

Jan Austen

A Collection of Critical Essays

I. Watt (ed.)

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'Twentieth Century Views' was a series of collected critical essays on various authors published in the 60's and 70's. I picked up a few of those during my book-buying forays around Harvard Square but I never dipped into them, until a day or so ago I suddenly became curious about what could people say about Jane Austen, having in recent times concluded all her six published novels.

Why do you read a critical assessment of a novel you have read? The obvious answer is to share an experience, to compare notes. And what can you say about an Austen novel? The plot is of course not too exciting, never meant to be, what matters is conversation refracted through an ironic temperament. As such the skill of an Austen is bound to engender admiration sweetened by delight. Now apart from the main protagonists, serving as mouthpieces for the author, most of the characters tend to be fools. This provides a dilemma. Who reads Austen novels, for whom were they intended. The general public, meaning at the time of Austen the leisured class? If so, would they not contain a lot of fools, and what possibly could they get out of the books? If you are a social fool, as most people seem to be, how could you possibly appreciate her novels? Would not the irony be beyond you? On the other hand do the novels have other qualities as well, so even a fool can enjoy them by taking them literally? After all the Austen novels are favorite material for various dramatizations be it regular movies or TV-series. The charm of such lie not so much in the fabled irony, but in the evocation of a period which must to many viewers seem idyllic. In short good old-fashioned escapism, with nice clothes and congenial scenery providing a setting for a pleasant life. The moral justification for the novel is traditionally to be didactic as far as morals go. To hold up to its society of readers a mirror in which their follies and bad ways can be shown for what they are, so they can mend their ways. A bad and immoral person may recognize, if with some promptings, his mistakes and maybe even be led to rectify them, guided by some deeper moral instincts within him, but a stupid person may hardly rise above his or her status, limited intelligence more or less by definition, excludes the possibility of improvement. Thus a Mrs Bennet of 'Pride and Prejudice' would hardly recognize herself as stupid reading about herself, while her husband, who is not stupid, may see his deficiencies more clearly, although that this alone would be cause for improvement is another matter, yet the reading may nevertheless have an impact.

Now there is one kind of criticism, the factual, academic, which takes the individual novels very seriously as objects of studies, and indeed those are the kinds of essays you may profit from, would your ambition be limited to the above mentioned sharing of experiences. Do your assessment of say Mrs V. agree with that of the author? Are there aspects of the novels you may have missed? Such scholarship, if charming, is hard to take too seriously.

It certainly is not science, nor does it involve any intellectual depth. It is the kind of thing serious people would only do as a hobby. However, it can be pursued in a more serious and interesting direction, of which there are intimations among the essays although never pursued at length. The novels of Austen appear to the modern reader surprisingly modern, especially compared to what was written contemporarily. This is of course the meaning of a classic. It is tempting to think that the classics in some uncanny way anticipated the tastes of today, of course the opposite is true, they did not anticipate as much as shape contemporary taste. Furthermore they were not written in isolation but within an already existing tradition, and it would be quite interesting to make direct comparisons, to see what Austen accepted and borrowed, and what she transformed and how exactly she did that. There are some references to Juvenal works which anticipate the more mature efforts, and also the more mature ones were not written in the order they were published, and in particular they did undergo some revisions. How exactly would be fascinating to take part of¹, as the novels of Austen are very carefully crafted.

One issue of some interest concerns the indirect verbal presentation versus the direct, as on the stage or in the film. How much of the subtlety of Austen survives a dramatization? The novelist has more levels at her disposal than the dramatist or the film maker. For one thing he or she can interchange dialogue and commentary on the same, which on stage would be technically very hard, and on film, although technically feasible, exceedingly contrived. Also the novelist does not have to spell out things in detail but leave much to the imagination of the reader².

At the next level of the technical and somewhat pedestrian academic study is the intellectual essay. This is clearly on a higher plane, or at least thought so by its author. Here there is no painstaking analysis involved but opinion. Opinion that can be well-founded and incisive, as well as merely silly. One author³ berates Austen for her inability to face the real moral issue, namely that such a large section of the population was involved in serving the leisured class, the society of which was the sole subject of Austen's art. How can we take seriously the moral censures of such an individual who is so blind to the real

¹ I once looked at the published notebooks by Dostoevsky on the *Idiot*. I found it deeply moving, because the finished novel is just one slice of a much bigger conception, in which everything is fluid. In preliminary versions of the novel, the idiot is seen as an evil character, and one may speculate that reflections of that preliminary idea are still present and only subconsciously perceived by the reader. Rather amusing is also that the relationships between the different characters undergo a continuous revision. At one stage X is the father of Y, later the roles are reversed, furthermore characters change sex and importance throughout the process. An alternate metaphor to the slice, which suggests that the finished novel is just one of many possibilities that could have been explored and just a matter of chance, is that the finished novel is the surface, encompassing a huge mass of the subconscious, giving the surface hidden depth, just as in psycho-analytic theory

² I recall as a child reading through *'Tom Sawyer'* in which there was a passing reference to Tom and his girlfriend interchanging a few words, without spelling out what those were. I remember thinking that it would have been hard to film the sequence, as the words had to be spelled out, and that would have spoiled the effect, because it would have put undue weight on their actual contents, which were but incidental.

³ Arnold Kettle (1916-86), a leftist literary critic and novelist, and the relevant essay is lifted out of his *'An Introduction to the English Novel'*.

problem of her society? We may ignore it and accept the premises of the world of the author, but this cheapens the art of her novels rendering them into mere period pieces. Besides such an attitude is very patronizing, he argues. Austen has often been berated for, as she put it, painting on such a small scale with such a fine brush. Her world is indeed very limited, so many of the major issues of the human condition are simply not touched upon. There is of course some relevance to such remarks, because the absence of such themes may make her novels uninteresting to some. On the other hand any kind of art and science should be judged on the assumed premises. The premises of Austen may indeed be limited, but her skill should be judged on what she achieves with them. She obviously took the social conditions of her society as granted and within its encompasses she needed to weave her moral tales. Future generations may find our treatment of animals appalling, although this is something most of us take for granted, and although if pressed may not approve, but in the general scheme of things we are happy to tolerate. Same with Austen. She had to address what was in front of her very eyes, had she addressed the issues of social inequity, her novels would have been very different. More speculative, less anchored in reality, and ultimately of minor interest. Novels do not engage us because of the timeless impeccability of their feelings.

Why does Austen nevertheless earn such universal praise? An appreciation that started more or less with the publication of the original works and does not seem to have abated in the two centuries that have passed since then. Although not to be compared to the Bard himself, she and Shakespeare remain the two most securely ensconced in the British literary canon. Which is the best of her novels? 'Northanger Abbey' is probably thought of her slightest, the one in which she stays closest to the tradition of the day, although the novel constitutes a sarcastic comment on the novels of the day following in the tradition of Cervantes. Furthermore 'Sense and Sensibility' is yet another early novel which is not considered up to par either. The most quintessential of her works is 'Emma' which along with 'Pride and Prejudice' is, I believe, the two most known and most frequently dramatized of her novels. While 'Mansfield Park' and 'Persuasions' are the odd ones out. Many people disapprove of the insipid heroine - Fanny Price, of the former, and Kingsley Amis even engages in a spirited diatribe against it, claiming that it is the most immoral of her novels. As to 'Persuasions' it is her last completed work⁴, and somewhat different in character from the previous ones. It is pointed out that it gives the direction the art of Austen would have developed, had she been given, like her mother and siblings, a more extended life time⁵.

January 16, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

⁴ posthumously published, there is no canonical version but two competing endings, at least in the Penguin edition I have read.

⁵ Of her eight closest in kin all but one surpassed the biblical three scores and ten (one brother died at 54), two well into their eighties, and one brother reaching even the age of 91 (and the rank of admiral).