

PP

JANE AUSTEN

Tony Tanner

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts

1986

and sensibility were going to have, whatever space and satisfaction intelligence and sensitivity were going to secure for themselves, would have to be within society.

There is perhaps more wisdom in the way the novel concludes than a post-Romantic generation – and we are all post-Romantics – can immediately recognise. But it would certainly not go against the spirit of the book if, while deferring to that wisdom, we remember the scream behind the screen, the scissors straining against the sheath. There is every evidence that Jane Austen intended a complex and not a complacent response.

For in a book which, at root, is about to what extent 'nature' has to be reshaped and 'pruned' to make 'society' possible, the resolution can only be a temporary pause in an endless dialectic. At one point we hear that John Dashwood, a fair example of the fatuous, selfish and stupid people who can thrive in society, is cutting down trees so that he can erect a greenhouse. 'The old walnut trees are all come down to make room for it.' It is just another minor example of his general insensitivity, and Elinor allows it to pass with an inward wince. Yet in a tiny way even this episode points to the abiding paradox of civilization. Man does continually devastate the magnificent wildness of nature in order to put up his little social hot-houses in the clearings; just how stifling and false life can be in that hot-house we have been shown in the scene at the party where Willoughby snubs Marianne. And Jane Austen would not be the first person to feel that there are some trees better left standing, and some greenhouses better left unbuilt. But she was not sentimental about wildness and she recognised that society is necessarily a more or less continuous depredation of unchecked nature. What is implied in all her work is that human society ought to be very good indeed to justify the inroads made on 'nature' – the feelings within us as well as the trees around us – to erect and secure it. To this end sense and sensibility should work together as closely as possible. But – it is another lesson of her novels – the work is not easy and there is the chance of pain at every step of the way. For a perfect balance between the two must remain an artist's dream, and meanwhile many houses serve merely as prisons for once-brilliant dancers, and the greenhouses continue to go up where once the great trees swayed in the more liberal air.

4

Knowledge and Opinion: *Pride and Prejudice*

Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point. . . . I had not seen *Pride and Prejudice* till I read that sentence of yours, and then I got the book. And what did I find? An accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face; a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses.

Thus Charlotte Brontë expressed her dissatisfaction with one of the most enduringly popular of all English novels, in a letter to G. H. Lewes written in 1848. I shall return to the terms of her criticism later, and the significance of their connotations, but the directness of her negative response prompts us to reconsider the reasons for the lasting appeal of the novel and what relevance, if any, it can still have for people living in very different social conditions. I want to suggest various approaches to the novel, which may help to clarify its achievement in terms of its own time and also suggest why the form of that achievement could become distasteful to a Romantic such as Charlotte Brontë. I also hope that by showing the different ways we may look at the novel, its abiding relevance for all of us may become more readily apprehensible.

It is indeed possible to call its relevance to the society of the time into question, for, during a decade in which Napoleon was effectively engaging, if not transforming, Europe, Jane Austen composed a novel in which the most important events are the fact that a man changes his manners and a young lady changes her mind. Soldiers do appear, but in the marginal role of offering distractions to young girls, which in one case goes as far as to

produce an elopement. However, we should be careful here in case we adduce this fact to demonstrate Jane Austen's ignorance of – or indifference to – contemporary history. She makes it clear that the soldiers are the militia – and her readers would have recognised them as part of the body of men specifically raised for the defence of England in the event of an invasion from France (which was distinctly feared at the time). However, since the invasion never came, the men in the militia had plenty of leisure and could be a disruptive presence in the community – as Mr Wickham (a militia officer) is. It is Darcy who pays his debts and buys him a commission in the socially more prestigious regular army. Here again, as Christopher Kent has noted in '*"Real Solemn History" and Social History*' (in *Jane Austen in a Social Context*), Jane Austen makes another telling contemporary point – for those who can read 'acutely' enough:

Even as a regular soldier, Wickham is not sent abroad, but to Newcastle in the turbulently industrial North. This recalls another point: that the army was not simply for use against foreign enemies. In the almost complete absence of effective police forces in England the army was central to the maintenance of order at home.

Jane Austen must have known about the troubles in the industrial North just as she would surely have known about the naval mutinies of 1797 (thought to be Jacobin-inspired), given that she had brothers in the navy. So contemporary history *does* touch the periphery of this novel (it is more in evidence in her subsequent work). Nevertheless it is true to say that, although history is discernible out of the corner of the eye (it is contemporary history which brings about the arrival of the disrupter figure, Wickham – who is more of a danger to the community than the French, or mutinous sailors, or agitating workers), the overall impression given by the book is of a small section of society locked in an almost – *almost* – timeless, ahistorical present in which very little will or can, or even should, change. (It will be very different by the time we get to *Persuasion*.)

For the most part the people are as fixed and repetitive as the linked routines and established social rituals which dominate their lives. Money is a potential (never an actual) problem, and

courtship has its own personal dramas; but everything tends towards the achieving of satisfactory marriages – which is exactly how such a society secures its own continuity and minimises the possibility of anything approaching violent change. In such a world a change of mind – an act by which consciousness demonstrates some independence from the patterns of thought which have predetermined its readings of things – can indeed come to seem a fairly momentous event, an internal modification matched in this novel by an external modification in an individual's behaviour. Let me put it this way. For the first two parts of the book Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet believe that they are taking part in an action which, if turned into a fiction, should be called *Dignity and Perception*. They have to learn to see that their novel is more properly called *Pride and Prejudice*. For Jane Austen's book is, most importantly, about prejudging and rejudging. It is a drama of recognition – re-cognition, that act by which the mind can look again at a thing and if necessary make revisions and amendments until it sees the thing as it really is. As such it is thematically related to the dramas of recognition which constitute the great tradition of Western tragedy – *Oedipus Rex*, *King Lear*, *Phèdre* – albeit the drama has now shifted to the comic mode, as is fitting in a book which is not about the finality of the individual death but the ongoingness of social life.

I am not forgetting the immense charm of Elizabeth Bennet which has so much to do with the appeal of the book: 'I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least I do not know . . .', wrote Jane Austen in a letter; and indeed her combination of energy and intelligence, her gay resilience in a society tending always towards dull conformity, would make her a worthy heroine in a Stendhal novel, which cannot be said for many English heroines. But at this point I want to suggest that a very important part of the book is how it touches on, indeed dramatises, some aspects of the whole problem of knowledge. Eighteenth-century philosophers had, of course, addressed themselves to what Locke called 'the discerning faculties of a man' with unusual analytic rigour, considering not only the question of what we know, but also the more reflexive matter of *how* we know what we know, and the limits set on knowledge by the very processes and instruments of cognition.

John Locke asserted at the start of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that it was 'worth while to search out the bounds between opinion and knowledge; and examine by what measures, in things whereof we have no certain knowledge, we ought to regulate our assent and moderate our persuasion'. And he added, in a *caveat* which is important for understanding much eighteenth-century literature, 'Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct.' Locke pointed out how, because of 'settled habit', often 'we take that for the perception of our sensation which is an idea formed by our judgement'. This fairly accurately sums up Elizabeth's earlier reactions to Darcy. She identifies her sensory perceptions as judgements, or treats impressions as insights. In her violent condemnation of Darcy and the instant credence she gives to Wickham, no matter how understandable the former and excusable the latter, Elizabeth is guilty of 'Wrong Assent, or Error', as Locke entitled one of his chapters. In it he gives some of the causes of man's falling into error, and they include 'Received hypotheses', 'Predominant passions or inclinations' and 'Authority'. These are forces and influences with which every individual consciousness has to contend if it is to make the lonely struggle towards true vision, as Elizabeth's consciousness does; and the fact that whole groups and societies can live in the grip of 'Wrong Assent, or Error', often with intolerably unjust and cruel results, only helps to ensure the continuing relevance of this happy tale of a girl who learned to change her mind.

The first title Jane Austen chose for the work which was finally called *Pride and Prejudice* was *First Impressions*, and I think this provides an important clue to a central concern of the final version. We cannot know how prominently 'first impressions' figured in the first version, since it is lost. There has, needless to say, been a great deal of scholarship devoted to the putative evolution of the novel, and I shall here quote from Brian Southam's *Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts*, since his research in this area is well in advance of my own. He suggests that the book may have started out as another of Jane Austen's early burlesques, though adding that little remains in the final form to indicate such an origin.

The object of the burlesque is hinted at in the title, for the

phrase 'first impressions' comes directly from the terminology of sentimental literature, and Jane Austen would certainly have met it in *Sir Charles Grandison*, where its connotations are briefly defined. She would have known a more recent usage in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), where the heroine is told that by resisting first impressions she will 'acquire that steady dignity of mind, that can alone counter-balance the passions'. Here, as commonly in popular fiction, 'first impressions' exhibit the strength and truth of the heart's immediate and intuitive response, usually love at first sight. Jane Austen had already attacked this concept of feeling in 'Love and Friendship', and in *Sense and Sensibility* it is a deeply-founded trait of Marianne's temperament. . . . There is a striking reversal of this concept in *Pride and Prejudice*, yet in circumstances altogether unsentimental.

He is referring to Elizabeth's 'first impressions' of Darcy's house, Pemberley, which are, as it were, accurate and authenticated by the book. She is also right, we might add, in her first impressions of such figures as Mr Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. But she is wrong in her first impressions of Wickham; and her first impressions of Darcy, though to a large extent warranted by the evidence of his deportment and tone, are an inadequate basis for the rigid judgement which she then erects upon them.

Mr Southam suggests that 'the original title may have been discarded following the publication of a *First Impressions* by Mrs Holford in 1801', and he repeats R. W. Chapman's original observation that the new title almost certainly came from the closing pages of Fanny Burney's *Cecilia*. This book also concerns a very proud young man, Mortimer Delvile, who cannot bring himself to give up his family name, which is the rather perverse condition on which alone Cecilia may inherit a fortune from her uncle. The relationship between this book and Jane Austen's novel has also been explored by other critics and it will suffice here to quote from the wise Dr Lyster's speech near the end of the book:

'The whole of his unfortunate business', said Dr Lyster, 'has been the result of PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. Your uncle, the Dean, began it, by his arbitrary will, as if an ordinance of his own

could arrest the course of nature! . . . Your father, Mr Mortimer, continued it with the same self-partiality, preferring the wretched gratification of tickling his ear with a favourite sound, to the solid happiness of his son with a rich and deserving wife. Yet this, however, remember: if to PRIDE AND PREJUDICE you owe your miseries, so wonderfully is good and evil balanced, that to PRIDE AND PREJUDICE you will also owe their termination.'

But, while conceding that the phrase 'first impressions' may be more than a glancing blow aimed at the conventions of the sentimental novel, I want to suggest a further possible implication in Jane Austen's original title. Without for a moment suggesting that she read as much contemporary philosophy as she did fiction (though with so intelligent a woman it is scarcely impossible), I think it is worth pointing out that 'impressions' is one of the key words in David Hume's philosophy, and the one to which he gives pre-eminence as the source of our knowledge. Thus from the beginning of the *Treatise of Human Nature*:

All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS. The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions*; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By *ideas* I mean the faint image of these in thinking and reasoning. . . . There is another division of our perceptions, which it will be convenient to observe, and which extends itself both to our impressions and ideas. This division is into SIMPLE and COMPLEX. . . . I observe that many of our complex ideas never had impressions, that corresponded to them, and that many of our complex impressions never are exactly copied in ideas. I can imagine to myself such a city as the *New Jerusalem*, whose pavement is gold and walls are rubies, tho' I never saw any such. I have seen *Paris*; but shall I affirm that I can form such an idea of that city, as will perfectly

represent all its streets and houses in their real and just proportions?

Elizabeth has a lively mind – her liveliness is indeed one of the qualities which wins Darcy to her – and her impressions are comparably lively, since the quality of the registering consciousness necessarily affects the intensity of the registered impressions. Similarly she is capable both of complex impressions and of complex ideas – more of this later. Her problem, in Hume's terms, is that her complex ideas are not always firmly based on her complex impressions obtained from the scenes before her. Here we notice that eighteenth-century suspicion of imagination to which Jane Austen partially subscribed, since it was likely to make you believe ideas not based on impressions – to confuse the *New Jerusalem* and *Paris*. (In rebelling against eighteenth-century philosophy and psychology, Blake was to assert the primacy of the faculty which could envision the *New Jerusalem* and elevate it over the mere perception of *Paris*.)

If, says Hume, we wish to understand our ideas, we must go back to our impressions: 'By what invention can we throw light upon these ideas, and render them altogether precise and determinate to our intellectual view? Produce the impressions or original sentiments, from which the ideas are copied.' That is from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. In the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* he also stresses that

the senses alone are not implicitly to be depended on; but that we must correct their evidence by reason, and by considerations, derived from the nature of the medium, the distance of the object, and the disposition of the organ, in order to render them, within their sphere, the proper *criteria* of truth and falsehood.

And 'a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection'. Impressions beget inclinations, and those inclinations may then come under the consideration of reason. But reason, being cool and disengaged, is not a motive to action, and directs only the impulse received from appetite or inclination, by

showing us the means of attaining happiness or avoiding misery. One further quotation:

In every situation or incident, there are many particular and seemingly minute circumstances, which the man of greatest talent is, at first, apt to overlook, though on them the justness of his conclusions, and consequently the prudence of his conduct, entirely depend. . . . The truth is, an unexperienced reasoner could be no reasoner at all, were he absolutely unexperienced.

Without experience, no reason; without impressions, no experience. This suggests the particular importance of 'first impressions', because, although they may well need subsequent correction, amplification, supplementation, and so on, they constitute the beginning of experience. All the above quotations from Hume seem to me to apply very aptly to *Pride and Prejudice* and I do not think this aptness needs spelling out. For Jane Austen, as for Hume, the individual needs to be *both* an experiencer *and* a reasoner: the former without the latter is error-prone, the latter without the former is useless if not impossible (as exemplified by Mary Bennet's sententious comments; she is *all* 'cool and disengaged' reason, and thus no reasoner at all). Both experience and reason depend upon impressions, and first impressions thus become our first steps into full human life. To overstress this may become a matter suitable for burlesque, but as a general proposition it is not inherently so.

To add to this proposition the reminder that first impressions, indeed all impressions, may need subsequent revision is only to say that full human life is a complex affair, and Jane Austen makes us well aware of this complexity. From the problematical irony of the opening assertion – 'It is a truth universally acknowledged' – there are constant reminders of the shiftingness of what people take to be 'truth'; for what is 'universally acknowledged' can change not only from society to society but from person to person, and indeed within the same person over a period of time. There is in the book a whole vocabulary connected with the process of decisions, opinion, conviction, stressing or suggesting how various and unstable are people's ideas,

judgements, accounts and versions of situations and people. After one evening of seeing Darcy 'His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world'; Elizabeth asks Wickham about Lady Catherine and 'allowed that he had given a very rational account'; she also believes his account of his treatment by Darcy and it is left to Jane to suggest that 'interested people have perhaps misrepresented each to the other'. Jane, however, has her own myopia, for, in her desire to think well of the whole world, she sees Miss Bingley's treatment of her as agreeable while Elizabeth more accurately discerns it as supercilious. However, Elizabeth is too confident, as when she asserts to her more tentative sister, 'I beg your pardon; one knows exactly what to think.' She is 'resolved' against Darcy and for a while takes pleasure in Wickham, who is, temporarily, 'universally liked'. She questions Darcy whether he has never allowed himself 'to be blinded by prejudice', without thinking that she may at that very moment be guilty of prejudging, with its resulting screening of vision. Opinions are constantly changing as people's behaviour appears in a different light. Elizabeth 'represents' a person or a situation in one way, while Jane adheres to her own 'idea' of things. It is Jane who, when Darcy is condemned by everybody else as 'the worst of men', 'pleaded for allowances and urged the possibility of mistakes'. Of course it is not long before opinion shifts against Wickham. 'Everybody declared that he was the wickedest young man in the world', just as everybody's opinion quickly reverses itself towards the Bennet family. 'The Bennets were speedily pronounced to be the luckiest family in the world, though only a few weeks before, when Lydia had first run away, they had been generally proved to be marked out for misfortune' (emphasis added). The fallibility of our 'proofs' and the prematurity of all too many of our 'pronouncements' are amply demonstrated in this novel. The 'anxious interpretation' which is made necessary on social occasions is examined, and the 'interest' which lies behind this or that reading of things is alluded to. When Mrs Gardiner 'recollects having heard Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy formerly spoken of as a very proud, ill-natured boy' she takes it, temporarily, as knowledge (emphasis added).

It is of course Elizabeth who most importantly comes to 'wish that her former opinions had been more reasonable, her

expressions more moderate'. As opposed to Jane, whom she calls 'honestly blind', Elizabeth has more 'quickness of observation'. But in Darcy's case her observation proves to be too quick. Not that we can or wish to count her wrong in her 'first impressions' of Darcy, for his manner is proud, patronising and, in his famous proposal, insulting and unworthy of a gentleman – as Elizabeth very properly points out to our great delight. But she had formed a fixed 'idea' of the whole Darcy on insufficient data, and in believing Wickham's account of the man – a purely verbal fabrication – she is putting too much confidence in unverified and, as it turns out, completely false, evidence.

However, it is important to note that her *éclaircissement* first comes through language as well – in the form of Darcy's letter. The passages describing her changing reaction to that letter are among the most important in the book. In effect she is having to choose between two opposed and mutually exclusive versions – Wickham's and Darcy's. 'On both sides it was only assertion.' She had at first been taken in by Wickham's plausible physical manner, but she gradually comes to put more trust in Darcy's authoritative writing-manner – she is discriminating between styles at this point. (Note that she immediately judges that Mr Collins is not a sensible man from the pompous style of his letter-writing – in this case, first impressions are validated.) She realises that 'the affair . . . was capable of a turn which must make him [Darcy] entirely blameless throughout the whole'. *The affair was capable of a turn* – there in essence is the whole problem which for ever confronts the interpreting human consciousness, which can turn things now this way, now that way, as it plays, seriously or sportively, with the varying versions of reality which it is capable of proliferating: one concrete world – many partial mental pictures of it. But if it is the problem of consciousness, it can also be its salvation, for it enables a person to change his version or interpretation of things. Just how tenacious a man can be of a fixed version, and how disastrous that tenacity can be when it is a wrong version, is indeed the very subject of *King Lear*. Elizabeth thinks for a time that her wrong version has cost her a perfect mate and a great house, crucial things for a young lady in that society:

She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man

who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. . . . It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both. . . . But no such happy marriage could now teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was.

But of course she does not have to undergo Lear's tribulations. By an intelligent and just reading of Darcy's letter she not only changes her mind about him: she comes to a moment of intense realisation about herself.

How differently did everything now appear in which he was concerned! . . . She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd. 'How despicably have I acted!' she cried; 'I, who have prided myself on my discernment! . . . Till this moment I never knew myself.'

This may seem somewhat excessive – it is part of Darcy's improvement that he comes to acknowledge the justness of much of what she has said about his behaviour and manner. The important thing is that in perceiving her own pride and prejudice – notice she uses both words of herself – Elizabeth can now begin to be free of them. There can be few more important moments in the evolution of a human consciousness than such an act of recognition. There is much in our literature as well as our experience to suggest that the person who never comes to the point of saying, 'I never knew myself', will indeed remain for ever cut off from any self-knowledge – what possible effect there is on his or her vision and conduct need not here be spelt out. If we don't know ourselves, we don't know our world.

It is not surprising that after wandering alone for two hours 'giving way to every variety of thought – re-considering events, determining probabilities', as Elizabeth does after receiving Darcy's letter, she experiences 'fatigue'. For she has indeed been through an ordeal and engaged in a critical effort of rearranging her mental furniture. As F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, 'I was impelled to think. God, was it difficult! The moving about of great secret trunks.' That there are internal expenditures of energy quite as exhausting as any bout of external action is a truth which

Jane Austen, with her restricted position in a fairly immobile society, was peculiarly able to appreciate Elizabeth's particular ordeal is indeed a very ancient one, for she has been confronting for the first time the problematical discrepancies between appearances and reality, and the unsuspected limits of cognition. It is a theme as old as *Oedipus Rex*, and, even if all that is involved is recognising a rake and a gentleman respectively for what they really are, in Elizabeth's society, no less than in ancient Greece, such acts of recognition are decisive in the procuring of happiness or misery.

The constant need to be alert to the difference between appearance and reality is made clear from the start. Compared with Bingley and Darcy, Mr Hurst 'merely looked the gentleman'. Since Mr Hurst alternates between playing cards and sleeping, he is hardly a problematical character. Wickham of course is more so. 'His appearance was greatly in his favour' and he has a 'very pleasing address'. He is 'beyond' all the officers of his regiment 'in person, countenance, air, and walk'. Elizabeth does not have it 'in her nature to question the veracity of a young man of such amiable appearance as Wickham'. He 'must always be her model of the amiable and the pleasing'. It is only after reading Darcy's letter that she has to start changing that model. As the above-quoted words make clear (none of them has pronounced ethical connotations), Elizabeth has hitherto responded to Wickham's manner, or that part of the self which is visible on social occasions. After the letter she thinks back:

As to his real character had information been in her power, she had never felt a wish of inquiring. His countenance, voice, and manner had established him at once in the possession of every virtue. She tried to recollect some instance of goodness, some distinguished trait of integrity or benevolence . . . but she could remember no more substantial good than the general approbation of the neighbourhood.

She has now started to think about 'substance' as being distinct from 'appearance', and from this point on Darcy's character will continue to rise in her estimation as Wickham's falls, until she can complain to Jane, 'There certainly was some great mismanagement in the education of these two young men. One

has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it.' Poor Jane, so reluctant to believe in the existence of human duplicity and evil scheming, would like to believe in the goodness of both men, but Elizabeth, with her more rigorous mind, points out that there is 'but such a quantity of merit between them; just enough to make one good sort of man; and of late it has been shifting about pretty much. For my part, I am inclined to believe it all Mr Darcy's.' Even here, as we can see, Elizabeth's sense of humour has not deserted her; and it enables her to disconcert Wickham with a nice irony. On her return from Rosings, Wickham asks if Darcy's 'ordinary style' has improved, adding, 'For I dare not hope that he is improved in essentials.' Elizabeth, by now convinced of the essential goodness of Darcy, can thus reply meaningfully, 'Oh, no! . . . In essentials, I believe, he is very much what he ever was.' Wickham makes a rather agitated retreat, adding with weak insolence, 'I must rejoice that he is wise enough to assume even the *appearance* of what is right.' The emphasis is Jane Austen's and the word occurs again later in the chapter, again italicised, as if to stress that Elizabeth is now fully awakened to the possible disparities between appearance and substance.

Just what constitutes a person's 'real character' is one of the concerns of the book: the phrase occurs more than once, usually with the added idea that it is something that can be 'exposed' (and thus, by the same token, concealed). In particular, Darcy in his letter writes that, whatever Elizabeth may feel about Wickham, it 'shall not prevent me from unfolding his real character', just as later in the letter he narrates Wickham's attempt to seduce Georgiana, 'a circumstance . . . which no obligation less than the present should induce me to unfold to any human being'. Cordelia's last words before being banished are

Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides
Who covers faults, at last shame them derides.

'Unfolding' a hidden reality is of course replacing mere appearance with substance. The fact that reality can get folded up and hidden away – because we are so built that we are forced to work from first impressions which can be cynically manipulated –

means that it is very important to be careful about what we regard as convincing evidence. It is the mistake of both Lear and Othello that they ask for the wrong kind of evidence, thus making themselves vulnerable to those who are willing to fabricate a set of false appearances. But in Shakespearean tragedy, as also in *Pride and Prejudice*, the 'real character' of both the good and the bad – of Cordelia and Iago, of Darcy and Wickham – is 'unfolded'. The cost and process of the unfolding are of course very different in each case. But the perennial theme is common to both.

At this point we may ask if Elizabeth has any more than calligraphic evidence for her new belief as to the relative merits of Darcy and Wickham. Obviously something more is required to give 'substance' to what could be mere 'assertion'. There is of course the magnanimous part he plays in the crisis precipitated by the elopement of Lydia and Wickham, but Elizabeth's improved vision has already by then 'learned to detect' the boring affectation in Wickham's manner, and appreciate the solid merit of Darcy. The education of her vision, if we may call it so, starts with Darcy's letter, but it is not complete until she has penetrated his house and confronted his portrait. This occurs on her visit to Derbyshire when the Gardiners persuade her to join them in looking round Pemberley, Darcy's fine house, and its beautiful grounds. This physical penetration of the interior of Pemberley, which is both an analogue and an aid for her perceptual penetration of the interior quality of its owner, occurs at the beginning of Book III, and after the proposal-letter episode I regard it as the most important scene in the book and wish to consider it in some detail.

The word 'picture' occurs frequently in the novel, often in the sense of people 'picturing' something – a ball, a married couple, a desired situation – to themselves. One important example of this is the following: 'Had Elizabeth's opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort.' These pictures, then, are mental images, either derived from impressions or conjured up by imagination. (It is of course a particular quality of Elizabeth's that she is able to think outside the reality picture offered to her by her own family.) There are also more literal references to pictures – as when Miss Bingley suggests to Darcy, by way of a spiteful joke, that he should hang portraits of some of

Elizabeth's socially inferior (to Darcy) relatives at Pemberley, adding, 'As for your Elizabeth's picture, you must not attempt to have it taken, for what painter could do justice to those beautiful eyes?' The relation between actual portraits and mental pictures is suggested when Darcy is dancing with Elizabeth. She has teased him with a witty description of their common characteristics. ' "This is not a very striking resemblance of your own character, I am sure," said he. "How near it may be to *mine*, I cannot pretend to say. You think it a faithful portrait undoubtedly." ' Later in the same dance he says, '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.' Her answer is, 'But if I do not take your likeness now, I may never have another opportunity.' This is more than mere banter because, since we cannot literally internalise another person, it is at all times extremely important what particular picture or portrait of that person we carry with us. The portrait metaphor allows one to suggest that the picture should be done with some care in order that the gallery of the mind should not be hung with a series of unjust unlikenesses.'

We know that Jane Austen herself went to art galleries when she could. Thus in a letter to Cassandra in 1811: 'May and I, after disposing of her Father and Mother, went to the Liverpool Museum, & the British Gallery, & I had some amusement at each, tho' my preference for Men & Women, always inclines me to attend more to the company than the sight.' And in 1813 it is clear that when she went to a portrait gallery she had her own fictional portraits in mind. Again the letter is to Cassandra:

Henry and I went to the Exhibition in Spring Gardens. It is not thought a good collection, but I was very well pleased – particularly (pray tell Fanny) with a small portrait of Mrs Bingley, excessively like her. I went in hopes of finding one of her Sister, but there was no Mrs Darcy; – perhaps, however, I may find her in the Great Exhibition which we shall go to, if we have time; – I have no chance of her in the collection of Sir Joshua Reynolds Paintings which is now shewing in Pall Mall & which we are also to visit. – Mrs Bingley's is exactly herself, size, shaped face, features and sweetness; there never was a greater likeness. She is dressed in a white gown, with green

ornaments, which convinces me of what I had always supposed, that green was a favourite colour with her. I dare say Mrs D. will be in Yellow.

Later in the letter she adds,

We have been both to the Exhibition & Sir J. Reynolds', - and I am disappointed, for there was nothing like Mrs D at either. I can only imagine that Mr D. prizes any Picture of her too much to like it should be exposed to the public eye. - I can imagine he wd have that sort of feeling - that mixture of Love, Pride & Delicacy. - Setting aside this disappointment, I had great amusement among the Pictures. . . .

It is worth noting that she does not expect to find a recognizable portrait of Elizabeth in Sir Joshua Reynolds's collection. For Reynolds, the artist, including the portraitist, 'acquires a just idea of beautiful forms; he corrects nature by her self, her imperfect state by her more perfect'. In his *Discourses* Reynolds laid typical neoclassical stress on 'central forms', and generalised figures which are not 'the representation of an individual, but of a class'. This neoclassic approach tended to minimise the individuating qualities of a person or thing in favour of more generic attributes or in deference to classical models. But for Jane Austen, the novelist and admirer of Richardson, it was precisely the individuating qualities, which sharply differentiated even the sisters in the same family, which held most interest. Elizabeth is not a type; indeed she has that kind of independent energy which is most calculated to disturb a typological attitude to people. She wants recognising for what she is and not what she might represent (Mr Collins's regard for her, as for Charlotte, is, she knows, wholly 'imaginary' - he sees her only as a suitable wife figure, and is dismissed according to his deserts). She is fortunate in attracting the discerning eye of Darcy - he is always staring at her, as if trying to read her fully, or capture the most complete likeness for his memory - for he alone of the men in the book is equipped to do justice to all her real qualities. It is thus only right that she should be brought to a full recognition of *his* real qualities. And this finally happens at Pemberley.

As they drive through the grounds Elizabeth admires the

unobtrusive good taste in evidence - 'neither formal nor falsely adorned' - and 'at that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!' Then they are led through the house, where again the elegance and genuine taste - 'neither gaudy nor uselessly fine' - awakens her admiration, and she again reverts to what she regards as her lost opportunity: "And of this place," thought she, "I might have been mistress!" Showing them round the house is Mrs Reynolds, a sort of cicerone who may be guilty of 'family prejudice' but whose testimony concerning the youthful qualities of Darcy and Wickham has authority for Elizabeth. She is a voice from *within* the house and thus acquainted with Darcy from his origins, and is not, as Elizabeth necessarily is, a purely social acquaintance. She shows them some miniatures, including one of Darcy ('the best landlord, and the best master') and invites Elizabeth to go and look at a larger portrait of Darcy upstairs in the picture gallery. Elizabeth walks among the portraits

in quest of the only face whose features would be known to her. At last it arrested her - and she beheld a striking resemblance of Mr Darcy, with such a smile over the face as she remembered to have sometimes seen when he looked at her. She stood several minutes before the picture, in earnest contemplation. . . . There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth's mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance. . . . Every idea that had been brought forward by the housekeeper was favourable to his character, and as she stood before the canvas on which he was represented, she fixed his eyes upon herself, she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression.

One can almost detect the unformulated thought: 'and of this man I might have been the wife'. It is a thought which explicitly occurs to her in due course.

Standing in the middle of the house, contemplating the qualities in the face in the portrait (qualities imparted and corroborated to some extent by the housekeeper), Elizabeth completes the act of recognition which started with the reading of

Darcy's letter. Notice the fact that the truest portrait is the large one in the more private part of the house upstairs; downstairs Darcy is only visible in 'miniature'. We can imagine that, the further a man goes from the house in which he is truly known, the more liable he is both to misrepresentation and to non-recognition. Standing before the large and true image of the real Darcy, Elizabeth has in effect completed her journey. When she next meets the original, outside in the grounds, she is no longer in any doubt as to his true worth. The rest of the book is, indeed, for the most part concerned with externalities – the mere melodrama of Wickham's elopement with Lydia, which gives Darcy a chance to reveal his qualities in action. But all this is only delay, not advance, in terms of the novel. For the most important action is complete when Elizabeth has finished the contemplation of the portrait. In answer to Jane's questions concerning when Elizabeth first realised she was in love with Darcy, Elizabeth replies, 'I believe it must date from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley.' This is not wholly a joke, nor should it be taken to indicate that at heart Elizabeth is just another materialist in what is shown to be a distinctly materialistic society. In this case the grounds, the house, the portrait all bespeak the real man – they represent a visible extension of his inner qualities, his true style. And, if Pemberley represents an ordering of natural, social and domestic space which is everything that the Bennet household is not, who shall blame Elizabeth for recognising that she would be more truly at home there? However, it is true that such a remark could only be made in the context of a society which shared certain basic agreements about the importance and significance of objects, domiciles and possessions. One can well imagine Charlotte Brontë's response to a remark of this kind. But these are matters to which we shall return.

Having mentioned the central importance of Darcy's letter, which contains an 'account of my actions and their motives' for Elizabeth to peruse and reperuse in private, we might at this point consider the overall importance of letters in this novel. So much of the main information in the novel is conveyed by letter – whether it be Mr Collins's vapid but acquisitive pomposity, or Miss Bingley's competitive coldness, or Mr Gardiner's account of Darcy's role in securing the marriage of Lydia and Wickham –

that there has been some speculation that the novel was initially conceived in epistolary form. Thus Brian Southam:

In *Sense and Sensibility*, twenty-one letters are mentioned, quoted, or given verbatim, and in *Pride and Prejudice* no fewer than forty-four, including references to a 'regular and frequent' correspondence between Elizabeth and Charlotte Lucas, and the further regular communications of Elizabeth and Jane with Mrs Gardiner, a very credible system of letters to carry much of the story in epistolary form. If this reconstruction is feasible it supports my theory that, like *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* was originally a novel-in-letters.

On the other hand critics have been drawn to note the brilliance of much of the dialogue and have suggested that the novel has close affinities with the drama. In an excellent essay entitled 'Light and Bright and Sparkling' Reuben Brower writes, 'In analysing the ironies and the assumptions, we shall see how intensely dramatic the dialogue is, dramatic in the sense of defining characters through the way they speak and are spoken about', and he proceeds to show just how much, and how subtly, is revealed in various passages of dialogue. Walton Litz in his book on Jane Austen says that the tripartite structure of the novel is similar to the structure of a three-act play, and adds that in many of the passages 'we are reminded of the novel's affinities with the best in eighteenth-century drama'. But he also notes that the early part of the novel is more dramatic than the latter.

Howard S. Babb has shown how Jane Austen plays on the word 'performance' in the early dialogues, bringing all the implications of the word together in the great scene at Rosings, where Elizabeth's actual performance at the piano becomes the centre of a dramatic confrontation. 'But after the scene at Rosings, when Darcy's letter begins Elizabeth's movement toward self-recognition, the term "performance" quietly disappears from the novel. The first half of *Pride and Prejudice* has indeed been a dramatic performance, but in the second half a mixture of narrative, summary, and scene carries the plot towards the conclusion.' As he rightly says, this reveals that Jane Austen felt able to take advantage both of scenic representation and of authorial omniscience using third-person narrative, but I think

there is another interesting aspect of the combination of the dramatic and the epistolary – particularly bearing in mind that, as Babb has noted, the word ‘performance’ fades after Elizabeth receives Darcy’s letter.

In essence a letter is written and read in retirement from the social scene; this is certainly true of Darcy’s major epistolary clarification. The letter enables him to formulate things and convey information in a way which would not be possible on a social occasion, where public modes of utterance necessarily restrict the more private ones. A letter is also a transforming of action into words, which may then be reflected on in a way which is impossible while one is actually involved in the action. ‘Introspection is retrospection’, said Sartre, and so is letter-writing, even if the letter seems to be written in the midst of some anxious situation. By combining the dramatic and the epistolary modes, Jane Austen has deftly set before us a basic truth – that we are both performing selves and reflective selves. It is in social performance that Elizabeth reveals all her vitality, vivacity and wit, as well as her actual physical magnetism; it is in private reflection (‘reflection must be reserved for solitary hours’) that she matures in judgement, reconsiders first impressions, and is able to make substantial changes to her mental reality picture. How suitable, then, that after giving us some of the most brilliant ‘performances’ in English fiction, Jane Austen should allow her novel to move away from performance towards reflection after Darcy’s letter. She thus subtly offers an analogue of how – in her view – the individual should develop. For, if the human being is to be fully human, then to the energy of performance must be added the wisdom of reflection.

The idea of the self as a performer has taken hold of much recent thought, and most people recognise that society is effectively held together by a series of tacitly acknowledged rituals in which we all play a number of different parts. Jane Austen certainly believed in the value of the social rituals of her time – be they only balls, dinners, evening entertainments – and would have seen them, at their best, as ceremonies and celebrations of the values of the community. What she was also clearly aware of was how the failings of some of the performers – insensitivity, malice, arrogance, foolishness and so on – could spoil the ritual, and transform a ceremony to be enjoyed into a

nightmare to be endured, as Elizabeth has so often to endure her mother’s agonising ceremonial violations. But, although we are all role-players for much of the time we spend with other people, there will obviously be a difference between those people who are unaware of the fact – who disappear into their roles, as it were – and those who are at all times quite aware that the particular role they are performing in any one particular situation is not to be identified as their self, that they have facets and dimensions of character which cannot always be revealed on every occasion. The former type of person may sometimes appear to be something of an automaton, incapable of reflection and detachment, while the latter type of person may often wish to make a gesture of disengagement from the roles he is called on to play, to indicate that he has not become mindlessly imprisoned in those roles. Such gestures are expressive of what Erving Goffman calls ‘role distance’.

Considering the characters in Jane Austen’s novel in this light, we can see that Mr Bennet has become completely cynical about the social roles he is called on to play. He extracts a somewhat bitter pleasure from making gestures of disengagement from these roles, to compensate for the familial miseries brought about by his having married a sexually attractive but unintelligent woman (another example of the dangers of unreflective action based on first impressions – Lydia is her father’s daughter as well as her mother’s). It is Lydia’s precipitous elopement, in addition to the more remote but not dissimilar marriage of her father, that provokes Jane Austen to her most direct attack on first impressions. She is justifying Elizabeth’s change of mind about Darcy.

If gratitude and esteem are good foundations of affection, Elizabeth’s change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise – if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural, in comparison of what is so often described as arising on a first interview with its object, and even before two words have been exchanged – nothing can be said in her defense, except that she had given somewhat of a trial of the latter method in her partiality for Wickham, and that its ill success might, perhaps, authorize her to seek the other less interesting mode of attachment.

It is fairly clear here that Jane Austen is showing her particular suspicion of the pre-verbal immediacy of sexual attraction. In this area in particular, she obviously thought that to act on first impressions could only be disastrous.

Mr Bennet effectively abdicates from the one role it is most incumbent on him to perform: that is, the role of father. He has taken refuge in mockery just as he takes refuge in his library – both are gestures of disengagement from the necessary rituals of family and society. Mrs Bennet, incapable of reflection, loses herself in her performance. Unfortunately she has a very limited view of the requirements of that performance; lacking any introspective tendencies she is incapable of appreciating the feelings of others and is *only* aware of material objects – hats, dresses, uniforms – and marriage, not as a meeting of true minds but as a disposing of redundant daughters. On another level Lady Catherine de Bourgh has none of what Jane Austen elsewhere approvingly calls ‘the Dignity of Rank’ but only the mindlessness of rank. She thinks her position entitles her to dictate to other people and impose her ‘schemes’ on them (a recurrent word in the book). She has never thought out, or thought round, the full implications of her performance. Being incapable of reflection she makes people suffer. At the other extreme Mary Bennet sees herself as a sage reflector before she has had any experience; when reflection portentously precedes performance in this way it is shown to be comical and useless. Darcy of course *has* thought about all the implications of his role in society, at least by the end of the book. His hauteur makes him go in for a certain amount of ‘role distance’, as at the first ball, when he slighted Elizabeth to show his contemptuous detachment from the social ritual of the moment; but, unlike Wickham, he is not cynical about role-playing, and by the end his performing self is shown to be in harmony with his reflecting self.

Jane Bennet is incapable of role distance, but she has such a generous and high-minded conception of the roles she has to perform – daughter, sister, lover, wife – that she strikes us at all times as being both sensitive and sincere. Much the same could be said of Bingley, whose rather spineless plasticity in the hands of Darcy’s more decisive will indicates nevertheless that his basic good nature extends to a willingness to perform roles which are thrust upon him – obviously a potential source of vulnerability.

Elizabeth is of course special. She can indeed perform all the roles that her familial and social situations require of her; moreover, she performs many of them with an *esprit* or an irony which reveal, as it were, a potential overspill of personality, as if there is more of her than can ever be expressed in any one role. She is also capable of role distance, not in her father’s spirit of cynicism but in her own spirit of determined independence. She will put truth to self above truth to role. Thus in two of the scenes which give us the most pleasure to read we see her refusing to take on the roles which people in socially superior positions attempt to impose on her. To Darcy’s first, lordly proposal she refuses to respond in the role of passive grateful female, as he obviously expects she will; while in the face of Lady Catherine’s imperious insistence that she promise not to marry Darcy she refuses to act the compliant social inferior to which role Lady Catherine is relegating her. The assertion of the free-choosing self and its resistance to the would-be tyranny of roles imposed on it from socially superior powers is a spectacle which delights us now quite as much as it can have done Jane Austen’s contemporaries.

All that has been said makes it clear that there are at least two different kinds of characters in the book: those who are fully defined by their roles, even lost in them, and those who can see round their roles and do not lose awareness of what they are doing. D. W. Harding uses the terms character and caricature to point to this difference, and, commenting that ‘in painting it must be rather rare for caricature and full portraiture to be brought together in one group’, he goes on to show what Jane Austen achieves by her carefully handled interaction of character and caricature, and what she is implying about a society in which such interactions are possible. (Examples are the meetings between Elizabeth and Mr Collins, and Elizabeth and Lady Catherine. See ‘Character and Caricature in Jane Austen’ in *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B. C. Southam.) There is an important conversation in which Elizabeth announces that she comprehends Bingley’s character completely. He replies that it is pitiful to be so transparent. ‘That is as it happens. It does not necessarily follow that a deep, intricate character is more or less estimable than such a one as yours.’ Bingley replies that he did not know she was a ‘studier of character’.

'It must be an amusing study.'

'Yes, but intricate characters are the *most* amusing. They have at least that advantage.'

'The country', said Darcy, 'can in general supply but few subjects for such a study. In a country neighbourhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society.'

'But people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them forever.'

Elizabeth's last remark is not wholly borne out by the book, for the Collinses and the Mrs Bennets and Lady Catherines of this world do not change. But 'intricate' characters are capable of change, as both she and Darcy change. Marvin Mudrick has examined this separation of Jane Austen's characters into the simple and the intricate, and shown how central it is to *Pride and Prejudice*, and there is no point in recapitulating his admirable observations here. Very generally we can say that obviously it is always likely to be in some ways oppressive for an intricate person to find himself or herself forced to live among simple people. Elizabeth has a dimension of complexity, a questing awareness, a mental range and depth which almost make her an isolated figure trapped in a constricting web of a small number of simple people. Darcy is posited as intricate to make her a match, but in truth he appears more to be honourable and reserved. He is not Benedick to Elizabeth's Beatrice. He is, however, capable of appreciating the intricacy of Elizabeth, so that in effect he can rescue her from the incipient claustrophobia of her life among simple people, and offer her more social and psychological space to move around in. (The good simple people, Jane and Bingley, join them in Derbyshire – the rest are left behind.)

This matter of social space is an important one, but another word may be said about what we may refer to as mental space or range, and its effect on language. We can recognise at least two very different ways in which people use language in this book. Some people employ it unreflectively as an almost automatic extension of their other behaviour; they are unable to think, outside their particular social situation. (Consider, for example, the extremely limited range of Mrs Bennet's conversation, its obsessive repetitions, its predictable

progressions.) Others, by contrast, are capable of using language reflectively and not just as an almost conditioned response to a social situation. Such people seem to have more freedom of manoeuvre within language, more conceptual space to move around in, and as a result they can say unpredictable things that surprise both us and the other characters in the book, and they seem capable of arriving at independent and thought-out conclusions of their own. Obviously such people are capable of thinking outside their particular social context – thus Elizabeth's mind and conversation are not limited to what she has seen and heard within her own family. (Compare Basil Bernstein's work in socio-linguistics, in which he differentiates between a restricted speech code and an elaborated speech code, the former determined by a person's particular position in the social structure, while the latter is not thus restricted.) It is not surprising that a person who has achieved a certain amount of mental independence will wish to exercise as much free personal control over his or her own life as is possible. He, or she, will not readily submit to the situations and alliances which society seems to be urging them into – hence Elizabeth's incredulity when Charlotte unhesitatingly accepts the role of Mr Collins's wife, to Elizabeth an inconceivable capitulation to the solicitations of social convenience. By contrast she will strive for a maximum of personal control (in defiance of real economic and family pressures), as is consistent with her having the quickest and furthest-ranging mind, and the most richly developed linguistic capacities.

Because the same space is occupied by people using language both reflectively and unreflectively, the claustrophobia for someone highly sensitive to speech can become very great, as witness the agonies of embarrassment which Elizabeth goes through while her mother rattles unreflectively on. This can obviously lead to a desire to escape, and, although Jane Austen does not seem to envisage how someone might renounce society altogether, she does show the relief with which an intricate person seeks out some solitude away from the miseries which can be caused by the constant company of more limited minds. Thus in the fragment *The Watsons*, which Jane Austen wrote some time between *First Impressions* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the isolated,

because more complex, consciousness of the heroine, Emma, is glad to seek out the refuge of her father's quiet sick-room away from the family downstairs:

In his chamber, Emma was at peace from the dreadful mortifications of unequal Society, & family Discord – from the immediate endurance of Hard-hearted prosperity, low-minded Conceit, & wrong-headed folly, engrafted on an onward Disposition. She still suffered from them in the Contemplation of their existence; in memory & in prospect, but for the moment, she ceased to be tortured by their effects.

(Compare Elizabeth, who 'sick of this folly, took refuge in her own room, that she might think with freedom'.) Elizabeth is fortunate to make a more permanent escape through marriage to Darcy; 'she looked forward with delight to the time when they should be removed from society so little pleasing to either, to all the comfort and elegance of their family party at Pemberley'. Pemberley is an all but impossible dream of a space – both social and psychic – large enough to permit a maximum of reflecting speech and personal control.

There is another aspect to the problems which can be posed by lack of social space. In a clearly stratified class society, such as Jane Austen depicts, there are invisible restrictions, boundaries and chasms, which the properly deferential person will not dare to traverse. There are quite a number of malicious remarks about people in trade made by some of the members of the landed aristocracy; one of the things Darcy has to do is to learn to appreciate the merits of people such as the Gardiners. The absurd and cringing servility of Mr Collins is an extreme example of the kind of mind, or rather mindlessness, which such a society can exact as a condition of belonging. It is a point, indeed, whether Elizabeth can be contained within such a society. One of the trials which Darcy has to pass is to confront the fact that he will become related not only to Mrs Bennet, but also to Wickham, if he marries Elizabeth. Elizabeth is sure that there is 'a gulf impassable between them' after the marriage of Lydia and Wickham. 'From such a connection she could not wonder that he should shrink.' Lady Catherine insists to her that 'connection with you must disgrace him in the eyes of everybody'. In this society, as in any

highly structured society, it is a matter of some moment just who may be 'connected' to whom. Darcy has already dissuaded Bingley from a defiling connection with the Bennets, and the connection – from an external point of view – had indeed become more disgraceful by the end. The question is, can Darcy cross the social space which, in the eyes of society (and in his own up to a certain stage) exists between himself and Elizabeth?

There is a curious little scene between Elizabeth and Darcy shortly before he proposes to her for the first time. They are discussing, of all apparently trivial things, whether it could be said that Charlotte Lucas is living near to her family, or far from them, now that she has moved fifty miles and become Mrs Collins. Darcy says it is near, Elizabeth that it is far; it is possible that he is wondering whether he will be able to move Elizabeth a sufficient distance away from the rest of her socially undesirable family. Elizabeth makes the politic remark, 'The far and the near must be relative, and depend on varying circumstances.' At this point Darcy 'drew his chair a little towards her', then a little later in the conversation he 'experienced some change of feeling; he drew back his chair, took a newspaper from the table', and coldly changes the drift of the conversation. In that small advance and retreat of his chair, Darcy is miming out, albeit unconsciously, his uncertainty as to whether he can bring himself to cross the great social space which, as he sees it (he is still proud), separates Elizabeth from himself. They live in a society which all but dictates certain 'connections' and works strongly to prevent others. Part of the drama is in seeing whether two people can resist the connections which society seems to be prescribing for them (as Lady Catherine has the 'rational scheme' of marrying her daughter to Darcy,* and Mrs Bennet wishes to thrust

* It was the favourite wish of his mother, as well as of hers. While in their cradles, we planned the union: and now, at the moment when the wishes of both sisters would be accomplished in their marriage, to be prevented by a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family!

The spectacle of Elizabeth holding out against the wishes, plans, schemes of society – positional control – is one which helps to sustain our belief in the possibility of some degree of individual autonomy. (It is tolerably savage comment on this society's power to enforce connections based on respectability that it is felt to be a blessing by the Bennets when it is announced that Wickham is

Elizabeth at Mr Collins), and make a new connection of their own, one which is not made in response to society's controlling power but freely made according to the dictates of their judgement, their reason and their emotions. One of the gratifications of the book is that Elizabeth and Darcy seem to demonstrate that it is still possible for individuals to make new connections in defiance of society. That there is perhaps a fairy-tale touch to their total felicity at the conclusion in the dream world of Pemberley should not discourage us from recognising the importance of holding on to this possibility as one which is essential to a healthy society. That is to say, a society in which the individual can experience freedom as well as commitment.

At this point it is perhaps worth considering in a little more detail just what kind of society Jane Austen does portray in this novel. It is a society which stresses social control over individual ecstasy, formality over informality, sartorial neatness over bodily abandon, and alert consciousness over the more Romantic states of reverie and trance. The schemes and structures of the group – family, community, society – tend to coerce and even predetermine the volition and aspirations of the self. No novelist could have valued consciousness more than Jane Austen, and some of the dialogue between Elizabeth (in particular) and Darcy requires a very high degree of alertness of consciousness. Indeed, this is just the point, that in this society linguistic experience is stressed almost to the exclusion of bodily experience. True, the men hunt, the women go for walks, and the sexes may come together at a ball. But all the important transactions (and most of the unimportant or vexatious ones) take place through language. When Darcy makes his second, and now welcome, proposal, we read of Elizabeth, 'though she could not look, she could listen, and he told of feelings which . . . made his affection every moment more valuable'. At this crucial moment 'love' has been

to marry Lydia after the elopement. 'And they must marry! Yet he is such a man! . . . How strange this is! And for this we are to be thankful.' Elizabeth's characteristically penetrating sense of the ironies in her society sees at once the strangeness of a marriage which is at once undesirable, in view of the character of the bridegroom, and absolutely essential in view of society's rigid rules. Public propriety entirely pre-empts private felicity. The fact of the connection has become more important than the individuals who will compose it.)

transformed into a completely linguistic experience. This is quite appropriate in a society setting a high value on consciousness.

Intimate physical contacts and experiences, while not denied, are minimised. Hands may meet, though it is more likely to be the eyes which come together across a distinct social space. Faces may be turned towards, or away from, other faces, and Elizabeth is prone to a good deal of blushing (allowing that the body has its own language, it is perhaps not entirely irrelevant to note that Norman O. Brown, following Freud, suggests that blushing is a sort of mild erection of the head). In general we are more likely to be shown dresses than bodies, public greetings than private embraces. It is interesting to compare, for instance, Jane Austen's description of an important ball with Tolstoy's. In Jane Austen the dancing (which from her letters we know she thoroughly enjoyed) is almost exclusively an occasion for conversation; indeed, it is a social ritual which permits something approaching private conversation in public, and there are some important exchanges between Darcy and Elizabeth while dancing. There is movement, there is grouping; there are *longueurs* and excitements. (In *The Watsons*, interestingly, Jane Austen describes what it is like for a young girl to enter a ball – the sweeping of dresses on the floor, the cold and empty room in which conversation is stiffly started, the noise of approaching carriages, and so on – a rather unusual excursion into private sensations which is not, however, taken very far.) What we do not get is the *physicality* of a ball. The following passage from *Anna Karenina* is inconceivable in Jane Austen. Kitty is watching Anna and Vronsky at the moment when they are falling in love with each other:

She saw that they felt as if they were alone in the crowded ballroom. And she was struck by the bewildered look of submission on Vronsky's face, usually so firm and self-possessed – an expression like that of an intelligent dog conscious of having done wrong.

If Anna smiled, he smiled in reply. If she grew thoughtful, he looked serious. Some supernatural force drew Kitty's eyes to Anna's face. She was charming in her simple black gown, her rounded arms were charming with their bracelets, charming the firm neck with the string of pearls, charming the unruly

curls, charming the graceful, easy movements of her little hands and feet, charming the lovely, animated face: but in that charm there was something terrible and cruel.

Kitty is 'sure that the blow had fallen'. At this decisive moment when the blow falls which will determine the rest of their lives, there is no language. It is Anna's body which is speaking to Vronsky, and speaking a language which Kitty can also read. Rational consciousness is drowned in an intensity of purely physical, sensory awareness and response. We have moved a long way from the sparkling dialogue maintained by Elizabeth with her partners, and are indeed approaching something like a state of trance, each dancer almost drugged just by the presence and proximity of the other. This is not intended as any indictment of Jane Austen's novel, for who would wish it other than it is? It is pointing to something characteristic of the society she wrote out of and in turn portrays: namely, the minimising of a whole range of physical experiences which can often change lives more forcibly than rational reflection.

As we have mentioned, Jane Austen is particularly suspicious of the immediacy of sexual attraction. It is worth asking, then, what is 'love' as it emerges from the book? And we should notice first that, if Jane Austen's society minimises the bodily dimension, so it does the possibility of a transcendental one. Her concern is with conduct, almost never with religious experience. (Gilbert Ryle points out in his interesting essay 'Jane Austen and the Moralists' (which appears in *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B. C. Southam) in which he argues that Shaftesbury's ideas influenced Jane Austen's ethics-aesthetics, that, while she often uses the word 'Mind', she almost never uses the word 'soul'.) Her society is secular and materialistic, and the terms need not be pejorative. It was a society which valued objects and the actual edifices which made up its structure; it was quite capable of sustaining a fairly nominal or unexamined piety towards the Unknown, but at its best it concentrated on how man and woman may best live in harmony with each other. (What may happen in such a society when it is not at its best, Jane Austen unsparingly reveals.) All of this obviously influenced the notion of 'love' and its relationship to marriage. Mrs Gardiner complains to Elizabeth that 'that expression of "violently in love" is so hackneyed, so

doubtful, so indefinite, that it gives me very little idea', and Elizabeth duly rephrases her reading of Bingley's attitude towards Jane as a 'promising inclination'. Early in the book Charlotte and Elizabeth discuss the conscious strategies that a woman must deploy to secure the attachment of a man, and Charlotte of course demonstrates the complete triumph of conscious calculation over spontaneous emotion by her decision to marry Mr Collins. She admits that she is 'not romantic' and asks only for 'a comfortable home'. Of course Mr Collins's company is 'irksome', but in her eyes the state of marriage, as a 'preservative from want', is much more important than the actual man who makes up the marriage. As Elizabeth realises when she sees them married, Charlotte will survive by having recourse to selective inattention, deriving satisfaction from the house and screening out as far as possible the man who provided it. Elizabeth's spontaneous reaction when told of their coming marriage is, 'Impossible', but her remark is not only indecorous: it is excessive. In such a society, the need for an 'establishment' is a very real one, and in putting prudence before passion Charlotte is only doing what the economic realities of her society – as Jane Austen makes abundantly clear – all but force her to do.

Indeed passion, as such, is hardly differentiated from folly in the terms of the book. Lydia's elopement is seen as thoughtless and foolish and selfish, rather than a *grande passion*; while Mr Bennet's premature captivation by Mrs Bennet's youth and beauty is 'imprudence'. This is a key word. Mrs Gardiner warns Elizabeth against becoming involved with the impoverished Wickham, yet when it seems he will marry a Miss King for her money she describes him as 'mercenary'. As Elizabeth asks, 'what is the difference in matrimonial affairs, between the mercenary motive and the prudent motive?' Elizabeth will simply not accept Charlotte's solution as a model of true 'prudence', nor will we. There must be something between that kind of prudence and her father's imprudence. And one of the things the book sets out to do is to define a rationally based 'mode of attachment' – something between the exclusively sexual and the entirely mercenary. Thus words such as 'gratitude' and 'esteem' are used to describe Elizabeth's growing feeling for Darcy. She comes to feel that their union would have been 'to the advantage of both: by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have softened, his

manners improved; and from his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance'. A word to note there is 'advantage': consciousness has penetrated so far into emotions that love follows calculations and reflections. What differentiates Elizabeth's choice from Charlotte's is not its greater impetuosity – indeed, it is Charlotte who is the more precipitate. It is the fact that it is a free choice which is not dictated by economic pressure (though Pemberley is a great attraction, as she readily admits); and it is a choice which is based on more awareness, knowledge, and intelligence than Charlotte brings to her cool but instant capitulation. Elizabeth loves for the best reasons, and there are always reasons for loving in Jane Austen's world. Consider this sentence from Tolstoy's *Resurrection*: 'Nekhludov's offer of marriage was based on generosity and knowledge of what had happened in the past, but Simonson loved her as he found her; *he loved her simply because he loved her*' (emphasis added). Tolstoy takes in a far wider world than Jane Austen, both socially and emotionally. He knew that there are feelings of such intensity, directness and tenacity that they reduce language to tautology when it attempts to evoke them. The kind of emotion pointed to in the remarkable clause I have emphasised – not to be confused with lust, for this is far from being a purely sexual attraction – is a kind of emotion which is not conceived of, or taken into account, in Jane Austen's world. This is not to censure Jane Austen for blinkered vision. It is, rather, to point out that in her books, and thus in the society they reflect, emotion is either rational – capable of being both conceptualised and verbalised – or it is folly.

And yet we sense that there is a capacity for depths and animations of feeling in Elizabeth which is not allowed for in the above description of the 'rationally founded' emotions preferred by Jane Austen. It is that extra something which dances through her words conveying an emotional as well as a semantic energy; it is what glows from her eyes and brings the blood to her cheeks so often; it is what sends her running across the fields and jumping over stiles when she hears that Jane is ill at Netherfield. After this last piece of anxious exertion she is said to look 'almost wild', and there in fact we have the beginning of a problem. The word 'wild' is applied to Elizabeth – and to Lydia, and to Wickham. In the case of the last two named, 'wildness' obviously has nothing to

recommend it and is seen as totally and reprehensibly anti-social. Elizabeth's special quality is more often referred to as 'liveliness'; this is what Darcy is said to lack (his understanding – i.e. rational consciousness – is apparently impeccable), and it is the main quality that Elizabeth will bring to the marriage. It is a fine point, and not perhaps a fixed one, at which liveliness becomes wildness, yet the latter is a menace to society, while without the former society is merely dull. Elizabeth is also often described as laughing (she differentiates her state from Jane's by saying, 'she only smiles, I laugh') and laughter is also potentially anarchic, as it can act as a negation of the principles and presuppositions, the rules and rituals, which sustain society. (Her famous declaration, 'I hope I never ridicule what is wise and good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can', puts her in the line of eighteenth-century satirists who worked to uphold certain values and principles by drawing comic attention to deviations from them. But Elizabeth's love of laughter goes beyond the satisfactions of a satirical wit, and she admits to a love of 'absurdities'. A sense of the absurd in life can be very undermining of a belief in society's self-estimation.)

With her liveliness and laughter it is not at first clear that Elizabeth will consent to be contained within the highly structured social space available to her. There is a suggestive episode when Mrs Hurst leaves Elizabeth and joins Darcy and Miss Bingley on a walk. The path only allows three to walk abreast and Darcy is aware of the rudeness of leaving Elizabeth out in this way. He suggests they go to a wider avenue, but Elizabeth 'laughingly answered – "No, no; stay where you are. – You are charmingly group'd, and appear to uncommon advantage. The picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth. Good-bye." She then ran gaily off, rejoicing as she rambled about. . . . Social rules, like aesthetic prescriptions, tend to fix people in groups. Elizabeth is happy to leave the group, laughing, rambling, rejoicing. It is only a passing incident, but it aptly suggests an independence and liveliness of temperament which will not readily submit to any grouping found to be unacceptably restricting. Marriage is part of the social grouping and is also a restriction. The dream aspect of Pemberley is that it presumably offers an amplitude which, while still social,

is large enough to offer a maximum field for expansion of both liveliness and understanding in which they can complement rather than constrain each other, and in which liveliness need never seek to express itself as anti-social wildness.

At one point Elizabeth is said to pass beyond the 'bounds of decorum' and it is part of her attraction that her energy and vitality seem to keep her right on that boundary where the constrained threatens to give way to something less willingly controlled. It is, indeed, just this that attracts Darcy to her, for, while the cold 'critical eye' which he casts on society immediately detects failures of 'perfect symmetry in her form', he is 'caught' by the 'easy playfulness' of her manners, and he stays caught by it. Where there is what Darcy calls 'real superiority of mind' he maintains that 'pride will always be under good regulation', and throughout his behaviour is a model of regulation. But 'good regulation' is not sufficient for a good society; it is what we expect from an efficient machine, and the danger in the sort of society portrayed by Jane Austen is a tendency away from the organic towards the mechanical. (Thus Elizabeth finds out that the 'civilities' of Sir William Lucas are 'worn out, like his information'. With his empty repetitions Sir William is a dim adumbration of some of Dickens's more memorable automata.) In a society that is still alive there will always be some awareness of, and pull towards, those qualities which that society has had to exclude in order to maintain itself. Ralph Ellison puts the idea in its sharpest form when the narrator of *The Invisible Man* asserts that 'the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived'. It would be foolish indeed to pronounce Elizabeth as a spirit of chaos with Darcy as the incarnation of pattern. (Indeed, in many ways Elizabeth is the best citizen, for she brings real life to the values and principles to which too many of the others only pay lip service, or which they mechanically observe in a spirit of torpid conformity.) But in their gradual coming together and Darcy's persistent desire for Elizabeth we do witness the perennial yearning of perfect symmetry for the asymmetrical, the appeal which 'playfulness' has for 'regulation', the irresistible attraction of the freely rambling individual for the rigidified upholder of the group. Indeed, it could be said that it is on the tension between playfulness and regulation that society depends, and it is the fact

that Elizabeth and Darcy are so happily 'united' by the end of the book which generates the satisfaction produced by the match.

'Uniting them' are the last two words of the book, and we do, I suggest, witness apparently mutually exclusive qualities coming into unity during the course of the book. Elizabeth at one point, in the presence of the insupportable Mr Collins, is said to try to 'unite truth and civility in a few short sentences'. The casual phrase is a passing reminder that civility is so often a matter of considerate lying, and another part of Elizabeth's appeal is her determination to hold on to what she refers to as 'the meaning of principle and integrity'. As Jane Austen shows, it is not always possible to unite civility and truth in this society, and the fact that there is often a dichotomy between the two produces that mixture of outward conformity and inner anguish experienced by her more sensitive characters. Pemberley is, once again, that dream place where such unities are possible. Given the importance of Elizabeth's 'playfulness' – for Darcy, for society, for the book – there is perhaps something too abject in her self-accusing retraction and apology to Darcy near the end. Although Darcy concedes to Elizabeth that 'By you I was properly humbled', we may feel that she is somewhat too willing to abandon her 'playfulness'. (For example, she redefines her 'liveliness' of mind as 'impertinence'.) There is the famous moment near the end when Elizabeth is about to make an ironical remark at Darcy's expense, 'but she checked herself. She remembered that he had yet to learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin.' One might be prompted to speculate whether Darcy will learn to laugh at himself (as the sentence half promises) or whether this is just the first of many and more serious checks and repressions which Elizabeth will be obliged to impose on herself as she takes her place in the social group.

But this is a happy book and we are not shown the wilting of playfulness under the force of regulation, but rather a felicitous 'uniting' of both. In 1813 Jane Austen wrote to Cassandra about *Pride and Prejudice*,

I had had some fits of disgust. . . . The work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade, it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about

something unconnected with the story; an essay on writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte or anything that would form a contrast, and bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and epigrammatism of the general style. I doubt your quite agreeing with me here. I know your starched notions.

Some critics have taken this as indicating Jane Austen's repudiation of her own light, bright, sparkling qualities; and it is true that, in going on to write about Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen turned to a heroine not only in a different plight, but of a very different disposition, while giving all the 'playfulness' to the socially unreliable and ultimately undesirable Mary Crawford. And there is no doubt that there is a diminishing of playfulness, a growing suspicion of unsocialised energy, in Jane Austen's subsequent work. Nevertheless I do not think this letter should be taken too seriously as an omen of repression to come. It is in fact ironical at the expense of books stuffed with the sort of sententiousness which Mary Bennet delights to quote, or the meandering digressions which could be found in many of the less well-formed works of the day. Jane Austen's disparagement of playfulness is here, surely mock-disparagement. She is herself still being 'sparkling', and if her later works grow more sombre in tone we may yet be glad that she gave us this one novel in which the brightness and the sparkle of the heroine's individuality are not sacrificed to the exacting decorums or the manipulative persuasions of the social group. Elizabeth Bennet says she is 'checked', but we shall always remember her as laughing.

As it can be seen, we are in the proximity of a major problem here: namely, that of the relationship and adjustment between individual energy and social forms. If one were to make a single binary reduction about literature, one could say that there are works which stress the existence of, and need for, boundaries; and works which concentrate on everything within the individual – from the sexual to the imaginative and the religious – which conspires to negate or transcend boundaries. Looking back at the terms of Charlotte Brontë's criticisms of *Pride and Prejudice* quoted at the start of this chapter, we notice a preponderant vocabulary of boundaries – 'accurate', 'carefully fenced, highly cultivated gardens', 'neat borders', 'elegant but

confined houses'. Her own impulse is towards the 'open country' and the boundless 'air', as the whole progress of her aptly named *Jane Eyre* reveals. In the eighteenth century, however, the stress was on the need for, or inevitability of, boundaries. Thus Locke in the first chapter of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

I suspected we began at the wrong end, and in vain sought for satisfaction in a quiet and sure possession of truths that most concerned us, while we let loose our thoughts into the vast ocean of Being; as if all that boundless extent were the natural and undoubted possession of our understandings, wherein there was nothing exempt from its decisions, or that escaped its comprehension. . . . Whereas, were the capacities of our understandings well considered, the extent of our knowledge once discovered, and the horizon found which sets the bounds between the enlightened and dark parts of things – between what is and what is not comprehensible by us – men would perhaps with less scruple acquiesce in the avowed ignorance of the one, and employ their thoughts and discourse with more advantage and satisfaction in the other.

And thus Hume:

Nothing, at first view, may seem more unbounded than the thought of man, which not only escapes all human power and authority, but is not even restrained within the limits of nature and reality. . . . And while the body is confined to one planet, along which it creeps with pain and difficulty; the thought can in an instant transport us into the most distant regions of the universe; or even beyond the universe, into the unbounded chaos, where nature is supposed to lie in total confusion. . . . But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer examination, that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience.

By turning the negative words in these passages into positive

ones, and vice versa, one could begin to establish a basic vocabulary to describe the very different kind of epistemology posited by the whole movement we know as Romantic. 'The vast ocean of Being', 'the most distant regions of the universe', even 'the unbounded chaos, where nature is supposed to lie in total confusion' – these were the very realms the Romantic imagination set out to explore; for it *did* claim for itself 'unbounded liberty' and refused to accept the notion that man and his mind are 'really confined within very narrow limits'. Locke invites us, in the interests of sanity, to recognise and accept the 'horizon' which 'sets the bounds between the enlightened and dark parts of things'. Blake took the word 'horizon', transformed it into 'Urizen' and made that figure the evil symbol of all that restricted and restrained man. He thus stood the Enlightenment on its head, and, if it was at the cost of his sanity, then, like other Romantics, he preferred to enjoy the visionary intensities of his 'madness' rather than subscribe to the accepted notions of mental health. Other Romantics too have preferred to cross that horizon and boundary and explore 'the dark parts of things', and often they have found this sphere to be full of dazzling illuminations.

This is not the place to embark on a summary of the Romantic movement. The point is that Jane Austen was brought up on eighteenth-century thought and was fundamentally loyal to the respect for limits, definition and clear ideas which it inculcated. Yet among writers who published work the same year as *Pride and Prejudice* were Byron, Coleridge, Scott and Shelley; the *Lyrical Ballads* were already over a decade old, and Keats would publish four years later. Jane Austen was writing at a time when a major shift of sensibility was taking place, as indeed major social changes were taking place or were imminent, and to some extent she was certainly aware of this. She had depicted at least one incipient Romantic in the figure of Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, and her treatment is a rather ambiguous mixture of sympathy and satire. In the figure of Elizabeth Bennet she shows us energy attempting to find a valid mode of existence within society. One more quotation from Blake will enable me to conclude the point I am trying to make. In the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake writes, 'Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of

Energy. Energy is eternal Delight.' As I have said, I think the Jane Austen's suspicion of energy increased in her later work. But in *Pride and Prejudice* she shows us energy and reason coming together, not so much as a reconciliation of opposites, but as a marriage of complementaries. She makes it seem as if it is possible for playfulness and regulation – energy and boundaries – to be united in fruitful harmony, without the one being sacrificed to the other. Since to stress one at the expense of the other can either way mean loss, both to the self and to society, the picture of achieved congruence between them offered in *Pride and Prejudice* is of unfading relevance. It is perhaps no wonder that has also proved capable of giving eternal delight.