Reply:

F. S. Schwarzbach distinguishes between "imaginists" (e.g., feminist critics) and "critics" in the true sense of the word: the former "remake [Austen] in their own image," while the latter remain mindful of the "necessary moral context" of her fiction. Yet if Schwarzbach wishes to identify himself as a "critic," his heavily freighted rhetoric of moral certitude calls that identity into question. Remaking Austen as a stern Sunday-school teacher, Schwarzbach may be more an "imaginist" than he knows.

Like so many other readers (I hesitate to use the vexed term "critics") of Jane Austen, Schwarzbach is less interested in studying the surprising opacities and intricacies of her language than in conjuring up a reassuring image of the author. Schwarzbach can dismiss potentially instructive textual difficulties because he already knows what kind of person Jane Austen was and what she meant to say. Though all interpretation eventually relies on some notion of authorial intention, Schwarzbach's "Jane Austen" seems curiously remote from the specificity of the text. For example, I am not quite sure what to make of his assertion, "I would have thought it obvious that, as a devout Christian, Austen regards men and women as imperfect by nature." If anything is obvious, it is that Austen's Christianity is by no means unproblematic. How does *Emma* demonstrate the author's piety? Mr. Elton, the novel's one representative of the clergy, hardly embodies the kind of evidence Schwarzbach needs: a dull, mean-spirited social climber, he is the least attractive character in the novel, surpassing even his wife, who at least has a certain redeeming comic value. Admittedly, one unappealing clergyman does not constitute a rejection of Christianity. But where in the text *are* the signs of Austen's devoutness? Since Schwarzbach fails to locate them, and since Austen's letters—not to mention her other novels, including *Mansfield Park*—imply a remarkable ambivalence toward religion, I remain unpersuaded that her devout Christianity is "obvious."

One can certainly make a case for Austen's moral seriousness (and for the political conservatism it underwrites), but morality is not necessarily Christian morality or even religious morality. In any case, I never argued that the moral reading was inadmissible. In fact, I thought I had made it clear that *Emma*, like Austen's other novels, lends itself very nicely to such a reading. My point, however, was that her works are complex enough to require another kind of reading, one more attentive to their subversively feminist implications. What bothers Schwarzbach is the very suggestion of this complexity. Where he disputes my readings, he invariably diminishes the text, filling in significant gaps and smoothing out intriguing wrinkles, in the name of the "values of [Austen's] class and culture," values that must be "seriously taken and earnestly lived."

There is something profoundly comforting about this well-bred, no-nonsense language of rectitude and duty. In my article, I discussed its almost irresistible appeal to readers of Jane Austen. Yet I hoped to show that this critical style, whatever its rewards, cannot account for the subtle but powerful patterns of overdetermination in Austen's novels. Schwarzbach's letter is yet another example of how a certain kind of moral interpretation loses more than it gains. While appearing to celebrate "delicacy" and "responsibility," it in fact reveals the interpreter's delight in judging and denouncing others, whether fictional characters or other interpreters; while claiming to enrich the literary work by eliciting its context, it in fact impoverishes the text by cutting off whatever does not fit into a preconceived frame.

I decline to be bound in my reading of *Emma* by the rather cramped context Schwarzbach has invoked. And I invite him to substitute for his opposition between "imaginists" and "critics" the more telling difference between readers who try to present their extratextual presuppositions as natural or inevitable, as a "necessary moral context," and those who recognize that all contexts are already products of interpretation and in turn subject to interpretation themselves. I can only wonder what "necessity" compels Schwarzbach to see the creator of Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse as affirming "that women are to fill a lesser place in life." Instead of fantasizing about Emma's promise "to love *and obey*" in the wedding service that Austen so skillfully elides, Schwarzbach ought to read not only the text but also his motives for rewriting it so prescriptively. He decries the "desire of some modern readers to remake [Austen] in their image"; perhaps even he might see some "indication of irony" in the way in which his letter exposes his own desire to find in Austen a mirror of his moralism.

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Literary Examples of Scientism

To the Editor:

Marvin Carlson's "Ibsen, Strindberg, and Telegony" (100 [1985]: 774–82) provides an interesting and worthwhile examination of a fascinating intersection of literature, history, and science. Several other literary references not cited in the introductory portion of Carlson's essay might be noted as relevant to his discussion.

Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* deserves mention as containing one of the most memorable and hilarious literary references to a child being psychologically and physiologically marked by circumstances attendant to his conception. Here are the narrator's opening words:

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> I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concern'd in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;—and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost: . . . you have all, I dare say, heard of the animal spirits, as how they are transfused from father to son, &c. &c.—and a great deal to that purpose. . . . (New York: Norton, 1979, 1)

Of course, Tristram Shandy's discussion does not exactly hinge on telegony, which is, according to the *OED*, "[t]he (hypothetical) influence of a previous sire seen in the progeny of a subsequent sire from the same mother," but, then, Carlson's biblical example of Jacob's flock also does not by this definition illustrate telegony.

While issues surrounding heredity were, unquestionably, central concerns in the latter part of the nineteenth century, much interest in the transmission of traits from one generation to another is evidenced in earlier literary history. For instance, American writers as different as Hawthorne and Poe were virtually obsessed by the subject, and traces of their interest pervade all their work. To cite just two concrete examples, near the end of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* Arthur Dimmesdale worries that Pearl's paternity might be discovered by her likeness to him, and in Poe's "William Wilson" the narrator partially explains his behavior by admitting, "I am the descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable temperament has at all times rendered them remarkable; and, in my earliest infancy, I gave evidence of having fully inherited the family character" (*Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. E. H. Davidson, Boston: Houghton, 1956, 113).

Furthermore, in a related area, in Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* part of the horror about Westervelt's hypnotic power over Priscilla and Zenobia is tied to the concern that dire consequences could (and do) result from a strong-willed man exerting his psychic influence on young women. This was not just literary speculation, either, for in an 1841 letter to his wife-to-be, Sophia Peabody, Hawthorne implored that she not submit to mesmerism (or, as he called it "these magnetic miracles") in an attempt to eliminate her headaches: "Supposing that this power arises from the transfusion of one spirit into another, it seems to me that the sacredness of an individual is violated by it; there would be an intrusion into thy holy of holies—and the intruder would not be thy husband!" (*The Blithedale Romance*, ed. Seymore Gross and Rosalie Murphy, New York: Norton, 1977, 242).

The selected examples cited above are not isolated cases. While psychological theories, social Darwinism, scientism, and related aspects of naturalism were critical influences on late nineteenth-century literature, a consistent literary interest in the issues on which these protean movements and subjects would focus can be demonstrated well before Zola, though Zola certainly did, as Carlson states, accord great prominence to such topics.

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