

## Jane Austen: A Voyage of Discovery

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How are we to judge of success in popular fiction?

One criterion might be the degree to which it keeps its audience awake when it ought more properly to be asleep; and it is, I suspect, your organising committee's pious hope that I possess this skill that has made them schedule my address at this most ungodly hour.

I fear they may be disappointed, for today I am more concerned with history than story, and, as you are about to discover, you have invited into your midst a very partial, prejudiced and ignorant historian.

Indeed I think I may boast myself to be with all possible vanity the most unlearned and uninformed male who ever dared give a keynote lecture.

Yet despite these deficiencies, after meeting many of you yesterday and being overwhelmed by the warmth of your welcome and the mildness of your mien, I was able to go to bed last night with some calm of spirit and even a little confidence of expectation.

What a difference a night makes!

Now, like Elizabeth Bennet learning the truth about Wickham, the scales have fallen from my eyes and I see you for what you are.

A coven of critics, an ambushade of academics, a stake-out of intellectual Dirty Harrys waiting for me to make your day.

But I have no-one to blame but myself. I had my warnings. A couple of months ago I listened to the tapes of Professor Auerbach's excellent radio programmes on Jane Austen in the *Women Who Dared* series. I paid particular attention to the section featuring JASNA and had the pleasure of hearing in advance several of your members discussing their attitudes to Jane.

What insight, I thought. What expertise. What empathy.

There was even one member, I recollect, who asserted that in any gravely critical situation the first thing she asked herself was, *what would Jane have done in such a circumstance?*

If this lady is present I would be interested to meet her, if only to reassure myself she is not a pilot with Continental Airlines who will be flying me home on Monday.

But there it is. For months now I have been aware that in a moment of madness I had agreed to stand on this platform, lecturing on Jane Austen to people who not only know more about Jane Austen than I do, but probably more about Jane Austen than Jane Austen did.

The only area in which I can claim unique knowledge and absolute authority is that of personal experience. I was invited, I hope, as an enthusiast not an expert. Don't worry, I've looked at the program and there seem to be plenty of those to come. Indeed I might say, *Après moi, le deluge*.

But before you drown in that flood, I hope you won't mind drifting with me on a gently meandering stream-of-consciousness voyage down memory lane.

I dearly love a mixed metaphor.

I also dearly love snapping up unconsidered trifles and I shall dole a few of these out along the way, in the hope that if interest doesn't keep you awake, irritation might.

My long affair with Jane Austen began in misapprehension, moved quickly into open distaste, then progressed through happy accidents and gradual insights to revelation, recrimination, and reconciliation, concluding in everlasting union. You may find the plot familiar.

We first met at Mansfield Park. I was sixteen. She was . . . well she felt to me about sixty, and while like all red-blooded young men I had dreams of being taken in hand by an experienced older woman, this was ridiculous. Already an omnivorous reader, I had, of course, heard of Austen, and been assured by some whose opinions I respected that within her books I would encounter sharp ironies, delicate wit, and above all strong attractive heroines. And what did I find?

I found Fanny Price.

Having already made the acquaintance of such feisty nineteenth-century creatures as Becky Sharp and Catherine Earnshaw, I was dumbstruck to be confronted with this vapid insubstantial apology for a heroine. For a while I hoped that, like another diminutive and disregarded child brought up by patronising relations, Jane Eyre, she was going to rise above her disadvantages and, with an eruption of indomitable spirit, put all to flight.

I was hugely disappointed.

Indeed her anaemic presence so dominated my reading that it blanched the life out of everything else in the novel and I was totally insensitive to any subtleties of characterisation or delicacies of wit, and even the famous Austen irony did not enter my soul.

**(Unconsidered Trifle 1:** I did however register the un-Austenian irony that Mansfield Park also happens to be the name of the ground of Hawick Rugby Football Club in the Scottish borders. Disciples of the Laputan school of literary research will be quick to point out that the great London soccer club Arsenal's ground is called Highbury,

and I anticipate a race to produce the first doctoral thesis on Jane Austen's Sporting Vision.)

So my first reading of Austen both disappointed expectation and at the same time confirmed a mild distaste formed some years earlier when, at an age when my great cinema hero was Roy Rogers, my mother took me to see the film version of *Pride and Prejudice* starring Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier. True there were horses in the film, but no cattle stampedes, gun fights or bar brawls, and I think my critical response was first to sulk and then to fall asleep.

She had already obliged me on an earlier occasion to sit through *Wuthering Heights* which also starred Olivier, and I have never been able to rid myself of the impression that what Heathcliff actually did in the years between leaving Yorkshire as a young tearaway and returning as a rich gent was to head south to Derbyshire and set up as Mr. Darcy. Those of you who have seen the recent BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice*, the one with the famous wet-T-shirt scene, may feel that its director shared my delusion.

But there was of course a far greater delusion which I was in danger of allowing to develop into a conviction. At sixteen I was at that most impressionable of ages, the period between boyhood and manhood when the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain. A careless reaction here can survive as a studied judgment twenty years on. I might on the basis of this one unfortunate experience have set Jane Austen aside as not for me—if not forever, then certainly until that age when 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, had settled to a geriatric somnolence—which at the age of sixteen I anticipated would occur about twenty-one.

I certainly did not anticipate in the short space of active life still awaiting me I would wish to devote any more time to Austen than was necessary to write a dull essay on *Mansfield Park* in the examination for which it was a set book.

Then in a happy day my school library acquired the final volume of the *Oxford Illustrated Edition of Jane Austen* and, attracted by its newness rather than any lively expectation of pleasure from its contents, I took it off the shelf.

Ladies and gentlemen, Keats's amazed delight on first looking into Chapman's *Homer* was nothing compared to mine on first looking into Dr. Chapman's edition of the *Minor Works*. And yet, I must confess that until I started preparing this talk, I had stored that delicious moment in the luggage compartment of my memory, marked Not Wanted On Voyage and might never have retrieved it had not your invitation to this conference set me on to re-read *Sanditon* which is, of course, in the

same volume as the juvenilia which were the main source of my remembered delight.

I flicked through the pages rapidly in a sort of *sortes Virgilianae*, and chortled with delight as specially loved passages came tumbling forth.

To give you some idea of the kind of man you are dealing with, let me quote you a few.

From *A letter to a young lady whose feelings being too strong for her judgement led her into the commission of errors which her heart disapproved*. (The title alone is worth the price of admission.)

“I murdered my father at a very early period of my life, I have since murdered my mother, and I am now going to murder my sister.”

Perhaps that was when I decided to be a crime writer.

In *Henry and Eliza*, we are shown how Eliza, having escaped from imprisonment, is obliged to sell off her wardrobe to provide for her two children. She spends the money on some playthings for the boys and a Gold Watch for herself.

But scarcely was she provided with the above mentioned necessities that she began to find herself rather hungry, and had reason to think, by their biting off two of her fingers, that her children were in much the same situation.

This is splendidly wacky but for sheer imaginative outrageousness it is hard to beat the masquerade party at Johnson Court in *Jack and Alice*.

Of the males, a mask representing the sun was the most universally admired. The beams that darted from his eyes were . . . so strong that no-one dared venture within half a mile of them; he had therefore the best part of the room to himself, its size not amounting to more than three quarters of a mile in length and half a one in breadth.

**(Unconsidered Trifle 2:** How fitting that the character at the centre of this crazily comic scene, who turns out not to be wearing a mask at all, should be called Charles Adams.)

Political correctness was not a concept which much troubled eighteenth-century England, nor indeed 1950s England, and I was and still am able to enjoy to the full in *Frederick and Elfrida* the eponymous pair’s heartfelt compliment to Rebecca Fitzroy:

“Lovely and too charming fair one, notwithstanding your forbidding squint, your greasy tresses and your swelling back, which are more frightful than imagination can paint or pen describe, I cannot refrain from expressing my raptures at the engaging qualities of your mind which so amply atone for the horror with which your appearance must ever inspire the unwary visitor.”

In something of the same vein, in *The Three Sisters*, which I felt far superior to anything by Chekhov, Mary Stanhope asks her friend

Fanny for advice on how she should respond to Mr. Watts's marriage proposal and anatomises her dilemma thus:

"He is quite an old man, about two and thirty, and very plain, so plain that I cannot bear to look at him. He is extremely disagreeable and I hate him more than any body else in the world. He has a large fortune and will make great settlements on me; but then he is very healthy."

This reminded me of Susan Vernon's comment on Mr. Johnson which could almost have been written by Pope.

"Too old to be agreeable, and too young to die."

(**Unconsidered Trifle 3:** I was particularly delighted with *Lady Susan* because it contained a handsome, dashing, highly intelligent hero called Reginald, perfect in every particular save that of being overly susceptible to the blandishments of a ruthless and beautiful woman. Which perhaps explains how I come to be here. What an eye for truth Jane Austen had!)

You must understand that in those days I was in no position to relate these early works either to the general literary background of the age, nor forward to the novels of Austen's maturity. I encountered names like Musgrove and Willoughby and Dashwood without any frisson of retrospective anticipation. When Maria Williams describes how Lady Greville summoned her out of the house to stand in the cold east wind at the door of her ladyship's coach and be harangued, my mind did not leap forward to Elizabeth Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. In *Love and Freindship* the trembling sensibilities of Laura and Sophia did not bring Marianne Dashwood into my thoughts.

Yet, interesting though these and many other similar speculations must be to the informed and academic mind, what I am trying to sing the praises of here is the unformed and generally ignorant mind which was mine at this period. Putting aside the aberration of my first unfortunate contact with *Mansfield Park*, I tend to think now that by a *felix culpa* I happened to come at Austen in the right way, by sampling her young works at something like the same age she was when she wrote them, and by not bringing to the feast a palate over-refined by a diet of Eng. Lit. studies.

As to what I did bring, I was deeply into the Romantic poets and those works of fiction, classical or modern, which were full of life, incident, and turbulent emotion, preferably all dished up with a good dash of cynical pessimism. But above all I enjoyed a good laugh. P. G. Wodehouse, Evelyn Waugh, Mark Twain, Gilbert and Sullivan, Spike Jones and the City Slickers . . . the more way-out and anarchic the humour, the better I liked it. I was in the market for fun without any glance at High Seriousness, for a romp through the manifest daftness of life without much care for its meaning.

I suppose every society has its own Nonsense tradition. In Britain it reached its peak during that most serious of ages, the Victorian, and then started taking itself seriously in various movements such as Surrealism, Dadaism, and Absurdism where it became the voice of artists who have travelled to the very edge of the imaginative universe, and looked over, and seen two old fridges, a bent bicycle, and a metal bedstead. And come home laughing, or at least too desperate to cry.

As pure comedy it is particularly attractive to the young mind, and its great single manifestation in the Britain of the fifties was *The Goon Show* on BBC radio.

I am uncertain what impression if any the Goons made upon the American public, but I do not doubt that the country of the Marx brothers and Spike Jones had its equivalents. It was a half hour show devoted to a crazy play with running characters played variously by Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe and, for a while, Michael Bentine. I recall titles like *The Affair of the Lone Banana*, *Napoleon's Piano* and *The Dreaded Batter Pudding Hurler*. It was absurd, irreverent, amazing and above all hilarious. To us young intellectuals of the early fifties, there was only one shibboleth—could you repeat this week's episode of *The Goon Show* almost word for word after one hearing?

It wasn't all that difficult. The jokes were often pretty basic, relying much on nonsequiturs and absurd misinterpretations. Those brief dramatic masterpieces, *The Visit*, *The Mystery*, and the musical comedy featuring Poppun and Pistoletta, are almost ready-made *Goon Show* scripts, while the matter of the handful of quotations from the early works which I have just set before you—hungry children biting off their mother's fingers, offensive compliments, amazing disguises—could have fitted in without any problem at all.

Sound effects were an essential ingredient. I can recall a scene in which a running character called Henry Crun and his inamorata, Miss Minnie Bannister, hear a knocking at the door. It gets louder and louder, with occasional pauses followed by an even greater onslaught. Finally silence. Then Henry says, "I think there's someone at the door, Min."

You may imagine my delight when I read in *Love and Freindship* the description of Laura's family's reaction to a violent knocking at their cottage door.

My father started. "What noise is that?" said he. "It sounds like a loud rapping at the door," replied my mother. "It does indeed," cried I. "I am of your opinion," said my father. "It certainly does appear to proceed from some uncommon violence exerted against our unoffending door." "Yes," exclaimed I. "I cannot help thinking it must be somebody who knocks for admittance."

"That is another point," replied he. "We must not pretend to determine on what motive the person may knock—though that someone does rap at the door, I am partly convinced."

I love the crazy caution of that *partly*.

This is pure Goonery. Jane Austen spoke directly across the intervening years to my young 1950s sensibility. She passed all the tests. She was one of us.

Many years have passed since this revelation, and though since then I have frequently revised my estimate of the age at which youth decays and senescence begins—now I set the mark around seventy-five—I cannot deny that time has set a grizzle on my case, and on its contents too. Forgetting is an inevitable part of the learning process. How can we sound authoritative unless we forget that once we did not know what now we know? Or that we once knew something else quite contradictory?

So new experience quickly elbows out the old and once having found this point of contact with Jane Austen, I was not long in making the acquaintance of the great novels and discovering in them pleasures proper to my age, and subsequently, new pleasures proper to the many ages of my frequent re-readings, though I must confess it took a good ten years for me to overcome my initial prejudice against *Mansfield Park*.

**(Unconsidered Trifle 4:** I was helped in this by reading in Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* that the Reverend Sydney Smith, the wittiest parson since John Donne and a great contemporary fan of the novels, rated Fanny Price as his favourite character. I had to take seriously the opinion of a man who on his death bed is said to have fumbled for a medicine bottle on his bedside table, found instead an inkwell and downed its contents in a single draught. When his nurse told him what he had done, he cried, "Fetch all the blotting paper in the house!" and soon afterward expired.)

So, for Smith's sake, and for many other good reasons besides, I have come to love Fanny Price, though I cannot help hoping that one of these decades in one of my re-readings, I will happen across a hitherto unnoticed scene in which she does something with panache, like setting fire to Aunt Norris.

During these years of my young manhood, I was first a student, then a teacher of, English Literature, with a consequent move away from the purely intuitive responses of adolescence to a more conventional critical stance in which I could set Miss Austen's works in an artistic and historical context.

If I ever had occasion to think about or refer to the juvenilia, I was quite happy to categorise them as satiric in tone and corrective in intention, mocking the conventions of the popular sentimental novel

of the day, mainly interesting for the way in which they prefigured themes, relationships, characters and even scenes from the mature novels.

And so I might have continued, had not *Sanditon*, the end of Austen's voyage, been located, thanks to the good Dr. Chapman, where all true journeys should finish, near to its beginnings.

For there was more than mere nostalgic pleasure here. The more I read, the more the conviction hardened in me that I had been quite right to react to this vein of exuberant goonery in the young Austen and quite wrong to forget it. Certainly she had a precocious talent and certainly the scholars are right to see signposted here some important directions her writing career was going to follow. But in looking too fixedly at where she is going it is easy to neglect where she is coming from.

She is first and foremost very young, and she seems to be happy to be young, enjoying her role as the younger of two girls and the second youngest of eight children. If they made a musical of the Austen family life called, say, *Meet Me In St. Eventon*, hers would be the Margaret O'Brien part. Indeed you may recall that Tootie Smith had a similar taste for the grotesque. Most large families have such a character, the kid who loves making the others laugh, mainly through choice but also by being what used to be called a little old-fashioned. She needn't be all that clever, though it helps. What she mustn't do is take herself too seriously, else she runs the risk of ending up like Mary Bennet, a pedantic bore. Mary Bennet makes us readers laugh, but she is certainly no source of entertainment to her family. Yet most of her pronouncements are full of good sense. What makes us laugh (or grit our teeth if we are her relations) is the contrast between their portentousness and the person of Mary herself. Imagine her saying something like: "too many sentimental novels corrupt the taste" or "we must live life according to right reason rather than be deluded by false romance" or "sensibility over-refined is sense undervalued." How we would smile to observe in this slip of a girl the measured manner and the weighty words of a greybeard.

Not, you understand, that I have anything against greybeards.

Yet these are the opinions the literary analysts have discovered almost perfectly formed in Jane's juvenilia.

What made it impossible for her to be the Austen family's Mary Bennet was, of course, that liveliness of fancy, that sheer *joie de vivre*, which perhaps brought her closer to being the Austen's Lydia Bennet. And if that seems to be going too far by a couple of Irish miles, don't forget that Mary Mitford's mamma recalled Jane as "the prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly she ever remembers."



I know that Austen-Leigh in the first edition of his *Memoir* was at pains to prove such a recollection could not have been circumstantially possible but I rather hope he was wrong. After all aren't these exactly the words Austen might have put in the mouth of one mother in the marriage market, say Lady Lucas, slighting the lively, fun-loving daughter of another, say Mrs. Bennet, who is triumphing about an anticipated success?

**(Unconsidered Trifle 5:** On the subject of husbands, there has been a great deal of speculation on the reason for Jane's breaking off her brief engagement to Harris Bigg-Wither. Perhaps it was simply that her acute sense of the ridiculous could not bear the idea that in the horse-loving society in which they lived, every time she and her husband were viewed approaching, some wag would probably say, "make room, make room! Here come the big withers!")

But I stray from my point, which is that Jane would have been much easier to categorise as a Lydia than a Mary because her high spirits were much more in evidence than her high seriousness. Certainly what I most experienced, or rather re-experienced, as I renewed my acquaintance with the juvenilia was not the satirist's indignation, or desire to reprove, or ambition to change, but a pure delight in the absurdities she observed so keenly, and a sheer exuberance in pursuing them to their extremes which has more to do with creative joy than critical intent. Austen-Leigh touches upon it in his *Memoir* when he adapts a phrase used of Walter Scott, saying that at this stage in her life her main concern was simply with *the queerness and the fun* of things.

That she had read much of the kind of literature she mocks is certain. But that she had enjoyed reading it even though recognising its essential daftness is almost equally certain. It is the daftness which makes it enjoyable. Like Pope, with whom she shares so much, she has alongside her highly developed sense of proportion a complementary and equally important sense of, and delight in, disproportion.

**(Unconsidered Trifle 6:** Has anyone else noticed the close resemblance between Thomas Hudson's portrait of Pope and Cassandra's sketch of Jane? The same looking-at-life-sideways pose, the same sceptical eyes and sardonic mouth, even apparently the same milliner.)

Unlike Pope, however, Jane is no infant prodigy. His claim to have "lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came" is backed by his *Ode on Solitude* composed when he was twelve. This in its measured prosody and solemn sentiments is a broad imitation of many classical models, and though knowledge of its author's tender years may make

us smile, as at a boy alto's exquisite rendition of "Ol' Man River," we have to acknowledge its success and Pope was able to publish it without embarrassment a quarter century after its composition.

Coincidentally Austen too has left us at the end of *Volume the First* an early Ode, hers to Pity not Solitude though its author is clearly wandering lonely as cloud. I find its tone wholly ambiguous. Is it a bad imitation or a poor parody? Looking at a known serious poem like "To The Memory of Mrs. Lefroy" doesn't help. How could an artist with her high sensitivity to the overblown and pretentious have penned such lines? Had they been presented as an effusion of Mr. Collins on the death of his noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, they would not have seemed out of place. She is much more at ease when her verses are clearly lighthearted, though she never achieves more than competence even here.

**(Unconsidered Trifle 7:** I have, however, noted with interest how her lines "On a Headache" begin:

When stretched on one's bed  
With a fierce throbbing head,  
Which precludes alike thought or repose,  
How little one cares  
For the grandest affairs  
That may busy the world as it goes . . .

prefigure metrically the Lord chancellor's song in *Iolanthe*:

When you're lying awake with a dismal headache, and repose is taboo'd by anxiety, I conceive you may use any language you choose to indulge in, without impropriety.)

But I am once more wandering cloudily from my point which is that even in prose, Jane is no child prodigy. There is commonly in the juvenilia of authors a great deal of imitation, and many choose the easiest form of mimicry which is parody. On my re-reading of Austen's early writings I make no claim to have discovered a standard of excellence which might have established her name even if she'd died at twenty-one rather than forty-one. But what I did find was something more than simply signposts to the future.

I found a pure joy in the simple act of creation and a real concern with the whole nature of writing rather than just a critique of one particular part of it.

I too was an enthusiastic scribbler from an early age, with humour as the main but by no means the sole dynamic of my compositions and imitation or parody as my principal form. I recall a blank verse drama with a sub-Byronic hero; a mock Nordic saga in alliterative verse; short stories in most styles from Hemingway to Wodehouse; and even, God pardon my youthful arrogance, a take-off of *Mansfield Park* as it might have been written by Dostoyevsky. Everyone

had consumption, I recollect, and polite conversation was punctuated by the frequent vomiting of blood. You may be relieved to hear that neither this nor any of the other juvenilia just mentioned has survived to trouble my executors, but if they had, I doubt if it would be easy to separate the direct imitation from the intended parody as in many cases I had only the sketchiest of acquaintance with my models. I was simply hooked on books which were the only consciousness-changing substance readily available to adolescents in the early 1950s. I was writing for the sheer fun of it, and in this I make my sole claim to any resemblance with Jane Austen.

I think she too was intoxicated with this brave new world of the imagination and I am sure she understood, and delighted in, the paradoxes and absurdities of the novel some time before she fully appreciated its powers, which was early enough as evidenced by the famous defence in *Northanger Abbey*. But long before she was able to feel indignant at its low standing she was able to mock its pretensions, recognising that to hold a mirror up to reality is only useful if something of interest is happening, but that to overcrowd your glass with events is to abandon the reality you want to mirror. She knew her Sterne and must have delighted in the fun he has in *Tristram Shandy* with the law of diminishing returns in autobiographical fiction which says basically that as you cannot write as fast as you live, the more you write the further you must be from finishing. She certainly knew Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, and possibly his *Historic Doubts* helped confirm her own partial and prejudiced view of Richard III, but it would be nice to think she had also come across his *Hieroglyphic Tales*, those almost surreal, indeed Goonish, short stories written in protest against what he saw as the sheer lack of novelty in the novel. They have the same quasi-modern appeal as many of Austen's early writings, which may have arisen, though less consciously, from the same impulse.

Austen also quickly spotted the limitations of that apparently most realistic of forms, the epistolary novel. True, letters were only one remove from the individual human voice speaking directly from the heart. Yet they had to be written and posted and received and replied to and the more traumatic the events they described, the less the opportunity or perhaps even impulse to get them on paper, and in any case the Shandean law of diminishing returns applies here also, and one always has the feeling that a heroine writing a thirty-page letter describing her fear of being ravished by some lecherous lord in the next apartment might find more profitable ways of spending her time.

So even *Lady Susan*, which is far from a humorous piece, is brought to a typically Austenian abrupt end with a reference to the difficulty of contriving a believable continuation of the correspondence. In other words, Jane acknowledges that the allegedly realistic

device of the letter becomes absurd when instead of being merely a medium of communication it begins to dictate the shape and geography of the story.

This abruptness of ending, ranging from the manifest incompleteness of some of the early pieces, through sudden halts, to the more extended but still perfunctory rounding up and rounding off which marks the end of most of the novels, seems to me to be of a piece, springing from that same awareness of the artificiality of her art. Yes, the novel is all of those things which Austen says it is in *Northanger Abbey*. It is also a child's peep show, a delusory drug, an evening masquerade. We reach the end, we close the pages. Fled is that vision. Do I wake or sleep?

Many of us who write fiction share, I suspect, an underlying uneasiness at the knowledge that characters who exist only in our minds can have more substance and engage us in closer emotional relationships than many real flesh and blood people of our acquaintance. The presence of the authorial voice in some fictions, the stepping out of the narrative flow onto the solid bank of reality, is not always an arrogant assertion of God-like authority. Sometimes it is a form of alienation technique at its simplest, reminding the writer as much as the reader that they both exist in the real world and that the pageant moving before their eyes is insubstantial and illusory. We fear that our role as observers and recorders can only be sustained by giving up something of essential humanity. We don't like to talk about it because we don't like to think about it. I once heard Saul Bellow say in an interview that most writers, as soon as you start asking them about their books, start lying. I knew at once what he meant, and I suspect Jane Austen would have too, which suggests that anything she says about her writing in her letters should be taken with a pinch of salt. And as much of it is modest to the point of self-deprecation, a very large pinch indeed! I believe the collections she compiled of the often crass and banal comments of her family and acquaintance demonstrate not uncertainty and the need for reassurance but an almost sardonic pleasure in appearing to be concerned with what they thought. Like most serious writers, she didn't need critics of any degree to tell her what she was at. She had a high degree of self-knowledge and a very precise estimate of her own worth.

And now at last to *Sanditon*.

I read it yet again after re-immersing myself in the early works. And suddenly what I was seeing there was a writer who'd done all she wanted to in a certain line, who knew what she was capable of, and who was ready to start finding out just how far she could go. *Sanditon* is of course sandy town, just as in *Pride and Prejudice* Meryton is merry town, the adjective here indicating the dominant humour, for without doubt *Pride and Prejudice* is the merriest of all

her works. Sandiness is a more obscure quality, but as well as being the perfect name for a seaside resort, it also has overtones of shifting uncertainty, of grittiness, of getting in the eye and causing irritation. The fragment of the novel that we have is busier, more vibrant with nervous energy, showing greater variety of theme and a more crowded canvas than any of the other novels in their entirety let alone in their opening chapters. After sixty-five pages of each of the others we have a pretty strong idea of precisely where they are going, but in the *Sanditon* fragment we are still not altogether sure who will turn out to be the chief protagonists. Charlotte seems favourite for heroine, but we cannot be absolutely certain that in this mood Jane Austen might not have dispatched her to Timbuctoo, care of Sir Edward Denham, or more fittingly perhaps, drowned her in quicksand.

The book after all begins with an accident. And what an accident! A man hurrying to the house of a doctor he doesn't need, has a fall, and now, needing a doctor, finds he was heading for the wrong house. This is the world upside down which was such a favourite viewpoint of the young Austen. It is rare in the finished novels for her to go too many chapters without a sideglance at the more absurd aspects of humanity, but here in *Sanditon* absurdity seems to be the norm and we have taken a large step from the incidental ironies of social comedy towards the satirical extravaganzas of Thomas Love Peacock, and even to the immortal caricatures of Dickens. In the BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice* I referred to earlier, it was objected by many that the portrayal of Mrs. Bennet turned her from a nicely observed portrait of an over-anxious, comically garrulous mother whose one concern is to see her daughters married, into a Dickensian grotesque. I added my voice to the objectors. Yet I can understand the temptation. The line is fine. Jane started on one side of it in her early works, moved easily across to the other side when the more serious tone and intention of her mature novels required it, but now seems ready to jump nimbly back to where she started. But not quite, of course. Diana Parker's letter to her brother Tom, which contains such delights as her account of rubbing Mrs. Sheldon's coachman's ankle for six hours and Susan Parker's nerves being so deranged that she fainted away twice on her brother Arthur's trying to suppress a cough, could as an individual piece have easily taken its place in the juvenilia. But here it is part of a much broader tapestry. Hypochondria, which is treated with such affectionate forbearance in the person of Mr. Woodhouse, is part of this book's dominating metaphor. Austen seems to me to be proposing a detailed diagnosis of a society which is admittedly sick but hardly at death's door, and for which some new treatments are advisable, but none should be taken inadvisedly, else you run the risk of overturning your carriage

in your search for a doctor. To suggest that the book's concern with sickness derives solely from her own state of health at the time of writing seems to me absurd. Creatively she seems to be writing at her most vigorous and with a confidence and drive which permit her now to reach back to the imaginative extravagances of her youth and draw upon them now as strengths rather than repress them as self-indulgent weaknesses.

I'm not sure if this is an "Unconsidered Trifle" or not, but as I read the description of Charlotte's first sighting of Sanditon I found myself thinking of Byron's Don Juan approaching London:

Through groves, so call'd as being void of trees,  
(Like *lucus* from *no* light); through prospects named  
Mount Pleasant, as containing nought to please,  
Nor much to climb; through little boxes framed  
Of bricks, to let the dust in at your ease,  
With "To be let" upon their doors proclaimed;  
Through "Rows" most modestly call'd "Paradise,"  
Which Eve might quit without much sacrifice.

And this shared sardonic attitude to modern development helped confirm a strange affinity I have often felt between the Christian lady and the debauched lord when reading Austen's letters. For the most part they are concerned like her beloved Cowper's with gently humorous observations on the domestic round of everyday life, then suddenly will come a flash of bloodstained steel and we are in the world of Byron's correspondence, which, if he had written nothing else, must have won him a place in the Pantheon. Her comments on Mrs. Hall's miscarriage, the Debary sisters' bad breath, the heavy casualties at the battle of Albuera, Mrs. Badcock's pursuit of her drunken husband, etc. etc. have all a typically Byronic twist, and in the *little piece of ivory* letter when she twits her nephew Edward, to whom we owe so much as the author of the *Memoir*, with concealing his crimes and miseries at Winchester school—"how often you went up to London and threw away Fifty Guineas at a tavern, & how often you were on the point of hanging yourself, restrained only . . . by the want of a tree within some miles of the City"—she captures the tone precisely of his lordship's declaration that often he would have committed suicide had it not been for the pleasure he knew it would have given his mother-in-law. Their world-views, though taken from very different vantage points, have got a surprising amount in common, and it is fascinating to imagine an encounter between the two of them. Their names are most famously linked by Auden when he debates which of them to address himself to on his Icelandic expedition. Austen, he suspects, might be shocked at being accosted by a strange man. But he then goes on to say how much more shocking he finds *her* for describing the amorous effects of "brass" and revealing

so frankly and with such sobriety the economic basis of society. Byron's background and, of course, gender, pointed him in one direction, Austen's in another. But the two of them are basically Augustans at large in a Romantic Age, which they are both part of and stand apart from, regarding it with a most knowing eye.

One thing they certainly have in common is that both died in their prime. What Byron might have become is hard to say. Perhaps his script required a romantic death. But Austen's hypothetical future is slightly clearer. Twenty years after her death the Victorian Age began, with its first great novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, already taking shape. Jane would have been only sixty-one, coincidentally my own age. I make no claim to special empathy when I say I know how much my own writing has developed over the past twenty years. And I would be disappointed if the critics among you weren't thinking that if I'd written six immortal works by the time I was forty, perhaps development would not have been necessary or indeed possible. But the creators among you will know that art doesn't stand still. It is easy enough for the critic to point to a single work, *Bleak House*, say, or *The Way We Live Now*, or *Vanity Fair*, or *Middlemarch*, or *The Waves*, or *Catch 22*, and declare, this was a peak, all that followed was mere descent. Well, it makes for nice graphs, but it has little to do with the hopes and aspirations of the true writer. We always know we can do better. The best is always yet to be. Hills peep o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!

Like Lord Byron's, Austen's is a restless questing spirit, though a much less self-dramatising one. He managed at the same time to create, and be, the two great representative figures of the age—Don Juan who experiences it and Childe Harold who embodies it. He went in search of death and found it and I do not think in literary terms we have much cause to regret the loss. He died in the age he belonged to, the age he helped to create and whose ikon he had become. Another twenty years here might have seen him a very sorry figure.

But death came looking for Jane Austen while she was still looking for life. After the perfect comedy of *Emma*, she had turned to near tragedy with *Persuasion*. She was on the move. *Sanditon*, I feel sure, was not just a turning back to the old world of ironic satire she had already conquered. It looks to a future she hopes to inhabit.

The defining characteristics of the Augustan Age are control and order. She'd been there, done that. Those of the Victorian Age are enterprise and energy. She could scent them in the air. Whatever her physical state, she was feeling creatively strong; she was back in touch with the inventive energies of her adolescence, and now she had the experience and expertise to dare let them run free. She was long overdue a much more generous helping of fame and fortune

than her writings had so far brought her, and while it is difficult to imagine Jane setting up a salon in literary London, genius is a potent lodestone and I do not doubt that the literary establishment would eventually have beaten a path to her door. The arc of her keen gaze was swinging ever wider, and while two or three families in a country village might be the ideal subject matter to recommend to a modestly talented tyro, she herself had moved far beyond such a self-limitation.

I recall reading somewhere that *Mansfield Park* was Jane Austen's *Vanity Fair*. Such a statement does neither book any favours. Try reversing it. *Vanity Fair* was Thackeray's *Mansfield Park*. Thackeray of course never attempted, was probably not capable of the close concentration on small detail which makes up the distinctive texture of an Austen novel. But Austen, had she lived, showed every sign of broadening her canvas, if not to the geographical boundaries of Thackeray's world, at least to somewhere close to his social and psychological limits.

Austen's significant link with *Vanity Fair* is, I think, a symbolic one. That book opens, you will recall, with Becky Sharp signalling her rejection of the values of Miss Pinkerton's Academy by hurling her graduation gift from the window of the coach which bears her away. The gift is a copy of Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary*.

Perhaps Jane Austen too had reached some kind of graduation stage and was preparing to signal her readiness to move on by hurling out of the window her beloved Johnson and the age he represents.

She had already done enough to establish herself as the last great Augustan. If time had spared her, she might have become the first great Victorian.

Or to put it another way, she might have recognised at last that her little piece of ivory had once been attached to a beast whose tread made the earth tremble at the same time as its appearance raised a delighted smile. To see it in the flesh would take a long but not impossible voyage. It is fitting that *Sanditon* should bring us to the very edge of the ocean. And it is fitting too that your clever organisers have chosen another small, though rapidly developing, coastal resort as the place to attempt to chart the likely directions of Jane Austen's tragically interrupted voyage.

This conference is the stately vessel which will, with fair winds and a good watch, bear JASNA to exciting new horizons and dramatic landfalls.

I am honoured to have been invited to launch it.

And though I have not been provided with a bottle of champagne to break across your stern—(tonight, perhaps?)—nevertheless, let me conclude with the traditional words.

May God bless you and all who sail with you.