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Frank W. Bradbrook

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PART I
THE GENERAL LITERARY
TRADITION

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CHAPTER I

PERIODICALS

Dr F. R. Leavis has suggested most clearly what Jane Austen gained from the books that she read:

Jane Austen, in her indebtedness to others, provides an exceptionally illuminating study of the nature of originality, and she exemplifies beautifully the relations of 'the individual talent' to tradition. . . . She not only makes tradition for those coming after, but her achievement has for us a retroactive effect. . . . Her work, like the work of all great creative writers, gives a meaning to the past.¹

The question of Jane Austen's relationship to her predecessors has been discussed by Mary Lascelles, Q. D. Leavis and Dr R. W. Chapman. Yet readers of Jane Austen's novels are constantly adding to the evidence of their traditional character, the subject being of such complexity that it is by no means exhausted. Dr R. W. Chapman provided lists in his editions of the novels and letters of all the books mentioned, but they do not include all the books that Jane Austen is likely to have read. Some sources can only be guessed on indirect evidence, and there are certain allusions that Dr Chapman was not able to trace. Moreover, the catalogues of literary allusions that he included in his editions are dangerous as well as useful, since trivial books are given the same stress as important ones, and there is a possibility that the reader will misunderstand the nature of the relationship of the writer to her sources.

The problem is complicated because the essentially miscellaneous reading of Jane Austen is characterized by a quite simple and direct interest in trivialities, while, on the other hand, she was sometimes tempted to adopt facile, ironical and satirical attitudes towards romanticism and minor writers who amused her. The positive, constructive interest in the values

¹ *The Great Tradition* (London, 1948), p. 5.

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which lie behind choices involving questions of manners and morals is what gives the novels a depth beyond any mere 'comedy of manners'. Yet Jane Austen's concern with moral values is usually indirect and rarely obtrusive.

Generally speaking, no doubt, she was more interested in writers of prose than in poetry or poetic drama, and in English prose writers rather than in French, Italian or German. It was in the pages of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, according to Dr Johnson, that the first model in English prose style was to be found.

Before the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, if the writers for the theatre are excepted, England had no masters of common life. No writers had yet undertaken to reform either the savageness of neglect or the impertinence of civility, to show when to speak or to be silent, how to refuse or how to comply. We had many books to teach us our more important duties, and to settle opinions in philosophy or politics; but an *arbiter elegantiarum*—a judge of propriety—was yet wanting, who should survey the track of daily conversation, and free it from thorns and prickles, which tease the passer, though they do not wound him.¹

Yet Jane Austen's only reference to *The Spectator* is far from complimentary. The defence of the art of the novel at the end of chapter v of *Northanger Abbey* has an element of exaggeration suggesting burlesque. But it is partly sincere, and the attack on the rivals of the novelist is genuine enough,

while the abilities of the nine hundredth abridger of the History of England, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from the *Spectator*, and a chapter from Sterne are eulogized by a thousand pens—there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them.

The common cant of the young lady who professes to despise novels is accompanied by a bogus enthusiasm:

Now, had the same young lady been engaged with a volume of the *Spectator*, instead of such a work, how proudly would she have produced the book, and told its name: though the chances must be

¹ *Lives of the English Poets*, 'The Life of Addison'.

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against her being occupied by any part of that voluminous production, of which either the matter or manner would not disgust a young person of taste: the substance of its papers so often consisting in the statement of improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversation, which no longer concern any one living: and their language, too, frequently so coarse as to give no very favourable idea of the age that could endure it.

What was the reason for Jane Austen's bitterness towards the apparently harmless pages of *The Spectator*?

There is an offensive air of patronage in *The Spectator*, especially in the tone adopted towards the women readers, 'the fair sex', to whom *The Tatler* had appealed. It was in their 'honour' that the title *The Tatler* had been invented, and in *The Spectator* Addison writes with characteristic condescension that 'there are none to whom this Paper will be more useful, than to the Female World. I have often thought there has not been sufficient Pains taken in finding out proper Employments and Diversions for the Fair ones. Their Amusements seem contrived for them rather as they are Women, than as they are reasonable Creatures; and are more adapted to the Sex than to the Species.'¹

Jane Austen, while despising extreme feminism of the Mary Wollstonecraft type, would naturally wonder, a hundred years later, how young women could endure such treatment, and how so-called gentlemen could have the effrontery to adopt it. As Anne Elliot, the heroine of *Persuasion*, remarks, 'Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything.'² Addison's attitude is that of the Bertrams towards Fanny Price in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. The creator of Marianne Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, and Emma could not tolerate such inequality, with the sense of inferiority on the one hand, and contempt on the other, as Addison accepts and encourages in his conception of personal relationships.

Yet there is some justice in George Saintsbury's comment

¹ *The Spectator*, no. 10.

² *Persuasion*, chapter 23.

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that Jane Austen's 'humour seems to possess a greater affinity, on the whole, to that of Addison than to any other of the numerous species of this great British genus', and his comparison of their 'demureness, minuteness of touch, avoidance of loud tones and glaring effects. Also there is in both a certain not inhuman or unamiable cruelty... a restrained and well-mannered, an insatiable and ruthless delight in roasting and cutting up a fool.'¹

It was Jane Austen's aim as well as Addison's 'to enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality',² and, writing a century later, such philosophy of life as she had acquired was brought to bear, like his, on 'Assemblies, at Tea-Tables'.³ As a woman, she had no entry to clubs, and the era of the coffee-houses was over. In certain ways, ideas about morals and manners, education and civilization, had changed, though some topics were still relevant.⁴ Addison, however, had a tendency towards complacency and pomposity, based on a sense of material security which Jane Austen did not share. When he refers his reader, with condescension, to 'that great Modern Discovery, which is at present universally acknowledged by all the Enquirers into Natural Philosophy',⁵ he may have inspired Jane Austen to parody and burlesque in the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged', she states at the beginning of her novel, 'that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.'

The Spectator's discussion of self-love and benevolence⁶ reflects the contemporary interest in this ethical debate, which had been partly provoked by the French moralists. By Jane Austen's time, interests and terminology had changed. Yet her fiction is still largely concerned with discrimination between the different kinds of human selfishness, showing when egoism is justified,

¹ *Pride and Prejudice*, with a preface by George Saintsbury (London, 1894), p. xiii.

² *The Spectator*, no. 10.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ E.g. on the levity of thought in young women of quality, *The Spectator*, no. 254 (contributed by Steele).

⁵ *Ibid.* no. 413.

⁶ *Ibid.* no. 588 (by Henry Grove).

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and under what circumstances it becomes evil. She is also fascinated by the evil and self-deception which apparent benevolence often conceals.

In one of the papers in *The Spectator*,¹ humanity is divided into two parts, the busy and the idle, a distinction which Jane Austen follows, though she is primarily interested in the latter. Her novels assume the existence of a leisured rural class, though one that has a function in the community. The world of Addison and Steele, centred in the coffee-houses of the city, is more concerned with the virtues appropriate to business and commerce, despite the rural background of Sir Roger de Coverley, and the frivolity of Will Honeycomb. For the man of business, idleness is the unforgivable sin: 'The Busy World may be divided into the Virtuous and the Vicious: The Vicious again into the Covetous, the Ambitious, and the Sensual. The Idle Part of Mankind are in a State inferior to any of these.'² Sir Andrew Freeport personifies the virtues of the city tradesman in *The Spectator* and may have served as the model for Mr Gardiner in *Pride and Prejudice*: 'a sensible gentlemanlike man . . . a man who lived by trade, and within view of his own warehouses',³ but Mr Gardiner is an unusual type of character for Jane Austen to depict. Generally speaking, the intentions of Addison and Steele are more direct and obvious: 'Having thus taken my Resolutions', Addison announces, 'to march on boldly in the Cause of Virtue and good Sense, and to annoy their Adversaries in whatever Degree or Rank of Men they may be found: I shall be deaf for the future to all the Remonstrances that shall be made to me on this Account.'⁴ Compared with the writer of a periodical paper, the aim of the novelist is to entertain rather than to instruct, and Jane Austen certainly meant to be amusing as well as moral.

It is interesting to compare Addison's description of a lady's library⁵ with later examples, such as those of Lady Sarah

¹ *The Spectator*, no. 624.

² *Ibid.* no. 624.

³ *Pride and Prejudice*, chapter 25.

⁴ *The Spectator*, no. 34.

⁵ *Ibid.* no. 37.

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Pennington in *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters* (1761) and Clara Reeve in *The Progress of Romance* (1785),¹ and contrast these examples of feminine virtue or aspiration with the comic lack of intellectual curiosity of Lydia Languish in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775). Addison's description of Leonora's library is satirical, suggesting the essential frivolity of the apparently learned lady. 'Upon my looking into the books, I found there were some few which the Lady had bought for her own use, but that most of them had been got together, either because she had heard them praised, or because she had seen the Authors of them.' Leonora's reading 'has lain very much among Romances', and Addison looks upon her 'with the mixture of Admiration and Pity', commenting

amidst these innocent Entertainments which she has formed to her self, how much more Valuable does she appear than those of her Sex who employ themselves in Diversions that are less Reasonable, though more in Fashion? What improvements would a Woman have made, who is so susceptible of Impressions from what she reads, had she been guided to such Books as have a tendency to enlighten the Understanding and rectify the Passions, as well as to those which are of little more use than to divert the Imagination?²

Lady Sarah Pennington suggests in her advice the sort of background that Jane Fairfax had in Jane Austen's *Emma*. She begins by a quotation from Gilbert West, *Education, a poem* (1751),

I labour to diffuse the important good,
Till this great truth by all be understood:—
That all the pious duties which we owe
Our parents, friends, our country, and our God;
The seeds of every virtue here below,
From discipline alone, and early culture, grow.

The last line of Gilbert West's verses seems to have been remembered by Jane Austen when she remarked of Jane Fairfax: 'Living constantly with right-minded and well-informed people, her heart and understanding had received every advantage of discipline and culture.'³

¹ See appendix 1, 'Books for Young Ladies'.

² *The Spectator*, no. 37.

³ *Emma*, chapter 20.

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The note struck by Lady Pennington is, generally, more serious than Addison's. She recommends Bishop Hoadly, and then advises her daughter to 'study *your own language*, and write grammatically. . . . *French* you ought to be as well acquainted with as with *English*; and *Italian* might, without much difficulty, be added. Acquire a good knowledge of *History*—that of your own country first, then of the other European nations—read them not with the view to amuse, but to improve your mind. . . . Learn. . . . *Geography*'.¹ Perhaps it was in mockery of such solemn injunctions to acquire a knowledge of history that Jane Austen wrote *The History of England from the reign of Henry the 4th to the death of Charles the 1st by a partial, prejudiced, and ignorant Historian*.² She added a note, 'There will be very few Dates in this History'.

Arithmetic, music, drawing and natural philosophy are also recommended by Lady Pennington. She considers that very few novels and romances are worth the trouble of reading, but when Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* appeared (1766) she made an exception to that in the later editions of her popular advice. She also shows signs of having read Richardson, as when she refers to 'the unhappy victims to the ridiculous opinion' that a reformed libertine makes the best husband. Her advice on the attitude to be taken towards religion is strictly Augustan, and would have appealed to that aspect of Jane Austen's nature which was in sympathy with eighteenth-century Anglicanism:³ 'Aim at perfection, or you will never reach to an attainable height of virtue. Be religious without hypocrisy, pious without enthusiasm. Endeavour to merit the favour of God, by a sincere and uniform obedience to what you know, or believe to be His will. . . .'⁴

The ridicule of the bad taste, sentimentality, hypocrisy and

¹ Lady Pennington, *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice*. See appendix II.

² Though it has been considered 'a take-off on Goldsmith's potboiler of the same name' (Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen, Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton, 1952), p. 23).

³ Cf. Dr Johnson's description of the hermit in *Rasselas*, chapter XXI: 'his discourse was cheerful without levity, and pious without enthusiasm.'

⁴ See appendix II.

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obscurity of the reading habits of fashionable young ladies, contained in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775),¹ was reflected by Jane Austen in her satire on the reading of Harriet Smith in *Emma* and Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. Earlier, George Colman, senior, in his one-act play *Polly Honeycombe* (1760) and Charlotte Lennox in her novel *The Female Quixote* (1752) had satirized the effect of over-indulgence in fiction on the female mind. Yet, despite the sentimentality and degrading taste encouraged by popular fiction, Clara Reeve, who herself wrote a popular Gothic novel *The Old English Baron* (1778), could still recommend in 1785 books for young ladies that included *The Spectator*, *The Rambler*, *The Adventurer*, Richardson's works, Fordyce's *Sermons* (beloved of Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*), *Galateo, or the Art of Politeness* (adapted by Richard Graves in 1774), a standard, conservative conduct book such as *A Father's Legacy* by Dr Gregory, and the works of the reactionary Mrs Chapone.

The fact that Jane Austen is known to have been influenced by Dr Johnson has perhaps resulted in an underestimation of the range and profundity of her indebtedness to him. Mary Lascelles suggests that the gossip of Johnson's letters to Mrs Thrale was more congenial to Jane Austen than 'the anxious censor of his generation's morals',² mentions the influence of *The Lives of the Poets* and makes a few general remarks about style. Mrs Q. D. Leavis, in the introduction to her edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, notes 'the mighty structure of the sentences', and says that '*Sense and Sensibility* is, in fact, the most Johnsonian of the Austen novels in style'.

Dr Johnson has various comments on style in his periodical essays.³ The observations on the epistolary style in *The Rambler* no. 152 are relevant both to Jane Austen's letters⁴ and to the novels in general. The glancing reference to axioms in *The*

¹ Act I, scene II.² *Jane Austen and Her Art* (Oxford, 1939), p. 44.³ The standard work on this subject is W. K. Wimsatt's *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson* (Oxford, 1941).⁴ See my article, 'The Letters of Jane Austen', in *The Cambridge Journal*, vol. VII, no. 5.

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Rambler no. 197 reflects the frequently ironical treatment of proverbs and clichés in eighteenth-century literature, an attitude that Jane Austen partly but not wholly endorses. Dr Johnson's positive ideal, put forward in the final number of *The Rambler*,¹ 'I have laboured to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations', looks back to earlier problems of purifying the language. By Jane Austen's time, there were different dangers and problems. The discussion of faults of style in *The Idler* no. 70 would, on the other hand, provide her with suggestions helping her to attain those negative virtues in style, that absence of solecisms, which her work manifests.

The double-sided nature of Dr Johnson, his wit and seriousness, can be seen in Jane Austen's novels. Wit, as he defines it in *The Rambler* no. 194, resembles Coleridge's definition of the imagination and is not incompatible with seriousness:

Wit, you know, is the unexpected copulation of ideas, the discovery of some occult relation between images in appearance remote from each other; an effusion of wit, therefore, presupposes an accumulation of knowledge; a memory stored with notions, which the imagination may cull out to compose new assemblages. Whatever may be the native vigour of the mind, she can never form many combinations from few ideas, as many changes can never be rung upon a few bells. Accident may indeed sometimes produce a lucky parallel or a striking contrast; but these gifts of chance are not frequent, and he that has nothing of his own, and yet condemns himself to needless expenses, must live upon loans or theft.²

In Jane Austen's novels, the combination of wit and seriousness can sometimes result in an apparent contradiction, as in the contrast between the liveliness of Henry Tilney's talk and the sententiousness of a remark by the author, such as 'his manner might sometimes surprise, but his meaning must always be just'.³ In *Mansfield Park*, two different attitudes of Jane Austen are represented by the seriousness of Sir Thomas and Edmund

¹ No. 208, Saturday, 14 March 1752.² Saturday, 25 January 1752.³ *Northanger Abbey*, chapter 14.