THE NOVELS OF
JANE AUSTEN

AN INTERPRETATION

THE NOVELS OF JANE AUSTEN

AN INTERPRETATION

Darrel Mansell

Macmillan Education

© Darrel Mansell 1973

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1973

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without permission.

First published 1973 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Associated companies in New York Dublin
Melbourne Johannesburg and Madras

SBN 333 14661 1

ISBN 978-1-349-01836-9

ISBN 978-1-349-01834-5 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-01834-5

TO THE MEMORY
OF MY MOTHER AND FATHER

‘This is meeting quite in fairy-land! –
Such a transformation!’

Miss Bates in *Emma*

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	ix
I NORTHANGER ABBEY: 'Active Imagination' in the Novels	1
II NORTHANGER ABBEY: 'Facts' in the Novels	22
III SENSE AND SENSIBILITY: 'Character' in the Novels	46
IV PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: Irony in the Novels	78
V MANSFIELD PARK: The Scourging of Irony	108
VI EMMA: Reality	146
VII PERSUASION: Romanticism	185
<i>Index</i>	222

PREFACE

In Kipling's story 'The Janeites' there is a mess-waiter named Humberstall who becomes so fond of Jane Austen's novels that he cannot resist writing about them. He goes around chalking remarks on the side-plates and gear-casings of his battery's artillery pieces. On their Mark Five Nine-point-two he writes 'The Reverend Collins'; on their cut-down Navy Twelve he writes 'General Tilney', and on the Skoda, 'The Lady Catherine De Bugg'.

Humberstall does not know it, but he is a critic. And he has made the battery's artillery into interpretations of Jane Austen's novels. His criticism is not very satisfactory, and tends toward a heavy-handed allegorising of the novels. He has ignored their exquisite complexity; he has produced something simple and clear, yet crude. But any other way would have had its shortcomings too. Even the most intelligent critic of Jane Austen must decide just how intelligent he wants to be. It is both impossible and undesirable to preserve anything like the complexity of art in writing about it. Thus Northrop Frye has remarked that all commentary is to some degree allegorical.

This book on Jane Austen is a little closer to Humberstall's technique than most. I have concentrated almost exclusively on a single idea: how the heroines become prepared to take their places in the world. This is the very soul of Jane Austen's art. She is intent on taking her heroines through a course of psychological reformation to which almost everything else in her novels is subsidiary. The plots, the characters other than the heroine herself, and the settings of the various scenes are constantly and relentlessly being put to use in order to further the heroine's psychological progress.

To discuss Jane Austen's novels exclusively in this way runs the risk of reducing them almost to an inert paradigm; and a paradigm she repeats, with variations, again and again. That, at times, is not very far from what I have done. But the result, I hope, has not been to make her novels somehow mean less than they have before, but more. I have lived with them long enough to be convinced that the paradigm is in Jane Austen's mind as well as mine; and that our recognising her plan helps us to appreciate her remarkable genius.

To begin with, we can appreciate Jane Austen's art for what I believe it truly is: fiction that has been slightly tempered, and thus made somewhat brittle, by a preconceived intellectual scheme. Her book, like Faust's, begins *Im Anfang war der Sinn*. She has a cool, shrewd, orderly intelligence – more so perhaps than any other of the world's great novelists. Like her own Emma, she hardly drinks tea without a stratagem. Almost always behind a scene, a detail of dress or furniture, a remark, is her carefully contrived scheme. What exists in her novels usually does so for a 'reason': a reason that seems to have come first, and that is still vaguely discernible behind the fictive texture which clothes it. She is always systematically furthering, little by little, the psychological development of her heroine from, and toward, a definite and preconceived point.

Indeed I think Jane Austen's greatness partly lies here, in the scheme. Her efforts to fictionalise what she has planned, her efforts to find persons, places and things that will invest her scheme with a seemingly autonomous fictive life, are occasionally not very successful; and more important, are never of very great concern to her. She is not nearly so concerned to make her material seem 'real' as she is to use it efficiently. Often she seems merely to be using whatever minimal fictive details – a Colonel Brandon, a piano – will serve the purpose. Almost always, that is, she is briskly using her material to move the heroine along toward the psychological point Jane Austen has in mind for her.

It seems odd that Jane Austen has been so consistently celebrated for her 'realism'. Her ability to conjure up scenes, characters and details which many readers have been moved to call 'realistic' is beyond dispute. But her determination to follow an intellectual plan results also in much that is not realistic at

all. Indeed, I think it is the plan which most characterises her art. And it is on this that I concentrate. Thus I have gone a short way toward considering Jane Austen's novels as a kind of allegory in which her strong, consistent intellectual purposes have usually, but not always, taken precedence over what one could conceive to be the demands of realism latent in her material.

The plan behind the novels therefore seems to me the essential feature of Jane Austen's art. All that is complex, subtle and wonderful in the novels begins with this, and never quite obliterates it. And I hope my discussion of the plan can enrich our appreciation of the novels in another, more specific way. Anyone who systematically reads the criticism knows that there are many episodes in the novels, such as Willoughby's final interview with Elinor Dashwood, the accidental meeting of Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy at Pemberley, Mrs Smith's strange narrative to Anne Elliot at Bath – episodes that are puzzling because they seem so utterly artificial, so contrived. They seem not quite an integral part of the plot, but rather to have been imposed on it from outside. Here are the cruxes in Jane Austen's novels, toward which her critics are irresistibly attracted; and about which they often make remarkably similar comments. In a recent book the author even introduces one such obligatory remark with a melancholy fatalism: 'I do not think it is frequently enough observed that. . . .'

Many of these episodes seem to me less puzzling when we understand that they have indeed been contrived without much concern for their plausibility; that they have indeed been forced into the plot because Jane Austen's overriding intellectual scheme requires them. She is intent on furthering her heroine's psychological progress toward a goal; and when she needs them she is willing to create these episodes and all sorts of other details that are far short of convincingly 'real'. We simply have to accept that events in her fiction are often not 'caused' by whatever laws of cause and effect conceivably govern our real world and fiction which aims at some kind of painstakingly realistic imitation of the world. Rather, her events often happen merely because the author, pursuing her plan to take the heroine through a carefully worked-out course of psychological reformation, *needs* the event at a given place and a given time. The

plan is often uppermost; the 'realism' of the event sometimes secondary.

Thus I am always trying to get at the idea that is behind, and perhaps even 'causing', these episodes. I discuss again and again what I take to be the 'uses' to which she is putting them; I relentlessly discuss how her plan to take her heroine through a course of psychological reformation seems to require a certain event at a certain time so that the heroine's attitude will be changed. At times I have even chalked rather simple and reductive comments on the sides of objects and characters when Jane Austen's purpose in introducing them has seemed fairly clear.

This book, then, is frankly a rather single-minded interpretation of the novels; and as such it is certainly open to criticism. Indeed Humberstall was called before a court of fellow Janeites and accused of writing 'obese words' on government property:

I told 'em that the back-side view o' the Skoda, when she was run up, put Lady De Bugg into my 'ead. They gave me right there, but they said I was wrong about General Tilney. 'Cordin' to them, our Navy twelve-inch ought to 'ave been christened Miss Bates. I said the same idea 'ad crossed my mind, till I'd seen the General's groovin'. Then I felt it had to be the General or nothin'. But they gave me full marks for the Reverend Collins. . . .

But perhaps there is one criticism that I can forestall: the criticism that I seem to be claiming at last to have cracked Jane Austen's artistic code, and to have found her 'meaning'. This criticism seems inevitably to follow from a statement like the following: 'One who advances an interpretation tacitly claims correctness for it, and thus allows the logical possibility that it may be incorrect.'¹ I do not think that Jane Austen's novels have any single correct 'meaning' – certainly not mine. I have merely tried to emphasise one of all the diverse and even contradictory meanings her great art will yield, or endure. To do so I have had to isolate what I discuss merely in order to discuss it; and if my interpretation is to have any significant

¹ Monroe Beardsley, 'The Limits of Critical Interpretation', *Art and Philosophy*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1966) pp. 73–4.

value it will only be because readers of Jane Austen's fiction will be able to relate my own special concerns to what we all recognise is the great complexity of her work.

As for Jane Austen's other critics and commentators, I have been influenced by them. In a lecture on her novels given at Newnham College, Cambridge, and published in 1911, A. C. Bradley said, ' . . . nor . . . will you ask me whether I have anything new to say. I do not know enough of Austen criticism to answer the question; nor does it matter. The faithful enjoy comparing notes; and I offer you some of mine. . . .' The days when one could strike such a grand attitude are past, if they were not then. I have had to reassure myself that I was not to any significant extent going over old ground before I was ready to write the book. Nevertheless some of my material is bound not to be new. For instance, there is the detailed chronological account, in my first chapter, of the composition of *Northanger Abbey*; there may even be instances of which I am unaware.

Almost never, however, do the critics appear in my text. If we agree or disagree on specific points I have invited them out into the footnotes to air their views. But in a few cases they have had their business, I mine; and so I have merely chronicled in the notes some other interesting opinions on the matter under discussion, without comment. I hope this has the effect of obscuring what I have made too clear. The footnotes are thus a counterweight to my own rather doctrinaire concerns. There the reader may find how realistic a certain detail is; how very beautiful is the description of the scenery around Portsmouth; how very much in, or out, of the tradition of Fanny Burney is a certain turn of the plot; how very much in character a certain remark is, and how clever; how very expressive of Jane Austen's own attitude is the attitude of her heroine; and other matters I almost never discuss, although there would have been some value in doing so. I find on the other hand that the critics have far from exhausted my own theme: Jane Austen's use of her fictional material to further a rather brittle plan for the psychological reformation of her heroine.

But like Tom Bertram I have my debts. The footnotes are misleadingly democratic, in that a few works I found especially

important appear alongside many others which were of only passing interest to me. Therefore I want to record here my considerable obligations to the following: O. W. Firkins, *Jane Austen*; D. W. Harding, 'Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen'; Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art*; Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*; and Mark Schorer, 'The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse'. Finally, all modern studies of Jane Austen must be based on the fine scholarship of R. W. Chapman. We are tracked everywhere in his snow.

As for the organisation of the book, I have taken up the novels in the order of their composition. Indeed I pay considerable attention to Jane Austen's artistic development during her career. But enveloped in the first three chapters is some material that applies to all the novels together. Thus in the first chapter there is discussion of 'active imagination' in the novels; in the second chapter a discussion of 'facts'; in the third, 'character'.

Finally I want to acknowledge the help of people who never appear in the text or the footnotes. The book was begun on a Dartmouth College Faculty Fellowship. Juliet Barron checked my references and quotations, and found more mistakes than I care to think about. Barbara Cunningham typed the manuscript. Most important, James M. Cox, Robert Grams Hunter, Chauncey Loomis, Noel Perrin, Martin Price, B. C. Southam, R. C. Townsend and Thomas Vargish all gave me self-effacing and indispensable advice.

Hanover, New Hampshire
July 1972

D.M.