

‘MYSELF CREATING WHAT I SAW’: SYMPATHY AND SOLIPSISM IN JANE AUSTEN’S *EMMA*

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Abstract

This paper situates Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1816) in relation to Enlightenment ideas about selfhood. It argues that the moral philosophy of two central figures from the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume and Adam Smith, may be used to shed light on Austen’s dramatisation of the self’s interaction with others, especially in *Emma*. Of particular importance is the emphasis on ‘sympathy’ in the work of Hume and Smith. The genuinely ‘sympathetic’ self gains self-knowledge and self-insight through responsiveness to the perspectives and predicaments of others. This is in stark contrast to solipsistic conduct, which locks the individual in a form of moral and epistemological blindness.

Keywords: Austen, Hume, Smith, Enlightenment, selfhood, sympathy, solipsism.

‘I cannot,’ writes David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740), ‘compare the soul more properly to anything than to a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination’ (Vol. I, Book IV: 247). Selfhood during the Enlightenment was, however, not always viewed in terms of such harmonious configurations. According to Charles Taylor, debates about the self during this period centre upon a ‘struggle’ between, on the one hand, an ideal (and therefore unreachable standard) of human conduct which is constituted in part by ‘the dignity of self-responsible reason’ and ‘the imperative of benevolence’, and, on the other, the reality of a ‘contrasting predicament, the one in which humans, alas, find themselves, where reason is hobbled or blinded’. The ‘narrative’ of this struggle depicts a ‘fall into blindness and error as well as trac[ing] the path of our gradual rise out of them’ (351).

Every novel of Jane Austen’s presents this ‘narrative’ in one form or another, but none more so than *Emma* (1816), which deals most explicitly with ‘blindness and error’, as well as the possibility of recovery from the moral maladies which are their origin. *Emma* dramatises – chiefly in the character of Emma Woodhouse herself, described early in the novel as having ‘a

mind delighted with its own ideas' (20) – a process of gradual liberation from solipsism, which is represented as an extreme form of the 'hobbling' of reason. Blindness (a trope in the novel) is linked repeatedly to solipsism and irrationality, while the cure, 'sympathy', is associated with clear vision and the proper exercise of reason, which enable the self to project itself beyond solipsistic enclosure, thereby envisaging meaningfully the perspectives and situations of others.

Critics such as Peter Knox-Shaw have argued for significant affinities between Austen's moral stance and those of central figures within the Scottish Enlightenment such as David Hume and Adam Smith. When one looks at the moral philosophy of Smith and Hume, it becomes evident that there are indeed important areas of commonality between their views and Austen's exploration of modes of selfhood, which may thus be regarded as part of a wider current of Enlightenment thinking about self-knowledge and the conduct of the self in relation to others. This paper, however, is focused more narrowly on one aspect of the wider debate about selfhood, namely the importance of 'sympathy' and the extent to which 'sympathy' is inhibited or vitiated by solipsistic behaviour.

Both Hume and Smith deprecate 'self-love', which they associate with stunted selfhood; and both contrast it with 'sympathy'. Hume, while acknowledging that a 'due degree of pride' is important in the 'man of sense and merit', inveighs against 'a man's overweening conceit of himself'. He suggests that if this 'overweening conceit' is present, it is unlikely to be discerned or rectified by that individual unaided, since '[n]o one can...be certain that his esteem of his own merit is well founded' (Vol. II, Book III: 291-292). The remedy has to come from within the social nexus: from the individual's relationships with others and the ways in which these further the process of self-knowledge. More precisely, the required antidote is 'sympathy', which, Hume suggests, facilitates interaction between people, the broadening of perspectives and thus the avoidance of solipsism. He describes how 'sympathy' enables us to internalise the views of others:

So close and intimate is the correspondence of human souls, that no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser degree. And though, on many occasions, my sympathy with him goes not so far as entirely to change my sentiments and way of thinking, yet it seldom is so weak as not to disturb the easy course of my thought....The sentiments of others can never affect us, but by becoming in some measure our own; in which case they operate upon us, by opposing and increasing our passions, in the very same manner as if they had been originally derived from our own temper and disposition. While they remain concealed in the minds of others, they can never have any influence upon us... (Vol. II, Book III: 287-288)

According to this, the power of 'sympathy' is such that it enables a profound spiritual exchange: the sentiments of others become 'in some measure our own'. The individual cannot be left unaffected by such an exchange and undergoes a necessary and beneficial transformation. In addition, 'sympathy' has the capacity to unlock the innermost thoughts of others, revealing that which 'remain[s] concealed' in their minds. Those who choose concealment close off communication, thus losing the opportunity to exercise influence on others, while 'sympathy', in disclosing people's 'sentiments and way of thinking', fosters reciprocity and mutuality in 'the correspondence of human souls'.

Smith's discussion of 'sympathy' in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) shows that, for him, as for Hume, the concept comprises much more than emotion excited by compassion.

It is a complex instrument of moral judgment, which requires the sympathiser to enter into the circumstances of another person's situation:

We either approve or disapprove of the conduct of another man, according as we feel that, when we bring his case home to ourselves, we either can or cannot entirely sympathize with the sentiments and motives which directed it. And, in the same manner, we either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, according as we feel that, when we place ourselves in the situation of another man, and view it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station, we either can or cannot entirely enter into and sympathize with the sentiments and motives which influenced it. We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them, unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them. (111)

Here too self-knowledge – ‘survey[ing] our own sentiments and motives’ – is represented as being grounded in meaningful interactions with others. The requirement, as in Hume’s concept of ‘sympathy’, is a form of transposition, whereby individuals ‘remove [themselves]...from [their] own natural situation’. There is no knowledge of self, it is suggested here, without understanding the predicaments of others; no knowledge of others without appropriate reference to the self. In Jerrold Seigel’s words, both Hume and Smith ‘saw the relational dimension as essential to the construction of stable self-existence’ (167). The key to attaining the necessary objectivity is distance: viewing ‘our own sentiments and motives...at a certain distance from us’, almost as if attempting to see ourselves from the outside. Significantly, the emphasis is not only on the perspectives of other people, but also on the particularities of their circumstances: ‘when we place ourselves in the situation of another man, and view it...with his eyes and from his station’. This, as we shall see, is how accurate judgment and meaningful ‘sympathy’ are acquired and represented in *Emma*.

For Smith, the antidote to ‘self-deceit’, which he describes as ‘this fatal weakness of mankind’ and ‘the source of half the disorders of human life’, is the incorporation within ourselves (to as full an extent as possible) of insights provided by the external perspective of others: ‘If we saw ourselves in the light in which others see us, or in which they would see us if they knew all, a reformation would generally be unavoidable. We could not otherwise endure the sight’ (152-153). The moral pathway which he outlines takes the form of a circular movement whereby an individual develops a responsiveness to the perspectives of others and then refers the knowledge gained back to himself or herself, transforming it into a vital form of self-assessment:

We become anxious to know how far we deserve [other people’s] censure or applause, and whether to them we must necessarily appear those agreeable or disagreeable creatures which they represent us. We begin, upon this account, to examine our own passions and conduct, and to consider how these must appear to them, by considering how they would appear to us if in their situation. We suppose ourselves spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct. (113)

The notion that people may be ‘spectators of [their] own behaviour’ suggests that the individual becomes both the one who acts and the one who assesses that action. The self which does not

take into account the perceptions of others – and the solipsistic individual would be a very good example of this – is unable correctly to ‘scrutinize the propriety of [its] own conduct’. Whereas a looking-glass generally does nothing more than reflect our own faces back at us, Smith speaks here of a different kind of mirror; one which, in incorporating ‘the eyes of other people’, facilitates not merely self-reflection, but the incorporation of a more encompassing perspective, which in turn constitutes a form of social wisdom. These insights, gained in part through striving to see through ‘the eyes of other people’, manifest internally as the acquisition of self-knowledge, whereby we ‘examine our own passions and conduct’.

This examination of one’s own conduct is frequently linked in the work of Smith (as it is in *Emma*) to approbation and disapprobation, and, more importantly, to self-approbation and self-disapprobation. (There is even a section in Part III of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* entitled ‘Of the principle of self-approbation and of self-disapprobation’.) Smith places so high a value on this activity that he goes so far as to claim that ‘[n]o activity can properly be called virtuous, which is not accompanied with the sentiment of self-approbation’ (173). His account of what ‘the principle of approbation’ entails makes it clear that it is imbued with some of the central tenets of Enlightenment morality and epistemology, including propriety and discernment:

[T]he principle of approbation...concern[s] the power or faculty of the mind which renders certain characters agreeable or disagreeable to us; makes us prefer one tenor of conduct to another; denominate the one right and the other wrong; and consider the one as the object of approbation, honour, and reward; the other as that of blame, censure and punishment. (314)

Seen in this light, all Jane Austen’s novels are dramatisations of and meditations upon the ‘principle of approbation’. (It is significant that the words ‘approbation’ and ‘reprobation’ recur throughout *Emma*.) But her most complex investigations of selfhood occur when ‘approbation’ is extended to include self-approbation, as in *Emma*.

‘Self-approbation’ is distinct from ‘self-satisfaction’ – which, in an extreme and chauvinistic form, is satirised by Austen in the character of the vain baronet, Sir Walter Elliot, in *Persuasion*. Instead, ‘self-approbation’ makes complacency impossible, for it requires that individuals become ‘spectators of [their] own behaviour’, sitting, as Smith indicates, in judgment of the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ of their own conduct:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct, when I endeavour to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it, it is evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself, as it were into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view. The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself, and of whose conduct, under the character of a spectator, I was endeavouring to form some opinion. (113)

Where solipsistic individuals lack the inclination to ‘examine [their] own conduct’, and are therefore inclined to overweening self-satisfaction, people who engage in self-approbation may have to undergo the discomfort of stringent self-criticism. If they find their conduct wanting – as Emma does when she chastises herself towards the end of the novel – then they have to

countenance what is perhaps most difficult to bear, the 'blame, censure and punishment' that come from within. The division into 'two persons' in this context does not imply a fragmentation of the self, or a lack of wholeness; instead, the 'spectator' and 'agent' complement each other in forming an evolved self which has internalised a finely honed moral sensibility.

The use of fiction to illustrate ideas drawn from moral philosophy is entirely consistent with Adam Smith's views, for, as Charles L. Griswold Jr. points out, Smith believed that works of drama and literature are particularly well suited to engage the impulse towards 'sympathy' and illustrate the ways in which it operates:

[Smith] implies that our sympathizing with imagined characters is the same kind of process as our sympathizing with 'real' people in everyday life. ...Drama and literature are central to ethics (in particular, to moral education) because the sympathetic imagination is so important to the accurate 'understanding' of others and to the formation of ethical judgment. (26)

One cannot imagine a more apt work of literature to consider in this regard than *Emma*, since it goes a great deal further than illustrating the capacity (according to Smith) of literature in general to reveal the workings of the 'sympathetic imagination'. In *Emma*, the ways in which 'sympathy' may act as a guide towards 'the accurate "understanding" of others' and 'the formation of ethical judgment', including the faculties of approbation and self-approbation, are so central that it would not be overstating the case to say that, to a large degree, that is what the novel is about.

At the beginning of *Emma*, the dangers of solipsism are emphasised to such an extent that the narrator, having described Mr Woodhouse as 'being never able to suppose that other people could feel differently from himself' (6), uses almost the identical phrase in relation to him only ten pages later: 'he could never believe other people to be different from himself' (16). The repetition, in addition to providing emphasis, enacts rhetorically the notion that an unredeemed solipsism is a form of spiritual stasis; a moral inertia. It is indeed evident that nothing is ever going to alter the 'habits of gentle selfishness' (6) which are now irredeemably ingrained in Mr Woodhouse. Consequently, although he is represented as being well-disposed towards his family and friends and free of malice, Mr Woodhouse embodies an extreme position in the moral landscape of the novel: that of intractable solipsism. In 'hating change of every kind (5),' he is one who will never change within himself. It is telling that he objects in particular to '[m]atrimony', which, 'as the origin of change, was always disagreeable' (5). The fact that he was himself once a married man, yet objects now to matrimony in others, exemplifies the fundamental lack of reason implicit in a solipsistic outlook.

The inability of the solipsist to consider matters from another person's perspective is represented in blatant terms in Mr Woodhouse's reaction to Miss Taylor's marriage to Mr Weston. In response to Emma's suggestion that, amongst the advantages which the marriage would bring Miss Taylor would be 'a house of her own', he protests, saying '[a] house of her own! – but where is the advantage of a house of her own? This is three times as large!' (6) It falls to Mr Knightley to deliver the carefully worded rebuke. The terms in which he articulates it identify him early in the novel as one who shows that understanding the feelings of others involves – as Adam Smith too emphasises – a need to sympathise with the particularities of their situation:

'It is impossible that Emma should not miss such a companion,' said Mr. Knightley. 'We should not like her so well as we do, sir, if we could suppose it. But she knows how much the marriage is to Miss Taylor's advantage; she knows how very acceptable it must be

at Miss Taylor's time of life to be settled in a home of her own, and how important to her to be secure of a comfortable provision, and therefore cannot allow herself to feel so much pain as pleasure. Every friend of Miss Taylor must be glad to have her so happily married.' (9)

Mr Knightley is alluding to the fact that, although Miss Taylor is loved by Mr Woodhouse and Emma, her status as Emma's former governess will always mean that her situation is precarious. Her being 'settled in a home of her own' and 'secure of a comfortable provision' will thus bring a considerable improvement in her circumstances. Although Mr Knightley does not criticise Mr Woodhouse directly, his comment that '[e]very friend of Miss Taylor must be glad to have her so happily married' implies that those who are not prepared to consider the matter from Miss Taylor's point of view are guilty of a failure of true friendship.

Mr Knightley's intervention in this instance is couched in relatively simple terms, since it takes issue with Mr Woodhouse's selfish desires, which, as suggested earlier, are the most blatant and unthinking expression of solipsism in the novel. However, his remonstrance here anticipates his very stringent censure of Emma later in the novel – the sternest criticism of her which he makes – when she is discourteous towards Miss Bates during the ill-fated picnic at Box Hill. The terms of the criticism are in that instance far more complex, since they are a response to solipsistic behaviour in Emma, which is a great deal more nuanced, less implacable and less entrenched than her father's. In many ways, Mr Knightley's scolding of Emma comes as a surprise – not that he reprimands her, but the way in which he does so. One might have thought that he would deprecate discourtesy in general, insisting that Miss Bates is as entitled as anyone to that due measure of courtesy which is the right of everyone in a civilised society. But that is not what he does. Instead, he bases his criticism on a very specific assessment of the two women's respective positions in society:

'Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation – but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed!' (339)

Mr Knightley has always shown himself to be preoccupied by the precise circumstances of people's social positions, as suggested, for instance, by his being inclined to deprecate the uncertainty of Harriet Smith's parentage, rather than being delighted, as Emma is, by the possibility it affords to fashion an identity for her – although, as his warm admiration of Robert Martin shows, he is more than willing to discern 'true gentility' (59) in individuals of lower rank. But here he seems to be taking his insistence on always seeing people in terms of birth, class and money to extraordinary lengths, with the rather startling suggestion that he might even have been willing to overlook Emma's conduct if Miss Bates enjoyed the same social and economic status: 'I would not quarrel with you... [w]ere she your equal in situation...'

What appears to be a form of tendentious morality in him shows instead an understanding of the vulnerability of those disempowered through penury or lack of social status, and the extent to which such people cannot defend themselves against someone like Emma. But there is another way of interpreting his reaction, and that is to see in it a defence of 'sympathy' as Smith and Hume conceive of it: a moral judgment arising out of the insertion of oneself into the

situation of another person, for, as Jerrold Seigel points out, within the Enlightenment notion of ‘sympathy’ there is ‘always an element of judgement’ (143). Interestingly, Smith, who speaks of the ‘raillery’ to which people are prone, describes almost precisely the factors which lead to Emma’s thoughtless conduct at Box Hill:

There is...a malice in mankind, which not only prevents all sympathy with little uneasinesses, but renders them in some measure diverting. Hence the delight which we all take in raillery, and in the small vexation which we observe in our companion, when he is pushed, and urged, and teased upon all sides. (40)

The ‘malice’ which Emma demonstrates in mocking Miss Bates does indeed ‘prevent’ her from showing the necessary ‘sympathy’, and, consequentially, she amuses herself at Miss Bates’s expense, neglecting to consider how hurtful the remark must be to the older woman. Mr Knightley’s rebuke brings home to her the failure of ‘sympathy’ by compelling her now to do what she did not do then – namely, to consider the unenviable circumstances of Miss Bates’s life: the decline in her fortune, her present penury, and the even more straitened circumstances which await her in the future: ‘[s]he is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more’. When he says that ‘[h]er situation should secure your compassion’, he is suggesting that Emma’s response ought to extend beyond a vague compassion. Instead, he is demanding of her the precision implicit in the kind of ‘sympathy’ which, in an excerpt quoted above, Smith describes as ‘plac[ing] ourselves in the situation of another man, and view[ing] it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station’.

A compassion which is not ‘sympathetic’ in the sense in which Smith uses it, however tenderly felt, would reinforce Emma’s superior position, just as acts of charity emphasise the power and privileges of the donor (which is how the *noblesse oblige* of Emma’s charitable activities amongst the poor is represented in the novel). But true ‘sympathy’ would mean ‘inhabiting’, in a certain sense, the circumstances of Miss Bates’s situation and thus seeing them not from without, but from within: an exchange of the kind which Hume had in mind when he said – as quoted above – that ‘[t]he sentiments of others can never affect us, but by becoming in some measure our own’. This redefines the very nature of the social contract, placing at its heart reciprocity and exchange, a close ‘correspondence of human souls’, rather than paternalistic charity. Paradoxically, therefore, while Mr Knightley may be seen as emphasising and even entrenching hierarchies of class and money in his suggestion that he would not have reprimanded Emma if Miss Bates had been ‘a woman of fortune’ or her ‘equal in situation’, he is simultaneously establishing a form of equality between the two women in demanding that Emma enter ‘sympathetically’ into the particularities of Miss Bates’s situation.

This most severe of all the criticisms Mr Knightley makes of Emma thus marks an important stage in what Knox-Shaw has described as her ‘fitful movement towards self-knowledge’, a trajectory which he associates with Emma’s ‘widening recognition of adjacent lives’ (201). Through this recognition of the lives of others, she comes to acknowledge ‘the blindness of her own head and heart’ (*Emma*, 373). Responsiveness to others does therefore indeed lead to self-knowledge, which is precisely the way in which ‘sympathy’ is meant to function.

The ‘heuristic process’ (218) which Knox-Shaw discerns in *Emma* is associated with reading correctly, while the blindness associated with solipsism leads to misreading. One of the most obvious instances of misreading is Emma’s mistaken interpretation of the charade which Mr Elton pens, and which she confidently assumes to be a tribute to Harriet, when it

is, of course, a declaration of admiration for Emma herself. The incident demonstrates how ‘a mind delighted with its own ideas’ imposes its own blindness, for the interpretation is almost perversely inaccurate. For instance, Emma even finds a way of accounting for the phrase ‘[t]hy ready wit’, which appears in the second last line of the charade: ‘Humph,’ she says, ‘Harriet’s ready wit! All the better. A man must be very much in love indeed, to describe her so’ (65).

Later in the novel Emma is described as an ‘imaginationist’ (302), which suggests that she tends to construct and believe in her own reality. One consequence of being an ‘imaginationist’ is that she expects other people’s inclinations to fall in with her own and thus always to confirm (rather than contradict) the reality she has concocted. She fashions other people in her own image, as do all ‘imaginationists’: Mr Knightley, towards the end of the novel, identifies the same tendency in Frank Churchill – another character with marked solipsistic tendencies – when he says of Frank that it is ‘[n]atural enough! – his own mind full of intrigue, that he should suspect it in others’ (404). Emma is also described at one point as wishing to lay down ‘the judicious law of her own brain’ (308). The phrase suggests that her brain, instead of engaging responsively with its environment, behaves autocratically, like a judge who imposes the law. The misreading of Mr Elton’s charade is a direct consequence of these tendencies, as suggested by Emma’s remarking to Harriet that ‘the state of [Mr Elton’s] mind is clear and decided, as my wishes on the subject have been ever since I knew you’ (67).

When Mr Elton makes his true intentions known, Emma responds with dismay and chagrin, but also with a measure of self-criticism:

But he had fancied her in love with him; that evidently must have been his dependence; and after raving a little about the seeming incongruity of gentle manners and a conceited head, Emma was obliged in common honesty to stop and admit that her own behaviour to him had been so complaisant and obliging, so full of courtesy and attention, as (supposing her real motive unperceived) might warrant a man of ordinary observation and delicacy, like Mr. Elton, in fancying himself a very decided favourite. If she had so misinterpreted his feelings, she had little right to wonder that he, with self-interest to blind him, should have mistaken her’s. (123)

This realisation marks an important stage in her development as a ‘sympathetic’ character, for here she is, for the first time, placing herself in Mr Elton’s situation, and considering how her conduct must have appeared to him. In this instance, she is indeed becoming ‘a spectator of [her] own behaviour’, beginning to see herself as others see her. She is able to recognise how easily a man of limited discernment, such as Mr Elton, could have been led astray by the hints she had unwittingly been giving him. In this excerpt, the connection between blindness and self-preoccupation could not be more explicit: Mr Elton ‘with self-interest to blind him’ has been unable to ‘read’ Emma’s feelings correctly.

In contrast to the ‘ordinary observation and delicacy’ of Mr Elton – and, indeed, of most characters in the novel – Austen represents in Mr Knightley a capacity for extraordinary observation. So important is it for this prescience to be demonstrably evident in him, that she goes as far as to compromise the great ‘mystery’ of the novel, which is the secret engagement between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, by revealing it earlier than the movement of the plot requires. The secret has been carefully kept from the reader, as well as from the other characters; but in the excerpt below it is intimated a full five chapters before Mrs Weston breaks the news to Emma. The purpose is, presumably, to show Mr Knightley’s unusual perspicacity at work.

Where almost all are blind, he sees. Consequently, the passage which describes his exceptional discernment is one of the most important in the novel:

[Mr. Knightley] began to suspect [Frank Churchill] of some double dealing in his pursuit of Emma. That Emma was his object appeared indisputable. Every thing declared it; his own attentions, his father's hints, his mother-in-law's guarded silence; it was all in unison; words, conduct, discretion, and indiscretion, told the same story. But while so many were devoting him to Emma, and Emma herself making him over to Harriet, Mr. Knightley began to suspect him of some inclination to trifle with Jane Fairfax. He could not understand it; but there were symptoms of intelligence between them – he thought so at least – symptoms of admiration on his side, which, having once observed, he could not persuade himself to think entirely void of meaning, however he might wish to escape any of Emma's errors of imagination. She was not present when the suspicion first arose. He was dining with the Randalls' family, and Jane, at the Eltons'; and he had seen a look, more than a single look, at Miss Fairfax, which, from the admirer of Miss Woodhouse, seemed somewhat out of place. When he was again in their company, he could not help remembering what he had seen; nor could he avoid observations which, unless it were like Cowper and his fire at twilight,

'Myself creating what I saw,'

brought him yet stronger suspicion of there being a something of private liking, of private understanding even, between Frank Churchill and Jane. (309-310)

The excerpt reveals a tension between competing 'stories' or narratives. The most beguiling is the one which declares Emma to be the 'indisputable' object of Frank Churchill, since this narrative coincides with a general desire to see Emma and Frank united in marriage. This outcome is what would gratify the little society of Highbury; it amounts, therefore, to a form of communal self-satisfaction. The blindness which proceeds from this prevents the onlookers from 'reading' the situation correctly – establishing yet again the link between self-satisfaction and false knowledge. For all the goodwill it implies, the story of Frank's 'pursuit of Emma' constitutes a partiality which is nevertheless entirely lacking in 'sympathy' (in the sense in which Hume and Smith use the term), since there is none of the distance which objectivity requires and no awareness of the fallaciousness of expecting that other people's wishes will inevitably coincide with one's own.

It requires 'sympathy' to unlock the secret and recognise the situation for what it is, as opposed to what people wish it to be; and Mr Knightley is identified here as astutely 'sympathetic', using close and precise observation and his knowledge of human behaviour to uncover the 'private understanding' between Jane and Frank. He manages to overcome his own emotional involvement – his dislike of Frank, and feelings of jealousy towards him – in order to attain a level of disinterestedness which allows him a certain distance and, therefore, a measure of objectivity. Empirical observation precedes cognition: covert glances and hints of subterfuge between the two become apparent to him before he understands fully their significance. He also makes use in discerning the truth of the situation of what is for Austen one of the most important ways of acquiring knowledge – the power of experience and cumulative understanding: '[w]hen he was again in their company, he could not help remembering what he had seen'.

The quotation from Cowper reiterates the suggestion that Mr Knightley is not an 'imaginist'. It comes from 'The Winter Evening', Book IV of a lengthy poem entitled *The Task*. The speaker

of the poem, staring at twilight into a 'glowing hearth', constructs imaginary scenes in the embers of the fire:

Me oft has fancy ludicrous and wild
 Soothed with a waking dream of houses, towers,
 Trees, churches, and strange visages expressed
 In the red cinders, while with poring eye
 I gazed, myself creating what I saw. (ll. 286-290)

This 'waking dream' is brought to an end when the 'freezing blast/ That sweeps the bolted shutter' (ll. 303-304) disturbs the speaker's reverie and 'restores [him] to [himself]' (l.307). It is significant that, once the speaker of the poem is jolted out of his 'waking dream', he regains self-possession and is 'restore[d]' to himself. The vivid scene which 'fancy' construes is undoubtedly appealing: it is both 'sooth[ing]' and engrossing, a combination of the familiar, as suggested by the reference to 'houses, towers, / [t]rees, churches', and the unfamiliar, as intimated by the 'strange visages' which the speaker observes. Yet, for all its enticement, it is presented as an indulgence of an impulse towards subjectivism and solitude, and a lapse in 'understanding' and 'thought'. This is seen in the speaker's response to a similar scenario, described immediately after the 'waking dream' at the fireside, where he wrongly imagines 'some stranger's near approach' (l.295): 'Tis thus the understanding takes repose/ In indolent vacuity of thought, / And sleeps and is refreshed' (ll. 296-298). Rejuvenating as such 'fancies' may be, the speaker needs to be jolted out of them to be 'restore[d]' to himself.

The empirical orientation at work in Mr Knightley's correct 'reading' of the relationship between Frank and Jane is the opposite of the self-fashioning implied by the 'waking dream' described in Cowper's poem. The close observations which he makes are grounded in specific, observable and measurable events, which can be retained by the memory and explicated when the underlying context is fully understood. This is reinforced by the fact that very precise information is given about the evening when Mr Knightley's 'suspicion first arose': the dinner party at the home of Mr and Mrs Elton, the absence of Emma, the 'look, more than a single look, at Miss Fairfax' from the ostensible admirer of Miss Woodhouse. The empirical element implies a reality, a factuality, which repudiates self-fashioning. The phrase '[m]yself creating what I saw', coming as it does at a relatively late stage of the novel, is laden with the cumulative critique of solipsism and its consequent misreading of signs and stories. It suggests that the self which avoids 'errors of imagination', including the temptation to construct its own reality, its own subjectivist vision, is a self which inhabits with full and alert responsiveness the circumstances of its own situation in the world.

The secret engagement between Frank and Jane is deplored in the strongest terms in the novel, even though the unreasonable behaviour of Mrs Churchill is acknowledged as a mitigating factor. Emma, upon being informed of it by Mrs Weston, wishes the two well, but denounces their conduct:

'I shall always think it a very abominable sort of proceeding. What has it been but a system of hypocrisy and deceit, – espionage, and treachery?...Here we have been, the whole winter and spring, completely duped, fancying ourselves all on an equal footing of

truth and honour, with two people in the midst of us who may have been carrying around, comparing and sitting in judgment on sentiments and words that were never meant for both to hear.' (362)

It is clear that her condemnation here has the full support of the narrator, and the vehemence of the terms she uses – 'abominable', 'hypocrisy', 'deceit', 'espionage', 'treachery' – is not meant to be viewed as overstatement, but rather as a proper and reasonable denunciation. The clandestine engagement is regarded as a betrayal of the social contract, which requires a measure of trust and openness; hence the use of terms such as 'espionage' and 'treachery', which generally have much broader social or political implications. But it is also possible to read into this a suggestion that the conduct of the two lovers was anti-social because it came close to precluding 'sympathy'. Their secrecy and the false clues they disseminated made it almost impossible for others to 'inhabit' the situation correctly. Only the extraordinary perspicacity of Mr Knightley is able to look past their apparent indifference to each other to discern the 'symptoms of intelligence between them'. The circle of 'sympathy', which, as suggested earlier, is meant to lead from the self to others and then back to the self again, could not be completed here because their duplicity has disrupted the discursive pathway. Their concealment of their intentions has made true communication impossible because it has arbitrarily altered the premises upon which communication is based – Emma says as much when she complains that people had mistakenly believed that they were 'all on an equal footing of truth and honour'. It is therefore appropriate that, later in the novel, she expresses a distaste for 'equivocation' (432), since 'sympathy' is a form of communication as much as it is a mode of conduct. Frank and Jane have turned what ought to have been the disclosure required by fidelity to the social contract into the enclosure of recondite meanings and private intimations, which has led to their 'comparing and sitting in judgment on sentiments and words that were never meant for both to hear'.

For much of the novel, Emma's views and conduct have been represented by the narrator with a considerable degree of irony – the irony arising, as it were, out of the gap between her frequently misguided perspective and the narrator's authoritative position. As the novel draws to a close, the irony recedes, since Emma, in coming to see and act correctly, gains the approbation of the narrator. One of the most significant passages in which she criticises her own former conduct follows immediately upon the revelation that Harriet believes herself to be in love with Mr Knightley and is persuaded that he 'return[s] [her] affection' (369):

It darted through [Emma], with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!

Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before. How improperly she had been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on!...Some portion of respect for herself, however, in spite of all these demerits – some concern for her own appearance, and a strong sense of justice by Harriet – (there would be no need of compassion to the girl who believed herself loved by Mr. Knightley – but justice required that she should not be made unhappy by any coldness now,) gave Emma the resolution to sit and endure farther with calmness, and even apparent kindness. (370)

Here, Emma casts off her former blindness as she '[sees] it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before'. Significantly, it is the 'blindness of her own head and heart' (373) which she now acknowledges and makes reparation for, since she recognises both her lack of true compassion ('how unfeeling') and her lack of reason ('how irrational'). Evident in her are the 'self-responsible reason' and 'imperative of benevolence' which Charles Taylor, in the excerpt quoted above, identifies as among the greatest ambitions of Enlightenment selfhood, while her candour and contrition exemplify the didactic Enlightenment narrative which Taylor describes as the 'fall into blindness and error as well as trac[ing] the path of our gradual rise out of them'. But it goes further than that. Emma is here also, as Smith would have it, a judge of her own behaviour, seeing herself 'in the light in which others see [her]', a spectator as well as an agent, and, in spite of her own anguish, a genuinely 'sympathetic' presence, motivated by 'a strong sense of justice by Harriet' and a desire to treat her fairly and with consideration. She is a stern voice of self-reprobaton, but also, in terms of the 'portion of respect' for herself which she retains, of self-approbation. In fact, the excerpt represents her acquiring, even under difficult circumstances, a balance of self-approbation and self-disapprobation. It is this balance which enables her to attain the necessary self-possession to conceal from Harriet the dismay which her revelation has provoked. Self-possession is a quality which Peter Knox-Shaw has identified as the mark of an evolved Enlightenment self, and which he associated directly with Austen in his comment that '[Austen] understood that a social tempering of the self was intrinsic to normal development, and that there was no moral refinement without self-command' (253). Emma has progressed from solipsistic self-indulgence to 'sympathetic' self-command.

As cogent a tool as 'sympathy' is, it has, of necessity, its limitations, and for an obvious reason: complete knowledge of other people's perspectives or thoughts is not attainable. In fact, as Knud Haakonssen suggests in his discussion of Smith's concept of 'sympathy', the imaginative aspect of 'sympathy' arises precisely because 'we do not have access to another person's mind' (12). From that perspective, one could argue that 'sympathy' will always remain at least partly chimerical. An additional reason for this is that, as suggested earlier, 'sympathy' is also a form of communication, and communication between individuals will always be incomplete. In *Emma* the narrator says as much when she points out that '[s]eldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken' (391). In her comment lies a frank admission of the circumscriptions and compromises inherent in ordinary 'human disclosure'.

However, there is a mode of discourse which approximates 'complete truth' within its own terms and the parameters which it constitutes. It is to be found in a sophisticated realist narrative such as *Emma*, which elaborates a complete social world within its fictional terrain, and in which an omniscient narrator guides the reader's response to the moral complexities which it has itself construed. In such a narrative, if anything is 'disguised' or 'mistaken', it is only because the narrative voice permits it to be so; and, in due course, disguises will be removed, errors rectified and secrets told.

Seen in that light, it is possible to view the kind of fiction which Austen writes as the expression (and enactment) of a powerful, even consummate form of 'sympathy'. It provides discernment, judgment and access to the thoughts and sensibilities of other people, revealing, as no other form of communication can, that which, to return to Hume's phrase, 'remain[s] concealed in the minds of others'. It is uniquely equipped to make available to us the conditions of other people's lives in situational terms. It undermines the solipsistic tendencies of certain characters by interpolating a moral commentary which has a counterbalancing effect. It judiciously withholds approbation

from some, and bestows it on others. It makes self-knowledge a trajectory and epistemology a journey. In its own way, it does itself ‘create what [it sees]’; but the result is expansiveness, a unique expression of what Hume calls the ‘correspondence of human souls’, not the enclosure of a private vision.

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