

“*Emma*”

[First published in 1957 as the introduction to the popular Riverside edition of *Emma*, this essay by Lionel Trilling was also published as a stand-alone article in the literary magazine *Encounter* and later appeared in a collection of his essays. Decades later, Trilling’s piece continues to be widely read and anthologized. In the essay, he makes the case that *Emma* is the best and most “modern” of Austen’s novels, focusing on the characterization of Emma and its complexity.]

It is possible to say of Jane Austen, as perhaps we can say of no other writer, that the recorded opinions of her work are almost as interesting, and almost as important to think about, as the work itself. This statement, even with its qualifying *almost*, ought to be, on its face, an illegitimate one. We all know that we should come to a writer with no preconceptions, taking no account of any previous opinion. But this, of course, we cannot do. Every established writer exists in the aura of his legend—the accumulated judgment of him that we cannot help being aware of, the image of his personality that has been derived, correctly or incorrectly, from what he has written. In the case of Jane Austen the legend is of an unusually compelling kind. Her very name is a charged one. The homely quaintness of the Christian name, the cool elegance of the surname, seem inevitably to force upon us the awareness of her sex, her celibacy, and her social class. *Charlotte Brontë* rumbles like thunder and drowns out any such special considerations. But *Jane Austen* can by now scarcely fail to imply femininity, and, at that, femininity of a particular kind and in a particular kind of society. And if we speak of names, we note the dismay of many new readers when they learn that certain of her admirers call her Jane, others Miss Austen. Either appellation suggests an unusual relation with this writer, one that doesn’t consort with the literary emotions we respect. The new reader perceives from the first that he is not to be permitted to proceed in simple literary innocence. Jane Austen is to be for him not only a writer but an issue. There are those who love her; there are those—perhaps they are fewer but they are violent—who detest her; and the new reader understands that he is being solicited to a fierce partisanship, that he is required to make no mere literary judgment but a decision about his character and personality, about his relation to society and all of life.

And indeed the nature of the partisanship is most intensely personal and social. The matter at issue is: What kind of people like Jane Austen? What kind of people dislike her? Sooner or later the characterization is made or implied by one side or the other, and with extreme invidiousness. It was inevitable that there should arise a third body of opinion, which holds that Jane Austen herself is not responsible for the faults that are attributed to her by her detractors, but rather the people who admire her for the wrong reasons and in the wrong language and thus create a false image of her. As far back as 1905 Henry James was repelled by what a more recent critic, Mr. Marvin Mudrick, calls "gentle-Janeism" and he spoke of it with great acerbity. James admired Jane Austen; his artistic affinity with her is clear, and he may be thought to have shared her social preferences and preoccupations. Yet James could say of her reputation that it had risen higher than her intrinsic interest warranted: the responsibility for this, he said, lay with "the body of publishers, editors, illustrators, producers of magazines, which have found their 'dear,' our dear, everybody's dear Jane so infinitely to their material purpose." In our own day, Dr. Leavis's admiration for Jane Austen is matched in intensity by his impatience with her admirers. Mr. D.W. Harding in a well-known essay has told us how the accepted form of admiration of Jane Austen kept him for a long time from reading her novels, and how he was able to be at ease with them only when he discovered that they were charged with scorn of the very people who set the common tone of admiration. And Mr. Mudrick, in the preface to his book on Jane Austen, speaks of the bulk of the criticism of our author as being "a mere mass of cozy family adulation, self-glorif[ication] ... and nostalgic latterday enshrinements of the gentle-hearted chronicler of Regency order." It is the intention of Mr. Mudrick's book to rescue Jane Austen from coziness and nostalgia by representing her as a writer who may be admired for her literary achievement, but who is not to be loved, and of whom it is to be said that certain deficiencies of temperament account for deficiencies of her literary practice.

The impatience with the common admiring view of Jane Austen is not hard to be sympathetic with, the more so because (as Mr. Harding and Mr. Mudrick say) it so often stimulates the self-congratulation of those who give it, and seems to carry a reproof of the sensitivity, reasonableness, and even the courtesy of those who withhold their praise. One may refuse to like any other author and incur no other blame from his admirers than that of lacking taste in this one instance. But not to like Jane Austen is to put oneself under suspicion of a general personal inadequacy and even—let us face it—of a want of breeding.

This is absurd and distasteful. And yet we cannot deal with this unusual—this extravagantly personal—response to a writer simply in the way of condemnation. No doubt every myth of a literary person obscures some part of the truth. But it may express some part of the truth as well. If Jane Austen is carried outside the proper confines of literature, if she has been admired in a fashion that some temperaments find objectionable, even repellent, and that a strict criticism must call illicit, the reason is perhaps to be found not only in the human weakness of her admirers, in their impulse to self-flattery, or in whatever other fault produces their deplorable tone. Perhaps a reason is also to be found in the work itself, in some unusual promise that it seems to make, in some unique hope that it holds out.

II

Of Jane Austen's six great novels, *Emma* is surely the one that is most fully representative of its author. *Pride and Prejudice* is of course more popular. It is the one novel in the canon that "everybody" reads, the one that every publisher of a reprint series includes among his first ten titles. *Pride and Prejudice* deserves its popularity, but it isn't a mere snobbery, it isn't a mere aversion from the popular judgment, that makes thoughtful readers of Jane Austen judge *Emma* to be the greater book. Not the more delightful, but the greater. *Emma* can't boast the brilliant, unimpeded energy of *Pride and Prejudice*, but that is because the energy which *Emma* does indeed have is committed to dealing with a more resistant matter. In this it is characteristic of all three novels of Jane Austen's mature period, of which it is the second. *Persuasion*, the third and last, has a charm that is traditionally—and quite accurately—called "autumnal," and it is beyond question a beautiful book. But *Persuasion*, which was published posthumously and which may not have been revised to meet the author's full intention, does not have the richness and substantiality of *Emma*. As for *Mansfield Park*, the first work of the mature period, it does indeed match *Emma* in point of substantiality, but *Mansfield Park* makes a special and disturbing case. Greatly admired in its own day—far more than *Emma*—it is now disliked by many readers who like everything else that Jane Austen wrote. They are repelled by its heroine and by all that she seems to imply of the author's moral and religious preferences at this moment of her life, for Fanny Price consciously devotes herself to virtue and piety, which she achieves by a willing submissiveness that goes against the modern grain. What is more, the author seems to be speaking out against wit and spiritedness and on behalf of

dullness and acquiescence, and thus to be condemning her own peculiar talents. *Mansfield Park* is an extraordinary novel, and only Jane Austen could have achieved its profound and curious interest, but its moral tone is antipathetic to the modern taste. I think that no essay I have ever written has met with so much resistance as the one in which I tried to say that *Mansfield Park* was not really a perverse and wicked book. But *Emma*, a work as richly complex as *Mansfield Park*, arouses no such antagonism, and the opinion that holds it to be the greatest of all Jane Austen's novels is, I believe, a correct one.

It is generally agreed that *Emma* is a difficult novel. We in our time are inured to difficult books and we quite like them. But *Emma* is really more difficult than any of the hard books we admire. The difficulty of Proust arises from the sheer amount and complexity of his thought, the difficulty of Joyce from the brilliantly contrived devices of representation, the difficulty of Kafka from a combination of doctrine and mode of communication. With all three, the difficulty is largely literal; it lessens in the degree that we attend closely to what they say; after each sympathetic reading we are the less puzzled. But the difficulty of *Emma* is never overcome. We never know where to have it. If we finish it at night and think we know what it is up to, we wake the next morning to discover that it is up to something else. It has become a different book. The effect is extraordinary, perhaps unique. This book is like a person, it is not to be comprehended fully and finally by any other person. Perhaps it is the point that it is the only one of Jane Austen's novels that has for its title a person's name.

For most people who recognize the difficulty of the book, the trouble begins with Emma herself. Jane Austen was surely aware of what a complexity she was creating in the character of Emma, and no doubt that is why she spoke of her as "a heroine whom no one will like except myself." Yet this puts it in a minimal way—the question of whether we will like or not like Emma does not encompass the actuality of the challenge her character offers. John Henry Newman stated the matter rather more accurately, and very charmingly, in a letter he wrote in 1837. He says that Emma is the most interesting of Jane Austen's heroines, and that he quite likes her. But what is striking in his remark is this sentence: "I feel kind to her whenever I think of her." This does indeed suggest the real question about Emma: whether or not we will find it in our hearts to be kind to her.

Inevitably we are attracted to her, we are drawn by her energy and style, and by the intelligence they generate. Here is her characteristic tone:

“Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid; it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public!”

Emma was sorry; to have to pay civilities to a person she did not like through three long months!—to be always doing more than she wished and less than she ought!

“I do not know whether it ought to be so, but certainly silly things do cease to be silly if they are done by sensible people in an impudent way. Wickedness is always wickedness, but folly is not always folly.”

“Oh! I always deserve the best treatment, because I never put up with any other. ...”

[On an occasion when Mr. Knightley comes to a dinner-party in his carriage, as Emma thinks he should, and not on foot:]

“... There is always a look of consciousness or bustle when people come in a way which they know to be beneath them. You think you carry it off very well, I dare say, but with you it is a sort of bravado, an air of affected unconcern; I always observe it whenever I meet you under these circumstances. Now you have nothing to try for. You are not afraid of being supposed ashamed. You are not striving to look taller than anybody else. Now I shall really be happy to walk into the same room with you.”

We cannot be slow to see what is the basis of this energy and style and intelligence. It is self-love. There is a great power of charm in self-love, although, to be sure, the charm is an ambiguous one. We resent self-love and resist it, yet we are drawn to it, if only it happens to go with a little grace or creative power. Nothing is easier to pardon than the mistakes and excesses of self-love: if we are quick to condemn them, we take pleasure in forgiving them. And with good reason, for they are the extravagance of the first of the virtues, the most basic and biological of the virtues, that of self-preservation.

But I think that we distinguish between our response to the self-love of men and the self-love of women. Surely no woman could have won the forgiveness that has been so willingly granted (after due condemnation) to the self-regard of, say, Yeats and Shaw. We understand self-love to be part of the moral life of all men; and in men of genius we expect it to appear in unusual intensity and we take it to be an essential element of their power. The extraordinary thing about Emma is that she has a moral life as a man is expected to have a moral life. And she doesn't have it as a special instance, as an example of a new kind of woman, like George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke. She has it quite as a matter of course, as a given quality of her nature.

And perhaps that is what Jane Austen meant when she said that no one would like her heroine—and what Newman meant when he said that he felt kind to Emma whenever he thought of her. She needs kindness if she is to be accepted in all her unusual actuality. I say unusual because women in fiction only rarely have that peculiar reality of the moral life that self-love bestows. Most commonly they exist in a moon-like sort of way, shining by the reflected moral life of men. They may be “convincing” or “real” and sometimes, by good luck, they are “delightful” but they seldom exist as men exist—as genuine moral destinies. We don’t take note of this; we are so used to their reflected quality that we do not observe it. It is only on the rare occasions when a female character like Emma confronts us that the difference makes us aware of the usual practice of novelists. And we really can’t say that novelists are deficient in realism when they present women as they do—because it is the presumption of our society that women’s moral life is not as men’s. No modern change in the theory of the sexes, no advances in status that women have made, can contradict this. The self-love that we countenance in women is of a limited and passive kind, and we are troubled if their self-love is energetic and assertive as man’s is permitted, and expected, to be. Not only men, but women as well, insist on this limitation. They do so not without qualification and exception, not without pleasure when the exception appears, but in general they do insist, and with the quiet effectiveness of an unrealized, an unconscious, intention.

But there is Emma, quite given over to self-love, wholly aware of it, and quite cherishing it. Mr. Knightley rebukes her for heedless conduct, and says, “I leave you to your own reflections.” Emma replies: “Can you trust me with such flatterers? Does my vain spirit ever tell me I am wrong?” She loves pre-eminence and praise; she loves power and she is frank to say so.

Inevitably we are drawn to Emma. But inevitably we hold her to be deeply at fault. Her self-love leads her to be a self-deceiver. She can be unkind. And she is a dreadful snob.

Her snobbery is of the first importance in her character, and it is of a special sort. The worst instance of it is very carefully chosen to put her thoroughly in the wrong. We are entirely on her side when she mocks Mrs. Elton’s vulgarity, even though we feel that so young a woman oughtn’t to set so much store by manners and tone. Mrs. Elton, with her everlasting barouche-landau and her “*caro sposo*” and her talk of her spiritual “resources,” is herself a snob in the old sense of the word, which meant a vulgar person aspiring to an inappropriate social standing. Mrs. Elton quite deserves Emma’s contempt. But when Emma presumes to look down on the young farmer, Robert

Martin, and undertakes to keep little Harriet Smith from marrying him, she makes a truly serious mistake. It is a mistake of nothing less than national import.

Here we should observe that *Emma* is a novel that is touched—lightly but quite certainly—by national feeling. Perhaps this is because the Prince Regent had expressed his admiration for *Mansfield Park* and his willingness to have the author dedicate her next book to him—it is a circumstance which allows us to suppose that Jane Austen thought of herself, at this point in her career, as having, by reason of the success of her art, a relation to the national ethic. At any rate, there appears in *Emma* a tendency to conceive of a specifically English ideal of life. Mr. Knightley speaks of Frank Churchill as falling short of the demands of this ideal: “No, Emma,” he says, “your amiable young man 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.” Again, in a curiously impressive moment in the book, we are given a detailed description of the countryside as seen by the party at Donwell Abbey, and this comment follows: “It was a sweet view—sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture [English agriculture, of course, is meant], English comfort, seen under a sun bright without being oppressive.” This is a larger consideration than the occasion would appear to require; there seems no reason to expect this almost solemn vision of England’s green and pleasant land. Or none until we note that the description of the view closes thus: “and at the bottom of this bank, favorably placed and sheltered, rose the Abbey-Mill Farm, with meadows in front, and the river making a close and handsome curve around it.” Abbey-Mill Farm is the property of young Robert Martin, for whom Emma has expressed a principled social contempt, and the little burst of strong feeling has the effect, among others, of pointing up the extremity and the large import of Emma’s mistake.

It is often said, sometimes by way of reproach, that Jane Austen took no account in her novels of the great political events of her lifetime, nor of the great social changes that were going on in England. “... In Jane Austen’s novels,” says Arnold Hauser in his *Social History of Art*, “social reality was the soil in which characters were rooted but in no sense a problem which the novelist made any attempt to solve or interpret.” The statement, true in a degree, goes too far. There is in *some* sense an interpretation of social problems in Jane Austen’s contrivance of the situation of Emma and Robert Martin. The yeoman class had always held a strong position in English class feeling, and at

this time especially only stupid or ignorant people felt privileged to look down upon it. Mr. Knightley, whose social position is one of the certainties of the book, as is his freedom from any trace of snobbery, speaks of young Martin, who is his friend, as a “gentleman farmer,” and it is clear that he is on his way to being a gentleman pure and simple. And nothing was of greater importance to the English system at the time of the French Revolution than the relatively easy recruitment to the class of gentlemen. It made England unique among European nations, and Alexis de Tocqueville in *The Old Régime and the French Revolution* advances it as the chief reason why England was not susceptible to revolution as France was.

It was not merely parliamentary government, freedom of speech, and the jury system that made England so different from the rest of contemporary Europe. There was something still more distinctive and more far-reaching in its effects. England was the only country in which the caste system had been totally abolished, not merely modified. Nobility and commoner joined forces in business enterprises, entered the same professions, and—what is still more significant—intermarried. The daughter of the greatest lord in the land could marry a “new” man without the least compunction. ...

Though this curious revolution (for such in fact it was) is hidden in the mists of time, we can detect traces of it in the English language. For several centuries the word “gentleman” has had in England a quite different application from what it had when it originated. ... A study of the connection between the history of language and history proper would certainly be revealing. Thus if we allow the mutations in time and place of the English word “gentleman” (a derivative our *gentilhomme*), we find its connotation being steadily widened in England as the classes draw nearer to each other and intermingle. In each successive century we find it being applied to men a little lower in the social scale. Next, with the English, it crosses to America. And now in America it is applicable to all male citizens, indiscriminately. Thus its history is the history of democracy itself.¹

Emma’s snobbery, then, is nothing less than a contravention of the best—and safest—tendencies of English social life. “A young

1 Tocqueville represents the class feelings of the English as being more lenient than in fact they were. But the difference between caste and class and the political effect of the social mobility which is represented by the “gentleman” are as important as Tocqueville says they are.

farmer," she takes occasion to remark in her sententious way, "is the very last sort of person to raise my curiosity. The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel that I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me; I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or other. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore in one sense as much above my notice as in every other he is below it." This is carefully contrived to seem as dreadful as possible—it almost constitutes an extravagance in the portraiture.

Snobbery is the grossest fault that arises from Emma's self-love, but it is not the only fault. We must also take account of her capacity for unkindness, which can be impulsive and brutal as in the witticism directed to Miss Bates at the picnic (which makes one of the most memorable scenes in the whole range of English fiction) or extended and systematic as in her conspiracy with Frank Churchill to quiz Jane Fairfax. We know her to be a gossip, at least when she is tempted by Frank Churchill. She has no compunctions about taking over the rule of Harriet Smith's life. One critic has accused her, on the ground of her own estimate of herself, of a want of tenderness, and has even said of her that she is without normal sexual responsiveness.

Why then should anyone be kind to Emma? There are several reasons, and one of them is that we come into an unusual intimacy with her. We see her in all the elaborateness of her mistakes, in all the details of her wrong conduct. The narrative technique of the novel brings us very close to her and makes us aware of each misstep she will make. The relation that develops between ourselves and her becomes a strange one—it is the relation that exists between our ideal self and our ordinary fallible self. We become Emma's helpless conscience, her unavailing guide. Her fault is the classic one of *hubris*, excessive pride, and it yields the classic result of blindness, of an inability to interpret experience to the end of perceiving reality, and we are aware of each false step, each wrong conclusion, that she will make. Our hand goes out to hold her back and set her straight, but it cannot reach her.

There is an intimacy anterior to this. We come close to Emma because, in a strange way, she permits us to, even invites us to, by being very close to herself. When we have said that her fault is *hubris* or arrogant self-love, we must make an immediate modification, for her self-love, though it involves her in considerable self-deception, does not lead her to the ultimate self-deception—she believes she is clever, she insists she is right, but she never says she is *good*. A consciousness is always at work in her, a sense of what she ought to be

and do. It is not an infallible sense, anything but that, yet she does not need us, or the author, or Mr. Knightley, to tell her, for example, that she is jealous of Jane Fairfax and acts badly to her; indeed, "she never saw [Jane Fairfax] without feeling that she had injured her." She is never offended, she never takes the high self-defensive line, when once her bad conduct is made apparent to her. Her sense of her superiority leads her to the "insufferable vanity" of believing "herself in the secret of everybody's feelings" and to the "unpardonable arrogance" of "proposing to arrange everybody's destiny," yet it is an innocent vanity and an innocent arrogance which, when frustrated and exposed, do not make her bitter but only ashamed. That is why, bad as her behavior may be, we are willing to be implicated in it. It has been thought that in the portrait of Emma there is "an air of confession," that Jane Austen was taking account of "something offensive" that she and others had observed in her own earlier manner and conduct, and whether or not this is so, it suggests the quality of intimacy which the author contrives that we shall feel with the heroine.

Then, when we try to explain our feeling of kindness to Emma, we ought to remember that many of her wrong judgments and actions are directed to a very engaging end, a very right purpose. She believes in her own distinction and vividness and she wants all around her to be distinguished and vivid. It is indeed unpardonable arrogance, as she comes to see, that she should undertake to arrange Harriet Smith's destiny, that she plans to "form" Harriet, making her, as it were, the mere material or stuff of a creative act. Yet the destiny is not meanly conceived, the act is meant to be truly creative—she wants Harriet to be a distinguished and not a commonplace person, she wants nothing to be commonplace, she requires of life that it be well shaped and impressive, and alive. It is out of her insistence that the members of the picnic shall cease being dull and begin to be witty that there comes her famous insult to Miss Bates. Her requirement that life be vivid is too often expressed in terms of social deportment—she sometimes talks like a governess or a dowager—but it is, in its essence, a poet's demand.

She herself says that she lacks tenderness, although she makes the self-accusation in her odd belief that Harriet possesses this quality; Harriet is soft and "feminine," but she is not tender. Professor Mudrick associates the deficiency with Emma's being not susceptible to men. This is perhaps so; but if it is, there may be found in her apparent sexual coolness something that is impressive and right. She makes great play about the feelings and about the fineness of the feelings that one ought to have; she sets great store by literature (although she does not read the books she prescribes for herself)

and makes it a condemnation of Robert Martin that he does not read novels. Yet although, like Don Quixote and Emma Bovary, her mind is shaped and deceived by fiction, she is remarkable for the actuality and truth of her sexual feelings. Inevitably she expects that Frank Churchill will fall in love with her and she with him, but others are more deceived in the outcome of this expectation than she is—it takes but little time for her to see that she does not really respond to Churchill, that her feeling for him is no more than the lively notice that an attractive and vivacious girl takes of an attractive and vivacious young man. As little as with any heroine of Bernard Shaw or of D.H. Lawrence is sentimental sexuality a part of her nature, however much she feels it ought to be part of Harriet Smith's nature. When the right time comes, she chooses her husband wisely and seriously and eagerly.

There is, then, sufficient reason to be kind to Emma, and perhaps for nothing so much as the hope she expresses when she begins to understand her mistakes, that she will become, as she says, "more acquainted with herself." And, indeed, all through the novel she has sought better acquaintance with herself, not wisely, not adequately, but assiduously. How modern a quest it is, and how thoroughly it confirms Dr. Leavis's judgment that Jane Austen is the first truly modern novelist of England! "In art," a critic has said, "the decision to be revolutionary usually counts for very little. The most radical changes have come from personalities who were conservative and even conventional ..."¹ Jane Austen, conservative and even conventional as she was, perceived the nature of the deep psychological change which accompanied the establishment of democratic society—she was aware of the increase of the psychological burden of the individual, she understood the new necessity of conscious self-definition and self-criticism, the need to make private judgments of reality. And there is no reality about which the modern person is more uncertain and more anxious than the reality of himself. For each of us, as for Emma, it is a sad, characteristic hope to become more acquainted with oneself.

III

But the character of Emma is not the only reason for the difficulty of the novel. We must also take into account the particular genre to which the novel is conceived. It is a genre which has the effect of bringing into the most extreme contrast the brilliant modernity of

1 Harold Rosenberg, "Revolution and the Idea of Beauty," *Encounter*, December 1953.

Emma, and its nature may be understood through the characters of Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates.

Sir Walter Scott in his famous review of *Emma* said that Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates were a mistake, that "characters of folly and simplicity," such as they are, are "apt to become tiresome in fiction as in real society." But Scott is wrong. Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates are remarkably interesting, even though they have been created on a system of character portrayal that is no longer supposed to have validity—they exist by reason of a single trait which they display whenever they appear. Miss Bates is possessed of continuous speech and of a perfectly free association of ideas which is quite beyond her control; once launched into utterance, it is impossible for her to stop. Mr. Woodhouse, *Emma*'s father, has no other purpose in life than to preserve his health and equanimity, and no other subject of conversation than the means of doing so. The commonest circumstances of life present themselves to him as dangerous, to walk or to drive or to eat an egg not coddled in the prescribed way is to invite destruction. Nothing must ever change in his familial situation; he is appalled by the propensity of young people to marry, and to marry *strangers* at that.

Of the two "characters of folly and simplicity," Mr. Woodhouse is the more remarkable because he so entirely, so extravagantly, embodies a principle, the profundity of which will be clear to anyone who recalls Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, especially the fifth chapter. (And can we fail to see how much of the theory of modern anthropology, aesthetics, and the psychology of perception are based upon Mr. Woodhouse's remark about Mrs. Elton: "... Considering we never saw her before, she seems a very pretty sort of young lady"?) Almost in the degree that Jane Austen was delighted by personal energy, by "progressive" tendencies, she was fascinated by persons capable of extreme inertness, who, like Mr. Woodhouse and Lady Bertram of *Mansfield Park*, disclose the "conservative" and "regressive" impulse that, as Freud tells us, lies hidden in the organic instincts. She does not judge them harshly, as we incline to do—we who scarcely recall how important in the Christian *Aberglaube* the dream of *rest* once was.

But if Mr. Woodhouse has a more speculative interest than Miss Bates, there is not much to choose between their achieved actuality as fictional characters. They are, as I have said, created on a system of character portrayal that we regard as primitive, but the reality of existence which fictional characters may claim doesn't depend only upon what they do, but also upon what others do to or about them, upon the way they are regarded and responded to. And in the

community of Highbury, Miss Bates and Mr. Woodhouse are sacred. They are fools, to be sure, as everyone knows. But they are fools of a special and transcendent kind. They are innocents—of such is the kingdom of heaven. They are children, who have learned nothing of the guile of the world. And their mode of existence is the key to the nature of the world of Highbury, which is the world of the idyll. London is only sixteen miles away—Frank Churchill can ride there and back for a haircut—but the proximity of the life of London serves but to emphasize the spiritual geography of Highbury. The weather plays a great part in *Emma*; in no other novel of Jane Austen's is the succession of the seasons, and cold and heat, of such consequence, as if to make the point which the pastoral idyll characteristically makes, that the only hardships that man ought to have to endure are meteorological. In the Forest of Arden we suffer only "the penalty of Adam, The seasons' difference," and Amiens' song echoes the Duke's words:

"Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather."

Some explicit thought of the pastoral idyll is in Jane Austen's mind, and with all the ambivalence that marks the attitude of *As You Like It* toward the dream of man's life in nature and simplicity. Mrs. Elton wants to make the strawberry party at Donwell Abbey into a *fête champêtre*: "It is to be a morning scheme, you know, Knightley; quite a simple thing. I shall wear a large bonnet, and bring one of my little baskets hanging on my arm. Here,—probably this basket with pink ribbon. Nothing can be more simple, you see. And Jane will have such another. 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. Is not that your idea?" To which Knightley replies: "Not quite. My idea of the simple and natural will be to have the table spread in the dining-room. The nature and the simplicity of gentlemen and ladies, with their servants and furniture, I think is best observed by meals within doors. When you are tired of eating strawberries in the garden, there will be cold meat in the house."

That the pastoral idyll should be mocked as a sentimentality by its association with Mrs. Elton, whose vulgarity in large part consists in flaunting the cheapened version of high and delicate ideals, and that Knightley should answer her as he does—this is quite in accordance

with our expectation of Jane Austen's judgment. Yet it is only a few pages later that the members of the party walk out to see the view and we get that curious passage about how sweet the view is, "sweet to the eye and to the mind." And we cannot help feeling that "English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright without being oppressive" make an England perceived—if but for the moment—as an idyll.

The idyll is not a genre which nowadays we are likely to understand. Or at least not in fiction, the art which we believe must always address itself to actuality. The imagination of felicity is difficult for us to exercise. We feel that it is a betrayal of our awareness of our world of pain, that it is politically inappropriate. And yet one considerable critic of literature thought otherwise. Schiller is not exactly of our time, yet he is remarkably close to us in many ways and he inhabited a world scarcely less painful than ours, and he thought that the genre of the idyll had an important bearing upon social and political ideas.

As Schiller defines it, the idyll is the literary genre that "presents the idea and description of an innocent and happy humanity." The practice of poets has been to set their idylls in pastoral surroundings and in the infancy of humanity; it is thus that they most easily achieve the remoteness from the "artificial refinements of fashionable society" which is implied by innocence and happiness. But this practice is merely accidental, not of the essence of the idyll, which is simply the portrayal of "a state of innocence, which means a state of harmony and peace with himself and the external world." For Schiller the political importance of the genre is clear: "A state such as this is not merely met with before the dawn of civilization; it is also the state to which civilization aspires, as to its last end, if only it obeys a determined tendency in its progress. The idea of a similar state, and the belief in the possible reality of this state, is the only thing that can reconcile man with all the evils to which he is exposed in the path of civilization. ..." And Schiller represents it as the poet's function—his political function—to gather up the elements of actual life that do partake of innocence, and that the predominant pain of life leads us to forget, to persuade us that innocence is possible.

But the idyll has an aesthetic deficiency of which Schiller is quite aware. It excludes the idea of activity, which alone can satisfy the mind. Or at least the idyll as it is traditionally conceived makes this exclusion. But Schiller finds it possible to imagine a transmutation of the genre in which the characteristic calm of the idyll shall be "the calm that follows accomplishment, not the calm of indolence—the

calm that comes from the equilibrium reestablished between the faculties and not from the suspending of their exercise.”

It is strange that Schiller, as he projects this new and as yet unrealized possibility, does not recur to what he has previously said about comedy. To tragedy he assigns the adjective *sublime*, which implies achieving greatness by intense effort and strength of will, while to comedy he assigns the adjective *beautiful*, which implies the achievement of freedom by an activity which is easy and natural. “The noble task of comedy,” he says, “is to produce and keep up in us this freedom of mind.” Comedy and the idyll, then, would seem to have affinity with each other. Schiller does not observe this, but Shakespeare knew it—the power and charm of *As You Like It* consists of bringing together the idyll and comedy, of making the idyll the subject of comedy, even of satire, yet without negating it. The mind teases the heart, but does not mock it. The unconditioned freedom that the idyll hypothecates is shown to be impossible, yet in the demonstration a measure of freedom is gained.

So in *Emma* Jane Austen contrives an idyllic world, or the closest approximation of an idyllic world that the genre of the novel will permit, and brings into contrast with it the actualities of the social world, of the modern self. In the precincts of Highbury there are no bad people, and no adverse judgments to be made. Only a modern critic would think to call Mr. Woodhouse an idiot and an old woman; in the novel he is called “the kind-hearted, polite old gentleman.” Only Emma, with her modern consciousness, comes out with it that Miss Bates is a bore, and only Emma can give herself to the thought that Mr. Weston would be a “higher character” if he were not so simple and open-hearted. It is from outside Highbury that the peculiarly modern traits of insincerity and vulgarity come, in the person of Frank Churchill and Mrs. Elton. With the exception of Emma herself, every person in Highbury lives in harmony and peace—even Mr. Elton would have been all right if Emma had let him alone!—and not merely because they are simple and undeveloped: Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston are no less innocent than Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates, and if they please us and do not bore us by a perfection of manner and feeling which is at once lofty and homely, it is because we accept the assumptions of the idyllic world which they inhabit—we have been led to believe that man may actually live “in harmony and peace with himself and the external world.”

The quiet of Highbury, the unperturbed spirits of Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates, the instructive perfection of Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston, constitute much of the charm of *Emma*. Yet the idyllic

stillness of the scene and the loving celebration of what, for better or worse, is fully formed and changeless, are of course not what is decisive in the success of the novel. What is decisive is the idea of activity and development. No one has put better or more eloquently what part this idea plays in Jane Austen's work than an anonymous critic writing in *The North British Review* in 1870:

Even as a unit, man is only known to her in the process of his formation by social influences. She broods over his history, not over his individual soul and its secret workings, nor over the analysis of its faculties and organs. She sees him, not as a solitary being completed in himself, but only as completed in society. Again, she contemplates virtues, not as fixed quantities, or as definable qualities, but as continual struggles and conquests, as progressive states of mind, advancing by repulsing their contraries, or losing ground by being overcome. Hence again the individual mind can only be represented by her as a battle-field where contending hosts are marshaled, and where victory inclines now to one side and now to another. A character therefore unfolded itself to her, not in statuesque repose, not as a model without motion, but as a dramatic sketch, a living history, a composite force, which could only exhibit what it was by exhibiting what it did. Her favorite poet Cowper taught her,
"By ceaseless action all that is subsists."

The mind as a battlefield: it does not consort with some of the views of Jane Austen that are commonly held. Yet this is indeed how she understood the mind. Her representation of battle is the truer because she could imagine the possibility of peace and victory—she did not shrink from victory.

And the anonymous *North British* critic goes on to say another good thing, a rather startling one. He says that the mind of Jane Austen was "saturated" with a "Platonic idea." In speaking of her ideal of "intelligent love"—the phrase is perfect—he says that it is based on the "Platonic idea that the giving and receiving of knowledge, the active formation of another's character, or the more passive growth under another's guidance, is the truest and strongest foundation of love." It is an ideal that not all will think possible of realization and that some of us will not want to give even a theoretical assent to. Yet if we regard the idea not in the actual world but in the idyllic scene of *Emma*, many of us will consent to its attractiveness. It proposes to us the hope of victory in the battle that the mind must wage; and it speaks of the expectation of allies in the

battle, of the possibility of community—not in actuality, not now, but perhaps in the future, for are we not led to believe, or almost believe, that it did exist in the past?

The impulse to believe that the world of Jane Austen really did exist leads to notable error. “Jane Austen’s England” is the thoughtless phrase which is often made to stand for the England of the years in which our author lived, although any serious history will make it sufficiently clear that the real England was not the England of her novels, except as it gave her the license to imagine the England which we call hers. This England, especially as it is represented in *Emma*, is an idyll. All too often it is confused with the actual England, and the error of the identification ought always to be remarked. Yet the same sense of actuality that corrects the error should not fail to recognize the remarkable force of the ideal that leads many to make the error. To represent the possibility of control of the personal life, of becoming more acquainted with ourselves, of the community of intelligent love—this is indeed to make an extraordinary promise and hold out a rare hope. We ought not be shocked and repelled if some among us think there really was a time when such promises and hopes were realized. Nor ought we be entirely surprised if, when they speak of the person who makes such promises and holds out such hopes, they represent her as not merely a novelist, if they find it natural to deal with her as a figure of legend and myth.

(1957)