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Edited by John Halperin

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# I

## Some backgrounds

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JOHN HALPERIN

*Introduction*

Jane Austen's nineteenth-century critics:  
Walter Scott to Henry James

This book celebrates the 200th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth in 1775 by bringing together in one volume new essays written especially for the occasion by some of the most distinguished scholars and critics of our time – many of whom have already contributed significantly to Jane Austen studies during the past several decades.

What follows in this book represents much of what is going on in Jane Austen studies now, in 1975. Many twentieth-century approaches to Jane Austen and characteristic areas of critical concern are reflected in the ensuing essays.

It is my purpose here to introduce the reader, or perhaps simply to re-acquaint him, with the first 'centenary,' as it were, of Jane Austen criticism, and to sketch the nineteenth-century context out of which modern and contemporary criticism have grown. There are a number of specifically bibliographical studies of Jane Austen criticism.<sup>1</sup> I shall not simply repeat here item by item, in a finer tone or no, what can be found in several standard reference works (for a fuller listing of critical and scholarly books and articles on or about Jane Austen, see the Select bibliography at the end of this volume). Few of the general bibliographical pieces on Jane Austen, however, deal in any great detail with nineteenth-century critical views of the novelist or approach her work from any pronounced historical perspective. Much of what has recently been published of a bibliographical nature

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understandably emphasizes trends and patterns of the last quarter-century or so, a period that has witnessed such a considerable expansion of interest in Jane Austen and such a remarkable virtuosity in critical approach.<sup>2</sup> What I will attempt to give here, then, is a flavoring of nineteenth-century perspectives upon Jane Austen by examining in some detail the attitudes entertained between 1815 and 1905 by her most important and influential critics.

## I

At the time Jane Austen published her novels – that is, during the second decade of the nineteenth century – women did not attend the universities. Men did not study English literature as part of any academic curriculum. Fiction was not deemed an important branch of the literary arts, and readers and critics did not look upon novelists as a literary species likely to add to the world's storehouse of significant art. Fiction was considered a leisurely amusement ('Castle-building,' as Charles Jenner put it in 1770 in *The Placid Man*) and worse, and novelists were rarely esteemed. The novel as serious literature, the novel as written by Aphra Behn, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, Sterne and others, had been replaced by the novel of their imitators, the novel of sentimentality and sensibility, the circulating library novel. (In 1775, the year of Jane Austen's birth, Sheridan in *The Rivals* has Sir Anthony Absolute tell Mrs Malaprop: 'A circulating library in a town is an ever-green tree of diabolical knowledge!') The rush to the libraries in the latter half of the eighteenth century provoked anti-fiction diatribes, based to some extent on fears of the effects of democratized reading habits on 'people who had no business reading,' from a number of different sources; and, as Richard D. Altick points out, the appearance of hundreds of 'trashy' novels in the later years of the eighteenth century encouraged this reaction against fiction.

Among the pessimists and optimists alike sprang up a rigid . . . association of the mass reading public with low-grade fiction. This was to have far-reaching consequences during the nineteenth century, for out of it grew the whole vexatious 'fiction question' . . . [O]pposition to fiction on religious and moral principles became a convenient stalking-horse for the other motives which it [became] less politic to avow. This tendency was already marked in the eighteenth century; people who, for social or economic reasons, opposed the expansion of the reading public found it handy to conceal their true purposes by harping on the common reader's notorious preference for the novel.<sup>3</sup>

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The campaign against fiction was one of the most strenuous activities of both the Evangelical and the Utilitarian movements in the first third of the nineteenth century. Both groups regarded all forms of imaginative literature, and especially the novel, with suspicion. Novels were held to be dangerous because they over-excited the imagination of young people; they were linked to corruption, dissipation and all sorts of immorality, including adultery and divorce. Imaginative literature was considered frivolous; Bentham, of course, excluded it from his ideal republic because it had no practical utility. Random reading was regarded as a waste of time; literature, after all, did not teach skills. Various Methodist tracts even argued that it could be proven from Scripture that God specifically forbade the reading of novels; one of the Utilitarian organs announced to its readers that 'Literature is a seducer; we had almost said a harlot.'<sup>4</sup> No wonder lighter literature was often kept out of the libraries; indeed, many of the early mechanics' institute libraries allowed only books on or about the various branches of science within their walls. By 1800 novels were so numerous and in such bad repute that respectable journals such as the *Scots* and *Gentlemen's* magazines ceased to notice them at all.<sup>5</sup> The reading public had convincingly demonstrated its size and enthusiasm in the 1790s, when Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* sold in the thousands, Tom Paine's rejoinder in *The Rights of Man* sold in the hundreds of thousands, and the Cheap Repository Tracts of Hannah More and others sold, unbelievably enough, in the millions. Political and religious controversy provided stimuli for reading in the nineties and on into the 'teens when thousands of workingmen subscribed to Cobbett's radical journal, the *Political Register*; and some began to fear that it had been a mistake to teach reading to working-class children in Robert Raikes's Sunday schools. The reading of novels, however, was always considered, by the various Establishments, the most frivolous and dangerous form of reading for the half-educated. Coleridge, certainly no literary Establishmentarian, nevertheless spoke for many when he asserted in 1808 that 'where the reading of novels prevails as a habit, it occasions in time the entire destruction of the powers of the mind.'<sup>6</sup> As late as 1826 the publisher Constable launched a series of cheap and popular publications that did not include fiction, and two years later the competing Murray's Family Library did the same. (Things had changed by 1865, however, when the founders of the *Fortnightly Review*, described by Anthony Trollope as 'the most serious, the most earnest, the least devoted to amusement, the least flippant, the least jocose' of literary periodicals, decided that their new journal must always contain a novel.<sup>7</sup>)

These things help explain, I think, why there is little serious criticism of Jane Austen during the first half of the nineteenth century.

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Attention to her work grows somewhat in the second half, particularly during the period 1859–1870. But between Jane Austen's death in 1817 and G. H. Lewes's 'The Novels of Jane Austen' in 1859, her work attracts little criticism of enduring interest, and only two essays of any distinction whatever (those by Scott and Archbishop Whately). Even from 1870 until the first decades of the twentieth century, Jane Austen criticism – with a few notable exceptions – is scanty and undistinguished. Edmund Wilson is surely wrong when he observes that 'only two reputations have never been affected by the shifts of fashion' in literary taste during the period 1820–1945: Shakespeare's and Jane Austen's.<sup>8</sup> We may agree with him when he goes on to say that Jane Austen's pre-eminent place has remained unchallenged for some years now and that it is likely to remain substantially untouched by future revolutions of taste. But Jane Austen has been a long time getting to the top of the greasy pole; as late as 1900 she was nowhere near it. It is the case, however, that when attention to her novels finally did revive in the twentieth century, its directions and interests were often those of the nineteenth century. Thus, although the nineteenth century contributed only a little to Jane Austen's subsequent literary reputation, what little it did contribute often anticipated and helped to shape the thrust of the later criticism with which most of us are more familiar.

An additional reason for this dearth of early criticism is that the anonymous mode of publication obscured the authorship of Jane Austen's novels for some years (her name never appeared on a title-page during her lifetime; indeed, even her nosy putative cousin Egerton Brydges did not know, as late as 1803, that Jane Austen was 'addicted to literary composition,' as he puts it).<sup>9</sup> The novelist nephew, J. E. Austen-Leigh, tells us that few of her readers

knew even her name, and none knew more of her than her name. I doubt whether it would be possible to mention any other author of note, whose personal obscurity was so complete . . . Seldom has any literary reputation been of such slow growth . . . her works were at first received [coldly], and . . . few readers had any appreciation of their peculiar merits . . . To the multitude her works appeared tame and commonplace, poor in colouring, and sadly deficient in incident and interest . . . Her reward was not to be the quick return of the cornfield, but the slow growth of the tree which is to endure to another generation.<sup>10</sup>

And clearly Jane Austen had neither the inclination nor the means to 'puff' her work herself, in the manner of Trollope's Lady Carbury. She lived 'in entire seclusion from the literary world: neither by corre-

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spondence, nor by personal intercourse was she known to any contemporary authors. It is possible that she never was in company with any person whose talents or whose celebrity equalled her own . . . Even during the last two or three years of her life, when her works were rising in the estimation of the public, they did not enlarge the circle of her acquaintance.<sup>11</sup> Her novels were fashionable with some highbrow readers, who admired her wit and her incisive picture of provincial life; yet even her admirers sometimes tended to see her fiction as having only a narrow range and a limited kind of seriousness. That many early-nineteenth-century readers and critics found her classical sense of control and decorum unappealing is borne out in B. C. Southam's calculation that only twelve contemporary reviews and notices of her work are known to exist (the actual number is probably fifteen rather than twelve – see n. 12) and that up to 1870 (the year of Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*, which stimulated a mild rediscovery of Jane Austen) 'fewer than fifty articles mention Jane Austen at any length and of these only six take her as the principal subject.'<sup>12</sup> Many of the major literary figures of the nineteenth century say little about Jane Austen, and the little they do say is often uncomplimentary. To the extent that she was popular at all, she was more so with professional critics than with professional writers. There is evidence that her work was quietly admired by such different characters as Southey, Coleridge, Henry Crabb Robinson, Miss Mitford, Tennyson, Macaulay, and Guizot; but Wordsworth, according to Sara Coleridge in 1834, 'used to say that though he admitted that her novels were an admirable copy of life, he could not be interested in productions of that kind; unless the truth of nature were presented to him clarified, as it were, by the pervading light of imagination, it had scarce any attractions in his eyes.'<sup>13</sup> (Wordsworth's dislike of Jane Austen can probably be attributed more to his deficient sense of humor than to any particular theory of composition.) Such luminaries as Madame de Staël, Macready, Newman, and the American poet Longfellow were lukewarm or less in their assessments of Jane Austen.<sup>14</sup> Carlyle pronounced her novels mere 'dish-washings!'<sup>15</sup> And later in the century, Jane Austen was roundly attacked by such important yet diverse writers as Charlotte Brontë and Mark Twain.

Charlotte Brontë's outburst came in private letters rather than in published essays, and Twain's in a few essentially offhand remarks and one rather obscure essay; since their opinions do not properly belong to the history of systematic critical perspectives on Jane Austen formally published in the nineteenth century, I shall mention them briefly here.

Charlotte Brontë's famous attack consists in three letters, two to

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Lewes and one to her publisher's reader, W.S. Williams of Smith and Elder. In her 1848 letters to Lewes, Charlotte Brontë describes Jane Austen's novels as resembling

an accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but [there is] no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen in their elegant but confined houses . . . Miss Austen being . . . without 'sentiment,' without *poetry*, maybe *is* sensible, real (more *real* than *true*), but she cannot be great.<sup>16</sup>

In her letter to Williams, written in 1850, Charlotte Brontë is more abusive:

anything like warmth or enthusiasm; anything poignant, heartfelt, is utterly out of place in commending these works: all such demonstration the authoress would have met with a well-bred sneer, would have calmly scorned as outré and extravagant. She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well; there is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy in the painting: she ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound: the Passions are perfectly unknown to her; she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with [them]; even to the Feelings she vouchsafes no more than an occasional graceful but distant recognition; too frequent converse with them would ruffle the smooth elegance of her progress. Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands, and feet; what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study, but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of Life and the sentient target of death – *this* Miss Austen ignores; she no more, with her mind's eye, beholds the heart of her race than each man, with bodily vision sees the heart in his heaving breast. Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete, and rather insensible (*not senseless*) woman.<sup>17</sup>

What Charlotte Brontë objects to in Jane Austen's novels is a restricted focus which ignores the *feelings* in its pursuit of a surface realism. It is odd that a writer like Charlotte Brontë, so conscious as she is in her own novels of the psychology of her characters, should have failed to recognize the same preoccupation in the fiction of her greater predecessor – but such is the case. (Surely she cannot have read *Emma* with much care.) Interestingly enough, however, Charlotte Brontë's comparison of Jane Austen's art with the painting of minia-

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tures corresponds almost exactly to Jane Austen's own modest assessment of her art (then unpublished) in a famous letter (1816) to her brother Edward as being confined to a 'little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory' on which she works 'with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour.'<sup>18</sup>

Twain, describing a ship's library in *Following the Equator* (1897), exulted that 'Jane Austen's books . . . are absent . . . Just that one omission alone would make a fairly good library out of a library that hadn't a book in it.' In an essay (only recently published) entitled simply 'Jane Austen,'<sup>19</sup> Twain says that reading a Jane Austen novel makes him feel 'like a barkeeper entering the Kingdom of Heaven.' He dislikes the propriety and stiff decorum of her characters, finds them unreal and unappealing, and, like Charlotte Brontë, complains of their passionlessness. He dislikes Jane Austen's preoccupation with the genteel and the artificial, and finally casts her into the abyss of the Puritan tradition, a tradition which always enraged him.

There are other, later depreciations of Jane Austen (most notably and surprisingly one by Henry James in 1905, which will conclude this survey); and there are too a number – not large, but significant nonetheless – of thoughtful and more comprehensive nineteenth-century critical discussions of her which are more friendly. The remaining pages of this essay will focus upon these other nineteenth-century views. As Southam points out,<sup>20</sup> there are several important issues with which Jane Austen criticism has been occupied from its beginnings, and it should be instructive to see how and where and when some of these issues first surfaced. What nineteenth-century criticism of Jane Austen there is is often as incisive as the criticism of our own day, and it certainly helps to illuminate the critical road that has led to this bicentenary occasion.

## II

We begin with Sir Walter Scott's unsigned review of *Emma* in the *Quarterly Review*.<sup>21</sup> Written in October 1815 and published in March 1816, Scott's essay is the first critical notice of Jane Austen of any substance. He begins by apologizing for being a reader of novels at all; but 'perusal of these light volumes,' he says, may provide a pleasant diversion from the miseries of real life, and on this ground he exonerates himself. We have already seen why it would have been necessary for him to do so. He then proceeds immediately to distinguish between the romantic and sentimental fiction current since the 1740s which reached its bathetic perigee in the last years of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth, and a new kind of fiction to which he gives no name but examples of which include the novels of Maria



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Edgeworth and the three novels of Jane Austen he has read – *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*. In the older novel, says Scott, the reader is ‘expected to peruse a course of adventures of a nature more interesting and extraordinary than those which occur in his own life, or that of his next-door neighbours.’ Incidents ‘beyond the bounds of his ordinary experience’ excite his wonder and interest. The older novelist, while bound by the limits of ‘possibility,’ could transgress those of ‘probability’ with impunity. ‘The novelist professed to give an imitation of nature, but it was, as the French say, *la belle nature*.’ Characters were depicted ‘in the most sentimental mood, and with minds purified by a sensibility which often verged on extravagance.’ This *genre*, Scott concludes, has exhausted both our curiosity and our patience; and he welcomes what he calls the new style in fiction, of which *Emma* is held to be a prime example.

The ‘new’ novel, according to Scott, proclaims the novelist’s ‘knowledge of the human heart’ (this is precisely what the novels of Jane Austen failed to proclaim, according to Charlotte Brontë). Its ‘characters and incidents [are] introduced more immediately from the current of ordinary life.’ The new novel tests neither the credulity nor the imagination of readers by providing a galaxy of ‘fictitious characters.’ What is most distinctive about this new *genre*, Scott says, is its ‘art of copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader, instead of the splendid scenes of the imaginary world, a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him.’ Content with delineating ‘the ordinary probabilities of life,’ the author of *Emma* is complimented for ‘keeping close to common incidents, and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life.’ This novelist has ‘produced sketches of such spirit and originality, that we never miss the excitation which depends upon a narrative of uncommon events . . . In this class she stands almost alone.’

Scott then goes on to compare the author of *Emma* with Maria Edgeworth, but concludes that the former is ultimately superior because she is less romantic. She confines herself, the review continues,

chiefly to the middling classes of society; her most distinguished characters do not rise greatly above well-bred country gentlemen and ladies; and those which are sketched with most originality and precision, belong to a class rather below that standard. The narrative of all her novels is composed of such common occurrences as may have fallen under the observation of most folks; and her *dramatis personae* conduct themselves upon the motives and principles which the readers may recognize as ruling their own and

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that of most of their acquaintances. The kind of moral, also, which these novels inculcate, applies equally to the paths of common life.

Scott praises the novelist's 'portraits from ordinary life' and remarks upon the paucity of 'story' (plot) in her novels. What takes place in *Emma*, despite various possibilities the romantic novel would have been quick to exploit, is a demonstration of the author's 'peculiar powers of humour and knowledge of human life . . . and the peculiar tact with which she presents characters that the reader cannot fail to recognize.'

Nowhere, of course, does Scott use the word 'realism' (a term imported from France in the 1840s); he is simply describing in non-technical terms what Jane Austen's novels are like. But he concludes his review with a shrewd, significant remark. This writer's novels, he says, remind him 'of the merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader.'

The allusion to Flemish painting suggests a kind of fiction, like that described by Jane Austen in her letter to her brother Edward, whose hallmarks include great attention to detail and interest in common humanity – and fidelity to things as they are. Indeed, it is the same allusion used by George Eliot, herself a close reader of Jane Austen's novels, to explain her principles of artistic construction in the famous seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede* (1859). Scott also makes an observation which, coming as it does ninety years before James's prefaces, seems particularly to strike a modern note. Part of this novelist's mimetic power, he argues, arises out of her habit of letting 'the characters of the speakers evolve themselves with dramatic effect.' She shows rather than tells.

Scott concludes his review by cautioning the anonymous author of *Emma* against giving us too much of characters like Mr Woodhouse and Miss Bates, characters of whom we soon tire; and, significantly enough (in terms of later criticism) against cold-bloodedness in the telling of love stories. Love, Scott says, is more than calculation.

Clearly Scott raises here a number of issues that were to concern later critics. One issue he does not specifically raise is that of Jane Austen's range or scope, seeming to see in her novels portents of the ordinary, and therefore of the universal, condition – which is sufficient scope for him. But he does suggest that a generating source of this new novel is, as we have seen, 'a knowledge of the human heart,' and in so saying he also seems to be hinting at Jane Austen's psychologizing powers, which of course are inseparable from the new 'realism' she helped bring to the novel.

The next published item of importance, while interesting, does not