

The Spirit and the Letter: The Latitude of Language in *Emma*

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'Now,'—said Emma, when they were fairly beyond the sweep gates,—'now Mr. Weston, do let me know what has happened.'

'No, no,'—he gravely replied.—'Dont't ask me, I promised my wife to leave it all to her. She will braak it to you better than I can. Do not be impatient, Emma; it will all come out too soon.'

'Break it to me,' cried Emma, standing still with terror—'Good God!—Mr. Weston, tell me at once.—Something has happened in Brunswick Square. I know it has. Tell me, I charge you tell me this moment what it is.'

'No, indeed you are mistaken.'—

'Mr. Weston do not trifle with me.—Consider how many of them is it?—I charge you by all that is sacred, not to attempt concealment.'

'Upon my word, Emma.'—

'Your word!—why not your honour!—why not say upon your honour, that it has nothing to do with any of them? Good Heavens!—What can be to be *broke* to me, that does not relate to one of that family?'

'Upon my honour,' said he very seriously, 'it does not. It is not in the smallest degree connected with any human being of the name of Knightley.'(my italics)¹

By the time the reader reaches this conversation at the beginning

of Chapter X of Volume III of *Emma*, the overt mystery of this passage—what the Westons have to tell Emma—can fairly easily be guessed, coming as it does a few pages after the announcement of the death of Mrs. Churchill. What strikes one as more mysterious is why Emma, who has never before been one to quibble about words, is so adamant in her refusal to accept as a valid oath Mr. Weston's swearing to her upon his word that the news has nothing to do with the John Knightleys or with Mr. Knightley, who is at that time in London with his brother's family. Emma's objection to Mr. Weston's oath pointedly emphasizes something that has taken place in Emma's consciousness. She is not questioning the validity of Mr. Weston's oath; she does not imply that she has lost confidence in *his* word. Emma has come, through her experiences from the muddled courtship of Mr. Elton, to the day at Box Hill and the subsequent failure of Emma's own words to promote good will between herself and Jane Fairfax, to distrust words, to distrust language itself. She has come to realize that *all* words are too inherently ambiguous to swear by.²

The ambiguity of words is of course the ambiguity of *Emma* itself, composed as it is of words. But Jane Austen's principal concern is not an aesthetic one, to be pondered by the novelist, but rather the more practical one of a human being living in a society in which the principal means of communication is words. Language, rather than action, is the medium of the muddle, confusion and mystery of the minds and feelings of the characters in *Emma*. The careless inattention to words, the conscious misuse of words, and the innate latitude of words themselves are the very stuff of the confusion here.³ The word games that occur at crucial points in the narrative—Mr. Elton's charade, Frank Churchill's game of anagrams, and

Mr. Weston's conundrum—all emphasize the theme of language.⁴

Mr. Elton's charade is an appropriate center to the situation in Volume I and casts light on the principal movement of the entire novel. Volume I presents literally (in the charade) and figuratively (in the action) a riddle that Emma is meant but fails to solve: that Mr. Elton thinks himself in love with her. This riddle is an imitation of and a false double to the deeper mystery with which the whole novel is concerned: the secret of Emma's own heart. Mr. Elton believes that his cleverness with language will convey to Emma his feelings through the charade on the word *courtship* and the final couplet asking her approval: "Thy ready wit the word will soon supply, / May its approval beam in that soft eye!" (E 71). Emma later blames Mr. Elton's inexactness of language for her mistaking the conundrum as being meant for Harriet Smith: Harriet has no "ready wit" and Emma's eyes are not accurately described as "soft." But the real point lies not in Mr. Elton's language but in his using a riddle, a game, as a means to communicate something as important as his feelings to the woman he believes himself to love. At this point in the novel Emma has not yet come to distrust language. In pondering her blunders with Mr. Elton, Emma lays perhaps more blame to his manners than to his language: "His manners, however, must have been unmarked, wavering, dubious, or she could not have been so misled" (134). This is the beginning of Emma's experiences that will lead to her rejecting Mr. Weston's swearing upon his word.

In the episode with Mr. Elton, Emma knows that it is a game and is a willing participant in it—so long as she thinks it is promoting the match between Harriet and Mr. Elton. But with the arrival of Frank Churchill a game begins that is hidden from all the

players but Jane Fairfax and Frank. Their love, their secret engagement, is given the form of a game of double-meanings. That Frank is cleverer and has more refined manners than Mr. Elton makes his game all the more dangerous. One suspects that Mr. Elton's charade is an attempt to give form to an illusion rather than to genuine feelings—and his subsequent coldness, his near incivility to Emma, confirms this suspicion. Frank Churchill really does love Jane Fairfax. The reality of Frank's feeling increases rather than diminishes his culpability. Frank's game is designed to hide from the people of Highbury, including his own father and step-mother, his love for Jane Fairfax.

The reader has many hints of the hidden truth in the connection between Frank and Jane, but it is first explicitly stated in Chapter V of Volume III when the point of view of the novel shifts to Mr. Knightley. His suspicions are first aroused when he notices certain looks pass between Jane and Frank, and he feels that his idea is confirmed when he witnesses Frank's misstep in attributing to Mrs. Weston a piece of Highbury news that in fact was conveyed in a letter from Jane, a part of their secret correspondence.

Frank uses the game of anagrams as a part of his larger game.⁵ The anagrams function as an image of the muddle and confusion on which Frank's game depends, but it is also an image of what is potentially dangerous in the game. The anagrams enable Frank to convey a secret message to Jane. This is a particularly appropriate mode for the message: He uses jumbled letters of the alphabet to acknowledge his "blunder" (the word he passes to Jane) in jumbling the information contained in another kind of letters—those he has received by post. Like Mr. Elton's charade, the anagram is meant by Frank to show his cleverness to Jane and to be a

little delight of the secret communication between lovers. But when Frank, who can never leave well enough alone, passes Jane the word "Dixon", an allusion to Emma's fantasy of a romance between Jane and Mr. Dixon, the game has the same effect on Jane that Mr. Elton's, once Emma understood *his* muddled meaning, had on Emma: she is annoyed.

Jane Fairfax has agreed to a secret engagement for reasons that we can guess, and from time to time we glimpse her enjoyment of the game.⁶ By the time the game of anagrams occurs, Jane has become acutely aware of the problems of such secrecy. Frank, one begins to feel, enjoys the secret game more than he would enjoy openly acknowledging his love for Jane. His indulging unnecessarily in the game such as when he passes Jane "Dixon," reveals a silliness, a childishness in Frank. The immaturity of his behavior, despite his obvious cleverness, is hinted by the original purpose of the letters used for the anagrams: Emma made them to amuse and instruct her little nephews.⁷

The motif of games involving words and letters is completed in Mr. Weston's conundrum at Box Hill. He asks which two letters of the alphabet signify perfection. The answer is M and A, that is, Emma. His conundrum turns out to be more instructive than amusing. Unlike Elton's charade and Frank's anagrams, the conundrum is not meant to convey a secret message, to have a deeper meaning than is apparent in the solution. But ironically, it does. Although the letters MA are meant to signify perfection, they suggest perfection only of the letter, a reduced and incomplete Emma, limited by wit, cleverness, and childish play. MA is a kind of perfection that satisfies the narrow comprehension of Mr. Weston and Mr. Woodhouse, and arouses the envy of the vulgar Mrs. Elton

and the admiration of the simple Harriet Smith. The more perceptive Mr. Knightley is not so easily satisfied: "Perfection should not have come quite so soon" (371), he comments at Box Hill.

Mr. Knightley is not being churlish. Emma's callousness to Miss Bates, which immediately precedes Mr. Weston's posing his conundrum, has manifested all too clearly Emma's imperfection of the spirit, of the feeling, which the perfection of the letter belies. In an earlier scene Mrs. Weston has warned Emma not to mimic Miss Bates, and at Box Hill when Miss Bates offers to say three very dull things, Emma is carried away by her own cleverness with words: "Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but you will be limited as to number—only three at once" (370). Emma instinctively depends on her manner to obscure her full meaning from Miss Bates: "Miss Bates, deceived by the mock ceremony of her manner, did not immediately catch her meaning; but, when it burst on her, it could not anger, though a slight blush showed that it could pain her" (371). The novel here reaches the crux at which the letter-perfect Emma, "handsome, clever, and rich," reveals an imperfection of feeling, of delicacy towards someone to whom she owes respect and good will.

Emma Woodhouse and Frank Churchill are linked thematically by their immaturity, which is reflected in their love of games and connected even more pointedly in their reliance on the perfection of the letter to conceal imperfections of the heart, of the spirit. Emma gives so much weight to the letter that she is easily deceived by the elegance of the letter (Jane Austen plays on the word) that Frank sends to Mr. and Mrs. Weston to put off the wedding visit that he has promised to pay them. His first appearance in the novel is, as

it were, in his letter to Mrs. Weston upon her marriage to his father. Mr. Knightley sees Frank's letters as a way of evading his duty: "He can sit down and write a fine flourishing letter, full of professions and falsehoods....His letters disgust me" (148-49).⁸ Frank's perfection, like Emma's, resides only in the letter. He is as adept as Emma at using style, manner and ceremony to conceal his misuse of language. Both Emma and Frank use language to create an illusion and to conceal reality—sometimes even from themselves.

Emma's imperfection is first hinted by her careless use of words, allowing them greater latitude than is consonant with their true meanings. She is quick to call the marriage of Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston her own "success," but Mr. Knightley in chiding her implies that a word is not in itself the truth. He points out that the word "success" is in this case inapplicable: "Success supposes endeavour. Your time has been properly and delicately spent, if you have been endeavouring for the last four years to bring about this marriage....But if, which I rather imagine, your making the match, as you call it, means only your planning it, your saying to yourself one idle day, 'I think it would be a very good thing for Miss Taylor if Mr. Weston were to marry her,' and saying it again to yourself every now and then afterwards, —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" (12-3). Mr. Knightley again corrects Emma when she calls Frank Churchill "amiable"; he maintains that Frank "can be amiable only in French, not in English. He may be very "aimable," have very good manners, and be very agreeable; but he can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people, nothing really amiable about him" (149).⁹

Mr. Knightley's criticism of Emma's use of words is not all stern censoriousness. The mode is transformed into a playful, romantic moment, one of the most romantic moments in all of Jane Austen's work, in the scene of the ball at the Crown Inn. Mr. Knightley asks Emma whom she is to dance with next, and this exchange follows:

She hesitated a moment, and then replied, 'With you, if you will ask me.'

'Will you?' said he, offering his hand.

'Indeed I will. You have shown that you can dance, and you know we are not really so much brother and sister as to make it at all improper.'

'Brother and sister! no, indeed.' (331)

Emma may still at this point and in some vague way think of Mr. Knightley as a sort of brother, but he hints here that his feelings for Emma are distinctly not all fraternal. Emma is not yet equal to articulating her attraction to Mr. Knightley, but her observation earlier in the ball scene conveys her attraction quite clearly:

She was more disturbed by Mr. Knightley's not dancing than by any thing else.—There he was, among the standers-by, where he ought not to be; he ought to be dancing,—not classing himself with the husbands, and fathers, and whist-players.... so young as he looked!—He could not have appeared to greater advantage perhaps any where, than where he had placed himself. His tall, firm, upright figure, among the bulky forms and stooping shoulders of the elderly men, was such as Emma felt must draw every body's eyes; and excepting her own partner, there was not one among the whole row of young men who could be compared with him. (325–26)

Such is definitely not the view through a woman's eyes of her brother. Emma feels here what she is not yet able to put into words, even to herself.

Emma uses words sometimes to create a subjective reality rather than to describe reality objectively—much as she alters Harriet Smith's appearance by making her taller than she is when she draws her portrait.¹⁰ In her annoyance when she learns Mr. Elton's true object, she places the blame on him: "To be sure, the charade, with its 'ready wit'—but then the 'soft eyes'—in fact it suited neither; it was a jumble without taste or truth" (134). Something of the same might have been said about Emma's drawing of Harriet. Looking beyond this initial episode, we see that Frank Churchill's passing Jane the word "Dixon" was tasteless, and Mr. Weston's conundrum on Emma's name something less than the truth.

Sometimes, as when Mr. Knightley says "Brother and sister! no, indeed," Emma, clever as she is, nevertheless misses the point. At Box Hill everyone except Emma understands Frank Churchill when he says to Emma: "[My wife] must be very lively, and have hazle eyes" (373). He is not describing the woman he wants to marry. He is describing Emma, whose hazel eyes Mrs. Weston has earlier praised.¹¹ Emma, however, has fixed in her mind the idea of Frank's marrying Harriet, so she ignores the literal level of this description. She comically fails to perceive that Frank is describing her. Emma has so little vanity about her physical appearance that she does not even associate hazel eyes with herself. Frank's description is letter-perfect, but his meaning—that he would like Emma for his wife—is nonsense.¹² He realizes this; Emma realizes this. But Jane Fairfax and Mr. Knightley are both deceived and consequently suffer from jealousy. Words create something of a reality of their

own.

Emma capitalizes on the ambiguity of words and manners when she imposes her own perceptions upon Harriet Smith—a game not, as we shall see, unlike Frank Churchill's manipulation of Emma's perceptions. Emma puts into Harriet's head the idea that Mr. Elton is falling in love with her, and she then proceeds to impose upon Harriet her own interpretations of Mr. Elton's words and actions. This in itself is wrong, creating an illusion that stirs real feelings of affection in Harriet. But Emma is even more culpable when she meddles in the affection that already exists between Robert Martin and Harriet.

She first criticizes Robert Martin's physical appearance and manners: "He is very plain, undoubtedly—remarkably plain... but I had no idea that he could be so very clownish, so totally without air" (32). Emma thus uses words to diminish the young man in Harriet's eyes. Ironically, it is language that shows Robert Martin to be superior to what Emma has thought. His letter of proposal to Harriet is written in language that "though plain, was strong and unaffected, and the sentiments it conveyed very much to the credit of the writer. It was short, but expressed good sense, warm attachment, liberality, propriety, even delicacy of feeling" (51). Emma finds Harriet's objection to the letter—it is too short—to be lacking in taste and sense, but Harriet's judgment parallels Emma's of Robert Martin himself: form takes precedence over substance.

Confronted with the reality of Robert Martin's letter, Emma can do no more than hint that "one of his sisters must have helped him" (51) write it. In the jumble and confusion of her own mind, Emma does not realize that she is making a game of Harriet's life.

Having never experienced romantic affection, Emma behaves as if such feeling has neither value nor power. In her ignorance and carelessness, in placing her own powers of fancy above those of imagination, Emma dictates both the words and the substance of Harriet's refusal of Robert Martin: "Emma assured [Harriet] there would be no difficulty in the answer and though Emma continued to protest against any assistance being wanted, it was in fact given in the formation of every sentence" (55). Emma's clever command of language invests her with considerable power, but at Box Hill she loses control of her words, not only in her speaking carelessly to Miss Bates, but in another sense as well.

Frank Churchill appears designed to be Emma's nemesis, for he is her equal in wit, cleverness, and careless play with words. Near the end of *Emma* Mr. Knightley remarks of Frank: "Playing a most dangerous game" (445). Frank, by imposing his own language upon Emma, makes her an integral part of his game. Frank's game is a sort of play, the creation of which requires that he manipulate Emma's lines as well as his own. Frank not only aims to make Emma, like the rest of Highbury, think him indifferent to Jane Fairfax, he uses her, in his manners towards her, as a kind of blind. His success is most strikingly shown when Mr. Knightley tells Emma that he suspects Frank and Jane of being more intimately acquainted than they admit. Emma blithely responds: "There is no admiration between them, I do assure you....That is, I *presume* it to be so on her side, and I can *answer* for its being so on his" (350-51). Emma's words here are her own, but the meaning is as patently dictated by Frank as had he whispered the response to her. This is an intimation of Emma's being in a position with Frank Churchill analogous to Harriet's with Emma earlier in the novel. But Frank

most fully takes possession of Emma's power of speech at Box Hill.

In the boredom of the afternoon at Box Hill, Frank attributes to Emma words and thoughts that are his own: "Ladies and gentlemen, I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse (who, wherever she is, presides,) to say, that she desires to know what you are all thinking of" (369). He then amends the demand that he has claimed comes from Emma:

'Ladies and gentlemen—I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse to say, that she waves the right of knowing exactly what you may all be thinking of, and only requires something very entertaining of each of you, in a general way. Here are seven of you, besides myself, (who, she is pleased to say, am very entertaining already,) and she only demands from each of you either one thing very clever, be it prose or verse, original or repeated—or two things moderately clever—or three things very dull indeed....' (370)

Miss Bates at once declares that three things very dull "will just do for me, you know" (370). Emma, carried away by Frank's manic spirits, herself conforms to the demand that Frank has made in her name, and makes her clever but disrespectful reply to Miss Bates: "Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but you will be limited as to number—only three at once" (370). Frank has not only spoken for Emma, Emma has allowed herself to speak as he has dictated: for the purpose of clever show.

Emma's words reveal her own imperfection. She has let cleverness take precedence over the respect owed Miss Bates. Although much of the novel is concerned with using precisely the correct words that will embody the truth, here Jane Austen shows that one cannot be guided solely by speaking what is true. Truth,

in short, is not license for expression. Emma's witticism is indisputably true: Miss Bates' loquaciousness is dull, rambling and tedious. But Emma has divorced Miss Bates' form and style from her meaning—the kind and generous feelings that Miss Bates' words are always meant to convey. Emma discovers, through her own carelessness, that it is better to say three dull things prompted by generosity of heart than it is to say one clever thing that over-rides delicacy of feeling towards other people. Emma has made this error before, though in a more indirect way. She gave more weight to Robert Martin's appearance and manner than to his affection for Harriet. She was particularly culpable in her influencing Harriet to underestimate the worth of the affection of such a man as Robert Martin. The parallel between Martin and Miss Bates reminds us that Frank might elicit the expression of Emma's fault, but the fault is her very own. The parallel further hints that Frank will not be the sole agent of Emma's retribution.

Emma is made fully conscious of what she has done, of her show of imperfection, by Mr. Knightley. That she feels the truth of Mr. Knightley's reprimand is shown in her tears as she drives home from Box Hill. The experience at Box Hill moves Emma to attempt to reform herself, and in a deeper and more significant way than her attempt after her mistake about Mr. Elton. The experience at Box Hill admits of no mitigation of muddle and confusion such as Emma found in the charade and in Mr. Elton's manners. She at first argues to Mr. Knightley that Miss Bates had not understood her. The narrator notes after Emma's speech to Miss Bates however that "Miss Bates, deceived by the mock ceremony of [Emma's] manner, did not immediately catch her meaning... "(371). Responsibility lies unequivocally with Emma herself.

Emma determines after Box Hill to express the good, generous feelings that she really does have towards Miss Bates. On the morning after Box Hill, she calls on Miss Bates and makes a "very friendly inquiry after Miss Fairfax" (378). Good feeling between Emma and Miss Bates is at once restored—another indication of Miss Bates' generous spirit. But Emma discovers that undoing the evil of an unbridled tongue is not always so simple. Jane Fairfax, suffering from jealousy that Emma has unconsciously caused in her flirtation with Frank Churchill, refuses to see Emma when Emma calls on Miss Bates. Emma then writes to Jane, who is said to be ill, "in the most feeling language she could command" (390) offering Jane the use of the Woodhouse carriage. Jane's cold response presses upon Emma a new awareness of the language of others: "Emma felt that her own note had deserved something better; but it was impossible to quarrel with words, whose tremulous inequality showed indisposition so plainly" (390). Emma again, perhaps this time more justifiably, gives more weight to the letter than to the spirit—in this case she considers Jane's handwriting to convey more than the personal rejection of herself that the words themselves convey. When Emma subsequently hears that Jane has not been too ill to go out with Mrs. Elton and when Jane sends back the arrow-root that Emma has sent to her, Emma must face the real meaning of Jane's note: Jane wishes to be in no way obliged to Emma. Emma's past actions and her past abuse of language, her past inattention to Jane, have all debased the value of Emma's words.

It is at his point in the narrative that Mr. Weston comes to fetch Emma to Randalls to be told of the secret engagement between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. We can see now why Emma is so quick to balk at Mr. Weston's swearing, "Upon my word."

Implicit in Emma's rejection of this oath is her sense of having grossly misused words herself and of having been betrayed by words—her own as well as those of others. Behind her demand of "Why not upon your honour?" lies the muddle of the charade, her carelessness at Box Hill, even the failure of her deeply felt note to Jane Fairfax. Emma has good reason to doubt the trustworthiness of words. The revelation of Frank's engagement but confirms her new conviction. Frank has been able to dupe everybody because they trusted his words. But we soon learn that the very modes of deception that Frank and Jane used have now turned against them, and Frank and Jane have themselves become victims of their own devices.

At her last meeting with Frank Churchill, Emma says to him: "I am sure it was a source of high entertainment to you, to feel that you were taking us all in" (478). The pleasures of the game gradually, though, turned to sources of pain. The first sign of discord comes when Frank passes Jane "Dixon" in the game of anagrams. The confusion of letters there prefigures the later blunder of yet more letters, these of the epistolary kind. At Box Hill, Frank is angry with Jane because the day before she has refused to let him walk with her from Donwell to Highbury. He uses the double-meanings through which they have earlier conveyed their secret affection for each other, but now the double-meaning expresses anger and rejection. Frank speaks sarcastically of the Eltons, but his words are meant to be, and are understood by Jane to be, a gloss on their own relationship:

'Happy couple!...How well they suit one another!—Very lucky—marrying as they did, upon an acquaintance formed only in a public place!—They only knew each other, I think, a few weeks in Bath! Peculiarly lucky!—for as to any real

knowledge of a person's disposition that Bath, or any public place, can give—it is all nothing; there can be no knowledge. It is only by seeing women in their own homes, among their own set, just as they always are, that you can form any just judgment. Short of that, it is all guess and luck—and will generally be ill-luck. How many a man has committed himself on a short acquaintance, and rued it all the rest of his life!' (372)

Such are the very circumstances under which Jane and Frank met and fell in love at Weymouth. Jane understands, then, his double-meaning. Her response also carries a double meaning: “A hasty and imprudent attachment may arise [at a watering place]—but there is generally time to recover from it afterwards. I would be understood to mean, that it can be only weak, irresolute characters... who will suffer an unfortunate acquaintance to be an inconvenience, an oppression for ever” (373). Jane's words in essence put an end to their engagement, and although the death of Mrs. Churchill seems to guarantee the return of their happiness, their retribution is not yet complete.

Earlier in the novel John Knightley and Jane Fairfax discuss letter writing and the value of the post. They remark upon the reliability of the postal system and the infrequency with which letters are lost: “The post office is a wonderful establishment!... The regularity and dispatch of it! If one thinks of all that it has to do, and all that it does so well, it is really astonishing!... So seldom that any negligence or blunder appears! So seldom that a letter, among the thousands that are constantly passing about the kingdom, is ever carried wrong—and not one in a million, I suppose, actually lost!” (296). But it appears after the death of Mrs.

Churchill that the post-office has failed. Frank writes to Jane telling her not to take the position as governess, that all shall be well. But after some days, he receives a parcel containing all the letters he has written to her and a note saying that she presumes that his silence means that their engagement is ended. Frank, thinking that his letter to Jane has been lost, blames the post office: "Imagine the shock; imagine how, till I had actually detected my own blunder, I raved against the blunders of the post" (E 443). The word "blunder" takes us back to the game of anagrams, and the game of conveying secret messages. Responsibility for the pain that Jane and Frank have suffered is implicitly fixed, not on the post office or on language but on Frank himself. In the confusion after his aunt's death, Frank forgot to have the letter posted. Before happiness is restored to Frank and Jane, even the post office, that great source of secret happiness to them when they are not together, becomes an instrument of the suffering that they cause themselves.

Emma too suffers retribution far deeper than the pain of her experience at Box Hill. The pain of Box Hill lies in Emma's having to face her own imperfection, accepting her own responsibility for the wound to her self-esteem that she has brought to herself through her careless disregard of Miss Bates' feelings. The revelation of the engagement of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill precipitates the discovery that causes Emma's deepest pain. When Emma hears of the engagement, her first thought is of Harriet, whom she believes to be in love with Frank. When Harriet declared that she no longer loved Mr. Elton and had a new object, Emma sought protection from making a second blunder. She refused to allow Harriet to name the man to whom she had transfer-

red her affection. Emma had already, upon seeing Frank and Harriet together after he rescued Harriet from the gypsies, decided that they were a possible match. When Harriet confesses that she is indeed in love with someone new, she gives what Emma thinks is a hint that her object is Frank: ““Oh! Miss Woodhouse, believe me I have not the presumption to suppose—Indeed I am not so mad—But it is a pleasure to me to admire him at a distance—and to think of his infinite superiority to all the rest of the world with the gratitude, wonder, and veneration, which are so proper, in me especially”” (341).

Emma tries to advise Harriet wisely: ““Perhaps it will be wisest in you to check your feelings while you can: at any rate do not let them carry you far, unless you are persuaded of his liking you. Be observant of him. Let his behaviour be the guide of your sensations”” (342). But when Emma steels herself to reveal the news of Frank’s engagement to Jane, Harriet comes in already having heard the news from Mr. Weston. She is completely unruffled. Emma at first thinks that Harriet is putting on a brave front, but soon realizes that she, Emma, has mistaken the object of Harriet’s affection: ““Harriet!...What do you mean?—Good Heaven! what do you mean?—Mistake you!—Am I to suppose then?—”” It is here in these incomplete, elliptical utterances that the truth begins to dawn on Emma. Words fail her utterly: ““She could not speak another word.—Her voice was lost; and she sat down, waiting in great terror till Harriet should answer”” (405). Emma loses her voice in another sense, one much more terrible than the one implied here. At Box Hill Frank Churchill usurps Emma’s voice, but the pain caused by that mischief pales beside what happens when she discovers Harriet’s real object: Mr. Knightley.

The true terror that Emma feels derives not only from Harriet's loving Mr. Knightley, whom Emma realizes suddenly that she herself loves, has always loved: "A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like her's, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress. She touched—she admitted—she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley, than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of a return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!" (407–8). This sudden revelation of the secret of her own heart becomes the source of Emma's deepest pain.

Emma told Harriet to observe and judge for herself the state of the affection of the man she loves. Now Emma must rely upon Harriet, as Harriet earlier both with Mr. Elton and with Robert Martin relied upon Emma, to describe and interpret a third person's words and manners. Emma is now in that state of dependence that she treated so lightly when it was Harriet who was dependent upon her. Emma's moment of absolute powerlessness comes in her having to ask Harriet: "Have you any idea of Mr. Knightley's returning your affection?" (407). Emma must then subject herself to being instructed by Harriet, a person inferior to Emma in every way but one: in her knowledge of Mr. Knightley's recent attention and manners. Harriet gives a plausible account, an account that Emma can marshal little evidence to dispute. After the revelation of Emma's blunder about Mr. Elton, Emma's imagination joined her to Harriet. But a bond through the exercise of imagination turns out to be quite a different thing from actually finding herself in Harriet's position—discovering that the man

Emma loves might, indeed, love another woman. Near the beginning of the novel Mr. Knightley has prophetically said that he would like to see Emma in love and in some doubt of her affection's being returned. Such is precisely the state to which Emma has been reduced. Emma now knows fully the wrong that she has done in the past in imposing her own views on Harriet.

Jane Austen does not long abandon Emma to her sense of loss or of her distrust in words. Mr. Knightley's proposal restores to Emma what she has believed lost, not only in the person of the man she loves but in the harmony that can exist between words and feeling, words and honor. Mr. Knightley, as Harriet's account of his attentions to her shows, is himself capable of giving erroneous impressions through both word and manner.¹³ But he is finally moved to propose to Emma because he is prepared to trust in the deepest, the fullest meaning of a word. He is nearly silenced when Emma, thinking that he wants to tell her that he has fallen in love with Harriet, first refuses to hear him and then says that she will hear him as a "friend." He balks at the word "friend" but then accepts Emma's offer, depending upon the best meaning of the word, upon the affectionate, generous, and disinterested feelings that the word properly comprehends: "As a friend!... Emma, that I fear is a word—No, I have no wish—Stay, yes, why should I hesitate?... Emma, I accept your offer—Extraordinary as it may seem, I accept it, and refer myself to you as a friend" (429–30). It is as a friend that he confesses his love. He marks, however, that his feelings are superior to the words that can express them: "I cannot make speeches, Emma.... If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more. But you know what I am.... You hear nothing but the truth from me" (430).

That Jane Austen does not give Emma's reply to his proposal has been taken to be a sign of Jane Austen's limitations: that she didn't know what a woman said in accepting a proposal of marriage.¹⁴ Such an idea is, of course, absurd. She very pointedly does not give Emma's words because Emma has finally reached the point at which the particular form of words has no significance.¹⁵ Emma knows that she loves and that she is loved; the emotional harmony that here exists between her and Mr. Knightley renders her exact words of acceptance of no importance. Jane Austen conveys the spirit of Emma's reply: "She was his own Emma, by hand and word" (E 433). In Mr. Knightley's proposal and in the narrative comment that carries the meaning of Emma's acceptance, the name Emma is marked, reiterated several times. Emma is no longer the MA of Box Hill.

The proposal scene brings a moment of reconciliation of the spirit and the letter, a harmonious union in which feeling takes precedence over words, but Jane Austen does not imply a fixed and static harmony. The reconciliation restores to Emma a sense of possible perfection that her recent experiences have denied. But that perfection is placed in the larger context of an imperfect world and imperfect words. Jane Austen marks the abiding imperfection of the letter and celebrates the perfection of the spirit when Emma does not explain to Mr. Knightley the reason for her inconsistent behavior in telling him not to speak and then telling him that she would hear him as a friend. To reveal what has been in her own mind, would have been to reveal yet more confusion arising from her relationship with Harriet Smith. Emma holds her tongue: "Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little dis-

guised, or a little mistaken; but where, as in this case, though the conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not, it may not be very material."¹⁶ Thus Jane Austen accepts the imperfection of her own chosen medium, but in human relationships, unlike art, words can be redeemed by the good feeling from which words should always arise.

NOTES

- 1 *Emma*, p. 392-93, Vol. 4 of *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 6 vols., 3rd edition. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932-1934); hereafter references to *Emma* are included in the text.
- 2 I am indebted throughout my discussion to the provocative essay by Graham Hough, "Narrative and Dialogue in Jane Austen," *Crit Q.*, 12 (1970), 201-29.
- 3 Donald D. Stone, "Sense and Semantics in Jane Austen," *NCF*, 25 (1970) notes: "The abuse of language can be psychologically, as well as socially, dangerous. Philosophers and anthropologists have made it increasingly clear that language, rather than reflecting reality, can create its own reality: what we see becomes defined for us by our manner of seeing, by the kind of language we draw upon to make our definitions," p. 31.
- 4 See Alistair M. Duckworth, "'Spillikins, Paper Ships, Riddles, Conundrums, and Cards': Games in Jane Austen's Life and Fiction," in *Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. John Halperin, for a discussion of Jane Austen's use of games in her novels.
- 5 See Joseph Litvak, "Reading Characters: Self, Society, and Text in *Emma*," *PMLA*, 65 (1986), 763-73, for his penetrating analysis of word games in *Emma*.
- 6 In retrospect Jane Fairfax might find the whole business disgusting, as she tells *Emma*, but she has her share of pleasure in Frank's double-meanings. See especially her "smile of secret delight" (243), when Frank says that only "true affection" could have prompted the gift of the piano.
- 7 Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., "Emma: Character and Construction," *PMLA*, 71 (1956), 637-50, discusses the novel as tracing Emma's growth from immaturity to maturity.
- 8 Cf. U.C. Knoepflmacher, "The Importance of Being Frank: Character and Letter-writing in *Emma*," *SEL*, 7 (1967), 639-58.
- 9 Ward Hellstrom, "Francophobia in *Emma*," *SEL*, 5 (1965), shows that characters whose values are deficient use words derived from French and

- are described with such words. Mrs. Elton's fondness for the Italian phrase connects her with the alien, non-English roles of those who are cut off from a sensible use of the English language.
- 10 D. L. Minter, "Aesthetic Vision and the World of *Emma*," *NCF*, 21(1966) 49-59, discusses the subjectivity of Emma's vision and her attempts to impose that vision on the real world.
 - 11 See *Emma*, p. 39.
 - 12 The narrator thus remarks: "Emma, glad to be enlivened, not sorry to be flattered, was gay and easy too, and gave him all the friendly encouragement, the admission to be gallant, which she had ever given in the first and most animating period of their acquaintance; but which now, in her own estimation, meant nothing, though in the judgment of most people looking on it must have had such an appearance as *no English word* but flirtation could very well describe" (368) (my italics).
 - 13 See Litvak, cited above, for a full discussion of Mr. Knightley as patriarchal 'reader.'
 - 14 Adena Rosmarin, "Misreading' Emma: The Power and Perfidies of Interpretative History," *ELH*, 51 (1984), takes the truncated proposal scene as conclusive evidence of Jane Austen's emotional shyness.
 - 15 John Bayley, "The 'Irresponsibility' of Jane Austen" in *Critical Essays on Jane Austen* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) remarks: "Emma and her father cannot understand one another, but this is no bar to their affection. Harmony, even intimacy, can exist in a community without mutual understanding—indeed must do, for we must live as we can" p. 7. Although understanding is not always possible and hence cannot be articulated, words should always arise from good feeling, a respect for the integrity of the other person.
 - 16 This is the point that it seems to me Hough, cited above, fails to give full weight to. The language of the "objective narrator" might be a social or even moral norm, but feelings are finally superior to words, take precedence over norms conveyed by words. Jane Austen marks more clearly than Professor Hough gives credit the inherent ambiguity of language. She would agree, I think, with his own assessment of language but not perhaps with his estimation of her understanding of the deceptiveness of language: "And style of speech is not an unambiguous indicator of character and value. It is an indicator, of course, but a far more deceptive and uncertain one than novels like *Emma* would suggest," p. 222.

Received September 30, 1991