

JANE AUSTEN

tony tanner



reissued edition

*with a preface by marilyn gaul and a
note on the text by john wiltshire*



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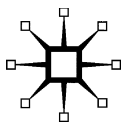
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Tony Tanner

REISSUED EDITION

with a Preface by Marilyn Gaul
and a Note on the Text by John Wiltshire

palgrave
macmillan



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First published 1986

Reissued Edition published 2007 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-0-230-00823-6 hardback

ISBN 978-0-230-00824-3 ISBN 978-1-137-06457-8 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-137-06457-8

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

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For G. H. W. Rylands

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Preface to the Reissued Edition

Marilyn Gaull

Everything which, in a great city, could touch the sentient faculty of a youth on whom nothing was lost ministered to his conviction that there was no possible good fortune in life of too “quiet” an order for him to appreciate – no privilege, no opportunity, no luxury, to which he should not do justice. It was not so much that he wished to enjoy as that he wished to know; his desire was not to be pampered, but to be initiated.

Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (1886)

Much like Henry James himself and the authors he enjoyed, Tony Tanner was a reader, a literary critic, an “appreciator,” as he preferred to be called, “on whom nothing was lost.” As teacher, lecturer, and author, he explained, explored, and illuminated more literature than most people encounter in a lifetime – from Colonial American prose to contemporary novels, European fiction, Jane Austen, and Shakespeare. Born March 18, 1935, raised in south London, the son of a civil servant and a teacher, Tanner’s childhood, which he recalled as secure and loving, was shaped by World War II. After completing his National Service, he attended Jesus College, Cambridge, where the moral historicism of F. R. Leavis and the practical criticism of I. A. Richards had turned English literature into the central discipline of a university education, an elite and comprehensive ideal of culture. To his studies of British literature, he brought his natural gift for close reading and a boundless curiosity. In the 1960s, he established American literature in the British university

curriculum as a legitimate academic discipline. When he died on December 5, 1998, Tanner was the first Professor of both English and American Literature at Cambridge University.

Tanner's first and, for some, major distinction was as an Americanist, interpreting American literature from his British perspective and drawing the great American works into a Western canon. Between 1958 and 1960, on a Harkness fellowship, he studied with Henry Nash Smith, the Mark Twain scholar, at the University of California, Berkeley, joining "the solemn thesis-carrying generation," as his contemporary, Malcolm Bradbury, called them in his aptly titled *Dangerous Pilgrimages: Trans-Atlantic Mythologies and the Novel* (1995), a generation that included David Lodge, who fictionalized his experience in *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (1975) and Kingsley Amis, in *One Fat Englishman* (1963). These "huddled masses of the travel-grant age" exchanged a grim, deprived, shell-shocked island for the postwar wealth and comfort of North America, where the last war fought on its soil had been a century before. While postwar England visibly shrank into mini-cars and miniskirts, America had materially expanded into housing tracts, shopping malls, supermarkets, monstrous cars, swollen new colleges with tribes of students in jeans and T-shirts, a popular culture in music, magazines, television, fast food, sports, theme parks, credit cards, a whole country that appeared to Europeans to be living an extended adolescence. In spite of waning McCarthyism, the Cold War, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and of suburban nuclear families, in spite of social conformities, corporate styles, the tyrannous averages and normalities against which everyone would soon rebel, Tanner, like Bradbury, re-created an American myth, or perhaps invented a new one.

From a California college campus, surrounded by a favored, restless generation of young people, Tanner envisioned an America with a common and noble history of autonomous literary heroes, an exotic mix of cowboys, jazz, poetry, intellectual experimentation, sexual freedom, the Beat generation, Black Power, and Jewish novelists. He explored a demanding colorful urban life with no British

counterpart except for the Angry Young Men, who, like Byron, had heroic longings but no great causes left to die for, nor the will to fight for any they might find. Although Tanner's concerns were literary and his life academic, he also encountered the nonliterary America, the alienated, multilingual religious, economic, racial, and ethnic communities, the hyphenated Americans, the Irish, Hispanic, Chinese, East European Jews, the Afro and Caribbean Blacks, the Middle-Eastern Muslims, struggling to survive, preserve, or reinvent their traditions, the uneasy balance they held between material success and cultural depletion. He observed the class and racial conflicts, the power and rage of the unions, the gangsters, graffiti, turf wars, the collective nightmare of alien invasions depicted in science-fiction movies, and an epidemic of adolescent rebellion. These realities, the penalties of a diffuse and decentered national culture, of a society "breaking up into smaller and smaller circles and units," as he said of *Emma* and *Persuasion*, shaped and enriched his readings of both American and British fiction. Indeed, he was so attuned to the literary voices and to the American experience itself that even Americans accepted his authority. Having gone to America, he said, to discover his own voice, he gave to American literature a voice in England as well.

In "My Life in American Literature" (*TriQuarterly*, 30 [1974], 83–118) he recalls the delight and wonder (the subject of his first book), the energy and inventiveness of the American culture he encountered, and the emergence of what became his alter ego when he returned to England two years later, an Americanist in Britain. At King's College, his dissertation, submitted in 1960, was the first in American literature ever accepted at Cambridge, published as *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature* (1965). Tanner said his goal was to recover the attitude of wonder and the vernacular style that characterizes American literature, a contribution that Frank Kermode called "The most impressive . . . hitherto made by an Englishman to the study of American literature" (*Guardian*, December 8, 1998, obituary). His next major book, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–70* (1971), dealt with contemporary American novels,

moving, as he said in "My Life in American Literature," from the nineteenth-century Wonderland of Melville, Hawthorne, Emerson, and Whitman, to Fitzgerald's twentieth-century Valley of Ashes, from complicated innocence to the "entropy of the new," Ellison, Bellow, Purdy, Burroughs, Pynchon, Vonnegut, Hawkes, Barth, Updike, to name just a few. However different, they shared a struggle to maintain the "unmediated spontaneities," as he called them, to resist the imprisoning social, psychological, linguistic, and even syntactical forms in which they worked. Authors and heroes shared a "dread," Tanner called it, "of being assimilated to an alien pattern not of their choosing," of being defined by someone else's reality (109), a dread that he confessed to as a critic, and an imprisonment in strange and anachronistic ideologies from which he was to rescue Jane Austen.

Although lengthy and detailed acknowledgments bordering on parody and weighty bibliographies had become fashionable in literary studies, Tanner, like the American authors he most admired, customarily wrote without baggage, "blind," as he said in the opening to *Adultery in the Novel*: "I wanted to try having my own say in my own way," claiming his space and earning his voice with powerful, discriminating, and original readings richly enhanced by allusions to philosophers, writers, critics, and intellectuals, both contemporary and historical. In *Jane Austen*, for example, any page might invoke the language and spirit of John Locke, David Hume, John Stuart Mill, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and even an unpublished paper by one of his students.

In *Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men: Essays on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century American Literature* (1987), *Henry James and the Art of Nonfiction* (1995), the posthumous collection, *The American Mystery: American Literature from Emerson to DeLillo* (2000), and shorter books on Saul Bellow, Thomas Pynchon, Henry James, and introductions to editions of James, William Dean Howells, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, reviews, and essays in collections, Tanner affirmed his role as pioneer British interpreter of American literature, from the earliest to the contemporary, for both British and American readers. Although he was an astute reader of Jane Austen, and even the most obscure contemporary male writers, he

had no ear for American women writers, not Emily Dickinson or even Joan Didion, whose monumental *Play it as it Lays* he dismissed as "a species of instant supermarket nihilism," a "quick 'wasteland' assembly kit" (*Scenes of Nature*, 182-3). Mostly, he objected to her language, its lack of challenge, which he had claimed to be the distinguishing characteristic of American literature. As a critic, he cultivated the "human voice" he most admired in Henry James, how one knows, possesses, uses, and controls it, "a verbal web safe for habitation and the expansion of consciousness" (*Scenes of Nature*, 34).

Believing the novel to be the best vehicle for the American imagination as he saw it, he saw it in decline among contemporary writers such as Mailer, Vonnegut, Pynchon, and Barth, or at least eclipsed, preoccupied with its own ending, fiction and the narrative impulse itself displaced by journalism, criticism, history, television, and film, a collapse of genre best illustrated in the title to Norman Mailer's fictionalized report of the antiwar march on the Pentagon in 1967, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel and the Novel as History* (1968). In *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (1979) Tanner turned the decline of the novel, the hybrid alternatives, the experience they represented into a defining characteristic: he called the novel itself a transgressive form, a challenge to "existing genre-expectations." Novels began, he wrote, in stories about the homeless or marginal, the "socially displaced or unplaced," those who do not belong or who challenge and transgress cultural norms, features that were to shape and survive, in Goethe, Rousseau, and Flaubert and the social structures their novels reflected. These intruders, so common in American fiction, represented, he wrote, "potentially disruptive or socially unstabilized energy that may threaten, directly or implicitly, the organization of society, whether by the indeterminacy of their origin, or the uncertainty of the direction in which they will focus their unbounded energy, or their attitude to the ties that hold society together and that they may choose to slight or break." Tanner's introductions to *Mansfield Park* (1966), *Sense and Sensibility* (1969), and *Pride and Prejudice* (1972) illustrate this same paradigm of aliens, intruders, of the unaffiliated guests

or unattached neighbors invading families and communities, challenging their coherence, and thereby re-creating, restoring, renewing them.

As an outsider, an observer himself, interpreting American culture, Tanner had become a literary ambassador, a role he assumed again in one of his last books, *Venice Desired* (1992). Against the reality of contemporary Venice, he measured the literary and artistic representations of Byron, Melville, Mann, Ruskin, Proust, and Pound, the oppositions the city awakened between the sensuous and the intellectual, the characteristic expressions it evoked in creative individuals, how they contributed to the adventure of Venice, its myth and decline. In the aesthetic history of Venice he identified that Blakean balance between energy and boundaries, between play and regulation, the "achieved congruence" he admired in *Pride and Prejudice*, which accounts for its "eternal delight" (*Venice Desired*, 141).

Finally, having raised introductions to an art form, he wrote the magisterial introductions to the Everyman editions of Shakespeare's plays. "The writing is so accomplished," Peter Holland wrote in a *TLS* review – before taking him to task for not including the neo-historicist scholarship of the previous twenty years – "the critical concentration both so sustained and so lucid that every page repays repeated reading" (December 7, 1997). Tanner's unmediated readings, his excluding heaps of historical detail that had accumulated over the previous twenty years, allow his readers, the un-common readers, to approach the plays as if they were in performance, all choices made without pausing for justifications, explanations, or history.

Over twenty years, before publishing *Jane Austen* (1986), during all Tanner's writing, lecturing, and study through unprecedented literary, social, political, and even personal upheavals, Jane Austen was a constant companion, traveling to places she would not have imagined, where sometimes even imagining her novels seemed impossible. But imagining them for others was his vocation, as David Simpson said in his eloquent memorial essay, "No One Properly to Talk To" (*Critical Quarterly*, 41:2 [1999], 31). While writing introductions to the Penguin editions to *Mansfield Park* (1966), *Sense and*

Sensibility (1969), and *Pride and Prejudice* (1972), he lived on borders, between American and European literature, physically and metaphorically traveling between these two different cultures. From his transatlantic perspective, he recognized in Jane Austen those dangerous temporal, social, psychological, and geographical boundaries at the heart of the novels, "the paradox of civilization," as he called it, at the end of his chapter on *Sense and Sensibility*, the uneven exchange between wilderness and gardens, between freedom and security, autonomy and isolation: "For a perfect balance between [nature and civilization] must remain an artist's dream, and meanwhile many houses serve merely as prisons for once-brilliant dancers, and the greenhouses continue to go up where once the great trees swayed in the more liberal air" (102).

In the 1960s and 1970s however, in America, the balance had tipped in favor of "nature," and few were interested in Jane Austen's novels, in fact in any novels at all, either to read or write them. With film, television, politics, journalism, and history absorbing the narrative impulse, novels were a minor form, at best a counter-culture, the authors, like the readers, marginalized even among academics. Instead of reading novels, freethinking faculty and students formed Norman Mailer's obscenity-spouting "Armies of the Night," rioting for what they called peace and love, assembling massive and unscripted public "happenings," challenging authority, precedent, anyone over thirty, their spirit captured in an antiwar musical with full-frontal nudity called *Hair*. The manners, civility, moralism, social pieties, convention of any sort, or the failure and violation of all of them, which Tanner explored in his introductions to Austen, her authentic use of language that he emphasized were irrelevant to a generation protesting a brutal and pointless war in Southeast Asia, dropping out to Beatles' lyrics, psychedelic colors, exotic drugs, and life on the road while a remote and authoritarian government engaged in the deception, manipulation, and greed. Beyond literary criticism, Tanner's comments on the conclusion to *Northanger Abbey* resonate with the time, then and now: "There is always the possibility of anger in the Abbey – or, indeed, in any structure in the social edifice. The

novel ends with a truce between anger and desire. But the war can always be rejoined elsewhere" (74). And it was.

Writing over twenty years of such contradiction and distress, a generation both confronting and retreating from the world, Tanner reflected their dark energies first in the introductions, from 1969 to 1972, and then in the collection and updates in *Jane Austen* (1986). He highlighted as others could not those crucial analogies with Austen's equally precarious society, communities at the edge of dissolution, characterized, then as now, by hypocrisy, materialism, and the degradation of language. *Persuasion* "shows," he wrote, "that English society is similarly 'in between': in between an old social order in a state of decline and desuetude, and some new 'modern' society of as yet uncertain values, hierarchies and principles. It may precipitately 'jump' to its own destruction and wreckage . . . It may, though it is a slim hope, reconstitute itself and its values. Meanwhile the message within the message of the book . . . reads like this: 'There was nothing less for English society to do, than to admit that it had been pretty completely wrong, and to take up a new set of opinions and hopes'" (249).

Though Austen was conventionally identified with the stable values of an idealized society, to which people either agreed or objected, in Tanner's contemporary readings, she depicts individual lives as a succession of liminal experiences, families as historical and geographical refugees, whole communities and societies "dispersed," as Tanner calls it, like sailors, "unlanded and unrooted," like the Americans he had lived among, a "floating, drifting, changing population" captured at individual and collective turning points. By reading Jane Austen's novels against the novels of personal and social initiation which he knew, novels such as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, authors such as James or Conrad, he retrieved the subtext, the very syntax and language of transition, the metaphorical "wandering" between, as Matthew Arnold would call it in 1855, "two worlds, one dead / The other powerless to be born" ("Stanzas on the Grand Chartreuse").

Such nuances, however, were lost on Americans in the stormy years of the 1970s when Tanner's Penguin editions

appeared, for literary scholars, even the nonpolitical ones, were not prepared to read Austen's novels, indeed any novels. Trained in the New Criticism, a cool, impersonal, intellectually challenging formalism, they were enthralled by anything difficult or opaque, by poetic irony, ambiguity, or wit, by Shakespeare, the metaphysical poets, the abstract, experimental, and occult, by Blake, Shelley, Yeats, Eliot, and Pound. With the exception of Joyce, perhaps, at best Dickens, why would anyone bother to read novels at all? What would one say about them? Just as Tanner missed the irony in American women authors, so American readers, in the middle of the twentieth century, failed to register Austen's ironic voices, her historical rootedness, and her social criticism.

In David Lodge's *Changing Places*, Morris Zapp, the American exchange professor from Euphoria State (the Berkeley campus where Tanner had studied), however pompous and misguided he appeared to the British, to the Americans was insane. How could a rational person base a career on novels, any novels, never mind an "utterly exhaustive" commentary on all of Jane Austen's novels, saying "absolutely everything that could possibly be said"? What was there to say? Conceding that "students were openly contemptuous," that "Jane Austen was certainly not the writer to win the hearts of the new generation . . . Morris woke sweating from nightmares in which students paraded round the campus carrying placards that declared KNIGHTLEY SUCKS and FANNY PRICE IS A FINK" (34-7). The humor is in the discrepancy between the arsenal of high-minded and heavy-handed theories he proposed and the novels, which were still conceived as trivial forms and largely domestic, the "historical, biographical, rhetorical, mythical, Freudian, Jungian, existentialist, Marxist, structuralist, Christian-allegorical, ethical, exponential, linguistic, phenomenological, archetypal," until there was nothing else to say. Since by 1975, when *Changing Places* appeared, and countless lectures, conferences, and papers honored the Bicentenary, British criticism had already taken a turn toward contexts, subtexts, and cultural studies, Zapp was in tune with Rummidge, the mythical British university which

hosted his exchange. And when, within a decade, literary critics started “doing” deconstruction, feminist and postcolonial studies of the novels, Zapp, rather than a ridiculous eccentric, became the norm.

That same year, 1975, Marilyn Butler, the great British literary historicist, published *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, which placed Jane Austen in the political, philosophical, and religious context of her times, while American scholars in panels, conferences, and essay collections explored her place, the place of novels and prose in general, in literary history – illustrated in a special issue of *The Wordsworth Circle* (1976), edited by Gene Ruoff with essays by Karl Kroeber, Joseph Kestner, Larry Swingle, Alison Sulloway, William Walling, and Ruoff himself, each contributing to the undiscovered “special aesthetic” of the novel.

Perfecting this new aesthetic and formalism, in 1979 Irvin Ehrenpreis offered a subtle and insightful reading of *Mansfield Park* in the *New York Review of Books* (XXVI:1, February 8), exploring what Tanner called in *Jane Austen* “those steady symmetries . . . indispensable for a truly civilized existence.” Marilyn Butler, however, dismissed such readings as misguided and narrow-minded, the “product of a refined and modern habit of reading”: “It is a peculiarity of the present literary atmosphere, that the best critics spend so much of their effort eliminating topicality, partisanship, the controversial or the politically self-interested from the great literature of the past, as though literature would be better off washed clean of real-life dust and heat. If we were to look with fresh minds at the more intelligent novels of the 1790s, or even at the work of modern historians on that period, we should find it less easy to overlook its most striking single aspect – the politicization of virtually all discourse, ‘literary’ as well as overtly ideological, Jane Austen’s along with the rest” (*New York Review of Books*, XXVI:6, April 5, 1979). In *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Backgrounds, 1760–1830* (1981), she extended this politicization to all Romantic writers. To Butler, to most of the critics who followed, the status and meaning of any literary work, certainly Jane Austen’s, depended on referentiality, the degree to which it reflected the historical moment when it

was written. Austen's choosing to exclude such overt historical references such as Sir Walter Scott's, for example, to present herself, as Tanner claimed she did, as a "provincial spinster enjoying (or suffering) a very limited horizon of contemporary experience," was an "occlusion," as the neo-historicists who followed Butler called it, not an exclusion, her attitudes toward slavery, rebellion, colonialism, rioting, militarism, and capitalism, sublimated, turned into a dark subterranean energy encoded in her simplest and most innocent work. To others, such as Auden, her limited focus was neither innocent nor repressed: he was "uncomfortable," he wrote in "A Letter to Lord Byron," with this middle-class English lady who reveals "so frankly and with such sobriety / The economic basis of society."

Auden's reading should have been useful to those American critics, neither formalists nor moralists, but at the cutting edge of feminism whose quest for financial and political equity, equal pay, and equal rights, conveyed that same identification of personal worth and financial status. Unfortunately, instead of the fearsome and cerebral canonical writer who was a woman, the one that Auden secretly admired, the woman who knew how things worked, Jane Austen became a woman writer, victimized, repressed, displaced, unappreciated, using her writing for retribution – a feminist reading of the "regulated hatred" D. W. Harding had identified in 1940, and the irony Malcolm Mudrick deciphered in *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (1952). In 1975, the bicentennial year, the same fateful year as Morris Zapp was promoting his commentary, as Butler placed Austen in a "war of ideas," in America, she became a feminist case study in the literary awakening to primarily British women figures, which began with Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The Female Imagination* (1975), Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women* (1978), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984) and, drawing political and feminist concerns together, Claudia Johnson's *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1989). These insightful and powerful readings depicted

Austen as a victim of a repressive society, or as frustrated and resentful, one among many women who, as Gilbert and Gubar conclude, turned "the energy of their own despair into passionate, even melodramatic characters who act out the subversive impulses every woman feels when she contemplates the 'deep-rooted evils of patriarchy'." Yet in the context of the rage, melancholy, and gothic misery that suffuses Romantic literature, such despair, even if it were true, seems a characteristic of her age rather than her gender. Everyone suffered "deep-rooted evils" of some sort or other, as people in any age do, Jane Austen fewer than most. Either from an attained wisdom, or temperament, rather than vindictiveness, suppressed anger, or numbing frustration, she offered to her own readers and to us, a sanity, balance, civility, a reconciliation and inclusiveness, right down to the level of syntax, that Tanner identifies in his analysis.

In an ironic turn suited to Jane Austen herself, while feminist critics made her sexuality the definitive condition of her writing, they also made her gender-neutral: after 1975, students, faculty, scholars, and publishers turned "Jane Austen," even "Miss Austen," into simply "Austen," called by her surname as if she were either a man or a nineteenth-century domestic servant. Within another decade, from her uncontroversial position as a Tory feminist, which Butler among others had believed, Austen was "queered," the feminist readings overtaken by radical sexual politics, by "The Muse of Masturbation," as Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick called her in "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" (*Critical Inquiry*, 17 [1991], 817–38) and in 1995, Terry Castle's "Was Jane Austen Gay?" (*London Review of Books*, August 2). New armies of the night quarreled over whether she had sexual relations with her sister, if it were incest, and if there really is a lesbian vampire in *Sanditon*, her bawdy language, the puns, double-entendres, displaced sexuality, turning the quintessential spinster into a sexual deviant, her novels into prurient displays of preadolescent humor depending on covert allusions to bodily functions and sexual activities, culminating in the pseudonymous and popular parody, *Pride and Promiscuity: The Lost Sex Scenes of Jane Austen* (2001). The

personal, the prurient, and the aggressive focus on sexuality obscured the comic narratives and their life-affirming revelations. Like other authors who were women, the feminist attempt to rescue Austen from a "biological determinism" imprisoned her in another metaphor, in a modern script that was not her own, a contemporary concept Josephine Hendin explored in *Heart Breakers: Women and Violence in Contemporary Culture and Literature* (2004).

Although in literary reviews, criticism, analysis, and even university courses, an author's name is usually just a metonymy for the works, in Jane Austen's case, she often is the work. Biographers commonly conclude her limited romantic encounters and unrequited passions are reflected in the feckless, indecisive, manipulative, tyrannical, insensitive, or hypersensitive men, in the boring, hopeless and, as Tanner describes them, "bleak empty marriages . . . revealing different degrees of failed mutuality, non-reciprocation, and myopic egotism or frivolous self-gratification" (10). With only glimpses of her life, sketches of her times, from her few surviving letters and sentimental memoirs by relatives, she became a legend, her most passionate admirers literally channeling her and her characters with whom mature and sensible men and women admit to falling in love, although, as D. W. Harding claimed, she would not have liked most of her readers at all. Still, in 1975, while Butler was resurrecting her as an intellectual, and Ehrenpreis as an artist, in a collection called *Jane Austen Today*, edited by Joel Weinsheimer, Juliet McMaster concluded, "I have no apologies to make for the spinster Jane, even though she may never show us her lovers in bed. In the fullest sense, she understood love, and made sure her best men and women came to do so too." Disregarding the boundaries between fiction and reality with equal abandon, in *Dear Jane* (1991), Constance Pilgrim claimed on no special evidence that *Persuasion* is based on an extended, clandestine, and hopeless romance with William Wordsworth's brother, John, which ended when he was drowned at sea. A film of her brief flirtation with Tom Lefroy is now being proposed at the cost of £8.5 million. Like the history of the novels, the history of the author has evolved into a commodity; from exposing the "economic basis of

society," she has become the economic basis of her own societies, at least half a dozen who consider themselves Janeites.

Coined by George Saintsbury in 1891, in an introduction to *Pride and Prejudice*, the term "Janites" referred to those with an uncritical, sentimental, and personal devotion to Austen and to everyone in Austen's novels. Changing the spelling to "Janeites," Rudyard Kipling took it as the title of a World War I story in which an uneducated, working-class soldier recalls the secret society of officers who read Jane Austen's novels in their foxholes, formed a "secret society" based on them, and even named their guns after the characters, an Austen allusion serving as a password that helped save him. "There's no one to match Jane when you're in a tight place," he observed, "Gawd bless 'er, whoever she was." Kipling himself and his wife found comfort in Austen's novels after they lost a son in the war, and veterans were advised to read her to help overcome what we now call posttraumatic stress disorder. But, like the academics, even the cultists found reasons to quarrel. In an on-line discussion group in the Republic of Pemberley, for example, a quarrel over the character of Fanny Price became so heated that it was labeled "dangerous," and new participants were warned against joining.

With these new forms of communication, the novels generate their own universe, alternate realities, unfolding in diverse and inexplicable ways – courses, dissertations, scholarly books, editions, poems, a heritage industry of tours, houses, furniture, literary societies, reading clubs, films, radio shows, costumes, sequels, imitations, T-shirts, teacups, cults – as some critics call the most devoted and uncritical, a universe with an endless supply of explorers who look for her and find themselves. As illustrated in *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees* (2000), edited by Deirdre Lynch, one could be a disciple without reading a novel at all, for every one except *Northanger Abbey* had been filmed, many times. These lavish costume dramas, representing a hygienic and idealized Regency England, and mindful and mannered courtship rituals, offered a visual and aural experience in which the novels were reborn. From these, far-fetched sequels abound, some claiming to know what she would have written; others, such as *Jane Austen in Boca*, extend her

voice to contemporary situations, in this case, *Pride and Prejudice* transplanted to a Jewish retirement community in Florida. A complete inventory of sequels, adaptations, imitations, songs, cartoons, jokes, and critical commentary appears on the website, "The Republic of Pemberley."

To all this critical buzz, the contending historicities and sexualities, the obfuscation of critical theories, the fierce allegiances of book clubs and literary societies, the distractions of *Clueless* and "lesbian chic," Tanner brought Jane Austen's own critique to the "discourse" of literary criticism, in the voice of Sir Edward Denham, the corrupted and corrupting reader, whose attempted seductions quoting from popular sentimental novels are "high-order balderdash," Tanner calls it (276), his life an "enactment of a perverted text . . . the implication is that by now *everybody* is likely to live a para-fictional life to some extent. The texture of everyday life now [as true in the twenty-first century as the nineteenth] *includes* the texture of the fictions it produces. No one can ever be sure that he or she is wholly outside some novel or other" (279).

Tanner, however, as the true critic, recovers Austen's integrity as an author, her "true seeing and true speaking," "the nature of true utterance," as he says in the introduction, and its true uses: "Language, to state the obvious, is the most important distinguishing mark of the human. But, equally obviously, it is everywhere abused, often to cruel and terrible ends. Jane Austen enacts and dramatizes the difficulties, as well as the necessity, of using language to proper ends." Among his contemporaries, Tanner had allies such as Norman Page (*The Language of Jane Austen*, 1972), Stuart Tave (*Some Words of Jane Austen*, 1973), George Steiner (*After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 1975), and John Burrows, whose *Computation Into Criticism: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels and an Experiment in Method* (1987), published a year after Tanner's, identified through a sophisticated computer analysis the "syntactical and metrical harmony" (96) that Tanner had admired. They all shared Robert Chapman's authoritative text, edited for Oxford University Press in 1923, the first critical edition of the novels, which established Austen's place in the canon of national literature, a brilliant

story recounted by Kathryn Sutherland in her indispensable *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood* (Oxford University Press, 2005). Tanner's close reading, his respect for authorial nuances based on the Chapman edition will be, nonetheless, exceptional preparation for the new Cambridge editions, edited by Janet Todd.

Tanner drew Austen into the intellectual and literary conversation of the Western world, a context that included such historical and contemporary critics, philosophers, and linguists as Locke, Hume, John Stuart Mill, Freud, Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Wayne Booth, Heidegger, Horkheimer, Raymond Williams, and Edward Said, to name a few. She didn't need historical referents to illuminate her work; the novels became history and illuminated those who hardly knew the formative or normative role her novels played in their lives. They were, as William Galperin wrote in *This Historical Austen* (2003), "a context in themselves where matters of history, ranging from the literary to the social to the very reality on which the narratives dilate, work to complicated, if often antithetical, ends" (1). Her "limited horizons," her "little bit of ivory two inches wide," were her microcosm, like Blake's "Eternity in a Grain of Sand," like Oedipus' life reduced to a single question, like King Lear's to the wrong question, like Hopkins to the "dappled things," the "counter, original, spare, and strange," and like Wordsworth to "little nameless unremembered acts."

Similarly, as a woman, a novelist, a thoughtful and aware human being, Jane Austen was herself, a great idea, a model of how ordinary people survive in perilous times, as we all do. Like most people she lived tangentially, on the margins, in the shadows of clashing armies and imminent doom, powerless to influence them, to escape, explain, or resist the conflicts or even natural disasters that shape our lives and change us forever. Born in 1775, living through decades of political unrest and war, she experienced the uncertainty, disruption, social confusion, the daily challenges of keeping alive, earning a living, overcoming disease, bereavement, becoming and staying connected, living with what Keats called "The Mystery of Things."

Like us, she lived in an age of terror, for which she was

unprepared, a terror disregarded by those who should have known better, brilliantly conveyed in her ironic representation of Henry Tilney when, at the end of Chapter IX in *Northanger Abbey*, he admonishes Catherine for suspecting his father of murdering his mother: "Remember the country and 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? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this . . . where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open?" That England, coherent, uncomplicated, open, healthy, benevolent, the green and pleasant land, even that religion is more of a fiction than the romances that supposedly corrupted Catherine's understanding.

Like Wordsworth, indeed, like Sir Walter Scott, her very opposite in some ways, she discovered her strength in what can be known, in what can be done, in the real rather than an idealized or theoretical world, "the world / Of all of us, – the place where, in the end, / We find our happiness, or not at all!" (*Prelude*, 1805, XI, 142–4). She expressed these realities in a fictional form that was both original and risky – and, despite changes of accent, costumes, and custom, hers is still a compelling view of how human beings accommodate themselves to the conflicts of nature and civilization, and survive. There can be no more crucial time to go back and read Jane Austen's texts and Tony Tanner, the critic who honored her true voice.

A Note on the Text

John Wiltshire

Writing for a broad readership, Tony Tanner often modernizes Jane Austen's spelling and punctuation. In quotations, generally though not invariably, Austen's 'every body' becomes 'everybody', commas are often omitted, paragraphing is modified, and her characteristic use of a dash between sentences or phrases is ignored. Many of these changes do not materially alter the meaning of the passage, but some – particularly when it is a question of giving the correct emphasis – do.

Elizabeth's crucial self-castigation should read

'She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. – Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.

"How despicably have I acted!" she cried. – "I, who have prided myself on my discernment! – . . . Till this moment, I never knew myself."

(Compare the presentation on page 113.)

Here, as elsewhere, dashes and commas are keys to the expressive effect. More importantly, words and even phrases are occasionally left out of quotations. Like all readers relying on their memory, Tanner sometimes misquotes and substitutes a word of his own for the original text, and there are, likewise, citations of statements assigned to the wrong character.

The necessarily selective list here is based in the first instance on the Penguin texts Tanner cites in his Bibliography, checked, where possible, against the readings given in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen

(2005—). *Sanditon* has been checked against R. W. Chapman's *Minor Works* (1954: Volume VI in the Oxford edition) and B. C. Southam's facsimile edition of 1975 (Oxford: Clarendon Press; London: Scolar Press).

Some examples from *Northanger Abbey* may help readers judge whether Tanner's modifications are significant. On page 43, 'Northanger Abbey: – These were thrilling words and wound up Catherine's feelings to the highest point of ecstasy.' This should read: 'Northanger Abbey!—These were thrilling words, and wound up Catherine's feelings to the highest point of extasy.' Later on the same page, 'the Abbey itself was no more to her than any other house' should be 'the Abbey *in* itself was no more to her *now* than any other house'. Two pages later, the omission of a phrase ('for their daughter') allows a sentence to be attributed to Catherine, rather than to her parents. On pages 46–7, the Thorpes cannot be the 'forward, bragging, scheming race' because this is John Thorpe himself abusing the Morlands. In the narrator's famous defence of the novel, Tanner substitutes 'that ungenerous and impolite custom' (p. 57) for the original's 'that ungenerous and *impolitic* custom', which, meaning inexpedient and self-defeating, is more to the point. An equally famous passage, the ironic defence of female ignorance, loses some of its bite when the comma is omitted after 'A woman especially,' (p. 66). In the long quotation on page 71, Mrs Radcliffe loses her final 'e' (to be picked up by Heathcliff on page 97) and there is a whole line omitted – 'and *Italy, Switzerland, and the South of France, might be as fruitful* in horrors'. Tanner misreads the reference to 'the northern and western extremities' as Europe, since the passage clearly specifies Catherine's 'own country' (72). A phrase is omitted from the quotation on page 74. 'Steady as the sanction of reason and conscience could make it' is in the original 'steady as the sanction of reason and *the dictate of* conscience could make it'.

Other mistaken attributions may be noted. It is Jane Bennet, not Elizabeth, who cannot question Wickham's veracity (p. 114). In *Mansfield Park*, 'Mary ... on viewing Thornton Lacey ... immediately insists, "The farmyard must be cleared away"' (160), but it is actually Henry Crawford

who sees Thornton Lacey and makes this comment. George (not his brother John) Knightley 'asks the question of the novel' [*Emma*] 'I wonder what will become of her!' (and with an exclamation mark) (187). On page 201, 'amiable' in quotation marks in Mr Knightley's speech should be 'aimable': otherwise the point of his distinction between the English and French words is lost. Mr Knightley's 'very different way of describing Frank Churchill's behaviour' (p. 206) is in fact Emma's own (though she certainly sounds like him in the passage quoted). Anne Elliot does not proclaim her lack of interest in a theatre party 'which would include Mr Elliot' (238): on the contrary, the theatre party would include Wentworth, and Anne makes clear her preference for that.

Marianne Dashwood, 'quite indifferent whether she went or starved' (p. 81), is, less melodramatically, in Austen's spelling indifferent whether or not she 'staid'. Elizabeth's 'famous declaration' (p. 135) reads 'I hope I never ridicule what is wise *or* good', not 'wise and good'. Emma plans not to 'inform' but to 'form' Harriet's 'opinions and her manners' (183). Minor as these transcription errors are, they are cumulatively important, as in the chapter on *Persuasion*. Anne Elliot has not 'modest taste and feeling' but 'modesty, taste and feeling'. In the same passage on page 211, 'expectations' should read 'recommendations': Anne has, then, 'such lavish recommendations'. 'The natural sequence of an unnatural beginning' (212) should read 'sequel': 'All, all must be compromised in it' must be 'comprised in it' (213). 'When existence or *when* hope is gone' (215); Louisa Musgrove praises the '*worth and warmth*' of the navy (230). The passage presented as a single sequence on page 219 in fact consists of one sentence and fragments of two others. One, lifted from two paragraphs following – and arguably registering a shift of feeling – has been inserted in their midst. There, Anne is 'transplanted into', not 'to' a new milieu; a tiny but telling instance of Austen's linguistic precision.

The chapter on *Sanditon* is based on the unreliable Penguin transcription but occasionally seems to consult either Chapman's edition, or the MS (which is held at King's College where Tanner was Fellow) because the capitalizations of the manuscript briefly appear: 'every Disorder of the

Stomach' (268); 'rotatory Motion . . . Giddiness' (273). 'They were now approaching the church and the *real* village of Sanditon' (254) reflects the Penguin text, but should probably read 'the neat village'. An error in that text's last sentence (283) has, however, been corrected.

There are other slips when Tanner is referring to the wide range of critics and thinkers contemporary with his writing. But none of them affects the readability of his work. He offers his book, after all, 'as a reading of the novels, not as a contribution to Jane Austen scholarship' (xxix). These are the mistakes of a critic passionately engaged with his subject, driving – and driven by – interpretations of Jane Austen's novels compelling in their originality and perception, and relying on his memory to supply quotations which forward his argument. Here is a critic who amply justifies the claim implicit in his references to Goethe, Tolstoy, James and others, of the structural coherence and intellectual stature of Jane Austen's novels. Wide-ranging, witty, daring, these are readings with an enduring power to challenge and stimulate.

Acknowledgements

This book is offered as a reading of Jane Austen's novels, not as a contribution to Jane Austen scholarship. In particular, it attempts to see the novels in their relation to problems concerned with society, education and language. Hence the introductory chapter, which offers a brief discussion of the relevance of these topics before the consideration of the individual novels. The earliest chapter in the book was, substantially, written in 1966, while the most recent chapters were written this year, so the book in effect represents my thoughts about Jane Austen's work ranging, intermittently, over some twenty years. I wish to express my gratitude to Penguin Books for granting me permission to reprint – in somewhat altered form – my introductions to *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. A much earlier – and very different – version of the chapter on *Persuasion* was given as a talk to the Jane Austen Society. I am much indebted to my editor, Beverley Tarquini, for her patience, help and encouragement. The dedication is a small acknowledgement of the inestimable debt I owe to a man who has been an exemplary and incomparable friend – and 'educator' – for over twenty-five years to me and to countless others.

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September 1985

TONY TANNER

1

Introduction

JANE AUSTEN AND THE NOVEL

'You know how interesting the purchase of a sponge cake is to me' – thus Jane Austen in a letter to Cassandra of 1808. Allowing for her habitual cool irony (aimed as much at herself as at others) it is hard to imagine such a sentence being written by any other major English novelist. The received image – or stereotype – of Jane Austen is that of a quiet, though brilliant, spinster living in the sheltered margin of her period. The image or stereotype has some truth – as stereotypes often do. But as many writers about Jane Austen have realised it is an image that has to be re-examined in light of her work. Austen-Leigh in his indispensable *Memoir* probably served to give authoritative status to the stereotype: 'Of events her life was singularly barren: few changes and no great crisis ever broke the smooth current of its course.' And he later lists some of the areas of human activity about which she never attempted to write: 'She never touched upon politics, law, or medicine', and so on. 'Science and philosophy of which I know nothing' – a quotation from a Jane Austen letter of 1815 cited by Austen-Leigh – simply serves to add to that list of what Jane Austen did *not* write about without bringing us much closer to what she did write about. He quotes from letters from Jane Austen which have since become famous, if not mindlessly overused: 'the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour'. Yes, we know about 'those two inches of ivory', but, since there seem to be people who can inscribe most of the New Testament on a pin's head, and since there have certainly been artists who worked yards of ivory with no residue of interest to engage us, we may say that the question is not one of dimensions but, rather, what did she inscribe on those (metaphorical) two inches of ivory?

Jane Austen – unwittingly surely, since her letters do not read

as if they were indirectly addressed to posterity – seems to collude or agree about the necessarily restricted range of her work: ‘Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on. . . .’ This would seem to embrace a ‘minimalist’ if not marginal conception of her art – almost defensively so. It is rather in line with the conclusion of one of her letters of 1815 where she writes, ‘I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress.’ We can accept the ‘boast’, for the ironic hyperbole thinly disguises a gay self-confidence masquerading as modest ignorance. Jane Austen was quite tolerably learned and certainly well informed. If she chose to present herself as a provincial spinster enjoying (or suffering) a very limited horizon of contemporary experience and, more generally, contemporary academic, philosophic and literary work, then that must have been because she realised (or decided) that she was not in any way going to compete with, say, Richardson and Scott – to mention no more. How it was that her own ‘modest’ works came to be held in more esteem and regard even than the work of those great authors can perhaps only be ascribed to the magic, or what James would call ‘the madness’, of art.

It seems that we should look in vain for evidence in her work of many of the main historical and political events which occurred during her lifetime. She saw – or lived through – the French Revolution, the rise (and fall) of Napoleon Bonaparte; the American War of Independence (and the war with England of 1812). She died (1817) midway between Waterloo (1815) and Peterloo (1819) and she lived through much of the turmoil which accompanied what E. P. Thompson has described as ‘The Making of the English Working Class’ (1780–1832 in Thompson’s version). She must also have been aware of the Jacobin and anti-Jacobin struggle which went on in England as a result of the French Revolution, a struggle most easily (though not adequately) described as the opposition of the views expressed in Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790) and in Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1791). These tumultuous revolutions, changes and arguments seem to have left very little mark on her fiction, and yet of course she knew what was going on. What effect, if any, all these events had in her writing we shall have to consider in due course.

It is easy enough to draw up a list of what Jane Austen seems to have 'left out' or *not* written about, though as we can see from a brief glance at the biographical details of her and her family's lives she was certainly aware – or made cognisant of – more than appears in her fiction. There she restricted herself to the point where we should do well perhaps to think again about what she did in fact put *in*. We should not expect to find, for instance, anything in Jane Austen's work like the following passage from Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849):

Time wore on and spring matured. The surface of England began to look pleasant: her fields grew green, her hills fresh, her gardens blooming; but at heart she was no better: still her poor were wretched, still their employers were harassed: commerce, in some of its branches, seemed threatened with paralysis, for the war continued; England's blood was shed and her wealth lavished: all, it seemed, to attain most inadequate ends. Some tidings there were indeed occasionally of successes in the Peninsula, but these came in slowly; long intervals occurred between, in which no quote was heard but the insolent self-felicitations of Bonaparte on his continued triumphs. Those who suffered from the results of the war felt this tedious and – as they thought – hopeless struggle against what their fears or their interests taught them to regard as an invincible power, most insufferable: they demanded peace on any terms: men like Yorke and Moore – and there were thousands whom the war placed where it placed them, shuddering on the verge of bankruptcy – insisted on peace with the energy of desperation.

They held meetings; they made speeches; they got up petitions to extort this boom: on what terms it was made they cared not.

All men taken singly, are more or less selfish; and taken in bodies they are intensely so. The British merchant is no exception to this rule: the mercantile classes illustrate it strikingly. These classes certainly think too exclusively of making money: they are too oblivious of every national consideration but that of extending England's (*i.e.* their own) commerce. Chivalrous feeling, disinterestedness, pride in honour, is too dead in their hearts. A land ruled by them alone

would too often make ignominious submissions – not at all from the motives Christ teaches, but rather from those Mammon instils. (Ch. 10)

Since the Peninsular War began in 1809 and the war(s) with Bonaparte dominated English national concerns for the first quarter of the nineteenth century – until the decisive battle of Waterloo (18 June 1815, two years before Jane Austen's death); and since – looking at home affairs, although the exigencies of the war had their effect here of course – the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800 were clearly aimed at suppressing the trade unions forming among the textile workers of Yorkshire and Lancashire, there were Scarcity riots in and around 1800, there were the Luddite riots in 1811, in which frames were broken in Nottingham, Derbyshire and Leicestershire, and there was a great deal of disturbance and discontent among the artisans in the West Riding from 1811 to 1815 – just noting these facts we can see that Charlotte Brontë's novel was set in the period which fell within the second half of Jane Austen's life and her most prolific creative years. We can also see that we should have little notion of these momentous internal and external events simply by reading her novels. To quote only one writer, who has made a point made by many others in various ways, reading Jane Austen's novels 'it would take an abnormally acute reader to realise that there had been a war on at all' (Esmé Wingfield-Stratford, *The Squire and his Relations*). As we shall see, it certainly would not have taken an 'abnormally acute' reader to gather from Jane Austen's novels that there had been a war on: indeed, it would have taken an abnormally obtuse one *not* to gather just that, particularly a reader of *Persuasion* but also a reader of *Pride and Prejudice*. More generally, it has become clear that Jane Austen was much more aware of contemporary events, debates and issues, of the wars and domestic unrest, of the incipiently visible results of the Industrial Revolution, and of a radical change taking place in the constitution of English society, than the conventional view allows, or perhaps wants to allow.

A related objection, and potentially a more serious one, is that Jane Austen not only did not know what was going on historically but also remained blithely and comfortably unaware of the prevailing Tory ideology which informed her work, writing

uncritically from its assumptions and classifications and within the boundaries of its rigid and foreclosing prejudices. Here is one of the more intelligent, if more extreme, versions of this criticism:

Many critics continue to venerate Jane Austen as a great artist who is also and inseparably a great 'moralist', while doggedly refusing to discuss the way her work mediates contemporary ideological, moral and social conflicts, unwilling or unable to discuss the way it is informed by a peculiarly Tory ideology and its incoherence. The consequence of this ideology is that instead of her art opening out gentry/middle-class reality and assumptions to a genuinely exploratory fiction which takes alternative forms of life and aspiration seriously, Jane Austen systematically closes up her imagination against critical alternatives. In doing so, her art, her religion, her morality and her version of the individual and community quite fail to transcend the narrow limitations of her historical class, albeit a class whose dominant role in English society is still very evident.

(David Aers, 'Community and Morality: Towards Reading Jane Austen', in *Romanticism and Ideology: Studies in English Writing 1765–1830*)

That Jane Austen held many Tory sympathies need hardly be questioned; but it does not follow that her work is uncritical of her society in many profound ways. It surely is. And there is another way of looking at this problem of the writer's relationship to the prevailing ideology of his or her time. Thus, according to Althusser, the works of a writer such as Balzac make us see the ideology from which they are born *because* they remain within that ideology, not because they transcend it. In fact Jane Austen partly remains within the ideology of her class and partly (and increasingly) transcends it. I would argue that almost everything David Aers says about Jane Austen is misleading or wrong, and testifies to another kind of misreading. Even his assertion that Jane Austen 'systematically closes up her imagination against critical alternatives' is an error, as the most superficial reading of *Persuasion* immediately demonstrates. As I hope will be apparent by the end of this book, to my mind it is clear that Jane Austen does both expose and criticise the