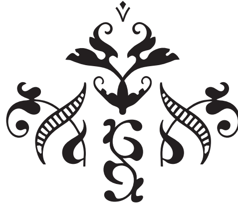

England's *Emma*

RACHEL M. BROWNSTEIN
Rachel M. Brownstein is Professor of English at Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center, CUNY, where she is also Executive Officer of the Liberal Studies Program. She has been teaching and writing about Jane Austen since before 1982, when her "Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels" was published.

Jane Austen began writing *Emma* in Chawton Cottage in Hampshire on January 21, 1814. She was thirty-eight years old and the author of several novels, two already published and one that had been accepted for publication the following spring. Although her name was not in print on any of her books, she was known as a writer among her family and her acquaintance, and in London her proud brother Henry had begun to make her authorship more widely known. To a reader like Henry, who was familiar with her works so far, the important things about Jane Austen would already have been clear: that she had a genius for writing, and that from the beginning, for her, writing novels had involved acute authorial—aesthetic—self-consciousness. As a very young girl she wrote (and formally dedicated to members of her family) brilliant send-ups of fashionable novels in which the joke is about the difference between the romantic and the real. The heroine of one early, very short satiric story is disappointed in love and retires to her room, where she "continued in tears the remainder of her Life." Her name is Emma. In her twenties, Jane Austen drafted but didn't finish a novel, "The Watsons," which also has a heroine—pretty, lively, and poor—named Emma. By the begin-

ning of 1814, when she started writing about her third (at least) Emma, Jane Austen had not only parodied other people's fiction and written her own but also rewritten several of her own novels. Altering *Sense and Sensibility* from a novel in letters, lopping and cropping *Pride and Prejudice*, she worked at making the novel an art form, which it had not quite been before she took it up.

By its title—the only one of her published novels to be named after the heroine—*Emma* declares that it is not about abstractions (like Sense and Sensibility, or Pride and Prejudice) or a place (like Mansfield Park) but about a woman, like many of the romantic novels she satirized. For its first readers, the name would have evoked other Emmas: the heroine of Georgiana Spencer's *Emma, or the Unfortunate Attachment* (1773), perhaps, or of Courtney Melmoth's *Emma Corbett* (1780), or the scandalously passionate eponymous protagonist of the radical Mary Hays's translucently autobiographical *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796). People who preferred real-life scandal to fiction, especially people connected, as Jane Austen was, to the English navy, might have been reminded by the name of a nationally known figure, the notorious heroine of Lord Nelson's love story, Emma, Lady Hamilton. But a novel by the author of three earlier books based on the courtship plot, a novel that begins with the words, "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich," would probably, for its first readers (never mind its mischievous author, whose favorite brother was a Henry), be most evocative of "Henry and Emma," Matthew Prior's "Poem, Upon the Model of The Nut-Brown Maid," which identifies its virtuous heroine—her father's "Age's Comfort"—with a traditional English ballad and thus with England. (In Austen's novel "Henry" is, tantalizingly, Emma's father's name, not her lover's.)

Surely it is partly Jane Austen's fault that in our time "Emma" seems to be the most English of names: it was easy to identify Emma Thompson with Jane Austen, and Emma Tennant seems to have a right to write Austen spin-offs. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Names* (1946), the name Emma derives from the Old German. The first English Emma, mother of Edward the Confessor (d. 1066), was actually French, the daughter of Richard, Duke of Normandy. (So it makes some sense, perhaps, that the

century-long literary war during which England and France traded accusations of producing more worthless romances than the other country would come to a conclusion when Flaubert gave the name "Emma" to romance-reading Norman Madame Bovary.) All of which begins to account for my title, which you will recognize as playing upon the patriotic poem by Rudyard Kipling that celebrates Jane Austen as "England's Jane."

> "Jane lies in Winchester—blessed be her shade!
> Praise the Lord for making her, and her for all she made!
> And while the stones of Winchester, or Milsom Street, remain,
> Glory, love, and honour unto England's Jane!"

Is *Emma* about Emma? does Emma, does *Emma*, represent England? To what extent is the England of *Emma* a place that never was—that still commercially viable Heritage England concocted (everyone from William Empson to Julian Barnes to your local film critic agrees) by English writers? Was Jane Austen an agent for the propagation of the myth of Merrie England? What did England mean to Emma, to Jane Austen? Can we begin to understand today? These are some of the questions I want to explore.

In 1814-1815—indeed, long before that—Jane Austen was a writer aware that she had an audience; her sense of audience was well-honed, keen, wry. When, in London on a visit to Henry, she learned that the Prince Regent (of whom she disapproved) admired her novels, she took this with her usual aplomb. About *Emma* she is said to have announced, "I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like." Her real or feigned worry about the heroine extended to the whole novel: she wrote about her fear "that to those readers who have preferred 'Pride and Prejudice' it will appear inferior in wit, and to those who have preferred 'Mansfield Park' very inferior in good sense" (11 December 1815). A month earlier she had written to Cassandra that John Murray, who was about to publish *Emma*, "sends more praise . . . than I expected" (17 October 1815). I think it would be a mistake to read this as evidence of either severe self-doubt or maidenly modesty. On the contrary, I think that Jane Austen was being deliberately, more than usually, provocative, with *Emma*. In

1815 she was a confident professional novelist: after the Prince's librarian's invitation and yet another nice letter from Murray, she purred from London to her sister in the country, "In short, I am soothed & complimented into tolerable comfort" (24 November 1815). When Mr. Clarke the librarian suggested that she write a romance about the royal House of Saxe-Coburg, she replied that she had to "keep to my own style and go on in my own way," which allowed her to "relax into laughing at myself and other people." She wrote, "I could no more write a romance than an epic poem" (1 April 1816). I want to suggest that *Emma*—completed three months before the battle of Waterloo, near the height of its author's and her country's confidence and consciousness of history—makes a claim, semi-serious in Jane Austen's own style and way, to be a national epic in prose.

She finished the novel in March of 1815, an astonishing year and one month after starting it. It was in the middle of this period—the early fall of 1814—that she wrote the letter, responding to a manuscript novel her niece Anna had sent her, in which she famously declared: "You are now collecting your People delightfully, getting them exactly into such a spot as is the delight of my life;—3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on." The remark reflects her delight in her own work in progress. For all the frequently noted narrowness of their geographical range, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and for that matter the as yet unpublished *Northanger Abbey* and as yet unwritten *Persuasion* cover much more geographical territory than *Emma*, all the action of which takes place in a country village where London, Bristol, Bath, Weymouth, the north of England, Ireland, and continental Europe are talked about as distant places dangerous to get to and be in. Toward the end of the novel sulky Frank Churchill, looking over views of remote "Swisserland" in the snugness of Donwell Abbey, says to Emma, "'I am sick of England—and would leave it tomorrow'" (365). The sour remark damns him even before his character is revealed as thoroughly bad; the contrast between Frank and Emma's home-loving male relations, the Woodhouse and Knightley men, could not be more dramatic. (Mr. Woodhouse is reluctant to stir from his fireside; his son-in-law John Knightley can't understand

why anyone would want to leave home of an evening to dine with a neighbor.) In the world of *Emma* tourists (they include an "Irish car party") are pleased to explore the local beauties of Box Hill. Mr. Woodhouse has doubts about the salubriousness of the seaside (as well as London, and anywhere but Hartfield): they may be read as ratified when Jane Fairfax is first imagined, then proved, to have been compromised there. Emma herself has never seen the sea—but will take a tour there on her honeymoon. While it wittily weighs the moral implications of enjoying England's edges, the novel presumes that only a restless fool or knave would want to leave the country altogether—like Frank, who is "aimable" only in French, being not at all amiably English, having "no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people" (149).

Both for true Janeites and for others who have merely heard of it, the Austen world is a definable place, a green and pleasant, cultivated and comfortable, tight little island in which the best people have delicacy, sensitivity, and moral seriousness of a particular national kind, which the very best people can recognize and describe, in English. (The worst people, Mrs. Elton for instance, use both vulgar slang and foreign terms like *caro sposo.*) Austen mocks them lovingly as John and George Knightley greet one another—"'How d'ye do, George?' and 'John, how are you?'"—in "the true English style, burying under a calmness that seemed all but indifference, the real attachment that would have led either of them, if requisite, to do every thing for the good of the other" (99-100). Characteristically, the author of *Emma* pays more attention to how John and George talk and feel than to what they look like; she listens to what the three or four families say more than she looks at the village. Jane Austen disliked giving particulars of right and left; her visual sense was not especially active. After visiting a couple of art galleries, she wrote once to Cassandra, "I had some amusement at each, tho' my preference for Men and Women, always inclines me to attend more to the company than the sight" (18 April 1811). Still she created a world that many readers (assisted by illustrators and, most recently, filmmakers) find easy to visualize—and identify—with England. We seem to know as if we have visited them: Highbury Village, with

Ford's store, The Crown, and the small home of the Bates ladies; adjacent Hartfield in its shrubberies, a notch in the large estate of Donwell Abbey; Abbey Mill Farm, spreading out beside the Abbey; the more and less dangerous walks and turns toward the vicarage and Randalls. Less rather than more dangerous: while *Emma* is discussed in books about The Realist Novel, Highbury and its environs are easy to place in the tradition of English pastoral, typically written by city people looking back at a lost country paradise cleaned up by the literary imagination. A paradise made for the privileged few.

Either for inventing or condoning such a world—the two very different charges are usually conflated—Jane Austen has been roundly criticized. People say she was in favor of—because she wrote about—an England owned by the few; that she nostalgically idealized a retrograde society that was disappearing, naturalized an economic system and a world view that resulted in the British Empire and all its abuses. Is the English country village of Austen's novels to be read as a representation of an historical place, or of a place that never was? If the latter, is that place presented as an ideal? Is *Emma* an example of the realistic novel at its work of copying nature—and society—or is it something else? Is the England of Austen's fiction informed by a sense of history, or of its own fictitiousness? By both?

Here, famously, is Emma standing outside Ford's, waiting for Harriet to finish shopping:

> Much could not be hoped from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury;—Mr. Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox letting himself in at the office door, Mr. Cole's carriage horses returning from exercise, or a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects she could presume to expect; and when her eyes fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarrelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker's little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread, she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused

> enough; quite enough still to stand at the door. A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer. (233)

The passage enchants escapist readers: pastoral Highbury as a refuge from the world we know. But, considered closely, it is a curious passage, which raises many questions. Exactly who is looking and why, here at nearly the exact mid-point of the novel? Is it Emma, or the narrator? By raising that question, by bracketing the view of Highbury village with words about the restive mind perceiving it, does the narrator suggest that Emma's mind is separate from hers, that the mind is always both informed by and separate from the place it finds itself in? And is she saying—on another level—that downtown Highbury is boring or worth attending to? If the latter, why doesn't *Emma*, the novel, pay more attention to tidy old women and dogs and children, and those Cole and Cox and Perry men who work for a living, and less to Emma Woodhouse's elite circle and privileged mind? Whose mind is rightly described as lively and at ease, here—Emma's? or is the narrator suggesting that Emma the Imaginist, whose too lively mind runs to spinning romantic stories, should be satisfied instead with contemplating the diurnal, unexciting, humble, and actual? Or is Jane Austen just signaling to the knowing reader that this is a novel in which almost nothing—as in downtown Highbury—happens? What is she suggesting, then, about the relation between the narrative about Emma Woodhouse that manages to go exactly nowhere—Emma ends up exactly where she began—and its "realistic" setting?

Critics who have addressed these questions—and there have been many, *Emma* being one of the most written-about books of all time—have more or less agreed to disagree, partly in order to be able to continue examining and expressing delight in the details and their disposition. I want to continue, here, in this tradition, trying to catch Jane Austen in the act of genius by focusing on spots of text like this one where the representation of things and places in a place that is called England is undercut or modified by language that makes the reader think about language and, for instance, point of view—and therefore to read the novel as something other than a mirror of reality. My point is that a

game with mimetic realism is played out in nearly every sentence Jane Austen wrote.

I like to begin "teaching" *Emma* by reading the first page of the novel aloud, and talking about the way the language calls attention to itself from the beginning. Actually, the second page, for I pass only briefly over the dedication, "To His Royal Highness The Prince Regent," where the phrase "His Royal Highness" is written out three times. Claire Tomalin points out that "Such a lavish supply of three Royal Highnesses and one Prince Regent was not [Jane Austen's] idea," but John Murray's. (Tomalin 247) So it can figure only lightly in my argument that by repeating sounds, words, phrases, and scenes, Austen insists that her novels are fabrications of words, literary works, something more than simple stories or sermons. Surely she must have been amused by the multiple "Royal Highnesses" in the dedication. In *Emma* the artful repetitions range from the staggeringly obvious to very subtle. Toward the end of Volume III, for example, when the heroine sits with her father and is "reminded . . . of their first forlorn tête-à-tête, on the evening of Mrs. Weston's wedding day" (422), the reader is overtly directed to compare and contrast a similar scene; but sometimes, as I will show, a nice and telling parallel is discovered only on rereading.

"Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress and vex her" (5). (The phrase "the best blessings of existence" recurs in the scene toward the end that I just referred to.) I like to read the first four paragraphs aloud, up to the one that ends on the next page with the sentence that goes, "The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her" (5-6). My aim is to show that this novel begins by calling attention to its own language, thus characterizing it as not only referential, not transparent. Doing so, I argue, *Emma* stakes a claim for both the pleasures of language and the seriousness of The Novel—identifying itself as a literary artifact, something composed or made. By stressing its heroine's significant imagination, by playing with point of view, by all its authorial and lin-

guistic self-consciousness, as well as by the subtlety of its moral and aesthetic distinctions, *Emma* claims to be different from the usual run of heroine-centered novels. Austen criticizes them for implausibility and unnaturalness, but *Emma* does not rest its own claim to superiority on its greater truth to life. It makes a larger claim. Like the poems of Jane Austen's Romantic contemporaries, *Emma* is concerned with the perceiving and creating imagination, and with what it can make, in a world in flux, that might mean and last.

The significance of beginning with "Emma" is clear: repeating the title, the first word insists again—insists a little too much, therefore ironically—on the heroine's primacy and on the kind of novel (about a woman, about a love story) to come. (Did Jane Austen think "Emma" was a romantic name? Does an 1808 letter allude playfully to *The Watsons*—"There were only 4 dances, & it went to my heart that the Miss Lances (one of them too named Emma!) should have partners only for two"—or does Austen think an Emma deserves to dance every dance?) In the novel's first sentence "Emma" is modified by a domestic-sounding surname: the focus on the homebody-heroine is emphatic, comfortable (the word is there for us to borrow); we are set to read about a novel heroine. But should we be so sure of what's to come? "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine," is how Jane Austen begins *Northanger Abbey*, making a point about the most necessary character in a novel. Writing to her niece Fanny—whom she praised for being odd—about general "ideas of Novels and Heroines," she would declare that "pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked" (23 March 1817). *Emma*, a novel about a heroine most people would not like, is a book in which the word "perfection" is repeated so often, apropos of the heroine, as to become a theme—most notably when Mr. Weston poses the flattering conundrum at Box Hill, "'What two letters of the alphabet are there, that express perfection?'" (he means *M* and *A*), and Mr. Knightley gravely rejoins, "'*Perfection* should not have come so soon'" (371). Emma's relation to a picture is brought up early on when Mrs. Weston calls her "the picture of health" and she undertakes to draw a picture of Harriet, whom she hopes to make

a heroine by making a match for her. The gap between "real" Austen heroines like Catherine or Emma or Fanny and the ideal mere picture of perfection Jane Austen thought other people admired too much is in effect the subject of all her novels. It points to a larger subject, the gap between the novel and the world it seems to represent.

In the first sentence the adjectives describing Emma—"handsome, clever, and rich"—are placed in apposition to her name: "handsome, clever, and rich" is what Emma is first of all, or first, second, and third. The sequence moves from appearance to substance, or beauty to money, both of them critical in the marriage plot; it says, more or less, that Emma has everything going for her. (Henry James exploits this when, discussing a novel by Trollope, he writes that the protagonist "is not handsome, nor clever, nor rich, nor romantic, nor distinguished in any way" [1]. That a man might be described in the terms Austen uses for Emma—"handsome," rather than "pretty"—has been remarked by many critics who emphasize her unusual and perhaps unmaidenly confidence and independence of mind.) Like her riches, Emma's "comfortable home" puts her in a good position—no reason for her not to be happy, and she is disposed to be, enjoying some of the "best blessings of existence." The short vowels reiterate the first sound of "Emma," also the sounds of "distress and vex," affirming what sounds like a logical link, and paving the way for the tonal shift from the intimate to the magisterial that occurs a little later, when the vowel is threateningly lengthened as "The real evils indeed" of Emma's "situation" are evaluated, and she is described as having "a disposition to think a little too well of herself," rather than, as at first, "a happy disposition."

That Emma only "*seemed* to unite *some* of the best blessings of existence" (emphasis added) is not lost on the least perceptive re-reader; but the meaning of "in the world" is more problematic. What does that add? What world is at issue? The reference in the title of Frances Burney's *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778) is to a social world, the world of the marriage market that thirty-eight-year-old Jane Austen might herself be said to have lived in for nearly twenty-one years: but while that worldly world may be evoked by the phrase, it really

seems to refer to this world rather than the next. The religious register (reiterated in "the best blessings," and "the real evils") puts us in a serious place as it tells us that place itself is serious—a point reaffirmed by the repetition of "house" ("Woodhouse," "his house"), and the interesting word "situation," which will gain resonance later on in the story of Jane Fairfax.

To adumbrate the meanings of the words in the novel's first pages is to begin to suggest that *Emma* is about much more than Emma, but that claim is not the only one I want to make. My goal is encouraging readers to appreciate the things Jane Austen does with words in order to convey a broad range of meanings, also to provide the purely literary pleasures of verbal precision. To make the point, I turn to a favorite place of mine where, beginning a new chapter, she writes, apropos of Mrs. Elton, "Human nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting situations, that a young person, who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of" (181). The best way to appreciate that sentence—the way it steps back from the action to philosophize, temporizes with the phrase "interesting situations," pivots on the pointedly ungendered "young person," tendentiously parallels "marries or dies," blows up the parallel with the illogical "is sure of," and comes to social earth with the syntactically different but similar-looking "spoken of," ending triumphantly with a preposition—is to compare it with its imitations. Here is Emma Tennant, also beginning a chapter, in *Emma in Love* (1996), a sequel: "Human nature is so well inclined to the receiving of compliments, that any amount of annoyance or interference will go unchecked, in order for the succession of pleasant remarks to continue" (85). The epigram is less sharp: the satire lacks point. And Angela Thirkell, not quite so baldly imitating, merely echoes Austen in *The Brandons* (1939): "But human nature cannot be content on a diet of honey and if there is nothing in one's life that requires pity, one must invent it; for to go through life unpitied would be an unthinkable loss" (13). The most substantive difference between Austen and her imitators here might be the difference in weight between what people say to and about one another—Austen's parallelism is bolder, her target more significant. There is also a

difference in music and preciseness—and in distance from the "human nature" being assessed.

"A young person, who either marries or dies": English novels of the kind entitled *Emma*—or *Evelina*, or *Ethelinde*—are about young *women* who *marry*. ("All tragedies are finished by a death / All comedies are ended by a marriage," Jane Austen's contemporary Byron wrote (*Don Juan* III, 9), making the distinction and the connection just as she does.) The heroine here, as well as being possessed by the plot, is the one who possesses, that is, hatches it. (Marilyn Butler observes that the brilliant innovation in *Emma* is that the heroine seeks to marry not herself but Harriet. [2]) Of all Jane Austen's heroines, Emma is the only one to own, or nearly, a plot of land [3]. Mistress of her father's estate, she is free of the marriage market: she doesn't have to sell herself to a man to get a home; unlike Elinor and Marianne, Elizabeth and Fanny, Catherine and Anne, she is not a commodity. Far from seeking to exchange her, her father wants nothing to change; the only lover who seeks to marry her for her money, Mr. Elton, is shaken off early on. With her thirty thousand pounds and her nieces, her music and her crayons and her reading lists, she has, as she informs Harriet, "'none of the usual inducements'" to marry. She goes on, enumerating them: "'Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want; I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husbands' house, as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's'" (84).

But something is missing in Emma's charmed life, or there would be no story, and no novel. Or as Jane Austen might put it, "when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way" (*NA*, 16-17). The literary convention of the marriage plot or the love story requires a mate for Emma. The hero, in this case, is a member of one of the three or four families in this country village—to be more precise, he is a member of Emma's own family, her sister Isabella's brother, as

they said then, and her "brother" John Knightley's brother. In addition to his suggestive surname, he bears the quintessentially English name of Saint George. For all his generic and emblematic labels Mr. Knightley may be as innovative a departure from standard novelistic practice as the girl who is referred to disparagingly as "*a* Harriet Smith": it is hard to say if *Emma* or *Mansfield Park* most cleverly foils the marriage plot by ingeniously eluding the obligation to exogamy.

> "Whom are you going to dance with?" asked Mr. Knightley.
>
> She hesitated a moment, and then replied, "With you, if you will ask me."
>
> "Will you?" said he, offering his hand.
>
> "Indeed I will. You have shown that you can dance, and you know we are not really so much brother and sister as to make it at all improper."
>
> "Brother and sister! no, indeed." (331)

But yes indeed, as well. Marrying Mr. Knightley, Emma proudly reaffirms family connections already made, joins estates that are contiguous. She goes nowhere, stays the same, resists change. At the end she is as she was at the beginning, mistress of and resident in her father's house, having solved the problem of being both wife and maiden that tragically baffled Frank Churchill's dead mother, who "wanted at once to be the wife of Captain Weston, and Miss Churchill of Enscombe" (16).

What happens to Emma, in *Emma*? In a sense, total victory is hers: her heirs, presumably, will inherit Donwell, while little Henry, her older sister's son who would have been the heir, will have only Hartfield. But the general critical consensus is that Emma gets all that in the process of a plot in which she is taken down a peg, humiliated. Some argue that she comes to know herself by knowing she loves Mr. Knightley, rather in the manner of Elizabeth Bennet; some even hint—I myself have—that Emma is sexually awakened when "it darted through her with the force of an arrow that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself." Others think she wants him only because she thinks he wants Harriet, whose "soft eyes" awaken her own most tender (homo)erotic impulses. Of course Emma only imagines Mr.

Knightley's interest in Harriet—and on rereading one discovers, with some shock, that Emma, without realizing it, has prefigured all early on: defending Harriet against Mr. Knightley's criticism, she says to him, "'Were you, yourself, ever to marry, she is the very woman for you'" (64). It is another piece of brilliant strategic repetition, more evidence of the obvious, that this novel, so much of which takes place in Emma's head, goes nowhere, on the level of plot, at all.

It is interesting to compare Emma on this score with Elizabeth Bennet, who unlike Emma delights in traveling. Elizabeth tells her sister that she fell in love with Mr. Darcy "on first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley." Like Donwell Abbey, Pemberley, the home that will frame the perfected heroine at the end, is talked about but not revealed to the reader until the last third of the novel. In the beginning of Volume III of *Pride and Prejudice*, the heroine, uninvited, visits for the first time Darcy's house and grounds, and reflects on their beautiful balance of art and nature that reflects the taste of the owner:

> It was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills;—and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal, nor falsely adorned. Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste.

And she thinks, "To be mistress of Pemberley would be something!" (*PP*, 245). When Emma in her turn contemplates and reflects on the much less romantically named Donwell Abbey she is charmed less by its beauties (which are similar, though it is lower) than by its stability. Her view is proprietary: she sees timber, not merely woody hills. Emma is already, after all, well connected with the place:

> She felt all the honest pride and complacency which her alliance with the present and future proprietor could fairly warrant, as she viewed the respectable size and style of the building, its suitable, becoming,

> characteristic situation, low and sheltered—its ample gardens stretching down to meadows washed by a stream, of which the Abbey, with all the old neglect of prospect, had scarcely a sight—and its abundance of timber in rows and avenues, which neither fashion nor extravagance had rooted up. . . . It was just what it ought to be, and it looked what it was—and Emma felt an increasing respect for it, as the residence of a family of such true gentility, untainted in blood and understanding.—Some faults of temper John Knightley had; but Isabella had connected herself unexceptionably. She had given them neither men, nor names, nor places, that could raise a blush. These were pleasant feelings, and she walked about and indulged them. . . . (358)

Characteristic of Jane Austen as the move from the actual to the moral is, so is the insistence on real estate. Emma goes on to walk over the gardens with some of the others, and they are drawn to a "broad short avenue of limes" that "led to nothing; nothing but a view at the end over a low stone wall with high pillars, which seemed intended, in their erection, to give the appearance of an approach to the house, which never had been there." But the flaw of a false entry, an appearance of an approach to a nonexistent place, is quickly smoothed away, by Emma and/or the narrator: "Disputable, however, as might be the taste of such a termination, it was in itself a charming walk, and the view which closed it extremely pretty." It is also much more than pretty. "It was a sweet view—sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive" (360).

As in the Highbury scene the focus is on the viewer's taste and her mind: Emma is taking in England, as if she has a perfect right to. Her relation to the proprietor—to people "untainted in blood and understanding"—confirms her possession of what she sees; her marriage will soon reaffirm it. The emphatic reiteration of the adjective—"English verdure, English culture, English comfort"—persuasively insists, effectively praises, says, What could be better than England? Unless, of course Emma and Jane Austen are not altogether of a mind here, and the free indirect speech rep-

resents not only Emma smugly thinking but someone critically overhearing her. Does repetition here have the elusively mocking effect it has in the triple "Royal Highnesses" of the Dedication? And what are we to make of that appearance of an approach to a house which never had been there? That she notices the flaw in taste indicates Emma's ability to discriminate and make distinctions; but the thing itself is baffling. One is tempted to attribute wonderful proleptic power to Jane Austen, and read the house "which never had been there" as the Jamesian house of fiction—of which *Emma*, surely, is the foundation. The representation of the real estate is *done well* by the writer: the false entry is a reminder that what is represented never actually was.

Was Jane Austen a conservative? a feminist? both at once? Is there a political message here, that lush old-fashioned green and pleasant agrarian England belongs to a woman of mind and taste and imagination—a woman like a novelist, like this novelist—as much as it does to the privileged men who own the land? And if that is the (feminist) message, must we not call Jane Austen a conservative, who affirms ownership, primogeniture, "legitimacy"? As usual, readers disagree: some argue that *Emma* slyly stands up for subversion of the status quo, allowing illegitimate Harriet to marry into respectability, in the end, and Miss Taylor the governess, and Jane Fairfax the near-governess, to become mistresses of small and large estates. Others insist that by praising the farms and the village and casting aspersions on vulgar Bristol—Mrs. Elton's mercantile hometown, where the slave ships docked—Austen the conservative idealist, conscious of her changing world, affirmed a virtuous, moral England that was being threatened, was in decline.

I want both to acknowledge these arguments and avoid them—to suggest that this text, by its ambiguous emphatic repetitions, simultaneously celebrates English identity and distances itself from historical England, representing a place that (it tells us) never was there, except in the imagination. That therefore what it most emphatically affirms is the imagination—an imagination that's conscious of, not oblivious to, change and history, and *for that reason* staking a claim for itself. Trying to account for Austen's irony and ambiguity, some critics have been led down

the garden path, like Emma at Donwell, to attribute it to her peculiar personal ambivalence and dividedness, her "regulated hatred" of the society she lived in. But surely the real life of the writer is only one of several sources of the ironic voice that charms us. For all the good new work on the subject of her life, we know precious little about Jane Austen: the biographical approach leads, as at Donwell, to nothing that is any longer there. Our curiosity about people, our interest in psychology and politics, should not distract us from the fact that Jane Austen was first of all a maker of works of art. To Cassandra she wrote on 8 September 1816, "I often wonder how *you* can find time for what you do, in addition to the care of the House;—and how good Mrs. West cd have written such Books & collected so many hard words, with all her family cares, is still more a matter of astonishment! Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of Joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb." The quotation is useful for giving us insight into genteel English women's lives at the time, and Jane Austen's relation to them: Cassandra did more of the housework, and neither of the sisters undertook marriage and its overwhelming (and often life-threatening) attendant "family cares." Austen's unstable comparison between what Cassandra does and what Mrs. West—a conservative didactic novelist—does, her easy contempt for "good Mrs. West" and her "hard words," are also suggestive. But what I want to focus hard on here is the word "Composition"—in the hope of directing more attention to what Jane Austen herself imagined herself to be engaged in.

NOTES

1. Frank Kermode quotes Henry James on the subject of Trollope's *The Vicar of Bullhampton* in his introduction to Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* (Penguin Books, 1994), p. x.

2. Butler writes on p. 251 that "The masterstroke is to make the apparent spring of the action not Emma's quest for a husband, but Harriet's."

3. For connections between plots of novels and plots of land, see Eleanor F. Shevlin, "The Plots of Early English Novels: Narrative Mappings Rooted in Land and Law," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 11, 4, July 1999, 379-402.

WORKS CITED

Austen, Jane. *The Novels of Jane Austen.* Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1969.

Austen, Jane. *Jane Austen's Letters.* Ed. R. W. Chapman. Oxford, OUP, 1979.

Butler, Marilyn. *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas.* Oxford: OUP, 1975.

Tomalin, Claire. *Jane Austen: A Life.* New York: Knopf, 1997.