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Publisher Routledge

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European Romantic Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713642184>

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Online Publication Date: 01 December 2000

To cite this Article Galperin, William(2000)"Let us not desert one another": Jane Austen and the romantic century',European Romantic Review,11:1,35 — 45

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10509580008570097

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509580008570097>

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Response

“Let us not desert one another”: Jane Austen and The Romantic Century

William Galperin

To talk of a movement called “romanticism,” on the one hand, and of a century-long interval in literature and culture, on the other, whose characteristic feature remains its steady development toward and subsequent engagement with an initiative that, according to romanticism’s own adherents and practitioners, constituted a break with the past, appears a contradictory enterprise. For the very notion of romanticism — which originates in the celebration of vernacular or popular discourses over and against those authorized by established canons of taste — is really a polemical shorthand for revolution rather than for the accretive or evolutionary process that the notion of a romantic century effectively presupposes. Yet, as Peter Manning makes abundantly clear, the centrality of romanticism, chiefly its preoccupation with questions of individuality and separateness, over a hundred-year span beginning in the mid eighteenth century is pretty undeniable even as it vitiates the Romantics’ self-legitimizing arguments and polemics regarding their difference from what Lamb disparagingly termed the “past century.” It is no longer necessary, that is, to take the Romantics’ word or self-representation in order to recognize the importance of a deed that with the benefit of two centuries’ hindsight can be said to have burgeoned definitively sometime around 1800.

I was reminded of this problem just the other day when, in the inaugural meeting of an honors course on Major British Writers, 1800 to the Present, I was queried by one student on the usefulness or legitimacy of 1800 to demarcate or, more precisely, to bifurcate, a canon of writing and cultural production that more or less commences in the fourteenth century. While I was briefly flummoxed (and not a little impressed) by the force of the inquiry, I was also struck by the appositeness of the division, which would carry even more force were we, as William Keach advises, to incorporate American texts into the century-long configuration. Who, after all, would

contest the bearing of romanticism — or something called romanticism — on American Transcendentalism, not to mention both *Leaves of Grass* and *Moby Dick*, which were published in 1855 and 1851 respectively? A course on British writers from 1800 onward, as against, say, one on literature in English over that same span, does not always lend itself to a line of inquiry (or as Harold Bloom would have it a line of influence) that stems profitably from an order or orientation that achieves codification "sometime around 1800." Yet, even as I spent much of the class attempting to justify the absence of any British writing on the syllabus post-late-Yeats, not to mention my somewhat disingenuous inclusion of both James and Eliot, I found myself increasingly committed to a line of defense that has fallen plainly out of fashion. Romantic-period writing, I explained to the class, marks a genesis of the "new," both in formal matters (i.e., the greater romantic lyric and the rise of the novel) and in other discursive developments, not the least being the middle-class orientation to which writing in the first decades of the nineteenth century was increasingly and dramatically pitched.

In reiterating — and, some might claim, resuscitating — the notion of romanticism as a genesis of the modern, I am not necessarily interested in arguing (pace Bloom again) for a romantic tradition that begins with Blake and continues unabated in the likes of Ashbery and others, any more than I am interested in looking backward for various antecedents that can be appropriated in what Claudia Johnson, I think, too-skeptically regards as a simple annexation of cultural and canonical property. In fact, with Johnson's own example of the novel in mind, coupled with Anne Mellor's focus on women's culture of the period and its eventual impact on Victorian England, I want to turn briefly to Jane Austen, and to her defense of the novel and of women's writing in *Northanger Abbey* to which Johnson and Mellor both have recourse. For as Austen's paeon to the novel shows, the particular centrality of romantic-period writing in the hundred-year span beginning in the mid-eighteenth century owes as much to the particular characteristics of romantic writing and culture that Susan Wolfson so nicely enumerates as it does to both the continuities and discontinuities to which the "new" — and its possibilistic horizons — were both prone yet also tantamount.

The most striking feature, then, of the digression on the novel in *Northanger Abbey* is its more-than-casual affinity with the claims of Austen's male contemporaries regarding the importance of *their* moment as distinct, both aesthetically and ideologically, from the literature of what Lamb, again, termed the "past century." Observing that the novel's heroine, Catherine Morland, and a friend, Isabella Thorpe, manage a kind of solidarity by reading novels in each other's company, Austen's narrator loses little time

in extending that observation in an assertion of the novel's rightful place in the canon of English literature. Uniformly male and generally conservative in its aesthetic and doctrinal affiliations, the canon, at present, is also an institution so formidable and entrenched that its biases and exclusions are routinely defended, even by novelists themselves.

Then, in appeal that modulates rapidly from women readers to women writers, and ultimately to a sense of consumption or reading as a version of *production*, Austen's narrator celebrates the novel's break from the established canons of taste on the basis of, among other things, the difference that such texts make: both in the minds of beleaguered female readers, who are able at last to read about themselves and their milieu, and in the more general conception of what literature is and what it does.

Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. From pride, ignorance, or fashion our foes are almost as many as our readers. And while the abilities of the nine-hundreth abridger the History of England, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from the Spectator, and a chapter from Sterne, are eulogized by a thousand pens, — there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labor of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them. 'I am no novel reader — I seldom look into novels — Do not imagine that I often read novels — It is really very well for a novel' — Such is the common cant. — 'And what are you reading Miss — ?' 'Oh! It is only a novel!' replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. — 'It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;' or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. Now had the same young lady been engaged with a volume of the Spectator, instead of such a work, how proudly would she have produced the book, and told its name; though the chances must be against her being occupied by any part of this voluminous publication, of which either the matter or manner would not disgust a young person of taste; the substance of its papers so often consisting in the statement

of improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversation, which no longer concern any one living; and their language, too, frequently so coarse as to give no favorable idea of the age that could endure it. (22)

This lengthy excursus, which has long been regarded as a foundational moment in feminist literary criticism, chiefly in its promotion of a "literature of their own," seems relatively unambiguous in its claims. Although one purpose of the digression is simply to counter the objections of critics and reviewers by reminding them that the novel is manifestly an enthusiasm shared by readers of both sexes, its main purpose would appear to be the promotion not only of women's writing, but of a version of women's writing that is largely realistic or "probable" in scope and allied thereby with an ideology of domesticity.

But there is clearly a problem in mounting such an argument. And it involves the schism between a legitimacy based on popularity, or on the range and degree of consumption, and a legitimacy based in ideology. That is, the solidarity forged by the institution of the novel, whose sudden respectability is confirmed by the proliferation of readers of both sexes, narrows in the narrator's polemic to an aggregation whose tastes and whose identity are sufficiently *restricted* to account for the novel's problems in the first place. Moreover, when one adds to this the narrator's insistence on the greater refinement of novels by and for women, a claim that virtually every literary movement or "modernity" from the late seventeenth century onward had waged on its own behalf, a fairly transparent defense of a particular kind of writing — exemplified in the productions of Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth — seems suddenly opaque and pitched, if only rhetorically, toward a discursive field more extensive than either domestic fiction per se or the conventionally male canon, whose particular improvements and refinements are (the *Spectator* notwithstanding) a basis for its current prestige and oppressive ubiquity.¹

If such circumlocution is necessarily preliminary to identifying this "discursive field" as "romantic," or on a continuum with a canonical break that the Romantics, more than any other of Austen's contemporaries, consistently claimed in their own defense, it is because there is no other way that Austen could possibly have indicated or would have wished to indicate that affiliation. For in the very way that the Romantics stand sufficiently on the other side of the gender divide to remain among the unnamable in the above polemic (and in Austen's writings generally), there would seem to be little point in extending the romantic imperative into precincts — most notably women's fiction — where the Romantics and their writing are ostensibly incongruous.

But if Austen's narrator has apparently avoided this particular incongruity, there are additional incongruities here that warrant attention, since they bear ultimately on the alliance that dare not speak its name. The first of these inconsistencies is the satire in *this novel* on novels in general, which range from the gothic — the fictional genre for which *Northanger Abbey* reserves its greatest criticism — to the present narrative, whose own heroine, although gently debunked as too-probable or pedestrian a figure for the purposes of readerly transport, never entirely shucks off a characterization meant to serve as a cudgel against "improbable" or sensationalistic fiction in general. Similarly, despite the narrator's effort to distinguish and demarcate the efforts of male and female writers to the benefit of the latter, it is unclear whether the narrator is also disparaging the "male" tradition as currently constituted, or whether that tradition and the ideologies it sustains are in any way contradicted by the particular authors, Burney and Edgeworth, whose works are presumably exemplary in their "knowledge of human nature" and in their responsiveness to its "varieties" and possibilities. Nor is it clear, given the increasingly overdetermined character of this passage, whether the binarisms here, predominantly those of men and women, are as firm or as determinate as they appear at first glance, or as they seem in retrospect to readers intent on identifying Austen's commitments and affiliations as a practitioner of domestic fiction: that what the narrator is striving for — to the degree that novels are clearly being read by both men and women — doesn't also amount to a hegemonic compact of sorts, uniting the initiatives and imperatives of a fairly specific order of male writing (Milton notwithstanding) with the embellishments and charm of a female sensibility.

It is the more the case, in fact, that the remarkable consensus linking men and women here, both as readers and as conservators of a cultural inheritance in which Burney or Pope each has a rightful place, cuts in two directions simultaneously: toward a legitimation of the current group of women writers based on their entitlement to inclusion in a canon, whose principal deficiency appears to be its failure to have made a place for them and for the novel to begin with; and toward a counter-consensus, in which the novel, far from according with canonical rule, would appear to contest the canon in the threat that the novel's particular catholicity, chiefly its responsiveness to the varieties of human nature, might well pose to a literary order that is also, needless to say, a political or doctrinal one. Or to put it another way: just as the narrator's defense of the novel imagines a more general, if conservative, consensus consisting of both men and women, readers and writers, this horizon simultaneously mimes and exposes yet another consensus, whose avowed break with the past, and with the hege-

mony likely to be sustained by the inclusion of women novelists, is contrastively progressive.

The Romantics, it must be emphasized, are not simply unnamed as adversaries in this passage; they are explicitly imitated rather than directly derogated. And this should give any literary historian pause. For short of declaring Wordsworth, or Coleridge, or Shelley the unacknowledged legislators of the narrator's polemic, it can be fairly asserted that the *author* of *Northanger Abbey* was sufficiently familiar with a "Romantic school" to know that she was appropriating its particular claim to modernity and to difference in allowing her narrator to digress in this fashion. Moreover, Austen knew enough to know that the literary establishments named in the narrator's polemic, both the one composed of writers of the "past century" and the projected establishment in which Burney and Edgeworth would be added to their ranks, stand on only one side of a divide separating a canonical hegemony (such as the narrator projects) and another grouping that, with the inclusion of certain women writers and certain novels, is more akin to what we would today call a counterhegemony.²

No one has of course argued that Austen and Burney are identical, and it would only belabor the obvious to claim that, at the level of craft and management of narration, Austen is a very different writer from the novelist whom she undoubtedly read with care and from whom she learned. Yet even so, it is one of the ironies of historical recovery that it is Austen rather than Burney who is generally credited (or as the case may be discredited) with having successfully served the aims of domestic ideology, along with fundamentally conservative or patriarchal ideology of which domesticity was a development.³ And it is Austen too who, in allegedly naturalizing these aims in representations of such authority and plausibility, is assumed not only to have furthered the cause of bourgeois hegemony in tracing and in promoting the evolution of the gentry into a professionalized middle class, but in so doing to have codified, if not wholly reinvented, the genre of classic or "realistic" fiction which became an armature in turn of the newly-constituted order.⁴ There are, to be sure, competing versions of Austen, most notably that of Johnson herself, that seek to recover a feminist or comparatively subversive current in her work. Nevertheless, it is the case now that such subversion or complaint often finds a less mediated expression in the writings of Burney, whose sprawling narratives, with their invariable attention to what Burney herself dubbed "female difficulties," are increasingly credited with having dramatized, far more directly and forcefully, the particular predicament of women and women writers in a patriarchal world.⁵

It is more than a little tempting, then, to credit the narrator in *Northanger Abbey* with sharing this proleptic insight so that the encomiums on behalf of Burney, which rest chiefly with the latter's putative depiction of things as they are, may be also part of a more generalized complaint against the hegemonic force of masculinist culture, literary and otherwise. Nevertheless, the defense of Burney, and of women's fiction generally, while nominally separatist in the narrator's digression, is consistent also with a claim for legitimation of which canonical judgments, past, passing and to come, are the ultimate measure. Furthermore, when one adds to this the fact that the gothic — the novelistic subgenre carrying the notion of "female difficulties" to an almost vertiginously sublime pitch — is deliberately excluded from what purports to be a defense of the novel generally, an altogether different picture begins to emerge: one in which the refinements of probabilistic fiction are complicit rather than at odds with the traditional order currently in place.

In reasserting the differences therefore between Austen and the female novelist who may well have been her most influential model, I am also stressing the peculiar continuity between Austen and her other contemporaries. I am underscoring, that is, the degree to which Austen's investment in an horizon of possibility rooted in the oppositional practices and productions of the everyday, must also eschew identity politics on behalf of a more democratic vista in which "female difficulties" are no less symptomatic of human and social difficulties. It may well have been Burney's purpose, as Catherine Gallagher has recently noted, to emphasize and to exploit the fact that women are chiefly "nobodies." But it is Austen's achievement, following the enlarged or counterhegemonic romanticism of which she is a part, to deconstruct the implicit binarism in Gallagher's formulation in consistently underscoring the degree to which nobodies are potentially sombodies and vice versa.

It is commonly agreed that the major and representative texts of British romanticism, ranging from *The Prelude* to *Don Juan*, are driven and informed by the prospect of a terrestrial paradise, specifically a wholesale renovation of human life and society in the here and now. But is this the only possibility on which romanticism opens? The answer, of course, is implied in the question, but it would be a mistake not to acknowledge the degree to which this answer has been impeded in most discussions of romanticism by a prospect that is for the most part biblically derived, or by the tradition, quite simply, to which romanticism is dialectically bound. Thus, a preliminary step in answering the question as I have framed it might well be to appreciate the degree to which romantic futurity, as customarily understood, is rather quickly foreclosed on by the teleology that

drives it, or by the sublime ends to which human life is in the end manifestly unequal. Only in the wake of this impasse, which is as much a problem for readers rightly oppressed by the weight of secularization in romantic texts, as it is more immediately for Coleridge in "Dejection: An Ode," does it seem plausible to consider romanticism as a movement in flux, whose incessant tendency to either contradiction or aporia, especially on matters of possibility and futurity, is paradoxically a sign of life. The disparity between ends and means in romantic teleology, between sublime expectations and the particular agents on whom they depend, is not simply a matter of hindsight; it is sufficiently a matter of foresight and sufficiently transparent to account for a reversal in which means and ends effectively merge and in which possibility, despite its teleological shape, is lodged less in a final solution than in an appreciation or understanding more akin to what Coleridge describes when he speculates on the "awakening" from "custom" that the "novelty" and "charm" of "things of everyday" can furnish.

Coleridge's observations are offered on behalf of the faculty of imagination, which he (along with his contemporaries) regarded as both an individual endowment and a universally shared faculty that, through the prompting of art, would lead to spiritual and social renewal. But while imagination succeeds on this view in empowering the subject to behold the world around him as if for the first time, the emphasis is on the subject rather than on the objects or other persons who are at best collateral beneficiaries of enhanced perception. It is also true that many of these objects are other subjects and similarly capable of the enfranchisement or transcendence that issues in this calculus from beholding the "everyday" in a new light. But this does not diminish the fact that the manifest appeals for imagination on the part of either Wordsworth or Coleridge are frequently individuated to the point, where, as Wordsworth gloriously predicts at *The Prelude's* close, "the mind of man becomes / A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells" (*Prelude* 13. 446-48).

To claim that predictions such as this one are consistent with the double-duty to both freedom *and* equality that characterizes the romantic ideology at its most ecumenical, would be tendentious. On the surface at least, any leveling or disruption of the more traditional order of hierarchies and correspondences is a secondary business in *The Prelude* and plainly ancillary to the focus on the individual and godlike mind. This is equally true of similar, if more modest, gestures in Wordsworth, for example the observation in "Tintern Abbey" regarding the mind that half perceives and half creates. Yet even conceding the bad faith that routinely invades the Wordsworthian myth of correspondences, what is necessarily subordinated in his various paeans to the enfranchised or liberal subject is never com-

pletely under containment. There remains in the transcendental arc of Wordsworth's argument something decidedly earth-bound and of this world that the poet cannot ignore. Beginning with the obvious fact that the "mind," however magnificent, is emphatically in "man" and in time, there is more importantly a sense that "beauty" and wonder are also prior to the beholder and, to revert to Coleridge's formulation (in what is, tellingly, his own assessment of Wordsworth's achievement in *Lyrical Ballads*), causative of an "awakening . . . from the lethargy of custom."

By no means, then, am I discounting the prestige that the imagination is consistently accorded in British romantic texts. I am simply noting a sense in which the transcendental arc of the romantic sublime is also a reaction-formation to certain aspects the "every day" — chiefly its possibility or "charm" — which require only the supplement of imagination for their peculiarly liberating effect. Very much like William Carlos Williams' red wheelbarrow, whose stunning materiality is irreducibly prior to and only secondarily the result of an imaginative intervention that is also, not surprisingly, recapitulated and thereby leveled in the act of reading, the romantic stance to the quotidian (including, as I have argued elsewhere, to things seen principally by the bodily eye) remains an inevitable and contestational counter-spirit within romanticism itself: a phenomenological residue that the more grandiose aspirations to autonomy and authority both invoke and leave behind.⁶ Thus, while romanticism constitutes an epochal or canonical break that, as its more severe readers have noted, underscores the inherently repetitive and paradoxically traditional conception of "modernity" as such,⁷ there abides within this predictable rupture another break or errancy that is a good deal less accountable and less susceptible to the kinds of hegemonic appropriations that the narrator of *Northanger Abbey*, no less than romanticism's most demanding critics in our time, are determined in one way or another to see negotiated. It is in *this recalci-trance* — or, following the digression in *Northanger Abbey*, in this resistance to a break that by definition minimizes both the antecedent elements on which romanticism depends and its ultimate legacy of possibility and melioration — that Austen becomes so important and representative a writer and so crucial to the conception of a "romantic century." For Austen's project, however circumscribed by discursive or disciplinary structures, or seemingly reduced to a routinized social landscape, remains in its vibrancy of detail demonstrably committed to horizons of possibility that are necessarily and productively hidden in plain sight.⁸

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Notes

1. For the tradition of "refinement" as a basis for modernity, with particular emphasis on the Romantics' self-legitimizing claims, see Griffin 64-87. See also Benedict 214-15, who stresses Austen's disapproval here of anthologizing practices that were (in contrast to earlier anthologies) pedagogical and disciplinary in scope and function.
2. The notion of counterhegemony as a fundamentally resistant coalition of seemingly disparate groups derives obviously from Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony and, more recently, from the extensions of Gramsci's thought on hegemony in collections such as *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. For Gramsci's own speculations on these issues as culled from his diaries, see Gramsci.
3. See Kaplan.
4. See Kelly 96-160.
5. See, most recently, Gallagher 203-56.
6. See Galperin.
7. See de Man 142-65.
8. My view of Austen's "romanticism" differs dramatically, then, from Nina Auerbach's comparatively undialectical conception of romantic writing and Austen's relationship to it. According to Auerbach, fiction of the romantic period is "the laughing denial of Romantic hopes for illumination" and transcendence in the poetry, so that "the prisons that pervade romantic fiction" and, by extension, the world of Austen's heroines are in the end "a mockery of life's promises and life's ultimate reality" (11) as opposed to a world that, regardless of its constraints, is simultaneously a site of possibility and thus a reminder that change, like politics, is irreducibly local. For Auerbach's treatment of Austen and romanticism, see Auerbach.

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