

## Unassuming yet proud

### The Prayers of Jane Austen.

By Terry Glaspey.

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31 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. \$9.99.

Review by Andre van Loon.

*Have we thought irreverently of Thee, have we disobeyed Thy commandments, have we neglected any known duty, or willingly given pain to any human being? Incline us to ask our hearts these questions, O God, and save us from deceiving ourselves by pride or vanity.*

The tone is confident and self-aware; the questions direct yet respectful. The prayer has a palpable concern for the right behavior towards a recognized authority—indeed, the highest authority in the Christian universe—but there is no self-castigation or chest-beating avowal of wrongdoing. Instead, there is a willingness to be guided, to be corrected if needed, to be shown where and how error occurred so that it can be addressed. There is also the knowledge that pain might have been given to other human beings: Sinners all, we can feel distress ourselves as much as cause it in others. The prayer ends with a striking plea to God—for Him to know our potential self-deception and to save us from the pride and vanity that may cause it.



A side window at Steventon Church. Courtesy of Sue Forgue.

Although Jane Austen is not famous as a Christian author, her sensibility comes through strongly in *The Prayers of Jane Austen*. The slim volume, by Oregon-based Terry Glaspey, features a selection of Austen's prayers alongside illustrations of rural England and church scenes (sourced

from the British Library). The book is an unexpected delight. As Glaspey notes in his introduction and competent (if not particularly analytical) commentary, Austen is famous for her fiction, full of wit and irony, rather than her devotional texts. We know her social situations fraught with romantic possibility, or the whiff of scandal from improper alliances and liaisons, but we may lack awareness of her patently serious-minded Christianity. As such, this work may come as a surprise to many.

It is important to note that for all her sincerity in her prayers, probably written for her family and used in a domestic context, Austen never turns either dour or messianic. There is no sense that the novelist's sensibility is suppressed by religious reverence. Although the tone is respectful throughout the prayers, they show a consistent awareness of human frailty and ability to act beyond the bounds of decency. They return repeatedly to the dangers of acting unwisely, asking God to help us to understand ourselves better so that faults can be avoided at best, or atoned for at worst. Teach us. Show us. Guard us. Such are Austen's ways of addressing the Deity.

Fear of night, the unexpected or strange, and the dangers of events outside of our control are also important and recurrent concerns. Austen prays that God may keep us safe during the night—not an irrational apprehension in a time of fewer street lights and less well-organized policing. The elegance with which Austen prays does not diminish her genuine anxieties:

*To Thy goodness we commend ourselves this night, beseeching Thy protection of us through its darkness and dangers. We are helpless and dependent; graciously preserve us.*

Austen's England may have been a green and pleasant land, but it was not without crime and potentially destructive, even fatal events.

Reflecting on Austen's awareness of what could go wrong really brings home her innate, clean-living pride. She is not boastful or vainglorious in her

prayers, but upright and sincere. Her God is all-powerful, yet not unknowable. Addressed in the proper way, with respect, God may be thanked or persuaded to show us our follies. The fault lies with us, but the corrections are a joint work, with God showing us how to live better, more cleanly. Perfecting the self, in other words, is not to be achieved by divine force, nor even by suffering. Instead, perfection comes through obedience to divine Law, and careful, considered improvements to behavior and thought.

Austen's prayers tend to be a few lines only, yet they are small gems. They have a clarity that is likely to have taken many hours to achieve: they share with the best poetry a sense of simplicity that comes from having just the right words. Precision and brevity, however, do not descend into pedantry or reticence. Austen says just what she needs to, as though she is aware she must carry herself with dignity and express herself plainly, if politely, to her Creator. At times, this may lead the reader to think Austen's God is no more than the most socially elevated personage at a dance or other gathering, to whom all must pay homage. This would be unjust, however, as Austen's Christianity is in little doubt: she believes in what she says profoundly. Not the least of *The Prayers of Jane Austen's* pleasure lies in witnessing the author's heartfelt Christian belief, expressed in such clear, unassuming yet proud English.

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