The Ethical Mode of *Pride and Prejudice*

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While Jane Austen feared that *Pride and Prejudice* might be considered "too light, and bright, and sparkling,"[1] much modern criticism has made the novel seem very weighty indeed. The fundamental mode of the book, however, would appear to reside somewhere between the two positions. In *Pride and Prejudice* it is precisely in the "lightness" that the moral aspect is revealed, and the limpid surface of the novel is suffused with "sense." Perhaps more successfully than any major novelist of the Eighteenth Century, Jane Austen was able to combine the stuff of the novel, everyday life, with the matter of the sermon. But she does so with such skill that any seams remain invisible.

The characters of *Pride and Prejudice* not only entertain the reader by their apparent autonomy, and that abundantly, but also illustrate moral patterns. Their interactions constantly manifest the significance with which the author wishes to invest them. The first type of patterning is the dichotomy of "simple" and "intricate" characters. This is an opposition which Elizabeth Bennet herself alludes to in the novel.[2] It involves a psychological distinction which might find apt examples in, say, Sir William Lucas as against Darcy. The former is defined by his snobbery and his "fixation" on his presentation at St James's, the latter cannot be encompassed by any such generalization. But even on this psychological level moral discriminations must be made. "Simple" characters like Mr Collins, Mary, and even Mrs Bennet, are evaluated by the novelist and found wanting. They are not caricatures like Dickens' galvanized, anarchic creatures. The very point that Jane Austen makes about them is that they are limited *people.* As D.W. Harding points out in a brilliant essay, Jane Austen does not simply dismiss her comic characters but gives even the vacuity of a Mrs Bennet due importance. The reader is made aware that Mr Collins can cause "real misery"[3] even while he entertains us in the various scenes dramatizing his opaque pomposity. In fact, all the major events of the novel are precipitated by Jane Austen's "simple" characters. Pivotal initiatives are provided, if inadvertently, by the proposals of foolish Mr Collins, the inane

1 Jane Austen, Letter to Cassandra, February 4, 1813, in *Jane Austen's Letters to her sister Cassandra and others,* ed. R.W. Chapman, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 299.
2 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice,* ed. Frank W. Bradbrook, Oxford University Press, 1970, pp. 36-7. All subsequent page references are to this edition.
3 D.W. Harding, "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen," *Scrutiny,* VIII (1940), 346-62, reprinted in *Jane Austen. A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Ian Watt, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1964, p. 171.

chatter of Mrs Bennet at the Netherfield ball, and Lady Catherine's undignified confrontation with Elizabeth.

Jane Austen is always setting up moral oppositions through her characters: the thoughtless Lydia as against the too-prudent Charlotte Lucas, the true affability of a Bingley as against the empty affability of a Wickham. She provides an extended contrast between Wickham and Darcy: "One has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it" (p. 199). The Bennet girls represent an entire range of moral worth, from the almost excessively "angelic" Jane, to the sententious, unfeeling Mary. Jane Austen is continually creating these moral designs involving character, but in such a tactful way that the vigour in characterization appears to predominate over the patterning. Litz has pointed out another important but unobtrusive moral spectrum: "Both Darcy and Elizabeth are flanked by figures who parody their basic tendencies: in Mr Bennet the irony of the detached observer has become sterile, while Lady Catherine de Bourgh represents the worst side of aristocratic self-consciousness."[4] Mr Bennet, like Elizabeth, Darcy and the Gardiners, is a discriminator. And unlike the good, but somewhat imperceptive characters (Jane, Bingley, Georgiana Darcy) he is nearly always acutely aware of what people are. He now has no illusions about his wife and he realizes the sober truth about some of his daughters. He "sees through" Collins on first receipt of his letter. But Mr Bennet, unlike the Gardiners, is culpably passive. He characteristically resorts to irony and isolation. He is forever retiring to the library, a simple action which Jane Austen is able to endow with greater significance in terms of a denial of paternal responsibility. This suggestion is, of course, made explicit in Mr Bennet's failure to heed Elizabeth's warning and prevent Lydia from holidaying in Brighton. Mr Bennet is willing to "enjoy the scene," but "in silence" (p. 92). Elizabeth sees that "her father, contented with laughing at them, would never exert himself to restrain the wild giddiness of his youngest daughters" (p.189). In short, Mr Bennet's largely aesthetic appreciation of characters like Mr Collins ("There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him" — p.56) is adjudged irresponsible by Jane Austen. Mrs Bennet does not even *see*; Mr Bennet even though he sees, does not act.

The most interesting "intricate" character in the novel is Elizabeth Bennet. She is a believable, attractive heroine. We discover her to be full of humour and vitality — her "liveliness," her laughter, and her

4 A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1965, p. 105.

dark eyes are frequently mentioned. Though sensible and perceptive, and a favourite of the author ("as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print"[5]), she is by no means idealized. For instance, we glimpse a charming ruthlessnes in Elizabeth's desire to know Darcy's connection with Lydia's marriage when she adds this mental post-script to her letter to her aunt: "my dear aunt, if you do not tell me in an honourable manner, I shall certainly be reduced to tricks and strategems to find it out" (p. 283). But all Elizabeth's "personality", as we might term it, goes hand in hand with, and is not negated by Jane Austen's use of her to dramatize moral concerns.

Much of the fascination and meaning of *Pride and Prejudice* arises from the dynamic relationship between Elizabeth and the author. As Mudrick points out, "In *Pride and Prejudice*...Jane Austen allows her heroine to share her own characteristic response to the world." In many ways Elizabeth is even a type of the novelist in the book.[6] She, like Jane Austen, is a "studier of character" (p. 37). For example, she is pleased that the arrival of Darcy will at least give her "one comparatively new to look at in their Rosings parties" (p. 151). She has a novelist's imagination. After she has refused Darcy for the first time,

> Elizabeth could not see Lady Catherine without recollecting, that had she chosen it, she might by this time have been presented to her, as her future niece; nor could she think, without a smile, of what her ladyship's indignation would have been. 'What would she have said?– how would she have behaved?' were questions with which she amused herself. (p. 187)

Elizabeth, like Jane Austen, delights in ridiculing "follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies" (p. 50), but on the whole she shares the author's tact in knowing when to suppress the description of such "nonsense," as on the coach-trip to visit Charlotte:

> Elizabeth loved absurdities, but she had known Sir William too long. He could tell her nothing new of the wonders of his presentation and knighthood; and his civilities were worn out like his information. (p. 136)

Here, Elizabeth's boredom with Sir William is exactly mirrored in the author's dismissal of him. Elizabeth shares Jane Austen's perceptiveness. She sees that Collins is "a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man" (p. 121); she has the perspicacity to be able to warn her father about Lydia; she has no illusions about her mother, nor about the reprehensible "indolence" (p. 249) of her father. Even before she has met Lady Catherine she suspects that "she is an arrogant, conceited woman" (p. 75), and the deft turn in her

5 Jane Austen, Letter to Cassandra, 29 January 1813, *Letters*, p. 297.
6 Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defence and Discovery*, Princeton University Press, 1952, p. 94.

summation of Lady Catherine on meeting her conveys Jane Austen's own dry appraisal:

> Elizabeth found that nothing was beneath this great Lady's attention, which could furnish her with an occasion of dictating to others. (p. 146)

In her insight Elizabeth at times almost takes on a choric function in articulating the author's awareness for the reader. Elizabeth moralizes for us on the shamelessness of the unrepentant Lydia and unabashed assurance of Wickham: she resolves "to draw no limits in future to the impudence of an impudent man" (p. 279). Faced with the marriage of Collins and Charlotte Lucas and Bingley's apparent desertion of Jane, Elizabeth is forced to this sobering conclusion:

> The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense. (p. 121)

In all of these areas the awareness of Elizabeth and that of Jane Austen coincide. But there is a point where Elizabeth's customary perceptiveness fails her, and where despite her protestations to the contrary, she does laugh at "the wise and the good." This is in her opinion of Darcy and of Wickham. Here Jane Austen and Elizabeth part company for a time, and irony intervenes to sustain perspective in the novel. This divergence between author and character is as instructive as the previously described convergence. In anything relating to Wickham and Darcy, Elizabeth is not a reliable reporter. She derides Bingley's "blind partiality" for Darcy, while demonstrating equally blind prejudice; while alive to all the moral shabbiness of Charlotte's mercenary marriage, she is slow to criticize Wickham for a similar manoeuvre.

Discussion of Elizabeth and Darcy brings us inevitably to discussion of the thematic import of *Pride and Prejudice*. Like the characterization, the whole narrative of the novel is also construed in Jane Austen's ethical idiom. *Pride and Prejudice* is a romantic comedy,[7] even relying on that standard ploy, initial antagonism between the lovers successively eroded to ultimate union. But although the book conveys all the enjoyment that romantic comedy can convey, Jane Austen imbues the genre with a deeper significance: she gives the reader "a sense of involvement and identification while simultaneously providing the perspective necessary for moral judgment."[8] In *Pride and Prejudice* she is concerned above all with a

7 See the discussion of Jane Austen and Shakespearean romantic comedy in E. Rubinstein's Introduction to his edition of *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Pride and Prejudice,"* Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1969, pp. 13-14.

8 Litz, pp. 110-11.

theme of true perception, of perceiving the truth. Like *Emma,* which is *par excellence* a novel about subjectivity, the whole novel contradicts Darcy's statement about his "investigations and decisions" not being coloured by his "hopes or fears" (p. 176). People see what they want to see. The most blind party is "everybody," society, people at large. The much-discussed opening; "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (p. 1), stands as a monument to the wilful self-deception of society. Jane Austen leads us to see the gap which actually exists between "truth" and "universal acknowledgment." "Everybody" is at first attracted to Wickham and condemnatory of Darcy. Only Jane reserves judgment on Darcy:

> Miss Bennet was the only creature who could suppose there might be any extenuating circumstances in the case, unknown to the society of Hertfordshire...but by everybody else Mr. Darcy was condemned as the worst of men. (p. 124)

We have only to compare Jane's "mild and steady candour" with Mrs Bennet's obstinate and excessive ill-opinion of Darcy ("I hate the very sight of him" — p. 295) to see that moral worth is measured at least in part in distance from the unthinking consensus of society. In this context, Elizabeth is naturally the object of some interest, because it is in her changing opinion of Darcy that the theme of true perception is centrally dramatized. At first Elizabeth allies herself with the common opinion. She shares the common prejudice in favour of Wickham, a view based solely on his amiable appearance and personable manners: "His appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address" (p. 64). Jane Austen provides in Wickham a study in duplicity through style. It gradually emerges (and earlier to the reader than to Elizabeth) that he is *all* style, and that there is no inevitable link between "veracity" and "amiable appearance." This connection Elizabeth, like "everybody," is led into assuming (pp. 71-2). The alternating lines of convergence and divergence[9] in the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy give the book its central romantic interest and, at the same time, illustrate the novel's central quest for truth, that of Elizabeth. At the Netherfield ball, Elizabeth jokingly tells Jane that she is determined to hate Darcy. But Jane Austen illustrates the oblique truth of this statement through her heroine's subsequent wilful misinterpretation of Darcy's behaviour. Elizabeth is unaware of her own motives in lending easy credence to Wickham, in "hating" Darcy, in teasing Darcy, in consistently failing to recognize his love for her (when she meets him repeatedly on her

9 Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art,* Oxford University Press, New York, 1939, p. 160.

favourite walk near Rosings, for example, she attributes this to chance, or rather "mischance," and not to his design). Jane Austen endows Elizabeth's attempt to understand Darcy's "real character" with considerable significance. Her mistaken preference for Wickham and her refusal of Darcy's first proposal are seen in terms of a failure within Elizabeth herself. Darcy's letter precipitates an inner struggle involving her own pride in her wit and discrimination. To change her mind in this important area, to choose between Wickham and Darcy, Elizabeth must revise her opinion of herself, which is why the reading of the letter in the novel is an "event" of some importance. Her conflict does not resolve itself into a simple choice between two rivals, it is a confrontation between appearance and reality, as exemplified in the figures of Darcy and Wickham, and as exemplified within Elizabeth herself. At first reading, she flatters herself "that her wishes did not err" (p. 182) but as she reads and re-reads what is, in effect, the truth, she is forced to acknowledge the subjectivity of her views. She has indeed been flattering herself and taking her wishes for facts. Elizabeth realizes that Darcy and not Wickham is possessed of substantial goodness, while before she had thought, or rather wanted to believe, that Wickham's appearance vouched for his goodness: "His countenance, voice, and manner, had established him at once in the possession of every virtue" (p. 183). Intimately connected with this realization is the bitter but ultimately therapeutic necessity to revise her opinion of herself:

> She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. — Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.
> 'How despicably have I acted!' she cried — 'I, who have prided myself on my discernment! — I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust — How humiliating is this discovery! — Yes, how just a humiliation...Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance. I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself.' (p. 185)

Undoubtedly this is the turning point of the novel. Elizabeth's *éclaircissement* is not complete (she still fails to recognize her incipient love for Darcy: "Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind") but the important movement towards self-knowledge has begun.

After this, the novel presents us with actual demonstration of the "real characters" of Wickham and Darcy. That this demonstration should *follow* Elizabeth's realization reinforces the notion of self-knowledge necessarily preceding knowledge of others. Wickham

shows his true colours in his elopement with Lydia, and Darcy shows his generous management of that affair and in his even more generous proposal of marriage to Wickham's sister-in-law — more generous in that his pride, both personal and familial, is more nearly concerned. This, though not dramatized like Elizabeth's struggle, is *his* personal test. Elizabeth clearly sees this: "Every kind of pride must revolt from the connection" (p. 289).

What remains for Elizabeth is the full acknowledgment of her love. Jane Austen uses the various scenes at Pemberley to provide a series of encounters which confirm Elizabeth's revised opinion of Darcy and confirm her concomitant growth towards self-knowledge. Elizabeth facetiously tells her sister that she dates her love for Darcy from her first sight of "his beautiful grounds at Pemberley" (p. 332). But, in many ways, this is the truth: "In view of what Pemberley has come to represent...we...wonder whether our author here intends us to see beyond Elizabeth's view of the matter."[10] Pemberley does represent more than material wealth and status, though the decorous ideal it embodies by no means excludes these things. Pemberley is "a kind of model" (p. 32) of rational yet humane harmony. This emerges first of all from the description of the place itself:

> 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 has done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. (p. 215)

Jane Austen appears at her most Augustan in endowing the ideal union of art and nature of Pemberley with an ethical value.[11] This suggestion is furthered in the affidavit of the housekeeper as to Darcy's true character, especially as to his affability ("the sweetest-tempered, most generous-hearted, boy in the world" — p. 219) and his goodness ("he is the best landlord, and the best master... that ever lived" — p. 219). Elizabeth has experienced the man's noble dwelling, and received a validation of his character from a trustworthy witness, when she sees the image of the man in his *smiling* portrait. These important revelations constitute an attractive and meaningful progression towards Elizabeth's meeting with the man himself.

10 Charles McCann, "Setting and Character in *Pride and Prejudice*," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, XIX (1964), 65-75, reprinted in Rubenstein (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Pride and Prejudice,"* p. 95.

11 For a full discussion of this matter, see Samuel Kliger, "Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in the Eighteenth Century Mode," in Rubinstein (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Pride and Prejudice,"* pp. 46-58.

When she does encounter him she is therefore prepared to love him. His demeanour of "gentleness" on this occasion is in total keeping with the "character" she has learnt to discern in him. Elizabeth, according to Jane Austen, can only "fall in love" when she has come to respect Darcy and be "grateful" to him. As Tanner says, "there are always reasons for loving in Jane Austen's world."[12] If nothing else, the novel illustrates the author's scepticism about the veracity of "first impressions" and the value of "love at first sight:"

> If gratitude and esteem are good foundations of affection, Elizabeth's change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise, if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural in comparison of what is so often described as arising on a first interview with its object, and even before two words have been exchanged, nothing can be said in her defence, except that she had given somewhat of a trial to the latter method, in her partiality for Wickham, and that its ill-success might perhaps authorise her to seek the other less interesting mode of attachment. (p. 246)

As in Jane Austen's other novels, marriages are earned, or, in the case of Charlotte and Mr Collins, of Mr and Mrs Bingley, or of Lydia and Wickham, at least deserved. Elizabeth and Darcy earn the right to love each other, the one through a tempering of liveliness with true judgment and the other through a tempering of pride with gentleness. Thus, their union comes to represent more than just the "happy ending" of romantic comedy. Jane Austen sees the complementary nature of the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy, not only in terms of personal characteristics (her liveliness as against his sobriety) but in terms of moral development:

> It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. (pp. 275-6)

Well might they "teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was" (p. 276). Darcy only wants liveliness, according to Mrs Gardiner, and what Elizabeth possesses almost to excess is that quality. When all is said and done there is also a significant affinity between Elizabeth and Darcy. They both dislike "performing" to strangers (p. 156). Freed from prejudice and from pride, they are both "acute" "unembarrassed" observers (p.230). Their perspicacity, for example, enables them both the evaluate the Bennets very shrewdly. They share the same moral rectitude, as shown in their identical responses of shocked concern at Lydia's elopement with Wickham. Only "laughter" separates them, but both make some important accommodations in this respect: Darcy smiles frequently on talking

to Elizabeth; his portrait is smiling; Mrs Gardiner thinks he has "something pleasing" about the mouth (p. 227). Elizabeth, for her part, curbs her playfulness on at least one important occasion (p. 330). The union of Elizabeth and Darcy then, exemplifies the union of wit and judgment, an ideal also both confirmed and illustrated in the rational elegance of Pemberley.

The theme of true perception in *Pride and Prejudice* is illustrated not only through the experience of the heroine and the central intrigue of the novel, but also in the very style. Jane Austen herself is the prime discriminator. It is she who tells us quite directly that Mrs Bennet "was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper" (p. 3); it is she who brutally dissects the marriage of Mr and Mrs Bennet (pp. 209-10) and who can compress blame for Mr Bennet's improvidence and laxity and a cruelly accurate appraisal of Wickham into the one sentence when she says that could Mr Bennet have financed Lydia's marriage himself, "The satisfaction of prevailing on one of the most worthless young men in Great Britain to be her husband, might then have rested in its proper place" (p. 272). Usually Jane Austen refrains from direct statement and uses her irony to enable the reader to appraise events and characters with her discerning eyes. The various events of the Austen novel are more than miniaturist scene-paintings of what are now period pieces. Each event — whether it be ball, party, soirée, meeting, conversation or receipt of a letter — provides the forum for a moral test of the characters involved, and the occasion for the author to instruct the reader. Thus, while the characters, especially perceptive characters like Elizabeth, seek to evaluate events, Jane Austen simultaneously evaluates the evaluators. For instance, the reactions of the various characters to Wickham's impending marriage to Lydia convey not only the author's view of this event, but also serve to discriminate the characters themselves. Like Jane Austen, Elizabeth is fully aware that their marriage can only be an unsatisfactory but necessary compromise: "And they *must* marry! Yet he is *such* a man!" (p. 268). At the furthest reach of the moral spectrum, Mrs Bennet is all unreflecting jubilation: "To know that her daughter would be married was enough. She was disturbed by no fear for her felicity, nor humbled by any remembrance of her mis-conduct. " 'My dear, dear Lydia!' she cried: 'This is delightful indeed! — She will be married!...She will be married at sixteen!' " (p. 270). Similarly, Charlotte Lucas's marriage to Mr Collins is judiciously weighed by Austen by means of the characters' reactions, and those reactions are weighed in their turn. Charlotte's own thoughts on the matter — "Mr Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was

irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary, But still he would be her husband" (p. 110) — illustrate her choice of establishment over the likelihood of happiness. Elizabeth's reaction of surprise and disapproval has the ring of authorial sanction. Though willing to concede a degree of necessity on Charlotte's part, she feels impelled to remonstrate with Jane's characteristically benign tolerance:

> 'My dear Jane, Mr Collins is a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man; you know he is, as well as I do; and you must feel, as well as I do, that the woman who marries him, cannot have a proper way of thinking. You shall not defend her, though it is Charlotte Lucas. You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger, security for happiness.' (p. 121)

On the occasion of the general announcement of the marriage, Mrs Bennet's irrational reaction ("Elizabeth was the real cause of all the mischief" and "she herself had been barbarously used by them all" — p. 115) provides an apt instance of her selfish and "mean" understanding; Mr Bennet indulges in cynical amusement at the improbability of the match; Jane wishes them both happiness notwithstanding; Kitty and Lydia are too engrossed in frivolity to be concerned.

Not only attitude, but the very style of language employed by the different characters is used as an index of moral worth by Jane Austen. Consider the skilful use of letters in the novel. Each letter reveals the "real character" of the writer, whether consciously (as in the case of Darcy's stately and honest letter) or unconsciously (as in Mr Collins's sublimely self-important and unreflective missive). Moreover, other characters reveal themselves in their judgment of these revelations. Mr Collins's letter of introduction provides a near-diagrammatic exemplification of "real character" in its reception. But, importantly, the moral "diagram" co-exists with the psychological vivacity of the scene. Mr Bennet apprehends at once the "mixture of servility and self-importance" in Collins's letter, but demonstrates his own leaning towards irresponsibly detached irony when he says that that same mixture "promises well." Jane thinks the best of Collins's wish to make atonement for the entail: "the wish is certainly to his credit." Mrs Bennet is actually predisposed by the letter to favour Collins and can even say "there is some sense in what he says about the girls," while Mary's moral impenetrability is likewise demonstrated by her concentration on the purely formal aspect of the letter:

> 'In point of composition...his letter does not seem defective. The idea of the olive branch perhaps is not wholly new, yet I think it is well expressed.' (p. 56)

Elizabeth's opinion seems to be the closest to the author's and

articulates the reader's conclusion as well: "He must be an oddity, I think." Collins's other letter, on the elopement of Lydia, provides a rather more brutal insight into his character, for allied to his insensibility to himself is an insensibility towards others. This can be predominantly amusing when addressed towards a character as selfishly insensible as himself, as in many hilarious scenes illustrating his "delighted alacrity" (p. 145) in flattering his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. But the tone deepens when Collins adopts the same demeanour in interaction with a sensitive character, as in his obliviously vain reception of Elizabeth's refusals to his proposal of marriage, or his similarly ridiculous blindness to his own folly in introducing himself to Darcy at the Nertherfield ball. In his letter to Mr Bennet on Lydia's predicament, such insensibility reveals the selfish inhumanity dormant within it:

> The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison of this... you are grievously to be pitied, in which opinion I am not only joined by Mrs Collins, but likewise by lady Catherine and her daughter, to whom I have related the affair. They agree with me in apprehending that this false step in one daughter, will be injurious to the fortunes of all the others, for who, as lady Catherine herself condescendingly says, will connect themselves with such a family. And this consideration leads me moreover to reflect with augmented satisfaction on a certain event of last November, for had it been otherwise, I must have been involved in all your sorrow and disgrace. Let me advise you then, my dear Sir, to console yourself as much as possible, to throw off your unworthy child from your affection for ever, and leave her to reap the fruits of her own heinous offence. (p. 262)

As Dorothy Van Ghent sees, language is the "mirror" of Collins's degeneracy:

> The elaborate language in which Mr Collins gets himself fairly *stuck* is a mimesis of an action of the soul, the soul that becomes self dishonest through failure to know itself, and that overrates itself at the expense of the social context, just as it overrates verbalism at the expense of meaning.[13]

The style of the Gardiners in their letters shows them to be sensible and sensitive. Miss Bingley's specious style in her letter to Jane on her removal to London is indicative of her callous frivolity. This last-mentioned letter is actually dissected in the book and significantly, while Elizabeth listens to Miss Bingley's "high flown expressions...with all the insensibility of distrust" (p. 105), Jane on the other hand thinks that Miss Bingley means "kindly" (p. 107) and is "incapable of wilfully deceiving any one" (p. 108).

Lydia's flamboyant, shallow style, both in her letters to a friend after her marriage, and in her conversation throughout, is seen by Jane Austen to be of a piece with the morality of her behaviour. Her

12 Tony Tanner, Introduction to his edition of *Pride and Prejudice,* Penguin, 1972, p. 38.
13 Dorothy Van Ghent, "On *Pride and Prejudice,*" in *The English Novel: Form and Function,* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1953, p. 106.

letter conveys the impression that it is all a great lark ("What a good joke it will be! I can hardly write for laughing" — p. 257). Her mother's daughter, she is preoccupied chiefly with externals, especially clothes: "I shall send for my clothes when I get to Longbourn; but I wish you would tell Sally to mend a great slit in my worked muslin gown, before they are packed up" (p. 257). On reading this letter, Elizabeth, as on other occasions, interprets for us: "Oh! thoughtless, thoughtless Lydia!". Every comment Lydia makes highlights her culpable inanity: her major concern before her wedding is to know whether Wickham "would be married in his blue coat" (p. 282), she buys a bonnet because she thought she "might as well buy it as not" (p. 194), and she mocks people for their appearance alone (she derides a waiter since he is "an ugly fellow...I never saw such a long chin in my life" — pp. 194-5); she says she never cared for Mary King for "Who *could* about such a nasty little freckled thing?" — p. 195). While the choice of a bonnet is a slight matter, and her opinion of a waiter of no great import, the point is that this same lack of judgment marks Lydia's choice of the handsome reprobate, Wickham.

Mrs Bennet's mode of expression is as suspect as Lydia's. She is also preoccupied with fashion and, as Jane Austen herself points out, is more concerned about Lydia's trousseau than her shameless behaviour (p. 274). Mrs Bennet also often expresses herself in the extreme terms which always make the Jane Austen reader wary. For instance, her insincerity in affirming the severity of Jane's indisposition at Netherfield is conveyed by a parade of superlatives:

> '...for she is very ill indeed, and suffers a vast deal, though with the greatest patience in the world, which is always the way with her, for she has, without exception, the sweetest temper I ever met with.' (p. 36)

To this we can compare the customarily immoderate expressions of "everybody" ("by everybody Mr Darcy was condemned as the worst of men"), or the untrustworthy gush of Isabella Thorpe in *Northranger Abbey*. Even Elizabeth illustrates this tendency in the vehemence of her refusal of Darcy's first proposal. She really does appear to protest too much:

> 'You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it...I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.' (pp. 171-2)

In fact, Elizabeth lives to regret the extravagance of her expressions (p. 334).

Jane Austen's own "language," the style of the entire novel, constantly evaluates while it amuses:

> Jane was by no means better. The sisters, on hearing this, repeated three or four times how much they were grieved, how shocking it was to have a bad cold, and how excessively they disliked being ill themselves; and then thought no more of the matter: and their indifference towards Jane when not immediately before them, restored Elizabeth to the enjoyment of all her original dislike. (p. 29)

Even before Elizabeth labels their feeling for us, the very perfunctoriness of the *oratio obliqua* demonstrates the shallow-ness of the Bingley sisters' regard for Jane. Jane Austen's irony operates consistently to illustrate true (as opposed to professed) motivation. Thus Elizabeth is for a long time unaware that her attraction towards Wickham accounts for her belief in his integrity: "Elizabeth honoured him for such feelings, and thought him hand-somer than ever as he expressed them" (p. 71). The Bingley sisters are said to solace their "wretchedness" over Jane's illness with "duets after supper" (p. 35). Here the triviality of the remedy gives a hint as to the precise magnitude of their "wretchedness." This last example recalls Reuben A. Brower's comment: "Many pages of *Pride and Prejudice* can be read as sheer poetry of wit, as Pope without couplets."[14] Jane Austen frequently gives the reader delightful comic details of Popean wit, like Collins's alteration of the object of his "affections" from Jane to Elizabeth, "done while Mrs Bennet was stirring the fire" (p. 62). Yet the wit is as meaningful as it is in Pope himself. Consider the pregnant antithesis conveyed in the description of Charlotte's motive in betrothing herself to Collins (she accepts him "solely from the pure and disinterested desire of establishment" — p. 110), or the ludicrous thoroughness of Lady Catherine's officious advice, implied in her suggestion that Collins add "some shelves in the closets up stairs" (p. 59).

To sum up, the "feel" of this novel is light and bright, the heroine delightful, and the wit sparkling, but what keeps the novel from being a slight, amiable romance, is Jane Austen's superlatively decorous imbuing of the fable with a moral. Every aspect of *Pride and Prejudice* from individual verbal detail to the entire narrative progression, is coloured, but never oppressively, by the author's ethical concerns. The statement of F.R. Leavis on Jane Austen's art gives only half the picture: "Without her intense moral preoccupation she wouldn't have been a great novelist."[15] He neglects the "dulce" of the "utile/dulce" duality so masterfully conveyed by *Pride and Prejudice.*

14 Reuben A. Brower, "Light and Bright and Sparkling: Irony and Fiction in *Pride and Prejudice,*" reprinted in Rubinstein (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Pride and Prejudice,"* p. 31.

15 F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition,* Chatto and Windus, London, 1955, p. 7.