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F. R. Leavis

Excerpt

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I

JANE AUSTEN

A CRITICAL THEORY OF
JANE AUSTEN'S WRITINGS (I)

Q. D. LEAVIS (1941)

It is common to speak of Jane Austen's novels as a miracle; the accepted attitude to them is conveniently summarized by Professor Caroline Spurgeon in her address on Jane Austen to the British Academy:

But Jane Austen is more than a classic; she is also one of the little company whose work is of the nature of a miracle. . . . That is to say, there is nothing whatever in the surroundings of these particular writers [Keats, Chatterton, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë], their upbringing, opportunities or training, to account for the quality of their literary work.

The business of literary criticism is surely not to say 'Inspiration' and fall down and worship, and in the case of Jane Austen it is certainly not entitled to take up such an unprofitable attitude. For in Jane Austen literary criticism has, I believe, a uniquely documented case of the origin and development of artistic expression, and an enquiry into the nature of her genius and the process by which it developed can go very far indeed on sure ground. Thanks to Dr Chapman's labours we have for some time had at our disposal a properly edited text of nearly all her surviving writings, and scholarship, in his person chiefly, has brilliantly made out a number of interesting facts which have not yet, however, been translated into the language of literary criticism.

Correlated with Professor Spurgeon's attitude to the Austen novels is the classical account of their author as a certain kind of novelist, one who wrote her best at the age of twenty (Professor Oliver Elton), whose work 'shows no development' (Professor Garrod), whose novels 'make exceptionally peaceful reading' (A. C. Bradley); one scholar writes of her primness, another of her 'sunny temper', with equal infelicity, and all apologize for her inability to dwell on guilt and misery, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. This account assumes among other things that the novels were written in 'two distinct groups, separated by a considerable interval of time. . . . thus, to put it roughly, the first group of three were written between the ages of twenty and twenty-two, and the second group between the ages of

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thirty-five and forty¹ and only notices revision where internal dating makes it inevitable—e.g. the mention of *Belinda* (published in 1801) in *Northanger Abbey*, or of Scott as a popular poet in *Sense and Sensibility* (which indicates a revision in 1809). As long ago as 1922 Dr Chapman pointed out²—but cautiously, as becomes a scholar, and with a distinct refusal to commit himself to any positive deductions—that ‘the chronology of Miss Austen’s novels is unusually obscure’ and that for ‘the great part of this assumption there is little warrant’. But we can go much farther than this. There are, besides the six novels, three volumes of early work in manuscript,³ and drafts and miscellaneous pieces at various stages, as well as the two volumes of correspondence, which taken together offer the literary detective as well as the literary critic a harvest of clues and evidence; and these writings cover her life from the age of fifteen to her death. Cassandra Austen, besides her notorious work in censoring those of her sister’s letters which she did not destroy, left a memorandum of the dates of composition of some of her sister’s work; other evidence exists in Jane’s *Letters*,⁴ and the manuscripts generally tell their own story. Moreover, she had a habit of constructing her novels on the current calendar for her own convenience. From these data we can make out the following table of Miss Austen’s working life:

JANE AUSTEN, 1775–1817

Between 1789 and 1793 she turned out for the amusement of her family a mass of satiric work (some dramatic and some in epistolary form), some unfinished stories, and many type epistles. From these she selected a number for preservation by copying them at intervals (to judge by the handwriting, over some years) into three volumes. Of these three, *Volume the First* has been edited and published by Dr Chapman; *Volume the Second* has been published under the title of one of its pieces, *Love and Freindship*; while the third volume has unfortunately never been printed, though a sufficient description of it can be found in the *Life and Letters* published by W. and R. A. Austen-Leigh.

- 1795 ca. *Elinor and Marianne* was written as a novel in letter form.
 1796–7. *First Impressions* written as a novel in letter form.
 1797. *Elinor and Marianne* was rewritten as *Sense and Sensibility*; the *Memoir* says ‘in its present form’, which means only that it was

¹ A. C. Bradley, address to the English Association.

² *The Times Literary Supplement*, 9 February 1922.

³ All now published (1967).

⁴ Edited by R. W. Chapman.

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- no longer in letters; in some respects at least it could not have been the novel that we know.
- 1797–8. *Susan*, a novel, probably written up from an unfinished story in *Volume the Third* called ‘Catharine, or the Bower’.
1803. *Susan* was rewritten and sent to a publisher.
- Before 1805, probably in the interval between the two versions of *Susan*, *Lady Susan*, an epistolary *nouvelle*, was written. It is untitled; its paper is watermarked 1805, but what we have is ‘not a draft but a fair copy’ and, judging by Jane Austen’s habits of composition, we can assume that this is a rewrite after a period of years.
- Between 1806 and 1807 a new novel, *The Watsons*, was started; we have a fair copy corrected, but not finished. Calendar evidence shows it was located in 1807.
- 1808–9. *Lady Susan*, on my theory, was expanded into *Mansfield Park* (the 1808–9 calendar was used to construct *Mansfield Park*).
1809. *Susan* probably revised again.
- 1809–10. *Sense and Sensibility* rewritten or revised, for publication in 1811.
- 1810–12. *Pride and Prejudice* was rewritten for publication in 1813, radically, beyond all doubt, since it is built on the ‘punctilious observance’ of the 1811–12 calendar.
- 1811–13. *Mansfield Park* rewritten as we know it for publication in 1814. Since she spent so long over it, the alterations were probably considerable, and I suspect the 1808–9 version to have been epistolary.
- 1814–15. *Emma* written up for publication in 1816 from the earlier story of *The Watsons* (as I hope to show).
- 1815–16. *The Elliots* written, but not, I believe, intended for publication as it stands; two of the last chapters towards the final version were completely rewritten, and we have the rejected chapter to compare. The prototype, which exists for every other novel, could hardly have not existed for this work, and as the author’s hands were full from 1806 onwards, it can possibly be allotted to the pre-1806 gap. Other reasons can be adduced in support of my theory.
- 1816–17. *Susan* was revised for publication as *Catherine*; it was published posthumously as *Northanger Abbey*, with *The Elliots* as *Persuasion*, by Henry Austen, who gave both these books the names we know them by.
- Jan.–March 1817. *Sanditon*, a new novel of which she was writing the first draft when she died. The MS remains for us to see what a first draft of hers looked like.

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We can see from this table of what Jane Austen chose to preserve of her work and the records, accidentally preserved, of what she preferred to destroy that our author wrote unceasingly (we should be unjustified in assuming that nothing was being written in the one period, 1798–1803, for which we happen to have no evidence). She had, it appears, some very peculiar habits of composition, which quite destroy the popular notion of her writing by direct inspiration, as it were. One habit was to lay down several keels in succession and then do something to each in turn, never having less than three on the stocks but always working at any one over a period of years before launching it, and allowing twelve clear months at least for each final reworking. Another was to start writing her novels much further back in conception than most novelists or perhaps than any other novelist; what is usually a process of rapid and largely unconscious mental selecting, rejecting and reconstituting was, in her case, a matter of thoroughly conscious, laborious, separate draftings; in every case except that of *Persuasion* we know, or I hope to show that we know, of early versions which bear little resemblance to the novels as published. Indeed, I propose to argue that her novels are geological structures, the earliest layer going back to her earliest writings, with subsequent accretions from her reading, her personal life and those lives most closely connected with hers, all recast—and this is what gives them their coherence and artistic significance—under the pressure of deep disturbances in her own emotional life at a given time.

This at least is clear, that Miss Austen was not an inspired amateur who had scribbled in childhood and then lightly tossed off masterpieces between callers; she was a steady professional writer who had to put in many years of thought and labour to achieve each novel, and she took her novels very seriously. Her methods were in fact so laborious that it is no wonder that she produced only six novels in twenty-seven years, and the last of those not finally revised, while another (*Northanger Abbey*) was so immature that she despaired of doing anything with it. Another point that emerges is that she was decidedly not precociously mature as an artist. There is no reason whatever to suppose that *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Northanger Abbey* as we know them agreed in form, tone, content or intention with those versions which were offered earlier to publishers, who (not unnaturally) did not care to publish them. In their original form they were no doubt as thin and flat as *The Watsons*, as sketchy as *Sanditon*, as unsympathetic as *Lady Susan*, and as much dependent for the most part on family jokes as *Northanger Abbey* still is. The novels as we know them are palimpsests through whose surface portions of earlier versions, or of other and earlier compositions quite unrelated,

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constantly protrude, so that we read from place to place at different levels. Two of the novels, *Emma* and *Mansfield Park*, are the results of an evolutionary process of composition, and bristle with vestigial traits. The novels as a whole, then, cannot be said to be the work of any given date, but the published versions are certainly to be ascribed to Jane Austen at the final date of revision, since before such final revisions they would probably have been unrecognizable to us now. Thus *Pride and Prejudice* was not the work of a girl of twenty-one but of a woman aged thirty-five to thirty-seven, and we have actually nothing as it was written, besides the juvenilia, till *Lady Susan*, a slight but accomplished piece of writing in her thirtieth year, and *The Watsons*, a thin sketch for a later novel, written when she was two years older. Since it is not until *Emma*, written when she was nearly forty, that she brings off a mature and artistically perfect novel, in which the various elements are for the first time integrated, we are justified in concluding that she was artistically a late developer as well as a slow and laborious writer. The wit similarly has a pedigree, so have the characters and much of the plots, and even the details of the intrigue. Much more in the novels is dependent on reference to, reaction against, and borrowings from, other novelists than is commonly realized, I believe. *Northanger Abbey* is generally held to be a 'sport', in its relation to the Gothic novels, but several of her novels were largely, and the others partially, conceived in a similar manner and are as little to be appreciated without at least as much realization of what they are tilting against or referring to. Far from the Austen novels having fallen straight from heaven into the publisher's lap, so to speak, they can be accounted for in even greater detail than other literary compositions, for Jane Austen was not a fertile writer. Her invention except in one limited respect was very meagre; casual jottings of aspects of 'character' and bits of situation and stage business made in her teens turn up at intervals to be worked into the shape required by the story in hand; a great deal of what seems to be creation can be traced through her surviving letters to have originated in life; much of her novels consists of manipulation and differentiation of characters and group relations made long before in cruder and more general or merely burlesque pieces of writing; rarely is anything abandoned, however slight, Jane Austen's practice being rather thriftily to 'make over'. Her inspiration then turns out to be, as inspiration so often does, a matter of hard work—radical revision in the light of a maturer taste and a severe self-criticism, and under the pressure of a more and more clearly defined intention over a space of years. Her invention consists chiefly in translating the general into the particular; she proceeds from the crude comprehensive outline and the dashing sketch to something

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subtle and specialized by splitting up and separating out—in fact her tendency is to overdo this process, so that in the end Mrs Norris and Elizabeth Elliot and Miss Bingley and Lady Catherine are each too much on one note, rather monotonous and over-attenuated, whereas the original piece of characterization in the void from which they all derive, Lady Greville in the second MS volume, is more robust in possessing all these facets—she abounds in all these forms of feminine ill nature instead of exhibiting only the one eternally, and is better comedy because she has no such tendency to get on the reader's nerves. But these later inventions were intended to get on the reader's nerves because they were aspects of social intercourse that had got on Miss Austen's.

I will take one illustration, a particularly neat one, of a process common in her work, from the second MS volume (which, like the first, is of the greatest interest to the literary critic). In 'A Collection of Letters' Letter the Third, the only one which is not burlesque, is an account by 'a young lady in reduced circumstances' of a couple of encounters with the local great lady, who first takes her to a ball and then calls next day to invite her to dinner. This letter is probably the best-known piece of Austen 'juvenilia' and it has been noticed by one or two critics that Lady Catherine de Bourgh is descended from Lady Greville and that the incident of Charlotte Collins being called out to the carriage in all that wind is also reproduced from this Letter. But anyone who will turn it up in the *Love and Freindship* volume, however sceptically, will have to admit that it indisputably contains all the following:

1. Lady Catherine's general line of impertinence to Elizabeth and some incidents slightly improved in *Pride and Prejudice*.
2. Mrs Norris's scolding Fanny when she is going out to dine with the Grants—the business about the carriage and walking in spite of the possible rain and the necessity of knowing her place are all there, with just the same tone of voice.
3. The ball which itself produces two balls later on, the one in *Pride and Prejudice* where Miss Bingley is rude to Eliza and the one in *Northanger Abbey* where the situation of being engaged to a partner who turns up at the last minute when the heroine is embarrassed at seeming to have no partner is here first set down. (And this last is borrowed from *Evelina*.)
4. The incident of Miss de Bourgh stopping her carriage, sending for Charlotte to come out in all that wind, 'abominably rude', etc.

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5. The conversation between the Bingley sisters on Eliza's indelicacy in taking a cross-country walk is clearly anticipated in Lady Greville's remarks to the letter-writer in similar phrases.
6. The characters of Lady Catherine and Mrs Norris are unmistakably delineated in Lady Greville, just as the sensitive and down-trodden Maria Williams who writes the Letter, with the humble mother, is the original of Fanny Price.

To see, however, how such jottings are used item 2 should be placed beside the relevant passage in *Mansfield Park*. The idea has not been merely polished or written up or expanded, it has been worked into an elaborate complex of characters, motives, plot and so on, so that it is part of the living tissue of the novel and is given power to move us by all that is behind it and embodied in it. It comes at the turning point in Fanny's history when she ceases to be in the general esteem what Mrs Norris has always represented her, and becomes thenceforward a person with a position of her own (Mr Crawford is to fall in love with her at the dinner). Sir Thomas's ordering of the carriage that Mrs Norris (like Lady Greville) has made a point of denying her with evident malice is not only employed to affect Fanny deeply as a mark of his consideration and exhibit both Mrs Norris and Sir Thomas characteristically, though it is meant to do all this by the way; the carriage incident in *Mansfield Park*, unlike the similar incident in the Letter, where it remains a piece of mere ill-natured rudeness, is a symbol of Fanny's changing status and a critical, indeed a pivotal, point in the plot. What was originally simple satiric humour, a piece of external and isolated observation magnified to the proportions of farce, has been fused into a work of art. It is this power of seizing on every trifle at her command, whether drawn from nature or literature (as we shall see, they were of about equal authority for her) and making it serve a complex purpose, using it in the one place and context where it will tell and do exactly what is required of it—it is this kind of ability that constitutes her genius, rather than any more mysterious and inexplicable quality.

* * *

The large Austen family, well born, but not well off, well educated, singularly united, with tentacles of kinsfolk reaching out into great houses, parsonages rich and poor, Bath and London, the navy and the militia, with its theatricals, dances, flirtations, marriages and invalids, was a rich source of raw material for any novelist, but it contributed in two less obvious respects to Jane's equipment. One was that in her capacity of constant visitor to outlying branches she necessarily

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wrote letters home, addressed, it is true, to Cassandra, but evidently meant, as Dr Chapman notes, to be read aloud to a group, keeping them in touch with their friends and relatives; similarly, when at home, she wrote to friends, nieces and nephews to transmit family news and give advice. In these letters we can not only find much that later went into the novels, but we can see that material in a preliminary stage, half-way between life and art. The character sketches, the notes on conduct and social functions, were written for an audience, and written also from a point of view that is the novelist's. There is unfortunately no room here to enlarge on this interesting relation of the letters to the novels, but I will summarize my argument by saying simply that without the letter-writing one of the conditions essential to the production of the novels would not have existed: the letter-writing, like the drafting of story into novel at different stages of composition, was part of the process that made possible the unique Austen novels.

The other service this family unit rendered the future novelist was in providing a literary springboard in its reactions to novels, which the Austens consumed largely but in no uncritical spirit. In addition to acting among themselves (these amateur theatricals have left, of course, other traces besides the acting in *Mansfield Park*: a preference after epistolary for dramatic narrative, and a tendency to characterization too broad for any medium but the footlights)—in addition to acting plays the Austens by reading aloud and discussing their reading had evidently acquired by the time Jane was fifteen a common stock of conversational allusions, jokes, understandings about the absurdities of their favourite writers, and certain literary criteria. The fruits of this were the contents of the three manuscript volumes—these items have mock dedications to members of the family. Some of these remain private jokes, others are jokes we can understand, while some, though closely related to the rest, are positive pieces of original composition. The trend of this family joke is satiric, but it implies also a habit of discussing the *theory* of novel composition and style. Jane was a sound critic of the novel before she began to be a novelist at all (among other numerous references in the letters to this subject there is a significant one to Cassandra—‘I know your starched notions’ in the matter of digressions in fiction). The family joke and writing for a circle which understood her allusions gave her the habit of writing with a side glance at her audience, which though it has in the earlier novels given us some cryptic passages, is nevertheless the source of that intimate tone with the reader that has made her so popular. It is the recollection of such a critical audience liable to pounce that accounts also for her poise—her hold on herself (so disastrously lacking in George Eliot) which constantly evokes self-ironical touches like that in *Persuasion* where,

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after Anne's indulgence in the poetry of autumn melancholy, she remarks on 'the ploughs at work [that] spoke the farmer, counteracting the sweets of poetical despondence, and meaning to have spring again'.

The Austen family were hard-headed and demanded not poetry but uncompromising fidelity to nature in their fiction. There is hardly anything easier to ridicule in literature than the eighteenth-century novel by contrasting it with daily life, particularly when manners, idiom and social conventions changed as rapidly as they can be seen to have done between *Clarissa* and *Evelina*, and *Evelina* and *Pride and Prejudice*. So the MS volumes are full of burlesques of the literary conventions, the style and the conversations of Richardson, Goldsmith, Sterne, Fanny Burney, and Henry Mackenzie among others, of the novel of sentiment, the language of sensibility and the language of morality. The value of such a start is obvious when compared with the 'sedulous ape' recipe for training an artist of a century later: dead conventions are not propagated thus, and a study of how other novelists wrote, combined with a critical perception of where such writing leads and why and how not to get there, is a tremendous help in finding where one wishes to go oneself. But the burlesque can already be seen in the MS volumes to have a positive side. Though it is impossible here to enter on a detailed examination of *Volume the First* and *Volume the Second* a few main strands are worth following.

There is an unconsciously very funny scene in *Evelina* (a novel the Austens seem to have known by heart) where Evelina visits her hitherto unknown father and experiences the correct emotions on the occasion, a hackneyed enough situation in eighteenth-century fiction to be satirized as a type of the false. Make the father a grandfather and multiply the grandchildren, and the burlesque does itself, as can be seen in Letter 11 of 'Love and Freindship'. This device is used again, as we shall see, in *Pride and Prejudice*. Many systematic attempts to prepare booby-traps for the reader and to throw cold water on his expectations are tried out in these pieces for use later in the novels. Many characters in the novels are to be recognized in a certain primitive form; since their origin is an important clue to the way Jane Austen conceived her novels, I will give some illustrations of what I shall call the functional origin of her characters.

The burlesque nature of the early work is visibly the source also of *Northanger Abbey*. Catherine is the anti-heroine of romance, and her family and upbringing and disposition are described entirely in anti-romantic terms. It is essential for the purposes of the joke that the book was meant to be that Catherine should be simple-minded, un-sentimental and commonplace, that unsolicited she should fall in love with a young man who snubs and educates her instead of adoring her,

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and should be launched into the world by an anti-chaperone (for Mrs Allen, like Catherine, is purely functional—hence her concentration on herself and her inability to advise, instruct or watch over her charge). This is generally admitted. But *Pride and Prejudice* was originally the same kind of story as *Northanger Abbey* and it is ignorance of this that has led the critics to debate problems such as whether Darcy is, like Mrs Jennings, an instance of the artist's having changed her mind about the character, whether Elizabeth Bennet is open to the charge of pertness, whether Mr Collins could possibly have existed. But such problems are non-existent. Besides taking its title from the moral of *Cecilia*, *Pride and Prejudice* takes a great deal beside, part borrowed and part burlesqued. One of the absurdities of *Cecilia* is her behaviour in defeating, out of the morbid delicacy proper to Burney heroines, the hero Delvile's attempts to come to an explanation with her about his feelings and the obstacles to a union with her (like Darcy he is driven to write her a long letter); it is necessary in her role of an anti-Cecilia that Elizabeth should be vigorous-minded, should challenge decorum by her conversation and habits, and eventually invite her lover's proposal; she is 'pert' and of a coming-on disposition, just as necessarily as Catherine is green and dense. Darcy is only Delvile with the minimum of inside necessary to make plausible his conduct (predetermined by the object of the novel). For the original conception of *First Impressions* was undoubtedly to rewrite the story of *Cecilia* in realistic terms, just as *Susan* (or *Catherine*) was both to show up *Udolpho* and *The Romance of the Forest* and to contrast the romantic heroine's entry into the world (*Evelina*) with the everyday equivalent. What would be the reactions of a real girl if, like *Cecilia*, she was appealed to by her lover's family not to marry him because she was an unsuitable match? In *Cecilia* the hero's mother, a 'noble' aristocratic figure, intended to be impressive, attacks *Cecilia* with all the appeals of which Lady Catherine's arguments to Elizabeth are a close but comic version (and succeeds in her appeal to *Cecilia*'s higher nature!). Now the character of the intolerable great lady was fished out of Letter the Third in the second MS volume, as I have noted earlier; by putting her into the high-minded Mrs Delvile's place, changing mother for aunt (the old trick of substituting grandfather for father in burlesque), and suppressing the plausible objections to the marriage which existed in the original (the terms of a will which binds the heiress *Cecilia*), the moral situation is exquisitely burlesqued and the incredibly unrealistic tone of *Cecilia* brought down with a jolt to the level of stage comedy. Mr Collins is invented in functional terms for the same purpose; his lengthy proposal is devised to give the author's views on Fanny Burney's preposterous conventions about