

Words of Love: the Erotics of Romantic Writing

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IN WHAT FOLLOWS I offer a brief and no doubt off-puttingly schematic distinction between three kinds of love, each of which seems important in the Romantic period to a particular group of writers, and associate each of them with a particular verbal habit. The first kind I notice is marital love, which I associate with Wordsworth and Coleridge, and with metaphor. The second I describe as libertine love, and associate with Burns, Byron and Shelley, and with simile. The third kind I call companionate love, and I associate it with Wollstonecraft and Austen, with women rather than men and with prose writers rather than poets. Those who celebrate companionate love, I suggest, share a rather pointed distrust of all kinds of figurative language.

In the lines from *The Recluse* which he published as a preface to *The Excursion*, Wordsworth describes his poetry as 'the spousal verse' celebrating the wedding between 'the discerning intellect of Man' and 'this goodly universe'. He claims to 'chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse / Of this great consummation'. The lines are very often quoted as Wordsworth's most emphatic acknowledgement that his central theme is the relationship between the mind and the natural world. My focus is rather on the marriage to which that relationship is compared. It seems, on the face of it, a disappointingly conventional marriage in which the Man is distinguished by his discerning intellect and the woman by her material, bodily virtues, her goodness. In *The Prelude*, when Wordsworth tries to indicate the special quality of those experiences that will become 'spots of time', memories to which we return repeatedly and invigoratingly, he does so in terms of a very similar marriage in which the mind is lord and master, and the body's wifely role is as his 'obedient servant':

This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
Among those passages of life in which
We have had deepest feeling that the mind
Is lord and master, and that outward sense
Is but the obedient servant of her will.

(1805 text, XI, 268-72)

Except, of course, that the mind in these lines is at once 'lord and master' of the household, and its powerful mistress, for whom outward sense is 'but the obedient servant of *her* will' [my italics]. It seems to be a characteristic of the ideal Wordsworthian marriage as it is of ideal Wordsworthian perception that the distinction between man and wife like the distinction between subject and object is at once asserted and denied. Wordsworth's interest, as he puts it in 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', is in those moments when the 'wild secluded scene' and the 'thoughts of more deep seclusion' that it inspires come together, a union figured for him by the joining at the horizon of the 'landscape with the quiet of the sky.' His interest in marriage is similarly

at its most impassioned when the man and woman who seem to have been so sharply differentiated unite to form a single mind which is recognized as at once master and mistress.

Marriage and the catastrophic consequences of marital breakdown are a pervasive topic in Wordsworth's poems from first to last. The figure of the abandoned wife or mother appears repeatedly, in *The Evening Walk*, *The Ruined Cottage*, 'The Female Vagrant', 'The Thorn', and many more, as does the husband who abandons his wife or is widowed, and in most cases the breakdown of the marriage coincides with the husband or the wife losing the sustaining, reciprocal relationship with the natural world on which Wordsworth grounds his ideal of human happiness. In *The Excursion*, the Solitary, when he is bereft of his wife and children, loses all proper sense of the connection between the world outside him and the world inside his head, and veers disastrously from the abject self-absorption of grief to the factitious concern with the public world signalled when he engages in revolutionary politics. The Solitary loses his life of domestic happiness through no fault of his own. The case of a character such as Peter Bell is more desperate, because he has never recognised the marital ideal:

He was a Carl as wild and rude
As ever hue-and-cry pursued,
As ever ran a felon's race.

Of all that lead a lawless life,
Of all that love their lawless lives,
In city or in village small,
He was the wildest far of all—
He had a dozen wedded wives.

Nay, start not! wedded wives and twelve!

(*Peter Bell*, 273-81)

He is, as Shelley was to point out, a 'dodecagamic Peter' (*Peter Bell the Third*, note to 36), and for Wordsworth it is not just a coincidence that he is also unable properly to value a primrose:

But nature ne'er could find the way
Into the heart of Peter Bell.
In vain, through every changeful year,
Did Nature lead him as before;
A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.

(244-50)

The primrose is just a primrose because Peter's mind is unable to engage in an interchange with the natural world and that inability is closely linked to his failure to achieve a happy monogamous relationship. In the one case happiness

is secured by the achieved harmony of mind and nature, in the other of man and woman, and both those achievements are typical, even prototypical, exercises of the imagination.

According to Coleridge, the imagination 'reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant elements: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling, profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.'¹ So, for the functioning of the imagination there must be difference, and that difference must be resolved, and yet the harmony that results is entirely consistent with a proper subordination, as for example of form to content. In all these aspects, it seems clear that the proper type of the imagination is the Christian ideal of marriage, which is founded on sexual difference, and resolves that sexual difference into a harmony which is still consistent with the proper subordination of the female to the male. The difference is resolved, and yet it remains crucial. Wordsworth repeatedly advertises it. His *Solitary*, for example, does not say, as most of us might, that he had one son and one daughter, but that he had two children, 'Graced mutually by difference of sex' (*The Excursion*, 3, 591)

If the proper type of the imagination is Christian marriage, its key expression is in metaphor, the figure through which a difference between two perceptions is resolved to produce a third perception. What seems most to horrify Wordsworth in all his critical writings is the notion that metaphor might be optional; that one might choose between metaphors, or that one might even choose between using a metaphor and dispensing with it. He responds to such notions with a horror that seems as much moral as aesthetic, as if it were equivalent to the notion that one might in different moods choose different women, or that a man might sit down and decide whether to take a particular woman as his wife or not. His disgust at Lord Lyttelton's epitaph for his wife is impelled by the incongruity of the language chosen and the emotion claimed: 'there is no interchange of action from within and from without', and the consequence is that the 'connections' between the words remain 'mechanical and arbitrary.'² The epitaph belies the marriage it mourns by inopportunistly insinuating that Lyttelton's connection with his wife was no more profound. For Wordsworth metaphor fuses two perceptions in an indissoluble marriage. I will offer just one example:

¹ S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 2, 16-7.

² *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 2, 74-5.

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
 Beside the springs of Dove,
 A Maid whom there were none to praise
 And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone
 Half hidden from the eye!
 —Fair as a star, when only one
 Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
 When Lucy ceased to be;
 But she is in her grave, and, oh,
 The difference to me!

The poem ends in ‘difference,’ but in a difference that the whole poem has worked to enrich. It is the difference between Lucy alive and Lucy dead, between the male speaker and the female spoken of, and between the shy retirement of the violet and the public conspicuousness of the solitary star, and, as the word difference is spoken, the poem is locked into shape, all its differences resolved with a finality that seems to strike Wordsworth as at once like marriage and like death, states that for Wordsworth seem to be connected by their permanence rather than linked, as they are for Byron, by the doubtfulness that attends their outcomes (see *Don Juan*, III, 9).

Shelley was an attentive student of both Wordsworth and Coleridge, and so it is unsurprising to find him assimilating their rhetoric. A passage from *A Defence of Poetry*, for example, seems to derive from Coleridge’s account of the imagination:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness: it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed: it marries exultation and horror; grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things.³

Shelley makes explicit here the nuptial analogy that, I have suggested, underlies Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s account of the imagination: poetry ‘marries exultation and horror’. But it might be better to describe Shelley’s as a parody rather than an imitation of the Lake Poets’ rhetoric. In Coleridge’s account the imagination reconciles ‘opposite or discordant qualities’. For Shelley it reconciles ‘all irreconcilable things’. Coleridge’s interest in dialectical modes of expression has produced in Shelley the kind of paradox that seems indistinguishable from self-contradiction. The marriage that Shelley posits, between exultation and horror, seems inherently unstable—not a marriage, one suspects, that will last. Indeed, Shelley elsewhere insists, in clear disagreement with Wordsworth and Coleridge, that the operations of the imagination are

³ *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 533.

distinguished by their transience: the mind in creation 'is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness'.⁴ For Shelley, as for his predecessors, the most characteristic work of the imagination is the forging of metaphors, but these too are in Shelley's view of things impermanent: indeed they contain within them the principle of their own obsolescence. The language of poets 'is vitally metaphorical; that is it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them become through time signs for portions and classes of thoughts, instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then, if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.'⁵ Metaphor marries two perceptions, but for Shelley marital and metaphorical raptures are both necessarily blunted by familiarity. Marriages and metaphors can survive only if they are repeatedly renewed, or, as Shelley puts it in *Peter Bell the Third*, quoting Boccaccio, if the mouth that has been kissed is able to renew itself, like the moon.⁶ But more often Shelley flamboyantly proclaims himself a committed opponent of the institution of marriage:

I never was attached to that great sect,
Whose doctrine is, that each one should select
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,
And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend
To cold oblivion, though it is in the code
Of modern morals, and the beaten road
Which those poor slaves with weary footsteps tread,
Who travel to their home among the dead
By the broad highway of the world, and so
With one chained friend, perhaps a jealous foe,
The dreariest and the longest journey go.
(*Epipsychidion*, 149-59)

The smartly turned couplets lend the thought a certain libertine swagger through which Shelley places himself, in terms of style as much as of sentiment, in a quite different tradition from that established by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Shelley describes Wordsworth in *Peter Bell the Third* as a kind of moral eunuch,

He touched the hem of Nature's shift,
Felt faint—and never dared uplift
The closest, all-concealing tunic.
(314-7)

⁴ *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 531.

⁵ *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 512.

⁶ 'Bocca baciata non perde ventura / Anzi rinnuova come fa la luna.' (*Peter Bell the Third*, 328-9)

Nature objects to this prudishness:

“Tis you are cold—for I, not coy,
Yield love for love, frank, warm, and true;
And Burns, a Scottish peasant boy—
His errors prove it—knew my joy
More, learnèd friend, than you.” (323-8)

Against Wordsworth, Shelley sides with Burns, identifying an alternative tradition of poets united by their flamboyant failure to espouse the monogamous ideal. But I am interested not so much in the way in which they acted out this creed in their personal lives as in the way that it informed their linguistic practice. This is Burns piously asserting the emptiness of a life given over to the pursuit of pleasure, and contriving to barb the sentiment with irony simply by expressing it through a rhetoric that is itself committed to the restless pleasure-seeking that the passage affects to condemn:

But pleasures are like poppies spread:
You seize the flow’r, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snow falls in the river,
A moment white—then melts for ever;
Or like the borealis race,
That flit ere you can point their place;
Or like the rainbow’s lovely form
Evanishing amid the storm.
(“Tam o’Shanter”, 59-66)

Pleasures last no longer than poppies or the snowflakes that fall on a river, or the northern lights or a rainbow, and the transience of pleasure is lamented in a passage that covertly celebrates that transience by allowing one simile to replace another in a sequence of substitutions that might be made to last as long as the poet’s energy and invention permit. It is a rhetoric that celebrates rather than bemoans the tendency of each pleasure to ‘evanish’, because its evanishment permits another pleasure, another simile, to take its place. ‘Or like’ is the phrase that best summarises this libertine rhetoric of simile. Here is Byron using it, as he describes the sudden relaxation of the Sultan’s many wives as they enter their own sanctum, the harem:

But when they reached their own apartments, there,
Like birds, or boys, or bedlamites broke loose,
Waves at spring-tide, or women any where
When freed from bonds (which are of no great use
After all) or like Irish at a fair,
Their guards being gone, and as it were a truce
Established between them and bondage, they
Began to sing, dance, chatter, smile and play. (*Don Juan*, VI, 34)

This is a stanza that explicitly sympathises with the women, but implicitly, as it invites simile after simile into the stanza, it behaves rather like the sultan. The similes move from birds to boys, to madmen to ocean waves, to women and at last to the Irish just as the sultan moves from one woman to another in his harem, and just as, in the plot of the poem, Juan moves from Julia to Haidée to Dudu, to Catherine the Great, only for his career to be cut short as he swithers between Lady Amelia, Aurora Raby and the Duchess FitzFulke. The two movements are surely closely related. The poetry revitalises itself by ceaselessly substituting one figure for another just as Juan maintains his vitality by moving restlessly between a succession of women. As Byron puts in the very same canto of the poem: 'My similes are gathered in a heap, / So pick and chuse,' (VI, 68, 6-7) and the 'pick and chuse' principle applies equally to his dealings with similes and with women.

It is a verbal practice still more pervasive in Shelley, and it is Shelley who most searchingly investigates its intellectual foundations. In his 'Essay on Love', Shelley explains that for all of us the true love object is an idealised mirror image of ourselves. We travel the world looking for some perfect embodiment of this image, and, unsurprisingly, given that it is an image of ourselves, we fail to find it. But though this may seem sad, it is a failure that, Shelley argues, should be celebrated, because it produces in each one of us a want or lack that 'urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that without the possession of which there is no rest nor respite to the heart over which it rules'. It is precisely because we are unable to find the perfect love object that we are freed to recognize 'the faintest shadow' of that ideal object everywhere, freed to spend our lives passing from one object to another, accommodating every possible object within a capacity for love that is never exhausted because it never meets an object that fully satisfies it.⁷

The thought finds its most finished poetic expression in *Epipsychidion*. No comparison is adequate to Emilia, the woman to whom the poem is addressed, and so each is offered only to be replaced by another, which also proves to be inadequate, in a process that need never end, and that does in fact occupy more than a 100 lines of the poem:

An image of some bright Eternity;
A shadow of some golden dream; a Splendour
Leaving the third sphere pilotless; a tender
Reflection of the eternal Moon of Love
Under whose motions life's dull billows move;
A Metaphor of Spring and Youth and Morning;
A Vision like incarnate April, warning,
With smiles and tears, Frost the Anatomy
Into his summer grave. (115-23)

⁷ *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 503-4. The most elegant account of Shelley's philosophy of love and its incorporation into the texture of his poetry is William A. Ulmer's in *Shelleyan Eros: the Rhetoric of Romantic Love* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).

‘Ah, woe is me’, Shelley continues, a gloominess that comes to him, one suspects, because he has run out of breath, or, to use more elevated terms, because it is beyond his mortal powers to prolong that play of substitution for the eternity that would alone be adequate fully to express the infinite beauty of Emilia. The poem is propelled forward by its own inadequacy, by Shelley’s failure to find a figure of speech adequate to Emily’s beauty. But, as Shelley admits, the infinite beauty is really a property not of the unfortunate Emilia but of the idealised mirror image of himself that constitutes for all of us the one true love object. For the brief moment of the poem Shelley is under the illusion that this ideal love object is identical with Emily, but, as Shelley well knows, such illusions cannot be sustained—soon another love object will succeed Emily, as she herself has succeeded his wife. As he wrote to John Gisborne, ‘I think one is always in love with something or other; the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal.’⁸ It is a quest that can never terminate. If the sequence of women who occupied for a while the role of the sun around which Shelley revolved is shorter than the sequence of similes that try and fail to express the beauty of Emily in *Epipsychidion*, there is only one persuasive explanation for this—Shelley’s vocabulary was more extensive than the list of his female acquaintance.

There is clear evidence that by the time that Shelley died Mary Shelley was finding the whole business rather tiresome. In a letter to John Gisborne’s partner, Maria Gisborne, Mary offered her own dry commentary on ‘Shelley’s Italian platonics.’ The ineffable Emilia had emerged from the convent in which Shelley found her immured, married a man called Biondi, and was leading him and his mother ‘a devil of a life.’ The whole affair put Mary in mind of a nursery rhyme:

As I was going down Cranbourne Lane,
Cranbourne lane was dirty,
And there I met a pretty maid,
Who dropt to me a curt’sey;
I gave her cakes, I gave her wine,
I gave her sugar candy,
But oh! The little naughty girl!
She asked me for some brandy.⁹

As Mary Shelley found to her cost, libertine poetics had little to offer women, but neither, perhaps, did the marital poetics of Wordsworth, dependent as they were on a difference that, however subtly qualified, assumed just as blithely as libertine poetics the inferiority of the woman to the man. It may even be that the two poetics are less intransigently opposed than I have suggested.

For Susan Wolfson, Coleridge is ‘a double agent,’¹⁰ whose commitment to

⁸ *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 2, 434

⁹ *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett, 2 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 1, 223.

the permanent union best expressed in symbol and metaphor is repeatedly betrayed by resort to the more casual relationships entertained by similes. The same erotic economy that Shelley analyses in his 'Essay on Love' and to which he gives poetic expression in *Epipsychidion* clearly underlies Coleridge's 'Constancy to an ideal Object,' and it works to undermine the constancy to which the poet lays claim. As in Shelley's essay, the quest for the ideal object can never arrive at its goal, because the ideal object is a Brocken spectre, a radiant reflection of the quester himself. It is a perception apt to prompt in Coleridge just as much as Shelley the libertine rhetoric of the simile:

shall I liken thee
To some sweet girl of too too rapid growth
Nipped by consumption mid untimely charms?
Or to Bristowa's bard, the wondrous boy!
An amaranth, which earth scarce seemed to own,
Till disappointment came, and pelting wrong
Bent it to Earth? Or with indignant grief
Shall I compare thee to poor Poland's hope,
Bright flower of Hope killed in the opening bud?

('On Observing a Blossom on the First of February, 1796,' 9-17)

The last of the 'dim similitudes' makes an attempt to place the rhetorical habit at the service of a respectable and focused concern for the fate of Poland, but it is an effort that never really persuades. In 'The Eolian Harp' Coleridge speculates that the whole of 'animated nature' might function as so many 'organic harps diversely framed' swept by 'one intellectual breeze / At once the Soul of each, and God of all.' ('The Eolian Harp', 44-8) The thought is dangerous because of its pantheistic tendencies, but also perhaps because Coleridge's reverence for the unity of the breeze coincides with a delight in the diversity of the harps. The thought encourages the prospect of a life spent passing from one natural phenomenon to another in a never-ending process of substitution, a life spent in blissful surrender to 'idle flitting fantasies,'

As wild and various as the random gales
That sweep and flutter on this subject lute! (42-3)

If so, it is particularly appropriate that the speculation should meet with a 'mild reproof' administered by Coleridge's wife.

Coleridge, at least in theory, and Wordsworth both in theory and practice, adopted an aesthetic ideal that was defined, I have suggested, by analogy with the ideal of Christian marriage. A harmonious state which is secured rather than compromised by the proper subordination of wife to husband supports the aesthetic ideal of a harmonious union that 'still subordinates art to nature;

¹⁰ Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 66.

the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.' Byron and Shelley flamboyantly repudiate this matrimonial ideal in favour of a libertine aesthetic in which difference works to ensure that satisfaction is deferred, passed from object to object in a sequence of similes the duration of which is limited only by the energy of the poet. Neither is an aesthetic that seems to offer much to women, or rather, the offer they make is insubstantial, amounting to little more than some pretty figures of speech, in the words of Mary Shelley's nursery rhyme, 'sugar candy'. It was a point grasped rather early by Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft entertains the 'wild wish,' as she calls it, that she might see 'the distinction of sex confounded.'¹¹ This is the distinction, as she well knows, on which the marital ideal celebrated by Wordsworth and Coleridge is founded, but for her it is an ideal established by one sex in the service of its own interests. Men have persistently 'laboured to prove, with chivalric generosity, that the sexes ought not to be compared; man was made to reason, woman to feel: and that together, flesh and spirit, they make the most perfect whole, by blending happily reason and sensibility into one character' (154). Neither does Wollstonecraft approve the libertine alternative favoured by Byron and Shelley, though, in the guise in which Shelley preferred it, it clearly exercised a certain seductive hold over her: 'The lively heated imagination . . . draws the picture of love, as it draws every other picture, with those glowing colours, which the daring hand will steal from the rainbow, that is directed by a mind, condemned in a world like this, to prove its noble origin by panting after unattainable perfection, ever pursuing what it acknowledges to be a fleeting dream'. (168) Both these ideals are rejected by Wollstonecraft in favour of the partnership founded on similarity rather than difference which she terms friendship. In several passages she suggests an awareness that her position has linguistic implications, as for example when she dismisses Rousseau as 'poetical' (175), convicts James Fordyce of using 'love-like phrases of pumped up passion' (193), and John Gregory of an 'elegance' that obliges us to 'pop on the author, when we only expected to meet—the father' (196). After all, the relationship between the sexes against which she protests, a relationship based on difference, in which one party is maintained in a state of dependence on the other, is very like the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle of a well regulated metaphor. Hence, one suspects, the several passages in which Wollstonecraft expresses her preference for what she calls 'the simple language of truth' (110), or 'the language of truth and soberness' (193).

Wollstonecraft is matched in her distrust of Romantic love by Jane Austen, whose novels moved Walter Scott to protest that they went too far in repudiating the 'romantic feelings which [her] predecessors perhaps fanned into too powerful a flame'.¹² Wollstonecraft goes so far as to argue that 'when even two virtuous young people marry, it would perhaps be happy if some

¹¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Miriam Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 147. Subsequent page references are included in the text.

¹² *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction*, ed. Ioan Williams (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), 236.

circumstances checked their passion; if the recollection of some prior attachment, or disappointed affection, made it on one side, at least, rather a match founded on esteem' (167). In *Sense and Sensibility*, when Marianne rebounds from Willoughby into the arms of Colonel Brandon, Austen gives Wollstonecraft's position the strongest fictional support that it can ever have received; but, in a more muted fashion, most of her heroines undergo a similar process. Austen understands the ideal relationship between a man and a woman, I want to suggest, not as the kind of marriage that Wordsworth celebrates, and still less as one in the possibly endless sequence of substitutions that Byron and Shelley found so energising, but rather as a relationship arrived at through the exercise of choice. Austen was delighted by her brother Henry's response, when he read *Mansfield Park*, to his namesake Henry Crawford: 'he admires H. Crawford—I mean properly—as a clever, pleasant Man.'¹³ And she was delighted, surely, because she knew that *Mansfield Park* relies on its reader being able to imagine a quite different outcome, in which a properly chastened Crawford finds in Fanny Price as Frank Churchill was to find in Jane Fairfax the wife who will bring him the moral strength that he lacks. The novel does not turn out like this not because such an outcome is inherently implausible or unsatisfying, but because Fanny decides otherwise.

Austen is also remarkable amongst her contemporaries for her reluctance to clutter up her prose with similes and metaphors. In large part, no doubt, this was simply a measure of her disdain for those of her colleagues who sought to elevate the status of the novel by writing in a self-consciously poetic manner, an ambition that she seems to have felt was rather too likely to produce the kind of prose one finds in a novel like *Julia* by Helen Maria Williams: 'His disturbed mind resembled a tempestuous flood, whose waves arise dark and turbulent, except when the sun-beam throws a line of trembling radiance across their agitated surface.'¹⁴ But I want to suggest that Jane Austen's distrust of figurative language is also closely connected to her distrust of the notion that partnerships can be formed and reformed at will and her equal distrust of the notion that marriages are made in heaven, and each of us faces the daunting task of finding our one possible partner as we wander the world forlornly like one half of Aristophanes's severed hermaphrodite.

Again I will offer just one example. Harriet Smith tells Emma Woodhouse that she has developed an attachment to Mr Knightley and that she has reason to suppose that Knightley returns her affection:

Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like her's, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress. She touched—she admitted—she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much

¹³ *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 256.

¹⁴ Helen Maria Williams, *Julia, a novel; interspersed with some poetical pieces* (London: T. Cadell, 1790), 2, 32.

worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley, than with Franck Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of a return? It darted through her with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!¹⁵

The simile, 'with the speed of an arrow', is striking, but it is striking because and only because the novel has until this point been written in a prose that has so consistently refused all figurative ornaments. It is also surely true that this is a simile that accrues its power not in spite of but because of its banality. It is the demonstration that, even in her thoughts, Emma can no more 'make speeches' than Knightley can when he finally proposes to her, and in both cases the failure of eloquence is offered as the guarantee of sincerity—as Knightley will put it, 'If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more'.¹⁶ Emma's simile tells us that she has experienced for the first time that sense of the irreplaceable uniqueness of a single individual that we refer to as love, but the banality of the simile mocks that claim even as it is acknowledged. Knightley, after all, as even Emma recognises, because he is at least her social equal, and because he is already a member of her family, her brother-in-law, and a constant visitor to her house, is the only absolutely appropriate partner that the neighbourhood affords. He is, for instance, the only man whom she could marry without threatening her relationship with her father. She recognizes with quasi-magical suddenness that Knightley is the man she loves, and, for all her quickness of perception, even the dumbest-witted reader of the novel has got there long before her. What feels to Emma like magic seems to the reader, and, when they learn of it, seems to all the residents of Highbury, the plainest common sense. For Wordsworth, marriage is best figured by metaphor. For Shelley and Byron, neither of them committed to the indissolubility of the marital bond, it is better figured by simile, a figure that approximates rather than identifies, and that establishes only a provisional link between the elements that it joins. But for Austen—and she speaks in this for a large group amongst the women of her time—marriage is best expressed in what Wollstonecraft calls 'the language of truth and soberness', in plain, unfigurative prose, because such prose can link two things without subordinating one to the other, and because such prose does not aspire, like poetry, to inevitability. It is content if it can express itself in what Austen calls in *Northanger Abbey*, referring to the language of novels, 'the best chosen language',¹⁷ that is, in words selected with care and intelligence, selected in the same way that sensible people select the partners that they plan to spend their lives with.

¹⁵ Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 444.

¹⁶ *Emma*, 469.

¹⁷ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Barbara M. Benedict and Deidre Le Faye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 31.