are able to pinpoint the course of events, not from the vague "About thirty years ago" of the opening, which is no more than a glance backwards at the antecedents of the story proper, but from a single reference in Chapter Sixteen, the chapter in which Edmund visits Fanny in the East room seeking her approval for taking the part of Anhalt in Lovers' Vows. On the table are some books, "her books of which she had been a collector from the first hour of her commanding a shilling". Edmund looks at three of them: Macartney's Journal of the Embassy to China (1807), Johnson's Idler, and Crabbe's Tales (in full, Tales in Verse), published in September 1812. In the next chapter, Sir Thomas surprises the household with his sudden and unannounced return from Antigua. In the strained atmosphere of the family gathering that

follows, Tom tries to delay his father's discovery of their rehearsing Lovers' Vows and rattles on about the pheasant-shooting and the wretched weather they have been having that October.

So Jane Austen fixes the month and year of Sir Thomas's return as October 1812. October 1813 is theoretically possible, until we calculate that this would put the end of the story at mid-1814, about nine months after Austen had completed the novel; and it is highly improbable that she would use a time-scheme setting the final section of the story in the future. With October 1812 as the known point, the reader can work backwards and forwards in the story to construct a time-scheme for the main action of just under three years, within which fall six key events: Sir Thomas and Tom leave for Antigua about October 1810; Tom returns about September 1811; Sir Thomas writes home, April 1812; Fanny in possession of Crabbe's Tales, published September 1812; Sir Thomas returns, late October 1812; Edmund turns to Fanny, summer 1813.

The 1810-13 chronology makes sense in every way; and it provides the right slot for Tom's reference, in September 1812, to the "strange business" in America, ie, what he would have read and heard by now about the outbreak and early events of the Anglo-American War a "strange business" because the United States declared war on Britain on June 16, unaware that Britain had already dropped the Orders in Council which restricted American trade with Europe and authorized the searching of American ships for British deserters, the cause of the dispute.

To confirm the novel's chronology is not simply a pedantic exercise. With the advent of slave and colonialist perspectives, the dating of the story becomes important to our understanding of Mansfield Park, since the Bertrams are financed by the income from their Antigua estate and Sir Thomas takes his journey there in an attempt to halt its decline successfully, as it turns out. Although these circumstances play a significant part in the first half of the story and resonate throughout the novel, traditional accounts of Mansfield Park have ignored the purpose of Sir Thomas's voyage (some describe it, using Austen's own word, as merely a visit on "business") and have treated the journey as no more than a device to get the head of the family out of the way and allow the young people to run wild. But to accept the historical force of Austen's portrait is to view Sir Thomas not just as a patriarchal English country gentleman but also in his "colonial" role as an absentee plantation owner, in Parliament an active member of the West Indian lobby, now compelled by "some recent losses on his West Indian Estate" to return to Antigua and (as we may suppose) take over the running of the plantation from the resident manager and restore it to prosperity. "Fat managers and lean employees" was the uncomfortable adage current on the island.

A variety of datings has been proposed for the action of the novel, some of which open up wholly misleading lines of interpretation: 1803-06 or 1805-07 sets Sir Thomas's visit just ahead of the abolition of the slave trade in 1807; whereas 1808-09 or 180810 give us post-abolitionist readings. Equally, in Chapter Twenty-One, Fanny's "slave trade" question to Sir Thomas carried a very different significance in 1812 than it would if asked in earlier years. It was a question which Fanny wanted to follow up with others. But she was deterred from doing so by the "dead silence" that followed, her cousins "sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject". We are left to wonder about Sir Thomas's reply. Charitably, we can suppose that he answers Fanny fully and to her satisfaction. But Jane Austen glides over the point, leaving it wholly unresolved, perhaps even weighing the balance against him. A moment earlier, Fanny has been telling Edmund how she loves to hear Sir Thomas talking of the West Indies, how she "could listen to him for an hour together. It entertains me more than many other things have done." Earlier, Sir Thomas was "communicative and chatty … as to his voyage". Now, the "dead silence" hints that his loquacity may have dried up at the

mention of slaves. As if to underline the point, Austen later restores Sir Thomas's animation when he comes to talk to William Price about "the balls of Antigua", a recreation that the young midshipman may also have enjoyed on his West Indies tour of duty.

The precise interpretation of this scene of Fanny's questions, asked and unasked, of the "dead silence", of the cousins' "seeming" absence of interest turns crucially on the issue of dating. Some critics fasten immediately on Fanny's reference to the slave trade and conclude, over-hastily, that her question to Sir Thomas must have been put before the Abolition Act became law in March 1807. But this is to misunderstand the historical situation. The Act came into force in two stages: from May 1, 1807, no ship with slaves on board was permitted to sail from any port in the British Empire unless legally cleared before that date; and from March 1, 1808, no slaves were to be landed. By the letter of the Act, for Britain and its overseas possessions, the slave trade was ended: "hereby utterly abolished, prohibited, and declared to be unlawful". Declaration, of course, is one thing, enforcement another. This branch of commerce, recognized, sanctioned and encouraged for 250 years, now went underground.

It was a trade that the African patrol was unable to stop. The naval presence was laughable: two elderly vessels, a frigate and a sloop, facing the slave outlets along 3,000 miles of coastline, and behind them the vast extent of the Atlantic sea lanes. Four more ships were added to the patrol in 1810, to some immediate effect. But deterrent policing was only possible years later, when the Navy was clear of its involvement in the American and Napoleonic wars and when the Admiralty, for centuries protector of the Islands, was sufficiently persuaded of the abolitionist cause to enforce the blockade wholeheartedly. A further immediate weakness lay with the Act itself, since trading was treated there as a contraband activity and carried penalties no heavier than confiscation and fines. Punitive as these costs could be, profits were so high that traders were prepared to risk capture. Even when losing two out of three of their ships and human cargoes, they could still come out with a profit. Four years later, in 1811, in an attempt to clamp down on the continuing traffic, the Slave Trade Felony Act was introduced. This made trading a crime, carrying a penalty of up to fourteen years' transportation. Its net was cast wide, applying to British subjects trading anywhere in the world and to traders of any nationality operating within the British Empire. In part, this was directed at British slave-dealers trading under neutral flags of convenience. This was a device employed well before 1807 and used by traders to avoid the Acts of 1789 and 1799 regulating the number of slaves according to the ship's weight and dimensions, humanitarian measures which cut into their profits. The Felony Act closed further loopholes and increased existing penalties. The severity of these measures had some effect. But since the demand remained "buying is cheaper than breeding" was a mainstay of planter wisdom the trade persisted.

As a further step, the abolitionists then persuaded the government to introduce the compulsory registration of slaves, beginning with Trinidad, under an Order in Council of March 1812. The registration, conducted in 1813, seemed to make their point. The returns indicated a sharp growth in the slave population from just over 21,000, as recorded in a recent census, to almost 26,000. The abolitionists were also concerned by the increasing traffic of other countries. Supported by British capital, Spain and Portugal were trading actively; and the United States was to maintain a flourishing trade right up to the Civil War. The Africa Institution was established immediately after the 1807 Act with a twin purpose: to "promote" the "civilization and happiness" of Africans, and to "promote the abolition of the African Slave Trade by Foreign powers". Almost at once, however, it was forced by events to turn its energies to breaches of the British abolition, while the foreign trade and Africa took second place.

So when Fanny ventured to put her question to the slave-owning Sir Thomas in October 1812 the date Austen so evidently signals to us the "slave trade" was still a burning issue, a persistent and horrifying scandal, debated in Parliament and extensively reported and discussed in the newspapers and periodicals. Pamphlets describing "recent slave trade atrocities" continued to circulate, and abolitionists voiced their indignation and repugnance even more vehemently. The campaign was also waged in the periodical press, notably in the Edinburgh Review, urging the strict application of the Abolition and Felony Acts and ensuring that the public was informed of slave atrocities in the West Indies and elsewhere. Appalling as conditions had been on the slave-ships before abolition, totally unregulated they were now even worse.

The planter cause was carried in the Quarterly Review, founded in 1809, and in pamphlets which revived all the old arguments in defence: for the benefits it conferred upon the Africans, for the fulfilment of Gospel precepts, for the support of a West Indian commerce essential to the mother country. This is the pressure of history on Mansfield Park. It enables us to understand why the "traffic in human flesh" (the abolitionist term, which Austen later uses in Emma) was a sensitive subject, unmentionable in the home of Sir Thomas Bertram; and unmentioned, too, until Fanny was courageous enough to raise it, a breaking of the taboo met instantly with a confounding "dead silence".

For the characters and circumstances of her story, Jane Austen did not have to look far. The slave connection was to be found in the immediate history of her own family. In 1760, Jane's father, the Revd George Austen, was appointed principal trustee of a plantation in Antigua, a fact unmentioned in the family biographies and memoirs. During Jane Austen's lifetime, the full abomination of slavery struck the nation's conscience and the "harshness and despotism" of the plantation owners and their managers were reported back to the family by Francis Austen from his experience of naval duty in the West Indies. A silence not unlike the "dead silence" at Mansfield Park may have begun to gather over Mr Austen's West Indian connections connections which extended deeper into the household. The owner of the Antigua plantation, James Langford Nibbs, a former pupil of Mr Austen at Oxford, stood in 1765 as godfather for James, the eldest Austen son.

Like Sir Thomas Bertram, Mr Nibbs had a spendthrift elder son, James junior; and like Tom Bertram, James junior was taken off to Antigua by his father to detach him from his "unwholesome connections". In this circuitous way, the Austens too had a dependence, however slight, upon the prosperity of a plantation in Antigua; and events similar to the Mansfield Park story would have become known to Jane Austen in her childhood. Like many planters' sons, James Langford Nibbs was sent home from the West Indies for education and gentrification. He aimed to set himself up as a propertied English gentleman, and began the process with a grant of arms in 1759, crowning the elevation of the Nibbs family with a country seat in Devon, where he died in 1795. Could this be the story, typical of West Indian advancement in the mother country, that Jane Austen drew on in portraying the Bertrams in their "modern-built house"? There is something distinctly "modern-built", nouveau and West Indian about Sir Thomas and his social standing, a point worth making since some commentators wholly misplace Sir Thomas, writing about him as a member of the old and established landed gentry who bears an ancient title. It is not only Mr Rushworth's Pounds 12,000 a year and his large estate that make him such a catch for Maria: "It was a connection exactly of the right sort", an "alliance" with the old-established gentry, the Rushworths having lived for centuries in "their ancient manorial residence", "a marriage which could bring" Sir Thomas "such an addition of respectability and influence".

Alerted at the very opening of the story to Sir Thomas's overseas interests, his "West Indian property", Jane Austen's readers would recognize his type immediately: not at all the character "West-Injine" fresh from the Caribbean vulgar, flamboyant, free-spending and high-living sneered at by the King, the court and the Tory gentry, the detestation of Cobbett and the delight of satirists from Hogarth and Smollett onwards but a Mr Nibbs, a second-generation absentee, set on rising above and obscuring the origins of his wealth; on giving his sons, via Eton and Oxford, connections and a gentleman's education; and on securing further connections and alliances through the marriage of his daughters, and through the marriage of Fanny Price to Henry Crawford. Students of patronage will also understand Sir Thomas's doubts whether his influence will run as far as obtaining a commission for Fanny's midshipman brother. In 1812, with the economic importance of the West Indies in decline, the extent of Sir Thomas's "interest" was in decline too. The portrait is subtle, deeply grounded in observation, and to see Sir Thomas in this character helps us to follow what part the Antiguan associations have to play in the comedy and in the darker side of Mansfield Park.

When Nabokov was preparing his lecture on Mansfield Park given to American students in the 1940s and 50s, he drew maps of England, marking the towns and counties mentioned in the story and tracing out the routes and distances travelled by the characters. He made plans of the rooms of Mansfield Park and the dozen or so areas Jane Austen specifies in her description of the gardens and grounds at Sotherton. And he laid out an extensive (if incorrect) chronology of the story itself. All this, Nabokov claimed, was the "exact information about details, about such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead". It was the compilation of this "exact information" which led him to describe his course of lectures as "a kind of detective investigation of the mystery of literary structures". The true chronology of the story is surely one of the items of "exact information" which can yield a vital clue in the "investigation" of Mansfield Park and lead the reader towards the penetration of its "mystery".

Edward Said gives us an Austen world of altogether different dimensions. In Culture and Imperialism, he views Mansfield Park in a global perspective, embracing the Mediterranean and India as well as the Caribbean, locating the house itself "at the centre of an arc of interests and concerns spanning the hemisphere, two major seas and four continents". It is a wide and exciting prospect, as stimulating as Nabokov's loving attention to fine detail, inviting us to consider Mansfield Park in the colonial aspect of its world setting. Physical and commercial geography here go hand-in-hand with moral geography. Between the household of Mansfield Park and the plantation on Antigua, Said finds a relaxed and balanced articulation: "What assures the domestic tranquillity and attractive harmony of one is the productivity and regulated discipline of the other." Not only the household, including Fanny Price, but Austen too, can contemplate Antigua with satisfaction as a sustaining and uncontaminated source of well-being: "for them the island is wealth, which Austen regards as being converted to propriety, order and, at the end of the novel, comfort, an added good". This conjunction of moral and material benefit finds the author at one with her creations: an alignment which joins Sir Thomas, Fanny and Jane Austen: References to Sir Thomas Bertram's overseas possessions are threaded through; they give him his wealth, occasion his absences, fix his social status at home and abroad, and make possible his values, to which Fanny Price (and Austen herself) finally subscribes. If this is a novel about "ordination", as Austen says, the right to colonial possessions helps directly to establish social order and moral priorities at home.

Professor Said's formulations are elegant and beguiling, seeming to lay bare the "colonial" mechanism and process of the novel, the dynamic of its certainties and authority. In this telling exposition, Culture and Imperialism carries a challenging and commanding thesis, which may

well prove to be as influential as Trilling's. If so, there is a no less pressing case for attending to the letter of the text, for dating the story correctly, and for taking account of the circumstances that stand behind the scene in Chapter Twenty-One where Fanny puts her "slave trade" question and "dead silence" prevails. Fanny gets no reply to her forbidden question because none is possible from a man who has supported the slave trade as a buyer of slaves lawfully in times past, or even illegally since 1808 and whose own fortunes have depended on it. One of the West Indian lobby, Sir Thomas would have argued and voted for the trade's continuation over the twenty years that Abolition was contested at Westminster. History is against him. The gap of "silence" between his slave-owning "values" and those of Fanny, the sole questioner of those "values", could not be more effectively shown.

Where does Jane Austen stand in this? With Sir Thomas, as Said believes? Or with her heroine? Readers of the novel will decide for themselves. But the logic of history, biography and the text itself places Austen beside Fanny Price. Mansfield Park's "power to offend" is not, as Said would have us believe, to render Fanny Price (and her creator) friends of the plantocracy. At this notable moment, in the lion's den, Fanny is unmistakably a "friend of the abolition", and Austen's readers in 1814 would have applauded the heroine and her author for exactly that.

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