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The Small Secret Sociology of Jane Austen
Subjectivities, Hierarchy, Context

Christopher Wilkes

A PAPER PRESENTED AT YORK ST. JOHN UNIVERSITY
NOVEMBER 2010
The Argument

I have little doubt that Jane Austen would have hated the book I am writing and this presentation. I imagine her sitting in the front row of the audience, writing intensely in that tight hand of hers in a notebook, full of fury, waiting only for me quieten down so that she could turn her alarmingly powerful satirical lens on me. But in spite of her imagined and compelling presence, I find myself driven to argue that there is something in Austen's work which is sociologically powerful and uniquely interesting. Indeed, I want to treat Austen herself as a sociologist.

There are three parts to this claim. First, I find something very valuable in the smallness of her analysis. Pierre Bourdieu once said of Erving Goffman that his was the sociology of the infinitely small. Bourdieu was driven to this view because of Goffman's interest in the details of a faculty cocktail party, the workings of the tiniest social gatherings, the individual, human gestures of power and subordination worked out on the body itself. Austen's view may be even smaller. Indeed, her focus on subjectivities allows us to enter the internal turmoil of human consciousness, that place where we ponder if this lecture is ever going to end, what's for dinner, or how my leg is hurting, even while we should be concentrating on something else. So my first claim is that the very smallness of Austen's analysis allows us to interrogate the subjectivities of Georgian England.

Second, there is her brilliance, expressed on almost every page, in her exposure of the social hierarchy of her time. Here is a typical passage picked at random from many other similar passages. It comes from Emma. Miss Woodhouse is talking of the marriage of Mr. Elton, the local clergyman, to a neophyte, a 'Miss Hawkins', who is about to join the Highbury community:

Of the lady, individually, Emma thought very little. She was good enough for Mr. Elton, no doubt; accomplished enough for Highbury - handsome enough - to look plain … As to connection, there Emma was perfectly easy … What she was, must be uncertain; but who she was, might be found out … She brought no name, no blood, no alliance. Miss Hawkins was the youngest of the two daughters of a Bristol – merchant, of course, he must be called; but as the whole of the profits of his mercantile life appeared so very moderate … all the grandeur of the connection seemed dependent on the elder sister, who was very well married, to a gentleman in a great way near Bristol, who kept two carriages! That was the wind-up of the history; that was the glory of Miss Hawkins. (Emma, 1988: 183)

Emma’s intention here is to place Miss Hawkins in a very particular location in the complex rankings of the rural social order which Miss Hawkins is now entering. Like any advanced social analyst, Emma does it by estimating her wealth (10,000 pounds in the funds); her social rank (lowly, from trade, and not wealthy trade at that); her accomplishments (that turn out to be limited) her taste (vulgar and uneducated); and her connections in society (non-
existent among people that matter). Through this mechanism, Emma is able to assign the new arrival to the role of a parvenu on the edge of her own social circle. Austen offers up these kinds of judgments endlessly in everything she writes, and, taken together, these accounts starkly reveal the dimensions of hierarchy, of what counted as socially correct behavior, and what mattered to the people she wrote about. Knowing this, we are much better able to make sense of how people operated, how they orchestrated their lives, why they learnt to play the piano well, or fold a cravat in a certain way, or herd cows, or hold dances. And, of course, these judgments were not trivial; they shaped the social possibilities of those who were judged in a very decisive way.

Third, historical context is all important in making meaning around Jane Austen. I am interested in making sense of these social judgments, the sensibilities and the architecture of social domination in which Austen lived. So this can only be done by historicizing Austen's period, following Marx, Thompson, Abrams and Jameson, elaborating as fully as possible the key elements of social, economic and political life so as to bring to light the nature of Austen's understandings on their own terms. So if Austen brings us smallness and subjectivities along with her sociology, the least we can do is bring historical context to her novels.

These three themes; smallness and subjectivities, hierarchy; and context shape the remarks I am about to make. This broader discussion comes from a longer argument to be found elsewhere in the manuscript Social Jane, which is an analysis of four social fields: economics; social space and geography; and food and fashion. I draw on each of these fields for examples as I proceed.

1. The Private Becomes Public: Smallness and Subjectivities

In sociology, we might use the phenomenological notion of inter-subjectivity to examine the very social nature of subjectivity in Austen's novels. But inter-subjectivity, while it refers to shared subjective meanings right enough, won't do here. Its primary focus on psychoanalytic meaning and social empathy doesn't place history at the centre of things, and for me, Bourdieu's notion of habitus, durable dispositions shaping action, derived from both personal and social history, is more useful.

So the focus here is on the social habitus in Austen. In the six novels, we spend a lot of time in the world of individual consciousness, but the social consciousness of the era is everywhere implied and negotiated. We start with the so-called juvenile novel, Northanger Abbey. Here in this parodic romp through the Gothic trope, Austen takes us to the universe of the early romance novel, about to be played out in real life by our protagonist, Catherine Morland:

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4 Gordon Marshall and John Scott's Dictionary of Sociology tells us that it is 'A term used primarily in phenomenological sociology to refer to the mutual constitution of social relationships. It suggests that people can reach consensus about knowledge or about what they have experienced in their life-world — at least as a working agreement if not a claim to objectivity.' John Scott, and Gordon Marshall. 2009. A Dictionary of Sociology. Oxford: Oxford University Press. But the way the term works out in sociology through Schutz stays too close to psychology for the purposes of this work. Thus while shared meanings are important, this works out to be of most use to social psychology in the development of shared therapeutic meaning. It may also refer to the development of empathy. And while both these uses are valuable, this present analysis needs a more capacious analytic structure that allows a wider history in. For this, Bourdieu's idea of habitus is more valuable. Bourdieu argues that the term habitus refers to durable disposition shaping action, and it derives from two sources: history and agency. But this history itself is not merely familial and personal, but also social in the widest sense. It might derive from the social history of an era.
…when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must and will throw a hero in her way. (N/A, 16-17)

Catherine Morland, absorbed almost entirely in romantic novels, does indeed get a break from dull, rural idiocy, and is thrown into Bath society by the wealthy Allens, who take a fancy to her and transport her to Bath. Her head is full of robbers and tempests and heroes, but the grownups do not seem to notice them.

But in Bath, that glittering metropolis of fashion, things warm up. Here Catherine starts to meet a wider social circle, and the first of these is Mr. Tilney. In the Lower Rooms, Mrs. Allen and Catherine meet a man who knows his muslin very well, a matter of extraordinary distinction. He is immediately valued beyond all other men. Catherine immediately starts dreaming about Mr. Tilney, and he becomes an element in the enduring gothic fantasy. But can Mr. Tilney, a respectable clergyman from a respectable family in Gloucestershire, really fit the bill. We need someone more ogrous and rough-fashioned to come along, and this happens quickly when the Thorpes appear. Miss Thorpe might certainly be wicked, given her full-time dedication to the art of flirting, but it is her brother John Thorpe who is even more promising to Catherine. To the background of Udolpho and other Gothic novels, John Thorpe appears as a snorting, vulgar brute who lacks any form of social subtlety and merely wants his own way. He grabs Catherine from the Tilneys and spirits her off into the country. Like a present-day car obsessive, he is preoccupied with how fast his horse moves. He takes himself to be a man of money and property, though this proves to be false. In contrast to the snorting John Thorpe and the flirtatious Isabella Thorpe, Miss Tilney, sister of the muslin expert had:

…a good figure, a pretty face, and a very agreeable countenance; and her air, though it had not all the decided pretension, the resolute stillness of Miss Thorpe’s, had more real elegance. Her manners shewed good sense and good breeding; they were neither shy, nor affectedly open; and she seemed capable of being young, attractive, and at a ball, without wanting to fix the attention of every man near her, and without vexation on every trifling occurrence. (N/A, 55-56)

The moral landscape is already clear. As the plot unfolds, the Thorpes are brushed aside and the Tilneys start to rise. But, of course, this is not a simple matter. General Tilney, the father of Henry and Eleanor, is truly villainous, and wants Catherine for her money. When this strategy does not produce results, he throws her out of the house.

But what of Catherine’s subjectivity? There is much internal musing, certainly, and indeed much of the novel's action takes place within Catherine's head. She now adds the confusion of the fashionable world to the Gothic infrastructure of her imagination. As John Thorpe speaks:

Catherine listened with astonishment; she knew not how to reconcile two such very different accounts of the same thing; for she had not been

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5 N/A, 28. The Chapman editions are in use throughout.
6 N/A, 29-30. Austen comments: …‘it must be very improper that a young lady should dream of a gentleman before the gentleman is first known to have dreamed of her’. (N/A, 30)
brought up to understand the propensities of a rattle, nor to know to how many idle assertions and impudent falsehoods the excess of vanity will lead. (N-A, 65)

This dialogue between several different forms of morality takes up the rest of the internal action. The Thorpes are easily described. But the Tilneys as more complicated - no one single organizing principle is at work here. Captain Tilney, the oldest Tilney child, is an adventurer and user of young women, as he exhibits with Isabella Thorpe, a young woman of much flair but little experience. Colonel Tilney needs funds and is ruthless in gaining them. But his younger children follow a separate path. Eleanor and Henry offer a clear alternative to both the Thorpe perspective and the senior Tilney view. Between these two poles, Catherine oscillates for the rest of the novel. She first comes under the spell of Isabella and her noisy brother, but soon her doubts set in. In a typical piece of internal monologue, Austen tells us:

Little as Catherine was in the habit of judging for her self, and unfixed as were her general notions of what men ought to be, she could not entirely repress a doubt, while she bore with the effusions of his (Thorpe's) endless conceit, of his being altogether agreeable. It was a bold surmise, for he was Isabella's brother .... (N-A, 66)

This brief infatuation, innocently started but soon discarded, is also quickly over. Catherine heads for the quieter climes of walks with Eleanor and Henry, in the midst of which the invitation from Colonel Tilney to visit Northanger Abbey itself seems to offer a continuance and a deepening of the Tilney connection. Here she enters the materiality of Gothicism itself - a brooding building, cloisters, stairways, hidden passages, chests and unused wings, dust and memory plentiful enough for the wildest imagination. She worries about the death of Mrs. Tilney, and fears it must have been awful. She muses on the problems of this poor woman:

… it suddenly struck her as not unlikely, that she might that morning have passed near the very spot of this poor woman's confinement - might have been within a few paces of the cell in which she languished out her days … In support of the plausibility of this conjecture, it further occurred to her, that the forbidden gallery, in which lay the apartments of the unfortunate Mrs. Tilney, must be, as certainly as her memory could guide her, exactly over this suspected range of cells, and the staircase by the side of those apartments of which she had caught a transient glimpse, communicating by some secret means with those cells, might well have favoured the barbarous proceedings of her husband. Down that stair-case she had been perhaps been conveyed in a state of well-prepared insensibility! (N-A, 188)

This purely Gothic musing is put to rights when she later talks to Henry Tilney about it, and he abruptly rejects her arguments. Austen comments on her attitude of mind:

The visions of romance were over. *Catherine was completely awakened.* Henry's address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done. Most grievously was she humbled. Most bitterly did she cry. It was not only with herself that she was sunk - but with Henry. (N-A, 199, my italics)
This is the turning point of the novel. What happens next has little to do with interiority. She comes out of this private universe and into brutal social experience. General Tilney finds that Catherine has no fortune, and is no use to him. He spares no time in throwing her out of her Gothic fantasy world, and out of his house, and she travels alone back to her rural home. But this is, of course, is not the end. Subjectivities are recast in the last scenes when Henry arrives on his white horse. He is able to express his innermost feelings more clearly when he arrives at Fullerton.

Gothicism is seen merely as teenage nonsense. Mature thinking arrives when Henry confronts Catherine with the accurate record of his mother's death. The loss of the internal monologue within the Gothic romance and the arrival of 'good thinking' about what men and women should - the shared gender sensibilities - establishes a new terrain of debate and internal musings. The Thorpes clearly manifest the sensibilities of the new social order, with all its gainings and strivings. But Austen is leading us elsewhere. With the first of her several clergy, Austen introduces Georgian social work as the best alternative for couples with limited resources and strong moral intent. In the last chapters, Henry rejects his father's overweening greed and domination, and offers himself to the Morland family as a suitor for Catherine.

General Tilney's resistance remains as an obstacle to perfect felicity. Through another touch of humour, Austen resolves the issue:

The means by which their early marriage was effected can be the only doubt; what probably circumstance could work upon a temper like the General's? The circumstance which chiefly availed, was the marriage of his daughter with a man of fortune and consequence, which took place in the course of the summer - an accession of dignity that threw him into a fit of good-humour from which he did not recover … (NA, 250)

The broad arena of gender subjectivities is thus raised and outlined in Northanger Abbey as a territory for debate and complicated positioning. But its argument is simple - mature people, passing beyond childish fantasy, establish households only after matters of property and character are settled. And the question of character is largely centered on gender performativity. Here, Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland settle on a quiet parsonage and an implied life of good works. And the themes of gender and money comprise two of the central elements of the social subjectivities, the private worlds that are shared, in the novels.

This arena of gender subjectivities gets a further working over in Persuasion. The story starts with the account of the docile, unmarried woman in a large household who has neither independent means or a husband. Patriarchy rules without question, and it is a particularly stupid form of patriarchy in the figure of Sir Walter Elliot. Anne Elliot, the vehicle on which Austen rests most of her argument, is represented as nothing more than a senior servant, and senior only because she has more obligations than the rest of the serving classes. There is much musing by Anne on the nature of her predicament. Here is a typical passage:

To hear them talking so much of Captain Wentworth… was a new sort of trial to Anne's nerves. She found, however, that it was one to which she

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7 See Amanda Vickery, op. cit., chapter 7, ‘The Trials of Domestic Dependence,’ for a more general, detailed account of this period.
must endure herself. Since he actually was expected in the country, she
must teach herself to be insensible on such points. (P, 52)

Thus begins Anne Elliot’s long and unhappy meditation on the man who she has loved all
her adult life. In the course of the book, there is much debate, many letters, and a host of
internal reflections on the nature of men and women, how men and women should act, what
constitutes a good marriage and a poor one, and how money is to be secured and protected.
As the agony comes to an end, it is only through the internal musings of a letter that Captain
Wentworth can finally share his true feelings with Anne. After hearing his friend Captain
Harville and Anne debate whether it is men or women who are most constant in love, he
writes a letter to her, even though she is in the same room:

I can listen to you in silence no longer. I must speak to you with such
means as are within my reach. You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half
hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone
for ever. I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own,
than when you almost broke it eight years and a half ago. Dare not say
that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I
have loved none but you. (P, 237)

The couple are reconciled and the inevitable marriage, the usual Austen end-product, takes
place. But the courtship has almost completely taken place in private, almost unknown to
the protagonists themselves. As well, it is a complete surprise to their families, and
Wentworth and Ann can hardly believe it. All the work of preparation has been internal,
taking place in the worryings and perturbations of the participants. The sources of these
anxieties, however, are hardly psychological. They are to found in the attitudes of the people
round them about how men and women should behave, and what kind of fortune is
appropriate for matrimony. The social habitus of gender is widely discussed, the lives of
women and men endlessly debated, and judgments made. It is merely in the reworkings of
such issues that we come to understand this powerful social dimension, as we are taken
inside the consciousnesses of the two main characters. These ‘durable dispositions’ about
what men and women should and should not do, what constitutes excellence of character,
and how distinction might be achieved in daily conduct, result from the reshaping of
received opinion, and often its rejection, as new social arguments are made against the
common wisdom. These new opinions, started first in familial and parental settings, are
vigorously interrogated and reshaped by the heroes of our story, before being presented
again in a new social form through the exchange of new vows. What was for some time
private becomes truly social as the Elliots judge the rightness and wrongness of Captain
Wentworth and his new bride.

The same theme of the private reworking of public social norms is widespread in Pride and
Prejudice. In the famous passages in which Darcy declares his love for Lizzy, and she resents
his advances, his theory of propriety, good and bad gender behaviour, is again set out in a
letter, since he finds he is unable to express himself face to face. The letter is several pages
long, and in it Darcy outline a detailed theory of appropriate male attitudes through the use
of two case studies - the treatment of Jane Bennett and his friend Bingley, and the alleged
misuse of Wickham. In it, Darcy is able to express both his views towards women, but also

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8 By this is meant the shared dispositions (Habitus) about gender, formed first in the social realm then interrogated privately
by Anne and Wentworth, and finally reformed and displayed again in public in a new fashion through their marriage.
the organizing principles by which he thinks family and business obligations are to be met.
Lizzy is thus able to read, as if in a written scholarly paper, the social habitus of Fitzwilliam
Darcy, and to decide, on the basis of this argument, whether she finds any common ground
with him, or whether the gap between them is unbreachable. Again, the sources of these
beliefs are hardly psychological, stemming as they do from his personal history in the Darcy
family, from his education and from the influence of friends. But the real social action of
the plot happens in very private settings.

Darcy himself tells us where his guiding principles came from:

As a child, I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my
temper. I was given good principles but left to follow them in pride and
conceit ... I was spoilt by my parents, who though good themselves ..
allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to
care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest
of the world ... Such I was, from eight to eight and twenty; and such I
might have still been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth 1 ... You
taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I
was properly humbled ... You shewed me how insufficient were all my
pretensions ... (P & P, 369)

Family history played their normal part in shaping Darcy's views, as indeed it did with
Elizabeth. But it is in their private musings, and in their awkward and extended emotional
exchanges, that they managed to breach their differences, and negotiate a common order of
beliefs, beliefs about gender, marriage, property and money that provided the basis for their
proposed future life together. And this private musing later finds validation through Darcy's
working (again behind the scenes and largely out of sight) to get Lydia married. The social
agreement that Darcy and Elizabeth finally develop sets them again Lady Catherine de
Bourgh and others in proper society, provides a source of confusion to Lizzy's own father,
who had thought Darcy the proudest man in England and the last man his beloved daughter
would ever marry, and goes against Darcy's own established beliefs.

So the formation of social habitus may begin and end in society, but in Austen's novels most
of the action we care about happens behind closed doors, and away from the public gaze.
Thus is the nature of Austen's small sociology.

Much of the action in the Austen novels happens within the consciousness of individuals. As
well as conversations, letters are the mechanism by which these private meanings are shared
and the social habitus is built up, negotiated and tested out. The final test is courtship, of
course, or, more precisely, the process of initial meeting and engagement, a process which,
for Austen, takes about a year on average. It is during this process that private dispositions
are shared, agreements and disagreements exchanged, attitudes tested in actual situations and
through personal history, and common ground formed, as in the case of Elizabeth and
Darcy, Ann Elliot and Wentworth, Henry Tilney and Catherine. Sometimes it seems that no
such 'bridging' can take place, as with Darcy and Elizabeth, but better understandings or
more knowledge may be found, and then agreement is reached. Evidence matters to Austen.
A handsome face and a witty character, as we see with Henry Crawford and George
Wickham, may be diverting, but the evidence of good character in their actions is lacking. In
other cases, as with Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford, the differences are orthogonal,
and no alliance is possible. Things blow apart. And most of this takes place in private, or in letters, or in one-to-one conversations. The sociology of the infinitely small is at work.
2. Hierarchy

In Amanda Vickery’s stunning book *Behind Closed Doors*, an account of domestic Georgian England, she comments:

Hierarchy was the skeleton that structured households, as natural as landscape. We should be careful not to presume that dependence was insufferable, or that rebellion boiled in every conscious underling. The conviction that hierarchy is abnormal is a modern reflex, not a principle of Georgian common sense. (Vickery, 2009, 201)

If Vickery is right, what were the elements of this 'natural hierarchy'? I examine four fields in which this natural hierarchy operates here - landscape, economics, fashion and food.

1. Landscape

Austen writes about the machinery of hierarchy on every page. It starts with the settings that Austen recounts - the landscapes, houses and land in which her action takes place. In her theory of landscape, memory and nature, Austen comes closest to the Tory Theory of Landscape which prevailed in her era among major elements of the landed classes. The situation is complicated, however. But I want to claim that it is absurd to dismiss Austen as simply a spokeswoman for a challenged class about to lose their land.

Edward Charles Williams, *The Old Roadside Inn*, oil on canvas, 1859. The Tory Theory of Landscape proposed stewardship of the land by those who had the wisdom, time and vision to see into the future, but it clearly masked self-interest behind an ideology of nobility. The Whig Theory of Landscape saw land as a commodity to be bought and sold like any other, ignoring the social relations of the land. In the Tory view, the human figures in the landscape were background; in the Whig theory, they were obstacles to be removed.

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9 Some parts of this section derive from the longer manuscript *Social Jane*, cited above.
Austen certainly had a well-developed *Theory of Landscape*. She believed in benevolent ownership, if the characters of Darcy, Brandon and Knightley are anything to go by. And clearly she made fun of the improvers, those mostly associated with what Everett\(^\text{11}\) calls the Whig Theory of Landscape. She relished the chance to make Rushworth a fop and a fool, but his 12,000 pounds a year, more funds than even Darcy controls,\(^\text{12}\) also meant he was not to be lightly dismissed. Her view is quite unequivocal. Life ought not to be reduced to commerce; rather, land and those who own it have wide responsibilities, of which making money may rank lower than other concerns. While she clearly understood the necessity of sound finance and sensible land management, she was more than superficially aware of the broad network of people who depended on the benevolent management of estates and villages for their survival. Thus it is in the moral character of those who own the land that she looked to for security. Benevolent landowning, coupled with a clergy who could be depended on to have the best interests of their parish at heart, apparently appeared to Austen to provide the best protection possible for those living in the countryside.

I think this is rather more than a simple reactionary view. We must consider what was coming. If Everett and Schama are right, then what was coming was Whiggism\(^\text{13}\) - an increasing emphasis on the use of the land simply as a commodity, stripped of its social and historical trappings – a landscape without people – to put it in one way. Austen would never have agreed to that, given her very thoughtful understanding of the complexities of rural life, and the way the social and economic mechanisms depended on large landholders. If Whig improvers planned to despoil the land, and merchants planned to buy and sell it at will, then memory and nature would be disrupted, and old patterns of courtesy, responsibility and custom would be thrown out. This is a view that, from all we can read, Austen would have resisted. Land and property can display power quite starkly, and offer a site of economic production and wealth, which they do in Darcy’s case in particular. They also provide locations where the moral conduct of the owner is continually on display in the workings of the community, and the judgements community members of those who own the land. But land and property can also be seen abstractly as mediums for the displaying of taste through landscape gardening and architecture in their highest forms, in which they aspire to the level of art, presenting the civilization of the owner for all to see. In this guise, land and property become a place, as Henry Crawford puts it, a venue which people travel to view and admire. Finally, property can inspire awe and dominance, reminding the outsider of the status and the social memory that old ownership of a landscape implies.

The central question to consider is the politics of landscape. Barrell’s argument about the political nature of landscape, the ‘distant perspective’ that only the landed interests had, the capacity to see beyond the mundane and take a society-wide perspective, had clearly had currency for some time. In this view, the *common folk were merely objects in a landscape to be worked upon*. There were others who, with their permanence in the memory of society, and

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\(^{12}\) *Mansfield Park*, page 40, *Pride and Prejudice*, page 10, has Darcy with ten thousand pounds a year.

\(^{13}\) By using this term I refer to the Whig theory of history, and the inevitability of progress. ‘Progress’ and ‘Improvement’ on the land meant changes to the landscape.
their permanence in the landscape, should be given authority to rule and to judge. This, at least, is James Barrell’s view of the thinking of the time. A certain distance from the common weal certainly sums up Darcy’s attitude to a tee. He is distant, not from coldness, though he admits to no easy sociability. Rather it stems from the need, Austen seems to be saying, to be looking into the distance, beyond the everyday, and to the large issues with which he must deal, like lost sisters, and the long-term matters of property with which he is involved. And while this view might be rigorously challenged as covering a good deal of self-interest under the cloak of dispassionate benevolence, it is clearly present in Austen’s writing.

Thus, Jane Austen’s theory of landscape is very much a Tory one, a view embodying a nostalgia for the past that never existed. But it’s much more complicated than that. Austen’s view also involves a clear awareness that property speaks to honor, dignity and social standing. It’s clear in everything she writes that moral and social character is of paramount importance in developing her system of social judgement. But I would want to claim that this view has a third part to it as well. Her view of the landscape also encourages good social relations, the conducting of affairs towards a wider benevolence than is usually associated with conservative theory. She clearly valued those who worked the land, as well as those who owned it, as she describes in some detail in the tale of Mr. Robert Martin and Mr. Knightley in *Emma.*

Memory plays its part in securing hierarchy here. The memory of land, its use and ownership, has the capacity to establish dominance in a way that any amount of money and rank cannot match. It is the final capital at stake. Long history cannot readily be bought. When Emma seeks to suggest that the Woodhouses are an ancient family, or the Dashwoods remind us that they have owned Norland Hall for many generations, they plan by this device to outrun history and present action, and display their ownership and their status as eternal. This is natural hierarchy. It is the classic play of the already-established against the nouveau riche of any generation and any social setting. There is memory in the land and eternity as well. The incumbents seem to be saying “We’ve been here forever, and you are ephemeral. Thus we are ‘natural’, and no amount of present action on your part will change things.” They have history in the bank. How can antiquity be countered in the struggle for control? Only by history and memory, and that takes time.
'The Cole-Heavers' (Charles James Fox; Frederick North, 2nd Earl of Guilford) by James Gillray, published by William Humphrey, hand-coloured etching, published 16 April 1783. 9 1/2 in. × 13 1/4 in. (242 mm × 338 mm) paper size. North was Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1767. Fox was the famous Radical Whig “… politician; his opposition to the power of the monarchy meant that he was out of favour with George III, and consequently allied to the Prince of Wales (the future George IV). Held office only briefly, (1) as foreign secretary in Rockingham's short-lived government of 1782, and (2) as secretary of state in the Duke of Portland's government of 1783-84. Supported the French Revolution in 1789, but by 1804 was instrumental in bringing down the government of Addington who had failed either to preserve the peace or to prepare for Napoleon's threat of invasion.’ (National Portrait Gallery Text) The cartoon shows 'an interior scene with Lord Fox and Lord North shoveling coins into a money bag labeled “For Private Use”; behind them hanging on the wall are several bags labeled “M.T.” and a sash labeled “For the Use of the Publick”; to the right are additional coins on the ground.' (Text sourced at http://www.americanantiquarian.org/Inventories/Europeanprints/b3f2.htm on October 22, 2010) "Two Virtuous Elves, Taking Care of Themselves" is the sub-title.

2. Money

Then there is the pressing question of Money. If gender subjectivities appear throughout the novels, they do so to the background music of economics and survival. The hierarchy of wealth among the Austen community was clear, with Rushworth and Darcy at the top, and the family of the Dashwoods, as well as the clergy, such as the Ferrars, and Edmund and Fanny Bertram, at the bottom. Austen's characters are drawn in complex social fields, in which economics is only one of the capitals that the participants strive for. Romance, passion, authentic feeling – all these are a good much sought, and for many of the characters, and especially Marianne and Elizabeth, this authentic feeling comes to dominate over all other considerations. But our heroines are juggling multiple demands, and nothing can be reduced to the simple lust for money, or even, more moderately, the need for security. Yet Charlotte Lucas comes close. Her marriage to Mr. Collins is surely shorn of romance, but it is not merely money and security that she wants. She also desires tranquility, a place of her own, some autonomy. With Mr. Collins, she knows she will have all three. An easily
managed husband, with a sound income and a reliable patron, will suffice for her. Maria Rushworth marries an estate and a social position, as well as a house in London. Rushworth’s money is important because she hopes for social position, even though she soon realizes that the tax on this transaction is too high for her to pay. Elizabeth’s Bennet has such high and such complex standards that she requires a man of serious moral character, of real social conscience, to be attached to her money, and it takes Darcy the whole length of the book to display these many talents. Lydia is romantic and adventurous, but is brought down by economics and social shame. Elinor is in love, but has a very practical bent. In the end, love trumps income, and it is a curious conclusion. Necessity, that rough teacher of women without their own resources, drives the bargain in the end. The two can never be separated.

In Austen’s writing we can discern two well-developed economic theories. First, there is the economic theory of the household. Parsimony and the philosophy of good stewardship reign here, and wasting money is not to be endured. This was a time in the English countryside when there was money to be had, but there was also widespread poverty. Austen learnt this lesson from her own life, and this lesson is routinely repeated in the novels:

Austen’s letters … define the economy of the quotidian, her real concern for the financial pressures under which she and her sister lived. The letters … show a thriftiness … (Susan Allen Ford, page 4)  

Money, as embodied labour, is not to be wasted. The reader meets thrift in the character of Elinor Dashwood, and we see it again in the comparison between Knightley and Churchill. Knightley despises Churchill because he wastes money and apparently rides all the way to London for a haircut. He also wastes time, and does no good for anyone else. In contrast, the morally acceptable do not waste time or money. And in comparison to Churchill, whose reputation cannot be trusted any more than his feelings, Knightley is all industry and good works. Money is not to be wasted because there’s so little of it about beyond the exalted ranks of the leading families. There is much poverty and suffering, and this suffering rises as far as the Bates, close to the higher reaches of society, in Emma. Poverty is a precipice waiting for the unsuspecting wastrel. There is also the tragedy of Mrs. Smith, whose husband gets tied in with the young William Walter Elliot, a fact that leads to his ruin and to her endless suffering. The character of William Elliot is vividly described in some detail, and we are led to understand that he, and his equally foolish ancestor, are all about wasted money. Austen’s claim is serious and simple. For the poor, and those with few resources, careful economic stewardship is a matter of necessity. Without it, the poor risk destitution, loss of security and loss of position.

But Austen also develops what I would call a social theory of the economy for the rich. For those who have more than they need to meet daily necessity, there is no choice but to be liberal and distributive. This moral economy of the estate and of wealth implies a decided social role beyond the individual family, penetrating into the wider community. When one owns a large house, many responsibilities follow. Now wider considerations come into play, and

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15 Persuasion, 152.
16 Persuasion, 196-197.
one must take a moral, ethical, political and, perhaps spiritual, lead in the lives of those
around you. Social welfare is paramount. Resources are not to be wasted any more among
the rich than they are among the poor, and due attention to the less fortunate is to be paid.
There were those in England at this time who took this ‘social obligation’ to be of
paramount importance in holding the country together. Without this social cement, they
would argue, England risked revolution and revolt. England risked the unthinkable:
becoming France.

There is also a third theory of the economy at work that tries to make sense of the larger shifts in
the English economic landscape, a theory of free trade overcoming mercantilism, in which
Adam Smith’s writings play a major role. Austen had little to do with this, and less to say
about it. Yet her characters are deeply involved in the ownership of land, in the raising of
fortunes through the navy, and in making a living in trade. Using all three theories together
allows us some traction into understanding the economic theories that predominated in
Austen’s time, both from the widest perspective at the level of the global economy, down to
the smallest concerns, such as the price of tea, or the cost of a yard of muslin.

What strikes the reader in all this is the way that Austen effortlessly combines an
understanding of social obligation and social rank within the simpler story of money itself.
She fully understood that people don’t simply marry for money, though this may be a key
factor, but rather that money and its uses throws off social meaning in all directions. The
way we make money and use money tells a social and ethical tale about us all that is hard to
mistake. Just as Adam Smith spent many pages in The Theory of Moral Sentiments telling us that
human beings have a great capacity to feel for others, and that money-making cannot be
separated from these broader social concerns, so too Jane Austen illuminates the ethical
complexities of economic life. This complexity forms the basis for her understanding of
economic hierarchy.
'John Bull taking a luncheon, or, British Cooks cramming Old Grumble-Gizzard with Bonne-Chére,' James Gillray, 1798. A typical James Gillray cartoon of the time. Many of his cartoons used food as the motif, but were rarely about food at all. From the New York Public Library website (http://legacy.www.nypl.org/research/chss/spe/art/print/exhibits/gillray/part4.html, recovered April 25, 2010) we learn that this cartoon was published in 1798, and that "Gillray here celebrates several British naval victories … A plump John Bull gorges himself on French warships ("Frigate"). A plump John Bull gorges himself on French warships ("Frigate"), served up to him by Lord Nelson (in the right foreground, with a wound over his left eye, received in that battle). Other naval heroes include Lord Howe (to Nelson's right) and Admiral Duncan (on the far right), who defeated a Franco-Dutch expedition to Ireland. John Bull's hat hangs over a print of "Buonaparte in Egypte," while, visible through the open window, Fox and Sheridan, dismayed by events so contrary to their predictions, beat a hasty retreat. Gillray's contemporaries acknowledged Gillray's role in demeaning the Whigs. In November 1798, shortly after this caricature was issued, Lord Bateman wrote to Gillray: "the Opposition are as low as we can wish them. You have been of infinite service in lowering them, and making them ridiculous.""

3. Food.

The English were also eating during this period, though, as usual, they were not eating well. But for some at least, this was about to change. *Cuisine* and culinary practices, including the purchase, preparation and consumption of food, provide a third terrain on which social hierarchies played out in Austen's time. There is much going on in the background while our Austen characters eat well or poorly, and drink too much or too little. This is a revolutionary age. Austen was born in the year the American Revolution started to bubble. At the same time, France was engaged in a series of social upheavals, and England is in a series of wars with Napoleon. The old mode of production had run its course. Most central to the culinary world is the advent of the French Revolution, and the flight of chefs from France. As the lickspittles of the hated aristocracy, French chefs were as despised as their masters, and their lives were in jeopardy. Certainly, job prospects had dwindled for them with the diminution of the aristocracy itself. As a result, a huge influx of new culinary talent arrived on English shores, and transformed the way the English ate. In particular, over the
next generation, they upturned what counted as good food, good manners and good culinary taste. Amy Trubek estimates that 5,000 chefs left French shores during the French revolutionary period, and most poured into England. They became cooks to the court, and to the leading families of the day, and not only did they cook differently, but they changed the social logic around food. Food itself became an autonomous source of distinction, another field in which to rise or fall. But they also developed a level of sophistication in the preparation and presentation of food that had been largely lacking in English social life. Much despised by the English aristocracy as decadent and lacking in ‘moral fiber’, the French nonetheless were grudgingly admired for their cultural astuteness, and especially for their cuisine, which soon set the standard for the English palette, at least among those that could afford to eat well, and who cared about food.

Most interestingly, Austen’s accounts tell us that food practices were part of the repertoire of dominance, part of the complex stratagem of manners that underscored hierarchy and privilege, not just as a backdrop to many important conversations and exchanges, but also as weaponry in itself. Grand houses had a repertoire of servants, food from all over the globe, perhaps a French chef, silver, glassware, and table damasks. The matter of providing food was a clear method of establishing dominance, far from the obligations of necessity. Doing it right meant securing social position. Do it wrong, and social ranking was in question. The entire theatre of preparation, presentation and consumption needed to be scripted and scripted well. The actors had to know their parts.

These small domestic social settings, in which nothing apparently happened, are much more than time-wasting. A future, and especially a feminine future, might utterly depend on caprice, happenstance, a chance meeting, a comment poorly formed, a meal badly presented. Accident and reason bled together in this world. Social occasions, and the food that fueled these occasions, were the backdrop for these incidents. And from these apparently small, private, intensely domestic incidents came large consequences – lives of luxury or despair, of material comfort or relentless struggle. Much was at stake in these apparently ‘trivial games’, as people offered each other cups of tea, and worried about the proper way to cut cucumber sandwiches.

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Finally, to be fashionable in Austen's day, carried its set of advantages and disasters with it. We might approach this question by considering the ‘designed way of life’, by which is meant the conscious attempt by the characters in Austen’s novels to form the body in a certain way, to worry about hair and complexion, to fuss over clothing, to pay attention to houses, furnishings, education, all as part of what it meant to constitute a cultivated position in the social sphere. In any simple rendering of her own society, Austen would have had an easy task, because she could have readily worked out, and understood very clearly, that those with more money, more style, more sophistication in each of these fields of endeavour
would naturally come out winners in the ‘rush to the top’. But, of course, this is not how it worked out, and this is not what Jane Austen believed to be true, or wanted for her heroes and heroines.

For Austen, fashion as a form of capital, a good that is struggled over, fought for, valued and contested, is inextricably bound with other forms of capital – morals, behaviour, values, attitudes are never far behind. Fashion comes freighted with meaning from everywhere. Thus it is that Henry Tilney might know a thing or two about muslin, but this is not important in itself, only an indicator of a wider sensibility that takes in the interests of others. The junior Mrs. Dashwood spends a lifetime acquiring objects, but she shows herself as a vulgar creature who lacks taste entirely. Her interest is quantitative – she wants as much as she can get, but there is never enough for her, and she remains a restless and unhappy character. Those loaded up with moral purpose and the highest ideals, such as Henry Tilney and Edward Ferrars, can’t find much room for gathering. Instead, they seek a quiet life helping others. In this, Austen finds a refuge from the fashionable world and the designed way of life that preoccupied the society around her, as it blundered on into industrialization, and new sources of wealth on a previously unimagined scale.

In any event, fashion was never really enough in itself, and nor were carriages, houses and interiors. Money might secure goods, but it did not guarantee taste or position in the highest levels of society. ‘Everything is Social’ says Bourdieu, and in the case of fashion, this was
certainly true. One dresses to have an effect. Beau Brummel might not have moved much, but he did stand around rather well, hoping to be noticed. There is a social purpose to his dressing, and when that social purpose disappears under the weight of the Regent’s approbation, then the value of his 'designed way of life' dissolves. Austen endlessly portrays the social way in which judgments were made about personal beauty, what was acceptable for women and men in terms of their personal style, whether women should run or walk, ride horses, what it meant to be an educated woman, spend money and time on clothes or not. Men could be rakes, but this could not last for long if they were to be socially admired. Only limitless money could save men from disaster if they chose to waste their lives, and few but the most wealthy had that. For most men, a more constructive life was needed, and for this life, a horse, carriages, a house, a wife, an education were needed, at least according to fashionable society. Without them, the social judgments which gave these elements of the designed life meaning could not be made. None of this mattered much to Austen, of course. Certainly to dress well to some degree was useful, but taken to an extreme, it was wasteful. Horses and carriages were nice, but only because they had a useful function in carrying people about. Austen did not lack vanity, and social judgments were finely understood, but she claimed we should not be diverted by fashion from the serious matter of how to behave best for the creatures that surround us in society.

The city and the new economy flood into all the novels, and, just as routinely, our heroines and heroes dismiss it. Clothes may be very well, and one might as well dress well as not. But fashion is not the purpose of life, and we must see through it. There are more important things to commit ourselves to, and those who are preoccupied with such things are merely decadent. ‘In a world’ in which widespread poverty exists, men are dying by the thousands in wars, and in which much must be done to secure the wellbeing of their neighbours, their counties, their towns and their country, wastrels are to be rejected and ‘seen through’. The designed way of life has its limits.
3. Context

Jane Austen cannot be read out of context. It is virtually valueless to read Austen with contemporary eyes if we are interested in understanding Austen's own consciousness, and the workings of the time she lived in. A historicized reading is essential to this task.19


19 See 'The New Historicism in Literary Study', D.G. Myers, *Academic Questions* 2 (Winter 1988-89) 27-36. I am especially interested in Fredric Jameson's re-reading of literary texts through historical context, and particularly *The Political Unconscious*. (Cornell, Ithaca, 1981) Certainly the general argument that literature does not 'float above society' is adhered to here, but the absolute disjuncture between the past and the present is rejected, as is the hyper-structuralist notion that history creates literature, and that the individual writer is dissolved. See, for example Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago University Press, Chicago) 1980. But 'the recovery of the original meaning', as Myers puts it, is indeed the aim here. A historicist approach extends the range of Austen's novels, and our understanding of them. But the new historicism puts this task somewhat differently. Literary texts display elements of the ideology of the time, rather than its simple history. This enables a poststructuralist reading of textuality to occur, according to Myers. But historicism can only go so far with Austen. Given her deeply 'domestic life', we cannot with a straight face reduce her writings to a reflection of wider historical events. The agency of the author has to be given real weight. Myers is critical of this trend of reducing literature to history, and sees much of the new historicism as a vehicle through which radical critics can display their own prejudices through literature.
1. Political Context

So what, then was the context in which Austen wrote? This was the Regency era, of course. George the Third had come to the throne in 1760, and was to reign, sometimes with some difficulty, well into the nineteenth century, finally dying in 1820, when his reckless son formally took over, just seventeen years before the beginning of Victoria’s prodigious period of sovereignty. He reigned throughout Austen’s life. Austen’s era is dominated by a series of social ruptures and disjunctures which can hardly have escaped her notice, and by which she was deeply influenced. The loss of the American colonies was a signal event, indicating as it did, a partial loss to the ‘old foe’, the French, who were deeply ‘complicit’ with the colonists. And these events also represented an equally significant loss of economic power. Indeed, the very notion of regal authority itself was at stake, as the new forms of wealth emerged from the industrial revolution taking place in the cities. The Tories, a party grouping which Austen is said to have supported, was in decline. Under the management of William Pitt the Younger, the 24-year-old Prime Ministerial ‘phenomenon’, the old landed régime held on for some years. But the traditional mode of making money, in which land, peasants and landowners combined to form the majority of the national wealth, was sinking. In its place, William Blake’s ‘dark, satanic mills’ were forming, and wealth was being ground out of the factory system, wealth in previously unimaginable quantities. An entirely new mode of economic production was coming fully into being, and its dominance could not be avoided. And this meant that the familiar place of the landed gentry, a social class to which Austen was attached, both by temperament and tradition, was being upturned. It was unclear what would emerge in its place.

At the same time, Britain was exerting its international influence. Long a global power, though hardly in the way we now conceive of globalization, Britain now faced Napoleon and social revolution just across the channel. The loss of aristocratic heads in Paris was dramatically depicted in British cartoons and writings of this time, and the events could hardly have been more shocking to the British aristocracy, or more welcome to radical elements among the emerging British working class. The Navy, about which Austen writes so enduringly, was at the center of this engagement, and her two brothers were both admirals of the fleet. And it is the Navy, of course, that in her novels provides one key avenue of advancement to men of little rank and background. Fortunes were made here very quickly, as the tale of Captain Wentworth reminds us. A captain in his thirties could gain a fortune of 30-50,000 pounds in a few years from nautical adventuring, more than enough for a comfortable life of leisure for him and his family for the rest of his days, should he marry.

London in 1800 was the largest city in the world. Huge ruptures in the economic system were associated inevitably by equally dramatic changes in the way people felt about their

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20 Part of this period is brilliantly depicted by Nigel Hawthorne (George the Third) and Rupert Everett (The Prince Regent) in the film *The Madness of King George*. Helen Mirren plays ‘Mrs. King.’ (*The Madness of King George*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, from play by Alan Bennett, and starring Helen Merrin, Nigel Hawthorne and Rupert Everett, Goldwyn Company, 1994). If the film is to be believed, George the Third suffered from porphyria, a disease of the renal and urinary system, which turns the urine blue, and which can invoke temporary bouts of madness. It is during this period that the Prince Regent and his Whig supporters had their fullest influence.

social world, and by the rise of an entirely new class of people tied closely to industrial production and to cities. As people flooded in to London from the surrounding countryside, but, much more broadly, from all over the world, the change in country life was clearly discernable. This ‘flood of newness’ is hinted at in the discourse on new fashions, for example, in *Northanger Abbey*, which Marilyn Butler has taken to be the novel which best depicts the shape of this emerging culture of consumption that was rapidly developing at this time.\(^{22}\)

New ideas of a truly revolutionary nature were in the air, ideas which decisively shaped society in this period. The 1790’s was the era of the Pitt administrations, in which a series of Acts were invoked that sought to manage these new ideas. The Combination Acts aimed to control the formation of societies and organizations that discussed social reforms.\(^{23}\) The Seditious Meetings Act restricted collective assembly in public. By dramatically repressing reform, government ensured that the working class movement disappeared underground, only to re-appear in the 1830’s in fuller force. Of course, there was considerable unrest throughout this period, but much of it was silent on the public stage for obvious reasons. Voting was essentially based on the ownership of property, and many electorates, the so-called ‘rotten boroughs’, were founded on small populations whose support could be bought and sold at will. The 1832 Reform Act enabled large cities to be better represented, but it still limited the franchise to a small number of adult males. Traditionally, many House of Commons constituencies were under the control of landowners.\(^{24}\)

The fear of ‘Jacobinism’\(^{25}\) was very real among English élites. The French Revolution had thrown into the air ideas that gave rise to great distress among the ruling interests in England of the time. It was not enough that radical elements of the French Revolutionary movement were beheading French nobles, their wives and their entourages. Even more troubling to


\(^{23}\) The Combination Act of 1799 (titled ‘An Act to Prevent Unlawful Combinations of Working Men) prevented trade union formation and the process of active bargaining. Its effect was to drive much working class political and social activity underground. The act was repealed in 1824, but replaced the following year by an act that severely curtailed the right of unions and working class organizations. The Seditious Meetings Act of 1795 restricted public meetings to 50 people. Licenses were required from the police for lectures and debates. Thompson relates the story of the London Corresponding Society, a group of men who met to consider who had the right to vote. They were investigated by the police, and key members were imprisoned, and tried by the Privy Council itself, and indeed interviewed by the Prime Minister himself. Thompson argues that the ‘great man’ was extremely irritable during these proceedings, and failed to achieve any success at all in securing from the accused any shame or discomfort in their actions.

\(^{24}\) This situation was widely written about in the novels of 19th century, among which the Palliser novels of Anthony Trollope are illustrative. Between 1864 and 1879, Trollope wrote six novels that came to be called the Palliser novels, and which depict the political and social life of Plantaganet Palliser, and his wife Lady Glencora Palliser. In an attempt to chaperone a protégé into such a ‘safe seat’, Lady Glencora gets herself, and the man in question, into a great deal of hot water. In such cases, the word of the local landlord was often sufficient to secure the nomination for a seat, and this nomination was often unchallenged, once the wishes of the local landowner were made known. But this was a subtle process in some instances. It was not seemly to have this wish directly implemented as a matter of raw power. Rather, given that the political and economic interest of the whole community were closely tied to those of the ‘big house’, it often became known in indirect ways what kind of person would suit. In some instances, large landowners controlled more than one seat. It was claimed that the Duke of Norfolk possessed eleven, and the Earl of Lonsdale nine. The significance of the ‘big house’ is, of course, everywhere in Austen’s writings. Perhaps it is most clear in *Pride and Prejudice*, when Bingley suddenly leaves the neighborhood for London, leaving a substantial gap in the economic life of the village. But the importance of Pemberley, not to mention Kellynch, in their respective locales, should not be overlooked. They were hubs of economic power for rural areas, and thus the economic and political wellbeing of entire communities were often at the whim of a landowner’s preference.

\(^{25}\) Jacobinism refers to the French Jacobin Club, a central political club at the time of the French revolution. Thus Jacobins are emblematic of revolution, compared to the stolid figure of John Bull, the traditional icon of the English ruling class.
established interests in England was the flood of new thinking about political representation, political power and the need to upturn old established practices of control by landed interests. The Jacobins in France were associated with the so-called ‘reign of terror’ during 1793 and 1794, during which at least 16,000, and perhaps as many as 40,000 counter-revolutionaries, mostly from the landed classes, were beheaded. Widespread hunger and starvation, along with an extraordinarily indifferent ruling class, conspicuous for their consumption, were some of the causes behind this movement. And while the ruling categories in England could point to a more benevolent régime in their own land, there were many rumblings among ordinary people on the northern side of the channel that the Jacobins were not entirely mistaken.

In London, the term ‘Jacobin’ soon became synonymous with any interests spreading ideas about political reform. These reforms came to fruition after 1830, with the passing of the Poor Law, the reform of Parliament, and the gradual extension of the franchise over almost a century. But these reforms had begun in Austen’s time, and certainly by 1780. This was an era of extreme conditions for working people. Roach comments:

> From the problem of poverty every other social concern branched out, because every other social evil seemed to the men (sic.) of the time to be either the cause or the result of it, and sometimes both cause and effect at once. It was both a rural and an urban problem … (Roach, op. cit.:16)

It is hard to argue with this thesis. Reformers uniformly wanted to refashion the working class in a ‘better direction’. (Roach, 17) Factory work was praised because it was thought to bring discipline to a previously undisciplined mass. The tyranny of the clock, a topic that Edward Thompson has widely investigated, was heralded by the reform-minded because it regulated and managed the disordered. School reform was authoritarian. So while freedom from poverty was sought, it was a freedom to be fashioned by discipline and compulsion.

Roach argues that ‘A reforming society is necessarily a more closely regulated society’, (Roach, 18) and that this regulation was a defensive move by ruling interests to secure a stable social environment. (op. cit.) Roach is not the only one to suggest that a genuine possibility of revolution was both feared and hoped for at this time. The lack of a regular police force, and the misery of the life of common people were both factors that enhanced the probabilities of social unrest:

> ‘Schools of Jacobinical politics abound in this country’, said Bishop Horsey of Rochester in his charge to the clergy of his diocese in 1800, ‘In them the minds of the lower orders are taught to despise religion and the laws of subordination’. (Roach, 19)

The educated and enlightened middle class of this era were alarmed by these problems that threatened to overwhelm the social order.

The ‘Age of Revolution’, therefore was dominated by large questions of democracy, revolution, the role of the nobility in the political systems, as well as more general ideas about liberty and the public welfare. On the smaller stage of everyday life, these large ideas played out in the way men and women treated each other, the way novels were interpreted,

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the conversations that developed, and the new styles of social life that were evolving. And behind all this, the very nature of the economic world was shifting dramatically with the rise of cities and industry. ‘Men of Purpose’ were stepping forward to take charge of this world, and the languid, gentlemanlike ways of the past were disappearing. We see both these styles of manners in the Austen novels27.

In Raymond Williams’ much-celebrated The Country and the City, he tells us what is at stake in this shift from rural to urban life:

Country and city are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember what they stand for in the experience of human communities. In English, ‘country’ is both a nation and part of a land. The country can be the whole of society or its rural area. In the long history of human settlements, this connection between the land from which directly or indirectly we all get our living and the achievements of human society have been deeply known. And one of these achievements has been the city; the capital, the large town, a distinctive form of civilization.

On the actual settlements, which in the real history have been astonishingly varied, powerful feelings have gathered and have been generalized. On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life, of peace, innocence and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved center, of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed; on the city as a place of noise, worldliness, and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.

Yet the real history has been astonishingly varied … Even the idea of the village, which seems simple, shows in actual history a wide variation. (Williams, op. cit, page 1)

Fundamental ideas of time, space and self were shifting during this period. The seasonal basis for time, established in the country on the foundation of well-worn tradition, was being thrown aside by clock-time, fundamental to the industrial world of measurement, precision and science. The limitless space of the landscape was being replaced by the rectangular space of the city. As transport developed, the capacity of people to cross the landscape was transformed. The space that could be traversed in a day was dramatically increased, so the sense of the human boundary was altered. And, as important as anything else, the emergence

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27 There is, of course, a tradition of writing that we are overlooking here that relates directly to the question of ‘manners’. The ‘novel of manners’, which Austen, along with Burney and Wharton are said to have developed, is typified as a work that concentrates on a certain code of ethics, and the degree to which participants in the novel adhere to this code. Wharton’s The Valley of Decision (1902) and the more well-known The House of Mirth (1905) are sometimes depicted as primarily concerned with a code of private conduct among a certain narrow class stratum, much as Austen and Burney wrote about the private details of a certain social ranking. Of course, the more important question is whether these novels are more than simple depictions of everyday life – a sort of descriptive ethnography of family, or whether they are distinguished analytically. Norbert Elias, the sociologist, has written with great insight about the history of manners. His two volume work, The Civilizing Process, Volume One, The History of Manners (Blackwell, Oxford, 1969) and Volume Two: State Formation and Civilization (Oxford, Blackwell, 1982) is celebrated for detailing, among other things, the rise of an elaborate system of social deference and social taste among European elites. Obscure for many years, Elias became celebrated during the 1970s with the fall of various forms of sociological structuralism, both of the structural-functional kind and the Althusserian, and, in its stead, the rise of a new humanist sociology. The larger field of the ‘Comedy of Manners’ includes several of the Greek Playwrights, an array of medieval writers, and clearly Shakespeare in Much Ado about Nothing, but continues through Restoration Comedy and Molière to Oscar Wilde and P.G. Wodehouse.
of the new society meant the sense people had of themselves, either as tightly-knit members of small communities, or as isolated atoms in a confusing city, was also in a state of flux.

2. Austen’s Class Context

Austen’s account of her time was mostly of village life, with the city as a backdrop, and it is mostly the story of women. Perhaps too, it is also the story of the ‘small politics’ of domestic life.28 But the most central question to answer here is how to place Austen in all this. She did not struggle in the working class, though poverty was always a worry. Nor did she nestle in a life of privilege, though her characters strived for security in landed property.

So where are we to place Austen herself? We already know that she was well-educated, a ‘gentlewoman’, who had socially significant connections, and who resided in the country. Can we be more precise? Consider, first, the environment she was born into and grew up in:

… the countryside of southern England, where she spent most of her life, was a pleasing and reassuring region, with its green smiling landscape of field and woodland and leafy hedgerows, of spacious skies and soft horizons; and with something at once homely and immemorial in the atmosphere emanating from its thatched villages, each centring (sp.) around a grey old church, its interior enriched with sculptured monuments of successive generations of local landowners and set in a grassy churchyard populated by gravestones inscribed with the names of successive generations of their tenants; and the two combining to suggest an extraordinary feeling of social and family solidarity and continuity. (Cecil, 1979, 10-11)29

Jane Austen was a ‘child of the gentry’,30 which meant she came from that class of men and women on the edge of wealth, but for whom respectability and achievement were paramount. Her father was a parson, as we know. Other relatives owned land, or were officers in the Navy. We know that the gentry were landowners, renting out their land, rather than working it themselves. Located between the nobility and the yeomanry, they survived in relative stability for several hundred years in England. The term ‘yeomanry’ referred to that category of people who owned land and worked it themselves. A term of worth, it referred to the self-sustaining, hard-working class of small farmers that Harriet’s Smith’s Mr. Robert Martin so clearly embodies. The gentry, assuming they carried out their roles in a responsible way, could gain respect in the social hierarchy from above and below. This, at least, was the view most commonly held in Austen’s time.

Good sense, a practical turn of mind and a sense of duty, both to the nation and to God, were the dominant daily values of this world.31 It was also an era that valued ‘taste’:

Taste implied learning and discrimination; learning and discrimination were acquired by a thorough grounding in the established and classical tradition of scholarship and the arts. The grounding combined with the

28 Claudia Johnson, Jane Austen, Introduction.
29 David Cecil, A Portrait of Jane Austen, Hill and Wang, New York, 1979
virile vitality of the age to produce a strong, fresh culture: in thought and architecture and painting and literature. (Cecil, 16)

And central to our understanding of Jane Austen, the interior life of the nation was also developing. This was an era in which private life flourished:

Private life flowered as never before in English history; so also the modes of thought through which it expressed itself, the arts of conversation and letter-writing. Manners were looked on almost as an aspect of morals; politeness almost a virtue. Concern for politeness was, like everything else, checked by realistic good sense. The eighteenth century mocked mercilessly at the affected and precious; and even at its most moral, it was not squeamish. Its talk was racy as well as polished … Like its houses and its chairs and its teacups, social intercourse in eighteenth-century England was the expression of a society that, at its best, managed to be at the same time both sensible and stylish. (Cecil, 17)

Cecil’s story of Austen’s world seems like a delicate balancing act of wishful thinking, however. Austen’s world was hardly this balanced. First, Austen’s social class was poised between the rising yeomen, the changing laws of enclosure, and the will of the nobility. Then the industrial revolution was arriving like an immoderate train, ready to drag everything in its wake, especially those with few resources, who planned to hold on to the past. And each side of this era, we have depictions of great unrest and disorder:

England in the first half of the century – the riotous, brutal, uproarious England depicted in Hogarth’s pictures and Smollett’s novels – was far from civilized in any high sense of the word, and some of its less pleasing characteristics were exhibited even by the people who sought to civilize it. (Cecil, 17)

And of course, what followed in the 19th century was industry, the rise of cities, social and political unrest, and a change forever in the ‘English way of life’, whatever that meant. And we can hardly overlook the social revolution in France occurring just as Austen came to her maturity. So while Cecil may claim that this ‘form of society’ was ‘elegant, established and poised’, it was a poise of great fragility and fleeting permanence. But, however permanent, Cecil claims that this fragile ‘moment’ in English history provided a particular role for women to play:

(A) growing refinement of manners went along with the growing social influence of women … high society women had often been influential, even formidable; the names of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu are enough to remind us of this. But these names suggest that they were powerful in virtue of what are generally looked upon as masculine qualities: masterfulness, aggressiveness, force of personality. In the later eighteenth century, growing refinement of feeling and taste led to women exercising influence by their characteristically feminine qualities and talents: intimacy, imaginative sympathy, graceful manners. Moreover with the flowering of social and private life these had more scope to display themselves than earlier. Always, in so far as society cultivates social pleasures and sets store by the private life, women grow more powerful. Women rule private life as men rule public. So it was in the late eighteenth century in England. This was the period when English aristocratic society was most agreeable. This was the period …of brilliant hostesses. In the professional classes, also, women grew strong… At the
same time, women’s intellectual position became more important. It was now that the phrase ‘blue stocking’ was coined to describe such formidable ladies as Mrs. Montagu, the Shakespearian critic, and Miss Anna Seward whose poems earned her the name ‘The Swan of Litchfield’. Fanny Burney herself is the first female novelist to achieve the rank of a classic …

It is a satisfactory society and a rare one that succeeds … in combining good sense, good manners and cultivated intelligence, rational piety and a spirited sense of fun. Certainly it suited Jane Austen. (Cecil, 19)

This idealized examination of Austen’s universe lacks the precision we need that would help us finally place Austen in the social context of her time. Its idealization is a process we all engage in when we read Austen, but it masks the real conditions of her existence. But the social historian David Spring has done us the service of closing this elision. Spring is at pains to develop a social history of the period. Austen’s ‘England’, he argues, was the England of the rural elite. In a detailed passage on the language Austen used, Spring usefully reminds us of the way Austen viewed rank, in a world which did not yet speak of class in a self-conscious way:

Jane Austen’s vocabulary .. (is) one that fits her world of the rural elite … What, then, is her social language? “Neighborhood” has already been noted as comprising the rural elite. Expressions like “the very great” or “resident landholder,” or “profession” designate groups within that part of the elite – all of them covered by the word “gentleman”. For those parts of society in varying degrees inferior to her elite she uses a variety of expressions such as “the second rate and third rate,” or “half gentlemen,” or for the very lowest “the poor.” Or she may specify these inferiors as “yeomen,” “laborers” “tenant farmers,” or “in trade” – all of them, as she would say “in a low line”. The word “line” – like such words as “sphere,” “circle,” or “rank” – does some of the work that the language of class would do later to indicate large divisions within society. (Spring, 55)

The question that remains to be answered, then, is if she had this sharp focus on the gentry, took them to be the fixed point in the universe from which all other ranks were to be measured, estimated and judged, where does she find herself located? Jane Austen has been seen rather loosely as the chronicler of the ruling class, of the middle classes and of the bourgeoisie, all rather distinct entities. Money is everywhere in her novels, to be sure, but this hardly makes her the simple mouthpiece of the emerging capitalists. The landed gentry were distinguished from the aristocracy by rank, but also by lifestyle – routinely they had less money to spend. Great houses, incomes hundreds of times the value of a working family’s income, made, at least in some cases, for unimaginable wealth and privilege. This was hardly Austen’s world. Rather than 100,000 pounds at the top of the ladder, or the 10,000 pounds a year that Mr. Darcy is said to command, the gentry might struggle by on 1,000 - 2,000 pounds a year, as does Mr. Bennet and Colonel Brandon. At the bottom end of the scale, those on 1,000 to 2,000 pounds a year were scarcely able to maintain an ‘honorable’ lifestyle.

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33 Spring, 55.
34 Spring, 56.
35 Spring, 58.
36 Spring, 58.
But while Austen clearly admired the respectable habits, the hard work and potential decency of the gentry, she was not one of them. She belonged instead to that group who aided and abetted the landed classes:

This group comprised the non-landed: the professional and rentier families, first and foremost the Anglican clergy: second, other professions like the law – preferably barristers, rather than solicitors – and the fighting services; and last the rentiers recently or long retired from business … if they owned land, and doubtless many of them owned some, they owned comparatively little … They were neither lords of manners nor collectors of rent from tenant farmers. But they lived in big houses, held or owned enough land to ensure privacy, that most cherished of social delights … (Spring, 59-60).37

Instead of the gentry, then, Austen properly belonged to what Alan Everitt has called the ‘pseudo-gentry’.38 These were people who aspired to be gentry, who had the social graces of the gentry, who associated with the gentry, but never actually had the land to allow themselves to enter fully into this world. But their social graces, their cultural capital, their ways of speaking, thinking and talking were of that sphere, even if their economic condition separated them from it. They had:

… a sharp eye for the social escalators, were skilled at getting on them, and (what was more important) no less skilled in staying on them … Of this … competition, no one knew more than Jane Austen. Her novels are full of it. She saw its range and idiosyncrasies and absurdities as someone might who among other things combined the gifts of an estate agent, family lawyer and auctioneer … On the male side, there were rich men like Henry Crawford, skilled in turning an ordinary house into something more than a gentlemen’s seat, into a “place … as to make its owner be set down as the great landholder of the parish”40 … On the female side, there were well-to-do young women like Emma Woodhouse who measured precisely how status was affected by setting up one’s carriage or keeping dining company … (Spring, 61)

Marriage, of course was the great step forward, that ‘bitter trade’ that Austen disliked so much.41 The world into which Austen was born was that of the well-to-do clergy. Austen’s father was one such clergyman.42 His position in the world enabled his family to live a life of semi-gentrification, and to secure footholds for Austen’s brothers in land, the navy and in the clergy. A final comment from Spring should allow us to place Austen once and for all in a clear social position:

Although English landowners were not commercial or industrial capitalists, they were agrarian capitalists. In their own sphere, they were economic modernizers … Their businesslike agriculture was … an

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37 The term ‘rentier’ usually refers to a person who lives off rents and investments incomes at this time. At a later date, it was a term widely used by Marx.
39 A real estate agent in the United States.
40 There is a footnote reference here to Mansfield Park, 243-244.
41 Spring cites this comment on page 61 of his text.
42 Spring, 62.
improving agriculture: improving cultivation, improving rents, and at the same time undertaking a massive transformation of the English landscape in the shape of the enclosure movement. (Spring, 64)

This impulse to improvement and management meant that agriculture did not get stuck in a backwater, but was rather a key element in the commodification and capitalization of the English economy in general. But Austen’s world was not a universe that was quickly changing. Her particular sphere had close and useful connections with the powerful influences of her day, and they were not likely to be smashed and disordered any time soon.43

So Austen sat in an awkward place between the industrious, hard-working yeomanry and the truly landed, for whom she had some admiration and doubtless envy. She read both these worlds with extraordinary skill. But it was a world full of complication. All moments in history may be seen, in retrospect, to be ‘on the move’, but Austen’s ‘moment’ seems especially volatile, a sharp contrast to the small settings she wrote about, which seem, for all their drama, to be placed in relatively certain structures of belief and behaviour. So she captures for us a still moment in a particular stratum of English rural society, even as profound shifts were disturbing the deep structures of social and political life.

3. Literary and Intellectual Context

But political and economic conditions were not all that shaped Austen’s universe. From all we know about her, she was an avaricious reader from an early age. She read the broadsheets, the literary pamphlets and the political diatribes of her period. But first and foremost she read novels. We have already seen that she knew the Gothic tradition very well, well enough to punch holes through it pretentions, and write an entire novel about a recovering devotee. She was familiar with Ann Radcliffe’s gothic tales, especially Udolpho.

Indeed, it is striking how closely the description of Northanger Abbey itself runs close to the description Radcliffe uses in describing Udolpho.

Second, she read Fanny Burney, whose focus on marriage shows similar interest to Austen. Burney, with her novel Evalina, (1778) is credited with establishing a new school of fiction in which a realist approach to women in contemporary life is invoked. Its wit, social satire and social realism presage Austen’s own work. Butler refers to this genre as the Richardsonian tradition.44 Fanny Burney wrote, in Evalina, Cecilia and Camilla, of aristocratic heroes who succumbed to the charms of women from lesser ranks. There are many parallels between the Burney mode of writing and Austen’s texts. Northanger Abbey has Fanny Burney’s fingerprints all over it.

Thirdly, Butler and others have argued that the novels of ‘small business’, prevalent at the time and presaging the new era of consumerism and commercialism, were also influential.

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44 Butler, op. cit. xxi. Samuel Richardson (1689 – 1761) was a writer and printer, best known for three novels Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded (1740), Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady (1748) and The History of Sir Charles Grandison (1753). He was a friend of Samuel Johnson, and a rival of Henry Fielding, who wrote novels in a similar vein. Fielding, in turn is well-known for his novel Tom Jones, and was a friend of William Pitt the elder.
In the characters of Isabella Thorpe, Lydia Bennet and Mary Crawford, we see protagonists entirely wound up in the business of buying, getting, and in Crawford's case, keeping. Isabella and Lydia may be satisfied with a new hat or a dress, but Mary Crawford is in the market for an estate. Nonetheless, the same logic applies. This new mode of acquisition from the city is widely canvassed by the novelist Maria Edgeworth in such novels as *The Parent's Assistant*, and *Belinda*, a novel that George Saintsbury claims provides a model for many of the spirited characters in Austen's books. Edgeworth's books were deeply moralistic in tone, and they lack Austen sharp satirical edge, but some of the concerns of the two novelists are closely paralleled.

There are also ‘larger ideas’ that we must briefly visit to round out this review of Austen’s intellectual context. In Claudia Johnson’s two books *Jane Austen* and *Equivocal Beings* 45, we are provided with a thoughtful summary of these larger settings. Johnson comments:

> For many years it was universally acknowledged that Austen defined herself negatively vis-à-vis … (Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe and Burney) …, shunning the plots of Wollstonecraft’s radical feminism, Radcliffe’s exaggerated Gothicism, and Burney’s escalated melodrama, and opting instead to exercise the cameoist’s meticulously understated craft … (but) … she inaugurates her career by asserting solidarity with a distinctly feminine tradition of novelists that developed in the late 18th century, a tradition in which Burney and Radcliffe ranked very high. Though Wollstonecraft remained an unmentionable throughout Austen’s career, there is ample evidence that she too was a figure Austen reckoned with. Indeed, in many respects Emma actually succeeds at Wollstonecraft’s grand aim better than Wollstonecraft did: diminishing the authority of male sentimentality, and reimmasculating men and women alike with a high sense of national purpose. (Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*, 191)

What is this claim to national feeling that Austen makes? Was she simply a patriot enforcing conservative rules as a reflection of the dominant ideology of the day? Clearly Johnson is arguing that her work reflects more than the mere musings of a small-scale scribbler. After a review of critical work on the women writers of the period, she comments:

> “… it is true that during the 1790s in particular, sentimentalism and gothicism converged to produce a body of novels distinctive first and foremost for their egregious affectivity. In works by Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Godwin, Lewis and Burney … emotions are saturated in turbulent and disfiguring excess; not simply patently disruptive emotions – such as ambition, greed anger, lust – but ostensibly gentler ones as well – such as reverence, sorrow, even filial devotion – are always and obviously going over the top, and then some. (Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*, 1-2)

Austen, of course is in a different league, according to most critics, using her judgment in a discerning and balanced way. But Johnson wants to claim that this is a misguided view, and that instead we should judge the writing of this period as a creative answer to a very troubled politics.46 Her claim, which is a compelling and bold argument, proposes that it was not a time when private troubles could be kept in check. Instead, they burst out into the open,


46 Johnson, Equivocal Beings, 2.
and were the subject of public discourse. Thus, she concludes, the welfare of the nation and the tears of individuals were closely connected.

Johnson connects sensibility on the smallest scale to changes in society on the largest scale. She argues:

During the 1790s, a man’s “benevolent nerves” carried a national agenda: they were formed by and guaranteed the continuation of the charm, the beauty, the hospitality, and the goodness of Old England itself, which liked its gallant old ways even if they did not make sense, and which won our love, veneration, and loyalty. In a world where the “age of chivalry” was ebbing, where the courtesies of the old régime were being displaced by the cold economic calculation of the new one, a Woodhousian man of feeling held out for civility; his attachment to the old ways preserved continuity and order, while qualities such as energy, penetration, forcefulness, brusqueness, bluntness, and decision were deemed dangerous, volatile and cold. (Johnson, op. cit. 198)

The very small sociology that Austen elaborates is also, by Johnson’s account, also a sociology of the very large, denoting a connection to the old, and an interest in the new, forms of society. And, further, Johnson wants to claim that masculinity itself was ‘under construction’, or perhaps reconstruction. This is, again, a structuralist argument in the making, that suggests that new ways of imagining the world, of orienting individuals to the world, in short, a new social and individual habitus47 was coming into being at this time, made necessary by the shift in the mode of production. Men of Mr. Woodhouse’s dispositions were only ‘useful’ to sit back and defend what they had, which was, of course, privilege, wealth and leisure based on the old, landed way of life. To go forward into the new era required energy, the willingness to risk, to surge ahead, to achieve, which many of Austen’s heroes and heroines, from Darcy and Elizabeth to Knightley, Brandon and Marianne, have in abundance. This is why Mr. Woodhouse is, in the end, a figure so much to be pitied, a pitiful residue of a way of life rapidly passing. Affect, feeling, sentiment – these were things of the past. The new masculinity must be tuned with the needs of the new world, and the new world required men of few words, little sentiment and much activity.

Johnson’s Jane Austen reminds us of the social hierarchy in which women wrote during this time. Men were capable of work of the first order by fiat, and women, however brilliant, could only achieve secondary status.48 Austen was, by any objective standards, a member of the ‘middling classes’, and while she might have been claimed by the landed gentry, she was never in her life a member of that class, much less of the nobility. Her social and cultural skills were of a high calibre, but in the complicated equation of class, her economic position rarely allowed her much ease, and certainly excluded her from a world of privilege and entitlement. Johnson’s case is persuasive and important on this point.49 Even if Austen were to be easily assigned to the ‘ruling class’, it would be a clumsy error then to ‘read’ her ideas merely as a reflection of this class position. And since she doesn’t sit there easily, it is all the more foolish to come to the simple conclusion that she speaks unthinkingly for privilege.50

47 Bourdieu’s term for durable dispositions.
49 Jane Austen, op. cit. xviii.
50 I am indebted here to Johnson’s reference to the work of David Spring and Janet Todd, which pursue this issue much further, and whose work I report in the last part of the chapter. The brilliance of Johnson’s work is not in question here, but
Johnson’s claim is that the boundary between the novel of the interior, and the novel focusing on broader social questions was permeable, and that Austen read the novels of her day, and was fully conversant with the flood of ideas in the larger world. She further claims, and with good reason, that in the period of reaction which England was experiencing, that novelists routinely resorted to rhetorical devices that allowed them to develop criticism, and still maintain their liberty. A certain subtlety of thought is here required here, not just of the writer, of course, but of the members of the reading public, including those who look back two centuries to make sense of all this. More than this, Johnson wants to argue that general ideas about liberty and freedom preceded the French revolution, and were in the air among the educated classes independent of events across the Channel. And indeed the characters of Emma and Elizabeth Bennet directly transgress ‘every proper feeling’ that would have been found acceptable in traditional society. In a telling commentary on Northanger Abbey, Johnson brings us to the main argument of her book:

…. at the outset of the novel, Austen lays it down as axiomatic that Catherine is intimidated by and deferent to self-assured men. But we should not assume that just because Catherine is awed by Henry Tilney, Austen is as well. … far from proving that women must steer clear from matters as arcane as politics, (the speech) shows on the contrary that all subjects lead to it … And part of the larger structural irony of the novel is that Catherine talks about politics every time she opens her mouth, whenever she considers the harshness of General Tilney’s paternal authority, for example, or questions Henry’s judgment … When we compare Austen’s novels to those of her more conspicuously political sister-novelists – conservative and progressive alike – we discover that she routinely employs a lexicon of politically sensitive terms, themes, and narrative patterns that she inherited from their fictions, and that she … often discusses politics all the time without making announcements about it beforehand. (In this way) Austen was able not to depoliticize her work … but to depolemicize it. (Johnson, op. cit., : xxiv-xxv)

Johnson has confirmed for us that the politics of Jane Austen is the politics of the infinitely small, but that it is not confined to this level. In sociological terms, what Austen contributes to an understanding of her time is her close attention to the minute practices of daily life, in the drawing rooms, the bedrooms, and the interior musings of the women and men she wrote about. This is a rich telling of human agency, and it is an incomparable account of where human action comes from, what motivates it, and how the smallest elements of the social landscape work themselves out. From this, we can read trenchant critiques of patriarchy, primogeniture and gender battles. And by looking out towards the larger social landscape, we gain a new reading on revolution, the structure of economic life, democracy, the boundaries of social class, and the relation between nationalism and individual feeling.

it is perhaps ironic that she comments: ‘ … historical and biographical Austenian scholarship … has always been preceded by very definite ideas about what it would find there’ (op. cit, xix). The same could be said of Johnson’s own work, as I have suggested above, and indeed, is doubtless true of this present book. This is a good methodological caveat for all researchers to put in place as we do our work.

51 Johnson, op. cit., xx.
Some Conclusions

1. If we are interested in the social subjectivities of 18th. and 19th century life, then we cannot rest easy with the notion that external actions reflect in some simple mimetic way the internal workings of human subjects, and the ideas that they shared as collectivities. Bourdieu conception of habitus nicely captures the sources of these subjectivities from the various sources deriving from internal consciousness, personal history and the history of societies. Austen's work takes place so much inside the heads of her characters, in the letters they write in private, and in the diaries that they kept, that it is easy to overlook the profoundly social nature of these thoughts. As individuals negotiated the terrains of character, money, marriage and gender, they established fields of engagement in which these matters could be settled. In this way, they formed aspects of the social habitus of the era, which in turn shaped actions and informed the thinking of Georgian England.

2. It's also easy to ignore questions of hierarchy and domination in Jane Austen. Bourdieu said of Lévi-Strauss that his brilliance resided in his capacity to show us things we already knew, but hadn't understood we knew. We learn about them for the first time through his eyes, even if they were there all the time. The same is true of Jane Austen's work. Hierarchy is everywhere in Jane Austen, there on every page for everyone to see. It is the basis of her social satire. And so it's valuable sociologically to draw that analysis out, and to show how detailed this analysis was - it's extraordinary in its subtlety and complexity. Jane Austen should come back and teach sociology -she would welcome the steady income and the health provisions, even if she would die of boredom. Great novelists add a dimension of social analysis to a starkly statistical and emaciated form of social history that depends only on external action and behaviour for our accounts. Hierarchy and judgement work both within human subjects and without, and the Austen contribution is to help us penetrate the black box of subjectivity, and to write a much fuller and compelling tale of human exploitation and human struggle.

3. Social, political and literary context certainly explains something essential about Jane Austen. Indeed that is one of the three claims I make about this work. But she cannot be reduced to context, as an extreme historicism might proposed. Her writing, and the scope of her work was indeed framed by context. She lived a small, largely rural life, but her contacts spread wide, and her reading took her wider. With two brothers in the Navy, another in banking and a fourth among the landed gentry, she was hardly ignorant of a much larger universe, even in the sitting room where she wrote alone.

4. But her problem was that she broke through these boundaries. She penetrated convention and saw its absurdity even as she confirmed the necessary order of the social world. She wanted her characters to be settled in solid surroundings, doing good works, even as she saw this was impossible for many and unnecessary for others. She pierced the social limits of her own background every time she put pen to paper. Indeed, it is glaringly obvious that her critical vision took her much farther afield than those who would have considered themselves worldly. She saw through the Beau Monde, and they loved her for it.

This piercing, this penetration, this critical vision, this endless interrogation, reached both outwards and inwards. Outwards it shone its light on social attitudes, social stupidities and
social limitations. Inwards, it made Austen’s own life painful. She famously fell in love at least once, and perhaps twice, but she never married, even though her heroines always followed this rule. How could she, when she saw through herself, as well as she saw through everyone else. If she truly fell in love with anyone, it was her sister Cassandra, with whom she spent her whole life. She certainly couldn’t believe in marriage. Here is one imaginary treatment of her own commentary at the end of her life about how it all worked out. It comes from one of the last scenes in Miss Austen Regrets, in which Jane Austen is depicted as being gripped with illness, and attended to by her devoted sister Cassie. They are talking about what might have been, the men Jane might have married, and what might have resulted:

All anyone of those men might have done is make me quite happy, and quite happy is not enough. Quite happy is not the ending I want to write for my story. And quite poor is the absolute limit.

Social criticism is a marvelous thing, but it does tend to make life impossible to live.

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55 The film Miss Austen Regrets is closely based on Austen’s letters and diaries, so the dialogue has some basis in fact.
56 Italics indicate the emphasis placed in the dialogue by the actress Olivia Williams, who plays Jane Austen. Miss Austen Regrets, directed by Jeremy Lovering, BBC Films, 2008, starring Olivia Williams and Greta Scacchi.