

THE LAST WORDS

In the preceding chapters an attempt has been made to examine the nature of Austen's ironic vision and to show how irony has served as a driving force to the novelist giving her works an excellence, energy and vigour, hitherto unknown in British novel. The present chapter is partly devoted to a summing up and partly a re-assessment of Austen as a novelist with a difference in the light of the view-points which the critics advanced down the ages and which I had no occasion to consider earlier because of the limited sphere of my enquiry.

Between the surface of Jane Austen's novels and the surface of her life there is a remarkable parallel: both are without any striking eventfulness. Both novels and life give us primarily a view of middle-class people in the daily rounds of family life in provincial towns---a life in which there is good breeding, and wit, and sufficient hope of a reasonably satisfactory outcome of whatever difficulties may intrude. In the novels we come occasionally upon disappointments in love and the threat or actuality of seduction, but these seem less significant than the constant routine of family and neighbourhood conversations and entertainments. Yet this quiet mode of life does not mean that in

her characters Jane Austen does not explore human experience with all the thoroughness possible to the comic mode she has chosen. She does not require spectacular events to deal with important problems.

The evidence does not permit much speculation about intensities that may have lain beneath the placid exterior of her own life. The seventh of eight children, she spent her first 25 years in the village of Steventon, Hampshire, of which her father was rector. The family was congenial and gifted in self-entertainment – by games, charades, reading (particularly in 18th -century literature), and the practice of an ironic criticalness by which they punctured literary vogues. At one time or another Jane lived in several small towns, where her provincial life was quiet to the point of being static. She at no time participated in a literary society or had a literary correspondent.

Living in the high years of the major English Romantics, she in effect rejected the Romantic cult of personality, just as she was largely indifferent to Romantic literature. She derived from a neo-classical tradition of the comedy of manners; in harking back to an 18th- century tradition, she rejected those parts of it which anticipated Romanticism.

Her juvenilia, *Love and Friendship* and *Volume the First* (written in the early 1790's, but published respectively in 1922 and 1933), are for the most part clever parodies of the sentimental and romantic clichés of popular fiction. *Lady Susan*, a fragment perhaps written in the mid-1790's and published in 1871, is in the 18th - century letter form. The history of *Sense and Sensibility* is typical of Jane Austen's early literary disappointments. It was written before 1796, rewritten in 1797-98, rejected by a publisher, revised in 1809-10, and published in 1811. (All dates given below refer to publication.) As the title indicates, *Sense and Sensibility* juxtaposes an ideal which might have been set forth in the *Spectator* with the emotional self-indulgence of later 18th -century sentimentalism; yet here the author avoids the effect of allegory by making Elinor (Sense) neither priggish nor unemotional, and Marianne (Sensibility) essentially intelligent and generous. *Northanger Abbey* (1818) makes fun of a current literary fad by telling of the imaginary thrills and dangers experienced by Catherine Morland, an indiscriminate reader of Gothic novels. Of the novels written before the century's end, only *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) has no apparent basis in topical or literary satire but has an independent life at her mature level of work – an ironic, unillusioned,

and yet sympathetic view of human nature and its flair for comic incongruity.

Although Austen was endowed with all the attributes of a true ironist— such as keen sense of the ludicrous, witty observation of human inconsistencies and absurdities, genial temperament, capacity to make fun of the frailties and foibles of all specimens of humanity— she is a novelist who revels in satire with equal gusto and verve. Satire is an element in which she lives, but there is no trace of the savage indignation of Swift in her writing. Her attitude as a satirist is best expressed in the words of Elizabeth when she says: "I hope, I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and non-sense, whims and inconsistencies, do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can". Each novel of Jane Austen has a motive covert as well as overt. *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* satirize that romantic philosophy which was sweeping the world in the early nineteenth century and which relied on the instinctive movements of heart and imagination. In these novels satire is all-pervading. It mainly takes the form of mimicry of the sentimental novelist's peculiar phraseology. *Sense and Sensibility* is satirical in tone. With subdued irony Jane Austen ridicules sentimentalists. The satire is mostly

directed against sensibility and sentimentality depicted in the characters of the Dashwood sisters. Jane Austen also ridicules the selfishness and worldly wisdom of Mrs. Dashwood and her henpecked husband, John. *Pride and Prejudice* exhibits the folly of relying on first impressions which eventually turn out false. *Emma* satirises the self-deception of vanity. Emma is a clever woman whose confidence in her own cleverness blinds her to reality. She spends her life in trying to rearrange the lives of others, but her plans when put into practice only reveal her failure to understand either the dispositions of people she is dealing with or the true nature of her own feelings and motives. *Persuasion* is full of satire on snobbery, vanity, affectations and pretences. The satire on Sir Walter's pursuit of his social superiors, 'Our cousins, the Dalrymples', is magnificent. Sir Walter is a snob. He prides himself on his good breeding, high standing and wide popularity. The moment Sir Walter and Elizabeth hear of the arrival of their rich relatives, Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret, they are all in flutter. Anne sees how they are all out to lionize their rich and noble relatives.

Jane Austen directs her satire particularly against women and their peculiar foibles. She does not spare people like Mary Musgrove

or Lady Bertram with their affectations. She condemns outright any taint of pampered sensibility. She always exposes insincerities. In her novels Jane Austen exposes folly, self-deception, irresponsibility, silliness and the individual's lack of knowledge of himself. Though she laughs at their foibles and fantasies, egotism and inconsistencies, she treats them kindly and sympathetically. Mr. Collins, basically a satirical character, is not exactly a mean, contemptuous toady. His creator draws him with a certain amount of sympathy.

Whatever influences initiated Jane Austen's second period of writing, successful publication was unquestionably an important stimulus to continuing creative work. Novels begun after 1810 include *Emma* (1815), *Persuasion* (1818), and *Mansfield Park* (1819). Some fragmentary work was not published until the present century.

Emma represents a culmination of the manner which Jane was developing in her early novels; it is the ultimate achievement of the artist viewing her heroine with detachment. Jane's detachment takes the special form of an awareness of the heroine's capacity for self-deception. Emma Woodhouse is the very embodiment of self-deception: she misreads evidence, misleads others, and discovers

her own inner feelings only by accident. In Fanny Price of *Mansfield park* and Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*, Miss Austen paints more gentle and self-effacing heroines in the tradition of Jane Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*; there is a little more awareness of theme and a little less comic gaiety. But there is still all the wide social perspective, the sense of frailty, and the awareness of complication of motive by which Jane Austen, who had had scarcely a tenth of the worldly experience of her model Fanny Burney, far surpassed her model and set a permanent standard for comedy of manners.