

Renouncing the Impossible, Wishing for Nothing in *Emma*

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This essay is about politics and religion in *Emma*. It thus enters into conversation with two ongoing but separate debates within Austen studies. In terms of politics, the debate centers on whether Austen's novels abet or undercut her conservatism. In terms of religion, the debate centers on whether Austen's novels abet or undercut her Anglicanism. In both cases I will be arguing that the business of Austen's novels is considerably more radical than the abetting or undercutting of a dominant ideology. In *Emma*, I will try to show, Austen moves well beyond her own natural law tradition and its conflation of political and spiritual values to articulate a nuanced vision of the existential conditions of post-revolutionary existence.

Most critics read Austen as a conservative novelist, committed to the social landscape of the eighteenth century. Marilyn Butler, for instance, writes that *Emma* has

the classic plot of the conservative novel. Essentially, a young protagonist is poised at the outset of life, with two missions to perform: to survey society, distinguishing the true values from the false, and, in light of this new knowledge of "reality," to school what is selfish, immature and fallible in herself.¹

According to Butler, Emma's submission to this reality beyond the self is a conservative one. Butler is not necessarily pleased with this conclusion, but her supposition is that such a conclusion is unavoidable.

An alternative theory places Austen in the context of post-revolutionary society rather than that of the eighteenth century, arguing that the conservative political and social vision articulated in Austen's novels sits uneasily alongside the democratic and romantic impulses that were unsettling both England and the Continent in her day. This position emphasizes the democratic experiments of the French Revolution, the poetic and political project of the *Lyrical Ballads* and the rapid changes in England's rural and urban landscapes, noting that these signal an end to the carefully controlled world in which Austen's characters move. Although the causal relations of historical conditions and imaginative literature are always problematic, it seems inevitable that Austen's texts register at least some of these changes. Eighty percent of the enclosure acts were passed in her lifetime, a fact of which she was certainly conscious.² Robert Martin, the model of a prosperous and enlightened tenant farmer, is obviously a representative of the changed economics of post-enclosure farming: he reads agricultural journals and he travels, exploiting the economic possibilities that the new roads have opened up.

Alongside enclosure, Austen's treatment of letters registers an historical sensibility beyond that of the typical "conservative novel." In *Emma*, the sending, receiving, and interpretation of letters are an astonishingly big deal. There are numerous instances: Jane Fairfax makes daily trips to the post

office; Frank Churchill sends his father a “highly-prized” letter in place of himself, which remains a subject of comment for weeks; Emma complains to Harriet that she is sick of Jane Fairfax because “every letter from her is read forty times over. . . .”³ One of Frank’s letters leads Mr. Knightley to declare that Frank is “womanly,” an assertion immediately contested by Emma; another of Frank’s letters is the subject of a chapter-long interpretive debate between Emma and Mr. Knightley; finally, Robert Martin’s gentlemanly letter of proposal to Harriet catches Emma entirely off-guard.

Indeed, Robert Martin’s letter shows how badly Emma’s way of evaluating others can be mistaken.⁴ Faced with its unexpected elegance, Emma visibly struggles to justify her original opinion of Robert:

The style of the letter was much above her expectation. There were not merely no grammatical errors, but as a composition it would not have disgraced a gentleman. . . . “I can hardly imagine the young man whom I saw talking with you the other day could express himself so well. . . . No doubt he is a sensible man, and I suppose may have a natural talent for—thinks strongly and clearly—and when he takes a pen in hand, his thoughts naturally find proper words. It is so with some men.” (50-51)

While Emma may be satisfied with this conclusion, the reader understands that the letter remains a direct challenge: Robert Martin, it says, is almost a gentleman. What unsettles Emma is not the fact that she was badly wrong in her interpretation of Robert Martin’s intentions; she is upset instead because a mere farmer can masquerade as a gentleman through the medium of writing. Emma has been used to evaluating by appearance, and on these grounds she finds it easy to render judgment on Robert Martin. She had told Harriet earlier: “I had no idea that he could be so very clownish, so totally without air. I had imagined him, I confess, a degree or two nearer gentility” (32). Now, in this letter, is a powerful repudiation of Emma’s former reading.

This small incident shows that Austen’s characters are situated at the intersection of two distinct ways of coming to understand people. One—the old way—relies on the social clues (dress, manner, profession) of a hierarchical social order. The other—the new way—emphasizes self-expression. The disjunction between these two ways is made evident here: through the medium of writing, Robert Martin seems much more like Mr. Knightley than he would if the two were standing side by side. Emma’s evident perplexity indicates that Highbury’s eighteenth-century social order is no longer an adequate guide to evaluating people. Throughout the novel, letters subvert hierarchy and interrupt Emma’s schemes by promoting self-expression and creating a democratic interpretive community. Austen’s treatment of letter-writing thus instantiates a certain history of letter-writing that Mary Favret identifies as indicative of post-Revolutionary society: “The letter’s private life and representative power, having become public property, remains suspect in nineteenth century literature. No longer would the letter inscribe the individual in a secure social order . . .” (34). It is clear that letters are open to multiplicity of interpretation, and thus demonstrate a fundamental principle of democracy, namely that meaning and significance are con-

structed via debate, disagreement and a consensus rather than by reference to an immediately-apprehensible truth. "A letter," as Edmund Bertram says in *Mansfield Park*, "exposes to all the evil of consultation" (423).

The nervousness over letters indicates that the eighteenth-century social order, whose hierarchical structure placed individuals in demonstrably distinct categories, is fading. In its place comes the confusion of democracy, which subverts the social clues that individuals had been wont to rely on in order to establish another's identity.⁵ Austen's characters must come to terms with this new reality, or face the punishment of never achieving self-understanding.

The debate about Austen and religion has likewise suffered, I think, from an improper attention to historical conditions—in this case, those of Austen's Anglican church. The problem, as many have noted, is that although Austen herself was evidently a sincere Christian, there is a remarkable paucity of religious reference in her texts. This has caused a number of critics to argue that, whatever her personal beliefs, Austen is a secular novelist.⁶ Others counter that, though explicit references are few, Austen's moral vision is self-evidently Christian.⁷ The terms of this debate strike me as unsatisfactory for two reasons: first, deducing Austen's faith from her morals inevitably functions as further proof of her conservatism; and second, this deduction seems like a version of a category mistake, in which critics debate morality as if they were debating religion. In any case, it ought to be clear by now that this debate will never be satisfactorily concluded: while Austen very well may have absorbed her moral thinking from Burke and Locke, who were Christians, she might equally have absorbed it from Aristotle or Shaftesbury, who were not. Jane Austen's moral vision, with its emphasis on moderation, self-understanding, and education, could have been propounded with equal conviction by a Christian, a Deist or an atheist.

It will not do, therefore, to mime current criticism by talking about Austen's moral vision as if we were talking about her faith. Yet, ironically, this conflation of moral and spiritual thinking mirrors the condition of the Church of England in Austen's day. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the education of clergymen was essentially secular: they read the classics, and studied natural law, moral philosophy, Locke, Newton, and mathematics. Clergymen-to-be might get a smattering of theology in their final year, but if they did it was of the natural religion variety, emphasizing the reasonableness and rationality of faith, rather than mysticism and transcendence, or its deduction from close Biblical exegesis.⁸ Austen's Church of England may very well have taken for its motto the words of John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury in the seventeenth century, who declared that the "great design of the Christian religion" was "to restore and reinforce the practice of the natural law or, which is all one, of moral duties" (qtd. Collins 43). Religion, in other words, helps society to function in accord with the natural law by ensuring the morality of its subjects. Natural law theory conflates moral, social, and religious issues, meaning that religion and society stand and fall together.

II

Recognizing the importance of natural law for Austen, however, is only the beginning of the difficulty, for natural law itself is a notoriously mercurial category, capable of encompassing a wealth of political and spiritual positions. (Burke was a natural law theorist; so were the Unitarian Dissenters.) In addition, the very concept of natural law seems, at the end of the Napoleonic wars, to be under attack. Post-revolutionary society overturned the “natural” social order: people moved up and down the social ladder by means of luck, cunning and skill rather than the rational orderings of birthright and inheritance, and the result was a world in which appearances could not be trusted: commoners might write like gentlemen or, more dangerously for Austen’s marriage-minded heroines, wealth and good manners might disguise avarice and moral turpitude. A quick glance at the number of misunderstandings present in *Emma* outlines the danger: Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, the piano, the insistent recurrence of riddles and word-games, the mysterious Campbells and the socially ambiguous positions of Jane Fairfax and Robert Martin. Most importantly, Emma seriously misinterprets the intentions of Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill and Mr. Knightley. It is clear that she makes these mistakes because of her commitment to the traditional familial and hierarchical structure of the eighteenth century, which guaranteed a ready knowledge of one’s place in the world. The fact, however, is that the natural order is in disrepair, and Emma’s persistent self-deceptions leave her unable to understand others or herself.⁹

Emma’s conundrums cannot be solved by suggesting, as the conservative reading does, that the many confusions of the plot are at last resolved, that the social hierarchy is reestablished, and that Emma, having finally achieved an understanding of the world, is now ready to assume her proper place in society. Rather, the novel’s preoccupation with the mysterious and the unforeseen continues to its very close: as the fortuitous, unexpected interference of the turkey thieves suggests, this is a world whose most important events are contingent on the unknown land beyond the shrubbery.¹⁰ And thus the novel’s foregrounding of boundaries between inside and outside, and its effort to portray the land within the hedge is known and safe, is constantly undercut. *Emma* is a novel in which the world and other people are destined to remain enigmas.¹¹ Under these conditions, true understanding seems hopeless; yet Emma must somehow achieve knowledge in the face of mystery.

What kind of knowledge is available in a world so characterized by contingency? The crucial scene, to my mind, comes mid-way through the novel. While Harriet considers a purchase at Fords, Emma walks to the door and looks out:

Much could not be hoped from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury . . . and when her eye fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarreling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children . . . she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused enough. A mind lively and at ease can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer. (233)

It is odd, first of all, that such a careful description of Emma's physical surroundings should also be described as "nothing." It seems that this vacillation is motivated by a switch from objective to subjective: at first, we have the narrator's impersonal voice, giving a meticulous description; then, suddenly, we are inside Emma's mind, seeing not what the narrator sees, but what she sees. The objective world, and the narrator's impassive voice, have dropped away, and Emma is left alone.

What she sees is nothing: "A mind lively and at ease can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer." We know, of course, that this "nothing" is actually a village scene: women and children, dogs, a dusty street. But Emma experiences these things as nothing, and her evident satisfaction springs from this perception. It seems that this "nothing" is a kind of blankness beyond which Emma's mind cannot push. It is not as though, when Emma gazes at the street, she actually sees nothing. But what she sees *is* nothing, in the sense that it has no significance beyond itself. Women, children, dogs, a dusty street: these do not point anywhere, or mean anything beyond themselves. They simply are. They do not exist for Emma apart from this single moment—but in this moment they are all that exists. This is everyday life, going about the everyday business of existence. Emma's triumph is that she realizes this; for once, she is simply content to experience, rather than to understand. It is a relief, perhaps, to take a break from trying to understand the world, and to simply let it be.

This is an unusual scene for Emma, for she is generally quick—too quick—to see the significance of things. Usually this means that their significance revolves around her. The everyday things that Emma sees here, however, seem to resist this kind of interpretive gesture, for they exist wholly independently of her. In this sense, they are nothing, which means that they are simply themselves—and rather than relying on an abstract schema, Emma must rely simply on her ability to see them for what they are, and acknowledge herself as somehow a part of a world to whom her own existence is a matter of indifference. Rather than forcing the external world to take account of her, Emma here lets the outside world disclose itself; her contentment is determined by this other, rather than by her own volition.

We can be more specific: Emma here achieves a significant degree of self-understanding, and this understanding comes precisely *because* of her inability to interpret the world. It is only when she gives up on the effort of interpretation that she can come to truly know herself as an experiencing subject. Rather than depicting an understanding of the world and an understanding of the self as joint projects, Austen here suggests that they are mutually exclusive. It is only when Emma gives up on the epistemological task of interpretation that she is content. The price she pays is in accepting the fact that her understanding will always be incomplete, and that the world runs according to its own, independent means, and is thus not available for her manipulation and modification.

This is confirmed at the novel's close, where another appearance of the word "nothing" completes Emma's education. In the first chapter, when Miss Taylor marries and leaves the Woodhouse establishment, the

narrator reports, “Emma could not but sigh over it, and wish for impossible things . . .” (704). At the novel’s close, as Emma is happily contemplating marriage to Mr. Knightley, Austen re-writes the earlier trope: “What had she to wish for? Nothing, but to grow more worthy of him. . . . Nothing but that the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in future” (966). Initially, the interpretation of this passage seems self-evident. But if we remember that this is a rather extraordinary re-writing of Emma’s earlier sentiment (from wishing for impossible things to wishing for nothing) and that Austen’s choice of the word “nothing” recalls a crucial moment in Emma’s own growth in self-understanding, a closer inspection is perhaps justified. In context, Emma’s contentment here seems not simply the contentment of marrying Mr. Knightley, but instead the sort of contentment that she experienced at Ford’s when for a moment she surrendered her interpretive struggles and experienced her own existence as independent of them. Given the novel’s insistence on the impossibility of ever achieving complete understanding, might not the “impossible things” that Emma has given up be that very pursuit of complete knowledge? Is this not an outright repudiation of the epistemological project, and a corresponding willingness to forge a meaningful life in the face of mystery? Reality, Emma learns, is not like Highbury’s hierarchical social text, but like letters: ambiguous, full of surprises, and always open to reinterpretation. In this situation, the best response is to keep understanding from interfering with living, to see nothing beyond what is there. To wish for nothing, then, is to stop wishing for a world loaded with significance, which points to a larger beyond and a network of ordering principles. To wish for nothing is simply to wish for clear sight, to wish for the patience to wait for the world to disclose itself, rather than rushing to interpret it. Wishing for nothing means wishing for the humility to be astonished at one’s very being.¹²

The trajectory of Emma’s development that I have been sketching takes her out of the orbit of natural law theory, and therefore beyond the sphere of both politics and religion as Austen—or her critics—think of them. Through Emma, Austen distances herself from natural law’s rationality and reasonableness, its collapsing of social, moral and religious visions. Emma renounces the complete understanding that this tradition promises, and instead determines to face squarely the unknown world both beyond and within Highbury’s shrubbery, where nothing is assured, and nothing impossible.

NOTES

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¹ Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) 250.

² Most of the enclosure acts were passed in two groups between 1760 and 1780 and between 1793 and 1815. See Maggie Lane, *Jane Austen’s England* (London: Robert Hale, 1986) 20.

³ All references to Jane Austen’s novels will be given in the text and are from R. W. Chapman, ed., *The Novels of Jane Austen*, Oxford University Press, 1954.

- ⁴ Mary Favret suggests that Emma's tendency to create coercive fictions about Highbury's residents is directly related to the loss of authorial control necessitated by letters. See "Jane Austen and the Look of Letters" in *Romantic Correspondence: Women, politics and the fiction of letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 133-75.
- ⁵ See especially an excellent article by Beatrice Marie, "Emma and the Democracy of Desire," *Studies in the Novel* 17 (1985): 1-13. Marie argues that *Emma* depicts love as a social rather than romantic phenomenon, in which desire between two individuals is always mediated or determined by a third. This triangulation opens the possibility for the subversion of social hierarchy.
- ⁶ Most infamously Gilbert Ryle, in "Jane Austen and the Moralists," *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B. C. Southam (London: Routledge, 1968): 106-22.
- ⁷ For this view, which is undeniably dominant, see Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), and Park Honan, *Jane Austen: Her Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987). The following passage from Honan's biography may be taken as typical of this position: "[Austen] heard that religion was the basis of civil society. She absorbed a strict Christian and stoic morality. Talents and achievements are as dust, she learned, and education is nothing if it does not lead to 'self-knowledge' . . ." (27).
- ⁸ Cf. Irene Collins, *Jane Austen and the Clergy* (London: Hambledon, 1994) 41.
- ⁹ For an excellent account of Austen and this epistemological crisis, see the first chapter of Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988). Johnson suggests that the French Revolution "gave rise to the novel of crisis in England, a novel in which the structures of daily life are called into doubt and the unthinkable just keeps happening" (26). Johnson argues that although Austen herself does not write explicitly in this vein, she fills her fiction with references to it.
- ¹⁰ I take the term "contingency" from Gene Koppel's provocative treatment of Austen's faith in *The Religious Dimension of Jane Austen's Novels* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988). According to Koppel, "an awareness of the independent and radical contingency of the world is very much a part" of Austen's fiction" (63).
- ¹¹ I disagree, then, with Nicola Watson's recent reading of *Emma*: "Austen's didactic programme is to bring the two discourses, the public and the private, onto a level, and to insure a world of near-perfect institutionalized intelligibility." See *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). Like a number of recent commentators, Watson views the circulation of letters and gossip within the novel as an economy which successfully realigns the characters in a proper eighteenth century social hierarchy. See also Casey Finch and Peter Bowen, "'The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury': Gossip and the Free Indirect Style in *Emma*," *Representations* 31 (1990): 1-18.
- ¹² Obviously, my account of Emma's encounter with nothingness owes a good deal to the thought of Martin Heidegger, especially *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953, 1959). More generally, Emma's acceptance of the "nothing" might be described in philosophical terms as a rejection of epistemology, with its emphasis on intellectual mastery and control, in favor of hermeneutics, which stresses instability and contingency in its quest for understanding.