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Salutes and Satire in Jane Austen's Characters' Sense of "Nature"

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Austen's forty-one years rather neatly span the Romantic movement's reformulation and enshrinement of the notion of "Nature." While any such continent-wide shifting of cultural norms will generate jargon and stimulate faddism, not every anonymous novelist will seize such opportunities for characterization both serious and comic. Austen may be caught mocking the clichés of Nature-worship in the foolishness of minor characters, from her earliest surviving mid-teen "novel" on through *Sanditon*. A heroine in Austen's most accomplished works, though privately sensing a relationship to nature any militant Romantic would deem robust, will, when the occasion demands, resort to uttering—in ridiculous masquerade, whether to herself or aloud—what we must recognize as fashionable second-hand palaver about natural phenomena. Behavior so opportunistic on the part of solid figures like Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot testifies to their author's sense of the trendiness of one's self-display as a "Nature-person." *Sanditon* provides an interesting gateway to Austen's lifelong critique of nature-talk.

The central character of this unfinished novel has no chance to make herself really foolish about "Nature"-faddism. But Austen does dramatize her susceptibility to a literature-driven tide of fantasy quite parallel to the gothic in *Northanger Abbey*: Charlotte Heywood, upon meeting the lovely Clara Brereton in a bookshop, has a well-clocked "5 minutes with fancying the Persecutions which *ought* to be the lot of the interesting Clara, especially in the form of the most barbarous conduct on Lady Denham's side" (392). Our narrator allows Charlotte rich enough free indirect discourse, echoing stereotypes explicitly romance-novelish,[1] to establish *potential* comic targetry here—only to intervene with "No, she was a very sober-minded young lady, sufficiently well-read in Novels to supply her Imagination with amusement, but not at all unreasonably influenced by them" (391-92). It is the touch of shadowing that lends *normalcy* to Charlotte's resistance to the nature-faddism of Mr. Parker and Sir Edward.

Charlotte needs that validation since the "eloquence" of the "Enthusiast" Parker (373, 371) so dominates the first third of *Sand-*

iton as we have it. Austen has characterized his rapport with Nature as conspicuously uncontemplative, tirelessly pragmatic:

> [of his sprained ankle:] . . . once at home, we have our remedy at hand you know.—A little of our own Bracing Sea Air will soon set me on my feet again.—Depend upon it my Dear, it is exactly a case for the Sea. (367)

> [now as real-estate speculator:] Sanditon . . . the favourite spot of all that are to be found along the coast of Sussex;—the most favoured by Nature, & promising to be the most chosen by Man. (368)

> [and responding to Heywood's scepticism:] Such a place as Sanditon Sir, I may say was wanted, was called for.—Nature had marked it out—had spoken in most intelligible Characters. . . . (369)

—among which "intelligible Characters" Parker cites Nature's thoughtfully siting it a whole "measured mile nearer" London than the rival seaside resort Eastbourne! along with another, equally utilitarian reference to Nature: "no slimey rocks—Never was there a place more palpably designed by Nature for the resort of the Invalid" (369). At first it may seem he almost welcomed his injury as a chance to test the efficacy of "saline air & immersion," but these prove only negotiable commodities, since wealth not health drives his enthusiasm, and a fortnight of Heywood hospitality is what actually sets him on his feet again.

That Parker finds Nature's ways respectable or interesting only when convenient to him personally is clear when he dismisses his wife's nostalgia for the productivity of their former inland garden: its caretaker still supplies their current seaside home with "all the comfort of an excellent Kitchen Garden, without the constant Eye-sore of its formalities; or the yearly nuisance of its decaying vegetation.—Who can endure a Cabbage Bed in October?" (380). From this irresponsible whimsicality regarding natural process we are freed by chapter four's stunning curtain-line, our first moment alone with Charlotte as she left the Parkers among their children to ascend to her bedroom at their house, and

> . . . found amusement enough in standing at her ample Venetian window, & looking over the miscellaneous foreground of unfinished Buildings, waving Linen, & tops of Houses, to the Sea, dancing & sparkling in Sunshine & Freshness.—[2]

The fresh energy of the sea, registered so compellingly upon the impartial gaze of young Charlotte, may work to anchor as a norm for us this character's perspective on nature and on other matters, in the face of the hypochondriacal hobby-horses, mystery-women and other oddnesses of the oncoming eight chapters.

Since we have the narrator's word that Charlotte is "not at all unreasonably influenced by" novel-reading, she has the benefit of

any doubt in her literary chat later with Sir Edward regarding Burns, "Scotts' beautiful Lines on the Sea" (which he cannot recall), and "all the usual Phrases employed in praise of [the sublimity of sea and shore], & descriptive of the *undescribable* Emotions they excite in the Mind of Sensibility." Among those phrases he cites "its Samphire, & the deep fathoms of it's Abysses, it's quick vicissitudes, it's direful Deceptions," and so forth (396). That Sir Edward's list issues from no personal observation but is aimed to impress his listener is signalled by its opening reference to that aromatic herb (samphire) which he may have gathered from the direful deception of Shakespeare's disguised Edgar, convincing his blinded father they face Dover cliff (*King Lear* IV, vi, 15). Through Charlotte's boredom with his commonplaces, impatience with his non sequiturs, and disgust that he should be so "very much addicted to all the newest-fashioned hard words," Austen shows how the sea speaks eloquently enough for itself without the self-parading palaver of a Parker or Sir Edward. In a completed *Sanditon* we might have caught Charlotte herself captivating Sidney Parker with innuendo-salted chatter like "The Wind I fancy must be Southerly" (398), instead of wasting it in a conversational effort to deflect Sir Edward from his silliness.

A brisk survey of the *kinds* of social meanings Austen can give to words about nature may offer consolation for the missing chapters of *Sanditon*, in the savoring what we do have. Closest perhaps to Charlotte's seaward embrace from her window at the end of Chapter four is another defiantly speechless but air-clearing moment of spontaneous engagement with Nature during the visit to Sotherton, in the ninth chapter of *Mansfield Park*. For some four pages Mrs. Rushworth has been showing the Mansfield party each room in the lower part of her home, with copious family history. As she proposes to lead them upstairs, even her son objects that they won't have time for the long-planned inquiry about improvements "to be done out of doors." The sentence which comprises Austen's next paragraph is as shapely as a sonnet:

> Mrs. Rushworth submitted, and the question of surveying the grounds, with the who and the how, was likely to be more fully agitated, and Mrs. Norris was beginning to arrange by what junction of carriages and horses most could be done, when the young people, meeting with an outward door, temptingly open on a flight of steps which led immediately to turf and shrubs, and all the sweets of pleasure-grounds, as by one impulse, one wish for air and liberty, all walked out. (89-90)

After so much Norris, history, crimson velvet and mahogany, these youngsters know what nature is and what it isn't: out-of-doors has become the place to retrieve yourself. A parallel impulse might be Emma's decision to see the sea for her first time during her October

honeymoon with Knightley—though her father is "sure it almost killed me once" (483, 101). How thoroughly "a tour to the sea-side" suits the circumstances of their becoming engaged during a walk in the shrubbery (424 ff.).

Yet *nature* as word or concept functions importantly within an Austen character as well as "out-of-doors." By observing Elizabeth Bennet's engagements with it (with side-glances at other heroines) we can distinguish some five interior senses Austen finds for it: three serious, one joshing, and one comically self-exposing, after Sir Edward's manner.

Elizabeth's three-mile "scampering" through the mud to Bingley's, provoking his sister's mockery and Darcy's remarking that her eyes have "brightened by the exercise," was motivated to produce no such effects nor to prove herself an Outdoor Girl. Bingley gets it right: "It shews an affection for her sister" (36). Natural passion of such potential energy can also possess an erotic dimension, as it does twice in *Mansfield Park.* Pained "by the increasing spirit of Edmund's manner" as she watched him and Mary rehearse in her "East Room" the scene in *Lovers' Vows* wherein Mary proposes to him, Fanny fears the performance itself, impending that evening, "would, indeed, have such nature and feeling in it, as must ensure their credit" (170). The narrator applies the same sense of *nature* to Fanny's own susceptibilities, the night Edmund brings her the gold necklace: trying valiantly to consider him just a friend, "but having also many of the feelings of youth and nature, let her not be much wondered at if . . . she seized the scrap of paper on which Edmund had been writing to her, as a treasure . . . ," and Fanny's own quite unbookish thoughts complete the paragraph (265).

Scarcely distinguishable from this familial or sexual reference of "nature"—together let's call it "generative"—is the "regenerative" sense grounding a paragraph in *Persuasion* vital to Anne Elliot's consciousness of her own healing powers, as well as those of Mrs. Smith she describes. On a second visit Anne is astonished at how much this old school friend has endured and how little her confinement with rheumatic fever leaves her to live for.

> Yet, in spite of all this, Anne had reason to believe that she had moments only of languor and depression, to hours of occupation and enjoyment. How could it be?—She . . . finally determined that this was not a case of fortitude or of resignation only . . . here was something more; here was that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from nature alone. It was the choicest gift of Heaven; and . . . seems designed to counterbalance almost every other want. (154)

Without speculating on what such acknowledgement of Nature might mean to its ailing author, I submit Anne takes the perception most seriously.

Secondly, such an awareness of Nature's heft emboldens Elizabeth to joshing travesty, in memorable raillery with Mrs. Gardiner. Her rejoinder to her aunt's invitation to a Lake-District tour builds sardonically upon their earlier talk of Bingley's apparent indifference to Jane, and Wickham's preference of a rich heiress to herself: "What are men to rocks and mountains?" (154). It is Mrs. Gardiner, Austen, and we who have the last laugh, though: once that tour has been curtailed to Derbyshire, it is no rocks or mountains but what Mrs. Gardiner recalls as the "delightful . . . grounds" of Pemberley with "some of the finest woods in the country" (240) which *show* Elizabeth what a man is indeed. The image of Darcy projected by grounds and woods is soon rounded out within Pemberley by his portraits, the trustworthy praise of his housekeeper, and of course by his reappearance in person. But toward her new appreciation of his nature her observation of his creative respect for Nature is prior and pivotal: Pemberley House is no sooner sighted than

> 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 . . . 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 at that moment she felt, that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something![3]

The passage's economy is vital; had the stream been *obviously* "swelled into a greater" its "importance" would no longer be "natural," and the woman who can note these discriminations will end, we feel, in rightly esteeming a Darcy. One's responsiveness to Nature, then, proves a serious touchstone of one's character.

But fourthly, if an Elizabeth can manage to know and love another better through appreciation of his interaction with nature in landscape-design, may not her sense of some implications of landscape-design clarify to an Elizabeth some issues of her own? In a later outdoor scene, standing on her own grounds (at Longbourn, but also maritally *and* martially), she refuses to be part of the designs of his aunt Lady Catherine—and how awkwardly *these* counteract nature! To speak to her alone Lady Catherine has proposed "a turn in . . . a prettyish kind of a little wilderness on one side of your lawn."[4] We learn that this "wilderness" is furnished with walks, benches, and a hermitage which Mrs. Bennet suggests will please her ladyship—that so far from preserving "wild" nature it quite conventionally provides a civilized buffer-zone between lawn and forest. On their walk, as Lady Catherine unfolds the purpose of her visit, in effect she lays before Elizabeth her designs for an artificial "wilderness" of

paths and benches for Elizabeth to spend her life in. This ersatz nature comes complete with a hermitage confining Elizabeth to adhere to her ladyship's rule of "sincerity and frankness" (353), in contemplation of her ladyship's icons of "honour, decorum, prudence, nay interest" (355), with perhaps a side-chapel for Lady Catherine's versions of "the claims of duty, honour, and gratitude" (358), as Elizabeth renounced any claim on Darcy. Even Elizabeth rises from the bench to which her guest had invited her, as their conversation attains Lady Catherine's ultimate insult, regarding her sister Lydia's elopement with Wickham:

> . . . is *such* a girl to be my nephew's sister? Is *her* husband, is the son of his late father's steward, to be [Darcy's] brother? Heaven and earth! . . . Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted? (357)

—an insult not only to the Bennet family, but to the natural integrity and self-purging resourcefulness of Darcy's Pemberley, and an outrage gently recalled by the third from final sentence of this novel. While Lady Catherine devised a "wilderness" to entrap Elizabeth, Lizzy escaped it surely with a keener sense of her own proper domain in life. She is sophisticated and articulate enough in the power and language of Nature to defy Lady Catherine's travesty of it in this episode.

That sensitivity can only intensify the comedy of an earlier moment when Elizabeth refuged herself in the ersatz Nature of travel-palaver. Concluding that first walk together around Pemberley, Elizabeth and Darcy find they must stand by the house till the Gardiners catch up.

> At such a time, much might have been said, and silence was very awkward. She wanted to talk, but there seemed an embargo on every subject. At last she recollected that she had been travelling, and they talked of Matlock and Dove Dale with great perseverance.[5]

Overhearing them, Mr. Parker might have a recommendation for their next trip.

It is the various privatizations of Nature by Parker, Sir Edward, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and Elizabeth and other heroines[6] in their insecure moments, that help us grasp the "dancing and sparkling" generosity of the concept Nature in Austen's mature works.

NOTES

[1] *Minor Works* (rev. 1988), *The Works of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press) VI, 391-92. Parody of pastoral imagery a half-century old appears on the second page of Austen's earliest work (1787-90) when Frederic and Elfrida lead their friend to "a verdant Lawn enamelled with a variety of variegated flowers & watered by a purling Stream," etc. (idem, 5). All citations of Austen's works henceforth are page-references to Chapman's 3rd edition of *Pride and*

Prejudice (vol. II), *Mansfield Park* (vol. III), *Emma* (vol. IV), and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (vol. V).

[2] (384). Austen's revision has heightened the dance-tune to which that description is set, for her final four words earlier read "under a sunshiny breeze" (see *Lady Susan/ The Watsons/Sanditon*, ed. Margaret Drabble [London: Penguin, 1974], 220). Note how *Sanditon*'s next five chapters likewise spring new perspectives upon us with the flick of a final sentence.

[3] (245); sixteen chapters later, to Jane's inquiry she joshingly dates her love for Darcy "from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley" (373).

[4] (352). If this is the same "little copse" Elizabeth and Jane caught their father fleeing toward (301), where Elizabeth fled to read an important letter (321), or where she confronted Wickham (327), any such past appropriation of the spot helps her check Lady Catherine's effort to create there an alternative nature.

[5] (257). Chapman's mounting of Gilpin's engravings of those two Derbyshire tourist-attractions just before this key chapter (243, 245) seems to miss the point of Austen's joke: two lovers acknowledging the powerful Nature around them and within, by hiding within safely depersonalized, possibly Gilpinesque, cliché.

[6] For comparison between Fanny Price's genuine regard for nature, her theatrical gestures through nature to impress Edmund (as Darcy had Elizabeth, without trying), and the Crawfords' cool indiffernece to it, see my "Humphry Repton, 'any Mr. Repton,' and the 'Improvement' Metonym in *Mansfield Park*" forthcoming in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 27 (1998), ed. Julie C. Hayes. On Anne Elliot's self-refuging in the jargon of Romantic nature poetry during her socially isolated walk to Winthrop (parallel to Elizabeth's screening herself behind a Matlock fan, just noted), see my "Vistas of Persistent Promise: An England Evermore About to Be," *Glorious Nature: British Landscape Painting 1750-1850*, ed. Paul Anbinder (New York: Hudson Hills, 1993), 48-49. I suggest there that Anne pointedly overlooks "the farmer, counteracting [her] sweets of poetical despondence" (85),—thus differing from Alistair M. Duckworth's otherwise helpful entry "Nature," *The Jane Austen Companion*, ed. J. David Grey (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 319.