
Part I

The Life and the Texts

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Jane Austen's Life and Letters

Kathryn Sutherland

Jane Austen's life, as a recoverable narrative, is almost exclusively a matter of family construction, with authority drawn either from the teller having known her or, more tenuously, claiming family relationship to her. Such a narrowly deduced documentary basis for any life is inevitably problematic regardless of how rich the surviving evidence might be; and in Jane Austen's case the evidence is also scarce. She was surrounded by family, at every waking and almost every sleeping moment, yet apparently they saw so little. Family makes, inherits, and transmits what we know as her life; it is only familial. Refracted through the prism of family, her life is also their lives: her relationships, variously perceived, to them; and their relationships, variously perceived, to each other. Through her they live; through them what we imagine as her life is shaped and circumscribed, even as it is revealed. The trickle of nonfamily biographies, which became a torrent in the final years of the twentieth century, derives, as it must, from these early accounts. Here's the problem: how is it possible to recognize in their carefully fashioned portrait of a conformable family member the writer of such startlingly original novels: novels, moreover, that point up the difficulties and constrictions of family identity? Looked at from the other end, no one would now be interested in the life of Jane Austen if it were not for what she wrote. Though we know we must not, under pain of the crassest naïveté, read the novels into the life/the life out of the novels, nonetheless we seek to connect them: the fiction must have a plausible psychogenesis. It does not; and not only does it fail in this respect, it is disconcerting to discover how little in the early family accounts sought to make the connection.

In the absence of diaries, which were either destroyed or never existed, the letters are the only evidence we have of a personal Jane Austen speaking/writing in her own voice, unmediated by fictional form. But they, too, are almost exclusively predicated on family communication and survive through family management. Her sister Cassandra can claim a unique role in channeling our thoughts about Jane Austen along certain lines. What we recover from the letters, as details of a life lived, what we conjecture as imagined possibility, are both derivable from the evidence preserved

and the gaps created in the correspondence as Cassandra stewarded and selectively transmitted it. In this sense Cassandra is Jane Austen's primary biographer, her relationship to the early sources that of an editor. Editing is choice, and until fairly recently, it tended in its critical methodology to submit the allowable variability of its materials to the service of a single "correct" text. Jane Austen, by Cassandra's critical editorial act, is unsurprisingly unheterogeneous – a sister, a daughter, only a family member.

There is the suggestive comment made by Caroline Austen, Jane Austen's niece, who spent extended periods of time with the elderly Cassandra, that Cassandra wanted the younger generation of Austens to remember Aunt Jane, but made sure none of them individually remembered or could reassemble too much: "it must be a difficult task to dig up the *materials*, so carefully have they been buried out of our sight by the past generat[ion]" (Austen-Leigh 2002: 186–7). It is Caroline who describes how some time in the 1840s Aunt Cassandra "looked over and burnt" the bulk of her correspondence from her sister. "She left, or *gave* some as legacies to the Nieces – but of those that *I* have seen, several had portions cut out" (Austen-Leigh 2002: 174). Cassandra's intervention – whether of destruction or dissemination – fragmented the textual record at the same time as it safeguarded and preserved her sister's memory for the next generation of Austens. But the inevitable consequence of her actions was to fuel speculation. By an inexorable logic, as Caroline's words concede, once we know something has been destroyed ("buried out of our sight") it becomes far more significant than any available knowledge. Cassandra's culling and distribution of family mementos may have been no more than an old woman's final act of housekeeping, but it has been viewed suspiciously ever after, within and beyond the family, as an act of censorship and suppression. Whatever her motives, she created a record with deliberate holes in it.

There are at the latest count 160 letters (161 when Austen's will is included) extant from an original correspondence calculated by Deirdre Le Faye, using patterns established in the more prolific periods of communication, at around 3,000. The letters from Jane to Cassandra, by general consent the focus of the correspondence, are represented by 94 surviving specimens. Of those she may have written to her six brothers, Francis (Frank) is represented by eight, and Charles by only one. No letters survive from Jane to her eldest brother James, nor to Edward, adopted in 1783 by his father's distant cousin, Thomas Knight of Godmersham, Kent; nor to Henry, purportedly her favorite brother. Of George, her handicapped second brother, there is no mention, and he is only rarely glimpsed in the family record. The family friend and fellow inmate of the cottage at Chawton, Martha Lloyd, later Frank's second wife, has four letters; Jane's cousin Philadelphia Walter has one. In the next generation, James's daughters Anna and Caroline have 16 and 10 letters each; his son, James Edward, has three. Fanny Knight, Edward's eldest daughter, has six, and Charles's daughter Cassandra (Cassy) has one. The extended private world of friends and acquaintances is represented by only six letters: one to her old friend Alethea Bigg; one to Charles Haden, Henry Austen's sociable doctor; a formal note to Lady Morley, to whom an

early copy of *Emma* was sent; a letter to Catherine Prowting, a Chawton neighbor; another to Ann Sharp, former governess to Edward's children at Godmersham; and one to Frances Tilson, wife of Henry's banking partner. The public world is represented by six letters to the publisher John Murray, each one no more than a brief note; by one famously indignant letter to Richard Crosby, who bought and failed to publish the manuscript of "Susan" (*Northanger Abbey*); and by a short correspondence of three letters to James Stanier Clarke, pompous librarian to the Prince Regent.

The proportions, which are undoubtedly skewed by accidents of survival unconnected to Cassandra's editorial decision, weigh heavily in favor of a predominantly female domestic correspondence, extended in later years to the elder of Austen's nieces and nephews. Its chief function is to maintain family connections and to share news, where news can be as trivial as the cost of a hair cut or as momentous as birth, death, or a brother's promotion. Where the addressee is Cassandra, the letters invoke a reader whose sympathy, on almost any topic, can be taken for granted. Theirs is an implicit intimacy which is difficult to decode because it is inevitably understated, by design "unyielding" (Favret 1993: 133) to other eyes, and drawing upon a deep reserve of shared (that is, known to each other though not necessarily identical) feelings and responses to books, to family members, and neighbors, and to the world in general. "[T]o strangers," Caroline Austen wrote, the letters "could be *no* transcript of her mind – they would not feel that they knew her any the better for having read them" (Austen-Leigh 2002: 174). Which leaves hanging the question of what the letters might reveal to those who did know Jane Austen.

As the daughters of the house, Cassandra and Jane would by convention be delegated to write letters whose contents would then circulate within a further family group or among friends and neighbors: "Your letter gave pleasure to all of us, we had all the reading of it of course, I *three times* – as I undertook . . . to read it to Sackree, & afterwards to Louisa" (*Letters*: 233). These letters are records of social events and are themselves social events whose reach and interpretation the writer soon loses power to calculate or control, as Austen observes writing from Lyme Regis, on Friday September 14, 1804, to Cassandra in Hampshire:

My Mother is at this moment reading a letter from my Aunt. Yours to Miss Irvine, of which she had had the perusal – (which by the bye, in your place I should not like) has thrown them into a quandary about Charles & his prospects. The case is, that my Mother had previously told my Aunt, without restriction, that a sloop (which my Aunt calls a Frigate) was reserved in the East for Charles; whereas you had replied to Miss Irvine's enquiries on the subject with less explicitness & more caution. – Never mind – let them puzzle on together. (*Letters*: 93)

Austen summarizes with cool amusement the little drama of miscommunication that the multiple reading of Cassandra's letter raises among its female audience, teasing out its capacity to reinfect the same news as represented in other letters. Instructions for reading, in the form of explicit advice on how to edit their contents for wider

consumption or for reading aloud, are a feature of her own letters: share this, suppress that, and keep this to yourself (e.g., *Letters*: 126). And in a late letter to her niece Fanny, whose tangled love life is submitted to her aunt's advice: "I shall be most glad to hear from you again my dearest Fanny . . . and write *something* that may do to be read or told" (*Letters*: 287). Where "the true art of letter-writing . . . is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth" (*Letters*: 68), the potential for misunderstanding in the wrong hands (or eyes) is considerable. This is only one of the ways in which the open family letter, filled with a mix of news, gossip, and opinion, addressed to the taste and capacities of one reader but shared by many, can without great violence be recast into the material of fiction. It is easy too to imagine that, read aloud, the staccato revelations of the letters would act as prompts to conversational development and misinterpretation among a knowing circle, as they do in the subtle epistolary subplot of *Emma*. (Volume 2, chapter 1 offers an extreme example.)

After Cassandra's death in 1845, the bulk of her own preserved letters went by bequest to Fanny Knight (Lady Knatchbull), presumably because so many were written either to or from Fanny's childhood home of Godmersham, Kent, during the extended, usually separate, visits each sister made there. This fact makes Godmersham (like Cassandra) a steady though not constant frame of representation for the news, events, and revelations the letters provide. How will their communications be received in the grander Godmersham circle? How might the reality or idea of Godmersham impress itself upon the writer's style? Though the sisters wrote personally to each other, they also wrote as denizens of the households they happened to inhabit, keeping in view, however discreetly, the importance of family networking and mutual assistance. As Austen put it to Cassandra from Godmersham on June 30, 1808, ". . . it is pleasant to be among people who know one's connections & care about them" (*Letters*: 137–8). After 1805, the financial assistance of the prosperous, landowning Edward Austen (he took the name of Knight officially in 1812) became indispensable to the domestic well-being of the Austen women. When in 1884 Lord Brabourne, Fanny's son and Jane Austen's great-nephew, published his mother's collection of letters, he did not fail to make the case that they offered a counterimage to that provided by James Edward Austen-Leigh in his *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870), the first proper biography. Austen-Leigh was the son of Jane's eldest brother, he had grown up in her childhood home Steventon parsonage, enjoyed his aunt's conversation and encouragement as a young writer, and attended her coffin to its grave in Winchester Cathedral. In a particular sense, repeated elsewhere in the tightly knit Austen family, his own early life replicated aspects of her life. But the account of Jane Austen that Austen-Leigh pieced together in the late 1860s is marked at every turn by half knowledge and the accidents of survival – broken memories, scraps of letters, yawning gaps in the evidence; and by a further defense – middle-class propriety. By contrast, Brabourne exploited the potential offered by Godmersham and its material luxuries, as glimpsed in his mother's large share of the letters, to fill in some of the gaps and to upstage Austen-Leigh's confected portrait by one of his own. Where Austen-Leigh worries

that the letters may reveal anything at all, Brabourne makes wildly exaggerated claims for their contents.

Austen-Leigh took his cue from his sister Caroline in begging the reader “not to expect too much from” Jane Austen’s letters (Austen-Leigh 2002: 50). Caroline had written a short memoir of her own, in March 1867, to assist her brother, and she states firmly there that “. . . there is nothing in those letters which *I* have seen that would be acceptable to the public . . . they detailed chiefly home and family events: and she seldom committed herself *even to an opinion*” (Austen-Leigh 2002: 173). Though the revised second edition of the *Memoir* (1871) reconsidered this dismissal in making use of letters that the nieces and nephew had each received from Aunt Jane, Austen-Leigh guessed correctly that there were further letters which would change the record in unimagined ways, if only he could lay his hands on them. “I have no letters of my aunt, nor any other record of her, during her four years’ residence at Southampton,” he admitted; “and though I now began to know, and, what was the same thing, to love her myself, yet my observations were only those of a young boy, and were not capable of penetrating her character, or estimating her powers” (Austen-Leigh 2002: 65–6). From May 1801, when Steventon ceased to be her home, until July 1809, when she settled at Chawton, Jane Austen’s life was, outwardly at least, rootless and impressionable: a series of temporary homes and lodgings in Bath and Southampton; holidays at Lyme Regis and other seaside resorts; extended visits to family in Gloucestershire, Hampshire, and Kent; shifting friendships and acquaintances. For that whole period of change, turmoil, and excitement, Austen-Leigh provides only four letters. Lacking precise information, even his estimate of a “four years’ residence at Southampton” is wrong by about 18 months. Letters for this period, among the sharpest and, in their way, most revealing Austen wrote (nos 49–67 in Le Faye’s edition), were all out of reach at Godmersham. Although this crucial gap was filled somewhat in the next generation, when William and R. A. Austen-Leigh’s enlarged biography, *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters. A Family Record* (1913), absorbed Brabourne’s major collection, it has retained its symbolic force into the present in the familiar narrative of Jane Austen’s life as two broken but curiously symmetrical parts. Thanks to an uncritical reliance on James Edward Austen-Leigh’s avowedly partial knowledge, the “two-distinct-but-matching-creative-periods” theory has become a biographical truism among Austen scholars: Steventon and Chawton, separated by an eight-year blank during which she was miserable and depressed (that is, not in the Hampshire countryside), and in a sense nonexistent.

The *Memoir* records letters to children, a few to the adult family circle, and a few to public figures. But this is nothing compared to the 96 letters (all but two Austen’s) made public by Brabourne 13 years later. A generation younger, with no personal memories or perceived loyalties to muddy his contract with the reader, Brabourne simply saw his mother’s cache of letters as an “opportunity”: “. . . no one now living can, I think, have any possible just cause of annoyance at their publication, whilst, if I judge rightly, the public never took a deeper or more lively interest in all that concerns Jane Austen than at the present moment” (Brabourne 1884: 1, xi–xii). Of course,

Austen-Leigh was not disinterested: at the very least there was the prestige that would accrue to him in his declared relationship to Jane Austen. His study delights in tracing her eminent admirers and his own connections to them. And as the comparison he invites the reader to make with Elizabeth Gaskell's recent successful *Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857) suggests, Austen-Leigh too was not blind to the market value of memorializing an unassuming yet remarkable female talent, another modest spinster daughter of a country parson. His memoir, published to coincide with the reissue of Austen's novels in Bentley's "Favourite Novels" series, prompted the assiduous convergence of family and commercial interests that would mark the upturn in Austen's popularity in the last decades of the nineteenth century. But there are nonetheless telling differences in the appeals he and Brabourne made to the public. By contrast, Brabourne's Jane Austen is only a property to be marketed, not a beloved aunt to be protected. Every aspect of his book points the contrast; but above all the visual distance between its frontispiece portrait of a fashionably posed pubescent girl and the demure piece of domestic goodness chosen by Austen-Leigh for the original *Memoir* of 1870. The engraving, from a portrait that Austen-Leigh commissioned, is a startling distortion into conformity of Cassandra's satiric cartoon, its original. By contrast, the Rice portrait, as it is now known, of a teenage girl came to light fortuitously as Brabourne prepared his portrait-in-letters of a Kentish Jane Austen. Both are highly coded images, both are problematic in their partiality, though issues of likeness have in recent years been overshadowed by questions of authenticity in the case of the Rice portrait. More pertinently, when viewed in historical perspective, these two Victorian-issued images illustrate the contrasting uses to which the primary biographical data is regularly put. If Austen-Leigh's official portrait is uncommunicative by design, the symbolism of a "teen Jane" promotes letters which, in Brabourne's estimation, are "the confidential outpourings of Jane Austen's soul to her beloved sister, interspersed with many family details which, doubtless, she would have told to no other human being" (Brabourne 1884: 1, xii). Though the particular circumstances – in family rivalry and social status – for this willful misreading of the letters have long disappeared, their legacy endures in the competing biographical conventions which either hide Austen in respectable and productive provincial obscurity or set her ambitions on a wider and more glamorous stage.

I

Jane Austen's letters are the key to everything. We may accuse one branch of her family of exaggerated reserve and another of blatant opportunism, but their opposition traces the fault line in her writings; the contested place where the ordinary becomes extraordinary. The puzzle of the letters stimulates us to articulate just what it is that makes Jane Austen's fiction so special. The letters are the raw data for the life and the untransformed banalities which, magically transmuted, become the precious trivia of the novels. More intriguingly they are the key to what has always been the most

important and the most baffling issue, what D. A. Miller refers to in his recent gripping study as “The Secret of Style” (Miller 2003). In the eulogy written only a few months after her death and first published as “A Biographical Notice of the Author,” a preface to Murray’s 1818 edition of *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, Austen’s brother Henry stated that “Every thing came finished from her pen; for on all subjects she had ideas as clear as her expressions were well chosen.” It is a claim which has proved remarkably resilient over the centuries. In Henry Austen’s case, brotherly pride and the conventions of obituary writing are sufficient excuse for such extravagant endorsement, but what is most interesting about his remark is that it roots his sister’s talent as a novelist in her aptitude for “familiar correspondence.” What he wrote was this:

The style of her familiar correspondence was in all respects the same as that of her novels. Every thing came finished from her pen; for on all subjects she had ideas as clear as her expressions were well chosen. It is not hazarding too much to say that she never dispatched a note or letter unworthy of publication. (Austen-Leigh 2002: 141)

We may observe with some amusement his immediate retraction in the shape of carefully edited (modified, paraphrased, and censored) extracts from two of his sister’s “finished” letters. We are also right to suspect his intention: he is clearly uncomfortable with the taint of commercialism or impropriety attaching to the idea that Jane Austen labored over her novels. But we must not therefore dismiss his point: there is no difference of style. Other male members of the Austen family were equally anxious to delimit the sphere of a specifically feminine writing practice. In the next generation, Austen-Leigh used the physical evidence of the letters – “her clear strong handwriting,” her “art in folding and sealing” – to deflect enquiry from anything as potentially countersocial and selfishly absorbing as creative writing: “Some people’s letters always looked loose and untidy; but her paper was sure to take the right folds, and her sealing-wax to drop into the right place” (Austen-Leigh 2002: 77). This is an absurd substitution for genius. But we are not therefore right to dismiss what it is used to illustrate: the originality of her achievement. I take this originality, this perfection of style, to be her accomplished minimalism: what Miller calls her “curious self-fashioning into the selfless medium of Style” (Miller 2003: 106). For the early family biographers the style and look of the letters provided a code that legitimated as it moderated, and allowed them to feel comfortable with, Austen’s literary genius. In the family, the letters functioned as a cover, literally, for novel writing (Austen-Leigh 2002: 173).

With few exceptions, Jane Austen’s letters are confidential family publications, much as the juvenilia were the confidential family publications of an earlier stage in her development. The earliest extant letters, from January 1796, when she was just 20, contain traces of the same arch motivation and expression, the same performative exuberance as the teenage fiction (Jones 2004: xxxi). Their revelations of her courtship by Tom Lefroy, for example, are tuned to the liberationist ethic that supports the

rampant egotism of her juvenile adventurers; details are sketched using the same repertoire of absurd phrase and distorting perspective: “Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together”; “Mr. Tom Lefroy . . . has but *one* fault . . . it is that his morning coat is a great deal too light”; “I am very much flattered by your commendation of my last Letter, for I write only for Fame, and without any view to pecuniary Emolument” (*Letters*: 1–3). This is a kind of writing in which details of personal experience – of sensation and action – are entrusted to a form of language that designedly betrays them, leaving the extent of what is revealed highly problematic and personal investment troublingly hijacked – unless one has the key to decipher them. Though the style of later letters is more muted, they retain a commitment to discomposure; what Carol Houlihan Flynn describes in an incisive essay as “jarring catalogues of ‘little matters’ that unsettle a reader looking for coherence.” Austen herself captures wonderfully the continuing wayward importance of “little matters” to her epistolary art when she confides to Cassandra, in September 1813, that “I am still a Cat if I see a Mouse” (*Letters*: 225). And Flynn sums up the search for a subject, which characterizes so many of the letters, as Austen’s exploration of “the limits of a stream of consciousness located somewhere between Sterne and Samuel Beckett” (Flynn 1997: 101–2).

The potential for disorientation in a form, the personal letter, whose cluttered impersonality and bizarre conjunctions of topic and tone confound our expectations, is pointed up in the opposed reactions first of family, and later of critics. To the embarrassment of the cautious Austen-Leigh, Henry Austen had publicly defended admittedly highly selected extracts as “more truly descriptive of her temper, taste, feelings, and principles than any thing which the pen of a biographer can produce” (Austen-Leigh 2002: 142). In the early twentieth century, H. W. Garrod, Keats’s editor, found in Austen a less artful correspondent, describing her letters as “a desert of trivialities punctuated by occasional oases of clever malice” (Garrod 1928: 25). More recently, and in contrast to the traditional critical valuation of Austen’s elegantly ordered novels, a direct consequence of the feminist reestimation of women’s autobiographical writing has been the recuperation of the cultural suppleness and multivocality of the letters. At stake here is the generic difference between letters and novels, by which letters can evade and even invert the merely imaginary (and largely conservative) solutions that fiction offers to the problem of female dependency and marginality. Letters come into their own when we acknowledge them as expressions of women’s dual allegiances: at the service of general society and a distinct female perspective (Kaplan 1988). This late recognition of the relevance of what disturbs in the letters – the difficulty of reading their private idiolect – accords with a revisionist scrutiny of the unpredictable reach of voices in the novels (Tandon 2003: 112–30). Here is the basis for a reappraisal that equips the twenty-first-century reader to transform Henry Austen’s observation of affinity into a wholly new appreciation of the “familiar correspondence” between letters and novels.

An agreement between the epistolary voice and the fiction is never lost because Austen’s letters almost always imply an audience of more than one. They may be

confidential, but they are not exclusive. There is an art in letter writing, and Austen is not above gesturing to it (*Letters* 121: 156). Here's the challenge: how do we, the uninitiated, learn to read the letters? Where the biographical archive is so sparse, it is tempting to use the letters to fill silences. They are almost all we have from the profoundest silence of all, that between the completion of the juvenilia (1793) and the publication of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). But unlike the self-conscious truncations of the juvenilia (guessing games played with a knowing audience), the letters are genuinely incomplete. Only ever half a conversation, we rarely have even that half continued without interruption for more than a few letters at a time. Where the subject matter of the famous six novels turns the knowingness of the juvenilia on its head by examining the limits of communication – its intended and unintended deceptions and our partial knowledge of one another even under conditions of the most intense social surveillance – the formal limits of the letter point to a different kind of truncation or fragility.

In a literal sense letters are spaces to be filled. Austen has a keen sense of the identity of the text of a letter with its material form: how words alone do not convey her meaning, but are supported or betrayed by their disposition on paper, by her handwriting, even by the paper itself. Cassandra's hand, she regularly notes, is by contrast far neater and tighter than hers, fills the page more satisfactorily, and in doing so signals her greater willingness to undertake the social responsibility of sending news: "I am quite angry with myself for not writing closer; why is my alphabet so much more sprawly than Yours?" (*Letters*: 17; and see 76, 151); "I cannot write any closer" (*Letters*: 79); "You are very amiable & very clever to write such long Letters; every page of yours has more lines than this, & every line more words than the average of mine. I am quite ashamed – but you have certainly more little events than we have" (*Letters*: 131); "I *will* leave off, or I shall not have room to add a word tomorrow" (*Letters*: 18). Typically, the sisters sent two letters each per week when apart, each letter filling a single sheet folded to form four pages and written over two or three days, the next one begun within hours of the latest sent rather than in response to the direct prompting of the postal service; a continuous if unsynchronized conversation: "Your letter is come; it came indeed twelve lines ago, but I could not stop to acknowledge it before" (*Letters*: 52). Letters 52 to 55, written by Jane to Cassandra between June 15 and July 1, 1808, represent one half of such a sequence. And since these letters are bound by conventions of space and duration, news must fit its vehicle: it cannot assume more space than there is left of the single sheet; on the other hand, the sheet must be filled. Of the spaces Austen filled – and we tend to know her life as a sequence of spaces filled rather than of actions (Steventon, Bath, Southampton, Chawton, Winchester; the mahogany writing desk, a makeshift sofa, a donkey cart) – the spaces of the letters, like the material fragments of manuscript fiction, carry a special significance. But unlike even the fragmentary fiction there is an essential bond between the writing materials of the letter and its contents, which marks the letter as incomplete in a further sense without its original carrier:

In another week I shall be at home – & then, my having been at Godmersham will seem like a Dream, as my visit at Brompton seems already. The Orange Wine will want our Care soon. – But in the meantime for Elegance & Ease & Luxury – ; the Hattons' & Milles' dine here today – & I shall eat Ice & drink French wine, & be above Vulgar Economy. [continued below address panel] Luckily the pleasures of Friendship, of unreserved Conversation, of similarity of Taste & Opinions, will make good amends for Orange Wine. – (*Letters*: 139)

The sentiments are explicit enough, but the editorial information inserted in square brackets, telling the modern reader that Austen squeezes in the final messages of her letter below the address panel, provides a ready example of her constitutionally “vulgar economy,” and of the dependence of epistolary meaning on more than an ability to read its text – in this case, on the evidence of its documentary carrier. Perhaps a clue to the importance of the letters lies not in their inwardness (which the uninitiated cannot penetrate) but in their outwardness – what they display to our eyes. Hence the great value of Jo Modert's (1990) *Manuscript Letters in Facsimile*.

In particular, the letters to Cassandra perform a surrogate function in recording an intimacy we know existed between the sisters but which has left few other traces. We hear it in their elliptical familiarity which gestures to the vital complicity between writer and recipient: “I must get a softer pen. – This is harder. I am in agonies” (*Letters*: 218); and in the antiphonal responses to now silent questions or in the piling of contextless scraps of news:

I am to meet Harriot at dinner tomorrow . . . On Tuesday there is to be a family meeting at Mrs C. Milles's . . . Louisa goes home on Friday . . . These are our engagements; make the most of them. – Mr Waller is dead, I see . . . Edward began cutting Stfoin on Saturday . . . There has been a cold & sorethroat prevailing very much in this House lately . . . I want to hear of your gathering Strawberries, we have had them three times here . . . (*Letters*: 130–1)

We hear it in the way these letters create a picture of the writer which is intended to overcome distance and in which her body, her situation as she writes and reads, is essential to the effect: “I am in the Yellow room – very literally – for I am writing in it at this moment” (*Letters*: 125); “it is now half past twelve, & having heard Lizzy read, I am moved down into the Library for the sake of a fire which agreeably surprised us when we assembled at Ten, & here in warm & happy solitude proceed to acknowledge this day's Letter” (*Letters*: 137). To read the full range of Austen's letters is to discover the difference in tone which marks those to Cassandra from her other correspondents. The letters addressed to Cassandra can now seem the most complexly coded of all, paradoxically because they were the least guarded, the most reliant upon a shared idiolect with its private mechanisms for recalibration; on occasion called to offer compensation and expansion, at other times laughter or forgiveness:

You used me scandalously by not mentioning Ed. Cooper's Sermons; – I tell you everything, & it is unknown the Mysteries you conceal from me. – And to add to the rest you persevere in giving a final e to Invalid – thereby putting it out of one's power to suppose Mrs E. Leigh even for a moment, a veteran Soldier. (*Letters*: 169)

I looked at Sir Thomas Champneys & thought of poor Rosalie; I looked at his daughter & thought her a queer animal with a white neck. – Mrs Warren, I was constrained to think a very fine young woman, which I much regret. She has got rid of some part of her child, & danced away with great activity, looking by no means very large. (*Letters*: 61)

And “Tho’ Sunday, my Mother begins it without any ailment” (*Letters*: 141); “My Mother is not ill” (*Letters*: 149). As Austen reminds her sister, in the flesh she and Cassandra are “the formidables” (*Letters*: 249).

It is only recently that critics have found a way to connect the letters to the novels, in part as a result of a new appreciation for what is by design disorderly and experimental in Austen's mature narrative method (Sutherland 2005: 306). On occasion the letters can read like jottings for fiction, offering clues to the kinds of risks she took as a novelist. This goes beyond, though it includes, what is visible from their characteristic graphic compression whereby topics are tumbled together, separated, or inappropriately yoked by dashes, an unparagraphed pileup of subjects and opinions, a paratactic rush of impressions unsorted by subordination. In the look of the letters we see reflected the look of the surviving working drafts of *The Watsons* and *Sanditon*. If we do not see it, we hear the same compositional compression in the interplay and encroachment of voice upon voice and topic on topic in the mature narrative style – though now as an artfully orchestrated fusion:

Former provocations re-appeared. The aunt was as tiresome as ever; more tiresome, because anxiety for her health was now added to admiration of her powers; and they had to listen to the description of exactly how little bread and butter she ate for breakfast, and how small a slice of mutton for dinner, as well as to see exhibitions of new caps and new work-bags for her mother and herself; and Jane's offences rose again. They had music; Emma was obliged to play; and the thanks and praise which necessarily followed appeared to her an affectation of candour, an air of greatness, meaning only to shew off in higher style her own very superior performance. She was, besides, which was the worst of all, so cold, so cautious! (*E*: 168–9)

In the letters, as in the speech and presentation of more eccentric fictional figures (in the passage quoted above, Emma, in conspiracy with the narrator, parodies the flights of fancy of Miss Bates, that “great talker upon little matters” [*E*: 21]), slices of mutton, work-bags, and piano playing retain a vital unaccountability. In extreme form this is what, from the evidence of the working manuscript of *Sanditon*, Tony Tanner described as “asyndeton,” making the homonymic joke that “Sanditon is built on – and by – careless and eroding grammar” (Tanner 1986: 260). On the experimental page of the

letters this telegraphic style, which in the novels stands in for both sociable and mental spaces, dissolves into a freewheeling creativity.

The letters written to Cassandra between January 1801 and January 1809 have a particular claim to be considered as the equivalent of an author's notebook. Contrary to the artistic narcolepsy that the family wished to impose on the record of Austen's life throughout this time, these years should be reconsidered as the crucible for her talent, a second and certainly more painful novelist's apprenticeship, during which she set aside the literary models of epistolary fiction and tested the potential of her own epistolary voice. The collision of life and fiction that stalled *The Watsons* some time in 1805 is traceable in the bleak letters of this period and was a necessary stage in Austen's development from a precocious literary parodist into a writer able to record and transform mundane reality. Ironic, self-critical, and often misanthropic, their vistas cramped by the equally cramped accommodation and forced sociability of small-town life, these letters are also full of experimental observations, each one a narrative node, a small punctuation of detail more luminous for its detachment from any extended teleology of plot or characterization:

Our grand walk to Weston was again fixed for Yesterday, & was accomplished in a very striking manner; Every one of the party declined it under some pretence or other except our two selves, & we had therefore a tete a tete; but *that* we should equally have had after the first two yards, had half the Inhabitants of Bath set off with us. – It would have amused you to see our progress; – we went up by Sion Hill, & returned across the fields; – in climbing a hill Mrs Chamberlayne is very capital; I could with difficulty keep pace with her – yet would not flinch for the World. – on plain ground I was quite her equal – and so we posted away under a fine hot sun, *She* without any parasol or any shade to her hat, stopping for nothing, & crossing the Church Yard at Weston with as much expedition as if we were afraid of being buried alive. (*Letters*: 87)

Mrs Day has now got the Carpet in hand, & Monday I hope will be the last day of her employment here. A fortnight afterwards she is to be called again from the shades of her red-check'd bed in an alley near the end of the High Street to clean the new House & air the Bedding. (*Letters*: 123)

We found our friend as comfortable, as she can ever allow herself to be in cold weather; – there is a very neat parlour behind the Shop for her to sit in, not very light indeed, being a la Southampton, the middle of Three deep – but very lively from the frequent sound of the pestle & mortar. (*Letters*: 167)

We might describe these vagaries of a fiction-making mind, a feature of the letters from this unsettled period, as both practice and release; like *The Watsons*, for whose growth out of and into the events of her own life we can find particular evidence. Are these the first minisketches for novels never written and never really intended? In such moments Austen's letters do seem like the decompositions we expect a novelist's letters to be. Reading Austen's letters from Bath, Lyme Regis, and Southampton is

to recover what the official biography continues to deny: the creative challenge and stimulus of alien surroundings.

II

Biographies are built from interpretations rather more than from facts. In Jane Austen's case there are so few facts that almost all we can know are the narrative consequences of different kinds of interpretation. In the Victorian period, this is evident in the contradictory family views on the letters. More recently, the challenge for the modern trade biographers has been to recover a personal Jane Austen and a plausible emotional and psychological hinterland for a writer, freed from family defensiveness. It is difficult to disregard the interpretative stranglehold of a family who have so effectively determined the content, even the tone and emphasis, of the biographical tradition. The Austens were clever down the generations without being intellectual or anything more than broadly sympathetic to the mainstream in the arts; professional, comfortable, culturally conservative – and stalwartly middle-England. Their official stance, unlike our interpretations of the novels, has shifted little since the early twentieth century. It is extraordinary to consider how late Jane Austen's biography has retained the imprint of a family property; as late as 2004 and the publication of the second edition of Deirdre Le Faye's *Family Record*, with its self-conscious incorporation of the narrative shape and the authority of the Austen-Leighs' *Life and Letters*, itself an enlargement of the 1871 *Memoir* and Brabourne's collection of letters. Le Faye was engaged in the 1980s to revise the family biography by Mrs Joan Impey, wife of Lawrence Impey, whose mother was Kathleen Austen-Leigh, granddaughter of the author of the *Memoir* and Jane Austen's great-great niece. Le Faye is always respectful and unspeculative, even where the evidence cries out for comment or evaluation. For example, there are plenty of skeletons in the Austen family cupboard: in the marriage of aunt Philadelphia to the East India surgeon-trader Tysoe Saul Hancock and their domestic and business dealings with Warren Hastings; in the incarceration of another aunt, Jane Leigh-Perrot, on a charge of shoplifting; in the personal history of the so-called Comte de Feuillide, first husband of Jane's cousin Eliza Hancock; in Henry Austen's business dealings; in Frank Austen's association with the East India Company. Le Faye is reticent, and her family-derived "Record" has assumed the status of factual biography (an impossible concept) among a teeming industry of interpretative lives of Jane Austen.

Jane Austen was born in the village of Steventon in rural Hampshire, in the south of England, on December 16, 1775. She was the seventh of eight children (six sons and two daughters), and her father was the local Anglican clergyman. Her mother's family, the Leighs, had connections with Oxford academia and more distant aristocratic pretensions. Her father supplemented his income and the needs of his growing family by taking as boarders in Steventon rectory private paying pupils from good families. Jane's earliest years would have been spent in a bustling house filled with

brothers and schoolboys; she may have picked up some learning herself in this environment. The overcrowding at Steventon may also explain why Cassandra, three years her senior, and Jane were sent away to school – briefly in 1783 and again in 1785–6 to Mrs La Tournelle’s Ladies Boarding School, Reading (afterwards known as the Abbey School). Jane may have begun writing the short, parodic works we know as the juvenilia within months of leaving school. School apart, Jane lived at Steventon, with occasional trips to stay with family and friends in other parts of the south of England, until May 1801, when her father retired and moved his now reduced household (Mrs Austen, Cassandra, and Jane) to live in Bath. Jane was 25 years old. She had to her credit three manuscript volumes of juvenile writings; she may also have written by now the epistolary novella *Lady Susan*; and we know she had three full-length novels in draft, all to be published much later, and with unknown amounts of revision, as *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Northanger Abbey*. Mr Austen died suddenly in Bath in January 1805. After some uncertainty, various temporary lodgings, and extended visits elsewhere, the three Austen women, now joined by their friend Martha Lloyd, moved in March 1807 to Southampton, where they shared a house with Jane’s brother Frank and his young wife. Jane probably wrote the aborted novel *The Watsons* in Bath. They remained in Southampton until July 1809 when the three Austen women and Martha Lloyd took possession of the cottage in the village of Chawton, Hampshire, the gift of Jane’s brother Edward. Chawton, only 17 miles from Steventon, was Jane Austen’s home for the rest of her life. She prepared for publication or wrote all six novels here, traveling the 50 miles to London for extended visits to stay with her brother Henry to see them through the press. She began to feel the symptoms of her final illness in spring 1816 but completed her sixth novel, *Persuasion*, and began a new novel, *Sanditon*, which she abandoned on March 18, 1817. She made her will on 27 April and was taken to Winchester for medical treatment on 24 May. Cassandra was her companion and nurse, lodging with her at No. 8 College Street, in view of the cathedral. Jane Austen died there in the early hours of July 18, 1817 and was buried in Winchester Cathedral on July 24.

Letters survive from 21 years of Austen’s life; fiction from much longer. It is worth remembering that we have more fiction than life because it helps put into perspective just what is recoverable and what is conjecture. It also reminds us that what we are interested in is the life of the novelist: how she wrote; where her ideas may have come from; what her working methods may have been; how she prepared her manuscripts for the press. Frustratingly, these vital details are almost pure conjecture. Our knowledge of Jane Austen’s life can only ever be fragmentary. In the early family biographies the fragment was a weapon against narrative, serving well the evasiveness of Austen-Leigh’s procedure in the *Memoir*. Fragments may be spurs to our desire to know more, but they are also information dead ends, and Austen-Leigh’s meandering style is loaded with fragmentary ruses: local Hampshire customs and anecdotes, lists, family genealogies, recondite allusions. The annotation now necessary to elucidate such ramified prose takes the reader even farther from its ostensible subject. Who owns Jane Austen? One interesting feature of the tenacious family hold on her life has been the

emphasis on her brothers' talents, professions, and opportunities as contexts (or substitutes?) for hers. Jane Austen had six brothers, five of whom lived actively in society; she had only one sister. Yet the evidence of her letters, as of the novels, argues the overwhelming importance of female society as her laboratory, the ambit and testing ground of her fiction. But until very recently women have lived such hidden lives that it has always been easier to uncover the actions and opinions of their male counterparts, however insignificant. Her nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh, was the first to suggest that Austen circumscribed her art to her brothers' talents, each brother taking a significant role in shaping her abilities. Accordingly, he writes that James had "a large share in directing her reading and forming her taste," while Henry, living in London, "was useful in transacting his sister's business with her publishers." Frank and Charles were naval officers, a fact which is embellished to explain why she "never touched upon politics, law, or medicine . . . But with ships and sailors she felt herself at home, or at least could always trust to a brotherly critic to keep her right" (Austen-Leigh 2002: 16–18). How else might Austen have known, not only about ships, but also and more generally about matters requiring literary judgment if it were not for her brothers? James Austen was no more than an occasional and mediocre poet; by contrast, six years after her publication debut Jane Austen was recognized by Walter Scott, the leading fiction writer of the age, as an important new voice. Henry may have acted as an unofficial literary agent, but he also failed in business and he seems to have been kept in the dark about her writings until the latest possible moment (*Letters*: 255, 335). The evidence afforded by Austen's increasingly confident independent literary negotiations – for example, with John Murray and the Prince Regent's librarian – has so far carried little weight; as has the possible assistance of her sister-in-law, Eliza Austen, in the publication of her first novel (*Letters*: 182).

From the beginning the public voice of the Austen family record relied on a private and largely unseen female account. Caroline Austen and Anna Lefroy, James Edward Austen-Leigh's sister and half-sister, are sources for the most intimate personal details that the biography records. Anna's memories reached back to the time when Aunt Jane was barely 20, and they are touchingly quirky. Jane Austen found a second self or mirror image in Jane Anna Elizabeth Austen, whose life intersects and annotates her aunt's in surprising ways. Brought to live at Steventon rectory in 1795, aged two, on her mother's sudden death, Anna remained there, mothered by Cassandra and Jane, until her father's second marriage in 1797. As a result, she maintained an intense attachment to the female household at Steventon and then at Chawton, often returning for long periods during later childhood and adolescence. The early bond was strengthened by a precocious talent for writing which Aunt Jane fostered. By a further coincidence, at the age of 20 Anna became engaged to and soon married Ben Lefroy, a cousin of that Tom Lefroy to whom Austen was attracted at 20 and who forms the subject of her earliest letters. In later life Anna was fiercely protective of Austen's reputation; she assembled notes for a family history, which has remained unpublished, though details from it have leaked into the public record, partly through the use made in later generations of another manuscript family history, written around 1880 by

Anna's daughter, Fanny Caroline Lefroy, who drew on her mother's memories and writings. Fanny Caroline's unpublished account of the Austens offered something new in speculating on the origins in romance or sexual love of Jane Austen's genius. She also handed down some of the few suggestions we have that Austen family life was not completely harmonious: for instance, she repeats Anna Lefroy's distrust of Henry Austen's easy charm and her belief that his bankruptcy in 1816 hastened Jane Austen's final illness. Fanny Caroline's manuscript, either directly or indirectly, has provided much of the romantic speculation in the twentieth-century biographical record.

Anna's half-sister Caroline, 12 years younger, remembered the daily routine at Chawton: Aunt Jane's early morning piano playing and the stories she invented about fairyland to entertain her little nieces. Caroline inherited pocket books, in which over several years her mother Mary, James Austen's second wife, kept a brief diary of events as they occurred. Mary was witness to two of the most important events in the slim record we have of Jane Austen's life. The first was her evident distress on being told (some time in early December 1800) that her parents were to leave Steventon and live in Bath; the second was her death, Mary having traveled to Winchester to help nurse her. Mary Austen is also a source (though not this time an eye-witness) for the circumstances surrounding Austen's acceptance and subsequent refusal of Harris Bigg-Wither's marriage proposal, which can be dated precisely to December 2–3, 1802. Characteristic of all three key events is that we come closest to Austen in moments of loss or negation; which is to say: we know her best (we have most authoritative documentary information) for the moments when she vanishes from view or for the things she did not do. She may have fainted (lost consciousness) on being told she must leave Steventon; she did not marry; she died.

What the submerged female biographical tradition suggests is that there were always other Jane Austens to be recovered; other, that is, than those described in the official account. For example, we know from Fanny Caroline's account that she disliked her sister-in-law Mary Austen, for her peevish ill-temper and neglect of her step-daughter. Under Mary's influence James too had become petty and self-regarding (*Letters*: 121); but the public record continues to overestimate his puny literary talent and its likely influence on his sister's work (Knox-Shaw 2004: 24–46). By contrast, it seems impossible to doubt the intensity of the bond with Cassandra. Yet it is equally impossible to consider their relationship in terms other than those of interdependence or conjoined polarity; a fusion which creates a sense of their complementarity or mutual completion rather than bringing into focus their individual aspects. Again, it is a highly defensive biographical strategy. Austen-Leigh established the terms for all subsequent investigation when he presented the sisters thus:

They were not exactly alike. Cassandra's was the colder and calmer disposition; she was always prudent and well judging, but with less outward demonstration of feeling and less sunniness of temper than Jane possessed. It was remarked in her family that "Cassandra had the *merit* of having her temper always under command, but that Jane

had the *happiness* of a temper that never required to be commanded." (Austen-Leigh 2002: 19)

Claire Tomalin's recent reinterpretation of the materials elicits the verdict that Cassandra was "the moon and shadow to Jane's brightness" (Tomalin 1997: 195). There is perhaps an allusion here to the Gothic *coloring* of some late twentieth-century revisionist readings of the relationship: Cassandra as the repressive force compelling Jane into premature social retreat, through their ridiculously early rejection of romantic love and their compact of emotional withdrawal. The evidence for such a reading is the death of Cassandra's fiancé, Tom Fowle, when she was in her early twenties, and Austen-Leigh's remark that the sisters "were generally thought to have taken to the garb of middle age earlier than their years or their looks required" (Austen-Leigh 2002: 70). In some respects, the Cassandra-Jane relationship is a biographeme, or model, for the bipolar readings of the limited evidence for Austen's life, which are a persistent characteristic of all the biographies. Such readings, and they are a feature both of the official family sourcebooks and of popular trade biographies, go like this: Cassandra was Jane's dearest companion/Cassandra hampered Jane's emotional fulfillment; Jane relished the high life at Godmersham and enjoyed her brother Edward's good fortune/Jane resented Godmersham and did not think Edward shared his wealth sufficiently with his mother and sisters; Jane hated life in exile in Bath/Jane's horizons were expanded by life in Bath; Jane only felt at home in the Hampshire countryside/Jane loved the social round of London.

A challenge for the future biographer will be to reveal the potential in Jane Austen's environment as convincingly as the family have persuaded us of its limitations. Opinions on family duty and proper female domesticity structure the early record in such a way as to provide a determining logic of limitation to explain her strengths as a novelist. Only recently have other models come into biographical contention. Austen's older cousin Eliza Hancock, later Eliza de Feuillide, and later still, after her marriage to Henry, Eliza Austen, born in India and brought up in England and France, is beginning to be seen as her adventurous, cosmopolitan, and "outlandish" other. Eliza was an inspiration for the anarchic creativity of the juvenilia. Later it was from her London home that Jane saw *Sense and Sensibility* and perhaps *Pride and Prejudice* through the press. Moving in smart London circles, she provided rich social and cultural opportunities. Like Anne Lefroy, a near neighbor in Steventon, who probably encouraged Jane Austen's intellectual aspirations in her childhood, Eliza may have offered a window on a different world. Both were intelligent, cultured women who may have helped release the creative potential in Jane Austen without offering or demanding in return a restricting emotional support. In addition, now that a significant barrier has been overcome, in the transference of Jane Austen's life onto screen, it may be that film's visual rhetoric will find in the relationships it explores (the love affairs which may have been or the communities of women within which she lived the greater part of her life) a persuasive and more satisfying interpretation of the puzzle which is Jane Austen.

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