

*Who Betrays Elizabeth Bennet? Further Puzzles in Classic Fiction*, by John Sutherland; xvi & 256 pp. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, \$9.95.

As a professor of literature at Cornell in the nineteen-fifties, Vladimir Nabokov was known for setting such examination questions as “Describe the pattern of the wallpaper in the Kareninas’ bedroom.” Although few students were able to provide the correct answer (Nabokov did, however, award a bonus point to the student who suggested it might be “little trains”), they were, nevertheless, forced to pay close attention to the details of the text and, in Nabokov’s words, “to enter the world of the novel.” Attention to the details of the text is the defining characteristic of John Sutherland’s recent work (for which “literary appreciation” rather than “literary criticism” might be a more appropriate term) including *Who Betrays Elizabeth Bennet?* and the two previous books in the series (also published by Oxford University Press), *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* (1996) and *Can Jane Eyre be Happy?* (1997). Indeed, in one of the thirty-five short essays which make up his most recent volume, Sutherland sets out to answer a question that would have no doubt delighted Nabokov: what English novel is Anna Karenina reading at the end of chapter 29? Sutherland’s answer—that the book is an amalgam of works by Anthony Trollope and a sensational 1853 best-seller—is both revealing and refreshing. It is revealing in that it tells us something more about the novel and suggests that Tolstoy is indulging in a metafictional moment, and refreshing because Sutherland is content to leave his insight for the reader to ponder without additional comment.

Other puzzles that Sutherland addresses in this volume, besides, of course the title piece, include “What happens to Jim’s family?” in *Huckleberry Finn*; “Is Betsy Trotwood a spinster?” from *David Copperfield*; “Why isn’t everyone a vampire?” in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*; and “How do the Cratchits cook Scrooge’s turkey?” from *A Christmas Carol*. Showing an eclecticism in both literary and worldly matters that is uncommon in academics, Sutherland takes his questions from anywhere, indeed, in his essay on the Cratchits’ culinary prowess he charmingly reproduces the letter from the grade-school students who first posed the question. Elsewhere he cites advice, questions and corrections from readers of his earlier volumes, including among their number doctors, lawyers and dentists. His willingness to ponder again earlier questions, such as the June apple blossom in Jane Austen’s *Emma*, are among Sutherland’s many strengths as a critic, as is his willingness to admit that sometimes the attention he lavishes upon a question—such as the gender of Lady Bertram’s lapdog in *Mansfield Park*—is not always proportional to the value of the investigation’s outcome. Regardless of his protestations, however, Sutherland’s insights are always fascinating, and it is perhaps the best compliment to his work to note that after having read it, one wishes to return immediately to the diverse (and often academically over-worked) texts which inspired it.

It would, however, be wrong to think of Sutherland's work as a mere parlor game for the literati. Intended or otherwise (and I suspect that much of it *is* intended), Sutherland's approach to these texts is a rejoinder to those who would take classic literature and subject it to the indignities of class, gender or some other type of political analysis. At times Sutherland's approach is subtle. Taking, for instance, the question of the color of the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, through careful analysis of the texts and a judicious use of history and authorial biography, Sutherland convincingly makes the case that like many children being born in that period, the monster was jaundiced. This explanation would seem to undermine the claims of those who would see in the novel evidence of a nineteenth-century fear of the "Oriental," and most refreshingly it does so on textual rather than political grounds. Similarly, in his piece on *Huckleberry Finn*, Sutherland dissects the text to show us that the real injustice in the book lies not in the author's use of the "N-word," but rather in his neglect of one of the central characters' family. This subtle reading of texts as means of resolving such problems would seem to correspond to Sutherland's generally measured approach, for although he sometimes appears to bemoan the impact of politically motivated literary criticism, he does, for example, acknowledge the beneficial impact of feminist theory in bringing back into the canon works that were once overlooked. Nevertheless, there are also occasions on which Sutherland addresses the excesses of political criticism, as is the case with his discussion of *Mansfield Park*.

Although Sutherland addresses the issue of the origins of the Bertram family wealth most volubly in *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?*, the issue reverberates through both of his later volumes. Taking Edward Said's claim that the Bertram family's wealth, and by extension most of nineteenth-century English literature, was based upon slavery and colonialism, Sutherland provides evidence from the text which suggests that Said's interpretation is simply mistaken. Indeed, he notes how slim a foundation that the superstructure of Said's ideological apparatus is constructed upon—two brief mentions of Antigua in the text—and then goes on to provide more evidence for a contrary position, including the state of the anti-slavery movement during the dates of the novel, and that movement's alliance with Fanny Price's particular brand of religion. Sutherland does not belabor the point: whatever ideological ax he has to grind remains hidden. By pointing out those textual details which conflict with Said's interpretation, Sutherland simply shows us how little Said's work has to do with the novel.

John Sutherland's work is then both conservative and radical. It may be conservative because it seeks to return to the texts as a source of speculation and wonder; it may be radical because it appears to eschew political posturing; of course, it may be the other way round. Regardless it shows us that text-based literary criticism is still very much alive, and that class, gender or other politically motivated literary criticism has very little to do with literature. It is, perhaps, most radical in its simplicity. One cannot, perhaps, imagine Judith

Butler, that advocate of complex language for complex thought, seeking the insight of grade-school pupils, and yet, by so doing, John Sutherland reminds us that the most revealing questions (and answers) are often the simplest.

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