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## Intelligence in *Pride and Prejudice*

Susan Morgan

Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free.

*Pride and Prejudice* has a charmed place as the most popular of Jane Austen's novels. Its heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, witty, self-confident, with those dancing eyes, and not quite beautiful face, depicts for us all that is flawed and irresistible about real people. Lionel Trilling has observed about *Emma* that we like Mr. Knightley "because we perceive that he cherishes Emma not merely in spite of her subversive self-assertion but because of it."<sup>1</sup> This applies to Mr. Darcy as well, and Elizabeth, perfectly aware of it, cannot resist inquiring when she demands an account of his having fallen in love with her: "Did you admire me for my impertinence?"<sup>2</sup> Her impertinence, of course, is why generations of readers have admired her and why we recognize that the major concern of the book is with the possibilities and responsibility of free and lively thought. *Pride and Prejudice* explores the special question of the meaning of freedom, given the premise which Jane Austen assumes throughout her fiction, that the relation between a character and public reality is at once problematic and necessary. We watch Elizabeth as she moves from a belief in her own logic to a more fluid interpretation of knowing and of intelligence in terms of the backgrounds, contexts, and particulars which inform truth. And we learn to acknowledge that the pressing importance of such a movement rests not in our hopes for being right but in our hopes for being free.

Miss Bingley describes Elizabeth's free spirit as "an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum" (p. 36). Certainly, Elizabeth hurrying through the muddy countryside to visit Jane, springing over puddles and jumping over stiles, is not a decorous sight. And just as certainly, those muddy petticoats and glowing cheeks contribute a great deal to Mr. Darcy's falling in love. The importance of Elizabeth's sense of freedom and the necessity of relating that idea to her growth in the novel may account for the fact that so many critics have sought to discuss *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of a dichotomy (suggested by the title) in which Elizabeth's freedom constitutes one pole and some sort of social sense the other. Her progress can then be understood as a movement from polarity to a merging or harmony, represented by her marriage to Mr. Darcy. Thus Alistair Duckworth finds it generally agreed that *Pride and Prejudice* "achieves an ideal relation between the individual and society."<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Van Ghent sees the book as illuminating "the difficult and delicate reconciliation of the sensitively developed individual with the terms of his social existence."<sup>4</sup> Marvin Mudrick, then, would account for Elizabeth's wrong-headedness as a failure to acknowledge the social context, and Samuel Klinger,

1/Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 77.

2/*The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford, 1932), 2:380. All further references to the novels are from this edition.

3/Alistair Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate* (Baltimore, 1971), p. 118, n.

4/Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953; reprint ed., New York, 1961), p. 100.

in variant terms, places the dichotomy as that between nature and art.<sup>5</sup> All would locate the embodiment of that final harmony among the stately and tasteful grounds of Pemberley.

Although most of these individual discussions, and others like them, are both valuable and persuasive, they share an assumption which in Jane Austen criticism has sunk to a truism, that her perspective is one of social and rational good. The general objection to this prevailing view is its orderliness when applied to *Pride and Prejudice*. It is hard to see where in that vision of social and emotional harmony with which so many would have the novel end there could be room for the doubts, the blindness, and the mistakes which Elizabeth still exhibits and which are a continuing part of every major character Jane Austen creates. I do not mean at all to imply that beyond the lightness there is some dark side to the novelist, some sort of regulated hatred or repression. I do mean to ask where there would be room for the life which, as Jane Austen was perfectly aware, goes on beyond all our formulations of it. Stuart Tave, in his recent study of Jane Austen's words, reminds us that "She knows, and she shows us in her novels, messy lives, and most people are leading them, even when the surface of life seems proper."<sup>6</sup> We have been too eager to assume that Jane Austen's was a conclusive vision, a sort of apotheosis of the optimism of premodern fiction. Yet to understand *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of some ideal blend of the individual and the social is to speak of finalities about a writer who herself chooses to speak of the possible, the continuous, the incomplete. Jane Austen's "social" concerns are with human relations, not society. Her own reference to "the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory" can only be called unfortunate in the light of the critical weight given that suspiciously humble remark. Jane Austen offers neither Chinese miniatures nor Dutch interiors nor any surface so finished that meanings are conclusive as well. It is hardly possible to speak of her themes as social (or as rational) without involving, by implication alone, that too familiar image of her as outside her own time and belonging to an earlier and more ordered age.

A more particular objection to the prevailing view of *Pride and Prejudice* is that it does not actually work. If Mr. Darcy is to represent society and Elizabeth a rebellious individualism, how are we to account for the fact that the first major breach of society's rules is made by Mr. Darcy, when he insults Elizabeth within her hearing at the Meryton ball? It seems evasive to conclude, with Mary Lascelles, that at the moment Mr. Darcy is out of character and the remark is a technical flaw.<sup>7</sup> Unquestionably, Mr. Darcy is an outstanding member of society, a landowner with both power and responsibility. His position and an accompanying sense of duties and obligations do justify a proper kind of pride. Yet this should not obscure the fact that Darcy's nature, far from being social, is reserved, independent, isolated, private, and vain. And it is Elizabeth who points to this dis-

5/Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (1952; reprint ed., Berkeley, 1968); Samuel Klinger, "Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in the Eighteenth-Century Mode," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 16 (July 1947): 357-70.

6/Stuart Tave, *Some Words of Jane Austen* (Chicago, 1973), p. 33.

7/Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (Oxford, 1939), p. 160.

crepancy when she remarks to Colonel Fitzwilliam on Mr. Darcy's rude conduct at the Meryton dance: "Shall we ask him why a man of sense and education, and who has lived in the world, is ill qualified to recommend himself to strangers?" (p. 175).

Elizabeth's failures in judgment, with Charlotte Lucas but primarily with Mr. Wickham and Mr. Darcy, are not adequately explained as a headstrong insistence on private judgment in the face of social values. It is inaccurate to claim that Elizabeth should have been swayed by the fact that Mr. Wickham "is a dispossessed man in an acquisitive society."<sup>8</sup> He has a military commission and the militia, like the navy, is an honorable and a gentlemanly occupation and a respected part of Jane Austen's social scheme. It would be just as distorting for Elizabeth to find Mr. Darcy socially acceptable because he owns Pemberley, whatever Charlotte Lucas may think. It is Charlotte, after all, who advises Elizabeth "not to be a simpleton and allow her fancy for Wickham to make her appear unpleasant in the eyes of a man of ten times his consequence" (p. 90). Charlotte chooses "not to be a simpleton" and will spend the rest of her life with Mr. Collins. To judge others in economic or social terms is the very sort of thinking Jane Austen would expose. Mr. Wickham is socially unacceptable, but for moral reasons rather than economic ones, not because he has no possessions but because he has no principles. And this is no more a question of manners than it is of position or money. Mr. Wickham can be as polite and conversant as Mr. Darcy can be reserved and rude. Elizabeth misjudges them, but not through an individualism which fails to appreciate class or social values. If that were true, *Pride and Prejudice* would be a lesser novel. Her failure is one of intelligence.

Jane Austen's major study of the links between intelligence and freedom is cast as a love story, and of a sort which she delighted in characterizing as "rather too light, and bright and sparkling."<sup>9</sup> Most of the action of *Pride and Prejudice* can be accounted for as a tale of love which violates the traditions of romance. The rather unromantic beginnings of Henry Tilney's affection for Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* have been expanded into a prominent motif about the lovers in *Pride and Prejudice*. For much of the story Mr. Darcy cares for Elizabeth in spite of himself, and she does not care for him at all. When Elizabeth does come to have some feelings for Mr. Darcy she understands her change as above all "a motive within her of good will which could not be overlooked. It was gratitude.—Gratitude, not merely for having once loved her, but for loving her still well enough, to forgive all the petulance and acrimony of her manner in rejecting him, and all the unjust accusations accompanying her rejection" (p. 265). Such a motive for love may not be ideal, but it has the author's full approval. It is also shared by Jane Bennet, the character in *Pride and Prejudice* who comes closest to providing standards of true sensibility. Jane explains to Elizabeth her own goodwill to Mr. Darcy on the grounds that "I always had a value for him. Were it for nothing but his love of you, I must always have esteemed him" (p. 374).

8/Mudrick, p. 110.

9/*Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2d ed. (1952; reprint ed., London, 1969), no. 77, Thursday, February 4, 1813, p. 299.

The emotional appeal of someone being in love with you is a favorite theme of Jane Austen's. It draws Marianne Dashwood to Colonel Brandon as well as Henry Tilney to Catherine and even, in a more comical way, Harriet Smith to the long-suffering farmer, Martin. It may help to explain Jane Fairfax's love for Frank Churchill, and it is strong enough to begin to lure Fanny Price toward Henry Crawford and finally to win Edmund Bertram for her. Its most powerful expression is in *Persuasion*, in the intense and muted feelings of Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth. There love reawakens love in an almost Shelleyan cycle of reciprocity. The particular significance of this theme in *Pride and Prejudice* is that Elizabeth's gratitude and increasing affection for Mr. Darcy are inseparable from her intellectual growth. Right thinking and wrong in the novel can be measured in terms of Elizabeth's changing feelings toward Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham. Against Mr. Wickham's empty charm Elizabeth must balance the dangers and obligations of a demanding love. Gratitude, then, is the response through which Jane Austen seeks to define freedom and intelligence within the binding circumstances of emotions, partial understandings, and incomplete truths.<sup>10</sup>

The progress in *Pride and Prejudice* need not then be described as a dichotomy resolved. Elizabeth's mistakes are not based on a rejection of society even though it is quite true that they are related to her sense of personal freedom. What we are to understand by that freedom is not the right to do and say whatever she wants in defiance of social conventions. Rather, it is a freedom from becoming involved. This is why Elizabeth's education is most appropriately a love story. Lionel Trilling has said that *Pride and Prejudice* shows us that morality can be a matter of style. It also shows us that intelligence can be a matter of the heart. Elizabeth believes that understanding, intelligence, perception, depend on being independent of their objects, and she wants most powerfully to be an intelligent observer of her world. That urge explains much of her continuing appeal and is the single most important force in her story. But for Elizabeth it means to be apart from events. Her lesson is the particularly harsh one her father has imparted that people are blind and silly and only distance can save her from being blind and silly as well. The view from that distance is necessarily ironic. For Elizabeth, then, being disengaged seems the only salvation from stupidity. Elizabeth's heart is not engaged by Mr. Wickham, her understanding is. Her opinion of him is based on her belief in her own discernment and her separation through intelligence from an essentially ugly world. Elizabeth's weapon against what she sees as stupidity and ugliness is her laughter, her impertinence, and her uncommitted heart. Andrew Wright has argued with some power that "against clarity, in *Pride and Prejudice*, involvement is set," yet his position is so unfortunately similar to Mr. Bennet's that it needs modification.<sup>11</sup> Mr. Bennet's clarity offers the protection against the pains of misjudgment and disillusion which only a disinterested cynicism can provide. Involvement, it is true, can give no such protection. Yet the point of Elizabeth's story is surely that she is always involved, and her recognition of that brings the kind of openness which alone can make clarity possible.

10/Stuart Tave offers a helpful definition of gratitude as "the response to the feeling of another, the natural obligation in return for having been thought worthy of being loved" (p. 140).

11/Andrew Wright, *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure* (London, 1953), pp. 117-18.

In defending Elizabeth's affection for Mr. Darcy in language almost identical with that she had used in defending Henry Tilney's for Catherine, Jane Austen makes the alternative quite explicit:

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 defence, except that she had given somewhat of a trial to 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. [P. 279]

The love at first sight that Elizabeth had tried with Mr. Wickham was curiously cold, much as the flirtation between Frank Churchill and Emma was cold. This is clear when Wickham becomes "the admirer of someone else. Elizabeth was watchful enough to see it all, but she could see it and write of it without material pain. Her heart had been but slightly touched, and her vanity was satisfied with believing that *she* would have been his choice, had fortune permitted it" (p. 149). Elizabeth's attraction for Mr. Wickham cannot be accounted for as a misplaced affection. The discrepancy between how Jane Austen presents Mr. Wickham and how Elizabeth sees him leads us to an understanding of the falseness of Elizabeth's vision.

There is a similarity of temperament (if not character) between Elizabeth and Mr. Wickham, much as there is between Emma and Frank Churchill. What all these characters share is a great deal of charm, a charm which comes from a liveliness of mind which is as interested in what is entertaining as in what is good and right. Mr. Wickham's villainy must limit the comparison, for Frank Churchill is merely irresponsible. His principles are sound. Yet Mr. Wickham's black character should not be understood as a cruder and more extreme version of Frank's, in spite of Jane Austen's general commitment to mixed character as superior both in terms of realism and technique. The first comment of Mr. Wickham that Jane Austen provides us with, when that interesting stranger has appeared on the street in Meryton with Mr. Denny, and the Bennet sisters are being informed that he has accepted a commission in the corps, is that "this was exactly as it should be; for the young man wanted only regimentals to make him completely charming" (p. 72). One wonders immediately what sort of charm would best present itself in the bright red uniform of the militia. And Jane Austen goes on to say that "his appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address. The introduction was followed up on his side by a happy readiness of conversation—a readiness at the same time perfectly correct and unassuming" (p. 72). This description, unlike Jane Austen's usual introductions in the novel, tells us nothing of Mr. Wickham's qualities or nature, but only of his looks and manners. His looks and manners are all that Elizabeth has noticed. And it will turn out that they are all Mr. Wickham has to recommend him.

Mr. Wickham, as the villain that Frank Churchill could never be, is a familiar type. That Jane Austen meant the reader to be aware of Wickham's conventionality is brought out in many scenes. A late example is Jane Bennet's

horrified reaction to the discovery that Mr. Wickham is “a gamester!” There is no need to explain this response, as Henrietta Ten Harmsel does, as a bit of moralizing creeping into an otherwise sophisticated structure.<sup>12</sup> The point Jane Austen wants us to see is not that for Jane Bennet (or her author) gambling is as bad as or worse than eloping with Lydia but that the fact of Wickham’s gambling fixes his character and so leaves no doubt as to how the elopement is to be understood. After this Jane says no more of her hope that Wickham’s intentions are honorable. She knows the kind of man he is and so must we. Wickham is something of a cliché, both in his false face as a charming young man and in his true face as the fortune hunter. This lack of originality in Wickham’s portrait can have nothing to do with any lack of authorial skill. We need only think of Mr. Collins, who belongs in the tradition of pious Christian hypocrites but whose character has so many peculiarities that he stands unabashedly on his own. We must then ask why Jane Austen, with her explicit contempt for the stock villain, would place such a character in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Mr. Wickham is most appropriately dressed in the scarlet uniform of the militia because he is a type rather than an individual. He is one of a class of men whom Lydia and Kitty, like their mother before them, are wild about. Mr. Wickham, to be sure, is a particularly good-looking version, and this distinction is not unnoticed by another of the Bennet sisters during that first dinner: “When Mr. Wickham walked into the room, Elizabeth felt that she had neither been seeing him before, nor thinking of him since, with the smallest degree of unreasonable admiration. The officers of the ——shire were in general a very creditable, gentlemanlike set, and the best of them were of the present party; but Mr. Wickham was as far beyond them all in person, countenance, air, and walk, as *they* were superior to the broadfaced stuffy uncle Philips” (p. 76). We cannot but notice how commonplace and how coldly evaluative this response is from the girl whose judgment is supposed to be special. Near the end of *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen, in her role as conventional novelist, reassures us that Eleanor Tilney’s new husband, though he has not actually appeared in the story, is “to a precision the most charming young man in the world.” She goes on to observe that “any further definition of his merits must be unnecessary; the most charming young man in the world is instantly before the imagination of us all” (*Works*, 5:251). This idea, with its overtones of literary convention, is used more critically in *Pride and Prejudice*. How closely Mr. Wickham qualifies as Elizabeth’s ideal of the most charming young man in the world may be guessed from her conviction, after taking leave for Hunsford, that “he must always be her model of the amiable and pleasing” (p. 152). The airy fictional tone of their relations is established from the beginning in the account of their first conversation: “Mr. Wickham was the happy man towards whom almost every female eye was turned, and Elizabeth was the happy woman by whom he finally seated himself; and the agreeable manner in which he immediately fell into conversation, though it was only on its being a wet night, and on the probability of a rainy season, made her feel that the

12/Henrietta Ten Harmsel, *Jane Austen: A Study in Fictional Conventions* (The Hague, 1964), p. 68.

commonest, dullest, most threadbare topic might be rendered interesting by the skill of the speaker” (p. 76). The feeling and behavior of the “happy” pair are obvious clichés, an effect delightfully reinforced by Jane Austen’s reference to Mr. Wickham and the other officers as Mr. Collins’s “rivals for the notice of the fair” (p. 76). We notice Elizabeth’s self-deception, her lack of any serious feelings for this handsome young officer about whom, as she is to realize later, she knows nothing at all.

Mr. Wickham’s kind of charm, one of public and superficial ease, makes him seem unreal. He is a flat character moving amongst actual people. This is achieved in part through the fact that Jane Austen has Wickham himself make up his own public role. The aesthetic and the moral responsibility for creating a typical rake must lie with Wickham rather than with his author. It is an excellent method, for Wickham, though villainous, is neither subtle nor ingenious, and the mask he creates for Meryton’s benefit and his own is tellingly unoriginal. One need only notice the silliness of the sad tale he recites to Elizabeth, in its style as well as its sentiments:

it is not for *me* to be driven away by Mr. Darcy. If *he* wishes to avoid seeing *me*, he must go . . . His father, Miss Bennet, the late Mr. Darcy, was one of the best men that ever breathed, and the truest friend I ever had; and I can never be in company with this Mr. Darcy without being grieved to the soul by a thousand tender recollections. His behavior to myself has been scandalous; but I verily believe I could forgive him anything and everything, rather than his disappointing the hopes and disgracing the memory of his father. [P. 78]

He is as trite as a scoundrel as he has been when a pretended hero. His unsettled life, indifference to Lydia, his debts and applications for money through her, are all boringly predictable. We are taught by the very language of the book, by the style of Wickham’s life and conversations and the style of his author’s descriptions, that he is not to be taken seriously, that he is just a made-up character, only a fiction after all. But for the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* Wickham is not some conventional villain in a novel. And, of course, his villainy has real consequences. Certainly in life there are people who are stereotypes, those limited to the superficiality and the insidious simplicity of living in roles. Like Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*, Wickham lacks the moral imagination to develop and so defines the limits rather than the possibilities of character.

Wickham is a danger to the very innocent (Georgiana Darcy) and the very wild (Lydia Bennet). Even Mr. Darcy acknowledges at the Netherfield ball that “Mr. Wickham is blessed with such happy manners as may ensure his *making* friends—whether he may be equally capable of *retaining* them, is less certain” (p. 92). Mr. Wickham does succeed in being universally liked in Meryton. Yet we must ask why Elizabeth, who is neither innocent nor wild nor like everyone else in Meryton, is also completely taken in. The first we know of Elizabeth is Mr. Bennet’s laconic observation that “they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters” (p. 5). Yet to be praised by Mr. Bennet is a questionable recommendation, since by quickness he must surely mean the discernment of other people’s follies. This is the way Mr. Bennet has chosen to exercise his own faculties and the way he has taught his



daughter, by example and encouragement, to apply hers. Elizabeth is quick to see and laugh at the failings of many—of the Bingley sisters, of Mr. Collins, of Mr. Bingley, of her own family, and even of Jane. Yet she chooses not to see Mr. Wickham, and this in spite of the fact that she is provided with obvious evidence of his falseness—in his absurdly sentimental choices of expressions, in the discrepancies between his assertions and his behavior, and in the very improbability of his story.

Elizabeth can be charmed by Wickham and can accept his story precisely because he and his story are such clichés. Elizabeth's self-deception does not lie, like Emma's, in being a creator of one's own interesting fictions. Nor does it, like Catherine Morland's, consist of playing a created character, except for that touch at the end of the novel when she and Mr. Darcy discuss whether the moral of their story will come out as it should. If Emma behaves like an author and Catherine like a character, then Elizabeth behaves like a reader. Another way of saying this is simply that Elizabeth neither manipulates people nor acts like a heroine herself. Instead, she understands herself as an observer, an enlightened and discerning witness to all that is ridiculous and entertaining in others. And she frequently places herself in the presumably disinterested position of someone watching yet apart. In the drawing-room at Netherfield "Elizabeth was so much caught by what passed, as to leave her very little attention for her book; and soon laying it wholly aside, she drew near the card-table" (p. 38). The next evening "Elizabeth took up some needlework, and was sufficiently amused in attending to what passed between Darcy and his companion" (p. 47). She takes up much the same positions at Hunsford and even within her own home. In Elizabeth's attitude we see the influence of Mr. Bennet's cynical credo that "for what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors, and to laugh at them in our turn?" (p. 364).

Elizabeth's observations are far from being as irresponsible and limiting as her father's. She tells Mr. Darcy that "I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies *do* divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can" (p. 57). Elizabeth can do more than laugh. She is able to credit Charlotte's sensible domestic arrangements as much as she delights in the absurdities of Mr. Collins. She can sympathize with Jane's suffering and can condemn the impropriety and the evil of her father's misused intelligence. Indeed, the variety of Elizabeth's observations and the degree to which she enjoys them are basic to her charm. Nonetheless, it is this sense of herself as standing apart and watching life which accounts for at least part of her attraction to Mr. Wickham.

Jane Austen has deliberately and obviously made Mr. Wickham a stock character in order to point to Elizabeth's central moral weakness, that she does not take life seriously. Raised by a foolish mother and a cynical father who has abdicated all responsibility, and encouraged to distinguish herself from her sisters, Elizabeth sees the world as some sort of entertaining game. She is not silly in the way that Lydia and Kitty are (though she is surprisingly close to them), but she cannot imagine that anything could be expected of her. Elizabeth is morally disengaged. What she wants is to understand what she sees and she also

hopes that what she sees will be exciting, will be worth understanding. And this, of course, is just what she thinks Mr. Wickham can offer. His stereotyped charm confers no individual feelings and invokes no personal obligations. His tale is bizarre, out of the ordinary, and shocking, with the initial flattering appeal of being a privileged confidence. It is presented to Elizabeth and to the reader literally as the recounting of a story. And on Elizabeth's part the hearing is complete with the proper forms of response, with expectations ("what she chiefly wished to hear she could not hope to be told, the history of his acquaintance with Mr. Darcy" [p. 77]) and the appropriate exclamations (such as, "Indeed!" "Good heavens!" "This is quite shocking!" "How strange!" and "How abominable!").

Elizabeth chooses to believe Mr. Wickham's story, and the reason she gives Jane is that "there was truth in his looks" (p. 86). We might accept this as having the familiar meaning that Mr. Wickham has an honest face if it were not that throughout Mr. Wickham's account Jane Austen has Elizabeth think about his good looks. She responds to his declarations of honoring Mr. Darcy's father (declarations made suspect as much by the triteness of their phrasing as by the fact that Mr. Wickham is even now dishonoring the father by exposing Mr. Darcy to Elizabeth) by the remarkable thought that Mr. Wickham was "handsomer than ever as he expressed them" (p. 80). And she silently remarks that Mr. Wickham is a young man "whose very countenance may vouch for [his] being amiable" (pp. 80–81). We cannot simply explain these responses by understanding Elizabeth, as we do Lydia, as a silly and ignorant flirt without any sense. Yet for her the credibility of Mr. Wickham's story is inseparable from his handsome face. Both Mr. Wickham's story and his looks have a glamor which is exceptional and dramatic without being either unpredictable or unique. Both are a recognizable type.

Because Jane Austen depicts both Elizabeth's credence and her feelings in the familiar and suspect language of sentimental fiction we must conclude that Elizabeth no more seriously believes Mr. Wickham's tale than she seriously believes she is in love with him. We need only think of how Jane Austen depicts the classic situation of a girl looking forward to seeing a man at a dance. Elizabeth, hoping to see Mr. Wickham at the Netherfield ball, "had dressed with more than usual care, and prepared in the highest spirits for the conquest of all that remained unsubdued of his heart, trusting that it was not more than might be won in the course of the evening" (p. 89). Her own high spirits are the most dominant note, and when Mr. Wickham does not come, the extent of Elizabeth's real regret may be gauged by Jane Austen's comment that "Elizabeth was not formed for ill-humour; and though every prospect of her own was destroyed for the evening, it could not dwell long on her spirits; and having told all her griefs to Charlotte Lucas, whom she had not seen in a week, she was soon able to make a voluntary transition to the oddities of her cousin" (p. 90). And it is to be doubted whether Elizabeth would have found more pleasure in dancing with Mr. Wickham than she does in laughing at Mr. Collins, or that, indeed, there is finally much difference between the two activities. Elizabeth has allowed herself to be taken in by a style which she can recognize so clearly later as stale affectation because she views the very artificiality of her connection to Mr. Wickham as an assurance of freedom.

For Jane Austen it is in that fact that the immorality of their relation lies. In the terms of *Pride and Prejudice* there can be nothing between them to be grateful for. This is not just a question of freedom from emotional involvement. Elizabeth is here violating a necessity which is as much a matter of imagination and perception as it is of feelings. Her self-restricting freedom is a refusal to commit her intelligence to growth, to seriousness, to a moral life.

*Pride and Prejudice* is about what is a pervasive theme for Jane Austen—the charm of what is passing around us, those experiences with other people out of which sound judgment can grow. The particular difficulty preventing proper relationships which Jane Austen examines in *Pride and Prejudice* is the intellectual commitment to a presumed “objectivity,” to clarity without involvement. This is the source of Elizabeth’s attraction to Mr. Wickham. Her ties to him are as artificial as his character. With Wickham Elizabeth has played at romance. We see a similar objectivity in Charlotte Lucas’s clear-eyed economic practicality as she reflects on her forthcoming marriage: “Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband.—Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want” (pp. 122–23). As to any question of sensibility, Charlotte quietly tells Elizabeth that “I am not romantic you know. I never was” (p. 125). There is also the objectivity of Mr. Bennet’s unbiased cynicism which does not except even his own family. His unflinching recognition of Lydia’s silliness is unmarred by even a touch of sympathy or of regret that his child should have such a nature. He is just as impartial to Jane, and can be amused that she is “crossed in love.” Yet these two, Charlotte and Mr. Bennet, have been the only intelligent people in Elizabeth’s environment and have influenced her moral growth. *Pride and Prejudice* is the story of Elizabeth’s movement away from these “sensible” and coldly self-deceptive visions, of freeing her intelligence from defensiveness and negation, and of learning to understand, as Isabel Archer would learn so much more painfully seventy years later, that freedom from significant choices is a prison, that objectivity can be blind, and that to set oneself apart is only to be cut off from the means to truth and to happiness.

Elizabeth, following the disappointments of Mr. Bingley’s departure from Netherfield and Charlotte’s engagement, responds by a moment of blinding cynicism: “There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well. The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense” (p. 135). Mr. Bennet would approve of such remarks. This closed vision is a violation of Elizabeth’s intelligence and an abnegation of her humanity. Nor is it forced upon her by the vicissitudes of life, being a matter of will rather than circumstance. Her hard opinion of Mr. Bingley’s departure makes that clear. That quality in him she had described at Netherfield as the merit “to yield readily—easily—to the *persuasion* of a friend” (p. 50) she now determines to see as “that

easiness of temper, that want of proper resolution which now made him the slave of his designing friends" (p. 133). Nor will she mitigate her contempt by recalling Charlotte's warning that Jane's feelings for Bingley were not apparent at all. Elizabeth, seeing herself as the impartial observer, unprejudiced by any feelings toward Bingley, is in fact choosing to place his actions in as bad a light as possible. Such objectivity is nothing more than cynicism. The saving difference between Elizabeth and her father is that her motive is not cool pleasure at the follies of others but a helpless sympathy with her sister's pain.

The sense of blasted hopes which passes as a realistic intelligence with Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Bennet is not allowed to influence Elizabeth unchallenged. The cynicism of these two is opposed by a warmer vision, that of Jane Bennet. It is Jane who replies to Elizabeth's despair at human nature and at Charlotte's marriage with the comment, "Do not give way to such feelings as these. They will ruin your happiness" (p. 135). For it is Jane who understands that to view the world coldly is to be neither perceptive nor superior nor safe from wrong. It is to be irresponsible and to abandon the difficulties of trust for the finalities of easy generalization. Jane's prepossession to think well of people does not lead her to be perceptive, and she is obviously wrong about the Bingley sisters. Yet Jane's kind of misunderstanding is acceptable to her author in a way that the disposition to think ill of people is not. And her role as the opponent of negativity is central to understanding Elizabeth's mistakes, her choices, and her intellectual growth.

At the beginning of the novel we are assured of Elizabeth's intelligence and Jane's blindness, in part because Elizabeth can see immediately that Bingley's sisters are not well intentioned. And we are quick to think of Jane as sweet but a fool. Although Elizabeth asserts that Jane is so good as to be quite perfect we know this to be untrue. Jane does lack discernment, does confuse her hopes with truths. We are on Elizabeth's side, the side of clarity as against softheadedness, as she takes Jane to task with an energy and realism we can only support. We remember the fineness of her reply to Jane's excuses for Charlotte's marriage: "You shall not defend her, though it is Charlotte Lucas. You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger, security for happiness" (pp. 135-36). And we must be delighted by her answer to Jane's attempt to explain away Mr. Wickham's accusations: "And now, my dear Jane, what have you got to say in behalf of the interested people who have probably been concerned in the business?—Do clear *them* too, or we shall be obliged to think ill of somebody" (p. 85). Against her sister's wit Jane's generous doubts seem foolish indeed. It is in this role of countering Jane's candor that Elizabeth most convinces us of her cleverness and perspicacity.

And yet, in the midst of Elizabeth's lively banter and her quick successes in teasing Jane, there emerges the disturbing fact that her superior wit actually has little to do with truth. Elizabeth may always win the arguments, but she is often wrong. Wickham's story is farfetched, even though Jane cannot sensibly explain why. She is quite right that "one does not know what to think," although the remark does sound limp when followed by Elizabeth's firm "I beg your pardon;—

one knows exactly what to think” (p. 86). Nor does Jane at all deserve to be accused of subverting principle in explaining Charlotte’s marriage, for she attempts to understand Charlotte as much as to excuse her. Elizabeth will not tolerate such an attempt, though a moment before she has found the marriage unaccountable. But it will be Jane who, near the end of the story, pleads with Elizabeth to “do any thing rather than marry without affection” (p. 373). Elizabeth undoubtedly was in the right about the Bingley sisters, but it should be remembered that she had the advantage not only of “more quickness of observation and less pliancy of temper than her sister” but also of a “judgment too unassailed by any attention to herself” (p. 15). Certainly, in the beginning the sisters do treat Jane with more real politeness and kindness than they do Elizabeth.

Jane’s candor, then, is not just the naive blindness Elizabeth would have us believe it to be, any more than Elizabeth’s lack of candor is true perception. Indeed, Elizabeth is more than eager to discover and laugh at those faults in others which Jane finds so difficult to see. Moreover, Jane’s optimism has to do with her faith that there is much in life that is beyond what she knows and that certainty as to the minds and hearts of others is rare indeed. Elizabeth does not allow for her own ignorance and prefers the certainty of deciding the worst. Her just enjoyment of the follies and nonsense of her companions sometimes goes uncomfortably close to the attitude described by Mr. Darcy as when “the wisest and the best of men, nay, the wisest and best of their actions, may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke” (p. 57). For the truth is that both sisters must often judge in ignorance, must imagine, must surmise. In such a case Elizabeth’s lively doubts are no more justified than Jane’s candor and gentle trust.

Although the comic side of Jane’s goodwill is so delightfully brought out by Elizabeth, its serious value is central to events. On Mr. Wickham’s story, “Miss Bennet was the only creature who could suppose there might be any extenuating circumstances in the case, unknown to the society of Hertfordshire; her mild and steady candour always pleaded for allowances, and urged the possibility of mistakes—but by everybody else Mr. Darcy was condemned as the worst of men” (p. 138). Jane does not see that Mr. Wickham is a liar. But neither does she allow his allegation to subsume her own view of human goodness or her sense of what is probable and likely. In part this is because Jane cannot believe that Mr. Bingley could be so wrong about his friend, Mr. Darcy, and in part because she just cannot conceive of deliberate wrongs. But primarily it is because of Jane’s recognition, insisted upon in the face of all Elizabeth’s powerful weapons of wit, observation, and laughter, that people and events are more complex and hidden than she can know. Jane Austen has not created Jane as a simple and good-hearted character merely to provide a balance to the complexity and intelligence of her main heroine. When we consider what Jane is doing in the novel and why her author would think her creation necessary, we must recognize that Jane is by nature neither objective nor perceptive and yet Jane Austen has made her the one character in the novel who is just to Mr. Darcy. It is by reason of the very qualities which Elizabeth (and the reader) presume to be weaknesses that Jane

turns out to be right. Without any “quickness of observation” and with the “wish not to be hasty in censuring anyone” (p. 14), Jane comes closer to truth than her intelligent sister. Certainly, Jane Austen is not instructing us to think pleasant thoughts rather than to apply our powers toward a better understanding of the world. Yet Jane’s candor, based on a sense of her own weaknesses, allows a flexibility that Elizabeth lacks.

The willingness to commit oneself to experience, in its unknown dangers as well as its possibilities, comes naturally to Jane, and perhaps that is why she is not the central character of *Pride and Prejudice*. She has never deliberately chosen involvement over clarity. Jane Austen’s major interest is always with those whose connections to reality, in terms of knowledge and goodness, are at once more questionable and more difficult. Jane is an innocent. Yet she teaches us that involvement can lead to a kind of truth which is not accessible to those who understand clarity as a vision gained through the exclusion of being involved. Elizabeth’s freedom, insofar as it leads to judgments she likes to presume are untouched by commitment or concern, does not bring understanding. In accounting to Jane for her unfairness to Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth admits that “I meant to be so 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. One may be continually abusive without saying anything just; but one cannot be always laughing at a man without now and then stumbling on something witty” (pp. 225–26). For we are in England, where character is mixed, and that makes it always possible for an observer to find the flaws in others. As Elizabeth acknowledges, such ways of looking are selfish and distorting, and cut oneself off from one’s kind. Between candor and cynicism there can be a way of understanding which presupposes neither human evil nor human good yet allows for both by the very suspension of any fixed view.

One of the most powerful facts in *Pride and Prejudice* is that after Elizabeth has her moment of shame and revelation at Hunsford so many of her perceptions continue to be quite wrong. She does see through Wickham, but she can learn to detect his artificiality only because she knows the truth. Her judgment not to reveal him turns out to be almost disastrous to her own family. And she is still virtually always wrong about Mr. Darcy. She interprets his silence at Lambton on learning of Lydia’s elopement with complete assurance: “Her power was sinking; every thing *must* sink under such proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace. She could neither wonder nor condemn . . .” (p. 278). After Lady Catherine’s visit Elizabeth speculates that if his aunt appeals to Mr. Darcy to give her up, “with his notions of dignity, he would probably feel that the arguments, which to Elizabeth had appeared weak and ridiculous, contained much good sense and solid reasoning” (p. 361). Even when all these confusions are resolved by Darcy’s second proposal, the two must still spend much of their courtship in the charming yet quite necessary explanations of all those motives and actions so misunderstood. Jane Austen, who did not compose love scenes for their emotional appeal, reminds the reader that in human relations, even of the kind reputed to provide immediate understanding, there is a great deal that intuition and surmise do not reveal.

We must ask what, after all, Elizabeth has learned and what her story is about if after the acknowledgment of prejudice and vanity in the lane at Hunsford her judgment seems hardly more accurate than before. Jane Austen has so arranged the plot that her heroine's moment of revelation and chagrin comes nearly in the middle of the story. After Hunsford there are few scenes of Elizabeth's quickness and wit, and much of the action seems not to depend on her at all. The Gardiners' delayed vacation and wish to visit Pemberley, the combination of Mrs. Forster's invitation, Wickham's mounting debts and Lydia's recklessness which precipitate the elopement, and Mr. Darcy's arrival at the Lambton inn at the moment of Elizabeth's receiving the news, all remind us that Elizabeth can have little control over people or events, while both may be crucial to her. The second half of *Pride and Prejudice* may be less sparkling than the first, but the quieter pleasure it offers is an extended view of Elizabeth's fate entwined with the lives of those around her.

What Elizabeth is doing in these later scenes, with a directness and care which were absent from her earlier casual wit, is seriously trying to understand the particular situations she finds herself in and the people she cares about. Whether she is trying to control her feelings enough at the Lambton inn in order to receive Georgiana Darcy and her brother, or paying a morning visit to the ladies at Pemberley, or accepting what she believes to be Darcy's giving her up after the elopement, or speculating (with the Gardiners and Jane) on Mr. Wickham's intentions, or surmising Mr. Darcy's reaction to his aunt's interference, Elizabeth is constantly engaged in trying to see and respond to other points of view. She is often wrong—and for quite the same reasons that she was wrong in the beginning, that her partialities and ignorance must limit her. The difference is that Elizabeth no longer sees her world as a place of easily discovered folly from which, in self-defense as much as in amusement, she must stand apart if she is to see the truth. She has come to value the connections and partialities which inform truth, to understand that a lively intelligence is personal and engaged, and to use that quick mind to reach for hopes and suggestive meanings rather than killing finalities. The former view had placed Elizabeth, along with her father, among those who understand human nature in crude categories of behavior and motivation. Against this reductive view Jane Austen places a vision of people as palpable yet flexible and elusive beyond our predictions for them. Even Jane's candor is not so conclusively defined as to be unchanged by Miss Bingley's unkindness. Neither Jane nor her creator can teach Elizabeth to be right. They do teach her that she has constructed protective fictions as a substitute for the pitfalls and delights of free thought.

As Elizabeth learns to suspend judgment and examine her experience she also becomes aware of her own affections. She had known by the Hunsford visit that her opinion of Mr. Darcy had been wrong. Yet her most important lesson about him is not that he is good but that he loves her in ways that can overcome the failings in his character. Lydia Bennet's elopement with Mr. Wickham is a curiously obtrusive event in a novel of Jane Austen's. Yet it is through this terrible deed that Elizabeth comes to realize her obligation to Mr. Darcy, an obligation which, as he makes clear, could only have come about because he loves her. All was done for Elizabeth's sake. And it is a romantic moment for these most

unromantic lovers when Elizabeth finally expresses her obligation and finds herself being proposed to. Elizabeth's gratitude—gratitude in the sense in which Jane Austen means it—is not for a favor done, not for an act of socially right behavior. It is a gratitude that, despite all the obstacles which realism can provide, despite time, conventions, and misunderstandings, despite her wrongs and his own limitations, Mr. Darcy can see Elizabeth honestly and love her as well. Between them there are no longer any of the conventional dangers of social slips or sudden reversals of opinion, as there always were in Elizabeth's relations with Wickham. That is why Mr. Darcy's proposal would have come without Elizabeth's offered thanks. Their feelings are past being subject to the accidents of circumstance. Fate is an empty convention of romance. Instead, Mr. Darcy offers Elizabeth an understanding of herself, one that is moral and affectionate and sound. It is a vision of clarity because of his involvement, a vision from a generous heart. To recognize that and to appreciate it is a reciprocal feeling which will unite Elizabeth with Mr. Darcy. For gratitude is an act of self love which carries with it an act of love.

Near the end of the novel Mr. Bingley returns to Hertfordshire and rides into the paddock at Longbourn. Mrs. Bennet, seeing him from her window, calls to her daughters to come as well. "Jane resolutely kept her place at the table; but Elizabeth, to satisfy her mother, went to the window—she looked,—she saw Mr. Darcy with him, and sat down again by her sister" (p. 333). With this image of the two sisters, and Elizabeth's gesture of looking changed to shared embarrassment and retreat, Jane Austen captures her heroine's transformation from a detached vision to an engaged one. Elizabeth, as she joins Jane at the table, accepts her new freedom, its boundaries, its uncertainties, and its hope.

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