



Northanger Abbey

"Further Notes"[part 2]

DETAIL:

The dramatic power of her characters led some nineteenth-century writers, including Macaulay and George Lewes, to regard her as no less than a "prose Shakespeare" In the words of George Moore, Jane Austen turned the washtub into the vase; in effect, she transformed the eighteenth-century novel--which could be a clumsy and primitive performance--into a work of art. . . . She invented her own special mode of fiction, the domestic comedy of middle-class manners, a dramatic, realistic account of the quiet backwaters of everyday life for the country families of Regency England from the late 1790s until 1815 The modesty of Jane Austen's fictional world is caught in her remark to a novel-writing niece that "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work upon," and her famous comment to a novel-writing nephew about "the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush" which "produces little effect after much labour."

The novels communicate a profound sense of the movement in English history--when the old Georgian world of the eighteenth century was being carried uneasily and reluctantly into the new world of Regency England, the Augustan world into the romantic.

Historically, the novels are a challenge to the idea of society as a civilizing force and to the image of man's fulfillment as an enlightened social being. They question the driving optimism of the period--that this, in the development of English society, was triumphantly the Age of Improvement. Improvement was the leading spirit of Regency England, its self-awarded palm. Certainly it was unequalled as a period of economic improvement, in the wake of the industrial revolution. The wartime economy accelerated this new prosperity. Alongside this material improvement there was an air of self-conscious, self-congratulatory

improvement in manners, in religious zeal, in morality, in the popularization of science, philosophy, and the arts. It was the age of encyclopedias, displaying the scope and categories of human knowledge in digestible form. Books and essays paraded "Improvement" in their titles.

But many of the achievements of Regency improvement were more apparent than real. This is nicely symbolized in its most conspicuous manifestation across the countryside itself. Landscape improvement was celebrated as the latest of the fine arts, much theorized about by contemporary aestheticians and brandished as a distinctively English contribution to the sum of civilization. Country houses and their grounds were expensively and elaborately improved, as GENERAL TILNEY's "improving hand" has transformed the pre-Reformation convent of NORTHANGER ABBEY into a modern home of extravagant and faintly ludicrous luxury, and as in MANSFIELD PARK, REPTON, the fashionable improver of the day, is to transform SOTHERTON COURT, a fine old Elizabethan country house, destined to be adorned in "a model dress."

Throughout the novels Jane Austen plays deftly with the terminology of improvement, carrying its negative overtones of novelty, showiness, and superficiality into the realms of manners, behavior, and morality. Improvement can be a facade, a veneer. Jane Austen's skeptical, testing irony is the acid solution to peel it off, exposing the ramshackle foundations of social and personal morality which improvement could flashily conceal. For MR. RUSHWORTH, SOTHERTON is "a prison--quite a dismal prison," crying out for the hand of Repton, whose specialty was making old houses look "cheerful." But the improving hand that first gets to work is Henry Crawford's. The cheerfulness and freedom his brings to Southerton's "prison" is a sexual escapade with the owner's wife!

Socially and politically, improvement had a very bitter ring. Essentially it was a middle-class conceit. Outside the gentry's world of property and privilege was a wholly different scene. Throughout this period a third of the country, its laboring population, lived permanently on the verge of starvation, while the rich became even richer, their prosperity more blatant. In this fertile ground revolutionary ideas took root; and the period from the beginning of the 1790s until the PETERLOO MASSACRE of 1819 was the most violent and repressive time in English history since the Civil War. Habeas corpus was suspended. Freedom of speech and freedom of assembly were curtailed. Bread riots were met with force, and with that blunt instrument the masses were kept down. Jane Austen gives no more than a fleeting glimpse of England's violence. In NORTHANGER ABBEY the London mobs come in as a joke. We never see the grinding misery of the poor; they are simply objects of charity, to be visited with a bowl of soup. It was not that Jane Austen was unaware. Hampshire and Kent, where she spent most of her adult life, were as badly hit by agricultural poverty as any other part of England. She must have seen it for herself and read about it in the essays and pamphlets of crusading reformers; and met it poignantly in her favorite poet, Crabbe, who delivered a starkly unpastoralizing report of what he observed, 'the Village of Life a Life of Pain.'

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Ironically, one of Jane Austen's major achievements in the novels is to have captured the total illusion of the gentry's vision, the experience of living in privileged isolation, of being party to a privileged outlook, of belonging to a privileged community, whose distresses, such as they are, are private, mild, and genteel. Each of the homes and neighborhoods is its

own "little social commonwealth," a microcosm, the center of a minute universe. The irony is implicit. The miniature issues of these little worlds, so realistic, so much the center of the stage, vivid and magnified to the point of surrealism, imply another, larger world beyond: "the flourishing grandeur of a Country, is but another term for the depression and misery of the people . . . to speak of the expensive luxury and refinements of an age, is but, with cruel irony, to remind us how many myriads are destitute." John Thelwall, in *THE PERIPATETIC* (1793), was presenting a line of argument which was familiar to Jane Austen's audience and which the novels artfully exploit. "The depression and misery" of the common people was a theme she could never handle directly; her way was to treat it by silent implication

[Lady Catherine de Bourgh's activities in the parish of Hunsford: "Whenever any of the cottagers were disposed to be quarrelsome, discontented or too poor, she sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints, and scold them into harmony and plenty." A similar reality of English life comes in Chapter 14 of *NORTHANGER ABBEY*, where HENRY TILNEY makes fun of his sister for supposing that CATHERINE's mysterious hintings about "something very shocking indeed" in London-- "uncommonly dreadful. I shall expect murder and every thing of the kind"--refers to a calamity that has actually happened. Catherine is merely talking about the latest Gothic novel; and Tilney enjoys himself, elaborating on his sister's fearful imaginings: ". . . .she immediately pictured to herself a mod of three thousand men assembling in St. George's Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood . . ." His tone is mocking and lighthearted . . . but historically his sister's train of thought is completely credible. The novel is set at the turn of the century, and in July 1795 there was a meeting of the radical London Correspondence Society, 100,000 strong, at St. George's Fields. All leading to the great unrest on 1795 and the pebble that cracked King George III carriage window. . . .]

It is with such momentary and glancing allusions that Jane Austen reminds the reader of England unseen, which lies beyond the blinkered social focus of the gentry's vision. But these are pinpoints of light. There was another "depression and misery" that she knew more intimately, and cold command fully and creatively. This was the private, personal history of women like herself, trapped and stifled within the confines of a hothouse society, recognizing its brittleness and artificiality, but with no other world to exist in. . . . [British Writers, 101-105]

W.H. Auden's verse epistle "Letter to Lord Byron" confesses a discomfort at finding such a streak of cold realism in the nature of Austen's works:

You could not shock her more than she shocks me:
Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.
It makes me most uncomfortable to see
An English spinster of the middle class
Describe the amorous effects of "brass",
Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
The economic basis of society.

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