Preface:
Subversive Criticism in Austen Studies

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Jane Austen was constructed, especially in the course of the nineteenth-century as an icon of Englishness, an *exemplum* of propriety and candour, urbanity and reserve, in a word as a model of the more or less virtuous *mediocritas* of the middle class. Such an idea was strenuously defended by conservative readers until the end of last century, when textual criticism and close reading together with neo-historical studies of the cultural and literary context imposed an irrefutable and different truth: Jane Austen is certainly an icon of Englishness but of a different kind of Englishness, focused on eccentricity. According to Paul Langford (2000), eccentric writing includes all the wide range of laughter (wit, burlesque, satire, parody, irony, and so on), and this tradition is older than propriety, which related to the rise of the middle class.

Parody and irony, or more precisely "ironic parody", in fact have been found since the origins of English literature, in Chaucer's well-known portraits of the Prioress, the Monk and the Friar for instance; in Defoe's *Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), in Swift's *Modest Proposal* (1729), Fielding's *Jonathan Wild* (1743), in Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), just to mention the most outstanding examples.

It is undeniable that Austen's *Juvenilia* belong to this category or genre: indeed, they are masterpieces in their own right in which "all the best gifts of the comic muse" (Austen 2002: 140) are displayed, particularly burlesque, which, deftly refined in the six novels, becomes "ironic parody", a kind of parody so subtle and refined, so ambiguous and realistic that it is very difficult – if not impossible – for the modern reader to detect and interpret.

Jane Austen was a "literary novelist" (Litz 1965: *passim*) – meaning that she took her inspiration from literature and became

a constant reference for other novelists, particularly for the great masters of the twentieth century: Ford, Woolf, and Forster. Austen's novels are realistic rewritings of the conventional forms of didactic literature which were most popular in her time; they are very subtle parodies of conduct books: *Sense and Sensibility* is in the form of a contrast novel; *Pride and Prejudice* a sentimental novel; *Mansfield Park* an evangelical novel; *Emma* and *Northanger Abbey* female Quixotic novels.

Jane Austen's "much labour" and "fine brush" (Austen 1995: 323) aim at shattering the monological structure of moralist discourse by corrupting it from the inside through writing, so that the slight pressure of a doubt on any point will suffice to make the conventional surface crinkle and crack, laying open the unnatural contradictions of the entire structure.

The subversive effect of Austen's writing consists in raising suspicion and generating doubts in the reader so as to make him/her call into question the moral principles supported by conduct books. Obviously, while the subversive effect depends on the sensibility and education (or "elegance of mind", as Austen herself would say) of the reader, the subversive aim instead can be retraced only through an in-depth analysis of Austen's narrative technique, and not by taking at face value the narrative form or *genre* which is the target of the author's parody.

As long as we trust the fabrications of her nephew's *Memoir*, we will perceive Jane Austen as an isolated, gentle and harmless old maid with "nothing eccentric or angular" (Austen-Leigh [1870] 2002: 132) who "never uttered a severe expression" (p. 139). However, notwithstanding Austen-Leigh's biography and the almost general acceptance of the Victorian portrait of "dear Aunt Jane" (responsible for Henry James's and Edward Said's famous blunders) there have always been readers and critics who recognised that the incongruities and ambiguities were really too many for a serious didactic writer.

Among the early "subversive critics" stands the Shakespearean scholar Richard Simpson. Simpson deserves to be acknowledged as one of the earliest subversive readers since he is the first to challenge the accuracy of the *Memoir*. As the anonymous author of its earliest review in the *North British Review*, Simpson ends up by delineating a conscious writer, problematic and sophisticated, deeply concerned

with the relationship between plot and characters, thus anticipating the definition of "dramatic novel" by Edwin Muir and Ian Watt:

> The events grow out of one another; and the characters of the actors are the sufficient reasons of the acts which are related. The action is such as is necessary to display the characters, not such as is invented for the purpose of mystifying and surprising the reader. (Simpson 1968: 254)

Simpson argues that the attentive reader must focus the attention on the novels' structure – a structure which he sees "open" as a consequence of Austen's "dualism of motive" (to use Farrer's words):

> Though she puts into the mouth of her puppets the language of faith, she knows how to convey to her readers a feeling of her own skepticism […] But there is enough in her evident opinions, in her bywords, in her arguments, to prove to any sufficiently clear sight that it would be, after all, much the same whether the proper people intermarried, or whether they were mismatched by some malevolent Puck […] really much ado about nothing. (Simpson 1968: 245)

Reginald Farrer – a traveller and a plant collector and for some time an aspiring novelist – is another precursor of subversive criticism that contemporary readers cannot afford to ignore. He not only possesses the sensibility to perceive Austen's subversiveness – "the most merciless of iconoclasts" (Farrer 1987: 254) – but he can also uncover the formal device on which her perfect mastery rests, that is to say, Farrer distinguishes and separates the *moral narrator* pursuing "her purpose of edification" from the *author* striving for "unprompted joy in creation" (Farrer 1987: 263). It is this "dualism of motive" – he argues – that "destroys not only the unity of *Mansfield Park*", but also "its sincerity" (p. 263). Farrer's diagnosis of insincerity and "radical dishonesty" (Farrer 1987: 262) would be echoed later in the fifties by Kingsley Amis who argued that if Jane Austen and her narrator are the same person, then "her judgement and her moral sense were corrupted" (Amis 1963: 144), and *Mansfield Park* is "the witness of that corruption" (p. 144).

But Amis, like D.W. Harding in that milestone of subversive criticism that is his essay "Regulated Hatred" ([1940] 1998), does not provide sufficient evidence in support of his opinions, and remains

on the surface of the text. The same may be said of the well-known Marvin Mudrick, though in his *Irony as Defense and Discovery* (1952) he resorts to psychological studies on comedy and laughter in order to disrupt the standard reading of the novels, so long misread and appreciated just for the very characteristics and values they intend to subvert (Harding [1940] 1998). Many subsequent critics would quote his conclusion of the chapter on *Sense and Sensibility*: "Marianne has been betrayed, and not by Willoughby!" (Mudrick 1968: 93)

We could say that Mudrick points to irony as the key to interpreting Austen's writing, but he does not investigate how it works in Austen's novels. In fact, in order to understand "parodic irony" the critic must have at least a modicum of knowledge of the object of parody and in the early fifties historical studies of Austen's literary and artistic background had yet to begin. Henrietta Ten Harmsel's *Jane Austen: A Study in Fictional Conventions* and Litz's *Study of Her Artistic Development* were to appear respectively in 1964 and 1965; Frank Bradbrook's work on *Her Predecessors* in 1967; Kenneth Moler's *Art of Allusion* in 1968; the reprint of Tompkins's *Popular Novel in England* in 1969. And these are only the earliest works of a long series which explored several aspects of Jane Austen's social and literary milieu: Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975); Warren Roberts's *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (1979); Irene Collins's *Jane Austen and the Clergy* (1993); Roger Sales's *Jane Austen and the Representations of Regency England* (1994); Mary Batey's *Jane Austen and the English Landscape* (1996); David Selwyn's *Jane Austen and Leisure* (1998); Brian Southam's *Jane Austen and the Navy* (2000); Paula Byrne's and Penny Gay's *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (2002); Jon Spence's *A Century of Wills* (2002), *Jane Austen in Context* (edited by Janet Todd in 2005), and so on.

A growing interest in narrative techniques followed the early critical studies and not exclusively in England and the USA. At the University of Bologna Carlo Izzo, sensitive to the new trends and not satisfied with the Jane Austen offered to Italian students in Mario Praz's ever-present *Storia della letteratura inglese* (1936) encouraged me to read the Italian translation of J.W. Beach's *The Twentieth Century Novel. Studies in Technique*. He recommended I study it carefully and then try to apply its critical perspective to

Jane Austen's novels. I thus learnt to distinguish between *narrator* and *author*, the voice-over from the "conductor" constructing her characters in close relation to the plot. I learnt to perceive how subtly the *author* can distance herself from the *narrator* in order to disown or even mock her. Studying the activity of the author/"conductor" it became more and more evident that the dissociation of the conductor from the narrator, that is of the ironist from the moralist, is the main device on which Jane Austen's language of irony (studied at the time by Wayne Booth, Mark Schorer, Andrew Wright, Lionel Trilling, and many others) is based. Continuing in this direction, in 1983 I published *La zitella illetterata*, where I compared the novels with some of the most popular conduct books of the time: *Sense and Sensibility* with contrast novels (such as Jane West's *A Gossip's Story*, 1796); *Emma* with female-Quixote novels (such as Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, 1752); *Mansfield Park* with evangelical novels (such as Hannah More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, 1808). More recently, the role of Bologna as the Italian hub for subversive Austen studies has been confirmed and consolidated by a series of international conferences: "Jane Austen Now and Then" (2002), "Unmasking Jane Austen: Austen Studies Today" (2009), "Subversive Jane Austen: from the Critic to the Reader" (2015). However, as discussed further in Massimiliano Morini's essay in this Special Issue, at least in the Italian critical panorama, the influence of a traditional, conservative reading was, and still is, hard to shift; and it may be found still lingering in the introductions to the latest Italian editions of Austen's novels.

Another key publication corroborating this interpretation of Austen as a subversive writer was Brian Southam's facsimile edition of an unpublished manuscript, *Sir Charles Grandison* (1980). Attributed by the family to her niece Anna, it has been revealed as a key text from which Austen's subversiveness unequivocally emerges. Not only does the 15 year-old author reduce Richardson's pompous seven-volume conduct-book to a booklet of 52 pages, but she turns it into a comedy in which Richardson's values are exposed and desecrated. In Act II the themes of Richardson's major novels are summed up in little more than three pages, with an abundance of double-entendre: *matrimony* and *fortune* inextricably linked in Mrs Awberry's first line; *tenderness of heart* and *love of money* inseparably symbolised in the purse thrown in front of the audience's

eyes; the celebration of marriage represented as a painful operation under duress and violence made at the presence of unmoved clergyman and clerk; the irreverent and liberating act of throwing the indispensable priest's book into the fire; the open remark on the weakness of religion in the face of money. In his introduction, Southam suggests that most probably Jane Austen's attitude to the theatre was somewhat different from the dislike and disapprobation until then attributed to her, since she was not to be confounded with her narrator in *Mansfield Park*. Southam's suggestion is taken up and upheld in what, in my opinion, is the best biography of Jane Austen, or at least the most innovative: that is *Jane Austen A Life* by David Nokes, published in 1997. With its portrait of Jane Austen as "rebellious, satirical and wild" (p. 7), Nokes's book has proved a reservoir of critical insights. Within the space of a year, 2002, three important works on Jane Austen and the theatre came out (Byrne; Anderson; Gay).

The studies on eighteenth-century women dramatists and playwrights shone a light on the background of the six novels showing them as an outcome of the tradition of female comedy and closet drama. It is here in fact, in the plays of Susanna Centlivre, Hannah Cowley and Elizabeth Inchbald, that the structural devices of Austen's irony can be found. To give an example, the function of fools, of such characters as Mrs Palmer in *Sense and Sensibility* or Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park* or the most famous (and still misread) Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. With her inability to understand entail, Mrs Bennet acts as the author's mouthpiece, voicing her attack on the very structure of patriarchal society.

In 2004 Cambridge University Press published a significant work for Austen studies: Peter Knox-Shaw's *Jane Austen and Enlightenment*. This book was reviewed by the *Times Literary Supplement* whose front-page title, "Radical Austen", attributed worldwide legitimacy and visibility to subversive criticism so far ignored or ridiculed. In this review, Michael Caines (2005) also openly contested the canonical study by Marilyn Butler entitled *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975). Knox-Shaw shed light on a social and family background imbued with the influence of Hume, Adam Smith, Priestley, Linneus, Voltaire and radical thinking in order to justify and explain Jane Austen's "chameleon-like" writing (Lascelles 1995: 102), general irony and multiperspectivism (Knox-

Shaw 2004: 13). Knox-Shaw based his work on textual evidence: from Adam Smith, Pope, Hume, Godwin, Priestly's *Disquisitions* (1777), Hunter's *Treatise on the Blood* (1812), Jenner's *Enquiry into the Cow-Pox* (1800), and so on.

Knox-Shaw's reconstruction of Jane Austen's intellectual background could not overlook what is, in my opinion, the main instrument of Jane Austen's irony as well as the material evidence of the "historicity" of her writing: that is the Picturesque. Like her generation, Jane Austen was "enamoured" of Gilpin, says brother Henry ([1818] 2002: 140). After so many studies on the Picturesque in the 1990s (Barrell 1992; Copley and Garside 1994; Bermingham 1994; Punter) it might seem almost superfluous to stress that the Picturesque was not simply a fashion nor an eighteenth-century aesthetic category like the Sublime and the Beautiful. The Picturesque is (in Bermingham's words) "an aesthetics constituted to serve the nascent-marketing needs of a developing commercial culture" (Bermingham 1994: 81) and as such it reflects and responds to its expressive needs, which can be summed up in Gilpin's keywords: change, variety, novelty.

Such principles and rules taken from *Three Essays on the Picturesque* (1792) also appear, *mutatis mutandis*, in Ford Madox Ford's essays on impressionism and the "modern novel" (1914). And it is no coincidence that Ford was a great admirer of Jane Austen: "There has been nothing worth *reading* written in England since the eighteenth century except by a woman (Ford [1924-1928] 1997: 19), "the one consummate artist that the English nineteenth century produced" towards whom "even the Master [Henry James] himself […] was heavy-handed" (Ford [1939] 1994: 785-6), he writes in *Parade's End* and in *The March of Literature.* He paid tribute to Austen again in his last work, *Portraits from Life* (1937), when, writing from a desert island in the land of fiction and allowed no more than thirteen books, he began his list with *Pride and Prejudice* & *Mansfield Park*.

Ford's admiration for Austen's technique should not be surprising, if we consider that multiplicity and changing perspectives are not an invention of the twentieth-century. In Austen's time, all people of taste, thanks to the theory of the picturesque, were familiar with perspectives, foregrounds and the varying of distance. The admiration of the theorist of impressionism in the modern novel

is both significant and understandable: traditionalists, conservative Austenites and Janeites cannot keep ignoring the fact that Jane Austen is a contemporary of Turner (both born in 1775) and not of the Dutch painters. Her ambiguity and ultimate irony are but the literary equivalent of Turner's picturesque and proto-impressionist Venice.

This is why among her portraits, the most truthful cannot but be Cassandra's watercolour, where she is turning her back on us. The very symbol of her irony, we will never know if she is making fun of her readers and her critics.

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