



JANE AUSTEN
SIX NOVELS & THEIR METHODS

MICHAEL WILLIAMS



JANE AUSTEN: SIX NOVELS AND THEIR METHODS

Michael Williams

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Plan of a Novel, ed. R. W. Chapman (London, 1926);
Jane Austen's Letters, 2nd edn, ed. R. W. Chapman (London, 1952) – hereafter referred to as *Letters*.

Page references to the novels and other writings of Jane Austen are, where appropriate, given in the text. The same applies to secondary, critical works cited, with reference by (at least) surname of author, date of work and page number. Further references, in the same style as in the text, are included in the Notes, which also embraces page references to primary works not by Austen. The Bibliography should be consulted for fuller information. Where two dates are given in a reference, the first is the date of original publication, the second that of the edition cited.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Note on References</i>	viii
1 Introduction: Fictional Methods and their Effects	1
2 <i>Northanger Abbey</i> : Some Problems of Engagement	10
3 <i>Sense and Sensibility</i> : Ideas and Arguments	31
4 <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> : Informal Arguments	53
5 <i>Mansfield Park</i> : Compromises	81
6 <i>Emma</i> : Mystery and Imagination	117
7 <i>Persuasion</i> : Becoming a Novel, Creating a Heroine	154
<i>Notes</i>	184
<i>Bibliography</i>	198
<i>Index</i>	207

1 Introduction: Fictional Methods and their Effects

... but All the Good will be unexceptionable in every respect – and there will be no foibles or weaknesses but with the Wicked, who will be completely depraved & infamous, hardly a resemblance of Humanity left in them. (Plan of a Novel)

It is no longer necessary to defend Jane Austen from the charge that she achieved her art unconsciously, and that in Henry James's celebrated phrase she was not much more than 'instinctive and charming'. It is, though, worth recording just how fully she knew, artistically, what she was about, and also how soon the knowledge came to her.¹ Among even the earliest surviving pages of the juvenilia, the spirited imitation of fictional devices is often more than a mockery of the clumsy or the improbable or the excessively stylised, on the surface. It is also a critical and amused questioning of some of the more fundamental aspects of the techniques and conventions available to a novelist for shaping a novel, and for helping to determine a relationship with a possible reader.

Take the example of the first pages of 'Jack & Alice'. Some of the burlesque looks to the methods and motives of characterisation, as in the portrait of the dazzlingly flawless hero exaggerated into the nonsensical, or the sets of supposed antitheses that are no more than jangling synonyms. Other elements go deeper still, and the opening of 'Jack & Alice' is also a joke about the workings of openings in general, and the problem of entering *in medias res*. Jane Austen starts her 'novel' by describing a masquerade, but instead of using the opportunity, as so many of her predecessors did, to introduce low scheming and thuggery, or an elevated disquisition on truth and its disguises, her masquerade is regarded from the first as a novelistic problem. She interrupts her account of it in order to describe the people who will be

attending, but does so with such thoroughness that the account of the masquerade, when resumed, is largely unnecessary. Even when they are masked, we know who everyone is, so that the 'never failing genius' of the hero, demonstrated in the speed with which he penetrates the masks, becomes a joke about the elaborate contrivances needed to convey this 'genius', a joke also about the dubious nature of the 'genius' itself.²

This strain of complex burlesque is also to be found, at least intermittently, in each of the six novels Austen wrote in adult life. Here it has become part of the novelist's pervasive effort to investigate the methods by which she establishes, orders and tests her material. It is of course true that any study of Austen's novels is in some way an examination of the narrative techniques they employ. The attempt to locate Austen in a literary-historical context, or to relate her achievement to the intellectual and moral preoccupations of her contemporaries and predecessors; the working-out of a consciously ideological argument about what W. H. Auden called her interest in 'the amorous effects of "brass"'; the drawing-out of 'education' as a significant theme in the novels; the consideration of these novels in relation to a general description or theory of what novels can or should 'do': all will have occasion, in one way or another, to examine the effect of the dialogue, for example, or the functioning of the authorial irony.³ But then such attempts are at best limited, at worst entirely predetermined, in what they reveal of the novels and their methods, by the particular nature of the approach being followed. To look at techniques in a more than oblique or incidental way, there must be a greater concentration on how individual techniques work and what they achieve. One way of doing this is to examine, on the one hand, the means employed by the novelist to shape the material of the novel, and, on the other, the interrelated but separate question of the kinds of response which the reader makes to the novel.

The bond and the discrepancies between 'text' and 'response' have been central issues for literary theorists in recent decades. Positions adopted have ranged from vigorous defences of the authority of the 'text' to equally vigorous declarations of the rights and freedoms of the 'reader'. My purpose is to adopt one of the less extreme positions, and I would cite what Wolfgang Iser (1976; 1978, p. x) has described as a 'dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction'. As the term 'dialec-

tic' indicates, such a position allows vital force both to 'text' and to 'reader'. The 'text' initiates and controls – but partially, never wholly – the response in the 'reader'; and the 'reader', in responding to the 'text', produces an 'interaction' that is more than the 'text', or at least in some respects different from it.⁴

It must at once be said, though, that my interest in this theoretical position is a specific and limited one. My focus is on the six Austen novels, their kinds of 'interaction' with 'readers', more specifically still on how some of these 'interactions' become possible. It is not, therefore, my intention either to provide a large-scale testing and demonstration of Iser's theories, or to provide rival accounts of the novel as a form, or of reading as a process. In short, my interest is in practical applications, rather than in theoretical implications. So, for example, though Iser and others have developed the notion of the 'implied reader' – the reader that the novelist has in mind when writing the novel, the reader created or projected by the novel – this is not a notion that I shall be seeking to apply. I do not doubt its use in other contexts, but it allows more predicative force to the novelist than the problems I examine in Austen's novels seem to suggest.

A focus on narrative techniques, in one way or another, is of course not new to Austen studies; but it would be fair to say that the emphasis has hitherto been on the shaping hand of the author alone, rather than on any concept of a 'dialectic'. The practice has also been to treat the narrative techniques as separate units that can be abstracted from the novels and then analysed and classified. As a method, it has naturally led to valuable insights, but it has limitations, some that are particularly telling for Austen's novels. The more completely we analyse the techniques as 'units', the less we can usefully say about the complex variousness of their interaction, or about the way they function within each novel as a whole. In order to establish general rules, exceptions are flattened out, variations are simplified, and the subtlety with which the techniques are used, on particular occasions, is blurred.

But it would be foolish to overlook what the approach has achieved. Mary Lascelles has lastingly enriched our understanding of the novels, in *Jane Austen and her Art* (1939), with the consideration of Austen's mastery of tone and of dialogue, and the use she makes of her 'communicative' style (pp. 90–102); of the ways in which the novelist 'chooses to fashion and control, by

the limitations she imposes on her subject, both its shape and its substance' (p. 133); of the analysis of the characteristics of Austen's comedy (pp. 139–46); or of the investigation of the relationship between narrator and reader (pp. 173–200). In all this there is valuable thinking about the general principles involved, but it is constrained by the fact that it can do only a little more than generalise. It is true, for instance that the link between reader and character depends on a sympathy that is 'compounded of liking and compassion in varying proportions' (p. 215), but we need more than this very general rule if we are to consider how, in particular, for one character, the link is forged, or the way its composition and strength vary through the course of the novel.

Some years later, in *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure* (1953; 1962), Andrew H. Wright offered an analysis of the complex variations of point of view in the six novels: 'it is sly, often intentionally misleading – or at least very delicately subtle: quite unobtrusive transitions carry the reader from one viewpoint to another, and only the closest attention will enable him to ferret out the real intention of the passage in question' (p. 46). Wright goes on to acknowledge that 'to separate is to do violence both to the unity of each novel and to the contextual harmony of the passages examined', yet he still prefers to categorise the 'six characteristic points of view' – ranging from 'objective account' to 'interior disclosures' – and he confidently assures us that his method 'clears a hundred ambiguities and misapprehensions; it makes plainer the intention' (p. 47). Of course his approach makes for some clarification, but the limitations, which he himself acknowledges, cannot be overlooked.

Much more recently, Karl Kroeber's *Styles in Fictional Structure* (1971) offers an examination of Austen's novels – and also those of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot – in order to attempt an account of the concept of 'style' and its inherent difficulties, and to describe the merits of 'systematized studies of fictional structures'. As that suggests, he too looks for the general rule, whether in regard to 'vocabulary', or 'character', or 'point of view', or the way a novelist can develop stylistically, or the use of 'imagery', or the 'romance–novel distinction', or the different ways in which larger or smaller parts of a novel are linked to and reflect the whole (pp. 8–9). Lloyd W. Brown's *Bits of Ivory* (1973) concentrates specifically on Austen's methods. Interestingly, he

argues for a move 'beyond the familiar categorization of the various components of the novelist's style. The full significance of each unit can only be grasped when it is analysed in relation to the themes and forms of each novel' (p. 5). That sounds promising enough, until we discover that his aim is actually to substitute for the old 'categorization' a new one of his own devising: thus his units – and they are treated very much as units – are 'verbal disputes', 'imagery', 'symbolism', 'conversation', 'letter writing', 'dialogue' and 'parody'. That does not quite prevent him from treating the 'units' as intimately connected with the novels as wholes, but the degree to which the classification is successful is also the degree to which this other aim is frustrated.

In *A Reading of Jane Austen* (1975) Barbara Hardy has also taken up questions relating to Austen's techniques. She is much less concerned with explicit categorising, but she still reflects different general approaches to the novels, in terms of 'the feelings and the passions', 'storytellers', 'social groups', 'properties and possessions'. Most usefully, perhaps, she examines what she calls Austen's 'flexible medium, a capacity to glide easily from sympathy to detachment, from one mind to many minds, from solitary scenes to social gatherings' (p. 14). Much of the preliminary mapping of this notion was done by Mary Lascelles, and it fits exactly the ground covered by Andrew Wright; but it is a measure of how far the thinking has advanced that the stress is now on the fluid movement from one position to another, rather than on defining the boundaries of each position. Even so, Hardy's remains an account of how, in general, the movement happens, and what in general are its effects.

More recently still, there is John Odmark's *An Understanding of Jane Austen's Novels* (1981). This seems at first to be promisingly asking some of the questions which earlier approaches omitted, since it claims its theoretical framework in a 'theory of reception' that is concerned with the 'relations among the component factors in the reading process: the *author*, the *text* and the *reader*' (p. xii). But unfortunately, this turns out, at least in Odmark's hands, to be among the least satisfactory of the attempts to deal with Austen's techniques. Like earlier approaches, it works by generalising: in his first two chapters, for instance, he takes up questions of 'irony' and 'point of view', but only to reach conclusions that were often anticipated, often indeed overtaken, by Mary Lascelles forty years earlier. He is

equally inadequate when showing what it is exactly, in the novels, that calls for the application of his theory, since he always seizes on some commonplace and then sets that up as if it *were* the novel. Assuming that *Northanger Abbey* is weakly constructed (p. 4), or asserting that in *Sense and Sensibility* there is 'a schematic presentation of character' (p. 6) are not achievements that either illuminate the novels or vindicate the theory. Even less fortunate is the way that, though he evidently conceives of reading as a very active process, Odmark is so preoccupied with accounting for authorial control and guidance that the reader seems, almost invariably, to be being led passively to pre-ordained conclusions (pp. 43–5, 52–4, 182–3, for instance). It is hardly necessary to suggest that readers seem usually to find the experience of reading Austen's novels somewhat less lifeless and rather more ambivalent.

It is the aim of this study to break with the tendency to generalise, and to examine the techniques of the novels as *techniques at work*, to see each novel in terms of the way it is put together, the questions it considers, the means it finds for exploring its material, and the 'dialectical' responses the reader can make. Where general principles and patterns are revealed they will be commented on, but it is not my primary purpose to examine the techniques in order to look for the general principles from which they derive, or the set of rules which their general functioning constitutes. And, once we view the techniques in terms of the specific effects they have at particular points in the novels, and the problems and pleasures of reading from page to page, then we shall find it more and more difficult, especially with these six novels, to see anything beyond a quite elementary usefulness in trying to establish the general rules. It is obvious that the novels have a common basis in ways of thinking and seeing the world, and in ways of deploying this understanding; equally it is true that the novels represent a significant chronological development, in terms both of what they deal in, and of how they do it. But it is as much the case that each novel has its own 'questions' to ask, and finds its own ways of asking them. Each, in short, has its own way of being a novel.

Another consequence of approaching the novels in this way, as we shall see, is that we shall find that there is an unusual degree to which the novels do *not* deal in truths and certainties, but are rather the means of investigating and testing propositions and

situations. That is not, somewhat anachronistically, to wish on Austen a heady relativism, and there is no particular sense in which she was not possessed of the certainties and the doubts of her own age: but it is what she did with these that is striking, and it is this that can be missed if we search too impetuously for a theme or a pattern in the novels. What are often taken as the conclusions towards which the novels work will thus begin to look more like the premises from which they start their investigations. It is not, for example, that Austen leads us to some conclusion, however elaborate and sophisticated, about the ways in which 'prejudice' and 'pride' can limit or pervert the understanding, in *Pride and Prejudice*: this is the assumption from which she starts, and in considering some of the difficulties and complexities of these concepts, she asks the reader what if, in a particular set of circumstances . . . ?

This takes us to the matter of existing criticism of the novels, by now a substantial body. As a record of previous readings of the novels, itself stimulating to later readers, and as an indication of those areas in the novels that have been most stimulating, or challenging, or rich, or difficult, or unpalatable, this substantial body is of crucial importance to an account of the novels that is also specifically and consciously an account of the reading of the novels. Therefore, the account offered here of the functioning of each novel will incorporate an account of its past treatment by the critics. That is not to suggest, though, that this is merely an attempt to provide a synthesis of established opinion; indeed we shall find that such a synthesising would be surprisingly difficult. It is of course to be expected, and it is necessary, that a novel worth the effort of reading should be susceptible to different, even divergent, readings, but, once that allowance is made, then the divergence associated with these novels is still surprisingly large – a consequence, no doubt at least in part, of the striking unresolvedness already noted. It is easy enough to find a consensus among the critics about the novels, but this is only possible in the broadest and least cutting of terms; if we try to be more specific and incisive, we must embark upon a particular 'interpretation', one which may borrow some credence from the novel, but which, as the product of an interaction between novel and reader, is at once more and less than the novel. We can all agree that *Sense and Sensibility* is 'about' the dangers of sensibility and the advantages of sense, or that *Emma* is 'about' the limitations of

imagination: any move beyond these placid and obvious generalities is a move towards the vitalised particularity and also the limitations of a specific 'interpretation'.

One means of focusing on particular instances of methods or meanings in the novels will be by way of comparisons with examples from the work of other writers. These contrasts will primarily be critical in nature, and will point to similarities and differences in the workings of a method, the solution of a technical problem or the achieving of a particular effect. Examples will come for the most part but not entirely from the eighteenth century, and for the most part but not entirely from novels. Thus, while this study makes no claim to offer a full literary history, even in sketch form, even in the end notes, it will imply some broad patterns of development, and some specific lines of descent: it will suggest ways in which Austen was influenced by her predecessors, or herself influenced her successors. But the chief purpose of these contrasts will be to illuminate the six novels and their workings.

Similarly, there will be occasion to consider more closely something of the social and historical context of the novels, the events and ideas out of which they grew, or which at any rate were a large part of the world in which they grew. Obviously, no amount of reading background or sources will make us see things quite as Austen and her contemporaries did; obviously there is a real sense in which it is much more important to establish her significance in the last decades of the twentieth century than to estimate her significance in the first decades of the nineteenth. But what she means now also incorporates, however vaguely or imperfectly, what she meant then. So, while making no pretence to a comprehensive account of 'background', and determined only by the exigencies of a particular problem in a particular novel, the questions formulated by the novels, and the means of dealing with them, will sometimes be examined in relation to the times of the novels. Everyone can see, for instance, that *Mansfield Park* is 'about morality' in some sense: whether or not that morality is to be associated with the Evangelicals or some other contemporary group is a question that, in the end, only *Mansfield Park* can answer. But it is an answer that we can only perceive if we already know something of the views and influences of contemporary moralists.

There are some obvious objections to the approach I am

embarking upon: it could be said, for example, that there is a certain rather carefree eclecticism about the diversity of ways I adopt in approaching the novels; or that I am somewhat ineffectually attempting to provide a hold-all for saying all I wish to say about the novels. Certainly, I have been suggesting that there are different means of considering them, and that some of these should be adopted simultaneously. But the different means all spring directly from the problems that arise when one attempts to consider the workings of Austen's novels, and their effects. And I make no pretence to having made use of all such possible approaches, or even to having made exhaustive use of the approaches I do follow. This connects with what must be the more serious charge that, while I imply that there are limitations to the act of 'interpretation', and that I have found a means of passing beyond those limitations, I offer accounts of the novels that are themselves 'interpretations'. But that is both inevitable and obvious. Any attempt to make a coherent statement about a novel must, if it tries to move beyond the obvious generalities, be an attempt at interpretation, and all I can say of mine is that they are offered in the knowledge of the limitations by which any act of 'interpretation' is beset. I do not claim to have analysed every last and least possibility of meaning, or to have catalogued all the ways of Austen's ambiguity. All I claim is that by considering the workings of the novels, and the different ways in which these can be responded to, I have shed some light on what *are* the ambiguities, and what *are* the possibilities of interpretation, for these novels.

There is only one way of organising such a study, and that is to order the accounts of the novels chronologically, novel by novel. There is of course a special difficulty with Austen here, since the chronology of the first three novels remains uncertain. But, since our interest is, in the first place, in the novels as they have come to us, rather than in the process by which they actually reached that condition, the date of first publication effectively orders all but one of the novels. *Northanger Abbey* remains a problem because that would place it last, jointly with *Persuasion*, and yet it was, at least in an earlier version, the first to be sold to a publisher. I have therefore followed the modern convention of treating it as 'first', but always with the reservation that this may not be entirely accurate since the possibility of late revisions can never be discounted.

2 *Northanger Abbey*: Some Problems of Engagement

'Oh! I am delighted with the book! I should like to spend my whole life in reading it. I assure you, if it had not been to meet you, I would not have come away from it for all the world.'

(Catherine Morland on *The Mysteries of Udolpho*)

Everybody knows that *Northanger Abbey* is a parody of the Gothic novel. Everyone sees that it is also, to borrow the sub-title of Fanny Burney's *Evelina*, the 'history of a young lady's entrance into the world'. And a well-established tradition insists that these two aspects of the novel are incompatible, even that the existence of each one is an active threat to the functioning of the other. Of course, the novel is also about reading and pleasure, reading and instruction. Does this help to heal the fracture?

The novel was probably first drafted after the earliest versions of what were to become *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. In 1803 the manuscript was sold to a publisher, but never published by him, and Austen repurchased it thirteen years later. After 1803, she probably revised it at least once, but the nature of the revisions can only be guessed at, and in the last months of her life she wrote of having laid it aside in an apparently unsatisfactory condition: it was published posthumously. All of this seems to suggest that the novel is both 'early' and 'unfinished'; that it is a not-quite-successful experiment by a novelist who was yet to achieve the coherence of maturity; and that it is not much more than a bridge between the vigorous and percipient parodies of the juvenilia, and the substantial achievements of the later novels.¹

The novel has, of course, never lacked defenders: but if their attempts are regarded successively, then they can still seem in fact to be revealing an incoherence in the novel. Unifying patterns are perceived, but only by including some and not all of the

novel's facets. What is omitted is then often criticised as being crude or irrelevant. A sophisticated account of the problem has been given by A. Walton Litz (1965, pp. 59, 62, 68–9). He suggests that the chapters primarily concerned with parody – the first two, and the five concerned with Catherine's Gothic fantasies at the Abbey – 'form detachable units'. He concedes that 'the Gothic elements are a brilliant commentary on Catherine's general character and behaviour', and he argues that Catherine is at once the anti-heroine, created in reaction to the Gothic conventions, and a heroine being educated 'into reality'. Yet he also insists that the expression of the novel's main themes is 'hampered by lapses in tone and curious shifts in narrative method', and he concludes that 'Jane Austen was experimenting in *Northanger Abbey* with several narrative methods she had not fully mastered, and the result is a lack in consistency of viewpoint'. In other words, the reader is prevented from engaging fully with the text.

Others have tried to perceive a unity in just this diversity of method. Katrin Ristkok Burlin (1975, p. 89) insists that the novel is a 'single, complex treatment of the theme of fiction', in which the reader is exposed to four different kinds of fiction. These are 'the absurd extravagance of sentimental Gothic fictions', 'the satiric, educative fictions of Henry Tilney', 'the manipulative, egotistical fictions of the Thorpes', and 'the satiric and realistic fiction of *Northanger Abbey* itself'. But surely the novel is not only about reading and fictionalising, in the way that this categorising suggests? Jan Fergus (1983, pp. 11, 16, 19–20) concedes that 'the novel is about writing novels', but her interest is largely confined to the elements of burlesque; and, though she also claims that the processes of education are important in the novel, this is only as far as they affect the reader, since for Fergus the heroine is deliberately excluded from such processes. Eric Rothstein (1974, p. 14) takes a significantly larger view of the question of education, in developing his argument about how 'the strength of *Northanger Abbey*, and its theme, emerge from the connections between Catherine's education and ours, and between the social and literary modes of her experience'. But, since his is a sophisticated extension of the contrast between high-flown Gothic improbabilities, and the ordinariness of the everyday, he is silent on the important non-Gothic literary links with the novel. Frank J. Kearful (1965, pp. 514–17, 527) claims that

the unity of the novel resides in a complicated interplay of satire and serious novel: but he has to redefine the parody in the first two chapters to make it into satire and thus a part of his formulation. Kearful also exemplifies the danger of making too much of the novel as a many-faceted thing. For him, Austen

is writing what is not simply a novel or a satire, a burlesque or a parody, a comedy or a tragedy, a romance or an anti-romance. She is, rather, combining elements of all these in such a fashion as to make us aware of the paradoxical nature of all illusion – even those illusions by which we master illusion.

But that begins to read like Polonius's recommendation of the Players; certainly it is more than Kearful's argument actually supports. Then, too, he assumes that the differing 'methods' exist as large and sequential blocks of chapters, but this leaves him insufficient scope for dealing with the way that there can be a shift of 'method' from sentence to sentence, or even within one sentence.

It begins therefore to seem that the novel is indeed attempting to pose important and difficult questions about the links between fictional and actual worlds. But, if we are not to conclude that the questions are muddled, we must find a form in which the different elements of parody, satire and education novel can each take their due part. This means in turn that we must establish a way in which the reader is able to respond simultaneously in different ways to the different elements, when they combine. Perhaps we need to think in terms of a continuum, one that will enable us to perceive a diversity of positions, and the complex interchange between the different positions that are reflected in the novel. At one end, there are accounts of Gothic, some so broad as to be pastiche, or even simple imitation, rather than parody; there are the occasions of genuine and cutting parody of the Gothic, and there are the significant echoes, often parodic, of non-Gothic literature; there is the shading of parody of novels into satire on the reading of novels, and that satire into a different but related satire on the social life of Bath, where art is the stylised representation of life, and life can seem to be an imitation of the imitation; there is the more straightforward reading of books for entertainment and education, and there are