

“*Mansfield Park* and Estate Improvements: Jane Austen’s Grounds of Being”

[In this essay, Alistair M. Duckworth argues that in *Mansfield Park* Austen uses the concept of estate improvement to examine notions of “cultural inheritance” and cultural evolution. He reads judicious estate improvement as a metaphor for Austen’s ideal approach to social change—one that avoids the extremes of “atrophy” and of immoderate “innovation.”]

Though historians of taste have frequently commented on Jane Austen’s reference in *Mansfield Park* to Humphry Repton, the heir of Capability Brown in landscape gardening, literary critics have not fully explored the thematic implications of estate improvements in the novel. Yet it is manifest that estates and the improvement of estates have an important place in Jane Austen’s fiction. Two of her novels and her last fragment are named after estates, and in all her novels estates function not only as the settings of action but as indexes to the character and social responsibility of their owners. Thus, in *Pride and Prejudice* the aesthetic taste evident in the landscape of Pemberley permits Elizabeth and the reader to infer the fundamental worth of Darcy’s social and ethical outlook, in *Emma* Donwell Abbey, with its “old neglect of prospect,” is the appropriate expression of Knightley’s stewardship, and in *Persuasion* the renting of Kellynch-Hall not only points to Sir Walter Elliot’s abandonment of his social trust, but partly explains the “autumnal” tone of Jane Austen’s last novel.¹

-
- 1 Historians of taste who have addressed themselves to Jane Austen’s use of Repton include Elizabeth W. Manwaring, *Italian Landscape in Eighteenth Century England* (1925; reissued New York, 1965), esp. pp. 221–24; Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque; Studies in a Point of View* (1927; reissued London, 1967); Dorothy Stroud, *Humphry Repton* (London, 1962); and (of special interest) Edward Malins, *English Landscaping and Literature: 1660–1840* (London, 1966), pp. 129–39. Literary critics have generally paid more attention to the picturesque elements in her work than to landscape improvements as such; see, for example, Frank Bradbrook, *Jane Austen and Her Predecessors* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 50–68. R.W. Chapman, however, has an interesting appendix on improvements in his edition of *Mansfield Park*; Tony Tanner recognizes the thematic importance of improvements in his lively introduction to the Penguin edition (Baltimore, 1966); and Avrom Fleishman, in his *A Reading of “Mansfield Park”: An Essay in Critical Synthesis* (Minneapolis, 1967), has anticipated something of my own view [continued]

So important is estate improvement in Jane Austen's novels that a case can be made for its role as a connecting thesis in her work. Certainly, I shall argue, in *Mansfield Park* Jane Austen deliberately uses a motif of estate improvements to define an attitude toward social change that is found elsewhere in her fiction. As the title of the novel suggests, an estate is not to be considered merely as a piece of landed property but as a metonym of an entire cultural inheritance. Improvements, likewise, go beyond an aesthetic meaning to suggest the nature and quality of an individual's response to the social, ethical and religious values he inherits.

Once the importance of estate improvements is understood, much of the dissatisfaction which many readers feel about the resolution of the novel may perhaps be allayed. Early in the novel, Repton becomes the occasion of aesthetic disagreement among the characters. As the novel progresses, this aesthetic disagreement increasingly implies a crucial divergence in social outlook. At the end of the novel, those who have been associated with Reptonian improvements—the Crawfords, Maria Bertram and Mrs. Norris—are excluded from the park, while the anti-Repton characters—Edmund and Fanny—marry and become effective guardians of the estate.

The division over estate improvements is thus another version of the division that emerges from the episode of the play. Improvements and theatricality, indeed, might be considered opposite sides of the same coin in *Mansfield Park*. Henry Crawford, the "capital improver" (244), is also "considerably the best actor of all" during the rehearsal of the play (165); Fanny, who is consistently opposed to improvements, is unable to "act any thing if you were to give [her] the world" (145). On the one hand we have a group of characters led by Crawford and including his sister Mary, Rushworth and all the Bertram children except Edmund, who view their estate as a manipulable inheritance and who opt for a variable conception of self. On the other hand we have Fanny and (less consistently) Edmund, who are committed to a permanent sense of place and a stable idea of identity. Though the plot of the novel will first suggest that a rapprochement of opposing attitudes will be realized in the marriages of Edmund and Mary and of Fanny and Henry—much as in *Pride and Prejudice* the vitality of Elizabeth and the conservatism of Darcy come together in a normative union—the seriousness of the issues raised in

of the function of improvements in the novel by seeing them in the context of Burkean conservatism (see esp. pp. 29–35). Page references to Jane Austen's novels in this essay are to *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 5 vols. (London, 1960).

the first volume and the failure of the Crawfords to alter their views on society and selfhood effectively prevent such an accommodation.

I shall return to the parallel between improvements and theatricality at the conclusion of this essay, but first I wish to argue for the importance of estate improvements in *Mansfield Park* by considering the motif both as it functions thematically within the novel and as it is illuminated by certain external contexts.¹

The question of improvements is raised early in the novel during a conversation in the Mansfield dining-parlor (I, vi). Rushworth, the rich but stupid owner of Sotherton Court, a neighboring estate, has just returned from a visit to Smith's place, Compton, which has recently been improved by Repton: "I never saw a place so altered. ... I told Smith I did not know where I was" (53). His own place Rushworth now considers "a prison-quite a dismal old prison," which "wants improvement ... beyond any thing" (53). Maria Bertram, his fiancée, suggests he employ Repton, and the officious Mrs. Norris, learning that Repton charges five guineas a day, is quick to support her favorite niece and to seize the opportunity of spending someone else's money: "Well, and if they were *ten* ... I am sure *you* need not regard it. ... For my own part, if I had any thing within the fiftieth part of the size of Sotherton, I should be always planting and improving" (53).

Interestingly, in view of her well-established viciousness in other respects, Mrs. Norris is (or was) something of an improver herself, having done a "vast deal in that way at the parsonage":

"We made it quite a different place from what it was when we first had it. You young ones do not remember much about it, perhaps. But if dear Sir Thomas were here, he could tell you what improvements we made. ... If it had not been for [Mr. Norris's sad state of health], we should have carried on the garden wall, and made the plantation to shut out the churchyard, just as Dr. Grant has done." (54)

I shall later argue that Jane Austen is using the technical vocabulary of improvements in a symbolic way. Here it is sufficient to note that although Mrs. Norris says she has done a "vast deal," it is Henry Crawford, the visitor from London, who is the most accomplished improver of all. Though the original condition of his own

1 The classic demonstration of the importance of theatricality in the novel is, of course, Lionel Trilling's "Mansfield Park," in *The Opposing Self* (New York, 1955).

estate, Everingham, seemed “perfect” to his sister, Mrs. Grant, with “such a happy fall of ground, and such timber” (61), Crawford has nevertheless “improved” it: “My plan was laid at Westminster—a little altered perhaps at Cambridge, and at one and twenty executed” (61).¹ Henceforward he becomes the acknowledged expert on improvements and is urged by Mrs. Grant and by Julia Bertram to lend his practical aid at Sotherton Court. Mary Crawford, it is true, finds “improvements in hand ... the greatest of nuisances” (57), but she has no objections to them once “complete”: “had I a place of my own in the country, I should be most thankful to any Mr. Repton who would undertake it, and give me as much beauty as he could for my money” (57).

Against this group of enthusiasts only Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram offer any opposition to improvements. Fanny, quoting Cowper, expresses her concern for the fate of the avenue at Sotherton which Rushworth plans to “improve” (he has already cut down “two or three fine old trees” which blocked the prospect [55]). Her sentiments, while sufficiently romantic, are not to be read ironically. Unlike the subverted enthusiasm of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*—Catherine “cared for no furniture of a more modern date than the fifteenth century” (182)—Fanny’s respectful attitude to the traditional aspects of the estate, like her later regret over the disuse of the chapel, is largely underwritten by her author. Edmund, for his part, though willing to admit the need of “modern dress” (56) at Sotherton, argues against the employment of an improver: “had I a place to new fashion, I should not put myself into the hands of an improver. I would rather have an inferior degree of beauty, of my own choice, and acquired progressively” (56).

Why Repton, and the figure of the improver generally, should so divide the characters in *Mansfield Park* is a question that seems, initially, easy to answer. Throughout Jane Austen’s writing life Humphry Repton (1752–1818) was a figure of controversy, the butt of satire, and a man whose name must have been frequently on the lips of anyone connected with the land. As R.W. Chapman notes, Jane Austen would have come across Repton’s celebrated “red books” in some of the houses she visited, and she must have been aware of the “paper war” in which he upheld his principles of landscaping against the vicious attacks of Sir Uvedale Price and Richard Payne

1 Malins (134) finds “illogical” Mrs. Grant’s remarks about the “perfect” condition of Everingham before improvement, “for if Everingham was ‘perfect’ before he improved it, what would be the point of altering it?” Precisely! Crawford should *not* have altered it. Now, doubtless, its trees have been cut down and its appearance altered beyond recognition.

Knight, the chief proponents in their different ways of the new picturesque.¹ The context of the paper war, however, is only a partial explanation of Jane Austen's intentions in *Mansfield Park*, and to the degree it suggests that her distaste for Repton was merely aesthetic, implying a preference for the more naturalistic styles of Price and Knight, it can be misleading. However "enamoured of Gilpin on the Picturesque" she may have been, Jane Austen commonly treats an enthusiasm for this style with some irony in her fiction—not everyone has Marianne Dashwood's passion for dead leaves. As the tone of Fanny's and Edmund's dissenting remarks in the Mansfield dining-parlor suggests, moreover, she is less occupied with the aesthetic merits of different styles of landscape than with the negative social implications of a particular mode of "improvement." The important question, then, is why she chose to cast Repton as a negative social example.

A glance at Repton's *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1795) and *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803) introduces something of a problem here, for these works reveal him to be not only an engaging writer but a theorist whose principles of landscaping often seem close to Jane Austen's own views. His emphasis on "utility," his insistence, in the first chapter of *Sketches*, upon a "due attention to the character and situation of the place to be improved" align him, for example, with Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*, whose "idea of a fine country ... unites beauty with utility" (97) and who finds "more pleasure in a snug farm-house than a watch-tower" (98). In his celebrated debate with Marianne (I, xviii), Ferrars's rational view of the countryside does not, of course, wholly invalidate Marianne's enthusiasm for the picturesque; like Marianne, Jane Austen was as sensitive to the "beauties of nature" as she was aware that "admiration of landscape scenery [had] become mere jargon" (97). But as in ethical matters Jane Austen gives priority to Elinor's sense over Marianne's sensibility, so in landscape she favors Edward's humanized, social settings to Marianne's romantic scenes. After a temporary enthusiasm for "rocks and mountains," Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, it will be recalled, settles for Darcy's tastefully improved estate.

1 For an account of the "paper war," see the relevant portions of Manwaring, Stroud, Malins and Hussey. The major documents of the controversy (at least in the initial phase) were Richard Payne Knight's "didactic" poem, "The Landscape" (1794); Uvedale Price's *Essay on the Picturesque* (1794); and Repton's *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1795). Open letters passed between Repton and Price; other interested parties entered the fray; and the controversy was taken up in the reviews of the time.

Not all of Repton's principles of landscaping are close to Jane Austen's implied views, of course, nor was his practice always consistent with his theoretical principles. His theory, moreover, written in the midst of debate, often has an apologetic air, giving rise to the suspicion of rationalizations after the fact. Undoubtedly some of Repton's improvements fully merited the criticisms they received. At the same time, however, it is surely true that Repton was made "the scapegoat for the sins of [a] flock of fashionable 'improvers,'" and that Jane Austen, in singling him out, both capitalized upon his notoriety and, somewhat unfairly, made him a representative of a much wider movement.¹

Repton's association with Capability Brown's methods accounts for much of his disrepute, for inevitably he became heir not only to Brown's practice but to the criticism that had long been directed at the "omnipotent magician" and at the figure of the improver generally. As early as Garrick's play, *Lethe or Esop in the Shades* (1740), Brownian improvements had been subject to satire (Brown is here satirized when Lord Chalkstone takes exception to the layout of the Elysian fields as viewed from the shores of the Styx). Even earlier, in the country house poem of the seventeenth century, expensive innovations in estates had been castigated for their extravagance, selfishness and disregard of "use." Clearly, when Jane Austen made use of Repton and, a little later, Thomas Love Peacock satirized him cruelly as Marmaduke Milestone in *Headlong Hall* (1816), a tradition of anti-improvement literature had long been in existence.²

Jane Austen's own treatment of improvements owes much, I suspect, to Cowper's *The Task*. In book three ("The Garden"), her favorite author censures "improvement" as the "idol of the age" in a passage which continues the traditional complaints of the country house poem against the ostentation and hostility to tradition of the vain trustee. Here, too, is an awareness of the enormous transformation that improvements could bring about in a landscape:

-
- 1 For appreciations of Repton's work, see John Nolen's introduction to *The Art of Landscape Gardening*, ed. John Nolen (Boston/New York, 1907); Stroud; and Donald Pilcher, *The Regency Style* (London, 1948), pp. 17–46, from which work I take the opinion here quoted. That Jane Austen intended Repton as a representative figure is suggested by Mary Crawford's reference to "any Mr. Repton" and Edmund's general distrust of the improver.
 - 2 For a detailed account of the anti-improvement literature of the eighteenth century, see the relevant portions of Manwaring and Malins. For an account of earlier criticisms of the false trustee, see G.R. Hibbard, "The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19 (1956): 159–74.

The lake in front becomes a lawn;
 Woods vanish, hills subside, and vallies rise:
 And streams, as if created for his use,
 Pursue the track of his directing wand. ... (II. 774–77)

With her knowledge of Cowper alone Jane Austen would have been well prepared to point up the insidious implications of extreme landscaping, but she was also undoubtedly aware of Richard Payne Knight's vituperative poem, "The Landscape" (London, 1794), in which Repton is bidden to "follow to the tomb" his "fav'rite Brown":

Thy fav'rite Brown, whose innovating hand
 First dealt thy curses o'er this fertile land.

Even without Cowper and Knight, it is likely that Jane Austen's own experience would have led her to a dislike of the drastic alterations to landscape which frequently attended Brownian or Reptonian improvements. The radical nature of such improvements, even more pronounced in the work of less talented imitators, was everywhere evident at the time. Often involving not only the indiscriminate cutting down of trees and the magical creation of rivers and lakes but, on occasions, the relocation of whole villages which blocked the prospect and the redirection of roads by special acts of Parliament, such projects could hardly fail to strike her as emblems of inordinate change. If Edmund Burke in his political prose following the French Revolution could use the imagery of excessive estate improvements to illustrate the horrors of the revolution, we need not be surprised that Jane Austen should suggest in the adoption of Reptonian methods dangerous consequences for the continuity of a culture.

The example of Burke may be usefully extended here, not because he necessarily had a direct influence on Jane Austen's thought, but because his dislike of radical change, again and again expressed in terms of injuries done to an estate or house, suggests an appropriately serious context for her own treatment of improvements.

Examples could be multiplied of Burke's employment of house and estate metaphors in the *Reflections*.¹ Often, indeed, in speaking of the state, Burke is clearly using the image of the estate to control the construction of his thought:

1 For a close examination of Burke's imagery in the *Reflections*, including an attention to the metaphor of the "noble house," see James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (Toronto, 1963), pp. 97–134.

one of the first and most leading principles on which the commonwealth and the laws are consecrated, is lest the temporary possessors and life-renters in it, unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors, or of what is due to their posterity, should act as if they were the entire masters; that they should not think it amongst their rights to ... commit waste on the inheritance, by destroying at their pleasure the whole original fabric of their society; hazarding to leave to those who come after them, a ruin instead of an habitation—and teaching these successors as little to respect their contrivances, as they had themselves respected the institutions of their forefathers. By this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions, the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken.¹

Constantly the need of a stable “ground” structure is stressed, as in his expressed “prejudice” in favor of church establishment:

For, taking ground on that religious system, of which we are now in possession, we continue to act on the early received, and uniformly continued sense of mankind. That sense not only, like a wise architect, hath built up the august fabric of states, but like a provident proprietor, to preserve the structure from prophanation and ruin ... hath solemnly and for ever consecrated the commonwealth, and all that officiate in it. (*R*, 111)

But it is not only in his veneration for traditional structures and dislike of excessive alteration that Burke serves as a useful gloss for *Mansfield Park*. His concept of “improvement,” where this is necessary, is also relevant to Jane Austen’s motif.

As he was fond of stating, Burke was no enemy to change and improvement, and the unimproved existence of institutions is a condition against which he constantly warns in the *Reflections*: “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation” (*R*, 23). An even greater danger for Burke, however, lies in the overthrow or destruction of establishments sanctioned by time and custom. Thus Burke is led, as Father Canavan has shown, to distinguish carefully between what is necessary improvement and what

1 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. William B. Todd (New York, 1959), p. 115. Further page references to the *Reflections* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text, preceded by *R*.

is more properly to be considered destruction.¹ Burke would agree with Charles James Fox in this matter, that “improvements were not to be confounded with innovations; the meaning of which was always odious, and conveyed an idea of alterations for the worse.”² To “improve” was to treat the deficient or corrupt parts of an established order with the character of the whole in mind; to “innovate” or “alter,” on the other hand, was to destroy all that had been built up by the “collected reason of the ages.” The difference is, of course, the difference between the two revolutions: the English had introduced “improvement” with their revolution, the French “innovation” and “alteration” with theirs.

It is worthwhile emphasizing the consistent antonymy of these words at the time. One further passage from Burke will reinforce the point, while a passage from his political opponent, Godwin, which refuses to make the distinction, will provide the exception that proves the rule. The passage from the *Reflections* argues that a “spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors. Besides, the people of England well know, that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission; without at all excluding a principle of improvement” (*R*, 38). In obvious refutation of these sentiments, Godwin writes of “government” in *Political Justice* that it is the “perpetual enemy of change.” Among other abuses, governments “prompt us to seek the public welfare, *not in alteration and improvement*, but in a timid reverence for the decisions of our ancestors” (my italics). Interestingly, this passage in the third edition of *Political Justice* (1798) revises slightly a passage in the first edition (1793) in which Godwin wrote that government “prompts us to seek the public welfare, *not in innovation and improvement*. . .” The point is plain. The radical Godwin’s intentional association of “innovation” and “alteration” with “improvement” is an obvious dig at Burke and others for whom these words are exactly opposite in meaning to “improvement.”³

1 Francis P. Canavan, S.J., *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, N.C., 1960). See especially the chapter on “The Process of Social Change.”

2 In the Commons, 29 April 1792. *The Speeches of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke in the House of Commons and in Westminster Hall*, 4:42. Cited in Canavan, p. 168.

3 Quotations from Godwin are to be found in *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. F.E.L. Priestley, 3 vols. (Toronto, 1946), 1:245 and 3:247. Interestingly, Repton took a Burkean position on this issue. In his dedication to George III of *Sketches and Hints*, he argues that “true taste, in every art, consists more in adapting tried expedients to peculiar circumstances [continued]

In the context of the anti-improvement literature of the time and of the political prose that frequently makes use of metaphors drawn from the practice of estate improvements, Jane Austen's motif takes on a serious meaning. In her view, radical improvements of the kind Repton represented were not improvements at all, but "innovations" or "alterations" of a destructive nature. No less than a political constitution, an estate, with the immaterial systems of religion, morality and manners that it contains, will need improvement from time to time. Cultural atrophy, resulting from neglect, is to be avoided. Even more serious, however, is a too active and thoughtless response on the part of an heir. Thinking to introduce improvement, he may well destroy the "whole original fabric" of his inheritance. What has been "acquired progressively" should not be radically changed. Not to know where one is in an estate that has been "altered" is hardly the cause for pleasure that Rushworth considers it, and Mrs. Norris's "vast" improvement at the Mansfield parsonage, which made it "quite a different place from what it was when we first had it" (54), strikes an insidious note in the context of Burke's prose.

Following the conversation at Mansfield there are two main episodes in the novel in which the improvements theme is taken up. The first is the visit to Sotherton, expressly made by the party from Mansfield for the purpose of assessing its "capabilities." The second occurs when Crawford proposes improvements to Thornton Lacey, the parsonage that Edmund is to inhabit on ordination. The two extreme responses that are evident in these episodes help negatively to define Jane Austen's own view of what constitutes the proper improvement of a cultural inheritance.

Sotherton Court, an "ancient manorial residence of the family, with all its rights of Court-Leet and Court-Baron" (82), is "one of the largest estates and finest places in the country" (38). Its status as a representative estate is stressed. Edmund notes that the "house was built in Elizabeth's time, and is a large, regular, brick building—heavy, but respectable looking" (56). Mary Crawford, while dismissing its owner, sees that "a man might represent the county with such an estate" (161). Heavy with the air of tradition and history, Sotherton is, however, aesthetically out of date. When the party from

than in that inordinate thirst after novelty, the characteristic of uncultivated minds, which from the facility of inventing wild theories, without experience, are apt to suppose that taste is displayed by novelty, genius by innovation, and that every change must necessarily tend to improvement." Again, however, what Repton said and what Jane Austen considered him to represent are very different things.

Mansfield arrives, they find the house as Edmund described it—"ill placed. ... in one of the lowest spots of the park" (56). With its brick construction, avenues, walls, palisades and iron gates, it is self-evidently an estate that has largely missed the "improvements" of the great eighteenth century gardeners.¹ Altogether it is a "good spot for fault-finding" (90). The interior of the house echoes the old-fashioned condition of the park, for it is "furnished in the taste of fifty years back" (84), and though "of pictures there were abundance ... the larger part were family portraits, no longer any thing to any body but Mrs. Rushworth" (84-85). As for the chapel, built in James II's reign and "formerly in constant use both morning and evening" (86), its function has ceased, prayers having been discontinued by the late Mr. Rushworth. Fanny, who had wished to see Sotherton in its "old state" (56), is disappointed: "There is nothing awful here, nothing melancholy, nothing grand. Here are no aisles, no arches, no inscriptions, no banners" (85-86). Like her response to the avenue earlier, Fanny's remarks are somewhat romantic and mediated through her reading (on this occasion she quotes from Scott). Edmund gently rebukes her by describing the original modest function of the chapel. Again, however, Fanny's instinctive response is in some measure valid, for Sotherton as a functioning estate has clearly fallen into a state of desuetude. In Burkean terms "the idea of inheritance" which "furnishes a sure principle of conservation" has been lost. Here it is less important that Rushworth has come to his inheritance out of the direct line than that he has utterly no awareness of his duty as trustee. Well aware of the aesthetic deficiencies of his estate, he is ignorant of far worse ills. We gather what these are from the complacent description given by Maria Bertram as the party from Mansfield approaches Sotherton in the barouche:

"Now we shall have no more rough road, Miss Crawford, our difficulties are over. The rest of the way is such as it ought to be. Mr. Rushworth has made it since he succeeded to the estate. Here begins the village. Those cottages are really a disgrace. The church spire is reckoned remarkably handsome. I am glad the church is not so close to the Great House as often happens in old places. The annoyance of the bells must be terrible. There is the parsonage; a tidy looking house, and I understand the clergyman

1 Malins contends (135) that "we do not hear of the faults which Crawford is presumed to have found." We do not need to; they are everywhere evident in the description of Sotherton. For example, Crawford finds "walls of great promise"; we may assume that they would be destroyed if he were to have his way.

and his wife are very decent people. Those are alms-houses, built by some of the family. To the right is the steward's house; he is a very respectable man. Now we are coming to the lodge gates; but we have nearly a mile through the park still. ... it would not be an ill-looking place if it had a better approach." (82)

Rushworth's improvements will clearly have nothing to do with his run-down cottages. His attention to the road leading to his house, like his admiration of Smith's "approach" at Compton and his later delight in wearing a "blue dress, and a pink satin cloak" (138) for the play, reveal his character to be grounded in vanity. Nor will his marriage to Maria be the "improvement" (53) Mrs. Grant predicts. Maria's pride in the handsome spire shows a love of display equal to her husband's, while the pleasure she takes in discovering that the church and great house are not close is nicely ambiguous. The physical distance between the two need have no significance, but with Maria as mistress the bells are unlikely to summon the family to regular worship, and the threat is implied that the physical gap will become a spiritual gap—a spatial correlative of a gap between, in Lord Lindsay's terms, a morality of grace and a morality of station.¹ Rushworth and Maria will become the antitypes of the landed ideal proposed by generations of English poets:

The Lord and Lady of this place delight
Rather to be in act, than seeme in sight.²

Their disregard of religion, evident both in Maria's remarks and in the present disuse of the chapel, will deny the traditional insistence on the religious dimension of landed ownership, and the displacement of their concern from the function to the appearance of Sotherton will neglect the traditional emphasis on "use" as the basis of landed existence:

'Tis Use alone that sanctifies Expende
And Splendour borrows all its rays from Sense.³

Sotherton is indeed in crying need of improvement—but of the right kind. Rushworth's plans ignore the proper area of his concern in pursuit of a style which, highlighting approaches and removing

1 *The Two Moralities: Our Duty to God and Society* (London, 1948).

2 Thomas Carew, "To My Friend G.N. from W^{re}st," lls. 31–32.

3 Alexander Pope, "Epistle to Burlington," lls. 179–80.

trees from the surroundings of the house, will make self the center of attention.

If the calcified condition of Sotherton constitutes one threat to Mansfield, resembling the “unreformed existence” (R, 193) of an inherited structure which Burke castigates in his *Reflections*, Thornton Lacey is threatened by the even greater danger of excessive “alteration.” The threat exists in the plans for its improvement that Henry Crawford—who has seen it briefly while out riding—suggests. Aware that the parsonage is to be Edmund’s home on ordination, Crawford predicts that “there will be work for five summers at least before the place is live-able” (241):

“The farm-yard must be cleared away entirely, and planted up to shut out the blacksmith’s shop. The house must be turned to front the east instead of the north. ... And *there* must be your approach—through what is at present the garden. You must make you a new garden at what is now the back of the house. ... The ground seems precisely formed for it. I rode fifty yards up the lane between the church and the house in order to look about me; and saw how it might all be. Nothing can be easier. The meadows beyond what *will be* the garden, as well as what now *is* ... must be all laid together of course. ... They belong to the living, I suppose. If not, you must purchase them. Then the stream—something must be done with the stream; but I could not quite determine what. I had two or three ideas.” (242)

What is remarkable here is how closely Crawford’s plans catch the rhythms of Repton’s own prose. His specifications for Thornton Lacey, indeed, are not unlike Repton’s plans for Harlestone Hall, the house most frequently considered the model of Mansfield Park. In Fragment VII of his *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1816), Repton describes his method at Harlestone:

The house was formerly approached and entered in the south front, which was encumbered by stables and farm yards; the road came through the village, and there was a large pool in front; this pool has been changed to an apparent river, and the stables have been removed. An ample Garden has been placed behind the house, the centre of the south front has been taken down, and a bow added with pilasters in the style of the house: the entrance is changed from the south to the north side, and some new rooms to the west have been added.

Disarmed by the tasteful appearance of Repton's "complete" improvements at Harlestone, which are pictured in the frontispiece of Chapman's edition of the novel, we may be unwilling to grant a symbolic dimension to Crawford's Reptonian plans for Thornton Lacey, but if we attend to Jane Austen's symbolic mode, Crawford's suggestions are insidious enough. His plans to "clear away," "plant up" and "shut out" features of the landscape are to be read as a rejection of a traditional shape of reality, while his wish to reorient the front of the house suggests a desire for complete cultural reorientation. Indeed Crawford, at Thornton Lacey, goes far beyond Repton's stated practice. Whereas Repton was careful to insist upon "unity of character" at Harlestone, arguing that "where a great part of the original structure is to remain, the additions should doubtless partake of the existing character," Crawford is intent on completely changing the condition of Thornton Lacey; he wishes to give it a "higher character," "raise it into a *place*" (243–44). In other respects, however, Crawford is reminiscent of Repton. His "before and after" description of the garden reminds us of Repton's splendid selling device in his Red Books of placing the water color representation of the scene as it would be *after* improvement behind a flap depicting the *present* (and of course unfashionable) appearance of the landscape.

Edmund, however, is not tempted by Crawford's picture of an improved Thornton. He, too, has "two or three ideas," and "one of them is that very little of your plan for Thornton Lacey will ever be put in practice" (242). He admits that the yard should be removed in the interests of a "tolerable approach" (242)—again he is not averse to "modern dress"—but he will not permit the wholesale redistribution of the structure that Crawford has in mind. He would agree, no doubt, with Burke's "prejudice" in favor of an established commonwealth—that it is "with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again, without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes" (R, 73).

At Sotherton, where his help was invited, Crawford's schemes may at least have helped to bring an old-fashioned landscape up to date (though even here there would have been misplaced priorities and emphases); but at Thornton Lacey, uninvited, his plans are not only extravagant and calculated to appeal to self-interest, they are also supererogatory. In terms of a value system that is to be found throughout Jane Austen's fiction, Thornton is a substantial and healthy estate. The farm house is surrounded by yew trees and the glebe meadows are, as Crawford admits, "finely sprinkled with

timber" (242). The church (unlike at Sotherton) is "within a stone's throw" (241) of the house, and the house itself, with its air of having been "lived in from generation to generation, through two centuries at least" (243), is an instructive contrast to Rushworth's moribund home. One is reminded of the healthy conditions of other estates in Jane Austen's fiction and of the similar signs of essential soundness in an estate which she consistently provides, among which are an abundance of timber (hence the heinousness of Crawford's tampering with his own well-timbered estate) and the nearness of church and house.

Trees, of course, have served as an emblem of organic growth throughout English literature. One thinks, for example, of the wych elm in *Howards End* which, in surviving the excavations of the Wilcox men, gives some hope for social continuity. On the other hand, the cutting down of trees has traditionally suggested a complete break with the past, at least from Donne's *Satire II* ("Where are those spread woods which cloth'd heretofore / Those bought lands?") to Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*, where the loss of the great tree at Groby signals the end of an order. This is surely why the cutting down of the avenue at Sotherton is so seriously viewed. In Jane Austen's fiction it is remarkable how often the presence of trees betokens value.¹ Pemberley has its "beautiful oaks and Spanish chestnuts" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 267), Donwell Abbey (noticeably "with all [its] old neglect of prospect") has an "abundance of timber in rows and avenues, which neither fashion nor extravagance had rooted up" (*Emma*, 358); and there is no "such timber any where in Dorsetshire, as there is now standing in Delaford Hangar" (*Sense and Sensibility*, 375). In *Sense and Sensibility*, we know at the beginning of the novel that the Norland estate is secure because safeguards have been taken against "any charge on the estate, or ... any sale of its valuable woods" (4). Equally it is a sign of the present owner's corrupted values that, when the old owner dies, he should cut down "the old walnut trees" in order to build a greenhouse (226).

If trees suggest organic growth and continuity, the nearness of church and house implies the necessary interdependence of the

1 And not only in her fiction. Her letters frequently reveal her love of trees. Writing to Cassandra (8 Nov. 1800), she tells of a "dreadful storm," which destroyed "highly valued Elms" and various other trees. She regrets that the "three Elms which grew in Hall's Meadow & gave such ornament to it, are gone" (*Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 2d ed. [London, 1952], p. 86). In another letter (6 June 1811), her dislike of a certain Mr. Tilson becomes evident: "Mr. Tilson admired the trees very much, but grieved that they should not be turned into money" (*Letters*, p. 289).

clerical and landed orders, and it is precisely this that would be lost at Thornton if Edmund were to accede to Crawford's "improvements" and give in to the temptation that is posed by Mary Crawford. While her brother paints his picture of an improved Thornton, Mary (who now hopes to marry Edmund and to transform him into a man of fashion) is able imaginatively to "shut out the church" and "sink the clergyman" (248). Like Mrs. Norris's improvements at Mansfield which were intended to "shut out the churchyard" (54), like Maria's pleasure in the distance between church and house at Sotherton, like Mary's own response to the leaving off of family prayers in the Sotherton chapel—"every generation has its improvements" (86)—Mary's view of a future Thornton entirely excludes any sense of religious responsibility. Edmund's assurance to his father at this point that he has "no idea but of residence" (247) predicts that despite his temporary attraction to Mary's charms he will finally return to his sense and to an awareness of his ordained role in life.

Sotherton Court and Thornton Lacey are, then, emblems of particular social conditions. The atrophy of the one and the extreme innovations which would entirely alter the character of the other constitute opposite threats to the continuity of culture that Jane Austen requires in her vision of society. The normative response implied in *Mansfield Park* comes close to that of Burke's "honest reformer" in the *Reflections*: steering a careful course between the extremes of "unreformed existence" and "absolute destruction," he makes the most of the existing materials of his country, while attempting to unite in his person a "disposition to preserve" and an "ability to improve" (R, 193–94).

True, *Mansfield Park* does not—as *Pride and Prejudice* does—permit any large improvement of existing institutions. In the latter novel, Darcy's "disposition to preserve" and Elizabeth's "ability to improve" are, by a beautifully plotted series of mutual concessions, brought into harmony, but in *Mansfield Park* the prime impulse of both Edmund and Fanny, the final trustees of the estate, is, as we have seen, toward preservation rather than improvement. Given the nature and degree of the threats posed by the Crawfords, this need not be a cause of concern, though several further observations are necessary to answer the frequently encountered charge that the novel is a reactionary defense of the status quo.

One may concede that in certain episodes Jane Austen seems to view society as a sacrosanct structure. The play sequence is a case in point. The physical structure of the Mansfield house—the novel's central emblem of a social constitution—is endangered by the

theatricals scheme. Tom Bertram may claim that the “liberties” they are taking with his “father’s house” (127) are of no consequence, and argue that “such *alterations* as I was suggesting just now, such as moving a book-case, or unlocking a door, or even as using the billiard-room for the space of a week” (127; my italics), will not be objectionable to his father. But the first thing that Sir Thomas notices on his return from Antigua amid the “general air of confusion in the furniture” is the “removal of the book-case from before the billiard room door” (182). His response is immediately to restore Mansfield to its “proper state” (187). The stage is dismantled, the book-case is replaced in its former position, all the copies of the play are burned, and the scene-painter, who has “spoilt only the floor of one room, ruined all the coachman’s sponges, and made five of the under-servants idle and dissatisfied” (190–91), is dismissed. Clearly, with Sir Thomas’s return a traditional order possessing something of a consecrated air is affirmed and in the “destruction of every theatrical preparation at Mansfield” (194) another attempt at “innovation”—Edmund so describes the scheme (127)—is foiled.

In the play episode, Jane Austen’s metonymy goes beyond simple metaphor to convey her faith in the substantial existence of certain preexisting structures of morality and religion. By locating traditional systems in the fabric of a house or, elsewhere, in the physical disposition of an estate, she has suggested, in a way that may be of interest to structural anthropologists, how essential to the continuity of a culture is the actual constitution of its physical locality. When the Salesian missionaries wished to convert the Bororo Indians, they made them abandon their circular villages to live in huts laid out in parallel rows. Then, they considered, the Indians would be “in every sense, dis-oriented. All feeling for their traditions would desert them, as if their social and religious systems ... were so complex that they could not exist without the schema made visible in their ground-plans and re-affirmed to them in the daily rhythm of their lives.”¹ Something of this anthropological importance of locality obtains in *Mansfield Park*, where a traditional religious and moral ethos is, in a real sense, embodied in the estate’s fabric and where the changes effected and proposed by Crawford in house and landscape carry strong overtones of the disorientation of a whole culture.

This is *not*, however, to argue that *Mansfield Park* is a perfect model of society, or that Jane Austen views the social structure as some immutable configuration that is liable to be destroyed with the introduction of the slightest change. In the first place, an estate is only as

1 See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York, 1964), p. 204.

good as those who inhabit it and, as David Lodge has insisted, all the inhabitants of the Park, with the significant exception of Fanny, are deficient “according to the novel’s own system of values.”¹ True, in the particular instance of the play, Sir Thomas’s actions in face of the “infection” (184) introduced by Yates and spread by the Crawfords are commendable and he indeed appears, in Marvin Mudrick’s words, as the “first defender of Mansfield Park.”² Elsewhere, however, his actions are far from being exemplary and he shares with his son Edmund the unfortunate characteristic of preaching more convincingly than he practices. In his easy acceptance of Maria’s financially rewarding marriage and in his attempt to coerce Fanny into another such union, he reveals his values to have a mercenary tinge. Above all, as he himself comes to recognize, his failure to educate his children properly—to teach them “to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice” (463)—reveals his parental deficiency. When to his negligence is added the listless indolence of Lady Bertram, it is clear that Sir Thomas’s estate is endangered from within as well as from without, from the selfish neglect of trust shown by its owners as well as from the alterations threatened by the Crawfords.

Beyond the imperfections of its inhabitants there is a second reason for questioning the absolute status of Mansfield Park as a social model. Although Jane Austen believes in the absolute validity of certain principles and truths, she is aware that the translation of these into a social reality can never be perfectly effected. Ideally, as Edmund suggests in his impressive defense of the clergyman’s role at Sotherton (92), manners should incorporate a moral meaning which is itself anchored in religious principle. Actually, of course, this is seldom the case, and even the best constituted estate, given the limitations of human conduct, will be an imperfect social paradigm of a transhuman moral order founded in God. But while it is true that the estate can never perfectly incorporate the Natural Law, it remains for Jane Austen a structure of the highest value. Like Darcy’s well-stocked library at Pemberley, which puts to shame the poor collection of books of the nouveau riche Bingley, it “ought to be good,” since it is the “work of many generations” (*Pride and Prejudice*, 38). Such an estate is the appropriate home of what Burke would call the “collected reason of the ages” or the “wisdom of our ancestors.” The natural repository of custom and tradition, it provides a framework of moral action which carries the guiding force of historical

1 *Language of Fiction* (New York, 1966), p. 96.

2 *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton, 1952), p. 175.

prescription. For this reason, especially, an individual does well to respect the topography of his inheritance and the “furniture” of his house.

Precisely because the estate is a structure in time, however, it will need improvement on occasions, as the example of Sotherton sufficiently attests. There is a constant need for the individual not only to preserve but properly to improve his inheritance, which means, as we have seen, that he should repair the deficiency of the part while respecting the character of the whole. Those who automatically assume that status confers value (like the Bertram sisters), or that privilege precludes activity (like Lady Bertram), or that the responsibilities of an heir may be lightly regarded (like Tom), promote the atrophy and permit the “alteration” that are the dangers they should prevent. The estate as a structure in time is valid only as it is actively supported by the individual.

The irony of *Mansfield Park* is that the only character who consistently upholds the proper character of the house and estate is Fanny Price, both initially and again during her expulsion to Portsmouth an outsider. So much has been written about Fanny’s “debility” that it is necessary to insist upon the firmness of her determination not to act and not to favor, least of all initiate, “Reptonian” innovations. Given her secondary social position, Fanny cannot be an active instrument of cultural preservation or improvement, but her lone refusal to act in *Lovers’ Vows* in the first volume, like her refusal to marry Crawford in the third, marks her as the guardian of an endangered heritage. Only when those at Mansfield recognize the quality of Fanny’s resistance can order and value be reinstated at the park. Lady Bertram’s wish for Fanny’s return from Portsmouth is largely selfish, but Sir Thomas finds that she is “indeed the daughter that he wanted” (472) and Edmund, after witnessing Mary Crawford’s amoral response to her brother’s “etourderie” with Maria, comes to find in Fanny the proper companion of his future life.

Fanny’s role as the moral conscience of Mansfield is evident in an important scene in the third volume where she listens, in her usual position as “quiet auditor of the whole” (136), to a conversation between Edmund and Henry on the subject of pulpit delivery. Since the motifs of theatricality and improvements are here brought together in the course of a final debate between the two men, the episode becomes a thematic climax in the novel. The opportunity Fanny is given once more of judging between the respective outlooks of the two men permits her to discover, at a crucial point, further grounds for her ultimate acceptance of Edmund and rejection of Crawford. Edmund’s reasoned remarks are again morally ahead

of his behavior—his wish at this stage is that Fanny should come to accept Henry as a suitor—but they nevertheless define with some precision the nature and limits of change permissible in an inherited structure of importance.

The important conversation follows a scene in which Crawford has been reading from Shakespeare to Lady Bertram and Fanny. His skill in reading, “truly dramatic” (337), recalls his excellent acting ability during rehearsals and Fanny is much impressed. The subject of reading aloud, and the common failure of otherwise qualified men to do this well, is under discussion. Edmund cites his own profession:

“Even in my profession ... how little the art of reading has been studied! how little a clear manner, and good delivery, have been attended to! I speak rather of the past, however, than the *present*.—*There is now a spirit of improvement* abroad; but among those who were ordained twenty, thirty, forty years ago, the larger number, to judge by their performance, must have thought reading was reading, and preaching was preaching. It is different now. The subject is more justly considered. It is felt that distinctness and energy may have weight in recommending the most solid truths. ...” (339–40; my italics)

Crawford is deferential in response (conscious that he is under the gaze of Fanny), but his subsequent remarks on the delivery of sermons, carefully attended to, reveal how far in fact his apparent agreement as to the relation of preacher and text differs from Edmund’s view.

“A sermon, well delivered, is more uncommon even than prayers well read. A sermon, good in itself, is no rare thing. It is more difficult to speak well than to compose well; that is, the rules and trick of composition are oftener an object of study. A thoroughly good sermon, thoroughly well delivered, is a capital gratification. ... There is something in the eloquence of the pulpit, when it is really eloquence, which is entitled to the highest praise and honour. The preacher who can touch and affect such an heterogeneous mass of hearers, on subjects limited, and long worn thread-bare in all common hands; who can say any thing new or striking, any thing that rouses the attention, without offending the taste, or wearing out the feelings of his hearers, is a man whom one could not (in his public capacity) honour enough. I should like to be such a man.” (341)

That eloquence in the pulpit was a matter of long standing concern to Jane Austen we know from a passage in *The Watsons* (1804?), in which Mr. Watson not only praises a sermon read by Mr. Howard “with great propriety ... [and] without any Theatrical grimace or violence,” but also expresses dislike for the “studied air & artificial inflexions of voice, which your very popular & most admired Preachers generally have.”¹ The source for Jane Austen’s treatment of pulpit delivery in both *The Watsons* and *Mansfield Park* may be Cowper’s *The Task*. In Book II Cowper has a long section on the pulpit (ll. 326–573) in which he expresses an abhorrence of “all affectation” in a minister of God. The “theatric” preacher

mocks his Maker, prostitutes and shames
His noble office, and, instead of truth,
Displaying his own beauty, starves his flock! (ll. 427–29)

Though Crawford is not satirically exposed in the way Cowper’s “vain pastor” is, his imagined conception of the preacher’s role leaves him open to many of the charges Cowper makes. It quickly becomes evident, for example, that he too would let down “the pulpit to the level of the stage” (l. 564):

“I must have a London audience. I could not preach, but to the educated; to those who were capable of estimating my composition. And, I do not know that I should be fond of preaching often; now and then, perhaps, once or twice in the spring, after being anxiously expected for half a dozen Sundays together; but not for a constancy; it would not do for a constancy.” (341)

Compared with Edmund’s repeated insistence on the duties of office, at Sotherton (92) and during the conversation about Thornton Lacey (247), Crawford’s attitudes show an entirely different, histrionic conception of the preacher’s role, in which the clergyman is an actor, his pulpit a stage, and the sermon a play script. As Cowper’s *The Task* provided a possible source for Jane Austen’s treatment of the false improver, Rushworth, so here his poem may lie behind her description of the would-be preacher, Crawford. Rather than pursue further the parallels that exist between Cowper’s “theatrical clerical coxcomb” and Jane Austen’s own actor, however, it will be more to the point of my argument to show how in the conversation about pulpit delivery Jane Austen not only exposes Henry but permits through Edmund’s remarks a proper correction of existing practices. The

1 *Minor Works*, ed. R.W. Chapman (London, 1963), 6:343, 344.

difference of emphasis between the two men thus recapitulates their differences over estate improvements.

Edmund's remarks are cautious; the lack of attention in the past to a clear manner and a good delivery in the pulpit is not to be excused; he admits the need of improvement in this area as he had admitted the need of a "modern dress" for Sotherton. But the distinctness and energy of an improved delivery must be in the recommendation of "the most solid truths." Edmund might here be employing the Burkean distinction between "substance" and "mode" (R, 23). Crawford's arguments in favor of eloquence in the pulpit, by contrast, ignore substance (here, the biblical text) in a total concern for mode (the delivery of the same). His descriptions of "subjects limited, and long worn thread-bare in all common hands" is in accordance with a previously expressed view of the liturgy, which he considered to possess "redundancies and repetitions" (340). There, too, the inadequacy of the given text was to be compensated for by the theatricality of the individual presentation: "Nineteen times out of twenty I am thinking how such a prayer ought to be read, and longing to have it to read myself" (340). In the case of both sermon and liturgy, Crawford's views are reminiscent of his attitude to the inherited estate—"a good spot for fault-finding." That which is inherited or received, whether biblical text or family estate, is for Crawford inadequate until transformed by some action of the self. Despite his avowals, however, such action is not "improvement" but "innovation" or "alteration." Jane Austen's expulsion of the Crawfords from Mansfield at the end of the novel is not, as it is sometimes read, the subjugation of vitality in favor of dull conformity; in the light of her use of estate improvements, it is the rejection of those intent on destroying a culture in favor of those who will preserve and properly improve their heritage.

(1971)