“Persuading the French to Read Jane Austen” – Professor C. Jon Delogu

A presentation to the Maine chapter of the Jane Austen Society of North America

April 29, 2017, Brunswick, Maine

It’s an honor to have the opportunity to speak to a group of Jane Austen specialists and enthusiasts during this bicentenary year of her death (1775-1817), and I want to thank you for placing your confidence in me. But since you don’t know me, this is no doubt an extension of the confidence you place in your long-time member and my friend, Karin Jackson, who invited me to attend my first meeting of your organization last fall. Thank you Karin.

I would like to dedicate these remarks to my daughter Rose, an avid reader but not yet a Janeite, who will be turning sixteen on May 11th. Besides some sportswear and postcards of the Chicago Thorne Rooms, my most important birthday present to Rose is a copy of *Mansfield Park* (1814) and also the book *Emotional Vampires: Dealing with People Who Drain You Dry* (2001, 2012) by Albert Bernstein. I think we all know that the heroine of *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price, is pale and physically weak throughout much of the novel because she has been preyed on by emotional vampires throughout her childhood and young adulthood. I will return later to Fanny’s courageous combat against these vampires and comment on Anne Elliot’s courageous pursuit of happiness in Austen’s posthumously published novel *Persuasion* (1818).

I have to call up my own courage now, not only because I am speaking to an audience that is, it’s safe to say, older and wiser than I am, but also because it includes one of my wise parents—Judy Delogu—and because I am myself a parent of not one but two children. Thankfully my father, Orlando Delogu, and son, Daniel Delogu, are not here though each exerts, *in absentia*, a heavy burden in his own way since, as we also know, *Mansfield Park* and

Persuasion are centrally concerned with absent parents, bad parenting, and bad choices made by poorly supervised children. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has had the feeling while reading Jane Austen of being simultaneously read *by* Jane Austen. Did my parents do a good job? Am I a good father? Have I made good choices? These are questions that might cross the mind of anyone who meets Mr. Bennet, Sir Walter Elliot, or Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. It's not far-fetched to say that Austen was writing parenting books long before that genre took on the prominence it has today, and she was offering her readers an opportunity to practice mindfulness and develop emotional intelligence long before those buzzwords and the activities they name spread like wildfire across North America, largely among people who, I dare say, have never read Jane Austen or any dead authors and maybe don't even like to read at all.

Here today I am preaching to the converted, but I live and work in France most of the time and persuading the French to read Jane Austen is no easy task. "Why is that?" you may wonder. After all, is not France still an enlightened "nation of readers"? Yes it is, says a 2015 study by the Centre National du Livre.[1] 9 out of 10 people have read a book in the past year, and, if this study is to be believed, the average French person reads 16 books a year—that's more than I read! However, the study also underlines that young people age 18-24 are reading less than their parents and grandparents, and only 40% of young people read for pleasure outside of school and class assignments. Jane Austen's novels are all available in French translation and have been for a long time, but it's safe to say that most French encounters with Austen today happen in university classrooms.

Classes that might teach Austen are of two kinds: either surveys of British literature or special cram courses in preparation for a French *concours*, usually the CAPES or the Agrégation.

[1] http://publishingperspectives.com/2015/03/study-reveals-the-relationship-between-the-french-and-reading/

A concours is a strenuous multi-day exam competition that functions as a job recruitment tool within the gigantic meritocracy of France's National Education system. The winners are given life-time employment as middle school or high school teachers. Some concours winners migrate to the university system or coach high school graduates enrolled in special *classes préparatoires* at the end of which students take other competitive exams to enter elite power schools called *grandes écoles*. A concours to become an English teacher typically features a selection of literary works and other topics in linguistics and the history of the English-speaking world. When it comes to popularity in the literature track, Jane Austen is tied for fourth place with Wordsworth. Each has appeared on the Agrégation program ten times since 1946—only Shakespeare, Milton, and Dickens have appeared more often. Over the years, I have taught concours classes on Emerson, Adam Ferguson, Ernest J. Gaines, and the *Federalist Papers*; but I've only taught Jane Austen in survey classes for second-year English majors. I had never read her before those experiences. I fell in love with Jane Austen in 1992 in the south of France— at the Université de Provence in Aix-en-Provence—and she has been one of my favorite authors ever since.

Of course there are a few other devoted Janeites in France and some are actually French. An informal survey I did reveals that these French readers of Austen generally admire her style and wit; and while some consider her writing to be particularly British, one respondent said, "Maybe it seems typically Anglo-Saxon at first, but if you go deeper you realize that [the novels] depict universal problems." So here is the challenge when it comes to teaching Jane Austen, especially in France: should one put the emphasis on its specifically British style and wit—in other words on formal features that can be inventoried more or less completely by students under exam conditions, or should one explore those "universal problems" no matter where the discussion may lead or how disjointed and self-reflexive it may become? Keep in mind that

concours judges must give numerical grades to tightly organized, argument-driven textual commentaries and oral presentations on a given Jane Austen passage or theme. Therefore, formalist approaches—especially narratology where the boundary line between object of study (outside over there) and student (here and now) is clear and unquestioned—tend to win out over more open-ended thematic criticism or rhetorical readings that may examine those "universal problems" but come to no conclusive, knock-down argument about them, precisely because they *are* problems that present real questions, dilemmas, enigmas, and a deconstructed uncertain border between text and reader.

In the stressful, high-stakes concours context, a long, quiet, cerebral novel such as *Mansfield Park* or the shorter but still meditative *Persuasion* can be particularly challenging to teach. These books are not "sparkling" like *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma*, and wit and style even come in for moral censure since those are the qualities of the vampire-like narcissists and tricksters that Fanny Price and Anne Elliot must stoically put up with or actively resist if they are to survive and stay true to themselves. It is not impossible but nevertheless a more challenging task to get readers interested in the making and strengthening of the moral compass of these young women. However, I have found this philosophical close reading to be far more rewarding than merely compiling inventories of stylistic features. The best formalist readings can and do join up with the best thematic criticism, but in my experience this is a rare occurrence and if forced to choose, I would rather re-read what Lionel Trilling or Tony Tanner has to say about *Mansfield Park* than spend too much time with the tidy, clever explications of the narratologists. What I fear is that the concours system, which rewards measurable efficiency and clarity, ultimately does a disservice to Jane Austen's novels. One can be thankful to the concours organizers for programming her novels so often, since that material, utilitarian exploitation is no

doubt responsible (along with film adaptations) for preventing her work from having been purely and simply forgotten in this age of Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. I'm just worried that Jane winds up being "ill-used" because her novels are maybe being turned to for the wrong reasons.

A second-year British literature survey class is a more promising setting to get students interested in Jane Austen's moral fiction.[2] Many of those students have the language skills to read Jane Austen fairly comfortably and they tend to be more open to different approaches than their upper-level classmates. Generally, second-year students are not yet thinking about the concours and most will never take one because they have no intention of becoming teachers, and therefore they don't see the need to judge and rank different critical approaches but are content to let them peacefully coexist much as they do within the covers of the many books in the MLA's *Approaches to Teaching* series, which now includes a volume devoted to *Mansfield Park*.[3] So how do I go about persuading French students to read and enjoy Jane Austen?

A good first step is to deploy flattery and establish familiarity. Students can readily agree that Jane Austen's life (1775-1817) spans the revolutionary period of America's War of Independence (1776-1781), the French Revolution (1789-1799), and the reign of Napoleon (1799-1815). I get knowing nods when I point out that Jane Austen, like Wordsworth and Rousseau, is one of the great witnesses to the struggle between a centuries-old Aristocratic paradigm (based on birthright, birth order, and rent) and a new Democratic paradigm (based on the novel idea of universal human rights, the exercise of individual talents, and Hamiltonian chutzpah). It's also easy to recall that in Austin's day the Classical Doctrine with its supreme

[2] Although he makes no mention of Jane Austen, I am sympathetic to the argument put forward in John Gardner's *Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978)—an against the grain reminder of why literature matters written in the heyday of North American narratology and experimental technical virtuosity in the novel and short story.
[3] Thank you to Karin Jackson for bringing this recent addition to my attention. *Approaches to Teaching Austen's* Mansfield Park, eds. Marcia McClintock Folsom and John Wiltshire, New York: Modern Language Association, 2014. There are also volumes in the series devoted to *Pride and Prejudice* (1993) and *Emma* (2004).

valorization of reason, clarity, order, and rules receives a multitude of challenges, in poetry and prose, from the undocile and restless Romantic movement. Students can also be relied on to remember that the year 1800 is roughly the turning point between a land-based agrarian economy and an urban, industrial, capitalist society. Austen is often using London and Bath as the hangouts of modern city mice, and places like Mansfield Park and Kellynch Hall are the homes of tradition-conscious country mice. And just like in the fable, sparks fly when city mice, such as Mary and Henry Crawford, move to the country or when country mice go to town. All this is clear and knowable, and therefore highly teachable.

My next step is to disrupt some of my students' uncritical assumptions about progress and the march of history. I point out that their national hero Napoleon is viewed by many as an opportunistic, ruthless tyrant "destitute of generous sentiments," as Emerson convincingly argues in *Representative Men* (1850). I also point out that the French Revolution—a bloody, terror-filled decade (1789-1799) that French schoolchildren are generally taught to consider as one of the great accomplishments of French genius that establishes the grandeur of France as a leader of Western civilization—is considered by many (not just Burke and Dickens and their own countryman Tocqueville) as a colossal failure which cements in place centrally controlled authoritarian tendencies that serially reemerge in tyrannical regimes from Napoleon, to the constitutional monarchies of the Restoration, to Napoleon III to the Christian-military-state of Vichy, to the "monarchical presidency" of Charles De Gaulle, and so on down to today's republican oligarchy of elderly white men who have mostly all attended the same elite power schools and know how to keep women, minorities, and outsiders in their place.

Challenging my students' narratives of progress and exposing the hairy underbelly of democratic movements of alleged emancipation and individual self-realization generally grabs

their attention and sets the stage, so to speak, for asking probing questions. For example, why does Jane Austen have Fanny Price stand so adamantly opposed to the amateur theatricals proposed by her cousin Tom Bertram and his visiting friend Mr. Yates? “I could not act anything if you were to give me the world. No indeed, I cannot act,” says Fanny. I point out that because she’s writing in English, Jane Austen has the capacity to constantly play off of the two main meanings of the verb *act*—*to do* and *to play* or *pretend*—for which French must use different verbs, namely *agir* and *jouer*. Austen’s narrator does not lecture the reader about what’s so very wrong about the amateur theatricals, nor does any character, young or old, spell it out. The adult most capable of seeing and stating the impropriety of aristocrats acting is Sir Thomas, and he is away on a business trip in Antigua—itself a dangerous because transgressive action. It would have been more proper for him to stay at home and delegate those actions to some servant who would act on his behalf and carry out his orders. In the absence of any guidance, the reader, like the characters themselves, is left to figure out on her own what’s wrong with acting. The answer is everything and nothing—*everything* if one is adopting the aristocratic world view that considers each and every animal, vegetable, and mineral to eternally occupy its immutable place within a great chain of being; *nothing* if one adopts the democratic world view that considers change, force, and movement to be the basic laws of nature and therefore puts the accent not on *being* but on *becoming*. This double-vision—being versus becoming—is perhaps in sharpest focus with Edmund who plans to become a clergyman, and who, in order, he says, to prevent outsiders in the neighborhood from being recruited to join the play, agrees to play the role of Anhalt, also a clergyman, though he professes to be opposed to the whole business. Thus, under cover of defending the family’s honor, Edmund gets to play love scenes opposite the sparkling Mary Crawford (playing a Baron’s daughter, Amelia, who wishes to marry her tutor, Anhalt).

The appendix in the Oxford World's Classics edition that summarizes the cast and plot of Kotzebue's *Das Kind der Liebe* adapted in English as *Lovers' Vows* (1798) is invaluable for keeping the network of intertexts and contaminations clear. The editor's remark, "This is type-casting with a vengeance," sums it up well—but to see exactly how and why requires mental dexterity and concentration. Fanny might be called a stick in the mud for refusing to act, but she is hardly a prig since she doesn't lecture anyone else about the impropriety of acting.[4] And she's not completely resistant since she agrees to go along with helping the others rehearse their lines and she is even on the verge of subbing for Mrs. Grant in the role of Cottager's Wife when Sir Thomas suddenly returns and the whole risky theater experiment is abruptly abandoned.

Fanny's ostensible resistance to acting also shows signs of collapsing when we see the enthusiasm she has for Crawford's reading aloud from *Henry VIII*, another play, and later when she is in Portsmouth and beginning to let herself believe that Crawford may be capable of changing for the better and therefore worthy of being given a second chance and receiving her affection. This act of revising one's estimation of someone's character, including one's own, is of course central to the plot of *Persuasion* where Anne Elliot at seven and twenty is clearly not the same person she was at nineteen. The same is true for Catherine Morland, Emma Woodhouse, Tom Bertram, and many other Austen characters whose suffering (usually due to some loss) leads each to think twice and thereby become less deluded.

At the end of *Mansfield Park,* it can look as though intelligence, virtue, and kindness are rewarded and careless, selfish behavior is punished. The narrator's summary account of the fate of each character certainly points in that morally satisfying direction. However, I like to point out

[4] Dictionary.com defines a prig as "a person who displays or demands of others pointlessly precise conformity, fussiness about trivialities, or exaggerated propriety, especially in a self-righteous or irritating manner."

to students the odd emergence of that first-person pronoun "I" at the beginning of the last chapter:

> "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.
>
> "My Fanny indeed at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of every thing."

Whether we take this to be Austen's storytelling narrator or Austen herself, these three instances of *I*—and there are other such eruptions on occasion in the other novels—foreground the fictional stage that we have been observing all this time. This stress on the constructedness of it all allows one to come to one's senses just in case one was beginning to mistake the novel for life itself. This is usually when it's important with students to remind them that it could have been otherwise—Jane Austen could have written a different beginning, middle, or ending (had Fanny marry Henry Crawford, for example)—and in life things often do turn out differently. It happens that virtue is not rewarded, hard work can be poorly paid if it's paid for at all, bad-parenting may not be called out or improved, and children may make bad choices and get sick and sicker instead of recovering, learning from mistakes, and so on. In other words, if the end of *Mansfield Park* sounds too good to be true, perhaps it's because it is. That's why they call it fiction.

And yet it's hard to keep in mind the randomness of history and how in life most things make good stories precisely to the extent that they are unplotted and unplottable. Austen knew that we make plots out of stories—providing cause and effect linkages where there may have

been only a random succession of events—afterward, looking back with hindsight as Anne Elliot does to make sense of her life as she approaches thirty.

It's hard to tell the difference sometimes between fooling ourselves and sincerely changing our minds. Look how Anne can sincerely say near the beginning of *Persuasion* (volume 1, chapter 4) that "she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement" to Wentworth—the man she breaks with at age nineteen on the advice of Lady Russell; whereas in the next to last chapter (volume 2, chapter 12), she seems to have persuaded herself that the opposite would have been the case: "I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement." So would she have suffered more or less? Was Lady Russell's advice good or bad? Obviously there's no way of knowing for sure. Jane Austen has her heroine become deeply philosophical in this frank confession to her future husband. The key paragraph begins, "I have been thinking over the past…." Among other wise declarations Anne says of Lady Russell's advice, "It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides." In other words, if Wentworth had not been "made" to use the term used to describe Fanny's brother's promotion within the navy hierarchy, or if Wentworth had been killed at sea and could never return to the Kellynch Hall neighborhood, then there would have been no reason to doubt the wisdom of Lady Russell's recommendation that Anne break off the engagement. How unsettling, if true, that all advice about momentous matters is essentially worthless or its worth is entirely subject to change depending on subsequent events. But neither Anne nor Fanny are going to allow themselves to be unsettled by that uncertainty. Each heroine's trust in the man she loves reflects and reinforces their trust in the order of nature—"Here's harmony! [says Fanny] Here's repose! … Here's what may tranquilize every care, and lift the heart to rapture." In a similar submission to the sublimity of Nature, Anne Elliot admires the hills around Kellynch

Hall and Uppercross as well as looking out to sea on the Cobb at Lyme. Both women have human guides early on—Lady Russell for Anne, Edmund for Fanny—but ultimately they trust in, “a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be,” says Fanny. Of course it takes an instance of failure or betrayal of that outer guide before one can begin to attend to that better guide in ourselves. This is why in Emerson’s famous essay “Self-Reliance,” he specifies that “*There is a time*”—without saying exactly when that time is—“in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through this toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till.” The stories of Fanny and Anne are stories of arriving—through freewill and fate—at that time of independence which is also, it needs to be stressed, also a surrendering to and joining with a higher power, what Wordsworth calls, inspired by Tintern Abbey—an engraving of which hangs in Fanny’s room—“a sense sublime… that… rolls through all things.” It is entirely fitting that Fanny becomes the Edmund-like guide to her younger sister Susan who is going to benefit from the same healthy surroundings at Mansfield Park that do so much for Fanny’s body and mind. And while it may strike us as odd that she should form a union with her first cousin, it is entirely proper to have Fanny be a clergyman’s wife just as it is for Anne to become a sea captain’s wife. This is about as good as it gets in Austen’s day, alas.

You can see, I think, even if you are not French, that such musings as I’ve indulged in here are more suitable for a leisurely sophomore year British lit survey than for the high-stakes concours context that has little time or tolerance for the interrogative mode much less the sublime and the beautiful. That’s why it’s an uphill battle to persuade the French to read Jane

Austen: younger students are not always able to follow along because of language deficiencies, and older students are often unwilling because they have their eyes on a big prize and are too impatient, like the Bertram and Crawford children, to be "out."

So now, depending on whether you've been happy or suffering for these last thirty minutes, you can praise or blame Karin Jackson for persuading Barbara Briggs to invite me to speak to you today. Whatever the case may be, I sincerely thank you for your attention, and I thank again Ms. Briggs and Ms. Jackson for giving me this opportunity.

I'm ready for questions and comments.