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# THE CREATIVE COST OF JANE AUSTEN'S MOVE TO BATH

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It is probably fair to say that it has become a commonly accepted view in the academic world that “canonical” authors like Jane Austen have had enough attention paid to them and that it is time to pass on to other concerns. It is, as it were, now their turn to be “marginalized.” But almost six decades ago Susan Sontag pointed out in a famous essay that the main function of academic commentary about what we now call “canonical” works has for a long time been in fact to make these works “manageable, comfortable” by burying them under “thick encrustations of interpretation”<sup>1</sup>—in other words, to enable them, in effect, to be forgotten. In that case, these works demand a labor never finished—either to continue

<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1967), 8.

to kill off any disruptive sparks of life in them or to try to break through the stifling crusts on them that seem now nearly petrified once and for all. But academic efforts are not all that serve to insulate readers from Jane Austen and her work: modernity itself can do so. Thus, at present, human motion from one place of residence to another, even more or less continuous travel around the world, are commonplace. What can modern sensibility, then, make of what is at least recorded as a tradition—that, when Jane Austen's father told his family they were to move to Bath, she fainted? And is it possible now to consider that this uprooting could have had a deleterious effect on her creative work?

The trauma of Jane Austen's move to Bath at twenty-five from her childhood home in Hampshire because of her father's retirement<sup>2</sup> has been described many times. Her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh writes that she was "exceedingly unhappy" when told the family would make this move<sup>3</sup> and that "during the temporary residences at Bath and Southampton she was only a sojourner in a strange land" until she was settled at Chawton in 1809 (84). Later biographers generally emphasize the trauma even more than he did. "The years 1800–1804," John Halperin writes, "were a period of upheaval and unsettlement in her life, and correspondingly little creativity" (119). He asserts that there "can be no doubt that she was unhappy. Indeed, she was to remain dissatisfied for a good many years. A decade of rootlessness was about to begin; this was a watershed event in her life" (124). Diedre La Faye repeats the tradition from family history that she fainted on hearing the news and surmises that the lack of letters from Jane to her sister Cassandra for December 1800 "suggests" that Cassandra destroyed them because they "gave vent to feelings of grief and perhaps even of resentment at being suddenly uprooted from her childhood home."<sup>4</sup> George Holbert Tucker calls her father's decision "one of most traumatic experiences of her life" and "a decision that caused her great unhappiness."<sup>5</sup> As Jon Spence puts it, the decision

would destroy with one stroke Jane's equanimity and with it her spirits and playfulness for she would lose her home of twenty-five

<sup>2</sup> In *The Life of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), John Halperin dismisses the tradition that "the Austens decided to move partly to put some distance between their daughters and the Digweed family" (125).

<sup>3</sup> James Edward Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1871; London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 59.

<sup>4</sup> Diedre La Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989), 113.

<sup>5</sup> George Holbert Tucker, *Jane Austen the Woman: Some Biographical Insights* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 185.

years and would have to live in a place she hated. To her Bath was a town with a population of rootless, shifting, idle, transient people. She knew what watering-place values were, and she knew what she would be according to those values. In Bath your identity was your situation in life, and she would be just another penniless spinster daughter of just another retired parson living on a reduced income.<sup>6</sup>

After this move, there would be little likelihood of her experiencing again something resembling what she had experienced with Tom Lefroy six years before. La Faye believes that romantic involvement with Lefroy, which had begun in December 1794 and had ended in mid-January 1795, "by no means . . . blighted her life" (A Family Record 87), but after the move other such romantic possibilities would have been less likely because she would now be in the humiliating position of a woman without money and without "bloom," put on display at Bath, an acknowledged place for such marketing, for any offer she might still be able to receive. True, a romance in summer of 1801 is imputed from a story told by Caroline Austen about a remark made many years later by Cassandra, but there is no other evidence this occurred, and, in any case, nothing came of it. And the marriage proposal she accepted from Harris Bigg-Wither, aged twenty-one, on December 2, 1802, was one she withdrew in the morning; Tucker compares him to the absurd Mr. Collins of *Pride and Prejudice* (Tucker 60–67). In conclusion, Park Honan's assessment of the disastrous effects of the move seems accurate: "In leaving Steventon," he writes, "she was being uprooted and crushed. . . . A loss may be a gain, but how does one happily endure without love, friendship, peace and delight?"<sup>7</sup>

Although she had three manuscripts that could be revised for publication, "she fell silent," Claire Tomalin tells us, and for "ten years produced almost nothing and not until she was nearly thirty-five . . . did she return to the working pattern of her early twenties."<sup>8</sup> But could this return after the trauma of her uprooting be without some detrimental consequence to her creative work? Academic criticism—as opposed to the popular opinion of the last two centuries—has come to agree with the judgment her nephew makes in his memoir and to favor the last three novels she published in her lifetime. Thus her "return" to her writing after settling once again in Hampshire is

<sup>6</sup> Jon Spence, *Becoming Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Hambleton and London, 2003), 131–33.

<sup>7</sup> Park Honan, *Jane Austen: Her Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 156.

<sup>8</sup> Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 167.



seen as a kind of victory.<sup>9</sup> For example, John Wiltshire asserts that it “was at Chawton that Jane Austen . . . found the conditions that fostered the writing of three of her greatest novels . . . which display a more intensified sense of the influence of place and environment on personality and action, a broader and more thoughtful social critique, and a much greater power of imagining her figures within the social and geographical spaces they inhabit”<sup>10</sup> than we see in the three novels drafted before 1801. In that case, if the move destroyed “her spirits and playfulness,” qualities represented in *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and even *Northanger Abbey*, then it would only have destroyed what was not necessary to her greatest artistic achievement and perhaps even a hindrance to it. The move to Bath would not, in a sense, have been such a disaster after all. Only her life (as such thinking would go) would have been “crushed”—but not her art.

There is, however, a problem in speaking of two distinct “waves” of her creativity at all, one supposedly occurring before her move and one after being settled almost nine years later at Chawton. The chronology of her process of writing is not clear. “Of enduring significance for how critics have viewed Austen’s creative life,” argues Kathryn Sutherland, has been JEAL’s [James Edward Austen-Leigh’s] . . . misleading suggestion that the six novels were products of two distinct and matching creative periods—roughly Austen’s early twenties and her late thirties—and that these two periods were divided by a largely fallow interlude of around eight years.”<sup>11</sup> After all, the three novels of the putative first period were not published until the putative second period and *Northanger Abbey* even after that. Sutherland makes a case that her creative work was a long, continuous process involving periods of gestation, circulation of manuscripts within the family circle, and revision. Nevertheless, it remains obvious that the authorial voice of *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* has changed from the voice that can speak in *Sense and Sensibility* unabashedly of Willoughby’s “manly beauty” and, of Marianne, “the confusion which crimsoned over her face, on his lifting her up” and carrying her in his arms.<sup>12</sup> Just as Cassandra’s memorandum of the composition

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, what was once her least liked novel, *Mansfield Park*, containing the heroine once least appealing to readers, Fanny Price, seems to have become a critical favorite.

<sup>10</sup> John Wiltshire “*Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 58.

<sup>11</sup> Kathryn Sutherland, “Chronology of Composition and Publication,” in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 36.

of the six published novels suggests, before the move that had "crushed" her Jane Austen must have *conceived* of the possibility of a naïve, warm-blooded female life—whether approved of or not according to the author's editorial position—while *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* hardly allow such a possibility, not even in the case of Emma, who may be confused but not by strong bodily impulses.

Moreover, the novelist and her trauma cannot be so easily separated from the experiences of the characters of her novels as would be allowed by a denial that there are in any meaningful sense two "waves" of her work, separated by a long period, and by the implicit assertion of an uninterrupted and autonomous creative process aloof, as it were, from the effect of outside circumstances. The reaction Jane Austen herself felt against leaving her Hampshire home was very like that of Marianne, rather than of Elinor, when, early in *Sense and Sensibility*, those two characters lose their home. As also has certainly been observed before, the author resembles Marianne in the writers that she liked<sup>13</sup> and makes the same choice of favorite poet, William Cowper,<sup>14</sup> who highly values just what Marianne feels has been taken from her by the move from Norland Park. "Domestic happiness," he exclaims in Book III of *The Task* ("The Garden"), "thou only bliss/ Of Paradise that has survived the fall."<sup>15</sup> He knows that the pastoral ideal was only a dream, as certainly did Jane Austen with her awareness of Crabbe's<sup>16</sup> bitter view of the rural life of the poor, if Marianne does not know it, but, still, he envies the age that "favor'd such a dream" (479) and asserts that "I never fram'd a wish, or form'd a plan,/ That flatter'd me with hopes of earthly bliss/But there I laid the scene" (484).

The sensibility of Cowper and Marianne—a psycho/physiological condition that is absent in the novels drafted by Jane Austen after the move to Bath—has asocial—and therefore socially critical—implications. If, for Cowper neither "business, crowds/ Nor habits of luxurious city life" can quite "quench" or "abate" an inborn "love of Nature's works" (485), it seems that Marianne and Willoughby can never forget their love for each other, based in their shared sensibility. According to Susan Manning, Jane Austen's novel

<sup>13</sup> "Austen praises Cowper and Scott in her letters, as well as Gilpin's writings on the picturesque" (Auerbach, 104).

<sup>14</sup> That Cowper was Jane Austen's favorite poet we know from her brother Henry Austen's memoir prefixed to *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in 1818. See "Biographical Notice" in Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Brian Spiller, ed., *Cowper: Verse and Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

<sup>16</sup> For a description of Jane Austen's interest in Crabbe see George Holbert Tucker, *Jane Austen: The Woman* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 146–48.

shows sensibility not as it is for Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1789) or Hannah More in *Sensibility: A Poetical Epistle* (1782) as the “enabler of sociability” but as a bodily and asocial response in human beings. No wonder, then, as Manning observes, “Wollstonecraft castigated its pernicious effect on women’s education in *Civil Society*” because it tends “to make women the creatures of sensation . . . and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain in order to render a rational creature useful to others.”<sup>17</sup> But even if the sensibility Marianne represents undermines larger social purposes and the ability for a woman to be, in Wollstonecraft’s words, “a rational creature useful to others,” it can still evoke response in others who observe it at first hand. As Cowper writes,

The heart is hard in nature, and unfit  
For human fellowship, as being void  
Of sympathy, and therefore dead alike  
To love and friendship both, that is not pleased  
With sight of animals enjoying life,  
Nor feels their happiness augment his own. (523)

What we see in Marianne is, in fact, such a young animal enjoying life—until the possibilities for that life are withdrawn from her—and then we see a young animal suffering. Robert Demaria, Jr.’s, observation that Cowper’s poetry reflects “his frightening identification . . . with the lives of caged animals or the victims of disaster or oppression”<sup>18</sup> is consonant with the appreciation of the poet by Marianne and by Jane Austen herself. Such animal suffering will be muted into resignation in the novels drafted almost a decade after their author was made to leave her Hampshire home.

The sight of the animal suffering of Marianne explains why there have been so many powerful cries of pain from naïve readers on witnessing it and why Mark Honan calls this novel “the darkest of all Jane Austen’s comedies” (283). Honan, who believes that Jane Austen in fact fell “deeply in love” with Tom Lefroy (107), and asserts that from this experience and its aftermath she learned “about the real anguish of a Marianne Dashwood” (111), indicates Marianne’s powerful function in the novel. Honan calls Marianne “one of

<sup>17</sup> Susan Manning, “Sensibility,” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature: 1740–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 90.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Demaria, Jr., ed., *British Literature 1640–1789: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 1064.

the most interesting and appealing characters in English fiction" (279) and maintains in five pages of commentary, briefly summarized here, that there is

a poignancy about Marianne that is deep enough to criticize not only society but all adulthood. No young person in fiction, perhaps, has reached maturity less easily. . . . When at the ball she goes to Willoughby and asks, 'Will you not shake hands with me?' society seems condemned, and when she hands over to her sister Willoughby's heartless letter and, "covering her face with a handkerchief almost screamed in agony", she reduces the rational Elinor to tears. . . . What her story deeply illustrates is how society preys on the inexperienced, naïve, feeling heart of a genuine person who is physically as well as mentally vulnerable, and very palpably of flesh. In focus . . . is the extreme narrowness of a young woman's chances in a closed-in society ruled by money, social climbing, hypocrisy. (280–85)

But sensibility is not simply a bodily response itself unmediated by ideals or ideology; the very name Marianne may well have been chosen to evoke the nickname of the French Republic.<sup>19</sup> Powerful as Marianne's sufferings are, undercutting of commonplace moralistic notions—in spite of what Jane Austen's official editorial views are supposed to be—probably occurs with more illuminative consequence in *Pride and Prejudice* than in *Sense and Sensibility*—not by means of tears but by means of the fun-loving of Lydia Bennett, whose sexual response to the attractive young male is not mediated and diluted by ideals of sensibility. Indeed, she is apparently unmoved by the sights of nature and has none of the regrets at leaving the home of her childhood that Marianne or Jane Austen had because Lydia is incurably addicted to selfish pleasures—especially the pleasures she can have with attractive men. She resembles the Lady Susan of the early Jane Austen manuscript, who serves to illuminate the dullness of the world in which she operates, but without Lady Susan's Choldero de Laclos-like cruelty and calculation. Lydia, who is not calculating and therefore not inhibited enough to be a Lady Susan, is introduced in the novel as "a stout, well-grown girl of fifteen, with a fine complexion and good-humored countenance; a favorite with her mother, whose affection had brought her into public at an early age. She

<sup>19</sup> Emily Auerbach, *Searching for Jane Austen* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 104.

had high animal spirits, and a sort of natural self-consequence, which the attention of the officers, to whom her uncle's good dinners and her own easy manners recommended her, had increased into assurance."<sup>20</sup> Lydia is, as both the author and Elizabeth see her, "self-willed and careless" (163). She is given only one chapter where she is really present (Volume II, Chapter XVI), and only one extended speech. The good times she has with Wickham, which are only very vaguely reported to the reader, are kept far away from the scenes of the main action of the novel, and Jane Austen assures us at the end that Wickham in time grows "indifferent" to Lydia, and she to him. The author evidently tries hard to minimize the effect of Lydia, even to quarantine her in the novel, and a careful textual study could, perhaps, suggest how much the presence of Lydia in earlier drafts had been "lopt and cropped," as the author put it, to make the novel ready for publication years after its conception. But in any case, in contrast to Lydia's fun-sexuality, what goes on between Elizabeth and Darcy is, until after the sight of his Pemberley estate, as Scott was first to remark, very cool or, in its outcome, obvious wish-fulfillment according to the pattern of a fairy-tale. As for the outcome for Lydia, who will "at sixteen, be the most determined flirt that ever made herself and her family ridiculous," "absolutely uncontrouled," as Elizabeth complains to their father, there is no reason to think she would not attract another handsome man in a red coat after her excitement over Wickham dies down—or that she ever stops enjoying herself in the ways the reader has already been allowed to glimpse. It is Elizabeth who would like Lydia to have to acknowledge the laws of the world, but Lydia never does. But it is the fun-loving of Lydia that illuminates that world and its laws in which a young woman with "high animal spirits" must live—a "closed-in society ruled by money, social climbing and hypocrisy," to borrow Honan's words; Lydia is a kind of Falstaff, whose appetites and love of good times illuminate the madness of the world in which the serious characters are engaged. And, even if she disapproves of her, Jane Austen could still have some Lydia not entirely stifled or perverted in herself before the move in 1801. To put all this another way: Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice* shows us what the world or worlds represented in the oeuvre of Jane Austen say must be extirpated in women even for the sake even of their mere survival.

Wayne Burns argues that what makes novels great is just this kind of undercutting and illumination that the character of Lydia provides. He calls

<sup>20</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 33.

the bodily voice that gives the lies to quixotic ideals the "panzaic" voice, after Sancho Panza. Of course, a "panzaic" reading will not agree with any of the commodified views of the work and life of Jane Austen produced according to cultural processes Kathryn Sutherland has described at length.<sup>21</sup> Such a reading that would see Marianne and Lydia as undermining idealistic heroes and heroines presents itself as more than just one cultural expression or "textual life" among many possibilities, for it would undercut *all* cultural ideals and reveal them as disciplines imposed on human beings. Burns himself, in the concluding sentence of Part One of his essay *The Panzaic Principle*, includes Lydia Bennett—and even Charlotte Lucas, who, after all, realistically assesses what marriage can be worth to her, to the shock of the idealistic Elizabeth—as Sancho Panza-like characters who undercut the idealistic pretensions of the Don Quixotes of their respective novels, as Thackeray's Becky Sharpe and Hardy's Arabella do in theirs.<sup>22</sup>

But in the novels Jane Austen drafted years after her devastating move to Bath, the self-discipline of "religion," "reason," and "constant employment," recommended by a supposedly reformed Marianne for herself to suppress her feelings for Willoughby (305), seem able to triumph with little question, especially in *Persuasion*, because there is not as much in those novels that can challenge them as there is in the three novels drafted before 1801. The sensitive erotic response of Marianne or the less poeticized fun-sexuality of Lydia is no longer present in the women in *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, or *Persuasion*. A hint of "spirits and playfulness" in a young woman remains in the last smile we see made by Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*—herself uprooted like Fanny Price—but, according to Edmund Bertram in that novel, it is "a smile ill-suited to the conversation that had passed, a saucy playful smile, seeming to invite, in order to subdue me"<sup>23</sup>—and he is immune to it. Even Emma, in spite of her wit, youth, and wealth, lacks emotional-bodily vibrancy in comparison to the young females of the "first wave" of novels; in this novel, old, impoverished Miss Bates is raised to the height of Christian ideal. As a little girl, Emma had a "saucy smile" for Knightly when she would provoke him, already a grown man, to correct her—such is the sado/masochistic pattern for their relationship that runs throughout the novel.

<sup>21</sup> Kathryn Sutherland, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), *passim*.

<sup>22</sup> Wayne Burns, *The Panzaic Principle, Parts I & II* (Vancouver: Pendejo Press, n.d.), 25.

<sup>23</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 419.

After Jane Austen's move to Bath, the dimension of critique of the order of things that can be evoked by the names of Marianne, Willoughby, Wickham and Lydia—or even Isabella Thorpe or Charlotte Lucas—is lost. The Bertram sisters of *Mansfield Park* are not given enough voice and presence or perhaps credibility in their behavior to carry on effectively the opposition to the ideals of their author—ideals which triumph as the author as human being is “crushed.” “Did her feelings resemble those of Marianne Dashwood upon leaving Norland,” Halperin asks about the author and her move to Bath, “or those of Anne Elliot upon leaving Kellynch?” (124). There is a difference between the reactions of these two characters, and, by all accounts, the author's own feelings at the time of the move resembled Marianne's more than they did the sad but resigned Anne's. Anne Elliot's body is deadened, except for her quiet and presumably meritorious suffering, and therefore offers little contrast to the others around her in a deadened world. But criticism from the standpoint of the heart-stirred or fun-loving young woman is less malleable to whatever idealism is prevailing than is the criticism by sense and reason, notoriously susceptible to apologizing for the order of things. Anne Elliot in the end of *Persuasion* actually says she had been *right* to turn down Wentworth eight and a half years before. And revaluation of the novels of the “second wave,” which in effect ignores what has been dropped out from the novels of the “first wave,” implies and/or supports Anne Eliot's view. It supports the view, the *world* view, that suffering in general and erotic suppression in particular is good, especially for women—for it results, in the case of Jane Austen, in what is now stamped a superior creative production.