Retrato de Jane Austen dibujado por su hermana Cassandra.

Retrato “idealizado” de Jane Austen conocido como “The Ring Portrait”.

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It seems that we just can’t get enough of Jane Austen. One day we’re debating the veracity of her portrait, yet again, this time as used on the new British £10 note and commemorative £2 coin; the next we’re taking to social media to express our horror at the image of what experts assure us is the “real Darcy”. In the UK, it is almost a national pastime to produce top-100 lists of “the nation’s favourite novels”, in which Austen’s works—or at least two or three of them—are usually close to the top spot. Adaptations of Austen’s novels for TV or the cinema either receive outpouring of unconditional approval or else generate outrage at the utter treason of miscasting (and therefore singularly misunderstanding) a particular hero or villain, or at allowing the unthinkably improper closing kiss to round off the story. To all of this we need to add what amounts to practically an entire industry of prequels and sequels to Austen’s narratives. Did Chaucer ever excite such passion in his latter-day admirers? Do even Shakespeare or Dickens awake such a vivid sense of pertinence or viscerality in responses from readers or enthusiasts? Is the blogosphere tingling with messages from the fanzone telling us just how much Pip or Oliver or Desdemona or Ophelia (or the Wife of Bath) is really, truly, more than you could possibly ever have thought, a kindred spirit whose inner torments are intimately shared and deeply understood across all these years? Clearly not.

Jane Austen died almost 200 years ago, on 18 July 1817, long enough by many several decades for her to have fallen—like the vast majority of her contemporary authors—into what Clifford Siskin (218) has called “the great forgetting”. And yet, except for a relatively short hiatus of some 50 years or so, between her death and the publication in 1869 of A Memoir of Jane Austen by James Edward Austen-Leigh, Austen’s cultural presence has never been other
than undeniable (and even during these ‘interlude years’, with the possible exception of the 1820s [see Harman, 99], she was by no means neglected). That is quite something to be reckoned with; the history of literature is replete with figures of sometimes enormous success within their own period who, gradually at first and then ever-faster, cease to attract the spotlight. To illustrate that point, we need only think about the posthumous fortunes of Sir Walter Scott or Lord Byron, not in the specialist arena of academic enquiry but, instead, in the wider world of popular reputation. In the early 1800s, both these authors had attained levels of acclaim immeasurably beyond the modest degree of success that Austen enjoyed at the very same time, even accepting that this included the Prince Regent’s approbation of her novels. But today, down on *Main Street*, who reads those two ‘canonical’ authors anymore?

Trying to work out exactly why Austen, in stark contrast to her two directly contemporary ex-megastars, is such a powerful cultural force practically two whole centuries after her death would prove to be no easy task; on the whole, it is one that I certainly do not set myself here. But I would say that one contributing factor to Austen’s seemingly perennial appeal is that her own authorial ‘figure’ is one that constantly slips the lease of close definition, and can therefore be taken—at one and the same time—to represent a broad range of distinct and even contradictory interests. By which I mean that she can sometimes appear to be all things to everyone.

Assessing this authorial figure on the basis of her mature fiction, Austen is to some—and entirely plausibly so—a conservative stakeholder in the social and political status quo of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, setting out the case for her own class and its interests. To others—equally plausibly—she represents the voice of marked disconformity with that very status quo and, through her irony, seeks to undermine the values and ambitions of her milieu. To some, she blithely shores up the patriarchy with her apparently interminable insistence on love plots that are simple conduits to matrimony, with all her women happily hard-wired for compliant wifehood and maternity. Yet to others, she is the voice of proto-feminism, peopling her novels with strong, intelligent female protagonists who insist on being treated
first and foremost as dignified human beings, and making these women push at the boundaries imposed on their social roles and expectations. We could go further still with all this; some—notoriously—have read Austen as an apologist for slavery; other have remarked on the utter impossibility of such an interpretation. To some, even today, Austen is esteemed for being an almost incidental writer who jotted down the odd scene or two of whatever novel she happened to be working on whenever she could spare the time from her (enthusiastically undertaken) household chores. This goes some way to explaining a still-common view of the novelist as imperturbable in tone and decidedly limited in scope of action. Others will assure us that, from the earliest age, she saw herself as a professional writer, and acted accordingly to become exactly that; they would also point out that her ‘imperturbable’ tone is at the very least ambiguous and that any ‘limited scope’ that we might detect is a profound misreading. To Hollywood, and to countless readers of our own time, she is the doyenne of the romantic, a story-teller for whom love always conquers all (though within this particular view, there are also myriad sub-currents that see her romanticism from radically different perspectives). To the greater part of the academic study of Austen, however, this popular facet is of almost no significance, and tends very largely to be ignored. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, if you’re confused about just who the real Jane Austen is, you are probably in good—and populous—company.

There is something about Austen’s mature narrative presence that appears to be in a certain sense detached from the worlds that it presents (indeed, for many, this detachment, an ironic distancing of commentary from event, is no small part of the novels’ charm). An immediate upshot of this apparent equitability is that it facilitates an interpretative space in which a variety of points of view can quite reasonably coexist. A cursory glance at the fiction of many of Austen’s more-or-less contemporaries such as Maria Edgeworth, Frances Burney, Jane and Anna Maria Porter, Susan Ferrier, Amelia Opie or Elizabeth Inchbald reveals, for them, a palpably different picture. Today, whilst we can unquestionably find much to admire and promote in the works of these writers, the level and degree of narrative comment that they tend to provide is
excessive in comparison to Austen and is also overly burdened by the type of remark that binds it heavily to place, time and (we might easily assume) authorial opinion. Two centuries down the line, we have trouble discerning the true import of such intervention, and this—I think—impacts negatively on the appreciation that we then accord to their writing. Where we can understand their narrators’ outpourings, they appear to us far too didactically directed, almost ‘propagandistic’ in fact. Not so—at all—with Jane Austen. Her narrators intervene with such subtlety and discretion that we are often left unaware of what are, actually, their very determined strategies, as our attention is given over—at least consciously—purely to the events in hand. The only real exception to this is Austen’s renowned ‘outburst’ in favour of the Novel and of novelists, uttered by the narrator in chapter five of Northanger Abbey (“…while the abilities of the nine-hundredth abridger of the History of England, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from the Spectator, and a chapter from Sterne, are eulogised by a thousand pens — there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist”). If this appears uncharacteristic of Austen’s mature writing, that’s because it is. And although this is pure speculation on my part, the fact that this novel was published posthumously (and therefore that Austen would not have had the opportunity to revise it for her public) is the most likely reason for the survival of this comment in what is otherwise a veritable universe of narrative restraint.

For many, the surprise is that this was not always so in Jane Austen’s writing. Whilst most of her readers are now familiar with the Big Six novels, comparatively fewer have read the novelist’s extraordinary juvenilia works, and so are unacquainted with an earlier Austen who most decidedly wore her narrative heart on her sleeve. By this, I do not mean that the young Austen necessarily makes use of a highly ‘interventionist’ narrator, but rather that it is in the nature of these texts to make playfully evident the underlying opinions of the narrator, whether this figure is expressed through a first- or third-person device, and therefore to suggest very strongly the sort of reaction that might be called for from the reader.
The texts produced by Austen from about 1788 to 1793 (that is, those written when she was around 13 to 18 years old)—including, for example, *The beautifull Cassandra* (sic), *Evelyn*, *The History of England*, *The Three Sisters*, *Love and Freindship* (sic) and *Lesley Castle*, which form part of her very few manuscript records still extant—are outstanding. They demonstrate what can only be understood as a very close knowledge of many mid-to-late C18 novels, not least those of Richardson and Fielding, in addition to her familiarity with a quantity of sentimental fiction, much of it epistolary, and of probably varying degrees of literary quality. They also show a grasp of authorial rhetoric, or—as Margaret Anne Doody (xv) puts it, “the young Austen’s evident command of the sheer idea of fiction in itself”, which is quite simply breathtaking in an adolescent writer. These texts (of which the earliest are little more than a few lines long) are exuberant, anarchic, expressionistic and often totally unpredictable in terms both of plot and character. They are redolent—as Doody herself reminds us (xxxvi-xxxvii)—of Jorge Luis Borges or Italo Calvino; in nature and scope, they seem practically anti-Austen, in the sense that we now generally understand this writer.

Over time, as the young Austen grew, so her early writing developed in complexity and ambitiousness, increasing in both length and seriousness and gradually eschewing the unrealistic and parodic, though never losing its sense of exuberance. The unfinished novella titled *Catharine, or the Bower* (1792; Austen was 17) is, I think, a perfect example of this, and in many ways begins to show signs both of the demure narrative irony and of an interest in strong-minded, good-hearted but humorously fallible young-women protagonists that would come to feature so centrally in Austen’s later fiction. But Austen’s juvenilia writings culminate, chronologically and also—in my own view—in terms of literary quality, with the unfinished epistolary novella that would eventually be titled (though never by Jane Austen) *Lady Susan*.

Austen probably wrote the 41 letters of the epistolary section of this novella in about 1794, when she was aged 19; it was terminated at a later date by a non-epistolary conclusion. Critics have speculated inconclusively over when exactly the novella was completed, although a point between 1804-1809 seems likely. A
considerable number of scholars have seen *Lady Susan* as a failure, applying the essentially teleological argument that, as it is abandoned in its epistolary format and subsequently concluded in direct narrative, this ‘proves’ Austen’s own dissatisfaction with a moribund narrative form that was unable to suitably accommodate her growing literary skill. The fact that her major fiction is entirely in direct narrative is taken as proof positive of this argument. Nevertheless, there are several dissenting voices, perhaps most notable of which is that of Marvin Mudrick, the first *Austen heavyweight* to unequivocally endorse the literary value of this novella (he states [138] that *Lady Susan* is Austen’s “first completed masterpiece” and “a quintessence of Jane Austen’s most characteristics and interests”). By and large, the question at stake in the diverse critical interpretations of *Lady Susan* is whether this work is simply an interesting irrelevance, marginal to Austen’s major writings, or else a text of fundamental significance to her stylistic development. Clearly, this is not the place for a detailed assessment of this issue (though see Owen, chapter two, for an overview of critical responses), but my own view of this is that *Lady Susan* is the pivotal developmental moment in Austen’s growth as a novelist.

Although almost entirely epistolary, the novella forwards an inchoate presiding narrative voice, one that will lead—in terms of form—to Austen signature free indirect style; it presents a thoroughly balanced encounter between the values of the pro- and anti-Jacobin worlds; and it sets out a complex and highly effective series of discourse forms, ranging from the public through to the intimate, with perfectly nuanced stylistic variations for each stage. All of these elements will make their appearance in Austen’s later fiction. Yet that later fiction, to state the obvious, will never again use the epistolary format. Just what went wrong? Why did Austen abandon the epistolary if—as I am claiming here—it was so stylistically compelling to her?

Once again, we are thrown onto the hard and inhospitable terrain of pure speculation. We could follow the argument—one that ultimately derives from Ian Watt’s *Rise of the Novel*—that only third-person narrative allows for the effective modulation between narrator and character that the increasingly competent fiction of the late C18 and early C19 novelists were demonstrating.
As this argument would have it, the epistolary—necessarily caged in to its first-person format—simply could not offer the universalistic narrative control that the third-person figure provides. My own view of this is that a close reading of *Lady Susan* wholly undermines any idea of literary limitation; indeed, the opposite appears to hold with this novella. What Austen learned through *Lady Susan* far outweighed whatever limitations its epistolarity might have imposed. In contrast to arguments of form, a more culturally rooted view is that provided by Nicola Watson. She proposes that, in the highly repressive political conditions of the late 1790s in Britain, the epistolary mode was increasingly associated with Jacobinism (an idea that was profoundly connected with the concomitant rejection of the use of the letter in political debate), and that this resulted in a ‘disciplining’ of the self-centred and Jacobin-associated epistolary into the more communal and anti-Jacobin third-person narrative. This view would tend to highlight a particular problem with *Lady Susan* that—at least if we accept Watson’s position—Austen does not seem to have been able to resolve. My reading of this novella leads me to conclude that, whilst Austen wished to support conservative communal values (in keeping, that is, with Marilyn Butler’s view of Austen’s underlying political inclinations, as forwarded in *The War of Ideas*), its epistolarity was increasingly perceived to reflect an individualism that was seen as both morally and politically tainted. Consequently, *Lady Susan*’s epistolarity is—at the close of the eighteenth century—too politically dubious a mode with which to convey conservative ideals, and far too closely connected with individualism to persuasively promote communal interests. Added to this—most significantly—is the undeniable magnetism and ebullient temperament of Lady Susan Vernon herself, a character of an obvious Jacobin sensibility, who appears to have escaped her author’s control in the sense that her irrepresibility could most certainly point to an underlying authorial sympathy for this character’s values. I would argue that there is, in fact, very little in Austen’s writings to suggest sympathy for any political position that might—however indirectly—support those voices calling for revolutionary change, in spite of Claudia Johnson’s take on Austen’s alignment with the views of Jacobin writers such as Mary
Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays or Charlotte Smith (and whilst fully accepting that Austen’s writing does, indeed show a “commitment to uncovering the ideological underpinnings of cultural myths” [Johnson, 27]). I propose that Austen’s portrait of Lady Susan was drawn so strongly—so ‘obviously’, we might say—precisely in order to present a transparent, unambiguous comparison with the ideal conservative values espoused by Susan’s sister-in-law and rival, Catherine Vernon. The problem, if we can call it such, is that Lady Susan is such a dynamic creation that, just like Milton’s Satan, she completely outshines the competition. As I have already mentioned, the very fact of writing an epistolary novella in England in the late 1790s could well have been misunderstood as implicit approval of Jacobinism; if we add to this mixture the exuberant and defiant disruptiveness of a personality who, in spite of her evident antisocial values made clear to us in the most evident of terms, vies chapter after chapter for narrative centrality, then the possibilities for perilous misreading is greatly increased.

Austen, acutely attuned to the panorama of novel publishing, a consumer as well as a creator of fiction and very much aware of who was being read and who was not, must surely have realised that this was not a path to be followed if she wished to see her own name in print. If—as I think is the case—her writing wished to reflect a certain ideology (a moderately conservative yet clearly meritocratic view of society, a position that Jane Spencer [169] has termed “the progressive element within the tradition of conformity”), Lady Susan may very well have taught Austen that, to avoid misinterpretation and possible censure, the only viable narrative approach possible to her was, essentially, the suppression of her authorial intentions or comment to the level of the strictly implicit. To those in the know, such intentions would be comprehensible; to those who could not or would not perceive them, the plot itself would prove to be sufficiently engaging. As if in recognition of this, Austen—adapting Scott’s Marmion, ll. 1147-8—candidly admitted to Cassandra (in letter 79, of 29 January 1813 [Le Faye, 202], confirming Austen’s reception of her copies of Pride and Prejudice) that “I do not write for such dull Elves/As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves”, by which is presumably meant
that she was as demanding on her readers’ interpretative nous as they have come to be on her authorial skills.

In other words, and to repeat myself, *Lady Susan* was not a failure; it was pivotal. From this novella, Austen learns a host of literary lessons, but perhaps the most important of these was that overly unequivocal writing may—paradoxically—actually be completely misinterpreted and, as in this case, could give rise to responses that understand a work in ways that are entirely at odds with what (I assume, at least) are the author’s own objectives.

In about 1803-05, Austen wrote another unfinished work, *The Watsons*. This has also largely been dismissed as a failure, a story that (perhaps for biographical circumstances relating to the death of Austen’s much beloved father in January 1805) is conventionally seen as too dismal to have merited any continuity. For what it’s worth, I find that the critical consensus on this text is mistaken, and that—though short and unfinished—*The Watsons* is a highly competent, highly promising portrait of a somewhat dysfunctional family. Most particularly, the narrative voice in this text—the first that Austen attempted after *Lady Susan*—represents a significant step towards the detached narrations of the later fiction, with a studied avoidance of any excessively transparent narrative positioning. I would say that this points to a clear putting into practice of the lessons learned in her abandoned epistolary novella.

And so, in short, it is to Austen’s early work that I believe we should look if we are to understand how the later fiction can give rise to such a broad variety of critical and cultural understandings. If Austen is, in a certain measure, all things to everyone, it is because that is exactly what *Lady Susan* taught her about becoming a published author: far better to be that, and for one’s own narrative message to be read subliminally, than to be misunderstood and perhaps even dismissed on the grounds of supporting determined social or political opinions. The risk of this in Austen’s own time would have been to be associated with a specific orientation and therefore to have excluded one or other sector of her potential readership, quite apart from bringing upon herself any unwelcome political attention. And whilst considerations of future judgement probably did not weigh too heavily on Austen’s mind, the fact of not giving rein
to the type of narrative comment that we now associate with her contemporaries has allowed, as we have seen, the flourishing of a huge range of opinions on Austen and her work, and has in great part facilitated her position as a cultural icon to generations of readers and general admirers, for whom the ‘real’ Jane Austen can so often be exactly the one that they want to believe in. For a writer, that’s not a bad way to pass into posterity.

Works Cited


Steventon, Hampshire. Casa natal de Jane Austen.