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Jane Austen's «chameleonic» art and *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

Jane Austen's style
seems to me to show (especially in the later
novels) a cunningly chameleon-like faculty...
M. Lascelles, 1939

Jane Austen is a literary novelist...
A.W. Litz, 1975

I discovered what writers have always known
(and have told us again and again): books always
speak of other books, and every story tells a story
that has already been told.

U. Eco, 1983

If M. Lascelles, author of the first book-length study on Jane Austen, felt the need to justify herself from the accusation of winding herself into a subject about which everything worth saying had been said already¹, it is all the more necessary that I should justify the title of this essay – «Jane Austen's "chameleonic" art and *A Poetics of Postmodernism*». Indeed, this title may appear somewhat «scandalous», especially in view of its reference to Linda Hutcheon's title *A Poetics of Postmodernism*², rather than to her later *The Politics of Postmodernism*³. Through the quotation of the former I mean to suggest that Jane Austen's contemporaneity is not to be regarded merely as an effect of late twentieth-century critical approaches or the product of contemporary economic and cultural *politics*. An explanation is all the more necessary in that, as a long-time Austenite, I am deeply aware of the fact that «canonical» Austen criticism has always been pervaded by a deep-rooted reluctance to admit as truthful or reliable any critical reading which may present a portrait of Jane Austen substantially different from Macaulay's, James's or Kipling's.⁴

Any other interpretation, if not set down as a «wild critical flight»⁵, is benevolently tolerated as a bright exercise in autobiography on the part of the critic or, at most, as an instance of the

*This essay was originally intended as a paper to be delivered at the 1998 ESSE Conference in Debrecen (Hungary).

M. LASCELLES, *Jane Austen and Her Art*, 1939, Oxford London New York, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. v.

² L. HUTCHEON, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York and London, Routledge, 1988.

³ IDEM, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, New York and London, Routledge.

⁴ See T. MACAULEY, *The Diary and letters of Mme D'Arblay*, «Edinburgh Review», Jan. 1843, lxxvi, repr. in B. C. SOUTHAM, ed., *Jane Austen The Critical Heritage*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968, pp. 122-123; H. JAMES, *The Lesson of Balzac*, 1905, repr. in L., ed. el, ed., . *The House of Fiction*, 1957, pp. 61-63; R. KIPLING, *The Janeites*, (1924), in *Debits and Credits*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987

⁵ G. B. TENNYSON, Review of M. Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, «Nineteenth-Century Fiction», vol. 31, n. 1, June 1976, p. 81.

pliability peculiar to great art and as evidence of its ambiguity. For instance, the ambiguity that M. Praz – in his *Introduction* to the Italian translation of I. Kott's *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*⁶ – would compare to the *forza aligera* of the seed, that is the vital strength of the text and its capability to take root and develop in different soils.

Yet, although Praz's *seed* was possessed of an intrinsic strength which, from a postmodern viewpoint, is mainly a reflexion from the user (reader) to whom that power belongs, this is not the perspective from which I wish to examine Jane Austen's relationship with postmodernism.

Rather, my starting point will be that the relationship between a great artist and his/her «reality» (any reality, textual reality as well) is a critical one – critical in the etymological sense of the word. As *krinein* in Greek means to analyze and comprehend, so it is a relationship which provides the artist with a degree of awareness that goes beyond his/her biographical *hic et nunc*, as well as beyond his/her historical period. So I will not speak of a *postmodern* Jane Austen, because I can more correctly assert that some basic features of postmodern fiction are to be found – either *in nuce* or *in potentia* – at the core of the narrative strategies of her six novels.

I need go no further than the current debate on the origins of postmodernism, that is the debate on its relationship with romanticism, which must be acknowledged as a fundamental issue in Austen studies. But I cannot avoid stressing the fact that Austen criticism has always been labouring under a tendency to overlook or, rather, not to focus on some significant facts recently brought to the fore by several gothic and romantic studies⁷, and which I may sum up, by way of example, in the chronological coincidence of Jane Austen's life with «Monk» Lewis's (1775-1818).

Starting from the nineteenth century, in the history of Austen criticism – I am referring to the well-known collections by Brian Southam, Ian Watt, David Lodge, John Bayley and many others – there appear frequent observations, opinions and standards of judgement which strikingly anticipate the critical language of Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

These critical evaluations – to be found in the work of Austen's first reviewers from Richard Simpson and Reginald Farrer, to Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, D. W. Harding, Lionel Trilling, Mark Schorer and so on – point out, and simultaneously give substance to, that characteristic feature of Austen's narrative art which Mary Lascelles defined in 1939, at the beginning of modern Austen criticism, as «a chameleon-like faculty»⁸. This chameleon-like faculty produces on the reader the impression «of understanding her less as one becomes more familiar with her writings»⁹, «of never quite knowing where we are with her as we know where we are with G. Eliot or even with H. James»¹⁰; the feeling that her novels are «like a person, not to be comprehended fully and finally by any other person»¹¹, because of «a technique which can both reveal and conceal, that will give only as much as the reader wishes to take»¹².

⁶ M. PRAZ, *Introduzione*, in I. KOTT, *Shakespeare, nostro contemporaneo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1964.

⁷ See R. JACKSON, *Fantasy, the Literature of Subversion*, London, Methuen, 1981; D. PUNTER, *The Literature of Terror*, London & New York, Longman, 1980.

⁸ M. LASCELLES, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁹ *Ibidem*, ch. VI.

¹⁰ J. BAYLEY, *The "Irresponsibility" of Jane Austen*, in B. C. SOUTHAM, ED., *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968, pp. 1-2

¹¹ L. TRILLING, *Emma and the Legend of Jane Austen*, 1957, in D. LODGE, ED., *Jane Austen's Emma*, London, Macmillan, 1968, p. 152.

¹² M. SCHORER, *The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse*, in «The Literary Review», vol. II, n. 4, Summer 1959, p. 563.

It is because of this chameleon-like faculty that Jane Austen could appear both as an inflexible moralist, «serious-minded and didactic»¹³ and as a superb ironist, amoral or immoral¹⁴; so mean¹⁵ and so perfect¹⁶ as to provoke reactions as diverse as M. Twain's «animal repugnance»¹⁷ and E. M. Forster's «open mouth in measureless content»¹⁸.

The main points of my essay emerge from this significantly contradictory multiplicity:

1 – Jane Austen's chameleon-like textual activity results in ironic parodies, to be intended in the sense with which L. Hutcheon employs this expression from her first articles in *Poétique* (1978) to her subsequent essays (*Narcissistic Fiction, A Theory of Parody* and the essays on postmodernism¹⁹). In other words, Jane Austen's novels may be read as ironic parodies, that is as intertextual and ironic rewritings of the most common narrative forms in contemporary sentimental and didactic fiction: from the contrast novel (in *Sense and Sensibility*) and the female-quixotic novel (*Emma*), to the sentimental novel (*Pride and Prejudice*), the evangelical novel (*Mansfield Park*) or the gothic romance (*Northanger Abbey*).

2 – In order to provide adequate evidence for this theory and thus highlight Jane Austen's subtle and hidden «much labour» (and explain the «miracles» of the novels), we need a form of close reading which combines the methodologies of historical criticism and «ironic» criticism.

My approach has developed from the suggestions of B.C. Southam, A.W. Litz and the later ones of K. Moler. According to these critics, any analysis of Jane Austen's novels should begin from «the main instrument of her imagination»²⁰, that is from her ironic vision and consequently from her ironic technique, which can be fully understood only in relation to her historical and literary context, or (as we would say today, with Hutcheon) in relation to her textual reality. But their advice has been followed less than it is necessary, probably because a thorough knowledge of Austen's textual reality may be achieved only with great difficulty, as demonstrated by the pioneering works of M. Summers, J.M.S Tompkins and few others.

It seems to me that, as in E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*, contemporary Austen criticism cannot resist the temptation to speak with her critics rather than with her historical-textual context. Even nowadays it is possible to read essays on *Mansfield Park* from which one receives the distinct impression that a famous and easily available play such as *Lovers' Vows* is known to the critic only through the quotations provided by previous critics of the novel (at best through R. Sales's summary at the end of his 1994 book²¹), rather than through a direct reading. And without a direct reading of *Lovers' Vows*, one cannot fully appreciate the central position given to the play by the Author, and thus one cannot be aware of the kind of relationship existing between the two texts. *Mansfield Park* is Jane Austen's parodic and ironic version of Elizabeth Inchbald's notorious play – a version pervaded by Evangelical and Gothic echoes, from H.

¹³ M. BUTLER, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1975, pp. 292, 299.

¹⁴ K. AMIS, *What became of Jane Austen ? [Mansfield Park]*, «The Spectator», n. 7745, Oct. 1957, repr. in I. WATT, ed., *Jane Austen, A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963, p. 142.

¹⁵ See D.H. LAWRENCE, *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 1929, in H. T. MOORE, ed., *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, London, W. Heinemann, 1955, p. 229.

¹⁶ V. WOOLF, *Jane Austen at Sixty*, «Nation», Dec. 15, 1923, repr. in *Collected Essays*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1966.

¹⁷ M. TWAIN, in I. WATT, ed., *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, cit., pp. 7, 9.

¹⁸ E.M. FORSTER, *Abinger Harvest*, (1936), Penguin Books, 1974, p. 175.

¹⁹ L. HUTCHEON, *Ironie et parodie: stratégie et structure*, in «Poétique», n. 36, Nov. 1978, pp. 467-71; *Narcissistic Fiction; A Theory of Parody*.

²⁰ B.C. SOUTHAM, ed., *Jane Austen The Critical Heritage*, cit., p. 32.

²¹ R. SALES, *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, pp. 222-26

More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* as well as E. Sleath's *The Orphan of the Rhine* or A. Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Without understanding the implied comparison between the two versions, you cannot understand the complex position and responsibility of the reader, with whom rests the task of choosing between Jacobin and anti-Jacobin values.

Occasionally, one also finds that the most recent editor of *Sense and Sensibility*, M.A. Doody, is praised for her remarkable insight in observing that the first apparition of Willoughby reflects the scene in which the hero of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* appears for the first time. This seems to be very naïve praise, and its naïveté is all the more significant, for it implies little awareness of the fact that Willoughby is first of all a stereotype in contemporary popular fiction, no less than the two heroines. Without recognizing this fact, we cannot properly measure the extent and quality of Jane Austen's operation of rewriting: just as we cannot compare the complex and fully sketched Willoughby in ch. 44 with the conventional villain-hero appearing, with the name of Mortimer, in the fourth of the five volumes of Charlotte Smith's *Ethelinde, or The Recluse of the Lake* (1789), or, with the very name of Willoughby, in a contrast novel of 1772, *The History of Miss Dorinda Catsby and Miss Emilia Faulkner*.

As is well-known, *Sense and Sensibility* is woven around the juxtaposition and comparison between the two sisters. As pointed out by Q.D. Leavis²², the novel is entirely based on conventional material, from the characters to the plot to the narrative form. The parodic rewriting affects and involves the whole structure, including the Omniscient Narrator, together with her peculiar style. It is a *categorical* style which proceeds through well-defined and definite juxtapositions, compressing the minor characters, that is «the condemned», into flat characters. And yet these minor characters are only seemingly flat: their active roles as *nodes* within the structural net of the novel speak to the contrary.

As «the visible part of an iceberg»²³, Austen's *flat* characters must be evaluated as very important parodic and metaphorical warnings. Consider for instance the character of Charlotte Palmer. Who remembers Charlotte Palmer, the silly and always laughing sister of Lady Middleton? She is known as a fool, too immaturely or impatiently sketched as the mistress of Cleveland, a country mansion less than thirty miles from Combe Magna, Willoughby's seat, in order to fulfil the task of taking Marianne into Somerset. Here is an example of her style in free indirect speech:

Mrs Palmer was equally angry. «She was determined to drop his acquaintance immediately, and she was very thankful that she had never been acquainted with him at all. She wished with all her heart Combe Magna was near Cleveland; but it did not signify, for it was a great deal too far off to visit; she hated him so much that she was resolved never to mention his name again, and she should tell everybody she saw, how good for nothing he was»²⁴

But when we learn that one historic Charlotte Palmer published in 1796 a book entitled *It is and It is not, a Novel*, we realize that the limited fictional world of *Sense and Sensibility* is also the representation of what Walter Scott called «the land of fiction» and what, in a more up-to-date language, we may call the historic and literary archive²⁵.

The character Charlotte Palmer is in fact *a text*, with a style and a language of its own, just like Marianne who embodies the «novel of sensibility», Elinor who personifies the style of the «moral tale» and the Omniscient Author who embodies the style of the «contrast novel». The

²² Q.D. LEAVIS, *A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings*, «Scrutiny», vol. X, 1941.

²³ M. LASCELLES, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

²⁴ *S. & S.*, cap. X XXII.

²⁵ L. HUTCHEON, *A Poetics*, *cit.*, p. 125.

presence in *Sense and Sensibility* of such a character as *It is and It is not* (Charlotte Palmer) is to be read as an underlining or a comment, as an indicator which points ironically to the dogmatic style of the Narrative Voice:

Sir John was a sportsman, Lady Middleton a mother. He hunted and shot; she humoured her children; and those were their only resources.²⁶

Passages such as this are no longer to be seen merely as the stiff residue of juvenile burlesque in Austen's first published novel. By contrast, they should also appear as a fine and subtle parody of the narrative style characteristic of the Omniscient Author of a contrast novel, as exemplified by Jane West's popular *A Gossip Story* (1796).

In order to proceed in my explanation, I now need to refer briefly to some theoretical notions that even Hutcheon finds it necessary to recall in her most recent essays: to parody does not mean to condemn and refuse. Parody constitutes both a break with and a connection to the past. One must be complicitous in order to be critical²⁷: in parody «you use and abuse the very structures and values you take to task»²⁸. The author of an ironic parody must, in Hutcheon's words, keep «an inside outside position»²⁹ or, as Farrer wrote of Jane Austen, he/she «must both run with the hare and hunt with the hounds»³⁰, because (and here I can use Hutcheon's words to express A. Wright's view on Jane Austen's irony) «there is no reconciliation, just unresolved contradictions»³¹. Ironic parody «questions the basis of any certainty»³² and indeed there have always been readers of Austen's novels expressing similar opinions³³.

As an ironic parody, *Sense and Sensibility* is a rewriting of the novel of sensibility, but only partially and indirectly. It is first of all a parodic rewriting of the contrast novel, a form of moralistic fiction and, as such, *Sense and Sensibility* also includes the burlesque of the novel of sensibility.

Several critical studies have shown that *Sense and Sensibility* is a very particular kind of contrast novel, as it tends to blur the «contrast» and even to invert it, ultimately in order to mock such abstract and conventional categories. The main device in which the ironic parody appears to be rooted in *Sense and Sensibility*, yet also in all of Austen's novels except *Persuasion*, is the fundamental distinction between the Omniscient Narrator and the Author. The Narrator is a character whose story the Author is constantly seeking to contradict or disprove in a subtle way: to that end the Author calls upon the other characters and provides them with a «narrative» to act on. It is from the multiplicity of their various and contradictory voices that the characters draw their vital strength; while, if compared with the whole choir, every single voice sounds flat and partial, just like the Narrator's monological version of the story. Such intertextual multiplicity of different voices and points of view provokes emotional reactions and feelings in the reader which often contrast with the rational expectations of the Omniscient Narrator and often of the reader him/herself. In this «contrast» between the *sensibility* and the *sense* of the

²⁶ *S. & S.*, ch. VII.

²⁷ See L. HUTCHEON, *A Poetics*, cit., p. 200.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

³⁰ R. FARRER, *The Book of Books*, 1917, repr. in D. Lodge, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

³¹ L. HUTCHEON, *A Poetics*, cit., p. 106. A. WRIGHT's work cit. is *Jane Austen's Novels. A Study in Structure*, 1953, Pelican Books, 1972.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ See R. F. PATTESON, *Truth, Certitude and Stability in Jane Austen's Fiction*, in «Philological Quarterly», vol. 60, Fall 1981, n. 4, pp. 455-67.

reader lies the reason for the «unsatisfactory» happy ending of *Sense and Sensibility*, as well as that of *Mansfield Park*.

It is Marianne – as she emerges from her letters to Willoughby, her own behaviour, the burlesque of the Narrator, the chats of Mrs Jennings, the well-behaved dislike of Lady Middleton, the marriage-market estimation of her brother, the affection of her mother and sister and the love of such a man of sensibility as Colonel Brandon – who defeats the burlesque and paternalism of the Narrator. Thus, it is not the Narrator, as Mudrick³⁴ would suggest, who betrays Marianne, but, on the contrary, it is the Marianne created by the Author who betrays the Narrator together with all «such dull halves» lacking in «ingenuity»³⁵ and ironic sensibility, and therefore incapable of realizing that Austen cannot be really on anybody's side because, as an Author, she has to be on everybody's side, the reader's too.

«The truth is» according to K. Mansfield's well-known remark, «that every true admirer of her novels cherishes the happy thought that he alone – reading between the lines – has become the secret friend of the Author»³⁶.

And *here* lies the truth: there is not just one misread and misinterpreted Jane Austen. Rather, from the ironic parodies of her novels, there may emerge as many Jane Austens as there are readers with different approaches and interests. This is why this word *chameleonic* seems to express so appropriately the essence of Austen's writing: the Author is absent and, at the same time, always present – not so much behind the characters, as in the network of relationships in which they live.

But if Austen historical criticism helps us to recognize the various forms, characters and texts adopted and reworked by our chameleon, it is through the close reading of her narrative language that we may perceive such mutations in the making.

And here I must pay homage to the incomparable work of Norman Page³⁷ from whom I learnt the technique of close textual reading: how to trace, in its making, the subtle and fine texture of the relationship between the reader and the point of view of the character; how to follow the use and shifting of the perspective, from Narrator's narrative to direct speech, to indirect speech in its various degree, to the inside views which show a character's inner workings. .

Consider, for instance, the figure of Fanny Price, in which echoes and quotations from Hannah More's Lucilla Stanley, Eleanor Sleath's Julie de Rubine, and Maria Edgeworth's prudent heroines merge in order to confront the reader with the contrast between Fanny as portrayed by the Omniscient Narrator (humble, generous and self-denying) and Fanny as she shows herself in her direct speeches and indirect speeches (self-assertive and selfish). It is here, thanks to the insights into her interiority, that we can trace Fanny's psychological mechanisms as they emerge in reaction to the social context of the novel. Similarly, we can also understand how a «portionless», dependent niece can develop the egoism, priggishness and hardness of heart necessary to survive in the «barbarous» world of *Mansfield Park*. In point of fact, the novel is about «guilt and misery» and V. Woolf showed herself well aware of it, and of the unconscious self-irony of the Narrator, when in *Orlando* she quoted from the final chapter: «Let other pens dwell on sex and sexuality. . . ».

Close readings may thus enable us to probe, through juxtapositions of situations, *progressions d'effet* and shifting of the point of view, Jane Austen's subtle work in order to

³⁴ M. MUDRICK, *Jane Austen : Irony as Defense and Discovery*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1952.

³⁵ Lett. to Cass. 20 Jan. 1813.

³⁶ Lett. to Mrs Humphrey Ward, 26 July 1899, in K. MANSFIELD, *Letters...* ed. . by P. Lubbock, p. 335.

³⁷ N. PAGE, *The Language of Jane Austen*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1972.

undermine what has just been asserted, or to assert what has just been denied³⁸. We can therefore borrow Hutcheon's definition of *historiographic metafiction* and state that Austen's ironic parodies «both parody and enact the totalizing tendency of all discourse to create systems and structure»³⁹, as they «both set up and then challenge» the monological structure of moralistic fiction.

The results of this kind of critical analysis are openly confirmed by Austen's Mentor-figure *par excellence*, Mr Knightley. Is not *Emma*, in the opinion of most critics, a version of the female-quixotic novel, that is a form enacting the triumph of reality over the imagination, of right over wrong? In the end, after the bulk of moralistic discussions and discriminations that make up the novel, these surprising words are uttered by the best of Austen's heroes:

I wish our opinion were the same. But in time they will. Time, you may be very sure, will make *one or the other of us* think differently; and in the meanwhile we need not talk much on the subject.⁴⁰

No less significant is the assertion made by the most perfect of Austen's heroines in *Persuasion*, which should be a serious novel on the usefulness of prudence: «It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decide»⁴¹, as if to say that, in certain cases, *Letters, Advice, and Instructions* do not contribute to happiness.

Such passages, together with the conclusions of the novels, open-ended precisely because of their starched conventionality, problematize *reality* to such a degree as to complicate the very urge and practice of problematization⁴². Just as Lady Bertram has been seen as an instance of Jane Austen's impatience with discriminating moral activity, so Charlotte Palmer may be seen in the same light.

Charlotte Palmer belongs to the same category as Lady Bertram in several respects, in both the fictional social world and that of formal structures and narrative strategies. Just like Lady Bertam she possesses everything she needs to be tolerably happy: physical beauty, a rich husband and an affectionate family. She has everything that matters; why should words be important? Words serve to communicate feelings through sounds; something which appears to be more important than their meaning.

The relevance of such characters in Jane Austen's novels is not always easily highlighted as they are very seldom allowed to stand in the foreground, being ideal covers both for the Author's unconventional opinions and for her most subtle technical devices. Seemingly flat and redundant, they are fundamental structural elements. As these figures embody the Author's aspirations and fears, they moreover carry out an exorcising function.

A seemingly «flat» fool like Charlotte Palmer is revealed to be fundamentally important. As a character/text it provides the novels' subtitles and thus the key to their narrative techniques: *Sense and Sensibility*, or, It is and It is not a contrast novel; *Emma*, or It is and It is not a quixotic novel; *Mansfield Park*, or It is and It is not an evangelical novel; *Northanger Abbey*, or It is and It is not a gothic novel, and so on. Indeed Charlotte Palmer enables us to identify the emblematic key

of Jane Austen's expressive mode. She is the embodiment of laughter:

³⁸ See for instance Mrs Bennet and entails: she is a fool who tells the truth; and she is a fool because she is not an hypocrit enough as to hide *her* truth.

³⁹ L. HUTCHEON, *A Poetics*, cit., p. 133.

⁴⁰ *E.*, III, 18, p. 428.

⁴¹ *P.*, II, 11, p. 232.

⁴² See PATTESON, *op. cit.*

She was short and plump, had a very pretty face, and the finest expression of good humour that could possibly be... She came in with a smile, smiled all the time of her visit, except when she laughed, and smiled when she went away.⁴³

Mrs Palmer represents laughter as a spontaneous and natural manifestation of physical vibrancy, and not as a (defensive or offensive) intellectual weapon, as is the case with so many Austenian characters from Elizabeth Bennet to Mary Crawford, Emma and Austen herself in the *Letters*. Mrs Palmer's innocuous and nonsensical foolishness seems to exorcise the urge to use laughter as a weapon, as well as any attendant sense of guilt.

«Mr Palmer doesn't hear me» said she laughing «he *never* does *sometimes*. How ridiculous!» This was quite a new idea to Mrs Dashwood, she had never been used to find wit in the inattention of anyone...⁴⁴

Through this sentence, prescient both of an Orwellian kind of *double-think* and of Hutcheon's idea of a postmodern language, we may perceive how Charlotte Palmer embodies senseless laughter as well as contradiction, that is lack of meaning. And lack of meaning is comical, yet also serious because, like all of Austen's flat characters, Mrs Palmer is «capable of rotundity»⁴⁵ since she might not be so unselfconscious as she seems:

It was impossible for any one to be *more good-natured*, or *more determined to be happy* than Mrs Palmer...⁴⁶

The use of «determined» may suggest the narrator's ironic delineation of a hopelessly obtuse character. But it might also not mean that at all. «Determined» is a double word, just like vision and writing are double in Jane Austen. Thus it seems appropriate to conclude by quoting R. Sales, a critic who cannot be accused of any wild critical flights of fancy nor any ahistoric remarks, and who needs to rely on postmodern language in order to pinpoint Austen's characteristic mood/stance, a stance informing the controversial potential that nowadays turns *Mansfield Park* into the most frequently discussed of Austen's six novels: «Regency values are sometimes celebrated while they are being repudiated»⁴⁷, that is to say «installed and subverted».

⁴³ *S. & S.*

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*

⁴⁵ E. M. FORSTER, *Aspects of the Novel*, 1927, Penguin Books, 1971, p. 82.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 20, p. 96.

⁴⁷ R. SALES, *op. cit.*, p. 106

