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***Pride and Prejudice:* Thought, Character, Argument, and Plot**

Richard McKeon

When we use words like “Pride and Prejudice” as a name they are no longer three words or one name but a single named-thing, and two or more persons may undertake to discuss that named-thing with some assurance that they are talking about the same thing. It would not be a discussion if they were talking about different things, but, on the other hand, it would not take place if they had the same things to say about it. We usually assume, therefore, that one such statement about the thing—what it is and why—will be shown to be significant and correct, or that the different statements will be shown to have approached the same thing from different perspectives and to have disclosed different aspects of it. Yet a literary object of discussion is not simply an entity; nor is it a variable entity which takes its characteristics from the perspectives in which it is considered. It may, however, be variously considered—in itself as an artificial object, or in terms of the underlying circumstances which condition it and constitute its subject matter as a natural object, or in terms of meanings and references which it employs as a communicative object, or in terms of the ideas and values which it embodies or adumbrates as an intelligible object.

We have a tendency, which we owe to Aristotle, to think of the literary object as an *artificial object*, so radically contrasted to natural objects that we make it a function of art to create probabilities and necessities distinct from those which we encounter in natural occurrences. The plot of a tragedy, or a comedy, or a novel is the sequence of actions presented on a stage or in a book.

We have no difficulty, on the other hand, in thinking of the literary

object as a natural thing. The interpretation of *natural objects*, which includes books, is not contradictory to the interpretation of books as artificial objects, for the one is an interpretation of the structure of a plot or argument in a literary work, while the other is an interpretation of a literary work as a product, and as an exposition, of nature and human nature. Literary critics once went to Aristotle for guidance in poetic interpretations of works of art in themselves. They have also gone to Lucretius and more recently to Freud or Marx for like guidance in materialistic interpretations of literary works as expressions or sublimations or suppressions of idols or images, concupiscences or irascibilities, alienations or disappropriations, which contribute to relief or cure of anxieties and fears. The subject of consideration in the one case is the structure of a book, in the other case laws of nature and human nature.

Since the time of Plato, or of the Hebrew prophets, we have been inclined to consider literary objects as formulations and applications of ideas and values. We go for guidance in interpreting them to the revelations of prophets and seers, the visions of poets and saints, and the principles and precepts of philosophers and sages. The subject of discussion is the structured cosmos of our aspirations and speculations and the degradations to which men and societies have fallen and how those departures from charity and grace have conditioned the conception and composition of the book and how they are set forth in it.

We have turned, again and again, from the consideration of the literary object as an *unnatural object*, as a *natural object*, or as an *object of thought and aspiration* to regard it as an *expressed object*. We explain literature by the uses of language and the devices of communication. As a name is not merely words but a named-thing, so the use of linguistics in the interpretation of literature is not an interpretation of words or letters but of expressed-things. A novel, like everything else that is said or done, is a fictive argument, an argument *made* to express intentions, to affect attitudes and actions, to convey information and data, and to formulate and structure thoughts. A novel is an episode in an immense ongoing conversation. It is constructed of arguments, their expression, transmission, and interpretation, and reactions and responses to them.

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Different interpretations of *Pride and Prejudice* are concerned with the same named-object, but not with the same literary-object. The subjects of interpretation are different novels. Once differentiated they are seen to have different literary qualities which are uncovered and interpreted by different forms of literary criticism. They are all, however, interpretations of the same named-object, in itself or in some of the variety of its circumstances, and are therefore not in opposition or in contradiction. In combination they may serve to disclose qualities of the novel, of experience, of nature, life, and thought which might otherwise go unnoticed. I shall begin by considering *Pride and Prejudice* as a philosophical novel.

I

Justification for reading *Pride and Prejudice* as a philosophical novel may be found in its much cited and variously interpreted opening sentence: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." This universal law is the first principle of a philosophical novel, although I shall also interpret it as the statement of a scientific law of human nature, a characterization of the civility of English society, and as a pronouncement on the manners of an economic class. *Pride and Prejudice* is a philosophical novel both in the sense of presenting a philosophy in exposition and of embodying a philosophy in action, and literary criticism exercises its proper function by expounding that philosophy and by explicating and clarifying the thought and action of the novel by means of it. The thought of *Pride and Prejudice* may be uncovered by interpreting it in accordance with any of a variety of philosophies, but it is peculiarly appropriate, and enlightening, to recognize its Platonizing echoes since the dialogues of Plato have gone through a history of interpretation that has evolved distinctions which are useful in interpreting *Pride and Prejudice*. Many interpreters of Plato's dialogues, in antiquity and later, argue that they are not statements of thoughts or opinions but are simply exhibitions of how philosophers talk; others, beginning with the Old Academy, interpret them as the expression of the truth not of the doctrines of one philosopher, but of all philosophers; some, beginning with the skepticism of the Middle or New Academy, hold that the method of Socrates was to demonstrate that all doctrines are false and therefore, by the same token, true; and some, following the Neoplatonists, sought in them the adumbration of a truth transcending human thought and expression. Neoplatonic truths are suited to tragedy and epic; skeptical Academic opinions provide a place and expectation proper to comedy. All Platonisms share hierarchical structures of being, thought, and aspiration. Plato himself describes three ladders of being, knowledge, and love

in the *Republic* and the *Symposium*. The New Academic skepticism chooses a low place on those ladders, which is excellently named in the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: knowledge is based on self-evident truths, opinion can rise no higher than “a truth universally accepted,” “possession of a good fortune” is a dubious degradation of vision of the ideal Good to possession of material goods, and “want of a wife” is a transformation of charity or *agape* or love of the good in itself to concupiscence or *eros* or matrimony.

This is a skeptical philosophy which credits what is generally accepted but doubts everything. It reduces knowledge to opinion, being to becoming, reality to appearance, aspiration and will to need and want, love to desire and concupiscence and cupidity. Platonic love begins midway down the ladder of love at marriage: Elizabeth and Jane climb up the ladder to a higher level of feeling and intelligence which is charity as love in marriage, a lower level of charity than Platonic or Christian *agape*, while others sink down to any of the still lower levels of concupiscence and cupidity—love of money, property, power, pleasure, reputation (or honor in a degraded sense, transforming the Good into what is good in the opinion of others). When one of these levels is elaborated in conscious thought and explicit expression, it is a degradation of philosophy, as in Mr. Collins’ love of God. Other levels take the form of beguiling transitions from cupidity to love when the emerging feeling is expressed not in terms of the new emotion but of a universally felt passion, as in Elizabeth’s first recognition of the possibility of loving Darcy, during her visit to his estate at Pemberley, when love appears as a love of property and position: “Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. They were all of them warm in their admiration; and at that moment she felt, that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!”¹

Each of the strands of the plot is an Academic skeptical particularization of being, knowledge, and love: Elizabeth’s critical intelligence, Jane’s uncritical love of everyone, Lydia’s silliness and cupidity, Kitty’s dependence and imitativeness, and Mary’s withdrawal and defensive pedantry. The final chapters present readjustments of the opinions of various characters in the interpretation of what has happened, centering on the marriages of three Bennet daughters, that is, realizations of love on three rungs of the ladder. The chapter devoted to the reappraisals of Elizabeth and Darcy, four chapters from the end (3.16 [58]), is an explicitly philosophical discussion which turns on a skeptical Academic version of

1. P. 181. References are to the Riverside edition (Boston, 1956). In this edition the novel is divided into three bks. with separately numbered chapters. To facilitate reference to editions in which chaps. are numbered in a single sequence, bk. and chap. are given as well as the page numbers of the Riverside edition and followed by the chap. numbers of other editions.

the opinion of Socrates that philosophy is ignorance. The reappraisals are interpretations of Elizabeth's refusal of Darcy's first proposal and of Darcy's letter of explanation. The philosophy and the love are generated by the clash and readjustment of two philosophies implicit in their reactions as reexamined. Elizabeth underwent a change of feeling as she freed herself of prejudices. Darcy underwent a change in his view of the spirit in which the letter was written. He has thought himself calm and cool; he now recognizes bitterness. Elizabeth replies that the letter may have been begun in bitterness, but it ends in charity (in the Academic skeptical version of the Platonic love, *agape*). She goes on: "You must learn some of my philosophy. Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure" (p. 275). Darcy denies that she has any such philosophy. Her retrospections are so totally void of reproach that the contentment arising from them is not of philosophy but of ignorance. The effect of Darcy's letter on Elizabeth had been to remove all her former prejudices gradually. Every unpleasant circumstance was forgotten in a hedonistic philosophy of Platonic reminiscence limited to what gives pleasure. The accomplishment and realization of Elizabeth's philosophy was impeded by prejudices; the obstacle which Darcy encountered was pride, which led him to think meanly of the rest of the world and to wish to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with his own. Elizabeth removed that obstacle by humbling him. This is the philosophic meaning and operation of *Pride and Prejudice*: it is a philosophy of pleasure released from unprincipled *prejudices* joined to a philosophy of principles released from unrestrained *pride*. The novel closes with the discovery and statement of the philosophy which structured it. Philosophical interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice* is not an analysis or criticism of a book, but an examination and development of a philosophy which conditioned the writing of the book and provided a subject matter for exposition in it.

2

The opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* may be interpreted as the statement of a law of nature and of human nature, and the description of the actions and reactions which forms the body of the book derives its sense, that is, its meaning and direction, from the natural laws which govern action and reaction. The interplay of nature and human nature can be seen in inanimate as well as in animate nature, as is apparent in Elizabeth's description of Pemberley where nature had done more to realize beauty than in other places and where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by human taste. *Pride and Prejudice* may be read as a *psychotherapeutic* or *socioeconomic retributive* novel descriptive of the actions and reactions of natures unchanged in power and in-

clinations and of natures in circumstances in which natural functions of perception and feeling, action and production are suppressed or distorted or in which they are freed from impediments and superimposed alterations. An epic presentation of the laws of nature and of the emendation of natures thrown off the track of their natural motions is found in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. Scientist and poet serve different functions in that depiction: Epicurus' discovery of the laws of nature and human nature in the concourse of atoms is set forth by Lucretius with the adornments of poetry to make the scientific truths more widely intelligible and readily acceptable in order to provide emotional impetus to curing fears and anxieties about the gods and death. Comic presentations of natures operating naturally and unnaturally cannot evoke the authority of human science for the statement of laws nor the intervention of gods, of Venus and Mars, or of Cupid and Psyche, to account for the cycles of love and war, or for the strategies of lovers. The laws of nature and the judgment of natures are therefore developed in conversations in which a mistaken judgment about a character under discussion is taken as a defect in the character of the judge, and therapy or retribution to cure or readjust natures which have been turned, by repression or suppression of thoughts and desires, or by appropriation or alienation of status or property, to judgments or actions at variance to their natures is effected in conversations which reinterpret past actions and judgments. Judges operate in mutually rectifying pairs; what is judged is examined in pairs which throw light on one another.

Elizabeth's examination of Darcy's letter was rendered difficult by her judgment of Wickham and Darcy, which in turn undermined her confidence in herself (2.13.156 [36]; italics added):

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!—I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified in my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust.”

Her reassessment then moved from herself to Jane to Bingley, and then to the justice of Darcy's judgment of her family and to the compliment of his judgment of Jane and herself.

As she studied the letter her reaction to the character of the writer changed, but she acknowledged the justice of his judgment of the characters of her sisters and that they were not changeable.

She studied every sentence: and her feelings towards its writer were at times widely different. When she remembered the style of his address, she was still full of indignation; but when she consid-

ered how unjustly she had condemned and upbraided him, her anger was turned against herself; and his disappointed feelings became the object of compassion. His attachment excited gratitude, his general character respect; but she could not approve him; nor could she for a moment repent her refusal, or feel the slightest inclination ever to see him again. In her own past behaviour, there was a constant source of vexation and regret; and in the unhappy defects of her family a subject of yet heavier chagrin. They were hopeless of *remedy*. Her father, contented with laughing at them, would never *exert* himself to restrain the wild giddiness of his youngest daughters; and her mother, with manners so far from right herself, was entirely insensible of the evil. Elizabeth had frequently united with Jane in an endeavour to check the imprudence of Catherine and Lydia; but while they were supported by their mother's indulgence, what chance could there be of improvement? Catherine, weak-spirited, irritable, and completely under Lydia's guidance, had always been affronted by their advice; and Lydia, self-willed and careless, would scarcely give them a hearing. [2.14 159–60 (37); italics added]

When Jane and Elizabeth discuss Bingley and Darcy, their judgments turn reflexively on the credibility of their judgments. Elizabeth says that her own regret and compassion are all done away with by seeing Jane so full of both (2.17.168 [40]). She goes on to seek the source of the differences in their characters and reputes, their being and appearance, not in their natures but in their education. "There certainly was some great mismanagement in the education of those two young men. One has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it." Jane replies that she never thought Mr. Darcy so deficient in the appearance of it as Elizabeth did, and Elizabeth justifies herself: "And yet I meant to be uncommonly clever in taking so decided a dislike to him, without any reason. It is such a spur to one's genius, such an opening for wit to have a dislike of that kind."

In like fashion Elizabeth's differences from her father in judgment of the effects of Lydia's behavior on the repute of the family reflect differences in their characters, as does his reaction to her reproach that he did not trouble to remedy Lydia's defects, reassuring her that although her sister is incurable, Lydia's manners will not frighten away Elizabeth's lovers, except squeamish youths not worthy of consideration (2.18.172–73 [41]). Elizabeth replies:

"Indeed you are mistaken. I have no such injuries to resent. It is not of peculiar, but of general evils, which I am now complaining. Our importance, our respectability in the world, must be affected by the wild volatility, the assurance and disdain of all restraint which mark Lydia's character. Excuse me—for I must speak plainly. If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking

her exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment. Her character will be fixed, and she will, at sixteen, be the most determined flirt that ever made herself and her family ridiculous. A flirt, too, in the worst and meanest degree of flirtation; without any attraction beyond youth and a tolerable person; and from the ignorance and emptiness of her mind, wholly unable to ward off any portion of that universal contempt which her rage for admiration will excite. In this danger Kitty is also comprehended. She will follow wherever Lydia leads. Vain, ignorant, idle, and absolutely uncontrouled!"

Mr. Bennet is convinced that he can do nothing to affect the understanding or the inclinations of Lydia but he assures Elizabeth that she and Jane will be judged for themselves and that the esteem they arouse will be unaffected by the behavior of their younger sisters. "Wherever you and Jane are known, you must be respected and valued; and you will not appear to less advantage for having a couple of—or I may say, three very silly sisters."

The evolution of the relations of Elizabeth and Darcy from unnatural judgments and feelings compounded of pride and prejudice to natural comprehension and esteem is effected by an emendation of understanding and feelings which restores their characters by insight into misconceptions and dislikes. This is brought about not by sympathetic and discerning analysis but by malicious intrusions based on misconceptions and selfish interests which lead to reactions contrary to those intended. Lady Catherine calls on Elizabeth, seeking an assurance that she is not engaged and a promise that she will never become engaged to Darcy. She sets the tone of the interchange by contrasting Elizabeth's character to her own, setting the insincerity she attributes to Elizabeth against her own character which has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness. Having failed to secure a promise from Elizabeth she reports her conversation to her nephew in an endeavor to secure a promise from him. The words and actions reported, in the light of his knowledge of Elizabeth's character, teach him to hope. "I knew enough of your disposition to be certain, that, had you been absolutely, irrevocably decided against me, you would have acknowledged it to Lady Catherine, frankly and openly." On being assured that this was so he asks Elizabeth whether his letter had soon made her think better of him, and she explains how gradually all her former prejudices had been removed. He fears that one part of the letter may yet cause her to hate him, but she observes that although they both have reason to think her opinions not entirely unalterable, they are not quite so easily changed as that implies. He says he had thought that the letter expressed calm dispassionate judgments, but he now recognizes that it was an expression of bitterness and resentment (3.16.274–75 [58]). The double movement

of purgation which brought them together was a cure of prejudice and of pride, of ignorance and of passion. Psychopathological interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice* is not literary criticism or evaluation of a book, but an examination and formulation of the operations and laws of human nature which make available critical devices by which to interpret the occasion of the book and the matters which it treats.

3

The opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* may be read not as a philosophical principle or as a law of nature, but as a conventional precept. So interpreted it is the prelude to a *novel of manners* in which the characters are presented not by stating what they are or recording what they do but by reporting judgments of the manners from which their natures and habits, and lists of their virtues and vices, are formulated and acquire acceptance. The second sentence states the law of operation of the precept. However little known the feelings or views of such a man on first entering a neighborhood, the truth of the precept is fixed in the minds of the surrounding families. The structure of manners found by following the precept extends beyond the novel to the style of life of the times which conditions the novel, in which it appears also as the subject matter depicted. Manners are the character of the style of speech and action; they are the outward sign of reported or suspected status and possession.

Bingley and Darcy emerge through a series of reports and rumors in the first two chapters until they appear in person at the dance in the third chapter where their characters are built up from their manners. "Mr. Bingley was good looking and gentlemanlike; he had a pleasant countenance, and easy, unaffected manners" (1.3.6 [3]). But Darcy draws the attention of the room by his appearance and by the report of his larger fortune. The testimony of his superiority is divided into that of the gentlemen, who think him a fine figure of a man, and the ladies, who think him handsomer than Bingley. His manners give disgust, however, and he is discovered to be proud, when he declines to be introduced to or converse with the ladies. "His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and every body hoped that he would never come there again." In questions of manners, judgments of persons are made in pairs and are reinforced and balanced by other judgments of the persons judged, to establish the characters of the two, as the characters of Bingley and Darcy balance one another; and these judgments are made by pairs of persons judging, as Jane and Elizabeth determine the character of Bingley and give solidity to their conclusions by balancing judgments of one another's characters. The subject under examination in judging these judgments is a nexus of

communication in which individuals emerge with characters as products and as sources. Manners and styles are what is experienced as indices of characters and attitudes in action, and as determinants of meanings and intentions in speech. What a man is must be inferred from the impression he makes; and what a character means to say cannot be known simply from what he says without consideration of how he says it, for his manner may make clear that he means something opposite or tangential to what he says. Manners and modes reveal character in action and give meaning to speech.

What Bingley and Darcy are emerges from judgments which relate and compare them. That development of their manners and revelation of their characters is fastened to a fixed point by Jane and Elizabeth's judgment of Bingley. That judgment in its turn has its fixed point in Elizabeth's judgment of Jane. The objects of judgment in turn judge each other and uncover characters determined by expectation of how they will be judged by others.

Between him and Darcy there was a very steady friendship, in spite of a great opposition of character.—Bingley was endeared to Darcy by the easiness, openness, ductility of his temper, though no disposition could offer a greater contrast to his own, and though with his own he never appeared dissatisfied. On the strength of Darcy's regard Bingley had the firmest reliance, and of his judgment the highest opinion. In understanding Darcy was the superior. Bingley was by no means deficient, but Darcy was clever. He was at the same time haughty, reserved, and fastidious, and his manners, though well bred, were not inviting. In that respect his friend had greatly the advantage. Bingley was sure of being liked wherever he appeared, Darcy was continually giving offence. [1.4. 11 (4)]

This establishment of the manners and characters of Bingley and Darcy relative to each other and in opposition to each other in the impressions they make on others lays an objective foundation for the changes which Darcy's character undergoes and the consequent changes in his manners and for the constancy of the character of Bingley who from the first pleases. That pivot of manners and character, however, is given a further dimension of variation in the differences in the judgments of Jane and Elizabeth which are reflexively indications of their own characters and of the potentialities they reveal of constancy or change in judgment of the characters and manners of Bingley and Darcy. Jane, who has been cautious in her praise of Bingley, reveals to Elizabeth how much she admires him: " 'He is just what a young man ought to be,' said she, 'sensible, good humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners!—so much ease, such perfect good breeding!' " (1.4.9 [4]). Elizabeth adds that he is also handsome, which a young man ought

likewise to be. "His character is thereby complete." Jane was flattered by his asking her to dance a second time. Elizabeth sees in this reaction a difference between Jane's character and her own. She grants that he is very agreeable and that Jane has liked many a stupider person, and goes on to say that she is too apt to like people in general; she has never heard her speak ill of a human being in her life. Jane will find her judgment of Bingley justified by later events. Elizabeth will move from censure to admiration of Darcy's words and actions, of his manners and his character.

The balanced judgments of the Bennet sisters are given objectivity in balance with the judgments of the Lucas sisters. The eldest Lucas daughter, Charlotte, is Elizabeth's intimate friend. Mrs. Bennet "with civil self-command" compliments Charlotte for being Mr. Bingley's first choice; but Charlotte replies that he liked his second, Jane, better, and he is reported to have said that she is beautiful. This overheard judgment is contrasted by Charlotte to another overheard judgment, that of Darcy, that Elizabeth is tolerable, but not handsome enough for him to dance with. Charlotte remarks that Mr. Darcy is not so well worth listening to as his friend, Mr. Bingley, who thought Elizabeth very pretty, and later adds that Darcy's pride does not offend her so much as pride often does because there is an excuse for it. "One cannot wonder that so very fine a young man, with family, fortune, every thing in his favour, should think highly of himself. If I may so express it, he has a *right* to be proud." Elizabeth says she could easily forgive *his*, if he had not mortified *hers*. Her sister Mary, who piques herself on the solidity of her reflections, observes that pride is a very common failing. She distinguishes pride from vanity, although they are frequently used as synonyms: pride is our opinion of ourselves, vanity what we would have others think of us. A brother of the Lucas sisters finds such pride in need of no excuses: if he were as rich as Mr. Darcy, he would not care how proud he was; he would keep foxhounds and drink wine (1.5.12-14 [5]).

A novel of manners may be tragic, when the judgment of others impedes or misjudges self-realization and ameliorization of individuals or of society as a whole. It may be comic, when individuals, pairs of individuals, and families adapt themselves happily and profitably within the framework of conventional morality. It may be utopian, when the framework of conventional judgment and retribution is superseded by a framework of individual morality and social justice. As judgment in a novel of manners is checked and rectified by the touchstone of other judgments or by the judgment of others, so actions are initiated and judged by two touchstones: relative to those acted on, condescension or cooperation, and relative to the agent, exertion or activity. Mr. Collins benefits by and admires the condescension of his patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh. She had condescended twice, he tells Elizabeth when he proposes marriage to her, to advise him that a clergyman like

himself must marry (1.19.80 [19]); and her civility in inviting him and his guests to dinner is just such an instance of her condescension as he knows not how to admire enough (2.6.121 [29]). Her condescension to Elizabeth is the action which provides in the reactions of Elizabeth and Darcy the denouement of the action. Relative to the individual, actions are exertion. Elizabeth reproaches her mother for lack of exertion or want of command over herself; Charlotte wishes that her mother would exert herself more; Mr. Bennet reviews the resolution of his difficulties in terms of the amount of exertion they require. In the absence of pride and prejudice, action proceeds, in the relations of Elizabeth and Jane or of Elizabeth and Darcy, by cooperation between the two or by activity of either one of the pair. Interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice* as a novel of manners is not interpretation of a novel but of manners and styles, of action and speech, of which the novel is a product and an expression.

4

Individuals are formed by societies, and societies are formed by individuals, but the character of an individual is inferred from his observed manners, and the structure of a community manifests itself in its operative civility. The opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* may be read as a rule of civility rather than a precept of manners, which derives its force in operation in the second sentence neither from the opinions of the young man of property or the opinions formed of him or his manners but from the justice of consideration that he is the rightful property of a daughter of one of the families of the community or the civility which he enters. The opening sentence is the prelude of a *novel of plot* or of narrated civility.

A narrative of plot or of action may be tragic or comic. The hero of a tragedy, as Aristotle observed, is a man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgment (*Poetics* 13. 1453a7–10). The finest tragic stories were always the stories of some few families (*ibid.*, 18–23). The tragic hero seeks the resolution of his predicament by appeal to the laws of gods and of states. Comic plots are likewise built on families, not “families of great reputation and prosperity,” such as Aristotle selected for tragic plots, who become involved in apparent conflicts of divine and human laws, but ordinary families, who seek reputations and prosperity but are frustrated by errors of judgment which are rectified in a sequence of discoveries and reversals. All the characters of *Pride and Prejudice* emerge from the judgments by which other characters establish their manners and determine them as characters, except two, who are judged later. The characters of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, whose family is the source of the problematic situations which emerge and are resolved in the

course of the action, are set forth in terms of their own understandings and feelings, without intrusion of the opinions of others, at the end of the opening chapter.

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develope. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news. [1.1.3 (1)]

They produced five daughters, but no son; therefore, the problematic situation which is the opening of the novel is a family of unmarried daughters and entailed property. Unlike tragic predicaments which arise in a civility of culture, cult, and polity, this is a comic predicament in a civility of business. The business of Mrs. Bennet is to secure the conjugal felicity of her daughters. The comic flaws of the Bennets are the insufficiency of the one and the indifference of the other to this business. Lydia's inconsiderate and senseless behavior is subject to reproof and correction because they are not to be "the business of her life" (2.18.173 [41]). The community of civility is built on conjugal felicity, compounded of marriage, position, and property.

The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* takes its beginning in the simple statement of the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, unqualified by opinions and judgments, and other characters take form in the civil exchange of what other people think and feel about them. When the uncertainties and irregularities attendant on Lydia's marriage seem to threaten or preclude her own, however, Elizabeth examines the feelings and actions which have contributed to the formation of their characters and to the constitution of the family:

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. Her father captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem and confidence, had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. . . .

Elizabeth, however, had never been blind to the impropriety of her father's behaviour as a husband. She had always seen it with pain; but respecting his abilities, and grateful for his affectionate treatment of herself, she endeavoured to forget what she could not overlook, and to banish from her thoughts that continual breach of

conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible. But she had never felt so strongly as now, the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage, nor ever been so fully aware of the evils arising from so ill-judged a direction of talents; talents which rightly used, might at least have preserved the respectability of his daughters, even if incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife. [2.19.176–77 (42)]

From this family framework, devoid of conjugal felicity and domestic comfort, the action of the plot runs through a sequence of discoveries and reversals determined, like the framework in which they arise, by the feelings and decisions of pairs of characters, Lydia and Wickham, Jane and Bingley, and Elizabeth and Darcy, to a resolution in which the impediments resulting from the marriage of the younger sister cease to block the marriages of the older sisters. The denouement set forth in the final chapter (3.19 [61]) is a sequential catalogue of the changes in the larger civility which contributes to the felicitous resolution of the related problems of those sisters.

The denouement presented in the last chapter begins, as did the predicament sketched in the first chapter, with Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. Mrs. Bennet, we are told, was happy to have got rid of her two most deserving daughters whom she could now visit and talk to with delighted pride. The accomplishment of so much of her business, however, did not change her into a sensible, amiable, well-informed woman; fortunately, perhaps, since her husband might not have relished domestic felicity in so unusual a form. Mr. Bennet missed his second daughter exceedingly, but delighted in visiting her. Bingley and Jane moved to Derbyshire away from the near vicinity of Mrs. Bennet, which was not desirable even to his easy temper or her affectionate heart, and Jane and Elizabeth were then a short distance from each other. Kitty spent the chief of her time with her two elder sisters and was removed from Lydia's example by Mrs. Bennet's refusal to consent to her accepting Mrs. Wickham's invitations. Mary was the only one to remain at home. She was compelled to mix more with the world, and comparisons with her sisters' beauty ceased. Wickham and Lydia underwent no revolution in character from the marriage of her sisters. The conviction that Elizabeth must now know of his ingratitude and falsehood did not disturb Wickham, and both he and Lydia hoped that Darcy would assist him materially. Recognitions and reversals extend beyond the Bennet family circle to Miss Bingley who, though mortified, continued to visit Pemberley, to Georgiana who made Pemberley her home, to Lady Catherine who was the negative cause of the union of Elizabeth and Darcy, and to the Gardiners who brought Elizabeth into Derbyshire and were the means of uniting them. Lady Catherine's extreme indignation and resentment

gave way, either because of affection for Darcy or curiosity to see how his wife conducted herself, and she visited Pemberley in spite of pollution by the presence of such a mistress and the visits of her uncle and aunt from the city. The Gardiners, Darcy and Elizabeth really loved.

Unlike the tragic denouement which results in change in character, thought, and action, a comic denouement results in marriage and change in property and position, accompanied by changes in geographical proximity, opportunities to visit and talk, feeling, influence, and financial assistance. Interpretation of a narrative or dramatic plot is literary criticism of an art object and not a philosophical interpretation of thought, or a scientific analysis of nature, or an interpretation of manners and styles of communication and action which influence the composition and contents of an artificial object.

* * *

A novel is not a uniquely defined subsistent object which can be viewed in different perspectives, encountered in different orientations, and judged in different aspects. It may be identified as a named-object, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, and when it is so identified we have a tendency to think of it as an artificial object like a book with its name on its title page and cover. We have a further tendency to think of that named artificial object as a narrative novel whose characters, plot, thought, language, and incidents may be studied by reading the book, and may be judged by considering it critically as a structure of action in itself or in relation to incidents of life, currents of thought, intentions of authors, or reactions of audiences. When we turn our attention from the artificial object, which we read, to the literary criticism, by means of which it is interpreted and judged, it is apparent that critics seldom limit themselves to the explication of the text or to the structure of the plot of a novel. Schools of criticism from time to time advocate concentration on the work of art without distraction of external data and pedantic erudition about circumstances and things related to the named-object. Opposed schools of criticism argue that such delimitation to art and the art object is empty and sterile and seek to place products of art in the societies and social circumstance in which they are produced or in the world of ideas and values in which they were conceived, or in the world of nature, in motion and reacting to motions, in which they were formed and have their effects, or in a world of expression and communication in which they acquire meanings and stimulate emotions. Traditional arts of criticism have identified the art object by different characteristics in their controversial oppositions. Poetic, when it continues in the mode as well as the language of Aristotle, is a science of artificial objects which studies structures created by art, dependent on probabilities and necessities

which are distinct from natural structures and motions, and separates their aesthetic qualities from moral and scientific analyses of their natures and effects. Rhetoric places the art object between the artist as speaker and his audience and seeks its characteristics in functions such as teaching, pleasing, and moving audiences of different kinds. The phenomenal art object of poetic and rhetoric is placed by dialectic in a context of ideas which transcend it and by grammar in a context of material elements and parts. In the dialectical judgment of the art object the good and the true have places together with the beautiful, and in the grammatical judgment the art object is a composition in which natural motions rectify and control deviations from nature.

Nonetheless, the arts of criticism, though they treat different subjects and identify art and art objects differently, all find a place for the consideration of artificial objects. It is possible, therefore, despite differences in their sources and their criteria of judgment, to compare what they bring to light in a given work. A poetic of a novel treats plots; a rhetoric turns on places; a grammar composes on laws; and a dialectic develops themes. An art of criticism provides a consistent language and a continuing subject matter. Once an art has been chosen in literary criticism, it may concentrate attention on the other arts in controversial opposition to their methods and to the matters they consider, or it may concentrate attention on common named-things and develop insights concerning them which may be related harmoniously and fruitfully to each other. Each art borrows from the language and subject matters of the others: there are poetical, rhetorical, grammatical, and dialectical plots, places, laws, and themes. This essay has used the art of rhetoric, and therefore I shall use rhetorical places to relate themes, laws, and plots as they vary in formulation and application in the four arts of criticism. The commonplace "thought-thing-action" is a commonplace of "language" which I shall use to explore the variations of meanings of theme-law-plot. Poetic themes of action and resolution are developed in accordance with civility in plots of initial error, discovery, reversal, and resolution. *Pride and Prejudice* is a comic *Agamemnon*: the fate of Agamemnon is the assassination of a hero returning from the wars, while the fate of Mr. Bennet is the inactivity of a hero who never went to the wars. Rhetorical themes of action and expression are developed in accordance with style and manners in plots of saying and doing, of understanding and misconception, of presentation and misrepresentation, and of exertion and activity. *Pride and Prejudice* is a comic *Marriage of Mercury and Philology*: the handmaidens in the marriage of eloquence and love of wisdom, the seven liberal arts of words and of things give way to the handmaidens in the marriages of style and manners—property, elegance, and status. Grammatical themes of action and reaction are developed in accordance with laws of nature in plots of suppressed desires and distorted thoughts, analysis and reconsideration, and insight

and liberation. *Pride and Prejudice* is a comic *De Rerum Natura*. Dialectical themes of action and thought are developed in accordance with love and ideas in plots of perception and recollection, of ascent and descent, of charity and concupiscence, and of pleasure and felicity. *Pride and Prejudice* is a comic *Divine Comedy*—a Human Comedy.

The places of rhetoric can be used to differentiate and discover four kinds of rhetorical arguments and to make possible a pluralistic interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice*. A different yet similar pluralism can be established by use of each of the other arts of criticism. The pluralism of pluralisms is a guarantee, on the one hand, that the controversial opposition of arts of criticism will continue unabated and that it will continue, as in the past, to contribute renewal and dynamism to art criticism, when it does not sink into a logomachy, and, on the other hand, that the interpretation of an individual literary work will be enriched by combining the varieties of literary criticism, since they do not yield propositions which may be shown to be true or false of an existent entity, but insights which draw attention to qualities which make an unqualified named-object a work of art by judgment.