

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Review Essay: The Austenisation of Sensibility & the Darcyfication of Jane Austen: A Reflection

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In recent years a slew of books, movies, websites, blogsites, have appeared in connection with the life and works of the famous English writer Jane Austen. This is so is not surprising, considering that in a world driven to irrationality and almost suicidal behaviour people do need some kinds of reassurances that life is basically good, decent and that in the end good triumphs over evil, even if evil does linger around for a long time doing its usual rounds of menace and violence and abuse. I have been reading with great interest the hubbub over *The Jane Austen Book Club* – a kind of ‘art film’ made with very interesting cross-referencing and music. Given that the major newspapers (*Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, etc.) all gave the film positive reviews, it certainly merits watching – after all the worth of a major writer lies precisely in the fact that readers/audiences/people find new and newer ways of approaching and interpreting the writer’s works.

Jane Austen is a rather special case of a major writer made major by the literary establishment which must have, from the very outset, decided that here was a relatively harmless author whose intense focus on the intricacies of human relationships afforded a way of both promulgating the Great Tradition while at the same time appearing to be critical of vastly held social norms and mores. We touch here the very sensitive and complex nature of ‘sensibility’. When I was studying Austen at high school our teacher took us through that not-often-discussed novel *Persuasion*. Some maintain that this supposedly last work of our author does not quite represent the real Austen. For here she was reflecting perhaps a little too much on the follies and foibles of those whose lives revolve essentially around play, albeit, play at very sophisticated, high levels of society. Very luckily our high school teacher did his best to show us young ones how the author had utilised the most resourceful riches of the English language in order to get her viewpoint/s across. It was important, he told us, that we read and reread this remarkable author because not to have done so would reveal us to be fundamentally uneducated! Now here was the nub: we the young ones were just being awakened to our own voices, our own literary voices and oftentimes these were shrill, disgruntled and showed little or no respect for the likes of Austen who was parodied and her six inches of ivory given very short shrift. A few years later when I studied Austen again at University, we were blessed to have a descendent of the author herself take us through *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*. With his penchant for the works and his own passionate regard for ensuring that his charges were not under any delusions about the real greatness of this greatest of all novelists in the English language, our professor painstakingly demonstrated to us just how subtle the Austen artifice was and just how blessed we were to be able to enjoy its rich tapestry of allusions, ironies and exposes. Now this last – *exposes* – caught my attention for I had always had this uneasy suspicion that here was an author who, for some odd, unexplained reason, seemed not to have ‘lived’ but to have existed on a plane which by its very trappings made sure she was not touched by Reality – or at least the kind of Reality I was used to. Poverty, hardship, violence, discrimination (except of the

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very discreet sort) seem not to have a place in her works – or if they did, they were summarily dismissed as being orders belonging to the lower levels of humankind. What a far cry from *Gulliver's Travels* or even that strange misfit *Tristram Shandy* or that desperate plea for compassion evidenced in *Wuthering Heights* or that moving spectacle of misplaced glory and vision in *Frankenstein*. Both before and after our author there were others who seem to me to have given this Reality more worthy notice. But I did realise that of her six novels (the six we were made to read/study) *Mansfield Park* stood out in its trenchant criticism of society valuing money more than it ought to. I remember during tutorials this perspective of mine drove some of my fellow tutees mad because they said my gripe/s were basically out of a 'sour grapes' mindset. When I cheekily pointed out that it could not have escaped Austen that her heroine was named Fanny Price in a context in which 'price' seemed to outweigh 'value' and morality, I was shut down by 'How can you be so vulgar?' I remember our tutor was bemused by these exchanges but she, too, didn't seem to want to enter into what I was very slowly beginning to realise was forbidden territory. Jane Austen was sacred; she occupied too lofty a position in the hierarchy of established authors and who was I to want to question the fundamental values she was enshrining through her great novels?

What kind of a life did Austen actually lead? We know she was involved in some sort of a relationship with this Irish bloke but what happened? Where is the documentation of her love-life? Some I know will think it's perverse to dwell on personal issues of this nature but I tend to think otherwise. Much of a great writer's strength resides in that wonderful border country of *real-life* and *imagined life*. What about Austen? In all the six novels, as many have observed over the years, life seems to stop once marriage is achieved – the depictions of married life are pathetically weak and almost stereotypical where again and again the man is dominant and the woman a little silly. I have so far seen only a handful of essays written by women who are prepared to take Austen as a woman and subject her to what we now have become accustomed to: gender stereotypes. Austen does not come out well in these essays even though most of the authors still continue to genuflect. There is this mysterious aura about our author which mystifies and seems to keep real stringent criticism away.

Thus what I have called the 'Austenisation of Sensibility.' If by this awkward word 'Sensibility' we mean 'groundedness', the capacity to truly *feel*, then it seems to me that Austen was afraid of real and deep feeling. I believe she had a deep sense of self-doubt, almost as if she were afraid to let go lest the experience overwhelmed her. Hence she always goes for 'sense': it is easier to work within the given confines of accepted modalities of behaviour. Hence every time real sensibility is involved there is an escape, a running away, brought back to acceptance only after some measure of punishment/remorse is shown. We know only too well these days what can happen when real feelings are expressed – ours is an age slowly starting to appreciate that all our years of education and achievements have yet to properly prepare us for a world in which individuals can openly express what they really feel and/or think.

So Jane Austen is a safe author, an author whom authorities (Authority) can use to pretend that at least a modicum of understanding comes about when students read and study the multi-layered textured pages of an Austen novel. Frequently these authorities delude themselves because the keener students, those whose sensibilities *are* engaged when they read Austen, go on to become sceptical, even cynical, about feelings, about sensitivities, about human nature, preferring to stay away/alooof from

the day-to-day intercourses of human beings in which complexities both inform and educate our relationships. Thus the flourishing of marriage/premarriage counseling centres worldwide; thus the flourishing of thousands of websites devoted to promoting a healthier understanding of human emotions, personal relationships, etc. I am not unaware that in skirting the real issues pertaining to Reality/Sensibility, our author did, on occasion, hint at the enormous powers at play which reduce ordinary men and women to gawk and envy at the lot of those who employ them or those whom they sometimes encounter in their meanderings. It is one thing, as many have pointed out, for Lizzy to despise her good friend Charlotte for marrying the priggish and pompous clergyman whose advances she had rejected, and quite another thing to learn that there are women in the world who do not lead comfortable lives through the largesse of inheritances. The Charlottes make up at least 90% of womankind. And though there is a definite place for the likes of Emma it is to be noted that true meaning does not often rest in the comforts of knowing that Mr Knightly is a distant relative of the morose, brooding, sometimes self-benighted Mr Darcy.

But here we must draw attention to the almost timeless appeal, especially for women, of the likes of Mr. Darcy. Hollywood (even Bollywood) triumphantly posts a new, better, more charming, more attractive, more stud-like, Mr. Darcy every few years. People do live vicariously – escape is, for sure, one of the perennial reasons for the existence of the entertainment industry. When highly intelligent women in careers which demand careful and sharp differentiations of layers of meaning and intent go gaga over the latest Hollywood (Bollywood) has to offer by way of a Mr Darcy hunk, it makes me wonder if, like the deeper and disturbing revelations of *Sex And The City*, these women are admitting the paltry, mundane nature of their own private, personal lives. What I have termed the ‘Darcyfication of Jane Austen’ makes itself felt and present in the untold numbers of narratives, confessions and guilt-ridden actions surrounding Plain Janes desiring Darcy hunks. Again and again, I am convinced, whatever the meatier criticisms proffered by the (herself) naive Elizabeth Bennet, the majority of women would abandon their high morals and willingly surrender themselves to the desultory charm of the Mr Darcys. This ultimately, I think, is the basic reason why Jane Austen continues to have this hold on people: she created a mythological world in which the Mr Darcys have almost total control of women, much to the dismay of ordinary men. The failure of this great writer lies in the fact that like herself, her heroines live in an unreal world, making believe that all around them is safe (her novels don’t even show the English moors to be what they are/can be!), that tomorrow will be much like today and that with time and patience all wounds will heal without too much sorrow, grief and suffering. How our gifted and talented writer managed to avoid referencing the horrible exploitations which made the Mr Darcys rich and decadent, how she refused to engage with the terrible experiences which young girls and women were exposed to, how she even, it appears, refused to enter into any personal relationship which would take the covers off, as it were, the artificial, remote and removed existence which protected the likes of her heroines from Reality, all of these are beyond simple reckoning. Freud somewhere incisively states that many a time we use our mind as a filter for our feelings because of our inhibitions, fears, anxieties, especially of the truly sexual kind. I believe this to be relevant to the ‘case’ of Ms Jane Austen.

All of the above is written in response to two specific books which I have just finished reading: Maya Slater’s *Mr Darcy’s Diary* (Phoenix, Orion, 2007) and G M

Poyla's *Jane Austen and the Black Hole of British History* (G M Poyla, 1998, revised/updated, 2008). The Slater book is a fictionalised account of Mr. Darcy's ruminations as he encounters the imponderable Miss Elizabeth Bennett and mulls over his good friend Charles's obsession with her sister. It is fairly well-written and is a straightforward read. I enjoyed the Slater's using Lord Byron as a diversion for both Mr. Darcy's and Charles' preoccupations – here, at least, is a healthy and robust portrayal of sexuality. Whatever we may say of Byron's misguided ways, there is no denying that he 'lived' and wasn't at all embarrassed or sorry to articulate his desires and longings. A rather nice foil to the likes of Mr. Darcy who throughout tries, without success I think, to rationalise his own weakness when it comes to acting like a man. Call this sexist but the Mr. Darcy whose 'diary' we are given access to through the imaginative musings of Ms Slater emerges as a somewhat tiresome, vain, boorish non-doer full of himself. Along the way – and this is a good, redeeming virtue of this book – we are given some insights into the existence of this upper-class decadent set who basically had little to do apart from attending parties and their *toilette*.

G M Poyla's book is an altogether different read: here is a man with many axes to grind-and several of these axes are real sharp and they cut and they hurt! Here is the great Jane Austen lain naked (well, as naked as one could possibly have her be, given that throughout there has been, according to Poyla, an ardent desire to conceal Reality, the reality of Jane Austen's life and living) with all the blemishes. Poyla's basic grouse, if I understand him correctly, is that Austen does not handle history rightly – that she steers people away from the horrors of her age and therefore there is much to be said about how she compromised morality. There are plenty of minutiae in this book and I am struck by the sheer energy and commitment to a cause (and it IS a cause which Poyla openly champions – the exposing of hypocritical history touted in brilliant fictions.) which is openly on display here. Poyla draws parallels between and among some cruel historic events (the numerous 'Holocausts' – you must read the entire book to fully appreciate Poyla's thesis) and reveals all manner of links and conspiracy theories which, for him, fundamentally pose a grave threat to all humanity. While I am in sympathy with his basic thrust insofar as Jane Austen was frightened to embrace the dark worlds which through her family connections she knew about, I am not able to verify and/or confirm that Poyla's more emphatic political views and posited standpoints do help us much by way of enlightening us. I learnt a lot, gleaned many new insights into the larger frameworks of the Austen *mythos* and along the way got to know better the underlying thesis of the 'black hole of British history'. But I cannot state that Poyla did the best he could/can – there are many flaws in the writing and the renditions of this otherwise passionately written and highly provocative book.

There is no doubt that the Jane Austen industry will continue to delight the literary eager-beavers and all of her acolytes. What does seem necessary, I feel, is that Jane Austen be *appropriately* studied and put in proper context. For all her so-called artistic use and manipulation of the English language she could not, I am afraid, bring herself to truly confront the one person who should matter to every great artist/writer: herself.