

from *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*

[In his *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*, Franco Moretti examines, with the aid of maps showing patterns in literature, the relationship between geography and “the narrative structure of the European novel.” In the following selection, he maps the geography of Austen’s novels and considers what the maps reveal about her work and its relationship to the development of the English nation-state during her time.]

1. Home-land

Let me begin with a map of very well-known novels: figure 1, which shows the places where Jane Austen’s plots (or more exactly, their central thread, the heroine’s story) begin and end. *Northanger Abbey*, for instance, begins at Fullerton and ends at Woodston; *Sense and Sensibility*, at Norland Park and at Delaford; and so on for the others

Figure 1. *Jane Austen’s Britain*



(except *Persuasion*, whose endpoint is left rather vague). Please take a few moments to look at the figure, because in the end this is what literary geography is all about: you select a textual feature (here, beginnings and endings), find the data, put them on paper—and then you look at the map. In the hope that the visual construct will be more than the sum of its parts: that it will show a shape, a pattern that may *add* something to the information that went into making it.

And a pattern does indeed emerge here: of exclusion, first of all. No Ireland; no Scotland; no Wales; no Cornwall. No “Celtic fringe,” as Michael Hechter has called it;¹ only England: a much smaller space than the United Kingdom as a whole. And not even all of England: Lancashire, the North, the industrial revolution—all missing. Instead, we have here the much older England celebrated by the “estate poems” of topographical poetry: hills, parks, country houses ... (figure 2). It’s a first instance of what literary geography may tell us: two things at once: what *could* be in a novel—and what actually is there. On the one hand, the industrializing “Great” Britain of Austen’s years; on the other, the small, homogeneous England of Austen’s novels.

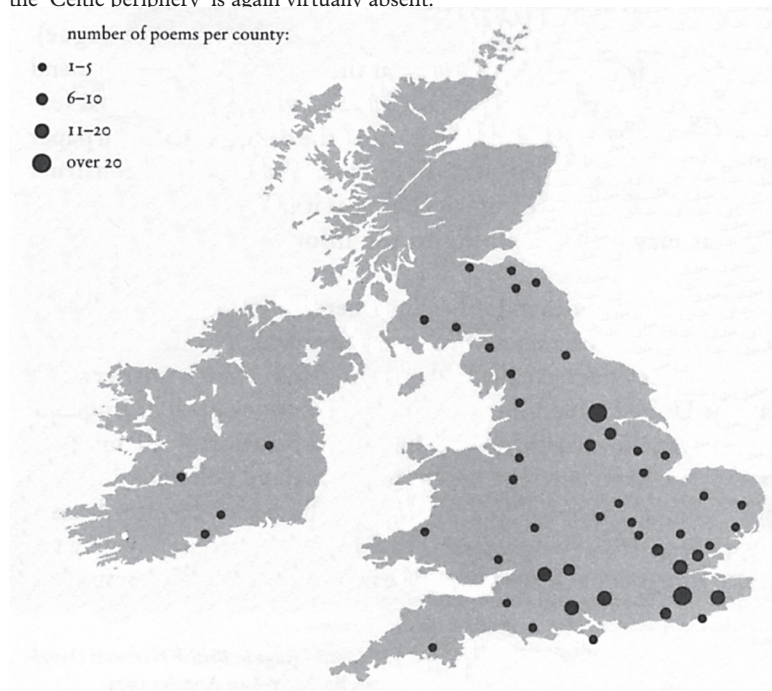
A small England, I have said. Smaller than the United Kingdom, to be sure; and small for us, now. Less so, however, at the turn of the eighteenth century, when the places on the map were separated by a day, or more, of very uncomfortable travel. And since these places coincide with the residences of the heroine (the beginning), and that of her husband-to-be (the ending), the distance between them means that Austen’s plots join together—“marry”—people *who belong to different counties*. Which is new, and significant: it means that these novels try to represent what social historians refer to as the “National Marriage Market”: a mechanism that crystallized in the course of the eighteenth century, which demands of human beings (and especially of women) a new mobility: physical, and even more so *spiritual* mobility. Because it is clear that a large marriage market can only work if women feel “at home”—in figure 1, many of the names indicate homes—not only in the small enclave of their birth, but in a much wider territory.² If they can feel the nation-state as a

1 Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism. The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1836–1966*, University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1975.

2 Austen’s space is of course too obviously *English* to be truly representative of the *British* nation. In this respect, Edgeworth’s *The Absentee* (1812), or Ferrier’s *Marriage* (1818), that deal with Ireland and Scotland as well as England, provide a more complete geographical setting (although in the end Edgeworth and Ferrier return to the idea of the nation within the nation, relinquishing the corruption of England for Ireland and [continued]

Figure 2. 'Estate poems' 1650–1850

Estate poems—which describe and celebrate a country estate—are most frequent in the southern counties of England where Austen's novels typically take place, while the 'Celtic periphery' is again virtually absent.



true home-land—and if not the nation-state as a whole, at least its “core area,” as social geography calls it: the wealthiest, most populated area (and the safest one, where a young woman may move around without fear). *Northanger Abbey*:

Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for. Of the Alps and the Pyrenees, with their pine forests and their vices, they might give a faithful delineation; and Italy, Switzerland, and the south of France, might be as fruitful in horrors as they were represented. Catherine dared not doubt beyond her own country, and even of that, if hard pressed,

Scotland respectively). The point is that England has long enjoyed an ambiguous and privileged position within the United Kingdom: *part* of it (like Scotland, Ireland, Wales)—but a *dominant* part, that claims the right to stand in for the whole. Austen's geo-narrative system is an extremely successful version of this opaque overlap of England and Britain.

would have yielded the northern and western extremities [the Celtic Fringe!]. But in the central part of England there was surely some security for the existence even of a wife not beloved, in the laws of the land, and the manner of the age...

Northanger Abbey, 25¹

But in the central part of England ... There is no better title for the map of Austen's novels. And as for Radcliffe's imitators, figure 3 ... shows the wide gulf separating the world of the Gothic from that of Catherine Morland.

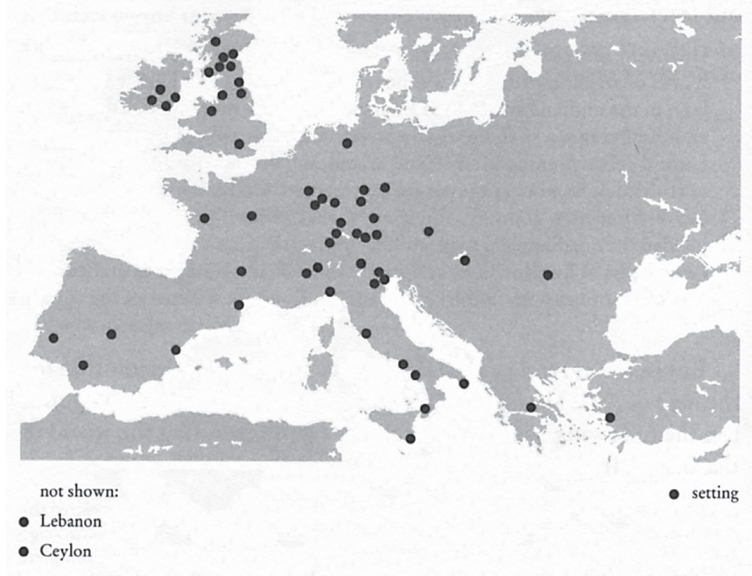
Literary sociology has long insisted, as we know, on the relationship between the novel and capitalism. But Austen's space suggests an equally strong affinity (first pointed out by Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*) between the novel and the geo-political reality of the nation-state. A modern reality, the nation-state—and a curiously elusive one. Because human beings can directly grasp most of their habitats: they can embrace their village, or valley, with a single glance; the same with the court, or the city (especially early on, when cities are small and have walls); or even the universe—a starry sky, after all, is not a bad image of it. But the nation-state? “Where” is it? What does it look like? How can one *see* it? And again: village, court, city, valley, universe can all be visually represented—in paintings, for instance: but the nation-state? Well, the nation-state ... found the novel. And viceversa: the novel found the nation-state. And being the only symbolic form that could represent it, it became an essential component of our modern culture.

Some nation-states (notably England/Britain and France) already existed, of course, long before the rise of the novel: but as “potential” states, I would say, rather than actual ones. They had a court at the center, a dynasty, a navy, *some* kind of taxation—but they were hardly integrated systems: they were still fragmented into several local circuits, where the strictly *national* element had not yet affected everyday existence. But towards the end of the eighteenth century a number of processes *come* into being (the final surge in rural enclosures; the industrial take-off; vastly improved communications; the unification of the national market; mass conscription) that literally drag human beings out of the local dimension, and throw them into a much larger one. Charles Tilly speaks of a new value for this period—“national loyalty”—that the state tries to force above and against

1 Narrative passages are identified by the title of the text, followed by the number of the chapter.

Figure 3. British Gothic tales 1770–1840

In this sample of nearly sixty texts, the highest concentration of Gothic tales is to be found in the triangle comprised between the Rhine, the Black Forest, and the Harz (the region of the pact with the Devil): a geographical distribution that was probably influenced by the enormous number of Gothic texts written in German. In general, Gothic stories were initially set in Italy and France; moved north, to Germany, around 1800; and then north again, to Scotland, after 1820. Except for one tale located in Renaissance London, no other story takes place inside Austen's English space.



“local loyalties.”¹ He is right, I believe, and the clash of old and new loyalty shows also how much of a *problem* the nation-state initially was: an unexpected coercion, quite unlike previous power relations; a wider, more abstract, more enigmatic dominion—that needed a new symbolic form in order to be understood.

And here, Austen's novelistic geography shows all its intelligence. In a striking instance of the problem-solving vocation of literature, her plots take the painful reality of territorial uprooting—when her stories open, the family abode is usually on the verge of being lost—and rewrite it as a seductive journey: prompted by desire, and crowned by happiness. They take a *local* gentry, like the Bennets of *Pride and Prejudice*, and join it to the *national* elite of Darcy and his

1 Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, Blackwell, Cambridge–Oxford 1990, p. 107.

ilk.¹ They take the strange, harsh novelty of the modern state—and turn it into a large, exquisite home.

2. England and its double

Marriage market, then. Like every other market, this also must take place somewhere, and figure 4 shows where: London, Bath, the sea-side. Here people meet to complete their transactions, and here is also where all the trouble of Austen's universe occurs: infatuations, scandals, slanders, seductions, elopements—disgrace. And all of this happens because the marriage market (again, like every other market) has produced its own brand of swindlers: shady relatives, social climbers, speculators, seducers, déclassé aristocrats ...

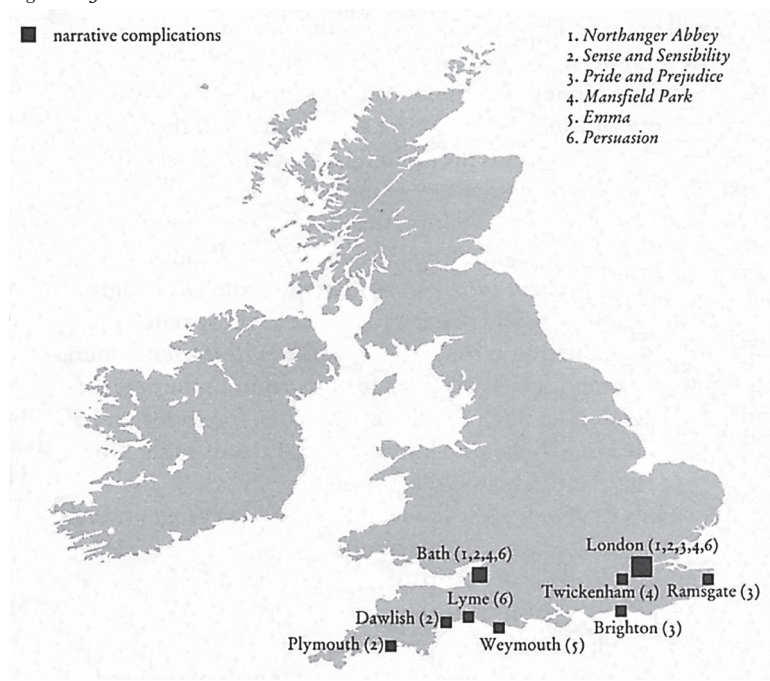
It makes sense, then, that this figure should be the inverse of figure 1. Look at them: the former is an introverted, rural England: an island within an island. The latter opens up to the sea, the great mix of Bath, and London, the busiest city in the world. In one, a scattered distribution of independent estates: in the other, an ellipse with one focus in London, and the other in Bath. There, homes; here, cities: and cities that are all real, whereas those homes were all fictional: an asymmetry of the real and the imaginary—of geography, and literature—that will recur throughout the present research.²

Two Englands, where different narrative and axiological functions are literally “attached” to different spaces ... and which one will prevail? The elite that has preserved its rural and local roots—or the mobile, urbanized group of seducers? In the language of the age: Land, or Money? We know Austen's answer: Land (preferably, with plenty of Money). But more significant than the final choice between the two spaces is the preliminary fact that Austen's England *is not one*. The novel functions as the symbolic form of the nation-state, I said earlier: and it's a form that (unlike an anthem, or a monument) not only does not conceal the nation's internal divisions, *but manages to turn them into a story*. [The two Englands in Austen's novels] form a field of narrative forces, whose reiterated interplay defines the nation

1 On the two gentries, see Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540–1880*, Oxford University Press, 1986, *passim*.

2 Why do novels so often mix real geographical sites and imaginary locations? Are the latter needed for some *specific* narrative function? Are there, in other words, events that tend to happen in real spaces—and others that “prefer” fictional ones? It is early to give a definitive answer, but Austen's novels certainly suggest that fictional spaces are particularly suited to happy endings, and the wish-fulfillment they usually embody. By contrast, the more pessimistic a narrative structure becomes, the more infrequent are its imaginary spaces.

Figure 4. Jane Austen's Britain



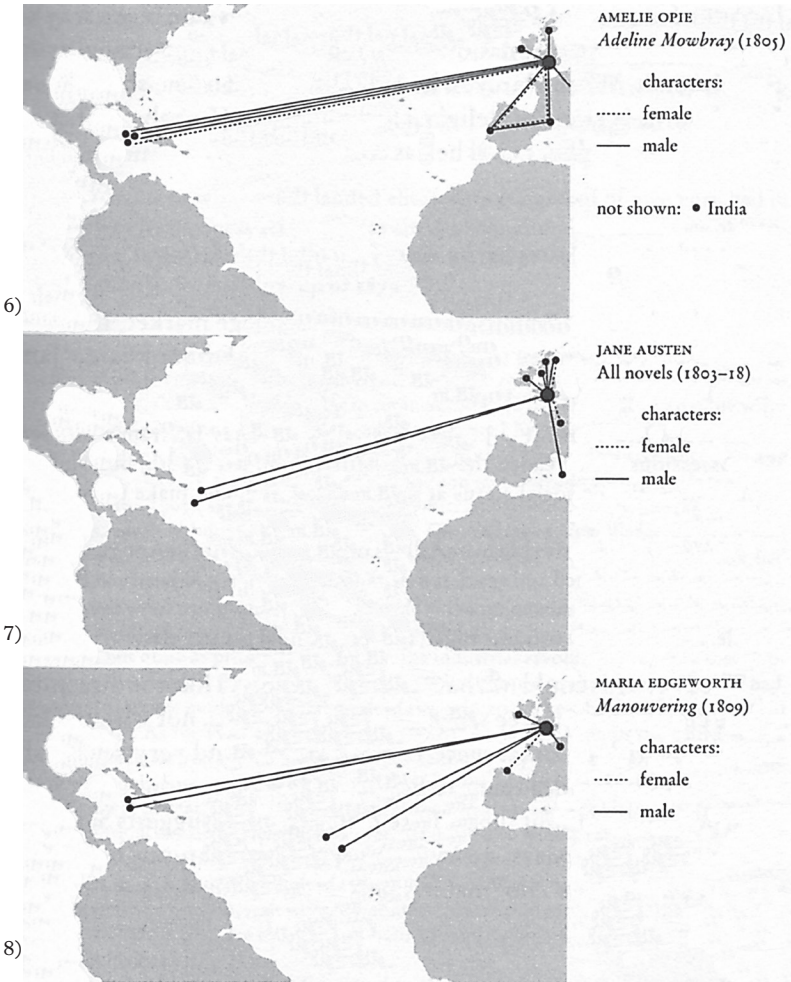
as the sum of all its possible stories: London, or the painful complications of life; the countryside, or the peace of closure; the seaside, and illicit emotions; Scotland, for secret lovers; Ireland and the Highlands, who knows, perhaps lands of the Gothic ...

Austen's England; what an invention. And I say invention deliberately, because today the spatial scope of her novels may strike us as obvious, but historically it wasn't obvious at all. Readers needed a symbolic form capable of making sense of the nation-state, I have often repeated; they needed it, yes—but, before Austen, no one had really come up with it. Look at figure 6: the travels of the heroine and the other main characters in Amelie Opie's *Adeline Mowbray*. Space, here, is so stretched as to be almost shapeless: in one novel, the heroine and the other characters travel as much as in Austen's six novels taken together (figure 7)—a choice which has its own *raison d'être* (a woman who defies current morality will suffer an endless *via crucis*: in Lisbon, in Perpignan, in Richmond, in London...), but that certainly cannot turn the nation into a symbolic "home." Or again, look at figure 8: the "excellent tale of *Manouvering*," as Scott calls it in the preface to *Ivanhoe*. Here, we have the opposite configuration to Opie's: the two heroines are motionless, in Devon, inside two

Figures 6–8. Britain and the world

In early nineteenth-century sentimental novels the international (and especially Atlantic) space takes the form of long retrospective narratives that focus on the (predominantly male) subplots: wars at sea, long-distance trade, Indian nabobs, West Indian planters...

Compared to her contemporaries, Austen markedly increases the central (and ‘English’) axis of the plot, so that the significance of the international subplot is accordingly reduced.



neighboring estates—while their men sail all over the world. A very simple, very clear division of the narrative universe: women at home, and men abroad (while the nation is again lost from sight).

Austen's geography is really different: it's a middle-sized world, much larger than Edgeworth's estate, and much smaller than Opie's Atlantic. It is the typically *intermediate* space of the nation-state, "large enough to survive and to sharpen its claws on its neighbors, but small enough to be organized from one center and to feel itself as an entity," as Kiernan once put it.¹ A contingent, intermediate construct (large enough... small enough...): and perhaps, it is also because she saw this new space that Austen is still read today, unlike so many of her rivals.

In Austen's middle-sized world, the notion of "distance" acquires in its turn a new meaning. In Opie, or Edgeworth (or Susannah Gunning, Mary Charlton, Barbara Hofland, Selina Davenport: in fact, in most sentimental fiction), distance is an absolute, ontological category: the loved one is Here—or Away. At Home, or in the Wide World. Present, or Absent (and probably Dead). It's still the atmosphere of Greek romances: space as a mythical force, against whose power of separation human beings (and especially women, from whose viewpoint the story is told) have only one weapon: constancy. They must remain what they are, despite all distance; they must remain loyal, patient—*faithful*.

Against this veritable ideology of space, Austen's heroines discover concrete, Relative Distance. Willoughby, Darcy, are twenty miles away, forty, sixty; so is London, or Portsmouth. Maybe there will be a visit, maybe not, because it takes time and effort to travel forty miles. But this moderate uncertainty shows that distance has been brought down to earth: it can be measured, understood; it is no longer a function of Fate, but of sentiment. It is one more way to attach a meaning to the national space, by literally "projecting" emotions upon it. When Darcy, who should be in London, shows up at Longbourn, "a smile of delight added lustre to [Elizabeth's] eyes" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 53). If he has come this far ...

3. "The recent losses in the West India estate"

England, Great Britain, the national marriage market, London, Bath, the Celtic fringe ... And the colonies? Edward Said, "Jane Austen and Empire":

1 V.G. Kiernan, "State and Nation in Western Europe," *Past and Present*, July 1965, p. 35.

In *Mansfield Park*, [...] 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 [...]

What sustains this life materially is the Bertram estate in Antigua [...] no matter how isolated and insulated the English place (e.g., Mansfield Park), it requires overseas sustenance [...] The Bertrams could not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class.¹

The Bertrams could not have been possible ... I like the directness of the claim, but disagree with it. I disagree, that is, not with the fact that the British colonies were very profitable, and very ruthlessly run: but with the idea that the English ruling class would "not have been possible" without them. Take Antigua away, suggests Said, and Sir Bertram disappears: no "wealth," no "social status at home and abroad," no "values," no "material support," no "sustenance." But is this truly the case?

The argument, here, has clearly two sides: the economic role of the British empire—and its fictional representation. On the former, which is far from my field of work, I can only say that I have been convinced by those historians for whom the colonies played certainly a significant, but not an *indispensable* role in British economic life.² And this is even truer for the gentry of Northamptonshire (the

1 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Knopf, New York 1993, pp. 62, 85, 89, 94.

2 In general, the key historical question (somewhat removed from *Mansfield Park* itself) is whether colonial profits financed the industrial revolution or not: and whether, as a consequence, the take-off of European capitalism would have been at all possible without colonial possessions. On this point, the arguments I have found most persuasive are those by Patrick K. O'Brien ("The Costs and Benefits of British Imperialism," *Past and Present*, 120, 1988), V.G. Kiernan (*Imperialism and its Contradictions*, Routledge, New York-London 1995), and Paul Bairoch (*Economics and World History*, Chicago University Press, 1993); although Robin Blackburn's *The Making of New World Slavery. From the Baroque to the Modern* (Verso, London 1997), which I read when this book had already been finished, made me reconsider several things.

Kiernan (who is, of course, a vitriolic critic of British imperialism) argues for instance that "the spoils of Bengal [...] may have percolated by devious channels into Lancashire mills, but not quite as promptly [as to start the industrial revolution]": and he then proceeds to point out that if early industrialists "had little access to the big money, they had, however [given the modest financial needs of the industrial take-off] equally little [continued]

county of Mansfield Park), which according to Stone and Stone, between 1600 and 1800 engaged in business activities (including colonial investment) in a percentage that oscillated *between one and two percent*:

The degree to which local landed elites were composed of men enriched in any way by business activities was always negligible. [...] Evidence of infiltration, interaction, marriage, entrepreneurship, and other kinds of intermingling were fairly low up to 1879.¹

Thus economic history. And if we then turn to *Mansfield Park* itself, Said's thesis becomes even more dubious. Early in the novel, when Bertram's older son runs into debt, his gambling "robs Edmund for ten, twenty, thirty years, perhaps for life, of more than half the income which ought to be his" (*Mansfield Park*, 3). On the other hand, the "recent losses in the West India estate," that are mentioned in the very same page, leave no trace on the life at Mansfield Park: losses or not, everything remains exactly the same. Perhaps that estate was not so indispensable after all? And then, here is Bertram, back from Antigua:

need of it" (pp. 54–5). As for Paul Bairoch, the thesis that the exploitation of the Third World financed the industrial revolution is for him one of the "myths" of economic history, and his own conclusions turn the argument on its head: "during the 18th and 19th centuries colonization was primarily a result of industrial development and not vice versa" (p. 82). As Bairoch himself explains at length, however, the myth is so widely accepted because "if the West did not gain much from colonialism, it does not mean that the Third World did not lose much" (p. 85). In other words, although the Third World did not contribute much to the industrial revolution, the latter, by contrast, had catastrophic effects on the Third World itself (as in the case of de-industrialization, to which Bairoch devotes an entire chapter of his book).

For his part, Blackburn shows in great detail the exceptional profits arising out of West Indian slave plantations, and summarizes his findings in the following way: "We have seen that the pace of capitalist industrialization in Britain was decisively advanced by its success in creating a regime of extended primitive accumulation and battenning upon the super-exploitation of slaves in the Americas. Such a conclusion certainly does not imply that Britain followed some optimum path of accumulation in this period [...] nor does our survey lead to the conclusion that New World slavery produced capitalism. What it does show is that exchanges with the slave plantations helped British capitalism to make a breakthrough to industrialism and global economy ahead of its rivals" (p. 572).

1 Stone and Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite*? pp. 141, 189. ...

It was a busy morning with him. Conversation with any of them occupied but a small part of it. He had to reinstate himself in all the wanted concerns of his Mansfield life, to see his steward and his bailiff—to examine and compute—and, in the intervals of business, to walk into his stables and his gardens, and nearest plantations.

Mansfield Park, 20

To examine and compute, to walk into stables and plantations, to meet the steward and the bailiff (who are in charge of managing the collecting of rents, and of financial affairs in general) ... All signs of large economic interests *in Britain*, and most likely near Mansfield Park itself. Said's picture seems exactly reversed: modest colonial profits—and large national ones. And yet, when all is said, Bertram *does* indeed leave for Antigua, and stays away for a very long time. If Antigua is not essential to his finances—why on earth does he go?

He goes, not because he needs the money, but because Austen needs him out of the way. Too strong a figure of authority, he intimidates the rest of the cast, stifling narrative energy, and leaving Austen without a story to tell: for the sake of the plot, he must go. It is the difference, as Russian Formalists would say, between the “function” and the “motivation” of a narrative episode: between the *consequences* of Bertram's absence (the play, the flirt between Edmund and Mary, Maria's adultery: in short, *virtually the entire plot of the novel*), and its premises: which are far less important, because (as in Freudian “rationalization,” which is a very similar concept) one “reason” can always be replaced by another without much difficulty.

Bertram goes to Antigua, then, not because he must go there—but because *he must leave Mansfield Park*. But it's nevertheless to Antigua that he goes, and I must still account for Austen's specific motivation of her plot. And then, in sentimental novels at the turn of the century, the colonies are a truly ubiquitous presence: they are mentioned in two novels out of three, and overseas fortunes add up to one third, if not more, of the wealth in these texts. ... Why this insistence? Could it be a “realistic” feature of nineteenth-century narrative, as Said suggests for Jane Austen?

Possibly. But, frankly, these fictional fortunes are so out of proportion to economic history that I suspect them to be there not so much because of reality, but for strictly *symbolic* reasons. Because Jamaica, or Bengal, remove the production of wealth to faraway worlds, in whose effective reality most nineteenth-century readers were probably not “at all interested” (like Fanny's cousins: see *Mansfield Park*,

21).¹ The way in which colonial fortunes are introduced—a few hasty commonplaces, period—is itself a good clue to the real state of affairs; and as for the colonies themselves, [they are rarely represented in British sentimental novels]; at most, we get a retrospective (and dubious) tale like Rochester’s in *Jane Eyre*. This is the mythic geography—*pecunia ex machina*—of a wealth that is not really produced (nothing is ever said of work in the colonies), but magically “found” overseas whenever a novel needs it. And so, among other things, the link between the wealth of the elite and the “multitude of labouring poor” of contemporary England can be easily severed: the elite is cleared, innocent. Which is a wonderful thing to know, for heroines that want to marry into it—and even better, of course, in the decades of the harshest class struggle of modern British history. ...

(1998)

1 Around 1800, *The Lady’s Magazine* devotes hundreds of pages to tales and “anecdotes” of the colonial world—but provides only a couple of genuine news items. ...