

A Regency Walking Dress and Other Disguises: Jane Austen and the Big Novel

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As the theme of this New Orleans meeting is to be “Rebellion, Revolution and Regency,” I wish to point out that I have produced a talk in keeping with the theme. This talk deals with a revolution in Austen’s life and work, and her association with the Regency—matters not unattended by feelings of rebellion.

In Jane Austen’s unfinished *Catharine, or the Bower*, found in the notebook *Volume the Third*, we hear silly Camilla Stanley and her mother gushing over Camilla’s correspondence with her friend Augusta:

“You received a Letter from Augusta Barlow to day, did not you, my Love?” said her Mother—. “She writes remarkably well I know.”

“Oh! Yes Ma’am, the most delightful Letter you ever heard of. She sends me a long account of the new Regency walking dress Lady Susan has given her, and it is so beautiful that I am quite dying with envy for it.”

“Well, I am prodigiously happy to hear such pleasing news of my young freind [*sic*]; I have a high regard for Augusta, and most sincerely partake in the general Joy on the occasion. But does she say nothing else? It seemed to be a long Letter—Are they to be at Scarborough?”

“O! Lord, she never once mentions it, now I recollect it; and I entirely forgot to ask her when I wrote last. She says nothing indeed except about the Regency.” “She must write well” thought Kitty, “to make a long Letter upon a Bonnet and Pelisse.” (*Catharine, or the Bower*, 211).

Austen’s abortive novel can be heard here making fun of the epistolary mode, and of both the opposing views regarding female letter-writing. Mrs. Stanley approves of female correspondence: “I have from Camilla’s infancy taught her to think the same . . . Nothing forms the taste more than sensible and Elegant Letters . . .” (210). This gush, like a pabulum concocted out of Mrs. Chapone, cannot quite conceal Mrs. Stanley’s pride in having her daughter correspond with the daughter of *Lady Halifax*—a name amusingly reminiscent of Lord Halifax, author of a famous treatise *Advice to a Daughter*, a conduct book inhibiting to most female activity and feeling. Mrs. Percival, *Catharine*’s aunt, takes the more traditional and sterner view, seeing “a correspondence between Girls as productive of no good, and as the frequent origin of imprudence and Error by the effect of pernicious advice and bad Example.”

This mini-debate rages amusingly in this passage, as if there had been a revolution in manners. As debaters, the women manage to ignore the decorous insipidity and total triviality of their letters themselves, which reinforce a culturally desirable female vanity, empty-headedness and fashion-conscious consumerism. In Richardson’s *Clarissa*, or in Eliza Fen-

wick's *Secresy*, authority figures are not unreasonable in imagining that a female correspondence can change someone's mind and behaviour; correspondence can corrupt or encourage, and thus bring about some revolution in manners. It is more exciting to believe that than to think that false values merely repeat themselves—as seen in Mrs. Stanley's formal but hyperbolical expression—a hyperbole bought at the expense of realism. "I . . . most sincerely partake in the general Joy on the occasion"—as if Augusta had got engaged or had a baby, instead of acquiring her "Regency walking dress."

The phrase "Regency walking dress" is itself my chief focus of interest here. The manuscript of *Volume the Third* reveals, rather infuriatingly, that this phrase was substituted for another, but I have failed to decipher exactly



Walking Dress, 1800s.

the expression crossed out. It may well be "Bonnet" with an underdeveloped "B." It looks a little like "Panol," or "Parrot"—or "Parisol." Whatever this reference to wearing apparel was (and it should match Bonnet and Pelisse) it has been excised in favor of another expression. Excised twice, for the same puzzling word was once there instead of "Regency" in the sentence "She says nothing indeed except about the Regency." (See *Volume the Third* ms p. 67).

How and when did this change come about? I cannot accept George Holbert Tucker's suggestion that it indicates *Catharine* was written as early as 1788-89, when George III's first serious attack of deranging illness brought on agitation for a Regency. *Volume the Third* was begun in May 1792 and the Regency crisis of the winter of 1788-89 was over by June 1789, when George III's return to health was celebrated.

I incline, rather, to accept Deirdre Le Faye's suggestion that Jane Austen rediscovered her earlier manuscript notebooks when she, her mother, and Cassandra at last came to roost in Chawton in July 1809. "Evelyn" is also added to in another hand, most likely by niece Anna Austen, though possibly by nephew Edward, and the last paragraph of *Catharine* is also the product of these other hands—and minds. The likeliest scenario is that on digging out her old notebooks Jane Austen shared her fiction with the nephew and niece, allowed them to join her in her old game of writing. I believe their interest, perhaps even enthusiasm, inspired her to return to writing, and thus to undertake the serious and heavy work of finally revising *Sense and Sensibility*, the first of her novels to be published, in the very year of the Regency, 1811.

Catherine, or Kitty, or the Bower, that unfinished fiction, was probably begun in the mid-1790s, certainly not before the date at the top of the notebook volumes—May 6th, 1792; interior references to Charlotte Smith's novels accord well with the date 1792-1793. The "Regency walking dress" added to it indicates that Jane Austen turned back to this work at some point after—probably very soon after—the Regency Act was passed by Parliament on 5 February 1811. Fashion magazines were very quick to seize on the new era. The *Lady's Magazine* of 1811, along with the enticements of a running serial entitled *Sappho—An Historical Romance*, includes advertisements for, e.g. a plume of three feathers with silver and gold ornaments "universally worn for the Regent's fête"; "A new and elegant Pattern for Regency Borders &c"; and a child's dress "with the Regent hat of grey silk." I have not yet found a "Regency walking dress," but in picking up the comedy of such terms Austen was undoubtedly reflecting a trend of the time in 1811. Camilla's remark gains a new comedy: "Augusta says nothing indeed except about the Regency," for Augusta is thus made to sound as if she had a political interest in current affairs, although her interest is entirely ladylike and fashionable.

In the period between 1809 and 1811 Jane Austen was working—and who can doubt *intently* working—on her own early writings. She was bringing what had been produced in the 1790s into line with current fashion. We have speculated about the "Lost Novels"—lost to us in their old form. We know that *First Impressions* was the prototype of *Pride and Prejudice*, we believe that an *Elinor and Marianne*, perhaps epistolary, was the germ of *Sense and Sensibility* and that *Susan*, which Jane Austen had tried to publish, and which had been once accepted (in 1803) but never brought out, was revised to make *Northanger Abbey* (published posthumously). Interestingly, "Susan" was reclaimed from the publisher (Crosby) in a letter sent by Jane Austen under the pseudonym of Mrs. Aston Dennis (M.A.D.) dated 5 April

1809, when the move to Chawton was an immediate prospect. Much of Jane Austen's writing career after the move to Chawton in 1809 consisted in revising or cannibalizing her own older works. But the revisions should be seen as a major matter.

In bringing her works into line with the new era—putting them into their Regency walking dress, as it were—Austen underwent a sort of personal and authorial revolution. That revolution made her publishable. We are, of course, glad that she succeeded, and most sincerely partake in the general Joy on the occasion. It is startling to realize that Jane Austen might *never* have published. During the early years of the new century she had obviously begun to feel that her style of writing was not going to be acceptable to the press and the arbiters of taste. From her mid-twenties she had started to make some effort to reach a public, but had been severely balked by the lack of respect paid to the never-printed *Susan*. After the death of her father in 1805, Austen, now in her thirties, seems for a while to have given up writing, save for odd comic verses to friends. Removal to a real home in Chawton, and probably also the society of some young relatives interested in writing, helped to free Austen's mind and restore confidence. But it was not the same sort of confidence as that of the young woman who wrote the material in the notebook *Volumes*.

Jane Austen had to change, in short, from a 1790s writer to a "Regency" writer. She has been recast in certain quarters as the first in line of the writers of "Regency romances"—a fact underdiscussed in academic circles. I believe the appeal of the "Regency romance"—for modern intents and purposes a genre invented by Georgette Heyer (1902-74)—lies in the combination of the traditional "love story" with the idea of a charming and tastefully pert woman who is a *little* likely to question the *status quo*, but not too much. Of course, there is always the dashing lover—less likely to appear in Austen. Yet I think Jane Austen herself does bear some relation to this genre. Her kind of novel was achieved by a special mixture of eighteenth-century qualities of attitude and style combined with domestic seriousness and Romantic respect for both idealism and power. Georgette Heyer started by writing novels set in the eighteenth century (*The Black Moth*, 1921), but made her mark when she invented the story set in the Regency with *These Old Shades* (1926). Heyer, in the period from the 1920s through the 1950s, caught—and in her own way also parodied—the qualities in literature wanted by her audience. These were not at all dissimilar to some of the qualities desired by Jane Austen's public, though Heyer has the added element of a version of pastoral. Her "Regency" is a happy abode of the past, a place to escape to. So Jane Austen's temporal setting has become idyllic—though it was a present-day setting for the author.

The desire for the combination of the flippant and the serious, the nostalgic and the entertaining, can be postulated in the readership (both male and female) of both writers. Heyer, like Austen, reached a public tired by a very difficult war which had brought not only painful loss but great upheaval. Some responses to the threat of change and some modified form of patriotism had to be incorporated in women's writing if it was to succeed—yet it

could not be successful if it proposed itself, as too critical a commentary. Fiction had to take the fundamental shape of things seriously, and to play by the rules.

I want to propose that Jane Austen's advance to the Long Novel acceptable to her contemporaries was a process of accommodation. It was a difficult and strenuous process—she had, as it were, to reinvent herself as a Regency figure. After all, the “Regency” itself is a figure for substitution. We are so devoted to the six Austen novels, it is hard for us to think of them as substitutes for anything—but they may not really have been the works Jane Austen wanted to write.

Her comments on the process reached us filtered through irony—as in the famous remark in a letter of February 1813 about the “defects” of *Pride and Prejudice*:

the work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story; an essay on writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Bonaparté, or anything that would form a contrast, and bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and epigrammatism of the general style. (*Letters*, 299-300)

We take this as simply irony in self-praise, but there is more to it. “Sparkle” was no longer in order—and particularly not in a woman. “Sparkle” in general meant that old Augustan style, the taste for paradox and wit, for snip snap antithesis—all things Jane Austen inherited. William Wordsworth, who had often praised the style of the poet Ann Finch, Countess of Winchelsea, was to say of Finch: “her style in rhyme is often admirable, chaste, tender, and vigorous, and entirely free from sparkle, antithesis and . . . over culture” (quoted in Lonsdale, p. 6). Lady Winchelsea's poetry is good because it is tender, and does *not* sparkle. Austen became increasingly aware, I think, that playfulness and epigrammatism had decided dangers. Regency readers wanted to be amused, but they liked to have a clear line drawn, the now-to-be completely serious line. An author like Maria Edgeworth met this demand, through didacticism, and allowed herself some political leverage, though at the cost of suppressing a wit rarely allowed full emergence. Frances Burney, writing *The Wanderer* in this new climate, got badly frozen by different styles of disapproval, chiefly emanating from dislike of her inclusive satire on England.

Jane Austen's relations to and with the “Regency” are paradigmatically played out in the merry amusing comedy of relations between herself, the Prince Regent, and the Prince Regent's librarian, James Stanier Clarke. It was he who entertained Jane Austen at the library of Carlton House in November 1815—only a few months after Waterloo. Clarke told her that she was “at liberty to dedicate any future work to His Royal Highness the Prince Regent” (*Letters*, 429). She tried to clarify whether this request amounted to a command, and Clarke's reiteration on paper that permission had been given showed Austen clearly that she was expected to dedicate her next work to the Prince. She was also told, flatteringly “The Regent has read & admired all your publications.” Though her opinion of the Regent himself, judging

from comments in her other letters, was not high, Austen made Prinny the lucky recipient of the dedication of *Emma*. The Regent undoubtedly intended to do good to Austen by getting her name more widely known; he supplied her thus with advertising that did have its effect on reviewers and readership. Had Austen lived longer, she would have reaped the full benefit of this. The Prince is to be congratulated on his taste. But James Stanier Clarke has made himself ridiculous in the eyes of posterity. (Now that he *may* be a source of a small portrait of Austen, we shall perhaps have to deal more kindly with James Stanier Clarke.) But he did go blethering on, suggesting that Austen write the life of a clergyman, modelled on his life, glorified. . . . It was in evading this suggestion that Austen defiantly set herself down as “the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress” (letter of 11 December 1815, *Letters*, 442-43).

Unlike James Stanier Clarke, we have the benefit of Austen’s parodic “Plan of a Novel, according to hints from various quarters,” which includes many phrases lifted straight from Clarke’s letters, and applied to the father of the heroine:

At last, hunted out of civilized Society, denied the poor Shelter of the humblest Cottage, they are compelled to retreat into Kamschatka where the poor Father, quite worn down, finding his end approaching, throws himself on the Ground, and after 4 or 5 hours of tender advice and parental Admonition to his miserable Child, expires in a fine burst of Literary Enthusiasm, intermingled with Invectives against Holder’s of Tythes.—Heroine inconsolable for some time—but afterwards crawls back towards her former Country. . . . (*Minor Works*, 430)

This is great stuff, interwoven as it is with parodic references to other fictions, as well as with hidden references to the comments on Austen’s novels passed by various acquaintances. The comedy, however, expresses irritation. In this “Plan,” novel-writing itself turns into a ridiculous ordeal. Dealing with James Stanier Clarke had been something of an ordeal. As the Regent’s deputy, or the Regent’s regent, as well as a clergyman, he is doubly a Father, and triply a substitute father. In the company of such mock fathers you get into the cold regions of Kamschatka, the extremity of Siberia.

The ordeal of creating her own novel, I would suggest, was an ordeal painful to Jane Austen, a retreat to Kamschatka and a crawling back. The original “Siberia” to which she had been sent was the Siberia of rejection by publishers. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Austen had in effect been warned that she would have to chill out to match the chillier decorums that constituted the lot of fiction allowed into the public discourse. Austen had inherited a taste for irony, paradox, and “sparkle” from the eighteenth century. Her early writing is rough, violent, sexy, joky. It sparkles with knowingness. It attacks whole structures, including cultural structures which had made a regularized place for the Novel, as well as the very workings (in stylized plot and character) of the English novel itself.

Jane Austen’s early writings, preserved for us in the three notebook *Volumes*, are short fictional pieces. It has been customary to imagine—unconsciously to imagine—that she always aspired to write the three volume novels, and that the early writings were mere apprenticeship or

practice until she could arrive at that happier capacity for sustained work. But if we think of it, this may not be true. Short fiction has its place—and sometimes it is a very high place. The short fictional piece, the “tale,” had been used to good effect by earlier women writers like Aphra Behn, and Eliza Haywood. Eliza Haywood, however, in mid-eighteenth century had to make a turn similar to Austen’s. Her kind of short story and its longer sexy cousin the “novel” or *novella*, had to be put aside for the sake of respectable long “history” to match the works of Fielding and Richardson. So we move from stories like *Fantomina* to the full-length *Miss Betsy Thoughtless*. Yet it was certainly not female practitioners alone who had an allegiance to the short fiction.

I am reluctant to use the term “short story,” that having become a relatively tightly-defined lyric genre in modern times. From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, short fiction can be defined as the medium which allows the greatest degree of questioning, a medium which permits the author (often through another narrator) to move out of the assumed structure of things, to hold definitions of reality to question. Boccaccio in the *Decameron* gave us the model of how to string short fictions, *fabliaux*, together to make a thematic narrative which still rests its identity on the individual tale. Cervantes in *Novelas Ejemplares* (1613) expands the ironic capacities of the tale. In “Rinconte and Cortadillo” for example, the world of the thieves becomes one of exact organization, and anxious properties.

Short fiction is a favorite Enlightenment mode, engaged in by Voltaire, for one notable example. It was explored by Diderot (e.g. *Ceci n'es pas un conte*) and more cautiously taken up by Marmontel in his *Contes moraux* (1789-1792). That is, Marmontel’s *Contes* were appearing in the *Mercur* at about the time Austen began *Volume the Third*. She might have known that Horace Walpole had written his *Hieroglyphic Tales*, stories first printed in 1785 and later published by Mary Berry in Walpole’s *Collected Works* (1798). Charles Burney, reviewing them, said they contained “a great many *odd fancies*” and in their allusions were “sarcastic, personal, and sometimes profane.” (Mack, ed., p. 162). Walpole in his Postscript to these *Tales* says they are “an attempt to vary the stale and beaten class of stories and novels, which, though works of invention, are almost always devoid of imagination.” He professes himself surprised that fiction (especially current fiction) is so dull: “that there should have been so little fancy, so little variety, and so little novelty, in writings in which the imagination is fettered by no rules . . .” (137). His tales play with the absurd, the disproportionate, the illicit; his characters are greedy bundles of expressionistic desire:

[the princess] had purchased ninety-two dolls, seventeen baby houses, six cartloads of sugar plums, a thousand ells of gingerbread, eight dancing dogs, a bear and a monkey, four toyshops with all their contents, and seven dozen of bibs; and aprons of the newest fashion. They were jogging on with all this cargo over mount Caucasus. . . . (119)

Robert Mack points out that the tales “reach into every conceivable area of narrative invention. . . . ‘An entire world of invention lies open for your use and enjoyment,’ Walpole seems to say, ‘why not take advantage of it?’”

(Introduction, xxvii). So too we might imagine Jane Austen saying—that is, the Austen of the early fiction. The characters are full of a fine excess, of energy impossible and disproportionate, of physicality unconcealed:

My mother rode upon our little poney and Fanny and I walked by her side or rather ran, for my Mother . . . galloped all the way. You may be sure we were in a fine perspiration . . . Fanny has taken a great many drawings of the Country, which are very beautiful, tho' perhaps not such exact resemblances as might be wished, from their being taken as she ran along. It would astonish you to see all the Shoes we wore out in our Tour. . . . Mama was so kind as to lend us a pair of blue Sattin Slippers, of which we each took one and hopped home from Hereford delightfully—. . . (“A Tour through Wales,” *Minor Works*, 177)

Like Walpole's personages, Austen's are wonderfully greedy, illicit mental collectors of wealth:

“I shall expect a new saddle horse, a suit of fine lace, and an infinite number of the most valuable Jewels. Diamonds such as never were seen! Pearls as large as those of the princess Badroulbador . . . and Rubies, Emeralds, Toppazes, Sapphires, Amythists, Turkey stones, Agate, Beads, Bugles & Garnets.”
 (“The Three Sisters,” *CAOW*, 62; from MS version)

Much of the comedy of these early fantastic tales comes from the fantasticating capacity of the mind not only to desire, but to create wants. Narrative follows these jumps of desire, and those who might represent law or sobriety have only other forms of want to offer.

Austen, like Cervantes, makes us see the organization of property and propriety from a comic underside:

Beloved by Lady Harcourt, adored by Sir George and admired by all the World, she lived in a continued course of uninterrupted Happiness, till she had attained her eighteenth year, when happening one day to be detected in stealing a banknote of 50 L, she was turned out of doors by her inhuman Benefactors. Such a transition to one who did not possess so noble and exalted a mind as Eliza, would have been Death, but she, happy in the conscious knowledge of her own Excellence, amused herself as she sat beneath a tree with making and singing the following lines. . . . (“Henry and Eliza,” *Minor Works*, 33)

In mocking depiction of the calm way in which the abnormal can be presented as normal, the criminal as the proper, the shameful as the excellent, Austen unites with Cervantes and with others who tease both the individual lust and social assumptions.

Her stories explore irregular unions—hardly anybody is married, or married in a regular fashion. The heroine of “Love and Freindship” [*sic*] is united to her true love shortly after he has wandered into their cottage. The young pair are married by the heroine's father: “We were immediately united by my Father, who tho' he had never taken orders had been bred to the Church” (*Minor Works*, 82). Austen's early fiction is a mock-pastoral world in which eviscerated institutions, or institutionalized ideas, though sometimes honored in gesture, are unable to contain the curiosity, animation, or general desire for self-gratification. The desire for self-gratification prevails everywhere—including in the heroine modelled on Jane's best friend and devoted sister. In “The Beautifull Cassandra” the heroine goes out walking

with a bonnet intended for a countess “upon her gentle Head.” “She then proceeded to a Pastry-cooks where she devoured six ices, refused to pay for them, knocked down the Pastry Cook and walked away” (*Minor Works*, 45). This is not a moral world where punishment catches up with evil doers. At the end of her libidinous excursion Cassandra can whisper to herself, “This is a day well spent.”

Jane Austen shares qualities in common with Rabelais—noticed by G. K. Chesterton. She also has some of the cool wit of a Diderot or Borges. Yet we have wanted to see these early works as chaotic and childish, mere ‘prentice-hand attempts to perform what will be done properly in the six novels. For, if the shorter works are not treated as childish effusions, they begin to loom very large indeed in Austen’s oeuvre, pointing to the alternative Austen who might have been a different writer, who might have figured in our calendar more like Diderot or Borges. It is not enough to say she is a parodist—though that is much—or to say that she is a satirist—which is a great deal more. We have to acknowledge, I think, that she here creates in her short fiction a “world of her own,” as we say—or that such a world becomes adumbrated. It is a world of libidinous pressures, only nominally constrained by structures imposed as order—whether those structures are English laws, or the new laws of the English novel. It is a world where the law of the Father applies only nominally or not even that. The law of the Father is a kind of gesture in the air.

Modes of defying the father in *rebellion* or *revolution*, which are likewise conventional ideas and structures in themselves especially in 1789-1800, come in for equally scornful treatment. This can be seen in Edward’s stilted and conventional defiance of his father in “Love and Freindship.” Love is refracted narcissism. Dislike of others is not only common but, as it were, decriminalized. In preposterous play with the idyll, the characters fare as they will without paying—money is everywhere, but it is always going missing, or becoming invalid. Austen proposes that libidinous desire is prior to the economic system, though always getting attached to it, as libidinous desire gets attached to the feudal system of inheritance, and to systems of chronology which make no ultimate sense. Desire is officially attached to the system of monogamy. In attaching itself to such systems, however, the libido proves itself capable of evading or transforming them—in Austen’s world.

This is a very frightening philosophic production on the part of a young woman. The disconcerting elements in Austen’s fiction (even in the six novels) are sometimes very palpable obstacles in our smooth approbation. But these elements in her early fiction can be redefined as lack of skill in doing the accepted thing. Doubtless Crosby, the publisher who got *Susan*, intuited that Austen’s book didn’t *feel* quite right, and put his response down to a sense that the author was amateurish, that she hadn’t quite got the hang of writing novels. The obstreperous qualities that work well in short fiction were not highly valued in the novel. Short fiction was not as available to writers as it had been in the mid-eighteenth century as vehicle for new and outrageous thought. The bright wit of the eighteenth century is felt to be political, and politically dangerous. The Regency is a tight time. Regency

fashions may have been sexy—but they hampered women's movement in tight skirts, and left men strangulated in neckcloths.

We confuse the "Regency" manners of Prinny and the boys with the tone of the period in general. As Claudia Johnson has shown, the era of the Napoleonic wars brings a backlash against cultural experiment, and particularly against experiment in the representation of women in fiction. The courtship novel is returned. It is softened, moralized, made safer.

Augustan wit in general is shunned. The early nineteenth century admires the serious. Byron had been serious and melancholy in *Childe Harold*. He returned in *Don Juan* to wit—with a vengeance. But Byron was already an established author, and there is an intermixture of the serious and the personal and the pathetic which saves his mock-epic from the accusation of total flippancy. One of Byron's strengths is that he (or his narrator) can give us the impression of being able to see through Culture—Culture not in the anthropological sense but in the modern urban sense, of an accumulation of knowledge about knowledge and artifacts that serves an individual's social turn and creates a unified dominant class. Jane Austen shares a doubt about the cultural—in part, such doubt is an inheritance of Enlightenment views that what is past is prologue, and that everything should be held up to question. The Romantic Age in its own way takes "culture" very seriously—we are headed towards the world of Matthew Arnold where there is a plain distinction between "Culture" and "Anarchy." To Jane Austen, culture often is anarchy.

I had for many years constantly hollowed whenever she played, *Bravo, Bravissimo, Encora, Da Capo, allegretto, con espressione, and Poco presto* with many other such outlandish words, all of them as Eloisa told me expressive of my Admiration; and so indeed I suppose they are, as I see some of them in every Page of every Music book, being the Sentiments I imagine of the Composer. ("Lesley Castle," *Minor Works*, 130)

Such a passage moves us from the simple satire (Charlotte's stupidity in not knowing musical terms) to a complex satire on cultural knowledge and its close relation to absurdity. Our thoughtful reaction is compounded by the culturally dense meanings of the two girls' names, "Eloisa" and "Charlotte," names guiltily complicated by the reader who knows Rousseau's and Goethe's novels. Such knowledge is itself a cultural achievement (though these philosophical novels are at least available to women), but the reader is beclouded amid an excess of association. Reading Austen's "Lesley Castle" one is apt to run into a new reading of Rousseau's "Eloisa" as too limp and die-away, as well as into a parody of the bread-and-butter "Charlotte" of *Werther*, who becomes that fiendish cook with a one-track mind, Charlotte Luttrell. Austen turns the culture into anarchy.

But the Novel itself—what of that? In England, in particular, the Novel had undergone many trials. The Renaissance and the seventeenth century had seen a great festival of fiction-reading, much amplified by new editions and translations of older novels from antiquity, such as the works of Heliodorus, and from the Middle Ages, such as Boccaccio. The rage for fiction-reading gave rise to a certain nervousness. Sixteenth-century scholars and

divines had begun to take a dim view of prose fiction. Yet, on the whole, it survived and prospered until that universal European post-war period of the later seventeenth century. After the Fronde, the English Civil War, and the Thirty Years' War, European governments reformed themselves more or less awkwardly either into a more absolute monarchic form to achieve the status of nation state (France, as later Germany and Austria) or into a more republican form allowing rule of an oligarchy. To both kinds of new politically adjusted power the tradition of prose fiction bore special dangers. The novel is critical of what is. It gives the younger generation a chance. Reading it can make women and boys think themselves too important. In France, the novel is represented as bourgeois—a brilliant stroke initiated by Boileau. In the plutocracies (England, Holland) the Novel under the label "Romance" was attacked as too royalist, old-fashioned and feudal. Prose fiction continued in a period of great experiment in the early eighteenth century, but the mid century saw more determined efforts to police it, not the least of these being novel reviewing. Whole tracts of the older fiction (and in Britain, practically all foreign fiction) were labeled off limits—a process of banning recorded in that ambiguous and clever novel that Jane Austen knew very well, Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* in 1752. As Lennox shows us in that book, the Novel can be allowed to continue to exist—even the novel about a woman by a woman—but only if the terms are agreed to. Nothing outlandish or dangerous must be shown. The novel is to exhibit the taming of a girl as she dwindles into a wife—the story of a girl learning her place. This is the story that Rousseau adapts in creating Sophie in his *Emile* (1762).

The novel then is tamed. "Realism" is the name that we give to an ideology of tameness and tightening applied to the novel. The novel in England—which defines itself as History or ultimately Novel as against *Romance*—is especially domesticated. The history of its domestication in relation to women has been traced by many other writers, including Vineta Colby, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Nancy Armstrong. I see the point of this domestication in another sense. The new novel is *domestic* in that it deals with home, and with England. Foreigners don't count. If you meet a Muslim in a work of fiction, then it isn't a proper novel, but Romance. All sensation (this in an era of colonization, wars, battle, murder and sudden death) is the baggage of the bad old "Romance." The Novel is to be allowed to exist, and to be read by women and the young, on condition that it always knows its own place in the Culture, which is a low place. This is a quiet, subservient, inferior form. Its best use and sole justification is that it can inform the young (especially women) of well-known truths, and teach them their place in the universe. Realism is valued because it resists thought-experiment. And if a woman writes only of what she strictly and severely knows then her fictional world—unlike that of, say, Madeleine de Scudéry—will be constricted indeed.

The courtship plot of the regular novel is always sneered at (women, bless their silly little hearts, like to read love stories). But courtship is of the essence, particularly if it ends in a synthesizing middle-class marriage. Jane Austen's early works cannot be called courtship novels, though they show an

exact knowledge of the formulas. In her six full novels, she had to adapt the courtship plot in good seriousness (or with some degree of seriousness). That she was not quite successful in her Regency disguise, perhaps, can be felt in the weight of Scott's complaint, in his cumulative review of *Emma*, that Austen does not pay enough attention to love. It may be because of that review that Austen discusses love, and male and female views of it, as thoroughly as she does in *Persuasion*.

Certainly, the novel as it was being shaped—the domestic novel, safe for women to write—and read—was not the appropriate home of social criticism or free aesthetic play—still less of moral questioning. Young people—especially but not only women—were to be instructed in their moral duties. So heavy did the weight of the real Regency formulations lie on the novel, one may feel, that the novel became flattened under the burden and passed out. How else can we explain the paucity of novels in the period between Jane Austen's death and Queen Victoria's ascent to the throne? The 1840s were to inaugurate a new era in fiction, but the preceding decades from a novel-lover's point of view are fairly dismal. There are few new writers in the 1820s and 1830s. Scott dominates the field, and he had developed in the historical novel a route out of the impasse offered by the domestic fiction. Maria Edgeworth did not die when Jane Austen did—she lived until 1849. But had she died in 1817 we should have lost but one important work by Edgeworth—the novel *Helen* (1834). Another novel, *Taken for Granted*, finished in 1838, was (interestingly) destroyed by its author. Frances Burney the novelist was apparently silenced by the reviews of *The Wanderer*. The author published a three-volume biography of her father in 1832, but wrote no more novels. Peacock's early spurt of novel writing ceases with *Nightmare Abbey* (1818). There is one novel in the 1830s (*Crochet Castle*, 1831); Peacock waited until the High Victorian Age to produce *Gryll Grange* (1860). Looking at such a record, one begins to think better of Catherine Gore, with her satiric "silver fork" novels in the 1830s—but even Mrs. Gore turned to song-writing and drama as more profitable.

The English novel, from the nineteenth century's late teens to its middle age, was in a pinched state. The challenge that Jane Austen offered to other novelists was not then to be taken up, and by the time it was truly taken up she was burdened with a certain quaintness never quite totally shaken off. She could also be smothered in Aunt Jane-ism.

The challenge that Austen offered arose from the challenge she herself faced—how to sustain some of her own deeper interests while submitting to the restrictions of the domestic and moral courtship novel as the only truly available form. What she does, I want to suggest, is to tap into the deep roots of the Novel as a whole—the Big Novel, not in the sense of the *Long* novel but of the larger traditions of prose fiction, going back to antiquity. If a novel is deep enough it can escape the shallowness of contemporary polite and prudential formulas. Austen's depths are very well hidden. She is strikingly unlike her contemporaries, female as well as male, in not overtly alluding to any of the heathen mythology in her novels. Indeed, the allusion to the fact of its existence comes in the form of mockery:

"How long ago it is, aunt, since we used to repeat the chronological order of the kings of England . . ."

"Yes," added the other; "and of the Roman emperors as low as Severus; besides a great deal of the heathen Mythology, and all the Metals, Semi-Metals, Planets, and distinguished philosophers." (*MP*, 18)

Austen is not going to let us catch her making her novels mythical. She customarily shies away even from explicit allegory of names of the type familiar enough in Fielding (with his "Squire Western" and "Mr. Allworthy"). We can catch her—just barely—in a name like Mr. Knightley. But she uses to a considerable degree and in a very fascinating way what I call the "tropes of the Novel."

One of these important tropes is the image of *mud*, the mixture of earth and water, usually combined with a margin, threshold or no-man's land of in-between. *Mud* is earthy and mobile, the deep primal slime from which things grow, the union of male and female, the party of *hylē*, the celebration of life on earth. Mud is thus exactly what is banned from drawing rooms and has no place in the transcendent. To name mud is to name what is *not* transcendent—it goes with the flesh, the muddy vesture of decay. Mr. Knightley has to display his shoes to Mr. Woodhouse to reassure him that he has no mud or dirt on them. This dry beginning of *Emma* tells us that relationships are balked, that this is something of a waste land of sterility—the sterility arising from propriety. When the hero and the heroine at last come together, they are outdoors after a shower. Earth and water have reunited, there is plenty of dirt around, and fertility is possible. To use the image thus is to join in the great Novel-work of celebrating the physical, of resisting the transcendent insofar as that does not honour the world of matter and flesh. Elizabeth Bennet gets mud on her petticoats racing over the fields and leaping over stiles in a rainy day. Her muddy vesture scandalizes the Bingley sisters—but not Mr. Darcy or ourselves. The beginning of *The Watsons* shows the sisters "As they splashed along the dirty Lane" (315). Life offers a new beginning.

Margins and edges are also important to novels as places of potential metamorphosis as well as transition. Places like riverbanks are, in fictional, traditional places of hope, meditation and encounter—but they are also associated with despair and suicide. The water margin is a dangerous place. In *Mansfield Park*, Henry Crawford enjoys the water margin of Portsmouth, when he is there with Fanny, but this place and moment also constitute an invitation to him to enter a metamorphosis, to change from his old self. This he cannot do, so he runs suicidally back to Maria Rushworth—whose married name ironically bears the rushes that grow in fertile mud, with the added suggestion that like her husband she is not worth a rush. The Rushworths' name invites us to expect an area of fertility—but their home in Sotherton is excessively dry and hot. Here at Sotherton we see a world of dry margins, or margins tightly controlled to prevent breaking away or transformation. On the novel's conventionally moral level we observe what happens to the characters, and are invited to judge and censure them. But at a deeper level still, the novel questions whether all such judgements and answers are not egotistical and perverse. That the Crawfords are egotistical and perverse

does not exonerate the anxious reader, who may feel momentary discomfort at the censoriousness of Edmund and Fanny—a discomfort for which there can be no easy focus of blame.

Jane Austen has persuaded us—as she had to do—that her novels are “about” their characters, and about her heroes’ and heroines’ marriages. And she is so superb at creating characters that we readily fall under this enchantment. Yet I think even this excellence is part of the disguise that the “Regency novelist” wears in order to write. Even characters as wonderfully rendered as Emma, or Henry Crawford, or (in a different fashion) frightful Mrs. Norris are surface figures of a deeper story. We reread Jane Austen because “she grows on us,” because, like any great novelist, she makes the myth of our own lives clearer and ultimately more bearable. We experience the novels like music and not like morality. The morality of the orderly shallows can sometimes wear off momentarily in a particular reading, exposing to our consciousness some of the other material we are getting from Austen.

As most of us—Austenites if not Janeites!—are going to read an Austen novel like *Mansfield Park* some 10 or 20 or 30 times (especially in preparation for the JASNA meeting at Madison) we of Jane Austen Society can afford to “throw away” a reading or two in trying to look outside or beyond the “characters.” *Mansfield Park* is indeed a good Austen novel to make the experiment with. Almost universally acknowledged as a masterpiece, it is yet to many readers the most problematic of Austen works. True, it might vie for that title with *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) the novel that reaches publication first and is the first reaction to tightness and restriction, displaying an ethos of fortitude and self-denial without denying the perils of such an ethos. It is a “Regency novel” already gone wonderfully sour, with a dashing hero who goes from right to wrong (instead of *vice versa*) and is ejected from the heroine’s life. *Mansfield Park* is a more mature grappling with similar material.

Mansfield Park is almost obsessively realistic, even in its rendition of faithful boredom. It pays strict attention to detail—all the details of the drives to and from Sotherton, for instance. We know why a turkey must be cooked one day instead of another. We are here in a world of scrupulosity. The author seems to share the scrupulosity of her heroine—or patient—Fanny Price, as well as the obsessive attention to detail shared (for all their differences) by Lady Bertram, Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Price. This busy-ness is combined with a quite remarkable indolence—an indolence almost universal. Scrupulosity seems to weigh everyone down—even, in the end, the unscrupulous—like a patient fatigue. If we were to take the prevalent mood of *Mansfield Park* as central rather than its character(s) we might get a different picture of it. “Animation” is what is desired—and what is lacking. The word “animation” itself is used repeatedly. What is lacking in this world is soul—or rather spirit, *psyche*—that which allows full humanity and full consciousness.

Instead of *Psyche*, we have *mortification*. Fanny is several times “mortified.” There is a *Psyche*-deficit. No wonder Edmund is so blindly eager to

take the harp-playing Mary as an image of his lost Psyche, his missing spirit, his *anima*. Mary also seems like the missing goddess, the Virgin Mary, who will give created life a meaning and a purpose. But Mary Crawford herself of course is merely another example of a psychic deficiency. The reader, too, who wants to find positive images, the Amor-Psyche story, the benevolence of the goddess, is not to be gratified. The world is losing beneficent meaning under the shadow of control, expressed in the fencing of property indicated in the very title, *Mansfield Park*. Ruth Perry has given us a political analysis of the name in connection with Lord Mansfield's famous Act—but we are still *parked*, encompassed within a pale. Freedom—and no freedom. The Bertrams' home is a restricted area. Sotherton is full of fencing. Fences, barriers, margins abound. Improvements of the estate offer new and fancy ways of fencing and controlling property—as Henry wants Edmund to get the village out of the way. Fanny herself in her cold white East room clings to some images of benevolent and spiritualized nature in her transparencies in the window “where Tintern Abbey held its station between a cave in Italy, and a moonlight lake in Cumberland” (152). She strives to re-animate nature through reflection—unlike Mary Crawford who “saw nature, inanimate nature, with little observation” (81).

What we see in *Mansfield Park*, I truly believe, is the plight of a world of psychic deficiency, a world presented in such multiple irony that the reader may if s/he will avert the eyes from the distress such a vision—albeit a comic vision—can create. I want to propose a bold leap—a thought experiment of one “strong misreading” or peculiar reading of the novel. The novel on our next reading can fit back into its accustomed shape. But—suppose we were to read *Mansfield Park* (just once) *as if* Fanny Price were “actually” dead? She died, let us say, in the middle passage to *Mansfield Park*, or more probably on the first night there after her arrival. What rose up in her place was a dead person having to act as if alive. Shy, shrinking, grieving, without physical presence, pale and quiet, this slightly animated corpse or zombie must go through the motions of living *as if* (in Richardsonian phrase) “all alive.” In *Northanger Abbey* (or its earlier version) Austen had already repudiated the trappings of the Gothic novel, without in the least losing interest in some of its main foci of interest, including not only the burial and silencing of a woman but also its representation of states of being. *Mansfield Park* is written in a totally non-Gothic paradoxically realistic manner. But a “Gothic” reading of it has a value, I suggest, a value especially appropriate to this city of Annie Rice and vampires, and of tombs whitened on All Souls' Day. If Fanny Price were sightseeing in New Orleans, I know she would head for the cemeteries, the famous Cities of the Dead. If we think of Fanny Price as one of the living dead, buried alive, that would fit in with many of her automaton qualities. It also fits in with the imagery associated with her: her love of ancient chapels and her own Gothic rejection of Sotherton's prosaic chapel: “There is nothing awful here, nothing melancholy, nothing grand. . . . No banners, cousin, to be “blown by the night wind of Heaven” (86). Fanny wants to look on funereal monuments; she delights in evergreens (those

graveyard plants); she wears a cross, and a cross of amber, containing dead things eternalized.

We are used to Coleridge's lurid picture of the nightmare Life-in-Death. The fear of loss of full life is a different matter from fear of mere dying. We have not attributed such interests to Austen. Yet *Mansfield Park* uneasily teases us with its ironies and its solemnities. We don't know how to take it. We expect *somebody* to die—but the arrows of death spare Sir Thomas and Tom. For both of these, death might be expected, even welcome to the reader as providing a neat and obvious way to make Edmund the heir. The entities who die are those we have not really known: Reverend Mr. Norris, Admiral Crawford's wife, the old grey pony, the lost sister Mary Price—who seems a scapegoat for both Fanny Price and for Mary Crawford. There is thus, a cloud of death around the story—finishing with the death of Dr. Grant, which benefits Edmund and Fanny.

The difference between life and death seems simple—but what about the difference between death-in-life and life? The state which *Mansfield Park* examines—and of which Lady Bertram, rosy and inert, is a splendid figure—is a state of suspended animation. The question of slavery raised by Fanny—a topic ignored by others in the story—reminds us that the commercial and colonial practices of such as Sir Thomas did consist on the most realistic level of denying a soul and a psychic life to human bodies which were supposed to live in suspended animation. The novel, for all its "happy" resolution—still uneasily incestuous—offers us *no* escape from the condition it so deeply describes. The mythic level of the story keeps pointing out how broken and unsatisfied is all that we encounter. Margins of metamorphosis prove traps. The divine mud is repudiated, as is Venus's ocean. The spiritless meets the spiritless. Who can believe that Edmund will be anything but scrupulous as a minister?—according to his lights? Who can believe he will do anybody any good? The well is dry. The church is nothing more striking than "the profusion of mahogany and . . . crimson velvet cushions" (85). Perhaps more attention should have been paid to the heathen Mythology.

Well there you have it. This is just a sketch of what Jane Austen got out of the Great Novel, the deep novel tradition, that kept her works from being comfortable prosy little comedies of upper middle-class courtship, with didactic elements carefully inserted. She had to go the very long way around, wearing her Regency walking dress, which must have been uncomfortable to walk in, and coming from Kamschatka.

NOTES

The Novels of Jane Austen, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed., 5 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1932-34), 5:27. All subsequent citations to Austen's novels are to this edition and are given in the text.