**Ruth Wilson**

**Milestones in a Reading Life:**

**Jane Austen and Lessons in Reading, Learning and the Imagination**

Department of English

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

The University of Sydney

A thesis submitted to fulfil requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

# STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Signature: Ruth Wilson

Name: Ruth Wilson

# ABSTRACT

The central question of this thesis asks how reading Austen’s fiction might be of value to student-readers in the twenty-first century. A supplementary question asks how reading practices affect the pleasure and usefulness of the reading experience. The inquiry seeks evidence and insights in a contemporary appraisal of Jane Austen’s fiction which has appeared on school reading lists for over a century. The study thus addresses the neglected nexus between reading fiction and reading pedagogy.

The uses of memory as a cultural trope and as an analytical tool are integral to the critical analysis of three of Austen’s novels. Framed in a personal reading memoir the study foregrounds the pedagogical potential of profoundly personal literary responses, congruent with historical reader-response theories and contemporary thinking about reading outside the parameters of modernist and postmodernist theoretical positions. A form of ‘expressive’ methodology accommodates reading memories, critical scholarship and close reading of literary texts as elements in the hermeneutic circle.

The thesis attends to the development of the imagination in a variety of forms: literary, ethical and social, and the roles they might play in navigating the challenges of adult life in a democratic society. I discuss a reading pedagogy that facilitates higher order thinking and consider ideas about reading in postcritical studies, postulating new possibilities for experiencing reading pleasure in classroom spaces. Most significantly I experiment with the potential of reading memoirs for developing an alternative pedagogical model that facilitates discoveries about the self and others, and might serve as a preparation for the existential challenges of adult life in the twenty-first century.

An *Appendix* provides a frame of reference for evaluating the role of reading practices in advancing the goals articulated in the senior secondary English syllabus in New South Wales. The study reviews literature associated with the synergy between learning to read and reading to learn, to provide a theoretical context for considering the continuing cultural and educational significance of reading imaginative fiction. A review of key ideas in Austen Studies traces the path by which this novelist arrived at her privileged position as a curriculum stalwart.

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# COMPLIMENTS AND CIVILITIES

I use the language of Jane Austen to frame my acknowledgement of debts incurred: first to Jane Austen, the writer whose novels have played a primary role in establishing reading as a mainstay of my emotional and intellectual wellbeing. In my latter years it has been challenging and rewarding to pursue a lifelong wish to understand how and why reading, especially reading Jane Austen’s fiction, has contributed such pleasure to my life.

In the process I have discovered the importance of institutions: the country school that I attended from infancy to matriculation and the University of Sydney where I made life-long friendships with books and fellow-students, attended lectures in small and large lecture spaces, trod the boards of various performance venues, and was introduced to my future husband in the University quadrangle. While acknowledging the ambivalent side of institutional discourse I am forever grateful to the women and men, some of them mentioned by name in the thesis, whose humanity enlivened those institutions and gifted me with curiosity about the pleasures of reading.

I am equally indebted to a number of scholars whose encouragement has contributed to the successful completion of the present study. Returning to my alma mater in the early eighties to study for a Diploma of Education I was introduced to the complexities of curriculum and its values by a truly great teacher, Dr David Smith. Professor Roslyn Arnold inspired my interest in reading pedagogy at that time. More recently she nourished my embryonic ideas about Jane Austen and empathy with her humanity, wisdom, knowledge and experience, and strengthened my resolve to proceed with the project, by affirming its value in the face of difficulties.

My thanks are due to Professor Robin Ewing whose gracious reception opened the doors to my doctoral candidature. I thank Professor Jacqueline Manuel for sharing her expertise on English curriculum and accompanying me on the first stretch of this journey. Dr Olivia Murphy has my continuing gratitude for guiding me sympathetically into twenty-first century thinking about fiction and Jane Austen. She demonstrated her generosity of spirit as an auxiliary supervisor well and truly beyond the call of duty. Finally, I search for words to convey the extent and nature of the contribution made by my primary supervisor, Associate Professor Rebecca Johinke, to the completion of the thesis. She enlarged my faith in the human capacity to empathise. Restoring my aspirations by re-affirming the value of the project, she worked with my dream to find a methodology to match my interest in reading pedagogy. She will know the nature of the compliment, as will readers of the thesis, when I say that she has been a second ‘Miss Brain’ in my life.

My membership of the Jane Austen Society has brought me friends and colleagues. Susannah Fullerton, President of the Australian Jane Austen Society, has been gracious with her support for my project and in sharing her encyclopaedic knowledge of Jane Austen. Joanna Penglase, another Jane Austen Society stalwart, has become a good friend and constant source of support throughout the entire process. She has been overwhelmingly generous in putting her editorial expertise at my disposal. Our engaging conversations about literature and life are rewarding and leave me, like Oliver Twist, always ready for more. From my small but dear group of friends I have received heart-warming support throughout a lengthy obsession; to them, especially to Elsie and Sam, I say thank you for your many words of encouragement.

Compliments and civilities are due to members of my family. They have bolstered my spirits with affectionate good will. My granddaughters initiated me into technological mysteries: Jessica explained lucidly how to access data electronically and read many chapter drafts; Kate demonstrated expertly how to do in an hour what it might have taken me two days to accomplish; my grandsons Nataniel and Asher never fail to compliment me on being a grandmother with a project.

I have tested theories and hunches about the dispositions and behaviour of Austen’s heroines on the professional judgement of my daughter Olivia. Her experience as a psychotherapist provided correctives when required and affirmations when warranted. From my daughter Laura, an artist turned primary school teacher, I received fortifying insights from inside the contemporary classroom, about learning to read and reading to learn. With both, I have had engaging and stimulating conversations about reading, meaning, conduct and the imagination.

My oldest daughter Julia and my patient husband David have, between them, made it possible for me to reach the end of the journey. Julia’s understanding of the PhD thesis process, her extraordinary energy and her ability to organise and manage time and data got me over a major hurdle. Her agile mind and natural aptitude helped to restore my confidence and enabled me to carry on with renewed enthusiasm. With David, to quote Jane Austen, ‘the pleasures of friendship, of unreserved conversation, of similarity of taste and opinions’ have been navigated, negotiated and adjusted over the sixty-six years of our relationship. They have been supplemented in recent years by his unfailing good will and backed up by welcome culinary services. Such pleasures make ‘good amends’ for our differences of opinion including the disparity between the quantitative methodology he adopted for his own doctoral research and the expressive and qualitative research orientation I have followed in the present study.

# PREFACE

I have tried that book for years … and I have found it my friend in need in all the necessities of this mortal life. When my spirits are bad – ‘Robinson Crusoe’. When I want advice – ‘Robinson Crusoe’... I have worn out six stout ‘Robinson Crusoes’ with hard work in my service. On my lady’s last birthday she gave me a seventh. I took a drop too much on the strength of it; and ‘Robinson Crusoe’ put me right again. Price four shillings and sixpence, bound in blue, with a picture into the bargain (‘*The Moonstone*’, 1868/1999, 16).

Gabriel Betteredge, one of the narrators of Wilkie Collins’s thriller, *The Moonstone*, describes his favourite book as his ‘friend in need’. He applauds the value of a particular story to meet the need of any and every ‘mortal’ moment. Most readers have their personal equivalents of *Robinson Crusoe*. Chief among mine are Jane Austen’s novels, all six of them. I am not alone. On the third Saturday of every second month I join a room full of enthusiastic Austen re-readers to hear an Austen ‘talk’— about her life, her times, a new perspective on an aspect of her writing, sometimes personal, sometimes scholarly. In books and in the pages of journals the scholarship abounds. Austen’s ‘critical heritage’ (Southam, 1968, 1987/2009) is a record of the diversity of needs fulfilled for a diversity of readers. It includes the exhilaration of reading and re-reading for ‘periods of pleasure repeated’ (Farrer, 1917, 266). In the ‘popular imagination’, appreciation of Austen’s fiction is ‘exceptionally wide and varied’ as it reflects the different ways in which readers continue to find value in the novels for ‘personal rather than professional reasons’ (Wells, 2011/2013, 64).

In my personal reading life, *Pride and Prejudice* was the first read of her novels*.* The year was 1947, and thecloud of the Second World War that had hung over my childhood was becoming just a memory. It was all opportunity and optimism in the wider world that beckoned us from the English classroom. Here, we were encouraged to think about *what* we were reading, although not, as yet, about *why*. My class was well into the Shakespearean text, *As You Like It*, with which I was already familiar thanks to an earlier classroom episode,when the film *Pride and Prejudice* (Leonard, 1940) arrived at last at our local picture show, the Lyceum.

My film-addicted parents had a passion for the film stars, Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier, so we sat through two viewings. I doubt that they (my parents) could have guessed my thoughts as I considered whether my mother wasn’t just a little like Mrs Bennet; and my father, well one could only wonder at how fictional characters could be so familiar. I wondered too how my parents perceived me in their minds: if they imagined me as any of the five daughters, I would have liked it to be Lizzy or perhaps Jane; although neither was likely, I really hoped it was *not* Mary.

As we were discussing our Shakespearean text in class, I made my first tentative foray into intertextuality. I raised my hand, as one did in 1940s classrooms, and spoke up to compare Rosalind’s high spirits with those of Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of the film. It had not occurred to me that I might find the heroine I had seen on the screen in the pages of a book. Mr Connor, our English teacher, was both empathetic and pedagogically wise. He sensed my curiosity and suggested that we should add the novel on which the film was based to our class reading list. I visited the library at lunchtime to make a start.

Modest by today’s standards, our school library was no more than an ordinary classroom with cupboards filled with books on three of the walls. I found the single copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and sat at a desk to read.Not even Shakespeare had prepared me for the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice.* Like multitudes of readers before and after me,I read it several times. I heard it in my head. This was language, prose language, used as I had never known it:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. (Austen, 1813/2006a, 3).

Later, at home, I read the sentence aloud. I savoured the sound, the subtle insertion of the noun clause that I recognised from our weekly drill in ‘parsing and analysis’, the balance of the phrases, the precision of the words. I could not grasp the meaning yet, but I was curious. I wondered *who* was so sure that men *must* find wives, or indeed, marry at all. I was a teenage girl in the 1940s; thoughts and images of marriage abounded in magazines and conversations. Like Lewis Carroll’s, Alice, a well-loved fictional friend, I grew ‘curiouser and curiouser’. I recalled the question debated by Alice and the March Hare. Is saying what you mean, I asked myself, the same as meaning what you say?

In discovering the language of Jane Austen’s fiction, I discovered what would become a lifelong passion. I could already anticipate the hours of reading enchantment, leaping headlong into worlds totally unlike my own and yet somehow, somewhere, in some odd way, strangely familiar. I knew even then that the language in which the stories were told would attract and challenge me as much as the plots and the characters. Trying to understand the nature as well as the mechanics of ‘well-written’ fiction became the transforming preoccupation of my lifetime.

Two years later I had a second watershed experience. Again it involved Jane Austen, but now I had graduated from *what* the novel was about to *why* it was worth reading. Having matriculated from my country high school, I was enrolled in English 1 at the University of Sydney. Several hundred of us were crammed into the Wallace Theatre, one of the largest lecture theatres on campus. We were a disparate lot: girls and boys just out of high school together with the final intake of ex-servicemen who were taking up the offer of a university education as recompense for their war service.

We were addressed by Miss Herring, the Austen specialist on the English Faculty. Jane Austen would have approved of the lecturer’s literary largesse since it extended to an embrace of Emma Woodhouse, eponymous heroine of the novel *Emma* (Austen, 2005a), foibles and all. There was no PowerPoint presentation in that pre-digital era, but the lecturer projected Emma into our imaginations with her carefully chosen words. She described a girl rich and materially indulged, sometimes funny and often rather silly, whose world was unfamiliar to us in almost every detail, except that it was inhabited by fellow human beings whose feelings and behaviour were uncannily similar to our own.

Thelma Herring focused on the mood of the times. She talked about the concept of war and the quest for peace as metaphors for the inner struggles of human beings and the rewards of inner peace and self-knowledge. She explained how, in literature, serious matters can be dealt with in comic ways. Language is the clue to understanding, she told us. She read another beautifully constructed first sentence:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her (Austen, 1816/2005a, 3).

She read it twice, first accenting the word ‘unite’, then the word ‘seemed’. We considered the use of the subjunctive mood. One word could make all the difference, cast the shadow of doubt over certainty; impose the weight of gravity on the lightest spirit. To tell nothing and to show everything, that seemed to be a key to unlock the secret of Austen’s genius.

As I developed friendships with other students of all ages in our tutorials, I discovered that literature classrooms could function as social spaces in which the sharing of thoughts and ideas enriched my understanding of texts *and* my personal relationships. We bonded with *Emma* and with each other. In these spaces, scattered around the campus, the study of a complex literary text gradually took shape as a shared social experience. It amplified empathic attunement as well as developing literary skills as Emma’s flow of thoughts filtered into our collective consciousness. Initial impatience with her wiles and wilfulness vanished in a wave of shared curiosity. We too shifted, from the will to judge to the willingness to understand the limited choices available to a young woman, even with Emma’s social status, in Jane Austen’s lifetime. We were no longer a disparate group, but a fellowship drawn together by our interest in Emma the girl, in *Emma*, the novel, and unexpectedly, in each other. It was an experience that transformed my view of reading as a process of meaning-making within the framework of social interaction (cf. Doecke & Mead, 2018, 251; Cole et al., 1978) that would profoundly influence my practice as a teacher.

Later in my professional career my view of teaching and learning was enriched by a third transformative experience, imagining myself a world away from Austen’s English villages, in war-torn Europe during the Second World War. The focus of my professional life had shifted from the English classroom to the design and implementation of intergenerational oral history projects. I was interested in the role of oral history as a medium for meaningful communication between the generations. In 1992 I designed and coordinated an integrated learning experience about the Holocaust. It was conducted, in the context of the subject History and the topic of the Second World War, as a joint project across three schools. Classes of Year 10 students were introduced to the principles and protocols of oral history by an oral history specialist. The students then collaborated in small groups. Each group interviewed one of the ‘living historians’ who had agreed to share with the students their personal childhood experiences as they were caught in the grip of war in Europe.

Preparation for the program was rigorous. Students were encouraged to express and explore their expectations before the interactions took place. These were the early days of collecting Holocaust memories, so ‘child survivors’ received support: they engaged in exploratory discussions facilitated by teachers, psychologists and spiritual counsellors. In the intervals between interview sessions, students collaborated in their small groups to review and organise material and plan future research and interview questions. I observed the progress of the interactions over six weeks. The excitement emanating from both generational groups as their relationships developed was palpable. I observed the emotional mood shift from diffidence, uncertainty, and a degree of anxiety, to pleasure, anticipation and mutual respect. After the final interview, students spent several lessons in preparing their written biographies and designing oral presentations around their personal reflections.

When I first met with the child survivors to explain the nature and purpose of the project, I asked them to consider the outcome they would most like to achieve as a reflection of the shared experiences. The consensus was that their personal stories should be made available to a wider audience of young people in their classrooms, so that they too could understand the consequences of prejudice against, and hatred of, ‘difference’. In order to honour this wish, I developed the project material into a multimedia teaching package (Wilson, 1995)*.* Comprising a combination of written, audio and visual texts, this generic teaching resource draws attention to ‘the central role of empathy in the learning and teaching of history’ (Young, 1995, 95). The material, in intent and content, addresses issues relating to intolerance and enables teachers to bring to life, in their classrooms, the experiences of child survivors.

A video recording of the students’ oral presentations to the women and men they interviewed displays the warmth of the interactions. It is clear from the expressions of appreciation that the relationships were intimate and affectionate. The group of students who interviewed the survivor called Leon, for example, presented him with a square, wooden box: one of the group stepped forward to address the audience of fellow students and families of participating students and living historians:

This is a silk-lined box. It represents the smoothness of Leon’s life at the end of a long, rough journey.

Each student in turn then took an object from the box and explained its significance: a pen standing for the writing down of Leon’s story for future generations; a piece of barbed wire as a reminder of the sharpness of his memories and the untangling of his ties with the ghetto; a coin to represent the wealth of his memories; a single tissue to stand as truth that ‘Leon’s tears and ours are not wasted’; a peace sign to represent Leon’s greatest hope for humanity; and finally the figurine of an angel to symbolise Leon’s belief that he had been ‘watched over’. The last student closed the box and handed it to Leon, stooped, silver-haired, a smile on his face and eyes brimming with tears:

The rest is space for you to add other cherished treasures and dreams.

During the presentation evening I witnessed a number of similarly moving presentations. Each group expressed joy and a sense of achievement. Teachers confirmed my impression that their students’ performances, both cognitively and affectively, were qualitatively different from and superior to their usual delivery. In a third transformational moment, I hypothesised that the joy of the relationship the students developed with their living historians spilled over into their relationship with the learning experience as a whole. It struck me that there was an aesthetic dimension within the structured interaction that prompted the students to open their feelings to their thoughts, and enabled the faculties of thought and feeling to nourish each other.

These transforming moments in my life have a common thread that unites feeling with learning. First, a schoolgirl discovers that she loves literature by responding to the beauty and complexity of language; second, members of a diverse group of older students discover a common bond in their shared exploration of a novel. As a reader and student of literature I discovered that Jane Austen’s fiction has provided pleasure and illuminated the human condition for many generations of readers. Finally, fifty teenage students show me how learning is enhanced when empathy knocks on the classroom door.

#

# CHAPTER ONE

#  READING IMAGINATIVE FICTION: TIME WELL SPENT?

“Oh! It is only a novel!” replies the young lady … 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 greatest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language (Austen, 1818/2006b, 31).

… many of the most valuable things we know come from literature we have read. If we read well we find ourselves in a conversational relationship with the most creative minds of our own time and of the past. Time spent reading literature is *time well spent* (Sutherland, J., 2013, p. 2; emphasis added).

### Rationale

Jane Austen’s novels provided me with a foundation on which to build a lifetime of reading pleasure. The genesis of my attachment can be traced to an empathic English teacher and a classroom that functioned as a social space intended to support ‘the kind of reading and response that literary works require’ (Doecke & Mead, 2018, 258). The enduring presence of Jane Austen’s fiction on reading lists in Australian classrooms has given it a status almost equal to Shakespeare’s in the history of the English subject. However, although commitment to the value of literature and the pleasures of reading have persisted, the purpose and role of reading have been affected by the mercurial nature of the subject and its own commitment to serve the ‘needs and purposes’ of English education in each ‘here and now’ (Dolin, Jones & Dowsett, 2017b, 11). The conditional nature of reading and reading practices is reflected in the language of the educational rhetoric as it has responded to cultural and sociological changes throughout the 20th century and into the recent present (see *Appendix*). Close examination reveals that the needs and purposes reflected in the optimism of early curriculum documents are a worldview away from the standards- and outcomes-based goals that drive educational policies in the present historical moment.

In Australia there was a determination to install modern literature at both the primary and secondary levels (Patterson, 2000, 242). Over time, definitions of literature have broadened, the authority of a literary canon has been challenged, and the ways in which language and meaning are understood have changed significantly. The good intentions of liberal theories about the pedagogy of child centeredness and the cultural value of literature for all students have been challenged by the focus on educational ideology and the currency of ideas about educational optimism as a more radical pedagogy in educational discourse (cf. Giroux, 1997, 119–146).

In light of these shifts in cultural and pedagogical discourses, my personal reading experiences of pleasure, profit and imaginative enhancement throughout my lifetime have been catalysts for conducting a contemporary appraisal of Austen’s fiction. The continuing presence of ‘everybody’s dear Jane’ (James, 1905, 230; cf. Wells, 2011/2013) in contemporary culture and on senior secondary syllabus prescribed reading lists (NESA, 2017b, 19) gestures to the continuing value of Jane Austen as cultural capital, and provides an additional reason to ask the following research question: How is reading Jane Austen’s novels of continuing value to student-readers? The formulation of this question is in itself an acknowledgement of the ‘many implications for teaching and learning’ at a time dominated by the ‘onrush of technology’ (Manuel, Brock, Carter, & Sawyer, 2009, 7). As the traditional defence of the humanities grounded in 18th century notions about an aesthetic and civilising education constructed around literature is challenged, it becomes increasingly important to consider how reading Austen’s fiction might contribute to the educational ideal of intellectual inquiry as an acknowledgement that ‘serious literature has things to teach us’ and ‘represents something more substantial and important than a mere idle diversion’ (Leys, 2020, 5). The study explores ideas about how a basic ambiguity that ‘defines the humanities’ (5) is reflected in the fictional representation of lived experience.

### Curricular context

From its emergence as a subject in the twentieth century, English was regarded as ‘something more than mere literacy’. Peter Board, ‘the first official Director General of education in New South Wales’ (Patterson, 2000, 242), put in place the ‘first episode’ in the history of reading pedagogy (Green, Cormack & Patterson, 2013, 329). He recognised that ‘something more than mere literacy’ was required to make public education ‘serve the national purpose’ and contribute to pupils’ ‘ultimate equipment for life’ (Board, 1932, 80, cited by Green, 1999, 402). The concept of reading here (New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 1911) predates but is congruent with the concept in the foundational curriculum document in Great Britain. The Newbolt Report (1921) projects a ‘view of “Literature” writ large’ (Green, Cormack & Patterson, 2013, 334) in which reading is ‘not a mechanical process but a social and humane accomplishment’ (Newbolt, 1921, 81), so that reading andliterature are articulated as constituents of the same educational agenda.

The reading pedagogy implied in both documents has been described as a function of three syllabus elements: reading lessons, reading materials, and teaching methods (Green, Cormack & Patterson, 2013, 330). Each successive syllabus for senior secondary English, apart from an unexplained exception in 1945, has been accompanied by ‘reading materials’ or a list of prescribed texts in which a novel by Jane Austen has appeared as an option for reading. At the end of the twentieth century the study of literary fiction, exemplified by Austen’s novels, was mandated at the senior or Stage 6 syllabus (Board of Studies, 1999) and assigned to a module or syllabus unit designed for students studying English at the Advanced level (See *Appendix*). The design of reading lessons and the nature of teaching methods, I would suggest, are as critical to reading experiences and outcomes as are the reading materials. It is from these perspectives that the term ‘student-readers’ has been devised to define the student cohort for whom the reading of imaginative fiction exemplified by Austen’s novels is mandatory.

The present study investigates the potential value of continuing the practice of reading and responding to Jane Austen’s fiction in senior secondary classrooms. It considers how Austen’s fiction might be relevant in an age which is connected by the dominance of technology to ‘scientific knowledge as the preferred knowledge form’ (Alsup, 2015, 7). It pays attention to the historic ‘disjuncture between so-called humanistic and scientific knowledge’ (2) that has been further exacerbated by the pressures of the so-called digital educational revolution, requiring teachers ‘to teach in technologically mediated ways’ (Buchanan, 2011, 67). Added to this concern is a qualitative shift in the reception of Austen’s novels since the mid-nineteen nineties after nearly two hundred years of mostly print text, and occasional screen- or stage-based, versions. This is further complicated by the reality, noted in the scholarship, that ‘text, film and TV adaptations’ have made their claim on Austen studies (Looser, 2017, 233), and in a way alternative media representations have themselves become a form of response to the novels.

**Literature and the humanities**

Questions about the value of literature are not new. In recent times they have been posed to education by the historical ‘epistemological conflict between the sciences and the humanities’ (Alsup, 2015, 3), and intensified by an unprecedented escalation of technology in the twenty-first century. It is interesting that the literary scholar and philosopher, C. S. Lewis, chose Jane Austen as his exemplar in constructing his case for the schism between science and the humanities (Lewis, 1954). His perspective differs from that of the literary critic and educator, F. R. Leavis, for whom Austen’s novels mark a transition to modernism (Leavis, 1948/1972).

In his inaugural address as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge in 1954 Lewis identified the epoch in which Jane Austen wrote as being closer culturally to that of Shakespeare than it was to his own age of modernism. He wrote:

Between Jane Austen and us, but not between her and Shakespeare, Chaucer, Alfred, Virgil, Homer or the Pharaohs, comes the birth of the machines. This lifts us at once into a region of change far above all that we have hitherto considered (Lewis, 1954, 5–6).

Lewis classifies the Industrial Revolution as a ‘Great Divide’ (1954, 2), comparing it to ‘the great changes’ of pre-history (6). This watershed in the history of culture separated the ‘Old Western Culture’ (6) from the present. Lewis contended that art, visual and literary, took on ‘shatteringly and bewilderingly new’ forms (5) and science ultimately became, in the wake of Watt’s engines and Darwin’s theories of evolution, the foremost preoccupation. Since then technical advances have been positioned as ‘the very milestones of life’ (6). The chasm that runs somewhere between us and *Persuasion* (4) separates us from a historical past which, Lewis maintains, warrants continuing interest and investigation, neither as ‘an indulgence in nostalgia’ nor as ‘an enslavement to the past’ (7), but as an expression of ‘liberation’ from both past *and* present.

The liberation of thinking in times of accelerated change creates a useful connection to Austen’s fiction in which the nuanced and sometimes unnoticed adaptation to changing ideas about propriety and social practice is rendered and explored. My life experience has persuaded me that reading novels like Austen’s, novels that are complex, ambiguous, and often perplexing, that pay attention to the nature of relationships, the roles of love, empathy and affection and the tensions involved in notions about moral principle, can develop ‘the skills of imagining and independent thinking…crucial to maintaining a successful culture of innovation’ (Nussbaum, 2010a, 53).

 As the century progresses the manifest ways in which scientific technology is changing the way we live, work and spend our leisure time are calling for choices and decisions that require rigorous critical thinking. The development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) already poses questions of life-changing significance. Scientific data ‘may not always be the best way to make decisions’ about such matters (Alsup, 2015, 3). The precedence given to the hard data of the marketplace is a defining characteristic of a neoliberal disposition to education and policy making, while the ‘humanistic core to liberal thinking’ (Leys, 2020, 6) all but disappears. This flies in the face of counsel offered by the late Stephen Hawking, the eminent theoretical scientist and cosmologist, who has been at the forefront of thinking about quantum physics, black holes and the afterlife. He turned to the humanities to guide his thinking. In these dangerous, aggressive times he advised that the quality he would most like to magnify is empathy: ‘it brings us together in a peaceful loving state’ (Clark, 2015). By engaging with the concept of empathy, Hawking aligns science and the humanities within the framework of imaginative thinking.

Maxine Greene, a world-renowned educator, also recommends empathy as the quality that brings people together, the faculty that ‘enables us to cross the empty space’ between ourselves and the ‘other’ (Greene, 2000, 3). In an emerging body of pedagogical research that considers ‘the nature and significance of empathy in education’ (Cooper, 2011, 27–46), the concept of narrative empathy has been linked to the aesthetic experience of reading (cf. Keen, 2007), and to the conception of fictional characters as representations of people in the everyday social world (cf. Oatley, Mar & Djikic, 2013). The concept of empathic intelligence and its relation to learning and pedagogy draws attention to ‘good literature’, like Austen’s novel *Emma*, as ‘a rich source of examples of writers’ empathic intelligence in action’ (Arnold, 2005, 73).

### Aim of the study

In this study, by way of reading memoirs and existing scholarship, and with reference to an historical curriculum survey, I consider how the understanding gained and the skills practised in reading Austen’s novels might serve ‘needs and purposes’, cognitive and affective, in an era of rapid change. The literary connoisseur Joseph Epstein (2014) draws on his personal biography to argue that reading fiction has an important role to play in both cognitive and affective development. He writes that novels have been ‘decisive’ in giving him ‘a *method or style of thinking*, a general point of view, and a goodly portion of such *understanding* as I may have of the world’ (emphasis added; Epstein, 2014, 263). Implicit in Epstein’s credo is confidence that there is a method or style of thinking that continues to illuminate the ways of the world over time.

The intention of the study is to draw on milestones in my life as a reader and in my career as a teacher of English to consider the potential value of reading stories, at times described reductively as being about ‘young women gossiping and deciding whom to marry’ (Jackson, 2017, 5). How, it might be asked, do Austen’s seemingly simple courtship novels matter in today’s complex, challenging and technologically driven world? In particular, how might the novels be read by student-readers from their perspective as contemporary citizens-in-the-making? What aspects of Austen’s fiction might maximise opportunities to develop the mind, emotionally, cognitively, creatively and critically? A wider educational agenda advocates teaching that mediates ‘the process of creating minds’ (cf. Eisner, 2003), congruent with the aim for readers to emerge from the experience with enhanced self-knowledge and an enlarged capacity for ‘finding things out about themselves’ (Kermode, 1966/2000, 39).

 In this process of self-discovery, I propose, readers encounter and address challenges, to *how* they think and to *what* they think, some of which correspond with key ideas about general capabilities in the Australian national curriculum (ACARA, 2013). The mandate to develop creative and critical thinking, personal and social skills, ethical and cultural understanding resonates with core aspects of Austen’s novels, and suggests that curriculum time that engages students in reading, talking about and responding to Austen’s novels might be time ‘well spent’, as advocated in John Sutherland’s epigraph to this chapter.

###  Examining the pleasure

Over time the aim of this research has narrowed in scope. In the *Preface* I relived the discovery of the ‘sheer pleasure effect’ (cf. Jones, W., 2008, 315) of deep immersion in Jane Austen’s novels. My ambition originally was to investigate the affordances of the curriculum to engage students in the full potential of Jane Austen’s fiction. The present study narrows the scope of the inquiry to focus on a neglected nexus between reading pedagogy and Jane Austen’s imaginative fiction. The intent and spirit of the inquiry are captured in the pedagogical goal articulated by the literary critic Lionel Trilling in one of his last essays, left unfinished when he died in 1975:

How, then, did I want my students to think of Jane Austen? Was she perhaps to be thought of as nothing more than a good read? I do not accept that my purpose can be thus described…. As my case stood, I would have granted that we must get beyond the unexamined pleasure with which we read in childhood and be prepared to say why and how it is that pleasure comes to us from stories (Trilling, 1976, 60).

The study builds on the *personal pleasure* of reading about Jane Austen’s heroines and their courtship trials, to reflect on and examine the potential of reading about their fictional universe to contribute to a constellation of educational goals that embrace both cognitive and affective dimensions of personal growth. These include the development of independence, creativity, critical and reflective thinking through reading fiction. Young readers are also exposed to a wider world and potentially transported to the world of the imagination. Clearly the overall mission of the syllabus within which the novels of Jane Austen are situated at the present moment in curricular time (NESA, 2017c), is the development of a richer understanding of human experience that goes hand in hand with the development of effective language skills. As implied in the ‘Rationale for Advanced English’, the reading program is integral to a larger educational design to provide student-readers with opportunities to read challenging texts and develop skills that ‘form the basis of sound practice of investigation and analysis required for adult life’ (NESA, 2017c, 10).

The fact that the texts are challenging is implicit in the research question as it is central to the analysis of the three novels selected for the reappraisal. The selected novels are germane to the different ways in which fiction, specifically Austen’s novels, might continue to be read to encourage a sensation of pleasure and learning that is useful in both practical and personal ways. It asks more specifically whether and how reading Austen’s fiction might provide student-readers with skills, knowledge and insights to help them understand, navigate and negotiate life in the twenty-first century. Written in a historical moment when a worldwide pandemic, COVID-19, raises, not for the first time, the very conditions of human individuality within a wider social and economic context, the study explores the ways in which fiction crosses a bridge to arrive at imaginative and alternative landscape of possibilities, filling the mind with words that turn ‘black text into an illuminated theatre’ (Young, 2016, 4).

The question, by default, considers whether the cognitive skills developed and exercised in the process of learning to read and respond to Austen’s fiction might encourage higher-order thinking capacities like decision-making and problem-solving that are transferable to the particular challenges that have been singled out as advantageous for life in a world oriented to the ‘Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects. Designated as STEM, these subjects are specifically encouraged, for example, in the most recent reform of the secondary school curriculum in New South Wales (NSW)’ (NESA, 2017c, 4). Accordingly, the analysis of Austen’s fiction pays attention to the norms and attitudes embedded in the language and linguistic structures and themes of the novels, and considers how these features of the fictions might be of benefit to twenty-first century student-readers as they prepare for adult life.

### Horace the poet and a conceptual framework

The prominent place Jane Austen has occupied and continues to occupy in the history of fiction and novel criticism and in the history of subject English underwrites the pertinence of the appraisal. The foundation for the study is provided by two historical pillars of belief about literature. Conceptualised as early as Horace’s *Ars Poetica (Art of Poetry*) which was composed in the first century B.C. (reproduced in Leitch, 2010, 122–123), the ideas of pleasure and profit have been associated with the spirit for writing, reading and responding to literature for two millennia, throughout the medieval and Renaissance periods and until the present day. The poet’s injunction that literature, at its best should be *dulce et utile*, both ‘sweet and useful’, has become a core idea in the subsequent history of literary criticism (2010, 122).

Horace’s formulation, although a commonplace of literary discourse, has not become a cliché, according to James Seaton, ‘if only because so many influential theories have insisted that literary works do only one or the other’ (Seaton, 2014, 83). In fact, Horace believed that the ‘teaching and delighting are intertwined, so much so that they cannot be separated’ (Seaton, 2014, 4). In Professor Herbert Read’s influential primer, *The Meaning of Art*, published in 1931, he writes that all artists desire to create forms that please ‘when we are able to appreciate a unity or harmony of formal relations among our sense perceptions’ (Read, 1961, 16). This synergy was captured in the 1911 syllabus in NSW: ‘the true end and aim of the teacher must be to rouse interest and create enjoyment in the books read’ (New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 1911, 18). As the *dulce* or ‘sweetness’ of literature, ‘enjoyment’ and ‘interest’ are emblematic of the aesthetic experience (cf. Dewey, 1934). The ‘*utile*’ or ‘usefulness’ is located in the power of literature to ‘develop the mind’ (New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 1911, 18) in ways that integrate, reflect and support the cultural values and the practical needs of society in the historic moment.

### Reading and re-reading Jane Austen

Austen scholarship provides a context for understanding cultural as well as literary values ascribed to her fiction over time. It has generated an abundance of critical insights that have been produced in the two centuries since Sir Walter Scott, using a vocabulary that marks him as man of his time, drew attention to Austen’s ability to breathe life into the minute particularities of daily doings hitherto thought unworthy of literary treatment. Critical interest in her writing has not only increased since then, but has been unusually diverse and uniquely charged with emotion. It is a commonplace of Austen scholarship that ‘the opinions that are held of her work are almost as interesting, and almost as important to think about as her work itself’. Lionel Trilling, who made this observation in his introduction to an edition of *Emma* (Trilling, 1957, 188), contends that the compelling legend that has been fabricated around Jane Austen means that we cannot read her novels in ‘literary innocence’ (188).

Re-reading and especially the compulsion to re-read Austen’s fiction is a recurring theme in the literature as well as in reading memoirs. Rachel Cohen had been reading Austen’s novels for three and a half years when she realised that she ‘had hardly read her’ as she deserved to be read (Cohen, 2020, 22). I have read the novels themselves, regularly and closely, during my lifetime. Close reading has been represented by Terry Eagleton as a method that ‘encouraged the illusion that any piece of language…can be read or even understood in isolation’ (Eagleton, 1983/2008, 38). But this is not my experience; close reading ‘does not have to come with the ponderous baggage of the New Criticism’ (Showalter, 2003, 56). My regular close reading of the novels has trained me to keep my mind and my inner ear open to the capacity of Austen’s prose to represent multiple and shifting points of view, as Bray (2018) illustrates throughout his study of Austen’s language; and, at the same time, to pay attention to the contexts which ‘produced and surround the words on the page’ (Eagleton, 1983/2008, 38).

### Personal response

Such close reading produces, in my experience, profoundly personal responses to what is read. The novels provide primary sources for considering distinctive features of Austen’s fiction. My selection for the inquiry is driven by the relationship of each one to a particular aspect of my personal relationship with Austen’s fiction: the way the author uses language, style and structure, to create a heroine of Shakespearian dimensions whose personal conflicts dramatise the ambiguities integral to making life choices in *Pride and Prejudice;* the perceptive faculty that enables the sometimes under-estimated Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* to develop and sustain a moral imagination; the inspired narrative construction that transforms romantic comedy into a pedagogical encounter as the heroine searches for happiness ‘in the tangles of domestic life’ (Kronman, 2007, 80) in *Emma*.

The analysis of the novels is guided by my personal insights about Austen’s fiction and the ways in which reading the novels has enriched my understanding of human experience and the capacities of ‘real-life people’, myself included, to adapt, or fail to adapt, to the changing conditions, needs and purposes in our own place and time. An overarching purpose of the inquiry is to consider how the making of meaning in the act of reading might generate skills and capabilities of practical use in everyday life: decision-making and problem-solving that will be vital for making judgments about the far-reaching implications of contemporary developments that are unlike all previous challenges; such as, for example, cyberspace security and artificial intelligence, or other forms of technology on the march.

In analysing Austen’s novels, I draw upon theories and assumptions about literature, literary criticism and the value of reading fiction in the eclectic, pluralistic and humanistic novel tradition (Schwarz, 1986). As a continuing conversation between different traditions of thought about the representation of human experience from Plato to postmodernism (Seaton, 2014), it acknowledges explicitly the contribution of twentieth century philosophers, Barthes, Derrida and Foucault among them, who posed the many challenges that created the ‘golden age’ of theory (Eagleton, 2003, 3). At the same time the conversation is respectful of the reservations expressed by Anthony Kronman:

For as I have watched the question of life’s meaning lose its status as a subject of organized academic instruction and seen it pushed to the margins of professional respectability in the humanities…I have felt what I can only describe as a sense of personal loss on account of my own very substantial investment in the belief that the question is one that can and must be taught in our schools (Kronman, 2007, 7).

No attempt is made to fit Austen into a particular theoretical framework in this study, but rather to respond, to examine, and to reflect on, the value of the ‘suffusing exhilarating, almost physical sensation of joy and well-being that Austen’s image of human life provides’ (Castle, 2002, 47, 40), on its own terms.

### Reading, learning and the imagination

In his 1854 novel, *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens dramatised a classroom with an imaginative grasp that has stood the test of time as well as my own copy of the book: second-hand, leather-bound, published by Thomas Nelson and Sons, with no publication date but presented in 1957 to an un-named and presumably exemplary student as a ‘Prefect’s Prize’. Dickens was among the small company of educated Victorians who believed that imaginative reading, like the Classics and poetry, were crucial to a child’s education. He created the industrialist Mr Gradgrind and the schoolteacher Mr McChokumchild, as caricatures, to personify and emphasise the void created by the loss of imaginative faculties. It is therefore probable that Dickens the man would have applauded the idea of a system of public education which, only half a century later, included the reading of imaginative fiction in a compulsory English curriculum as ‘a principal means’ by which students were encouraged to explore their expressive, creative and ethical selves in the classroom (Yiannakis, 2017, 19).

There has been ‘heated disputation’ over the motivation for installing literature and literary pedagogy at the centre of popular or mass education (cf. Goddard, 2009, 181–191; 183). The traditional view which celebrates the cultural and educational significance of the educator and poet, Matthew Arnold, is committed to an appreciation of literature, reading to learn, and Enlightenment goals, for their role in achieving the ‘full development of every individual’s human potential’ (Goddard, 2009, 182). In a Marxist account, the reading of literature is sinister, a ‘cultural balm’ that disguises the reality of power relations in society, and a means of inculcating 'in the less privileged and uneducated social groups an uncritical nationalism’ (Goddard, 2009, 182).

A third more recent view (Hunter, 1988, 1993; cf. Brass, 2009, Willinsky, 1990), assigns responsibility for the privileged place of literature in school reading syllabuses, to the educational bureaucracy. Reading practices, in Ian Hunter’s thinking, have more to do with ‘the bureaucratic and pragmatic operations of the pedagogical machinery of which they are a part’ than with either ‘relating the experience of reading the text to personal and worldly experiences’ or ‘desires for democracy, freedom or moral development’ (Patterson, 2000, 251). In essence, they are, in this paradigm, oriented to the development of specific cultural attitudes that support existing belief structures about society and the place of the individual within it.

The research question was formulated against a background in which cultural attitudes are heavily influenced by the weight of technological and economic challenges. The STEM imperative and issues bound up with questions about economic growth are central to educational funding and practice. As Nussbaum reminds us, education is concerned with producing ‘responsible democratic citizens who think and choose well’ about a wide range of issues of national and worldwide significance (Nussbaum, 2010a, 27–28). In this climate the value of reading and its association with the development of the imagination is perceived as vulnerable, while ‘the functionalist allure’ is on the rise, reducing the needs and purposes of young people in the digital age to ‘basic literacy’ (Brock, 2009, 24). In critiquing the economic growth discourse its critics identify the driving impulse as ‘economic anxiety’ and the ‘profit motive’, dispositions that are alien to the imagination, the humanities and the arts, and that distract from the development of abilities that are considered ‘crucial’ to the health of any democracy’ (Nussbaum, 2010a, 6–7).

### Jane Austen and things that matter

As my personal reading history testifies, Austen’s fiction can function as a model for reflecting on how those things that matter in real life take on different meanings over a lifetime. I join, among others, Catherine Helen Spence (1825–1910), a Scottish-born journalist writer who, like her favourite author, appeared on a paper note. ‘So great a charm’ did the novels have for Catherine Spence that she ‘made a practice of reading them through regularly once a year’ (Gentile, 2012, 28). So did my doctor’s mother, she told me, remarking on a faded handbag-sized copy of *Emma* that I held in my hands during a consultation. The record of Austen’s popularity among general readers (cf. Lynch, 2000, Wells, 2011/2013) and of her literary status among professional readers includes many accounts of lifetime readers of her fiction (cf. Bloom, 2008, 2009; Mazzeno, 2011; Southam, 1968, 1987/2009). An ever-increasing volume of scholarship, some in the form of reading memoirs, illustrates the multiple and diverse ways in which the pleasure and profit of reading her novels have been experienced.

My research thesis is relevant to ideas about reading Austen’s fiction as a potential source of pleasure, as well as of curiosity, personal and social development and critical thinking. The value of reading for pleasure relates to reading fiction generally, but is especially relevant to Austen’s fiction, as the scholarship testifies. In my personal reading history Austen’s novels have stood as exemplars for illuminating how language works and how meanings are both constructed and fluid, how human beings interact within the framework of social conventions, and how the capacity to think critically and systematically is shaped in and by the reading of fiction. I have not argued, nor could I, that Austen’s fiction *should* be readby young, or for that matter older, people; only that her novels, like many others that ‘release the imagination’ (Greene, 1995/2000a), provide fertile soil to nourish the ability to think critically and creatively, and also to reflect more deeply on ‘love, friendship and the things that really matter’ as Deresiewicz (2011) sums up the value of reading Jane Austen in the title of his memoir.

The enduring presence of Austen’s fiction in cultural discourse is worthy of note and also of research interest. In the chronology of literary study her position has been established as the ‘the first modern novelist’ in English literature (Leavis, 1948/1972, 16). In the history of Australian school reading programs that have aimed for something beyond literacy, her name sits alongside that of Shakespeare. In New South Wales, for example, study of her novels has endured on school English reading lists for readers in the sixteen to eighteen year old age group for over a century. She and her fiction have a ‘complicated’ relationship with the pedagogical field of conduct literature to which she responds ‘with both amusement and sincerity’ (Halsey, 2013, 35; 29–35).

In popular culture Austen has an enduring presence in a variety of ‘textual lives’ (Sutherland, 2005). ‘Translations’ of her work appear in film, television, video-blogs, sequels and prequels. In a sense Jane Austen has emerged over time as an ‘invention’, a construct as well as a ‘woman’, that has been and continues to be manufactured in an ongoing ‘fraught public process…a bizarre, unprecedented social, literary and historical extravaganza’ (Looser, 2017, 1). Recent research has uncovered a bounty of cheap editions of the novels that were published during the decades when Austen was supposedly lost to sight, and did not appear in scholarly libraries (Barchas, 2019). In the 1840s, mass-market editions were included in non-conformist volumes aimed at pious females, traded for soap wrappers, and given as Sunday school prizes. With the arrival of ‘Chick lit’ in the 1960s gender marketing strategies projected Austen as a woman’s novelist, with lots of pink to give the appropriate signal.

In this way, Austen has been re-invented many times, and her fiction has been reread to serve a multitude and range of interests and purposes. Some are personal, like those of ‘her family and immediate circle of friends’ (Halsey, 2013, 135), many of which were ‘collected and transcribed’ by the author herself (Southam, 1987/2009, 48–51). Some are about publishing, promotion and profit as was Henry James’s account of ‘the body of publishers, editors, illustrators, producers of the pleasant twaddle of magazines’ who found ‘everybody’s Jane…so infinitely to their material purpose’ (James, 1905, 229). A great many twentieth century readings reflect modernist and subsequently postmodernist cultural, canonical and theoretical discourses. The appeal of her characters and courtship narratives to film directors, screenwriters and audiences has kept the novels alive with new editions (Parrill, 2002, 8). Paradoxically, Austen’s romances on the screen also encourage alternative and often oppositional ways of reading the novels themselves.

### Challenges

Partly as a result of alternative ways of experiencing the Austen phenomenon, the Austen discourse includes a strand of discussion that challenges Austen’s relevance to this generation of young readers. The cultural commentator, Hugh Mackay, qualifies the usefulness of reading the long-form texts:

… in today’s culture, finely honed literacy skills are simply not as important as they once were. Important for those who appreciate the joys of reading, yes; but no longer essential for making your way in the world…Who’s to say it is ‘better’ to read Jane Austen than to see her work dramatised on the screen? Better for some; infinitely more tedious and unappealing for others…Would it be a tragedy if high-order literacy became a skill acquired by and nurtured by some and not by others? (Mackay, 2007, 338–339).

In making his point, Mackay disregards Austen’s contemporary cultural currency in her own right as a novelist. Her fiction rather than her screen representations continues to be a point of reference within a range of cultural and cross-disciplinary discourses: anthropological (Handler & Segal, 1990), economic (Piketty, 2014, 2, 53–54,105–106, 411–412, 415–516) and social geography (Herbert, 1991); and even game-theory with its series of ‘pay-off’ moves and countermoves in social interactions (Chwe, 2013). Mackay’s conclusions suggest rather that the novels in their literary form might not be worth reading anyway, that they are little more than the courtship romances that have been adapted for the mass market (Kaplan, 1996). Stripped of their complexity and nuanced characterisation, as well as their linguistic and cultural diversity, the ‘harlequinised’ versions have gained a ‘familiarity’ that ‘breeds content’ as Kaplan comments playfully (172).

In the cited extract, Mackay treats Austen the novelist as a benchmark for his own cultural discourse. However, when he queries the usefulness of ‘high-order’ literacy skills he neglects to consider their relevance as precisely those skills ‘we employ for quotidian tasks’ (Nussbaum, 2010a, 7). In comparing the experience of reading the adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* with the experience of reading the novel itself, Olivia Murphy (2005) argues that adaptations, including those on screen and TV, are resistant to Austen’s idea of ‘what constitutes a good reading or a great reader’ (23). Readers of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* experience certain aspects of her writing, for example her ‘ironically-laden free indirect speech’ (35), without which the benefits of reading her fiction are deprived of their greatest significance.

Many examples from a personal exploration of Austen’s fictional universe in my lifetime continue to exemplify issues that young people face today: managing family and working relationships, understanding how society functions; navigating everyday ethical questions around friendship and responsibility. The pedagogy of critical thinking, a ‘key element in the ecology of twenty-first century e-learning environment’ (Balcaen, 2011, 354) is shown in action when Elizabeth, the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* discovers and redeems her failure to read attentively and judiciously. Mackay neglects the value of literature’s role to ‘provide ideas about the human condition and the planet we live on’ (Orr, 1991/1996, 52), which are rarely touched upon in the films, televisions series, prequels and sequels that have been derived from the originals. The novelist Julian Barnes defined the functions of fiction in terms that effectively challenge McKay’s position:

The novel is not likely to die. There is no substitute, at least so far, that can handle psychological complexity and inwardness and reflection the way that the novel can. The cinema’s talents are quite other (Guignery & Roberts, 2009, 68).

Novel reading received a dismissal of another kind from Simon Birmingham during his incumbency as Federal Minister for Education (2015–2017). It was reported in the media that the Minister found *Pride and Prejudice* ‘a bore’. His response to reading the novel is representative of those readers for whom the reading of Austen’s fiction might be considered, repeating Mackay’s words, ‘tedious and unappealing’ (Mackay, 2007, 338) because, he claimed, his teacher ‘failed to bring it alive’; as a result, he gave up on English (Knott, 2015). This experience showed him, the report continued, that ‘what makes a difference is the passion, knowledge, and communication skills of the teachers in the classroom…not the number of students or how attractive a school’s grounds are’. It might be argued that this view, formed early, was the rationale for policy and funding decisions that resisted smaller class sizes. The (ir)relevance of class sizes is a matter for ongoing debate. An equally significant decision made by Simon Birmingham was his intervention in 2017 and 2018 ‘to deny funding to 11 Australian Research Council (ARC) grants, all in the humanities’ (Myton, 2018). This too might be related to his alienation from subject English, the reading of Austen’s fiction, and what the humanities represent.

In an alternative perspective in contemporary public and educational discourse, attention is deflected away from knowledge that has been valued in the humanist tradition. In his support for ‘early education in coding’ as the key to new knowledge and research driven by ‘commercialisation opportunities’ (Bagshaw, 2016), Birmingham, as Minister for Education, leaned toward the increasingly STEM-focused view of education. Some educators however do believe that to be fully literate in the world we now inhabit, young people require reading and writing in a number of intertwined worlds: for example, the personal, the cultural, the educational and professional, as well as the civic and the cyber, each of which requires its own processes and skills (Alsup, Emig, Pradl, Tremmel, Yagelski, et el., 2006, 282–283).

Birmingham’s single-minded view of educational priorities stands in stark contrast to this call to educational arms, casting an ironic and fancifully intertextual backward glance (of the sort that Austen might relish if she were alive today), to Mrs Elton’s comment about the city, Birmingham:

They came from Birmingham, which is not a place to promise much, you know, Mr Weston. One has not great hopes of Birmingham. I always say there is something direful in the sound (Austen, 1816/2005a, 336).

Humour aside, the implications of Birmingham’s failed expectations seem to have far- reaching consequences that may have something to do with his negative view of reading, of Jane Austen’s fiction, and of English teachers. In fact, the comments proffered by both Birmingham and Mackay warrant interrogation. Both examples say something about the way in which public discourse in the context of a radically different ‘here and now’ tends to neglect the value of reading, both for pleasure and well-being on the one hand, and, on the other, for the amplification of cognitive and affective faculties so essential for navigating the complexities, ambiguities and pressures of adult life in the twenty-first century.

### Methodology

As already indicated, this research thesis is oriented to close readings and analysis of Austen’s fiction and framed as a reading memoir. A memoir is, I realised as I sorted through my own reading memories, not an autobiography or a day-to-day diary of a life. It is about an aspect of a life, a way for the writer and the reader to become immersed empathically and imaginatively in recollected memories. In a reading memoir the perspective is, of course, reading itself, but the sight lines are diverse. In the study I am in conversation with a number of accomplished reading memoirists who have chosen to share their relationship, some with reading in general and some with Jane Austen in particular, in a in a variety of ways. There are many splendid examples of both. My selection has been made from a wide sample of preliminary reading to which I refer as associations rise; however, I engage more frequently with a smaller number of memoirists to achieve a balance between the notion of reading as a form of art and an enduring source of pleasure and profit, and the particularities of the ways in which readers of Jane Austen have read, understood and remembered her fictional narratives.

In designing and coordinating the Living Historians project described in the *Preface*, I discovered that memory can function as a mode of investigation. As survivors of the Holocaust have overcome the immediacy of their pain, they have found themselves able to share their stories. Because their recollections were addressed to children and because they belong to a culture that believes in passing on intergenerational knowledge, their oral history interviews were as full of ideas about the future as they were with memories of the past. In the present study I draw on this insight.

In adopting reading memoir as a methodology, the present research thesis draws on a phenomenological source for understanding how and why people read, and what they feel they gain from the reading experience. My observations are enhanced by my own and other personal reading experiences and insights, by a body of relevant scholarship, and by close reading of Austen’s fiction. The use of memory as a methodological tool accords with its epistemological potentialities (Keightley, 2008), providing an alternative to conventional historiography: a ‘process of making sense of experience, of constructing and navigating complex temporal narratives and structures and ascribing meaning not only to past, but to present and future also’ (56). The use of memoir is not only liberating; it offers a language that combines the personal with the impersonal, generating meaningful judgments that are enriched by memories that are profoundly connected with reading and re-reading, and with Jane Austen’s novels and characters.

### Significance of the study

The intention of the inquiry is to reflect on the value of reading Jane Austen’s long-form and complex fiction in a twenty-first century world; one in which, it has been claimed, ‘reading books has been sacrificed to the tyranny of texting and the dizzying array of social media platforms’ (Adams, 2019). The study is significant first, then, for addressing a contemporary dilemma that revisits the traditional rivalry between science and the humanities. In the study, I recall ways in which fiction, specifically Austen’s fiction, has helped me to develop cognitive skills and encourage cultural and social insights, and reflect on how they might contribute to the pleasure and profit of young people who live in today’s climate of change and uncertainty. In this way the present study makes a contribution to a larger case for teaching literature in the secondary school (cf. Alsup, 2015).

The methodology used for this study is equally significant. It breaks new ground in addressing the neglected nexus between reading pedagogy and reading imaginative fiction by combining rigorous research with anecdotal material. Lifelong readers including myself are drawn into the conversation, partly because there is a sense of an ending, the potential loss of a literary world which, in our lifetimes, has opened the way to ‘an entire realm of discourse’ (Merkin, 2019). We proffer our reading memories as evidence to be considered in the conversations that take place around the development of reading policy and reading pedagogy. At the same time, the methodology used for the analysis, the ‘serious noticing’ (Wood, 2019) of both the text and the feelings and thought associated it, provides an exemplar for understanding how Jane Austen’s uses of the imagination enrich and inform the imaginations of readers of many ages and in any age. Thus the study generates significant new knowledge about reading and responding to imaginative fiction, the relevance of Jane Austen’s fiction to curriculum aims for acquiring knowledge and developing understanding, skills and values that might support young people as they to navigate the world they inhabit in this century, and the evidence it contributes to an ongoing debate in cultural and educational domains.

### Summary of chapters

In Chapter One I discuss the rationale for undertaking a contemporary appraisal of Jane Austen’s fiction, and consider the implications of the enduring presence of Jane Austen’s fiction in the New South Wales English curriculum. The research question is articulated and positioned at the intersection of reading pedagogy and literary study. The inquiry is contextualised first within the humanities/science dialectic, and then in a synthesis of ideas about the pleasure of reading and the development of the imagination. I consider specific challenges to reading Jane Austen from cultural and educational perspectives and explain the roles of pleasure and profit in the conceptual framework. The methodology establishes the role of reading memoirs, my own and those of other lifelong readers, as complementary frames of reference for the analysis and interpretation of Austen’s fiction, and for a discussion of how reading Austen’s fiction relates to the cultivation of general capabilities articulated in the school curriculum.

In Chapter Two I review relevant bodies of literature. First I identify and review scholarship associated with the value of reading imaginative fiction. I provide a brief overview of reading pedagogy which is supplemented by an *Appendix*. I review research and scholarship about the pleasure of reading, its relation to wellbeing, and the significance and nature of the imagination, in its literary, ethical and social modalities. I identify the writings of F. R. Leavis and Terry Eagleton as shaping influences for the ways in which fiction has been read and taught in schools. Attention is paid to recent research and scholarship associated with literary cognitive studies, Theory of the Mind, and to an understanding of how alternate, postcritical, ways of reading fiction respond to and resonate with the development of capabilities that enhance well-being and develop insights and skills that are useful for navigating adult life. I identify, explore and evaluate areas of Austen scholarship that cover the enmeshment of biographical and critical approaches to her status as a writer of fiction. I synthesise and evaluate her pedagogical role, both informally and as a curriculum stalwart.

In Chapter Three, an analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* is related to personal reading experiences in my life, drawing on Vivian Gornick’s reading memoir (2020) to enlarge my personal reflections on the role of re-reading in the literary experience. I consider Shakespearian echoes in Elizabeth’s combative relationship with Darcy, and discuss the ways in which Austen’s literary imagination creates, in Elizabeth Bennet, a heroine who exceeds the possibilities of heroines in my early reading and in Austen’s own literary period. I explore Austen’s sophisticated repertoire of literary techniques: the ways in which she uses modulation to create different shades of meaning, and her confident use of free indirect discourse to reveal the heroine’s consciousness. I consider how re-reading Darcy’s letter relates to the origins of the novel in the epistolary tradition, and also provides a lesson in how to read. As the heroine of Austen’s most popular novel, Elizabeth Bennet emerges from the analysis as the product of Austen’s literary imagination at its peak; and as a model for the cultivation of critical and creative capabilities exemplified in the way she learns to read.

In Chapter Four, I examine the pleasure and for some readers the pain of reading Austen’s most problematic novel, *Mansfield Park*. I critique the widely discordant views that inform the critical reception of Fanny Price. I discuss the ways in which the heroine’s displacement from her home resonates with my personal childhood memories and how this attunes me to the nuances of Fanny’s initial timidity and to the courage of her ultimate fearlessness. Austen’s increasingly confident use of free indirect discourse is examined, as well as the organic unfolding of the narrative. William Deresiewicz’s reading memoir (2011) illuminates the way in which Austen explores the implications of what it means to be good in the novel, and how the reader’s views might change over successive readings. The novel is discussed as a novel of place in which Austen’s moral imagination provides Fanny with a room in which to cultivate her moral vision and her ethical capabilities.

In Chapter Five, I frame the analysis of *Emma* in early reading memories of the novel and those of reading memoirist, Susannah Fullerton. I examine how the subjunctive mood of the novel traps the reader in the heroine’s flawed assumptions about reality. I hypothesise that Emma’s good fortune does not erase the impact of the profound emotional loss of her mother in childhood. A second loss, experienced when her surrogate mother marries, is discussed as the catalyst for Emma’s impudent interventions in as well as her unfortunate misunderstandings about the lives of others. I consider the grasp of Austen’s social imagination as the narrative traces the development of Emma’s capacity to read the minds of others, to examine her own obligations in social relationships, and reflect on an unacknowledged need to be loved. I conclude that Austen’s social imagination works with such consummate skill that readers barely notice that they as well as Emma and her suitor, are engaged in an empathic pedagogical dynamic.

The study concludes with a discussion of the evidence gathered from the analyses. The novels and their heroines have been read from the perspectives of both author and reader, reflecting on the value of including anecdotal evidence from lifetime readers in the inquiry. I give an account of the pedagogical uses to which Austen’s fiction has been put historically, and consider how analysis of each of the three novels can shed light on human relationships and self-discovery in the present moment, identifying aspects of Austen’s imagination that relate to the purposes of education: the development of critical and creative, ethical and social capabilities required to navigate the adult world. I relate the analysis to reading pedagogy and the implications for change if reading for pleasure and for stimulation of imagination faculties is to be encouraged in reading responses and classroom conversations.

The *Appendix* provides an historical survey of the Senior Secondary English Syllabus in New South Wales, 1911–2017. As a point of reference for the study, it identifies curriculum milestones and traces the course of reading and literary study during the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

# CHAPTER TWO

#  A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: READING, LEARNING, FICTION AND JANE AUSTEN

… the need to make up characters, and to place them in worlds that are parallel to our own or are perhaps wildly at variance with it, is part of the history of all peoples, cultures and countries; there is no human group that has not told tales (Hoffman & Murphy, 2005, 1).

### Introduction

The previous chapter established the focus and scope of the research question and the rationale for selecting Jane Austen’s fiction as the exemplar for a contemporary appraisal of imaginative fiction. The scope of the literature reviewed in this chapter is defined by the parameters of the question and organised in two sections. The first section identifies and reviews beliefs, assumptions and practices associated with the value of reading imaginative fiction with specific reference to the ways in which reading and responding to imaginative literature have been conceptualised in the New South Wales senior secondary school English curriculum (see *Appendix*). The second section identifies and reviews a representation of the substantial body of literature that reflects, records and comments on the ways in which Jane Austen and her novels have been read, understood and taught since they were first published in the early nineteenth century.

## Section 1

### Reading fiction: more than mere literacy

Tim Winton, the novelist, captures the significance of historical perspective: ‘the past is in us, not behind us … things are never over’ (2006, 6). Turning to history in order to ‘put our past to work’ is a relatively new phenomenon in English curriculum research (Green, Cormack & Reid, 2000, 111; cf.: Brock, 1984, 1996; Carter, 2012; Manuel & Brock, 2003), a corrective to the preoccupation with the present historical moment, in which ‘the relationship between past, present and future is taken-for-granted’ (Seddon, 1989, 1). The lineage of the subject English reveals a range of legacies; the one most relevant to the present study highlights English as ‘a site for the formation of culture with literature as its primary tool’ (Cormack, 2008, 275). In particular, an exploration of the links between past, present and future revealed by re-reading the history of reading pedagogy and practices (cf. Green, Cormack and Patterson, 2013) enables us to examine the value of ‘simply maintaining what is familiar to us… in the face of radically different times’ (Green, Cormack & Reid, 2000, 112). At the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, radically different times underwrite the need to re-locate the familiarity of reading imaginative fiction, which began, in my memory, with the bedtime stories of childhood, in relevant historical, educational and cultural contexts.

The chronology of mass education (Gillard, 1998/2018) provides a historical context for the development of literacy in which a relationship between reading and moral development is already discernible. In the historical account the encouragement of literacy and the reading of bible stories for their moral lessons go hand in hand. The impetus for such a project has its origins in the church, parochial, charity and Sunday schools that were established in the eighteenth century. Educational philanthropists like Robert Raikes (Booth, 1980), Hannah More (Prior, 1999) and the Clapham Sect (Piggin, 2007) were passionate about an educational mission to teach children to read the Scriptures, as well as the stories and homilies, many of them purpose written by More herself.

In the nineteenth century, however, ‘the newly minted needs of industry’ called for ‘reading skills beyond the parameters of moral instruction’ (Benn & Chitty, 1996, 1). This need generated a network of large-scale monitorial schools, some of which were established by progressive educators like Robert Stow (Cruikshank, 1965). Many conformed to the dreary spirit depicted by Charles Dickens in the novel *Hard Times*, as discussed in the previous chapter, while some introduced children to imaginative activities. In fact, ‘the history of public schools does not map neatly on to the history of factories’ (Watters, 2015, 3) as suggested by Alvin Toffler’s influential book of the 1970s (Toffler, 1970/1971).

The strictly utilitarian purpose of reading in nineteenth-century monitorial schools was undoubtedly turned on its head by progressive thinking about education and a turn to literature in the early twentieth century (see A*ppendix*). The foundational curriculum document, named for the man who headed the committee appointed to design an agenda for the teaching of English in England (Newbolt, 1921), reflects Sir Henry Newbolt’s identity as a cultivated man of his time: nationalistic, poetic, and optimistic. He was not a man for all seasons, as his fall from grace in the eyes of late twentieth–century educators attests (Eagleton, 1983/2008, 25). Nevertheless, research suggests that ideas he espoused about the pleasure and profit of reading persist in the belief systems of many English teachers (Peel & Hargreaves, 1995, 38–50).

The inaugural syllabus in New South Wales (New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 1911) was implemented a decade prior to publication of the Newbolt Report in England. It provides evidence of a retrieval of the earlier moral intent of literacy, albeit transformed by Wordsworthian ideas about reading and the imagination. As Jacqueline Manuel and Paul Brock (2003) explain, literature, predominantly ‘canonic’, was installed in the intellectual history (Reid, 2003, 100) of the English subject, via the first curriculum, as a ‘reservoir of cultural values’ grounded in Matthew Arnold’s writings on education, culture and literature (cf. Arnold, 1880; 1869/2008). The progenitor syllabus in New South Wales is a primary source for understanding the optimism of the curriculum makers:

…. formal instruction in the theory of expression will scarcely be needed … pupils who daily hear and read well-framed sentences will naturally tend to use similar ones … comparison can thus be studied to the best advantage in and between masterpieces (New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 1911, 21).

In view of future contestations over the development of writing skills, it is noteworthy that exposure to good writing as a sure-fire pedagogical strategy was taken as a given by Peter Board when, as already noted, he articulated a vision in the 1911 English syllabus in New South Wales.

Historically, such confidence is a matter of disputation. In his examiner’s report following the Leaving Certificate examinations in 1946 and 1948, Professor Waldock, the Challis Professor for English (1934–1950), reported that students ‘imagine that they can pass a Leaving Certificate without being able to write a sentence’ and were very weak in fundamentals, not knowing what a noun is, ‘let alone an abstract noun’ (Brock, 2015, 2). Literacy anxiety is a recurring theme in which the culprit changes: comics in my day, television in my children’s day, social media as I write now; and the teaching profession for all seasons.

It was my good fortune to attend Professor Waldock’s lectures on Milton and *Paradise Lost* in the Wallace Theatre during the second year of English at the University of Sydney. Disappointed perhaps, but not disappointing to me, he recited sections of Milton’s epic poem, including those few lines from near the end of Book 1 with which I was already familiar because they were among my father’s favourite literary quotations:

From morn/ To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve/ A summer’s day; and with the setting sun /Dropped from the zenith like a falling star (1. ll. 742–744).

It was a superb and emotionally touching reading. My heart dropped in sympathy with the final line. In the hushed atmosphere of a packed auditorium it was easy to believe that great imaginative literature does indeed affirm the significance and profundity of language itself; that literature gives us something that nothing else can, and even if it features the spirits or the gods ‘it makes us feel what it is to be human’ (Dobrin, 1986, 60).

### The humanistic tradition

My response to the reading was an experiential affirmation of a core belief in the humanistic disposition to literature. It is attuned to the insights we gain from art and literature as well as those we gain when we reflect on our responses. James Seaton’s concern with the humanistic heritage of literary criticism acquaints readers with a trajectory from Plato to postmodernism (Seaton, 2014). He represents the humanistic view of literature in the twenty-first century as a middle way between the suspicious view of art expressed by Plato and the elevation of art by Neoplatonic critics to a transcendental universality. He points out that in the Aristotelian tradition the fictions that had found a form in plays and epic poems but not yet in the novel were believed to say important things about human life but not about the universe (Seaton, 2014, 73). He writes:

From Aristotle on, critics in the humanistic tradition have held that literary works may arouse strong emotions but, if they are well-made, also allow for the resolution of those emotions. They contend that the influence of literature, especially in the best works, is indeed real and valuable, but usually indirect, difficult if not impossible to prove, and always subject to debate (3).

In view of the findings generated by empirical research in the emerging field of literary neuroscience to be addressed in a later section of the literature review, it is worth speculating at this stage that an interdisciplinary fMRI study of close and pleasure reading of Jane Austen’s fiction (Phillips, 2015, 55–81), indicates a more direct influence of fiction than Seaton postulates. In the interdisciplinary field of cognitive literary studies (Zunshine, 2015) the relationship between reading fiction, the development of attitudes, and even the shaping of social relationships is being extensively investigated empirically to explore whether or not the benefits of reading fiction go beyond deep moral reflection to impact on behaviour itself (cf. Kidd & Castano, 2013).

This is good news for the humanities and the humanistic optimism about the role of fiction in education. According to Daniel Schwarz (1986), the humanistic heritage allows for a dialogue in which there is a blend of voices of critics and theorists who have been most influential in the way the English novel has been read and taught (Schwarz, 1986, 1). Although a more suspicious intellectual climate has challenged ideas about the coherence of the novel, Schwarz positions major premises about post-structuralist thinking about fiction within the humanist arc. He starts with Henry James, his wrestle with the challenges of ‘how to focus on technique without sacrificing subject matter’ (Schwarz, 16), and the sense in which James requires the novelist to extend a ‘penetrating imagination’ to the depiction of ‘the sense of life’ (21).

For Schwarz the trajectory of humanist critical theories of the English novel accommodates key figures like F. R. Leavis (60–79), as well as Marxist theory and post-structuralism (187–221). Schwarz thus traverses the territory from structuralism to post structuralism and also includes a stage of the reading journey that encourages readers to thread their personal responses into the fabric of the text. This is essentially different from the pattern in the carpet, conceptualised by Henry James as the work of the author or master weaver. Schwarz believes that the role of the reader is to participate in making the pattern rather than to discover a pattern already in existence. I propose that a reading pedagogy that encourages a synergy between the ‘learning to read’ and ‘reading to learn’ phases of reading development encourages readers to participate in weaving the textual pattern.

### Learning to read and reading to learn

The encouragement of a synergy between ‘learning to read’ and ‘reading to learn’ (Green Cormack & Patterson, 2013, 331) is one way in which reading practices can be shaped to enrich the act of reading. The complexity of this notion is addressed in the approach of Lev Vygotsky to language, learning, reading and creativity (Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978; cf. Wertsch, 1985). A theorist of developmental learning in Russia in the 1930s, Vygotsky delivered lectures that were collected and translated following his death. In the 1970s there was a re-emergence in the West of an interest in the social origins of language development that brought Vygotsky’s ideas to the attention of linguists and educators. The central idea is that ‘what has already been achieved is a ‘yesterday’ of development’ (Verenikina, 2010, 3). Vygotsky describes (Cole et al., 1978) the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as the distance between the current level of independent problem-solving and the level of potential development when the learner has guidance from a more capable source (86). The current level of development was conceptualised as a springboard to future and higher order of thought in the learning process; it applies to the ‘learning to read’ phase of the reading process to delineate that stage between what has already been achieved and what, with encouragement and social interaction, might be achieved next. In this way the learning process anticipates and assists all aspects of learning, including and perhaps especially, the way in which children learn how to read.

Vygotsky’s work on the zones of proximal development is congruent with the 1970s shift in early reading pedagogy from the phonetic approach in a behaviourist framework to a psycho-linguistic model. Frank Smith’s watershed 1971 study of reading is now in its sixth edition (Smith, 2004). His latest research sheds light on fundamental aspects of the complex act of reading and the remarkable capacity of the brain to adapt from spoken to written language (cf. Dehaene, 2009). Smith builds a case for reading practices that draw on students’ own capacity to think, based on evidence that, for many students, the phonics approach does not work. A conceptual bridge with the potential to move readers from the ‘learning to read’ phase to the development of the increasingly higher-order thinking required for reading complex fiction is provided by Vygotsky’s social constructivist model for learning, language, and meaning (Cole et al., 1978).

Vygotsky’s model is accommodated within Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading and writing (2005, 1–58). Rosenblatt conceptualises reading as a spiral, a ‘to-and-fro interplay between reader, text and context’ (9). In this process readers gradually construct ‘a cumulative meaning’ in which they are enabled to move to successively higher conceptualisations that are analogous with Vygotsky’s ‘zones’. An essential factor in this process is the stimulation provided by rich conversational interactions with peers and teachers. Vygotsky’s theorisation of thought, language and learning and his emphasis on the significance of the socio-cultural context of learners help to explain how the love of language and stories that I encountered in my home and from the mentorship of my teachers in the classroom contributed to my motivation to extend the reach of my thinking and reading. Vygotsky’s beliefs about art and creativity admit literary discourse as a legitimate source of evidence for studying language and the mind ‘in all its manifestations’ (Barrs, 2016, 242).

Like Vygotsky’s zones of proximal learning, Rosenblatt’s notion of transactional reading breaks with the dualistic Cartesian view of self and object, with the ‘to-and-fro’ spiral initiating an affective-cognitive dynamic that takes the reader from text to an interpretation fundamentally influenced by the reader’s ‘prior experience’ (Alsup, 2015, 84, 6). Michael Berubé (2016) considers reader-response theory to be beyond challenge: ‘of course we all bring to every text the welter of experiences, associations, encounters and intellectual relations we have accumulated over the years’ (Berubé, 2016, 19). Within the community of reader-response theorists there is, however, a spectrum of opinion about the relative significance of text and reader in the construction of meaning. Wolfgang Iser (1972) and Hans Robert Jauss (1982) develop an aesthetic reading theory, while Bleich (1978) considers the reader’s part of the transaction to be more important than that of the text itself. Stanley Fish (1982) contends that readers adopt the interpretive strategies of an interpretive community with which they are associated. Rosenblatt’s belief in the ability of each reader to make a unique response to a given text endows her work with a unique capacity to span the gap between modernist and poststructural reading discourses in a fundamentally democratic pedagogy that ‘encourages readers to read in ways that bring their background into their reading’ (Davis, 1992, 73). Her spiralling mode of reading is in itself a form of playfulness that can add to the pleasure of reading.

The pleasure of my personal reading experience has convinced me of the transformation that occurs in Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development, a place where the potential entwining of thought and imagination is actualised before moving along the next spiral. I now understand that I had arrived at that place when I fixed my eyes on Lewis Carroll’s ‘wonderland’ and gradually came to know and sometimes understand Alice and her strange fellow characters, forming bonds of friendship that have defied time. As Vygotsky conjectured, the scene was set for cognitive and affective growth when I turned to the first page of the book, but the way forward was taken, not as he suggested, in the company of teachers or known adults, but rather in the spirit of Wayne Booth’s metaphor of fellowship that makes the first half of his book title, *The Company We Keep* (Booth, 1988). Entering into intimate companionship with the (implied) author and friendly guide, Lewis Carroll (Carroll, 1865/2009), I was ushered through Wonderland and introduced to the curious world of Alice, the White Rabbit and the awesome Queen of Hearts.

I have never lost the sensation of pleasure and excitement of that initiation into the realm of imaginative fiction; nor the feeling that I was on the brink of understanding words and sentences the like of which I had never before encountered. I am still astounded by the speed with which the language of Alice’s ‘wonderland’ took hold of my imagination and started to make sense. First I was watching Alice. Alice was intent on watching her sister. Her sister was reading a book. The book must be dull, Alice thought, because it ‘had no pictures or conversations in it’ (Carroll, 1865/2009, 12). As I was pondering this very new idea I was abruptly flung down the rabbit hole with Alice, into a world that was both utterly strange *and* strangely familiar.

I wondered later if my abiding delight in fictional conversations sprang full grown from Alice’s regretful observation about lack of conversation in her sister’s book. But it was only when I entered the fictional world of *Pride and Prejudice* at a later stage of my reading education that the foundation was laid for the examination of what I was thinking and feeling while I was reading, and for understanding the delights of conversation as Alice had suggested. Where did the pleasure come from, I then wondered: was it from the story, the characters and their talk, the plot or maybe the author? Perhaps it even had something to do with me, the reader?

It took many years of reading, much re-reading and a new vocabulary, to learn gradually that the ‘pleasure’-effect’ of reading to which Wendy Jones refers in her article on Austen’s novel *Emma* (Jones, 2008; Austen, 1816/2005a) was inextricably bound up with my sense of personal profit. What I brought to and what additionally I took away was the measure of pleasure and profit, an experience during which I witnessed, as Horace said of Odysseus in his treatise on poetry, ‘the customs of many men’ (cited in Leitch, 2010, 122–123). The opportunities provided by reading fiction to engage with people and cultures outside my familiar purlieus have provided a magic carpet to whisk me to the land of reading pleasure where I would make many discoveries to my profit, about myself, about others and about unfamiliar worlds.

### Fiction, pleasure and research

The pleasures of novel reading come from many sources and are experienced at many levels. According to Louise Rosenblatt the prime reason for the survival of literature is its power to provide readers with the pleasure associated with entertainment and recreation (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, 175). John Mullan (2006) identifies what gives the reader pleasure and where the pleasure comes from in quite specific ways. He explores the many manifestations of the formal ingenuity of the writer, including titles, subtitles, opening paragraphs and chapters that engage with the reader at the sensory level. For Mullan, the seeds of reading pleasure are planted in the imagination, the way it lives on in the reader’s consciousness where ‘a core of memorable novels’ have an ‘afterlife’ (Mullan, 2006, 20). Vivian Gornick (2020) would agree. Speaking of ‘unfinished business’ in a reading memoir that focuses on the experience of *re*-reading, she writes of the moment in her life that she realised that it was to the books that had become her intimates that she ‘would turn and turn again, not only for the transporting pleasure of the story itself but also to understand what I was living through, and what I was to make of it’ (Gornick, 2020, 5).

Reading for pleasure is receiving increasing attention in the literacy field (Clark & Rumbold, 2006) and is yielding increasing evidence that a *love* of reading is the foundation on which lifetime reading is built (Sanacore, 2002). Two Australian studies endorse international evidence: reading for pleasure is associated with wellbeing as well as other benefits that serve young people in and beyond the classroom. In a study undertaken between 2006 and 2010, Jacqueline Manuel gathered data on the reading practices of 2117 Australian students aged from 12 to 16 years and from diverse backgrounds (Manuel, 2012). The study investigated a wide array of preferences and attitudes and indicated strong preferences for and benefits from reading for pleasure over reading for other reasons. In his literary memoir Joseph Epstein (2014) points out that classrooms can ‘sometimes kill great subjects and also splendid books’ (8). Some writers, like the Australian poet Judith Wright and the American novelist Willa Cather, have reservations about their work being made available in school editions. The term ‘readicide’ has been given to the notion that the development of test-takers is to be more highly valued than the development of life-long readers (Gallagher, 2009).

In a study that reviews the data that Manuel analysed in 2012, the authors (Manuel & Carter, 2015) set their analysis in the context of current historical research. They predicate their findings on the earlier confirmation of ‘salient relations between reading for pleasure and a wide range of educational social and personal benefits’ (2015, 116; cf. OECD, 2011). From such evidence they confirmed (Manuel & Carter, 2015, 126) the view that ‘becoming and being a confident committed reader’ is associated with reading for pleasure *and* has ‘wide-ranging effects on personal, intellectual, social and educational wellbeing of people from early childhood to old age’ (CYL, 2009, 11). The Australian studies have implications for the need of a radical shift in thinking about and developing policy for a reading pedagogy within literary studies that acknowledges the pursuit of pleasure as a primary goal.

The role that might be played by reading for pleasure in fostering mental wellbeing is treated as a matter of urgency by Jean Twenge, a professor of Psychology who has been researching generational differences for a quarter of a century. She considers that the ‘iGen’, that cohort of young people born into the internet world after 1995, is distinctively different from previous generations in its behaviour, its preferences and its attitudes. In her book called *iGen* (2017)she draws from four large representative surveys of eleven million subjects since the 1960s as well as from her own generational research, to argue persuasively that the ‘breakneck speed of technological change’ (Twenge, 5) has created distinctly different issues and generated social tensions and employment uncertainties which put ‘iGen’ members ‘at the forefront of the worse mental crisis in decades’ (3). In seeking antidotes for the current situation Twenge offers evidence-based reasons for taking advantage of the positive relationship between reading for pleasure and a range of benefits, including general well-being, by supporting strategies that focus on how to make every student ‘a big fan of reading’ (60). Twenge’s aspiration is echoed in conclusions to the Australian research studies when they make a case for radically new approaches to reading in the classroom in order to facilitate reading pedagogy that puts wide reading and pleasure at its centre (Manuel, 2012; Manuel & Carter, 2015).

### Imagination and research

The pleasure of reading is associated with imaginative activity, the connection of imagination with the joy ‘that comes from within’ (Warnock, 1976/1978, 78), and the relationship of imagination to memory, creativity and learning (Cole et al., 17–97). In her study of the imagination, Mary Warnock describes the pleasure of the ‘imaginative emotion’ as ‘part of the actual creation of experience’ (1976/1978, 206). It is for this reason, she believes, that the imagination is worth cultivating. It is surprising and perhaps even alarming, then, to discover that a literature review that analyses thirty-nine articles relating imagination to some specific area of knowledge in the curriculum (Paixao & Borges, 2018) finds that imagination was only ever ‘peripherally’ addressed’ (1).

The authors orient their study to a sociocultural theory, treating imaginative action as a psychological process, deeply grounded in and informed by reality and ‘real–world elements’ (7). Their view is congruent with Vygotsky’s conceptualisation of psychological processes as a system, in which every creative act has a long gestation, and in which memory, perception and imagination play a part (cf. Cole et al., 17–97). In this paradigm learning and imagination are understood as an essential psychological process for human development that expands human experience beyond the immediate reality, and the relationship suggests that imagination is a faculty that can be ‘repressed *or* fostered’ (Paixao & Borges, 2018, 8; cf. Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016).

The motif of an arts–related curriculum, which has been shown to foster ‘qualitative leaps in school performance in general’ (Paixao & Borges, 2018, 3), endorses the critique of the arts in the Australian curriculum written by Robyn Ewing, professor of teacher education and the arts (ACARA, 2017; cf. Ewing, 2020). She writes that ‘international and national research demonstrate that the Arts are intrinsic to individual and social emotional wellbeing … not only for our humanity but also for their transformative potential across the curriculum’ (Ewing, 2020, 75). The research of Fleer & Peers (2012) supports Ewing’s position on the arts and the Vygotskian perspective (Cole et al., 1978, 17–97) that imagination and cognition are ‘inextricably linked’ (Paixao & Borges, 2018, 5).

The patterns detected in the review of literature conducted by Paixao and Borges evoke personal reading memories. Shared readings of the novel *Emma* discussed in the first chapter flood my mind with recollections of the community ‘called into being’ (Greene, 2007, 564) by our combined effort to understand a fictional heroine. Similarly, research that links imagination and creativity to curiosity and the motivation to learn (cf. Ketsman, 2013) reminds me of how imagining the world in which Emma lived filled me with curiosity to enter related fields of learning: English social history to understand the times in which she lived; psychology to try to fathom her motivations; and literary criticism to find out how other readers understood the heroine.

The multiple perspectives in an anthology of studies about the assumptions that inform approaches to literary studies from the perspectives of practising educators (Dolin, Jones & Dowsett, 2017a) shed light on the role or status of curiosity and pleasure in reading practices encouraged in twenty-first century senior secondary school English classrooms in Australia. A number of the essays consider whether current assumptions about what matters in literary study might have led to a ‘neglect’ of the aesthetic, and by implication the imaginative, affective and pleasurable dimensions of reading (Quin, 2017, xvi). Well might that question be asked, given that the words ‘imagination’ and ‘empathy’ are notable absences from the index and by implication from consideration in any of the seventeen chapters with an interest in the way literature has been read in Australian secondary schools since 1945.

### Imagination and empathy

Maxine Greene’s writings on the arts and the imagination affirm the concerns associated with the neglect of the role of the imagination discussed in the preceding section. They have obvious affinities with writers for children who believe in the wonderment of reading and the unthought-of possibilities provided by the reading of imaginative stories (cf. Chambers, 2005, 2007, 2011; Egan, 1992). Her ‘unique attention to literature and the arts’ is explored in an imaginary conversation in which her ideas about how the imagination are related to freedom, ethics, democracy and aesthetics (Baldaccino, 2009, 1). Greene urges teachers to recover reading memories of ‘moments when imagination opened new worlds’ for them, and suggests that their personal enthusiasm can initiate students into ‘something grand and lustrous, beyond the everyday’ (Greene, 2007, 562). The germ of an idea for the inclusion of the writing of reading memoirs in the training of literature teachers might be teased from Greene’s words.

Greene argues persuasively that without imagination empathy would not be possible (Greene, 1995/2000a, 3). In recent years the field of empathy studies has developed across several academic disciplines to interact with ideas about reading, especially reading fiction (Hammond & Kim, 2014; cf. Keen, 2007/2010). The role played by empathy in the evolution of the human species has been rigorously examined by the evolutionary biologist, Frans de Waal (2009), who believes that, while empathy comes naturally to our species, it does not always find expression unless given encouragement. Recent neurological research suggests that reading imaginative fiction may be a fruitful way in which encouragement can be operationalised (cf. Kidd & Castano, 2013). Empathy as a benefit has been linked to better performance in a number of human areas of endeavour, including politics, law, business, ethics, medical care and education (Lindhé, 2016, 19). The oral history project in which I was involved and which I described in the *Preface* suggested to me and the teachers involved that empathy can play a role in raising the quality of educational performance. In her theorisation of the teaching-learning relationship, Roslyn Arnold (2005) concludes that affective and cognitive dimensions of learning are inseparable in a pedagogy in which empathic teachers (20-21,175-77) assist in the development of empathic intelligence.

### Empathy, fiction, and theory of mind

The affective approaches discussed in the previous section reflect a renewed interest in human relationships. This harks back to Adam Smith, his theory of moral sentiments published in 1759, Adam Smith (Macfie & Raphael, eds, 1976/1759), and consideration of what it is that makes human beings respond with sympathy, pity and/or compassion to the suffering of fellow individuals. Smith postulated ‘a process of imaginative identification’ (Hunt, 2007, p. 64) that moves on from the treatment of feelings and emotions in the early eighteenth-century sentimental novel of his own time to Austen’s treatment of the Box Hill episode in the novel *Emma* (Austen, 1816/2005a, 399-409); and of Mr Knightley’s indictment of Emma’s lack of empathy, in today’s currency, for Miss Bates. In the Wittgenstein-Foucault tradition of family resemblances, this traces the lineage of Austen’s fiction back to the influence of the sentimental novel rather than signalling a complete break from it.

The conceptualisation of reason as a site in which emotions and feelings are enmeshed, ‘for worse *and* for better’ (Damasio, 1994/2000, xii) is a salient factor in understanding the developing field of cognitive literary interdisciplinary studies. It offers new possibilities for understanding the relationship between the brain and reading. The contents of the *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies* (Zunshine, 2015) support the claim that the field is relational rather than unified, defined by diversity rather than coherence. A ‘consilience’ of literary studies with the evolutionary human sciences is not without opponents. The field has been challenged by a number of critics from within the literary community, one of whom describes it as a ‘bargain with the devil’ (Menand, 2005, 14). Nevertheless the field, which ranges over narrative, history, emotions, empathy, literary experience and cognitive theory, has generated both empirical and theoretic studies (Zunshine, 2015) that enrich our understanding of the relationship between reading and the brain.

With the entry of cognitive science into the literary field, there has been a shift from the strictures placed on fiction by postmodernists and by traditional views of literature as mimesis (Oatley, Mar & Djikic, 2013). The way has been opened for the conceptualisation of reading as a form of imaginative model-building, in which simulations of the social world are not only entertaining but useful:

One of the virtues of taking up this idea from cognitive science is that we can think that just as if we could benefit from spending time in a flight simulator…we could benefit from spending time with simulations of fiction in which we can enter many kinds of social worlds, and be affected by the characters we meet there (Oatley, Mar & Djikic, 2013, 237).

The proponents of this theory have conducted empirical studies which demonstrate that social reasoning has been improved by reading fiction. In a similar framework of ‘a more cooperative investigation of the cognition of literature’ (Jaén & Simon, 2012/2013, 24), a foundation has been laid to argue theoretically that literature is not just nice, but that it is necessary (Gerrig, 2012).

A call for literary cognitivism brings together the humanities and the science of human nature in the framework of a cognitive revolution in which literature and the arts play a leading role in the discovery of the human mind. Patrick Hogan presents cognitive science, literature and the arts as a constellation for reciprocal insights that, he claims, might save literary study from being ‘left on the dust heap of history’ (Hogan, 2003, 3). Like Steven Pinker (cf. 1997, 2015) he is optimistic about the ways in which the sciences of the mind can illuminate the ways in which language and literature work. They agree that the arts are central to understanding the human mind. Hogan underlines the significance of neurobiology and evolutionary biology in addressing the huge pedagogical problem of reading engagement. Neurobiology, he proposes, is a pathway to understanding literary emotion and the attraction readers feel for the fictional characters that inhabit a fictional universe. He investigates emotive responses to literature in which the narrative provided by the text is fused with memories stored in the reader’s imagination (cf. Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1987; Oatley, 2011). The aesthetic dimensions of the text such as rhythm, sound and imagery are postulated as a source of ‘fluttering’ or anticipation (Hogan, 2003, 4).

Within the parameters of a cognitive approach to literature, a theoretical perspective called Theory of Mind (ToM) (Leverage, Mancing, Schweickert, & William, 2011) has gained currency among scholars who work at the intersection between cognitive science and literary theory as a relational ‘dynamic’ (Zunshine, 2015, 1). The term was coined in the 1970s to refer to the ability to ‘impute states of mind to others and oneself’. The theoretical framework ‘has been associated with one of the fastest growing bodies of empirical research in psychology’, although it has its opponents (Leudar, & Costall, 2009/2011). Known as mind-reading, the capacity is predicated on the view that we are all mind-readers of varying degrees of expertise (cf. Ickes, 2003; Djicik, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013), and that the skills that we bring to acts of mind reading are also exercised and can be enhanced by reading fiction. Mind-reading is not considered to be fortuitous; it is dependent on approximate guesses about what others are thinking, at increasingly complex levels of social interaction: for example, mind-reading moves to a deeper level when ‘I’ proceeds from thinking about what ‘others’ are thinking, to thinking about what ‘others’ are thinking about what ‘I’ am thinking, and so on.

ToM is used as a research tool by Kidd and Castano (2013) for investigating whether reading fiction is related to more effective mind-reading skills, and whether literary fiction, as opposed to non-fiction or popular fiction, leads to better performance. The authors of this empirical research write:

We submit that fiction affects ToM processes because it forces us to engage in mind-reading and character construction. Not any kind of fiction achieves that, though. Our proposal is that it is literary fiction that forces the reader to engage in ToM processes (Kidd & Castano, 2013, 1).

This is partly because both the characters and the social world depicted in literary fiction exhibit a degree of complexity that encourages high order thinking in the form of inferences and insights. Narrative fiction provides models or simulations for achieving a form of experiential learning (cf. Mar & Oatley, 2008).

In her discussion of the ‘social brain’, Wendy Jones (2017) nominates the fictional character Emma as a supreme example of how an individual *learns* by passing through a series of mental processes from perception of an action, to its spontaneous emotional impact and a personal attunement that resonates with personal experience and personal judgment. Jones argues that these processes involve ‘different [brain] levels (cortical, subcortical) and domains (cognitive, emotional)’ (2017, 258). Jane Austen’s literary fiction has in fact become the gold standard for testing and defining the cognitive and affective effects of reading. In an experiment that ‘used fMRI and fMRI-compatible eye-tracking to explore cognitive differences between two modes of literary attention’, Natalie Phillips asked her subjects to read passages from novels by Jane Austen, switching between close reading as though preparing to write a formal essay and informal pleasure reading (Phillips, 2015, 57). The experiment focuses on literary attention, or more specifically, the cognitive dynamics of the different kinds of focus we bring to reading. This experiment grew out of Phillips' ongoing research about Enlightenment writers who were concerned about issues of attention span, or what they called ‘wandering attention’. Phillips (2015) believes that the global increase in blood flow during close reading suggests that multiple complex cognitive functions are brought into collaborative play when readers pay attention to literary texts. Blood flow also increased during pleasure reading, but in different areas of the brain. Phillips suggests that each style of reading may create distinct patterns in the brain, and that ‘each style of engagement has its own cognitive demands’ (63) that are more complex than the difference between active and passive reading.

Jane Austen’s fiction has been pressed into service in diverse fields of interest, including game theory (Chwe, 2013), evolutionary theory (Carroll, Gottschall, Johnson, & Kruger, 2012) and computer-based textual analysis (cf. Kerr, 2017). It has been noted that works of genius are ‘astoundingly patient of interpretation’ (Kermode, 1974, 429). This is certainly the case with Austen’s fiction. This may be because the domain within the parameters of her fictional universe appears to offer a tightly controlled knowledge area for study. Lisa Zunshine, a leading scholar in the field (2006, 2007, 2014, 2015), contends that the uniqueness of Austen’s ‘multiply-layered and mutually-reflecting subjectivity’ (Zunshine, 2007, 275) makes the insights of cognitive science uniquely suited to draw out the properties of the novels. In a frequently quoted manifesto, Zunshine delivers a powerful reason for valuing the reading of fiction:

If you want nonstop high-level sociocognitive complexity, simultaneous with non-stop active reorganization of perceptions and inferences, only fiction delivers. Teach less of it, and only students whose parents encourage them to read a lot of fiction on their own will still do well. The less fortunate others will end up with poor vocabularies and grades (Zunshine, 2014, 5).

Zunshine appropriates concepts from cognitive science to demonstrate how Austen’s ‘treatment of fictional consciousness’ (Zunshine, 2007, 276) experiments with and helps develop readers’ ‘evolved cognitive adaptations’ (294). She follows Butte’s formulation of Austen’s innovative representation of multiple ‘embedded states of mind as in “I know that you know that I know”…’ (Zunshine, 2007, 278). Her research at the intersection of science and literary theory (Zunshine, 2014) informs her theory that Jane Austen’s fiction has the potential to train readers to achieve complex levels of inference in the construction of meaning, thereby increasing readers’ capacity for ‘complex thinking *across all academic disciplines’* (Zunshine, 2014, 91) (emphasis added). The nature of Austen’s fiction, its focus on the personal growth of its heroines and the social relationships within small communities, allow for personal responses in which questions of empathy, perspective and decision-making are prime considerations.

### Reading, personal response and literary criticism

The historical curriculum survey of reading and response in senior secondary English (see *Appendix*) details the ways in which mandated modes of personal response have generated differences in the ways that fiction has been read over time. It is important to understand that reading pedagogy historically incorporates the idea of response as well as the text: ‘texts are not taught in isolation from response’ (Beavis, 2000, 53). The writings of two seminal twentieth century figures are essential reading for understanding the processes by which the pleasures of reading and response were gradually wound back in the second half of the twentieth century. The crucial educational roles played by F. R. Leavis (1943/1979; Leavis & Thompson, 1942/1964; McKillop, Bell, & Ford et al., 1996; Singh, 1986/2009) and Terry Eagleton (1983/2008, 1985/1986, 2003) have influenced orientations to literature and to reading in a way that is more complex and more controversial than a simple contrast between Leavisite close reading and poststructuralist reorientations to literature and meaning.

Leavis’s influence is seen in the reforms of the 1960s as they filtered into senior secondary English classrooms where Jane Austen’s novels had been the most frequently prescribed for reading for several decades. They mandated *personal* responses in the framework of an understanding of reading as a way of inculcating moral values (cf. Mathieson, 1975), an expression of literary discernment and moral discrimination. The 1990s reform reflects a radical shift in educational discourses, increasingly influenced by the emerging field of sociology and cultural studies (cf. Walton, 2008). As a result institutionalised schooling itself was subject to sociological critique and conceptualised as a form of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1978/1990), and, in Eagleton’s words, the ‘very meaning’ of literature, reading and criticism underwent ‘deep alteration’ (1983/2008, xi). The critical thinking mode of response to literature sponsored by the Leavis pedagogy (Leavis, 1943/1979) was reoriented politically, theorised as critical literacy in the light of literary theory informed by ‘the pioneering works’ of a group of a diverse contingent of European intellectual theorists (Eagleton, 2003, 1), and ideas about literary criticism moved into Paul Ricoeur’s territory of suspicious hermeneutics and critique (Ricoeur, 1970/2008).

Leavis’s literary identity had been caught up in the literary and cultural cross-currents of the 1930s, (Gross, 1992, 28-301) and entangled with a personal biography fraught with disrupted relationships and contested attitudes to popular culture, like those recorded as ‘the decline and fall of Cambridge English’ in the *Memoirs of a Leavisite* (Ellis, 2013, xi). Terry Eagleton, who succeeded Leavis as a missionary influence for a particular reading pedagogy (cf. Eagleton, 1985/1986), is similarly enmeshed in his relationship with literary ideology and ‘its most intimate relations to questions of social power’ (20). Eagleton concedes sceptically that ‘English students in England today are ‘Leavisites’, *whether they know it or not* [because] that current has entered the bloodstream of English studies…’ (1983/2008, 27; emphasis added). He encouraged teachers, especially those of a younger generation, to take an extreme position against the older generation of teachers and the bourgeois humanism that, it was claimed, informs their literary pedagogy (Eagleton, 1985/1986, 95–104). Eagleton’s arguments are part of a discourse that refreshed and re-invigorated literary study, but in the process of politicising reading, the casualty was the ‘creative imagination’ (Eagleton, 1983/2008, 180). The losers were student-readers for whom the prospect of reading pleasure, already compromised by anxiety about a high-stake examination, was further compromised by the storm of theory in which their reading was framed.

There are several points of comparison between Eagleton and Leavis. Both exhibited an unrelenting zeal in their endeavour to influence teachers and transport their versions of reading pedagogy into school classrooms. Eagleton’s writing is characterised by a compelling vigour, but he faces the charge that he lacks ‘self-reflection’ (Mullan, 2003, 1). Similarly, Leavis refused to defend his critical decisions in abstract or theoretical terms. Both men might be accused of tautology or circularity. Eagleton’s methodology, especially his habit of reading texts in the light of his own political theory and then using his theory as evidence to support his theory, is marred by a circularity.

It is not clear whether Eagleton’s method is a political strategy or an indication of a ‘lack of conceptual clarity’ (Stow, 2007, 75). In this respect he might be compared with Leavis who also revealed a glaring tautology in the single sentence that makes his signature contribution to the conceptualisation of the great tradition of the novel:

Jane Austen, in fact, is the inaugurator of the great tradition of the English novel – and *by ‘great tradition’ I mean the tradition to which what is great in English literature belongs* (Leavis, 1948/1972, 139) (emphasis added).

This has left Leavis open to lampooning in the novel *Possession* (Byatt, 1990) in which two young academics combine scholarship with passion. In its turn, theory is subjected to satire in the novel *Nice Work*, by the literary scholar, David Lodge (1998/2011): a piece of evidence for the effectiveness of fiction in revealing rather than concealing, as Eagleton is inclined to argue, the paradoxes in the cultural discourses embedded in literary fictions.

### Ethical reading and the moral imagination

Unlike Leavis and Eagleton Martha Nussbaum brings a philosopher’s expertise and sensibility to the act of reading which, she believes, should ‘manifest itself in public life’ (Stow, 2007, 45). She has made a significant contribution to understanding the relationship between reading, the flourishing of the individual, and the safeguarding of democracy (Nussbaum, 1990/1992, 1995, 1997, 2002, 2010a). She argues that reading novels will enhance many aspects of public life, social, economic and especially ethical. In her seminal work, *Love’s Knowledge* (1990/1992), she investigates the literary fiction of Henry James, framing the novels as moral enquiries into how we should live. She explores and attempts to clarify the relationship between moral philosophy and literature (cf. Diamond, 1993). She makes a claim, endorsed in the present study, that the novels read over a lifetime operate as philosophical ‘spheres of reflection’ (Nussbaum, 1990/1992, 11). She also contends, in her argument for why democracy needs the humanities, that the cultivation and exercise of investigative skills associated with understanding fiction can be applied to making everyday decisions and choices to support a world culture ‘capable of addressing the world’s most pressing problems’ (Nussbaum, 2010a, 7).

 Like Greene (1995/2000a, 2007), Nussbaum establishes a nexus between the imagination and the accumulation of skills that cultivate humanity. Nussbaum enlists the concept of the moral imagination to underline the significance of fiction in teaching readers to think empathically, creatively and intelligently. Evoking Socrates (Nussbaum, 1997) she proposes that citizens who ‘cultivate their humanity’ acquire the capacity to understand that human beings are bound by ‘ties of recognition and concern’ (9–11). Her philosophical disposition is congruent with the view of Noah Yuval Harari (2011/2014). Both the philosopher and the evolutionary historian believe that one of the dangers we face as the pressures of economic management dominate the cultural landscape is the loss of liberal humanism (Harari, 256-259). From a similar perspective Eli Wiesel continued to support Enlightenment precepts that inform liberal humanism although he agreed that the great literature studied by perpetrators of the Holocaust failed to thwart their lack of humanity (Orr, 1991/1996). He holds reading pedagogy rather than literature responsible: ‘It emphasised theories instead of values, concepts rather than human beings, abstractions rather than consciousness, answers instead of questions, ideology and efficiency rather than conscience’ (Orr, 1991/1996, 1). The pedagogical imperative implicit in Wiesel’s manifesto is a key impulse in the purpose of this inquiry, drawing attention to those aspects of literature that relate to the affective element in the reading act.

### Affective reading

A number of books published in the second decade of the twenty-first century have argued strongly that readers should be encouraged to engage with imaginative fiction through its appeal to the emotions. A plea for putting the emotions back into literary interpretation drives Jean-Francois Vernay’s study of the multiple possibilities of reading (Vernay, 2016). His argument is as exuberant as his conceptualisation of what he calls the ‘seduction’ of fiction:

Let us shout it from the rooftops. Literature provides a space so rich with possibilities because it is able to offer much more than expression or revelation. The text, the illusion and representation, is but a mere façade concealing a subtext that begs to be discovered (Vernay, 2).

In his attempt to cross the boundary between ‘professional’ and lay readers, Vernay argues for the integration of affective and analytical approaches to reading. He believes that an approach that acknowledges the many ways in which emotions play a part in the text and that encourages responses to the text that relate to the reader’s emotions might seduce readers into a relationship with the writer.

Reading with feeling is a way of responding to fiction that was once covered by a favoured term for reading responses, especially at school: appreciation. In her exploration of the mode of appreciation, the philosopher Shirley Feagin (1996) develops a psychological model for appreciation as a way of understanding how the imagination can be harnessed by the writer’s choice of language, imagery and ideas. A core idea in her theoretical construction is the distinction she makes between appreciation and interpretation, the way fiction is read that ‘abstracts’ from ‘particular interpretive commitments’ (Feagin, 3). Although written two decades before Rita Felski’s most recent thoughts about how fiction entices readers (Felski, 2020), there is, I suggest, a natural flow from one to the other, as a way of shifting to a postcritical reading pedagogy discussed in the following section of the literature review.

### Postcritical reading and connections

Notions of reading response as ‘appreciation’ were, to some extent, congruent with the ideas of critical thinking that characterised reading in the Leavis tradition. However, such reading practices were dealt a critical blow in the 1970s. Acts of appreciation were perceived as being tied to the inculcation of readers in general into reading responses that defer to society’s dominant power structures. By the 1990s the appreciative aspects of reading literature were replaced in many classrooms by what were hoped to be remedial acts of critique, a mode of reading that ‘seeks to wrest from a text a different account than it gives of itself … [assuming] that it will meet with and overcome a resistance’, and always liking ‘to have the last word’ (Felski, 2012, 4).

Rita Felski, Professor of English at the University of Virginia and author of ‘*The Limits of Critique’* (2015), conducts a ‘close-up scrutiny of a *thought-style* that slices across differences of field and discipline’ (Felski, 2015, 2). She suggests that critique has had a ‘halo effect’ that disguises its inherent negativity (Felski, 2012, 6). In an interview for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (Guisti, 2019), Felski expounds on her interest in ‘a reinvigorated phenomenology of reading that elucidates, in rich and fascinating detail, its immersive and affective dimensions’ (8). She coined the term ‘postcritical reading’, as an alternative to critique (17) and harbinger of a ‘new surge of interest’ (8) in other ways of reading. Her formulation is congruent with the methodology of the present study and the application of more ‘intellectual rigor’ to interpreting reading memoirs or, in Felski’s words, ‘accounts of *why* people value literature and *how* they engage with literature’ (Giusti, 2019, 16). Felski, concerned with developing a vocabulary with which to convey the multiplicity of ways for connecting with art, makes a case for ‘attachment’ as a keyword for the humanities and a core concept in examining the process and pleasure of reading ‘across time’ (Giusti, 2019, 11).

Felski believes that ‘evaluation is inescapable’ (Giusti, 2019, 16), but she is not concerned with distinctions between high and popular culture. She points out that reading can ‘also be a way of escaping one’s milieu and everything it stands for’ (19), and that even this way of reading, a process described vividly in Orhan Pamuk’s 1994 novel, *The New Life*, is also a way of forging ‘connections’ (Felski, 19). Her views about affectivity are central and coincide, for different but associated reasons, with E. M. Forster’s view of the crucial role of affectivity in making connections.

‘Only connect!’ exclaims one of the characters in Forster’s novel about human connections and human affection, *Howard’s End* (1910/2012, 195). In a wider literary context the phrase has assumed a broader purchase, suggestive of the manifold ways in which the elements of fiction that Forster identifies, story, plot, character and others, form a network of interconnections and ultimately, connect the writer, the reader, and the text as well. Felski’s alternate and preferred way of reading, described as a form of affective and cognitive attunement expounded in her forthcoming book (Felski, 2020), resonates with Forster’s phrase and provides a ‘vocabulary of passions, affects and emotional investments’ (Guisti, 7), appropriate to a postcritical approach.

### The potential of memoir

Attunement is a key to the methodology developed for the re-appraisal of three of Jane Austen’s novels and their potential to provide student-readers with skills and insights relevant to navigating life in a contemporary democracy and a global economy. In analysing the novels, educational, literary and Austen scholarship are augmented by a range of reflections on the attunement to fiction in general and specifically to Jane Austen, that has added pleasure and profit to the needs and purposes of a selected group of lifelong readers. That reading memoirs, my own and those of other lifetime readers, are incorporated into the methodological framework for this study is congruent with the aim to ground the analysis of Austen’s fiction in an epistemology that approaches knowledge and sense-making from a phenomenological perspective.

Halsey writes that research in the field of reading and response is hampered by the fact that ‘the act of reading is very rarely recorded’ (Halsey, 2013, 9). However, a prevailing disposition of contemporary readers to engage with their reading lives in the form of reading memoirs might address the gap. Like the meditations of the novelist Marilyn Robinson (2012), most memoirs dwell on the rewards of reading from the perspectives of both ‘pleasure’ and ‘meaning’ (Robinson, 19). As a fiction writer she speaks of the obligation of fiction to ‘simulate the hourliness and dailiness of human life’ (20) and implies that reading fiction offers an experience in which the mystery of life assumes a ‘human scale, a great reality for all of us in the course of ordinary life’ (21).

Whilst the limits and partialities of memory must be taken into account, its uses as a ‘cultural trope’ and as ‘an aspect of everyday consciousness’, enriches the reflective life and provides a source for a multi-layered construction of meaning. Meditations on lived experience serve as a ‘method of scholarly analysis and argumentation’ and ‘an affirmation of subjectivity in intellectual work’ (Keightley, 2008, 56). Several examples of writing that incorporate personal recall and reflective narrative, have been analysed in a study by Margaret Willard-Traub (2007, 188). The author concludes that ‘memoir as method’ presents an ideological challenge to traditional disciplinary discourses by means of which the relationship between scholars and their readers is reshaped.

In selecting from the many reading memoirs that now appear on publishers’ lists, the choices have been made with an eye to balancing multiple perspectives: the act of reading, the pleasure of reading and the enduring reading appeal of Jane Austen’s fiction. So, for example, Damon Young (2016) frames his life as a reader in the notion of reading as an art, and the role reading has played in giving him both bliss and a feeling of empowerment. Harry Eyres (2013) draws lessons for life as he filters what he considers the enduring legacy of literature through poems written by Horace and translated by himself, writing lyrically of wine, poetry, and friendships. In her hybrid of literary criticism and memoir Vivian Gornick (2020) delves deeply into her area of expertise as a literary commentator to look for those reading experiences which have succeeded in sense-making about the big questions. That made her the right sort of reader for the present study.

Rebecca Mead turned to George Eliot and the novel *Middlemarch* to explore her own reading life (Mead, 2014), while Susan Hill (2009/2020) gives a lively account of her year of re-reading books from her own crowded bookshelves, and what she learned from her re-readings. Joseph Epstein’s 2014 record of his literary education is both erudite and accessible, stressing as it does the role of reading in self-development. Some memoirs are devoted exclusively to reflections on Jane Austen’s fiction. Maggie Lane (2014), in a fascinating study of what it is like to grow old in Austen’s world of family and of fiction, focuses on an interesting but specific area of anthropological interest. Rachel Cohen’s (2020) study of what Austen meant to her in times of her emotional turbulence and to others, including many writers she admires, pays a moving tribute to Austen’s capacity to provide personal consolation. It is a capacious view of the breadth of Austen’s influence: her impact on critics, her relationship to her turbulent times, the link between close reading and memoirs, and Darcy’s letter as a mini memoir to testify to his good character as a gentleman. Cohen’s re-readings of Austen are filled with personal insights that amplify existing scholarship. She draws attention to the role of men in recording human experience (Cohen, 2020, 40–41), highlighting how, in Austen’s hand, the pen tells a new story about women.

In the selected memoirs of Susannah Fullerton and William Deresiewicz, however, Austen’s strong pedagogical presence is more finely attuned to the mood and purposes of the present study. Susannah Fullerton (2017) condenses a lifetime addiction with Jane Austen into a slender volume that combines appreciation and enthusiasm with a breadth of literary knowledge about Austen, her fiction and her value as cultural capital. Fullerton’s popularity as a literary tour guide who emphasises the appeal of places associated with fictional characters gives substance to Katie Halsey’s observation that ‘the effectiveness of Austen’s characterization is such that a fictional character gives importance and symbolic meaning to a real place’, citing as an example Tennyson’s interest in the Cobb at Lyme Regis for its association with the fictional character, Louisa Musgrove, rather than for its scenic appeal (Halsey, 2013, 141). Deresiewicz (2011) reads Austen’s six novels with infectious energy, attributing to each one a specific aspect of his personal development. As an Austen reader he engages with his memories of reading the novels to explore the ways in which he needed to grow up in order to discover the world outside himself. He recalls and elaborates on his early premonition that Austen ‘would teach me everything… about everything that matters’ (1).

## SECTION 2

###  Jane Austen’s Fiction: more than mere marriage

In her introduction to an anthology of articles and essays Deirdre Lynch (2000) suggests that anxiety over how Jane Austen novels are read ‘seems to shade over into anxiety over Literature – over the viability of that category … which is said to be losing currency in our own time’ (Lynch, 2000, 8). Lynch and her contributors share Lionel Trilling’s view that that there is something both ‘interesting and important’ in the number, diversity and range of responses to Austen ‘that have accumulated … since her publication of *Sense and Sensibility’* (Lynch, 2000, 5). Lynch is not interested in adjudicating ‘between faithful and unfaithful readings’. A common theme that informs all articles is the belief that there is something misguided in the idea that the ‘values and insights of literary texts are fully actualized at the moment of their creation’ (7). The articles reflect the tensions between alternative Austens, ‘between the historical conditions in which these alternatives are produced and between the dominant fictions of Englishness and of home by which each is inflected’ (6). Lynch’s selection of articles affirms the value of those anthologies that give a sense of the variety and validity of the alternate and sometimes contradictory values and insights identified in Austen’s texts over time (cf. Carson, 2009/2010; Copeland & McMaster, 1997/2012; Lambdin, & Lambdin, 2000).

The anthology opens with Claudia Johnson’s influential essay on two cultures of ‘Austenian reading communities’ with its history of a ‘nonnormative tradition’ of reading Austen, especially with regard to possibilities of adult sexuality, largely forgotten by recent Austen scholars (Johnson, 2000, 15, 24–44). Ranging through nineteenth and twentieth century responses to the novels the anthology concludes with two articles that focus on issues raised by Austen’s barely visible characters, ‘the retinue of servants and their high profile in screen adaptations of the novels’ (Sales, 2000) and the invisible slave labour that supports the affluent lifestyle of the Bertrams in *Mansfield Park* (Fraiman, 2000).

In the present study, key moments in the evolution of Austen’s critical legacy are identified and explored through the literature, to illustrate the extent to which readings of her novels reflect and/or challenge cultural dispositions as well as literary conventions. It has been remarked that Austen herself would certainly have been surprised and perhaps ‘amused’ to know ‘what an immense number of critical works would be devoted to her’ (Hodge, 1972, cited in Mazzeno, 2011, 1). No doubt she would also have regretted that the financial interest she received from royalties during her lifetime was not equalled by the interest displayed in her and her six novels after her life came to a premature end in her forty-first year. The voluminous literature that informs Jane Austen Studies is a fertile source for understanding how Austen’s novels came to be described in such ‘appreciative’ terms as the novelist Eudora Welty’s ‘constellation of six bright stars’ (Welty, 1969/2009, 10); and why the reason to read the novels came to be represented, as it is by Harold Bloom in his foreword to Susannah Carson’s anthology (Carson, 2010, v–vi) by the proposition that ‘she seems to know us better than we know ourselves’. Austen’s critical legacy is a unique record of ‘effusions of fancy’, to quote George Austen’s ambivalent inscription on his daughter’s third volume of juvenilia (Sabor, 2006, xxvi).

While the research literature has been interested in Jane Austen’s presence in the literary hall of fame, proclaimed, as already noted, by F. R. Leavis in one of his less well-constructed arguments, (Leavis, 1948/1972, 13–18), it has been relatively silent about how Austen’s novels came to be installed in the classroom, making her ‘a true stalwart of the English curriculum’ (Niemtus, 2015, 1). It has also been silent on the matter of what it is between the covers of her novels that has warranted their enduring presence in the reading lives of students for two centuries. In reflecting on my own introduction to Austen’s fiction at school followed by a lifetime of re-reading her novels, I am optimistic that the present study might fill some of those silences.

The abundance of Austen scholarship includes, perhaps is initiated by, an unsigned review of *Emma* by Sir Walter Scott, the celebrated historical novelist, which was issued in 1816. Although he himself was pushing the novel in a different direction from Austen, Scott recognised that she, in representing scenes ‘of common occurrence’ (Scott, 1815/1816, 63) as the new form of ‘modern’ novel writing, was in a class ‘almost alone’ (64). He conceded that the scenes were of such ‘spirit and originality’ that the excitement expected of the Romance was never missed. Writing several years later, after Austen’s death, Scott recorded in his Journal (1826) that Jane Austen was a ‘young lady’ whose ‘finely written novel of *Pride and Prejudice’* revealed her ‘talent for describing the involvement of feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with’ (Scott, 1826, 106).

The extract from Scott’s Journal in which he makes the celebrated distinction between his own ‘big bow-wow strain’ and Austen’s ‘exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting’ (Scott, 1826, 106) is a frequently quoted Austen reference. It remains a key recollection of my course in English 1 at the University of Sydney in 1949. The senior lecturer, Mr Harold Oliver, read it very slowly in a tone that suggested the limitations, not of Austen, but of Scott’s literary perceptions. He would have applauded Anthony Mandal’s opinion that ‘this interpretation, while acknowledging the subtlety of Austen’s style, occludes much of the vibrancy and range that her works also evidence’ (Mandal, 2005, 23). Nevertheless, Scott revealed a breadth of literary perspective and delicacy of expression rare for the time.

Since the appearance of Scott’s review, the Austen critical legacy has expanded to include studies that consider not only the fictional universe of the novels, but the historical context in which Austen wrote and the context in which they are now read. In her introduction to the fiction of Austen’s time Mary Waldron (1999/2001) synthesises the evolution of Austen’s critical legacy. She argues that by historicising Austen’s fiction readers ‘run the risk of losing the novel’ (Waldron, 12). She also considers what Mazzeno calls the ‘explosion in Austen studies [that] began after the Second World War’ (Mazzeno, 2011, 2) and that has continued apace, as the bibliographical record confirms (cf. Chapman, 1953; Gilson, 1982/1997, cited in Mazzeno, 266). Since that time there has been a critical reaction against the nostalgia of the novels ‘for a more settled and reliable moral and social scene’ (Waldron, 1999/2001, 8). The Marxist perspective in particular challenges ‘the kind of radiance’ that accompanies Austen’s apparent ‘confidence’ about the future of society (Kettle, 1953/1969, 167). Waldron identifies another strand of adverse criticism grounded in opposition to Q. D. Leavis’s view of Austen ‘as a universally involved but free spirit’ (Waldron, 1999/2001, 8; cf. Mudrick, 1952).

Two volumes that record and examine Austen’s critical heritage from 1812 until 1940 set the goalposts high for research and commentary on her reception up until that time (Southam, 1968; 1987/2009). They include a record of responses to Austen’s fiction, culled from ‘contemporary comments and reviews and partly through the historical and bibliographical details of the novels’ publication’ (Southam, 1968, 4). Brian Southam, as editor, frames the criticism in a scholarly discussion of literary, historical and cultural contexts. His meticulous research has provided a source for understanding Austen’s contribution to the novel genre on which later scholars have been able to draw for their own scholarship (cf. Waldron, 1999/2001, 167–169).

Southam’s introduction to the first volume of Jane Austen’s critical record (Southam, 1968, 1–33) emphasises distinctive qualities of Austen’s fiction that have been recognised at watershed critical moments. Walter Scott describes her talent for providing ‘portraits from early life’ (Scott, 1815/16, 64). Archbishop Whately detects Austen’s capacity to ‘concentrate, as it were, into a small compass, the net result of wide experience’ (Whately, 1821, 93) and praises her for resisting the didactic gesture. George Lewes applauds her above all novelists for ‘the economy of art’ and her ‘easy adaptation of means to end’ (Lewes, 1859, 152). Julia Kavanagh remarks on her ‘keener sense of disappointment than of joy fulfilled’ (Kavanagh, 1862, 194), while Margaret Oliphant wonders at ‘so fine a wit and so keen a sense of the ridiculous’ (Oliphant, 1870, 220). Richard Simpson heaps praise on her ‘Shakespearean characters’, perfectly discriminated (Simpson, 1870, 249), and more important, perceives ‘irony’, grounded in the critical faculty, as a condition of her art (243).

Farrer’s exuberant centenary tribute to Jane Austen draws attention to the ‘periods of pleasure repeated’ to be derived from multiple readings of the novel *Emma*(Farrer, 1917, 266). Henry James appears to be distracted, by his reading of the family biography and its associations with Austen’s ‘work basket [and] her tapestry flowers’ (James, 1905, 231), from recognising the painstaking craftsmanship which underpins what he calls her ‘narrow unconscious perfection of form’ (James, 1883, 179). Virginia Woolf puts a higher value on the perfect ‘balance of her gifts’ (Woolf, 1923/1925, 281), speculating that if she had not died so soon Austen ‘would have been the forerunner of Henry James, and of Proust’ (283).

As an object of critical inquiry Austen’s achievements have been viewed from a variety of perspectives over two centuries of her currency as a fiction writer. Mazzeno’s broad survey focuses on how Austen has been treated in postmodern critical terms, arguing that her work has been ‘interpreted quite differently by critics whose own predilections often influence the way they approach Austen’s fiction’ (Mazenno, 2011, 2). Although he concentrates on Austen’s reputation within the scholarly community, Mazzeno makes the penetrating observation that the many adaptations of the novels for screen and television that have positioned Austen as a figure of importance in popular culture are in fact forms of criticism. Similarly, the many written adaptations in the form of prequels and sequels ‘springboard off Austen’s fiction to create new tales, attempting to give viewers or readers the same sensations (usually warm, fuzzy ones) that many people get from the original fiction’ (2011, 3).

### Jane Austen: A particular kind of person

In her analysis of critical responses between 1830 and 1970, Nicola Trott (2005) concludes that in the nineteenth century the critical focus was directed primarily to Austen as ‘a particular kind of person’. The first biographical account of Jane Austen was produced by her family. It has been described as a Victorian ‘project of domestication’ by Austen scholar, Kathryn Sutherland who regards it as essentially ‘dishonest’ (Sutherland, 2002, xix, xx) in its dramatic misrepresentation of Austen’s artistic consciousness. As Waldron argues persuasively, Austen had firm views about how the novel should be crafted in order to represent the absurdities of the society it projected. In particular she regarded as absurd the ‘fixed moral programme that justified the existence of many a contemporary novel’ (Waldron, 1999/2001, 13). Her continual reference in the novels to contemporary writers are testimony to her scepticism in this regard:

Austen’s disagreement with contemporary assumptions about fiction, then, resulted in a demonstration that the novel form was capable of containing more uncertainties and unanswered questions than had before been thought, and that it could still identify issues of principle without (as she wrote in *Mansfield Park*) dealing in extremes of ‘guilt’ and ‘misery’ (Waldron, 14).

It is clear, according to Ian Watt (1963) that Austen, like Shakespeare, was an ironic commentator on her contemporaries, using ‘imitation and exaggeration’ as techniques to express the critical spirit that ‘lies at the foundation of her artistic faculty’ (Watt, 1963, 6).

The family *Memoir* failed to convey any such message of Austen’s artistic sophistication. Until recently Austen’s favourite brother Henry was considered, ‘unequivocally and *without justification’* (Wells, 2017, 1; emphasis added), to be the author of the first biographical communication offered to the public (Austen-Leigh, 2002, 145–154). However, whether or not Henry was responsible for the claim that Austen cared for neither fame nor profit from work that ‘had cost her nothing’ (140), the *Biographical Notice* established the tone of understatement about Austen’s professional attitude to writing fiction that delayed a proper understanding of her status as a writer and it was certainly perpetuated in subsequent family memoirs (Austen-Leigh and Austen-Leigh, 1913/2006; Austen-Leigh, M. c. 1923). In her introduction to the earliest family *Memoir*, Kathryn Sutherland concludes that the family wrote in a ‘spirit of censorship as well as communication’ (Sutherland, 2002, xxi) that affected perceptions of the author and her novels for at least a century. It is clear from the close scrutiny of what survived of the letters written by Austen to her sister, Cassandra (Le Faye, 2011), that, contrary to family legend, both money and her reputation as a writer were hugely important issues in her life.

 Henry James’s observations of Austen illustrate how easily the biographical material produced by the family intrudes into critical commentary. Both his imagery and his language in an excerpt from an essay in *The House of Fiction* (James, 1905/1914), echo the domestic content and tone of recollections of their Aunt, bent over her embroidery in a cool part of the house, appended to the 1870 memoir (Austen-Leigh, 2002, 157–182). The irony of his analogy of Austen to ‘the brown thrush who tells his [sic!] story from the garden bough’ (James, 1905/194, 231) is that, reading Austen in the context of the *Memoir*, James fails to recognise his own debts to Austen’s artistic achievement. I have been struck, for example, by an intriguing family resemblance between Isabel Archer and Elizabeth Bennet that causes me to wonder whether traces of Elizabeth’s literary genes can be detected in Isabel’s genome; whether, from an intertextual perspective, Lizzy’s soul-searching over Darcy’s proposal is a blueprint for Isabel’s midnight meditation; and what, if anything, contemporary student-readers can learn from the fictional soul-searching experiences of these nineteenth century heroines.

In Southam’s magisterial discussion of Austen’s critical heritage he provides rich biographical commentary as well. He calls the *Memoir* ‘an endearing fiction’ (Southam, 1987/2009, 4). Kathryn Sutherland, we know, is more sceptical, capturingthe missing nuances of a family record that aimed to ‘rescue her from oblivion’ without piercing ‘the obscurity of her domestic retirement’ (J E Austen-Leigh, 1871, in Sutherland, 2002, 9). Early non-family biographers approached their task with deference to the family (cf. Jenkins, 1938). Mary Lascelles’s study also combined Austen’s life with her work, providing critical commentary that examined ‘the story-teller’s peculiar problems’ (Lascelles, 1939/1969, v). Following a biographical approach that kept more or less to the family script (cf. Cecil, 1935/1978), later biographers have added speculation and inference to the sparse details that make up the known facts of her life.

The complexity of the relationship between Austen’s biographical record and her critical history took a dramatic turn with D. W. Harding’s psychology-driven re-reading of Austen herself as ‘a great but conflicted novelist’ (Mazzeno, 2011, 58). Partly as a response to the Janeite effusions of literary men (cf. Southam, 1968, 1987/2009), Harding’s paper was delivered as a lecture to the March 1939 meeting of the Literary Society of Manchester University. Harding considers earlier depictions of Austen by the female novelists, Julia Kavanagh (Kavanagh, 1862) and Margaret Oliphant (Oliphant, 1870) as a gentle satirist to give a ‘false impression’ (Harding, 1939, 34).

Rather than identifying satire and didacticism as an authorial intention, Harding argues that Austen’s underlying drive was the need to *express* but also *regulate* her critical attitudes toward people in real life, some of whom she detested, and some of whom she cared for and did not wish to offend. A problem with Harding’s analysis is his focus on Austen as a person. There is no analysis of ‘language and devices of style’ (Southam, 1987/2009, 127) to account for the liveliness and appeal of the heroines, whom Harding treats as mere vehicles for her personal ‘eruptions of fear and hatred into the relationships of everyday social life’ (Harding, 1940, 350). His claim that her books are ‘read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked’ (Harding, 1940, 346–362; 347) contradicts, in an amusing way, Reginald Farrer’s earlier perception that the reason she was ‘thoroughly disliked’ by some readers was actually the way their own features were discernible in Austen’s ‘fools’ (Farrer, 1917, 246).

Following Harding’s trail, readings of both Austen as a person and of her works as fiction have increasingly paid attention to a more psychologically complex Jane Austen (cf. Tomalin, 2001). For example, her frantically busy lifestyle (Byrne, 2013), and her exercise of personal freedom through her writing (Mantel, 2007) have informed more recent readings of her works. Such contemporary views have shattered Austen’s nineteenth century biographical shell, even with its ‘contradictory guises’ (Johnson 1990, xiii). The novelist was no longer limited to her role as a spinner of domestic and romantic idylls, or in the final decades of the century, defined by the status, assigned to her by the nowadays controversial figure of F. R. Leavis, as ‘the first modern novelist’ in the great tradition of English fiction; a canonical novelist of ‘unqualified greatness’ (Leavis, 1948/1972, 18, 16). The scene had been set for Leavis’s evaluation by Reginald Farrer in 1917 (Farrer, 1917).

Farrer’s exuberant tribute, delivered on the centenary of Austen’s death, reacted against the family rendition of Austen’s ‘Victorian gentility’ (Southam, 1987/2009, 4). He drew together a number of significant themes associated with Austen’s ‘pre-eminence’ (245). These range from comparisons of Austen and Shakespeare (246; cf. Wiltshire, 1999) to the significant role her novels played in bringing comfort to readers, including, as Southam recorded, scholars and artists like ‘the eminent orientalist Cowell’ who was ‘composed’ by nightly readings of the novels ( Southam, 1987/2009, 9).

From a dramatically different world, the First World War soldier-reader in his ‘water-logged trench’ (Farrer, 1917, 246), depicted in Kipling’s short story, *The* *Janeites* (1926), testifies to the enduring appeal of Austen’s fiction to a remarkably broad range of ‘passionate amateur readers’ (Wells, 2011/2013, 20, 52). Among the studies that focus on the fascination that Austen holds for her readers, Kathryn Sutherland’s study of *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives* (2005) nominates ‘the biographer’s baggage’ (55–117) as a phenomenon worthy of specific attention. The idea of ‘Janeites in the trenches’ (Sutherland, 2005, 16–23), for example, initiates a view of Austen and her personal life as embodied in her heroines. This synthesis is one of the features of Jane Austen Societies that have proliferated internationally. Their interest in ‘quiz-taking [and] ballroom-dancing’ (Lynch, 2000, 16; cf. Fullerton, 2012) is a phenomenon that is inevitably associated with Austen scholarship, in the same way that the establishment of Jane Austen in her cult status is inextricably bound up with ideas about who Jane Austen was as a person.

### Responding to Jane Austen

Much has been written about Jane Austen in the context of other people and phenomena: Austen as a banker’s sister (Clery, 2017), as a parson’s daughter (Collins, 2007) and as a Regency exemplar (Cecil, 1935/1978). The intricate web of biographical speculations is striking in itself, and for what it suggests about the power of Austen’s imagination to connect with a multiplicity of ideas about human experience and human culture. Over and above the biographical context, the diversity and range of responses to Austen’s fiction add a layer of complexity to the interpretive challenge of the novels. Traditionally, critics comment on the perspicacity of her observations about everyday life and relationships, her mastery of the comic spirit, and her capacity as a literary craftsperson to develop character and control the narrative. Since the middle of the century, critical scholarship has taken a number of turns, Freudian, Marxist, socio-political, feminist, and post-colonial included, as well as continuing interest in historical and literary perspectives (Marxen, 2015, 2).

Each critical focus brings a different vocabulary and a particular set of assumption to the critical task. Prior to the 1970s gender issues were addressed, although not within any particular theoretical framework, by examining how Austen’s female characters lived and related to each other. Subsequently the focus was on the degree to which Austen accepted, resisted or was complicit in maintaining the status quo of women in a patriarchal and authoritarian society. The latter view has been strongly and influentially argued by Marilyn Butler (1975), who grounds her claims for Austen’s conservatism in her choice to write and publish novels of a particular pre-existing kind. Claudia Johnson (1990) considers the ramifications of Austen’s status as a specifically female novelist. She claims that ‘the precondition of Austen’s posthumous admittance into the canon was an apparent contentment to work artfully within carefully constructed boundaries which have been termed feminine’ (xiv). She concedes that contemporary critics have linked Austen to philosophical and intellectual discourses of her time, but regrets that:

Marilyn Butler – who has argued persuasively for Austen’s relationship to the postrevolutionary [French Revolution] ‘war of ideas’ – contends at last not that her ideas were engaged and developed by that very war, but rather that ‘old-fashioned notions’ were ‘given to her’ by the ‘sermons’ and ‘conduct books’ that somehow ‘formed her mind’ (Johnson, 1990, xviii).

Johnson includes Austen among female ‘warriors of ideas’. Her aim is to rescue her from nineteenth century critics who patronised Austen ‘even as they grouped her with Shakespeare’ (Johnson, 1990, xvi). She examines the ways in which the novelist smuggled social criticism into her narratives through indirect techniques like irony and ‘the device of centering her novels in the consciousness of unempowered characters – that is, women’ (Johnson, 1990, xxiv). Johnson canvases a central idea in the novel *Emma*, that a completely truthful account of events is barely possible, to support the critical view that Austen deliberately ‘depolemicizes’ her work (Johnson, 1990, xv). In an unlikely critical turn Johnson’s view accords with earlier plaudits for the decline, in her fiction, of ‘the didactic posture’ (cf. Whately, 1821).

Austen criticism in the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first century has been positioned in wider frames of reference than the class-gender-ethnicity paradigm. Social relationships among the limited number of Austen’s fictional families whose lives revolved around their daily interpersonal transactions provide a fertile source of ethnographic study. Courtship and kinship are taken as the focus of attention in an anthropological study (Handler & Segal, 1990) that seizes on Austen’s unceasing attention to the details of social life:

Our study of relations between Austen and anthropology leads us into many thorny issues of text and context, narrative description and cultural translation, intertextuality and realism. However, we begin not with theory but in the field; that is, with an immersion in Austen’s world of marriage. Our aim in adopting this ethnographic approach to Austen is not to evade theoretical reflexivity but to place it within an analysis of our primary data –Austen’s six novels (1–2).

In this ‘fiction of culture’ the authors explore the ways in which social rules might or *might not* regulate the characters’ conduct in pursuit of reproduction and maintenance of the status quo. In a parallel shift away from a focus on the psychology of characters, James Thompson (2015), Professor of English and Austen scholar, reads Austen sociologically, to show how Austen’s characters exhibit their sociability. The analysis of the six novels reveals the wide set of skills on which characters draw, with a greater or lesser degree of expertise, including wit, judgment, adventurousness, responsibility and mutuality. As a model for understanding the processes of social formation in Austen’s novels and their relation to the continuing dialectical conversation between self and society, Thompson’s methodological approach has potential for reflecting on the capabilities required to adapt to social change. Bridget Draxler and Danielle Spratt (2018), both of them literary scholars, draw Austen’s fiction into public engagement in the twenty-first century. In their study, engagement with Austen’s fiction and the eighteenth-century context in which it was conceived are fused with social welfare projects to exemplify how the humanities can work in the public sphere.

### Austen and Language

For many Austen readers, the private pleasure of reading Austen’s novels begins but does not necessarily end with the experience of her language. It takes precedence over the profit to be gained from the multiplicity of theoretical approaches as a point of entry to the delights of her fiction. Mary Lascelles (1939/1969) was among the small number of critics who analysed rather than simply commented on this aspect of Austen’s fiction. She proposed that Austen avoided figurative language and indeed was suspicious of it as her playful treatment of similes in the juvenilia suggests. This traditional view, according to Joe Bray (2018), is insufficiently nuanced. He argues in the most recent study of Austen’s language and style that her use of figurative language becomes more experimental toward the end of her career, especially in the unfinished novel, *Sanditon* (Austen, 2008, 137–209).

Bray explores Austen’s use of language to manipulate perspectives and points of view through subtle variations of thought, speech and writing as ‘free indirect discourse’. He advances the work of Norman Page (1972), his predecessor in the field of Austen’s language, who emphasised Austen’s debt to Samuel Johnson, an apparent ‘disparity between subject matter and significance’ (Page, 7) and the relationship between language and questions of moral worth. The argument of Bray’s book is that through increasing mastery of free indirect discourse throughout her career, Austen advances the possibilities of realistic fiction to provide multiple perspectives and challenge, even subvert, the notion of an omniscient authorial presence.

Charlotte Brontë’s criticisms of Austen’s language for its lack of poetry (Brontë, 1848) are a reflection of her personal taste rather than any form of critical argument. She can find nothing in ‘Miss Austen’ but a ‘shrewd and observant’ writer, ‘no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck’ (126). She makes nothing, apparently, of the appearance of Pemberley woods, which Elizabeth Bennet enters from ‘one of its lowest points’, and ascends to ‘the top of a considerable eminence’ from which she views Pemberley ‘standing well on rising ground and backed by a ridge of high woody hills; and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal nor falsely adorned. Elizabeth was delighted’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 271). All Elizabeth’s delight, as well as a foreshadowing of her rising fortune, is invested in the language of this passage, the ‘rising’ of the ground, the ‘swelling’ of the stream, the backdrop of ‘woody hills’. The simple scene grows like a visual composition, a painting in words and phrases, as evocative of the mood, tone and promise of the novel as are Brontë’s descriptions of her ravishing Yorkshire moors.

The association of women and eloquence in Shakespeare and Austen underwrites Penny Gay’s claim that Austen ‘rewrites’ Shakespeare’s heroines to ‘suit her own culture’ (Gay, 2010, 463). A non-fiction book called *Talking About Austen in Baghdad* (Rowlatt and Witwit, 2010) tells a true story of a teacher who calms her class of girls in war-torn Baghdad in 2005 by reading and talking about Jane Austen’s novels. It may be difficult to account for the durability of themes in Austen’s novels, but time is the litmus test in this case, and they seem to have a chameleon–like quality that enables their appropriation for a range of purposes over time.

 Mazzeno’s survey of two centuries of Austen criticism (2011) is structured to reflect the historical phases of Austen’s critical legacy. He locates modernist, humanist and New Critical studies in the period that separates the two world wars; formalist and humanist criticism between 1949 and 1974. The two hundredth anniversary of Austen’s birth in 1975 marks a shift to the ‘feminist revolution in Austen Studies’ and places Austen among the theorists, even while traditional approaches to Austen and criticism persist in the literature. Mazzeno’s style might lack the engaging readability and verve with which Southam recorded and dissected Austen’s critical legacy until 1945; but he synthesises the scholarship from each period in chapter discussions that display his familiarity with and finely tuned evaluations of the biographical and critical dimensions of Austen Studies into the first decade of the twenty-first century. The chronological list of books cited (Mazzeno, 2011, 247–288) has been invaluable for ready reference to categories relevant to the present study, including biographical approaches.

A more sharply focused interest on the relationship between Austen’s novels and the field of politics was initiated by Marilyn Butler’s depiction of a conservative Jane Austen who ‘fails to respond to her age’ (Knox-Shaw, 2004, 3). Butler’s arguments were followed by much debate. As Brian Southam, writes:

Counter-Jane Austens have been proposed. For example, a subversive writer, undermining the power structures and values of a patriarchal society; a proto-feminist, a writer in sisterhood with Mary Wollstonecraft; a Marxist Jane Austen; and other provocative and intriguing characterisations which challenge the traditional image and invite us to rethink our understanding of the novelist (Southam, 1998, 7).

The approaches to Austen have proliferated in an unusually diverse way since the six novels were canonised by critics who have fallen out of fashion in English studies (cf. Leavis, F. R., 1948/1972) and institutionalised as a model for literary style and artistic techniques (cf. Woolf, 1923/25). Austen’s writing has been placed, for example, on the feminist spectrum (Kirkham, 1983/1986; Poovey, 1984).

Austen is depicted as a ‘secret radical’ in a study that challenges the diversity of views about the author’s position on the political spectrum (Kelly, 2016). Helena Kelly conducts a careful sifting of the evidence provided by a composite of dubious biographical accounts, her letters, and the novels themselves, to argue for the radical nature of Austen’s ‘beliefs, not just about domestic life and relationships but about the wider political and social issues of the day’ (2016, 30). The political climate in which Austen and her family lived, according to Kelly, was that of a ‘totalitarian state’ (22) in which ‘words were dangerous’ (23). As a result Austen used them ‘warily’, in the expectation that her readers ‘would understand how to read between the lines’ (22). Devoney Looser (2017) provides a finely detailed account of the cultural adaptations of Austen’s work to give substance to the question, ‘Whose Jane Austen’ is she? (2017,2). In a refreshingly original approach to Austen, Looser demonstrates a way of understanding Austen’s appeal, in the diverse ways that her works were adapted to the needs and purposes of popular culture. This connects with my own interest as an adolescent in the1940s: elocution and performance.

Austen has been implicated, especially in the novel *Mansfield Park*, as a key figure in the field of postcolonial studies (cf. Park & Rajan, 2000). Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) describes how Austen *assumes* the importance of Britain’s empire to life at home, but chooses to fall into an aesthetic silence about the slave-exploited foundation on which people like the Bertram family lived in leisurely comfort. The questions raised by Said have given rise to an alternate way of looking at nineteenth century literature by focusing on the ideology implicit in or that can be inferred from the fictional narrative and the dispositions of fiction characters. He has argued that ‘what is most interesting about art is its ‘worldliness’, the way it both reflects and helps constitute the political realities of its society’, calling into question ‘any belief in an autonomous or ‘pure’ realm of art and learning’ (cited in Gorra, 1993, 2). Whilst this intellectual transition refreshed literary and cultural discourses, Said himself had ‘reservations about much of the post-colonial theory which was to follow in its wake’ (Eagleton, 2003, 10). The blurring of lines between political and personal responses to fictional narratives and characters has led to an emphasis on Austen’s political position vis-a-vis slavery and abolition that distracts readers from notions about individuality and the nature of social relationships that were central to Austen scholarship prior to the advent of theory.

Writing from a traditionalist position Peter Knox-Shaw (2004) considers Austen to be ‘a writer of centrist views who derives in large measure from the Enlightenment, more particularly from the sceptical tradition within it that flourished in England and Scotland in the eighteenth century’ (5). He demonstrates the range of her reading, while Olivia Murphy (2013) discusses what Austen read and the critical way in which she read as keys to understanding what and how she wrote.

Qualifying the benefits of theory without rejecting it altogether, Roger Gard responds to ‘some perennially fresh quality in the novels’ (Gard, 1992, 1), unexpectedly defending the position taken by Henry James with regard to Austen’s graceful style as her chief charm. It is perhaps a sign of changing times that, as theoretical lenses have multiplied, an attempt to limit the danger of losing the text in the context can be detected. Terry Castle (2002), who has been described as a key proponent of ‘the hegemony of theory within literary studies’ (Jones, 2008, 315), demonstrates how to combine ‘a Janeite vocabulary of appreciation with sophisticated theoretically informed analysis’ (315). Castle demonstrates that the delicacy and subtlety of Austen’s art make it ‘deeply moving, infinitely expansive and curiously indestructible’ (Castle, 2002, viii). She succeeds admirably in balancing the ‘sheer pleasure effect’ generated by the novel *Emma* with the ‘satiric spirit’ in which Austen gives us her array of both shallow and ‘knightly’ characters. She refuses to allow ‘feminist quibbles’ to betray the ‘experience of reading’ (40), in a virtuoso critical analysis, reminiscent of Reginald Farrer and observant of Lionel Trilling’s requirement to examine the pleasure of reading.

### Jane Austen: education and pedagogy

Responses to Jane Austen’s fiction help to explain not only how she became famous and ‘became a truly global phenomenon’ (Harmon, 2009, 2) but also illuminate the ‘social, cultural and literary preoccupations’ of her readers (Halsey 2013, 1). In her study of Jane Austen’s readers Katie Halsey illuminates how the reading of Austen’s novels pedagogically upheld a tradition well established in the history of fiction reading, especially in the relation of novels to conduct books and literature (Halsey, 2013, 29–35). Austen’s heroines show readers how to turn reading itself to good account, and even provide readers with a way to understand ‘the complexities of real problems’ that the ‘simple’ and ‘universal’ ‘truths’ of conduct literature failed to embrace (Halsey, 2013, 30), hence just one of the sources of irony embedded in the opening statement of *Pride and Prejudice*.

The long classroom history of *Pride and Prejudice* is not associated with the explosion of screen and television versions in popular culture. In her study, *The Making of Jane Austen*, Devoney Looser (2017) considers the history of Jane Austen in schools (181–183). She points out that although ‘not everyone was happy about Austen’s fiction being turned into fodder for schools‘ (181), the novels were recommended as school texts even before their scholarly reputation was established. This reality, according to Looser, leads to a conundrum: ‘what came first, we might ask, the growth in popularity of Jane Austen or the growth of English literature instruction in schools of all kinds?’ (Looser, 2017, 182).

As intriguing as the question Looser asks is the question of *how* Austen became a ‘curriculum stalwart’ (Niemtus, 2015, n.p.). In attempting to account for the extraordinary enthusiasm of his students who enrolled for a college courses on Jane Austen, Lionel Trilling identified the ‘pleasant but wholly imprecise way of empathy’ that ushered them into Austen’s fictional world (Trilling, 1976, 68). No doubt some of these students became teachers and transported Austen’s stories of courtship and marriage into the school curriculum in the twentieth century. The literature suggests that many teachers of English are regular and repeating readers of the novels; some of them encourage other teachers to do the same by explaining that they continue to find Jane Austen relevant to their students (cf.: Lima, 2013; Nutters, 2014).

It is worth noting that concerns about teaching Jane Austen’s novels led the Modern Languages Association to commission a series of pedagogical approaches to the novels. *Approaches to Teaching Austen’s* *Pride and Prejudice* (Folsom (Ed.), 1993), *Approaches to Teaching Austen’s Emma* (Folsom (Ed.), 2004) and *Approaches to Teaching Austen’s* *Mansfield Park* (Folsom and Wiltshire, (Eds.),2014) provide contextual material, critical essays from a range of perspectives and suggestions for classroom activities that encourage student-readers to respond to Austen in ways that are attuned to her time and to the present historical and cultural moment. An anthology of ‘antipodean views’ of Jane Austen’s fiction (Fullerton & Habers, 2001) includes a section on ‘Jane Austen in the Classroom’ (58–71) in which respondents recall their school encounters with Jane Austen, some as teachers, some as students. They run the gamut, from the actor John Hargreaves who echoes Simon Birmingham’s ‘boring’ 61), to a teacher’s account of how her class of boys moved from boredom to fascination by studying *Pride and Prejudice* though the lens of marriage proposals (63).

Southam’s scholarship is an invaluable source for tracing the origins of the curriculum trajectory of Austen’s novels which emerges as one of the more positive aspects of the family’s invention of Austen’s domestic serenity.Althoughit is clear that the publication of the *Memoir* trapped Austen in a ‘mid-Victorian sensibility’, discouraging and delaying, to some extent, serious scholarship, (Southam, 1987/2009, 26), itwas instrumental in promoting her novels as fit reading in the domain of informal education, especially for young and female readers. The fact that the first subsequent book written about the author was ‘designed for the moral instruction of the young’ (Southam, 1987/2009, 37) is indicative of the role that Austen’s fiction was assigned to play in the ‘moral education’ of young people. In 1882, a review of a new edition of the novels went further and encouraged the study of the novels from a literary perspective (Southam, 1987/2009, 39).

One of the earliest reviewers of the *Memoir*, the novelist, Margaret Oliphant,stated that ‘her works have become classic, and it is now the duty of every student of recent English literature to be more or less acquainted with them’ (Oliphant, 1870, 225). In the 1890s the novels were still being recommended as models for the behaviour of young ladies (Southam, 1987/2009, 66); in 1893 the Cambridge don, Arthur Quiller-Couch, declared himself to be ‘one of her devotees’ (49). It is impossible to ignore the unique blend of adulation, personal adoration, and sense of ‘connoisseurship’ (Southam, 1987/2009, 9) that accompanies the perceptive literary commentary of a substantial number of illustrious academics. George Saintsbury, the professor of Literature who ‘invented’ the word ‘Janeite’ (Southam, 1987/2009, 60) that was subsequently used in the title of a short story by Rudyard Kipling (1926), ‘was as strict and purely critical as anyone could wish’ when he placed Jane Austen ‘in the open territory of Literature, English and European’ (Southam, 1987/2009, 65).

When Jane Austen was included among the authors to be studied in the first secondary English curriculum in New South Wales in 1911, she was already regarded as a literary genius (Southam, 1987/2009, 2) who had been compared by Tennyson to Shakespeare, alongside whom she continues to stand, steadfast, aided also, as already discussed, by her status in the great tradition of English fiction proclaimed by F. R. Leavis, as a curriculum stalwart.

### Jane Austen and cultural relevance

The proliferation of ‘spin-offs’ from Jane Austen’s personal mystique and her six novels has created a body of texts that testify to her enduring cultural relevance and to the way in which literature in general is liable to cultification by an international sorority of ‘Janeites, Austen’s disciples and devotees’ (cf. Lynch, 2000). In looking at the sociological implications of her oeuvre in the context of ‘modernization’, James Thomson (2015) reported that ‘we now have to contend with the texts of the 6 novels and more than 40 full-length films, videos and web-series’ (1). In the area of what is now called ‘fanfic’ Austen and her novels have been a magnet since 1913 ‘when Sybil Brinton in her novel *Old Friends and New Fancies* mashed up all six of Austen’s completed and published novels in a sequel that integrated all of the major characters and added some new ones of her own’ (Goldsworthy, 2020). The seemingly unstoppable progression of spin-offs has now produced a body of fiction that is ‘dauntingly diverse’ (Lynch, 2005, 161), but that has also become significant in its own right for understanding Austen as a cultural if not necessarily literary icon (cf. Lynch, 2005). There have been dramatisations as well. Performing Jane Austen’s fiction has a long history that ‘begins with private theatricals…that didn’t happen in the toniest theatres’ (Looser, 2017, 83). From this perspective there is a clear distinction between Austen’s readers of imaginative fiction and Austen’s fans who dwell in the realm of fandom.

The novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Fielding, 1996), very loosely based on *Pride and Prejudice*, and Karen Joy Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club* (Fowler, 2004) are among the most popular derivatives of the Austen phenomenon. They have established independent reputations and seem to speak to multiple categories within the Austen constellation. Fowler’s novel appeals to a wide cross section as it settles six Austen readers into a re-examination of their lives in the context of Austen’s fiction. Each of Fowler’s characters has a uniquely personal view of who Jane Austen is. It seems that little has changed since Austen’s descendant, Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh, recorded the craving for intimacy that characterised readers’ relationships with her celebrated relative. ‘It was not only as an author but as a woman that Jane Austen had made her way into the affections of many readers’ (Austen-Leigh, c. 1923, 65), she wrote. Fowler’s characters, whose lives reflect their own versions of Austen, share this view; however, they have a stereotypical quality that contrasts, to their disadvantage, with the uniqueness of Austen’s characters. The lack of narrative complexity and internal symmetry have prompted the critic John Mullan (2004) to describe Fowler’s book as a bad idea, but it reminds me of the pleasure of shared readings like those I experienced in my university tutorials and in my own book club discussions, as social and literary connections merge in pleasurable ways.

A different sort of ‘fandom’ produces books that use Austen’s characters and plots to explore what the authors regard as Austen’s unfinished business. In a well-researched and crafted historical novel that follows Maria Bertram and Mrs Norris from Mansfield Park into exile in the West Indies (Russell, 2014), Austen readers are offered an imaginative extension that establishes its own warrant for reflection and interpretation as a gloss on the original novel and ‘the postcolonial revaluations of the English canonical texts’ (Rajan, 2000, 8).

The warrant for Seth Grahame-Smith’s best-selling Quirk Classic, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), in which the Bennet sisters conduct their quest for husbands against the background of a zombie invasion of Regency England, needs to be examined and evaluated in the context of ‘the insatiable cottage industry of Jane Austen’ (Miller, 2017, 431). Sydney Miller considers that the Quirk Classics ‘are far less compelling on their own than they are in the context of the metanarrative of Austenmania that has surged in recent decades’ (Miller, 431). He investigates the impact of ‘the commitment to the cultivation of unequivocally bad taste’ (432) on the understanding of Austen’s contribution to literary culture and concludes that it comes at ‘too high a cost’, an evaluation with which many Austen readers like myself would endorse. The corpus of Austen’s fanfic novels spans the spectrum from seriously good to seriously bad, and makes Jane Austen’s readers seriously sad that the author received little financial reward for her labour in her lifetime.

The production of fanfic has continued unabated, and around it a community of writers and readers, calling themselves the Derbyshire Writers’ Guild, are devoting themselves to the concept and practice. In a period of two months four different full-length Austen fanfic novels have attracted major publishers (Goldsworthy, 2020). In her assessment of the contribution they make to understanding the Austen literary phenomenon, the writer Kerryn Goldsworthy writes that ‘none of these books get to the heart of an enduring mystery: the question of precisely what it was and is about Jane Austen that continues, more than 200 years later, to keep so many of us in thrall’ (Goldsworthy, 2020, 6). As Austen’s reputation has soared in both literary and mass cultures, so the possibilities her fiction offers for critical and creative responses have multiplied. The social situations in which her characters find themselves and the life decisions they are required to make have remained relevant despite the march of time, as have the richness and diversity of responses to her life and to her texts.

### Conclusion

The fact that Jane Austen has proved to be a writer for all seasons and for so many reasons helps to explain why reading her fiction continues to feature on school curriculum reading lists. How best to read her in this season, and for which reasons, are the questions considered in this research thesis. The research question addresses a persistent conundrum, the potential of literature to influence attitudes, values and conduct. In the present inquiry the development of literature and scholarship related to the field of neuroscience augments my own insights and those of other lifelong readers of fiction.

Austen’ fiction has evoked a multitude of personal, literary and intellectual responses since her stories entered the consciousness of early readers. This is why, I suggest, the word evocative best encapsulates the breadth and depth of her imagination and the way it functions in readers’ imaginations. It is the word that underwrites the richness and complexity, suggestive but imprecise terms, so often associated with her novels. Austen’s imagination, embodied in her language, in her narratives and her characters, evokes feelings and ideas as a new source for the imaginative transformation of readers’ experience and understanding of life that takes place in the act and art of reading.

The Horatian pleasure and profit of reading imaginative narratives and the development of the novel, as well as the art, act and value of reading, are intricately entwined in the evolution of Jane Austen’s reputation as a novelist. The coolness of her tone (Price, 1975, 265) is shared with rather than imposed on the readers; this perhaps accounts for the sense of intimacy experienced by her readers. While in the cinema her novels are regularly translated to the screen ‘as romance and costume drama’ (Todd, 2020), her fiction has accommodated many ways of thinking. It is only in the novels that we are reminded that inevitably ‘we are all engaged in negotiating our claims with others’ (Price, 1975, 267). Whilst the pleasure of reading has been shown to have a distinctly personal benefit, perceived and potential repercussions in the public domains of culture, politics and, more recently, mental health have also been scrutinised, especially in educational discourses. As ‘instruments of thought’ (Price 1983, xiv), novels establish certain expectations that provide readers with opportunities to experience literature and especially the novel of manners that is forever associated with Austen’s claim to fame, as an expression of ‘the largest intentions of men’s souls as well as the smallest’ (Trilling, 1950/1964, 211–212).

# CHAPTER THREE

# *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*: I DEARLY LOVE A LAUGH!

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### Introduction

In the previous chapter my review of the scholarship highlights the influence of literary theory and modes of literary criticism on the conceptualisation of fiction, and the ways in which the novel has been read, valued and studied within the parameters of secondary schooling (see *Appendix*). It is clear that evolving cultural discourses have intersected with literary discourses to orient and shape reading and reading pedagogy. For example, when the emotive tenor of belletrist writing with its emphasis on ‘the formation of literary taste’ (Bennet, 1909/1913, 2) held sway throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, responses took the form of ‘appreciations’ with which I was familiar, especially in my senior high school years. I enjoyed the latitude to read with feeling, taking pleasure in the free exercise of my imagination, especially in poetry, ‘so closely connected to emotional experience’ (New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 1911, 19). In responding to fictional literature I was accustomed, by the time I reached my final year, to grounding my interpretation in the characters, plot and language of the story, and assumed that the relationship of the story to my own experience provided a ‘warrant for the response’ (Feagin, 1996, 171), making the response relevant and appropriate on its own terms rather than in the framework of any particular view or interpretation.

In the mid twentieth century however, serious students of English who sat for the English Honours Leaving Certificate Examination, as I did in 1948, were initiated into reading practices that combined New Critical ideas about the autonomy of the text with rigorous critical thinking about how literature reflects the values of a particular view of ‘civilised’ society. In the spirit, I later realised, of I. A. Richards and New Criticism (Richards, 1924/2001), I prepared for the examination by writing essays on ‘unseen’ and often challenging poems that had appeared in previous examination papers. ‘Unseen’, we were told, meant exactly that; dictionaries were not available in the examination room. I recall struggling at home to make sense of an ‘unseen’ poem because I had no idea of the meaning of a key word in the first line. Eventually I gave in and looked it up in the dictionary. That certainly helped! Electrified by the distorted word forms and the rhythm and no longer baffled by the word ‘carrion’ I managed to eke out the three required pages. A year or two later, at university, I studied modern poetry and developed a long-lasting reading relationship with Gerard Manley Hopkins.

In the final quarter of the twentieth century ideas about ‘irony, paradox and ambiguity’ were widely discarded as ‘New Critical chitchat’ (Felski, 2015, 5). During the 1980s, critical reading transitioned, for cultural theorists, into ‘critique’. Reading practice in this mode, as the pedagogue Marnie O’Neill observed (1993), has the ‘potential to construct critical readers as opposed to responsive readers’ (24). In the associated literary discourse, value judgments were eschewed as ‘theoretically misconceived’ (Belsey, 1980, 126–128; cf. Brooks, 1990), and Leavisite orientations were ‘scoffed at’ as ‘platitudes’ (Felski, 2015, 15). In a technique that defers to Paul Ricoeur’s ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (1970/2008), the imposition of critique as a required response raises the stakes of reading literature at school.

Rita Felski who rejoices that New Criticism has had its day nevertheless laments the perpetuation of suspicion as a basis for reading fiction. In her contemporary exploration of critique and its limits, she regrets that literary criticism has come to assume that ‘the smartest thing you can do is to see through the deep-seated convictions and heartfelt attachments of others’ (Felski, 2015, 16). By identifying and subverting assumptions and beliefs embedded in texts on grounds of ‘coercion, collusion or exclusion’ (15), Felski suggests, critics do the texts a disservice. She advocates exploration rather than critique as a technique for preserving the affective and more pleasurable aspects of reading. By implication, I would argue, the shift to critique as a way of reading also undermines the potential of literature to fulfil the Horatian paradigm. In the trajectory that shifts from appreciation to critique, the integration of ‘pleasure’ and ‘profit’, central to and integrated within Horace’s paradigm for reading literature, simply evaporates. No longer attuned with Antonio Damasio’s proposition that emotions and feelings are ‘enmeshed…in the bastion of reason’ (Damasio, 1994/2000, xii), reading responses oriented to the hermeneutics of suspicion, as understood and interpreted by Felski, tend to isolate readers from their emotions and feelings and deprive the ‘bastion of reason’ of its life force when it is brought to bear on acts of reading and interpretation.

In addressing the research inquiry and asking how reading Austen’s two-hundred-year-old novels might continue to be of value to young people today, my analysis of the three selected novels is guided by an imaginative engagement with Jane Austen’s fiction that started in my adolescence. The critical analysis pays particular attention to the pleasure provided by Austen’s fictional heroines, each of whom is central to a marriage plot, and from whose conduct and temperaments I have derived both pleasure and profit in the course of my lifetime. In my analysis of selected passages I try to adopt the role of a ‘serious noticer’ (Wood, 2019, 51), described by the literary critic James Wood as a way of writing that participates in the ‘transformation of the subject through metaphor and imagery’ (65); many of these are drawn from my reading memories.

As a point of departure for evaluating the author’s currency in the here and now of the twenty-first century, the examination and analysis of Austen’s fictional universe celebrates the usefulness of personal narrative and ‘the importance of personal experience in lieu of objective knowledge’ for the production of ‘new research and teaching methods’ (Looser, 1993, 54). It is informed by my lifetime of reading, enriched, enlarged, and illuminated by the insights of a like-minded company of reading memoirists. A legacy of Austen scholarship and a collation of shared reading experiences thus provide me with a compass for mapping the author’s literary and cultural perceptions onto contemporary experience, and evaluating their potential for resonating with and navigating some of the challenging aspects of growing up in the contemporary world.

### *Pride and Prejudice*: ‘too light & bright & sparkling’

A chief joy of my growing-up years was my Friday afternoon elocution lesson. My teacher lived half way between school and home, and nothing that I experienced during the week compared with the pleasure I felt as I leaned my bicycle against a wall, walked across a narrow strip of lawn, pushed open a heavy glass door, and knocked on the dark timber door of Miss Brain’s ground floor flat. On my first visit the teacher’s harmonious voice and words of welcome offered me a new experience. At some unconscious level of response, I was aware of softness and warmth, clarity and colour, sensations that I had not previously associated with speech. I suppose the mystery of this strange mixture of sensations was already entering into my consciousness as the lesson stirred my imagination with unfamiliar ideas about speech. First I learned something about vowels that startled me. I had been aware of five vowel *letters*, but the thought of eighteen vowel *sounds* was entirely new. Each sound was articulated by Miss Brain, imitated by me, and entered phonetically by her into the exercise book I have kept for posterity, with her instruction: ‘learn by heart and practise every day’.

Next came another revelation. Miss Brain told me about ‘modulation’. First she wrote it on another page of my book: ‘modulation: light and shade, the art of varying tone and mood’. Then she explained that the voice, *my* voice, is an instrument, and elocution lessons were to be like piano lessons, about learning *how* to use my instrument well, in order to give pleasure to my listeners. The tones of her welcoming words played again in my head as affirmation of what she was telling me. She described vocal modulation as an art similar to painting, the selection of colours – ah, colour! – and tones to express feelings and convey meanings. I would learn about the organs of speech, she told me – the lips, tongue, teeth, and the rest; how to exercise and control them, so that my speech, especially when I read stories aloud or recited poems and dramatic pieces, would be transformed into an instrument of interpretation and personal meaning.

Miss Brain wrote in my exercise book; ‘your voice is your own instrument, and if you want to play it well you must give it light and shade’. As an analogy, nothing could have prepared me better to respond positively to *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen, 1813/2006a). As I have become more familiar with Jane Austen’s fiction I have transferred my elocution lesson on modulation to the area of fiction. Austen’s fiction demonstrates in fine detail how the contrast of light and shade work for the author as a stylistic and aesthetic strategy. We know that Austen was conscious of what she was doing, despite the critical judgment made by Henry James about ‘the narrow *unconscious* perfection of form’ (James, 1883, 179; emphasis added). The fortunate survival of the letter in which the author wrote in 1813 about ‘her own darling child’ (Le Faye, 2011, 210), as she called her second novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, tells us in her own typically playful style:

The work is rather *too light & bright & sparkling*; – it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter – of sense if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story….or anything that would form a contrast and bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and Epigrammatism of the general stile’ (Le Faye, 2011, 212; emphasis added).

Austen’s perceptive commentary on the art of novel writing and composition is not as transparent as at first appears, although some critics, including Q. D. Leavis in her introduction to *Mansfield Park* published in 1957, accepted it as ‘self-criticism’ (Leavis, 1957, xi). As a general principle, Austen’s observations about fiction and her own writing use humour to make her most serious judgments; so it is with her suggestion to include a long chapter of sense about something unconnected with the story. Austen implies, and here she is serious, that readers might misunderstand how dramatic contrast is achieved artistically, when they accept such a convention as a means by which it might be achieved. In reality, as Pat Rogers points out in the *Introduction* to the Cambridge edition of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813/2006), ‘the book has a wonderful economy of means which incorporates a subtle graduation in moods and veins of feeling’ (xxii). When Austen plays the modesty card she should never be taken at face value. In this case, she is giving voice to her suspicion that readers may not grasp that there is more to her ‘darling child’ than meets the eye. The critical record is in itself an account of how only the most attentive of her early readers noticed the shadows in her fictional universe and in the lives the people who inhabit Meryton, Longbourn, Netherfield, Hunsford, Rosings and Pemberley. But the celebrated first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* that has received a great deal of critical attention for its ironical subtleties and cultural implications, is now widely understood to epitomise, as opening sentences do, ‘the logic of the novel as a whole’ (Mullan, 2006, 36). It alerts readers to the larger ironies with which the heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, must wrestle, in sunlight and in shadow, as she makes particular choices that resist ‘universal’ expectations associated with marriage.

Readers are not long into the novel when shadows cloud the apparent joyful domesticity of Longbourn and the Bennet family. At the end of the first chapter the humour with which the bickering of the ill-matched parents is rendered turns slightly sour. Mr Bennet has an abundance of wit, some of which he has passed on to his favourite daughter, and a modicum of malice, none of which appears in Elizabeth’s disposition. The human comedy enacted in the Bennet household gives us a mother who takes refuge from family responsibilities in her ‘poor nerves’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 5), and a father who shoots her down with verbal arrows before retiring to his library:

Mr Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper (5)

The addition of two silly and shallow sisters, and the much-maligned Mary who takes refuge from her plain looks in affectations of learning, certainly *form a contrast* with the two older sisters. In both aesthetic and dramatic terms, as Austen would have known, these are shadows that work better than any long chapter to create the effect she wants. Surprisingly, perhaps, the lovely and gentle Jane also forms a contrast by means of which Elizabeth shines more brightly. Although absolutely first in the family looks hierarchy and unswervingly kind in her judgments, Jane’s temperament leans to obedience and passivity. The horse ride to Netherfield is undertaken unquestioningly at her mother’s behest. Elizabeth’s comment that her sister is ‘a great deal too apt to like people generally’ undermines the compliment suggested by the observation that she never sees ‘a fault in anyone’ (1813/2006a, 15*)*. As Austen wrote in a letter, she does not write for ‘dull elves’, (Le Faye, 2011, 210) and attentive reading reveals the ambiguity of her statement about the sparkle of *Pride and Prejudice.*

Austen believes that discrimination should be exercised when making choices about friends. She expresses this humorously in her letters, and more seriously in her novels. Liking people too easily is seen as a failing of judgment. Mr Weston in *Emma* errs in complimenting the vulgar Mrs Elton, and although Elizabeth Bennet would probably exempt herself from such criticism in the early chapters, she discovers when she reads Darcy’s rebuttal of Wickham’s claims that her ready surrender to the latter’s charm lays her open to the same charge. Nevertheless, Elizabeth is every inch a heroine, and for all her faults, she quickly reveals herself in *her* novel, for each Austen novel analysed in the present study belongs in one sense to its heroine, to be, in the words of her creator, ‘as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print’.

The author has herself been as irresistible to a parade of prominent readers, as has her creation. As Virginia Woolf commented with tongue in cheek, Jane Austen was revered by ‘twenty-five elderly gentlemen living in the neighbourhood of London who resent any slight upon her genius’. Woolf captures, better than any other Austen critic has managed to do, why that may be so. The sheer joy of Austen’s presence in her early writing as a ‘girl of fifteen laughing, in her corner, at the world’ (Woolf, 1923/25, 261) persists, mellowed by time and honed by meticulous and painstaking craftsmanship into a mature ‘knowingness’ that sees the shadows cast by darker forces but remains aware of and continues to be delighted by the brighter side of the moon. There is arguably a grain of truth in Arnold Bennett’s ‘plain speaking’: ‘she loved her social system – but had no (or few) illusions about it’ (Bennett, 1927/1928, 288). Her letters hint that this lack of illusion applied to members of her social group as well.

Elizabeth Bennet too exhibits an independence of thought, although we have no way of knowing that it resembled Austen’s, as she rises above the less interesting, less amusing, less conscious members of her family. There is merriment in her nature and in her responses to Darcy’s rudeness. Her ready wit and light-hearted charm are sharpened and enriched by her intelligence and a moral earnestness that rarely keeps her spirits from ‘rising to playfulness’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 421). Even when she is devastated by knowledge of her own propensity for prejudice and consequent lack of judgment, her composure does not desert her. She is able to leave Hunsford, the scene of her self-confessed humiliation, with an expression of gratitude to her host, Mr Collins, and an attempt ‘to unite civility and truth in a few short sentences’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 239).

*Pride and Prejudice* is a superb study of how the heroine of a novel is made. By contrast with other characters, and in conversations with them, Elizabeth Bennet flourishes as a fictional character, in high spirits and low. The larger ironies of the novel relate to larger relationships, but they are always reminders of the particularities which drive Elizabeth’s inner conflict. A woman of her time could not, with propriety, pursue a husband, even if she knew the one she wanted. She had to be asked, more than once as it happens in Elizabeth’s case. Her female gender made marriage a condition of her future security. Despite her mother’s pressure to perform her duty to her family, however, the prospect of the inane Mr Collins as a marriage partner is simply not a credible proposition. It is only with difficulty that she accepts the behaviour of her friend Charlotte who sets out to meet and capture Elizabeth’s rejected suitor ‘in the lane’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 137). In the dramatisation of these conflicts, the lightness, brightness and sparkle of days spent enhancing bonnets and calling on neighbours, and of evenings spent dancing and flirting, are both ritualised as a way of life and compromised by the shallowness they reveal in the social activities of everyday life.

Two early female critics challenged the unalloyed brightness and sparkle of Austen’s life and fiction, as portrayed in the family memoir. Both were novelists themselves, and perhaps this accounts for their perspicacity. Southam notes (1968, 29) that the novelist/reviewer, Mrs Kavanagh, saw things ‘no previous reader had picked up’ because, without any obvious critical method, she conveyed the personal experience of reading Austen, writing out of her sense of enjoyment. While identifying the jewels in Austen’s literary crown Kavanagh observed discerningly that there was no trace of the ‘severity’ of Austen’s touch in the family account (Kavanagh, 1862, 177).

In the depiction of the Bennet family and Elizabeth’s shame in them, Mrs Oliphant detected ‘the pitiless perfection of art’ (Oliphant, 1870, 220). The novelist, Hilary Mantel, writing in the twenty-first century, is more outspoken. She writes that ‘no one who read it closely was ever comforted by an Austen novel’ (Mantel, 2007, 82). She compares Austen’s novels with those of the twentieth-century novelist, Elizabeth Jane Howard, which are all ‘less cosy than they appear’ (Mantel, 2016, 2), and in which limited social settings serve to show how ‘a busy underground stream of anxiety threatens to break the surface of leisure lives’ (Mantel, 2016, 4). Mantel points out that Austen’s fictional endings which occur at the church door, with a wedding, beguile readers into contemplation of the ensuing marriages and what they might have in store for the happy heroines (Mantel, 2007).

My first reading of *Pride and Prejudice,* contrary to Mantel’s, did give me comfort.Being a schoolgirl at the time of my first reading, I did not have the biographical knowledge or literary discernment to consider, as Oliphant, Kavanagh and Mantel have done, the nature of the creative experience, ‘out of which the novel was written’ (Southam, 1987/2009, 18). But I did relate to the cracks in the Austen family mirror. I found the fictional reflections of family life comforting for their familiarity. From this experience I understood that imaginative fiction works mysteriously. It shows us that we are not alone, in ways that we may not have imagined, and also conjures up new possibilities for the way we might deal with our unspoken anxieties.

### Reading *Pride and Prejudice*

Recalling my first reading of *Pride and Prejudice* I can feel again the push and pull of feelings and thoughts. On the one hand, I wanted to linger as I was reading, to ponder and savour the *experience* of reading, the pleasure of the language, style, structure, and the inferences to be drawn from the words on the page. But then again, I wanted to speed up my reading, to fly through the pages to the happy ending that I knew was waiting for Elizabeth Bennet, albeit at the church door. I lived in an age when every film and popular magazine story touted marriage as the ‘happily-ever-after’ ideal for their heroines. Besides, I had already met Rosalind in *As You Like It*. I had been introduced to her by one of the never-to-be-forgotten English teachers that students are sometimes fortunate enough to encounter; and I knew Beatrice as well, from a dialogue with Benedick that I had prepared for an elocution examination. From their exploits I understood the wedding to be the end of a quest, rather than, as and I was to discover at a later stage of my own life, the beginning of a new test.

The connections I made between Elizabeth Bennet and the Shakespearian heroines seemed to be intuitive. However, as theories about how texts work have become more complex, the connections present themselves as the embodiment of intertextuality. Julia Kristeva’s theoretical propositions about meaning as something filtered from text to text by means of ‘codes’ (Kristeva, 1980, 66) that are shared by writers and readers, are crystallised in the traces of Rosalind and Beatrice that I have discovered in the fictional character of Elizabeth Bennet. In this way, my present understanding of Austen’s novel is partially shaped by Shakespeare’s texts, and my analysis of Elizabeth Bennet as heroine takes into account some vague family resemblances to Shakespeare’s heroines: the charm, wit and capacity for merriment of Rosalind, and the sharp intelligence, independence and verbal acerbity of Beatrice.

However, in my readings of the novel, Elizabeth Bennet is and always will be the creation of Jane Austen’s imagination. She brings to the novel of courtship a late eighteenth century sensibility that was turning its attention to the nature of a loving marriage, in which the value of the emotions and the imagination are examined attentively. Elizabeth has a different presence from either of Shakespeare’s heroines. Beatrice’s wit and stubbornness appear in Elizabeth, but not her deep psychological aversion to marriage. Although Rosalind and Elizabeth both hope to educate their prospective marriage partners in the ways of mutual love and respect, only Elizabeth is also educated by her experience until she can fervently declare: ‘Till this moment I never knew myself’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 230). Neither Rosalind nor Beatrice has been formed dramatically in ways that would justify putting Elizabeth’s words in their mouths. Elizabethan heroines might describe how they think and feel, but they do not change.

Neither do Austen’s heroines change like later heroines. Elizabeth, for example, is transformed by what she learns about herself, so that the best parts of who she is already can now be liberated. It might be argued that Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James (1881/1863) is a fictional beneficiary of Austen’s techniques for revealing inner thought and feeling, but James’s heroines are seeking salvation rather than liberation. ‘Certain veils are pierced and obstacles removed, so that the heroine can see the world more clearly’, writes James Wood of Austen’s heroines (1998, 2). Readers can observe this process in action as Elizabeth unfolds the history of Darcy’s relationship with Wickham:

…she again began the mortifying perusal of all that related to Wickham, and commanded herself so far as to examine the meaning of every sentence…[in respect to the connection with Pemberley] each recital confirmed the other, but when she came to the will, the difference was great (Austen, 1813/2006a, 227).

Elizabeth is choosing between two versions of the truth: one told by Wickham, the other revealed in Darcy’s letter. Here we are experiencing the strength of the epistolary novel and its power to express personal feeling; at the same time readers enter the domain of moral philosophy, engaging with questions of profound significance to Elizabeth for making decisions about the company she has chosen to keep.

Reflecting on the dilemma in which Elizabeth finds herself, I am reminded of the moral philosopher, Dorothea Krook (1959) who taught at Cambridge during the Leavis term, and whose courses on Henry James I attended at the University of Tel Aviv in 1979. Her lectures were compelling, for the clarity of her delivery and a critical vocabulary with which I was not familiar. No novel could be analysed until an outline was provided of the *donnée*, the artist’s ‘given’ subject or idea. Reading was about the discovery of how the subject was treated, and what the artist made of it. This I believe was the method she used to demonstrate that Henry James’s novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898/2011) was not merely a ghost story. Each lecture started with reference to the ‘moral fable’, that strand of the novel that can be traced, in the eighteenth century, from Bunyan onwards with its roots in the parables of the bible (Kettle, 1951/1965, 13).

I recall an uncomfortable colloquium with Professor Krook at which, after discussing my draft assignment, she suggested that there might be an elect group of readers with a special affinity for reading and understanding James’s moral fables. I am still not sure whether or not she considered me to be among them, such was the ambiguity, derived from Henry James perhaps, of her own speech. However, as a reader I have been influenced by her insistence on examining the ambiguities of moral behaviour and the ways in which these are handled in the telling of the tale. Henry James’s depiction of Isabel Archer’s midnight meditation (1881/1963, Chapter 42), although different in tone and mood, is no more compelling than Austen’s portrayal of Elizabeth Bennet as she reads, and re-reads with the closest attention, consciously willing herself to weigh ‘every circumstance with what she meant to be impartiality’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 227):

Again she read on. But every line proved more clearly that the affair, which she had believed it impossible that any contrivance could so represent, as to render Mr Darcy’s conduct in it less than infamous, was capable of a turn which might make him entirely blameless throughout the whole (227–228).

She stops reading to weigh up the circumstances; she considers them from every perspective or ‘turn’: what counts only as assertion, what should be considered as proof, what was probable in each statement, each possibility is deliberated before she continues. In this way, Austen demonstrates how exemplary reading can be a preparation for judgment, and how careful and attentive reading might shape the narrative and draw the protagonists toward the happy ending traditionally associated with romantic comedy.

Novels, as we have learned with the development of realist fiction, are not necessarily about happy endings. A character in Michael Cunningham’s novel, *The Hours,* wonders what book to give a sick friend: ‘You want to give him the book of his own life, the book that will locate him, *parent him*, arm him for the changes’ (Cunningham, 1999, 21­–22; my emphasis). If parenting functions as a means of being helped to understand the way you feel, then reading Austen’s most popular novel made me feel parented as never before. In Mr and Mrs Bennet I glimpsed my own parents’ fractured relationship. My mother, also, spent many hours recovering from nervous headaches, and shared with Mrs Bennet a propensity for tactlessness about me and my friends that at times left me like Lizzy, ‘hurt and depressed’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 371). My father had, like Lizzy’s father, some ‘great qualities’, but his ‘peculiarities’ (209) were often puzzling as well as controversial. We lived as a family in a swirl of small town gossip that confused me, about what passed for shared and amusing banter and what was circulated with malicious intent. Most significantly, I felt an affinity for Mary although I had no sisters: less pretty, less agile, less popular than many of my friends, I found, in books and reading, a resource for getting on with life. In retrospect I believe it served me well.

I have continued to care for Mary. Perhaps this is because, until recent rehabilitations in fanfic and sequels, no one else has seemed to do so. The most recent of the revisions, *The Other Bennet Sister* (Hadlow, 2020), follows a string of re-imaginings of the ugly duckling of Longbourn, bringing her out of the shadows where she hovered as the pretentious intellectual of plain appearance. She has been treated in the sequels as an independent woman (McCullough, 2008), as a romantically desirable heroine (Mingle, 2013) and as ‘the forgotten sister’ who discovers an identity (Paynter, 2014). As Austen’s fictional character she was remarkable only for her plodding intellect and lack of looks.

 When I read and think about Mary as the plain daughter, I see her as someone who refuses to act like a victim, in the best way she can and handicapped, as she is, by an unfortunate lack of social capital. According to James Edward Austen-Leigh’s memoir of his aunt (1871), the author mentioned that Mary would marry a law clerk who worked for her Uncle Phillips, a way of designating her status in the scheme of things. I wonder if the six fictional revisions cited by Charlotte Jones in her Jane Austen blog (Jones, 2016) take up her cause as a response to ideas about marginalisation. The influential ideas of Michel Foucault are discernible as extrapolations, from larger state institutions, to the institution of the family and the devaluation of those who do not or cannot embody its particular values. While Mary is not subjected to social exclusion in Austen’s novel she is less valued than her better looking sisters, even and quite often, as close reading testifies, by the narrator and the heroine. Although the evaluation of spin-offs and fanfic is complicated by issues around quality and commercialisation, the case for fictionalising Mary Bennet in the twenty-first century may serve Austen as well as or better than scholarship that subjects her fictional universe to anachronistic judgments.

In her letters Austen occasionally comments derisively on the plain looks of visitors, a trait that inevitably reminds me of my own mother who was quick to point out that one or other of our acquaintances was ‘no beauty’. I felt I shared something personal with Mary, and that, I think, is why I registered her plight while her older sister, Elizabeth, who had no knowledge of what it was like to be an ugly duckling, suffered only ‘painful sensations’ for herself when Mary’s performance on the pianoforte aroused the derision of Mr Bingley’s sisters (Austen, 1813/2006a, 112). Although this puts me, as reader, at odds with a heroine who delights me, it also raises questions about why, how and whether readers should become involved in the ‘peculiar preoccupation’ (Vermeule, 2010, 12) of caring about people who turn out ‘not to exist’ (12) and the extent to which caring about literary characters is a catalyst for the pleasure of reading fiction. My personal response to the fictional character, Mary Bennet, did not diminish my imaginative investment in Elizabeth Bennet as the fictional heroine. However it serves the theoretical orientation of the present study, and affirms the relevance ascribed by Wolfgang Iser (1972) to the nature of the prior experience of the reader in the phenomenology of reading.

Although I found it easy to understand how Mary might have become who she was, it was Elizabeth that I recognised, from my very first reading of *Pride and Prejudice*, as the heroine I had been waiting for. Later, better-informed, and more mature readings of the novel have sharpened my perception of her as a young woman of remarkable independence, especially in the context of the period and the transition from strategic to romantic marriage. But she was *my* heroine, relevant to *my* life, from the moment she told the story of Darcy’s reluctance to partner her, ‘*with great spirit’*. Her ‘lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 12) was just the model I needed as I was emerging from childhood into adolescence, when the thought of parties and invitations, school dances, and the dreaded the possibility of being a ‘wallflower’, were hovering in my consciousness.

When I removed *Pride and Prejudice* from the library shelf and started to read I was in a receptive state of mind. Vivian Gornick (2020) describes it to perfection:

Ah, receptivity! Otherwise known as readiness. Responsible for every successful connection ever made between a book and a reader – no less than between people – is that deepest of all human mysteries, emotional readiness: upon which the shape of every life is vitally dependent…How often have lifetime friends or lovers shuddered to think, ‘If I had met you at any other time…’. It’s the same between a reader and a book that becomes an intimate you very nearly did not encounter with an open mind or a welcoming heart because you were not in the right mood; that is, in a state of readiness (117–118).

I was ready, at that adolescent moment to visit Longbourn, Meryton, Netherfield, and, pleasure of pleasures, the ‘large, handsome, stone building’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 271) called Pemberley, in the company of Jane Austen’s ‘delightful creature’, Elizabeth Bennet (Le Faye, 2011, 210).

### Heroines for life

I had discovered how important heroines were in my life on a blazingly hot Australian summer day in early 1942. I was sitting with about 25 other girls and boys in a prefabricated classroom, waiting for our English teacher to appear. In our first year of high (secondary) school we had been provisionally assigned to the A-class. A balding man wearing glasses appeared. He must have been at least middle-aged, because most young men, including teachers, had been called up to fight in the war in Europe and more recently in the jungles much closer to home. The wiry man wrote his name on the board: Mr. Bowra. Under his name he wrote a list of books. I cannot remember all the titles, but certainly they included *The Last of the Mohicans* (Cooper, 1826); *Treasure Island* (Stevenson, 1883); *Oliver Twist* (Dickens, 1838); *David Copperfield* (Dickens*,* 1850);and *Flynn of the Inland* (Idriess*,* 1932).

There were the names of about ten books and their authors written on the blackboard, of which I had read only one: *Oliver Twist.* If we hadn’t read at least half the books on the list, Mr Bowra told us, we should not be in the A class. I was mortified. But even more than mortification and apprehension lest I was about to be demoted to a lower class, was a sense of outrage. These were all books with boys as heroes. Where, I wondered, were the heroines I was growing up with? Where were Alice, Anne and Norah, each of whom had taken me to a wonderful place outside the dusty country town where I had been born and which I rarely left: to Alice’s fantasy land and her topsy-turvy adventures with weird and wonderful friends (Carroll, 1865/2009); to Anne’s lush and fertile Prince Edward Island with its magical sunsets and her quirky way of describing people and her insistence that her name be spelled with an ‘e’ (Montgomery, 1908/2013); to Norah Linton, a paragon of virtue deftly brought to life by her author’s affection, and her knock-about adventures with horses and cattle on Billabong Station in the Australian bush (Bruce, 1910/2014).

Regretfully, it is true, I had failed to register issues raised in some of these books by prevailing stereotypes. The values associated with indigenous people in the Billabong books were racist; attitudes to females were sexist. While girls might be tomboys up to a certain age they were expected to emerge at the appropriate time as models of femininity. As issues of race and women’s liberation gained cultural momentum, the books were banned from libraries and ultimately revised. However, the fact that I missed the denigration implicit in the depiction of Aboriginal characters and yet felt so strongly for and about Mary Bennet, reinforces what I have learned from Vygotsky’s thinking about the role of prior social and imaginative experience in the development of language, thought and reading practices. The experience that I felt I shared with Mary prepared the ground for empathic attunement as Maxine Greene reflects upon it:

The beholder, the percipient, the learner must approach from the vantage point of her or his lived situation, that is, in accord with a distinctive point of view and interest. I would suggest again, however, that it may well be the imaginative capacity that allows us to experience empathy with different points of view, even with interests apparently at odds with ours (Greene, 1995/2000a, 31).

My response to Mary Bennet discussed above serves to demonstrate the complex nature of Greene’s position. In this case, my own imagination engaged with that of Jane Austen but led me to a different place. To analyse what is happening in this case, I turn to the reader and philosopher, Damon Young, and his reference to Simone de Beauvoir’s attribution of *sorcery* to the transmutation of ‘printed symbols into stories’. Without a reader, he writes, ‘the magic stops’ (Young, 2016, 6). For me, as a reader with a reader’s entitlement in the process, I perceive my empathic response to Mary Bennet as ‘the other’ rather than as a parody of the conduct book heroine, as a way of staking a claim to autonomy as a reader, based on an engagement with the text that is both attentive to the evidence of the text and attuned to my personal experience in my interpretation.

Like Susannah Fullerton, another reading memoirist with a reading history of Austen addiction (Fullerton, 2017), I recognise Austen’s preference in general for high-spirited heroines, a generational shift that did not stop in the nineteenth century. Female novelists in Britain produced heroines of another ilk in mid-twentieth century in post-war Britain. In her account of the books to which she would like to return for a year of reading, Susan Hill (2010) recalls the novels of Barbara Pym whose literary reputation rose and fell several times after publishing six novels between 1950 and 1961. There are echoes of Jane Austen in this publishing chronology. Hill confesses that she has never learned to read Austen with pleasure, which is strange in view of the following extract:

They were exactly the kind of novels my mother would have borrowed…[depicting a] world of stuttering curates, wistful spinsters and awkward bachelors of North Oxford …[with] her trenchant eye, her detached and sometimes mordant vision…(Hill, 2010, 22).

Perhaps Hill is more attuned to the social comedies written by Pym because they are inhabited by plain, middle-aged and middle-class spinster heroines with a distinctively twentieth century sensibility.

I share with Fullerton a childhood history of reading about high-spirited heroines who prepared me for the more perplexing female heroines who forged their identities in the ethos of Jane Austen’s novels. Rising above her sisters partly, as we have seen, by virtue of Austen’s subtle modulation of light and shade in the range of characters, Elizabeth Bennet was the fictional heroine for whom girls like Alice in Wonderland and Anne of Green Gables had been a form of initiation. As it happened, Mr Bowra did not demote me for my deficient reading, and as luck would have it when the timetable was finalised we were assigned a female teacher.

Mrs Eason, routinely shared with her class her own encounters with literature, not just reading but also her performance while at university in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It.* She had played Rosalind with whom I felt an immediate connection. As a painfully shy teenage girl I admired a girl with such confidence, wit and spirit. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be the daughter of a banished duke, like Rosalind in Shakespeare’s play, instead of daughter of a country doctor father who, I was painfully aware, sometimes received slurs on his character in the anti-Semitic climate of the period. I had not yet studied Shakespearian set pieces with my elocution teacher, so Mrs Eason’s recitation of a passage from the play was my first experience of Shakespearian language. Fortuitously, or perhaps providentially, it was the passage in which Rosalind responds with spirit to banishment by her uncle on the grounds that she is her father’s daughter (Shakespeare, 1599/2000, 21):

So was I when your highness took his dukedom;

So was I when your highness banished him:

Treason is not inherited, my lord:

Or if we did derive it from our friends

What’s that to me? My father was no traitor!

Then, good my liege, mistake me not so much

To think my poverty is treacherous (*As You Like It*, Act 1, Scene 3).

I thrilled to the audacity of the reply and to the force of the words. The Shakespearian passage was like a rehearsal for my first reading of *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth Bennet’s spirited defiance in her exchange with the aristocratic Lady Catherine de Bourgh (Austen, 1813/2006a, 389–398) revealed her pride and prejudices at the thought of a marriage between her nephew and Elizabeth:

“Is this to be endured! But it must not, shall not be. If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere, in which you have been brought up.” (394).

Her rudeness is parried by Elizabeth’s calculated wit and the perfect pitch of her reply:

“In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal.” (395).

When I first read that particular exchange the thought occurred that Shakespeare’s Rosalind might be whispering the words in Lizzy’s ear. The delight of discovering, some years later, the thread of Austen scholarship that links Jane Austen to Shakespeare, was affirming. Early references by literary scholars like Lord Macaulay and George Lewes mention Austen’s name ‘in the same breath as Shakespeare’ (Southam, 1987/2009, 2). Among contemporary Austen scholars who make the same connection, John Wiltshire (1999) has questioned whether Austen is actually indebted to Shakespeare or is merely influenced by him. Penny Gay points to the linguistic competence, complexity of speech, and talent for using language as a weapon, that are attributes shared by Shakespeare’s and Austen’s heroines (Gay, 2010). There is ample evidence from the texts themselves of intertextual connections that fit Kristeva’s theory of a wide and nebulous web of textual codes. They may also be a direct and practical result of Austen’s personal familiarity with Shakespeare’s dialogue, possibly encouraged by a mid-eighteenth–century revival of interest in his works (Gay, 2010, 463).

It is apparent that Austen had internalised Shakespeare’s language, like every English person educated to the standard of Henry Crawford and Edmund Bertram, as the following exchange in *Mansfield Park* illustrates:

“But Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. *It is part of an English-man’s constitution*…one is intimate with him by instinct. – no man of any brain can open at a good part of any one of his plays, without falling into the flow of his meaning immediately.”

“No doubt, one is familiar with Shakespeare in a degree,” said Edmund, ‘from one’s earliest years. His celebrated passages are quoted by everybody, they are in half the books we open and we all talk Shakespeare….” (Austen, 1814/2005b, 390–39)(emphasis added).

The point made by Edmund, as Rogers points out (Rogers, 2006, 6), quoting Shakespeare, is beautifully illustrated by the echoes of Mercutio’s “Nay, gentle Romeo, we must have you dance” from Act 1, Scene 4 of *Romeo and Juliet*, in the first words we hear from Mr Bingley, “Come Darcy, I must have you dance” (Austen, 1814/2006a, 11). Neither request, as Rogers again reminds us, is successful.

The linguistic strategies that enable the narrator and the characters to *talk Austen* rather than *talk Shakespeare* contributes significantly to the pleasure of reading the novels. At meetings of my Jane Austen society there is always a range of objects for sale, each bearing an example of Austen talk, in the form of quips and aphorisms from the novels. But commercialisation is not the full extent to which the language of *Pride and Prejudice* has been mined. Critics have looked for and identified specific features and quirks of language that account for the truthfulness of Austen’s depictions: the folly, meanness and absurdity of characters like Mr Collins and Lady Catherine, on the one hand, and, on the other, the particular charm of Elizabeth’s conversations. The trust she feels for her Aunt Gardiner, for example, enables her to express unreservedly her thoughts about marriage and money, a recurring motif in the pattern of the novel:

“Pray, my dear aunt, what is the difference in matrimonial affairs, between the mercenary and the prudent motive? Where does discretion end and avarice begin? Last Christmas you were afraid of his marrying me, because it would be imprudent; and now because he is trying to get a girl with only ten thousand pounds, you want to find out that he is mercenary.” (Austen, 1813/2006a, 173).

Elizabeth constructs a balanced and persuasive argument that starts with two rhetorical questions and eschews moral judgments. Matrimonial and mercenary are allied by alliteration. Austen balances abstractions with the concrete and the personal to clarify her own position and demonstrate the flaw in her aunt’s. The logic of Elizabeth’s argument effectively redeems her from W. H. Auden’s ‘shocked’ poetic response to Austen’s description of ‘the economic basis of society’, although it is not clear whether the poet’s discomfort is caused by the novelist or by society itself:

It makes me most uncomfortable to see

An English spinster of middle class

Describe the amorous effect of ‘brass’,

Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety

The economic basis of society (Auden, 1937, 299).

How, I wonder, would Auden answer the question Elizabeth asks of her aunt, about where discretion ends and avarice begins.

The conventional ‘elegant decorums’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 174) are less relevant to Elizabeth than the particular circumstances in which people find themselves. In this novel we find Austen’s heroine challenging established notions of a suitable marriage, especially among the propertied classes to which Darcy and Lady Catherine belong. An alliance that ‘gave the individual and those closest to him potentially useful new kinsmen, and increased the number of people through whom favours might be sought and advancement achieved’ was losing ground as a condition of marriage (Houlbrooke, 1984, 73). In conversation with her Aunt Gardiner, Elizabeth Bennet is at her most thoughtful and spirited, defending the rights of the individual to determine for herself the path best taken. The empathic change of heart that enables her to understand and accept Charlotte Lucas’s decision to marry Mr Collins rather than face a future of dependence on her family or service as a governess, is a function of the logic she presents to her aunt.

 Perhaps it is this combination of independence and empathy that has endeared Elizabeth to a succession of novelists and engendered a tradition of praise from fellow novelists (cf. Carson, 2010). If it takes a novelist to know what novels and novelists are about, the long list of authors who have admired Austen’s novels is a reflection of the respect paid by fellow writers to her craftsmanship. The list includes the novelist-politician Benjamin Disraeli who claimed to have read *Pride and Prejudice* seventeen times, Robert Louis Stevenson, the writer of adventure and science fiction, who declared that every time he read *Pride and Prejudice* he wanted to get down on one knee and propose to Elizabeth Bennet, and the contemporary satirist, Martin Amis, who avers that when love blooms for Darcy, ‘it blooms for every male reader on earth’ (Amis, 1975, 83).

Naturally, because after all this is a courtship novel, the blooming of love for Darcy and Elizabeth fulfils what companion memoirist, Vivian Gornick calls, in a useful phrase, ‘the promise of the narrative’ (Gornick, 2020, 120). The latter lies in the making of a match between a girl whose spirits are, by nature, as high and happy as those of Rosalind in her Ganymede disguise and a single man of large fortune, described by his future mother-in-law as ‘a most disagreeable, horrid man, not at all worth pleasing’ (Austen, 1813/006a, 14). Their first meeting at the Meryton ball sets them on a collision course that augers ill for romance. However, ‘the author controls the narrative with inconspicuous ease’ (Rogers, 2006, lxxv), and navigates the unpromising romance toward a conclusion that appears to satisfy everyone – including even the ‘mortified ’Miss Bingley (Austen, 1813/2006a, 430).

### Re-reading *Pride and Prejudice*

In an interview about literature, A. C. Grayling was asked by his fellow philosopher, Norman Geras (2009) whether he was a Jane Austen fan. He answered:

You could say that – I used to go to bed with Austen every Easter holiday when I was a student! Austen sets the example of how to do what great literature should do – reveal something about the human condition. *Pride and Prejudice* is a great example of this. Everyone knows roughly what it is about. Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy misunderstand each other at the outset – he thinks she is rather vulgar, and she thinks he is horribly stuck-up. As the novel goes on they both re-learn how to judge one another, they re-evaluate the other’s moral worth. Among many things, *Pride and Prejudice* is an exploration of moral epistemology (Geras (2009).

I cannot claim to have re-read Austen’s novels as frequently or as assiduously as Grayling, but I have returned to each of them at least every decade. I have found every time that re-reading reveals changes, not to the text, but to my own consciousness, so that like Elizabeth Bennet I can claim, paradoxically and once again, that  ‘till *this* moment, I never knew myself’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 230; emphasis added).

The title of Vivian Gornick’s reading memoir describes each reading of the novels she values as ‘unfinished business’ (Gornick, 2020) because she knows that the next reading will be different in some way. Her discussion of *Sons and Lovers* illustrates the process. She has read the book at different stages of her life, and each time she experienced the narrative and related to the characters from a different point of view. In both her earlier readings she engaged with the female characters and the sexual themes of Lawrence’s novel, *Sons and Lovers* (Lawrence, 1913/1970). The third time, she was in her mid-thirties, twice married and divorced:

Now preoccupied with desiring rather than being desired, I gloried in giving myself up to the shocking pleasure of sexual experience itself – rich, full, transporting – imagining myself now, like Paul at the end of the novel, ‘the hero of my own life’ (Gornick, 2020, 18).

In rereading the same novel in her maturityshe no longer saw sexual passion as ‘*the* central experience of life’, in either the book or in her own life, but read the book as a revelation of the power of life itself. In her third reading of the novel she was influenced by the cultural ethos of the 1970s; she had left a second marriage because, she realised, at ‘the simple heart of the matter’, she didn’t want to be married (Gornick, 2020, 35). She turned the pages, she writes, ‘as though reading Braille, hoping to gain for myself the freedom from emotional blindness the book was urging on its readers’ (35).

How do Gornick’s thoughts about marriage, I wonder, connect with Jane Austen’s life, and with her portrayal of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*? We can never know whether, at a deeply unconscious level, Austen was a single woman by choice, but we do know that, contrary to the inferences we might draw from Auden’s stanzas, she chose not to marry for money alone, even though the implications of such a choice were problematic. We also know that the marriage background against which the courtship of Elizabeth and Darcy takes place is hardly impressive: the Bennets, the Hursts and Mr and Mr Collins, compromised in one way or another, and certainly less than blissful; Sir William and Lady Lucas, happiness unknown; Mr and Mrs Gardiner, happiness assured. Reason enough, I suspect, for Austen to write her final chapter as a fictional gesture in which the generous and gracious get their rewards and the less deserving get their deserts, with the exception of Mr Bennet who, in gaining access to the Pemberley library, gets rather better than he deserves.

The marriage landscape of the novel is reason enough too for both the gifted and the less gifted among Austen’s readers to be stirred to consider the implications even though or perhaps especially because Austen leaves the future to the imagination. In producing the stream of re-imaginings that are keeping Austen’s work alive into the twenty-first century, authors have created what might be described as a meta-genre for a new generation of readers and viewers, which may or may not, illuminate Austen’s fiction, but does not diminish or displace it.

My personal relationship to reading and re-reading has several affinities with Gornick’s. She writes of the ‘companionateness’ of her reading (2020, 4); I, like Cunningham’s character in *The Hours*, felt parented by books, Austen’s in particular. Gornick sometimes thinks she was ‘born reading’ (3). I often feel that I was formed by reading, and that re-readings of books I value have, in different ways, defined the different phases of my life. We both, as memoirists, regard re-reading as one of the chief joys of being a reader, an invitation to re-examine the books we love to read, and an opportunity to learn to know ourselves again, at a new moment in time. *Pride and Prejudice*, as a book I read for the first time when I was at the crucial intersection between adolescence and adult life, not only presented me with new possibilities for moving into the next phase of my life; it played a particularly significant role in the selection and development of inner resources for making my way in the world.

I came of age well before the contraceptive pill and women’s liberation movements. At that time, it was possible, and in fact quite probable, that someone would make a passing reference to ‘marriages that are made in heaven’ without provoking gales of laughter. In my early readings of the novel I took comfort from a narrative in which the Bennet marriage that resembled in many ways that of my parents did not preclude daughters of the marriage from attaining the heaven-made ideal. Take Elizabeth, for example, I told myself hopefully, as I associated the frequent references to eyes in the novel with biblical and secular sayings about eyes as windows to the soul, and possibilities of recognising a soul mate were he or she to appear on the scene. The sight of Elizabeth’s ‘fine eyes’ causes Darcy to feel, at first, ‘very great pleasure’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 30). Later he is overcome by a sense of being in ‘some danger’ as ‘a mixture of sweetness and archness’ in Elizabeth’s manner (57) bewitches him. Miss Bingley’s jealous attempt to provoke him by mocking Elizabeth’s eyes and asking what painter could do them justice is met by indifference to her intent:

It would not be easy, indeed, to catch their expression, but their colour and shape, and the eye lashes, so remarkably fine, might be copied (57).

Elizabeth, on the other hand, cannot help noticing how often Darcy’s eyes follow her, as they do at Netherfield and later at Rosings, while in the street Darcy determines *not* to fix his eyes on her (81). Cumulatively, the eyes have it! They suggest to me, and there are no signs that the narrator does not agree, that Elizabeth and Darcy are, despite his pride and her prejudices, soulmates; and that the promise of the narrative is to draw them together in an intimate relationship, after exposing them to the obstacles that life throws in the way of desire and after they have submitted to the requisite task of ‘soul searching’ that would bring them both to a mutual understanding of themselves, of each other.

When I re-read *Pride and Prejudice* in the early 1960s, I experienced again the pleasure of engaging with Austen’s narrative, characters and ideas, but my personal response was more like that of Hilary Mantel (2007). I took less comfort from the novel this time, but not necessarily for the same reasons as Mantel, whose novelist’s imagination responds to *Pride and Prejudice* as a ‘ high comedy with an underlying note of panic’ about ‘the dark spiders of ruin and social disgrace’ that ‘scurry across the threads of the narrative’ (Mantel, 2007, 76). My mind was now attentive to the realities rather than the possibilities of romance and marriage. Times had changed and so had I. Perhaps, in the zeitgeist of the 60s, I found the novel not dark enough. By then, talk about marriages made in heaven would probably raise a laugh, while talk, particularly among women, about the unbearable loneliness of marriage, would definitely not raise an eyebrow. For a generation of women, many of whom were the first university–educated females in their family, contemporary versions of Mr Darcy were in short supply. Mr Bennet, however, was to be found in abundance, taking refuge from wife and family, not in the household library, but in a variety of places and spaces, from city offices to suburban pubs. I put *Pride and Prejudice* aside with a sigh, and picked up *The Pumpkin Eater* by Penelope Mortimer (1995). This was truly the zeitgeist: a lonely woman with lots of children and no Darcy in sight. Reading this novel, I found my own tears matching those of the anguished heroine.

It took another rereading, this time in the 1980s, to remind me that Austen was still, always had been, and I believe always will be, relevant to the notion of intimate relationships and how they are constructed. The difference in the two readings fits with Hans-Georg Gadamer’s claim that the work of art is not just a historical artefact, but is ‘newly actualized and brought to life in the hermeneutic encounter’ (Felski, 2011, 573). The significance of re-reading, highlighted by Gornick and her shifting insights, lies in the renewal of the hermeneutic encounter. Rita Felski questions the usefulness of what counts as contextualisation in the hermeneutic technique that insists that ‘the most rigorous reading is performed against the grain’ (Felski, 2011b, 217), and is ‘driven by an adamant refusal to take words at their face value’ (216).

Reading in the context of the reader’s life experience is, however, a different matter. Insights are grounded in the ‘messy, mundane, empirical details of how and why we read’ (Felski 2011a, 574) and illuminated by the affective resonances of the text to which both Gornick and I exemplify readers who re-actualise readings at each successive encounter. The *Pride and Prejudice* that I re-read in the 1980s had not changed, but I as a reader had. Most significantly, Germaine Greer had arrived in my life. *The Female Eunuch* (Greer, 1970/2002) heralded the possibility of change and the renewal of optimism. It is fortuitous that I decided to read the novel again post Greer. It was my youngest daughter’s text for the Higher School Certificate in 1980 and I wanted to refresh my memory so that we could explore it together. Laura was almost the same age as I had been when I first read the novel, and I wanted to endow her experience with a similar mixture of curiosity and wonder. Together we ventured into the Shakespearian resemblances, noticed the choice of words, the balance and rhythm of the sentences, and discussed the characters and the relationships between them.

The sort of ‘serious noticing’ that the critic James Wood (2019) recommends in order to reveal the life of the work performed the miracle. It introduced Laura to the excitement of literary sleuthing as we turned our attention to the subtle changes in the choices and decisions that Elizabeth made about Darcy throughout the novel. When we came to Chapter 10, we noticed that it defined a significant moment in the narrative that I had not previously considered with the close attention it now seemed to warrant. It starts with Miss Bingley’s gushing interruptions to Darcy’s letter writing, and his reluctant responses. The transition from Miss Bingley and Darcy as a duo to Bingley, Elizabeth and Darcy as a trio, we noticed now, is as seamless as the choreography of a ballet. Elizabeth glides into the conversation with a graceful compliment in response to Bingley’s clumsy apology for the standard of his handwriting, and thereby elevates the conversation to another level altogether: “Your humility, Mr Bingley”, said Elizabeth, “must disarm reproof” (Austen, 1813/2006a, 52).

How can Darcy not register, at some level, the superiority of Elizabeth to his friend’s sister? And how can the notion of ‘humility’ not signal a rupture to the narrative as it raises the conversation to another level? The word ‘humility’ is a curious choice. It seems to come out of nowhere, although the mischievous spirit of Shakespeare’s Beatrice might be stirring the pot. I explained to Laura that the status of humility as a virtue was contested by Aristotle as well as by Enlightenment thinkers; and that, although Austen did not use a strict Enlightenment lexicon in her fiction, nor meet Enlightenment arguments ‘in their own discursive space’ (Rogers, 2006a, xliii), the choice of this word in the context of a casual conversation about Bingley’s untidy handwriting suggests a larger purpose on Elizabeth’s part. The antonym of humility is, of course, arrogance. Could Elizabeth’s invocation of the word be a deliberate strategy to draw Darcy’s attention to a quality that he palpably lacks, a bait to capture his attention and, at the same time, a rebuke to him in the guise of a compliment to Bingley? And, if either or both of these, what, to use a term favoured by James Wood, are the stakes here?

By asking these questions *of the text* as readers, Laura and I were examining the pleasure of reading the novel, as Lionel Trilling asks, and finding evidence of how Austen manages to extend the reach of a reader’s imagination to possibilities unstated *in the text*. To answer the questions we needed to return to Darcy’s first appearance in the novel, to the monthly Meryton ball. On that night his popularity rating fell dramatically within the space of one paragraph. On his entrance the ‘admiration’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 10) bestowed on him for his ‘fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien’ (10) was almost immediately transformed into disapproval, as ‘he was discovered to be above his company, and above being pleased’ (10). Clearly, such conduct laughs in the face of humility, and saying the word in Darcy’s hearing suggests an ulterior motive on Elizabeth’s part. Whether or not she intends to bait Darcy, his response could not be more gratifying:

“Nothing is more deceitful”, said Mr Darcy, “than the appearance of humility. It is often only carelessness of opinion, and sometimes an indirect boast.” (Austen, 1813/2006a, 53).

As the conversation develops around the meaning of humility, using as an example the earlier discussion of a precipitous departure from Netherfield and the extent of a friend’s persuasion in decision making, the chapter foreshadows both the narrative structure of the novel and the centrality of the efforts that must be made by both Elizabeth and Darcy to understand the meaning of humility. Only then will they have a foundation on which to build an intimate relationship that will be as mutually satisfying as the one represented by Austen in the final chapter.

### Conclusion

In the course of my life I have taken away from *Pride and Prejudice* a succession of insights that have resonated affectively with my life at the time of reading. It is clear that Vivian Gornick, in her extensive and rich reading life, has had similar experiences with the novels of D. H. Lawrence to which she returns periodically. Much of Austen’s impact is due, I believe, to the power of her literary imagination. It may be that the intricate exploration of a heroine’s consciousness in *Pride and Prejudice* has its origins in Austen’s earlier unpublished epistolary novel, *First Impressions*. The use of letters in the mature novel is evidence of the richness of Austen’s literary imagination; not just in the comic brilliance of Mr Collins’s letter to Mr Bennet, but in the bold confidence with which Elizabeth’s re-reads Darcy’s letter. Austen, James Wood writes, ‘shocked fiction forward from Samuel Richardson’s epistolary mode’ (2019, 207). When Elizabeth re-reads the letter she demonstrates best practice reading, while Austen demonstrates, in *Pride and Prejudice*, how accomplished a novelist she has become. As Elizabeth adjusts her ‘style of thinking’ she pays attention to the ‘endless details’ that connect with the ‘dramatization of large themes’ (Epstein, 2014, 12) or, in her case, the details that provide evidence on which to base sound judgment about a larger matter.

 Even though the novel was set in a period long before I was born, it offered me a different version of what it was to be an adult woman in my own time. In Elizabeth Bennet I discovered a female who could match, even surpass, young men like David Copperfield, to become the heroine of her own life. This is not the place to discuss who is the more successful of the two, but it is a conversation worth having. There is no moment in young Copperfield’s maturation that matches the measured judgment and blinding honesty that enables Elizabeth to re-read herself as ‘blind, prejudiced, partial and absurd’ (Austen, 1813/2006a, 230).

Here Austen’s literary imagination is at work, inviting readers to enter Elizabeth’s consciousness as she reflects on her own short-sightedness, adding retrospective irony to the many references to her eyes. Elizabeth could have chosen not to cast her eyes over Darcy’s letter a second time, to cling to Wickham’s version of Darcy’s behaviour, not to weigh up and test the evidence. Darcy too is shown negotiating his future. He could have chosen not to reflect on what it meant to him to be or not to be a ‘gentleman’, to disdain Elizabeth for her family’s shortcomings. Both heroine and hero tease apart the possibilities of a relationship within the boundaries set by both the society in which they live and by their hearts’ desires.

As developing readers we need to understand that ‘reading is a complex business in which readers both impose themselves on and are exposed to literary texts’ (Felski, 2008, 3). As a result, in Felski’s view, ‘we are sorely in need of more cogent and compelling justifications for what we do’ (3) when we read. It is natural that a romantic comedy in a realistic domestic setting resonates with the aspects of our lives that relate to our sense of emotional wellbeing. This is one of the many ways in which the pleasure of Austen’s fiction can be experienced. The desire for an intimate relationship with a partner in which both parties feel rewarded and respected and the effort required to achieve it will be as significant for the well-being of young people in the twenty-first century as it has always been for Jane Austen’s readers. Whether the relationship takes the form of marriage, whether it is heterosexual, or whether it is a lifelong commitment, these are issues that are not as controversial in the twenty-first century as they were when Austen wrote her novels or when I first read them. However, given issues like those raised by the Me Too Movement and the prevalence of domestic violence in contemporary partnerships, the difficulties around marriage and gender relationships are as many, as varied and as seemingly intractable now as they were for Mr and Mrs Bennet. To the extent that fiction can be a vehicle for opening minds and engaging feelings in why and how choices are made and how judgments about the potential of romantic relationships might be navigated, readers of *Pride and Prejudice* are offered models for and opportunities to develop the critical and creative capabilities advocated, not just in the English syllabus, but in the broader goals for living well in a free and democratic society.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# *MANSFIELD PARK:* A ROOM OF HER OWN

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, an analysis of Austen’s most popular novel, *Pride and* Prejudice, invoked Shakespeare’s romantic comedies as intertextual refrains, while the lively conversations of Austen’s most popular heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, were recalled in references to the speeches of two of Shakespeare’s irrepressible and supremely confident heroines, Rosalind and Beatrice. When Austen shifted her attention to *Mansfield Park* (1814/2005b), she took a dramatically new direction in tone and mood with ‘a complete change of subject’ (Le Faye, 2011, 210). It was the first of her novels to have its genesis in her ‘sober middle age’ (Pickrel, 1987, 618), a period of her life marked by a reversal of her earlier hostility to an evangelical moral outlook (cf. Leavis, Q. D., 1957, xii). Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice* had escaped the fate of a fallen woman, sending home a muslin gown with a ‘great slit’ for mending (Austen, 1813/2006a, 321); by contrast, Maria in *Mansfield Park*, ignoring the warning that she might tear her dress in pursuing her adulterous sexual desires (Austen, 1814/2005b, 116), was cast out of family and home. Caught in the slipstream of Austen’s changing moral outlook, *Mansfield Park* has confounded and indeed offended readers who resisted a transition from detached, amused, and amusing authorial irony to a profound moral examination of the changing social world.

According to the chronology provided by Austen scholar, Deirdre Le Faye (2005, xvi–xxiv), Austen started to plan the novel in 1811, shortly before she began to revise *First Impressions*, the novel she had commenced at the age of twenty-one (Wiltshire, 2005, xxi). *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1813 when Austen was already about halfway through composing *Mansfield Park*. *Emma* was commenced in 1814 shortly after *Mansfield Park* was accepted for publication. Sandwiched between the heroine widely regarded as Austen’s most popular and the novel considered by critics like Reginald Farrer (1917) to be her most perfect, this anomalous novel and its heroine are preoccupied with matters of moral consequence in such a different way from the other romantic comedies that Austen’s critics have struggled to account for ‘what became of Jane Austen’ as Kingsley Amis does in his essay with that title (Amis, 1956, 124–127). Part fairy tale fable and part comedy of manners, the narrative follows the fortunes of Fanny Price, a Cinderella-like figure, who is transplanted from the squalor of her disorderly family home in the busy seaport of Portsmouth to Mansfield Park, the expansive country estate of affluent relatives.

### Reading *Mansfield Park*

*Mansfield Park* is the novel I decided to read during the long summer break between the first and second years of my Arts degree. I had read *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Northanger Abbey* as required texts on Thelma Herring’s list of Austen novels to be studied in English 1. I do not recall any critical commentaries except for those of Walter Scott. His celebrated ‘bow-wow’ passage was extracted from a journal entry in 1816 (Scott, 1826, 106). His earlier unsigned review of *Emma* waspublished in the *Quarterly Review* issued in March 1816 (Scott, 1815/1816). Scott established Austen’s novels as belonging ‘to a class of fictions which has arisen almost in our own times, and which draws the characters and incidents introduced more immediately from the current of ordinary life than was permitted by theformer rules of the novel’ (Scott, 1815/1816, 59). I was naturally delighted to find that on their visit to Sotherton in Chapter 10, volume 1, the party from Mansfield took time out to ‘lounge away the time as they could with sofas, and chit-chat, and *Quarterly Reviews’* (Austen, 1814/2005b, 121).

Even now I am not sure why I chose to read that particular novel at that moment in time, especially as I had not yet read the first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility.* However, *Mansfield Park* proved to be an auspicious choice. It went beyond the realisation that, in following *Pride and Prejudice* chronologically, this novel provided, in subject, mood and tone, the shade that might have been missing from ‘the light & bright & sparkling’ (Le Faye, 2011, 212) delineation of courtship, marriage and family life at Longbourn. It also happened that the association with acting, rehearsals and theatre that are central to the first volume of the novel connected with where my life was at that moment. Furthermore, related to those activities, I had just emerged somewhat bruised from an episode in which my judgment and my sense of principle had been tested. And matters of principle and the development of moral fibre as well as physical energy, it seemed to me as I read the second and third volumes of the novel, were emerging as central concerns in the education of the heroine, Fanny Price.

 On both counts, the experience of theatre and the question of principle, reading the novel *Mansfield Park* helped me reflect on choices I had made and outcomes that I was beginning to question. They were related to my involvement in the newly formed university dramatic society, the Sydney University Players, which was proving to be a pathway to a lively campus life. Responding to a notice that called for students to bypass the official drama society, Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS) with its limited opportunities for new recruits, I had plunged enthusiastically into the selection of the play and preparations for the first production, inspired by long discussions about the Stanislavski method of acting. By midyear a successful production of Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1881/2007)was playing in the theatre that was used regularly for lunchtime films and theatrical productions including the annual University Review. The *Union Theatre* as it was called then was later renovated, expanded and re-named the *Footbridge Theatre*. A favourable notice by the *Sydney Morning Herald* drama critic, Lindsay Brown, ensured good audiences. I trust to my memory for his verdict on my role as Mrs Alving, which I read so often that I had it by heart: the actress, he said, ‘moved with grace and dignity through the labyrinth of fate’. A short sentence but not a bad one, I prided myself! Having so unexpectedly landed the lead female role I was experiencing the delights and expectations that Austen depicts in *Mansfield Park*: the excitement of adopting an unfamiliar role on stage that seemed to spill into my own life. For the first time in my life I was part of a friendship group in which I felt comfortable, popular, and welcome. Somewhere among the pile of stored books for which there is no longer room on my bookshelves there is one exploring Stanislavski and his methods signed by my new ‘best mates’. It was an exhilarating time.

The risqué sexual content of both *Ghosts* (Ibsen, 1881/2007)and *Lovers’ Vows* (Inchbald, 1798/2020) and their relative subversive potential reverberated with my own experiences in an uncanny way. Family friends expressed alarm to my mother that I was taking part in a play with references to ‘a sexual disease’. My mother had more in common with Lady Bertram than with Sir Thomas so, unlike the would-be thespians at Mansfield Park, I had no battle to wage. However, in 1949 censorship lingered still; it applied to literature, film and theatre. The producer of the play who also undertook the main male role of Oswald had a flair for public relations. He invited the Assistant Treasurer in the Labour Government, Clive Evatt, who had been an active member of SUDS in the 1920s (Cunneen & Mclaughlin, 2007), and whose son, Clive Junior, had been present at the inaugural Sydney University Players meeting, to attend the first night performance and post-performance party organised by the Norwegian Embassy. The intention was to enlist sympathy at the political level in case of any issues over censorship.

In retrospect, Farrer’s observation in the context of a tribute to Jane Austen strikes a familiar chord in this synthesis of personal experiences:

And, how much nearer we are today [to] Anne [Elliot] and Fanny than to the generation immediately behind us, is shown by the fact that Pastor Mander’s ejaculation in ‘Ghosts’, that it is Oswald’s duty to love and honour his impossible dead father, represented such an accepted axiom to the Victorians that its obvious irony in the play was felt to be a blasphemy (Farrer, 1917, 257).

My father too was authoritarian and problematical, and as a young bible reader I had often balked at the fifth commandment: honour thy father and thy mother. So the irony in Ibsen’s drama was not lost on me even at the time of performance, and when I read *Mansfield Park* I was struck by a further irony: Fanny’s earlier and very *un-Victorian* criticism of her own father’s repulsive habits did not sit so easily with the rules of conduct to which she was being conditioned by her own society. In this and other ways I felt at home in Fanny’s company. Because, as a family, we read and talked about the bible regularly, I was used to thinking about matters of conscience in the context of bible stories and literary language. This relates, for me, to the methods of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1992), who has explored literary fiction and the significant role it can play as a moral influence. In the field of virtue ethics, a high value is set on the ‘skill of attending to moral salience’ (Vallor, 2016/2018, 100) as Fanny Price does, sitting in the East room and working out who she should be as well as what she should do. William Deresiewicz (2011) also takes this approach. In his reading memoir he revisits *Mansfield Park* multiple times, learninglessons about the motivations for marriage, then and now, the arts of social climbing, and issues of money and class. He pays attention, too, to the virtue of being useful, an attribute that Fanny’s cousin and mentor, Edmund, considers to be central to the conduct of an ordained clergyman.

It seemed to me at the time of reading *Mansfield Park* so soon after weeks of trying to understand the probing moral seriousness of Ibsen’s drama and the anguished moral dilemma of my own character, Mrs Alving, that Fanny’s thoughts and conversation about matters of principle were worth attending to. Not only were Austen’s decisions about taking her characters on an excursion to Sotherton and rehearsing the play *Lovers’ Vows* (Inchbald, 1798/2020) brilliant literary strategies, prefiguring, as each episode does, the larger narrative purpose. They also serve to inform the moral impact of the novel; readers of Austen are called on to go beyond literary judgment to decisions about characters, their dispositions and their relation to life and society. Fanny’s reaction to both episodes gains meaning and complexity from the mirroring of events in which the inhabitants of Mansfield Park engage, opening up and expanding imaginative possibilities for a moral investigation of what counts when decisions call for discipline and reflection.

In this way my theatrical experience on campus and the complexities revealed by the theatrical scenario in Austen’s novel were mutually illuminating, and also relevant to a decision I made following the successful production of *Ghosts*. Unexpectedly, I had received a summons from the Vice-Chancellor’s wife who was the Patron of SUDS. When we met over afternoon tea in her husband’s office in the University Quadrangle, she explained that she had attended the first night performance of our play. She complimented me on my performance and wondered if I would like to audition for the role of Lady Macbeth in an upcoming SUDS production. This was an unusual turn of events. Usually, casting for the major annual production of the prescribed Shakespeare text for final year secondary school students was pre-ordained from within the ranks of the society. This year, it appeared, no Lady Macbeth stood up to be counted or cast, and the Society’s patron had suggested that she approach ‘the actress who played Mrs Alving’.

Of course, it was flattering. And it was tempting. I was ambitious, feeling the first stirrings of desire for a theatrical career. I had been applauded for my performance, and felt a growing sense of identity that had more to do with the mature woman I had played on stage than with me, a young undergraduate with neither direction nor a fixed sense of purpose. The decision I was called on to make was not straightforward. I was a founding member of Sydney University Players, reacting against the exclusive and hierarchical nature of the established dramatic society. As active members we were also, in a sense, comrades. Questions of rivalry, loyalty, and, yes, principle, were involved. I discussed the offer with my friends and sensed their ambivalence, although no one advised against accepting the role. I met the more glamorous set who ran the establishment society and of course I succumbed.

I turned up for weeks of rehearsal in a little theatre on the top floor of a small private hotel called Goulds in the city, and subsequently played Lady Macbeth to an audience made up chiefly of whole classes of final year secondary school students in the Great Hall of the University of Sydney. The experience was unforgettable. I learned a lot about stagecraft and voice projection from the testy and unpredictable producer, Sam Hughes. After several weeks of rehearsal, he momentarily considered recasting Lady Macbeth from among the young male acolytes who worked backstage. I barely survived emotionally at that moment but I survived in the role, to sleepwalk the length of the dimly lit Great Hall, taper in hand, overlooked by the doctor and the nurse as they commented on the eerie nightly activity from their observation post in the organ loft. Taking a bow at the conclusion of each performance I felt the thrill of applause and recognition. However, I was not as happy generally as I had been when rehearsing or performing in *Ghosts*.

Perhaps because I had been summoned from outside the clique I remained something of an outsider in an exclusive club of sophisticated thespians, some of whom were already poised for careers in professional theatre. Gordon Gostelow who played Macbeth left for London shortly after and spent many years working with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Michael Blakemore who was studying medicine and who played a minor role, I think one of Duncan’s sons, moved to Britain and eventually become an Associate Director of the National Theatre. The costume designers, make-up artist and hairdresser were professionals. They were altogether a confident crew, quick on repartee like the Crawford siblings, and among them I felt, as Fanny no doubt did, dull and boring. At the same time some of my most cherished relationships with my less worldly friends, where I had felt secure, more confident and lively, were diminished as a result of my decision to accept the role of Lady Macbeth.

As I read *Mansfield Park* that summer, I agonised with Fanny Price and applauded her for her resistance to the powers of desire and persuasion. I thought about the moral chasm between Fanny and the more charismatic Mary Crawford. I recognised Elizabeth Bennet’s archness in Mary Crawford, but not her sweetness. I discovered that the shade Austen considered lacking in *Pride and Prejudice* was lurking in unexpected corners of *Mansfield Park,* especially in the fire-less East room where Fanny spent her days reading, thinking, and educating herself. Most urgently, I pondered whether Fanny’s determination to be good was a virtue or a bore, a personal issue and an ambiguity at the heart of the critical dilemma that has always divided readers when they visit *Mansfield Park*.

### *Mansfield Park*: A critical dilemma

A problem arose with the publication of *Mansfield Park*, ruffling the composure of hitherto and hereafter approving readers and critics of Jane Austen’s fiction. The radical change from the previous novels in which the narrator observes her heroines with an amused detachment, to a more experimental technique in which the narrator disappears into Fanny’s consciousness and then reappears to make sure that she is understood, is one of the several features that set this novel apart from the others. ‘My Fanny’ (Austen, 1814/2005b, 553) Austen calls this heroine and the personal possessive pronoun suggests a uniquely empathic relationship between character and narrator. This is not the only innovation. Fanny, unlike all other heroines, starts her fictional life in childhood, long before she is ready to think about romance or marriage. As the oldest girl in a lower middle-class family, born into poverty and household duties, she does not inherit Elizabeth Bennet’s Romantic Comedy genome. On the contrary, her literary DNA has traces of Cinderella and perhaps a little of Snow White. They are gentle girls who find themselves almost alone in the world, subject to the whims of a wicked stepmother. At the age of ten, Fanny Price is alone too; she is transferred from her squalid but bustling home in Portsmouth and her beloved older brother, William, to Mansfield Park. Her aunt, Mrs Norris, has masterminded the move as an act of charity, representing herself as a benefactor while revealing herself as a cruel taskmaster reminiscent of a fairy tale stepmother. As for a fairy godmother, that role is taken by the narrator herself, who watches over Fanny with a solicitude that critics have found disconcerting, and the severest of them, the novelist Kingsley Amis, has rejected as a failure of Austen’s moral judgment (Amis, 1956, 127).

The story that follows Fanny’s life at Mansfield Parkis both simple and complicated, as is the critical dilemma it has engendered. The grandeur of the mansion in which she lives is overwhelming; it ‘astonished but did not console’ her’ (Austen, 1814/2005b, 16). Initially she ‘crept about in constant terror of something or other’ (16), hiding her forlorn feelings behind ‘a quiet passive manner’ (16). But, after being comforted and advised by her older cousin Edmund she lived ‘not unhappily’ (22) with her female cousins, the poor relation, useful to everyone especially her indolent but not unkind Aunt Bertram.

Fanny’s early childhood experiences do not make her a ‘creepmouse’ (171) forever. From the age of sixteen she starts to experience life differently, as she becomes involved in a succession of carefully plotted and tightly constructed narrative psychodramas that involve members of the Bertram family. Fanny observes events with a degree of detachment that is compromised by her increasing affection for her older cousin. Edmund is the single member of the Bertram household who has paid attention to Fanny’s emotional needs. Under his guidance she has undergone a course of education remarkably different from the lessons that engage her confident cousins, Maria and Julia:

Miss Lee taught her French, and heard her read the daily portion of History; but he [Edmund] recommended the books which charmed the leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment; *he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read*, and heightened its attraction by judicious praise. In return for such services she loved him better than anyone in the world except William; her heart was divided between the two (Austen, 1814/2005b, 25; emphasis added).

Thus Fanny embarks upon a recovery of sorts, both physical and moral. Edmund’s reading pedagogy is impeccable, and provides Fanny with a window from which to observe the inhabitants of Mansfield Parkand the energetic visitors, Mary and Henry Crawford, who have taken up temporary residence at the adjoining parsonage. Fanny judges the manners of these sexually aware young adults from two perspectives: her reading, and the rules of decorum mandated by the master of the house, Sir Thomas Bertram. Here, however, the complication starts. As the narrative shifts from Fanny’s difficult childhood to the territory of romantic comedy, the expectations of readers, especially Austen’s readers, are jolted. The brilliantly conceived and executed plot engages readers in a family excursion to Sotherton, the stately home of Maria’s fiancé; the preparations for a performance of a controversial play; and the attempted courtship of Fanny by Henry Crawford. In each of these episodes Fanny is tested, and for a section of critical readership, she is found wanting.

The critical reception of the novel is synthesised by John Wiltshire in his introduction to the Cambridge University Press edition of the novel:

The story of *Mansfield Park’*s reception over the past two hundred years resembles the story of its heroine in the house itself. Like her, it has been neglected, passed over, misunderstood, sneered at and ill-used. It has had its defenders, and a surprising number of them have been like her cousin Edmund, men of the cloth. Gradually, however, its qualities have become impossible to overlook. Yet even when *Mansfield Park*’s stature is acknowledged, it is with reluctance: a great, but not a favourite, novel; not the obvious heir to the Austen estate, thought to be lacking in comedy and even in irony, not ‘out’ but not exactly ‘in’ either. And just as Fanny cherishes secret, illicit desire, some critics have argued that the novel itself harbours shameful secrets behind its principled, conservative exterior. Unlike Jane Austen’s other novels, then, *Mansfield Park* has presented less of an invitation and more of a challenge (Wiltshire, 2005, lvii-lviii).

Wiltshire’s witty commentary highlights a critical approach in which the novel and its attributes, textual and contextual, have generally been considered from the perspective of Fanny Price and the social milieu of *Mansfield Park*. Perhaps, however both the novel and the heroine have been, as the narrator tells readers of the latter, ‘too little understood to be properly attended to’ (Austen, 1814/2005b, 15). Wiltshire subverts his own critical position when he associates the purported lack of comedy and irony for which Austen is celebrated with questions of being ‘out’ and ‘in’, drawing attention to a scene (57–60) that is in actual fact both comic and ironic. One of the most hilarious conversations in all of the Austen oeuvre, especially when read aloud on *Audible* by a superb reader like Juliet Stevenson (Austen, 1814/2000), the exchange reveals the underlying flaw in Mary Crawford’s character, her flair for endowing the most trivial matters with her inimitable wit:

It is much worse to have girls not out, give themselves the same airs and take the same liberties as if they were, which I have seen done. That is worse than anything – quite disgusting! (Austen, 1814/2005b, 58).

Contradictions in the critical record of this novel are not uncommon. Ideas about underlying ‘secret illicit desires’ have been central to arguments that excoriate Fanny for her yielding, submissive and by implication hypocritical behaviour. She is excoriated on two counts; first for her view that ‘virtue and happiness [are] indeed deterrents to the good life’ (Trilling, 1954/1960, 211), and alternatively for her own vice in the form of jealousy as she contemplates the loss of Edmund to Mary (cf. Auerbach, 1983). The mode of criticism is at times grounded in rhetoric rather than close textual attention as each critic pursues a line of argument that detracts from Fanny Price as either a fictional character or as a person of any human interest. Auerbach contrasts the ‘hell of ‘jealousy and agitation’ that overcomes Fanny Price as everyone else is ‘gay and busy’ (Auerbach, 1). To put this gloss on the intense emotional dramas played out during the rehearsal of *Lovers’ Vows* (Inchbald, 1798/2020) indicates a lack of attention to the ‘toils of frustration, suppressed rivalries, and acute sexual jealousies’ that emerge from the rehearsal dynamic (Stabler, 2003, x). The rivalry between the sisters, the duplicity of Henry Crawford as he courts one, then the other, the vanity of Mr Rushworth and the sheer stupidity of Mr Yates, these manifestations of human behaviour can barely be passed off as no more than gaiety.

Reginald Farrer, in his exuberant eulogy on the centenary memorialisation of Austen’s premature death (Farrer, 1917), preceded Kingsley Amis in striking a major and more seriously argued critical blow against *Mansfield Park*. After delivering a mounting succession of plaudits to its predecessors, he accused Austen of breaking faith with her own nature by undertaking this unexpectedly different work of fiction. Farrer set out in principle to break the Austen family myth of domestic saintliness around Austen. Perhaps this is why he was so fiercely critical of a heroine who concerns herself with right action.

Nina Auerbach reinforces his opposition in a particularly censorious way. Her analysis of the novel takes Fanny down a perverse imaginative path, distorting Lionel Trilling’s reference to Wordsworth’s leech gatherer to argue that Fanny is a ‘killjoy, a blighter of ceremonies and divider of families’ (Auerbach, 1983, 211). This may be how Fanny captures Auerbach’s imagination, but Auerbach does not speak for me as a reader of the novel. As a witness to Fanny’s rapturous response to ‘the brilliancy of an unclouded night’ and to the delight she takes in ‘star-gazing’ (Austen, 1814/2005b, 132), I respond to her grasp of cosmic wonder beyond the excesses of romanticism and also the banalities of everyday life.

Farrer (1917) accuses Austen of Dante’s *gran rifiuto* (262), a great refusal to follow the natural order of her own moral path. It is possible that Farrer was in reaction against the very idea of ‘ordination’ in Austen’s letter to Cassandra prompted by an ‘unforgettable suggestion’, foisted upon her by the Prince Regent’s librarian, that she write about a country clergyman. Farrer acknowledges that the latter interaction does not fit the date of composition; nevertheless he constructs his case from such speculations. He proposes that her ‘purpose of edification’, being not her own, is ‘always at cross-purposes with her unprompted joy of creation’ (Farrer, 262). What Farrer conveys is that the purposes of edification, transmitted by Austen and as he understands them, are not purposes that he endorses personally. While his speculations are interesting, they discount Austen’s capacity to take her readers on a voyage in which discovery rather than edification is the destination.

Farrer sets a precedent for future critics in rejecting the moral pattern of this novel. Unlike Henry James whose central heroines are, like Fanny Price, often unfairly denigrated (Krook, 1962/1967, 394), Austen frames her moral pattern in an optimistic view of human beings and their capacity to question and clarify the ambiguities of human experience. Both Edmund and Fanny, he more than she, are attracted to the Crawfords. They reflect on this in their conversations, and the narrator makes it clear that Fanny is not invulnerable to Henry’s seductive charm or to the complicity of his sister, although mercifully she is protected by her prior attachment to Edmund:

And without attempting any further remonstrance she [Mary] left Fanny to her fate – a fate which, had not Fanny’s heart been guarded in a way not suspected by Miss Crawford, might have been a little harder than she deserved; for although there are doubtless such unconquerable young ladies of eighteen (or one should not read about them) as are never to be persuaded into love against their judgment by all that talent, manner, attention and flattery can do, I have no inclination to believe Fanny one of them, or think that with so much tenderness of disposition, and so much taste as belong to her, she could *have escaped heart-whole from the courtship*…had not her affection been engaged elsewhere (Austen, 1814/2005b, 270; emphasis added).

 The narrator’s intimations of personal affection for a purportedly unappealing heroine, and her alleged disapproval of characters whose charm engages readers more forcibly, emerges as a persistent problem in the critical heritage of *Mansfield Park*.

Lionel Trilling is an ardent advocate of the cultural and literary significance of Jane Austen’s fiction (Trilling, 1976) but he also finds it difficult to like Fanny. However, he manages to have a bet each way in his provocative and assertive reading of the novel (Trilling, 1955). Initially he appears to concur with what he presents as the consensus view around the priggishness and conservative nature of the novel. Midway through his essay, however, he turns his back on his opening argument, describing *Mansfield Park* as a great novel whose greatness is ‘commensurate with its power to offend’ (116). From this point Trilling historicises the novel, finding beauty in Fanny as a Christian heroine leaning toward a tradition of saintliness that is delineated by her debility. Trilling compares Fanny with Milly Theale, the heroine of Henry James’s *The Wings of a Dove* (2008). In my reading,the likelihood that Fanny Price might turn her face to the wall, as Milly does, is not borne out by any textual evidence. Fanny is not under death sentence like Milly, but, as Martha Nussbaum might say, entering the stream of life (Nussbaum, 1992, 38).

Like Farrer, Trilling ignores aspects of Fanny Price to which Austen draws attention in the text: the positive impact of Edmund’s kindness on her temperament, the speed with which she adjusts to the attractions of Mansfield Park, the way in which she adopts timidity as a *mask* for her uncertainty as she sets about learning the ways of the household, and the conflicts she experiences in developing her own set of values and principles of conduct. Above all her humility is tested and reinforced by the treatment received from Mrs Norris. Here is an alternative Fanny, unrecognisable in the ‘dull little nobody’ presented by Farrer (Farrer, 1917, 263). Her ‘cross-questioning of her position on *Lovers Vows*’ (Stabler, 2003, xix) would do credit to Elizabeth Bennet who, as the analysis in the previous chapter illustrates, learned to identify, examine and weigh evidence with an awareness of her own prejudices. As readers we are enabled by the narrator to accompany Fanny to her haven in the East room, the ‘nest of comforts’ in which her few treasured possessions are gathered (Austen, 2005b, 179). In a beautifully executed example of free indirect thought, a strand of the technique called free indirect discourse (FID) invented and perfected by Austen (cf. Bray, 2018), Fanny’s own thoughts about Edmund’s participation in *Lovers’ Vows* ‘infiltrate’ the third-person narrative (Bray, 2018, 4). The following passage shows the ways in which Austen uses free indirect speech to show how Fanny interrogates her own feelings:

But she had more than fears of her own perseverance to remove; she had begun to feel undecided as to what she ought to do; and as she walked round the room her fears were increasing. Was she right in refusing what was so warmly asked, so strongly wished for? What might be so essential to a scheme on which some of those to whom she owed the greatest complaisance, had set their hearts? Was it not ill nature – selfishness – and a fear of exposing herself? And would Edmund’s judgment, would his persuasion of Sir Thomas’s disapprobation of the whole, be enough to justify her in a determined denial in spite of all the rest? (Austen, 1814/2005b, 179).

The fact that Fanny considers that it is even possible not to comply with the wishes of those to whom she feels a debt of gratitude for her life at Mansfield Park, is evidence of how she is changing, how a unique capacity for defiance is already forming. In ignoring this, Trilling transgresses the ‘limits within which responsible reading of the text can occur’ (Pickrel, 1987, 620). Even on a first reading the admiration of both Trilling and Farrer for Henry and Mary Crawford goes against the text. Mary simply does not live up to their praises. Her assumed opposition and eventual acquiescence to her brother’s planned seduction of Fanny suggests something other, illustrated by the following exchange between sister and brother:

“Foolish fellow! And so this is her attraction after all. This it is – her not caring about you – which gives her such a soft skin and makes her so much taller, and produces all these charms and graces! I do desire that you will not be making her really unhappy; a little love may animate her and do her good, but I will not have you plunge her deep, for she is as good a little creature as ever lived, and has a great deal of feeling.”.

“It can be but for a fortnight”, said Henry, “and if a fortnight can kill her, she must have a constitution which nothing could save… .” (Austen, 1814/2005b, 269).

Even Mary’s patronising concession of Fanny’s vulnerability cannot ameliorate the carelessness with which she consigns Fanny to her brother’s intentions. If it is a question of charm and the contrast between Mary’s vivacity and Fanny’s reticence, Elizabeth Bennet serves as useful measure of what Austen deems appropriate. It is unimaginable that she would sanction Mary’s indulgence of a plan to seduce a young woman. However, the idea that Fanny might be stripped of charm because Austen want to show that charm is deceptive (cf. MacIntyre, 1984) underestimates Austen’s literary imagination.

I do not find it difficult to like a heroine who speaks with calm intelligence, whether she is discussing the power of memory in the parsonage shrubbery with Mary Crawford or the purpose of prayer in the chapel at Sotherton (Austen, 2005b, 101). Nor do I find it submissive or passive to resist the seduction of Henry Crawford or to defy the authority of Sir Thomas Bertram. Like the critic, Thomas Edwards (1965), I find the singularity of M*ansfield Park’s*beauty in the ‘triumph of its integrity [which was] a prediction of what fiction was to be for the masters of the next hundred years’ (Edwards, 1965, 67). Everything is connected, and a form of internal intertextuality plays a powerful role in creating the unity of the novel, with an abundance of foreshadowing and retrospective affirmation. The ‘principle’ of which Sir Thomas was unthinkingly certain in the first chapter (Austen, 2005b, 2) is re-fashioned and reactivated by his recognition that his views about the education of his daughters and his stewardship of the Mansfield estate (Austen, 2005b, 536) have been deficient.

### *Mansfield Park*: Persons of interest

Fascinating, seductively attractive and morally challenging, both Mary and Henry Crawford are shown, like Fanny, to have been deeply affected by their childhood. As orphans they have been raised by a profoundly incompatible uncle and aunt. Their implied presence in the novel – the aunt is already deceased and the uncle absent – is an example of Austen’s ability to breathe life into characters, whether or not they are vocal or present. Henry has been influenced by the cynicism and sexual opportunism of the uncle, while Mary’s brittle cynicism about marriage is derived from the submissive suffering endured by her late aunt. Austen gives her readers every opportunity to understand the origins of their dispositions. Unlike Fanny they are born to wealth and privilege. Unlike Fanny they are fun to be with; they both sparkle in conversation and Mary glitters in appearance. Unlike Fanny, they fail to reflect on anything outside their own fantasies and desires.

The schism in the ways readers think about Fanny and the Crawfords remains central to the interest of the novel. As Deresiewicz demonstrates in his reading memoir, it takes multiple readings of *Mansfield Park* to discover how easily we can be seduced by and even remain attracted to behaviour that challenges the principles we aspire to live by. That is what Austen seems to be asking her readers to consider when she displays the Crawfords in all their charm. This does not mean readers have to love Fanny Price as much as they do Lizzy Bennet, although some of us well may. Deresiewicz puts it this way:

The truth is I never did grow to like Fanny Price, and I never could bring myself to dislike the Crawfords as much as I knew I should…But the lessons of *Northanger Abbey* still applied: ‘Such feelings ought to be investigated, that they may know themselves’…I wasn’t even sure that Austen expected us to like Fanny Price. She knew quite well that Fanny would be tough to love, but she wanted to draw the contrast with people like the Crawfords in the starkest possible terms (Deresiewicz, 2011, 162).

Deresiewicz’s reading memoir is constructed around the six novels which, he claims, gave him his most significant life lessons. He was initially ambivalent about *Mansfield Park.* The novel as he first experienced it seemed to ‘pit itself against everything Austen believed in… against wit and energy and curiosity’ (2011, 122). Like many readers he falls captive to the charms of Mary Crawford whose resemblance to Elizabeth Bennet camouflages her exercise of subtle manipulation. Although ‘she stewed with secret spite’ (126) he writes, she treats Fanny ‘with a gentle consideration that seemed to flow from real good will’ (126). As for Henry, however, ‘he was tougher to like’ (127). Bad enough that he lured Maria Bertram’s affections to serve the needs of his own vanity; after all, Maria was a willing participant in a duplicitous relationship. Fanny, however, is a different case, the object of cold calculation, for whom he wished nothing more than that she should ‘feel when I go away that she shall never be happy again’ (Austen 1814/2005b, 269). Those who turn their backs on the good life as the Crawfords do, ‘cease to be charming’ (Pickrel, 1987, 614). They slide with ease into the space carved out for ambiguity and ambivalence in Austen’s artistic scheme. Virginia Woolf shows us how the artist in Austen achieves this end:

Never did any novelist make more use of an impeccable sense of human values. It is against the disc of an unerring heart, an unfailing good taste, an almost stern morality, that she shows up those deviations from kindness, truth and sincerity which are among the most delightful things in English literature. She depicts a Mary Crawford in her mixture of good and bad entirely by this means. She lets her rattle on against the clergy, or in favour of a baronetage and ten thousand a year with all the ease and spirit possible; but now and again she strikes a note of her own, very quietly, but in perfect tune, and at once all Mary Crawford’s chatter, though it continues to amuse, rings flat’ (Woolf, 2009, 265).

To Austen’s artistic credit, Mary and Henry Crawford ring ‘true as fictional characters but ring false as human beings’.

I share Virginia Woolf’s view of Mary Crawford as a mixture of good and bad motives that add verve and complexity to the scenes in which she appears. Deresiewicz describes Henry Crawford as a dilettante whose behaviour contrasts with that of Fanny, to demonstrate that ‘Wisdom is better than Wit’, as Austen counselled her niece the same year, 1814, that the novel was published (Deresiewicz, 163). I find no textual evidence, however, for Deresiewicz’s suggestion that Austen split in two the heroine of his previous novel, Elizabeth Bennet, giving Mary her charm and Fanny her goodness, as an explanation for Fanny’s eternal dullness (Deresiewicz, 162). As Woolf implies, Austen does not have a Manichaean view of the world. It is notable that her single unrelentingly evil character, Mrs Norris, sometimes comic but never amusing, appears in *Mansfield Park*, and her exceptionality is, to some extent, responsible for the disturbing nature of the novel. A good reason for associating Austen with the great dramatist Shakespeare (Southam, 1987/2009, 22) rather than with the great novelist, Charles Dickens, is the endless ambiguity of her characters, never more so than in this, the so-called problem novel. Fanny is a more complex creation than the iconic wives of David Copperfield, simple-minded and innocent Dora, on the one hand, and Agnes, the domestic angel, on the other. The task Austen sets herself in this book is truly the task of many fairy tales, to create a heroine deprived of the advantages of birth and family, and discover how she can use the experiences life offers her to flourish in the world.

It is the role of another major person of interest in the novel, Sir Thomas, to offer Fanny just that opportunity. As the owner and guardian of Mansfield Park his role in the fiction is especially significant. To describe him, as Farrer did, as an ‘old Augustan bore’ (1917, 263) is to reduce Austen’s rich paradoxical rendition of a member of the landed gentry and trustee of the country-house ideal to a straw man, ripe for dismantling. Austen would never be guilty of such a breach of narrative composition. It is a long journey from his role as Fanny’s benefactor who accepts her on conditions of her inferiority to his own daughters, to a recognition of her right to live as an equal within his family. The economy of Austen’s art, ‘by which is meant the easy adaptation of means to end’ (Lewes, 1859, 152), exposes the flaws in his guardianship, a failure to safeguard the standards and values that were thought ‘to ennoble the status of the gentry’ (Toker, 2001/2, 223).

The happy ending of *Pride and Prejudice* celebrated Darcy’s suitability for this duty (Duckworth, 1971, 121) and the positive achievement of taking a wife like Elizabeth Bennet rather than a debilitated relic of his own class like Lady Catherine’s daughter. To treat Fanny’s delicacy of body and spirit in the same vein as Lady Anne’s chronic malaise in *Pride and Prejudice* is, however, simply wrong; as it is misleading to see *Mansfield Park* as a declaration of deterioration rather than a celebration of reclamation. Sir Thomas, who is guilty of carelessness and lack of empathy, has, in one important way, already moved with the times, making a companionate marriage and accepting a discounted dowry. Lady Bertram, however, is incapable of fulfilling her obligations as a wife and mother. Her indolence is not explained medically; in a post-colonial reading she might be taken to resemble a slave-owner’s privileged wife. But Sir Thomas is not unkind to her and he himself is not subjected to the irony that Austen metes out to Mr Bennet. Nevertheless, he is guilty of gross errors of judgment in handing over the stewardship of the house to Mrs Norris, misunderstanding the principles of an education that will perpetuate the values he cherishes and withholding affection from his daughters. His severity toward Fanny Price, on the basis of her inferiority, endures from the moment of her arrival until his departure for Antigua when he farewells her with a harsh comment on her lack of ‘improvement’ (Austen, 1814/2005b, 38).

The change that comes over Sir Thomas during his time in the West Indies is not easy to explain. His recognition of Fanny on his return as a valued member of his family signals a readiness on his part to establish a more generous order at Mansfield Park. He greets Fanny with a ‘kindness that astonished and penetrated her’, referring to her as his ‘little Fanny’ (208) well before the escalation of Fanny’s ‘consequences’ as a result of Henry Crawford’s courtship intentions (cf. Toker, 2001/2002, 229). Feeling tenderness toward Sir Thomas for the first time, Fanny notices an alteration in his person. As he ‘was grown thinner and had the burnt, fagged, worn look of fatigue and a hot climate’ (Austen, 2005b, 208–209), so Sir Thomas notices an improvement in Fanny’s [e]state, ‘a fine blush having succeeded the previous paleness of her face’ (208).

The transition from the fun of the first volume to a scene of domestic tranquillity in which Sir Thomas, unlikely as it seems, is ‘indeed the life of the party…communicative and chatty in a very unusual degree’ (209) displays the energy of the charming Crawford siblings in another light. Deresiewicz, in his reading memoir, explains how Austen helped him to see how the ‘rich and wellborn’ deal with people, and also how they hurt themselves:

The Crawford’s mobility, which looked so much at first like energy….was little more, I finally saw, than restless discontent….While the Crawford’s arrival set Mansfield awhirl with schemes of pleasure – the play, a trip to Maria Bertram’s fiancé’s estate – they always seemed to have a way of going sour… Everyone fought… over what kind of pleasure they were going to have, and who was going to have the most (Deresiewicz, 2011, 144–145).

It is in response to her uncle’s unusual ‘chattiness’ that Fanny asks the momentous question about the slave trade (Austen, 1814/2005b, 231). Heralding a radical re-reading of the novel by critics and readers oriented to the cultural analysis that was gaining ground in literary discourses of the final quarter of the twentieth century (cf. Culler, 1997/2011; Eagleton, 1983/2008), the question signals the need for a more intellectually serious consideration of political imperialism in discussions of the novel. However, the fact that Fanny’s question falls on deaf ears in the fiction suggests that no one at Mansfield Park is, as yet, ready to deal with this issue. Austen’s awareness of and interest in the abolitionist movement is known. Her inclusion of Miss Lambe, ‘a young West Indian of large fortune’ among the characters who inhabit the unfinished novel *Sanditon* (Austen, 2008, 199)indicates that she is conscious of the rising interest in matters related to the West Indies.  In my reading of *Mansfield Park* I have found it less fruitful to explore the degree of Austen’s complicity in the imposition of British imperialism than to reflect on the changing nature of the youthfully needy Fanny’s relationships (Todd, 2020, n.p.) as she develops the confidence to raise her voice, if as yet unanswered, in the conversations that take place at Mansfield Park.

### Educating Fanny

Fanny Price is indeed an unusual heroine, dramatically different from her predecessor. The influential critic, D. W. Harding, ‘long struggled to like’ her (Lee, 2010, 998). Lionel Trilling pulled no punches: ‘nobody’, he believed, ‘has *ever* found her possible to like’ (Trilling, 1955/1969, 212; emphasis added). Even my fellow Austen memoirist, William Deresiewicz, continues to be beguiled by the Crawfords: ‘fun people are fun’ (2011, 161) he thinks, and finds Fanny difficult to like. So, it is now time for me to declare myself to be as fond a friend of Fanny Price as her narrator could wish.

I cannot argue that readers *should* like Fanny, although I wish they *would*. But I do care about whether they understand those aspects of her nature with which I connected when I first read about ‘the little girl [who] performed her long journey in safety’, from Portsmouth to Mansfield Park(Austen, 1814/2005b, 13). In a trice my imagination took me back to a soft summer’s evening on the beach where my parents had taken my brother and me for a farewell picnic before they left us at our new temporary home. We played happily near the water. We were country children and the sea was a novelty. My brother pointed out with delight the imprint of crab claws in the damp sand. Quest Haven was the big house nearby, where we were to spend the next six months while our parents travelled abroad.

The connection with Fanny, Quest Haven and Mansfield Park is nebulous, but memories of that half year were strong enough to connect me with Fanny’s fictional world. My brother and I, aged five and three, were separated from our parents for a period of only six months. The circumstances were vastly different. We were well cared for and eventually reunited with our parents, but those six months shaped my disposition, my personality, and my relationship with my brother to whom I clung ferociously. Quest Haven, like Mansfield Park, was a hierarchical household in which age was an inseparable barrier to social interaction. In the sprawling house there were rooms set aside for different age groups, toddlers like myself, ‘middle’-aged children like my brother, and then the older children. Each area was a space unto itself. Moments together with my brother, unless stolen, were few and far between. I was lonely and confused, and I longed for his company. I *crept* to the door that separated me from my brother’s age group as often as I dared, just to feel his presence, but fear of punishment kept me away as often as not. Years later, reading about Fanny, my heart and mind engaged effortlessly with her yearning for William and her idealisation of Edmund as a surrogate brother. No one was unkind at Quest Haven, the food may not have been as delectable as the gooseberry tart with which Lady Bertram attempted to comfort Fanny, but I am sure it was appetising. Nevertheless, like Fanny, I ended many days’ ‘sorrows’ by crying myself to sleep (Austen, 1814/2005b, 16).

The roles of the imagination and of prior experience as theorised in Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading and writing (Rosenblatt, 2005, 1–37) are realised dramatically in my personal response to the novel. Each time I read the novel my imagination spirals, to use Rosenblatt’s trope, from text to association and back to text with heightened awareness. My own experience hovers in each encounter, less fraught with emotional deprivation than Fanny’s but an inevitable presence. Once home I could talk freely to my brother, my timidity reserved for strangers as Fanny’s was. Reminded of her devotion to her brother, Fanny too found her tongue under the shelter of a surrogate brother’s ‘protective tenderness’ (Lascelles, 1939/1969, 67). Like Fanny, I remained shy in company, preferring to observe, ponder the behaviour of others, think about whether I should emulate it, and contextualise it in books I had read.

Perhaps that is why I cannot agree with Farrer when he accuses Jane Austen of creating, in *Mansfield Park*, a Victorian-style heroine, who is little, soft, silly, and deserving of the epithet, ‘female prig-pharisee’ (Farrer, 1917, 264). Reading Farrer’s description of Fanny I am reminded again of Henry James the critic, and Charles Dickens the novelist, for different reasons. It was James who described Austen’s heroines as ‘perfect little she-Philistines’ with ‘undoubtedly small and second-rate minds’ (James, 1883, 180); and it is Dickens who created David Copperfield’s sweet but silly little wife who was certainly not endowed with a large mind. David’s Dora is as far from Austen’s heroine, Fanny, as James is from capturing the essence of Austen’s artistic methods and achievements. James does not surprise me when he compares Austen as an artist to ‘the brown thrush who tells his [sic] story from the garden bough’ (James, 1883, 230), because I sense the spell cast by the Austen family refrain and their images of domestication. Here he explains her ‘fortune with posterity’, by which he no doubt means her enviably increasing sales:

…. as if, at the most, for difficulty, for embarrassment, she sometimes, over her work-basket, her tapestry flowers, in the spare, cool drawing room of other days, fell a-musing, lapsed too metaphorically, as one may say, into wool-gathering, and her dropped stitches, of these pardonable, of these precious moments, were afterwards picked up as little touches of human truth, little glimpses of steady vision, little master-strokes of imagination (James, 1883, 231).

James’s comments stem from the burgeoning cult of Austen promoted by the various recollections of Austen’s nieces and nephews. His criticisms are drawn from and echo the family’s language: the drawing room mentioned several times in her niece Caroline’s recollections as well as references to her love of the garden and her devotion to needlework (Austen-Leigh, 2002, 165–182). I think again of Kathryn Sutherland, Oxford academic and Austen authority, who leads the research field in investigating the ways in which reading Austen’s novels has been influenced by extraneous circumstances. She judges the family accounts to be misleading and, beyond a certain point, ‘irrelevant, even dishonest’ (Austen-Leigh, 2002, xx). The fact that Austen’s family constructed her persona to fit the Victorian proprieties of their own era has been a distraction from Austen’s innovative ideas and techniques.

Echoes of Austen family recollections like those in the above passage exemplify Sutherland’s point. James gives no close reading, no detail of Austen’s language or ideas. He fails to tell us why he attaches the term *littleness* to her touches of human truth, glimpses of vision and strokes of imagination. The text of the novel tells a different tale, as Fanny’s thoughts about the conditions for a loving connection between a man and a woman reveal Fanny’s mind and imagination, each large enough to transcend James’s reductionist verdict:

“I should have thought,” said Fanny, after a pause of recollection and exertion, “that every woman must have felt the possibility of a man’s not being approved, not being loved by some one of her sex, at least, let him be ever so agreeable. Let him have all the perfections in the world, I think it ought not to be set down as certain, that a man must be acceptable to every woman he might happen to like himself…”. (Austen, 1814/2005b, 408).

The boldness of Fanny’s claim, on behalf of ‘every woman’ (48), is one that every *man* takes for granted. This passage, coloured by Fanny’s linguistic diffidence (‘I think it ought not to be set down as certain’) calls into question, as many of Fanny’s thoughtful arguments about principle do, James’s perspective on Austen. His own similarly virtuous heroine, Catherine Sloper who resides at *Washington Square* (1880/1995), has a history of emotional deprivation not unlike Fanny’s. She too hedges her high principles in timid language. However, Catherine’s father, unbending to her needs as he is, acknowledges the quality of thought that drives his daughter’s ‘unaggressive obstinacy’ (94). Dr Sloper appears to be more discerning about the quality of his daughter’s mind than James shows himself to be when he reduces Austen’s heroines to ‘she-Philistines’ (James, 1883, 179). This is not his finest critical moment.

James takes a position on Austen’s fiction that does not apprehend the scope of her technical mastery. She constructs, for example, in *Mansfield Park*, a novel of place that not only tells a story about a changing society but in which the characterisation of the heroine embodies the larger purpose of the fiction. Fanny’s mind is developed, thanks to Edmund’s care and encouragement, by a reading education that informs and enriches her interpretation of the people and activities that animate *Mansfield Park*. Moreover, Fanny learns long before Virginia Woolf declared it to the world, the benefits of having a room of one’s own. In the East room to which she is relegated so unkindly by her aunt, Fanny learns what every Austen heroine has to learn: how to read. Against Aunt Norris’s intentions, the East room provides Fanny with a haven where, eventually, she is allowed a fire to warm herself and her thoughts. Fanny’s first response to the proposed play that is to cause moral havoc in the Bertram household is to ‘withdraw with the text of the play and read it like a novel’ (Wood, 2019, 218). There is something supple about the speculation that Austen’s heroines discover not what is best in themselves, but ‘what is best *for* themselves and for others’ (Wood, 2019, 210), and that the novels are therefore hermeneutic rather than, as readers sometimes treat them, therapeutic. The hermeneutic task of Austen heroines is thus to ‘to read themselves and carry their spirit inside them’ (Wood, 2019, 21) as Fanny does most notably of all the heroines.

Reticent as she is as a result of her marginalisation in the Bertram family, Fanny is emboldened by her reading to think in ways that Austen conveys indirectly by removing the barrier between the narrator and Fanny’s consciousness. Austen’s use of free indirect discourse in the case of Fanny is more sustained and more sophisticated than it was with Elizabeth Bennet, as Austen moves in and out of her consciousness. The formation of Fanny’s mind resonates with the formation of her principles, achieved by a painstaking attention to details of language, image, allusion and narrative relationships that elude James in his critique of Austen’s fiction. Episode by episode the first volume builds a foundation for the attempted seduction of Fanny Price and for her resistance to the powerful attractions of a way of life that ruins the future of the Bertram sisters and threatens the reclamation of *Mansfield Park*.

The arrival of the visitors at the Parsonage and a discussion about Mary Crawford’s views about estate improvement, the contingencies of rural economies, and the ways of the navy test Fanny’s bond with Edmund:

“Well, Fanny, and how do you like Miss Crawford now?” said Edmund the next day, after thinking some time on the subject himself. “How did you like her yesterday?”

“Very well – very much. I like to hear her talk. She entertains me; and she is so extremely pretty, that I have great pleasure in looking at her.” (Austen,1814/ 2005b, 74).

Fanny’s spontaneous response is far from priggish. It is only when prompted by Edmund that she considers other aspects of the conversation: the impropriety of expressing publicly her private thoughts about her brother and her uncle. In responding to Edmund’s invitation Fanny displays the skill that Elizabeth Bennet had to learn painfully, as she read and re-read her lover’s defence of his conduct to Wickham, in *Pride and Prejudice*. Fanny lays out the evidence of Mary’s impropriety as thoughtfully as Elizabeth examined every detail of Wickham’s conduct. She weighs one piece against another as a basis for expanding the possibilities:

“Do not you think,” said Fanny, after a little consideration, “that this impropriety is a reflection upon Mrs Crawford, as her niece has been entirely brought up by her? She cannot have given right notions of what was due to the admiral.” (75).

Fanny struggles to find an excuse for what she sees as Mary’s disloyalty, displaying good will and an empathic nature. Edmund’s unconscious wish, on the other hand, is to accommodate his burgeoning attraction to Mary by minimising differences in their views of propriety, usefulness and self-regard. In turning to Fanny he is looking for confirmation as much as for genuine debate:

Having formed her mind and gained her affections, he had a good chance of her thinking like him; though at this period, and on this subject, there began now to be some danger of dissimilarity, for he was in a line of admiration of Miss Crawford, which might lead him where Fanny could not follow (76, emphasis added).

Fanny cannot *follow* Edmund further, once her jealousy has been roused. But in a surprising way, it turns out well, because it is the experience of jealousy that slowly brings Fanny closer to her own feelings. The diffidence with which she accepted the loss of her horse riding exercise to Mary Crawford masked the strength of her reaction by displacing her resentment from herself to the horse that has been appropriated; ‘if she were forgotten the poor mare should be remembered’ (Austen, 1814/2005b, 79). But when facing the next ordeal, the visit to Sotherton, she has already grown stronger. She has acquired a sense of direction. On approaching the estate she orients herself:

“… The house fronts the east, I perceive. The avenue, therefore, must be at the back of it. Mr Rushworth talked of the west front.” (97).

For the first time Fanny intuitively consults and follows her own compass. Inspection of the house and chapel engages her intellect and her imagination. It is an eventful day and she has much to observe in the scenes that prefigure the drama about to unfold. Mary’s amusement at the thought of a family at prayer and the accidental slight to Edmund’s vocation provoke Fanny’s anger. As Maria and Henry break the rules of decorum to push their way around the edge of the gate and into the park Fanny exerts herself to warn them with uncharacteristic vigour:

“You will hurt yourself, Miss Bertram,” she cried. “You will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes – you will tear your gown – you will be in danger of slipping into the ha-ha. You had better not go.” (116).

 For an inspired intertextual moment, ‘unnerving’ in its ‘unexpectedness’ (Wiltshire, 2005, lvi), the novel trembles on the edge of tragedy. Maria’s recall of the bird’s cry in Laurence Sterne’s novel, *A Sentimental Journey*,is a reminder too of Mr Rushworth’s grim description of Maria’s future home as ‘quite a dismal old prison’ (Austen, 1814/005b, 62). But this is Fanny’s novel, and like David Copperfield, she proves to be the heroine of her own story.

No other Austen heroine has been called upon to experience and endure the ordeals that confronted Fanny Price at Mansfield Park. Resonating with the fairy tale origins of her life, each narrative episode tries, tests and develops Fanny’s inner resources, whether in the ‘tranquil rural parishes of Northamptonshire’ (Stabler, 2003, vii) or later back in her squalid birth home in bustling Portsmouth. The determination to be true to the self that is being formed, through observation in the house and environs and reading and contemplation in the East room, sustains her through her ordeals, as the tension between principle and desire mounts. Once again, a fairy-tale hint of spells and charms breaks through the fun and games, sparkle and glitter, of romantic comedy that swirls around the Crawfords. Fanny, left to her fate as the object of Henry’s seductive attentions, is *under protection*, ‘her heart guarded, in a way unsuspected by Miss Crawford’ (Austen, 1814/2005b, 269) by her profound attachment to Edmund. Under such protection Fanny refuses to compromise, even when marriage to Henry offers a possibility to escape the misery of her parents’ home. Her refusals are not passive. She is the ‘most defiant of all the heroines’ (Pickrel, 1987, 617). In fact, no other Austen heroine could be called defiant in Fanny’s way. The transgressions of Lydia and Maria are acts of impulse, unlike Fanny’s anguished acts of principle.

The final chapter brings Fanny’s misery to an end, as the narrator returns her to her fairy tale origins. The first time I read the final chapter I slipped back in time. I sat next to my brother at a Saturday afternoon matinee in the Lyceum Theatre where, years later, I would see *Pride and Prejudice*. I had grasped my brother’s hand as the tornado lifted Dorothy into the air and tossed her into unbounded turbulence from which she descended to follow the yellow brick road in search of *The Wizard of Oz*. I let it go when Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, appeared with her magic wand. Then I relaxed and sighed with relief. And so I do every time I reach the final chapter of *Mansfield Park,* and the narrator, like Glinda, performs magic with her pen:

Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort and to have done with the rest (Austen, 1814/2005b, 533).

 Like a fairy godmother, the narrator loves Fanny and rejoices in her happiness. She rewards the virtuous, forgives Lady Bertram who can do no better, and metes out just deserts to the cruel, the unkind and the manipulators. The chapter offers a detailed prognosis of the life to come at Mansfield Park. End of problem, except for those critics who cannot find it in their hearts to forgive Fanny for not being more fun. At last the hybrid nature of a boldly experimental novel is revealed: part fairy tale and part romantic comedy framed within an overarching moral fable. The grace of *Mansfield Park* has been renewed by the influence of Fanny Price. The ‘delicate and puny’ child who was received conditionally by Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram on her arrival at the grand house will watch over them, unconditionally, from the parsonage, flourishing as befits a ‘young, pretty, and gentle’ girl (Austen, 1814/2005b, 321).

### Conclusion

In the development of Fanny Price, as the agent of change for *Mansfield Park*, Austen shows us how the concept of virtue can play ‘an essential and central’ role in an ethical life (Vallor, 2018, 21). The author is not and never has been a moralist. She does not spell out the virtues that enable the flourishing of Fanny, although this state is clearly visible to Sir Thomas when he returns home from his Odyssey. The virtues emerge from her behaviour: her empathy, her humility and her usefulness that have allowed her to survive with dignity the conditions of life in which she finds herself. She demonstrates how, as Martha Nussbaum believes, attention paid to the moral salience of conduct is a preparation ‘for the actual flow of life, and for the necessary resources in meeting its surprises’ (Nussbaum, 1992, 38). As she reads and thinks about what she reads in her own room, and as she observes the conduct of others, Fanny undertakes a form of self-cultivation in which human beings are encouraged to ‘address their deepest needs, confront their most earnest perplexities and bring them from misery to some greater measure of flourishing’ (Nussbaum, 1994, 3).

In my readings of the novel over time, I have become increasingly aware of the nuanced ways in which Fanny examines the principles of human conduct. I have never read her as a victim, despite a sustained developmental period during which she struggles to rise above her circumstances without sacrificing her goodwill. Unlike Mary Crawford, she uses her opportunities to recover from childhood wounds; to observe, to read and to meditate in the sparsely furnished and unheated East room. Ironically, in a novel that is thought not to have ironical ambiguities (cf. Trilling, 1955/1969), the privileged daughters of the house, Maria and Julia, receive a superior education that delivers no wisdom, no insight, no discipline, and ultimately no virtue. They bear the brunt of their father’s failure to introduce a new order to an old way of life. They receive paternal authority without paternal affection and maternal indulgence without maternal attention. They are supervised by a woman of mean and evil intent, imprisoned by both their privilege and the vestiges of an irrelevant code of conduct. They have done nothing to cultivate in themselves the capacity to forge a sense of autonomy that goes beyond the entitlement of inherited privilege.

Austen’s so-called problem novel, *Mansfield Park*, occupies a special place in my reading life. As Charles Dickens wrote of George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859/2008) it‘has taken its place among the actual experiences and endurances of my life’(Mead, 2014, 15). *My* novel, like the narrator’s Fanny, has done as much to explain me to myself as any therapy session has ever done. Read as a novel of place, it has been an experience of enduring significance. The message is not simple; life requires us not just to put our house in order, but to keep it in order. We are required to remain alert to change, because society and culture are always in a state of flux, in each and every present moment.

Austen chose to explore a period of transition in her own life when religious thoughts were occupying her attention, and in her own time when established ideas about manners, morals, money and marriage were under pressure from relatively more liberal attitudes to the individual in relation to society. She gives readers a model: the story of a particular house, its inhabitants and its visitors in a way that measures the past against the present and considers the adjustments required to move into the future. But in a sense it could be any household and any family culture in any time period. The twenty-first century is no exception. Questions raised about life at Mansfield Park remain relevant, although the context in which the novel is now read has changed radically: global migrations, a digital revolution and, as I write, a global health pandemic. Reading *Mansfield Park* is a way of reminding ourselves in the twenty-first century to examine again the virtues that enable human beings to flourish and the ways in which the cultivation of ethical capabilities is more urgent than ever.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# *EMMA*: A SUBJUNCTIVE NOVEL

### Introduction

The trajectory from *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1815, seventeen years after it was begun, and dedicated by request to the Prince Regent, was not predictable. In between the lively and most popular heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* and the most perfectly executed heroine of *Emma,* the more reserved heroine of *Mansfield Park* had made her problematic appearance. The author who had noted that her older brother Henry preferred *Mansfield Park* to *Pride and Prejudice* wrote of ‘my Emma’:

…I am very strongly haunted by the idea that to those Readers who have preferred P&P. it will appear inferior in Wit, & to those who have preferred MP. very inferior in good Sense (Le Faye, 2011, 319).

Austen’s characteristic mock modesty may have been in play as she wrote to the Chief Royal Librarian, confirming the dedication of the novel. But the statement is clearly an expression of her thoughts about what readers might have found, or were perhaps intended to find, in the two previous novels. Although ‘the claim of the author’s intention’ upon the critic’s judgment’ has been branded a fallacy (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1972, 334) and a theory that writing is ‘the destruction of every voice’ including that of the author (Barthes, 1977, 142) have made their mark on critical reading, there is no reason to dispute the author’s word in this case. Just as *Mansfield Park* had been different from *Pride and Prejudice,* so the novelist intendedher later novel to be different from both its predecessors; and that difference might, she thought, disappoint her readers.

A hint of how readers might be disappointed in *Emma* shows up in Austen’s celebrated comment: ‘I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like’ (Le Faye, 2011, 209). Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, had been a heroine whom Austen *expected* to be liked. She was confident that no more ‘delightful a creature’ had ever appeared in print. ‘How I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least, I do not know’, she wrote to her favourite niece (Le Faye, 2011, 210). Lizzy is no conduct-book heroine, like the heroines of Samuel Richardson or Maria Edgeworth. The first time she speaks ‘it is to contradict her mother’ (Fullerton, 2017, 55).

Austen did not express any concern about the reception of the heroine of *Mansfield Park*. In her account of her brother’s approbation for that novel she reports that her older brother Henry Austen ‘likes Fanny & I think foresees how it will all be’ (Le Faye, 2011, 266). She shares with her niece her own view that ‘pictures of perfection …make me sick and wicked’ (Le Faye, 2011, 350), indicating that she did not conceive of Fanny Price as ‘one of the poor in spirit’ (Trilling, 1955/1969, 213). I have argued in the previous chapter that such a critical view of the heroine of *Mansfield Park*, for whom the narrator herself expresses a unique tenderness, is challenged by close textual reading; and that Fanny’s ordeal and recovery are better framed within the fairy tale elements of the text than in the generic expectations of romantic comedy.

The precise circumstances of each of Austen’s heroines are crucial to the unique way in which a particular woman is shown to experience life. This is especially so with *Emma.* One of the intriguing mysteries of this novel is the way in which the author ‘cleverly’ contrives to ensure that the prediction that her heroine will not be much liked does not come true (Dooley, 2017, 4). As Wayne Booth observes, Jane Austen skirts moral questions to concentrate on the technical mastery that evokes ‘an intricate mixture of sympathy for Emma with a radical recognition and repudiation of her faults’ (Booth, 1983, 29). Ultimately, Mr Knightley’s view that she is faultless despite all her faults has been the view of readers and critics alike, even if the faultlessness stems from Austen’s artistic execution as much as from the heroine herself.

As she is the only heroine for whom a novel is named, Emma’s thoughts and conduct demand the sort of close reading and re-reading that Elizabeth Bennet gave to Mr Darcy’s letter in *Pride and Prejudice.* Only then might readers discover how Emma’s conduct in each of the narrative sections, from her attempts to match-make to her climactic display of rudeness and lack of empathy at Box Hill, springs from prior circumstances and controls the overarching narrative. In their introduction to the novel, Cronin and McMillan (2005,) claim that ‘more than any other of Austen’s novels, *Emma* asks its readers to acknowledge and to delight in the difficulty and the complexity of the process of reading’ (lxv). As I have argued in relation to both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, at the heart of each novel there is an examination of the puzzling business of reading, whether the subject is a book or a letter or a person’s mind. In the events that provide the interest of *Emma*, blunders in the domain of mindreading assume giant proportions. The fact that the character of Emma inhabits the narrative so seamlessly makes it essential to read attentively for internal contradictions and inconsistencies. Readers are as vulnerable as Emma herself to the consequences of careless reading.

### The Book of Books

Reginald Farrer’s discussion of *Emma* is an adumbration of much that has been written about the perfection of Austen’s fourth published novel. He describes *Emma* as ‘the book of books’ and assures readers that ‘the whole thing is Emma’ (Farrer, 1917, 265), using the vocabulary of the theatre to point out that there is only one ‘scene’ in which Emma is not ‘on stage’. Terry Castle’s exemplary study (2002) fuses theoretical rigour and emotional response. Castle approaches Farrer’s level of enthusiasm for Jane Austen. She regards the view that Austen’s romantic plots are an ‘ideological embarrassment’ as a ‘betrayal of the experience of reading’ (Castle, 2002, viii), describing the euphoric experience of reading *Emma* for the ‘suffusing exhilarating, almost physical sensation of joy and well-being that Austen’s image of human life provides’ (Castle, 40).

Trilling’s reading of the novel pays attention to the larger implications of the particularities implied by Castle and described by Austen:

It was a sweet view – sweet to the eye and the mind: English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a bright sun without being oppressive (Austen, 1816/2005a, 391).

Identifying a surge of national pride invested in the ‘sweet view’ from Donwell hill, Trilling locates the novel in the tradition of the English pastoral idyll (Trilling, 1957). In ascribing a legendary status to the novel, he abstracts and detracts from the life force of the novel to align himself with readers who identify Austen’s fictional universe as ‘a paradise made for the privileged few’ (Brownstein, 1999, 229); yet another site on the heritage trail of English literature.

On the other hand, in a more productive vein, Trilling turns his experienced and perceptive reading mind to a consideration of who Emma is, and why, given her capacity for ‘self-love’, readers should find it ‘in their hearts’ to be kind to her (Trilling, 1957, 192). He suggests that self-love, usually associated with males, has great power and charm, and makes Emma different from other women in fiction. It is a clue, although this is not perhaps Trilling’s main point, to help readers solve the puzzle of Emma Woodhouse. It might explain why she is able to pick herself up after each of a succession of ‘horrible blunders’ (Austen, 1816/2005a, 291), exhibiting the resilience required by infants as they learn to walk, until she achieves a steadiness of purpose that has been delayed, perhaps by the early loss of her birth mother.

At first reading, it appears that the heroine of *Emma* invites comparison with Elizabeth Bennet, and that the two heroines invite comparison. Austen’s next heroine, gentle Fanny Price, provides a contrast rather than a comparison with all her other heroines, except arguably for Anne Elliot, the last heroine standing in the established oeuvre. In imagining Emma Woodhouse, Austen seems to reprise Elizabeth, a heroine who is lovely to look at, fun to be with, confident, witty and intelligent. On re-reading, however, it becomes clear that the resemblances to Elizabeth – approximately the same age as Emma, with a similar talent for witty banter and playful disposition – are compromised. Emma Woodhouse does not have Elizabeth’s transparency; in Emma’s case, as readers are informed in the first sentence of the novel and are shown in the ensuing narrative, all is *not* as it seems.

The opening of *Emma* has received as much attention in the critical scholarship as have first sentences, paragraphs and opening chapters from Austen’s other works. In the bicentenary celebration of *Pride and Prejudice*, the Austen scholar and self-confessed addict, Susannah Fullerton (2013), wrote a chapter on ‘the famous first sentence’ (29–51) that acknowledges the influence of eighteenth century moralists like David Hume, Adam Smith and Dr Samuel Johnson on the meaning and implications of the concept of truth. Because of its place in the opening principal clause, this key word establishes itself as a grounding idea in the sentence and the novel itself. The opening of *Mansfield Park* is powerful in a different way. It provides readers with a tight-knit synthesis of the past history of the Ward sisters and the present ‘moral *ambience* into which the heroine is to be cast’; the first chapter has been described as ‘ one of the great bravura expositions in fiction’ (Gard, 1992, 155). By contrast, the opening single-sentence paragraph of *Emma* is deceptively simple: a compound sentence comprising two principal clauses joined by the conjunction ‘and’; but the implications of its proposition reverberate throughout three volumes of a complex and tightly woven narrative.

### *Emma*, the novel: Austen’s alchemy

The copy of *Emma* that sat alongside my notebook when I attended Thelma Herring’s lectures at the University of Sydney in 1949 is one I continue to read today. It has no introduction, and I now have at least five other editions, each with a thoughtful and useful introduction by an Austen scholar. My most recent Austen acquisition, the nine volumes published by Cambridge University Press (2005–2008), has its own story; I won them in a raffle at a Jane Austen Society conference, much more exciting than a hamper of groceries and wine, with its fine paper and meticulous scholarship. But my original copy with its faded pink hard covers that are a little frayed at the edges is my everyday reader whenever I re-visit *Emma*. It measures 14cm by 10 cm, so it sits comfortably in a handbag, even a small one, and after all this time it has no loose pages. It cost four shillings and nine pence in pre-decimal currency, was purchased from the landmark city bookstore, Angus & Robertson, Booksellers to the University, and was published by Thomas Nelson & Son. It is a pleasure to handle: the pages are tissue-fine, almost like silk, and the print is as clear as the letters on an optometrist’s chart when viewed through the optimal lens. There is no date, but I turn to the underlining of words, the marginalia and the notes on once blank pages at the back of the book for reminders of my thoughts and questions about Emma as a person and *Emma* as a novel. Susan Hill, in her record of literary musings and memories, makes no apologies for annotations and underlining in her books. She writes that she has always regarded them as ‘mine to scribble on’ (Hill, 2010, 124).

On the very first page of my own copy of *Emma*, that ‘most humane and joyful of novels’ (Castle, 2002, vii), there are numerous notations, some in pencil, some even in ink. Alongside the opening and underlined words of the third paragraph, ‘sixteen years had Miss Taylor been in Mr Woodhouse’s family’, I have noted that the ‘reversed word sounds lovely!’, an indication of my habit of reading aloud phrases and sentences that sound pleasurable in my head. The word ‘irony’ also appears in the margin, to mark the comment about Emma’s relationship with her governess, ‘highly esteeming Miss Taylor’s judgment, but directed chiefly by her own’. Both these comments are written in pencil and I think must have been prompted by thoughts when re-reading the novel.

The most significant marking on the first page, and perhaps the most significant of the markings dotted through the small book, is the circle I made with my pen around the word ‘seemed’ in the opening sentence:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly twenty one years with very little to distress or vex her (Austen, 1816/2005a, 3).

I imagine now, although memories have faded along with the book cover, that the circle and the hieroglyphic-type comment in the margin – ‘subjunctive? doubt/ Jespersen’ – were made at the desktop at the same time that I put to use the de-luxe fountain pen I had been given to celebrate my matriculation from high school, jotting down phrases from Thelma Herring’s lecture in my large exercise book.

I was familiar with the notion of the subjunctive mood for two reasons. First, my mother, who had been educated at a school with an English curriculum and a matriculation examination that qualified students for entrance to Oxford during the period of the British mandate of Palestine, was justifiably proud of her command of English grammar; particularly the use of the subjunctive mood after, as she would remind me if I lapsed, the words ‘if’ and ‘wish’. My mother was proud of this knowledge; knowing when and how to use the form of the subjunctive was for her, as an immigrant to Australia in 1929, a valued part of much needed cultural capital.

My second association with the subjunctive came through my study of French and Latin, which involved much learning and memorisation of noun and verb forms. My erudite Latin teacher, Miss Elspeth Howie, introduced us to Julius Caesar and his invasion of Gaul, divided as it was into ‘three parts’, an aspect of historical geography that has, for an unknown reason, lodged itself in my memory. She also shared jokes constructed around ideas about ‘conjugating’ verbs and ‘declining’ nouns. My interest in how language works was expanded in senior English years when I read the essays of Addison and Steele. As I progressed from writing compositions in primary and junior high school to writing essays in my two senior years, I aspired with youthful optimism to emulate the style of such master writers. At the same time my interest came to focus intuitively less on word forms *per se* than on the ways in which the meaning, tone and mood of sentences and of larger units of text were influenced by variations in form.

I must, then, have been prepared for, even excited by, Miss Herring’s suggestion that the use of the verb ‘seem’ was a signal of the subjunctive mood and a sign that doubt and uncertainty would need to be accounted for when reading the novel *Emma*. However, my reference to ‘Jespersen’ in the margin indicates a hesitation, a need to check out the meaning and implications of the subjunctive in the text book that had been recommended by another of my English lecturers, Mr F. W. W. Rhodes. His course was described in the University Calendar (University of Sydney, 1949) as ‘lectures and exercises on English grammar, usage and expression’ (274). Like the novel, the textbook, *Essentials of English Grammar* (Jespersen, 1933/1948), still has space on my bookshelves. It is larger than Austen’s novel. Its boards are covered with sky-blue cloth, and the spine, with its title in gold lettering, is more faded than the front and back. It was bought the same year from the same book store as my copy of *Emma,* at a considerably higher cost, sixteen shillings and sixpence. A whole chapter is devoted to a discussion of ‘mood’. Jespersen includes the fact that only the verb ‘to be’ takes a distinctive subjunctive form, and opines that the days of even that one instance were numbered. In 1949 the novelist W. Somerset Maugham (2011, 229) announced that the subjunctive mood was in its death throes. No one was to know in 1948 when the seventh impression of Jespersen’s text, the one I own, was published, that in 1964 the whole world would become familiar with the song *If I Were a Rich Man*, and that in 2008 the singer Beyoncé would fantasise about *If I were a Boy*. And Jespersen was in good company. In 2008 Jellycat Books published *If I Were a Pig* (Wilkinson, 2008).

The use of the verb ‘seemed’ in Austen’s sentence raises the issue of subjunctive mood, not of subjunctive verb form. It is the catalyst for reading the opening proposition, that the circumstances of Emma’s life united ‘some of the best blessings of existence’ (Austen, 1816/2005a, 3), as a statement that does not describe reality, and statements of unreality are at the heart of the subjunctive mood. It seems to Emma the heroine that Harriet will be better off married to Mr Elton with whom she has nothing in common than to Mr Martin with whom she has already formed a bond. It seems to Emma that Frank Churchill must be in love with her. And it seems to Emma that Jane Fairfax must be in love with Mr Dixon, the husband of her friend. It is in this sense that *Emma*, the novel,unfolds from the very first moment as a succession of episodic modalities, each of which turns out *not to be* what it first appears, and especially how it *appears to be* to Emma.

### Austen’s narrative techniques

Austen is aided by her mastery of ‘techniques that expand and deepen the reach of her fictional world’ (Bennett & Royle, 2004, 6), such as quotation, allusion, and internal narrative echoes. In an unexpected turn of the screw for realism and the novel, Austen created her own technique, a way to dramatise the consciousness of fictional characters as the soliloquy does for theatrical characters. Her association with free indirect discourse (FID) has provided literary ammunition for those who, like the Austen scholar, John Mullan, argue that when Austen sat down to write *Emma* in 1814 she was preparing ‘to write a revolutionary novel’ (Mullan, 2015, 1). To reinforce his position on Austen, Mullan contrasts the limited responses of the novelists HG Wells and Henry James to her novelistic achievements with the view of Samuel Beckett among the most experimental authors of the twentieth century, that the ‘divine Jane’ had something to teach *him* (2).

Revolutionary, according to Mullan, in its form and technique rather than its subject matter, the narrative of *Emma* is ‘radically experimental’ because it was designed to enable readers to share the heroine’s delusions (3). The ‘alchemy’ that produces the perfection of the novel 5) is a function of exactly the right blend of third person narration with a form of first-person reflection, the technique now generally referred to as FID. Austen initiated the experimentation in *Sense and Sensibility*. The use of the technique has been noted in previous chapters in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. Mullan argues that in *Emma* Austen perfected the technique and bequeathed a legacy which later novelists have taken for granted. An early example occurs in the following passage:

Harriet certainly was not clever, but she had a sweet, docile, grateful disposition; was totally free from conceit; and only desiring to be guided by anyone she looked up to. Her early attachment to herself was very amiable; and her inclination for good company, and power of appreciating what was elegant and clever, shewed that there was no want of taste, though strength of understanding must not be expected (Austen, 1816/2005a, 25).

The passage displays the ‘finesse’ with which Austen deploys the technique (Thompson, 2015, 56). The single word ‘herself’ shifts the reader’s focus from the narrator’s account of events into the heroine’s mind, where concepts of docility, gratitude and appreciation alert us to Emma’s vanity as well as to her self-centred representation of her relationship with Harriet. Wayne Booth’s analysis of *Emma* includes a passage in which he describes free indirect discourse, although he does not use the nomenclature, when he nominates ‘the solution to the problem of maintaining sympathy despite almost crippling faults’ as the decision to use the heroine ‘as a kind of *narrator*, though in the third person, reporting on her own experience’ (Booth, 1961, 246).

Henry James is perhaps the supreme beneficiary of Austen’s literary innovation, although as already suggested, he underestimated the seriousness of Austen’s technical achievements. Austen’s innovation is, in fact, critical for the ‘ordeal of consciousness’, the title of Dorothea Krook’s study of James’s heroines and the tragic stories of mistaken and misunderstood motives that illustrate the inseparability of moral and epistemological problems (Krook, 1967). From *Emma* James inherits Austen’s pedagogic disposition (Moore, 1982, 70), described by Lionel Trilling as a belief that ‘the deepest and truest relationship that can exist between human beings’ consists in accepting ‘another’s guidance in one’s growth’ (Trilling, 1972, 82). The relationship between Emma and Mr Knightley acts out this belief explicitly; but it is captured in embryonic form in Elizabeth Bennet’s interior self-questioning upon the receipt of Mr Darcy’s letter, which leads to her better understanding of Darcy, Wickham and of herself.

The subjunctive mood of the novel complements the raising of Emma’s consciousness during passages of free indirect discourse. As I have read the novel over the years I have reflected on the miracle of unalloyed pleasure in an engagement with seemingly trivial events like dinners, dances and picnics. The secret lies in the profound insights that emerge almost imperceptibly for the reader, from the nature of interactions between human beings in a social setting. And I recall the definition of ‘modulation’ that my elocution teacher Miss Brain entered into my exercise book in her small neat handwriting: ‘modulation: light and shade, the art of varying tone and mood’. The blend of light and shade in *Emma* is perfectly achieved, a second manifestation of Austen’s alchemy. The sparkle that emanates from Emma’s privileged life at Hartfield is modulated by the multitude of unrecognised flaws in her self-perception. Each narrative twist and turn of the novel is distinguished by this phenomenon.

From the first page of the novel, the subjunctive mood obtrudes itself into the ‘best blessings’ of Emma’s existence (Austen, 1816/2005a, 1). The celebration of Miss Taylor’s wedding from which the narrative emerges occurs on a day that offers ‘every promise of happiness’ (4) to Emma’s beloved governess. And yet there is sorrow too, ‘gentle sorrow’ the narrator tells us, received without ‘the shape of any disagreeable consciousness’ (4). This statement is strangely at odds with the powerful verbal signals that follow. Almost immediately ‘loss’, ‘grief’, and ‘mournful thought’, (4) provide powerful analogues for the mood of the evening.

Emma realises that she faces a succession of evenings of inevitable ‘intellectual solitude’ (5) in the company of her father whose ‘habits of gentle selfishness’ 6) confront her with a burden of responsibility which children should not bear. In later episodes Emma’s imagination is shown to be distorted by her lack of perception. In the opening chapter, however, her relationship with her father is the embodiment of an empathic imagination, as Maxine Greene defines it: ‘the imaginative capacity that allows us to experience empathy with different points of view, *even with interests apparently at odds with ours*’ (Greene, 2000a, 31; emphasis added). On re-reading the novel it is possible to locate the source of Emma’s promise as an adult human being in the loving nature of her relationship with her father.

 The unexpected arrival of Mr Knightley, who offers Emma welcome relief from her responsibility to address her father’s need to be pacified on that night signals the central role he is to play in the narrative and in Emma’s life, as observer, mentor, critic and eventually her lover. Emma, whose description of herself as ‘a fanciful troublesome creature’ (Austen, 1816/2005a, 9) is closer to the bone than she realises, embarks on a succession of fanciful and troublesome escapades that distract her from submerged feelings of loss and grief. Provoked by the marriage of Mrs Weston who has loved her with ‘blind affection’ (40), her emotions are perhaps even more deeply embedded in the premature death of her mother. Emma’s attempts to marry Harriet to Mr Elton, to conduct a meaningless flirtation with Frank Churchill, to figure out who sent a piano to Jane Fairfax, and finally to match make Harriet for a second time, are pursued thoughtlessly against a background of quotidian social interactions. Each episode is marked by a moment or moments in which the cloud of Emma’s ignorance casts a shadow over her potential to realise the blessings of her existence.

Nothing happens in *Emma* that has not either been foreshadowed or that does not reverberate with a later narrative moment; sometimes both. In justifying Harriet’s suitability to be the wife of any ‘gentleman’, Emma suggests that Mr Knightley himself could do no better than consider marrying her friend. ‘Were you yourself ever to marry, she is the very woman for you’, she tells him (Austen 1816/2005a*,* 67). Does she remember this prediction when she contemplates Harriet as her own rival for Mr Knightley’s heart? We are not told, and perhaps the joke is meant to entertain the reader on a later reading rather than to alert Emma herself to yet another blunder. Growing up in a household of witty wordsmiths who spent long evenings amusing each other with verbal puzzles and jokes (cf. Selwyn, 1999, 277-302), Austen draws more heavily on this predilection for puzzlement and clues in *Emma* than in any of the other novels. The name of the town of Weymouth, which readers do not visit, is threaded through the narrative in ways that implicate Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax but became apparent to me only on third and fourth readings. And again, Mr Knightley warns Emma that one day she might set her heart on someone and know the pain of unrequited love, an exact prediction of how Emma will later feel.

At times Emma glimpses the shadow cast by her own blunders. ‘Better to be without sense than to misapply it as you do’, Mr Knightley admonishes her (Austen, 1816/2005a, 67). His vexed attempts to show her the bad sense of her intention to make a match between Harriet and Mr Elton put her, too, into a state of vexation. This is an ironic reminder that before story opens and before she set about her interference in Harriet’s life, she has had ‘very little to distress or vex her’ (3). Austen plays on the idea of vexation. The following passage illustrates Emma as she works to disguise the real damage caused by her manoeuvring and to defend herself from reflecting on chinks in her own armour:

Emma remained in a state of vexation too; but there was more indistinctness in the cause of her’s [sic], than in his. She did not always feel so absolutely satisfied with herself, so entirely convinced that her opinions were right and her adversary’s wrong, as Mr Knightley. He walked off in more complete self-approbation than he left for her. She was not so materially cast down, however, but that a little time and the return of Harriet were very adequate restoratives (Austen, 1816/2005a, 70–71).

In this episode, as in those that follow, the dinner parties, the ball, the strawberry picking party at Donwell Hall, we are shown the lengths to which Emma will go in order not to ‘quarrel with herself’ (73); that is, not to allow herself to be vexed.

The novel ‘centers on the fallibility of assumptions’ (Doody, 2015, 395) upon which perceived realities founder. The fraught atmosphere that pervades the Box Hill excursion gathers together the darkest clouds of all – the snobbishness of the Eltons and the transgressive conduct of both Frank Churchill and Emma, the pain of Jane Fairfax and her aunt, and the indignation of Mr Knightley. A sudden cloudburst, a thunderstorm and pouring rain to end the picnic in emotional disarray might have set the scene for the dawning of Emma’s consciousness of her existential dilemma. But that would have been a Brontë novel, and is not the mood in which Emma was conceived by Austen, nor the purpose for which Austen balances light with shade in her fictional universe. Her unceasing attention to the minute details of social life (cf. Handler & Segal, 1990) establishes a more measured approach, providing her with the means to weave intricate patterns of human behaviour that reflect the complex nature of light and shade in everyday life, even as they entertain, puzzle and test her readers.

### Emma, the heroine: a single woman of good fortune

Emma Woodhouse is a heroine who has no doubts about her understanding of herself or of others. Describing herself as ‘a single woman of good fortune’, she is set apart from other Austen heroines by her conviction that marriage has nothing to offer her. She is eager to encourage others into the state of matrimony, but it is not a condition that she aspires to in order to enhance either her emotional or her social status. She is certainly correct in the latter case; her social status as the virtual mistress of Hartfield is unassailed.

The inhabitants of Highbury defer to Emma’s rank in society as a prosperous member of the landowning gentry, and she regards such deference as her inalienable right. She is initially offended by the attempt of Mr and Mrs Cole to join the ranks of her family and friends, on the grounds that their ‘rise in social class’ has its ‘origin in trade’ (Hatton, 2019, 135). She resists their right to transcend their moderately genteel status. However, the dismay she experiences when she appears to have been excluded from the invitation extended to and accepted by her friends, signifies a subtle adjustment on her part. The Coles are shown on their own grounds to be adept negotiators: their purchase of a piano provides evidence of their new social position; at the same time they consolidate that position by inviting their guests to play and be entertained by the instrument, thus situating the piano as an ‘offering to the community’ (Hatton, 2019, 140). Emma’s certainties about class relationships are exposed as she considers the impossibility of any alliance between her friend Harriet and the Martins:

She would have given a great deal, or endured a great deal, to have had the Martins in a higher rank of life. They were so deserving that a little higher would have been enough: but as it was, how could she have done otherwise?-Impossible!- She could not repent. They must be separated (Austen, 1816/2005a, 201).

When Emma accepts the invitation of Mr and Mrs Cole to their home, however, her certainties are tested and shown to be in a state of flux, merely assumptions that she is required to re-negotiate as she navigates a changing social landscape.

### Emma’s power

The narrator advises readers early as to how this heroine, in truth, should be regarded. ‘The real evils of Emma’s situation were the *power* of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself’ (Austen, 1816/2005a 3; emphasis added). But, it is a condition of Austen’s novels that even when the truth is acknowledged, ‘there might be some truths not told’(177*).* So, the implications of Emma’s ‘power’, where it came from and how she learns to regulate it, are more important than they at first appear. These aspects of Emma’s behaviour become the focus of readers’ interest as the interpretive ambiguities of Emma’s conduct multiply. The narrative teases and exercises the imagination as the heroine is shown to ‘blunder most dreadfully’ (149) in her perceptions of herself and of the people in and on the edges of her socio-economic sphere.

The word ‘power’ is not underlined in my original copy of the novel, and since my undergraduate days I have taught myself to make my notes on index cards rather than in the texts. In any case I would resist marking the Cambridge press volumes that I now consult for textual authority, out of respect for the pristine condition of its beautiful presentation. But the meaning and implications of power in this novel have been keys to my understanding of Emma’s relationship with herself and the people with whom she engages in her privileged and circumscribed daily routines. Sheryl Craig reminds us that Austen’s first readers read the novels in the context of their own time, which included ‘Georgian economic and political realities’. They were alert to her informed economic references of the sort that shocked later readers like the poet W. H. Auden into poetic recognition of Austen’s emphasis on the ‘economic basis of society’, her ‘well informed and opinionated’ expression of the ‘political economies of her age’ (Craig, 2010, 4). But this is not the case with *Emma* the novel or for Emma the heroine. In this, the fourth of Austen’s published novels, the nature and role of power have a unique significance; they have less to do with money and more to do with Emma’s headstrong will. Money is not an issue for this heroine. She leads an affluent life within the environs of Highbury, a village that offers an ‘economic ideal’ enshrined in a ‘model community’ (Craig, 2010, 6). She has not been to London, nor has she seen the sea, that archetypal representation of imaginative possibilities. In the micro-economy of Highbury, Sheryl Craig claims (2010), there is a distinction between value ‘in exchange’ that introduces ideas about the ethics of money and value ‘in use’, a sort of moral worthiness. That Emma is unaware that usefulness also requires ethical oversight is revealed by her mistaken belief that, in diverting Harriet from Mr Martin to Mr Elton, she is being ‘useful’ to her new friend (Austen, 1816/2005a, 26).

The difference between these concepts of value is of no interest to Emma, as Mr Knightley tries to explain to Mrs Weston in a seminal and extended conversation that constitutes the only chapter in which Emma is absent from the narrative (36–42). Miss Bates, for all her scattered musings, understands the situation better than Emma. She grasps the essence of what it is that makes the Highbury community function:

If ever there were people who without having great wealth themselves had everything they could wish for, I’m sure it is us (Austen, 1816/2005a, 186).

She appreciates blessings that Emma, bathed in the affection of her family and her community, takes for granted.

From the account of the narrator in the first chapter the affection with which Emma ‘seems’ to be blessed is ambiguous. Following the premature loss of her mother as an infant, an event of far reaching emotional consequences in any life, Emma has been nurtured by a loving but permissive governess. As the novel opens Miss Taylor, now Mrs Weston, is leaving Hartfield for her new marital home, and Emma is, to say the least, forlorn. Her adoring father, Mr Woodhouse, wont to cover his daughter in gratuitous praise, offers her neither comfort nor intellectual companionship. Moreover, he requires the sort of devoted attention and affirmation usually associated with Victorian spouses. These biographical elements of loss, abandonment, separation and emotional demands, and their impact on the development of healthy relationships with self and others, need not be framed in any particular theory of emotional development to lay bare Emma’s predicament. They are catalysts commonly associated with thinking about the complexities and mysteries of growing up. Ramifications of their impact on an impressionable young woman as she faces the first test of her adult life are to be expected.

Left alone with her father for the first time in her life, it is not surprising that Emma should draw on the power she has been hitherto granted, to deal with the approaching boredom and increased responsibility of life with her father. As already noticed, Mr Woodhouse is a man of ‘gentle selfishness’ (Austen, 1816/2005a, 6) to which Emma willingly submits. Perhaps this is why she does not allow the sorrow to take ‘the shape of any disagreeable *consciousness*’ (4, emphasis added). The circumstances of Emma’s life, the combination of a second loss, excessive affection and the separation from her surrogate mother, conspire to delay the transition from immature delusions of omnipotence to a more mature form of regulated autonomy:

We allow the infant this madness and only gradually ask for a clear distinguishing between the subjective and that which is capable of objective or scientific proof (Winnicott, 1952, 224).

Examples of profoundly experienced emotions associated with flawed adjustments were not new to Austen’s generation. They find in Shakespearean dramas expression as well as in myths and fairy tales. In *Mansfield Park* there is a playful reference to the fact that Shakespeare is ‘part of an Englishman’s constitution’, and the first of the family memoirs recalls how Austen would tell her nieces and nephews ‘the most delightful stories, chiefly of Fairyland’ (Austen-Leigh, 2002, 72). Such legacies are the stuff and substance of the novel, while the evolution of the chief protagonist is closely linked to the evolution of philosophical and literary ideas about the individual and the individual’s relationship with society.

Both Fanny Price and Emma come of age in the pages of their novels. Fulfilling the purpose of the *bildungsroman* which, according to Franco Moretti (1987) is the aesthetic expression of modernity, both *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* provide narratives that set up balancing acts between the individual and the social, and the static and the mobile. In *Emma*, both the heroine and her readers are challenged to juggle with the competing claims of the established hierarchical order and an emerging bourgeois culture in the idealised village of Highbury.

The author’s accomplished use of free indirect discourse enables an individual female psyche to be explored in its relation to social codes of behaviour, a subject that has fascinated modern European as well as English language exponents of fictional realism. In Emma’s case, her delusional sense of power is central to both the psychological and the artistic purposes of the novel. First, it drives the decisions that underpin the interactions of characters in the novel. Guided only by unregulated and usually wrong-headed perceptions about the desires and needs of her friends and acquaintances, Emma uses her power in ways that delude her and play tricks on her readers, depending on how attentively and how often the latter engage with her escapades.

The power that drives Emma also fuels the narrative energy of the novel. Some of the most enthusiastic critical responses to the novel have emphasised the energy and exhilaration generated by the small dramas that enliven Emma’s routine existence. Reginald Farrer (1917, 191, 265–270) experiences a dizzying delight in the unfolding of Emma’s character across multiple readings. John Wiltshire identifies the ‘teasing of the reader’s attention’ as the ‘source of narrative excitement’ (Wiltshire, 2014, 137). Wendy Jones invokes the image of a boomerang in motion to describe how the mistakes Emma makes in reading what is in other people’s minds rebound on her (Jones, 2017, 237). Susannah Fullerton writes in her literary monograph of *Emma* (Fullerton, 2020) that no other book has meant as much to her or given her ‘such unutterable reading pleasure’ (2). For these readers Austen’s fear that her heroine would not be ‘much’ liked, has been groundless.

Emma turned out to be the heroine whom Fullerton most ‘adores’ (a favourite Fullerton word) above all others. In her reading memoir she describes how she feels about the difference between a first reading, a once and once-only thrill, and the delight of missed cues picked up in re-readings. Describing how she feels, especially about characters, is a signature feature of Fullerton’s method. She would agree with Terry Castle that although identifying with a character is now ‘often thought to be the height of critical naiveté’ there is no other way to describe, for example, the Box Hill episode in *Emma* (Castle, 2002, 4). But examining those feelings and how they were evoked is equally important to Fullerton. She studies the ways in which Emma differs from other Austen heroines in a literary monograph on Emma (Fullerton, 2020). She considers their behaviour to be generally influenced by the nature of the world in which they live, with few rights for women and with no money or power, and observes that this is not the case with Emma Woodhouse, whose struggle is less with the world than with herself:

Emma Woodhouse has a great deal to learn. She has to learn not to let her imagination run away with her, not to meddle in the lives of others, how to correctly value her own place in society, and of course she has to learn about love … self- deception must be rejected in order to gain self awareness (Fullerton, 2020, 10)

Reading memoirs provide a plethora of clues to the pleasure and profit of reading. In her ‘tale of Austen addiction’ called *Jane and I*, Fullerton (2017) recalls her earliest reading experiences, and records the story of how her activities as an encyclopaedic reader as a child and literary scholar as an adult have been most fully realised in her passion for Jane Austen’s novels. Her mother introduced and often read to her ‘until she was hoarse’ (18):

Through books I had fallen in love… I had travelled around England and got to know it beautiful and varied landscapes, from Daphne du Maurier’s Cornwall to the Brontës’ moors in Yorkshire; and I had lived in many different communities, learning about what could and could not be said, which friends were false and which were true, and what power gossip could have. My mind was now ready for the next step…. (18).

The slender monograph that records the next step, and the many steps that followed, provides a joyful account of why books, especially those by Jane Austen, matter to her. She recalls with regret that she ‘missed the privilege of being taught Jane Austen at high school’ (22), although only *Mansfield Park* remained to be read when she undertook her B.A. studies at the University of Auckland. Continuing her studies at the University of Edinburgh in the 1980s her literary journey really began. Her attraction to and interest in the physical locations associated with writers and their works led eventually to a professional career as a literary tour guide.

In the course of her travels and of her reading Fullerton ventures down unexpected pathways. In following up examples of crime in Austen’s life and in her fiction, she produced a study that visits, for example, the execution site in Sydney of a connection of Austen’s great-nephew Lord Brabourne, who published the first collection of the author’s private correspondence (Brabourne,1884). Her research instincts and her literary imagination were stimulated by this and other observations in her reading and her literary travels. The resulting publication, *Jane Austen and Crime* (Fullerton, 2004), fulfils Maxine Greene’s theories about how the imagination can work to generate new ideas, an example of ‘the promise in any quest’ (Greene, 2000a, 15). Fullerton’s imagination is allied to inventiveness and the capacity to surprise. Furthermore, although the book is classified as ‘another historical background study’, her research leads to ‘a discussion about the symbolic nature of imprisonment’ that is congruent with the social theories of Foucault (Mazzeno, 2011, 219-220). Such symbolism is invoked again in the fictional episode that exposes Harriet Smith and her friend to the threat of a band of gypsies. Austen’s readers would have been aware, as Fullerton points out, that speaking to gypsies was forbidden by law and could lead to a prison sentence (Fullerton, 2016, 2).

Foucault’s theories illuminate the inclusion of the gypsy scene and its capacity to extend the reader’s imagination beyond the margins of the narrative. The episode does more than provide Austen with a brilliant narrative strategy and Emma with a rationale for fabricating a new romantic possibility for Harriet. Every time I read about the gypsies, two centuries after Austen was writing, I return to a school room in which the class is chanting a verse: ‘my mother said/I never should/play with the gypsies in the wood/If I did, she would say, naughty girl to disobey; [clapping rhythmically in tandem with another child] disobey one, disobey two, disobey over Waterloo’. Such is the power of personal response in the spiralling action described by Louise Rosenblatt (2005). In that reading moment a shadow falls across the narrative for me as a reader.

The way in which this interplays with a historical reality complicates the reading response in a more sophisticated way than those generated by the possibility that it was a hanging offence to be seen conversing with gypsies (Fullerton, 2019), and demonstrates the rich complexity of reading in ways that are both personal and critical. David Cressy’s historical study of the Roma as a group with a history that goes back to ancient India highlights the fact that although gypsy relations with a fearful wider community resulted in anti-Gypsy laws and statutory prohibitions that were brutal, they were used less often as views became more enlightened. It has, in fact, been argued that by Austen’s time gypsy life was beginning to attract a degree of sympathy that blurs expectations about the depiction of gypsies in literature and art (Houghton-Walker, 2014). In arguing that Austen shares a more enlightened view by placing the blame for the incident on Harriet rather than on the gypsies Sara Houghton-Walker draws attention to ways in which historical nuances complicate reading responses. Close reading of the episode, however, is crucial. In that final test I find that the appearance of the gypsies in the narrative, brief as it is, enlarges the parameters of Austen’s fictional world to include those on the margins, and reveals a social world in which women and children are considered unsafe without the protection of a (white) male like Frank Churchill.

### Emma and Ann with an ‘e’

There are no such shadows in the ‘Anne books’ that gave me an early taste for imaginative heroines. These are among the books absent from the reading list prescribed by the teacher who welcomed my cohort to secondary school English. In her memoir Fullerton describes how she was prepared for Austen’s heroines by the Canadian novelist, L. M. Montgomery. The Anne books in particular resonate with *Emma*. Both heroines, Emma and Anne, experience a rural village life: Anne in Avonlea and Emma in Highbury test the limits of their judgments and their imaginations in dramas of their own making, against a social backdrop made up of a network of intimate relationships. Fullerton writes:

Anne taught me a lot, but she also prepared me magnificently for Jane Austen. Like Emma, Anne of Green Gables says things she regrets; like Elizabeth Bennet she forms a violent prejudice against a male because of one stupid remark… tries to make a place for herself where she is not really wanted (like Fanny Price) … Making new friends, finding one’s way in the world, coping with difficult friends and relations, learning when to speak and when to stay silent, discovering what others are actually saying … I was with her every inch of the way … but little knowing then that Anne’s problems are those of Jane Austen’s heroines too, and that Anne was getting me ready for richer, more complex and even more wonderful heroines still to come (Fullerton, 2017, 16).

In the evolution of my reading practices, the differences between Anne and Emma as fictional human beings have ultimately been more significant than the similarities. A girl learning to navigate her way among adults who often seem to have forgotten the magic of the imagination, Anne was a standout heroine for girls of my generation. She certainly rises above another popular figure to whom I never gave my heart. Pollyanna (Porter, 1913/1952) like Anne and Jerusha, is one of the ‘effervescent exuberant orphans’ (Mills, 1997, 230) with whom I connected at a relatively low order thinking level of reader response. I, like many girls of my generation, was attracted to the ‘uncorruptible innocence of the Romantic child’ (230). I realise now that I was not then ready to read for the challenges to moral development that Austen’s heroines face. But when eventually I experienced the sound of Austen’s prose and the complex relationships in which her heroines became entangled, the clichés and sentimental features of less masterly writing gradually became apparent.

However, my own literary imagination benefited, when the time came, from recognising that Austen’s heroines soar far above Montgomery’s. Anne is superficially similar to Emma, partly because, in relative terms, she *is* superficial. It is never difficult to work out who Anne thinks she is, what she wants from life, or why she behaves as she does. And while her choices reflect the contemporaneous limitations of women, the solutions are separate from underlying issues of deeper psychological and social moment. I have tried to re-read the Anne books in more recent years, wanting to capture again the audacity, the delight and the feel-good emotion that I enjoyed as a young reader. But exposure to the dazzling Emma Woodhouse has dimmed Anne’s glitter which I now find more appealing in the memory than in the reality.

Nevertheless, similarities between Montgomery and Austen have received attention in the Austen scholarship:

L. M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* series and Jane Austen’s novels share many things: international popularity, thriving film and merchandising industries – and the same group of devoted readers. Many ‘Janeites’ are ‘Anneites’ too, and for very similar reasons: Austen and Montgomery both write domestic romances in rural settings; both critique society’s mistreatment of women; and, most significantly, both create compelling, memorable heroines (Fuller, 2008, 1).

In her study of Austen’s influence on L. M. Montgomery, Miriam Rheingold Fuller (2008) suggests that the latter writer altered Austen’s heroines and their experiences to reshape the fictional self she created and to re-imagine her own troubled romantic history:

I believe Montgomery enjoyed Austen’s novels because she strongly identified – or in some case wished to identify – with her heroines in the first three Anne books to rewrite her own life through writing Anne’s. In particular Montgomery uses Austen’s romance scenarios involving quarrelling or conflicted lovers (Fuller, 2008, 2).

Fuller’s description of how Montgomery puts Austen’s characters and plots in her own work is as damning as it is illuminating. The limitations of Montgomery’s literary imagination are implicit in the critic’s account of the author’s imperfect blurring of her life and her fictional vision.

Emma is not only more complex than Anne; she is eternally perplexing for Austen’s readers who continue to find ambiguities and ironies in her fictional representation. At the same time Emma is open in a way that does not define Montgomery’s Anne, just as it does not define Jane Fairfax. Therein lies Emma’s charm for many readers, including when he realises it, Mr Knightley himself.

### Emma and Knightley: a reconciliation of sense and fancy

The length of time it takes cupid’s arrow to pierce Emma’s defences and, as a result, to prompt Mr Knightley to get down to the business of courtship, is a mark of Austen’s narrative ingenuity. By making ‘the apparent spring of the action not Emma’s quest for a husband but Harriet’s’ (Butler, 1975, 251), the author underlines the subjunctive nature of the novel in the subtle questioning of what ‘really’ constitutes the blessings of life. The claimed ‘best blessings’ of Emma’s existence are tested against the girl’s lived experience, as she engages day by day in the social interactions that make up the sum total of that very ‘blessed existence’. Ultimately and against all expectation one of the most persistent blessings of Emma’s existence proves to be the very person who, it could be argued, is the one who vexes her most.

Much has been written about Mr Knightley’s age, thirty-seven years old compared with Emma’s twenty. When Susannah Fullerton first read the novel she was ‘horrified’ by the disparity (Fullerton, 2020, 20), but in later readings its significance dissolved. How, she asks, could anyone not love George Knightley, pointing out that he is, nevertheless, only ‘*close* to perfect’ (20; emphasis added). In her view Knightley has three functions in the novel: as critic and moral tutor, as exemplar of right judgment and fine behaviour, and as romantic interest. There is no question that ‘as a result of Mr Knightley’s scolding, Emma begins to pay attention to what people are thinking and feeling’ (Jones, 2017, 259). In this novel it is the imagination itself that is under scrutiny.

Emma is counselled by her older brother-in-law to ‘estimate’ people by *their* nature and not by *her* ‘fancy or whim’ (Austen, 1816/2005a, 106). It is a matter, he might be advising her, of mind reading, of subjecting her imagination to her social intelligence, of becoming ‘attuned’ to social signals (Jones, 2017, 185-191). But what, readers might ask, of his own capacity to read minds? For there is also no question that Mr Knightley himself has a great deal to learn, despite the ‘advantage’ of sixteen years’ experience (Austen, 1816/2005a, 106). Emma is not the only one with an imperfect perception of reality. His ‘reading’ of Frank Churchill’s intentions, for example, is distorted by his own lack of self-knowledge. Close reading of chapter five in which he and Mrs Weston dissect Emma’s nature, appearance, and skills, forewarns the attentive reader of Mr Knightley’s incipient romantic interest in Emma, despite and perhaps because of the sixteen years between her birth and his. The discrepancy in age between the female and male protagonists must have prompted my pencilled note in the lower margin of my first copy of *Emma*. There, on page ninety-nine, I have written ‘Daddy- Long-Legs’, followed by an exclamation mark and two question marks. I presume therefore that the association both surprised me and motivated me to consider it further.

My recollection of *Daddy-Long-Legs* is entangled with some unusually fond memories of my mother. Her education in the English style school for girls established in Jerusalem in 1867, and headed by Miss Annie Landau from 1899 until 1945 (Schor, 2013) included an introduction to British culture and literature. I think this served my mother well as a form of acculturation; and as a preparation for her married life in a British colony, as Australia was when she arrived, in the country in 1929: a bride appended to her husband’s passport. It was not only English grammar that she had mastered. At Miss Landau’s school she had learned, for example, that English ladies make morning calls wearing hats and gloves, that they serve elegant afternoon teas. This unexpectedly proved to be essential knowledge for a doctor’s wife in a country town. In rare intimate moments she shared with me the pleasure of reading her best-loved books, recommended and lent to her by Miss Landau herself. They included, I remember, *Ivanhoe,* an historical novel by Sir Walter Scott published in 1819; *Lorna Doone, a Romance*, by Richard Blackmore published in 1869; and an epistolary novel called *Daddy-Long-Legs* published in 1912 (Webster, 1912/1999).

Webster’s epistolary novel tells the story of an orphaned girl sent to college by a mysterious benefactor who chooses to remain anonymous, making the one proviso, that Jerusha, who re-names herself Judy, should correspond with him regularly and not expect a reply. Because she has caught a glimpse of her benefactor’s long shadow she chooses to address him as ‘Daddy-long-legs’. Although limited in length and with only one sequel, Webster’s creation reaches deeper than the Anne books into issues around gender and education. In post-Freudian terms the use of ‘Daddy’ for a character who, as it turns out, becomes, like Mr Knightley, an older lover, ‘understandably makes reader uneasy’ (Phillips, 1999, 79). And the college world Judy depicts in her letters is ‘one of old-fashioned, almost embarrassingly wholesome fun’ (Coates, 2014, 2). Nevertheless, Judy is funny in a way that Anne never is; she has a hint of the archness of Elizabeth Bennet when it comes to humour. She is also naively ‘open’ in a way that is reminiscent of what Mr Knightley finds lacking in Jane Fairfax and irresistibly endearing, as it turns out, in Emma.

These, I think, are the associations that make an unlikely connection in my imagination, between two essentially dissimilar works of fiction. The fourth of Austen’s published novels is generally regarded as one of six ‘divine comedies of love’ (Amis, 1975(83). Webster’s novel has found its place among ‘College Girl’ stories, novels that were published in the early twentieth century and played ‘a part in normalising the idea of higher education for women’ (Coates, 2014, 2). She uses the letter-writing mode with which Austen experimented in her writing apprenticeship, before transcending the notion of ‘narrational omniscience’ (Neary, 2019, 197). In no sense can an epistolary novel approach ‘the complex layering of point of view’ which results in the ‘complexity and ambiguity of style which is [Austen’s] hallmark’, (Bray, 2018, 103). And yet, for me as a reader, the resonance from one novel to the other has been productive. It highlights the aspects of both narratives that fit the parameters of the novelistic bildungsroman tradition. Although the heroines are born into different situations in life, each follows a learning trajectory that takes her from a flawed and perhaps damaged sense of self to a healthier state of mind. Each is accordingly enabled to move beyond apparent possibilities to a reality in which the blessings with which she has been provided are truly available.

Webster’s heroine is a participant in a limited educational experience compared with Emma, because of the novel’s more limited fictional vision. Moral and ethical questions are not touched upon in the relationship that develops between the heroine and her benefactor. Nevertheless, she is provided by him with opportunities to develop social skills, with opportunities to gain the cultural capital required to function in the enlarged world she enters on leaving the orphanage; and ultimately with opportunities to experience authentic self-empowerment as she embarks on her journey to become a famous writer. ‘I’m a foreigner in the world and I don’t understand the language’, Judy writes in one of her mandatory letters (Webster, 1912/1999, 30), as she explains the need to read *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868/2019,a book with which her fellow students have been familiar from childhood. The intertextual irony of Emma’s neglected reading lists is palpable.

So too is Judy’s recognition that casual conversation, in which shared cultural information is often taken for granted, is integral to the nature of functioning social relationships. The ease of Emma’s conversations with Mrs Weston throughout the novel illustrates Austen’s expertise in blending sheer gossip with illuminating revelations. Related to Vernay’s pleas for putting emotion back into reading responses and the need to break down barriers between professional and non-professional readers (Vernay, 2013/2016) is the proposition that a human propensity to delight in gossip lies at the heart of our obsessions with fictional characters (Vermeule, 2010). Certainly, this is borne out in my book club. There, once a month, gossip is made respectable, whereas talking about mutual friends in ‘polite circles’ of my age group is taboo. We talk about how fictional characters behave and how we feel about them with total frankness – something we might not do about people we know in real life. This kind of meeting, ‘around a shared cultural object’ encourages us to share our interpretations in what has been described as a ‘playful’ way (Oatley, 1999, 452). Although we fulfil the expectation that reading groups reject rigid theoretical approaches associated with post-modernism (Long, 1987, 306-327), we are all attentive readers, and our own gossip about characters, their motivations, and the consequences of their behaviours, is inevitably interlaced with informed analytical discussion that focuses on what each of us finds in the text as evidence for our speculations.

### Conclusion

My readings and re-readings of *Emma* have been informed and enlivened by a synergy between each of multiple experiences of reading the novel. Features of the physical book with which I embarked on my journey with the heroine attest to the enduring value of some of its physical qualities: its longevity, its aesthetic appeal, its accessibility and its acquisition from an iconic bookseller. As Marilyn Robinson writes about her preferences for reading as a child, her reading was not indiscriminate. ‘I preferred books that were old and thick and hard. I made vocabulary lists’ (Robinson, 2012, 85). Even my winning of a scholarly set of Jane Austen’s works reminds me of the mysterious role that fate and chance play in life and in fiction. As Halsey concludes from historical evidence, readers have always ‘responded to the material features of the books they encounter, as well as the non-material qualities of the books they read’ (Halsey, 2013, 107).

In the non-material context of *Emma* readers learn thatthe random circumstances of Emma’s existence have played tricks on her sense of self. Her privileged position in the social order is what we see, endowing her with an impudent charm. ‘Silly things do cease to be silly’, she says, ‘if they are done by sensible people in an impudent way’ (Austen, 1816/2005a, 229), revealing both the folly of her endeavour to take control of her life by controlling the life of her friend, and the wayward nature of her imagination. At an unconscious level Emma’s sense of security is undermined by random circumstances that deprived her of her mother, while her confidence remains unimpaired, possibly because of the unconditional love she has received from her surrogate mother. The pain of the initial loss that was alleviated by her beloved governess is revived by Mrs Weston’s marriage.

The prospect of the barren intellectual life awaiting her now that her father is her primary companion is assuaged by resort to the excesses of her imagination and driven by Emma’s flawed sense of self. In my reading of the novel, Emma has compensated unconsciously for the loss of maternal love by developing a form of self-love that thrives on her imaginative audacity and finds expression in the exercise of power over others. In this novel we learn that the imagination, for all its possibilities, is also at risk from lack of proper judgment. As Elizabeth Bennet has to learn to weigh up evidence by reading Darcy’s letter with greater care, so Emma has to learn to harness her imagination by reading herself as well as others more attentively. This of course is what she learns from Mr Knightley.

In the bildungsroman tradition, she commences her real education reluctantly, as her blunders are reflected back to her. Mr Knightley exemplifies another sort of imagination: what Maxine Greene describes as the use of the imagination to enter into the world of others, ‘to discover what it looks and feels like from the vantage point of the person whose world it is’ (Greene, 2000a, 4). He raises questions that are deeply ethical in terms of how human beings should treat one another. His discernment when he rebukes her for her rudeness to Miss Bates is exemplary:

Were she a woman of fortune I would leave her every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation – but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor … (Austen 1816/2005a, 408).

It is instructive to note Knightley’s use of the subjunctive: ‘*were* she a woman of fortune’; ‘*were* she your equal in situation’. In this case the subjunctive is also the empathic. Emma is alerted to her past lack of judgment and sensitivity to others. Attentive readers witness the subtle transformation of the self-*love* that fuels her sense of power and has led her into misunderstandings and misjudgements, into authentic self*-knowledge*. Emma’s mind ceases to be a ‘hiding-place’ (Hopkins, 2018, 19) for her flawed notions about other people and especially about her ability to read the minds of others. Knowing at last that she loves her brother-in-law she is empowered to take the boldest risk of her life, testing reality, and testing Mr Knightley too, by urging him to speak even while dreading what she might hear.

This, I think, is the main idea to which every detail in the novel is connected. Austen, in *Emma*, extends the bildungsroman beyond the education of the heroine to explore, in the relationship between Emma and Knightley, the possibilities of the pedagogical encounter, reinforcing the subjunctive mood of the novel. In the episodes that unfold, one from the other, each is brought to ‘bear on the main meaning’ of the novel (Gard, 1992, 153). Emma learns from Knightley’s gravitas, and he, as we see when she invites him to dance with her, learns to value rather than criticise her lively charm. The climactic proposal drama which equals, although in a more restrained way, the romance of *Pride and Prejudice* and the poignancy of the yet-to-come *Persuasion*, is, unusually, positioned five chapters before Emma’s story reaches its conclusion. His reticence is revealed as a romantic trope. ‘If I loved you less’, he tells her, ‘I might be able to talk about it more’ (Austen, 1816/2005a, 469).

In the remaining chapters Mr Knightley does indeed reveal the extent to which he has both learned from and learned to love his ‘dearest Emma’. Austen cleverly gives readers time to witness the social capabilities that are brought to bear on the Hartfield community. Everything is negotiated: Harriet will live happily after with Mr Martin. The Eltons will find their place, for all their affectations, in the community and Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax will be able to visit the Bates and Weston households as often as they choose. Most important, Mr Knightley will spare Emma’s anguish about leaving her father and give her the companionship she craves. As the lovers share the contents of Frank Churchill’s letter they negotiate their points of view without sacrificing their individuality; and as they plan married life in the company of Mr Woodhouse there is every sign that Emma will gain the support of a husband in managing her father and not, as some readers have feared, suffer a double dose of patriarchy. As Emma chooses her husband ‘wisely and seriously and eagerly’ (Trilling, 1976, 199) Austen renders love as intelligent love, a pedagogical ideal around which the novel itself has been imagined.

# CONCLUSION

# THE SOUND OF AUSTEN

### Introduction: Engaging with Jane Austen’s fiction

As this study draws to a close, I return to my starting point, a simple schoolroom library, an open book on the desk, my schoolgirl eyes scanning the first page. The sound of Austen rising from the opening paragraph was as pleasing to my ears as the tripping phrases of a simple Mozart sonata form that we had only recently listened to in our music class. I experienced the transition in mood from the exposition or opening statement of the novel to the agitated conversation initiated by Mrs Bennet in exactly the same way that I had grasped the musical idea of the sonata form (cf. Wallace, 2009). Our talented music teacher deserved more attention than she was accorded by a class of rowdy country teenage boys and girls.

The enchantment of that first reading of *Pride and Prejudice* has never left me. It was a sensory experience in which I *read* with my eyes*, heard* with myears*,* and *felt* withmy whole physical and emotional self*.* And as I *felt* the sound of Austen’s prose, I *knew* that her language would, from that moment, be as recognizable to me as the sound of Mozart’s sonata no. 16 in C major, as Miss Ferguson played it on the piano. In retrospect I understand that I was fully acting out Damasio’s (re)conceptualisation of the mind as a place where affective and cognitive experiences become ‘enmeshed’ in the feeling of what happened (cf. Damasio, 1994/2000, xii).

The affective and the cognitive dimensions of her fiction emerged in the analysis of the three novels by Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*, renowned as her most popular novel; *Mansfield Park*, considered to be her most perplexing work; and *Emma*, in which the heroine and the novel have been claimed as examples of artistic perfection. The analysis was consciously undertaken in the spirit of the humanistic literary heritage (Schwarz, 1986). It takes account of the way the novel has been read, taught and written about since the early twentieth century, and it includes consideration of subsequent ‘dialogue’ with ‘recent criticism, including structuralism, deconstruction, and Marxism’ (Schwarz, 1986, 1). While my personal engagement with literature has been predicated on the pleasure of reading, my critical engagement has also been at work within a conceptual framework that is related to a body of research linking reading pleasure to personal well-being, to skills formation, and to a form of knowledge about self and others that is imparted in its own particular way. In the case of Austen I wanted to understand how she manages to be unequivocally intellectual in her concerns and yet to leave her readers feeling that they have enjoyed the experience.

As I have progressed in my reading and professional life I have absorbed, rejected, adjusted to and been astounded by shifting views of what fiction is, and how it should be read at school (see *Appendix*). In considering how Austen’s novels are of continuing value to student-readers it is instructive to recall their historical role in education. Often read as ‘conduct’ or ‘manners’ novels, Austen’s fiction is a reminder that she herself was ‘far from opposed to the central tenets’ of formal conduct books for females and their commendation of ‘propriety, and good manners, prudence, economy, modesty and good sense’ (Halsey, 2013, 37). Austen makes fun of them in Mr Collins’s proposal to reading from them as a way of entertaining the Bennet girls. Nevertheless, ideas about the ‘modern system of female education’ in the spirit of Hannah More (More, 1799/2010) inform the moral development of her own heroines, although it is possible to read traces of Mary Wollstonecraft’s more radical protests against the plight of women (Wollstonecraft, 1792/2020) in the anguished decision-making of Charlotte Lucas and Jane Fairfax.

 Austen’s fiction went on chronologically to be recruited by the Victorians, although in a sense the latter retreated from the Enlightenment values recommended by Mary Wollstonecraft. Following the publication of the family *Memoir* in which Austen was presented as an analogue of Dickens’s familiar female figure of domesticated perfection, the novels were promoted as models for women on the basis of the family portrayal of Austen rather than that of her livelier romantic heroines, Elizabeth Bennet and Emma, which, arguably, was hitherto the case. By the 1890s the novels were recommended in the spirit of updated conduct novels, valued for the ‘lessons in behaviour they held for young ladies of a new generation’ (Southam, 1987/2009, 66). However, the spirited aspect of Austen’s heroines was picked up by more advanced women to reinforce emerging ideas about women’s rights and the emerging ‘feminist cause’ (Southam, 1987/2009, 39). The novels were also employed pedagogically as works that had already become ‘classic’ by the 1870s, literature with which, according to the novelist and critic, Mrs Oliphant, ‘every student of recent English literature’ should be ‘more or less acquainted’ (Oliphant, 1870, 225). Their enduring presence on college and university reading lists was well established, and would have ensured that teachers were familiar with them, when *Northanger Abbey* was prescribed for senior secondary English students in New South Wales in 1911. There can be no doubt that Austen warrants her reputation as a curriculum stalwart.

It is clear then that throughout the historical record Austen’s fiction has served a range of different and sometimes contradictory pedagogical purposes. In analysing three novels for this study, I have focused on the broad curriculum agenda for the ‘development of the mind’ (cf. Eisner, 1979); and more specifically oriented to the potential of the novels to fulfil a set of curriculum goals in the most recent English curriculum revision in the Stage 6 Advanced syllabus (NESA, 2017c, 4). My analysis of each novel has accordingly been sensitive to the ways in which acts of reading might develop ‘critical’, ‘creative’, ‘ethical’, and ‘personal and social’ capabilities specified in the syllabus (2017c, 24). The analysis has been couched in a reflective mode of thinking and writing that subsumes current theories about the humanistic role of fiction as a vehicle for enhancing the mind and the imagination.

### Teaching Jane Austen’s fiction

There is ample evidence that educators who resolutely support the humanities in this way also acknowledge the advantages of technology and understand that it is here to stay. Janet Alsup was a spokesperson for a call to arms issued in 2006 (Alsup, Emig, Pradl, Tremmel, Yagelski, et al., 2006) to create a renewed vision of what English education might be. Subsequently she wrote:

I am not a technophobe. I have a smart phone, use a computer daily, and tweet. You may be thinking at this point that I am about to set up a division between knowledge of the digital age and that of the humanities. The disjuncture, and sometimes even battle, between human and technological knowledge has been well documented. However, the humanities and the digital age are not necessarily and essentially divided and at odds (Alsup, 2015, 8).

In an exemplary learning unit on *Pride and Prejudice* (Coulombe, 2011), a practising teacher demonstrates how to use Facebook and social media in a classroom as ‘an opportunity to combine text study with technologies’ (2011, 93). She reports a number of significant reading outcomes: first, the idea of using Facebook stimulated motivation, eliciting ‘an enthusiastic YES’ from students (89). After an initial period of bewilderment students with basic literacy levels started to engage with Austen’s ‘arcane’ language (89). Equally significant they made connections with the characters and with issues in the novel that related to their own lives. The level of teacher satisfaction is obvious as well:

I noticed that the trend to read ahead in the novel continued and more students were willing to read sections of the text aloud in class. Vocabulary from Austen which had been introduced in class and then employed for the role-play began to make an appearance in other texts produced by students. What was most pleasing to me was the laughter! (Coulombe, 2011, 92).

The learning experience is a testament to a reading pedagogy that commits to ‘social engagement’ as a necessary condition of meaning making in the classroom (Doecke and Mead, 2018, 251), and encourages reading as first and foremost a pleasurable activity. The unit on the study of *Pride and Prejudice* outlined above is cited as evidence that technology in the digital age can be integrated judiciously into classroom discussion to produce desired learning outcomes. On the other hand, a lesson that uses the language of Twitter to get across ‘the point of classical literature in 140 characters or less [sic]’ (Aciman & Rensin, 2009, 93) can only fail to convey the richness of the original. In an article on ‘Presentism’ in which he advocated a ‘leaning of literary studies towards the present’, the literary scholar Liam Semler (2017, 11) cites Henry Giroux (2016) to emphasise the danger of a ‘selfie culture’ that normalises instant gratification, fluidity and greed. I am reminded of the eighteenth century anthologies like *Elegant Extracts*, satirised as the sort of reading ‘aloud’ with which Mr Martin entertains Harriet Smith in Austen’s novel *Emma* (Austen, 1816/2005a, 28), ‘books for wide consumption that encouraged dip-and-skip reading’ (Benedict, 2009, 1). In considering the relationship between reader and text in a time of significant change, the functions of reading that encourage ‘relaxing, thinking and connecting with other minds’ have been ‘constants’ in the history of reading practices (Mackey, 2019, 116). They are not well served by ‘skim reading’ which, according to literacy researcher Maryanne Wolf (2018) has become the new normal and allows insufficient time for the reading brain to grasp complexity of thought, to develop empathy with characters or to perceive beauty in the language and construction of the narrative. Most significantly, such reading practices can do little to create lifetime readers with a capacity for sustained reading that is both pleasurable and that reflects upon how what matters in the text connect with what matters in the reader’s life.

Reading Austen’s fiction for the analysis I have endeavoured to practise what, in my discussion, I advocate: reading strategies that encourage the engagement of a reader’s present mind and imagination with the ‘more ambitious mind’ of the writer (Young, 2016, 6). My analytic discoveries have emerged from these practices. In the case of student-readers, I suggest, the extent to which these discoveries relate to and enhance readers’ critical, creative, ethical and social selves serves as a measure of the richness of reading. However, the extent to which the objectives for ‘knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values’ implied but not specified in the syllabus (NESA, 2017c, 14), the learning objectives and outcomes (15–17) specified in the syllabus and the achievement of standards upheld in the curriculum *Introduction* (4) provide a basis for measuring the attainment of such goals, remains a matter of contestation in the English curriculum scholarship. This curriculum issue, although outside the scope of the present study, warrants empirical investigation. Decisions about what and how to read as a motivation for lifelong learning would benefit from evidence of the extent to which and the ways in which student-readers value their reading experiences.

With the novel positioned at ‘the peak of the modern literary market place’ (Gorelick, 2019, 140), the fact that it *can* assume a life of its own inside the hearts and minds of readers is attested to by the recollected experiences of habitual readers like myself, and like reading memoirists whose reading experiences sometime reflect, sometimes challenge and often illuminate my own. We are all of us part of the humanistic conversation that embraces the ‘intellectual and methodological assumptions’ (Schwarz, 1986, 2) of humanism, while also acknowledging contributions of theorists like Barthes, Derrida and Foucault to the complex nature of meaning and how it is constructed. The conversation is especially pertinent to notions about the pleasure of reading and its role as a springboard to learning and enhancement of the cognitive and affective faculties that propel the imagination.

### Jane Austen and reading

In the thesis *Preface* I embarked on a form of reading memoir that attempts to re-capture the pleasure of reading and to examine the magical moments of my reading life. It was an experience of enchantment, perhaps even a ‘seduction by style’ (Felski, 2008, 62). Enchantment is an aspect of the reading experience that is barely addressed in the curriculum or the implied reading pedagogy. In this respect it is instructive to examine Module ‘B’ of the Stage 6 Advanced English syllabus for the critical study of literature’ (NESA, 2017a, 19–20; see *Appendix*), the location at which senior secondary student-readers are offered the Jane Austen reading option:

In this module, students develop detailed analytical and critical knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of a substantial literary text. Through increasingly informed and personal responses to the text in its entirety, students understand the distinctive qualities of the text, notions of textual integrity and significance (NESA, 2017a, 19).

The syllabus rubric reverberates with historical influences. In the earliest syllabus, appreciation, personal response, and an aesthetic sensibility were understood to be the crucial affective foundation on which a reverence for literature and the meanings believed to be contained within it were to be built. In the mid-twentieth century the balance shifted to the cognitive dimensions of reading: critical thinking as a result of close and discriminating reading, evidence-based evaluations, and exploration of ideas was the driving impulse of reading pedagogy insisted upon on the watch of the Challis Professor of English at the University of Sydney and mandated by the Wyndham reforms (Manuel & Brock, 2003, 18). While reverence for canonic literature might be detected in the choice of texts, it is F.R. Leavis whose presence lingers in the rubric of Module B, although it might be argued that the influence of cultural theory hovers over ‘notions of context with regard to the text’s composition and reception’ (NESA, 2017a, 19).

The module rubric gives few if any hints of the personal and affective dimensions of postcritical reading. The module’s gesture is to personal judgment rather than personal response. As I write students have recently answered this year’s Jane Austen question in Module B, Paper 2 of the English Advanced Higher School Certificate Examination (NESA, 2020). They are asked to comment on the passage in which Emma (Austen 1816/2005a, 54–55) offers advice to Harriet Smith on whether she should ‘accept a man or not’ (55):

In what ways does this excerpt reflect the concerns and aesthetic qualities of Austen’s novel? In your response, make close reference to the excerpt and to your prescribed text (NESA, 2020, 5).

Missing from this question is language that invites readers to explore personal and imaginative relationships with the text.

This is in keeping generally with the linguistic approach to reading, exemplified by the vocabulary used to introduce students to the concept of intertextuality. Like the examination question it lacks an invitation to explore the sensory aspects of reading. This distinctive feature of Austen’s writing has been encapsulated elegantly by Halsey. The novelist, she writes, has the capacity to enrich her narratives with ‘the allusive traces of her own reading’ (Halsey, 2013, 5). In the Glossary provided for the senior secondary English syllabus (NESA, 2017c, 56–87), the inclusion of the term intertextuality suggests that it remains *de rigueur* for students who wish to perform well in their examination response. The concept is described technically, as the ‘associations between one text and another’ generated by references that can be ‘more or less explicit or self-conscious’ and can take the form of ‘direct quotations, allusions or structural borrowings (appropriations)’. Here, there is little for student-readers to work with or by stimulated by, either as responders or composers. Such an explanation of intertextuality is not likely to provide a catalyst for apprehending or conveying the emotional power of intertextuality in, for example, *Mansfield Park* (Austen, 1816/2005a)*.*

A heart-breaking shift of mood and tone occurs when the party from Mansfield pay their visit to Sotherton Court, and Fanny witnesses Maria’s flight from the walled garden in the company of Henry Crawford (116). This is one of Austen’s most complicated but beautifully crafted scenes. It demands the language of the heart to respond authentically. Language less technical than that offered in the curriculum glossary is required to do justice to the impact. The words in which the starling in Laurence Sterne’s novel, *A Sentimental Journey* (1868) bemoans his captivity, when uttered by Maria Bertram as she climbs over the fence, are transformative (Austen 1816/2005a, 116). With these few words, ‘“I cannot get out”, as the starling said’, Maria is relocated imaginatively from a secluded walled garden to a cage from which there is no escape, and Maria herself is transformed in the reader’s imagination from an objectionable woman of privilege to a pitiful victim of her own times and conventions. As Terry Castle demonstrated in her response to *Emma* (Castle, 2002), the language of feminism may be useful but is not necessarily sufficient to convey the pleasure and the drama of profoundly affecting reading experiences.

The linguistic tone of the syllabus rubric misses much of what I discovered in the analysis of the three novels – the sheer pleasure of reading from the heart as well as the mind, the opportunity to walk a path toward meaning-making in which readers embrace the joy of Austen’s sound, the harmonious arrangement of the narratives, the embedded clauses that lend grace, elegance and harmony to her sentences; awesome moments of cognitive insight that precede the wonder of self-discovery; to say nothing of the flood of warmth that flows from Jane Austen’s ‘extraordinary powers of empathy’ (Jones, 2017, xi).

### Re-reading Jane Austen

There is much to miss in a first reading of Austen’s fiction because its inherent richness hides its light behind a bushel of romantic daydreams. Furthermore, the empathic disposition of the narrator’s relationship with both her readers and her characters occludes tensions that bubble ever so gently between the surface and the depths of her narratives. They are so subtle that they were only occasionally apprehended in the early reception of her work, but perhaps contemporary critics like Hilary Mantel have over-reacted to the dark underside of ‘Jane Austen’s country’ (Mantel, 2007). In 2015 I presented an informal paper to my local Jane Austen Society with the title, *What did I miss? Re-reading Jane Austen* (Wilson, 2015)*.* The premise is self-explanatory. I drew on my multiple re-readings to highlight the discoveries that emerged over time from the ambiguities of the narratives and the complexities of the characters, and equally important from new experiences in my own life. As already noted, Vivien Gornick describes her re-readings of *Sons and Lovers* across fifteen years; each time she identifies with a different character, according to where she is in her own life. In her latest reading, in her ‘advanced maturity’ she writes, she sees clearly that as a reader she has taken a journey ‘toward the richest meaning of the book’ (Gornick, 2020, 18).

As I have re-read the novels over the years, I have taken a similar journey, finding new or changed meanings as life around me changed as well, sometimes in unexpected ways. Perhaps most unexpected, as already alluded to, is the benefit of advances in technology. I have recently exchanged my habit of reading aloud sentences and whole paragraphs in my own voice, for a new and enhanced experience. Now it is a joy to listen to Austen, the narrator, and her characters in the beautifully modulated voice of the accomplished actor and reader, Juliet Stevenson. As the ‘sound’ emerges so expressively on the *Audible* audiobook resource I am struck more forcibly than ever by the crucial contribution language and style make to the novelist’s creation of layers of meaning through the sound and feel of the novels. As a result of paying more attention to the sound of Austen, the significance of the aesthetic and the affective dimensions of reading have assumed a degree of prominence in my thinking and in my analysis. There are references to reading aloud scattered through the Austen literature. Halsey reminds us that Austen herself, as recalled by a niece ‘was considered to read aloud remarkably well’, and that ‘scattered references in the letters alert us to reading Jane’s novels aloud in the family circle’. Austen ‘almost certainly wrote her novels anticipating that they would be read aloud’ and accommodated the elocutionary effects of ‘emphases, pauses, tone of voice and gestures’ (Halsey, 2013, 19) in her writing.

*Audible* readings that provide readers with the opportunity to actually hear the elocutionary elements that are represented, for example, by Austen’s punctuation, especially her dashes, differ from the adaptations offered in print, television and screen versions. The recorded versions of the novels are in a different categorical domain from other media versions. Many of the latter illustrate the diverse ways in which ‘the cultural values attached to Austen’s work are constantly being altered by the commercial demands of the media industry…not only re-writing Austen, but continually re-writing the modernist conceptual divide between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art (Nelson, 2013, 6–7). The vocalised versions, on the other hand, bring to the fore the distinctive sound of Austen’s prose and the pleasure it has brought to many generations of readers, without interfering with the act of reading ‘words on the page’ that is fundamental to engagement with the novels.

Reading Austen’s novels with the added advantage of hearing her prose in a voice that is trained to interpret as well as to deliver the words has added to the pleasure of re-engagement. Reading in this way also, I suggest, provides a clue to the conundrum of why and how so many and such a wide variety of readers do engage with Austen’s language, narratives, and perhaps above all her characters. Listening attentively to the vocal delivery of words on the page, readers are more open to the influence of Austen’s modulation of mood and tone on the imagination. This is reading with a particular sensibility, to each her own.

The sensibility that informs the analysis in this study is not a return to the past. It is not the reverential sensibility that underwrote the approach to reading in the progenitor syllabus, and it is not exclusively the modernist sensibility that prioritised discernment and critical intelligence as the key to personal response that was introduced to NSW schools in the Wyndham reforms. Nor is it the postmodern sensibility in which meaning-making is conceptualised as an artefact in a constructivist paradigm that ‘receives its motive and direction from a desire to assert power and control’ (Kronman, 2007, 181). This is doubtless a crude version of constructivism; Terry Eagleton conceded that power is not always bad and that change is not always necessary (Eagleton, 2003, 163–164). Nevertheless, it has had, according to the educator Anthony Kronman, too wide a currency in the humanities (Kronman, 181). The disposition of critique and its guarded or suspicious approach to reading and responding have filtered from the Academy, where it turned literary studies on its head. This might have been a good thing in its day as Rita Felski suggests in an interview in 2017 (Felski, 2017), about what she calls post-critical reading, but she wonders whether the mode of critical reading, and particularly a continuing deference among scholars to a particular methodology called critique, might be misguided. Acknowledging that she herself has practised, benefited from and taken pleasure in suspicious reading, she describes it as having been a welcome change, in its time, from the complacency which was stifling intellectual thought in the Academy. Now, however, she is equally fatigued by the familiarity of a routinely critical mode of interpretation. She suggests that it is time to think about the pleasures of reading in sophisticated ways, and this does not mean resorting to gush and sentiment.

Given the historical disposition of reading practices at the senior school level to reflect the trends of literary study in the Academy (see *Appendix*), it might be time to grasp Felski’s olive branch to ideas about reading for pleasure. Re-reading Austen’s fiction with my eyes and ears attuned to what I might have missed in previous readings, I became less interested in theories about race, class and gender and more alive to resonances of sound, thought, and feelings. In the process I found myself inevitably registering such issues in any case. How would attentive contemporary readers escape issues of gender and class differences that are embedded in the core of the text if they read with open minds and imaginations? Readers may find associations, wherever they read, with their personal experience, whether it springs from an unhappy childhood or, as it might do in contemporary classrooms, from acknowledged or unacknowledged gender diversity. Fiction, in this way, potentially and providentially provides the ultimate pedagogical experience, those unexpected and meaningful insights about personal identity in relation to the world and other people that can change the course of a life. I learned that the imagination flourishes as reading becomes a transaction with language itself, from which I gained the sort of understanding that made my own experiences ‘more comprehensible’ (Rosenblatt, 1938, 8).

**Jane Austen, reading, learning and the imagination**

Transactional reading as advocated by Louise Rosenblatt makes an ‘event’ of every act of reading (Rosenblatt, 1994/2005, 7). As already discussed, it triggers a mental spiraling motion from words on the page, to thoughts, feelings, and associations, and then back again, generating a ‘reading’ that is both creative and critical. The marvel of Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* is that the writer shows readers how this is done. They are given the opportunity to observe Elizabeth Bennet in two acts of reading Darcy’s letter. Her first reading is distorted by her lack of close attention and the overwhelming influence of her own prejudices. In the second reading she enters into an imaginative conversation with the ‘marks on paper’ (Rosenblatt, 1994/2005, 7). Elizabeth’s re-reading of the letter works on one level as a practical demonstration of Rosenblatt’s reading-response paradigm in action, a way of reading with the whole self.

Students who read this scene are provided with a model and an opportunity to emulate the model in a seamless reading experience. The fusion does not end there. A case for the collaboration of emotional amplification with the development of higher-order thinking skills in the spiraling activity is congruent with Vygotsky’s zones of proximal learning and his ideas about ‘the role of emotion and affect in the genesis of thought’ (Barrs, 2016, 242). Reading in this way exercises skills that are both cognitive and affective. Reading in this way provides potentially ‘the curricular content and pedagogy’ that, as Martha Nussbaum argues, ‘can greatly affect’ the developing mind by encouraging the faculties required to interpret evidence and make decisions in everyday life in a democratic society (cf. Nussbaum, 2010a, 45).

The transactional reading practice demonstrated by the heroine in *Pride and Prejudice* is creative in its openness to imaginative associations and critical in its practice of selection, discernment and judgment at each turn of the reading spiral. The more nuanced, subtle and ambiguous the text, the greater are the opportunities to exercise, strengthen, and test a composite of skills that can be applied to the ‘world of language, literature and culture’ throughout a lifetime (Showalter, 2003/2015, 26). From this perspective Austen’s fiction provides unusually fertile soil in which to plant the tiny seeds from which exhilarating, nuanced and richly insightful reading might flourish.

Analysis of the three novels clarifies and throws into high relief the richness of the imagination in Austen’s fiction, the wide spectrum of imaginative faculties that have worked together to sustain interest, in low, high and educational cultural discourses, in this most enduring of novelists. The imagination is a vast subject, but there is no better medium for unpicking the threads from which it is woven than that provided by Austen’s fictional universe. In understanding the imagination, we understand ‘a great deal about perception, and about pleasure and other values’ (Warnock, 1976/1978, 9). In reading Austen’s novels, we have the pleasure and the advantage of experiencing the richness of an imagination that takes multiple forms.

In each of the three novels the inventiveness of Austen’s literary imagination comes to the fore. She has been called a ‘ferocious innovator’ (Wood, 1998, 7), moving the novel forward from Samuel Richardson’s epistolary mode, while demonstrating, in the letters of Mr Collins and Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, how effectively letters can serve the delineation of character. She also finds a completely new way of representing young women, making them both spirited and flawed in ways that leave their intelligence and integrity intact. They come to see the world ‘more clearly’ (Wood, 1999, 18), and prepare the way for the heroines of George Eliot, and after her, of Henry James. Having created a new style of heroine, Austen’s literary imagination invented, or perhaps re-invented, Free Indirect Discourse (FID) as a way to enter a heroine’s consciousness and connect readers with her inner thoughts.

Earlier writers like Richardson and Fielding might have theorized their heroines by default, but Austen humanised them in a way not achieved by any of her novelistic predecessors, and only equaled by the most gifted of her successors. In humanising her heroines, as analysis of all three novels has demonstrated, she puts both her social imagination and her moral imagination to work in ways that illustrate how fiction connects with the deep questions of moral life. The arc of Austen’s literary imagination and her attention to the formal aspects of form and style are informed by her interest in novel reading. No one has articulated more succinctly or precisely the criteria by which fiction of value might be recognized: the ‘most thorough knowledge of human nature’ rendered in all its varieties ‘in the best chosen language’ and by ‘the greatest powers of the mind’, as proclaimed by the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* (Austen, 2006b, 31).

Austen’s empathic intelligence is a model for readers. It is a dynamic way of thinking and feeling about other human beings (cf. Arnold, 2005). It builds a bridge between her social and her moral imaginations, each of which shows us that if we are interested in people and the ways in which they interact, we must also be interested in their moral dispositions. In this way, Austen shows us that ‘empathy is the core of all moral action’ (Jones, 2017, xvii). Of all her characters perhaps the most empathic is, surprisingly, a male. Mr Knightley is distinguished throughout the novel by his many empathic gestures – to Mr Woodhouse, to Miss Bates, to Jane Fairfax and, most movingly, to Harriet Smith. Perhaps that is why he deserves the most perfectly conceived heroine in Jane Austen’s constellation.

### Implications for a reading pedagogy (1): personal response

So far the contemporary appraisal of Austen’s imaginative fiction presented in this study suggests that engagement with her novels has the potential to provide pleasure and profit that is both enriching and practical, for contemporary student-readers. I have argued that transactional reading processes that engage prior experience and knowledge with the writer’s imagination stimulate and enhance readers’ imaginations, may lead to transforming insights, and initiate and exercise capabilities and skills of significant personal benefit and practical use. In considering the pedagogical implications I draw on a range of personal reading experiences, including mine, as a phenomenological source for understanding how lifelong readers view their own reading history.

In my first reading of *Pride and Prejudice* my immediate personal response, as recalled in Chapter 3, was to the sound of Austen. The first paragraph of the novel simply resonated with my imagination in a sensation that was partly pleasure, partly curiosity. I discovered that Austen’s language was as engaging as the intertextual relationship between Shakespeare’s Rosalind and Elizabeth Bennet, although the identification of one heroine with the other was certainly a contributing factor. Through the experience of Austen’s sound I discovered a motivation to pursue language, fiction and reading that shaped my future life, personal and professional.

William Deresiewicz explains that he came to engage with Austen’s novel *Emma* only when he *resonated* with the scene in which Miss Bates responds gently to Emma’s offensive comment:

And that was when I came to understand what Austen had been up to all along … Austen, I realized, had not been writing about everyday things because she couldn’t think of anything else to write about. She had been writing about them because she wanted to show how important they really are. All that trivia hadn’t been marking time until she got to the point. It was the point. Austen wasn’t silly and superficial; she was much, much smarter —and much wiser —than I could ever have imagined (Deresiewicz, 2011, 12).

When Deresiewicz realizes that Emma’s cruelty is ‘a mirror image’ of his own disposition he describes his depth of attunement in a way that accords with Rita Felski’s emerging theory of literary attachment (Felski, 2020). Felski claims an even wider analytical purchase for the language of attunement because, she believes, it resists Bourdieu’s reduction of attachment to ‘matters of exchange, cultural capital, and struggles of distinction’ within a theoretical and sociological framework (Giusti, 2019, 7). The resolution, she claims, is the development of a different vocabulary and mode of thinking and writing about literature, and indeed, about all works of art.

From this perspective, the value of acknowledging and encouraging the expression of personal resonances in the reading process is underlined. And if this is to be so, then students need affirmation of and practice in using a vocabulary that supports the expression of what is fundamentally the language of attunement: words like ‘reverberation’, ‘mood’, and ‘alignment’, even emotive words like ‘wonderment’, ‘ enchantment’ and ‘awe’ that are in tune with the alchemy I explored in *Emma*. Similarly, in my analysis of the same novel, ‘mood’, in its subjunctive inflection, is a strong presence. It emerges as a feeling rather than as a concept, a strong impetus for my initial and primarily affective engagement with the novel, that was explored and anchored in the text itself. Of course, the very idea of thinking about a ‘presence’ as a useful contribution to literary analysis is unacceptable to the current canon of theory. Attention to textual vigilance and detachment in the formation of meaning tends to preclude such notions. However, a reading pedagogy that encourages readers to notice what resonates in their consciousness and what triggers their emotions and associated ideas, requires a vocabulary for reflecting on thoughts and feelings that are located outside the boundaries of theoretical abstractions.

Questions and ideas about what constitutes and constructs a *personal* response serve as a guide to the formation of ideas and the adoption of theories that inform reading pedagogy. The questions are answered in a particular way by my own reading memories and those of reading memoirists with whom I engage in this study. So too with examples from the fictional book club (Fowler, 2004), in which the back stories of the oddly assorted members of a Jane Austen Book Club weave in and out of their personal responses and shared views of Austen’s characters.

The failure to engage personally in a particular work is not then a failure of the novel: it might be regarded as a form of personal response that, in a classroom, invites investigation. In a book club it may be different; this is illustrated by an incident in my own book club. An attempt by enthusiastic Austen readers among us failed to convince a well- and widely-read fellow member why, for some of us *personally*, reading Austen’s novel *Persuasion* has been the source of both pleasure and profit. Nothing in the novel and nothing said about the novel *resonated* with this reader. Reflecting on this I wondered whether her failure to engage is in fact her personal response, and that the interest might lie in discussing why that is so. However the difference between book conversations in a book club and in a classroom highlights the significance of theorising a reading pedagogy that responds to the insights of and about adult readers.

 The approach I have taken when analysing Jane Austen’s fiction is an enactment of my personal response to each of the novels. It follows a model for reading as an event of significance, one that has provided me with pleasure and interest; as an exercise of a range of skills in close reading and interpretation of the work that blends the emotional impact of reading with thoughtful reflection and consultation with other readers and with scholarship; and, above all, the opening of the mind to the discovery of new insights with which to think about what living is for and the many ways and places in which answers to that question might be found (Kronman, 2007, 75). It is an approach that enlists remembered experiences and a personal understanding of prevailing cultural discourses and dispositions, drawing them together as a means of making sense of the novels from a contemporary perspective and with a contemporary sensibility. Reflecting on aesthetic, moral and intellectual dimensions of the novels as they entered my consciousness, I felt empowered to experience ‘the fullness of lived reality rather than mere abstraction’ (Seaton, 2014, 47) in Austen’s fictional universe.

 I think this is the message conveyed by Eli Wiesel in the passage referred to in the first chapter of the thesis. The writer does not hesitate to attribute the morally reprehensible conduct of well-read perpetrators of Nazi atrocities to a flawed reading pedagogy: to reading that is abstract, theoretical, and lacking in the sort of imagination that underwrites the capacity to ‘experience empathy with different points of view’, even those we do not share (Greene, 2000a, 31). The sort of reading that Wiesel implies (Orr, 1991/1996) requires a pedagogy that encourages inductive processes, by means of which readers immerse themselves deeply enough in the narrative and engage intimately enough with the characters, to make their own discoveries and come to their own ethical judgments. To return to *Pride and Prejudice* and Elizabeth’s second reading of Darcy’s letter for illumination, it is here that readers are given a demonstration in how to read, even as they are given an opportunity to exercise their own reading skills.

Readers who engage deeply with the fiction they read in this way open themselves to discoveries *about* themselves. When the insights are especially novel and powerful, readers might experience something extraordinary: they enter the realm of epiphany, valorised by James Joyce as a source of enduring exaltation. On the other hand, the method of reading that applies theoretical lenses ‘to change the way we see the text’, as recommended in curriculum support literature (Dixon & Murphy, 2018, 22), precludes such experiences. Reading practices that lean on theoretical lenses might be less helpful as a reading pedagogy than the inductive process undertaken by Elizabeth Bennet.

This is a major finding of Sara Golsby-Smith’s doctoral thesis. In her study she considers how the theoretical orientations of the syllabus reforms might influence reading pedagogy in the classroom (Golsby-Smith, 2007). Her interest in the act of reading prompts her to report back to other teachers from her experience in the senior secondary English classroom about her personal attempts to interpret the assumptions and declared intentions of the syllabus. She laments the conclusion drawn by her brilliant literature student, Amy: that it was more important in senior English to ‘read’ the syllabus and what it required to get a good mark, than to open her mind to all the possibilities of her texts. Her study suggests that theory itself sometimes ‘undercuts its own admirable assumptions’ (9) with its claims for deconstruction and reconstruction. Golsby-Smith claims to take her cue, perhaps unexpectedly, from the arch-theorist, Jacques Derrida, favouring a reading pedagogy that allows the teacher the freedom to respond in different ways to particular texts, to be pragmatic according to different areas of interest, and to avoid imposing rigid schemes in reading situations (Golsby-Smith, 2007, 106).

In today’s post-theory world this advice, especially when applied to school student-readers, is salutary. I have learned from experience in the classroom, as both student and teacher, that the *pleasure* of reading is precipitated by deep engagement with the construction of meaning and the discovery of personal insights, rather than from deconstruction of the text. Accounts archived in reading memories, both my own and those of other devotees of fiction, contain frequent references to how the works ‘resonate’ with the reader’s lived experience. It is clear from the memoirs that what resonates is personal and often changes over time. But it seems, from my own reading and from reading experiences recorded by others, that what resonates most with each individual reader and in any given reading warrants discussion and reflection in the classroom if reading is to contribute to self-discovery.

### Pedagogical implications (2): classroom conversations

Classrooms, as Joseph Epstein points out in the record of his literary education, can ‘sometimes kill great subjects, and also splendid books’ (Epstein, 2014, 8). As a result, as already noted, some writers have been reluctant to have their works listed on school reading lists. But classroom discussions are part of the learning experience, and student-readers who choose the Jane Austen option in Stage 6 English (or whose teachers choose it for them), may benefit from a reading pedagogy that encourages the sharing of personal resonances in their classroom conversations. In a best-case outcome those readers who resonate spontaneously with the novel might communicate their pleasure to and ignite the curiosity of those among them who do not. As I recounted in the *Preface*, this was my experience of the *Emma* tutorials I attended during my first year of tertiary education. A reading pedagogy based on shared feelings might address the question asked by Golsby-Smith in her study as she investigates the impact of theoretical influences in the 1999 curriculum reform (2007). How, she asks, can students ‘converse with each other about what they believe a text is saying’ (11) when their freedom to respond from their personal experience is compromised by the syllabus.

The frustration that prompts her to ask this research question is her response to a pedagogy that applies pre-ordained concepts to students’ views about works of the imagination. She describes the constraints imposed on students’ classroom conversations by the prescription of specified approaches to reading experiences. She is referring to the notions ascribed to the module called Area of Study in the 1999 Stage 6 syllabus (see *Appendix*), which asked readers to consider passages of texts including poems and fictional excerpts, from the perspective of, for example, ‘journey’ or ‘discovery’.The common module of the 2017 syllabus has broadened the framework to ‘texts and human experience’, perhaps responding to the view of teachers like Golsby-Smith. However, a curriculum support resource produced by the English Teachers Association NSW (ETA) to provide direction to students of the 2017 Advanced Stage 6 syllabus follows a similar pedagogical route:

The text is regarded critically as we search to see not just what it is that makes this text work but why the text is important. It’s like applying a *lens* to magnify ideas the ideas but what you find is that different lenses change the way we see the text. The word *lens* in this context means approaching the text from a different perspective, perhaps focusing on gender, race or power relations in the text (Dixon & Murphy, 2018, 22).

The problem with this approach is the likelihood that the lens, like the concept to which Golsby-Smith objects, might assume greater significance than the text itself. As a teacher she has a passion for giving student-readers the freedom to make their own discoveries as they share their reading experiences. This freedom is central to the way of reading experienced when I entered into conversation yet again with the three novels in the present study.

### Conclusion

In his discussion of reading as a form of art, Damon Young interprets freedom in reading as an exchange of ‘encyclopaedic mastery for biographic honesty’. He writes that his consciousness is partly what he has read and partly how he has read it (Young, 2016, 23). This is the form of liberty assumed in my personal reading memoir and in the reading memoirists to whom I turned in order to ‘provide a public reflection on this often private art’ (Young, 2016, 23). Where better to find evidence of the value of reading and what works to make lifelong readers, than in the responses, memories, and writing of those who have walked the talk. By entering this conversation I have myself engaged in a communal reading pedagogy that respects, includes and enlarges the contribution made by the traditional gatekeepers of literary criticism, whose preferences, biases and prejudices also contribute to the art of reading well. Together we make up a company of reading companions bonded by shared and sometimes radically different textual experiences.

All the memoirists alluded to in this study, however, share something special: an orientation to the seductive aspects of literature like sound and shape, to the ways in which emotions enliven the affair between writer and reader (cf. Vernay, 2016), as well as a sensitivity to aesthetic responses that have been investigated and theorised by recent excursions into the neuroscience of reading and art (Armstrong, 2013; Zunshine, 2015). For all of us, imaginative fiction is alive. Allowing ourselves to be disturbed as well as delighted, we respond to ‘the feeling of what happens’, the title of Damasio’s exploration of the biological roots of consciousness in human beings (Damasio, 1994/2000). Caring about characters is central to the way we read and talk about fiction. Although we know and wonder at the fact that these characters do not exist, we learn from their social interactions and from the ways in which they read or fail to read each other’s minds (Vermeuile, 2010). No doubt there are differences in our views of the world, but our attachment to fiction, in Felski’s paradigm, includes our shared recognition of a form of social knowledge that is reflected in the way we engage and talk about fiction. This sort of sharing is the experience Golsby-Smith longs for in the classroom conversations that she believes might encourage a form of reading for reasons that are different from those prompted by the imperative of syllabus outcomes and standards.

The failure of my reading group to move our fellow reader on the question of *Persuasion* is instructive, especially from the perspective of Felski’s ideas about attunement as the prerequisite to reading engagement. This is acted out tellingly by Fowler’s book club members, referred to above, as they share views and often disagree over interpretations of characters and their motivations. Although a lack of internal symmetry and character definition in Fowler’s novel heightens awareness of Austen’s artistic sophistication and complexity as John Mullan concludes in his review of the book (Mullan, 2004), the range of her stereotypical characters – a single man, a single woman, a serial divorcee, a gay woman, a happily married woman and an abandoned wife, enable her, albeit in a simplistic way, to highlight what Lionel Trilling meant by the intensely personal and social relationship that Austen’s readers form with her and with her fiction.

If Felski is right, reading pedagogy and classroom conversations need to seek ways to provoke, if they cannot induce, attunement at some level, in order to precipitate textual engagement. For engagement to occur readers need to experience the unique configuration of factors, human and non-human, possibly inclusive of recollections of persons, places and emotions, that must come together to create a *state of* *readiness* sufficient for deep engagement with Austen’s fiction. Felski’s theory of attachment matches Gornick’s intuition about reading readiness and receptivity alluded to in an earlier chapter. It points to a wide range of pedagogical possibilities, including even the significance of a teacher’s expression of passionate enthusiasm for a work, as an ‘actor’ in the preparation of students for deep engagement with the books they are required to read.

Pursuing the goal set by Lionel Trilling for his American college students in the mid-twentieth century, to examine the pleasure experienced when and from reading Jane Austen’s fiction, has been illuminating. It has proved to be a key to understanding how student-readers anywhere might derive value in the form of both pleasure and profit from the experience of reading the novels in today’s global society. The pleasure of reading Austen is not related, my inquiry suggests, to the time or place in which it was written, as much as it is to the ‘reality that powerful fiction so powerfully discloses’ (Wood, 1999, xi) in any time and place. This is made possible by Austen’s investment in the reader’s imagination as well as the richness and diversity of her own. While analysing Austen’s fiction I have been reminded constantly of where Austen’s imagination meets and illuminates the reader’s capacity to engage with new possibilities, whether it is her literary imagination that invites critical and creative responses to the subterranean ripples in her narratives and to her heroines as they work out their destinies; or to her moral imagination that opens readers’ minds to the ethical nuances involved in making complex life choices; or to her social imagination that alerts readers to the crucial importance of developing mind-reading skills and cultivating social intelligence. Evidence gathered in the present study suggests that young readers who pay close attention to such matters in the context of one of Austen’s beautifully constructed and well-told stories about finding a compatible life partner are offered the prospect of pleasure in reading and profit in the things that matter.

#

# APPENDIX

# Historical Curriculum Survey

The art and passion of reading well and deeply is waning, but Austen still inspires people to become fanatical readers. We read Austen because she seems to know us better than we know ourselves, and she seems to know us intimately for the simple reason that she helped determine who we are both as readers and as human beings (Bloom, 2009, vi).

### Curriculum inquiry

Jane Austen’s novels were prescribed for reading in the progenitor senior secondary school English syllabus in New South Wales (New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 2011). As a repository of ideas about literature and reading the inaugural syllabus adopts Matthew Arnold’s beliefs about the benefits of a liberal education for the masses as well as for the elite (Arnold, 1880), thus making the education for children of the middle and working classes ‘more than vocational’ (Pratt, 2007, 19). The field of historical curriculum studies in relation to subject English in Australia has paid particular attention to the nature of prescribed texts and the ways in which they were read during the twentieth century. In this historical context Jane Austen has a unique history as the only novelist, including curriculum favourites like Charles Dickens, George Eliot and the Brontë sisters, to have her fiction prescribed on every published list of prescribed texts.

English has had a ‘simultaneously privileged and contested position’ (Carter, 2012, 7) as the single long-term compulsory subject in the school curriculum. Literature was installed at the centre of the first syllabus for ‘its special educating power’ and novels were studied as ‘an author’s view of some phase of human life’ (NSW Department of Public Education, 1911, 19) Austen’s novel, *Northanger Abbey*,appears as the prescribed novel on a list that was structured in three year cycles. Given that a novel was viewed, ‘not in abstract terms, but as a concrete vision’ and that pedagogically it was advised that ‘story should be treated as story’ and efforts made ‘to bring out its real and living interest’, the appeal of Austen’s novels is readily apparent. As time has passed the conceptualisation of reading and reading response has changed. In negotiations to finalise the most recent curriculum revision the mandated presence of the novel in the course of reading and literary study was saved by a last minute intervention by English curriculum experts who argued vigorously to reverse the decision to make the novel optional as opposed to mandatory as it had been since the first syllabus (1911) (Johnston, 2017; Manuel, 2017), although poetry did not receive a similar reprieve.

It is important to note and record the episode in the interests of any future retrieval of the ‘intellectual history’ (Reid, 2003, 100) of literary study. Because English is not a ‘timeless category’ it needs to be understood as a ‘profoundly historical category and also an historical construction’ (Green, Cormack & Reid, 2000, 111). This historical curriculum survey contributes to the process by tracing the course of reading and reading pedagogy in Australia during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The fact that the mandatory status of literature within the compulsory subject of English has persisted and that Austen’s fiction continues to be inscribed as an option for study makes the survey a benchmark for surveying the position of imaginative fiction in the curriculum landscape, and as a means of inquiring how the curriculum responds to the idea of ‘new possibilities for radically different times’ (Green, Cormack & Reid, 2000, 112).

### Curriculum chronology

English curriculum research in Australia has its source in the inaugural syllabus in New South Wales (NSW Department of Public Instruction, 1911), the first curriculum milestone. The reorganisation of courses in New South Wales anticipated the foundational British Newbolt Report (1921) by a decade. Both documents, the Australian and the British, are ‘highly literary’ in orientation (Green, Cormack & Patterson, 2013, 334) and share ‘philosophical, pedagogical and discursive’ dispositions (Manuel & Carter, 2019, 223). As primary sources, both attest to the influence of Mathew Arnold, an educator who turned from poetry to literary criticism (Kirsch, 2011, 28–29), whose ideas about culture and literature were his credentials for becoming ‘spokesman for the humanities’ (Pratt, 2007, 19). Equally, both curriculum documents are mediated by a proliferation of progressive educational ideas known collectively as the New Education movement (cf. Selleck, 1968). They played a prominent part in determining what public education should look like and the means by which it should open the way to wider cultural opportunities. Both the agenda for the reorganisation of courses in New South Wales (1911) and the text of the Newbolt Report (1921) reveal the roles played by a Romantic culture of the self and ideas drawn from literary criticism of the time in setting the theoretical agenda for how all children should learn to read (cf. Turney, 1983).

The arrival of the Wyndham curriculum of 1965 signalled a second milestone in New South Wales curriculum history. It followed a decade in which ‘comprehensive secondary schooling became the norm in public education’ (Green, Cormack & Reid, 2000, 111). The introduction of a Higher School Certificate (HSC) syllabus that catered for different levels of reading interest and ability with a high stakes public examination at the end of a sixth year of secondary schooling, necessitated a radical reorganisation (cf. Watson, 2003). However, after only three decades, a period in which the development of a sociology of education and literature (English, 2010) was moving the discourse into unfamiliar, and for some educational stake-holders, alien territory, a third curriculum transformation was designed to address the needs and purposes of a new millennium (Board of Studies, 1999). Literature was subsumed into a broader textual paradigm, but continued to take centre stage as a manifestation of language. Furthermore, the only mandatory component that is examined is the textual, predominantly made up of prescribed texts, including a selection that includes canonic novels like those of Jane Austen, under the new nomenclature of ‘prose fiction’. Critics lamented the fate of literature in the new curriculum but Manuel and Brock (2003, 23) point out that there was still ‘a mandatory core of literature to be studied by all students undertaking HSC English’.

Only twenty years later, a revised syllabus was released for implementation in 2017 (NESA, 2017c). It is treated as the fourth milestone in the survey because it responds to a national curriculum which was itself the outcome of a long-lasting political debate (Reid, 2009) and a lengthy planning process (cf. Dixon, 2012). This survey might play a small part in examining the extent to which the rhetoric of the revised syllabus preserves, changes or discards previous understanding of and commitment to the value of reading and literary study.

### Literature Review

The *Courses of Instruction for High Schools* (New South Wales Department of Public Instruction, 1911) is regarded in the scholarship as the first curriculum ‘transformation’ (Manuel & Brock, 2003, 16) because it transformed the utilitarian educational landscape of the previous century. The presence of the Romantic imagination (Carter, 2012) and Wordsworthian ideas about the liberating power of imaginative contemplation in the formation of English (Reid, 2002, 2004) have blended to provide one of the ‘curriculum story lines’ (Smith and Ewing, 2002, 28) of literary study. An alternative story line follows the influential work of Ian Hunter (1987, 1988, 1993) whose genealogy of literary culture uses a Foucauldian methodology to wage ‘a campaign’ (Holbrook, 2014, 98) against personal growth as an explanation for the presence of reading literature in the school curriculum. Hunter argues that English serves the purposes of a bureaucratic technology and that literature is the instrument by means of which the future citizenry is moulded into social conformity as defined by an ‘an expert governmental elite’ (Hunter, 1988, 181). The tension between these stories and their variations sets the agenda, for later debates over the role of literary study and about the value of the imagination.

The research literature locates the starting point of both subject English and the centrality of reading practices and reading pedagogy in the inaugural curriculum (Green & Cormack, 2008; Manuel & Brock, 2003; Manuel & Carter, 2017a). Matters of frequent debate, these features of subject English have become more recently matters of historical inquiry (Green, Cormack & Patterson, 2013). Initiated by Paul Brock’s pioneering scholarship (Brock, 1984) in the field of English syllabuses in New South Wales, a number of doctoral theses have ventured into historical territory. Brock starts with the syllabus iteration of 1953 and proceeds through the second curriculum milestone reform in in the 1960s (1982, 1984, 1986 1987, 1996). He detects lost opportunities along the way, like the failure to pay attention to Rosenblatt’s reader-response theory, transmitted from America. Reading was not, as Board had thought, sufficient to make good readers: children need to learn to read ‘in a particular way’ if they are to ‘read to learn’ (Nay-Brock, 1984, 55; cf. Rosenblatt, 1938/1995). Brock also identifies a subsequent shift toward a more dynamic paradigm that picked up on Newbolt’s ideas about thought as the foundation of the syllabus and the integration of the separate parts, language and literature.

Such ideas were fundamental to the Newbolt Report in Britain (1921) when it was commissioned as a basis on which to establish an English curriculum suitable for English people. It is a layer loaded with meaning in the ‘archaeology of knowledge’ (cf. Foucault, 1969) about reading practices and literary study in the Anglophone world. Margaret Mathieson (1975) noticed the missionary zeal for literature embodied in the report. Her study strengthened notions of the ‘unique capacity’ of English ‘to improve character and transform society’ (79). In the approach to its centenary the Newbolt Report has received renewed critical attention from multiple and varied perspectives. Most relevant to Australian curriculum interests is a study that identifies the enduring influences of both the 1911 English syllabus and the Newbolt Report in senior secondary English (Manuel & Carter, 2019). The authors found, as Brock did before them, that ‘for secondary school curriculum in NSW’ the values associated with reading and literature in the 1911 syllabus and in the Newbolt Report ‘find their apotheosis in the 1953 syllabus’ (Manuel & Carter, 2019, 235). The resonances they find in the two primary source documents recur as an ideological thread in the required reading of successive iterations of the English curriculum.

Garry Rosser’s investigation of prescribed texts and the way they are read to ‘discipline the subject English in Wyndham reformed syllabuses between 1965 and 1995’ (Rosser, 2000) is strongly influenced by the work of Terry Eagleton and the impact of an emerging body of postmodern critical theory in the field of cultural studies (Walton, 2009). Eagleton (1983/2008) approaches literature as a cultural practice, presenting a challenge to modernist-era constructs, bringing a range of theoretical discourses associated with the postmodern period and post-structuralist ideas about fluidity and unpredictability (cf. Culler, 1997; Eagleton, 1983/2008; Williams, 1958) to bear on assumptions like those recorded in the Newbolt Report. He could be said to treat culture as an ‘imposition *on*’ rather than an ‘expression *of*’ people (Culler, 1997, 45). In this respect Eagleton’s theory exhibits an explicitly Marxist drive that is characterised by an association of Literature with false consciousness and the ideology of the imagination (Eagleton, 17-18). This aspect of Eagleton’s pedagogical approach is fundamental to my rationale for a reading pedagogy that challenges Rosser’s view. The impact of the prescribed reading pedagogy on less advantaged students, and the texts prescribed between 1965 and 1995 prompt him to ask sceptically, what is, and who sets, the agenda for Higher School Certificate (HSC) senior English syllabi and the HSC examination (Rosser, 2000, 6).

Rosser’s work marks an epistemological break in curriculum discourse about literary study. He repudiates implicitly the commitment throughout a long period of scholarship to literature as a source of enrichment and to reading as a pathway to personal fulfilment (cf. Brock, 2009, 2015). Rosser opens a gateway to then prevailing ideas drawn from social science, in particular about the role of reading and reading responses in reproducing dominant power structures in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1978/1990); and from critical theory in rejecting idealisation of the imagination and other commonplaces of traditional literary discourse, and arguing that ‘literature and ideology’ are coupled as an inseparable phenomenon (cf. Eagleton, 1983/2008, 19). Rosser argues that ‘Literature’ should be understood as a body of texts which falsely claim enduring significance, thus constituting a form of cultural imperialism; and further claims that the majority of students have no interest in such texts and read them only to pass examinations.

Prescribed texts on HSC reading lists (Rosser, 2000, 5) are examined as ‘an expression of institutional practices and cultural discourses. A weakness of Rosser’s argument is the absence of voices of dissent in his rejection of traditional humanist views of literature and reading. Nevertheless his work heralds a radically new orientation for subject English, its relationship to literature, and the intellectual climate in which scholarship in the context of the next curriculum milestone was to be contextualised.

The prevailing intellectual climate of educational discourses in Australia at the time transformed ideas about meaning, learning and reading, and their relationship to each other. Studies in the field relate to syllabus documents and the constitution of the subject (Michaels, 2001); teachers’ responses to curriculum change (O’Sullivan, 2005); the pedagogical challenges of teaching Stage 6 English in the 1999 curriculum (Golsby-Smith, 2007); the nature of innovation and change (McGraw, 2010); Romantic influences and the 1999 Stage 6 curriculum (Carter, 2012; cf. Reid, 2002, 2004); the challenges of literary theories (Ireland, 2014); and the special role of the English teacher (Howie, 2014). Insights about reading pedagogy inscribed in accounts of personal classroom experiences are especially valuable in understanding how curriculum rhetoric might be constrained (Golsby-Smith, 2007; cf. Golsby-Smith, 2011, 2013) or adapted (Howie, 2014) in the classroom. So also are the questions asked about the future orientation of literature (Manuel & Brock, 2003) and the preparation of teachers for the theoretical and pedagogical issues stemming from the 1999 structural and conceptual revisions to senior secondary English (Manuel, 2002). Public perceptions of radical changes in the 1999 syllabus milestone are discussed in a study of media reporting on English as a method of teaching Literacy as opposed to Literature alongside more recent emphases on critical literacy and cultural perspectives in English teaching’ (McGraw, 2005, 27).

Studies by Jacqueline Manuel and Don Carter have adopted a historical orientation to explore the continuities of influence in subject English in New South Wales (Manuel & Carter, 2017a), and, with the national framework available, have provided state-based historical studies of the culture, provenance and transformation of prescribed texts in senior secondary school in New South Wales (Manuel & Carter, 2017b, 2017c). As a result, there is now in place an existing body of scholarship with which to compare the current state and status of reading, specifically the reading of prose fiction, in Australian classrooms.

### The progenitor syllabus: creating a common meeting ground

The optimistic spirit of Peter Board pervades the inaugural syllabus (NSW Department of Public Instruction, 1911). A common core of subjects was *mandated* for all secondary students in order to provide a ‘common meeting ground’ and create a ‘well-educated citizenship’ (1911, 5); literature was crowned as the ‘highest influence of education’. The intention of the curriculum was to establish a foundation in English classrooms for a future society in which fellowship and harmony would emerge from learned and shared values inscribed in books. In the Arnoldian spirit, culture, grasped through the best that has been ‘thought and said’, is the force that puts human beings in contact with ‘the mainstream of human life’ (Arnold, 1869/2008, 25). Pupils should carry away worthwhile knowledge that has been ’interwoven in its parts’ (or integrated), that is ‘exact not hazy’ (or processed), ‘grasped and well understood’ in their ‘own thinking’ or personalised), and‘remembered’ (or internalised) (NSW Department of Public Instruction, 1911, 7–8).

The syllabus content (15–23) is remarkably brief by current standards. Knowledge and skills are designated as the foundation for the ‘private and public responsibilities of adult age’ (5), supported by two phenomenological pillars, use of the mother tongue and the study of literature. The ‘general aim’ of the syllabus was to develop the mind, fill it with high ideals and refine and ennoble character, by reading texts that provided information, that were the source of ‘higher pleasure’, that were a means of ‘knowing life’ and promoted ethical as well as literary values. The pedagogical imperative was shaped by the belief that only the arousal of ‘interest’ and the ‘creation’ of pleasure could lead students to such ‘ends’.

### Prescriptions: enjoyment and interest

The precedent of *prescribing* literary texts was established in the first iteration of the 1911 syllabus. They were selected for their capacity to provide information, values and knowledge about life and to serve as a vehicle for developing both reading and related writing skills. Historical scholarship has revealed that Board was unable to reverse the traditional influence of Sydney University in selecting texts as a preparation for English studies at a tertiary level (Brock, 1989). Nevertheless, novels were not approached from an academic or abstract perspective. They were understood as a ‘concrete vision’ of the author’s view of some phase of human life, while teachers were advised that always ‘story should be treated as story’, with emphasis on the ‘real and living interest’.

The pedagogical thrust of the syllabus has its source in the recommendation for students to keep Literature *Notebooks*, so that reading and writing enter into a dynamic and intimate relationship as students develop writing skills, record their own impressions, estimates of character, plot summaries and diagrams, and identify quotations of note and textual allusions to other works. In the senior years (Years 3 and 4), the contextual domain of the novels is enlarged; closer attention is paid to authors and the epochs in which their own lives are spent. In the final year students studied a comprehensive history of the development of literature, from the Saxon to the Romantic period (NSW Department of Public Instruction, 1911, 18–19).

Periodic reviews of Board’s reforms with English and English literature at the centre of secondary school education were conducted throughout the following five decades. In the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, amendments and adjustments reflect shifts in the way curriculum makers perceived the balance of the three components of the curriculum: literature, language and literacy (Green, 1990, 1999). The substance of the1911 syllabus remained relatively stable throughout the fifteen syllabus editions between 1911 and 1945, when an anomalous syllabus foregrounded Language in a highly prescriptive syllabus and reduced the Literature section to half a page of what has been described as ‘general and at times bland statements about literary study’ (Carter, 2012, 116).

The 1953 syllabus iteration returned to the substance and spirit of the Newbolt Report (Nay-Brock, 1984, 52–58). Surprisingly, the emphasis on integration of the different elements in the syllabus was not reflected in its bipartite structure, Language and Literature. Literature was put under the special care of the English teacher, with ‘emotion; and ‘fantasy’ given a special mention. ‘Thought’ was nominated as the foundation of the syllabus, the rules of grammar were promoted, and understanding the text was considered more important than personal response. But time was running out for a curriculum whose rhetoric reflected the cultural and educational environment of a fading era.

### The Wyndham Reform: a second milestone and a great adventure

The reforms undertaken by Harold Wyndham as Director General of Education in New South Wales initiated a great educational adventure, a term used by Garth Boomer (1977) to refer specifically to the ferment of democratic ideas about education throughout the period 1968–1972 (Green, Cormack, & Reid, 2000, 111). It is borrowed here to convey the sense of excitement generated as the educational project was reconceptualised: a way of serving rather than reproducing students in the context of a democratic society, as the focus shifted from the ‘social elite’ of the nineteenth century and the ‘scholarly elite’ of Board’s 1911–1912 reorganisation (Wyndham, 1957, 32), to deal with the increasing diversity of aptitudes and abilities at a time of rapid population expansion. An extra year was added to the secondary school curriculum, and the Leaving Certificate Examination was replaced by the Higher School Certificate (HSC) raising the stakes even higher with regard to standards and performance.

The *Report of the Committee Appointed to Survey Secondary Education in New South Wales* (Wyndham, 1957),acknowledged a growing community demand for more young people to reach the standard required to complete senior secondary education even if they did not wish to proceed to university. At the same time, the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales were to be ‘invited to accept a pass (of an approved pattern) at the Higher School Certificate Examination as meeting matriculation requirements’ (98). Ironically, although Wyndham, like Board, wished to thwart university intervention in the design and content of the English curriculum (Brock, 1989; Manuel & Brock, 2003), in reality, university influence was perpetuated by the role of tertiary institutions as major stakeholders in the Board of Senior School Studies, in which authority for courses for study and the issue of the Certificate were vested. The interventions distorted the intention to regulate the syllabus and had a ‘devastating impact’ on enrolments in the more challenging courses (Manuel & Brock, 2003, 17).

### Prescriptions

Literature is not venerated in Wyndham rhetoric as it was in the rhetoric of the Board and Newbolt documents. Spiritual development is linked instead to religious education and preparation for a worthwhile life. The pattern that emerged was, according to Rosser (2000) a ‘core’ of ‘enduring’ texts by ‘canonic’ authors, some of whom, like Jane Austen, had been prescribed in the progenitor syllabus, ‘re-cycled’ and ‘supplemented’ by new books and authors, mostly contemporary and/or Australian, described in a Foucauldian critique of the curriculum, as ‘peripheral’ (Rosser, 166).

The emergence of the thematically driven 2 Unit Contemporary HSC Syllabus in the 1980s came closer to Rosser’s criteria for the introduction of texts with a broader appeal to contemporary readers. However, it too was grounded in assumptions about the values and ‘cultural’ truths transmitted by a predominantly literature-based syllabus (Manuel & Brock, 2003, 20). Designed for students with less interest in or aptitude for English, it was less demanding than the courses called 2 Unit and 2 Unit General. Again the influence from the universities, through their presence on the Board of Senior Studies, led to a distortion of the original intention, and more able students retreated to the softer option (Manuel & Brock, 2003, 21).

### The Leavis influence: the ‘stretch of literature’

The influence of the literary scholar and critic, F. R. Leavis, parodied by his less admiring peers as‘the Messiah of Modernism’ (Watson, 1997, 227), pervades ideas about literature, reading and reading pedagogy at all levels of the Wyndham syllabus (Manuel & Brock, 2003, 18). Leavis encouraged critical thinking, contending however that as an ‘anti-philosopher’ his interest lay in the relationship between ‘thought, meaning and sensibility’ and the role they play in resolving ‘the problem of value judgment’ (Singh, 1986/2009, 285). It might be argued that teachers were ill equipped, ‘practically, theoretically and philosophically’ (Manuel & Brock, 2003, 24) for the task of reading in this way with their students. The harder course options especially were associated with Leavis; a contemporary distaste for F. R. Leavis and his literary assumptions and methods tends to denigrate his far-reaching influence on senior secondary literary studies, but there is little doubt that his passion for ‘the stretch of literature’ as ‘something waiting to be discovered and explored’ (Jacobson, 2011, 4) inspired a generation of readers and scholars.

The influential Challis Professor Sam Goldberg, appointed to the Chair of English at the University of Sydney at the very time of momentous change to the secondary school curriculum, was in fact an Oxonian and, as such, not taught by Leavis. However, in his contribution to the F. R. Leavis Special Issue produced by *The Cambridge Quarterly* (MacKillop, Bell, Ford, Gervais, Gomme, et al., 1996), a former Leavis student points out the similarities. John Wiltshire, who also pursued an academic career in Australia, describes the reformed approach as a ‘rigorous critical rather than academic approach to texts’ that blended ‘the moral intensity of Leavis with the technical apparatus of New Criticism’ (416). The potential disjuncture was predictable. Leavisite inflections of cultural discernment and good taste did not sit comfortably with the fundamentally democratised orientation of the Wyndham syllabus. It gave rise to a tension between a view that writers like Shakespeare and Austen are irrelevant to readers from a range of culturally diverse backgrounds, and an alternative view that all readers are entitled to the cultural capital and the humanistic insights associated with these ‘staples of any high school curriculum’ (Strauss, 2015, 2). Susan Sontag (1961/2009) was able to grasp the ‘utopian moment’ of her time (311), the egalitarian spirit of Western democracy that revitalised intellectual and cultural climates following the Second World War and to praise the rise of contemporary popular culture without ‘detracting from the glories’ of Aristotle and Shakespeare, which she ‘admired far more’. She asked: ‘Do I have to choose?’ (310). The incorporation of a wider range of literary experiences into the HSC curriculum was one way of responding to that rhetorical question.

Subsequent editions of the HSC senior curriculum remained relatively untouched by the radicalisation of ideas in the 1980s about schooling, literature and questions of taste about ‘who reads what and why’ (English, 2010, xi; cf. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1978/2000), cultural capital (Guillory, 1993) and literature as a textual phenomenon (Eagleton, 1983/2008). However the winds of change were gathering force in a tempest of ideas that challenged the values of liberal humanism and the moral authority of literature as a taken-for-granted feature of the educational landscape. Australian academics were actively involved in ‘the new intellectual and institutional configuration’ of sociology, culture and literature (English, 2010, vi). An escalating tension mounted between ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ in Wyndham’s traditional loyalty to a ‘canon’ of texts and an approach to criticism informed by a perception of Leavisite beliefs about literature as an influence that ‘may not make you better, but tells you what you are’ (Watson, 1997, 241). The problem, according to critics (Eagleton, 1985/6; Rosser, 2000, 2002) was that reading practices that ‘embraced and absorbed the text in order to reveal its connections with human experience’ (Patterson, 2000, 251) ignored the reality of a literature curriculum that was alien to the lives and interests of students.

### A third milestone: a reconceptualised and expanded syllabus, 1999

In 1994 the state Ministers of Education had voted against introducing a National Curriculum. It was agreed that each state would revise its own curriculum ‘along the lines of National Statements and Profiles that were completed in 1993…and *firmly grounded in critical theory’* (Durrant, 2005, 9; emphasis added). Curriculum ‘improvement’ has been aptly described as the ‘art of the practical’ underpinned by the ‘art of deliberation’, with progress from one stage to next, incremental rather than monumental (Schwab, 1983). The Review Committee charged to recommend curriculum reform options under the chairmanship of Professor Barry McGaw (1996) faced a challenging task.

Throughout the 1990s the need for changes to the content, structure and priorities of subject English had been debated in Australian curriculum scholarship (Goodson & Medway, 1990; Green & Beavis, 1996). The entire issue of *English in Australia*, 109(1994), the journal of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) had been devoted to the changing scene of literature and reading in the lead-up to the revision of the New South Wales syllabus. Interest was expressed in what the post-structuralist reading class would look like, whether it would be a ‘radical alternative or more of the same’ (Doecke, 1994, 6). The implications of current developments in literary theory for teaching practice were embedded in rather than articulated by overarching statements in the syllabus that emerged in 1999.The purpose of the Higher School Certificate Program of Study (Board of Studies, 1999, 5) was described as a preparation for education, employment and citizenship, in a context that values and encourages ‘intellectual, social and moral development’ and in an environment that fosters ‘physical and spiritual development’. The centrality of English to ‘the learning and development of students’ remained almost unchanged since 1911, predicated on its role as ‘the national language’ and as a catalyst for the refinement of students as ‘confident, articulate *communicators*, critical and imaginative *thinkers*, and *active participants* in society’ (6; emphasis added). The development of values, cognitive (*critical*) and affective (*imaginative, perspective*) faculties, and skills feature in the melange of statements that constitute the *Rationale* presented in the document.

Early expectations of the 1999 revision stressed the way that radical changes to the structure and focus of Stage 6 English would influence ‘what happens in the classroom’ (Department of Education and Training, 2000, 8). The concept of the English class as a space where ‘reading literature is what we did’ (Alsup, 2015, 181) is replaced in the English Stage 6 curriculum by a space in which students become ‘active participants in constructing meaning and developing their cognitive, aesthetic, imaginative and critical capacities through immersion in language and texts’ (Manuel & Carter, 2017a, 86). As ‘composers’, students are expected to develop their imaginative capacities; as ‘responders’, they are encouraged to approach ‘texts’ as an analytical exercise largely outside the realm of the imagination.

### Theoretical perspectives

The 1999 curriculum vocabulary is representative of a shift from the modernist Leavisite sensibility of the Wyndham era. The word *texts* covers a broad range of possibilities among different modes of writing, of which literary texts is one. Students are referred to as *composers* and *responders*, indicating more differentiated roles for reading and writing pedagogies. The idea of *meaning* is prioritised and transformed, exchanging notions of richness, complexity, even perplexity, for historicity and instability (Eagleton, 1983/2008, 54). The concept of literacy, as critical literacy, is extended well beyond traditional notions of vocabulary, syntax, reading and writing, to suggest a development of high-order competence in social, aesthetic, literacy and arguably political domains.

Ideas about *communication* and the implications associated with the notion of students as ‘active participants in society’ (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, 6)) not only shift the goalposts of subject English, they reconstruct them from different materials. Statements about the plurality of perspective and the imperative for cultural diversity that appear in the curriculum *Rationale* (6) are associated implicitly with post-structural orientations to texts, paving the way for exploration of intertextual relationships that highlight the way meaning can be influenced by the impact of one point of view on another. The currency of critical literacy in the way reading practices were formulated increased in value as a catalyst for social action (Janks, 2012; Luke, 2000, 2012). It was argued that the concept served the curriculum agenda to encourage students ‘to take their place…as active participants in society’ (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, 6), by developing their understanding of how ‘the role of language, text and discourse’ maintains ‘social orders that create disparity’ (Janks, 2014, 349).

Sifting through the statements inscribed in the *Rationale,* we can identify those that might be associated with postmodern ideas: the literary experience as a critical approach to all texts and an ability to identify qualities of *all* texts, form, content, purpose and audience. Aesthetic literacy and appreciation of aesthetic values are modernist preoccupations, while appreciation of the role of contexts in shaping reading and learning is comfortably accommodated by both frameworks. The rhetorical statements are synthesised and amplified in the *Aim* and *The Study of English* (Board of Studies, 1999, 7) as the use, enjoyment and value of the English language in ways that ‘make explicit the language forms and process of meaning’.

The most powerful statement in the curriculum document is possibly the briefest: ‘Meaningis central to the study of English’ (7). It resonates with philosophical and theoretical leanings to a changed relationship between language and literature, one that transformed the critical act from a quest for meaning in literary texts to an examination of how meaning is made and re-made by any and all texts. It is the very opposite of what is implied in Anthony Kronman’s deliberately ambiguous lament for the ‘meaning of life’ as an end to the educational project (Kronman, 2007).

### Prose fiction

The classroom approach to prose fiction is influenced by post-structuralist ideas about ‘texts’ throughout the curriculum documents (Board of Studies, 1999), and of ‘intertextuality’ as a focus for study in one of the mandated modules (36). The conceptualisation of literary texts as a source of consciousness, experience, wisdom and story located in in ‘an isolated literary text’ (Frow, 1990, 45), is replaced by ‘a more general and often quite unconscious and deep seated structure of ideas that has something to do with the maintenance of power of various kinds in society’ (Freadman, 1984, 34). The amended curriculum vocabulary that articulated what was new to the study of English was exciting, possibly subversively so, to those who viewed English as ‘a discipline that purports to be outside politics [and that] in practice reproduces a very specific political position (Belsey, 1989, 159).

From this perspective, the nature, role and very purpose of reading differed significantly in the 1999 syllabus. Students were no longer invited to read a story as a story with a full measure of enjoyment and interest as they were by the 1911 syllabus. They were not required to provide a personal interpretation of the text, albeit less concerned with the pleasure of reading, but with an emphasis on ‘independent, responsible exercise of intelligence and judgment’ (Goldberg, 1966, 110).

### The syllabus in action

The curriculum document for the 1999 syllabus is not only much more voluminous than those for previous milestones, it is dramatically more prescriptive. It covers rationale and aims, structure, detailed learning objectives broken down into outcomes, as well as content, and detailed coverage of the modules by means of which learning experiences and examination requirements are structured. But the most significant feature of the syllabus is the shift from modernist to postmodernist orientations to culture and literature. Where once culture deferred to literature, the reverse was now the case. Some teachers found it difficult to make the transition to the 1999 language-based curriculum, due partly to lack of clarity about the informing theories (Manuel, 2002).

The curriculum neglected to articulate how the nature and complexity of postmodernity and the postmodern period and the way it perceived the narratives of modernity (Eagleton, 1983/2008, 200–204) problematised the nature of ‘literature’, when studied as a pre-constituted category that ‘underwrites’ or ‘authorises’ readings and invites contestation (Green & O’Neill, 2014, 44). There was also a lack of clarity about the extent to which the sceptical sensibility associated with post-structuralism should influence the pedagogy of reading. Advocacy for a more sceptical approach to literature (cf. Michaels & Gold, 2006) conflicted with teachers’ perceptions of what counted as literature, provoking correctives that restored a less theoretically correct perspective to how literary texts should be read (Ireland, O’Sullivan, & Duchesne, 2017, 55-64). In the paradigm shift to beliefs about ‘textual power’ (Scholes, 1985, cited in Green, 2008, 40) and intertextuality, culturally critical readings and critical literacy have been, predictably, a source of persistent debate within English curriculum literature, (cf. Durrant, 2005; Janks, 2012, 2014; Luke, 2000; Misson & Morgan, 2005, 2006), but ironically, according to Alex Kruse (2008), this ‘radical’ shift took place at a time when the golden age of cultural theory associated with the postmodern period was ‘long past’ (Eagleton, 2003, 1).

The HSC English syllabus of 2015 seals the final phase of the 1999 revision. Examination and analysis of responses required of students in their HSC examination papers reveal the degree to which the theoretical underpinnings of the 1999 curriculum are embodied in the framework and focus of questions to which students are expected to respond as ‘critical and imaginative thinkers’ (Board of Studies NSW, 1999, 6). As Golsby-Smith (2011), an experienced and practising teacher, points out wistfully, reading the syllabus tends to be more significant to some astute students than reading the texts it prescribes for study. High stakes examinations were party responsible for this attitude.

The first paper that HSC students are required to tackle is constructed around an *area of study* whose focus is a concept drawn from every day experience.Students are asked to address and respond to the idea of ‘discovery’ and ‘how it circulates in society’ as ‘a powerful discourse’ that ‘has a range of meanings’. They are presented with a range of *texts* that in themselves provide different *contexts* and perspectives, audiences and purposes(Dixon, Murphy & Alrawi, 2015, 29). The three modules that constitute the substance of the second paper are a challenging blend of close reading and critical literacy. In the Advanced modules in particular, the ‘great tradition’ (Leavis, 1948/1972) persists in the inclusion of a ‘sturdy representation of what may be called classic and complex contemporary texts’ (Manuel & Brock, 2003, 22). Close reading in the best Leavisite tradition is called for if the requirements articulated in the objectives and outcomes are to have any traction in students’ responses.

The most challenging innovations to the 1999 syllabus are embodied in the key ideas explored in the modules. Intertextuality, critical literacy and ideas about representation and truth are pervasive. While teachers were advised to engage students ‘ethically’ (Michaels & Gold, 2006, 90–99), the salient issue for many teachers was ‘how the aesthetic works with the social and political’ (Morgan & Misson, 2005, 18), an ‘anxiety’ provoked by the high profile of critical literacy in the updated theoretical framework. Although by this time challenges to the role of canonic texts in the cultivation of literary tastes and a movement ‘along the lines of Cultural Studies’ were widely accepted, nostalgia for the imaginative and aesthetic dimensions of literature persisted alongside a determination that Literature should not re-claim its traditional elitist status.

### Toward a national curriculum

As the focus shifted to the first and second decades of the twenty-first century, ‘a feeling of ‘crisis’ generated by reform initiatives that were ‘ideological and discursive in nature’ (Green, 2002, 57) can be detected in the general tenor of discourse. In the process of pulling together diverse and sometimes contradictory theories about literature, it was difficult for some teachers to reconcile them with normative ideas about literature and reading practices that reflected their view of the world and were embedded in the 1999 curriculum from the past (cf. Manuel & Carter, 2017a), let alone to integrate them into the ideal of a coherent curriculum’ (cf. Eisner, 1979, 42–48). It was in this unsettled ethos around HSC English, which had been four years in the planning and was then in only its sixth year of implementation, that the process of designing a ‘newly formalised national curriculum’ (Green, 2008), to renew ‘the project of English’ (35), was undertaken. An opportunity to respond to the *Statements of Belief* published by the Australian Association of Teachers of English (AATE) resulted in a chorus of concerns about the future of literary study. Wendy Morgan probably spoke for many in the profession when she congratulated the professional body for having the courage to produce a manifesto (Morgan, 2007, 34). She identified the dominant discourse as ‘traditional humanism’, commenting that the statement revealed ‘signs of a struggle between older and newer views of the nature and purpose of literature and the work of readers’ (34). Her words were not only discerning of the present but prophetic of future negotiations over what and how to read.

### Developing the Australian Curriculum: English (AC:E)

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was established in 2008 to ensure that all young Australians are provided with the skills, knowledge, understanding and capabilities specified as a means of achieving excellence and equity articulated in the *Melbourne Declaration* (MCEETYA, 2008). These are set out in the *Preamble* to *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* (National Curriculum Board, 2009a, 4) and establish informally the criteria for evaluating the success of the educational project. Among implicit challenges with regard to literature and reading in the senior secondary English syllabus was a requirement to develop a world class curriculum oriented to the knowledge, understanding and skills that would achieve the national goals of both equity and excellence.

A protracted process of formulation, negotiation, and consultation was initiated early in 2008 (Dixon, 2012, 19; cf. Thomson, 2008). It was commenced by the interim National Curriculum Board (NCB) and carried through to completion by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA), with a Shaping Paper to guide the writing (National Curriculum Board, 2009a) and a Framing Paper (National Curriculum Board, 2009b) to establish the principles and structure of a national curriculum organised around the three strands of Language, Literacy and Literature. Responding to media demands for a ‘strong’ national curriculum to address, by implication, the failure of existing curriculum approaches by restoring English to its proper status, the President of the Australian Association of Teachers of English (AATE) suggested *textuality* as an alternative organising principle to incorporate the three elements, language, literature and literacy (Howie, 2009, 1-4).

Although this proposal gained no traction, reconciliation of sorts came from another quarter, with the declared intention to identify ‘the structure, scope and content of a national curriculum that both looks to the subject’s future and acknowledges its past’ (Howie, 2009, 4). Dixon’s account of professional negotiations and consultations (Dixon, 2012) reports on the healing of ‘key fracture lines’ between definitions of literature and text, and of literary criticism and critical literacy (21). While, however, conservative reviewers of the national curriculum (Donnelly, 2014; Spurr, 2014) raised the spectre of the culture wars in educational discourse, they in turn were accused of a ‘staggering lack of engagement with empirical research’ (Facchinetti, 2015, 29) and of framing English ideologically as a liberal subject in the traditional and comprehensive sense, without authentic engagement with any of the *ideas* that inform the rationale for teaching literature.

### A narrowed vision

As consultant to the national curriculum process from its beginning in 2008, Robert Dixon reported on some of the differences that emerged between school and university teachers during the consultation period (Dixon, 2012, 19). He commented on ‘just how far apart academic and school English have grown’ (20). In the context of the historical record this should be seen as the result of a hard-fought campaign that goes back to the days of Peter Board and distorted the intentions of curriculum planners in the Wyndham era (Manuel & Brock, 2003, 16–17; cf. Brock, 1989). Strenuous resistance to attempts to introduce ‘specialised literature courses’ in senior secondary school to ‘connect more directly’ with University level literary study might be seen as a new phase in the same power struggle. Dixon emphasises the good will around the negotiating table aimed at reaching a consensus (Dixon, 2012, 23).

In their response to the proposed national curriculum, representatives of the English teaching body in New South Wales had made their position clear on a number of issues early in the consultation process. They objected strongly to the ‘narrow vision’ that informed the four proposed courses (ETA, 2010, 6). The course rationales were perceived to neglect the philosophic underpinnings and the implications for pedagogy ((ETA, 5). Integration of literature into a comprehensive study of English was recommended and the idea of a course devoted exclusively to literature was rejected (ETA, 7). The courses were considered less able to address the diversity of needs, abilities and interests of English students in New South Wales than the existing package. While members of the teaching profession commended the Literature course for its ideological orientation to humanism, they were concerned that the emphasis on the imagination might be taken to mean that priority be given to fiction (ETA, 7). Issues around a possible return to Arnold’s cultural heritage model were raised together with the problematic nature of aesthetic qualities of literary texts. What, it was asked, is the precise meaning of the pursuit of ‘pleasure and enrichment’, what are the implications for reading practices? (ETA, 2010, 8). It was proposed that NSW retain existing courses with some revision to content and assessment practices; and retain also existing preferences for a recursive model of learning and opportunities for high-order thinking, unlike the linear model and reduced reflective opportunities provided, it was argued, by the Australian curriculum.

### NESA (2017): a fourth milestone

The NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) replaced the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW (BOSTES) on 1 January, 2017. Each state has implemented its own curriculum syllabus, revised with reference to the aims, content and priorities of the national curriculum. The post-national curriculum syllabus for English senior secondary studies relevant to the study of Jane Austen’s fiction was released in 2017 for implementation in New South Wales classrooms in 2018 and assigned for HSC examination in 2019. It was again designated *English Advanced Stage 6 Syllabus* (NESA, 2017c), following consultation and endorsed as such by NESA. A consultation program of meetings and feedbacks took place during 2016, and analysis of consultation and revisions to the draft syllabus was conducted during the following year. The executive summary of the *English Advanced Stage 6 Draft Syllabus Consultation Report* (NESA, 2017b, 2) advocated for higher levels of challenge, breadth and depth of textual study, and a ‘clearer continuum of learning from English Advanced and the [highly specialised] Extension courses’ (2). The Advanced Stage 6 Syllabus (NESA, 2017c) is clearly positioned as the closest, but not identical, course to the Literature subject in the national curriculum.

In a succession of brief statements the *Introduction* to the Stage 6 Curriculum (NESA, 2017c, 4) summarises the purpose of the curriculum and what it reflects, provides, includes and supports. Specific mention is made of the inclusion of content from the Australian curriculum, the need to focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects, and ‘a standards-referenced approach to assessment and certification’. Included are idealistic ideas about personal growth and practical ideas about preparation for the workforce; how young people might be prepared for future life with the resources they need for self-development, self-respect and self-regulation as well as the skills required to function in the twenty-first century world of work. Overall the introduction provides a sense of balance in which standards of different kinds apply to personal development and learning performance.

### Learning across the curriculum

A section on ‘learning across the curriculum’ (NESA, 2017c, 24–28) elaborates on the mandating of general capabilities, an initiative of the national curriculum. In the early stages of national curriculum development, a warning was given that the capabilities might be ‘little more than an updated version of the key competencies’ (Reid, 2009, 15). However, the proposal received a favourable response, as noted earlier, from the English Teachers Association (ETA, 2010, 1). Of the ten general capabilities listed (24), ‘critical and creative thinking’, ‘ethical understanding’, ‘personal and social capabilities’, ‘difference and diversity’, and ‘civics and citizenship’ resonate strongly with a resurgence of humanities and the arts that is implicit in the revision. Echoes of the intellectual imagination of philosopher and literary scholar, Martha Nussbaum, can be heard more than faintly in the accommodation of general capabilities in the revised NSW syllabus. Nussbaum’s celebration of literature (Nussbaum, 1990), the cultivation of humanity (1997), her championing of education as a principle in the development of civic sensibilities and a democratic society (2010a), and her own list of capabilities (2010)support each other to provide a rationale for developing the qualities and faculties advocated in the learning across the curriculum content of the Stage 6 English syllabus.

Nussbaum’s conceptual framework for the capabilities required by twenty-first century citizens shares the commitment to equity and universal human dignity expounded in the *Melbourne Declaration*. In an address presented at the University of Chicago Law School’s Best Ideas lecture series (Nussbaum, 2010b), her discussion of the creation of capabilities and their role in human development (cf. Nussbaum 1997, 2002) resonates with those advocated in the 2017 school curriculum. Engagement, self-sufficiency and civic mindedness are qualities that are, she suggests, underwritten by three faculties: critical thinking that embraces reflection, especially self-reflection and the examination of the lived life; curiosity about others in the framework of global citizenship, plurality and inequality; and empathy, as the capacity to imagine what it would be like to be someone else as the foundation of a moral life.

### Rationale for English in Stage 6 Curriculum

The rationale of the revised syllabus (NESA, 2017c, 9) once again acknowledges the mandatory status of English in the school curriculum, but a significant change is revealed in a subtle but instructive shift in vocabulary. In keeping with theoretical commitments to notions of textuality in the 1999 Stage 6 syllabus, the *word* ‘literature’ disappeared. That it reappears in 2017 is suggestive of a shift, not necessarily back to the past, but to a refreshed understanding of how literature can play a role in connecting readers with the present and the ‘ever-widening contexts’ of the future (9). The phrase ‘quality literature of past and present societies’ in the fourth paragraph is a gesture of friendship from the textual world, pointing again to a reorientation in the conceptualisation of how books might be read.

A second significant change emerges when the content prescribed for developing general capabilities across the curriculum (NESA 2017c, 24–28) is contextualised in the syllabus rhetoric (NESA 2017c, 9). Associations can be detected among the different elements: ‘personal and social capabilities’, for example, are congruent with ideas about the relational nature of language in the syllabus rationale (9); capabilities in the area of civics and citizenship enhance the possibilities of forming active and informed participants in Australian society. Ethical understanding and respect for difference and diversity (25) can be nurtured by exposure to unfamiliar literary heritages.

Aspects of the revised *Rationale* that orient it ‘toward the familiar territory of the humanities’ (Holbrook, 2013) might be invigorated and refreshed by new theoretical insights that draw together the affective and the cognitive aspects of reading in ways that connect dynamically with the prescribed capabilities: empathic intelligence (Arnold, 2005), empathy and fiction (Keen, 2007/2010); fiction and attachment (Felski, 2020), the ethical and civic responsibilities of education (Nusssbaum, 2010a), and the ways in which research in psychology (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Oatley, Marr & Djicik, 2013), cognitive literary studies (Zunshine, 2015) and especially theory of mind and the way it interacts with literature as an aid to human communication and what goes on in other people’s heads (Jaen and Simon, 2012/2013; Leverage, Mancing, Schweickert & William, 2011). This body of scholarship offers an approach to reading in which the qualities associated with enjoyment, empathy, creativity, the imagination and social relationships bridge a gap between narrative and everyday life. Ideas about the contribution of empathy to questions of human rights (cf. Hunt, 2007/2008, 35–69) and of fiction to the development of empathy (Keen, 2007/2010) are central to the value Nussbaum ascribes to novels themselves.

### Rationale for English Advanced (NESA, 2017b)

The Advanced course *Rationale* was revised on consultation to reflect the required level of ‘rigour’ and to include ‘a greater focus on literature’ (NESA, 2017c, 7). It introduces vocabulary and phrases that imply richness, complexity and challenge in a course that situates Jane Austen’s fiction at this level of literary study. The tone of the revised rationale is optimistic. It suggests a nexus between enjoyment and literature, of ‘experiences, ideas and emotions’, of ‘complex and evocative ideas’ (NESA, 2017c, 10). The rhetoric here, like that of the national curriculum is inflected with the nuances of the humanities unconstrained by the parameters of discourses oriented to ‘the ideological implications of particular texts’ as the measure of ‘students’ awareness’ (Rosser, 2002, 92). Although the syllabus avoids nostalgia for the past days of ‘canonical hegemony’ (Ince, 1992, 264), the brief opening paragraph of the *Rationale* for the Advanced syllabus (NESA, 2017c) evokes the humanities and the arts:

In the English Advanced course, students continue to explore opportunities that are offered by challenging texts to investigate complex and evocative ideas, to evaluate, emulate and employ powerful, creative and sophisticated ways to use language to make meaning, and to find enjoyment in literature (10)

The priority of reading texts ‘through particular ideologies’ claimed for the 1999 syllabus (Rosser, 2002, 92) seems no longer applicable. Students are invited to ‘make’ meaning from their texts rather than to search for the way it is disguised within texts. A crucial difference lies in the balance of critical and the imaginative, the latter linked in the revised syllabus to the ‘understanding of literary expression’ and nurturing of ‘aesthetic values’. While students are encouraged to ‘broaden their capacity for cultural understanding’ (NESA, 2017c, 10), the critical edge of ‘critical literacy’ as defined by Luke (2000) and Janks (2010, 2012, 2014) has been dulled. The syllabus *Glossary* provides a sense, and only a sense, of theoretical orientation (NESA, 2017c, 56–87). There is a suggestion of restrained deference to the sensitivities of the culture wars, perhaps unconscious, in the way terms like ‘critical’, ‘culture’, ‘cultural assumptions’ and ‘cultural expression’ are defined in the *Glossary*.

### The Modules

The revised HSC syllabus retains the modular structure introduced in 1999. As a syllabus model it provides varying levels of challenge in conceptually similar units of learning for students of varying levels of ability. Modules lay out statements or rubrics, as a framework of instructions to guide teachers’ orientation to the study of texts, students’ understanding of how to respond to texts, and HSC examiners’ priorities in evaluating students’ examination answers. The modules, collectively, inhabit the broad canvas on which subject English composes its vision of how texts play a role in the education of students about to embark on adult life in a globalised world.

The common module in the revised syllabus *Prescriptions* (NESA, 2017a, 10–11) focuses on deepening understandings of ‘how texts represent individual and collective experiences’ (10). It is essentially experiential, immersing students in personal and textual perspectives on human experience, representing a significant shift from the conceptual and fundamentally abstract focus of the common module in the 1999 syllabus and its subsequent iterations. As the foundation for the rest of the course, the common module offers students one prescribed text and a number of short texts as a basis for asking questions and seeking answers about human experiences drawn from students’ understanding of what is in texts, how they work, the contexts in which they are written, how they define human experience, how they affect us personally and how the world is represented in the text.

In the common module students are ‘educated’ in the ways in which style or language choices are integral to the ‘representation’ embodied in the text. They learn to value texts for how they *communicate* with readers, how they *call* readers to see the world differently, and *connect* readers with a wider world. These are ultimately the preoccupations of humanism, a pursuit of ‘understanding’ that embraces the concept of ‘meaning’ as variable, plural and amenable to Socratic examination.

Modules A *and* B amplify the common module’s core concern with the representation of human experience. Each of these modules re-contextualises prescribed and additional texts in theoretically distinctive, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, orientations to textual study. They address themes similar to those of Modules A and B in the pre-national curriculum syllabus, but they re-orient the focus in ways that reflect the influence of the national curriculum and the incorporation of its cross-curriculum themes and capabilities. Module C addresses the issue of writing in senior secondary English, and the need for pedagogies that approach writing as a craft to be understood, practised and learned.

Module A, ‘Textual Conversations’(NESA, 2017a, 17–18), aims to teach students how to identify ‘resonances and dissonances between and within texts’, and the way in which various language concepts, including intertextuality, can ‘connect and distinguish texts in ways that shape new meaning’. In Module A this approach invites the insights of post-structural intertextuality. However, in this module, the imperative of rigorous intertextual analysis to reveal significant codes and ideological orientations (cf. Frow, 1990), is mediated by an approach that is exploratory rather than interrogatory. The syllabus module encourages a response that is creative as well as critical, and emphasises the excitement of discovering the ways in which conscious and unconscious influences of other texts shape the meaning of the texts they read as well as those they compose.

Advanced Module B (NESA, 2017a, 19–20), *Critical Study of Literature*, transports the student reader into Leavisite territory, especially that of close reading. It pays attention to aesthetic dimensions of language, textual integrity and qualities, and complexity of ideas. Students are offered a choice of prescribed texts for the period 2019–2023 (NESA, 2017a, 19–20) from among: literary novels (including Austen’s *Emma*), poetry, drama, Shakespearean drama, non-fiction written by writers of high calibre, and documentary films. Selecting one prescribed text, students develop their personal ‘rich interpretation’ from their reading and research into the way creative language is used, into purpose, audience and context and into ‘perspectives of others’, basing their readings and carefully crafted written responses on close attention to and analysis of its ‘textual forms and features’. The module observes the Leavisite tradition of ‘astute close reading’ that should encourage students to ‘slow down’, linger over phrases, consider sentence structure and attend to the ‘texture of the writing’ (Reid, 2013, 69).

Module C (NESA, 2017a, 21–22) is possibly the most innovative revision to the HSC syllabus. Students are represented as ‘accomplished writers’ rather than composers. They are encouraged to study quality texts as a model for their own writing. A subtle pedagogical shift brings a sense of freshness and immediacy to the act of writing by appealing to their developing understanding of language and its diverse purposes and moods. ‘The Craft of Writing’ (NESA, 2017a, 21–22) treats writing as a skill that requires explicit attention in the syllabus, implicitly acknowledging the salient role it plays in assessment and the examination processes.

In Module C, students examine how others write in order to ‘reflect on the complex and recursive processes of writing’ as they study, emulate and master the skills required to produce ‘their own sustained and cohesive compositions’, resembling the approach taken by Peter Board in the inaugural syllabus. Drafting, revising and experimenting are now incorporated into the syllabus as dynamic learning experiences, practical rather than hypothetical. Imaginative writing and the way it is assessed has always been a problematical area in the senior secondary syllabus (Dove, 2018, 61–69). Arnold’s (1991) pioneering work on writing development, designated in her title as magic in the brain, has been more influential in the junior syllabus where ‘cognitive criteria for assessment’ is less in demand.

Arnold’s (1991) work captures the potential of developed writing skills to empower students in the phrase she uses in her title: writing as magic in the brain. Writing thus assumes a larger presence in the 2017 revision, connecting with and a reminder of Rosenblatt’s theoretical position on the reading-writing transaction. Like readers, writers draw on prior experience although only the writer faces a blank page (Rosenblatt, 2005, 17). The new approach indicated by the writing rubric in Module C is suggestive of greater awareness of the bond that can be encouraged between reading and writing by providing opportunities to make reading part of the prior experience that students can bring to their writing endeavours. It is exciting to consider how this implicit acknowledgement of a relational reading and writing dynamic might inspire a pedagogical shift that benefits writing and at the same time addresses the perpetually challenging question of reading response.

### Conclusion

Although at first sight the 2017 revised curriculum appears to replicate the major reform in 1999, there is a subtle but distinctive difference in language and tone, and in the focus of the modules. The implications of critical theory and cultural studies in their politically emancipatory mode seem to have been modified in the revised syllabus, while fundamental theoretical shifts about texts, textuality and representation now appear in normative and uncontroversial guise. The nature of subject English was, and remains, fundamentally changed by the reconceptualisation of the 1999 syllabus. At the same time the nuances of humanism modulate this curriculum rhetoric in ways that differentiate it from the 1999 syllabus iterations.

In treating texts as representations of human experience and stories as the lifeblood of the national language, the Advanced English Stage 6 syllabus illustrates the difference. Perhaps it operates as the canary in the curriculum, testing the possibility that the study of English might encourage the formation of lifelong readers by anchoring their reading experiences in the spirit of humanistic inquiry. The complexity, contradictions and conundrums that fascinate and perplex curious human beings have a strong presence in this syllabus. The rhetoric and the modules demonstrate the rapprochement achieved between past and present in the development of English curriculum in New South Wales. It is puzzling however that there is no acknowledgement of the possibilities offered by a vibrant field of twenty-first century research that pays attention to fiction and reading. It is equally puzzling that the lack of philosophic underpinnings and implications for pedagogy detected in the national curriculum rationale has not been addressed in the NESA syllabus. The trans-disciplinary field of literary cognitive study (Zunshine, 2015), the renewed attention to affective and ethical dimensions of reading (Nussbaum, 1999, 2010a), the theory of mind (Kidd & Castano, 2013) and ideas about literary attachment (Felski, 2020) should not be ignored; they renew interest in and optimism about the influence of reading and the significance of reading pedagogy. It may be that the most significant aspect of this curriculum, from the perspective of reading and the novels of Jane Austen, is the list of capabilities that have not, as yet, received the attention they deserve.

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