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Review Article
The Life of Writing

The Life of Jane Austen. By John Halperin.
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Authors who leave behind few personal records are problematic for literary historians. Those, such as Shakespeare, Defoe, and Austen, who also employ self-effacing techniques, who transform themselves while writing, who, in deconstructionist terms, make their presence in their works derive from various forms of absence, are more problematic. They defy biographers to simplify authorial image: they impede the questionable procedure of directly relating the writer and his works. As a result, biographers should heed the lessons Samuel Johnson, the pioneer of critical biography in *Lives of the Poets*, taught himself. Johnson learned that, by admitting involvement in the process of relating writers and their works, he could make that process more effective. He did not set out to be self-effacing when unmasking writers. Confessing biases, he made discoveries through his confessions; to probe the lives and writings of others he realized he had to explore his presence in his own writing. He adopted neither a single style nor the view that critical biography is an unmixed genre. In the *Lives of the Poets* he is never simply matter-of-fact; he provides biographical evidence, aware of the fictionality of documents as well as of testimony. In drawing on mixed sources of information, he saw that arbitrariness is one feature of critical biography. Literary historians who ignore these lessons evade the demanding procedures involved with relating criticism and biography.

Like Shakespeare and Defoe, Austen left few personal records behind. Her letters are not continuous or profuse. The testimony of nephews and nieces making up only partially for this, the biographer must join deductions from the letters, testimonies and novels; he must adopt fictional assumptions and approach his various sources know-

ing his biography will succeed only if its fiction contains their fictions. He will not pretend to find her directly revealed in her letters because epistolary conventions mediate personality. It is unnecessary to point out the strategies the biographer should apply to testimony; we are used to not taking such evidence at face value. The problems novels pose to the biographer are less known. It is tempting to construct a novelist's life without realizing its fictionality and then to abstract from his novels, regardless of their fictionality, motifs, images, and ideas to parallel 'the life.' In Austen's case, this is particularly unapt because she is a dramatic writer whose use of dialogue, grammar, style and other rhetorical features reveals her characters to have several and distinct existences. Interpretation is a vital problem for her characters; they live in worlds of competing fictions resolved only by those with the most human fictional sense. The biographer intent upon abstracting ideas from her novels must recognize how Austen dramatizes generic rules. She does not decrie gothic, sentimental, and popular modes so much as contain them in more imaginative modes. Fictions compete in her novels; one cannot know her but by analyzing the strategies with which she controls this competition. As we shall see, Halperin ignores her fictional strategies. He assumes her life and books are separate and must be yoked. But Austen puts her characters, readers and herself through processes which show, not that her life was ordinarily confused and contradictory as Halperin claims, but that it and her works are a piece because of her inclusive moral and fictional sense. Halperin's failure to see this haunts his biography, showing that, far from containing her, it insults her by failing to understand her practice.

Revealingly, Halperin's biography starts with a flurry of contradictions. Conceding that Austen's reputation is unassailable, he yet wants to alter her image by making people see that each novel, rather than any one, is typical. Setting out to understand what she was like when not writing, he does not see that, by drawing on her writing, his goal is not as simple as he pretends. Moreover, in claiming that he can make her "come alive for the reader," he displays condescension and literary pretension. Intent on preserving the "narrative flow" of his account which, he boasts, is different from all preceding ones, he fails to justify its fictional elements. Starting with a description of Austen's burial in Winchester Cathedral and ending with her death-bed thoughts, the biographer employs a cyclical narrative framework that hints at the fictionalizing which underlies his brusque, matter-of-fact demythologizing of the novelist. The burial scene allows him to challenge the family's elegiac praise of the relative whose writing they undervalued. But, in attacking the family's "ritual closing-of-ranks" (p.5), Halperin

does not realize that his description emphasizes the family's frustrated need for ceremony. Dispraising their unconscious fictionalizing, Halperin is unconscious of his own fictionalizing. It may be proper to show that the family deceived itself in promoting a legend about their relation which was belied by their distrust of her satire, but he is more reprehensible because he insensitively creates negative fictions about her.

Although he thinks his viewpoint novel, Halperin has unearthed no new facts about Austen. In fact, it is reductive rather than novel. He affirms that, since she belonged to the gentry and preferred the country to the city, her temperament and plots were conservative. This reductiveness about personal and literary cause manifests itself extremely when he claims the eleven-year old Jane was a confirmed parodist and cynic (p. 35). He can present her as an aggressive, emotionally cold young girl because of his reductive treatment of satire and her juvenilia. He claims the juvenilia uphold eighteenth-century restraint and prefigure her mature ironic mode, yet, because he does not support these exegetical and fictional claims, he merely debases her early achievement and later writing. Concentrating on the butts of her satire rather than on the incorporation of satire into fiction, Halperin traces autobiographical references in such juvenilia as "Catharine" and "Lady Susan." In these she laughs at her own sentimental excesses, laments her dowerlessness and the education of women, and reveals a bitter insight into bad-tempered guile that is "instinctive as well as contextual." He does not develop the crucial point about the interplay of experience and imagination. If he had, he would have invalidated many of his pretended revelations. Instead, he prefers to stress that the detachment and cynicism of the juvenilia appear unchanged in the first three major novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Northanger Abbey*. Besides simplifying the juvenilia, he belittles Austen's personal and literary developments which, for most readers, make an essential difference between her early writings and first novels.

One thing should be becoming obvious: Halperin makes a series of negative points for which he claims narrative and psychological consistency. But, denying Austen led an ideal existence, his fragmentary method predisposes his conclusion; the patterns of disorder and unhappiness he finds in her life are superficial and invented. He paraphrases the letters in order to heighten their inconsistencies, but this reveals only his inconsistency. Particularly happy when he can point to malice and cynicism in the letters, he does not consider her humour and self-mockery as epistolary conventions. Absence of letters he eagerly sees as a sign of frustration with her mother or writing.

His naive idea of absence ignores the tension between concealment and revelation in the letters. He glibly uses them as simple evidence against her, unaware of how she invites her correspondents to use them. Halperin ignores how much she mediates herself, how much she creates her personality through writing and how much her novels reveal her characters creating and destroying themselves through writing and reading. He is as reductive about the novels as about her personality. If Austen suffers from sibling rivalry and neurasthenia, similarly reductive terms are applied to the novels. Hence, *Pride and Prejudice* is "funny" and "suspenseful." This reductiveness leads to contradictions: the novel is "perfectly plotted" but its denouement is "botched." Attempts to trace biographical references are also reductive and impressionistic: much of the author is in Elizabeth, her shyness is found in Darcy, the sibling rivalry of Jane and Cassandra appears in the relations of Elizabeth and Jane Bennet. Austen's fictional sense is most betrayed in his contention that strains of "nastiness" in the novel correspond to those in her character (p. 74). He assumes that imagined evil reveals personal evil, just as he tends, despite occasionally indicating her creative freedom, to insist that her writing is limited by and to her actual experience. Besides denigrating her imaginative capacity, he defames her, even on his own terms, by criticizing her failure to give an optimistic ending to *Pride and Prejudice*. After all, by his account she is a pessimist. But the truth is, he is blind to the subtle functions of bathos in her denouements.

He also applies reductive terms to *Sense and Sensibility*, calling it "bleak" and "nasty" (p. 84). He insists its greatness lies in its power to give offence and that Austen must have been in a foul mood when she wrote it. These eccentric remarks betray implausible, because simple-minded, notions of literature and personality. His tracing of autobiographical elements is no more convincing: he sees Austen in Elinor because the latter dislikes noisy children and is prudential about money and marriage, also seeing her in Marianne and Cassandra in Elinor. Although he finally dissociates Austen from Elinor's sense and Marianne's sensibility, this concession sheds no new light upon the author's personality; it merely reveals an over-schematic reaction to the novel which in turn suggests his objection to its "botched" ending is not to be taken seriously. His remarks about *Northanger Abbey* only seem more balanced. He views it as satirical but light, as judgmental yet amusing (p. 101). But when he claims the novelist has no sympathy with the heroine and that her goal is the destruction of romance, his exaggeration of her cold aggressiveness is purely hostile. Stressing that the end of the novel is "bungled," he reinforces his allegation that she jealously denied her characters happiness in her denouements. Al-

though admitting this novel contains her most passionate defence of fiction, he once again belittles her creativity, suggesting it was mean-spirited and defensive.

Austen's letters from the decade between her composition of the two sets of three novels are taken by Halperin to evidence extreme unhappiness. To him, the letters either vary extremely in mood or their periodic cessation reveals frustrated creativity. The themes he stresses in these letters, namely, disappointed love, strife with her mother, anguish at having to live at Bath and Southampton, he sees reflected in "The Watsons," a dark, unfinished work which in its stress on the inconstancy of men came so close to her life and her sense of personal unfulfillment that she had to abandon it. Before her second period of major writing, Austen was, in Halperin's eyes, frustrated about her lack of publication, stifled by living with spinsters and widows, and depressed about her lack of social prominence. He makes sure to stress that, even in the more cheerful letters which she wrote after moving to Southampton in 1809 when she faced the possibility of retiring to Chawton and the delightful Hampshire countryside, there is a bitterness of spirit, a resentment about her living conditions, neurasthenia and sibling rivalry. The letters written from the Chawton period are most remarkable to Halperin for ungenerous and vindictive attitudes towards relatives and young children. He continues this reductive emphasis when dealing with her publishing success. While admitting that the acceptance of *Sense and Sensibility* gave her renewed confidence, he endows her with a "mania for secrecy" about her writing on the grounds of supposed fear of further literary rejection. Clearly, Halperin's strategy is to insist that Austen was never confident or self-possessed, that any happiness stemmed from external circumstance rather than mental independence, and that she was afflicted by deep, unresolved conflicts. With respect to the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, he repeats his notion that, despite her exuberant sense of vocation, her moods remained unsteady. His antagonism comes out in his charges of literary naivete. Despite his thesis that each of the novels is typical, he points to her emotional involvement with Elizabeth Bennet, seeing this as immature wish-fulfillment. He also rushes to disclaim her statement that *Mansfield Park* is about ordination. Although he praises her realistic concern in this novel for actual names and facts, because this allows him to set limitations to her art, he is eager to attack her epistolary accounts of her novels. He does not consider that such attacks make his documentary reliance upon her letters questionable.

Halperin continues his destruction of Austen's image by showing that, even with vocational success, she suffered a severe conflict

between desire for money and recognition and fear of fame. The deliberately insulting connotations in this part of his biography are increasingly intolerable. Take, for instance, his claim that her "cold-hearted nastiness had its periods of remission, but it seems always to have been there just beneath the surface, available to be dredged up at certain moments" (p. 227). The mixed metaphors of chronic ill-health and mud reveal a gross disrespect. While he acknowledges a renewed personal buoyancy, he takes every opportunity to emphasize uncharitable bad-temper and "startling heartlessness" (p. 230). Despite the negative things he managed to say of the earlier novels, he strains his expression to come up with new insults for the later ones. Hence, *Mansfield Park* is her most unpleasant and controversial novel because nearly all the characters are self-absorbed, indulgent and vain (p. 234). Besides wondering about the claim that unpleasant characters make for an unpleasant novel, one questions the categorical sense capable of saying the novel is like the others but the most autobiographical. The nub of Halperin's argument seems to be that Fanny Price is as much part of Austen's character as Elizabeth Bennet. In Fanny's hatred of noise, dislike of urban life, and love of nature we have a "magnificent picture" of the novelist's personality in her late thirties (p. 241)! Disrespect in the biographical parallels is also heightened: he suggests that Austen's dislike of her mother and other relatives and her resentment about marriage and inconsequence appear strongly in the novel. He repeats his notion that the denouement is botched because she would not invent a final love scene when she knew she would not appear in one herself.

The letters which Halperin takes as the immediate background of *Emma* he hunts for signs of heartlessness, priggishness and mean-spiritedness because he is intent on challenging that novel's comic grace. By this point in the biography the irony is inescapable that, in detecting a hardening sense of detachment in Austen, Halperin succeeds only in displaying his own remoteness from his subject. It is also by now clear that his abstract, atomic approach to the novels disallows the creative reflexivity of dramatic and novelistic processes. In claiming that Emma's advice to Harriet not to marry Robert Martin parallels Austen's advice to a niece, Halperin forgets that Emma's advice is undermined by the novel. The futility of his viewpoint appears in the claim that Emma's being opposed to love may reflect Austen's emotional incapacity. Such crude inventiveness avoids recognizing that Mr. Knightley's suggestion that it would be good for Emma to fall in love and be uncertain of requital is fully and comically upheld by the plot. Austen is great because she discountenances such attitudinizing as Halperin's. He continues refusing to treat her as a serious exponent

of narrative dialectic when he suggests that in *Emma* she calls for the subordination of imagination to reason. Fortunately, Austen was able to make the relation of imagination and reason involved and reciprocal, thereby making herself and her readers more human, despite the reductive efforts of Halperin to the contrary.

That Halperin discounts authorial development and an incremental argument about the novels is clear well before he reaches *Persuasion*. With little evidence he suggests that Austen airs her private disappointments in this novel. Not much about the relation of author and works is learned from his statement that Anne Elliot's contempt for Sunday travelling and for Bath "meshes with" Austen's dislikes. Treating her novels as determined by her personality in order to learn about her personality involves a fruitless circularity which debases both writer and her work. As the biography concludes, the reader's dominant sense is of Halperin's propaganda, of his low-grade fiction about a great author, of the falsity of the disclaimer by which he initially pretends not to challenge her reputation. His remarks about *Sanditon* are revealing in this regard. While seemingly praising the author by denying that this last composition evidences any decline in creative energy, he celebrates the work by saying it would have been "her most savagely cynical performance" (p. 335). The reductive force of this sentiment suggests several things: it reinforces the judgement that Halperin has not written a definitive critical biography because he deliberately prevents himself from exercising the imagination and self-criticism which Johnson taught biographers to employ; it helps point out that the biographer who believes his own propaganda cannot balance truth with respect, deduction with imagination, a balance absolutely essential in understanding the reciprocal relations between personality and authorship in great writers like Jane Austen.