

Pride and Prejudice: The Limits of Society

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I think it is probably fair to say that for most people both the interest and the meaning of *Pride and Prejudice* reside in the splendid opposition and gradual reconciliation of Darcy and Elizabeth. There may be differences in the interpretation of individual episodes, or in the estimation of where or with whom the values of the novel finally lie; but there seems to be general agreement that the essential impulse of the novel is dialectical, and hence that both Darcy and Elizabeth must undergo some changes of heart and of opinion before the novel can reach its beautifully poised and profound resolution in their marriage.

But even beyond this initial agreement about the dialectical thrust of the novel, there has been a remarkable consensus about the terms which ought to be used to describe its antitheses. Again and again in discussions of *Pride and Prejudice* we come upon some variation of the terms "individual" and "society." In Dorothy Van Ghent's essay in *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953), for instance, *Pride and Prejudice* is described as illuminating "the difficult and delicate reconciliation of the sensitively developed individual with the terms of his social existence."¹ In A. Walton Litz's *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (1965), Darcy and Elizabeth are said to "dramatize the persistent conflict between social restraint and the individual will, between tradition and self-expression."² And in *The Improvement of the Estate* (1971) written almost twenty years after Dorothy Van Ghent's essay, we find Alistair Duckworth still working within what is clearly the same framework of description. "Only when Elizabeth recognizes that individualism must find its social limits," he says,

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¹*The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Rinehart, 1953), p. 100.

²*Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 105.

"and Darcy concedes that tradition without individual energy is empty form, can [*Pride and Prejudice*] reach its eminently satisfactory conclusion."³

In the face of such a long-standing consensus of interpretation it may seem merely ingenious at this point in time to question either the essential validity or the usefulness of this description of the novel. But in at least two important respects it seems open to objection. In all the interpretations to which I have referred, the word "society" and its derivatives suggest a sociological abstraction—an institution, a set of laws, or a tradition (to use a word common to two of them). For Jane Austen, on the other hand, the word has quite a different meaning.

Here, for instance, in a passage from *Pride and Prejudice*, is how Elizabeth uses the word in a conversation with Lady Catherine.⁴

"But really, Ma'am, I think it would be very hard upon younger sisters, that they should not have their share of society and amusement because the elder may not have the means or inclination to marry early."

(165)

And here is how one of those younger sisters uses it in the same novel while providing her own appropriate remark on the subject.

"While I can have my mornings to myself," said [Mary], "it is enough. — I think it no sacrifice to join occasionally in evening engagements. Society has claims on us all; and I profess myself one of those who consider intervals of recreation and amusement as desirable for every body."

(87)

And finally, here is how the narrator of *Emma* uses the adjectival form of the word in her description of the background and character of Mr. Weston.

He had received a good education, but on succeeding early in life to a small independence . . . had satisfied an active, cheerful mind and social temper by entering into the militia of his county, then embodied.

(E:15)

³*The Improvement of the Estate* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1971), p. 118. I am indebted to Duckworth and particularly to the note which accompanies the passage I have quoted for first suggesting to me the prevalence of the "individual-society" interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice*.

⁴All quotations from Jane Austen's novels are from the standard Chapman edition (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971).

"Society" in these examples has nothing to do with conventions, laws, or traditions; perhaps its closest synonyms are "company" or "companionship." Similarly, "social" does not mean "of or pertaining to the institutions of society" but "gregarious" or, as we would now say it, "sociable." Far from being an abstraction, then, "society" always suggests for Jane Austen the presence of other individuals with whom it is either a duty or a pleasure to mix.

Of course it may be objected that criticism need not be limited to the vocabulary of its subjects. After all, Jane Austen never uses the word "irony," and yet that term has proven to be one of the most useful words for describing the quality of her vision. Indeed, it is not part of my intention to bar any word from criticism that serves its function in illuminating a text. But in this case, the "sociological" definition of "society" has had the effect of disinfecting Jane Austen's novels a little too thoroughly, of removing from them the complex sense of lived social life.

In the Austen criticism of the 40s (I am thinking now of D.W. Harding's classic "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen"⁵), this strong and sometimes sardonic sense of "other people" was, of course, much emphasized—in fact, too much so, for it led to an essentially false image of Jane Austen as a silent rebel with an unspoken hatred of the people around her. But though such criticism certainly overstated its case, it had at least the salutary effect of reminding us that Jane Austen wrote as a private individual in a milieu in which publicity—Mrs. Bennet's "visiting and news" (5)—was a matter of course. To downplay or ignore this sense of social life, of "other people," is to lose something important in any of Jane Austen's novels. But it is particularly regrettable in the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, where the aura of a small, enclosed community of talking, visiting, and company is so strong.

It is not simply that an important historical dimension to the novel is lost, however. For the abstraction of the word "society" has also led, I think, to a fundamental misconception of Jane Austen's dialectic. As we can see most explicitly in the quotation from Alistair Duckworth, there has been a tendency in such discussions of the "individual" and "society" to allegorize Elizabeth and Darcy into representatives of those respective terms. Elizabeth, then, reveals the energy, the impulsiveness, the respect for personal merit which characterizes individualism, while Darcy, with his sense of propriety and his noble family connections, stands for "society" or the established social codes.

⁵*Scrutiny*, 8 (1940), 346–62.

But if society for Jane Austen is not so much opposed to individuals as composed of them, we may be justified in turning such well-established associations on their heads. After all, it is Elizabeth whose values are primarily gregarious and social and who might fittingly stand for what Jane Austen conceives of as society, while it is Darcy whose reserve, privacy, and discretion are, in fact, protective of the individual.

Putting these terms aside, however, what is important is that the issues of *Pride and Prejudice* are much less abstract and much more localized than sometimes stated. And they have to do with nothing less than the conditions of personal existence in the small town world of three or four country families which Jane Austen delighted to describe. For in such a world social participation could be a duty, a delight, or a danger. In a novel like *Emma*, for instance, it is clear that society does have claims, not simply, as Emma learns, because the repetition of "old news, and heavy jokes" (E:219) may be all that is left of enjoyment to people like Miss Bates and her mother, but because the quality of that society depends upon the willingness of those with superior moral and intellectual qualifications (like Emma and Darcy) to contribute to its tone and to be responsible for its sanity and generosity.

But just as clearly, there are limits to society and sociability which are inherent in the very confinement of small-town living. These limits are explored in such characters as Sir John Middleton in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mr. Weston and Miss Bates in *Emma* and, in very specific ways, in Bingley and Jane Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. But it is finally in *Pride and Prejudice* as a whole that we get our clearest look at what might be called the dialectic of social participation in Jane Austen's novels. For it is only there that she fully explored the necessary tension between the impulse, indeed the responsibility, to be open, engaged and responsive members of a community, and the need for reserve, distance, and privacy lest social intercourse become vulgarized and degraded by familiarity.

I

At the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, in fact even before we have proceeded twenty pages, our disposition towards much that follows is formed by an initial, and seemingly simple, antithesis. At the Meryton ball, the first public event of the novel, we meet two men between whom there is "a great opposition of character" (16). Charles Bingley is everything a sociable gentleman should be—lively, open, unreserved, with a pleasant countenance and an agreeable manner. He mixes well with the rest of the company, dances every dance, and soon

finds himself liking, and liked by, nearly everyone in the room. (10, 16).

"What a contrast between him and his friend" (11). Mr. Darcy, on the other hand, is almost completely antisocial. Haughty and reserved, he declines being introduced to anyone, talks only to members of his own small party, and dances only twice. He feels not the slightest interest in any other people at the assembly, and in return is heartily disliked for it. (11, 16).

Unlike her cousin, Egerton Brydges, whom she criticized for his sloppy novelistic methods, Jane Austen never introduces characters merely to be described.⁶ Nor does she ever describe a character simply because he figures in the action of the novel. Her characterizations always serve thematic as well as mimetic purposes. The extended contrast between Darcy and Bingley is no exception. For the opposition between openness, candour, and sociability on the one hand, and reserve, fastidiousness, and exclusiveness on the other is not allowed to end here. Indeed, once we have expanded our notion of Darcy's social distance to include its apparent source in his snobbish regard for wealth and great connections, we can trace the same opposition at work in the "grouping" of some of the other characters.

At almost the same time that we encounter the differences between Darcy and Bingley, we are also introduced to the characters and dispositions of Bingley's sisters. Elizabeth immediately suspects that they do not possess the same open temper and sociable good nature as their brother—"their behaviour at the assembly had not been calculated to please in general"—and the narrator soon leaves us no doubt about it. The sisters, we are told, are "proud and conceited," and though not incapable of being agreeable when they wished to please, have become so enamoured of their own beauty, wealth, and rank (the latter almost entirely mythical, of course) that they now believe themselves fully "entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others" (15).

If this description were not in itself sufficient to suggest the association of Bingley's sisters with Darcy's own apparent brand of pride and conceit,⁷ we are certainly invited to make the connection by subsequent events. For once Elizabeth has taken the measure of Bingley's sisters' "superciliousness" (21), she finds it easy to believe them as "charmingly group'd" (53) with Darcy in their opinions as they are in their walks. In fact, much of the animosity we feel towards Darcy in the first part of the novel is created by a form of guilt by association.

⁶*Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, 2nd edn., ed. R.W. Chapman (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), p. 32.

⁷See the exchange between Charlotte Lucas and Elizabeth about Darcy's pride, p. 20.

We are *shown* the snobbishness, the shallowness, the ill-nature of the Bingley sisters; we *extrapolate* Darcy's few remarks or actions, as Jane Austen quite intends that we should, to resemble those of the people who are so much his companions.⁸

But while we are thus building up a sense of Darcy and the two Bingley sisters as a group united by a common pride and selfishness, it is hard to resist seeing Bingley and the two Bennet sisters as an antithetical group characterized by a generous sociability. At least part of this sense of polarization is the result of our age-old interest in comic resolution. Jane and Bingley are clearly established as lovers, and we can see quite as well as Elizabeth that they are meant for one another. Darcy and Bingley's sisters, on the other hand, are cast in the role of the "blocking society," holding out for wealth and connections against true love. But though plot certainly reinforces our sense of the polarity of the two groups, the real contrasts and differences are established by the remarks and reactions of Elizabeth.

A noble tradition in Jane Austen criticism has cast Elizabeth in the role of ironic commentator and has even suggested that her irony is subversive of society.⁹ But this is again to misunderstand the nature of society in the novel. For while Elizabeth is certainly fond of laughing at the follies and inconsistencies of her fellows, her wit is almost completely social in its bias. Far from being either detached from or subversive of society, her irony normally claims as its victims precisely those selfish, vain, or foolish people (like Miss Bingley, Darcy, Collins or Lady Catherine) who either cannot or will not contribute to making society as lively, open, and full of community as a good conversation. The people whom she instinctively prefers, men like Bingley, Wickham, and Colonel Fitzwilliam, are all open, agreeable, sociable people, with "a happy readiness of conversation" (72). And even Elizabeth's occasional bitternesses arise not from any real detachment from society, but from too great a dependence upon its merely superfi-

⁸We are told, for instance, that the Bingley sisters can be agreeable when they wish to be. And in fact we see them turn on their charm more or less when they will. Their reserve seems to be under their own control. In Darcy's case, reserve is a part of his character, and it is by no means clear that he will ever be entirely comfortable in society. Yet Jane's remark, early in the novel, before we have had a chance to know Darcy, makes it almost impossible for us to interpret Darcy's reserve in this way. " 'Miss Bingley told me,' said Jane, 'that he never speaks much unless among his intimate acquaintance. With *them* he is remarkably agreeable' " (19). This again seems to make Darcy and the Bingley sisters all of a kind.

⁹See Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), pp. 94-126, and D.W. Harding, "Jane Austen and Moral Judgment," in *From Blake to Byron*, ed. Boris Ford (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1957), pp. 51-59.

cial aspects, from a failure not dissimilar to her father's to distinguish between a pleasing face or manner and something more substantial. With Elizabeth as the basis of our point of view, then, our sense of the contrast between the pride and exclusiveness of some of the characters and the generosity and sociability of others is strengthened by the force of her own social convictions.

II

Throughout much of the first half of *Pride and Prejudice* we have little reason to doubt the justice of these convictions or the polarization of character and judgment to which they lead. For despite our superior view of events (particularly where Darcy's interest in Elizabeth is concerned), so much of the action seems to support Elizabeth's "reading" of the other characters that we scarcely notice the inconsistencies and ambiguities that do exist. Consider the arrival of Wickham, for instance. Coming as he does almost immediately after the introduction of Mr. Collins, he seems to confirm the fact that in this novel only characters without inflated notions of wealth and rank can be rational, unprejudiced, and attractive. Like Bingley, he is open, unreserved, agreeable, and with such easy and engaging manners that he seems as clearly a member of that sociable "good" group of characters as Mr. Collins, with his eternal prating about Lady Catherine, seems to belong with the Darcys and Miss Bingleys. Indeed, Wickham's subsequent revelations make both associations even more appropriate. For not only does he admit to a dislike for Darcy (and at this point a dislike for Darcy is an almost certain passport to Elizabeth's and the reader's affections), but he also reveals the hitherto unknown link between Darcy and Collins through Collins's characteristically proud and conceited patroness.

But if Wickham's story appears to confirm the opposition between sociable and unsociable characters, it also deepens our sense of the antagonism. Up till now we have been concerned with what has seemed to be a question of manners, of courtesy, though not without larger implications. Wickham's story adds a new dimension to the action, for now we get our first glimpse of the power of wealth and rank, a power capable of ruining a young man for life. For if Wickham's story is true, his chances for economic security have been destroyed almost solely as a result of Darcy's dislike for his warmth of temper, and his envy of Wickham's more intimate relationship with Darcy's father. Moreover, it is an injustice which Wickham's own comparative poverty prevents him from redressing.

Nor is this the only instance in which lives are capriciously altered and fates menaced or determined by the power concentrated in the

hands of a privileged few. Bingley's sudden disappearance and Jane's resulting suffering, Charlotte Lucas's miserable capitulation, Colonel Fitzwilliam's pathetic admission that younger sons cannot marry where they will — all of these point to the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of maintaining values like simple openness, candour, and kindness in a world dominated by their opposites. Perhaps the most striking and symptomatic example of this deepening of tone, this antagonism of viewpoints, is the confrontation between Elizabeth and Collins at the time of his proposal. For though the scene begins light-heartedly enough with the incomparable foolishness of Collins's pretended passion, it ends with the menace of poverty and loneliness for those, like Elizabeth, without money and rank. And whatever else one might wish to say about it, the threat cannot be ignored.

At Rosings, of course, we return briefly to the broader comic contrast of pride and sociability in the characters of Lady Catherine and Colonel Fitzwilliam. The "superlatively stupid" (166) conversation at dinner and cards, in fact, seems to sum up once and for all the kind of stifling parody of society to which wealth and rank seem to lead. But the hints inadvertently dropped by Colonel Fitzwilliam of Darcy's "triumph" in detaching Bingley from Jane bring us back once again to the level of antagonism. Responsible for Jane's suffering, Wickham's poverty, Bingley's inconsiderateness and, we almost feel, for Colonel Fitzwilliam's hesitation, Darcy seems now to symbolize all that inhibits real happiness and sociability. His arrogance, his conceit, his disdain for the feelings of others, these have become more than personal qualities. They have come to stand for a whole way of life. And thus, Darcy's rejection by Elizabeth at the moment when he seems to have felt an impulse stronger than pride is an irony which we as readers have been fully prepared to appreciate.

III

It is a short-lived irony, however. For with the arrival of Darcy's letter, both Elizabeth and (to a lesser extent) the reader are shown to be partly wrong. The neat polarization of characters into groups and the unambiguous judgments of events are revealed to be too simple — at least where Darcy is concerned. It is appropriate, of course, that our common disillusionment should come by way of a letter, a simple narrative. For it has been largely the result of personality, of the dramatic immediacy of the events in the first part of the narrative that we have been deceived. Like Elizabeth, we have trusted ourselves too implicitly to qualities like liveliness, openness, and apparent good nature, without really questioning their ultimate value. Darcy's letter is thus the herald of a new sobriety and detachment which can be felt

even in the mode of the novel itself as we move away from dramatic presentation towards the less exciting but more mediated account of events which characterizes the last half of *Pride and Prejudice*, particularly Lydia's elopement which we do not "see" at all.

This new sense of "distance" or detachment in the novel is, of course, entirely in keeping with the devaluation of sociability which now takes place. For if Elizabeth learns to distinguish between personal agreeableness and the more important quality of moral integrity, she also learns how little one can be taken as the index of the other. Furthermore, she now realizes the part played by her own desire to be thought agreeable in her mistaken judgments of Darcy and Wickham. "Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other . . . [she had] courted prepossession and ignorance" (208).

But to say that Elizabeth now sees the danger of judging people solely on the basis of qualities such as liveliness, candour, or conversability is to recognize only one part of a rather complex shift of perspective. For in admitting that she has misjudged Darcy, Elizabeth is now faced with the problem of understanding him. It is a problem she shares with the reader. With Darcy's departure from Rosings, our chance of observing him first hand is gone for another fifty pages. It is upon Darcy's letter, then, and the light it throws upon his earlier actions that we must rely in beginning to reassess his character. And if it is to be a positive revaluation, that letter must enable us to see the past action of the novel in quite a different way. If it does not allow us to excuse the *extent* of Darcy's pride, it must at least make it possible for us to accept Darcy's own estimate of his character—that his faults are rather of temper than understanding (58).

In fact, this is exactly what the letter does. By explaining that his objections to Elizabeth's family were based primarily on the grounds of their "impropriety" rather than their deficiency in great connections, Darcy's letter opens the way not only for a reassessment of his character and behaviour but to the recognition that there may be a form of pride and reserve which differs from that of mere snobbishness, and which may be both unobjectionable and necessary. But before we can get anywhere with this new look at Darcy, we must first get rid of some important misconceptions about "propriety." For most modern readers the word "propriety" has nothing but unfortunate connotations. Seen through the distorting lens of the Victorian age, the word has come to stand for a kind of rigid and even hypocritical adherence to the outward customs and usages of polite society. Indeed it is perhaps this conception of the word as much as anything which has contributed to the idea that Darcy "stands for" the "social restraints" imposed upon individual freedom.

For Jane Austen and, in fact, for most people of the 18th century, on the other hand, the word had not become so fixed or so pejorative. It was in a state of flux. For though it was just beginning to take on something like the meaning we now attribute to it, most of the eighteenth-century definitions of "propriety" still carried the impress of its Latin root, *proprius*, meaning "belonging to the individual," or, in other words, "peculiar," "characteristic." Far from suggesting a conformity to common rule, then, most senses of the word still connoted a concern for what was unique, special, or "proper" to a circumstance or person. We must keep this in mind if we are to see how Jane Austen understood the word.

As it is most frequently used in *Pride and Prejudice*, "propriety" suggests a kind of behaviour which is particularly careful not to violate the privacy, the integrity, and the right to respectability of every individual. As a concept governing social relations, then, "propriety" is intimately concerned with the discretion and reserve necessary to prevent individuals or actions from becoming "common" through excessive familiarity. Wickham's "general unreserve" about his relations with Mr. Darcy, his freedom in allowing his claims to be "openly acknowledged and publicly canvassed" (138), though another instance of his apparent sociability, is, in truth, an act of "impropriety" because it represents a breach of such discretion and privacy, a breach made all the more culpable since "respect for [Darcy's] father" ought to have stopped him from "exposing the son" (207).

Mr. Bennet's "impropriety . . . as a husband" (236) shows a similar disregard for necessary social distance. By continually "exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children" (236), Mr. Bennet is, in effect, robbing her of the respect which is due to her as both a wife and mother, no matter how silly she is.

But if "propriety" thus enjoins a certain respect for the individuality and reputation of other people, it also prescribes a concern for, indeed a pride in, one's own name and character. And it is in this sense of the word "propriety" that Darcy finds the Bennets lacking as a family. And it is for this reason that he is reluctant to see Bingley connect himself with them. "'For what do we live,'" Mr. Bennet asks Elizabeth, "'but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?'" (364). It is all too typical a question. For having lost all respect and esteem for his wife, Mr. Bennet has now lost any respect he might have had for the name and character of the man who was fool enough to marry her. Caring little or nothing for his reputation as a gentleman, he allows his wife and daughters to make spectacles of themselves (and him) at any public place, and even contributes to their exposure. In so doing, of course, he may purchase a kind of grim entertainment, but it is finally at the expense of his own respectability

as well as that of his family. And given the kind of talking, gossiping world described at the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, it is not to be expected that the contempt that Mr. Bennet shows for himself and his kin will be slow to be communicated to the rest of the community.

With this in mind, then, I think we can now see the importance of Darcy's letter and the interval of time between its arrival and his reappearance in the novel. It is not that we give up our earlier notion of the contrast between reserve and sociability, but that our attitude towards both is radically redefined. Through Darcy's letter, we are forced to "re-see" the entire first half of the novel, to recognize not only the errors of judgment which can proceed from a prejudice for sociable people, but the limitations of sociability itself, the danger of living so much in the public eye that familiarity turns to contempt. But in thus revising our sense of the rights and wrongs of characters like Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and Wickham, we are slowly led to an appreciation of Darcy's superiority. For though we may still deplore the snob-bishness and lack of consideration for others which is evident in his manner, we can now see that there is a positive need for qualities like pride and discretion that Darcy possesses.

The prominence given to Lydia in the fifty pages following Darcy's letter is only too obvious a reflection of these same issues. Lydia has been called "highly sexed" by at least one critic, and Jane Austen has been praised for her refusal to sentimentalize Lydia's strong "animal spirits."¹⁰ But what characterizes Lydia is not so much passion as it is a mere carelessness about herself and her reputation. Brought out into society before her time and consequently without the kind of reserve or shyness which ought to characterize girls of her age¹¹ (contrast Georgiana Darcy at the other extreme), Lydia has always been loud and forward. But in the pages that follow Elizabeth's return to Longbourn, Lydia's indifference to publicity is stressed with such a heavy hand—" 'we talked and laughed so loud, that any body might have heard us ten miles off' " (222)—that it seems surprising it has gone so long unnoticed.

That we should now see all this through Elizabeth's eyes is one of Jane Austen's usual triumphs of plotting. For not only is Darcy further justified in his characterization of the Bennets' behaviour, and Eliza-

¹⁰Mudrick, p. 100.

¹¹In a letter to her sister, Jane Austen lamented the contemporary loss of reserve, asking, "What is become of all the Shyness in the World?" (8 Feb. 1808). This letter is usually quoted apropos of Fanny Price's remark in *Mansfield Park*, " 'There must be a sort of shyness' " (MP: 197). But it applies equally well to Lydia's case and perhaps suggests that there is a greater sense of continuity between the two novels than is usually recognized.

beth raised in our eyes by the conscientiousness of her attempts to act upon that knowledge, but the scene is thereby prepared for Elizabeth's trip to Pemberley just a few chapters off. Though she doesn't know it yet, Elizabeth's conversation with her father, her representations of the "improprieties of Lydia's general behaviour" (230), her concern for her family's "importance, [its] respectability in the world" (231 — all of these are bringing her closer in spirit to Darcy than ever before in the novel, and helping to make possible the rapprochement which begins at Pemberley.

The chapters at Pemberley, indeed, represent the second climax of the novel, and for many people its essential resolution.¹² Elizabeth has come to realize what we might call the "limits of sociability," the function of reserve, and the need for a "proper pride" in one's character. And Darcy, on his side, now reveals that he has recognized the errors of manner into which his excessive self-regard and exclusiveness have led. The result of this recognition is a new sociability. Never before has Elizabeth seen him so friendly, "so desirous to please, so free from self-consequence, or unbending reserve" (263) as he is at Pemberley. Instead of remaining detached and distant, he now makes every effort to be agreeable to Elizabeth and to the Gardiners to whom she now introduces him. The dialectic of sociability and reserve seems to have resolved itself perfectly into a new synthesis, and there seems to be little more reason to continue the novel except to complete the engagement between Darcy and Elizabeth.

IV

Why then does the novel go on? Why is Lydia's elopement necessary? Is it merely to prolong the suspense of the love plot? Is it a concession to the popular-novel-reading audience and its desire for melodrama? Is it that the elopement section of the novel is part of an earlier and insufficiently revised draft? All of these are possibilities, of course; but if we now shift attention away from the elopement as such and turn again to Darcy, I think we can at least make a case for another explanation.

The course of Darcy's progress in the novel is both consistent and revealing. Beginning in his chill refusal to participate in a dance, the entire history of his relationship with Elizabeth can be described as a struggle between the contrary impulses of pride and love—the one

¹²Critics have in fact so long complained about the second half of the novel (and particularly Lydia's elopement) that Joseph Wiesenfarth devoted an entire chapter of his book on Austen to answering the charge. For the arguments on both sides, see his *The Errand of Form* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 60-85.

keeping him reserved and aloof, the other leading him increasingly towards that form of social communion which Jane Austen once likened to a dance.¹³ His first proposal comes at the midway point of this struggle. For though love has by this time so far gotten the better of pride that all Darcy's efforts to remain unintrigued by Elizabeth have failed, yet pride still musters sufficient strength to make his proposal as vain and complacent as Mr. Collins's own. At Pemberley, however, Darcy takes a clear step forward and begins to get out of the closed circle of his pride by consciously and concertedly taking Elizabeth's advice and "practicing" sociability.¹⁴ But is this really enough? Aren't we trivializing Jane Austen's own sense of society by suggesting that all Darcy owes to it is a certain refinement of manner? It is true, of course, that at Pemberley both Elizabeth and the reader become aware of the larger sphere of influence which is Darcy's by right of his position as landlord. But as Wickham has pointed out earlier, Darcy's efforts here are completely consistent with his pride. Are there no obligations to society which run against the notion of pride? Or, to put it another way, is Darcy now immune to the laughter, the foolishness, which seems to be so much a part of Jane Austen's own vision of social relations. The answer, I think, is no.

As is perhaps already obvious, the direction in which Darcy is moving in the last half of *Pride and Prejudice* is not only towards an attitude of greater candour and sociability but also towards an involvement in laughter and ridicule. Darcy is as clearly aware as Elizabeth herself that such attentions as he pays to the Gardiners "would draw down the ridicule and censure of the ladies both of Netherfield and Rosings" (263). But now he willingly exposes himself to it.

With Lydia's elopement, however, Darcy takes the last step: he risks the exposure of his own name and reputation by actively involving himself in retrieving the fallen reputation of the Bennets. Love is, of course, a major factor in Darcy's decision to open his family name to the remarks of such a scandal, but love only provides the willingness, the impulse. As Darcy realizes, and as I think Jane Austen intends the reader to realize too, the duty, the responsibility of such a risk has always been there.

Before Elizabeth's refusal, Darcy thought it beneath him "to lay his private actions open to the world" (322). With the same (in this case mistaken) pride which he had shown in his proposal to Elizabeth, he had simply assumed that his reputation would speak for itself without

¹³I am referring of course to Henry Tilney's celebrated comparison of marriage and dancing in *Northanger Abbey*, pp. 76-77.

¹⁴I use the word "practicing" advisedly. For as Elizabeth demonstrates to Darcy at Rosings, sociability, like piano-playing, is an acquired art (175).

further effort on his part, that his character, his wealth, his position would be more than sufficient to confound any lies that Wickham might dare to spread. But as Darcy discovers more than once in the novel, people are not to be moved in this way. And it is precisely because of his refusal to be open, his inordinate fear of involving himself in ridicule that Wickham's designs are able to succeed.

But it is not simply that Darcy thereby exposed his name to greater indignities by his fear of publicity than he would have if he had been more open. He also allowed a great number of people in Hertfordshire (particularly the Bennets) to be seriously victimized through their ignorance of Wickham's past. "It was owing to him," as Darcy tells Mrs. Gardiner, "to his reserve, and want of proper consideration, that Wickham's character had been so misunderstood, and consequently that he had been received and noticed as he was" (324). Had Darcy been less proudly reserved, and more willing to risk the idle remarks of the usual town gossips, Wickham's elopement with Lydia (certainly his constant reception at Longbourn) would almost surely have been avoided. Had he been less careful of his own reputation and more aware of his responsibilities to the society of which he is a part, the Bennets need not have been so threatened.

It is only through the events surrounding Lydia's elopement, then, that we arrive at the final adjustment of the relations between sociability and reserve. For with her usual good sense, Jane Austen realizes that however important it is to maintain one's dignity in the world, such dignity cannot be an end in itself. The final step Darcy takes towards an involvement in society, therefore, goes beyond the simple candour he learns when he begins to meet people like the Gardiners halfway. It includes being actively engaged in a society where to be a responsible, feeling, and discriminating adult means to risk at times the exposure to laughter.

For Darcy this means stepping down off the pedestal where his pride has kept him aloof in Grandisonian perfection, and joining the mass of men who, as Elizabeth will teach him, are laughing and laughed at. For whatever else it is, laughter is the great equalizer in Jane Austen's novels. And though it may vary in profundity from the vulgar "fun" of Lydia to the sociable playfulness of Elizabeth to the moral consciousness of Jane Austen herself, laughter is there as an eternal reminder that we are all part of one community, and not even the best of men can be totally beyond the responsibility and the reproach of belonging to it.

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