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Mrs Leavis and Miss Austen: the “Critical Theory” Reconsidered

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Very little is known of Jane Austen’s methods of composition. Of the six novels there survives only a brief fragment, sixteen pages of *Persuasion*, and for information about her workshop we have to rely upon the evidence of the less important pieces, the unfinished first drafts of *The Watsons* and *Sanditon*. The remainder of the manuscript material consists of fair copies, which reveal almost nothing of the artist at work. But perhaps this lack of knowledge is no great handicap. We have the six novels, and most of us are happy enough to devote our attention to them, without wondering unduly about their genesis. Curiosity about the origins of such finished works of art seems to belong to the historian, the biographer, or the literary psychologist, rather than the critic. But between 1941 and 1944 there appeared in *Scrutiny*¹ a “Critical Theory of Jane Austen’s Writings,” by Mrs. Q. D. Leavis, insisting that no criticism of Jane Austen can be properly based unless it is grounded on a close knowledge of her methods of composition. This, and Mrs. Leavis’s other claims and conclusions are so remarkable that anyone treating Jane Austen critically must take account of the theory, whether to accept or reject it.

For Twenty years it has remained unchallenged. It has achieved the status of a working theory and critical discussions are frequently conducted on the assumption that its conclusions are proved. Its influence upon readers of *Scrutiny* is probably wide; Eric Bentley wanted to include the articles in his anthology, *The Importance of Scrutiny*, and he pressed for them to be published in book form. In 1944 Edmund Wilson wrote that here Mrs. Leavis was getting to grips with Jane Austen’s artistic development as other critics had not done. And though Professor Mudrick questioned the theory on several points, he acknowledges the strength of Mrs Leavis’s perceptions and scholarship.² It is these matters that I wish to consider.

In *Scrutiny* the theory filled 95 pages, and in examining Mrs. Leavis’s case I can do nothing more than abstract the major propositions and conclusions, and I must apologise in advance for the consequent weakening of her argument. Her basic assumption is that unless we examine how Jane Austen wrote “no criticism of her novels can be just or even safe.”³ The preliminary to criticism is the establishment of a writing timetable, and an understanding of the close and detailed relationship between the early writing and the novels, and between all the literary work and her life. Mrs. Leavis believes that in Jane Austen “literary history has ... a uniquely documented case of the origin and development of artistic expression, and an enquiry

into the nature of her genius and process by which it developed can go very far indeed on sure ground.”⁴ “Taken together” (the works and the letters) “offer the literary detective as well as the literary critic a harvest of clues and evidence...”⁵ ; “... a great deal of what seems to be creation can be traced through her surviving letters to have originated in life.”⁶

The second major point is that the novels “are palimpsests through whose surface portions of earlier versions, or of other and earlier compositions quite unrelated, constantly protrude, so that we read from place to place at different levels.”⁷ Mrs. Leavis understands that behind the novels there are “early versions which bear little resemblance to the novels as published.”⁸ Bringing these points together, we are presented with the proposition that the “novels are geological structures, the earliest layer going back to her earliest writings, with subsequent accretions from her reading, her personal life and those lives most closely connected with hers, all recast ...”⁹ This theory is applied to the development Mrs. Leavis supposes to have taken place when *The Watsons* was changed into *Emma*, and *Lady Susan* into *Mansfield Park*.

As a preliminary, before examining the theory in action, I should qualify Mrs Leavis’s claim that her inquiry “can go very far indeed on sure ground.” First, of the six novels, only the sixteen pages of *Persuasion* have survived to show us the exact nature of the drafts; and there is nothing to show the actual process by which Mrs. Leavis supposes the earlier writing was transformed into the mature works. Secondly, we have very little information *about the* composition of the novels. From a memorandum by Cassandra¹⁰ we know when five of the six novels were written; that *Pride and Prejudice* was originally named *First Impressions*, and was later published “with alterations and contractions”; and of *Sense and Sensibility* she wrote, “I am sure that something of the same story and characters had been written earlier & called *Elinor & Marianne*.” In addition we learn from the *Memoir*¹¹ and *Life and Letters*¹² that *Elinor and Marianne* was an epistolary novel, written before 1796, and the dates of the various revisions to the first two novels. So Mrs. Leavis’s claim, that at a certain stage each one of the novels was in epistolary form, is largely hypothesis. Only of *Sense and Sensibility* is this certainly true; in the case of *Pride and Prejudice* it is a possibility; but as for the other novels there is no external evidence in favour of such an assumption. Indeed, Cassandra’s memorandum (which for a number of reasons I believe to be authoritative) argues against such a possibility. Having recorded that considerable changes took place in the first two works it is unlikely that she would have ignored alterations on a similar scale to the four later novels; but of these she records nothing more than the dates of composition.

This example of Mrs. Leavis’s argument will serve to illustrate that far from being based “on sure ground,” in the absence of fact, her theory is really a matter of conjecture, developed on a series of similarities and parallels that she finds among the works, and between the works and incidents in Jane Austen’s life and family history. We scarcely need reminding of the dangers, and weaknesses of such a method of literary investigation; and in the case of Jane Austen, the arguments by resemblance is on especially difficult ground. Her plots, characters, and background are those of the familiar world of her own social group. The novels, and much of her other writing, are concerned with the experiences of a young woman as she moves toward love and marriage, the crucial period of the heroine’s life. Among the works we can find much the same events, and similar people, arranged in another pattern, given a different tone and a new meaning. The art is in fine gradations, as Jane Austen knew. And it is obvious from many of her perceptive critical remarks that Mrs. Leavis is equally aware of this. But in developing her argument she forgets that among the six novels, the quantity of other writing, over five hundred pages of letters and extensive family reminiscence, resemblances among the figures, settings, and incidents are almost inevitable. That they do occur should be accepted as a matter

of fact, not as an invitation to speculate. For instance, Mrs. Leavis finds that Jane Austen's letters are full of character sketches which "often appear in a recognisable form in the novels,"¹³ She takes Mr Lushington from Letter 87, a figure who "suggests Mr. Walter Elliot, or Harriet Moore's husband who suggests Mr. John Knightley or Miss Milles and her mother who suggest Miss Bates, and hers –the list is endless."¹⁴ Yes, the list is "endless"; not because Jane Austen took her characters directly from life, but because they are so lifelike, a distinction that Mrs. Leavis fails to make. As Dr. Chapman has said, "the assumption that her characters had real prototypes goes back to her own time, and was then a tribute, though a clumsy one, to her verisimilitude."¹⁵ And the *Memoir* states quite plainly: "her own relatives never recognised any individual in her characters. ...She said that she thought it quite fair to note peculiarities and weaknesses, but that it was her desire to create, not to reproduce."¹⁶ Her art was to give form and meaning to her observation, of which the letters are a record. But this does not mean that we must share Mrs. Leavis's view of the letters as an "indispensable stage in the production of the novels."¹⁷ Neither should we accept on trust the wider range of resemblances Mrs. Leavis finds between the novels and the earlier pieces.

Having considered the general nature of the critical theory, I want now to illustrate the extent to which Mrs. Leavis is compelled to construct a hypothesis out of speculation rather than fact. The theory stands partly upon a timetable of composition, constructed out of the known dates and Mrs. Leavis's inquiry. This enables her to date the original drafting, or the large-scale revision of the novels. She claims that Jane Austen was in the "habit of constructing her novels on the current calendar."¹⁸ But a close examination of the novels reveals that only in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* is it clear that the time scheme of the plot was based on a calendar. *Pride and Prejudice* was published, in 1813, and as the dates in the story fit the 1811-1812 calendar, there is good reason for supposing that this was the actual period of the final revision. On the other hand, *Mansfield Park*, based upon the 1808-1809 calendar, was published in 1814, and according to notes by Cassandra and Jane Austen herself, it was written between February, 1811, and soon after June, 1813. If, as Mrs Leavis claims, a version of *Mansfield Park* was in existence in 1808-1809, why should Cassandra remain silent about it when she bothers to record the changes made to *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*? It is again on calendar evidence that she dates *The Watsons* for 1807, finding one date in fifty pages to fit the almanac for that year. But apart from this single date there is no evidence that the events of the plot are located in such a time scheme. So, far from it being Jane Austen's habit to construct her novels on the current calendar, she only did so once, for *Pride and Prejudice*.

Another rather startling proposition is that "Catharine" (a juvenilia piece, dated August, 1792) is the prototype for *Northanger Abbey*. One's surprise is not so much that anyone should suppose a direct relationship between the works, as at Mrs. Leavis's boldness in doing so. When she made this suggestion all that was available of "Catherine" was the first eight lines, and a brief resume of the plot:¹⁹ this unfinished story (over seventeen thousand words) was not published until 1951."²⁰ It is in connection with *Northanger Abbey* that Mrs Leavis makes a generalisation about the prototypes of all the novels; she claims that their originals were "as much dependent for the most part on family jokes as *Northanger Abbey* still is."²¹ This directly contradicts another part of the critical theory, where *Lady Susan* is said to have been the original for *Mansfield Park*. Yet *Lady Susan* is remarkable as the first of Jane Austen's works to be free from the layer of private references and jokes that underlies much of the juvenilia. Another weakness of the theory with regard to prototypes is that while Mrs. Leavis claims to be able to identify in the earlier writing originals for five of the novels, she admits that as the prototype of

Persuasion cannot be found among the surviving manuscripts, it must have been lost. This seems very unlikely. As far as we can judge it is only the drafts of the published novels which have failed to survive; we can thank Jane Austen's care, and that of the family, for the preservation of everything that was never intended for publication (e.g., the juvenilia. *Lady Susan*, *The Plan of a Novel*), or that was not ready for publication (the unfinished first draft of *Sanditon*). There is no reason to suppose that any manuscript as important as the prototype of *Persuasion* must have been failed to come down to us. And surely Cassandra would have made a note of this early version in her memorandum? There are many other faults in the argument: those arising out of mistaken assumptions, ignorance of certain important facts, and hypotheses pressed beyond the bounds of reasonable development. There is no time to detail these, and I prefer to examine the heart of Mrs. Leavis's case, the process by which she supposes *Lady Susan* to have been turned into *Mansfield Park*, and *The Watsons* into *Emma*.

Mrs. Lewis is not alone in finding many curious features about *Mansfield Park*, but among the critics of this great novel she is the only one who claims to have found the root of the trouble, which, it seems, can be traced to certain events in the author's life. Mrs. Leavis remarks upon the "personal animus manifested against Mary Crawford," and that "the author is evidently not in this case the detached and impartial presenter that she is elsewhere seen to be."²² It appears that Jane Austen's loss of artistic control is the result of this novel having been written out of the earlier piece, *Lady Susan*, which was in turn written out of events in the Austen family between 1795-1797. According to Mrs. Leavis, at that time Jane Austen was disturbed at the courtship of her brother Henry and Eliza de Feuillide, who became his wife. Eliza was the model for the flirtations, calculating adventuress, Lady Susan, who is modified to become Mary Crawford, a figure who still suffers from Jane Austen's original animus against Eliza. On a point of technique Mrs. Leavis supports the argument for such a derivation: "there seems to me quite obviously an overlaid epistolary novel behind the version of *Mansfield Park* that we have. The dimmed and distant effect of much of this novel, the impression it gives of low spirits in its presentation, is due, I suggest, to its being retold from letters."²³

Neither of these stages can be proved or disproved, but I am convinced firstly, that *Lady Susan* was not based on these family events, and secondly, that the earlier piece has only the most general connection with *Mansfield Park*, and certainly is not a prototype. Internal evidence suggests that *Lady Susan* was already written by 1795, before the family drama of Henry and Eliza had begun. The manuscript is a fair copy, the transcription of a work which, judging by its style, subject matter, and treatment, was written immediately after the last of the juvenilia, that is about 1793 or 1794. The "Conclusion" was probably added later, perhaps at the time of transcription, sometime after 1805. Further, the style does not lead one to suspect that a contingent family drama has been turned into art. According to Mrs. Leavis, Jane Austen was the bystander to her brother's seduction by Eliza, and that in the story we have a scheme such as this: Eliza-Lady Susan, Henry-Reginald, and Mrs. Vernon (Reginald's concerned sister, who reports the affair to their parents)-Jane Austen. Assuming such a basis in life, surely one would expect Jane Austen's emotional warmth, her anxious love for Henry, and her distaste for Eliza, to be communicated to the work, not necessarily in a direct and obvious manner, but perhaps in some special quality, and intensity, a sense of emotion repressed, or controlled. But there is no such quality in *Lady Susan*; no warmth of feeling, no asperity towards the villainess, no sympathy for Reginald (who is something of a prig), no sense that the action has been observed, or the emotions experienced. The method of presentation, the style and tone, give the work a frozen air, an effect totally different from the vivid impression we receive (as Mrs. Leavis very

acutely points out) from the juvenilia pieces, “Letters the 3rd and 4th,” where the quality of these fragments tempts one to suppose them the direct product of personal experience.

But there is perhaps a reason stronger than any of these for doubting the biographical interpretation. Everything we know of the Austen family points to their clannishness, their jealous concern for Jane Austen’s reputation. It is curious then, if, as Mrs. Leavis maintains, *Lady Susan* is clearly written out of family events that Henry Austen, who survived his sister by 33 years, should allow such a damaging account of his own intimate affairs to remain in existence, especially as his own wife is represented so unfavourably. Other members of the family did not detect any historical element, and J. E. Austen-Leigh, who was alive to the proprieties of allowing his aunt’s minor pieces into print, was responsible for its publication with the 1871 *Memoir*. These considerations make it impossible to accept Mrs. Leavis’s theory that *Lady Susan* was written out of life.

The link between *Lady Susan* and *Mansfield Park* is equally open to question. There is no suggestion in the family records that the novel ever existed in an earlier, epistolary form. Indeed, Mrs. Leavis’s argument that the “dimmed and distant effect” points to a letter origin is demonstrably false. The liveliest and most spirited of the juvenilia are cast in letter form, a mode of narration which in no way prevents a writer from reporting direct conversation, and describing scenes and situations in much the same way as in the ordinary narrative method. According to Mrs. Leavis, *Pride and Prejudice* was also originally cast in letters; that of all the novels is the one to which the terms “dimmed and distant” would be least appropriate. (This is something that Professor Mudrick has drawn attention to.) It is very unlikely that Jane Austen designed any work in letters after the first draft of *Pride and Prejudice* in August, 1797, for her next step was to turn *Elinor and Marianne* from letter form into the direct narrative, *Sense and Sensibility*. The following work, *Northanger Abbey*, seems to have been a direct narrative from its inception. Thus, by 1798 it appears that Jane Austen had come to see the limitations of the letter form, and a return to it, as Mrs. Leavis proposes for the 1808 original of *Mansfield Park*, would be quite illogical. Having developed her technique she would not return to a form that had been abandoned in the previous decade.

Turning from the question of form to that of character, we find Mrs. Leavis again in a very doubtful position. In claiming that *Lady Susan* is drawn from life she could make a simple equation between the three main fictional and real-life figures. But the transformation of *Lady Susan* is a more complicated problem, for it has to provide a much larger cast in *Mansfield Park*. Mrs. Leavis’s explanation is as follows: *Lady Susan* is split up into two characters, Mary and Henry Crawford (this reveals the source of the “personal animus manifested against Mary Crawford,”²⁴ for she is really Eliza “altered almost out of recognition.”)²⁵ The Bertram daughters come from “Lesley Castle,” a juvenile piece to which Jane Austen turned when she “was looking for more characters to fill out the new story *Mansfield Park* in 1808.”²⁶ Mrs. Norris comes from Lady Greville in “Letter the Second,” another juvenile piece, which also provided Maria Williams. Maria Williams, joined with Frederica and Mrs. Vernon from *Lady Susan*, becomes Fanny Price. Lady Bertram is derived partly from Mrs. Allen, the antichaperone in *Northanger Abbey*, and partly from the burlesque version of *Lady Elmwood* in Mrs. Inchbald’s novel, *A Simple Story* (1791). At this point one might well stop and ask – Where is it to end? So freely does Mrs. Leavis assume the transformation of characters (remember, they can be “altered almost out of recognition”, and it is surprising that Mrs. Leavis can be so quick and certain in her identifications), as Jane Austen culls her figures from the juvenilia and forces them into the matrix of *Mansfield Park*, that in turn one could continue this “hunt-the-prototype” inquiry. Unfortunately, it leads only to the valueless conclusion that any

of the characters in *Mansfield Park* might have been evolved from any original, regardless of sex, age, or qualities. In pursuit of her evidence for influences, derivations, and borrowings, Mrs. Leavis loses all sense of what must be the criteria of relevance and significance. Her method leaves us with the possibility of endless cross-relationships.

Superficially, there is a stronger case for arguing the change of *The Watsons* into *Emma*. Other critics have been struck by similarities between the works. Dr. Chapman, the greatest Jane Austen scholar, and a conservative judge, went as far as to remark that “*The Watsons* may with some plausibility be regarded as a sketch for *Emma*.”²⁷ Briefly, the resemblances are these: the name Emma is common to both heroines; the action takes place in Surrey; there is a ball in which someone is rescued from embarrassment by an invitation to dance; and the heroines’ fathers are self-centered invalids. Mrs. Leavis calls attention to these likenesses, and also traces a number of character transformations between the works; These I shall not discuss as they are of the same order as those she proposes for *Mansfield Park*, and are therefore open to the same objections. There is, moreover, a serious neglect of detail which weakens our confidence in the presentation of evidence. For example, Mrs. Leavis claims that Elizabeth Watson becomes Miss Bates. In *Emma* Miss Bates is in “her middle of life” (her mother is a very old lady”). Accordingly, to fit Elizabeth to this part of her theory Mrs. Leavis calls her an “old maid,”²⁸ thus securing a descriptive relationship between her and Miss Bates. Jane Austen gives Elizabeth’s age as 28. It is also argued the Emma Watson’s situation, that of a poor dependent, contributes towards the figure of Jane Fairfax, who thinks seriously of becoming a governess. Given an account of *The Watsons* and its intended continuation (according to Cassandra), Mrs. Leavis states that Jane Austen planned that Emma Watson was to be her niece’s governess. This detail would, of course, link her with Jane Fairfax, but in fact there is no suggestion, inside or outside *The Watsons*, that Emma was to be anybody’s governess.

The resemblance that Mrs. Leavis considers most important is that of the ball scenes; they have many features in common. But the dangers of the argument-by-resemblance become apparent if for a moment we apply this method elsewhere. If we turn to *Pride and Prejudice* we find that the opening scene offers a far closer parallel: consider the similarities between Elizabeth and Emma, Darcy and Lord Osborne, Tom Musgrave and Bingley; and there are more parallels in the action and dialogue. Elsewhere in the two works are further likenesses: the basic situation of *The Watsons* is far closer to *Pride and Prejudice* than to *Emma*, for Emma Watson, like Elizabeth Bennet, is a heroine of superior abilities and fine nature in a household whose members are intent on marriage, and where the father exerts little control. And during Lord Osborne’s visit to Stanton we can watch, in miniature, an aspect of the gradual change in Darcy’s manner towards Elizabeth. This is not to say that I suspect parts of *Pride and Prejudice* to have been based upon *The Watsons*, or vice versa. I only want to point out that Mrs. Leavis’s method of tracing sources can be applied with equal validity to indicate the possibility of influence or direct relationship in a number of directions, not all of them consistent with her theory.

But what is most striking about the characters and situations of Emma Watson and Emma Woodhouse is not the likeness, but the *contrast* between them. The earlier figure is a quiet, sober-minded girl who has just lost her prospects of fortune, and has returned to an impoverished family. But Mrs. Leavis can explain this with out straining her theory of resemblances, for this is merely resemblance in reverse. Jane Austen abandoned *The Watsons* (after nearly eighteen thousand words). Mrs. Leavis accepts the *guess* (it is no more than that) of Austen-Leigh in the *Memoir*, who suggests that Jane Austen left the work because she “became aware of the evil of having placed her heroine too low, in a position of poverty and

obscurity,”²⁹ a situation that has a tendency to degenerate into “vulgarity”. Armed with this explanation, Mrs. Leavis claims that in writing *Emma* Jane Austen returned to the fragment, “to make a fresh start with the same materials by shaking the kaleidoscope to make a new pattern ... A new Emma was required who should be free from the ‘low’ circumstances in her immediate person, so Emma Woodhouse becomes a *real* heiress; she is a more pronounced character – frank and decisive – to suit her altered circumstances.”³⁰ If Mrs Leavis can call such a remarkable transformation the shake of the “kaleidoscope,” it is surely an invitation for the devil’s advocate to change and reassemble the patterns of Jane Austen’s art, and so to open the possibility to an infinite number of connections between the scenes, incidents, and characters. (Incidentally, it is strange that Mrs. Leavis does not mention Austen-Leigh’s other opinion, that *The Watsons* “could not have been broken up again for the purpose of using the materials in another fabric.”³¹ A theory of composition based on such a method of argument is not acceptable.

The preoccupations of the critical theory bring us back to the truism that of course there is a relationship among the separate works of an author’s output, just as there is an intimate (and often mysterious) bond between his life and his art. I have tried to show in what ways Mrs. Leavis has gone beyond the limits of reasonable hypothesis in her study of this question. There is, however, the larger issue, raised specifically at the head of the critical theory, that unless we make an examination of Jane Austen’s methods of writing “no criticism of her novels can be just or even safe.”³² The theory itself is a kind of casual explanation, which seeks to discuss the novels in the terms of their origin. Certainly this approach has its uses when we are dealing with some of the immature and fragmentary pieces among the juvenilia. But the six novels are complete and successful works of art. The major critical questions of interpretation and judgement are to be answered from the texts. There is no need for a theory of composition to tell us why they are so and not otherwise. There are no grounds for insisting that a theory of composition should be anterior to criticism. Any critical approach made today, utilizing our present, limited state of knowledge, can be safe and sufficiently grounded. Perhaps the strongest proof of this is to found, paradoxically, in the critical theory itself, where Mrs Leavis, if no “theorist,” “shows herself, in analysis and incidental remarks, to be the keenest modern critic of Jane Austen, someone to whom many more recent writers owe a considerable debt.

Bibliography

¹ *Scrutiny*, X (1941), 61-90, 114-142, (1942), 272-294, XII (1944), 104-119.

² Bentley, (ed.), *The Importance of Scrutiny* (New York, 1948), p. 444; Wilson, *A Literary Chronicle: 1920-1950* (New York, 1950), p. 304; Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defences and Discovery* (Princeton, 1952), pp 260-263.

³ *Scrutiny*, X, 86.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Reproduced Minor Works* (Oxford, 1954) opposite p. 242.

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- ¹¹ J.E. Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen* (Oxford, 1926), ed. R. W. Chapman, pp. 49, 101.
- ¹² W. and R.A. Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen her Life and Letters a Family Record* (London, 1913), pp. 80, 96.
- ¹³ *Scrutiny*, XII, 118.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Jane Austen, *Facts and Problems* (Oxford, 1948), p. 126.
- ¹⁶ Pp. 156-157.
- ¹⁷ *Scrutiny*, XII, 112.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, X, 62.
- ¹⁹ See *Life and Letters*, p 63.
- ²⁰ In Volume the Third (Oxford, 1951), pp. 30-128.
- ²¹ *Scrutiny*, X, 65.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 122
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- ²⁷ *Facts and Problems*, p.51
- ²⁸ *Scrutiny*, X, 75.
- ²⁹ See the 1871 edition, p 296: This occurs in a section of the *Memoir* R. W. Chapman omitted from his edition (1926).
- ³⁰ *Scrutiny*, X, 77.
- ³¹ *Memoir*, (1871), p. 296.
- ³² *Scrutiny*, X, 86.