Northanger Abbey is a much gayer affair than Sense and Sensibility. Not that its essential subject is any less weighty: the novel pits reality against Catherine Morland's imagination as uncompromisingly as Sense and Sensibility contrasts Elinor with Marianne. Nor does the element of parody, which of itself would be brittle enough, account for Northanger Abbey's gaiety. Rather, the delicately light tone of the whole and especially the wonderful suppleness of the conversations between Catherine and Henry Tilney fill the novel with a spirit of joie de vivre. Northanger Abbey has a far richer flavor than its genesis as a parody of those Gothic tales which came to enthrall the eighteenth century would suggest, and, I believe, a firmer body.

It is surely, at bottom, a novel about education, one which Jane Austen might well have subtitled "The Dangers of the Imagination," for Catherine skirmishes with the same enemy throughout the book. During its first half she naively misinterprets many of the social actualities at Bath because, imposed upon by Isabella Thorpe, she tends to view them according to notions of friendship and honor that derive ultimately from novels of sentiment. But while those novels treat sentiment as a means of insight, in Northanger Abbey it is associated with a lack of perception. Thus Catherine, under the spell of her apparently intimate companionship with Isabella, completely misjudges the rise and fall of her friend's supposed attachment to James Morland; determined to find nothing but fidelity in Isabella, Catherine simply overlooks such facts as her friend's irritation on learning that James is not rich or her subsequent flirtation with Captain Tilney. In the second half of the
story, Northanger Abbey itself gives Catherine all the encouragement she needs to transform life into a piece of Gothic fiction—to read the natural death of General Tilney’s wife as a bizarre murder that he has plotted. Whether Isabella or the Abbey supplies the local stimulus for Catherine, the source of her difficulties remains her own gullible imagination, which seize on novels as statements of fact and therefore distorts the reality surrounding her. It is this strand of meaning that ties the halves of the story together, even though the parodic episode at the Abbey seems strained in comparison with the earlier, more realistic scenes at Bath.

Of course parody and realism exist side by side throughout *Northanger Abbey* because of the particular narrative device that Jane Austen has chosen to dramatize her theme. This device consists of providing the reader with two bearings, as it were, on Catherine’s actions: Jane Austen takes one of these herself, masquerading as an author who champions the behavior recommended by sentimental novels; the other she takes from inside the story by means of the sensibly rational Henry Tilney, whose opinions are solidly grounded in reality. In her own role Jane Austen talks of Catherine and a typical sentimental heroine in the same breath, when describing, for instance, a reconciliation with Henry:

> Feelings rather natural than heroic possessed her; instead of considering her own dignity injured by this ready condemnation—instead of proudly resolving, in conscious innocence, to shew her resentment towards him who could harbour a doubt of it and to enlighten him on the past only by avoiding his sight, or flirting with somebody else, she took to herself all the shame of misconduct, or at least of its appearance, and was only eager for an opportunity of explaining its cause. (p. 93)

Passages of this sort, many of them sounding a much stronger note of parody, recur throughout the story and answer several purposes. They serve to remind us that Catherine has her own problems with novels, and in doing so they keep the theme of *Northanger Abbey* before us. But they also mark the real
difference between the fundamentally honest, good-natured
Catherine and the egotistical, exaggeratedly sensitive heroine
of the sentimental novel, as is evident in the lines I have quoted.
This difference needs to be maintained, because Catherine must
develop and reform as the story goes on. Obviously Jane Austen's
pose as commentator restricts her in the main to speaking
parodically and forbids her to show Catherine any way out of
her difficulties. That job is turned over to Henry Tilney, who
for all his wit performs in a basically realistic fashion. This re­
mains the dominant tone of the novel, far outweighing the ele­
ment of parody, and fittingly enough, for Catherine must
finally come to terms with a real world.

Although Henry courts Catherine with verve from the be­
ing of Northanger Abbey to the end, he offers her at the
same time a complete course of instruction in sensible be­
havior. During the scenes at Bath he aims primarily at discover­
ing the nature of society to her, whereas at the Abbey he con­
cerns himself largely with enlightening her about herself. But
a distinction of this sort should really not be made, for in either
case he tries to free Catherine's imagination from the errors bred
in it by reading novels. Perhaps the shape, import, and texture
of the story will come clearer, however, if I first sketch the
major influences to which Catherine is exposed, then present a
typical conversation in which Henry plays the pedagogue, and
finally—to suggest Northanger Abbey's vivacity and subtlety—
explore a dialogue in which the feeling of Henry and Catherine
for each other is transmitted through a gracefully modulated
verbal surface.

The most important fact that Catherine must be brought to
recognize in the world at Bath is the duplicity of Isabella and
John Thorpe, both of whom make a practice of showing off
their individuality by manipulating fashionable communities of opinion. (I shall always be using *community of opinion* pejoratively: to mean a view which appears the property of a select group and thus suggests the social exclusiveness of the person professing it.) To be sure, the young Thorpes are not the only bad angels whom Catherine encounters. But neither Mrs. Allen nor Mrs. Thorpe—the one of them proving her utter self-concern by habitually generalizing about dress, the other by generalizing about the virtues of her own family—wields real influence over Catherine. And even General Tilney does not pose any sustained threat to her while she remains at Bath. John and Isabella do, however; and, though the brother is too openly a boor to gain much ground in his suit for Catherine, she needs all the help she can get from Henry Tilney to protect her sensibility against the sister.

Plainly Isabella models the role that she usually adopts in *Northanger Abbey* on the conduct celebrated by sentimental novels. Her air of intimacy with Catherine in the following passage, which occurs during the first conversation that we hear between them, may serve to remind us how quickly such friendships flourished in the sentimental tradition. But more directly, her vigorous diction, extravagant figures, and intensive generalizations are designed to publish a most spirited set of feelings—presumably to convince Catherine, here, of how warmly Isabella regards her:

"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. I told Capt. Hunt at one of our assemblies that I would not dance with him, unless he would allow Miss Andrews to be as beautiful as an angel. The men think us incapable of real friendship you know, and I am determined to shew them the difference. Now, if I were to hear any body speak slightingly of you, I should fire up in a moment:—but that is not at all likely, for you are just the kind of girl to be a great favourite with the men."

(pp. 40–41)

Actually, Isabella has her eye not on Catherine but on herself.
In the opening sentences she cuts a figure by generalizations that flaunt her emotional integrity. Then she summons up a community of opinion—a kind of generalization that she momentarily affects to share with Catherine, yet immediately turns to her own advantage—about the "real friendship" that exists between young ladies despite what men may say. Of course the mere content of this advances Isabella's cause to some extent, because it obviously applies to elegant young ladies only. But she exalts herself more spectacularly by the way in which she manages the generalization: minimizing its communal aspects, she treats it as a springboard to catapult her into new revelations of her strenuous loyalty—"I should fire up in a moment"—and of her personal insight in recognizing Catherine's attractions. In sum, Isabella enjoys all the social convenience of calling on what seems a community of opinion about "real friendship" while in fact she restricts the community to herself, appropriating the public power of the view to a display of her own uniqueness. (This fundamental self-centeredness in Isabella does in fact ally her, whether she realizes it or not, with the cult of sensibility celebrated in novels, which itself promotes egocentricity in exalting the feelings of the individual.) The cited passage is characteristic in the sense that Isabella is driving to gratify herself in whatever she utters, whether she assumes the intensely sentimental pose that she does here or speaks, as we shall hear a little later, with a more than hard-headed practicality.

John devotes himself as avidly as Isabella to pursuing his own pleasure and performing with dash. His execution is much less subtle than hers, in fact sometimes crudely profane, yet like Isabella he tries to impress his superiority on Catherine by exploiting a community of opinion, whether he talks with her about horses, his usual subject, or "drinking":

"There is no drinking at Oxford now, I assure you. Nobody drinks there. You would hardly meet with a man who goes beyond his four pints at the utmost. Now, for instance, it was reckoned a remarkable thing at the last party in my rooms, that upon
an average we cleared about five pints a head. Mine is famous good stuff to be sure. You would not often meet with any thing like it in Oxford—and that may account for it.” (p. 64)

John derisively sets up a fashionable norm of “four pints” with his first generalizations, thrusting right on from them to make his deviation from the standard known. The intensive ‘remarkable’ and ‘famous’ advertise his supremacy, while in effect he substantiates his claim by the reliable impersonality of “it was reckoned” and the apparently cautious ‘not often” or “may account.’ Again the power of generalizations has been misappropriated to the service of the individual.

John, then, zealously plays up to his idea of a “sport” in his abortive efforts to court Catherine—too engrossed by his role to realize how little it appeals to her. And Isabella casts herself as the kind of spirited young lady popularized by novels when she wins Catherine’s friendship, attracts James Morland into an engagement, breaks with James to try her luck with Frederick Tilney, and at last, jilted by him, seeks a reconciliation with James through Catherine. It is the sort of style practiced by the Thorpes, with its giddy magnification of the trivial and its parade of intensity, that Henry Tilney sets out to undermine in his first conversation with Catherine (pp. 26-27). There he works by mimicking the style, either feigning not to believe that Catherine keeps no “journal”—“How are your various dresses to be remembered, and the particular state of your complexion, and curl of your hair to be described in all their diversities, without having constant recourse to a journal?”—or mocking a smart emotionalism:

Then forming his features into a set smile, and affectedly softening his voice, he added, with a simpering air, “Have you been long in Bath, madam?”

“About a week, sir,” replied Catherine, trying not to laugh.

“Really!” with affected astonishment.

“Why should you be surprized, sir?”

“Why, indeed!” said he, in his natural tone—“but some emotion must appear to be raised by your reply, and surprize is more
easily assumed, and not less reasonable than any other.—Now let us go on. Were you never here before, madam?"

Clearly Henry objects to the style itself on the ground that the feeling it lavishes on details exaggerates them beyond all reason. But his "assumed" hints at another objection, that the style may become a means of disguise. His hint is borne out when the Thorpes appear in Northanger Abbey, for, as we have already seen, they exploit the style mercilessly, using the social code that it reflects as a modish façade while contriving to aggrandize themselves.

The impropriety of the Thorpes is not a matter of style alone; it extends to their behavior as well. The novel shows them twisting social forms as ruthlessly as linguistic ones to serve their own ends. Without a qualm John lies to Catherine about seeing Henry drive away with Eleanor Tilney and later lies to them about Catherine having a previous engagement, all for the purpose of clearing his own path to Catherine and to the fortune that he believes her to possess. It is ironically fitting that John's self-absorption should doubly frustrate him in the end: when he attempts to propose, he is so busy managing his own role to create this new community of opinion that he fails to perceive Catherine's total ignorance of what he intends; and he brags to General Tilney of Catherine's wealth in order to glorify himself, with the result that the General encourages Henry's suit, which makes John's hopeless.

As for Isabella, whether she intrigues with Catherine, James Morland, or Frederick Tilney, she presses after money as single-mindedly as John, and as indecorously. But she achieves a climax richer in fraud than anything he can manage. It occurs when she has already decided to abandon James, because he turns out to be poorer than she had thought, for Frederick Tilney, and just after she has been fostering an attachment between Catherine and John, only to find that Catherine feels no attraction to him. "Since that is the case," replies Isabella, "I shall not tease you any further"; "I thought it a very foolish, imprudent business, and not likely to promote the good of either," for "it is not
a trifle that will support a family now-a-days; and after all that romancers may say, there is no doing without money” (pp. 145—46). She cheerfully repudiates the sentimental community of opinion with which she has constantly plied Catherine as a “tease,” something “romancers may say,” and replaces it with tough financial judgments. Even this new sense, however, is laid down by her with an eye to her own benefit, not Catherine’s. Isabella is really engaged, as the continuation of the dialogue shows, in making out a case for her rejection of James before hinting at her change of mind to Catherine. For she readily perverts Catherine’s reference to morality—“You do acquit me then of any thing wrong?”—to trap her into another community of opinion, one which is in fact grounded in Isabella’s entirely selfish concern with her own situation, although the impersonal phrasing lends a specious air of authority to what she says and even pretends to regard the case of Catherine:

“Oh! as to that . A little harmless flirtation or so will occur, and one is often drawn on to give more encouragement than one wishes to stand by. All those things should be allowed for in youth and high spirits. What one means one day, you know, one may not mean the next. Circumstances change, opinions alter.” (p. 146)

The generalizations are strictly controlled to prepare Catherine for Isabella’s turn to Frederick Tilney and to justify it. All the earlier intensities of manner have disappeared, but Isabella’s dedication to self-interest remains, which suggests that she is always playing a part, never committing herself in and through her speech.

A distinction of this sort between words and deeds is exactly what Catherine’s general naïveté and specific fascination with novels prevent her from recognizing adequately. Henry Tilney keeps trying to open her eyes whenever they meet, to the Thorpes in particular, though he never judges them personally for Catherine, as well as to social uses and abuses as a whole. Sometimes he employs the mimicry we noticed earlier, and often he speaks out more directly; but he never, in contrast to the
Thorpes, imposes his views on Catherine. The job he undertakes is of instructing her how to form her own opinions rationally. So if she badgers him to explain how his brother could think of making up to an already engaged Isabella, Henry at first arranges his replies to shed a clear light on her friend: “Is it my brother’s attentions to Miss Thorpe, or Miss Thorpe’s admission of them, that gives the pain?” or “I understand: she is in love with James, and flirts with Frederick” (p. 151). But when Catherine demands that he “guess” at his brother’s motives, Henry refuses:

‘. . . Nay, if it is to be guess-work, let us all guess for ourselves. To be guided by second-hand conjecture is pitiful. The premises are before you. My brother is a lively, and perhaps sometimes a thoughtless young man; he has had about a week’s acquaintance with your friend, and he has known her engagement almost as long as he has known her.” (pp. 151–52)

After the powerful generalization about “conjecture,” he insists that she decide for herself and then summarizes the evidence on which she may act. This is Henry’s invariable goal—to teach Catherine sensible processes of thinking and to make her accept responsibility for them.

In the second half of the story, it is Catherine’s fevered misinterpretation of General Tilney brought on by her exposure to the Abbey that needs curing. Certainly the General stands as a bad enough angel in his own right, yet he hardly measures up to her vision of him—more appropriate in something like The Mysteries of Udolpho—as the murderer of his wife. The worst he can do is peremptorily dismiss Catherine from his home when he discovers that she lacks the fortune credited to her by John Thorpe. Many readers have objected that this act seems dramatically unconvincing; without denying the charge, we might nevertheless observe that the General’s earlier remarks betray the same kind of indecorous self-indulgence. Indeed he is a somewhat toned-down version of the Thorpes, pushing forward himself and his desires as assiduously as they do, though he accomplishes this by reversing their technique,
that is, by constantly feigning to minimize or censure himself. His first real speech in the novel stamps his nature for us, when he characteristically intrudes to take over what his daughter has begun and invite Catherine to the Abbey himself:

“My daughter, Miss Morland has been forming a very bold wish. We leave Bath . . . And could we carry our selfish point with you, we should leave it without a single regret. Can you, in short, be prevailed on to quit this scene of public triumph and oblige your friend Eleanor with your company in Gloucestershire? I am almost ashamed to make the request, though its presumption would certainly appear greater to every creature in Bath than yourself. Modesty such as your’s—but not for the world would I pain it by open praise. If you can be induced to honour us with a visit, you will make us happy beyond expression.” (p. 139)

Although the General seems to shower Catherine with consideration here, true decorum would hardly sanction so lushly emotional an address or the florid self-deprecation of “our selfish point” and “almost ashamed.” Nor would it allow him the direct mention of her “modesty,” which he has all the satisfaction of pointing to before he pretends to retreat decently. The whole passage is overripe, as if he were more interested in publicizing his own sense of propriety and his own capacity to feel than in actually persuading Catherine, even though her visit is much to his purpose. And in fact General Tilney never, here or elsewhere, really projects himself into others. Whatever he says discloses how self-indulgent he is, whether in half-covertly calling attention to himself and his possessions or in bending everyone else to his wishes.

Eleanor Tilney is the opposite of her father. One of Northanger Abbey’s good angels, she works side by side with the more vivacious Henry in the service of reason and decorum. Thus she provides a contrast to the selfish Isabella Thorpe and to the egocentric General Tilney—and never more dramatically than when she is charged with the General’s command to banish Catherine from the Abbey. In her talk with Catherine (p. 225),
Eleanor demonstrates the warmest sympathy and, what is more impressive, an integrity founded in the deepest feeling:

"I could hardly believe my senses, when I heard it;—and no displeasure, no resentment that you can feel at this moment, however justly great, can be more than I myself—but I must not talk of what I felt. Good God! what will your father and mother say! After courting you from the protection of real friends to have you driven out of the house, without the considerations even of decent civility!"

Thoroughly upset herself by what her father has done, she can yet ignore her own pain for, or translate it into, the effect of the incident on Catherine and the Morlands. Because of Eleanor’s relationship to the General she cannot denounce him outright: "Alas! for my feelings as a daughter, all that I know, all that I answer for is, that you can have given him no just cause of offence." But the claims of decorum weigh far more heavily with her than loyalty to her father, as she shows in her closing judgment of Catherine’s hurried departure: "I hope, I earnestly hope that to your real safety it will be of none; but to every thing else it is of the greatest consequence; to comfort, appearance, propriety, to your family, to the world." Eleanor’s generalization brings the conceptual terms to life by insisting on their value. And she proves herself emotionally committed to these values by pleading with Catherine to write her, even though General Tilney has forbidden all correspondence between them.

At this narrative climax of *Northanger Abbey*, it is up to Eleanor to stand by Catherine and give what aid she can, for Henry is away from home. But he has already guided Catherine through the thematic climax of the story, which occurs before the General has any thought of forcing her to leave. One day at the Abbey, Henry surprises Catherine as she comes from the room of his dead mother, where she has been searching for proof of the monstrous crimes that she imagines General Tilney to have perpetrated. Learning her suspicions, Henry discovers that all his earlier efforts to educate her in the nature of the world
have hardly helped, and he proceeds to offer her his plainest lesson in logic and its moral consequences. He needs to do so, less because her misconception libels his father than because it is a sin against her own faculties. Thus, after carefully spelling out his father’s innocence in the affair, Henry turns directly to Catherine at the culmination of the dialogue, reproving her more openly than ever before for the impropriety into which her abuse of reason has led her:

“If I understand you rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly words to—Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you—Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known . . . ? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?” (pp. 197-98)

He asks her to view the reality about her reasonably rather than imaginatively, that is, to correct the very processes of her thought. Now he uses the novelistic language of intensity—the “horror” and “dreadful” of which Catherine has been so fond—not parodically but literally, as an accurate measure of her moral aberration. And Henry’s rhetoric is just as forthright, aligning the series of facts that she has forgotten and accumulating the rhetorical questions to develop an intensity quite unusual for him, but one justified because Catherine has outraged morality. Even at a moment like this, however, he expresses his feeling for her by “Dearest Miss Morland,” though she is too mortified to notice it.

Still, Catherine has finally been shocked into seeing herself and the world clearly. So the General’s violence, when it comes, stirs her emotions but not her imagination, as Jane Austen declares: “Her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability; and with a mind so occupied in the contemplation of
actual and natural evil, the solitude of her situation, the darkness of her chamber, the antiquity of the building were felt and considered without the smallest emotion" (p. 227). And Catherine can return to her own home, convinced of her blamelessness and recognizing the genuine guilt of General Tilney. There she may wonder restlessly what Henry really thinks of her and chafe under the rather prosaic sense of her mother—that lady who might well make Henry's instruction unnecessary if she were with Catherine throughout the story. But Henry soon arrives to put an end to her suspense and to gain the consent of her parents to their marriage.

The theme of the novel is expressed most obviously in its main action, then, which shows Catherine making a morally secure discovery of herself at the Abbey, arriving at a fuller understanding of her enemies, whether the Thorpes or General Tilney, and finally winning Henry, the champion of reason. It is through the dialogues between Catherine and Henry, however, that Jane Austen dramatizes her theme most richly, rendering in them the very process of education. We have already seen Henry teaching his pupil by open mockery and earnest warnings, but his usual mode is closer to the lively irony that runs through his talk with Catherine when she accompanies him and Eleanor on a walk out from Bath (pp. 106-10). Indeed he holds forth with so much wit here that for me to concentrate on dredging up the serious purposes in what he says must seem an overly solemn affair. Yet perhaps such an analysis can be justified if it suggests how thoroughly a representative passage in the novel is imbued with its theme. And the passage is representative, not only of Henry's charming educational methods but of Northanger Abbey's whole movement: for rather as Catherine turns from literature to life in the story, so this conversation be-
gins with the case of literature and ends in considering life itself.

The dialogue gets under way with Henry a bit puzzled when his protégée, admiring a cliff outside of Bath, seems to equate reading with reality:

"I never look at it," said Catherine "without thinking of the south of France."

"You have been abroad then?" said Henry, a little surprised.

"Oh! no, I only mean what I have read about. It always puts me in mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through, in the 'Mysteries of Udolpho.' But you never read novels, I dare say?"

"Why not?"

"Because they are not clever enough for you—gentlemen read better books."

But when Catherine apparently separates herself from him by these last generalizations, Henry's reply shows him in perfect control. His words stand both as a compliment, declaring that there is no distance between them, and as an ironic reminder of the violent sensibility cultivated by fiction of this sort in its devotees:

"The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure. The Mysteries of Udolpho, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again;—I remember finishing it in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time."

The opening generalization about the "pleasure in a good novel" looks firmly sensible—as if Henry shares and approves of Catherine's taste—except for his "intolerably," which pushes a trifle too far, making the whole sentence sound like the claim of a too intense partisan. But perhaps the ambiguity of his tone comes through more clearly in the last clause, where the exaggeration about "my hair standing on end" may warrant how completely
he belongs to Catherine's party or caricature the agitation of novel readers.

Henry continues in this equivocal vein with the deft extension of a legal metaphor when he next speaks, after Eleanor has described his impatience to finish *The Mysteries of Udolpho*:

"Thank you, Eleanor;—a most honourable testimony. You see, Miss Morland, the injustice of your suspicions. Here was I, in my eagerness to get on, refusing to wait only five minutes for my sister; breaking the promise I had made of reading it aloud, and keeping her in suspense at a most interesting part, by running away with the volume, which, you are to observe, was her own, particularly her own. I am proud when I reflect on it, and I think it must establish me in your good opinion."

By "testimony," "injustice," and "opinion" Henry invokes the law and its implications of authority—to give Catherine a sober guarantee, it would seem, of his enthusiasm for novels. But of course the behavior which he dwells on, of himself as a novel-reader, is a series of improprieties, if not illegalities. While the ironic value of the figure becomes clearest in Henry's closing reference to "your good opinion," it is also true that the last sentence continues to express his desire of having a place in Catherine's "good opinion." His use of the metaphor throughout the passage epitomizes Henry's attitude: his control of it suggests the detached superiority of a judge, yet he controls it to demonstrate his liking for Catherine.

But she destroys the delicate balance of his two speeches, if she has ever really been aware of it, by taking what he has said of novels at face value and then delivering an even more extreme version of her previous statement about men and books. Catherine's generalization now typifies the whole sentimental mode that he has been covertly attacking, her new formula abandoning the moderate language of reason for the jargon of emotional intensity:

"I am very glad to hear it indeed, and now I shall never be ashamed of liking Udolpho myself. But I really thought before, young men despised novels amazingly."
"It is amazingly; it may well suggest amazement if they do—
for they read nearly as many as women. I myself have read hun­
dreds and hundreds. Do not imagine that you can cope with me
in a knowledge of Julias and Louisas. If we proceed to particu­
lars, and engage in the never-ceasing inquiry of 'Have you read
this?' and 'Have you read that?' I shall soon leave you as far be­
hind me as— . I want an appropriate simile;—as far as your
friend Emily herself left poor Valancourt when she went with
her aunt into Italy."

While Henry still allies himself with her to some extent by
speaking so knowingly about Catherine’s favorite subject, he
seizes on her "amazingly" to dramatize the peril of her ways.
For one thing, he relocates the word in a new, a factual context,
as if to show her the conditions under which such an intense
expression can meaningfully survive. More than that, he offers
her a model of valid generalizing, in effect, by countering her
assertion with a proposal of his own about how much men read
and then going on to document it. Although the legal metaphor
reappears in "particulars" and "inquiry," it no longer seems so
equivocal: perhaps a tone of the former irony persists, but in the
main the figure now calls up the sense of a reliably rational
process. And in truth, the body of Henry’s speech reveals him
engaged in weighing evidence, backing up his generalization
with specific instances before he allows himself the luxury of
"an appropriate simile" to clinch his argument.

So when Catherine, learning nothing from his demonstration,
repeats her error in referring to "Udolpho" as "the nicest book
in the world," he makes his point even more directly:

"Very true . . . and this is a very nice day, and we are taking a
very nice walk, and you are two very nice young ladies. Oh! it is
a very nice word indeed!—it does for every thing. Originally per­
haps it was applied only to express neatness, propriety, delicacy,
or refinement;—people were nice in their dress, in their senti­
ments, or their choice. But now every commendation on every
subject is comprised in that one word."

Impudent as Henry’s comments are, they add up to a solid les-
son in intellectual precision, and it is just possible that they also hint at a moral critique of the sentimentally intense mode with which Catherine has associated herself. He at least proves by his climactic generalizations—in which 'nice' serves "for every thing" and includes "every commendation on every subject"—that verbal commitment to the mode prohibits one from making distinctions, the very basis of thinking. And an obvious analogy suggests itself: that a personal commitment to the mode, which would mean responding with the same intensity to every stimulus, perverts the nature of human experience.

Eleanor now breaks in to chide Henry for his impertinence, then sympathetically engages Catherine in a discussion that soon turns to other reading. Although Eleanor's gentle manner changes the tone of the dialogue for the time being, the issues remain essentially the same. History is mentioned, which Catherine can peruse 'a little as a duty,' but

"The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes' mouths, their thoughts and designs—the chief of all this must be invention, and invention is what delights me in other books."

Apparently Catherine views the facts of history as a drag on "invention," that imaginative vitality which makes fiction so compellingly real for her. Distinguishing inadequately between the genres, she blurs their separate claims to reality. Eleanor's reply, however, makes exactly the distinctions that her friend has glossed over:

"Historians, you think . . . are not happy in their flights of fancy. They display imagination without raising interest. I am fond of history—and am very well contented to take the false with the true. In the principal facts they have sources of intelligence in former histories and records, which may be as much depended on, I conclude, as any thing that does not actually pass
under one's own observation; and as for the little embellishments you speak of, they are embellishments, and I like them as such. If a speech be well drawn up, I read it with pleasure, by whomsoever it may be made—and probably with much greater, if the production of Mr. Hume or Mr. Robertson, than if the genuine words of Caractacus, Agricola, or Alfred the Great.

For Eleanor, history is primarily factual, but it also makes use of art ("embellishments") to enhance the facts without radically distorting them; once the distinction is recognized, both orders of reality can be enjoyed. But we must still do justice to Eleanor's rhetoric here, which is as winningly deferential as it is firm. After she has generalized Catherine's position by the phrasing of her first sentences about "historians"—which serves in part to prevent her own disagreement, when it comes, from seeming a personal attack on Catherine—Eleanor quickly admits that she herself is emotionally biased (by "fond") before going on with her analysis. In the body of her argument she is scrupulous about separating facts, carefully assessing their credibility, from ornamentation. And her differentiation between the artistic and the "genuine," now applied to some specific cases, runs through the closing sentence, even while Eleanor professes her partiality again. Unlike Henry, she sustains decorum precisely by insisting on her bias, and the whole speech shows how competent an instructor she is in her own right.

Yet still Catherine resists their logic. She may now count up five people who approve of history, but she converts these "instances" into a new emotional assertion:

"So many instances within my small circle of friends is remarkable! At this rate, I shall not pity the writers of history any longer. If people like to read their books, it is all very well, but to be at so much trouble in filling great volumes, which, as I used to think, nobody would willingly ever look into, to be labouring only for the torment of little boys and girls, always struck me as a hard fate; and though I know it is all very right and necessary, I have often wondered at the person's courage that could sit down on purpose to do it."
Perhaps in opposing “all very well” to “a hard fate” or “know” to “wondered” Catherine is struggling to distinguish between what is reasonable and what she feels. But her most ringing generalizations about history here, hardly qualified by “as I used to think,” remain clearly emotional in origin. Henry recognizes this and responds with some exciting pedagogy, simultaneously parodying both her claims and the illogic of her “method”:

“That little boys and girls should be tormented is what no one at all acquainted with human nature in a civilized state can deny; but in behalf of our most distinguished historians, I must observe, that they might well be offended at being supposed to have no higher aim; and that by their method and style, they are perfectly well qualified to torment readers of the most advanced reason and mature time of life. I use the verb ‘to torment,’ as I observed to be your own method, instead of ‘to instruct,’ supposing them to be now admitted as synonymous.”

Her claims themselves Henry undermines largely by exaggeration. First he announces it a matter of principle that all children should be mortified—his ironic clashing of “civilized” with “tormented” further dramatizing Catherine’s vehemence—and then stretches her generalization until historians are harrassing the “mature” as well as the young. With his last sentence Henry points out the logical fallacy in her performance. It is in the brilliant rhetoric of his reply, though, that he mimics Catherine’s procedure most instructively. We may recall how her conviction that everything historians write is dull immediately begot another generalization, even more hopelessly subjective, to the effect that tormenting children with dullness is the whole motive of historians. No wonder Henry begins by sorting out two of the ideas that she has so thoroughly entangled, the first third of his opening sentence treating the vexation of “little boys and girls,” and the second third allowing historians some “higher aim.” But in the closing third—as if he would now re-enact Catherine’s folly—he pours together historians and tor-
ment in a new assertion. To emphasize what he is up to, he abandons that antithetic pattern that he has used, however ironically, to order distinctions within each of the first segments in his sentence, and he substitutes for it a rhetoric making a more flamboyant appeal, one that essentially piles "style" on top of "method" and "mature time of life" upon "most advanced reason" without differentiating significantly between them. And his final sentence recapitulates the whole movement, juxtaposing "torment" and "instruct" only to dissolve the antithesis in "synonymous," which spells out Catherine's surrender of sense to feeling.

Seething at his parody, Catherine tries to defend her uniting of "torment" and "instruct," striking back at him with an intense diction and an urgent rhetoric of her own:

"You think me foolish to call instruction a torment, but if you had been as much used as myself to hear poor little children first learning their letters and then learning to spell, if you had ever seen how stupid they can be for a whole morning together, and how tired my poor mother is at the end of it . you would allow that to torment and to instruct might sometimes be used as synonymous words."

"Very probably. But historians are not accountable for the difficulty of learning to read; and even you yourself, who do not altogether seem particularly friendly to very severe, very intense application, may perhaps be brought to acknowledge that it is very well worth while to be tormented for two or three years of one's life, for the sake of being able to read all the rest of it. Consider—if reading had not been taught, Mrs. Radcliffe would have written in vain—or perhaps might not have written at all."

"Very probably" shows Henry's rational sympathy for her. Nevertheless, he wants to make sure that the distinction he has drawn will stick: thus he again separates "tormented" from "read" while passing specific judgment on Catherine with "you yourself." But of course he must soften his reproof if he is to win her to logic and affection, so he ends with the witty yet gentle turn back to the beginning of the entire conversation.
It would be unfair to leave the impression, however, that Henry devotes himself only to the teaching of Catherine, or that Jane Austen intends every dialogue in Northanger Abbey to expose the dangers of unreasonableness. In the one that follows, for instance, she aims at dramatizing Henry’s feeling for Catherine, accomplishing the job through the technique of metaphoric indirection that I have mentioned before. Although Henry’s manner remains as playful as ever, his underlying appeals reverberate with emotion—and of course his sustained drive throughout the scene to maneuver Catherine into declaring that she likes him implies the degree of his commitment to her. Not only does their talk reveal Henry’s intense affection for Catherine, but it also marks, through the values on which he bases his suit, how conventional he is at bottom.

The conversation records the second meeting of the two (pp. 76–78), and it takes place just after John Thorpe has tried to prevent them from dancing together. Henry speaks first, his opening words unequivocally announcing his attraction to Catherine:

“That gentleman would have put me out of patience, had he staid with you half a minute longer. He has no business to withdraw the attention of my partner from me. We have entered into a contract of mutual agreeableness for the space of an evening, and all our agreeableness belongs solely to each other for that time. Nobody can fasten themselves on the notice of one, without injuring the rights of the other. I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage. Fidelity and complaisance are the principal duties of both; and those men who do not chuse to dance or marry themselves, have no business with the partners or wives of their neighbours.”

After that plain beginning, Henry tempers his expression to some extent by turning to the “business” metaphor that domi-
nates the sentences immediately following. But although this figure discreetly impersonalizes Catherine as "my partner," and although Henry's very extension of it implies that he is not overwhelmed by his feelings, he develops the figure in such a way that it attaches a number of emotionally potent suggestions to the actual situation: he and Catherine are bound to "mutual agreeableness" by a "contract," and their "agreeableness belongs solely to each other." But apparently Henry does not find this figure resonant enough, for he deserts it to take "a country-dance"—in the figure that recurs throughout the rest of the dialogue—"as an emblem of marriage," the most intense of human relationships. And by the generalizations of his closing sentence Henry insists on the validity of the new figure, not blatantly—after all, one effect of his rhetoric is to keep the halves of the figure distinct—but powerfully for all that, in part through the cumulative rhetorical pattern of the sentence as a whole, and especially by the conceptual terms of his first clause, which fix the moral identity of dancing and "marriage."

Evidently the figure is too risky for the naïve Catherine. At first she rejects it as illogical, and Henry quickly breaks in with "compared" to keep her grounds strictly rational—to keep her, that is, from rejecting as well the feeling implicit in what he has said.

"But they are such very different things!—"

"—That you think they cannot be compared together."

"To be sure not. People that marry can never part, but must go and keep house together. People that dance, only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour."

But for all the prosaic sense of Catherine's closing generalizations, their phrasing gives rise to exactly the sort of overtone which Henry has attempted to muffle. Her resolute division between the latently charged "can never part" and the utterly factual "only stand opposite each other" in effect disputes Henry's moral equation and, worse than that from his point of view, denies the emotion that he has worked to import into their situation as dancers.
Henry acknowledges the strictures of her "definition" momentarily, but only to suggest that he can be as fundamentally common-sensical as she has been. Then he immediately pushes on with his emblem to emphasize its emotional values further:

"And such is your definition of matrimony and dancing. Taken in that light certainly, their resemblance is not striking; but I think I could place them in such a view.—You will allow, that in both, man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal; that in both, it is an engagement between man and woman, formed for the advantage of each; and that when once entered into, they belong exclusively to each other till the moment of its dissolution; that it is their duty, each to endeavour to give the other no cause for wishing that he or she had bestowed themselves elsewhere, and their best interest to keep their own imaginations from wandering towards the perfections of their neighbours, or fancying that they should have been better off with any one else. You will allow all this?"

Although Henry shows decorous restraint again in substituting the general "man" and "woman" for more particular references to himself and Catherine throughout the body of his remarks, yet by generalizing his claims he also secures a tone of added authority for the personal feeling reflected in so many of them. Perhaps no more than his reasoned agreement with society's rather hardheaded prudence appears in Henry's observation that marriage, like dancing, involves an "engagement formed" to serve the interests of both the man and the woman. But certainly what he expresses through "man has the advantage of choice" is the affection that has moved him to choose Catherine as his partner—for more than a dance, by the terms of the figure. He even transmutes her low-keyed "can never part" into the vivid "belong exclusively to each other till the moment of its dissolution," pointedly reuniting this heightened emotion with dancing. Through all these generalizations the rhetorical pressure keeps building up, for Henry sets them forth in a series of "that" clauses, reaching his climax—appropriately enough—in an appeal to "duty." And it is worth noting, finally, that the "duty" Henry outlines—while it pulls in harness with "interest"
to require that both he and Catherine exercise sensible control
over their "imaginations"—requires as well that they direct
their deepest feelings toward each other. The speech remains
witty courtship, to be sure, but at the same time it delivers a
sermon on human relationships, and it also urges Catherine to
recognize, to respond to, the emotion of her partner.
She will not budge, however:

"Yes, to be sure, as you state it, all this sounds very well; but still
they are so very different.—I cannot look upon them at all in the
same light, nor think the same duties belong to them."

Catherine ignores all the nuances with which Henry has colored
the figure, either because she regards it too literally or because
she objects to his use of "duty." Whichever the case, there is no
shade of personal feeling in her language. So Henry undertakes
to make his own fondness for Catherine even clearer, though
he maintains his proper distance by continuing to manipulate
the emblem and to speak impersonally of "man" and "woman":

"In one respect, there certainly is a difference. In marriage,
the man is supposed to provide for the support of the woman; the
woman to make the home agreeable to the man; he is to purvey,
and she is to smile. But in dancing, their duties are exactly
changed; the agreeableness, the compliance are expected from
him, while she furnishes the fan and the lavender water. That,
I suppose, was the difference of duties which struck you, as ren-
dering the conditions incapable of comparison."

Now he points out the inaccuracy of the figure, but as a way to
affirm that in dancing, their present activity, it is the man who
must show his regard, as Henry himself is doing, in "agreeableness"
and "compliance." And his strict antitheses imply that
she is showing none in return. When he caricatures Catherine's
objection at the end, he does so only because her sense of some
"difference of duties" seems to be what has led her to overlook
the emotions inherent in his argument—and he must call at-
tention to them somehow.
But Catherine's reaction to all this sounds as flat as ever, so Henry changes his tack to charge her directly with being indifferent toward him:

“No, indeed, I never thought of that.”

“Then I am quite at a loss. One thing, however, I must observe. This disposition on your side is rather alarming. You totally disallow any similarity in the obligations; and may I not hence infer, that your notions of the duties of the dancing state are not so strict as your partner might wish? Have I not reason to fear, that if the gentleman who spoke to you just now were to return, or if any other gentleman were to address you, there would be nothing to restrain you from conversing with him as long as you chose?”

Henry's "quite at a loss" is alive with regret that Catherine will apparently neither subscribe to his emblem nor take in its drift, and he voices his distress more explicitly in the "alarming" and "fear" that soon follow. All the while his phrasing cuts Catherine off from any share in these emotions, as if he were thus hinting at her lack of concern. He attacks her more sharply by the figure, however, chiding Catherine for neglecting her "duties" as a dancing-partner—which is to say, if we remember Henry's main exposition of them, that she has not shown herself sufficiently attached to him. At the last, he even seems to give up the metaphoric mode itself, though without surrendering the values he has appropriated to dancing. For he moves from the relatively indirect "your notions" and "your partner" to the specific "I" and "you" to tax Catherine openly with preferring other gentlemen to himself, rendering his own lack of favor with special force by the inclusive "there would be nothing."

While the facts that Catherine now recites appear somewhat promising in themselves, her tone remains noncommittal:

“Mr. Thorpe is such a very particular friend of my brother's, that if he talks to me, I must talk to him again; but there are hardly three young men in the room besides him, that I have any acquaintance with.”

“And is that to be my only security? alas, alas!”
So Henry is finally compelled to ask her straight out for some real assurance that she likes him. Of course, by “alas, alas!” he consciously exaggerates the feelings behind his plea, but in order to keep the public expression of them decorous he must objectify them—and in some new way, given the dismal failure of his efforts to communicate with Catherine through the emblem.

Fortunately for him, she is stirred at long last to the handsomest of answers: “Nay, I am sure you cannot have a better; for if I do not know any body, it is impossible for me to talk to them; and, besides, I do not want to talk to any body.” In the first clauses she still holds fast to common sense; perhaps she even labors her logic deliberately here to suggest how unreasonable Henry is in demanding that she declare her emotions. But she concludes with the sort of direct, personal statement that he has been after all along, and he knows how to value it: “Now you have given me a security worth having; and I shall proceed with courage.” It is no accident that Henry repeats “security,” now employing it as a metaphor, for he thus converts Catherine’s pledge from a group of words into something concrete, something utterly real. And he does indeed “proceed with courage,” right to the end of the novel.

The entire scene richly illustrates Jane Austen’s technique of treating a social situation in metaphorical terms to dramatize the emotions of her characters. Here she allows Henry to invent the specific emblem, and we have seen how fully he uses it: not only to make known his affection for Catherine but also to formulate it with appropriate restraint. Through the double life of Henry’s figure, Jane Austen creates the virtual life of the scene. And by letting him break with the emblem finally to utter his feelings more directly, Jane Austen only reaffirms what she has rendered throughout the passage—that this virtual life is vigorously emotional. In the sustained vivacity of the dialogue as a whole, in Jane Austen’s delicate control of its multiple meanings, we begin to breathe the air of Pride and Prejudice.
1. Whether *Northanger Abbey* as we have it represents fundamentally earlier or later work than our *Sense and Sensibility* is a bibliographical problem that cannot be solved decisively. We know only that the early novels went through several versions before publication. We can make fairly sound guesses about the dates of revision, but we cannot say how far Jane Austen revised in any given case. I am venturing to take up *Northanger Abbey* after *Sense and Sensibility* mainly because its dialogue sounds technically more mature to my ear. Yet there is some scholarly warrant for treating it as later work. For one thing, if we may believe Cassandra Austen's memorandum, the original of *Northanger Abbey* postdates a dramatic version of *Sense and Sensibility*, itself the reworking of an epistolary *Elinor and Marianne*, and indeed one version of *Pride and Prejudice* (see R. W. Chapman's Introductory Note to *Sense and Sensibility*, p. xiii). So one could argue that *Northanger Abbey*, even in its initial form, would probably have benefited from Jane Austen's earlier experiences with a dramatic genre to the extent of being technically more assured. It might also be added that several scholars—among them Chapman in his *Jane Austen: Facts and Problems* (Oxford, 1948), p. 75—have suggested the possibility of Jane Austen doing some revising of *Northanger Abbey* as late as 1816, though this new date hardly supports my placing of the novel where I have. In any case, it is certain that *Northanger Abbey* never had to fight its way out of an epistolary form as *Sense and Sensibility* did.

2. Mudrick writes that Henry "cannot speak except in irony" (*Jane Austen*, p. 50), a finding that seems to me conditioned less by the text of *Northanger Abbey* than by the critic's rather complicated psychological interpretation of it. Taking the novel as an attack on all social conventions and personal feeling, he senses in its pages the "need" of the youthful Jane Austen "to assert her own non-commitment" (p. 51). She supposedly satisfies this compulsion by identifying herself in large part with Henry, whom Mudrick views as the implacable enemy of convention and apparently of personal feeling as well. But we have already heard how earnestly Henry rebukes Catherine for her unorthodox conception of General Tilney, and in the dialogue that I am now to analyze I think his liking for Catherine comes clear—indeed he expresses it directly in his first sentence.