

JANE AUSTEN

A French Appreciation
by Léonie Villard

with

A New Study of Jane Austen
by R. Brimley Johnson

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A French Appreciation

LÉONIE VILLARD

Translated by

VERONICA LUCAS

(from “*Jane Austen: sa vie et son œuvre*”)

With

A New Study of Jane Austen
(interpreted through “*Love and Friendship*”)

R. BRIMLEY JOHNSON

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NEW STUDY OF JANE AUSTEN

BY

BRIMLEY JOHNSON

CHAPTER I

THE BIRTH OF GENIUS

IN my judgment the publication of that amazing riot of laughter, which is *Love and Friendship*, goes far to prove (what I always suspected to be the case) that the foundations of Jane Austen's genius were *not* realistic, but were built upon a close study of the conventions of romance. This priceless sheaf of imperishable delight does not directly lift the veil. There is in it no sensational revelation concerning the most reserved personality who ever won the homage of mankind. Only we know to-day, what should never have been in doubt, that beneath the fine balance and swift quiet of *Pride and Prejudice* there beat an untamed joy in glorious nonsense and the Shakespeare laugh.

Comparing this palace of marble wit—not built for strangers' eyes—with the published novels, we can detect the Birth, and the Growth, of her immortal art : as it developed from intellectual and witty criticism of fiction to the loving observation of human nature and the creation of *real* character. We can distinguish, also, between the fiction-types which she left unaltered (*i.e.*, inhuman) among her own creations ; and thereby disprove the charge of cynicism against her work. We can see how each of the novels has modified, more and more as they matured, the method and manner of her art, which, nevertheless, maintained its structure and its foundations to the last.

CHAPTER II

JANE AUSTEN—BOOK-LOVER

THERE have been two assumptions always made about Jane Austen—the foundation from which all criticism or appreciation have been established :—

1. That she was exceptionally modern in her realism ; an observer and showman, whose work was based on the study of human nature.

2. That no writer of equal genius ever owed so little to her predecessors ; knew or cared so little about books.

I believe that both assumptions are fundamentally untrue.

She wrote books because she loved books, and for no other reason. She did not study human nature, but loved men and women ; and her realism sprang from loyalty to her friends.

We say that English realism began with Samuel Richardson ; and this is, practically, correct. But his realism was not modern : that is, it did not mean that he worked only from life, was inspired by the determination to reveal human nature, was even primarily concerned with telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

It meant that, as a printer and bookseller, he had lived in a world of books, and, by some strange kink in his stiff and pedantic little mind, happened to notice

that heroes and heroines were not very much like real life. They were more aristocratic, too, than anyone he knew well; and, for these reasons, far less interesting than his own friends.

Therefore, having a pretty knack of using his pen, the good man set about solemnly *correcting* the novel, by comparing it with the life he knew and the characters he saw around him. His object was to improve the materials of his trade, not—primarily or even consciously—to tell the truth about life and men. Above all, being a moral man, he wrote with a purpose, but not for a purpose. He merely used his observation as a tool for the perfection of his art.

Defoe, in fact, is far nearer the moderns as a realist; but his methods have not taken root in English literature, and we certainly have no school of Defoe realism.

It is improbable that Richardson was influenced, even unconsciously, by the Father of the English novel; though *Pamela* might have kept his tales in the kitchen. On the other hand, Richardson's *corrective* realism, the deliberate sobering of romance, proved so instantly pleasing to English taste as to become practically universal. There is no need to labour the point of priority or influence between the authors of *Clarissa* and *Tom Jones*, with Tobias Smollet more or less behind both. The fact of historical importance is that this process of humanising the characters of fiction on the approved lines of dramatic story-telling, which yet remained a romance, continued to fill the libraries for many a year: certainly long after the days of Jane Austen.

Charlotte Brontë's fiery soul drove her to utter burning words on certain aspects of the "Woman's question"; George Eliot's varied religious experience

made her a preacher of ethics ; Maria Edgeworth's stepmother prompted her to insert the educational pill. But the English novel remained substantially a work of art, and never pretended to be a "human document."

While all admit the artistry of Jane Austen's style, there has always been a natural, though not entirely wise, tendency to regard her as, with equal folly, men once looked on Shakespeare—

Whose fruitful genius, happy wit,
Was framed and finisht at a lucky hit,
The pride of Nature, and the shame of Schools,
Born to create, and not to learn from Rules ;

to pity her, or to marvel at her, for the intellectual starvation of her life ; and, finally, to estimate her work exclusively as a faithful and humorous picture, *an observation*, of her own circle in her own day. The confusion, or the mistake, has come from a failure to distinguish between criticism and taste. Whatever her family biographers may try to prove, Jane Austen was *not* a well-read woman—in the modern sense ; nor a professional woman of letters like George Eliot. She never studied literature as such ; and, in fact, lightly expressed her scorn of those who did ; pointing her satire through Mary Bennett.

But, on the other hand, she lived for and among books, far more than Fanny Burney or Charlotte Brontë : to a large extent she even judged people in real life by their literary tastes. We read in one of her most delightful letters, dated September, 1796, of a certain Miss Fletcher : " There are two traits in her character which are pleasing—namely, she admires *Camilla*, and drinks no cream in her tea."

The Library at Pemberley had been " the work of many generations," and Mr. Darcy was " always buying

books." Ellinor's spirited defence of Edward's "reading aloud," against the romantic derision of her rapturous sister, is the defence of a book-lover. She "had heard his opinion on subjects of literature and taste," and could pronounce that "his mind was well-informed, his enjoyment of books exceedingly great, his imagination lively, his observation just and correct, and his taste delicate and pure."

But Marianne "*would* give him Cowper," and how could she "hear those beautiful lines, which had frequently almost driven her wild, pronounced with such impenetrable calmness, such dreadful indifference!" "It would have broke *my* heart, had I loved him, to hear him read with so little sensibility."

Though Brandon was over thirty, he "had read, and had a thinking mind"; while Marianne's first test of Willoughby was "to question him on the subject of books, when her favourite authors were brought forward and dwelt upon with rapturous delight . . . Their taste was strikingly alike. The same books, the same passages, were idolized by each . . . He read with all the sensibility and spirit which Edward had unfortunately wanted."

But, alas—they "never finished Hamlet"; and she would "read nothing but what they had been used to read together."

Had she a fortune, Marianne would buy "books!—Thomson, Cowper, Scott—she would buy them all over and over again; she would buy up every copy to prevent their falling into unworthy hands; and would have every book that tells her how to admire an old twisted tree—and the bulk of her fortune would be laid out in annuities on the authors or their heirs."

Benwick's tastes were similar. He had "a tolerable collection of well-bound volumes . . . considerable taste

in reading, though principally in Poetry," talked always "of Mr. Scott and Lord Byron," and even "turned Louisa into a person of literary taste." It had been: "Give him a book, and he will read all day"—mourning for *one* young lady; then he "sat at Louisa's elbow, reading verses, or whispering to her, all day long."

Anne, indeed, "ventured to hope that he did not always read only poetry . . . it was the misfortune of poetry to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely . . . the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly." He had not only read, but "repeated, with tremulous feeling, various lines that imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness"; and she "had the hope of being of real use to him in some suggestions as to the duty and benefit of struggling against affliction, which had naturally grown out of their conversation."

Anne herself was supposed in the family to have refused Charles Musgrove because "he might not be learned and bookish enough," and she herself had "only knowledge enough of the language to translate at sight" certain "inverted, curtailed Italian lines into clear, comprehensible, elegant English."

From "fifteen to seventeen" Catherine Morland "read all such books as heroines must read"; and if Fanny Price learnt French and History from Miss Lee, it was the beloved Edmund who "recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment."

The volatile Isabella devoured books—when she "had heard" that "something very shocking indeed" had "come out in London," from that "particular friend of hers," Miss Andrews, "one of the sweetest

creatures in the world," though there *was* "something amazingly insipid about her." While Henry Tilney himself was "proud" when he reflected upon the zeal with which he broke the "promise he made of reading" Udolpho aloud to his sister, refusing to wait "only five minutes," stealing "her own copy, particularly her own," and "finishing it in two days, his hair standing on end the whole time."

How much scorn we find, again, for those who do not love their book. Miss Bingley, you may remember, was easily "exhausted by the attempt to be amused with her own book, which she had only chosen because it was the second volume of Darcy's." Emma "supposes" that Mr. Martin "is not a man of information beyond the line of his own business. He does not read." But Harriet believes he "had read a good deal: the Agricultural Reports, and some other books that lay in one of the window-seats—but he reads all *them* to himself. But sometimes, of an evening, before we went to cards, he would read something aloud out of the 'Elegant Extracts,' very entertaining, and I know he has read the 'Vicar of Wakefield.' He never read the 'Romance of the Forest' nor the 'Children of the Abbey.'"

The poor man was so "busy" he quite "forgot" them—"He was a great deal too full of the market to think of anything else . . . just as it should be . . . What has he to do with books . . . *so very clownish, so totally without air!*"

We have already admired poor Willoughby's refined taste; and Henry Crawford's culture was far beyond reproach. Though "he did not think he had had a volume of Shakespeare in his hand since he was fifteen," he could "fall into the flow of his meaning immediately"; he "gave the sense," and was "truly dramatic."

“ To *good* reading ” Fanny had been long used ; her uncle read well, her cousins all, Edmund very well, but in Mr. Crawford’s reading there was a variety of excellence beyond what she had ever met with. The King, the Queen, Buckingham, Wolsey, Cromwell, all were given in turn ; for with the happiest knack, the happiest power of jumping and guessing, he could always alight at will on the best scene, the best speeches of each ; and whether it were dignity or pride, or tenderness or remorse, or whatever were to be expressed, he could do it with equal beauty.” His conduct, indeed, was open to criticism ; but he and Fanny *had* “ moral and literary tastes in common.”

Finally we have Miss Austen’s own spirited defence of novel-writing (and reading) from the professional point of view : which takes two forms :—

“ You never read novels, I dare say,” remarked the innocent Catherine to the “ great ” and “ wise ” Henry Tilney—“ because they are not clever enough for you ; gentlemen read better books.” But Henry declares with emphasis that, on the other hand, “ the person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid.”

Catherine is “ very glad to hear it. But I really thought before young men despised novels amazingly.”

“ It is *amazingly* ; it may well suggest *amazement* if they do, for they read nearly as many as women. I, myself, have read hundreds and hundreds. Do not imagine that you can cope with me in a knowledge of Julius and Louisas. If we proceed to particulars and engage in the never-ceasing enquiry of ‘ Have you read this ? ’ and ‘ Have you read that ? ’ I shall soon leave you far behind.”

Already, in one of her own rare outbursts of personal opinion, Jane Austen had provided her heroine with

an excuse for shutting herself up on a "rainy morning" to read novels with her best friend :—

Yes, novels ; for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom, so common with novel-writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances to the number of which they are themselves adding ; joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its pages with disgust. Alas ! if the heroine of one novel be not patronised by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard ? I cannot approve it. Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans. Let us not desert one another ; we are an injured body. *Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than any other literary corporation in the world*, no species of composition has been so much decried.* From pride, ignorance, or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers ; and 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 eulogized by a thousand pens,† there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances *which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them*. 'I am no novel-reader ; I seldom look into novels ; do not imagine that I often read novels ; it is really very well for a novel.' Such is the common cant. 'And what are you reading, Miss —— ?' 'Oh ! it is only a novel !' replies the young lady ; while she lays down her

* So says Fanny Burney :—"In the republic of letters, there is no member of such inferior rank, or who is so much disdained by his brethren of the quill, as the humble novelist," and Robert Bage remarked, in *Hermesprong*, that "novels are now pretty generally considered as the lowest of all human productions."

† Mary, we know, was always teasing her sisters with "some new extracts to admire, and some new observations of *threadbare* morality to listen to." She borrowed them, largely, from Evelina's "dearest of guardians," Mr. Villars !

book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. '*It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda*' ; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language. Now, had the same young lady been engaged with a volume of the 'Spectator,' instead of such a work, how proudly could she have produced the book, and told its name ! though the chances must be against her being occupied by any part of that voluminous publication, of which either the matter or manner would not disgust a young person of taste ; the substance of its papers so often consisting in the statement of improbable circumstances, *unnatural characters*, and topics of conversation, *which no longer concern anyone living* ; and their language, too, frequently so coarse as to give no very favourable idea of the age that could endure it.

In every particular, the published novels confirm her familiarity with the fictions of the day and her delight therein ; her determination to satirise them with friendly wit and, at the same time, to make her own work more just and true to real life.

Northanger Abbey was built out of books ; in every character, situation and turn of phrase—Mrs. Radcliffe, Fanny Burney and a host of "evergreen follies" from the Library. *Sense and Sensibility* is a warm-hearted study of an old-world, *literary*, female grace. I worked out years ago a fairly complete summary of the numerous echoes from Fanny Burney in all her books—in addition to the title of *Pride and Prejudice* and its close parallelism to *Cecilia*.

Despite the emotional charm and the occasional matchless humour of her *Letters*, no biographical record of Jane Austen has ever satisfied her most devout admirers. But they confirm beyond all possible dispute both sides of my argument as to her attitude about books.

There is nowhere any attempt at serious criticism or any pretension to taste for serious literature :— “ Ladies who read those enormous great stupid thick quarto volumes which one always sees in the breakfast parlour there must be acquainted with everything in the world. I detest a quarto. Capt. Pasley’s book is too good for their Society. They will not understand a man who condenses his thoughts into an octavo.” (To Cassandra, February, 1813.)

And when a certain Mrs. Martin indulged the boast that *her* Library would “ *not* consist only of novels, but of every kind of literature,” Jane writes, “ She might have spared this pretension to *our* family who are great novel-readers, and not ashamed of being so.”

On the other hand, her eager enjoyment in every kind of story appears again and again, with reference to long-forgotten writers and books ; and there is more than one allusion to the family’s own energy in securing an abundant supply of “ something to read ”—“ The Miss Sibleys want to establish a Book Society in their side of the country like ours. What can be a stronger proof of that superiority in ours over the Manytown and Steventon Society, which I have always foreseen and felt ? No emulation of the kind was ever inspired by *their* proceedings ; no such wish of the Miss Sibleys was ever heard in the many years of that Society’s existence. And what are their Biglands and their Barrows, their Macartneys and their Mackenzies to Captain Pasley’s *Essay on the Military Police of the British Empire* and *The Rejected Addresses* ? ” (To Cassandra, January, 1813.)

CHAPTER III

LIFE MUST CORRECT ROMANCE

RICHARDSON plainly states the *corrective* and improving aim of his realism. Being invited by certain "professional" friends to write "a little book of familiar letters on the useful concerns of common life," it occurred to him that he could improve upon the hint. By publishing a natural *story* "he might introduce a new species of writing that might possibly turn young people into a course of reading different from *the pomp and parade of romance-writing*, and, *dismissing the improbable and marvellous, with which novels generally abound*, might tend to promote the cause of religion and virtue."

Scott contends that the "effort at introducing actual *novelty* is more likely to produce monsters than models of composition." In the Preface to Fanny Burney's *Evelina* we read: "*To draw characters from nature, and to mark the manners of the times, is the attempted plan of the following letters.*"

Other writers, besides Jane Austen, had commented freely upon the unlikeness of fiction to real life—as a subject of amusement or regret.

The anonymous author of the *Pursuits of Literature* remarked that "though all of them are ingenious ladies, yet they are too frequently whining and frisking

in novels, till our girls' heads turn wild with *impossible* adventures."

Hannah More, with that easy sprightliness that so unexpectedly distinguished her private letters, has a charming descriptive passage (in *The Two Wealthy Farmers*) of "A Plain Man on his Daughter's Favourite Novels":—

I could make neither head nor tail of it; it was neither fish, flesh, nor good-red-herring; it was all about my Lord, and Sir Harry, and the Captain. But I never met with such nonsensical fellows in my life. Their talk was *no more like* that of my old landlord, who was a lord, you know, nor the captain of our fencibles, *than chalk is like cheese*. I was fairly taken in at first, and began to think I had got hold of a godly book; for there was a deal about hope and despair, and death, and heaven, and angels, and torments, and everlasting happiness. But when I got a little on, I found there was no meaning in all these words, or if any it was a bad meaning. Eternal misery, perhaps, only meant a moment's disappointment about a bit of a letter; and everlasting happiness meant two people talking nonsense together for five minutes. In short, *I never met with such a pack of lies*. The people talk such wild gibberish as no folks in their sober senses ever did talk; and *the things that happen to them are not like the things that ever happen to me or any of my acquaintance*. They are at home one minute, and beyond the sea the next; beggars to-day, and lords to-morrow; waiting-maids in the morning and duchesses at night. Nothing happens in a natural gradual way, as it does at home; they grow rich by the stroke of a wand, and poor by the magic of a word; the disinherited orphan of this hour is the overgrown heir of the next; now a bride and bridegroom turn out to be a brother and sister, and the brother and sister prove to be no relations at all. . . . Then there is another thing *which I never meet with in real life*. We think it pretty well, you know, if one has got one thing, and another has got another. I will tell you how I mean. You are reckoned sensible, one person is learned, the squire is rich, I am rather generous, one of your daughters is pretty, and both mine are genteel. But in these books (except here and there one whom they make worse than Satan

himself), every man and woman's child of them are all wise, and witty, and generous, and rich, and handsome, and genteel, and all to the last degree. Nobody is middling, or good in one thing and bad in another, like my live acquaintance ; but it is all up to the skies or down to the dirt.

In *Love and Friendship* we find Sir Edward enraged by the "noble manliness of his son's reply"—
"Where, Edward, in the name of wonder (said he) did you pick up this unmeaning gibberish? *You have been studying novels, I suspect.*"

But it is Henry Tilney, in *Northanger Abbey*, who gives Jane Austen away.

With good-humoured wit, and in a spirit of brotherly teasing, he led the innocent Catherine to anticipate all the mysteries and horrors she loved in *Udolpho* ; but when she *applies* her reading to real life, judging his father by romantically unjust suspicions, he turns the tables on her ; gently, indeed, but firmly.

"Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English—that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?"

No words could describe more clearly and justly Miss Austen's own methods of work ; the process by which her *truthful* novels, with their inimitable

characterisation, have been transformed from the tinsel of romantic sentimentality in which the novels of her day abound ; that are so perfectly reproduced in *Love and Friendship*.

For us, as for Catherine, 'the visions of romance are over.' We see that 'charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature—at least in the middle counties of England—was to be looked for.* Of the Alps and Pyrenees, with their pine forests and their vices, they might give a faithful delineation ; and Italy, Switzerland, and the South of France might be as fruitful in horrors as they were represented. In the central part of England there was surely some security for the existence even of a wife not beloved, in the laws of the land and the manners of the age. Murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves, and neither poison nor sleeping potions to be procured, like rhubarb, from every druggist. Among the Alps and Pyrenees, perhaps, there were no mixed characters. There, such as were not as spotless as an angel might have the dispositions of a fiend. But in England it was not so. Among the English, she believed, there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad.

Jane Austen, we know, only attempts to put us right, and to draw real men and women, "in the midland counties of England." The double-edged satire with which she leaves most of the Continent to the mercies of Romance only points the force of her more serious intent ; while recognising the limited ground on which she felt sure of herself, as what Scott describes her, "the faithful chronicler of English manners and English Society of the middling, or what is called the genteel, class."

Where, however, did she derive the perfect truthfulness of her character-study, the subtle and under-

* "All ladies know," wrote Robert Bage, "for all ladies read novels, how extremely dangerous the roads of England are for female travellers who happen to be young and handsome."

standing realism of a thousand "inevitable" fine shades? From a love of humanity that made her furious, while she laughed, at the current absurdities of her predecessors. At least the children of *her* brain and her genius should be as the wise, or foolish, but always delightful, sons and daughters of real men, her sisters and brothers, her neighbours and friends.

The development of Jane Austen may be seen from the parody of *Northanger Abbey* to the portraiture of *Persuasion*. Which is, perhaps, the normal development of the artist. We all begin as keen craftsmen, intent on the intricacies of our art, spreading ourselves gaily or cynically, upon new forms and the subtleties of mind, that are a little cold and indifferent towards humanity; so they shall fill the picture. Growth, and our own experience of life, add the soul's message, the real self given to mankind; enriching, warming and immortalizing the art.

The personal, emotional, nature of Jane Austen's corrective realism came, however, more from memory than observation. It seldom leads to moralising or the dramatising of ethics. There is no spirit of reform, outside a passionate applying of truth and justice to particular cases. For general morality and social ethics she, rather provokingly, accepts the conventional religious outlook; because she is telling stories, writing books, not sermons or a human document.

Her almost vehement sincerity towards women largely came from what was, evidently, a ruling factor of her own life, the bond of perfect love for her sister Cassandra. We see it, of course, in Elizabeth and Jane Bennet; Emma and Harriet—who are sisterly; Ellinor and Marianne Dashwood, whose love, indeed, suffered much and was kind; while, in minor folk, the Musgroves

(Louisa and Henrietta) are plainly revealed with more subtle links and contrasts than the Bertrams (Julia and Maria). It was her family, again, who supplied the tender pride in William Price; the side-hint at loose morals in Crawford's uncle, set against the full-length portrait of Admiral and Mrs. Croft; above all, Captain Wentworth. From her own parsonage she drew the charming, if not over-devout, young clergymen—Henry Tilney, Edward Ferrars and Edmund Crawford; as Mr. Elton, no doubt, tormented the next parish.

Her passion for truth, in fact, appears in individual character-drawing, is inspired by individual circumstances, when the author feels in her bones that her people are really alive. It is *not* the realism or passion of the reformer—of life or of art.

As a novelist we can even see that, like her own Anne Elliot, she "*had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older.*" The "woman" in her (not the girl-author of *Love and Friendship* or *Northanger Abbey*) could be eloquent "on the side of early warm attachment and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution that seems to insult exertion and distrust providence." Her ideal in man came to be the ardour and confidence of Captain Wentworth that "seemed to foresee and to command his prosperous path"; just as *his* ideal in woman was "*a strong mind, with sweetness of manner*"; not, as he said in his haste, the somewhat obstinate, and really weak, "decision and firmness" of a Louisa Musgrove. "It could scarcely escape him to feel that a persuadable temper might sometimes be in favour of happiness." Thus did Emma submit to Knightley, Elizabeth look up to Darcy.