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The Voice of the Particular. Authorship and Reflections of Reality in Jane Austen's Correspondence

Júlia VALLASEK

Babeş-Bolyai University
Department of Political Sciences
jvallasek@yahoo.com

Abstract. My essay is dealing with different roles mirrored in Jane Austen's collected letters, focusing on the stylistic and topical differences and similarities between the narrative style of her prose and that of the letters.

Austen's letters are addressed mainly to family members and friends (with a few important exceptions), their topic varying from exchange of information about family members and events concerning the Austens to personal reflections of the letter-writer, and some (very few but well elaborated) considerations about her own creations and the nature of fiction-writing itself.

A close reading of Jane Austen's correspondence also reveals the everyday reality of England at the time of the Napoleonic wars, serves as a background to Austen's well-known and ever popular novels, but most of all offers a precise description of the status of a woman writer in the last decades of the eighteenth century, the obstacles and possibilities to be found in her way. The way in which the writer of these letters matches different roles with different narrative voices through a span of 21 years makes her personal correspondence comparable to a virtual novel.

Keywords: Jane Austen, Authorship, Representation of women, Reception, Epistolary Style

Scholars and readers coming to Jane Austen's letters seem to share the opinion of R.W. Chapman, who in his introduction to the edition of the letters states that they do not offer an expected insight into the inner world of the creative

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mind of the authoress, because they have been "robbed of their general interest by Cassandra Austen's pious destruction of all that she supposed might possibly excite general curiosity" (Le Faye, *Jane Austen's Letters* ix).

Chapman was not the first person to express his dissatisfaction and anxiety caused by the letters; Caroline Austen, the niece of the authoress, who was helping James Edward Austen-Leigh in putting up his memoirs of Jane Austen expressed the same kind of dissatisfaction, only this time connected to what is to be found in the letters preserved by Cassandra Austen, and not to what might have been there, and was lost forever.

> There is nothing in those letters I have seen, that would be acceptable to the public. They were very well expressed, and they must have been very interesting to those who received them, but they detailed chiefly home and family events: and she seldom committed herself even to an opinion, so that to strangers they could be no transcript of her mind, they would not feel, that they knew her any better for having read them. (Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record* 249)

However, times are changing, and what seemed to be lacking any interest in 1926[1] or earlier, now provides us with a rich material concerning the socio-cultural relationship in England at the time of the Napoleonic wars, and above all it offers a precise description of the status of a woman writer in the last decades of the eighteenth century, the obstacles and possibilities to be found in her way. Although Caroline Austen was unable to sense "opinion" in the Letters, the reader of our days, equipped with a general knowledge of literary theory (hermeneutics, Bourdieu's theories concerning the literary field, the role and meanings of irony etc.), might find that the writer of these letters was expressing her opinion in an exquisite, elliptical and intensely ironic way, showing many similarities with her novels.

1. General notes on the *Letters*

The series of Jane Austen's letters continues through the span of 21 years. The first one dated in 1796 is a cheerful account of a ball written by a young girl of 20, deeply engaged in flirting. The last one dating from 1817 is written by a woman lying in her deathbed, yet trying to keep up the appearances of the cheerful, if a bit malicious letter writer. Austen's letters are mainly addressed to family members and close friends with a few notable exceptions, those written to her publishers and to the librarian of the Prince Regent, James Stenier Clarke.

[1] The year when *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, edited by R.W. Chapman, appeared.

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The majority of the letters addressed to Cassandra Austen are thorough accounts of everyday activities. Being single women depending on the support of their brothers, the Austen sisters were obliged to answer the call of their family, and to visit one or the other of their brothers' families whenever their service was needed to help a sister-in-law lying in childbed, or a widowed brother struggling with the problems of child raising. Whenever parted, the sisters exchanged letters every three or four days, these letters being the written forms of today's phone calls: long and capricious descriptions of journeys, family events, small gossips and allusions fully understandable only by the addressee. The letters addressed to her brothers (two of them in Naval Service) are much more conformed to the formal requirements of letter writing: these are properly written accounts of family events, carefully selected to cover all the major events a missing family member might be interested in. In time the circle of family letters is extended with letters to Jane Austen's nieces and nephews. To the motherless orphan, Fanny Knight she gives advice about matters of the heart, love, marriage and the perspectives of a young woman, to Anne Austen (who to the great luck of Posterity was trying to write a novel) offers a kind of creative writing course about how an adequate and credible atmosphere and character should be constructed. "You are now collecting your People delightfully, getting them exactly into such a spot as is the delight of my life; 3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on." (Le Faye, *Jane Austen's* 275)

2. Aspects of the early reception of Jane Austen

Nowadays there is a strong cult of Jane Austen constantly strengthened by the numerous editions of her books, and the Hollywood or BBC film adaptations of her novels featuring favorite stars, numerous sequels written to her novels, and stories/movies about her life focusing mainly on the possibility of a romantic yet unfulfilled love-affair kept as a well guarded secret. Recently the cult of vampires and other supernatural creatures with the use of the postmodern bricolage technique even led to mashup-books like a *Pride and Prejudice and the Zombies* (Seth Grahame Smith, 2009), *Sense and Sensibility and the Sea Monsters* (Ben H. Winters, 2009) or *Emma and the Werewolf* (Adam Rann, 2009).

The activities of the numerous Jane Austen Clubs on the Internet, reading clubs, the general interest used by travel agencies offering Jane Austen tours to Steventon and Bath, or the offer of souvenir shops all show what Carole Houlihan Flynn said:

> Austen is a cultural fetish, loving or hating her has typically implied meanings well beyond any encoded in her works. Because she has proved essential to the self-definition of so many contending interests—people who see

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> themselves as delicate escapists or as hard nosed realists, as staunch defenders of morality or as exponents of ludically amoral theatricality, as elitists or democrats, as iconoclasts or conventionalists, as connoisseurs or as common readers it is difficult to distangle the 'real' Austen from the acknowledged or unacknowledged agendas of those discussing her. (212)

However, this was not always the case, since for the first 50 years following her death in 1817, Austen was a minority interest and very little was known about her. She had her champions, among them Walter Scott, but not only the events of her life, but also her novels were largely forgotten, not read and used as inspiration by the emerging women writers of the nineteenth century (cf. Shattock 22-23).

As it is well known, Jane Austen spent all her life in the bosom of her family, and the family regarded her literary reputation as a family matter, most of the family members being convinced that the details of her life should not be shown to the public. Her brother, Henry wrote a short bibliographical note which was prefixed to the posthumous edition of *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* in 1817, but only in 1870 did *A Memoir of Jane Austen* appear written by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh.

What is notable in this biography is that it presents "dear aunt Jane" as a ladylike amateur, writing occasionally and for personal amusement, whose life "was passed in the performance of home duties and cultivation of domestic affections without any self seeking or craving after applause" (Austen-Leigh 82).

As we can see, the emphasis is on the woman and not on her writing; the account of the authoress' career is left out. In the following I intend to analyze Austen's *Letters* from this double point of view: how the role of a woman and the life of a writer are presented and how these two— practically inseparable—aspects of life intermingle.

3. Representation of the woman

Contrasting her balanced and harmoniously built novels, Austen's epistolary style (especially in her letters to her sister Cassandra) is a capricious mixture of "little matters" with ironical comments, jumping from one subject to another, as if she was putting down immediately everything that crossed her mind. This style, mirrored by the construction of the sentences (not respecting grammar, separated by dashes whenever a new subject appears) somewhat resembles the inner working of the mind presented two centuries later in novels using the *stream of consciousness* narrative technique. The opposition of polarities (themes apparently not connected to each other, states of mind, when labelling a purchased product or a person) gives a "not so quite triumphant account of the day" (Le Faye, *Jane*

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Austen's 16) as presented in an excerpt from Letter 10, written on 27-28 October 1798.

> Soon after I had finished my letter from Staines, my Mother began to suffer from exercise and fatigue of travelling so far . . . She bore her Journey however much better than I had expected & at Basingstoke where we stopped more than half an hour received much comfort from a Mess of Broth & the sight of Mr. Lyford, who recommended her to take 12 drops of Laudanum . . . Mary is quite well & uncommonly large. We met with no adventure at all in our Journey yesterday, except that our Trunk had once nearly slipt off, & we were obliged to stop at Hartley to have our wheels greased. . . . I went to Mrs Ryders and brought what I intended to buy, but not in much perfection. I gave 2s^3d a yard for my flannel, & fancy it is not very good, but is so disgraceful &contemptible an article itself, that it's being comparatively good or bad is of little importance. I bought some Japan Ink likewise, & next week shall begin my operations on my hat, on which You know my principal hope of happiness depends.—I am very grand indeed,—I had the dignity of dropping out my mother's Laudanum last night, I carry the keys of the Wine & Closet, & twice since I began this letter, have had orders to give in the Kitchen. . . . Your letter was chaperoned here by one from Mrs Cooke, in which she says that Battleridge is not to come out before January, and she is so little satisfied with Cawthorn's dilatoriness that she never means to employ him again. (Le Faye, *Jane Austen's* 16-7)

Her epistolary style deliberately resembles the style of one of her much ridiculed characters, Miss Bates from the novel *Emma*, who is first presented as a "great talker on little matters" (Austen 21), then mocked by the protagonist of the novel, because in the middle of a conversation she is "flying off through half a sentence to her mother's old petticoat" (Austen 225).

The employment of every single and minor event as a subject is explained by the fact that writing letters was as much part of the duties of a woman as giving orders in the kitchen; therefore, Austen is in continuous search of subjects. Often, the lack of a subject motivates the act of writing itself: "Expect a most agreeable letter for not being overburdened with subject (having nothing at all to say)—I shall have no check to my Genius from beginning to end" (Le Faye, *Jane Austen's* 74-5). Yet she goes on through three pages writing about family members, gossips from the Navy, the unfitting haircut of one of their relatives and birth of another, visits from friends etc., concluding "But I say all that I have to say, I hope I have no reason to hang myself" (Le Faye, *Jane Austen's* 74-5).

To write letters full of subject in "even lines" and "close writing," as at a certain point Jane Austen praises her sister's letter, was not only important in

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supplying subject for the whole household and neighborhood, but also a matter of material need and courtesy. Since the addressee of the letter was usually required to pay postage upon delivery, the letter needed "to look as if they were worth the cost of postage" (Favret 136-7).

Among the polite "small talk" of the letters carried on with insistence through many pages one can come across surprisingly strong, even cruel comments on different aspects of a woman's life, especially childbearing. "Mrs Hall of Sherbourn was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected oweing to a fright.—I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband" (17). Or about the third pregnancy of her niece: "Anna has not a chance to escape . . . Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty.—I am very sorry for her.—Mrs Clement too is in that way again. I am quite tired of so many children" (336).

The dejected or sometimes harsh comment on childbearing is not necessarily the unsatisfaction of the authoress who called her novel *Pride and Prejudice* "my own darling Child;" it generates from the sad experience of life, as the news about friends and relatives dying in childbed abounds in the Letters.

4. Representation of the authoress

About a year before her death Jane Austen writes to her sister:

> I often wonder how you can find time for what you do, in addition to the care of the House;—And how good Mrs West[2] could have written such Books & collected so many hard words, with all her family cares, is still more a matter of astonishment! Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of Joints of Mutton&doses of rhubarb. (321)

The theme of being an authoress and not an author, therefore being different and supposed to be inferior in quality, reappears many times in the letters presented always through an ironical distance mocking with the concept of inferiority as a woman/writer.

In a letter to one of her nephews who is trying to write a novel (like many other members of the family, as writing plays, poetry, short prose and charades was a characteristic activity of the Austens) she is giving polite encouragements while also characterizing the style of her own novels. "What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of variety and Glow?—How could I possibly join them on to the little bit, (two Inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour?" (323)

[2] She refers to Mrs Jane West (1758-1852), a prolific writer of novels, poetry and plays.

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We cannot find in the Letters the direct expression of a creative mind at work, there are little if any entries about how she conceived her own novels. The presence of a self-conscious authoress can be seen in the minute details, and precise observations given to nieces and nephews coquetting with novel-writing, and in a letter written to James Stenier Clarke, the Regent's librarian, who keeps on suggesting her subject for her novels to be written.

First he proposes Austen to portray "the Work the Habits of Life and Character and enthusiasm of a Clergyman" (La Faye, *Jane Austen's* 296), to which she responds in highly ironic false modesty. Herself the daughter and sister of a clergyman who, according to her *Letters*, was quite well read in the field of religious and theological works, rejects the offer claiming her gender makes her impossible to fulfill such a task.

> The comic part of the Character I might be equal to, but not the Good, the Enthusiastic, the Literary. Such a Man's Conversation must at times be on subjects of Science & Philosophy of which I know nothing—or at least be occasionally abundant in quotations & allusions which a Woman, who like me, knows only her own Mother/tongue & has read very little in that, would be totally without power of giving.—A Classical Education at any rate, a very extensive acquaintance with English Literature, Ancient & Modern, appears to me quite Indispensable for the person who would do any justice to your Clergyman—And I think I may boast myself to be, with all possible Vanity, the most unlearned, & uninformed Female who ever dared to be an Authoress. (306)

The Regent's Librarian is not giving up, and suggests a historical romance about the family of the Regent to be written, making Jane Austen leave behind the mask of false modesty and present herself as a highly self-conscious authoress, ready to speak up in defence of her own style and subjects.

> I am fully sensible that a Historical Romance founded on the House of Saxe Cobourg might be much more to the purpose of Profit or Popularity, than such pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in—but I could no more write a Romance than an Epic Poem.—I could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my Life, & if it were indispensable for me to keep it up & never relax into laughing at myself or other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first Chapter.—No—I must keep on to my own style and go on in my own Way; And though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other. (312)

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Joanne Shattock says that nineteenth-century English women writers created the sense of literary community while reading one another's books: "They were astute critics of one another's work, and conveyed their views sometimes in personal correspondence and sometimes in published reviews. . . . It was an alternative of a female literary society" (Shattock 8).

In Austen's letters there are many references to books she or the members of the family were reading, among them many novels by the popular female writers of the age, though she seldom articulates her opinion about them, and if she does so, it is usually not favorable or avoiding comment through light and humorous characterizations.

She writes to her niece, Anna Austen:

> Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones.—It is not fair.—He has Fame & Profit enough as a Poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people's mouths.—I do not like him, & do not mean to like Waverley if I can help it—but fear I must.—I am quite determined however not to be pleased with Mrs West's Alicia de Lacy, should I ever meet with it, which I hope I may not.—I think I can be stout against any thing written by Mrs West.—I have made up my mind to like no Novels really, but Miss Edgeworth's Your & my own. (277-278)

In her famous comment Miss Hinton reported that Jane Austen "was no more regarded . . . than a poker" by her companies, adding that after the appearance of *Pride and Prejudice* she became regarded "a poker of whom every one is afraid. . . . a wit, a delineator of character, who does not talk, is terrific indeed" (Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record* 24).

The reader of Austen's Letters might agree with this last remark as the letters provide an excellent territory for Austen to record everything from household faults to personal conduct in minute and highly critical details. She is not forgiving a thing and is mocking at anything that may have captured the attention of the silent observer. In a letter to her sister Cassandra written in 1800 Jane Austen gives a witty yet almost cruel description about those being present at a ball she had attended.

> There were very few Beauties, & such as were, were not very handsome. Mrs Blount . . . appeared exactly she did last September, with the same broad face, diamond bandeau, white shoes, pink husband, & fat neck. The two Miss Coxes were there, I traced in on the remains of the vulgar, broad featured girls who danced at Enham. . . . I looked at Sir Thomas Chamneys's daughter & thought her a queer animal with a white neck. . . . Mrs Warren has got rid of some part of her child, & danced away with great activity, looking by no

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> means very large.—Her husband is ugly enough, uglier even than his cousin John, but he does not look so very old. The Miss Maitlands are both prettish, with brown skin, large dark eyes, & a good deal of nose.—The General has got the Gout, & Mrs Maitland the Jaundice. Miss Debrary, Susan & Sally all in black, . . . I was as civil to them as their bad breath would allow me. . . . I had the comfort of finding out the other evening who all the fat girls with short noses were that disturbed me at the 1'st Ball. They all prove to be Miss Atkinsons of Enham. (60-3)

In her essay about Jane Austen's *Letters* Carol Houlihan Flynn notes that "the familiar letter allowed the powerless to criticize the powerful, but as an instrument serving two cultures, it also served to maintain powerful systems of social control" (Houlihan Flynn 112). While placing herself in the role of the observer, Austen manages to extract herself from a tradition inherited from her novelistic models and present in some of her own novels as well. In domestic novels (Richardson's *Pamela*, *Clarissa* or Austen's own favorite *Sir Charles Grandison,* in Fanny Burney's *Evelina* and *Camilla* and in Austen's own *Northanger Abbey, Emma* or *Mansfield Park*) the female protagonist is always placed to be the subject of the watchful eyes of the others. A female figure must always be ready for inspection, and open to the comments of others, especially men and older, more respectable women. Becoming the minutious describer of everything that captures her attention, and yet avoiding expressing her own feelings and thoughts can only be explained by the continuous want for new subjects to be put in letters and the enigmatic character of the authoress. When quietly and constantly rejecting the role of the observed, and taking up the role of the observer, Jane Austen is in fact expressing a Declaration of Independence of a highly self-conscious authoress.

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