

JANE AUSTEN AND THE
ENLIGHTENMENT

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For Barbara

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sets out to construct the meaning that the novels had in their original context, and pursues her findings regardless of whether or not they are attractive to contemporary readers, as when she warns that Austen's morality is 'preconceived and inflexible', and 'of a type that may be antipathetic to the modern layman'.³ This is not usually the case with gender-centred studies of Austen, which tend to concentrate on the significance that the novels have for the present.⁴ And while many writers in this tradition have managed to combine relevance with sophisticated historical insight, such readings – being of an essentially different order – almost invariably sidestep rather than interlock with Butler's, so that battle over the war of ideas has seldom been joined.⁵ In consequence the Anti-Jacobin Austen is still very much at large, not only among those who have built on Butler's work but also among those who, writing from a different perspective, have tried to integrate her thesis within a postmodernist account, one recent critic deferring to the 'Tory feminism', and 'counter-revolutionary' plotting of *Mansfield Park* while describing the novel itself as 'an evangelical sermon'.⁶ A further reason for Butler's prevalence is that her work is rooted in a tradition that was fully conversant with formalism and with textual analysis. Subsequent attempts to question the view of Jane Austen as a Tory reactionary have often had to draw on a more limited – and less demonstrative – range of critical methods.⁷ While it is true that the most vivid and finely focused of recent accounts of Jane Austen have implicitly opposed the Butlerian thesis, they have done so without providing a rebuttal. The time is ripe, then, for a

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 298, 296. I am indebted here to Alistair M. Duckworth's thought-provoking essay, 'Jane Austen and the Conflict of Interpretations' in Janet Todd's anthology, *Jane Austen: New Perspectives* (1983), pp. 39–52. For a valuable review of feminist critics of the eighties see the opening pages of Janet Todd's 'Jane Austen, Politics and Sensibility', in Susan Sellers, ed., *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice* (Hemel Hempstead, 1991), pp. 71–87.

⁴ Highly influential in this category is Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago, 1984). Particularly sensitive to textual nuance and period concerns is Margaret Kirkham's *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction* (1983, rev. edn 1996).

⁵ The most important exceptions here are Claudia L. Johnson's two pioneering books, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago, 1988) and *Equivocal Beings* (Chicago, 1995), and Mary Waldron's *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time* (Cambridge, 1999), but this last excellent study touches only incidentally on Austen's thought and politics.

⁶ Clara Tuite, 'Domestic Retrenchment and Imperial Expansion: the Proper Plots of *Mansfield Park*', in You-me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, eds., *The Postcolonial Jane Austen* (2000), pp. 96, 99, 102. The same line is adopted in her *Romantic Austen* (Cambridge, 2002), despite the retrieval of sensibility there.

⁷ Nancy Armstrong in her study of early eighteenth-century fiction compellingly argues, in passing, that Austen, rather than being seen as a Tory or as a member of the landed gentry, should be approached as a linguistic identity that voices 'a middle class aristocracy'. See *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 159–60. Butler's thesis is implicitly opposed by Roger Gard in a series of commonsensical and subtle readings in *Jane Austen's Novels: The Art of Clarity* (1992).

study that confronts Butler's more squarely, and more on its own terms – a rash undertaking were it not for the many critical contributions of the last decades that yield some higher ground.

My brief in this book is that Jane Austen is a writer of centrist views who derives in large measure from the Enlightenment, more particularly from that sceptical tradition within it that flourished in England and Scotland during the second half of the eighteenth century. This tradition stands at some remove from the popular conception of the movement as a whole. While celebrating reason, scientific method, and social reform, the Anglo-Scottish school dwelt on the irrationality of human nature, tempered the optimism of the *philosophes* with an emphasis on the limits of individual heroism, and instilled a distrust of dirigism and of the doctrinaire. Less militant than its French counterpart, the sceptical Enlightenment nurtured a particular dislike of civil faction and of the bigotry that went with it, and this relaxed spirit of partisanship made it accessible to many institutions and intellectual cults of the age. We shall see how deeply the ideas of writers like David Hume and Adam Smith penetrated movements as diverse in tone and mode as the picturesque and the Evangelical revival. But of particular significance here, is the openness of the contemporary Anglican church to the Enlightenment, for it is precisely the assumption of its imperviousness that has so often been invoked to underline Jane Austen's mental seclusion.

Exponents of the reactionary Austen have regularly stressed her religious beliefs, even though she has often been found deficient in this quarter – even 'supremely irreligious' in one instance – by the devout.⁸ Readings of this kind tend to place Austen as an Evangelical (which she was not) or as an 'orthodox' Christian rather than as the Anglican Erasmian that she was,⁹ the better to insist on the fixity of her views, or – in the case of materialist approaches – on their archaic character as the product of an outmoded infrastructure. If her religion is unusually secularized, as Butler implies, that is what was immediately demanded to buttress the status quo, and to shield it from the eroding forces of change.¹⁰ This approach relies, all too clearly, on the old and long-entrenched view that Christianity and the Enlightenment were as chalk and cheese, as far removed from each other as reason and *l'infâme*.

⁸ G. K. Chesterton, 'The Evolution of *Emma*', collected in Ian Littlewood, ed., *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*, 4 vols. (Mountfield, 1998), 1, 444. See also Cardinal Newman's remarks to Anne Mozley, *Letters and Correspondence of Newman*, ed. Anne Mozley (1891), II, 223.

⁹ For discussion of the tolerance and rationalism of the Erasmian tradition see Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Catholics, Anglicans, and Puritans* (1988), particularly ch. 2.

¹⁰ Butler, *War of Ideas*, pp. 1–2, 93–9.

system which the supply of nutrients would then replace,⁵² and in the eighties he conducted and wrote up a series of experiments on bone growth in which the assimilation of dyes showed that areas of increase kept pace with those of waste, 'so as to give to the new the proper form'.⁵³

Another of Hunter's ideas from this period contributed to a scientific theory with which the Austen family certainly were familiar. In a letter from Steventon dated November 1800, Jane records a party at Ashe where her brother James and a female friend alternately read from, and no doubt discussed, 'Dr Jenner's pamphlet on the cow-pox'.⁵⁴ Crucial to Jenner's explanation of why a cowpox vaccination was effective against smallpox was his belief that the more serious disease was a strain of the mild one, 'accidental circumstances' having worked 'new changes upon it'. He speculates further that diseases as apparently different as 'ulcerous throat', measles, and scarlet fever 'have all sprung from the same source, assuming some variety in their forms according to the nature of their new combinations'.⁵⁵ This was to be a fertile theory, for it stressed differentiation, showing that variety and uniqueness were a modality of organic existence, while hinting also at the generative role played by chance. As a model for his idea of variation through descent, Jenner cites an essay by Hunter on the relation between the wolf, jackal, and dog. There, from the evidence of comparative anatomy, his old teacher had argued, in a remarkable anticipation of Darwin, that the three species derived from a common ancestor through a process of continuous evolutionary change. Jenner neatly introduces his readers to this thought at the start of his cowpox pamphlet, remarking that

the Wolf, disarmed of ferocity, is now pillowed in the lady's lap. The Cat, the little Tyger of our island, whose natural home is the forest, is equally domesticated and caressed.⁵⁶

Similar relationships, he goes on to say, hold true for the multifarious forms of infectious disease, which seem, however, to be all the more volatile, some gaining in virulence over a period of months, some – disobligingly in the case of docile forms – vanishing altogether.

When Jane Austen writes amusingly about changes in the style and behaviour of young girls coming out into society, she draws out a metaphor that plainly owes something to Jenner:

⁵² See John Abernethy, *Physiological Lectures* (1817), p. 196.

⁵³ See 'On the Growth of Bones', John Hunter, *Observations on Certain Parts of the Animal Economy* (1786), ed. Richard Owen (1835 edn), p. 318.

⁵⁴ To Cassandra Austen, 20–2 Nov. 1800, *Letters*, p. 62.

⁵⁵ See Edward Jenner, *An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Cow Pox* (1800), p. 48.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1 and fn.

What is become of all the Shyness in the World? – Moral as well as Natural Diseases disappear in the progress of time, & new ones take their place. – Shyness & the Sweating Sickness have given way to Confidence & Paralytic complaints.⁵⁷

Jocular though it may be, the comparison is full of implication. If fads come and go like epidemics, they are also, by inference, catching. And if the method of their transmission is understood to be a sort of sympathetic copycatting of the kind commented on by Hume, there is a pre-echo, here, of the present-day theory of the 'meme' – Richard Dawkins's comparison of the way ideas spread to the replication of a successful gene.⁵⁸ The reading of Jenner's paper in 1800 certainly had an unexpected outcome in the Austen family when the 'great discoverer' befriended James at Cheltenham, and insisted on revaccinating his daughter Caroline himself.⁵⁹

Science re-orders the ordinary in many unforeseen ways. Its findings reach into seemingly unrelated areas, sometimes through direct application, sometimes for no better reason than that they offer an arresting paradigm. Leslie Stephen may have overstated the case when he claimed that Darwin's observations on the breeds of pigeons 'had a reaction upon the structure of European society', but artificial speciation was indeed a powerful idea, and he was surely right to argue that new ideas can 'suddenly start into reality, and pass from the sphere of remote speculation to that of immediate practice', and to suggest that this was particularly true of the eighteenth century.⁶⁰ Jane Austen did not have to focus on scientific matters with any rigour to experience the impact of explanations that had penetrated her world. Yet her public reception reveals, as we shall see, that she was perhaps of all great creative English writers of her generation the one most easily associated with an empirical habit of mind. There is much to suggest that she was exposed from an early age to an attitude towards contemporary science that was unusually wholehearted even for the time, and it is worth taking stock of her adolescence from this point of view.

One early landmark in Jane's reading was the present from her elder brother Edward (no doubt when he had outgrown it) of Thomas Percival's *Tales, Fables and Reflections* (1775), a manual on science and liberal opinion disguised as a conduct-book.⁶¹ Percival introduced his young readers

⁵⁷ To Cassandra Austen, 8–9 Feb. 1807, *Letters*, p. 119.

⁵⁸ First expounded by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, 1976), but enlarged on in his later books, and by other writers such as Daniel Dennett, see his *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (Harmondsworth, 1995), pp. 341–70.

⁵⁹ *Reminiscences of Caroline Austen*, introd. Deirdre Le Faye (Overton, Hants., 1986), p. 31.

⁶⁰ Leslie Stephen, *English Thought*, 1, 10–11.

⁶¹ See Sir Zachary Cope, 'Dr Thomas Percival and Jane Austen', *British Medical Journal*, 1 (1969), 55–6; and Collins, *Parson's Daughter*, pp. 27–8.

mind. One principle continually invoked is that fictive actions should tally with repeated observations from real life:

I have scratched out Sir Tho: from walking with the other Men to the Stables &c the very day after his breaking his arm – for though I find your Papa *did* walk out immediately after *his* arm was set, I think it can be so little usual as to *appear* unnatural in a book – & it does not seem to be material that Sir Tho: should go with them.⁷⁸

Linked to this principle of avoiding the abnormal is another that declares war on the unnecessary, the joint import of the two being that when deviation occurs it does so to some effect. A further requirement is that anything relating to the public world should be represented with scrupulous fidelity. So Jane Austen takes pains to check that hedgerows grow in Northamptonshire, or that Gibraltar has a Government House; and expects her niece to do the same:

Lyme will not do. Lyme is towards 40 miles distance from Dawlish & would not be talked of there . . . They must be *two* days going from Dawlish to Bath; They are nearly 100 miles apart.⁷⁹

The corollary to this passion for accuracy is an extreme caution about venturing into territory that is not known at first hand:

Let the Portmans go to Ireland, but as you know nothing of the Manners there, you had better not go with them. You will be in danger of giving false representations. Stick to Bath & the Foresters. There you will be quite at home.⁸⁰

Austen took this rule of sticking to the observed so far that she notoriously altogether avoided scenes in which men confer together in the absence of women. Her limitations of range have been ascribed with good reason to the constraints under which middle-class women laboured in her period, but they are also a condition of the 'experimental' discourse to which she was pledged. Later critics approaching her work from the perspective of the full-blown sociological novel of the nineteenth century have put a construction on these limits that negates their special implications. Raymond Williams, in a pithy phrase, remarked adversely of the novels that where there is only one class there is no class at all; but he was cannily forestalled on this issue by G. K. Chesterton who precludes some shrewd commentary on the exposure of Emma's class-bound attitudes with the following:

⁷⁸ To Anna Austen, 10–18 Aug. 1812, *Letters*, p. 268.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 268–9, and see To Cassandra, 24 and 29 Jan. 1813, *Letters*, pp. 198, 202.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

It is true that Jane Austen did not attempt to teach any history or politics; but it is not true that we cannot learn any history or politics from Jane Austen. Any work so piercingly intelligent of its own kind, and especially any work of so wise and humane a kind, is sure to tell us much more than shallower studies covering a larger surface.⁸¹

By analogy with other kinds of discourse that are empirically grounded, the 'experimental' novel does not need to offer a general theory in order to have real significance.

Among the handful of reviews that Austen received in her lifetime a piece on *Emma* makes much of the reader's pleasurable shock at recognizing 'modes of thinking and feeling which experience every day presents in real life'. Whereas human nature seems almost uniform when conveyed by 'a more sweeping observer', the reviewer continues, Austen's characters come to life as individuals because of the way they are 'surveyed in this microscopic detail'.⁸² Nature study in one form or another became a regular source of metaphor for critics drawing attention to the variety of Austen's creations throughout the nineteenth century. Perhaps one reason for this is that the novels seem to have had a special appeal for readers with a scientific background. Ardent Jancites of the early decades of the century included polymaths like William Whewell, an authority on inductive method, and Archbishop Richard Whately, a founding father of statistical sociology and an editor of Francis Bacon. Whately's justly famous essay on the novels takes off from Walter Scott's notion of Austen as the founding figure of an entirely new class of fiction distinguished by its fastidious 'copying from nature', and its attention to 'the current of ordinary life'.⁸³ A chief point made by Whately – later to be developed by Macaulay as the basis of his comparison of Austen to Shakespeare – is that the minor characters of the novels are as finely differentiated as the central ones. Such alertness to diversity immediately puts him in mind of the expert in taxonomy: 'to the eye of a skilful naturalist the insects on a leaf present as wide differences as exist between the elephant and the lion'. Later, this metaphor is extended when John Thorpe, 'the Bang-up Oxonian' from *Northanger Abbey*, is classified

⁸¹ See G. K. Chesterton, 'The Evolution of *Emma*', collected in Littlewood, ed., *Critical Assessments*, 1, 443.

⁸² See 'Anonymous Review of *Emma*', *The Champion*, 31 Mar. 1816, in Littlewood, ed., *Critical Assessments*, 1, 297–8, 300.

⁸³ See Walter Scott, 'Unsigned Review: *Emma*', *Quarterly Review*, 14 (Mar. 1816), collected in Littlewood, ed., *Critical Assessments*, 1, 287–8. Whately's opening pages contain several echoes of Scott's phrasing, plus the idea of 'a new school of fiction'; see 'Unsigned Review: *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*', *Quarterly Review*, 24 (Jan. 1821), collected in Littlewood, ed., *Critical Assessments*, see 1, 318–19.

Following in the tracks of Repton who had claimed that Price's taste in landscape implied a notion of government based 'on the uncontroled opinions of man in a savage state', the *Anti-Jacobin* accused Richard Payne Knight of wishing to remove all fetters on man's 'primal purity and excellence'.⁴⁰ Knight's primitivism was, in fact, not of this soft kind at all, and it is interesting that the *Anti-Jacobin* satirists distorted it, in the hope perhaps of preserving a monopoly of hard-nosed attitudes for themselves. What sympathy had been to the cult of sensibility, priapism was to prove for Knight's version of the picturesque. In *The Progress of Civil Society* sexual attraction is the force that spurs individuals, by nature deeply selfish, into developing as social beings. Knight draws on Adam Smith's theory of the four stages, on his own study of phallic rites, and on his love of ruggedness, to sketch a complex view of social evolution in which sex is both the creative prime mover, and an energy to be contained. For while the primal desire initiates all that 'changed the wandering brute to social man', it is also the source of deep antagonism:

First native lust the rugged savage led
To the rank pleasures of his lawless bed: –
Promiscuous glow'd the fierce instinctive flame,
Uncheck'd by reason, and unawed by shame,
Till, often cloy'd with what he oft desired,
His passions sicken'd, and his nerves grew tired.⁴¹

Only through the curbing of sexual passion (or perhaps through satiety) can the higher impulses initiate that 'converse of the soul' that forms family bonds and weaves a civil fabric from them. Since every individual is the theatre of a racial history, courtship rehearses, in its small way, the great drama of sociability. The instinctual life that survives from prehistory remains continuous with – and yet in essence distinct from – the life of civil refinement, and both come into play, uneasily saddled together – in the quest for a social partner. In a revealing passage from his later *Analytical Inquiry* (1805), Knight points to the way dancing straddles these divided worlds, for while it releases animal energies, it works as a 'natural expression of refined or elevated sentiment', this last impulse being visible even in its primitive forms, for 'the attitudes and gestures of savages' are grace and dignity itself.⁴² In adolescence, however, animal desire combines with the

⁴⁰ 'Mr Repton's Letter to Mr Price' prefixed to Uvedale Price's *A Letter to H. Repton*, p. 10. See 'Letter' (16 Apr. 1798) introducing 'The Loves of the Triangles', in *Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin*, 4th edn (1801), p. 120.

⁴¹ *The Progress of Civil Society: A Didactic Poem in Six Books* (1796), 1, lines 131–6.

⁴² *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, 4th edn (1808); see particularly 1,iii,2, and 1,ii,58–62, 88; and p. 213.

idealism of romance to form unstable fantasies, 'pictures of perfection' (the phrase is evidently not Austen's alone)⁴³ that can only lead (without the aid of satire) to cynicism or disillusion. Knight insists, in sum, that the psyche of the modern beau is two-tiered, and that the experience of wooing, so much taken for granted, is a bewildering process, inevitably ridden with tension.

A similar sense of intrinsic irony pervades the central courtship of *Pride and Prejudice*, and it surfaces early at the evening party hosted by Sir William Lucas who, with an avuncular eye on matchmaking, tries to persuade Darcy to dance:

'What a charming amusement for young people this is, Mr Darcy! – There is nothing like dancing after all. – I consider it as one of the first refinements of polished societies.'

'Certainly, Sir; – and it has the advantage also of being in vogue amongst the less polished societies of the world. – Every savage can dance.'

Sir William only smiled. 'Your friend performs delightfully;' he continued after a pause, on seeing Bingley join the group; – 'and I doubt not that you are an adept in the science yourself, Mr Darcy.'

'You saw me dance at Meryton, I believe, Sir.' (25)

Every savage can dance, and so can Darcy who carelessly betrays a pride in his performance at Meryton, while puncturing Sir William's pretence. His refusal to dance, dressed up as a principle, rises from a determination to avoid entanglement in what he primly considers to be inappropriate company, and belongs to the same mood of self-denial that causes him to find fault with Elizabeth's looks while admitting to her beauty and attractiveness. When the gauche Sir William seizes on Elizabeth to offer her up as a partner, Darcy – despite being 'extremely surprised' by the present of her snatched hand – finds himself 'not unwilling to receive it' (26). When he does ask for the dance, Elizabeth, still stung by his earlier rejection of her, refuses him, but her refusal restores the possibility of civility between them, while at the same time reawakening Darcy to the great pleasure of her presence.

Like Coleridge's water-insect, Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship moves forward by fits and starts, gathering from every setback the energy for a new break. In retrospect it appears to Elizabeth that they have each 'improved in civility', but reproachful behaviour seems to have speeded them on their way (367). Sexual attraction and civility make uneasy bedfellows, for if 'incivility' towards the outside world is 'the very essence of love' (an aphorism

⁴³ To Fanny Knight, 23–5 Mar. 1817, *Letters*, p. 335.

based on Adam Smith),⁴⁴ it is also a condition that afflicts lovers themselves. Elizabeth's 'deeply-rooted dislike' of Darcy has its rational side, and the reasons for it, good as well as bad, mount fast. Darcy's offensive haughtiness provides a fertile breeding-ground for Wickham's skilfully implanted slanders, and there is the real injury of his removing Jane as a partner for Bingley, news of which Colonel Fitzwilliam lets slip. All this is more than enough to account for Elizabeth's refusal of Darcy, but the particular outrage of the proposal, when it comes, points to a strong undertow of the irrational in their relationship. Elizabeth with her usual flair for articulation goes some way to identifying this when she asks Darcy if he can deny

a design of offending and insulting me [when] you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character? Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I *was* uncivil? (190)

Darcy's only rational cause of dislike for Elizabeth is tied up with his recoil from bad 'connections', but it seems that the presence of a desire that resists conscious control is itself a cause of irritation to him. And when Elizabeth admits to 'taking so decided a dislike to him, without any reason' – for the sake, as she says, of giving free rein to her wit (225–6) – her own explanation is not to be trusted. Though she does indeed revel, Beatrice-like, in the role of a licensed taunter, there is much else afoot. For her, as much as for Darcy, dislike masks an underlying attraction.

On the subject of sexual allure *Pride and Prejudice* is as eloquent as it is inexplicit. Beyond a fairly conventional sort of report on how characters look and are perceived to look, the narrator has little directly to offer. But the reader is made to see almost from the start that Elizabeth and Darcy are marked out for courtship, and this knowledge is superimposed on their apparent inability to get on with each other, standing in, as it were, for the attraction they refuse to acknowledge themselves. With an inspired reticence and tact Jane Austen succeeds in enclosing the unconscious feelings which impel her promising couple, who are alike in being unafraid of dislike. One early clue to their attachment comes in the after-dinner scene at Netherfield, when Darcy – after studiously burying himself in a book to avoid the sycophantic arabesques of Caroline Bingley – makes an unconscious gesture on hearing her ask Elizabeth to join in a turn about the room:

⁴⁴ *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 141; 'though a lover may be good company to his mistress, he is so to nobody else': Adam Smith, *TMS*, p. 31, but see the whole section of I.ii.2.1.

Elizabeth was surprised, but agreed to it immediately. Miss Bingley succeeded no less in the real object of her civility; Mr Darcy looked up. He was as much awake to the novelty of attention in that quarter as Elizabeth herself could be, and unconsciously closed his book. (56)

Under the cover of civility Caroline sets in train a self-serving and knowing ploy. Using Elizabeth to bait her own hook, she shows herself more conscious of the real object of Darcy's interest than he does himself, for his distracted and telltale closing of the book is partly rationalized as curiosity over Caroline's out-of-the-way behaviour. But where Caroline senses potential depths from the start, the Bennets are so blind that Jane has to ask Elizabeth, after she has accepted Darcy, how long she has been in love, to which she replies, 'I hardly know when it began' (373). Twice she insists that it has been quite 'unconsciously' that she has inspired feelings in Darcy (190, 193), a situation reciprocated by the almost compulsive teasing that his presence inspires in her. The evening party at Hunsford is particularly revealing here, for it shows Elizabeth's feelings of anger and indignation for 'that abominable Darcy' (144), newly refuelled by proof of Wickham's accuracy on the character of Lady Catherine (84, 162), yielding to a manner that is bantering and flirtatious. Colonel Fitzwilliam gives Elizabeth a lead when he playfully inquires how Darcy behaves among strangers:

'You shall hear then – but prepare yourself for something very dreadful. The first time of my ever seeing him in Hertfordshire, you must know, was at a ball – and at this ball what do you think he did? He danced only four dances! I am sorry to pain you – but so it was. He danced only four dances, though gentlemen were scarce; and, to my certain knowledge, more than one young lady was sitting down in want of a partner. Mr Darcy, you cannot deny the fact.' (175)

Wickham's grave charges of misconduct pale away before the sprightly comedy that Elizabeth improvises round the uncomfortable memory of the ball at the Meryton assembly, and Darcy's lame plea that he needs to be introduced to strangers plays into her hands, allowing her to stage-manage a post-mortem on the original scene:

'Shall we ask your cousin the reason of this?' said Elizabeth, still addressing Colonel Fitzwilliam. 'Shall we ask him why a man of sense and education, and who has lived in the world, is ill qualified to recommend himself to strangers?' (175)

When Darcy confesses to a lack of social ease on such occasions, Elizabeth retorts, from the piano, that such skill is as much acquired by practice as mastery of the keyboard, and that his trouble is that he has never taken the pains to learn. Her whole bearing to Darcy proves, when face to face, to be

sons of the forest' were often left standing to form the nucleus of clumps while lesser trees and scrub were swept away, but on these the whole effect of the natural scene depended:

often some of the most beautiful groups, owe the playful variety of their form, and their happy connection with other groups, to some apparently insignificant, and to many eyes, even ugly trees.⁵⁰

Accusing Brown of regimentation, he compares his clumps (which were commonly fenced off) to platoons on parade, and by such means builds a political dimension into his protest against the taste that had already won the status of a national style. Connection rapidly shifts from a visual term, in his hands, to a sociological one: he uses the word to embroil the liberal, Anglo-Scottish idea of a social fabric woven of local loyalties. In his letter to Repton who had labelled him an anarchist, he equates connection in a landscape to a community which owes its good relations to a sense of reciprocal responsibility. Repton's breach of this principle is brought home in *Mansfield Park* where the alterations to Thornton Lacey suggested by Henry Crawford (who is a devotee of his school) involve a total reorientation that would 'shut out' all traces of the vicarage's social context – the adjoining farmyard and blacksmith's shop (241–2). In the plates of several of Repton's books such excision was enacted with the help of raisable flaps, one of which notoriously disposed of a beggar.⁵¹ Brown's even more drastic clearances – which often entailed eviction – and stemmed from a love of the 'distinct, hard, and unconnected', spelt out a proud isolationism that rejoiced in the severance of ties with lower ranks;⁵² and his improvements seemed, in the troubled climate of the mid-nineties, to be a conspicuous symbol of an aristocracy that refused to acknowledge the source of its riches, islanding itself in an ocean of mown grass.

Though Lady Catherine is the high-priestess of 'connection' – a word that re-echoes throughout the novel, what she really means by the word is dis-connection as her ready recourse to the metaphor of pollution shows. If she is brought to visit Pemberley after the wedding it is in spite of the

⁵⁰ *Essays* (1810), I, 255.

⁵¹ Repton began this practice in his Red Books; the begging war-veteran appears on the flap of a plate entitled 'View From My Own Cottage, In Essex'. *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1816), facing p. 232. For a valuable discussion of Austen's relation to Repton's work see Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore, 1971), pp. 39–52.

⁵² See *A Letter to H. Repton*, p. 163; and for some valuable commentary on the implications of Brown's 'style of disconnection' see Stephen Daniels and Charles Watkins in Copley and Garside, eds., *Picturesque*, p. 21.

taint that its 'woods had received, not merely from the presence of such a mistress, but the visits of her uncle and aunt from the city' (388). When it comes to courtship Lady Catherine is the clumper *par excellence*, her incestuous outlook being formed not only by the wish to keep wealth within the family but by the premiss that her family is the best possible connection. These family attitudes also run deep in Darcy who has, by his own admission, been taught from an early age 'to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world' (369). Darcy changes, however, and though he frequently and bluntly reverts to the 'inferiority' of Elizabeth's connections (52, 189, 192), he does ultimately learn, in her phrase, 'to get the better of himself' (327). He undergoes a radical transformation in the course of the novel, powered by the spell of Elizabeth and by all that disposes him to her, and no other character alters as much. Critics who press the novel into an Anti-Jacobin mould tend to compress or discard this basic feature, concentrating instead on Elizabeth's change of heart, treated in some cases as though it were a religious conversion. In fact, the Butlerian stereotype of the sprightly heroine who renounces her independence of mind in order to conform to a received view of the world is peculiarly ill-suited to the character of Elizabeth Bennet who suffers no diminishment of either liberty or sprightliness in her process of maturation. Indeed, such a reading is deliberately blocked by the narrator on the novel's last page:

Georgiana had the highest opinion in the world of Elizabeth; though at first she often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm, at her lively, sportive, manner of talking to her brother. He, who had always inspired in herself a respect which almost overcame her affection, she now saw the object of open pleasantry. Her mind received knowledge which had never before fallen in her way. (387–8)

'Self-abasing' Elizabeth never is,⁵³ and though her mortification over being duped by Wickham leads to genuine remorse, this seems to reflect her generous spirit, for Mrs Gardiner is also deceived despite her much longer acquaintance with Wickham, and it is with good cause that Darcy holds himself responsible for covering up his history. Elizabeth is really never under any illusion about the superficiality of her feelings for a man who lacks the capacity to arouse her hate (149).

Hunsford and Pemberley are rival headquarters in that crucial conflict of world view that Jane Austen plays out through the novel's comedy of courtship. If Hunsford uses the idiom of Brown to throw an aura of

⁵³ Butler, *War of Ideas*, p. 209.

a loyalty, however, that is provisional rather than personal, so that when Lord Grondale takes second place to Hermsprong (who turns out to be the rightful heir) Blick is swift to change tack, turning his hand to a 'copious epistle, in a stile of pompous humiliation'.⁷⁶ Collins goes through a similar contortion after Elizabeth's engagement, wind of which comes through Mr Bennet: 'Console Lady Catherine as well as you can. But, if I were you, I would stand by the nephew. He has more to give' – advice so graciously taken that Darcy is soon 'exposed to all the parading and obsequious civility' that Collins can muster (383–4).

Underlying both these portrayals of the sycophantic parson is an idea boldly enunciated by Mary Wollstonecraft in a discussion of the way individual character is moulded by profession. In *Hermsprong* Bage frequently cites the *Vindication*, and in the course of long debates on education and sexual equality summarizes its arguments.⁷⁷ From this novel alone Austen would have had a clear sense of what Wollstonecraft stood for, but there can be little doubt that she knew the book in any case. Isobel Armstrong has pointed to the way the characterization of Wickham accords with an arresting passage from the *Vindication* on the effeminacy of army officers, and the same passage provides a sketch of the clerical disposition. In both fields a 'great subordination of rank' takes its toll on independence, bishops consequently being exempt:

'The blind submission imposed at colleges to forms of belief serves as a novitiate to the curate, who must obsequiously respect the opinion of his rector or patron, if he mean to rise in his profession. Perhaps there cannot be a more forcible contrast than between the servile dependent gait of a poor curate and the courtly mien of a bishop.'⁷⁸

Bage clearly alludes to this in *Hermsprong* when the narrator closes a conversation between Blick and Lord Grondale on the respect due to property and rank:

'There are men – classes of men, I believe, to whom no human attainment is so useful and profitable as assentation. It is for the benefit of young beginners in this respectable art, that I have recorded this dialogue. Dr Blick was an adept. He cannot be a bishop.'⁷⁹

As a novelist Bage interprets Wollstonecraft's analysis with some latitude for his curate of 'liberal opinions' does indeed stand up to his rector – though

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, III, 264. ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 168–77.

⁷⁸ Wickham 'simpers and smirks', and enjoys the cross-dressing of his friend Chamberlayne (330, 221). See Isobel Armstrong's Introduction, xxiv–xxv; and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman in Political Writings*, ed. Janet Todd (1993), p. 87.

⁷⁹ *Hermsprong*, I, 229.

at the price of his job – and he includes a third charitably minded parson to show that Blicks are by no means universal.

Jane Austen appears to take a passing glance at Wollstonecraft also, but only in the act of demonstrating that Collins is larger than any stereotype: 'far from dreading a rebuke either from the Archbishop, or Lady Catherine de Bourgh', he leaps at the opportunity of attending the Netherfield ball, booking Elizabeth for the first two dances (87). Though Collins is as importunate in courtship as he is obsequious in the affairs of his parish, his conduct carries the mould-marks of social conditioning all along, for he relies on the submission of women as blindly and habitually as he submits to the yoke himself.

Austen's great brilliance in conceiving Collins was to conjoin two seemingly incompatible stock-in-trades – the toadying lackey and the presumptuous lover – and reveal their congruence. Her conflation of fictional types is readily illustrated from *Hermsprong* where Collins has a forerunner not only in Dr Blick but in Sir Philip Chestrum, the physically repellent and thick-skinned suitor whom Lord Grondale has earmarked for his unwilling daughter. Though the match is backed by Dr Blick, the sprightly Miss Campinet puts in a spoke wherever she can, and in a memorable passage tries to argue Sir Philip into accepting the principle that it takes two to make a couple:

'Does Miss Campinet's fancy and your's hit?'

'I can fancy she, if she can fancy me.'

'Well, I have told you that I could fancy you, if you could fancy me. But you can't, you know; and you say that's a good reason for not having me. Now what's a good reason for you, may be a good reason for Miss Campinet.'⁸⁰

Collins perseveres in a wilful self-deception that is based, like Sir Philip's, on the premiss that daughters have no other role than to please. When Elizabeth tries to break through the assurance that causes him to take her refusals as a mere tease, she resorts to language that has the exact ring of Wollstonecraft's: 'Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart' (109). But the *Vindication* has already made its presence felt in the scene in which Collins, taking it upon himself to read to the Bennet daughters, discards a novel from the circulating library in favour of Fordyce's sermons. Wollstonecraft had devoted an entire section of her tract to the mischief done by this stand-by of the young woman's library, no doubt because it so perfectly exemplified an attitude – associated with Rousseau and the

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 94.

First, Austen underlines the natural transference of feeling that requires no particular 'interest'; second, she indicates how Mrs Jennings's feelings are intensified by manifold associations with the Dashwood family; and third, she shows that Mrs Jennings's grief is redoubled by the way she thinks herself into Mrs Dashwood's position. This last imaginative construction of 'what we ourselves should feel in the like situation' is Smith's special contribution to theory, though it coexists in his treatise with associative explanations and with Hume's idea of automatic influence.⁵² And indeed this mirror-like finding of the other in the self – so graphically mimed by Austen's syntax and italics – throws light on the form of *Sense and Sensibility* as a whole.

In his model, Smith posits an 'attentive spectator' to engage with the experiencing agent, 'the person concerned'.⁵³ To the end of maximizing the sympathy between these two consciousnesses, he extrapolates a set of virtues proper to each. So the bystander will have to be exceptionally sensitive, the sufferer unusually stoic in order for the optimum level of concord to be reached. The 'amiable virtues' appropriate to the spectator are summed up in the term 'sensibility'; to the agent, on the other hand, belong 'the awful and respectable virtues' most often shorthanded as 'self-command'.

The relevance of these categories to the initial placing of the two heroines is suggestive – we hear almost as much of Elinor's self-command as we do of Marianne's sensibility. But the plot works in such a way as to complicate and test these attributes. Each sister is, in Smith's terms, both an agent and a spectator of the other, and for each of them, the special endowment is complemented by its contrary, so that Marianne is 'sensible' as well as amiable, and Elinor has 'good heart' in addition to her sense. Each, moreover, on Smith's model, is to find herself out of role with regard to the evolving action. Marianne is soon to become 'the person concerned' for her sufferings turn out to be the more extreme, as Elinor sees, and more rapidly come to their height. Elinor's sympathies, on the other hand, are stretched from the moment she assumes the part of bystander, and our sense of her character is as much moulded by her mental and practical interventions as by her immediate affairs. But if Elinor emerges as almost a paragon of attentiveness, Marianne – on any *social* reckoning of the amiable virtues – gets off to a very slow start, hampered as she is by a received culture that puts a high premium on exclusivity, and by a plot that connives at her detachment from Elinor's real situation by masking it with a vow of secrecy.

⁵² *TMS*, I.i.1.2 and I.i.1.6, 9–11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, I.i.1.4, 10.

Sense and Sensibility centres, as its title signals, in the relationship of the sisters – hence no doubt the recurring criticism that its heroes are drawn, for once, short of full length. In place of the usually even-tenored ways of confidantes, Jane Austen unfolds a relationship that itself undergoes great strain, responding beneath its polite surface to the old Terentian maxim that lovers fall in only after they have fallen out. Things come to their lowest ebb between the sisters when Marianne blurts out her 'mortifying conviction', long held, that Elinor's feelings are weak, and her self-command, therefore, of little consequence (104, 263). Each accuses the other, at different times, of concealment (79, 170), and the pain of each is heightened by a privacy unbroken by the small change of daily contact. But here there is a significant distinction between them. Where Marianne, for the sake of the purest possible apperception, cultivates silence and absorption – or 'idleness' as the narrator, following Johnson, acidly remarks (104)⁵⁴ – Elinor busies herself, keeping up the usual pretences and civilities, without ever quite losing touch with her sorrow. In so far as Elinor finds solace by this route, she embodies Smith's type of the agent who 'exert[s] that recollection and self-command which constitute the dignity of every passion, and which bring it down to what others can enter into'.⁵⁵ Marianne, on the other hand, corresponds to the anti-type who, sacrificing 'equality of temper' to a 'sense of honour', is 'apt to sit brooding at home over either grief or resentment'.⁵⁶ Indeed the language applied to the sisters in this context is often highly reminiscent of the *Theory*, as is the gist of the narrator's clinching observation that by 'brooding over her sorrows in silence, [Marianne] gave more pain to her sister than could have been communicated by the most open and most frequent confession of them' (212).

Smith's notion of 'matching' emotional tone in the interests of promoting both social and individual harmony runs through the novel. After Marianne is rebuffed by Willoughby at the party, the sisters are described 'in joint affliction', Elinor's fits of tears 'scarcely less violent than Marianne's' (182). More vividly, at the climax of Marianne's illness, Austen produces a special prose, full of dashes and asyndeton, to convey the 'anxious flutter' of her unofficially sensitive heroine (314–15). While the obvious parallels that unfold between the two courtships make an irony of the emotional distance that subsists between the sisters for much of the time, they account also for the strength of their final intimacy. Marianne's cry of remorse – 'how

⁵⁴ To Mrs Thrale, 17 Mar. 1773, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1992), II, 21.

⁵⁵ *TMS*, I.i.5.3, 24. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, I.i.4.10, 23.

Martin's interest in books such as *The Vicar of Wakefield* (which Emma 'would not think any thing of') that Harriet speaks of her plan to get Robert to read the Radcliffe which he has – perhaps unsurprisingly – forgotten to borrow (34).² But the matter is left open, and the relative detachment of fantasy from its literary source has its point, for it accords with the novel's premiss that there is fiction in the very air that the characters breathe. Already in *Northanger Abbey* Catherine's fanciful constructions are a lot more plausible than the strained leaps of Charlotte Lennox's heroine, making the novel's quixotry more domestic than female. Catherine's daily muster of new evidence to fit her case provides a demonstration, however dramatic, of a quite normal cognitive process – and one much fixed upon by sceptical philosophers. Thus David Hume insisted on the ubiquity of 'fictions', and on how our 'remarkable propensity to believe' generates its own momentum, so that 'any train of thinking is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse'.³

In *Emma* quixotry is generalized further than in *Northanger Abbey*, for we are shown that it is not only heroines that 'can see nothing that does not answer'. Mr Woodhouse, for one, turns out to be as much of an imaginit as his daughter, unconsciously attributing many of his own feelings and expressions to Mr Perry; and the scrupulously accurate Miss Bates is puzzled to find that she has visualized Mr Dixon as a look-alike of John Knightley, explaining that 'one takes up a notion, and runs away with it' (233, 107, 176). If George Knightley has a better idea of what is going forward than the other characters, it is because he is unusually ready to make allowance for what he projects. And when he self-reprovingly quotes from Cowper, 'Myself creating what I saw', he somewhat overcorrects his wish to think badly of Frank Churchill, for the tender look Frank has given Jane Fairfax is, indeed, a telltale one.⁴ Even Mr Knightley's judgements are liable to warp, however, as we see when Frank Churchill suddenly begins to rise in his estimation after Emma has said that she never loved him (433).

² Jane Austen's preference for the Goldsmith seems very clear here, which is odd, perhaps, in view of her earlier respect for Radcliffe. *The Romance of the Forest* is, however, a considerably less interesting novel than *Udolpho*, as Claudia L. Johnson concludes in her sensitive account of it (*Equivocal Beings*, pp. 73–93). It is as well to keep in mind that Radcliffe's reputation had declined significantly in the decade after her death, see my "'Strange Fits of Passion': Wordsworth and Ann Radcliffe", *Notes and Queries*, 45 (1998), 188–9.

³ *THN*, I.iii.ix,113; I.iv.ii,198; see also I.ii.viii.

⁴ Cowper, *The Task*, iv, 'The Winter Evening', line 290; *Emma*, p. 344.

Not content with generalizing mental waywardness in *Emma* through a wide cast of imaginites, Jane Austen is out to show that her reader is an imaginit too. Where plot is collapsed in *Northanger Abbey* and Catherine's extravagant construction round the figure of Montoni continually exposed to the daylight of 'probability' and the 'natural course of things', in *Emma* the reader is as much in the dark as the characters themselves, and kept guessing about outcomes. Emma's own ideas on what is in the offing are quite in line, moreover, with the resolutions provided by many of Austen's fellow-novelists and found acceptable by the audience she shared with them. Only Austen's refusal to understate the mercenariness of the marriage market makes a non-starter of Emma's darling scheme of uniting Harriet to Mr Elton, whose love of money (with only a small deflection of character) might well have been subdued by lust. As she wrote Austen must have realized that she had it in her power to supply sufficient substantiation to make many of Emma's fantasies come true. But the snuffing out of fictive plots also conveys the sense that the ways of reality are deep and intractable, uniquely right like the answers to riddles. Emma and Harriet's much talked-up collection of these provides the reader with a clue to the nature of the novel's plot, a clue confirmed on second reading when the solution to Emma's puzzle over why Jane Fairfax should be enduring Highbury for so long – 'She is a riddle, quite a riddle!' – seems blindingly simple (285). A successful riddle poses a question to which there appears to be no possible answer, usually because its component clauses are, on the face of it, incompatible, and in *Emma* this obfuscatory function is performed by the various fictions that grow up around the secretly engaged couple. Frank himself, in the first place, makes a show of flirting with Emma 'in order to assist a concealment so essential to me', even if this may seem a rather suspect rationalization for his habitual coquetry (438). And Emma, for her part, assigns Jane to Mr Dixon, providing an adulterous attachment for her rival at which Frank mischievously connives, before she goes on to assign Frank to Harriet, after the episode with the gypsies. Even if some of these fictions obviously ring false they are enough to put the reader off track, so that the union of Frank and Jane is lost on all but the most disciplined of imaginites.

Once the novel's central riddle is resolved, the disclosure has a knock-on effect. Emma is not left to worry for long over the imaginary grief of Harriet, and the discovery that it is Mr Knightley whom Harriet has set her heart on rather than Frank, precipitates the recognition that she wishes to marry Mr Knightley herself. Jane Austen compresses what must rate as one of the most superbly managed of all denouements into a few pages, and simultaneously clinches a central and pervasive theme: that blindness is the

reward of assuming a godlike control. Harriet breezily asks Emma, once the secret of the engaged couple is out, if *she* at least had had no idea of it – ‘You, perhaps, might. – You (blushing as she spoke) who can see into everybody’s heart; but nobody else.’ In fact it is ‘with her own heart’ that Emma has, for the first time, to come to terms (404, 407). And her moment of truth, which is treated to the heightened language of a formal recognition scene (‘With insufferable vanity . . . with unpardonable arrogance . . .’), brings with it the perception that in being deceived about others she has also deceived herself (412). At a relational level it is the accident of her manipulation of her puppet-like companion into the posture of a potentially serious rival – for hasn’t she already told Mr Knightley that Harriet is just the right wife for him? – that breaks the spell of her dominance, and suddenly calls into question what she has presumed to be her special right – ‘to arrange everybody’s destiny’ (413).

The forces that underpin Emma’s exercise of sovereignty will occupy us later, but the immediate point to grasp is that Emma’s fictions are themselves shaped by her habitual stage-managing. The context of her description as an ‘imaginist’ is suggestive here, for it is the news of Harriet’s rescue by Frank that sets her planning once again, and rescue of one kind or another is at the root of all her imaginings. It is the account of how Dixon saved Jane at Weymouth from being dashed into the sea ‘by the sudden whirling round of something or other among the sails’ that gives her the germ for her graphic and ever-expanding story of their affair (160), and it is rescue that holds the key to her adoption of Harriet whom she yearns to raise from obscurity to a position of eminence through matchmaking. It would be wrong to suppose that Jane Austen had no time for the ‘preserver’ motif. Indeed, it is put to work in *Emma* when Colonel Campbell takes the orphaned Jane under his care out of gratitude for having been saved from death during a camp-fever by her father (163). But it is characteristic, all the same, that the rescue that carries the most weight in the novel is Mr Knightley’s unobtrusive act of kindness to Harriet after she has been cruelly snubbed by Mr Elton at the ball, an act ‘much more precious’ than Frank’s dashing intervention on the scene with the gypsies (328, 406). But the special attraction of rescue for Emma – what stamps it as her personal motif – is that she finds particular enjoyment in a role (whether vicarious or not) which safeguards her supremacy by allowing her to be the obliger rather than the obliged.

If the novel’s concern with fiction is bound to questions of rank, this is true also of its treatment of sociability. Thus a theme of Austen’s earlier career is, again, given a new direction in *Emma*, and one continuous with

the analysis of social position that is so conspicuous in *Mansfield Park*, only from the opposite point of view, since Emma occupies a place as exalted as Fanny’s is lowly. Though these two novels – which together represent the climax of Austen’s career – are strikingly different, they are given a complementarity by their joint concern with the psychological effects of circumstance. This, too, as much as the analysis of imagination, and of group-bonding, is a traditional Enlightenment concern, though we shall see that Austen’s treatment of it is as individual as ever. While still on the subject of plot, however, we should first look at the relation between Emma’s development and her shifting attitudes towards the social life of Highbury.

Emma’s fitful movement towards self-knowledge is tied, as is the case with the sisters in *Sense and Sensibility*, to her widening recognition of adjacent lives, so that she is involved in a process of discovery loosely analogous to the reader’s, a ploy that was to become increasingly standard for the liberal novelist. But included in this inbuilt paradigm (always at risk from her vitality) is a gradual alteration in the way she thinks about herself. Social position is of the utmost importance to Emma at the novel’s start. Her arrangements of destiny have everything to do with the articulation and preservation of rank. Her decision to patronize Harriet (‘delightful inferiority’) rather than befriend Jane, is in keeping with Alexander Pope’s dictum on Atossa: ‘Superiors? death! and Equals? what a curse! / But an Inferior not dependant? worse’.⁵ And her chagrin at having to stand second to Mrs Elton on the dance floor, or hear her assume equality with Mr Knightley, is intensified by the way she has collapsed any alternative scale of value by repeatedly pronouncing on the priority of rank over worth. So Robert Martin is dismissed for his want of gentility and ‘air’, regardless of the quality of his letter, and Harriet is informed – despite all professions of lasting regard – that under the name of Mrs Robert Martin she can receive no visit (32, 53). It is Emma’s remorse over her rudeness to Miss Bates at Box Hill that at last provides the turning-point in this unhealthy scheme of things. The choice of Miss Bates is significant not simply because as an unmonied spinster she is a type of the socially defenceless, but because she is particularly richly endowed with ‘universal good-will’, a virtue that comes in for high praise throughout *Emma* (21). Austen returns here to a debate of the nineties in which, as we have seen, she earlier took part, and she once again upholds a belief in philanthropy while distinguishing between it and personal affection.⁶ It is while reflecting on Mr Weston’s indiscriminating attentions to all his acquaintance that Emma is brought

⁵ Pope, *Epistle to a Lady*, lines 135–6; *Emma*, p. 38. ⁶ See above, pp. 143–4.