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Jane Austen

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THIRD EDITION

Edited by

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side" himself—by the culture into which he is accidentally born? How can there be any free play of individual genius, the free and original play with the language by which we recognize the insight and innovations of genius? The question has to be answered separately for the work of each artist, but as for Jane Austen's work we have been finding answers all along—in her exploitation of antithetical structures to convey ambivalent attitudes, in her ironic use of syntactical elaborations that go against the grain of the language and that convey moral aberrations, and finally in her direct and oblique play with an inherited vocabulary that is materialistic in reference and that she forces—or blandishes or intrigues—into spiritual duties.

The language base of the Austen novel gives us the limiting conditions of the culture. Somehow, using this language of acquisitiveness and calculation and materialism, a language common to the most admirable characters as well as to the basest characters in the book, the spiritually creative persons will have to form their destinies. The project would be so much easier if the intelligent people and the stupid people, the people who are morally alive and the people who are morally dead, had each their different language to distinguish and publicize their differences! But unfortunately for that ease, they have only one language. Fortunately for the drama of the Austen novel, there is this difficulty of the single materialistic language; for drama subsists on difficulty. Within the sterile confines of public assumptions, the Austen protagonists find with difficulty the fertility of honest and intelligent individual feeling. On a basis of communication that is drawn always from the public and savage theology of "property," the delicate lines of spiritual adjustment are explored. The final fought-for recognitions of value are recognitions of the unity of experience—a unity between the common culture and the individual development. No one more knowledgeably than this perceptive and witty woman, ambushed by imbecility, could have conducted such an exploration.

ALISTAIR DUCKWORTH

Pride and Prejudice: The Reconstitution of Society†

More successfully than *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* moves from an initial condition of potential social fragmentation to a resolution in which the grounds of society are reconstituted as the principal characters come together in marriage. As in the former novel, there is

† From *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971) 116–28, 140–43. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

a recognition of widespread economic motivation in human conduct, but a more important bar, initially, to the continuity of a traditionally grounded society is the existence everywhere of separations—between classes in the context of society as a whole, between minds in the smaller context of the home.

The fragmentary nature of the novel's world is humorously evident from the beginning in the constitution of the Bennet family itself, as any number of scenes could illustrate. Consider, for example, the various reactions to Mr. Collins's letter announcing his intention to visit Longbourn:

> "There is some sense in what he says about the girls however;" [said Mrs. Bennet] "and if he is disposed to make them any amends, I shall not be the person to discourage him."
>
> "Though it is difficult," said Jane, "to guess in what way he can mean to make us the atonement he thinks our due, the wish is certainly to his credit."
>
> Elizabeth was chiefly struck with his extraordinary deference for Lady Catherine, and his kind intention of christening, marrying, and burying his parishioners whenever it were required.
>
> "He must be an oddity, I think," said she. "I cannot make him out.—There is something very pompous in his stile.—And what can he mean by apologizing for being next in the entail?—We cannot suppose he would help it, if he could.—Can he be a sensible man, sir?"
>
> "No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him."
>
> "In point of composition," said Mary, "his letter does not seem defective. The idea of the olive branch perhaps is not wholly new, yet I think it is well expressed."
>
> To Catherine and Lydia, neither the letter nor its writer were in any degree interesting. It was next to impossible that their cousin should come in a scarlet coat. . . .

Mr. Bennet's somewhat cynical irony, his wife's fixed concern to marry off her daughters, Jane's indiscriminate benevolence, Mary's pedantry, the youngest sisters' love of the military, are all evident, as, too, are Elizabeth's perceptiveness and special position (hers are the only thoughts reported). But beyond the humorous revelation of character the scene discloses an important concern of the novel. The meaning of any statement or action, such a method suggests, is not single, but multiple in ratio to the number of minds perceiving it. In such an individualistic—almost Shandean—world,[1] meaning is in danger of

1. The idiosyncratic world of Laurence Sterne's (1713–1768) *The Life and Options of Tristam Shandy, Gentleman* (1760–64) [*Editor*]

becoming a function of private desire, and all that does not accord with the individual vision is in danger of being discredited. Only when self-interest encounters self-interest, seemingly, is communication, indeed conversation, possible. Mr. Collins and Mrs. Bennet understand each other perfectly in their "tête-à-tête" before breakfast at Longbourn. When coincidence of interest is absent, mind is closed to mind and conversation is in vain, as Mrs. Bennet interminably complains about the injustice of the entail, Sir William Lucas recalls his presentation at St. James's, Mr. Collins descants on the beauty of Rosings.

The distances of the drawing room, moreover, are the mirror of social distances outside. As a "gulf impassable" seems to loom between Darcy and Elizabeth, so there are seemingly uncrossable distances between the aristocracy (Darcy and Lady Catherine), the gentry (the Bennets), and "trade" (the Philipses and the Gardiners). Those who were "formerly in trade"—the Lucases and the Bingleys—add mobility, but hardly continuity, to the social moment, as they seek landed security at their different levels.

How in this world of distances are people, and classes, to come together? This, the crucial question underlying *Pride and Prejudice*, is answered primarily through the education of the hero and heroine, whose union is not only to their mutual advantage, but brings together widely separate outlooks and social positions. As many critics have argued, it is in the mutuality of the concessions made by Elizabeth and Darcy that the novel's attraction lies. If Elizabeth's private vision is shown to be insufficient, then so, too, is Darcy's arrogant assumption that status is value-laden. Only when Elizabeth recognizes that individualism must find its social limits, and Darcy concedes that tradition without individual energy is empty form, can the novel reach its eminently satisfactory conclusion.[2]

That Darcy's pride is convincingly humiliated needs little documentation, but it is more important, I think, to consider Elizabeth's education in the novel. Hers is the only mind to which we are granted continual access, and through her internal development from a private to a social outlook we discover again that for Jane Austen an individ-

2. That *Pride and Prejudice* achieves an ideal relation between the individual and society seems now to be generally agreed. Cf. Lionel Trilling's succinct summary of the novel's thesis: "a formal rhetoric, traditional and rigorous, must find a way to accommodate a female vivacity, which in turn must recognize the principled demands of the strict male syntax" (*The Opposing Self* [1955] 222). Samuel Klinger's brilliant article, "Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in the Eighteenth-Century Mode," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 16 (1947): 357–70, sets the novel in the context of the history of ideas, by showing how the various relationships of the novel depend upon commonplace antitheses of ethical and aesthetic debate—art and nature, the rules and originality—the impulse of the whole being toward a reconciliation of extremes and the establishment of a normative mean. Noting the "Whig" resonance of the hero's name, Donald J. Greene, in "Jane Austen and the Peerage," *PMLA*, 68 (1953): 1017–31, argues for a historical rapprochement, suggesting as a "unifying thesis" of the novel (and of Jane Austen's fiction) "the rise of the middle class, a process of which the middle class itself became acutely conscious when Pitt, in effect, overthrew the entrenched political power of the Whig aristocracy in 1784."

ual's moral duty is necessarily to society, properly understood, and that any retreat into a subjective morality is misguided. While *Pride and Prejudice* quite clearly looks with a critical eye upon automatic social responses, it also validates inherited social principles as they are made relevant to the conditions of the moment and properly informed by individual commitment. To support this argument, it will be necessary, first, to demonstrate how carefully Jane Austen has qualified Elizabeth's largely admirable individualism.[3]

For a long time the inadequacy of the heroine's outlook is concealed, as the narrative strategy emphasizes its undoubted virtues. Elizabeth's morality, when seen in action, is praiseworthy. * * * What is important to her are friendship and love, the mutual reciprocation of kindness and concern by two people—sisters, lovers, or friends. This present, all is excusable; this absent, nothing is. But the very reduction of the area of her moral concern renders her outlook susceptible, for, if the other in a close relationship fails to reciprocate affection or trust, disappointment must ensue. * * *

Elizabeth's experience with Wickham, of course, reveals this inadequacy * * *. Wickham is at first view "most gentlemanlike"; "he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address." But these are external qualities only, and it is significant that we hear nothing of his "character," "understanding," "mind"—the inner qualities which Jane Austen invariably requires to inform the outward show. As Elizabeth herself will later realize, the "impropriety" of Wickham's communications at the first meeting is blatant; but, already prejudiced against Darcy, she accepts Wickham's slanderous perspective, and in later refusing Darcy's proposal of marriage will adduce as a major reason his treatment of Wickham: "In what imaginary act of *friendship* can you here defend yourself?" (my italics).

Wickham, it seems to Elizabeth initially, like herself and Jane, holds brief for the holiness of the heart's affections. He discovers value, so it appears, in friendship or in the spontaneous action of the self, and not in a conformity to sterile social principles. In this way, he is the opposite of Darcy, who, in Elizabeth's eyes, allows "nothing for the influence of friendship and affection." Thus, when Jane wishes to see both Wickham and Darcy as in some way right—"do but consider in what a disgraceful light it places Mr. Darcy"—Elizabeth refuses to be persuaded that Wickham's view is just another perspective on Darcy's character. "There was truth in his looks," she says of Wickham, "one

3. Not everyone would agree that *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel of the heroine's education. Marvin Mudrick, for example, finds Elizabeth's attitudes admirable and normative: "Like Mary Crawford later, Elizabeth is a recognizable and striking aspect of her author" (*Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* [1952] 120). There is, Mudrick argues, "no compulsion—personal, thematic, or moral—toward denying the heroine her own powers of judgment" (197). But such a reading ignores the heroine's own gradual awareness of the excesses of her individualism.

knows exactly what to think." And at the Netherfield ball which follows, although it is Wickham and not Darcy who is absent—in spite of the former's assertion that he has "no reason for avoiding" Darcy—it is against Darcy that Elizabeth's "feeling of displeasure" is directed.

* * *

The relativistic (or better, perspectivistic) aspects involved in knowing another person are touched upon at the Netherfield Ball, where a conversation between Elizabeth and Darcy reveals the extent to which initial interpretations of character are constructions, or sketches, based on available (and often inadequate) information. When Elizabeth accuses Darcy of "an unsocial, taciturn disposition," he concedes that this may be a "faithful portrait" in her eyes; and when Elizabeth later questions him about his "temper," she admits that her questions are intended to provide an "illustration" of his character. Darcy has earlier been made aware of her meeting with Wickham, a fact that has bearing on the following exchange:

> She shook her head. "I do not get on at all. I hear such different accounts of you as puzzle me exceedingly."
>
> "I can readily believe," answered he gravely, "that report may vary greatly with respect to me; and I could wish, Miss Bennet, that you were not to sketch my character at the present moment, as there is reason to fear that the performance would reflect no credit on either."
>
> "But if I do not take your likeness now, I may never have another opportunity."

Darcy is here suggesting that Elizabeth should avoid basing her judgment of him on "report," whether the general report of Meryton or the particular report of Wickham. In either case the sketch she will draw will be partial, for its perspective will be limited. Darcy's true character is not to be immediately derived, as Wickham's character has been by Elizabeth, from external appearances. Unwilling to accede to Darcy's implied request that she postpone her judgment, however, Elizabeth takes his likeness now. Her decision angers Darcy, and they part, not to meet again until they come together at Hunsford.

There, in his letter to her following her rejection of his proposal, Elizabeth begins to see Darcy's character in a different "light" and to recognize how badly she has misjudged him from a too easy acceptance of Wickham's partial view and a too hasty response to externals—"every charm of air and address." The perspectivist theme is more importantly continued in the second great recognition scene, Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley. At Darcy's estate Elizabeth comes to an awareness of Darcy's intrinsically worthy character and of the deficiencies of her own outlook. Taken with her response to his letter, her visit

to Derbyshire marks a crucial change in the direction of her critical views, which now turn inward on herself and her family, at the same time as her ethical outlook broadens to take in other than personal and interpersonal factors. At first, Pemberley seems only to add contradictory perspectives on the man; but on larger view the visit refutes perspectivism as a bar to true moral discrimination as it recognizes its inevitable existence in human relations.

* * *

At Pemberley, Darcy is "so desirous to please, so free from self-consequence" that had she and the Gardiners "drawn his character from their own feelings, and his servant's report, without any reference to any other account, the circle in Hertfordshire to which he was known, would not have recognized it for Mr. Darcy."[4] In his home Darcy is exemplary, and the description of his estate, though general, is a natural analogue of his social and moral character.

Pemberley is a model estate, possessing those indications of value that Jane Austen everywhere provides in her descriptions of properly run estates—beautiful trees, well-disposed landscapes, a handsome house, and finely proportioned rooms. Its grounds, while aesthetically pleasing, are quite without pretension or evidence of extravagance. There is a kind of scenic *mediocritas* about the estate, a mean between the extremes of the improver's art and uncultivated nature:

> It was a large, handsome, stone building, 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. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste.

Darcy had evidently given his estate the kind of "modern dress" Edmund Bertram calls for at Sotherton [in *Mansfield Park*]. There is perhaps something here, too, of a Shaftesburian recognition that excellent aesthetic taste denotes an excellence of moral character.[5] Thus, when Elizabeth comes to exclaim to herself that "to be mistress of Pemberley might be something," she has, we might conjecture, come to recognize not merely the money and the status of Pemberley, but its value as the setting of a traditional social and ethical orientation,

4. Mrs. Reynolds is not, however, without "family prejudice," and Jane Austen is careful to provide more than one view of Darcy even at Pemberley. The Lambton community view has "nothing to accuse him of but pride" but they also acknowledge his liberality and charity.
5. A point made by Walton Litz in *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (1965) 103–4. Cf. also Martin Price's remarks in "The Picturesque Moment," in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (1965) 268.

its possibilities—seemingly now only hypothetical—as a context for her responsible social activity.

Following Elizabeth's journey through the park the perspectivist theme is interestingly continued as she accompanies the housekeeper into the dining parlor:

> It was a large, well-proportioned room, handsomely fitted up. Elizabeth, after slightly surveying it, went to a window to enjoy its prospect. The hill, crowned with wood, from which they had descended, receiving increased abruptness from the distance, was a beautiful object. Every disposition of the ground was good; and she looked on the whole scene, the river, the trees scattered on its banks, and the winding of the valley, as far as she could trace it, with delight. As they passed into other rooms, these objects were taking different positions; but from every window there were beauties to be seen.

By looking through the dining parlor window, Elizabeth sees the "whole scene" from one point of view and "as far as she could trace it." She recognizes the harmony of the scene with delight. As she moves from room to room, however, the "objects were taking different positions." Nevertheless, it is still the same landscape that she views. Her position, not the disposition of the ground, is what has altered. By traveling first through the park, then by looking back over it, Elizabeth is made aware of the permanence of the estate and yet of the necessarily partial and angled view of the individual. She sees that no overall view is possible to the single vision, but that an approximation to such a view is possible provided the individual is both retrospective and circumspect. More than this, it is not only the angle of the view but the distance from the object which renders the individual sight fallible. An abrupt hill may have its steepness emphasized, just as Darcy's personal abruptness may be exaggerated, by the distance from which it is viewed.

Elizabeth's journey through the park, from its boundary to the house, is a spatial recapitulation of her association with Darcy from her first prejudiced impressions of his external appearance, through a recognition of other (and seemingly contradictory) views, to a final arrival at the central core of his character. As the reader follows Elizabeth's journey, he learns that although relativism and perspectivism are facts of existence—different people will see life from different windows, and movement through time and space inevitably provides different angles of view—variability is a function of human perception and not a characteristic of truth itself. That which is good and true in life resists the perversions of the individual viewpoint, as Pemberley is a beautiful scene from wherever it is viewed by Elizabeth.

* * *

As we see Elizabeth's prejudice modified, so we see Darcy's pride humbled.[6] But we have also learned, with Elizabeth, that Darcy possesses a "proper pride"—whose definition Mary Bennet, characteristically, has already supplied—and that much (if not all) of what had seemed "so high and so conceited" in his early behavior is open, retrospectively, to a more favorable interpretation.[7] Darcy's "proper pride" is not merely a stereotyped literary attitude but a well-established commitment to propriety in a time of collapsing standards—the pride of a responsible landlord who recognizes with some apprehension "in such days as these" that the norms by which men have lived for generations are in danger of neglect or destruction. * * * Darcy sees his role in life as a permanent one which will fix the nature of the self. "Disguise of every sort" is his abhorrence. His role-behavior is not to be considered an act of *mauvaise foi*, though the Sartrean accusation permits an instructive comparison. Like the "Presiding Judge" and "Chief Treasurer" for whom Sarte has so much distaste, Darcy—as Jane Austen describes him—identifies himself with his role.[8] There is nothing pejorative for Jane Austen in the belief that pride in function is a safeguard against contingency. Whereas for Sartre the acceptance of a role is the evasion of personal freedom, the refusal to see that we can act roles other than the one we now act, for Jane Austen freedom is only authentic when given a proper social context. This is not to say that social position for Jane Austen inevitably confers personal worth—the absurd pretensions of Lady Catherine and Mr. Collins, based as they are solely on position, are satirically exposed. It is to argue that Jane Austen affirms a positive interpretation of social role. Charlotte's marriage to Collins is not the total loss of integrity that Elizabeth considers it, for it shows her willingness to become part of society, to play a social part. Mr. Bennet, on the other hand, so much more witty and attractive than Charlotte, is a less than responsible character in his refusal to play a part. Always the spectator who watches others play their roles, quick to observe discrepancies or ridiculous mannerisms in a performance, Mr. Bennet himself refuses to adopt the role of father and landowner. His chosen freedom from social commitment and his withdrawal from the proper stage of his behavior are serious faults in his character.

* * * Though certain critics have seen the novel as the celebration

6. For an interesting reading of Darcy as a deflated version of the "patrician hero" figure in eighteenth century fiction, and of Elizabeth as an "anti-Evelina," refusing to take the sycophantic role of the typical Richardson-Burney heroine, see Kenneth L. Moler's chapter in *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (1968). Though Moler goes on to show that Jane Austen "does not allow her anti-Evelina to rout her patrician hero completely" [102], he is clearly not concerned to stress—as I am—the education of the heroine in the novel.
7. Reuben Brower points out how "the simultaneity of tonal layers" in the early conversations of the novel permits a favorable interpretation of many of Darcy's apparently rude utterances. ("'Light and Bright and Sparkling': Irony and Fiction in *Pride and Prejudice*," in *The Fields of Light* [1951]).
8. Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (1956) 485.

of the individual spirit, this is at best only half the story. The individual vision is inevitably partial, prone to relativistic impressionism, and in need of a social context. The special attraction of the novel is that it allows a vital personality herself to learn through retrospection the limitations of a private view. Elizabeth's final location within the park of Pemberley is also the self's limitation of its power to define its own essence, the heroine's recognition of moral and social limits within which she must live.

As Elizabeth enters the park, so what had been an enclosure opens to receive an infusion of individual energy. Though an admirable model of society, Pemberley, unlike Mansfield Park, is not a central focus, but a peripheral ideal to which Elizabeth moves. When Darcy leaves his ideal center and moves into the center of less perfect worlds—the assemblies of Meryton or the drawing rooms of Longbourn—his deficiencies become apparent. If Elizabeth's movement is from personality to character, Darcy's movement is from *persona* to person. His strict attention to his station and its duties, admirable as it is, must yet allow access to the claims of spontaneity and relaxation, whilst remaining vigilantly opposed to the social and ethical subversion of both unbridled freedom and passive indolence. If Elizabeth—to put it in the scenic terms of the novel—is out of place with muddy petticoats in the Netherfield drawing room, Darcy is equally "out of his element in a Ball-room."[9] When he wishes to introduce responsibility and tradition there by asking Elizabeth what she thinks of books, he is to be told, "I cannot talk of books in a ballroom." There are still spaces for spontaneity in the world of *Pride and Prejudice*. * * *

The novel is structurally balanced between the basic orientations of the two principals. The central chapters of Darcy's proposal and letter reveal that Elizabeth's objections to him are dual: he has ruined the happiness of her sister by his influence over Bingley, and he has been unjust to Wickham. If, as we have seen, Elizabeth's acceptance of Wickham's charges seriously called into question her personalist ethic, her first accusation is more valid. Darcy's prudent and social point of departure has led him to be blind to the real love that exists between Bingley and Jane. The best solution, clearly, is neither society alone, nor self alone, but self-in-society, the vitalized reconstitution of a social totality, the dynamic compromise between past and present, the simultaneous reception of what is valuable in an inheritance and the liberation of the originality, energy and spontaneity in the living moment. * * *

Recognizing (in "A Letter to William Elliot, Esq." [1795]) that authority needs "other support than the poise of its own gravity," [Edmund] Burke might be describing the characteristic limitation of

9. This quotation actually describes Lord Osborne in *The Watsons*, a character in some respects like Darcy.

Fitzwilliam Darcy. In calling "the impulses of individuals at once to the aid and control of authority," he might be describing Elizabeth's movement in the novel.[1] And in a passage from the *Reflections*, we may discover the thesis and antithesis of *Pride and Prejudice*. Burke requires as qualities of his ideal statesman a "disposition to preserve and an ability to improve" (193–94), and it is exactly these requirements which are united in the marriage of Darcy and Elizabeth. Darcy's is the disposition to preserve, Elizabeth's the ability to improve, and taken together they achieve a synthesis which is not only (as Elizabeth recognizes) a "union . . . to the advantage of both" but a guarantee of a broader union in the fictional world of the novel. By crossing the "gulf impassable," Elizabeth and Darcy provide a fixed moral and social center around which the other marriages group themselves. The Collinses—all prudence—and the Bingleys—all benevolence—will remain; ruling passions will continue to prevail in the Longbourn drawing room and at Lucas Lodge; the Wickhams will continue to move from place to place; relativism and perspectivism will not miraculously vanish from the Meryton community. All these faults, however, are but the surface discontinuities of a ground that is, by the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy, substantial and well disposed.

STUART TAVE

Limitations and Definitions†

Jane Austen was fond of dancing and excelled in it. She often writes about it in her letters. It is the sort of thing one might expect, that enjoyment and ability in moving with significant grace in good time in a restricted space. In the earliest letter of hers that survives, written when she was twenty, she says, "I danced twice with Warren last night, and once with Mr. Charles Watkins, and, to my inexpressible astonishment, I entirely escaped John Lyford. I was forced to fight hard for it, however."[1] There is a lot of action going on in that small space. Even more important, three years later we find that she did dance with John Lyford, on an evening when she had what she calls an odd set of partners. "I had a very pleasant evening, however," she tells her sister, "though you will probably find out that there was no particular reason for it; but I do not think it worth while to wait for enjoyment until

1. *The Works of Edmund Burke* (1906) 5.77, 79–80.

† From *Some Words of Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) 1–2, 12–15, 33–35. Reprinted by permission of The University of Chicago Press. The author's notes have been edited to provide references to the recent edition of Austen's letters.

1. *Jane Austen's Letters*, 3rd ed., ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9–10 Jan. 1796, 2.