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Jane Austen Weekly: Elizabeth Bennet's Brain Scan

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A few days ago my husband woke me by yelling, "They are talking about that Jane Austen brain thing on NPR!"

Last week, I wrote about "that Jane Austen brain thing" -- a study at the Stanford Center for Cognitive and Neurobiological Imaging (CNI) which has been using fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) to track the blood flow in the brains of people reading *Mansfield Park*.

When I dragged myself to the radio, I did not like what I heard. According to the NPR broadcast, the CNI study showed that kids should "turn off those iPhones, turn off those iPads, turn off the television" to become "completely immersed" in a book.

By all means, turn them off. But that wasn't the Stanford researchers' point.

I love NPR! And unlike Mitt Romney, I promise to renew my membership. But I also feel compelled to clarify the research. (For the record, the NPR Health Blog is more accurate).

The CNI's study specifically distinguishes between *pleasure reading* and *close reading*. I called Natalie Phillips, the Assistant Professor of English at Michigan State University who is co-directing the research, and asked how she defined these terms.

She told me that the subjects in the fMRIs were instructed to read certain Austen excerpts "as you normally would, when reading for pleasure, as though you just picked up this book off the bookshelf, and are reading in your favorite place" (an admittedly humorous requirement for someone inside an fMRI).

On other select excerpts, subjects were told to perform "a close reading for literary analysis... Pay attention to how the story's structure is constructed, or crafted, noticing literary details such as setting, narration, tone and characterization. Focus on literary themes and patterns, word choice, syntax and the order in which sentences and ideas unfold."

This is a classic definition of close reading, exactly what I want my Fordham students to learn how to do.

And it is *this* kind of reading that seems to generate the most impressive brain scans in the study. Pleasure reading and close reading both activate the brain, but preliminary results suggest that close reading creates more global activation, stretching far beyond those regions typically associated with attention; in one example, the brain's blood flow even reached into areas for physical activity. As I wrote in last week's blog post, close reading may literally be "fuel for thought, a crucial mechanism of neurological development and expansion."

Austen stars in the CNI study precisely because her novels fit both the pleasure reading and the close reading categories. As countless fans around the world will testify -- some probably dressed up as Austen characters this very moment -- her books produce a lot of pleasure. (Why some men do not appreciate this is a subject for another post.) As literature teachers will testify, they are also ideal sources of close reading.

This week my Fordham class turned to *Pride and Prejudice*, which has to be Austen's most pleasurable novel. Austen feared it was "too light and bright and sparkling." But she still called Elizabeth Bennet "the most delightful a creature as ever appeared in print." Several of my students gushed about the book. So did a very old woman who asked me to walk her home from a bus stop many years ago. The walk was short but she was slow and I learned a lot about her -- that she had no children, that her husband was long dead, that she had escaped the Holocaust, and that *Pride and Prejudice* had a permanent place on her bedside table. Nothing else could cheer her up on those dark and lonely nights.

I understand that feeling. I too love *Pride and Prejudice* and remember when its pleasures have consoled me.

But close reading is a different experience, though it, too, can be pleasurable. To appreciate the difference, let's turn to the scene where Elizabeth Bennet is herself busy reading. Darcy has just handed her a letter. The day before, she rejected his marriage proposal and accused him of harming both Mr. Wickham and her sister. The letter contains Darcy's self-defense.

The first time she reads the letter, Elizabeth peruses it "with an eagerness" and "impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring" (it almost sounds like pleasure reading). When she reviews the letter the second time, Elizabeth is more careful,

"command[ing] herself so far as to examine the meaning of every sentence." She reads again and again "with the closest attention," dwelling on particular details, comparing them with her own memories of past events.

Then, the "order in which [the novel's] sentences and ideas unfold" (as the CNI study puts it) takes an extraordinary turn. Elizabeth's own mind begins to unfold like a book. She searches her intellectual contents as if flipping back to an earlier page. She tries "to recollect some instance of goodness" in Mr. Wickham; she recalls their previous conversations, "many of his expressions," like literary excerpts, "still fresh in her memory." But now, Elizabeth sees what the CNI study asked of its subjects -- the details, themes and patterns that close reading and re-reading afford. "How differently did every thing now appear." She realizes that Mr. Wickham is a liar. More importantly, she realizes that she was blinded by vanity and resentment. "Till this moment," Elizabeth Bennet famously declares, "I never knew myself."

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the reward for the kind of meticulous critical scrutiny the CNI study supports is self-consciousness, intellectual expansion and moral growth. Long before the invention of fMRIs, Jane Austen knew that close reading was good for the brain... and for the soul.

In this day when colleges and universities are being corporatized, when the humanities are under fire, and when English Departments around the country are required to "assess" their learning "objectives" and "outcomes," we need to remember this immeasurable ideal.