

Human Nature and 'Inanimate' Nature in Jane Austen's Novels

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1: The Concept of the Natural

Jane Austen's focus as a rationalist and a moralist is upon the laws of nature which man can comprehend and control. Her use of what she calls 'inanimate'¹ nature reveals that she saw a direct correspondence between human and material nature. That is, she takes material nature as a metaphor for human nature. Jane Austen neither holds up material nature as a reflection of man's better nature, consequently exalting all that is natural, nor views human and material nature as inherently malignant. She sees both as made up of conflicting qualities, the imperfection of a fallen world.² Thus Jane Austen takes a view of nature that was gaining currency in her time but which was to find its clearest and most complete expression about thirty years after her death in John Stuart Mill's essay "Nature." Mill attempts to sort out the vexed question of the characteristics of nature and its relationship to man. His essay, like Jane Austen's novels, concerns itself with the laws of physical nature and implies that these laws are analogous to moral laws to which human nature is subject.

Mill maintains that the laws of nature are inescapable: "Man necessarily obeys the laws of nature, or in other words the properties of things, but he does not necessarily *guide* himself by them.

Though all conduct is in conformity to the laws of nature, all conduct is not grounded on knowledge of them, and intelligently directed to the attainment of purposes by means of them."³ He continues, showing that although we cannot be free from these laws, we can determine the ends towards which our actions move by a knowledge of these laws, that is by an understanding of cause and effect. He concludes: "If, therefore, the useless precept to follow nature were changed to a precept to study nature; to know and take heed of the properties of things we have to deal with, so far as these properties are capable of forwarding or obstructing any given purpose, we should have arrived at the first principle of all intelligent action, or rather at the definition of intelligent action itself."⁴ Intelligent action is synonymous with action that is morally sound—good, vital, ordered rather than evil, destructive, chaotic. At the center of the view of human nature of both Mill and Jane Austen is a deep awareness of the conflict between the elements that are morally sound and those that are morally unsound. Both are in effect *natural*. The problem that arises, then, is not that of choosing between the natural and the artificial, or even of synthesizing the natural and the artificial, but of cultivating the beneficial and of controlling and limiting the destructive powers of nature.⁵

Acknowledging that nature contains both good and evil destroyed the validity of the use of "natural" and "unnatural" as terms of absolute moral value. Mary McCarthy maintains that Jane Austen does in fact use "natural" to designate such value: "Nature or, rather, the natural—the reverse of affectation—is in fact a guarantor of value [in Jane Austen's novels], just as it is in Shakes-

peare, whereas in Dostoevsky the unnatural...has become the most natural thing in the world."⁶ Although Jane Austen's subjects are quite different from those of Dostoevsky, her view of nature seems to me much closer to that of the Russian novelist than it is to that of Shakespeare. In *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* characters themselves use "natural" and "unnatural" to convey moral import, but Jane Austen makes clear that they do so at their peril, at the sacrifice, in most cases, of their own good judgment.

In Jane Austen's novels the terms "natural" and "unnatural" have ceased to function as indications of moral import and can now convey only the ethically neutral meanings of "usual" and "unusual." Nevertheless, three of the characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, attempting to justify themselves or someone they like, resort to calling actions "natural" in a context that distinctly appeals to the former connotations of the word and thereby lends an implicit moral approval to the actions. Elizabeth Bennet is predisposed to approve of Wickham, for he has paid attention to her, flattered her and thereby gained her good opinion. When he transfers his attention to Miss King, Lizzy is determined, against all good judgment, to approve the motive for his action: "The sudden acquisition of ten thousand pounds was the most remarkable charm of the young lady... but Elizabeth, less clear-sighted perhaps in his case than in Charlotte's, did not quarrel with him for his wish of independence. Nothing, on the contrary, could be more natural... she was ready to allow it a wise and desirable measure..." (PP 149-50)⁷. A lapse in judgment similar to Elizabeth's is found in Mr. Darcy, who makes the same sort of appeal to the authority of nature to justify his prejudices

springing from his pride. He has mortified Elizabeth by speaking to her of his scruples about marrying her: "Nor am I ashamed of the feelings I related. They were natural and just. Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections?" (PP 192). Darcy is as predisposed to like himself as Lizzy is to like Wickham: pride and vanity give rise to the prejudices of both. Jane Bennet has neither the pride nor the vanity of her sister and Darcy, but she is prey to an excessive candor, an insistence upon placing every action in the most generous light. Such generosity can become so limiting that it seems a parody of the blindly generous attitude of Lizzy towards Wickham and of Darcy towards himself. Jane attributes Miss Bingley's rude neglect of her to anxiety on Bingley's behalf. Miss Bingley's rudeness she cannot deny, but the motives for the neglect she is sure are "natural and amiable" (PP 148). Jane Austen stresses here not so much the failure of these characters to share her own understanding of nature as their using "natural" as a term of moral approbation for justifying action or opinions that good judgment shows them to be wrong.

Mary Crawford's use of "natural" in *Mansfield Park* marks the same confusion and impreciseness that concerned Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*. Like Darcy, Elizabeth and Jane, Mary clings to old connotations and relies on them to justify her own failings, her own prejudices. When she writes to Fanny to inquire about Tom Bertram's illness, she cannot contain her delight in the possibility of Edmund's becoming the Bertram heir, and she attributes the same feelings to Fanny: "And now, do not trouble yourself to be ashamed of either my feelings or your own. Believe me, they are not only

natural, they are philanthropic and virtuous” (MP 436). Mary is right to call her own feelings natural—if she means that they are in keeping with her habitual sacrifice of right feeling to her mercenary ambitions. But such feeling would hardly be in keeping with Fanny’s usual awareness of the pain and suffering of others and her sympathy for them. Ironically, Mary’s feelings would be quite unnatural to Fanny for selfish as well as unselfish reasons: Fanny would hardly be delighted by anything that secured Mary for Edmund. The feelings of both Fanny and Mary are natural to each, but Mary’s feelings are selfish and vicious, contrary to what she says, and Fanny’s, lending a certain accidental truth to Mary’s words, are indeed virtuous and philanthropic: but they are not the feelings that Mary attributes to Fanny. Jane Austen’s full understanding of the dangers of a facile use of “natural” is particularly apparent here.

These dangers, these ambiguities arising from the natural’s signifying not necessarily the morally sound but only the usual, the expected, lead Jane Austen to use “wild” to describe what would previously have been called “unnatural.” Lydia Bennet’s wildness is implied when she is described as having “high animal spirits” (PP 45), and when Lizzy warns their father that Lydia is ““absolutely uncontrolled!”” (PP 231). When Lydia returns to Longbourne married to Wickham, who, according to the housekeeper at Pemberley, ““ has turned out very wild”” (PP 247), she is “Lydia still; untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy and fearless” (PP 315). Elizabeth implies the connection between the wild and the natural, which shows that although the conduct of Lydia and Wickham is natural,

it is by no means morally sound. Their union is natural, the probable result of their natures: "While the contents of [Jane's] letter remained on her mind, she was all surprise—all astonishment that Wickham should marry a girl, whom it was impossible he could marry for money; and how Lydia could ever have attached him, had appeared incomprehensible. But now it was all too natural" (PP 279).

But even the use of "wild" to denote the reprehensible part of nature poses certain problems. Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Hurst use "wild" not as a part of a natural scheme, but as the opposite of decorous, socially proper, "wild" becomes a term of social rather than moral disapprobation.⁸ When Lizzy arrives at Netherfield with mud on her petticoats to visit the ailing Jane, Mrs. Hurst remarks that she "really looked almost wild" (PP 35). Mrs. Bennet tries to put an end to a conversation between Lizzy and Bingley by saying, "Lizzy...remember where you are, and do not run on in the wild manner that you are suffered to do at home" (PP 42). The irony of both these comments lies in the speakers' failure to understand Lizzy's actions or her words. Her concern for her sister's health is as incomprehensible to Mrs. Hurst's selfish nature as her quick mind is to Mrs. Bennet's obtuse nature: both women call Lizzy wild because she is beyond their ken. They insist upon an artificiality dictated by their own mean understanding.

The subjective use of words associated with nature to signify either moral or social import is acknowledged by Edmund Bertram, who in discussing Mary Crawford's view of adultery notes the relativity of words associated with nature: "I do not consider her as mean-

ing to wound my feelings. The evil lies yet deeper; in her total ignorance, unsuspectingness of there being such feelings, in a perversion of mind which made it natural to her to treat the subject as she did. She was speaking only, as she had been used to hear others speak, as she imagined every body else would speak'" (MP 465). Unlike Mary's own use of "natural" or the uses of "natural" that we noted in *Pride and Prejudice*, Edmund calls Mary's words, Mary's view of adultery, "natural," not as a means of justifying her opinion but of conveying how deep in her own mind lies the error in her judgment. The naturalness of Mary's response is a mark of the extent of her moral confusion. Mr. Knightley makes a similar point when Emma challenges his opinion of Frank Churchill. Emma demands: "What has Frank Churchill done, to make you suppose him such an unnatural creature?" (E 145). Mr. Knightley replies: "I am not supposing him at all an unnatural creature, in suspecting that he may have learnt to be above his connections, and to care very little for any thing but his own pleasure, from living with those who have always set him the example of it. It is a great deal more natural than one could wish, that a young man brought up by those who are proud, luxurious, and selfish, should be proud, luxurious and selfish too" (E 145). Had Frank been brought up by people of different values, and had he nevertheless turned out as he has, then he might well have been called unnatural just as had Mary Crawford adopted the values of Fanny and Edmund she might have been called unnatural—the term thus applied becoming one of moral approbation.

In *Emma* Jane Austen dramatizes most effectively the differing

conceptions of what is natural and what unnatural, what wild and what civilized. She makes clear that however relative are the terms themselves, the values connected with the terms are by no means relative. Mrs. Elton, enthusiastically taking up Mr. Knightley's half-serious suggestion that an exploring party come to Donwell, describes how things should be done: "There is to be no form or parade—a sort of gipsy party.—We are to walk about your gardens, and gather the strawberries ourselves, and sit under trees;—and whatever else you may like to provide, it is to be all out of doors—a table spread in the shade, you know. Every thing as natural and simple as possible" (E 355). The resonance of this speech depends upon our recollection of two earlier events which Jane Austen evokes and connects through Mrs. Elton's calling her plan "a gipsy party." Harriet Smith's encounter with the real gypsies establishes these people as rude, unfeeling, abusive, devoid of kindness and good feeling towards others. They are wild; everyone else in *Emma* is supposed to be civilized, pretends to be civilized. But the gypsies' abusiveness to Harriet closely parallels the conduct of the Eltons to Harriet at the ball. Both events even require a rescue. When Harriet speaks of Mr. Knightley's rescue of her at the ball, Emma, for once without much help from her fancy, thinks Harriet refers to the incident with the gypsies and to Frank Churchill's rescue of Harriet. The juxtaposition of the incidents serves not only to dupe Emma, but to imply something crucial about the behavior and the feelings of the Eltons: even though they pretend to be civilized, possess all the appearance of civility that handsome faces, lace, pearls and carriages can give, they are in their conduct, in their feelings for other

people, no more civilized than the gypsies.

Mr. Knightley does not allow Mrs. Elton to impose her sense of what is natural upon him or his party. He promptly tells her that his own ideas dictate that the “‘simple and the natural will be to have the table spread in the dining-room. The nature and simplicity of gentlemen and ladies, with their servants and furniture, I think is best observed by meals within doors’” (E 355). To find Mr. Knightley, “who had nothing of ceremony about him” (E 57), suddenly championing such nicety for its own sake strikes a peculiar note. But at the end of the conversation Jane Austen explains his attitude: “Mr. Knightley had another reason for avoiding a table in the shade. He wished to persuade Mr. Woodhouse, as well as Emma, to join the party; and he knew that to have any of them sitting down out of doors to eat would inevitably make him ill. Mr. Woodhouse must not, under the specious pretence of a morning drive, and an hour or two spent at Donwell, be tempted away to his misery” (E 356). Mr. Knightley uses ceremony, not to regale in the credit it brings upon himself, as Mrs. Elton is wont to do, but to enable him to show his attention to and concern for the comfort of others.⁹ His use of social form to signify what is natural suggests the relationship of nature to society, how society is meant to embody the best aspects of nature. Here is a standard of the ‘natural’ that Jane Austen values and approves.

2: Problems of Improvements

John Stuart Mill’s “Nature” provides further an excellent gloss to Jane Austen’s work and sheds considerable light on one of her most

powerful metaphors: landscape improvements. Having argued that nature contains both good and evil, beneficial and destructive forces, Mill marks how meaningless the dictum "Follow Nature" is and points out that artificiality, in the sense of taming and using nature for beneficial purposes is by no means to be dismissed: "If the artificial is not better than the natural, to what end are all the arts of life? To dig, to plough, to build, to wear clothes, are direct infringements of the injunction to follow nature."¹⁰ Man must, he insists, admit the imperfections of nature, "which it is man's business and merit, to be always endeavouring to correct or mitigate."¹¹ Mill then shows the intimate connection this idea forms between human and material nature: "The best persons have always held it to be the essence of religion, that the paramount duty of man upon earth is to amend himself: but all except monkish quietists have annexed to this in their inmost minds...the additional religious duty of amending the world, and not solely the human part of it but the material, the order of physical nature."¹²

Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* meditates upon Wentworth's praise of firmness of character and wonders if he has considered that this, "like all other qualities of the mind...should have its proportions and limits" (P116). That is, every quality of mind has the capacity for being a virtue if proportions and limits are observed or for being a vice if they are unheeded.¹³ Every individual has the responsibility for determining which aspects of his disposition need cultivation, need to be made stronger and more prominent, and which need to be controlled and weakened. In *Pride and Prejudice* Darcy is only partly correct when he maintains: "'There is, I believe, in every

disposition a tendency to some particular evil, a natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome” (PP58). Darcy’s good sense has made him realize that everyone, even himself, has some natural defect, but his pride, which is the defect of his own disposition—not resentment, as he suggests—has made him believe that his own inability to correct his fault indicates the existence of such an incorrigible fault in everyone. By the end of the novel he has not ceased to have any pride, but he has begun to understand its proper proportions and limits.

Implicit here is a quality of mind that all Jane Austen’s characters share: malleability. The capacity for change is common to all nature—human and material. Jane Austen stresses the importance of malleability through her uses of the phrase “human nature” in *Mansfield Park*. She uses the phrase from time to time in all of her novels, often in some witty aphorism such as her first description of Augusta Elton in *Emma*: “Human nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting situations, that a young person, who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of” (E 181). But in *Mansfield Park* all five uses of the phrase imply the capacity of human nature for change, of either a beneficial or detrimental kind.

Jane Austen admired a tractable disposition, but in Mrs. Grant she shows the evil of being too malleable. Mrs. Grant tells Mary Crawford that “if one scheme of happiness fails, human nature turns to another...” (MP 46). Mrs. Grant’s own flexibility gives her a cheerful nature and enables her to adapt herself easily to the faults of others. But a less tractable nature might have led her to be less accommodating and more instrumental in helping others to

improve.¹⁴ Sir Thomas Bertram contrasts with Mrs. Grant in that he perceives malleability as a weakness and is himself too rigid in his opinions. He expresses the view that "human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey" (MP 248), which implies a theoretical belief in the possibility of improvement. But in practice Sir Thomas sometimes counts on the weakness of human nature to achieve his own desires. Such is the basis for his hope that Henry Crawford's absence will weaken Fanny and make her finally agree to marry Henry: "Sir Thomas...went on with his own hopes, and his own observations, still feeling a right, by all his knowledge of human nature, to expect to see the effect of the loss of power and consequence, on his niece's spirits, and the past attentions of the lover producing a craving for their return..." (MP 368). Sir Thomas and Mrs. Grant are both in a sense irresponsible: she in her indiscriminate accommodation of everyone, he in his belief that everyone should acquiesce to his judgment.

Edmund Bertram has a more complete understanding of malleability than either Mrs. Grant or his father. He admits that Mary Crawford's description of a fidgeting and mind-wandering group at daily prayers is "an amusing sketch, and human nature cannot say it was not so" (MP 87). But his understanding is not limited to what is; he comprehends what should and can be. He is most closely similar to Fanny Price in this view. When she hears of the adultery of Maria and Crawford, her immediate response is that "it was too horrible a confusion of guilt, too gross a complication of evil, for human nature, not in a state of utter barbarism, to be capable of!" (MP 441). That human nature given all the advantages made

possible by intelligence, education, rank and money could move to an end the very opposite of improvement is at first incomprehensible to Fanny. But upon more careful reflection "her judgment told her it was so. His unsettled affections, wavering with his vanity, Maria's decided attachment, and no sufficient principle on either side, gave it possibility" (MP 441). Ideally, Fanny would like to consider the malleability of human nature as a guarantee of improvement, but her judgment makes it impossible for her to deny that malleability can lead just as logically and naturally to moral collapse. Henry and Maria have not cut themselves off from nature; they have allied themselves with the destructive rather than the beneficial powers of nature.

That one of the principle themes in Jane Austen's novels is the distinguishing of reality from appearance is a critical commonplace. But her concern seems to me more complex than this; the problem is not adequately stated in the appearance-reality dichotomy. The deeper problem lies in comprehending nature, the laws that act upon reality, determining the course and direction of change. Mary Crawford usually sees what *is*—that her brother is an unfeeling flirt, that Dr. Grant is an ill-tempered glutton, even that she herself is selfish and mercenary—but she never understands the consequences, the ends towards which these failings tend—Henry's entanglement with Maria and the consequent loss of Fanny, Dr. Grant's death as a result of over-indulgence in rich food, her own estrangement from Edmund. She perceives only what is before her, as she herself says with regard to landscape improvements: "I have no eye, or ingenuity for such matters, but as they are before me..." (MP

57). Mary views human nature as fixed, with no possibility of change: "Selfishness must always be forgiven you know, because there is no hope of a cure" (MP 68). Mary seems to believe that social form—in this case, perfunctory forgiveness of selfishness—exists not to enable one to overcome or control one's faults but rather to allow one's faults free play without imposing any of the unpleasant consequences of wrong conduct. But the very organic nature of reality gives rise to possibilities of improvement as well as to the natural ends towards which habitually wrong conduct leads.

Emma Woodhouse shares something of Mary's limitations; but she has a greater perception of what is before her than has generally been credited.¹⁵ Emma is, after all, not wrong in thinking Mr. Elton or Frank Churchill in love. Nor in her realization that Frank is not in love with her. She is correct in seeing that Jane Fairfax must have a hidden motive for not accompanying the Campbells to Ireland. But like Mary, Emma cannot extend her understanding beyond the most immediate observation. Mary does not care what lies beyond; Emma fantasizes what lies beyond. When Mr. Knightley advises Emma, he does not admonish her to be guided by reality, as would be expected if the conflict was between appearance and reality. He knows that the deceptiveness of appearance makes such distinction difficult, if not impossible. Mr. Knightley commends nature to her: "If you were as much guided by nature in your estimate of men and women, and as little under the power of fancy and whim in your dealings with them, as you are where these children are concerned, we might always think alike" (E 98-9). Emma has an advantage over Mary Crawford: she knows that there is

more than the immediately perceived reality, and her amendment consists chiefly in her turning from fancy to nature. Emma possesses a moral standard that Mary lacks; Mary would have only laughed at Frank Churchill's duplicity, as she laughs at that of her brother, but Emma is justly disapproving of Frank's conduct and comprehends fully both the extent of the pain that he has caused and that he might have caused. The themes of deceptiveness of appearance, the limitation of immediate reality, the facile nature of fancy and the necessity of a just comprehension of the wholeness of nature unite in the improvements motif in *Mansfield Park*.

In Jane Austen's time the interest in landscape improvements was so commonplace that the motif in *Mansfield Park* would have had an immediacy that is lost to modern readers.¹⁶ Critics have generally attempted to explain the different views of the characters on the subject in terms of a dichotomy: some characters approve of landscape improvements and some do not.¹⁷ But this division does not really exist in the novel. Perhaps the only thing that all the characters do agree on, theoretically, is the desirability of improvements. The variety of opinions on the subject lies in the different attitudes towards the personal responsibilities involved in improving and in the conceptions of what actually comprises improvements, the different comprehensions of manner and kind.

Jane Austen perceived in the fashionable concern for improving, the danger of dissociating the commonsensical usefulness of improvements from a near obsession with improvements purely of appearance. The rage for ornamental improvement had led to a gross neglect of utilitarian improvement. This imbalance finds its parallel

in improvements in human nature. The emphasis of the time was on the outward and the visible. Improvements tended towards the creation of the illusion of perfection rather than towards a striving for true perfection. Jane Austen saw that not only did the improvement of man have an analogue in the improvements of material nature, but that faults in landscape improvement reflect faults in man's values, which dictate his improvement of himself.

Jane Austen has herself been charged with championing the superficial qualities of appearance and personality, especially in *Mansfield Park*. The general argument proposes that Jane Austen condemns in *Mansfield Park* the vitality and sparkle she championed in *Pride and Prejudice*. Almost as a penance for having written something "too light, and bright, and sparkling" (L 229), she wrote *Mansfield Park*. The brightness of the later novel is found in the oppressive glare of the summer day at Sotherton, in the unremitting glare of sunlight in the Prices' sitting room in Portsmouth: it is the light of nature, which is not always pleasant. Sparkle we find in the "sparkling dark" (MP 470) eyes of Mary Crawford. Mary's mind, like her eyes, may sparkle, but it is dark. Elizabeth Bennet's eyes are also dark and sparkling, but her mind is light. Elizabeth's charm may lie in her sparkle, but her greater worth resides in the light of her mind. This light makes her akin to Fanny Price, who has "soft light eyes" (MP 470). Jane Austen did not have so rigid a mind as to form inflexible associations of material and moral value. She might well have preferred dark sparkling eyes to soft light ones, but she never confuses the qualities of eyes with those of mind. She consistently places the greater value on the mind, and her consistency

is not violated by a preference for a mind that is sparkling and light over one that is light but lacks sparkle. That is, one may, as a matter of taste, prefer Lizzy Bennet to Fanny Price, but a failure of moral judgment, rather than of taste, is signified by a preference of Mary Crawford to Fanny Price.

The difficulties that arise from *Mansfield Park* of course go beyond discerning the significance of the qualities of eyes. Lionel Trilling's provocative essay on the novel shows clearly the errors that arise from seeking to impose rigid dichotomies on Jane Austen's vision in *Mansfield Park*.¹⁸ He suggests that the novel asserts that the only form of moral probity is quietness and dullness. The praise of the novel "is not for social freedom but for social stasis."¹⁹ But Jane Austen juxtaposes Fanny Price and Lady Bertram in order to dispel this charge. She is interested in what lies behind the outward qualities of quietness and dullness. Lady Bertram is indolent and useless, Fanny is diffident, modest and fearful of doing wrong. Not only, though, is Lady Bertram patently not meant to be recommended as an example of a good way of living, William Price, who is heartily approved, possesses the qualities of spiritedness, vivacity, celerity and lightness which Trilling says are presented in the novel as "deterrents to the good life."²⁰ Jane Austen gives her moral approbation, which has nothing to do with appearance and temper, to both William and Fanny. Making a more general judgment, Trilling maintains that "No other great novel has so anxiously asserted the need to find security, to establish in fixity and enclosure, a refuge from the dangers and openness of chance."²¹ This point is well taken, but the literalness of fixity and enclosure implied by

Trilling's other comments is not supported by the whole of the novel. Fanny and William outwardly lead very different kinds of lives, but both find security in the fixity and enclosure of sound principles, which are also the basis of their deepest freedom.

Although Jane Austen does not confuse form and meaning, her characters often do. As a result they sometimes give all their effort to improving the surface of things—or even worse, mistake the superficial perfections they possess for complete perfection. Among the most common of these superficial advantages are those of physical beauty and wealth, both of which one sometimes gains simply by being born, but which are not in themselves a real merit to possess. Mary Crawford and Maria and Julia Bertram accept as their birthright their fortune, beauty, and even strength. All three fall prey to the illusion that these qualities constitute perfection. The only improvement that Mary and Maria can envision lies in their becoming richer. Emma Woodhouse has the same gifts as Mary, Maria and Julia, these “best blessings of existence” (E 5), but she is less personally vain and less inflexible in her thinking than they. Above all she values moral principles that are less than nothing to them. Mary, Maria and Julia are not only happy to have everyone else think them perfect; they share that estimation themselves. Emma knows that she is not perfect, but she is willing to allow anyone else to think her so. Mr. Knightley pinpoints the truth that Emma must eventually come to terms with—that twenty-one years in the world have allowed her to mistake good fortune for merit. Emma takes credit for the marriage of Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston, but Mr. Knightley remarks: “Success supposes endeavour....

why do you talk of success? where is your merit?—what are you proud of?—you made a lucky guess; and that is all that can be said” (E 12–13). Later, at Box Hill, Mr. Knightley comments on Mr. Weston’s conundrum on Emma’s name: ““Perfection should not have come quite so soon”” (E 371). Emma is not perfect and no endeavor on her part has made her deserve to be called so.

Endeavor is crucial to improvement, but money can sometimes be substituted for endeavor, thereby giving one the illusion of not needing to exert oneself. Mary Crawford and Rushworth are prepared to substitute money for personal exertion in acquiring landscape improvements. Rushworth wants physical beauty, a show-place, and he is prepared to pay Repton to give it to him. He is equally willing to pay for the beauty of Maria Bertram, even though she does not love him: Maria is an ornament, another adornment for Sotherton. Mary’s idea of improvement is much the same: ““I should be most thankful to any Mr. Repton who would undertake it, and give me as much beauty as he could for my money...”” (MP 57). Both take money as the *sine qua non* of worth, the beauty acquired being commensurate with the amount of money spent. John Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* has the same attitude; he calculates his sister’s beauty in terms of the size of the income of the men her beauty is likely to attract: ““[Marianne] was as handsome a girl last September, as any I ever saw; and as likely to attract men I question whether Marianne *now* will marry a man worth more than five or six hundred a-year, at the utmost...”” (SS 227). The common idea shared by Mary, Rushworth, and Dashwood is that money and beauty determine worth, and that which is of value

can be purchased: a woman purchases all the security, luxury and material comfort that her beauty entitles her to; a man purchases with his money the merit of a beautiful wife. Neither transaction is more than a superficial improvement.

Not all love of appearance signifies an over-valuing of money. A deeper fault lies in a general limitation of values, a placing of too much value in the ephemeral and material quality of things. At its simplest level the love of appearance reveals a personal vanity that cuts one off from an awareness of anything but one's image of oneself, as in Mrs. Allen's obsession with clothes or Rushworth's fascination with the pink satin cape he is to wear in *Lovers' Vows*. Marianne Dashwood cannot value Colonel Brandon properly because he wears a flannel waistcoat—a powerful symbol to her of his failure of vitality and youth, which are the qualities exalted in her personal scheme of values. Mary Crawford has a similar attitude towards clothing. She is ashamed of Edmund's profession and is consequently relieved that “there is no distinction of dress now-a-days to tell tales...” (MP 416). Fanny Price's interest in and admiration of William's naval uniform contrasts with Mary's relief that there is no such outward and visible sign of Edmund's profession. Ironically, of course, Mary would be proud of William's garb, because the profession signifies to her “heroism, danger, bustle, fashion” (MP 109)—and a chance to become rich. For Fanny the uniform is the emblem of all the values and principles of William's profession—values and principles also comprehended by Edmund's profession.

Mrs. Bennet and Lydia admire uniforms but neither for the rea-

sons of Mary or Fanny. They are attracted to military men. For Lydia a coat in itself is enough, as she implies when she describes the scene in Gracechurch Street on the morning of her marriage: "And there was my aunt, all the time I was dressing, preaching and talking away just as if she was reading a sermon. However, I did not hear above one word in ten, for I was thinking, as you may suppose of my dear Wickham. I longed to know whether he would be married in his blue coat" (PP 319). Mrs. Bennet is angered because Mr. Bennet refuses to give her money to buy Lydia wedding clothes: "She was more alive to the disgrace, which the want of new clothes must reflect on her daughter's nuptials, than to any sense of shame at her eloping and living with Wickham, a fortnight before they took place" (PP 310-11). Mrs. Bennet's exhilaration when she hears of Lizzy's engagement might seem to show a mercenary spirit—"Oh! my sweetest Lizzy! how rich and how great you will be! What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have!" (PP 378)—but in truth Mrs. Bennet values marriage itself, not money, above all else. Lizzy might have made the best match materially, but Mrs. Bennet can glory equally in Lydia's marriage to Wickham, for he *is* a husband. Mrs. Bennet's deepest failure is in perceiving nothing of the individual worth indicated by principles. She is blind not only to the disgrace of Lydia's elopement but to the unhappiness that is a probable consequence of Lydia's marrying an unprincipled man.

The value of material appearance is even more limiting to a woman like Mrs. Elton; for all that she truly values is herself. She arrives in Highbury with her beauty, her lace and pearls, her talk of unbrok-

en packs of cards, and the village at large is prepared to believe her as superior as she thinks herself. Just as she tries, but fails, to associate Emma's superiority with her own value by talk of their forming a musical group, she annexes to herself the material objects signifying to her great worth, which she does not herself possess: the glories of Maple Grove and the Sucklings' barouche-landau are a part of her conception of her own worth. The carriage connects her values to Emma's. Mrs. Elton's love of material show is a parody of Emma's own fondness for outward signs of value.

Emma has a proper sense of the value of Mr. Knightley's character, but she has something of her father's attachment to ceremony and form. Consequently, Emma disapproves of Mr. Knightley's lack of attention to some of these forms for their own sake: "Mr. Knightley, keeping no horses, having no spare money and a great deal of health, activity and independence, was too apt, in Emma's opinion, to get about as he could, and not use his carriage so often as became the owner of Donwell Abbey" (E 213). When he comes to the Coles' party in a carriage, Emma commends him; "'This is coming as you should do...like a gentleman'" (E 213). He understands the absurdity of the sort of show Emma values: "'How lucky that we should arrive at the same moment! for, if we had met first in the drawing-room, I doubt whether you would have discerned me to be more of a gentleman than usual.—You might not have distinguished how I came, by my look or manner'" (E 213). Mr. Knightley, of course, is not prompted by his image of himself to come in a carriage but by his wish to do what he can for the comfort of Jane Fairfax and Miss Bates. In his scheme of values, ceremony

and form are useful conveniences for showing a proper regard for others. Emma wishes for the improvement not of Mr. Knightley's fundamental worth but of his exhibiting the material accoutrements of that worth. Mrs. Elton mistakes the trappings of gentility for gentility itself.

The dominant aspect of the ideas about landscape improvements of Mrs. Norris and Henry Crawford reveals a resemblance between their values and those of Mrs. Elton.²² All three regale in merit for which they cannot justly take any credit. Mrs. Norris basks in the glory of Mansfield Park and in the marriage of Rushworth and Maria as Mrs. Elton does in Maple Grove and the Sucklings. Unlike Mary Crawford and Rushworth, Mrs. Norris wants credit for making improvements without spending any money. She takes all the credit for the Bertrams' adoption of Fanny, but she will contribute nothing to the financial support of the girl and does nothing to help improve her. Fanny is as unworthy of her energies as her half acre at the White house. But Mrs. Norris cannot resist claiming that she is an improver, saying that she did "a vast deal in that way at the parsonage..." (MP 54). Significantly, no one present remembers Mrs. Norris' projects, and she can only point to the solitary apricot, a gift from Sir Thomas, as proof of her labors. She does, however, contrive to give herself credit for the expense and care that the Grants have taken in improving the parsonage and its grounds: they have done precisely what she always meant to do!²³

Crawford is not so illiberal as Mrs. Norris, but his improvements at Everingham are designed solely to bring credit upon himself. He happily takes credit for the improvements that Mrs. Grant attributes

to him even though she has never seen Everingham. When we at last hear something specific about Crawford's estate, we can find a hint that his improvements have been at best superficial and incomplete. He modestly claimed that "there was very little for me to do" (MP 61), but in truth he did not know what was required. When he visits Fanny in Portsmouth, he tells her that on a recent visit to Everingham he "had introduced himself to tenants, whom he had never seen before; he had begun making acquaintances with cottages whose very existence, though on his own estate, had been hitherto unknown to him" (MP 404). He could hardly have much improved an estate which by his own admission he knows so little of. The misfortune of both Mrs. Norris and Henry Crawford is that they possess the money, the energy and the intelligence to be true improvers, but they will not exert themselves properly.

The over-valuing of fortune and beauty imply a dissociation, a failure to comprehend the whole—sense that should attend fortune, and lack of vanity, beauty. Of those whose opinions we hear on landscape improvements only Edmund and Fanny seem to value the significance of such comprehension. Fanny does not approve of Mary's abdication of any responsibility for improvements save providing the money: "It would be delightful to *me* to see the progress of it all" (MP 57). But her weakness lies in her lack of confidence, in her unwillingness to use her own judgment to determine the improvements.²⁴ Edmund is more confident and fully approves improvements: "Mr. Rushworth is quite right, I think, in meaning to give [Sotherton] a modern dress..." (MP 56). But he would take responsibility for what was done, would personally

involve himself in the improvements: “‘I do not wish to influence Mr. Rushworth...but had I a place to new-fashion, I should not put myself in the hands of an improver. I would rather have an inferior degree of beauty, of my own choice, and acquired progressively’” (MP 56).

Edmund’s conception of what constitutes improvements becomes clearer in his later conversation with Crawford about Thornton Lacey. Crawford’s interest is all in ornament, whereas Edmund takes a deeper—and more realistic—view of what kind of improvements he will be able to make: “‘I must be satisfied with rather less ornament and beauty. I think the house and premises may be made comfortable, and given the air of a gentleman’s residence without any very heavy expense, and that must suffice me’” (MP 242). Edmund gives priority to comfort and utility; ornament and beauty are secondary.²⁵ It is perhaps most significant that Edmund would have his improvements “acquired progressively”—that is, he would oversee the scheme as it took shape and would maintain the chance to adapt and change his judgment as the plan was executed. Henry Crawford’s plan for Everingham “was laid at Westminster—a little altered perhaps at Cambridge and at one and twenty executed” (MP 61). He has improved his estate according to a basic plan formed when he was a schoolboy and only *perhaps* altered while he was at university. Edmund adheres to an organic principle of growth and change directed by good taste and sound judgment.

The importance of comprehending wholeness is applied to human nature in the conversation between Fanny and Edmund about Mary Crawford soon after she comes to Mansfield. Fanny acknow-

ledges first Mary's beauty and the pleasure of hearing her talk. When pressed by Edmund, Fanny admits that Mary was wrong to speak of her uncle with disrespect. They value justly Mary's appearance and her cleverness, but are not blind to the faults that exist independently of her charm and beauty. A similar conversation concerning Emma Woodhouse occurs between Mrs. Weston and Mr. Knightley. He agrees that she is very beautiful and that he does not think her personally vain. But he is not blind to Emma's faults or to the harm that can result from her friendship with Harriet. He maintains that Emma does not "imagine she has anything to learn herself, while Harriet is presenting such a delightful inferiority" (E 38). Mrs Weston argues that Emma will improve Harriet, but Mr. Knightley sees that the surface is all that Emma will alter, that she has never had the discipline to improve more in herself: "[Harriet] will grow just refined enough to be uncomfortable with those among whom birth and circumstances have placed her home. I am much mistaken if Emma's doctrines give any strength of mind, or tend at all to make a girl adapt herself rationally to the varieties of her situation in life.—They only give a little polish" (E 38–9). Mr. Knightley sees Emma whole, and it is a wholeness that validates his love for her.

Jane Austen's imagination in all her novels is deeply engaged with the question of human nature and its capacity for change, its potential for becoming better as well as its potential for becoming worse. Her use of inanimate nature as a metaphor for human nature finds its fullest expression in *Mansfield Park*. The title itself alerts us to the novel's principal theme: what man is given (man's field) and

what man makes of what he is given (park). Although the novel is often said to be a Cinderella story, a deeper pattern suggests that the fable of the tortoise and the hare more accurately reflects Jane Austen's subject.

NOTES

- 1 Jane Austen uses "inanimate" to distinguish between human and material nature in a description of Mary Crawford, who "saw nature, inanimate nature, with little observation; her attention was all for men and women..." (MP 81). Although strictly speaking, according to the OED, animals are not classified as a part of inanimate nature, it appears that Jane Austen makes her division between humans, who have souls, and the rest of material nature, including animals, which does not. That is, she seems to have considered the root word to be *animus*, spirit or soul, rather than *anima*, breath, or *animatus*, life or animation.
- 2 For a discussion of the question of the quality of nature see John F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of 'King Lear'* (London: Faber and Faber 1949).
- 3 John Stuart Mill, "Nature," in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed J.M. Robson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1969), vol. X, p. 379.
- 4 Mill, pp. 379-80.
- 5 See especially Samuel Klinger, "Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in the Eighteenth-Century Mode," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 'Pride and Prejudice'* (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), pp. 46-58. The problem of maintaining that Jane Austen advocated simply a synthesis of the natural and the artificial is apparent when one thinks of Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford, who use artificiality, social forms, to facilitate first their flirtation and then their adultery. They use the artificial, the social, for precisely the opposite purpose from what these forms are designed.
- 6 Mary McCarthy, "One Touch of Nature," in *The Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970) pp. 190-91.
- 7 This and all subsequent references to the texts of Jane Austen's work are from *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*, ed R.W. Chapman, vols. I-V, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1932-34); vol. VI, 1st ed., reprinted with revisions by B.C. Southam (Ox-

ford, 1969); and from *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 2nd ed., corrected reprint (Oxford, 1959). The standard title abbreviations precede the page number given in my text.

8 See Lloyd W. Brown, "Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition," *NCF*, 28 (1974), p. 332. Brown quotes an ironic use Mary Woolstoncraft makes of the world "wild" when speaking of society's view of young women like Elizabeth Bennet.

9 Mr. Knightley's use of form and ceremony throws some light on Lizzy Bennet's conduct. Since the only inconvenience in her walking to Netherfield is to herself, and since she is prompted by a concern for her sister, we can see that neither she nor Mr. Knightley is attached to form as a means of parading themselves, their dignity and fashion. Ceremony is a tool to be used or put aside, depending upon the circumstances, to promote the comfort of other people. In Lizzy's case, this requires a sacrifice of her own comfort and convenience.

10 Mill, p. 381.

11 Mill, p. 381.

12 Mill, p. 381.

13 See Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed B.C. Southam (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 115, for a discussion of Jane Austen's Aristotelian view of human nature.

14 Mrs. Bennet similarly indulges Kitty and Lydia, barring them from improvement, though with far less drastic results than come from Mrs. Grant's indulgences. We see a similar pattern in Mrs. Dashwood's attitude towards Marianne, and even to a certain extent in Miss Taylor's (i.e. Mrs Weston's) towards Emma.

15 W.J. Harvey, "The Plot of *Emma*," *EIC* 17 (1967), notes that Emma's fantasies are based on reality, from what she actually sees before her, and that it is this tie with reality, however tentative, that makes possible her reform. One can compare Emma with Miss Bates, whose connection with reality lies only in what she sees and hears. Miss Bates is rarely able to *understand* what she observes, but unlike Emma she never fantasizes, never makes erroneous assumptions or leaps to false conclusions.

16 For a review of the criticism concerning Jane Austen's use of landscape improvements, and a consideration of general works on landscape improvements in Jane Austen's time, see Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate*:

A Study of Jane Austen's Novels (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), esp. footnote 5, p. 39.

- 17 Duckworth's study of the improvements episode moves away from the idea of approval and disapproval of improvements, but my view of Jane Austen's use of the motif differs somewhat from his. He maintains that Jane Austen objects to doing too much (citing the claim of Mrs. Norris to having done "a vast deal"). It seems to me that the significance of the improvements motif lies not in *degrees*, but in the proper harmony of beauty and utility, the latter being given priority over the former. Jane Austen is careful not to judge improvements purely on grounds of taste (except, perhaps, where the felling of trees is concerned), but she distinctly disapproves of improvements that give greater value to appearance than to utility. My view is closer to that of Ann Banfield, "The Moral Landscape of Mansfield Park", NCF, 25 (1971). See particularly her discussion of the moral significance of landscape improvements in romantic and neoclassical terms, pp. 1-4.
- 18 Lionel Trilling, "Mansfield Park", in *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1955).
- 19 Trilling, p. 211.
- 20 Trilling, p. 211.
- 21 Trilling, p. 210.
- 22 Jane Austen provides a verbal link between Mrs. Norris and Crawford. Mrs. Norris declares: "I am excessively fond of improving" (MP 53), and when Julia asks Crawford, "'You are fond of the sort of thing?'" (MP 61), he replies, "'Excessively...'" (MP 61).
- 23 Mrs. Norris makes a habit of giving herself credit in this way. For example, when Mrs. Grant offers to stay with Lady Bertram so that Edmund can go with the party to Sotherton, "Mrs. Norris thought it an excellent plan, and had it at her tongue's end, and was on the point of proposing it when Mrs. Grant spoke" (MP 80). Her falsely taking credit for even the most trivial of arrangements is more pointed when she announces to Sir Thomas the plan for the carriage after the Mansfield family has dined at the parsonage: "Sir Thomas could not dissent, as it had been his own arrangement...but that seemed forgotten by Mrs. Norris, who must fancy that she settled it all herself" (MP 281).
- 24 Fanny's lack of confidence is similar to that of Edward Ferrars. Elinor's defense of Edward when Marianne says she believes he has no taste for draw-

ing suggest the view I think we are meant to take of Fanny's hesitance with regard to landscape improvements: "He always distrusts his own iudgment in such matters so much, that he is always unwilling to give his opinion on any picture: but he has an innate propriety and simplicity of taste, which in general direct him perfectly right" (SS 19).

- 25 Edmund's awareness that utility and comfort have a part in improvements as important as — perhaps even more important than — beauty, is shared by Edward Ferrars, who notes of a particular landscape: "It exactly answers my idea of fine country, because it unites beauty with utility" (SS 97).

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