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JANE AUSTEN

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by
B. C. SOUTHAM

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General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side, we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in *The Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly-productive and lengthily-reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality.

For writers of the eighteenth century and earlier, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

the manners of their time, or reflecting the special taste of their time, they cease to please when those manners pass away or when that taste alters; but such as contain in their characters or their scenes either the essence of truth or of poetical beauty will not quickly perish. The *Vicar of Wakefield* is still universally read. Scott's romances are recovering the place which a reaction from excessive popularity at one time forfeited for them; and Jane Austen's works,—though not devoured by young ladies of our period with the same greediness as the new stories just come from Mudie's,—are still taken down by 'the girls' from the maternal shelf, when there is nothing else to be had, and are read,—by them,—with tranquil interest. But they are pondered over with most attention and most appreciation by men of thought and literary education.

44. Richard Simpson on Jane Austen

1870

Unsigned review of the *Memoir*, *North British Review* (April 1870), lii, 129–52.

Simpson (1820–76) was a Shakespearian scholar and writer on Roman Catholic matters, a Catholic himself. Nominally a review of the *Memoir*, the article is one of the high points in the understanding of Jane Austen (see Introduction, pp. 2–31).

Although Miss Austen has left a great name in literature, she never belonged to the literary world. Her gallery of portraits was not like that of Miss Burney, selected from a motley crowd of artists and authors, noble patrons and plebeian listeners, which frequented a father's concerts or drawing-rooms, or was gradually drawn within the net of literary correspondence and acquaintance. She never aspired higher than to paint a system of four or five families revolving round a centre of attraction in a country mansion, or a lodging at Bath, or a house in a country town. This was, indeed, the only society she knew. Her name therefore, though great in a history of literature, counts for nothing in the history of men of letters. She stood by herself, and not only may but must be studied apart from them. Not they, but their books, influenced her—their writings, not their company and conversation. She belongs to them as a student and follower: as a model for them to follow, her influence only began to be felt after her death. During her life she neither belonged to their order nor drew inspiration from their society. She was born in 1775 at the rural parsonage of Steventon, where she lived nearly a quarter of a century. Before she was sixteen she wrote many tales, nonsensical but spirited. After that age, she practised herself in burlesquing the silly romances of the period. She wrote *Pride and Prejudice* when she was twenty-one, *Sense and Sensibility* when she was twenty-two, and *Northanger Abbey* when she was twenty-four. She then, on the death of her father, removed to Bath and Southampton, the only places where she had experience of urban society; and there she wrote nothing. Her second period of literary activity began

characters as developed in the stories. It is only in Collins and in Elton that the official self-consciousness of the clergyman is strongly brought out, and in each case as a foil to show off some weak fibre in the mind or the character. We should rather examine a natural than an artificial set of characters if we wish to find out her subtle means of discriminating one from another. Macaulay declares that they are so subtle as to defy analysis. But Miss Austen is so pellucid a writer, her whole soul displays itself in so kindly and unreserved a way, that if it is ever possible to analyse an artistic synthesis into its first elements it should be so in her case. Her biographer refers to her fools as a class of characters in delineating which she has quite caught the knack of Shakespeare. It is a natural class, better defined than most natural classes are, and less difficult to analyse. It ought therefore to serve very well to test her manner of working. In reality her fools are not more simple than her other characters. Her wisest personages have some dash of folly in them, and her least wise have something to love. And there is a collection of absurd persons in her *stultifera navis*,¹ quite sufficient to make her fortune as a humourist. She seems to have considered folly to consist in two separate qualities: first, a thorough weakness either of will or intellect, an emptiness or irrelevancy of thought, such as to render it impossible to know what the person would think of any given subject, or how he would act under it; and often, secondly, in addition to this, fixed ideas on a few subjects, giving the whole tone to the person's thoughts so far as he thinks at all, and constituting the ground of the few positive judgments arrived at, even in subject-matter to which the ideas in question are scarcely related. The novels do not give a single instance of the fool simple in all the purity of its idea. Mrs. Palmer, in *Sense and Sensibility*, comes the nearest to it, but in her case her thorough womanly good-nature gives a solid nucleus to a character which in order to be perfect ought to have only *pepo loco cordis*, a pumpkin for a heart. Intellectually however she is a nullity; and Miss Austen's method of positively representing a mere negative is ingenious and happy. It is one solution of the great problem of art, the universal form of which is, how to represent the realities of the natural scale in the imitations of the artificial scale—how to imitate the song of birds on the gamut of the pianoforte, or the coloured lights of nature with the unluminous colours of the palette. Mrs. Palmer's nullity is represented first by her total want of intellectual discrimination. Her good-nature furnishes her with a perpetual smile; and any event, any word, that

¹ 'Ship of fools'.

should cause either pain or pleasure to a person of sense, has no other effect upon her than to broaden the smile into a laugh. When she talks, her entire want of discrimination is shown in her failure to see the contradiction of contradictories. Her indignant speech about Willoughby is a typical utterance:—'She was determined to drop his acquaintance immediately, and she was very thankful that she had never been acquainted with him at all. She wished with all her heart that Combe Magna [Willoughby's place] was not so near Cleveland [her husband's], but it did not signify, for it was a great deal too far off to visit; she hated him so much that she was resolved never to mention his name again, and she should tell everybody she saw how good-for-nothing he was.' There are foolish sayings of which a clever man might be proud; if any real Mrs. Palmer could in fact string together contradictions so readily she would soon lose her character as a mere simpleton. The method does not make Mrs. Palmer look so thoroughly inane as she is intended to be. Mr. Frank Matthews was once playing Bottom the weaver, and in the speech 'ear hath not seen, eye hath not heard,' etc., by some inadvertence put the words right, and then by a greater inadvertence corrected himself, and put the words wrong. The effect was ludicrous—a natural fool finding it much more unnatural to be foolish than wise, and painfully retracing his steps when he had inadvertently followed common sense. Something of the same effect of want of naturalness attends the elaborate self-contradictions of Mrs. Palmer. In the later novel, *Emma*, where perhaps Miss Austen perfects her processes for painting humourous portraits, the negative fool is much better represented in Miss Bates. Miss Bates has enough of womanly kindness and other qualities to make her a real living person, even a good Christian woman. But intellectually she is a negative fool. She has not mind enough to fall into contradictions. There is a certain logical sequence and association between two contradictories, which it requires mind to discover: Miss Bates's fluent talk only requires memory. She cannot distinguish the relations between things. If she is standing in a particular posture when she hears a piece of news, her posture becomes at once a part of the event which it is her duty to hand down to tradition: 'Where could you possibly hear it? For it is not five minutes since I received Mrs. Cole's note—no, it cannot be more than five—or at least ten—for I had got my bonnet and spencer on just ready to come out—I was only gone down to speak to Patty again about the pork—Jane was standing in the passage—were you not, Jane?—for my mother was so afraid that we had not any salting-pan large enough,'