

Brian Southam

Was Jane Austen a Bonapartist?

Article published in the Jane Austen Society Report for 2000

This may seem an odd question to ask. Jane Austen's reputation is firmly in place as a political and ideological conservative, English through and through and unradical to the backbone. On its own, *Emma* confirms her thorough-going Englishness, her attachment to English manners and traditions and the sweet especial English scene, along with her aversion to most things French. We only know of one reference to Bonaparte, a light-hearted suggestion to Cassandra that *Pride and Prejudice* might be padded out with his 'history' so as to 'bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile'.¹ But the Bonapartist question is nonetheless real. It is raised by a manuscript in Southampton University Library, a transcription by Jane Austen of Byron's poem known today as 'Napoleon's Farewell'. It was first published, untitled and anonymous, in *The Examiner* for 30 July 1815, and next in Byron's *Poems* (April 1816), now with the title 'Farewell to France'. It seems likely that Jane Austen copied the poem from *The Examiner*, since she gives it a title of her own. Moreover, she follows *The Examiner* text in one small but significant detail, omitting 'still' from line 3 of the third stanza, the word which Byron added to the text for its appearance in *Poems* 1816. Byron's style was readily recognizable and as an admirer of his work she would have faced no difficulty in putting a name to this anonymous poem when it first came out in *The Examiner*.

It is worth saying that *The Examiner*, a radical weekly founded and edited by Leigh Hunt, was opposed to the government's demonising of Napoleon. Instead, *The Examiner* maintained that he was no more and no less guilty of inhumanity than any other war leader and that the British public should be reminded of the political advances he brought to his European conquests as well as of his excesses. *The Examiner's* opening pages for the issues of 23 and 30 July were given over to the news of Napoleon's surrender and his presence on an English ship in English waters. Along with this news came extensive editorial comment. Given Hunt's literary tastes, political views and friendships - including Byron, whom he regarded as an ally and 'a free spirit' - *The Examiner* was a natural home for Byron's poem.

Unlike his 'Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte' (published in April 1814), 'Farewell to France' is not one of Byron's remembered poems. It belongs to his sentimental-declamatory vein. Napoleon's heroic posture is conveyed in resounding but monotonous verse. But the poem had a particular impact in the summer of 1815. After Waterloo, Napoleon had fled first to Paris and then South West Rochefort, where two frigates waited to take him to America. Changing his mind, however, under a flag of truce, he had himself rowed out to a British man-of-war, the *Bellerophon*, to place himself, as he put it, 'under the protection of British Law'.² On 24 July, the *Bellerophon* arrived off the English coast and tourists flocked out to see the fallen Emperor. In Tor Bay and Plymouth Sound, for the next two weeks until his departure for St Helena,

Napoleon's appearances on the ship's deck provided the main news of the day for the London and provincial papers. So Byron's dramatic monologue mythologises Napoleon at a precise moment of history - the manuscript is dated 25 July. It portrays a leader solitary and defeated, yet charismatic, unbroken and ready to return, an arch-Romantic figure of grandeur, glamour and pathos.

Whatever it was about the poem that impressed Jane Austen, she was at pains to copy it out in her finest copper-plate hand - a rare occurrence, since we know of only four other occasions when she copied out other people's verse. Moreover, whether she was copying *The Examiner* or *Poems* (1816), not content with making a straight transcription, she introduced changes of her own. Some of these are insignificant, merely matters of capitalization and punctuation. Others signal a degree of involvement with the poem, effecting a purposeful, if only slight alteration to its course: a softening, in line 1, of Byron's 'gloom' to 'bloom'; in lines 2 and 4, the reversal of 'fame' and 'name'; in line 17 'Liberty' de-democratised into 'Victory'; and in lines 21-22 more certainty is given to Napoleon's return as saviour of his people.

These changes are few and marginal. In its essentials Byron's original meaning remains intact. It is certainly not a case of 'appropriation', of Jane Austen taking over the poem and using it for statement of her own. So the question remains - what, in the first place, captured her interest? To that, it is safe to say we shall never find the answer. Cassandra is the person with whom Jane Austen is most likely to have discussed either Napoleon or Byron's poem, and their surviving correspondence provides no clue whatsoever - the only Austen family reference to Napoleon to have come to light so far is Fanny Knight's diary entry for 8 April 1814: 'glorious news of Buonaparte vanquished and dethroned' (recorded by Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* [1997], p.242).

Short of pure speculation, the best we can do towards figuring out a possible answer is to take someone of Jane Austen's generation, not one of the notable literary figures whose views on Napoleon are well-documented, but someone as little known as Jane Austen was in her own lifetime, and who shared something of her critical temper, her detachment, her wit and independence of mind. Few women meet this description. But among those who come near to it is Elizabeth Ham, a minor novelist, born in 1783, eight years later than Jane Austen. Her reaction to Napoleon, while not untypical of the time, is quite individual and is probably the closest we can get in trying to reconstruct some approximation of Jane Austen's own attitude - a risky enterprise, but at least worth the attempt.

To this end, I have chosen four passages from her memoir written in 1849-52. The first extract reports a conversation Elizabeth (then aged 15) overheard between her mother and an officer in the Stafford Militia in 1798: this was following the Battle of the Nile, which took place on 1 August:

The Guard house was not far from ours, and our windows commanded a view of it, and the Officer on duty, if he had ever so slight an acquaintance, was glad to avail himself of it to lounge away an hour or two. I took my work and sat down, listening to their conversation. I think it must have been just the time when the first news of the Battle of the Nile (1798) reached England, and the report was that General Bonaparte was taken. To my great astonishment, this Officer seemed to be sorry for him, saying that he was the greatest General of the day, and told how, though so young, he had worked his own way to power, adding that he, the Officer, was in Corsica when the mob burnt the house of his father, and that had he known what the son would turn out to be, he would have striven hard to have saved that house.

To all this I listened in perfect astonishment. I had been taught by all I heard around me that it was a cardinal sin not to hate the French, and that Bonaparte was to be held in most particular detestation in proportion to his power to do mischief - and here was a British Officer praising him!

From that time my mind was awakened to judge for itself. It was soon found that the report of his being taken was false, and from that time I watched the career of Napoleon with the deepest interest. He was accused of cowardice in running away from his troops. But I saw how these troops idolized him, and could that be? Here was a young man, not yet thirty, stopping single-handed a second reign of Terror. Staving off famine from the Parisians, and bringing order out of anarchy. The calumnies invented to blacken his character were so utterly unbelievable that they had the effect of making me reject every story that was told to his disadvantage. In one word, he became my Hero, and it was quite a passion with me. He was made First Consul, and some one lent me a medal bearing his likeness that had somehow found its way to England. I took the impression with Isinglass dissolved in spirits of wine, and a beautiful face it was, and put it into a Locket that it just fitted, with a little round curl of my little brother James's hair to consecrate it.³

This is the Jane Austen of 'sense' and 'sensibility', a mixture of independent judgement and teenage hero-worship, combining the sentimentality of Marianne Dashwood with the cool reflection of her sister Elinor.

Five years later, in 1804, Elizabeth Ham reports on the country's preparedness to meet the threat of invasion:

A threatened invasion now roused the energies of all England. Corps of Volunteers both Yeomanry and Infantry were formed all over the Kingdom, and a *levée en masse* was proposed. Beacons were built up on every eminence and every precaution that could be imagined taken against sudden alarm.

My brother John held a Captain's commission in the Guernsey Militia, my brother Tom the same rank in a Company of volunteers. My Uncle William was first Comet, then Lieutenant in the Somerset Yeomanry. Whilst my Father and my numerous Uncles contented themselves as privates in their several Corps.

Whilst this 'Scarlet Fever' was raging I paid a visit to Somersetshire and thought Tom looked remarkably well in his regimentals, tho' his brother Officers did not wear theirs, certainly, 'as if to the manner born'.

I took great pains to teach Tom how to place his hat on his head. Those ugly cocked hats! If they were not well poised they were frightful. These undisciplined youths always wore them bobbing down their backs.

On this occasion I paid Susan Pester rather a long visit. She insisted on introducing to my particular notice a great Tom-cat called Bonaparte, whilst she affected to patronize another called John Bull.

It was then thought almost monstrous that anyone could admire a single act of Napoleon's and as the talk of the *Empire* was then rife, and the expected divorce hinted at, they bestowed on me the *soubriquet* of 'the Empress'. They were a merry set, and I enjoyed my visit greatly, notwithstanding we slept in a dark wainscoted room ornamented with the scalps of Indians.⁴

('Empress': having crowned himself Emperor on 18 May 1804, Napoleon placed the crown on the head of his wife Josephine). With Francis and Charles in the Navy, and Henry an ex-Militia officer, and many relations and friends of the family in the Volunteers, the Austens, like the Hams, were an actively patriotic family.

This third extract dates from around 1807:

Napoleon was still my hero, much to my family's annoyance. One evening, my Mother thought to enlist Capt: Napier on her side. 'Do you know,' said she to him, 'that Bessy won't believe a word against Bonaparte. She denies that he could have ordered his own wounded to be poisoned.' 'Is that true?' said he, turning to me. 'Is it reasonable to suppose,' I replied, 'that he would be such an object of devotion and love to his Army, if he could be guilty of such cruelty to them at such a time?' He seized both my hands and shook

Lines of Lord Byron, in the Character of Buonaparte.

1.

Farewell to the Land, where the bloom of my glory
Arose, & overshadowed the Earth with her name,
She abandons me now, but the page of her story
The brightest or blackest is filled with my name.
I have waged with a World, which vanquish'd me only
When the meteor of Conquest allur'd me too far,
I have coped with the Nations which deaden'd three lonely
The last single Captive, to Millions in war

2.

Farewell to thee France! when thy Diadem crown'd me
I made thee the gem & the wonder of Earth,
Thy weakness deceiv'd, I should leave, as I found thee
Decay'd in thy glory and sunk in thy worth.
O! for the veteran hearts which were wasted
In strife with the storm, when their battles were won,
Then the Eagle whose gaze in that moment was blasted,
Had still soar'd with eyes fix'd on Victory's sun.

3.

Farewell to thee France! but when Victory rallies
Once more in thy Regions, remember me there;
The Violet grows in the depth of thy Vallies,
Tho' wither'd - thy tears will unfold it again.
Once more I may vanquish the foes that surround us,
Once more shall thy heart-leap awake to my voice.
There are Links that must break in the Chain that has bound us,
Then turn thee, & call on the Chief of thy Choice.

ORIGINAL POETRY

We scarcely need remind our readers, that there are points in the following spirited Lines, with which our opinions do not accord; and indeed the Author himself has told us, that he rather adapted them to what may be considered as the speaker's feelings, than his own.

1.

FAREWELL to the Land, where the gloom of my glory
Arose and o'ershadowed the earth with her name;-
She abandons me now, -but the page of her story,
The brightest or blackest, is filled with my fame.
I have warred with a world which vanquished me only
When the meteor of Conquest allured me too far;-
I have coped with the Nations which dread me thus lonely,
The last single Captive to millions in war!

2.

Farewell to thee, France -when thy diadem crowned me
I made thee the gem and the wonder of earth,-
But thy weakness decrees I should leave as I found thee,
Decay'd in thy glory, and sunk in thy worth.
Oh! for the veteran hearts that were wasted
In strife with the storm, when their battles were won,-
Then the Eagle, whose gaze in that moment was blasted,
Had still soared with eyes fixed on Victory's Sun!

3.

Farewell to thee, France -but when Liberty rallies
Once more in thy regions, remember me then-
The Violet grows in the depth of thy vallies,
Though withered, thy tears will unfold it again-
Yet, yet, I may baffle the hosts that surround us,
And yet may thy heart leap awake to my voice-
There are links which must break in the chain that has bound us,
Then turn thee and call on the Chief of thy choice!

Byron's 'Farewell to France' as first printed, untitled and unattributed,
in *The Examiner*, 30 July 1815.

them heartily. 'I honor you,' he exclaimed. 'I honor you from my heart!' I shall never forget my poor Mother's look of blank amazement. He told me that his Father was present when the subject was first mentioned, by, I think, a French Officer in Egypt. That everyone understood it as a hoax, except the Hoaxee, a young English Officer. But Napoleon himself has since admitted that the question was discussed with his Physician as to the humanity of thus disposing of those that could not be removed, those who were actually dying, rather than let them fall into the hands of the Turks. I found that he was as great an admirer of the Hero as I was.⁵

The final passage comes in early August 1815, on the eve of Napoleon's departure for St Helena, for which he had been transferred from the *Bellerophon* to the *Northumberland*. It was rumoured that he was to be brought to London, having petitioned the Prince Regent to be allowed to stay in England.

I was on a visit to Compton at the time Napoleon was lying off Plymouth in the *Northumberland*, I think it was, after his surrender. I still felt powerfully interested in his fate, which was not yet decided. A half pay officer with his wife and children had taken a cottage adjoining my aunt's. One evening he brought home the news that Bonaparte was certainly to pass through Ilchester on the morrow, and to change horses there on his way to London. My young cousins were all agog to go and see him. My aunt for some reason of her own, wished to get rid of us all, and strongly insisted on our going. I felt it was a sort of fool's errand, to walk eight miles there and eight back for such a chance; and yet the bare chance of seeing him was sufficient to prevent my making much opposition. It was all across the country, and neither of us knew the way, but we contrived to find it, and arrived very much tired about twelve o'clock at Sam Pester's house. He was absent, but his brother Philip was there attending to the business for him. We were ashamed to tell our errand, or to make any inquiries. Mrs Pester very hospitably invited us to share their early dinner. In the course of conversation Philip said 'By the bye, 'twas said that Bonaparte was to come through the town'. And then with a wicked smile 'Oh I know now what brought you here'. I was terribly provoked, but there was nothing for it but to join in the laugh.⁶

'I still felt powerfully interested in his fate'. Is it pushing it too far to suppose that Jane Austen's attitude towards Napoleon was not unlike Elizabeth Ham's? If so, we can leave her words to serve as a simple yet sufficient explanation, in the absence of any other, for the impulse that moved Jane Austen to copy out Byron's poem.

But there is a further complicating circumstance. At the time of Waterloo, Southey held the post of Poet Laureate. Feeling, as he wrote 'in some degree bound to celebrate the greatest victory in British history, I persuaded myself that if any person had a valid cause or pretext for visiting the field of Waterloo' - then rapidly becoming a major tourist attraction and a favoured spot for sightseers - 'it was the Poet Laureate.'⁷ So in September 1815, Southey dutifully set out to pay his visit. Stopping at Brussels on the way, in the 'waggon-loads of wounded and convalescent soldiers' he reported seeing the 'dreadful marks of war'; and, arriving at Waterloo itself, he found 'the field of battle ... still strewn with the vestiges of slaughter'.⁸ What came out of this was a lengthy poem, *The Poet's Pilgrimage to Waterloo*, published in 1816. As more than one reviewer complained, the poet's eye was not so much upon the 'horrors' and 'glories' of the Battle but upon himself ('for he is a prodigious egotist', remarked an anonymous critic in the *Augustan Review*), and upon his family, 'his fellow-travellers', 'and all who hate Buonaparte with a hearty hatred' - this not at all calculated to 'impress ... foreigners' with 'the taste and genius of the nation - especially as he is foolish enough to call upon the world to view him as the bard of Britain, acting *ex officio, et pro bono publico*.⁹

Early in 1817, Mrs Austen and her two daughters were reading Southey's poem at Chawton Cottage. It was received 'generally with much approbation', Jane wrote to Alethea Bigg: 'parts of it suit me better than much that he has written before. The opening - the *Proem* I believe he calls it - is very beautiful'.¹⁰ It was in the *Proem* that Southey wrote lovingly of his

children and the joys of childhood; not without a tragic irony, for the theme, as it turned out, was to be poignantly personal: in April 1816 Southey's (then) only son died at the age of nine. This was known to the Austens at Chawton, since one of Jane's oldest friends, Catherine Bigg, the sister of her correspondent, Alethea, was married to Southey's uncle, the Revd Herbert Hill, who held an important place in Southey's life. Having paid for the poet's education at Westminster and Oxford, Mr Hill was regarded by Southey with great affection - 'always the man of letters', he called him.¹¹ Jane Austen had kept in touch with Catherine Hill, staying with her as recently as 1814, and no doubt it was this connection which gave the Austens a special reason for keeping up with Southey's latest work.

With Napoleon safely out of the way, amongst writers and political commentators the prevailing mood was one of relief, and pity too, for the prisoner now held secure on a remote and rocky island, as St Helena was represented, his political existence at an end and his life so circumscribed. But this was a sympathetic note not shared by Southey. Twenty years before, as one of the Wordsworth-Coleridge circle, Southey's veneration was for Napoleon the Liberator and bringer of peace, the shaper of Europe's destiny. But Southey turned Tory. His patriotic *Life of Nelson* (1813) reversed the image. The Emperor Napoleon was a blood-stained tyrant, 'his soul ... incarnadined ... with a deeper dye than that of the purple for which he committed them; - those acts of perfidy, midnight murder, usurpation, and remorseless tyranny, which have consigned his name to universal execration, now and forever.'¹²

As Poet Laureate, Southey found a further platform of authority. His celebratory Ode for the New Year 1814, a 'Carmen Triumphale', allowed him the space to rant at length. France stood 'Disgraced ... to all succeeding times' and 'Vengeance' called for Napoleon's 'Death' - a call sent out despite warning noises from the Ministry.¹³ With an eye to the post-war settlement, a kid-glove approach to Napoleon and the French was the official order of the day.

The Poet's Pilgrimage provided Southey with yet another opportunity to indulge his unforgiving stance and to congratulate himself on his consistent antagonism. Silently denying his Radical days of the 1790s, he wrote now of his own 'faith unshaken from the first' against the 'Tyrant', a 'Man of Blood ... Like Satan rising from the sulphurous flood.'¹⁴ Southey was relentless. The Allies were at fault, mercy their weakness: 'Ye had him - and ye did not strike the blow! ... Black as he is with blood ye let him live! O wherefore have ye spared his head accurst!'¹⁵ Stanza after stanza of vengeful ferocity, weary to the modern ear. But the family circle at Chawton Cottage listened to each other's reading of this stuff 'generally with much approbation' - and we are left wondering just what had been in Jane Austen's mind when she copied out Byron's poem.

Notes

¹ Letter to Cassandra Austen, 4 February 1813, *Jane Austen's Letters* (1995), ed. Deirdre Le Faye, p. 203.

² Letter to the Prince Regent, written from Rochefort 13 July 1815, *Napoleon's Letters*, (1934), ed. J.M. Thompson, p.309.

³ *Elizabeth Ham by Herself 1783-1820* (1945), ed. Eric Gillett, pp.43-44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.102-3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.194.

⁷ Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (1995), p.156, quoting Southey's *Journal of a Tour in the Netherlands in the Autumn of 1815* (1816).

⁸ Letter to Mary Barker, from Brussels, 1 October 1815, *Selections from the Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. John Wood Warter (1856), ii.429; Letter to John May, from Liege, 6 October 1815 (*Letters of Robert Southey* (1912), ed. Maurice H. Fitzgerald, p.248).

⁹ Unsigned review, *Augustan Review* (July 1816), iii. 45-46, reprinted in *Robert Southey: The Critical Heritage* (1972), ed. Lionel Madden, pp.208-09.

¹⁰ Letter to Alethea Bigg, 24 January 1817, *Letters* (1995), pp.327-28.

¹¹ Quoted in Jack Simmons, *Southey* (1945), p. 90.

¹² Robert Southey, *Life of Nelson* (1813), p.108.

¹³ 'Carmen Triumphale For the Commencement of the Year 1814'. The ferocity of the original version was somewhat tempered and the material Southey removed, with the examples quoted in my text, was incorporated into a new and unacknowledged poem, 'Ode Written during the Negotiations with Buonaparte', published in *The Courier*, 3 February 1814 and *The Times*, 21 April 1814.

¹⁴ *The Poet's Pilgrimage to Waterloo* (1816), Pt I, i. stanzas 4,5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Pt I, iv. stanzas 6,7.