

Surface and Subsurface in Jane Austen's Novels

JULIET McMASTER

I Take the metaphor of my title from Charlotte Brontë's memorable criticism of Jane Austen:

She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well; there is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy in the painting: she ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound: the Passions are perfectly unknown to her . . . Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet: what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study, but what throbs fast and full, though hidden . . . *this* Miss Austen ignores.¹

It is the original and recurring objection to Jane Austen. Mark Twain complained that her characters are automats which can't "warm up and feel a passion."² And even her admirers have defended her in terms which to her detractors are damningly faint praise. George Henry Lewes announced, "First and foremost let Jane Austen be named, the greatest artist that has ever written, using the term to signify the most perfect mastery over the means to her end . . . Her circle may be restricted, but it is complete."³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning was all too ready to concede to this view: the novels, she said, are "perfect as far as they go — that's certain. Only they don't go far, I think."⁴ "Perfect," for Mrs. as for Mr. Browning, is a term of opprobrium. It means the reach doesn't exceed the grasp.

In the twentieth century Jane Austen certainly does not want for discriminating critics who make large claims for her significance, but even her admirers stand on her appeal to the head rather than the heart. Ian Watt quotes Horace Walpole's dictum that "this world is a comedy to those that

think, a tragedy to those that feel," and acknowledges "Jane Austen's novels are comedies, and can have little appeal to those who, consciously or unconsciously, believe thought inferior to feeling."⁵ We have to a large extent conceded Charlotte's point, and agreed that Jane Austen's business is indeed with the head and not with the heart — we simply don't find her reaction as devastating a piece of criticism as she evidently meant it to be, valuing as we do the activity of the mind and the application of the intellect. We admire the unruffled surface, and have a properly Augustan reservation about the virtues of the kind of "vehemence" and "profundity" that Charlotte misses.⁶

And yet . . . do we really need to concede as much as we do? In our heart of hearts (and I use the phrase designedly) don't we know that a *full* reading of a Jane Austen novel is a very *moving* experience, as well as an intellectually delectable one? — that the moment of reconciliation when Mr. Knightley *almost* kisses Emma's hand is fraught with passion, just as is the occasion when Mr. Rochester crushes Jane Eyre to his breast in the orchard at Thornfield, while a violent midsummer storm is brewing?

Deep reservoirs as well as shallow ones may have unruffled surfaces: if unruffled surface is what we admire, then we need not look beyond it — and we can delight in the fidelity with which the surface of the lives of genteel English people is delineated; but if we do indeed value the dramatization of deep emotion, that too is there, and the more visible, if not the more obvious, for the apparent tranquillity.

Charlotte Brontë, accused on one occasion of equivocation, vindicated herself vigorously: "I would scorn in this and every other case to deal in equivocation; I believe language to have been given us to make our meaning clear, and not to wrap it in dishonest doubt."⁷ I suspect Jane Austen would consider such a declaration somewhat crude. The naive Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* has something similar to say of General Tilney's white lies: "Why

he should say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while, was most unaccountable! How were people, at that rate, to be understood?" (NA, 211).⁸ And Catherine's education is to involve the realization that language need not always be interpreted literally.

Of course novelists and dramatists have traditionally made capital out of a discrepancy between the profession and the reality, and many a comic scene has been built around it. Here is Becky Sharp, justifying herself to Jos. Sedley when he has come to visit her in her disreputable lodgings: she has just stowed the brandy bottle, the rouge-pot, and the plate of broken meat in the bed.

"I have had so many griefs and wrongs, Joseph Sedley, I have been made to suffer so cruelly, that I am almost made mad sometimes . . . I had but one child, one darling, one hope, one joy, which I held at my heart with a mother's affection . . . ; and they — they tore it from me — tore it from me;" and she put her hand to her heart with a passionate gesture of despair, burying her face for a moment on the bed.

The brandy-bottle inside clinked up against the plate which held the cold sausage. Both were moved, no doubt, by the exhibition of so much grief. (*Vanity Fair*, Ch. 65)

Becky pours out her wrongs and her griefs; the brandy bottle and the rouge-pot tell a different story. Thackeray's procedure provides a convenient contrast to that usual in Jane Austen. Becky's speech is a gush of emotion; her meaning is totally a product of that energetic brain of hers, and one can almost hear the whirr and click of a calculating machine in action. Jane Austen's characters, on the other hand, conduct apparently rational conversations with each other on subjects of general interest, while simultaneously their *hearts* are deeply engaged. She is not particularly interested in the exposure of the hypocrite who uses social forms as a mask for his true motivation.⁹ Nor is Charlotte Brontë, by the way — it is notable that in the proposal scene in *Jane Eyre* Jane declares explicitly, "I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom [or] conventionalities" (Ch. 23). *Jane Eyre* and *Lucy Snowe*

have to maintain a proud reticence, or burst through the barriers of convention in order to express their feelings, and when they do burst through, they mean all they say; Becky Sharp and Blanche Amory are socially perfectly at ease in the display of emotion, but they mean something different. But Jane Austen's characters succeed in expressing themselves not in spite of custom and convention, but *through* them; and they mean not something different from what they say, like Thackeray's, nor all they say, like Charlotte's, but far more than what they say.

And here we come to Jane Austen's powerful use of understatement in emotional scenes. It is her frequent practice to bring a situation to a crisis, to provoke expectations of some climactic exclamation of the "What was her consternation to discover . . .!" type, and then to report instead some apparent commonplace of behaviour or polite converse. For instance (the italics in these passages are mine):

Elinor Dashwood and Edward Ferrars meet after a period of estrangement. He has been engaged to another woman; she believes him to be actually married. After her family's embarrassed reception of Edward, we hear that "*she sat down again and talked of the weather.*" And presently, "*when she had ceased to rejoice in the dryness of the season, a very awful pause took place*" (SS, 359).

Elizabeth Bennet has at last realized that Darcy is the man she loves, but just when she has come to believe that, because of her own and her family's behaviour, he will never approach her again. Her mother calls her to the window to see the arrival of Mr. Bingley. "Elizabeth, to satisfy her mother, went to the window — she looked, — she saw Mr. Darcy with him, and *sat down again by her sister*" (PP, 333).

Mary Crawford, in spite of her prejudice against younger brothers, has fallen in love with Edmund Bertram. She is engaged in a game of Speculation when the gentleman's conversation turns on the fitness of Thornton Lacey to be

a prestigious gentleman's residence: "Thornton Lacey was the name of [Edmund's] impending living, as she well knew; and *her interest in a negotiation for William Price's knave increased*" (MP, 241).

Anne Elliot has steeled herself to speak to Mrs. Croft of her brother, Captain Wentworth, brave in the knowledge that Mrs. Croft knows nothing of the previous engagement: "Perhaps you may not have heard that he is married," added Mrs. Croft. [Anne] *could now answer as she ought.*" (P. 49)

Again and again Jane Austen indicates a severe emotional shock by this kind of understatement. She is not *avoiding* the presentation of strong feelings; she is presenting them by indirection. It is not because her characters have no feelings that they talk of the weather and make polite responses in such moments. Words would not carry the full weight of what they feel in any case. They observe the social forms, but not at the expense of crushing themselves. For they *can* express what they feel, but they can seldom express it directly or fully: to do so would be to lose the intensity, to be emotionally shallow. (That is what Jane Austen tried to suggest in *Sense and Sensibility*, when Elinor hears the man she loves is married, and *Marianne* goes into hysterics.) Her people speak in a succinct code, where A expresses not only A, but B and C as well.

So I would like to examine, in some detail, a few passages of dialogue, and to show how polite conversation, conducted on matters of apparently general import, and within the bounds of decorum, can be informed with a sub-surface level of intense personal emotion. One thing is said on the surface; but below the surface are implied the individual's ecstasies and agonies. In this way I hope to mine out some of that rich and primitive ore which Charlotte Brontë misses.¹⁰

I will confine myself to the last three novels, partly for convenience, but also because I think that this is an aspect

of Jane Austen's art which she developed and refined, and uses with best effect later in her career. Lucy Steele's bitchy insinuations in *Sense and Sensibility* are relatively crude examples of a character's ability to suggest more than is stated, compared with Frank Churchill's elaborate *doubles entendre*, or with the kind of oblique communication that constantly goes on between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth, where, though they seldom speak to each other, each constantly understands the full import of the other's speech better than their interlocutors do. And in my selection of passages I deliberately choose situations that parallel Charlotte Brontë's characteristic one, where the protagonist is forced to look on while the man she loves is courting an unworthy rival: a Blanche Ingram or a Ginevra Fanshawe, a Mary Crawford or a Louisa Musgrove. In such situations Jane Austen puts her reader on stage, as it were, since we become with the protagonist spectators who are intimately aware of unspoken implications in the exchanges we witness.

My first extract is from the famous excursion to Sotherton in *Mansfield Park*.¹¹ Mary Crawford, Edmund and Fanny, the trio who are so constantly associated, have begun to wander in the little "wilderness" of the park. Mary has just heard that Edmund is to take orders, and has had all her prejudices against younger brothers renewed. "A clergyman is nothing," she declares. Edmund defends his vocation.

"A clergyman cannot be high in state or fashion. He must not head mobs, or set the ton in dress. But I cannot call that situation nothing, which has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively considered, temporally or eternally — which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influence."

Mary remains unconvinced: "One does not see much of this influence and importance in society," she argues. And how can a clergyman be so influential when one "scarcely sees [him] out of his pulpit"?

Edmund tries to explain that preaching is not a clergyman's only business, and to enlarge on and explain his previous claim:

"A fine preacher is followed and admired; but it is not in fine preaching only that a good clergyman will be useful in his parish and his neighbourhood, where the parish and neighbourhood are of a size capable of knowing his private character, and observing his general conduct And with regard to their influencing public manners, Miss Crawford must not misunderstand me, or suppose I mean to call [clergymen] the arbiters of good breeding, the regulators of refinement and courtesy, the masters of the ceremonies of life. The *manners* I speak of, might rather be called *conduct*, perhaps, the result of good principles; the effect, in short, of those doctrines which it is their duty to teach and recommend; and it will, I believe, be every where found, that as the clergy are or are not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation."

"Certainly," said Fanny with gentle earnestness.

"There," cried Miss Crawford, "you have quite convinced Miss Price already."

There is a touch of irony at Fanny's expense here. We see her as Mary sees her, as an insignificant good little thing; and she is still too much Edmund's creature, and his echo. Nevertheless, she is, with the reader, the spectator who sees more of the game than the contestants.

The dispute between Edmund and Mary is a fundamental one. It is the dispute between principle and style.¹² For her, as for her histrionic brother, who believes he would preach splendid sermons (341), preaching is all there is of a clergyman, because that is all that *appears*; it is the part of his profession that can be done with distinction and applause. But Edmund refuses to divorce status from function; he de-emphasizes the preaching, and insists on the practice: he is Jane Austen's version of Chaucer's poor parson. Edmund takes his stand on moral ground, Mary on aesthetic. So far they are distinguished in their general discussion on the duties and the status of clergymen.

However, the issue between them is personal and private too. In reply to Mary's gay, "There, you have convinced Miss Price already," Edmund urges,

"I wish I could convince Miss Crawford too."

"I do not think you ever will," said she with an arch smile; "I am just as much surprised now as I was at first that you should intend to take orders. You really are fit for something better. Come, do change your mind. It is not too late. Go into the law."

"Go into the law! with as much ease as I was told to go into this wilderness."

"Now you are going to say something about law being the worst wilderness of the two, but I forestall you; remember I have forestalled you."

Mary maintains her gay and even frivolous tone, but there is more at issue here, as all three know, than a general dispute on the merits of various professions. Edmund's underlying argument might be translated thus: "Respect the calling I have chosen, because I want to marry you." Mary's underlying answer goes, "Well, I'm interested in your offer; but you must conform yourself to my minimal requirements for distinction." They are neither of them fully conscious of this set of implications, but that is essentially the issue under discussion. That "Come, do change your mind. It is not too late," for all its playfulness, has its undertow of urgency.

In spite of Mary's trite witticism about law and the wilderness, Jane Austen evidently intends her readers to understand the wilderness emblematically. It was Mary who led the way into the wood, with its "serpentine" pathways, and Edmund enters it much as the Redcrosse Knight, accompanied by his Una, enters the Wandering Wood in which he encounters the female monster, Error. Related symbolism is unobtrusively developed elsewhere in the novel. Mary is the temptress, the siren, who plays the harp and sings. In another significant little scene involving the same trio, Edmund stands at the window with Fanny, who is like the figure of duty urging him to look up at the stars, while Mary goes to the piano to take part in a glee. He and Fanny agree to go out on the lawn to stargaze, but he finds himself unable to resist the music: "As it advanced, [Fanny] had the mortification of seeing him advance too, moving forward by gentle degrees towards

the instrument, and when it ceased, he was close by the singers, among the most urgent in requesting to hear the glee again" (113). This Odysseus has neglected to have himself tied to the mast. Our last glimpse of Mary is to be of her attempt to lure Edmund back to her, with "a saucy playful smile," as he says, "seeming to invite, in order to subdue me" (459). But this time he is able to say Get thee behind me, Satan.¹³

To return to the Sotherton scene: After Mary's sally about the wilderness, Edmund admits he can never achieve a witticism, and "a general silence succeeded." Fanny, as she so often is, has been the most acute sufferer as the witness of this veiled courtship, and presently she indicates her pain:

"I wonder that I should be tired with only walking in this sweet wood; but the next time we come to a seat, if it is not disagreeable to you, I should be glad to sit down for a little while."

"My dear Fanny," cried Edmund, immediately drawing her arm within his, "how thoughtless I have been! I hope you are not very tired. Perhaps," turning to Miss Crawford, "my other companion may do me the honour of taking an arm."

"Thank you, but I am not at all tired." She took it, however, as she spoke, and the gratification of having her do so, of feeling such a connection for the first time, made him a little forgetful of Fanny. "You scarcely touch me," said he. "You do not make me of any use. What a difference in the weight of a woman's arm from that of a man! At Oxford I have been a good deal used to have a man lean on me for the length of a street, and you are only a fly in the comparison."

D. H. Lawrence unkindly called Jane "old maid."¹⁴ And she certainly doesn't expatiate on what he calls "That exquisite and immortal moment of a man's entry into the woman of his desire."¹⁵ But nevertheless, Edmund registers, and within the bounds of polite converse expresses, the thrill he feels at this physical contact with Mary.

There is again an emblematic quality in this threesome — Edmund between his two women, the one needing his arm, the other consenting to take it temporarily. It is a recurring triangle. Later in the novel, Fanny is the chosen

witness for another such scene: this one is literally a courtship, though played as a scene in a play. During the rehearsals for *Lovers' Vows*, first Mary and then Edmund separately seek out Fanny to hear their lines in the crucial proposal scene between Amelia and Anhalt. Fanny plays her role reluctantly enough:

To prompt them must be enough for her; and it was sometimes *more* than enough; for she could not always pay attention to the book And agitated by the increasing spirit of Edmund's manner, had once closed the page and turned away exactly as he wanted help. It was imputed to very reasonable weariness, and she was thanked and pitied; but she deserved their pity, more than she hoped they would ever surmise. (170)

Fanny has been disliked by many because she has so much the air of a martyr; but her martyrdom is very real, for she is made to witness, and even to prompt, exchanges where the private signification is perfectly understandable and deeply painful to her.

Readers of *Mansfield Park* have often objected to what they take to be Jane Austen's summary treatment of the important matter of how Edmund, once he has lost Mary, comes to transfer his affections to Fanny:

Scarcely had he done regretting Mary Crawford, and observing to Fanny how impossible it was that he should ever meet with such another woman, before it began to strike him whether a very different kind of woman might not do just as well — or a great deal better I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion. (470)

Such readers have I think missed one of the major sub-surface movements of the novel: Edmund's unconscious courtship of Fanny, which is concurrent with his deliberate courtship of Mary. The reader is constantly informed of how his love for Mary and his love for Fanny grow *together*. The three are always "in a cluster together" (86), they seem "naturally to unite" (90). The more Edmund's ardour kindles for Mary, the more fervent become his feelings for Fanny. He speaks of them as "the two dearest objects I have on earth" (264). When he confesses his love for Mary to Fanny, he calls *her* "Dearest Fanny!" and

"[presses] her hand to his lips, with almost as much warmth as if it had been Miss Crawford's" (269). And when he writes to Fanny of his beloved, he tells her "There is something soothing in the idea, that we have the same friend, and that whatever unhappy differences of opinion may exist between us, we are united in our love of you" (420). He has indeed needed Fanny's "prompting," even in his courtship of the other woman.

Of course the psychological probability of the confidante's becoming a principal in the love affair is frequently demonstrated in literature as in life. Ritualized comic versions of the situation appear several times in Shakespeare alone (not to mention *Lovers' Vows* itself), and Fanny in her role as prompter for Edmund might well say with Viola, "A barful strife!/Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife!" A more serious psychological study appears in *Henry Esmond*, where the hero woos Beatrix for a decade, making a confidante of her mother, and finally marries the mother instead. And George Eliot exploited the same situation for irony and pathos in the relation of Farebrother, Mary Garth and Fred Vincy, in *Middlemarch*.

Mary Crawford and Fanny, for Edmund, are a package deal; and at the end he simply discovers that he has mistaken the wrapping for the gift. So, in the scene at Sotherton I have been discussing, Edmund's decorous place between the two young ladies, courteously lending an arm to each, is an objective co-relative for the passionate tensions of the eternal triangle.

The next scene I would like to mine is from *Persuasion*.¹⁶ It occurs during the walk to Winthrop, when Louisa Musgrove has just urged her sister Henrietta to visit her cousin and admirer Charles Hayter, in spite of the disapproval of the status-seeking Mary Musgrove, who feels she should connect herself better. Louisa boasts to Captain Wentworth of her part in the affair, while Anne accidentally overhears:

"And so, I made her go. I could not bear that she should be frightened from the visit by such nonsense. What! — would I be turned back from doing a thing that I had determined to do, and that I knew to be right, by the airs and interference of such a person? — or, of any person I may say. No, — I have no idea of being so easily persuaded. When I have made up my mind, I have made it. And Henrietta seemed entirely to have made up hers to call at Winthrop to-day — and yet, she was as near giving it up, out of nonsensical complaisance!"

"She would have turned back then, but for you?"

"She would indeed. I am almost ashamed to say it."

"Happy for her, to have such a mind as yours at hand!"

Anyone with sense and discrimination can see that Louisa is expressing herself with more force than intelligence: the sister who urges a persuadable mind in one direction may be as blameworthy as the sister-in-law who urges it in the other. But, with the kind of deafness to nuance and delicacy that characterizes the Mrs. Eltons of the world, she insists on her own irreproachable rectitude. Louisa's strengths and deficiencies, however, are not so interesting to us as Wentworth's misjudgements of them. For him all discussions on the influence of one person over another relate to himself, and his broken engagement to Anne, and Lady Russell's persuasion that caused the breach. When he says "Happy for her, to have such a mind as yours at hand!" he has mentally recast all the people in question, so that Henrietta has become Anne, himself Charles Hayter, Mary Lady Russell, and Louisa the advocate he wishes he himself had had eight years ago. The rights and wrongs of the case he has not yet come to terms with. All he feels now is, "I have suffered because Anne yielded to persuasion; therefore the others must have been wrong." This is the premise on which he bases his moral philosophy.

"Your sister is an amiable creature; but *yours* is the character of decision and firmness, I see. If you value her conduct or happiness, infuse as much of your own spirit into her, as you can. But this, no doubt, you have been always doing. It is the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it can be depended on. — You are never sure of a good impression being durable. Every body may sway it."

Here, of course, there is an irony for the reader. Wentworth is supposing that because Anne gave him up she is inconstant in her heart, whereas we know, as we listen with her, that *her* feelings have scarcely altered through eight years, and we will soon find out that the "firm" Louisa will transfer her affections in a few weeks.

"Let those who would be happy be firm [he continues]. — Here is a nut," said he, catching one down from an upper bough. "To exemplify, — a beautiful glossy nut, which, blessed with original strength, has outlived all the storms of autumn. Not a puncture, not a weak spot any where. — This nut," he continued, with playful solemnity, — "while so many of its brethren have fallen and been trodden under foot, is still in possession of all the happiness that a hazel-nut can be supposed capable of." Then, returning to his former earnest tone: "My first wish for all, whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm. If Louisa Musgrove would be beautiful and happy in her November of life, she will cherish all her present powers of mind."

His solemnity is not really playful, though he is conducting an entertaining conversation — speaking aphoristically, and illustrating his maxims by apt analogy with elements of the autumn landscape. If we did not know the circumstances, we would be forced to suppose that this man has a bee in his bonnet about firmness: he is almost obsessive. "My first wish for all, whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm" — a curious priority! And then, "If Louisa Musgrove would be beautiful and happy in her November of life, she will cherish all her present powers of mind." He is thinking of the contrast with Anne. Anne, as he resentfully thinks of her now, is not beautiful and happy, but faded and miserable, and so she deserves to be in this and every other November of her life. That is the feeling that underlies his analogy. And in his little parable of the nut he is wiser than he knows. Louisa, in comparison with Anne, does have a limited range of sensibility, and can perhaps hope to achieve not very much more than "all the happiness that a hazel-nut can be supposed capable of." We need hardly pause over the quality of his advice — thus encouraged by him, Louisa does "cherish all her

present powers of mind," and, through her stubborn persistence on the Cobb at Lyme, nearly knocks out her brains altogether.

Captain Wentworth speaks with a weight of implication of which he is not, as Edmund is in the other scene, in control. His speech has been essentially an expression of his resentment against the persuadability of Anne Elliott, but the form it has taken is earnest praise of Louisa Musgrove:

He had done, — and was unanswered. It would have surprised Anne, if Louisa could have readily answered such a speech — words of such interest, spoken with such serious warmth! — she could imagine what Louisa was feeling. For herself — she feared to move, lest she should be seen.

Captain Wentworth has essentially been saying: "Anne made me miserable by listening to someone else's advice"; Louisa has heard "What an admirable woman you are! I would like to make you happy." Anne has heard some combination of both. And from this time, particularly as Henrietta is now out of the picture, Captain Wentworth is considered by Anne and others to be virtually engaged to Louisa. He has committed himself to one woman because of her unlikeness to the one he is really thinking of.

From this commitment he is happily released by Louisa's fortunate facility in falling in love with Captain Benwick. He must then inform Anne that he had never been in love with Louisa. They are at a public assembly in Bath, and he must again make his declaration by indirection: "I regard Louisa Musgrove as a very amiable, sweet-tempered girl, and not deficient in understanding; but Benwick is something more." (182)

Now he is in control of his language of implication, and Anne is perfectly able to translate it: "His opinion of Louisa Musgrove's inferiority, an opinion which he had seemed solicitous to give, his wonder at Captain Benwick . . . — all, all declared that he had a heart returning to her" (185). The full declaration — and it is fuller in this novel than in any of the six — is to come in a scene that

exactly parallels the scene with the hazel-nut. Anne, in the fullness of her experience of eight years of fidelity to her love, speaks to Harville on the subject of constancy in men and women, while this time Wentworth is the eavesdropper. There is the same oblique communication between the two, and Wentworth like Anne has been put through the agony of jealousy. The spurious virtue of firmness has been re-categorized as obstinacy, and the real virtue of constancy is given due credit. As he listens, Wentworth is able to write, without indirection, words that are for Anne's eyes alone: "I am half agony, half hope I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own, than when you almost broke it eight years and a half ago." (237.) Anne had a smaller proportion of hope to agony in the previous scene, but she had the same feelings, though they were never voiced, there and through most of the novel.

Captain Wentworth is closer to being a Mr. Rochester than any other of Jane Austen's heroes. When Mr. Rochester found himself tied to a woman he didn't love, he "unlocked a trunk which contained a brace of loaded pistols" (*Jane Eyre*, ch. 27), and when he was deserted by the one he loved, "He grew savage — quite savage on his disappointment He got dangerous after he lost her. He would be alone, too" (ch. 36). Now, perhaps Wentworth is not quite the stuff that Mr. Rochester was made of, and Jane Austen gives us no expanded account of his behaviour in his darkest hours after Anne rejected him. But we do have, in the course of conversation in the drawing-room at Uppercross, sufficient indication that he too has passed through the valley of the shadow. The Musgrove girls look for his first command, the *Asp*, in the navy list.

"You will not find her there, [he tells them] — Quite worn out and broken up. I was the last man who commanded her. — Hardly fit for service then. — Reported for home service for a year or two, — and so I was sent off to the West Indies."

The girls looked all amazement.
"The Admiralty," he continued, "entertain themselves now and then, with sending a few hundred men to sea, in a ship not fit to be employed."

And when his brother-in-law tells him he was lucky to get even such a command as the *Asp*, he admits, "I was as well satisfied with my appointment as you can desire. It was a great object with me, at that time, to be at sea, — a very great object. I wanted to be doing something" (65). The reference to his state of mind on being dismissed by Anne is clear. We have seen "no teare-floods, nor sigh-tempests," no pistols removed from the trunk, no withdrawal from the society of man — just a light-toned conversation with new acquaintance about the course of his profession. But Anne and the reader can understand that his mood was as close to being suicidal as Mr. Rochester's was, that he went to sea in a leaky ship, and would as soon have gone to the bottom as not. He has been Jane Austen's restrained version of Childe Harold, a "gloomy wanderer o'er the wave."

Finally, I choose to consider another neglected girl who looks on while the man she loves pursues an unworthy woman; but this time the point of view is centred not in the neglected girl, but in the unworthy one — in the erring Emma, in fact. To get the full emotional impact of all that is going on in this novel, we must sometimes make the imaginative leap that is needed to understand what the restrained Jane Fairfax is feeling, for Emma herself is of course hot-headed but cool-hearted, and for most of the novel doesn't know her own feelings.

Few of us can fail to have been impressed by the extraordinary power of the Box Hill scene. I think its power resides in the fact that beneath all that conversation and badinage, and beneath the overstrained attempt to make a party go, there are two subsurface levels of action, which the alert reader is aware of, and which give the surface level a particular intensity. In one level, at least one of the principals is not aware of what is going on: Emma's unconscious love for Mr. Knightley is beginning to force it-

self to the surface of her mind, and makes her realize that "she felt less happy than she had expected. She laughed because she was disappointed" (368). Frank Churchill suggests that for her entertainment everyone must reveal his thoughts; Mr. Knightley asks pointedly,

"Is Miss Woodhouse sure that she would like to hear what we are thinking of?"

"Oh! no, no" — cried Emma, laughing as carelessly as she could — "Upon no account in the world." (369)

Divided from Mr. Knightley by the "principle of separation" that prevails (367), and pointlessly incurring his disapprobation by her joyless flirting with Frank Churchill, she is weighed down by a misery she can't define. From this state of mind arises her cruel joke at Miss Bates's expense, followed by her ride home in the carriage with the unconcealed tears running down her face.

In the other action, the principals are thoroughly awake to the language of implication, and are aiming covert barbs at each other which they mean to strike and wound. Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, the secret lovers, have quarrelled, and his pointed attentions to Emma are designed to express to Jane his independence of her. He is under *Miss Woodhouse's* command, he implores *Miss Woodhouse* to choose and educate a wife for him, since he has no faith in his own choice. He and Jane proceed in their covert quarrel to break off their engagement. Frank comments of the Eltons (who like himself and Jane met at a public watering-place) that they are "lucky" their marriage is as happy as it is: his apparently general comments are deeply insulting to Jane.

"Very lucky — marrying as they did, upon an acquaintance formed only in a public place! . . . — 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)

Jane Fairfax has her cue to answer: "A hasty and imprudent attachment may arise — but there is generally time to recover from it afterwards" (372-3). "Jane," he can be understood to say — (I wish I could write the scene as Charlotte would have liked it; but then I like it the way it is) — "Jane, now that I've seen you in your sordid little home, with your dreary family, I'm thoroughly disillusioned, and I wish to God I hadn't got involved with you." "Frank," she may be supposed to reply, "get lost." At any rate, as Frank afterwards acknowledges, "She spoke her resentment in a form of words perfectly intelligible to me" (441).

That form of words is not, I suspect, perfectly intelligible to Charlotte Brontë and her allies. She accused Jane of being deaf to the rhythms of the human heart, but she herself had no ear for the still small voice. She was attuned to what Scott called "The Big Bow-wow strain."¹⁷

In general terms I have been talking about the power of form to liberate rather than to limit. In art the restrictions of form and discipline do not confine, but rather *define*. "As well a well wrought urne becomes / The greatest ashes, as halfe-acre tombes" — the sentiment was shared and practised by Jane Austen, even if the metaphor would hardly be characteristic. Her novels are well wrought urns, where Charlotte's preference was more in the line of half-acre tombs. I have had occasion to quote Donne once before in this paper; and, strange bedfellows as they seem at first sight, Donne and Jane Austen have much in common. They both have the conviction that it is not the quantity of experience that counts, but the quality; and they both have the concomitant power to make "one little roome, an everywhere." They find the world's room in a bed, in a relationship, or in Highbury, or in those "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village" that Jane Austen delighted in writing about.¹⁸

We all know that Jane Austen was an ironist. Studies of her irony have formed the mainstay of much recent criticism of her novels. But we usually associate irony

with the intellect: we think of it as a polemical tool, or as a means of creating comedy through its illumination of incongruity; we assume the ironist maintains a cerebral detachment, like Mr. Bennet's in *Pride and Prejudice*. Marvin Mudrick even heads one of the chapters of his book on Jane Austen's irony "Irony and Convention *versus* Feeling."¹⁹ But irony and feeling are not necessarily opposed: there is an irony used to express emotion as well as an irony used to make fun of it. Arthur Sidgwick pointed this out in an early and illuminating article on the term: "It often comes about," he said, "that while the lower stages of feeling can be expressed, the higher stages must be suggested. In the ascent the full truth will do; but the climax can only be reached by irony."²⁰ I do not claim quite this much for Jane Austen — she does not deal in the tragic experience of an Oedipus or an Othello —; but her power of understatement, and ability to express feelings by indirection, inform her novels with emotional intensity. She offers us far more than the *surface* of the lives of genteel English people.

NOTES

- ¹Letter to W. S. Williams, April 12, 1850. *The Shakespeare Head Brontë* (Oxford, 1931), xiv, 99. Reprinted by B. C. Southam, *tical Essays* (Englewood cliffs, 1963), p. 7.
- ²Unpublished manuscript entitled "Jane Austen." I quote from Ian Watt's introduction to *Jane Austen: a Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), p. 7.
- ³"The Lady Novelists," *Westminster Review*, 58 (July, 1852), 134. See Southam, p. 140.
- ⁴Letter to Ruskin, November 5, 1855. *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. F. G. Kenyon (London, 1897), ii, 217. See Southam, p. 25.
- ⁵*Jane Austen: a Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 4.
- ⁶Howard Babb has pointed out how "most of Jane Austen's critics are obsessed by a sense of her limitations." *Jane Austen's Novels: the Fabric of Dialogue* (Ohio, 1962), p. 3.
- ⁷See her introduction to *Wuthering Heights*.
- ⁸References are to *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed., R. W. Chapman, third edition (London, 1932-4).
- ⁹The earlier novels have the most of this kind of traditional satire: General Tilney, Lucy Steele, and Caroline Bingley are deceitful; but Elizabeth, Mary Crawford, Emma and Captain Wentworth are self-deluded.

- ¹⁰Howard Babb has provided excellent analyses of these and other passages in *Jane Austen: the Fabric of Dialogue*. My emphasis differs from his, however.
- ¹¹The main passage I am discussing in this section is *MP*, 92-5.
- ¹²Lionel Trilling points out how Mary Crawford "cultivates the style of sensitivity, virtue, and intelligence." *The Opposing Self* (New York, 1955), p. 220.
- ¹³Marvin Mudrick comments perversely on this passage, "Mary has suddenly become Satan," and calls this final view of her "a grotesque makeshift." *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton, 1952), p. 165. He seems not to have noticed that the imagery throughout has prepared us for such a view of Mary.
- ¹⁴In "A Propos of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*" (1930).
- ¹⁵*John Thomas and Lady Jane* (New York, 1972), p. 114.
- ¹⁶The main passage I am discussing in this section is *P*, 87-8.
- ¹⁷Scott was opposing this to what he called Jane Austen's "exquisite touch," and her "talent for describing the involvement and feelings and characters of ordinary life." *Journal of Walter Scott, 1825-26* (London, 1939), ed. J. G. Tait, p. 135. See Southam, p. 106.
- ¹⁸Letter to Anna Austen, September 9, 1814. *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. R. W. Chapman, second edition, (London, 1952), p. 401.
- ¹⁹*Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*, p. 60.
- ²⁰"On Some Forms of Irony in Literature," *Cornhill*, 58 (April, 1907), 499.