

CONJECTURING POSSIBILITIES: READING AND MISREADING TEXTS IN JANE AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

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Precisely halfway through the novel (almost to the very letter by a computer count of words), Elizabeth Bennet, the central character of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, is the recipient of a letter. She is forced to read it twice. The letter is from Fitzwilliam Darcy, the man she will eventually marry, but still in the grip of those two flaws from which the novel takes its title, Elizabeth at first misreads it. Only when she reads it again in a different frame of mind is she able to arrive at a closer estimation of the meaning of its words and the intention of its author. In a novel initially written in the epistolary style, it is not, of course, remarkable that letters should be received and sent, and indeed there are quite a few coming and going on its pages. Yet this one, so centrally placed, functions not only as a turning point in the progress of events but as the focal point of a theme that is devoted only in part to the ways of courtship and marriage and—for it is important to note the incident Austen picks as her image—far more to the reading of texts. Kelly and Newey are right to argue that in this novel the reading of texts stands as both a fact and a metaphor, for Austen often speaks here of “reading” the world as well as the word (e.g., 90, 95). But Austen is actually more precise. What she wants to teach Elizabeth, and the reader along with her, is, in the strictest sense of the word, a philosophic understanding of the epistemological grounds that allow us to read at all.

We have not typically thought of Austen as a novelist much disturbed by such philosophical questions, although a number of excellent studies have sought to dislocate this prejudice.¹ These, and the work of Martha Satz and Zelda Boyd, to whom I shall return in a moment, have not, however, yet

succeeded in changing the general impression that if Austen has an interest in anything but human affairs, it is in social manners and history, not in philosophic issues. Even critics like Gilbert Ryle, who takes her to be a serious moralist and to be interested in the theory as well as the practical end of morality, begins his analysis of her views by stating that she is not a “philosopher” (168). Yet Austen is highly philosophical, alert both to ideas in general and to the currents of her time. What is deceptive is that rarely does she present these theoretically. Mostly her conceptual world is so fully dramatized in her characters and her plots that it can only be inferred from the nature of the action and the language of the narrative. But once in a while we do, in fact, find a moment so abstract as to convince us beyond doubt that Austen’s purpose is philosophical. Thus, for example, in *Mansfield Park*, Mary Crawford, the embodiment of the skeptical point of view, measures the distance and the duration of her walk in the woods with Edmund in subjective and relative terms. He, the voice of another age, proposes an objective criterion. Consulting his watch, he tries to show her she has mistaken both space and time. But this means nothing to Mary Crawford. “A watch,” she protests, exasperated, “is always too fast or too slow. I cannot be dictated to by a watch” (95). The presence of such a striking scene and the central place of these characters indicate that the human relationships that stand at the forefront of Austen’s action, important as they are in themselves, serve as illustrations as well of a philosophic theme. Austen seems to be asking here, is there such thing as truth? Can it be known? And by what means? And with what degree of certainty?

These same epistemological questions lie at the heart of *Pride and Prejudice*. Its vocabulary—and Austen, as I shall show, uses lexical devices to guide the reader through her argument—relies heavily on such words as “suspect,” “presume,” “conjecture,” “guess,” “detect,” “surmise,” “infer,” “trust,” “perceive,” “believe,” “construe.” “Suppose,” her favorite of this kind, turns up ninety times in the novel. Such words stress not only the importance of epistemological questions but also the absolute uncertainty of epistemological grounds. The novel’s famous opening sentence—“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”—immediately introduces the question of truth, however only to interrogate it by the irony of its tone. Truth is not to be had so easily, if it is to be had at all. Elizabeth, saying to Miss Bingley “Your conjecture is totally wrong” (27), utters words that would be appropriate almost anywhere in the book. The novel is a map of misreading. Even its comedy often depends on the misconstruing of texts.

Two very fine essays have already laid some groundwork for my inquiry. Arguing that “problems of knowledge” are highlighted on every page (171), Martha Satz has demonstrated that there is often in *Pride and Prejudice* “a salient gap” in the minds of the characters “between evidence and conclusion,” that what they take as reliable knowledge is in fact a “fragile edifice” (172). And

writing on *Sense and Sensibility*, Zelda Boyd has shown that Austen uses modal auxiliaries to suggest that knowledge rests not on certainty but on “hypothesis” (149).² I agree with both these claims but believe we must go further. In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen enters the great debate on epistemological questions raging at that very moment between the empiricists and the rationalists, that she sides not with the rationalists, with whom she has always been associated (see, for example, Farrer, Simpson, Meyersohn, and Held)³, but rather with the empiricists.⁴ But realizing that empiricism is an epistemological minefield, she sets out to chart a path that will make the reading of texts, of the word or of the world, not an utter impossibility. For even as with David Hume himself, who concedes that in actual life we cannot function on absolute skepticism, Austen knows that human existence requires some approximation of truth. Elizabeth’s destiny is tied to her being able to read both the letter and its sender. The narrative is thus a quest for an epistemological principle on which a suitable hypothesis of reality can rest. And while there is never any question that we are looking at a work rooted in its time and place, in the process of this quest Austen foreshadows many issues central to modernism and postmodernism, even to current critical theory—all rooted, if we look back far enough, in that very empiricism Austen was one of the first to embrace.

In this essay I explore the particulars of her epistemological inquiry, in itself and as it shapes the plot, the characters, the language, and the very act of narration, the last of which, as I shall show in my concluding paragraphs, offers an encompassing frame that encapsulates the problems Austen addresses in this novel and the manner in which she resolves them. I should also like, in passing, to take note of the many points at which Austen anticipates questions we are still asking today, to delineate, as I do so, ways she suggests these in her narrative, and to identify her conclusions, many of which could still be argued as defensible positions, some of which would not be alien to contemporary thought. Such a project has its dangers. It may pull Austen out of her time and project her into ours. But it has advantages also. Looking back from our perspective, knowing the questions we currently pose, helps us to discern the outlines of similar questions in Austen’s work. But looking forward from her text, where these questions are conceived in their embryonic forms and have not yet the names and histories they have acquired in our era, we come to realize that these questions may be formulated differently, that, while they cannot be answered definitively—as Austen herself is well aware—they are not incapable of some tenable solutions.

Repeatedly in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen negates the possibility of anything like genuine knowledge. The very word is considered suspect. Rarely do characters say “I know” without being shown to be wrong. “‘I know it must be a scandalous falsehood,’” Lady Catherine says, for instance, on being told that Elizabeth might be inclined to marry Darcy (353). “‘No, no,’” says Jane on

being informed that the marriage is to take place. “‘I know it to be impossible’” (372). “Conviction” also, as a rule, heralds an erroneous conclusion, as when Darcy writes to Elizabeth that having carefully observed Jane, he felt secure in his “‘conviction’” that she did not care for Bingley (197). Although she will finally decide that it is not completely impossible to approximate reality, by destabilizing words that rest on epistemological certainty, Austen clearly undermines the idea that human knowledge can ever be sure and absolute. Sometimes we are only ignorant of the unknown, not the unknowable, but one of Austen’s notable modernisms is her sense that human events always occur in a temporal context. What we are ignorant of at the moment at which we need to make a choice that hinges on that specific knowledge, however knowable it might be in some putative universe, is, in its effects on us, much the same as the unknowable. The very genesis of the plot turns on such a moment exactly. Hearing Darcy, at the beginning, say of her that he does not find her “‘handsome enough’” to entice him to dance (12), Elizabeth takes an instant disliking to him, “unaware” that a moment later, catching sight of her playful manner, Darcy quickly changes his mind (23). She has already conceived that prejudice by which the rest of the novel is driven.

Much of the structure of the narrative, including its characters and action, is as consciously calculated to explore the means of knowing as to offer the realistic social and psychological portraits we have mostly thought it aimed for. Each of the sisters, for example, is an experiment in the question of what it is we can rely on for the knowledge we require. Lydia, the slave of passion and instinct, proves, by the future predicted for her, that we cannot count on nature for an intuitive sense of truth. Nor can we rely on others to interpret reality for us. Many in this novel do, each in a somewhat different fashion, with the deviations illustrating variations on this theme. Kitty, for instance, who shadows Lydia and generally does what her sister urges, is psychologically suggestible, a characteristic that can be dangerous when the influence is bad but one that can be beneficial when the influence is good. Swayed by Lydia, she is reckless. But when her “elder sisters” take “charge,” at the conclusion of the novel, she exhibits “great” “improvement” (385). Bingley, who is Kitty’s double in being susceptible to influence, differs, however, in one respect. While Kitty is psychologically malleable, Bingley is malleable intellectually. The power Darcy has over him is not the power of personality but the power to persuade. When Darcy explains the events to Elizabeth that separated Bingley from Jane, he characterizes Bingley as “‘modest’” and speaks of the “‘diffidence’” that prevented him from “‘depending on his own judgment’” (371). Mary, whose primary function lies in connection with a point I shall turn to in a moment, belongs also to this group, although she relies not on people but books. Jane, the sweetest of the sisters, is, from a practical point of view, epistemologically the worst. Disinclined to “‘see a fault’” (14), hers is the wiser course undoubtedly when she refuses to believe the stories Wickham has

told of Darcy. But later she refuses equally to conclude that Wickham has lied. She will make no decision at all. Her favorite attitude, which is summarized in her phrase “I hope and trust” (305), makes her a very pleasant young woman but not a very useful guide through the complexities of life. Elizabeth only, of the sisters, will learn, as she learns to read that letter, the skill required to read the world. Her arriving at this skill is the *bildung* of the novel. But Austen’s development of her heroine is essentially philosophic, all her other acquisitions being ancillary to this end. And what she develops in Elizabeth is a practical empiricism. Almost the first thing we learn about her is that her dominant attribute is her “quickness of observation” (15). And Austen so conceives the plot as to turn this characteristic, the first requirement of the empiricist, into the basis of what becomes Elizabeth’s philosophic perspective.

It is Austen’s perspective too. What Austen had or had not read on the subject of empiricism cannot be ascertained. But in the preface he appended to the posthumous publication of *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, her brother Henry does insist that her reading was extensive, in history and *belles lettres* especially, and we know that serious reading in the later eighteenth century and early nineteenth routinely included works that today would be classified as philosophy. It would not have been unusual for a family like the Austens to have had in its library the standard works of Locke and Hume. We know that Austen read some Hume, for her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh reports that she was well acquainted with Hume’s *History of England* (88), to which indeed she herself refers on the pages of *Northanger Abbey* (109). But whether or not she had read Hume’s more philosophical publications, empiricism was in the air and the subject of much discussion, disagreement, and debate. Indeed, as Austen was growing up, empiricism was the philosophy that was displacing rationalism as the modern point of view. It would have been difficult for Austen to avoid exposure to it.

Austen makes the empirical method explicitly central to her concerns. “‘We all love to instruct,’” says Elizabeth, “‘though we can teach only what is not worth knowing’” (343). The obvious corollary to this is that whatever is worth knowing we must discover for ourselves, and the prominence in this novel of the empiricist vocabulary—particularly “perceive” and “observe”—implies that we must discover these things chiefly through the empirical method.

Austen, indeed, takes visible pains to discredit other assumptions, especially the faith in reason still left over from the Enlightenment. She is intent on setting limits, in the text of the novel itself, on the nature and function of reason and on redefining the term entirely in empiricist terms, as a mere logical operation designed to sift through empirical data. Characters who turn to reason as a tool for acquiring knowledge turn out invariably to be wrong. Elizabeth herself begins with the assumption that what is reasonable must, by that very token, be true. Wickham’s “account” of the relationship between Darcy and Lady Catherine, seeming to be “rational,” seems to her therefore

implicitly right (84). It will be part of her education to learn that the rational may be false. Compared to her empirical language, which is extensive, as we have seen, Austen uses very few words that point to the uses of rational thought. Her favorites are “deduce” and “conclude,” and both are operational terms. Even “reason” and “rational”—except when the former is used to mean “ground”—are employed, with one exclusion on which I will comment below, primarily to describe the logic through which we need to filter data. Indeed, in one of those abstract moments in which the argument turns philosophical, Austen even provides a tutorial on the need to differentiate between the knowledge we can acquire and the reason that helps us use it, between what David Hume would have called matters of fact and matters of logic, the first to be derived empirically and only the latter to be determined by the rules of rational thought. Jane and Elizabeth have been speculating on why Bingley has left the neighborhood:

“You persist, then, in supposing his sisters influence him.”

“Yes, in conjunction with his friend.”

“I cannot believe it....They can only wish his happiness, and if he is attached to me, no other woman can secure it.”

“Your first position is false. They may wish many things beside his happiness.” (136)

Jane is perfectly right in her reasoning. She is wrong in her conclusion because she has started from the wrong premise. The premise is a matter of fact and cannot be reached through a rational process. By arranging it so that Jane can be right about the one and yet wrong about the other, Austen tells us we must distinguish between the tools that give us knowledge and the tools that help us use it.

Equally, Austen in this novel rejects the idea of authority, the notion that there are truths to be had from the wise, or from the past, from our elders, or from religion, attacking, almost systematically, virtually every conventional site—parents, social standing, clerics—held in eighteenth-century culture, by traditionalists at least, as the venue of authority. Most of those who claim authority or on whose behalf it is claimed are objects of contempt or derision. Never indeed is Austen’s humor broader or less subtle than here. It is, for instance, Lady Catherine, presented as nearly a farcical character, whose manner is said to be “authoritative” (58) and Mr. Collins, the novel’s fop, who entertains a high opinion of his “authority as a clergyman” (48). Similarly, the authority imputed to Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in their roles as parental figures—as when Collins feels sure Elizabeth will accept his proposal of marriage as soon as she realizes it has been “‘sanctioned’” by the “‘authority’” of her parents (109)—is shown to be without justification and, even more to the point, without merit. Even when an authority is not manifestly ludicrous, Austen shows it is

not possible to rely on it as truth. When Elizabeth and the Gardiners are taken through Pemberley, for instance, Elizabeth is so greatly impressed by what the housekeeper says of Darcy that she thinks they might have been wrong in not thinking well of him. Having known Darcy all his life, the woman is clearly an "authority" (264). But the Gardiners disagree. Having no grounds as yet to doubt Wickham, they take him as an "'authority,'" too (249). What Austen is saying is plain enough. Looking to someone else's authority only postpones the final question since in the end we must determine which authority to believe, and the only way to do that is to turn again to experience, for it is only by being witnesses to what Wickham and Darcy do that everyone comes at last to realize which authority is to be trusted.

This is not to say that Austen necessarily wants to jettison what might be called traditional wisdom. It may contain some kernels of truth, but to know whether or not it does it must be tested again and again, in every conceivable circumstance, against the evidence of experience. It is this critical distinction Mary is designed to illustrate. Despite her pomposity, which inclines us to discredit what she says, Mary's remarks, it should be noted, usually turn out to be true, true in the general run of things and true in a general sort of way within the events of the novel itself. "Every impulse of feeling," for instance, she pronounces at one point, "should be guided by reason" (21), and these are words her sister Lydia might well have heeded for her good. The problem Austen sees with Mary is not that her opinions are wrong but that she enunciates them as though they were *a priori* postulates. In reality they are not. In fact, the opinions Austen gives Mary, like the one just quoted above, are almost always generalizations that would have been garnered from experience, experience codified over the ages into quotable principles. But this is the very thing that Mary seems unable to comprehend. For Mary, these are eternal verities to be accepted without question. Austen is stressing that unless—and this is surely one of the reasons she dwells so persistently on the concrete that she often succeeds in convincing us she has no philosophical purpose—they are merely informing frames on which we draw to form our insights, general truths are nothing more than empty and meaningless clichés, as they always are with Mary. Tradition, that is, may be wise or not. But whether it is we can only know by putting it to the test ourselves. It is this ability, in the exclusion I mentioned above, to find exactly the right relationship between the codified principle that generalizes from experience and the particular situation to which the principle is applied that Austen normally calls "common sense" and its possessor "reasonable."

That Austen's empiricism cannot be taken as a mere casual inclination to look for insights in experience is plainly shown in the philosophic sophistication of her analysis, which structures the action so as to demonstrate its implications and limitations.

She is acutely aware of both. She knows, for instance, as well as Hume, that empiricism can yield only that limited body of knowledge that is accessible

to the senses. Every other kind of reality is completely beyond its ken. Religion is not a concern in this novel, as it will be in *Mansfield Park*, but social, moral, psychological, and philosophic questions are, and even the simplest of these, she shows us, cannot be answered through sensory knowledge. Darcy's failure, once again, to perceive, by watching Jane, that she was in love with Bingley testifies to the limitation of even the strictest observation. Similarly, Austen knows that, restricted to the phenomenal, empiricism can only speak of how things look, not what they are. Her constant use of "appear" and "seem" in relating the conclusions to which her characters arrive acknowledges an unbridgeable gap between perception and reality. The fact, indeed, that some of the characters are shown to be consciously engaged in manufacturing appearances—when Jane does not wish to be "perceived" as being affected by Bingley's return (337-38), when Charlotte argues that women must show more affection than they feel to induce proposals of marriage (21-22)—illustrates how intensely conscious Austen is of the degree to which appearance is capable of being dissociated from reality. Through Wickham and Darcy, who appear the opposite of what they are, deliberately in Wickham's case, this discrepancy becomes a central question in the book.

The very existence of reality is obviously problematic to Austen. Although in the end she seems to accept, at least hypothetically, the idea that, however inaccessible, there is some kind of reality somewhere, there are moments in the novel, especially in Wickham's story, in which she appears to toy with the notion that, as Nietzsche once expressed it in a passage that has gained currency in modern theory, reality must be considered only another "piece of fiction" (Section 521). Wickham, as he exists in the minds of the characters of the novel almost until the very end, and even in the mind of the reader, is entirely fictional. Both his character and his history are fabrications of his own. Some might say he should be seen, as invariably he has been, simply as an old-fashioned liar, but it is not without importance that the stories Wickham tells do not appreciably alter the details of what we later hear from Darcy. From the beginning, Wickham admits to his "'imprudence'" and "'extravagance"'; he even concedes he did not deserve the kindness Darcy's father bestowed on him (79). It is not lying Austen emphasizes. What she emphasizes is construction, the fact that the identical data may serve to construct quite different truths. It is to this that she draws our attention in her typically ironic way when Wickham is made to say of Darcy what is actually true of himself, namely that "'the world... sees him only as he chuses [sic] to be seen'" (78).

Hence, whatever she may be willing to assume in some ultimate sphere, Austen's view of the reality to which observation admits us is very much in the empiricist realm, epistemologically a realm less detected than construed. This is prodigiously clear in her language. Rarely, unless she is being ironic, does Austen use words like "discover" or "find" when she describes what a character learns. What little we do learn in her novel about the realities of

the world, we must rather “credit,” “trust,” “believe,” “imagine,” “fancy,” “conceive,” “presume,” “surmise,” “suspect,” “suppose,” “infer,” “guess,” “conjecture,” and “construe.” The paradigm scene—another one of those philosophic moments that call our attention to the abstract—is to be found when Colonel Fitzwilliam, summarizing a conversation in which he has had, characteristically, to infer what the speaker meant, closes by saying, “‘It was all conjecture’” (185). Inference, the Colonel reminds us, is the sum total of our knowledge.

And Austen is well aware that inference is nothing more than interpretation.⁵ It is interesting that the word “fact,” except as part of the phrase “in fact” used as an intensifier, appears in the novel only six times. Observation does not yield facts. The heavy inferential vocabulary through which conclusions are presented, of which the words I cited above are but a small representation, suggests that, like a good empiricist, Austen looks on sense impressions as a mere dustheap of raw data, out of which reality must be conceptually constructed, much like those puzzles we find in newspapers made up of individual dots that can only produce a picture if we draw connecting lines from one number to the next. Austen repeatedly shows us Elizabeth engaged in attempting to draw those lines. “‘I cannot make him out,’” for instance, she remarks on hearing her father read a letter Collins has sent (64). Asking Darcy a series of questions, she says she is trying to “‘make...out’” his character (93). When she hears of Bingley’s return, she does “not know what to make of it” (332). In each of these cases, Elizabeth uses a common colloquialism, but it is not perhaps an accident that the word “make” appears in each. Austen is showing Elizabeth in the act of making reality, not because she is fabricating it in the way that Wickham does but because she has no choice. That is the nature of empirical knowledge. Often, indeed, such knowledge rests not on a single inference only but on layers of supposition. Believing she has understood him, Elizabeth does not, for example, say that she knows what Darcy means, rather that she has surmised what his words “*seemed to imply*” (182; italics mine).

One of the things that makes it difficult to interpret in empiricism is that there are no paradigms to guide us in ordering our data. The picture in the newspaper puzzle is predetermined by the numbers that are preassigned to the dots. The dots of observation, however, do not come with sequential numbers. We can connect them in many ways. Austen’s epistemological language leaves no doubt that she is aware that the right picture, if there is one, not only lies beyond our reach, but that many pictures are possible, and that the ones we form in our minds depend on the patterns we make of our data. Frequently Austen foregrounds the hurdles that stand in the way of interpretation and when she does so she places her emphasis not on the fictional dilemmas her characters are attempting to solve but, metafictionally, on the act of decipherment itself. Different characters, for example, often make totally different pictures out of the identical dots. Thus, to Bingley speed in writing signifies ease and

fluency; to Darcy it shows carelessness (48). Bingley's departure from the neighborhood means to Jane he does not love her; to Elizabeth it proves that his sisters know he does and are whisking him away to avoid his marrying her (118). And as she reads that central letter trying to evaluate Darcy's version of events but recalling Wickham's story, it dawns on Elizabeth that there must be, the versions being incompatible, duplicity on "one side or the other" (205). But nothing in the data itself can tell her where the duplicity is.

Error is therefore unavoidable. Most of the blunders in the novel are made through faulty interpretation. Austen does not use many words to suggest this kind of flaw—"mistake" and "error" are her favorites—but she uses these words often. "'I am much mistaken,'" says Jane when she first meets Caroline Bingley, "'if we shall not find' her "'charming'" (15). "'You can hardly doubt,'" says Collins, confident that Elizabeth is expecting his proposal, "'the purport of my discourse;...my attentions have been too marked to be mistaken'" (105). In every case the speaker is wrong. As Collins remarks on the only occasion he turns out to be right in the novel, "'we are all liable to error'" (114). Error often compounds error. While we are trying to interpret, we are being ourselves interpreted, and being interpreted, sooner or later we are bound to be misread. It is a sign of Elizabeth's growing philosophical consciousness that she recognizes this fact. Listening to Darcy, Austen writes as she layers once again multiple levels of supposition, Elizabeth notes "a sort of smile" that she "*fancied* she understood; he *must* be *supposing* her to be thinking of Jane" (179; italics mine). Here is one small empirical fact, a sort of smile on Darcy's face. Elizabeth takes it to be the result of his interpreting her thoughts; but her own thoughts, she is aware, are an interpretation of his, or at least of what she thinks he has interpreted her to mean.

Nor is the chance of misunderstanding limited to our reading of others. In a striking, postmodern, way, Austen suggests we are not always subjects even to ourselves. Often we are, no less than others, objects to our own understanding and must attempt to read ourselves in the same way we read others. Time and again we find her characters waking suddenly to the thought that they have wrongly construed themselves. Only near the end of the book does Darcy, for instance, come to recognize that his first letter had been written in a state of "'dreadful bitterness,'" though at the time he had believed himself to be perfectly "'calm and cool'" (368). This is a point so important to Austen that Elizabeth's striking words, spoken after she comes to see that it had been her pride and prejudice that had led, in her first attempt, to the misreading of Darcy's letter—"Till this moment, I never knew myself'" (208)—are the pivotal point of the book.

The only way in Austen's novel we can know whether or not we have interpreted well or ill is, pragmatically, by seeing the results of our actions. But such a test, as Austen knows, puts us at the mercy of time. As, often, we lack the knowledge we need at the time we really need it, before we commit

ourselves to action, so we have no way of knowing, at the time we need to know it, whether we are right or wrong in the reading of our data. An enlightening gloss on this question is to be found in the act of deception. Another subject Austen explores in the language of her narrative—characters, thus, are “duped,” “misled,” “deceived,” victims of “misrepresentation,” “self-deceived” and much “imposed on”—is the idea that deception would at first appear to be a moral or psychological problem, a question more of human relationships than of epistemological truth. But that is not how Austen presents it. Her point is not that people lie and that other people believe them but rather that truth is hard to detect and falsehood hard to distinguish from it. The Wickham affair is once more an instance—on his part a deliberate lie but simulating truth so well that those who hear him cannot tell, until much later, which it is.

And even when consequences suggest which interpretation is right, conclusions always remain contingent. Austen never lets us forget that, however true they seem, interpretations are only hypotheses, resting on so many assumptions that we can never be certain about them. When Darcy admits he may have been wrong in his estimate of Jane’s feelings, he does not say he had misread her, but offers instead a conditional statement: “‘If *you* have not been mistaken here, I must have been in error’” (197). Someone had to have been wrong, but which of the two he is not prepared, even now, to stipulate.

Austen’s extraordinary grasp of the motives of her characters makes not only for the novel’s shrewd psychological analysis, it stresses yet another aspect of its epistemological inquiry, namely the problem of premises. The recurrent use of words like “assume,” “presume,” and “suppose,” as well as small periodic lessons—as when Darcy tells Elizabeth she was right that his “‘behavior’” merited nothing but “‘reproof’” but that her “‘accusations’” were, nevertheless, completely “‘ill-founded’” because they were “‘formed on mistaken premises’” (367)—remind us that everything hinges on premises, that if our premises are wrong, we cannot count on our conclusions, however good our logic may be. The chief example here is Collins when he proposes to Elizabeth. On the premise that she intends to accept his proposal of marriage, Collins interprets her refusals in every conceivable way but one: it is her modesty that prevents her from accepting him initially, although in the end she means to do so; this is how “elegant” women behave; she wishes to increase his passion by prolonging his suspense. Although she repeatedly tells him so, it never occurs to him that Elizabeth has no desire to marry him (106-09).

It is a premise of this kind that is the prejudice of the title. The term has generally been taken in its psychological sense to the exclusion of all others. But this is precisely where psychology and philosophy intersect. Elizabeth’s bias towards Wickham because he flatters her vanity and her prejudice against Darcy because he has insulted her pride are the false premises on whose basis she misinterprets both their stories. Nothing, indeed, is worse than premises produced by psychological flaws. Hidden as they are from our consciousness,

these are the very last assumptions we subject to scrutiny. But every premise, Austen reminds us, is in the strictest sense a prejudice—something for which we have no evidence; if we did it would be a conclusion—and is capable, if mistaken, as in the case of Collins above, of rendering both empirical proof and the strictest logic useless.

These many and radical qualifications Austen places on what we can know and how well we are able to know it come very close to the total skepticism inherent in the empiricist view, but never, at least in *Pride and Prejudice*, does Austen retreat from this position. Indeed, what makes her epistemology not only modern but postmodern is the fact that, on the contrary, she seeks an answer not beyond but within this skepticism and that she is prepared, in the end, to accept a hypothesis in which knowledge and understanding are partial, imperfect, and indistinct. It would be fruitful to compare Austen's views here to Arthur Fine's in current philosophic thought. Fine repudiates, on the one hand, philosophic realists like Larry Laudan and Ian Hacking who, in an Aristotelian way, believe that there is a correspondence between perception and reality, but, on the other, also is averse to the ideas of antirealists like Bas Van Fraassen and T.H. Morgan who deny such a correspondence and accept or reject a theory on internal coherence alone. Fine thus turns away from all global statements in favor of a more conditional and a more open-ended approach, one that "picks out...interpretations, locally, as it goes along," satisfied to find a small, temporary, and relative truth and ready to rescind its inferences if new discoveries contradict them (148).⁶ Although we can never know with certainty, Austen appears to say in this novel, that although we can never be really sure about reality and our conclusions, we can, in a small and provisional way, locate islands of possibility on which thought and action may rest.

And these local, tentative answers are to be found through probability, in *Pride and Prejudice* without question the most important aid we have. Not surprisingly, probability as the means of gaining access, however imperfectly, to reality, so much in our statistical age the contemporary view, was popular, in the wake of empiricism, as early as the eighteenth century. In *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, published in 1736, Joseph Butler, for example, while attempting to defend Christianity against the deists and yet unable to escape the impact on his thought of Locke, argues not for the truth of his creed but only for its probability, probability being for him the best of the available tools. The word itself and synonyms for it appear well over a hundred times in the progress of Austen's novel. Austen knows that probability, as an interpretation itself, is not without serious snares and pitfalls, and over and over again she illustrates the difficulties of calculating what is likely and what is not. Often the probable seems improbable. When Elizabeth learns that Darcy chose to be present at Lydia's wedding, it strikes her that she might have been the reason. Of course,

she is absolutely right. But, recalling their recent history, she decides that that is "improbable" (320). On the other hand, the improbable may appear probable to some. Mrs. Bennet considers it "'likely'" that the new tenant of Netherfield will "'fall in love with'" one of her daughters (4), although, since the parties have not even met, she has no grounds for thinking so. And the fact that Mrs. Bennet miraculously turns out to be right tells us that sometimes it is not the probable but the improbable that occurs.

Nevertheless, interpretation through the sifting of probabilities is not a totally hopeless task, and chiefly in Elizabeth's efforts to read the novel's central letter Austen shows us how to steer through the perilous obstacles of realities and of texts.

That there is a verbal text to be deciphered in the letter Austen is not prepared to deny, any more than she is prepared to deny that some reality, however unknowable, exists, although, precisely as she questions our ability to apprehend objective truth with certainty, she questions the degree to which verbal realities can be grasped. The very circumstance that one text can yield two utterly different readings plainly indicates that Austen knows how uncertain meanings can be.

Further, that the verbal text refers to the world and not to itself Austen similarly insists on. Language is not here self-referential, although this is yet another idea she appears to be toying with, for during the period that Elizabeth cannot determine which reality, Darcy's or Wickam's, is the true one, the language of each, as it creates rival constructs in her mind, seems, as Austen is well aware, to point only to itself. Reading, in that crucial letter, Darcy's account of past events and recalling Wickham's version, Elizabeth does not know which is true. "On both sides," she is made to say in words that might well have appeared in a Saussurean argument, "it was only assertion" (205). For the moment, she is standing merely between two rival texts, each, as Perry Meisel might put it, a reality that for her, being ontologically "groundless," is linguistically tautological. Yet Austen contends that, hard as it is, we must not decline to attempt a conclusion.

Meanwhile, she does suggest that in one respect there can be a good in not insisting on one final point of view. For the contrary temperaments of Elizabeth and Jane have a beneficial effect as they correct each other's excesses. Jane is too flexible, too gullible, far too trusting for her own good, Elizabeth too suspicious and stubborn. But that is just as well, hints Austen, considering that Jane was right to believe the best of Darcy and Elizabeth was wrong. If human beings will make mistakes, it is just as well that there should be errors on all sides of a question. This is what makes of social exchange a vital epistemological instrument, that in the barter of opinions individual biases can hope to cancel each other out. But ultimately a choice must be made. Those who do not make a choice invariably find themselves the victims of accidental circumstances or of truths selected by others, as we see in the case of Jane,

whose passivity nearly costs her marriage to the man she loves. Furthermore, not taking action, again in a postmodern way, is merely another kind of action. When new information is learned about Wickham, Jane and Elizabeth, for example, decide not to broadcast it to the neighborhood. “Wickham will soon be gone,” says Elizabeth, and “it will not signify to anybody here, what he really is” (226). Of course, they are wrong, as they come to know (277, 291), since their silence allows Lydia just enough time to elope with Wickham. In certain circumstances, indecision is not even an alternative. This is the case with Darcy’s letter. Elizabeth must believe him or not. She cannot choose to suspend judgment. Unless she actively believes and accepts Darcy’s apology, she has as much as disbelieved it. In the phrasing of William James, indecision in this instance does not exist as a live option.

And most importantly, Austen insists, unlike Derrida and others who dissociate the text from the pen that has engendered it, that the letter has an author, one whose character and intentions Elizabeth must attempt to decipher, the decipherment of which is in fact the very point of reading it. For each of Elizabeth’s two readings produces the picture in her mind of a very different man. It is for the sake of determining which of these two is really Darcy that she must interpret his words, because one she would marry and one she would not. And on that choice will rest her happiness.

The process that takes her through this reading, while it constitutes instructions not remarkable in themselves in the context of empiricism, is remarkable in that it shows, drafting a virtual course in the management of empirical observation, how completely Austen requires herself to stand within the empiricist framework and how thoroughly she understands what that framework allows and entails.

The primary focus is on evidence, on its nature, on its sources, on its proper interpretation. Until the moment she reads that letter, the most basic of all prerequisites, namely that evidence is necessary for the making of a judgment, simply does not occur to Elizabeth. Her sense of Darcy had been nothing but the expression of an antipathy, which she had, however, accepted as a valid base for her view. Only now does she realize that she had had no “reason” at all for the opinion she had formed of him (225). Not only is Austen stressing the need here for substantiating evidence, she is also differentiating between a reason and a cause, between a psychological motive and a philosophic ground. A cause Elizabeth had had for her disinclination toward Darcy: the mortification of her pride. What she had not had was the evidence that could function as a reason. In yet another of those moments that make a philosophic point, Austen illustrates the difference. Earlier, when Wickham had told her that Darcy had accused him of forfeiting his claim to the family’s good will by his “extravagance” and “imprudence,” Elizabeth had protested indignantly, certain that Darcy’s charges were slanderous (79). Now, in a clearly parallel scene, she comprehends that she has “no proof” that Darcy is wrong to speak

in his letter of Wickham's "extravagance" and "profligacy" (205). Rehearsing her history with both men as she reconsiders that letter, Elizabeth furthermore comes to see not only that evidence is essential but that it must be relevant evidence. She had formed her conception of Wickham by taking his appealing "countenance" and his delightful "manner" and "voice" as indications of his character (206). But now, beginning to discern what to accept and what to question in making a particular judgment, Elizabeth dismisses these factors as entirely irrelevant and becomes in turn aware of others, others she had ignored before. She recalls how freely Wickham had spoken to her of himself, how quickly he had confided to her what should have been his private thoughts, how unreservedly he had complained that Darcy had treated him unfairly. She had been flattered by his confidences. Only now is she finally "struck" by the astounding "impropriety" of his making "communications" of this kind to a total "stranger," struck even more that this impropriety had completely "escaped her before" (206-07). Austen, moreover, requires Elizabeth to take full responsibility for the discovery of evidence. Until this moment, Elizabeth has allowed herself to be only a passive recipient of whatever accidental intelligence was directed her way. Now, as she upbraids herself for blindly putting her trust in Wickham, a man about whom nothing was known by anyone in the neighborhood, she understands that she should have made the effort to learn something about him, to acquire "information" by "enquiring" into his character (206).

Had she done so, had she inquired in the neighborhood about Wickham, she would have acquired what Austen calls "second-hand intelligence" (9), a major subject in this novel. For the most part Austen distrusts it. In the form of rumor, gossip, and the general opinion, it becomes in *Pride and Prejudice* a chorus transmitting misinformation, voicing, for instance, the popular view that Wickham is charming and Darcy cold (206). Austen is so much indeed the empiricist that she is always highly suspicious of any opinion that is not rooted not only in actual observation but in a specific observer. The passive voice in verbal constructions—such as Wickham's "'it is believed'" that Darcy intends to marry his cousin (83)—is always in Austen a warning signal precisely because it names no source. Individual observation often counters what rumor claims. When Elizabeth has a chance to rely on her own "observation," she realizes that Darcy's sister, whom everyone considers "proud," is nothing more than "exceedingly shy" (261). But it is frequently the case that such intelligence is the only knowledge that is available, and Austen is at pains to teach Elizabeth as well as the reader how to assess it judiciously. The critical moment in this connection comes when Elizabeth suddenly realizes that everything she has known about Wickham, or everything she thought she knew, was only "what he had told" her "himself" (206). Darcy, by contrast, suggests in his letter that she inquire into his character by consulting the "testimony" of his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Their "'near relationship,'" Darcy explains, and their

“constant intimacy,” as well as his role as an executor of the elder Darcy’s will, renders him thoroughly “acquainted with every particular” of his story (202). The key to this passage is the word “testimony.” Austen uses this word again when Elizabeth at Pemberley ponders the housekeeper’s “testimony” in regard to Darcy’s character (265). David P. Demarest, Jr., has stressed that, not only in *Pride and Prejudice* but in *Emma* and *Mansfield Park*, Austen uses legal language to suggest a legal paradigm for the investigation of evidence. And that is just what she means here. Colonel Fitzwilliam and the housekeeper are being offered as character witnesses, as though Darcy were on trial. Whatever we cannot observe ourselves, Austen appears here to be saying, we may have to accept from others, but we must give it credence only if it is the kind of evidence acceptable in a court of law.

Finally, we must understand, in handling the evidence we acquire of whatever sort it is, that, like all empirical data, the picture that evidence gives us of reality is an interpretation only, never certain or absolute. Until she rereads Darcy’s letter, this too does not occur to Elizabeth. And for this her pride is to blame. For if it is as a faulty premise that the prejudice of the title has its most important function, pride here functions as an obstacle to our seeing that even at best our conclusions are only conjectures. Elizabeth’s pride not only inclines her to a prejudice against Darcy, it engenders an arrogant certainty that her reading of events is the only possible one. Had she considered at the start, as she was forming her first impressions of the characters of the two men, that other interpretations were feasible, it would not have been so difficult for her to detect errors in her thoughts. Convinced, however, that there could be one interpretation only, she persisted in her blindness to every other possibility. Only as she rereads that letter and considers what Darcy tells her does she suddenly realize that the very information that had led her to favor Wickham was equally “capable of a turn which must make” Darcy utterly “blameless” (205). “Capable of a turn,” of course, is the crucial language here. The focus is not on new information. The focus is on interpretation and the many ways in which evidence can be construed.

It is in connection with such blunders that Austen invokes the power of reason. Although it cannot provide us with knowledge, as it might for a rationalist, reason, in a functional sense, can, for Austen as for Hume, help us manage empirical evidence in an intelligent, fruitful way. It can help us judge and evaluate it. This is the process that takes Elizabeth from her first reading to her second. Both of her readings are impressions in the strictest empiricist sense, as are both her readings of Darcy. That is why the novel’s first title—and we should note that for this title Austen chose an empiricist term—is not *Impressions* but *First Impressions*. Impressions is not what Austen rejects. What she rejects are those first impressions Elizabeth forms without reflecting on whether or not they are defensible. And to make impressions defensible we need the critical power of reason. Rereading that letter, for example, Elizabeth

now begins to compare, as she had failed to do before, Wickham's actions to his words. He had boasted that facing Darcy was not something he had to fear. But he had not appeared at the ball at which Darcy was expected. He had told tales to everyone who was inclined to listen to him that Darcy had mistreated him. But he had only told those tales after Darcy had left the neighborhood. He had assured her that he respected Darcy's father far too much to speak a word against his son. And yet he had spoken ill of Darcy at every available opportunity. Each of these empirical tidbits she had held separately in her mind. Reason is what brings them together. It is what helps her now to draw those lines that connect the disparate dots. Having "weighed" now "every circumstance" of the particulars of the letter, she is able to see a picture that had not emerged before. Austen is still not prepared to say that Elizabeth has arrived at knowledge. But the connecting of those dots has at last enabled her to estimate a "probability" (205-06).

Reason, furthermore, is essential in helping correct those errors of will that often prevent the mind from consenting to these various operations. These errors are highlighted all through the novel. When Elizabeth, for example, attempts to send Mary silent signals not to offer to play the piano for the hapless assembled guests, Mary, Austen pointedly writes, simply "*would not understand them*" (100; italics mine); when Darcy accuses Elizabeth of misapprehending everyone, he insists that she does so "'wilfully'" (58). The condition is psychological, but it is evident that Austen comes at her psychology here from a philosophic angle, for her interest in these errors is primarily epistemological, not as a limitation of character, although that is of interest too, but as an obstacle to knowledge. Again and again, as she takes Elizabeth through the rereading of that letter, Austen brings her to recognize not only that she has misread but that she has chosen to do so. Even when she had been compelled, on her first reading of the letter, to see some merit in Darcy's words, she had been so averse to believing him that she had repeatedly cried "'This must be false! This cannot be! This must be the grossest falsehood!'" not because his words were not credible but because "if" she granted them "true," they would "overthrow," she realized, "every cherished opinion" she held. Her "prejudice" had engendered a will to "discredit" what he said (204-05). What Austen keeps underscoring here is that the words, the signs on the page, plain enough before her eyes, have little to do with Elizabeth's reading. Reading is done with the mind, not the eye. Until Elizabeth utters those words that mark the turning point of the novel, "'Till this moment, I never knew myself'" (208), she is not ready psychologically to form her philosophic view.

Some of what Austen raises here concerning the state of mind of the reader and the nature of reading itself seems to anticipate the idea that it is the reader's response that makes the meaning of a text. The very fact that the different readings of that letter are made to depend not on changes in the text but in the reader's state of mind indicates that Austen is conscious of the philosophic

issues that have led to this critical theory. Having conceded that objectivity lies forever beyond our grasp, Austen could hardly have failed to realize that reading was a subjective act. Yet this is precisely the conclusion on which she cannot come to rest. To accept a reader-response interpretation of that letter would make the reading of it useless. The only point of reading the letter is for Elizabeth to know whether or not to marry Darcy. The meaning has to be tied to the text even as the text to its author. Yet, although she is clearly repudiating its most radical ramifications, Austen does not altogether reject even this postmodern idea. She seeks a less global middle position. As Wayne Booth conceives of a figure whom he calls the “implied reader,” “created by the work” itself and functioning as the “ideal interpreter” (138), as Umberto Eco imagines an *intentio operis* that places a set of defined parameters around what the reader may infer as the meaning of a text, creating a kind of model reader (see especially 64 ff.), and as Walter Slatoff insists that readers have to come to the text with a degree of self-awareness of their own subjective locations (171), so Jane Austen tries to find, within the unavoidable limits of our subjective relationship to the meaning of a text, a position that will allow the possibility of a reading.

And the position she adopts is precisely the position offered by David Hume himself in his essay “Of the Standard of Taste,” his most important contribution to the subject of aesthetics and, incidentally, to the problems inherent in the act of reading. Austen might well have known this work. Published in 1757, this was precisely the kind of essay that was read in homes like Austen’s. Admitting, as he hardly cannot, the subjectivity of perception, Hume, nonetheless, insists in this essay that there are worse and better readings, and, precisely as Austen does, offers advice on how a critic can distinguish between the two. His focus, very much like Austen’s, is on the state of mind of the reader. In each of us there is potentially a “sound” and a “defective” state, but only in a “sound” condition can we formulate a “true standard” that will permit us to read well. To reach that standard, we must seek to divest ourselves of bias, of our moods, of idiosyncracies. We must seek to bend our “fancy” to the “situation” at hand and give “due attention to the object” (232). As we would not choose to judge “flavors” while suffering from a “fever” or “colours” with a jaundiced eye, so we should not attempt to read when subject to certain “internal” states (233-34). And of these the most pernicious, as for Austen so for Hume, is the state in which we harbor a particular “prejudice” (244). To “produce its due effect,” a “work of art” must be “surveyed in a certain point of view” (239); “prejudice” destroys “sound judgment, and perverts all operations of the intellectual faculties” (240). What Hume is saying here in essence is that even in empiricism there are two kinds of subjectivity, one implicit in the philosophy, the other the distinctive prejudice of the individual mind. The first is impossible to escape. The second, however, can be corrected once we recognize its existence and take measures to counteract it. And, like Austen,

Hume believes that the means of correcting our prejudices are the “operations” of “reason” (240-41).

Hume is speaking here, of course, of a reader of literature. But Austen not only, as we have seen, uses the concept and language of reading for every kind of interpretation, she clearly intends, as she trains Elizabeth, to educate her readers as well, to teach them to read both the world and her novel. The novel is a *bildungsroman* as much for the reader as for Elizabeth. Partly we learn in the usual way, by identifying with the heroine. But partly our education is wrought through the narrator of the novel. Satz has shown that this narrator assumes the epistemological task of pointing out the interpretations to which events and characters lend themselves (171). But narrators and the making of narratives are even more central in this book that is full of rival narrators engaged in making rival narratives. Wickham’s story, for example, is told to Elizabeth in many versions through a series of narrators. First, she hears it from Wickham himself (77 ff.), then from Miss Bingley, whom she believes to be prejudiced against him (94), then from Jane who is not prejudiced but who is only, it turns out, repeating the story she heard from Bingley (95-96), who, in his turn, we then discover, did not know Wickham at all but only had his account from Darcy (96). Obvious in this tangle of narratives is not only Austen’s emphasis on narration as an activity but, since these narratives do not differ very much in the data they offer but only in how it is interpreted, an emphasis too on the fact that narrative is always tied to a narrator, that every tale, like every fact, is only an interpretation reflecting the narrator’s view or purpose, and that both narrator and narrative must, in consequence, be considered objects to be interpreted.

And it is exactly this fact that the chief narrator of the novel is designed to make us realize. The very first words are so constructed, in the irony of their tone, as to require interpretation. The narrator either intends what is written or its absolute opposite. But nothing in the words themselves tells us which of the two is meant. Many ironists have, we know (Jonathan Swift, whose “A Modest Proposal” was held by some to be suggesting that the Irish eat their children), lamented literal-minded readers who have taken them at their word and have so misread their meaning. A reader of Austen’s opening sentence might well understand the words themselves and yet wholly miss their point. Austen thus positions her narrator and the reader of her text in a dialogue not of words but of meanings and intentions. The bond so created is complex and makes an epistemological statement. It gives us experiential evidence that, despite the skepticism of the empiricist position, despite the profoundly reflexive reality of its subjective point of view, and despite the relative nature of any truth it claims to find, reading, even if only feasible by conjecturing possibilities, is nonetheless, though always precarious, not entirely impossible.

NOTES

¹ Janis Stout, for example, has demonstrated that Austen is often more interested in her themes than in her action, Butler that her moral perspective rests on a solid base of ideas, and Susan Morgan that Austen's novels are not only firmly grounded in an "intellectual position," but that it is this very position that, in fact, unifies her works (3-4). Daniel Gunn shows that the rhetoric of her fiction is frequently ideological, Frederick Keener that she is the genuine heir of the "philosophical tale" that prevailed in the eighteenth century, and Stone that it is misleading to think that the limited scope of her action limits her philosophic dimensions.

² While she holds that Austen's fiction cannot "release a theory of knowledge formed fully enough to be a systematic epistemology," and while she believes that Austen rejects "the inheritance of Locke" (3-4), Susan Morgan does conclude that Austen shares with her contemporaries a sense that the question of "how we perceive" can no longer be assumed but is a "dilemma" she must resolve (5).

³ This overwhelming conviction that Austen is, if anything, a rationalist in her epistemological views arises, in part, I think, from the fact that there is so much in her fiction that is essentially Augustan, from her dislike of excessive emotion to her well-balanced, sculptured sentences. The tendency has always been to assume she is of a piece with every aspect of the age, including its mainstream rationalism. But sitting, on the line that divides the age of reason from the age of empiricism, she takes her imprint from both.

⁴ While no one has ever, as far as I know, taken her to be an empiricist—and some like Ryle insist she was never touched even by "echoes" of Butler and Hume (182)—a few have argued that Austen allows sentiment to temper reason in the making of moral choices (see, for example, Kearney) and, as Chillman has rightly claimed, sentiment in the Romantic period is largely grounded in empiricism. Zelda Boyd has, furthermore, argued that Austen and Hume share one thing, namely the view, as Hume expressed it, that one cannot derive an "ought" from an "is" (149).

⁵ This question of interpretation is foregrounded again in *Emma*. Here the "enigmas," "riddles," "charades" and "conundrums" the characters play (especially in Chapter 9) act as metaphors for the difficulties inherent in interpretation.

⁶ I owe my acquaintance with Arthur Fine's book to George Levine's discussion of it in his essay "Looking for the Real." In the literary field, antirealism, suggests Levine, might be said to acquiesce in the final "impossibility of unmediated knowledge" without entailing "a refusal to accept the conditions of 'homely' truths" (13). Susan Morgan says something similar. Rejecting the view of those who speak, as most of Austen's readers have done, of her novels in terms of "finalities," Morgan characterizes Austen as one who chose rather "to speak of the possible, the continuous, the incomplete" (80).

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