

from “Three Around Farnham” [from
The Country and the City]

[In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams considers how representations of urban and rural spaces in English literature are shaped by and respond to economic and social contexts. The following selection is drawn from a chapter that discusses the work of three authors—William Cobbett, Jane Austen, and Gilbert White—in terms of class dynamics; Williams’s reading of Austen focuses on her work’s response to the increase in class mobility that occurred during her lifetime.]

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that Jane Austen chose to ignore the decisive historical events of her time. Where, it is still asked, are the Napoleonic wars: the real current of history? But history has many currents, and the social history of the landed families, at that time in England, was among the most important. As we sense its real processes, we find that they are quite central and structural in Jane Austen’s novels. All that prevents us from realizing this is that familiar kind of retrospect, taking in Penshurst and Saxham and Buck’s Head and Mansfield Park and Norland and even Poynton, in which all country houses and their families are seen as belonging, effectively, to a single tradition: that of the cultivated rural gentry. The continual making and remaking of these houses and their families is suppressed, in this view, for an idealizing abstraction, and Jane Austen’s world can then be taken for granted, even sometimes patronized as a rural backwater, as if it were a simple “traditional” setting. And then if the social “background” is in this sense “settled,” we can move to an emphasis on a fiction of purely personal relationships.

But such an emphasis is false, for it is not personal relationships, in the abstracted sense of an observed psychological process, that preoccupy Jane Austen. It is, rather, personal *conduct*: a testing and discovery of the standards which govern human behavior in certain real situations. To the social considerations already implicit in the examination of conduct, with its strong sense and exploration of the adequacy of social norms, we must add, from the evidence of the novels, a direct preoccupation with estates, incomes and social position, which are seen as indispensable elements of all the relationships that are projected and formed. Nor is this a preoccupation within a settled “traditional” world; indeed much of the interest, and many of

the sources of the action, in Jane Austen's novels, lie in the changes of fortune—the facts of general change and of a certain mobility—which were affecting the landed families at this time.

Thus it would be easy to take Sir Thomas Bertram, in *Mansfield Park*, as an example of the old settled landed gentry, to be contrasted with the new “London” ways of the Crawfords (this is a common reading), were it not for the fact that Bertram is explicitly presented as what Goldsmith would have called “a great West Indian”: a colonial proprietor in the sugar island of Antigua. The Crawfords may have London ways, but the income to support them is landed property in Norfolk, and they have been brought up by an uncle who is an admiral. Sir Walter Elliott, in *Persuasion*, belongs to a landed family which had moved from Cheshire to Somerset, and which had been raised to a baronetcy in the Restoration, but his income, at this time, will not support his position; his heir-presumptive has “purchased independence by uniting himself to a rich woman of inferior birth”; and the baronet is forced to let Kellynch Hall to an admiral, since, as his lawyer observes:

This peace will be turning all our rich naval officers ashore. They will be all wanting a home. ... Many a noble fortune has been made during the war.

The neighboring Musgroves, the second landowning family, are, by contrast,

in a state of alteration, perhaps of improvement. The father and mother were in the old English style, and the young people in the new.

Darcy, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is a landowner established for “many generations,” but his friend Bingley has inherited £100,000 and is looking for an estate to purchase. Sir William Lucas has risen from trade to a knighthood; Mr. Bennett has £2000 a year, but an entailed estate, and has married the daughter of an attorney, whose brother is in trade. Knightley, in *Emma*, owns Donwell Abbey, and Martin, one of the new gentlemen farmers, is his tenant. The Woodhouses have little land but Emma will inherit £30,000, “from other sources.” Elton, the vicar, has some independent property, but must make his way as he could, “without any alliances but in trade.” Mr. Weston belongs to a “respectable family which for the last two or three generations had been rising into gentility and property”; he marries, through the militia, the daughter of “a great Yorkshire family,” and when she dies

enters trade and purchases “a little estate.” Harriet, finally revealed as the daughter of “a tradesman, rich enough” marries her gentleman-farmer with the reasonable “hope of more, of security, stability, and improvement.” The Coles live quietly, on an income from trade, but when this improves become “in fortune and style of living, second only to the Woodhouses, in the immediate neighborhood.” In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwoods are a settled landowning family, increasing their income by marriages, and enlarging the settlements of their daughters; they are also enclosing Norland Common, and buying up neighboring farms; the necessary of stocks for enclosure and engrossing affect the rate of the family’s immediate improvement. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland, the daughter of a clergyman with two good livings and a considerable independence, goes with a local landowning family, the Allens, to Bath, and in that sharply observed social exchange meets the son of the family which has owned the Abbey estates since the dissolution of the monasteries; his sister has married on the “unexpected accession” of her lover “to title and fortune.”

To abstract this social history is of course to describe only the world of the novels within which the more particular actions begin and end. Yet it must be clear that it is no single, settled society, it is an active, complicated, sharply speculative process. It is indeed that most difficult world to describe, in English social history: an acquisitive, high bourgeois society at the point of its most evident interlocking with an agrarian capitalism that is itself mediated by inherited titles and by the making of family names. Into the long and complicated interaction of landed and trading capital, the process that Cobbett observed—the arrival of “the nabobs, negro-drivers, admirals, generals” and so on—is directly inserted, and is even taken for granted. The social confusions and contradictions of this complicated process are then the true source of many of the problems of human conduct and valuation, which the personal actions dramatize. An openly acquisitive society, which is concerned also with the transmission of wealth, is trying to judge itself at once by an inherited code and by the morality of improvement.

The paradox of Jane Austen is then the achievement of a unity of tone, of a settled and remarkably confident way of seeing and judging, in the chronicle of confusion and change. She is precise and candid, but in very particular ways. She is, for example, more exact about income, which is disposable, than about acres, which have to be worked. Yet at the same time she sees land in a way that she does not see “other sources” of income. Her eye for a house, for timber, for the details of improvement, is quick, accurate, monetary.

Yet money of other kinds, from the trading houses, from the colonial plantations, has no visual equivalent; it has to be converted to these signs of order to be recognized at all. This way of seeing is especially representative. The land is seen primarily as an index of revenue and position; its visible order and control are a valued product, while the process of working it is hardly seen at all. Jane Austen then reminds us, yet again, of the two meanings of improvement, which were historically linked but in practice so often contradictory. There is the improvement of soil, stock, yields, in a working agriculture. And there is the improvement of houses, parks, artificial landscapes, which absorbed so much of the actually increasing wealth. Professor Habakkuk has observed that

English landowners as a whole were a class of consumers, and the greater parts of their borrowings were contracted for non-productive purposes, to provide dowries, to fund short-term debts contracted as a result of extravagant living, to build mansions; the borrowings for enclosures, for example, were usually a small part of total indebtedness.

This is not to deny the function of many landowners in agricultural improvement, but to set it in its actual social context. It is the essential commentary on what can be abstracted, technically, as the agricultural revolution: that it was no revolution, but the consolidation, the improvement, the expansion of an existing social class.

Cultivation has the same ambiguity as improvement: there is increased growth, and this is converted into rents; and then the rents are converted into what is seen as a cultivated society. What the “revolution” is for, then, is this: this apparently attainable quality of life. Jane Austen could achieve her remarkable unity of tone—that cool and controlled observation which is the basis of her narrative method; that lightly distanced management of event and description and character which need not become either open manipulation or direct participation—because of an effective underlying and yet unseen formula: improvement is or ought to be improvement. The working improvement, which is not seen at all, is the means to social improvement, which is then so isolated that it is seen very clearly indeed.

It is not seen flatteringly. The conversion of good income into good conduct was no automatic process. Some of the conscious improvers are seen as they were: greedy and calculating materialists. But what is crucial is that the moral pretension is taken so seriously that it becomes a critique: never of the basis of the formula, but coolly

and determinedly of its results, in character and action. She guides her heroines, steadily, to the right marriages. She makes settlements, alone, against all the odds, like some supernatural lawyer, in terms of that exact proportion to moral worth which could assure the continuity of the general formula. But within this conventional bearing, which is the source of her confidence, the moral discrimination is so insistent that it can be taken, in effect, as an independent value. It is often said, by literary historians, that she derives from Fielding and from Richardson, but Fielding's genial manipulative bluff and Richardson's isolating fanaticism are in fact far back, in another world. What happens in *Emma*, in *Persuasion*, in *Mansfield Park*, is the development of an everyday, uncompromising morality which is in the end separable from its social basis and which, in other hands, can be turned against it. It is in this sense that Jane Austen relates to the Victorian moralists, who had to learn to assume, with increasing unease from Coleridge to George Eliot and Matthew Arnold, that there was no necessary correspondence between class and morality; that the survival of discrimination depended on another kind of independence; that the two meanings of improvement had to be not merely distinguished but contrasted; or, as first in Coleridge, that cultivation, in its human sense, had to be brought to bear as a standard *against* the social process of civilization. In these hands, decisively, the formula broke down: improvement was not improvement; not only not necessarily, but at times in definite contradiction. Jane Austen, it is clear, never went so far; her novels would have been very different, involving new problems of structure and language, if she had. But she provided the emphasis which had only to be taken outside the park walls, into a different social experience, to become not a moral but a social criticism. ...

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