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JANE AUSTEN

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INTRODUCTION

JANE AUSTEN began work on *Emma* in January 1814 and completed the novel on 29 March 1815. In the meantime *Mansfield Park* had appeared and the edition was sold out in six months. Jane Austen's reputation was slowly growing, although her novels were published anonymously and she was known to the general public as 'the author of *Pride and Prejudice*'. She received a message from the Prince Regent expressing his admiration and inviting the dedication of her next novel. Accordingly *Emma* appeared on 29 December 1815 (though the title-page is dated 1816), dedicated to a man for whose personal character Jane Austen had scant respect. She was doubtless more gratified by a long and laudatory review of her novel in the influential *Quarterly Review*, written by no less a person than Sir Walter Scott. Since the review was unsigned, we do not know whether Jane Austen was aware that she had earned the praise of the most successful novelist of the day; but undoubtedly this review marked the peak of the modest fame she achieved in her own lifetime. She died a little more than a year later, with *Persuasion* written but not seen through the press. *Emma* was the last completely finished product of her maturity; and in the opinion of most modern judges it is, of all her novels, the one which most perfectly represents her genius.

If the reader is making his first acquaintance with *Emma*, let me urge him to read no further in this Introduction until he has finished Jane Austen's text. Of few novels can it be said with more justice that reading it and re-reading it are quite different experiences. Probably the latter is more rewarding,

but I should be sorry to deny anyone the pleasure of the former by 'giving away' the story.

On first reading, *Emma* is a comedy of mysteries and puzzles (it is no coincidence that riddles, anagrams, and conundrums figure so prominently in the action) which challenge the reader's perspicacity quite as much as the heroine's. To be sure, put on our guard from the very first page against too close an identification with Emma's hopes and expectations, we may anticipate her realization of the true state of affairs—we may guess that Mr. Elton's attentions are directed not at Harriet but at herself long before his declaration; and we may suspect, before Emma is told, that there is some secret between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill. Indeed, one of the marks of Jane Austen's skill is that it does not matter, as regards the effectiveness of the narrative, at what point we anticipate Emma's discoveries, if at all: the book is protected against failure for any reader, however naïve, however sophisticated. But only an uncannily knowing reader could predict the fate of every character from the outset. On first reading we must to a large extent share the heroine's bafflement, curiosity, and suspense as to the course of events. When Frank Churchill facetiously announces to the company gathered on Box Hill, 'I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse . . . to say, that she desires to know what you are all thinking of',[1] he is in a sense stating what the novel, on first reading, is all about.

On second reading we do know what everybody is thinking of, and *Emma* becomes a comedy of ironies. From a position of privileged wisdom, we watch Emma entangle herself deeper and deeper in mistakes and misunderstandings, unwittingly preparing her own discomfiture and disappointment, while all the other characters are to some extent living in a similar world of illusion. Even Mr. Knightley does not escape unscathed, for we know that his legitimate disapproval of Emma's conduct derives some of its animus from unnecessary jealousy on Frank Churchill's account. The miracle is,

[1] p. 334.

that the second reading does not cancel out the first, nor exhaust the interest of subsequent readings. As Reginald Farrer said:

> While twelve readings of *Pride and Prejudice* give you twelve periods of pleasure repeated, as many readings of *Emma* give you that pleasure, not repeated only, but squared and squared again with each perusal, till at every fresh reading you feel anew that you never understood anything like the widening sum of its delights.[1]

Thus while every sentence of description and dialogue reverberates with ironic significance on second reading, there is no passage which is not sufficiently interesting, amusing, and character-revealing to seem quite in place on first reading. Conversely, the ironic mode does not totally dominate the second reading because 'our attention is so diversified by the thick web of linguistic nuance that we do not concentrate singlemindedly on the ironic results of the mystification'.[2] We are unlikely to exhaust the subtleties of *Emma* even on a second reading, and we can never, therefore, assume a position of entirely detached superiority towards the heroine. Becoming aware at each re-reading of what we 'missed' before, we are compelled to acknowledge, like Emma herself, the fallibility of our human understanding. This is perhaps one reason why Jane Austen's prediction when she began *Emma*—'I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like'[3] has so often been falsified.

Of course, we must like Emma Woodhouse if the novel is to work; and of course Jane Austen's prediction was really a definition of the artistic problem she set herself: how to make us care for Emma in spite of her faults, but without glossing over those faults. Emma can be snobbish, cruel, selfish, and calculating in the field of personal relations—the

[1] Reginald Farrer, 'Jane Austen, *ob.* July 18, 1817', *Quarterly Review*, ccxxviii (1917), 24–8.

[2] W. J. Harvey, 'The Plot of *Emma*', *Essays in Criticism*, xvii (1967), 48–63.

[3] James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870); ed. R. W. Chapman (1926), p. 203.

way she exploits and manipulates poor Harriet in the matter of Robert Martin's suit is only one of many examples. Marvin Mudrick, indeed, argues that Emma never really loses these unpleasant qualities. He is sceptical about Emma's 'reformation' and about the prospects of the marriage that rewards it.[1] But it is surely demonstrable that Emma really does change, for the better, and the title of the French translation of the novel, *La Nouvelle Emma*, was well-chosen. One small, but telling index of Emma's moral progress is her attitude to the Martin family, which shifts from crude snobbery—'The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do'[2] to an uneasy conflict between conscience and prejudice—'She would have given a good deal . . . to have had the Martins in a higher rank of life. They were so deserving, that a *little* higher should have been enough: but as it was, how could she have done otherwise?'[3] to her final, sincere declaration: 'It would be a great pleasure to know Robert Martin.'[4]

Emma does, then, learn from her mistakes; but this alone would not be enough to make her acceptable, from the outset, as a heroine. How does Jane Austen make us like her? First of all, by narrating the story very largely from her point of view. We see most of the action through Emma's eyes and this naturally has the effect of making us identify with her interests and of mitigating the errors of her vision—since we *experience* those errors with her, and to some extent share them. Indeed, so powerful is the pull of sympathy exerted by this narrative method, that checks and balances have to be introduced in the form of discreet authorial comments and well-timed interventions from Mr. Knightley. Knightley is the nearest thing to a paragon of virtue in the novel, but Jane Austen has carefully prevented any *female* character from filling the same role and thus putting her heroine in the shade. Jane Fairfax is the only serious contender—indeed a more conventional lady novelist of the period would have made her

[1] Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defence and Discovery* (1952), pp. 181–206. [2] p. 25. [3] pp. 167–8. [4] p. 432.

the heroine; but the intrigue in which Jane is involved, as well as contributing to the mystery of the plot, conveniently makes her a passive and enigmatic, if not indeed a quite negative character. Mrs. Weston is a worthy woman, but since her story, in a sense, reaches its happy conclusion on the first page of the novel, she does not engage our interest very deeply. Beside the other women—the silly Harriet, the vulgar Mrs. Elton, the chattering Miss Bates, and all the other old women in the story (amongst whom Mr. Woodhouse should perhaps be counted)—Emma can only shine. And it must be acknowledged that Jane Austen has given her positive and attractive qualities. She is endlessly patient with her tiresome father. She has a cheerful and resilient temperament, and is not given to self-pity. And she is, quite simply, intelligent. She finishes her sentences (always a criterion of worth in Jane Austen); she has a fine sense of humour; her errors are the result not of stupidity, but of a quick mind that is not sufficiently extended by her limited and banal society, so that she is tempted to *invent* interest for herself. She is, to use her own word, 'an imaginist'.[1] There is an interesting parallel to be drawn here between Emma and her creator, if we accept D. W. Harding's plausible suggestion that Jane Austen herself was as much provoked by her own milieu as attached to it, and that writing novels was a way of 'finding some mode of existence for her critical attitudes'.[2]

We misrepresent the novel if we suppose that the authorial voice is always judicially detached from Emma. There are many passages where the attitudes and verbal styles of the author and the character are so close that it is impossible to drive a wedge between them. Emma surely shares much of the credit for such witty lines as 'Mr. Knightley seemed to be trying not to smile; and succeeded without difficulty, upon Mrs. Elton's beginning to talk to him'.[3] Or consider the scene

[1] p. 302.

[2] D. W. Harding, 'Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen', *Scrutiny*, viii (1940), 346-62.

[3] p. 282.

where it is Emma's painful duty to explain to Harriet the misunderstanding about Mr. Elton's intentions. The artless pathos of the girl's response 'really for the time convinced that Harriet was the superior creature of the two—and that to resemble Harriet would be more for her own welfare and happiness than all that genius or intelligence could do'. The next paragraph continues:

> It was rather too late in the day to set about being simple-minded and ignorant; but she left her with every previous resolution confirmed of being humble and discreet, and repressing imagination all the rest of her life.[1]

The dry candour of the first part of this sentence, checking the over-emotional response, is deeply characteristic of Jane Austen; but again it is difficult to say whether this is an authorial observation or a wry reflection of Emma herself. The effect, anyway, is to confirm the solidarity of author and heroine in a commitment to *intelligent* virtue.

Some repression of Emma's imagination is necessary to this aim because there is a great moral difference between making literary fictions, as Jane Austen does, and imposing fictional patterns on real people, as Emma does. Furthermore, Emma's fictions are sentimental and self-indulgent, derived from inferior literary models: her fond belief that Harriet is of distinguished parentage, and that Jane Fairfax is amorously involved with Mr. Dixon, are good examples of this. When Emma finally achieves maturity and self-knowledge, and is rewarded by Knightley's declaration of love, the moment is marked by an emphatic rejection of sentimental romance:

> for as to any of that heroism of sentiment which might have prompted her to entreat him to transfer his affection from herself to Harriet, as infinitely the most worthy of the two—or even the more simple sublimity of resolving to refuse him at once and for ever, without vouchsafing any motive, because he could not marry them both, Emma had it not.[2]

[1] p. 128. [2] p. 391.

The ironic invocation of literary stereotypes is one of the ways by which Jane Austen reinforces the realism of her own fiction. 'Realism' is a notoriously slippery word, but one that applies to *Emma* in almost any sense. Ian Watt, for instance, distinguishes between 'realism of presentation' and 'realism of assessment': qualities, exemplified by Richardson and Fielding respectively, which are in a sense mutually antagonistic, since the illusion of life discourages detached judgement and vice versa.[1] Yet *Emma* surely embraces and reconciles both these effects. It is rich in that faultless observation of motive and behaviour and speech habits for which Jane Austen has always been justly admired, making her characters as interesting to us as are our own acquaintances, and in much the same way—simply as human beings. This illusion of life depends upon the events of the novel seeming to follow each other in a natural and casual sequence, yet we can see that they have also been carefully patterned to lead Emma through a series of errors and instructive recognitions. The small, close-knit society of Highbury makes it natural that there should be a good deal of mutual entertaining, but it also enables Jane Austen to bring her principal characters all together at various crucial moments—Mr. Weston's dinner party, the ball at the Crown, the expeditions to Donwell and Box Hill—where the illusions and deceptions of these human beings are subjected to intense social (and therefore highly dramatic) pressure. The rendering of so much of the action through Emma's eyes intensifies the realism of presentation, but the quiet authority of the author's voice guarantees realism of assessment. Perhaps we read *Emma* first mainly for the presentation, and subsequently mainly for the assessment, but, as I said earlier, one reading does not cancel out the other. Under analysis *Emma* reveals an amazing multiplicity of ends and means, all perfectly adjusted and harmonized.

Consider, for example, Jane Austen's handling of the most serious crisis in her heroine's history. At the nadir of Emma's fortunes, when she is stricken with guilt for having insulted

[1] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, Penguin edn. (1963), pp. 300–1.

Miss Bates and incurred Mr. Knightley's reproof, when she has discovered the truth about Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, with all its embarrassing reflections on her own conduct towards them, and when she has belatedly recognized her own love for Mr. Knightley but believes he is going to propose to Harriet, whose pretensions to such a match she has herself encouraged—at the point when all these circumstances converge to bring Emma's morale to its lowest ebb, we get this piece of description:

> The evening of this day was very long, and melancholy, at Hartfield. The weather added what it could of gloom. A cold stormy rain set in, and nothing of July appeared but in the trees and shrubs, which the wind was despoiling, and the length of the day, which only made such cruel sights the longer visible.[1]

The passage was justly singled out for praise by R. W. Chapman,[2] but the 'miracle of communication' is not, as he suggested, impossible to analyse. Jane Austen is, of course, exploiting the pathetic fallacy here—but so stealthily that we are not distracted from the reality of the moment by a conscious recognition of her artistry. This artistry does more than establish a general consonance between the heroine's mood and the weather. The words, 'the length of the day, which only made such cruel sights the longer visible' provide a delicately appropriate analogy for Emma's state of mind because the circumstances of her life, her very fixed social position in a small and inward-looking community (a fact frequently underlined in the course of the narrative) mean that she can expect no release from her disappointment and regret but is condemned to live with them indefinitely. Emma's situation, in short, can only make *such cruel sights* as Harriet's marriage to Mr. Knightley *the longer visible*; and this is stated explicitly a few lines later:

> The prospect before her now, was threatening to a degree that could not be entirely dispelled—that might not be even partially

[1] p. 382.

[2] R. W. Chapman, *Jane Austen: Facts and Problems* (1948), pp. 201–2.

brightened. If all took place that might take place among the circle of her friends, Hartfield must be comparatively deserted; and she left to cheer her father with the spirits only of ruined happiness.[1]

The words *prospect*, *threatening*, and *brightened* in this passage are drawn from the vocabulary of weather description and thus, together with the echo of the 'despoiled' vegetation in 'ruined happiness', link it to the earlier one. And the whole scene recalls to Emma the very first scene of the novel when, 'the wedding over and the bride-people gone, her father and herself were left alone to dine together with no prospect of a third to cheer a long evening'.[2] On that occasion Mr. Knightley had provided an unexpected and welcome third; but there are several reasons why he cannot be looked for now.

To her credit, however, Emma does not collapse under the pressure of these distressing thoughts. The chapter ends:

the only source whence any thing like composure could be drawn, was in the resolution of her own better conduct, and the hope that, however inferior in spirit and gaiety might be the following and every winter of her life to the past, it would yet find her more rational, more acquainted with herself, and leave her less to regret when it were gone.[3]

The pessimistic strain of seasonal imagery is sustained in 'every winter of her life', which has the effect of making Emma's future appear as one long winter. But the importance of this passage is that it describes Emma's first really disinterested effort at moral reform, inasmuch as she hopes to gain nothing except self-respect from her good resolution. In fact, she is rewarded the very next day, of which we get this description at the beginning of the next chapter:

The weather continued much the same all the following morning; and the same loneliness, and the same melancholy, seemed to reign at Hartfield—but in the afternoon it cleared; the wind changed into a softer quarter; and the clouds were carried off; the sun appeared; it was summer again. With all the eagerness which

[1] p. 383. [2] p. 4. [3] p. 384.

such a transition gives, Emma resolved to be out of doors as soon as possible.[1]

Walking in the garden, Emma is joined by Mr. Knightley, who in due course makes his most welcome proposal. The change in the weather is thus a natural circumstance which brings the couple together, giving them the time and the privacy to disentangle their misconceptions and reach an understanding; but it is also effectively symbolic. 'It was summer again.' The restoration of weather appropriate to the season intimates the restoration of happiness to Emma, and of comedy to the novel.

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[1] p. 384.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

Emma was begun on 21 January 1814 and completed on 29 March 1815. It was published by John Murray in December 1815 (advertised in the *Observer*, 10 December, as to be published 'on Saturday next', and in the *Morning Chronicle*, 21–3 December); the title-page is dated 1816. This edition was of *c.* 2,000 copies (price 21*s.*, in boards); 1,250 sold within the year. Murray had offered Jane Austen £450 for the copyrights of this novel and *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*. She refused, but gave Murray the second edition of *Mansfield Park* (1816) and *Emma* on royalty terms. The second English edition of *Emma* did not appear until 1833.

The present text is substantially that of R. W. Chapman's edition (Oxford, 1923; revised by Mary Lascelles, 1966), based on the first edition. Chapman's textual apparatus has been revised and his emendations reconsidered.

J. K.

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Emma was published in December 1815 (title-page dated 1816) by John Murray on ordinary royalty terms after Jane Austen had turned down his offer of £450 for the copyrights of this novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park*. Over half the first edition of about 2,000 copies had sold by the end of 1816. A French version, *La Nouvelle Emma*, appeared in that year; and so did the first American edition (Philadelphia). *Emma* was included in Bentley's cheap Standard Novels series (6*s*. a volume) with Jane Austen's other novels in 1833 (reprinted 1866, 1869, 1878–9, 1882), and in Carey and Lea's Philadelphia edition, 6 vols. (1832–3; 1,250 copies). The Everyman edition (1892) was revised by Mary Lascelles (1963). E. V. Lucas introduced the previous World's Classics text in 1907.

COLLECTED EDITIONS. See above, Carey and Lea, Bentley, Everyman's Library, World's Classics. The standard edition of the novels is R. W. Chapman's, illustr., 6 vols. (Oxford, 1923–54; revised by Mary Lascelles, 1965–7), the texts based on collation of the early editions, with invaluable commentaries and appendices.

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edition of the novels, vol. v); the *Memoir* by her nephew J. E. Austen-Leigh (1870; 1871 edn. containing fragments and minor works—see Chapman, vol. vi), ed. Chapman (1926, 1951); William and Richard Austen-Leigh, *Life and Letters of J. A.* (1913). Modern biographies include Mary Austen-Leigh, *Personal Aspects of J. A.* (1920); C. Linklater Thomson, *J. A., A Survey* (1929); Mona Wilson, *J. A. and Some Contemporaries* (1938); Elizabeth Jenkins, *J. A., A Biography* (1938; revised edn., 1948); and R. W. Chapman, *J. A.: Facts and Problems* (1948; Clark Lectures).

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Emma: for a selection of comment and criticism see *Jane Austen: 'Emma'; a Casebook*, ed. David Lodge (1968).

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