Jane Austen herself places *Emma* among the novels for us in a letter to the Reverend J. S. Clarke: "...I am strongly haunted with the idea that to those readers who have preferred 'Pride and Prejudice' it will appear inferior in wit, and to those who have preferred 'Mansfield Park' inferior in good sense." 1

This second judgment can be accounted for easily enough: not only is Jane Austen writing to a clergyman, but *Emma* certainly does lack the moral fervor that pervades *Mansfield Park*. The grounds of the first judgment are harder to settle. Perhaps Jane Austen is thinking simply of the sparkling repartee in *Pride and Prejudice*. But I wonder if the judgment may not reflect the fact that the rich ambiguity which we and Elizabeth must come to recognize—the union of pride and shyness in Darcy's behavior—has been thinned in *Emma* to an either/or irony which counterpoints the heroine’s illusions with reality. This is not to minimize the achievement of the novel, for it remains in many ways Jane Austen’s most finished work. She sustains the irony brilliantly, as well as the point of view on which it depends (though in one chapter, the fifth of Volume III, she shifts us from Emma’s perspective to Mr. Knightley’s in order to show us Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill more clearly). She not merely sustains the irony, but develops it through a series of increasingly tense misinterpretations to the climactic moment when Emma discovers what she most wants, indeed what her real self is, only to be convinced that she has forfeited Mr. Knightley by her own actions.

The novel is founded, then, in Emma’s perspective. Through her we participate in the three main narrative movements: her encouragement of the courtship she imagines Mr. Elton carry-
ing on with Harriet Smith, which results in Mr. Elton proposing to Emma herself; her games with Frank Churchill, whom she also assigns to Harriet after a time, only to find that he has been engaged to Jane Fairfax all along; finally, her rivalry with Harriet over Mr. Knightley, which ends with Emma getting the man she loves, but not until she has lived some days with the fear that he prefers Harriet and with the knowledge that she herself has unwittingly taught her protégée to hope for him. Jane Austen interlocks these movements beautifully, the new situation and its characters always beginning to claim our attention before the old movement is quite finished. More than that, she handles the movements as a whole so that the courses of Emma and Mr. Knightley gradually converge, so that they reveal their feelings for each other more and more clearly. I am thinking of such matters as the early quarrel between them over Harriet’s rejection of Robert Martin; of Mr. Knightley’s resentment against Frank Churchill, in the middle stages of the story, which is matched by Emma’s scorn at the suggestion that Jane Fairfax has attracted Mr. Knightley; and of the anxious misinterpretations which each of them falls into about the feelings of the other when they meet at last to talk over Frank Churchill’s engagement. The details of the relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley I shall take up in a later section of this chapter. But I must first make clear what sort of person Emma is, largely by placing her against a number of other characters, and what change she undergoes in the novel.

Emma’s most basic trait is trust in her own judgment. The story shows, of course, that her measurements of personality are often sheer fancy—Jane Austen frequently mentions Emma’s active “imagination”—and that her interpretation of an event is likely to consist of an absolutely false induction. What else is
her misreading of Mr. Elton’s behavior toward Harriet and herself; or her fantasy of the attachment that is to flower as a result of Harriet’s rescue by Frank Churchill from the gypsies; or, perhaps the most ironic example, Emma’s supposition that some secret understanding exists between Jane Fairfax and Mr. Dixon—an edifice which Emma erects on the chance juxtaposition of the two names in a rambling monologue by the Miss Bates whom she so disdains? This habit indicates more than perverse rationality on Emma’s part. Her complete reliance on her own convictions and her ready publication of them mark her need to dominate. Out of her own brain she fabricates a reality which she imprints on the world around her, fancying the progress of one match after another. And time after time, when imposing her views on others, she congratulates herself on being the only person who can really see what is going on. Both of these tendencies betray Emma’s compulsion to assert herself, indeed to prove herself unique.

Emma’s aggressiveness seems to have been nourished by her upbringing, given what we learn of that: if Mr. Knightley has checked her now and then, both her father and her governess (who later becomes Mrs. Weston) have indulged her constantly. The personality of Mr. Woodhouse, of course, has nothing like the bite of Emma’s. But perhaps it is not entirely absurd to find one source for her self-centeredness in the behavior of her father—rather as his other daughter, Isabella Knightley, has inherited his concern about health—for he appears almost wholly engrossed in himself. Long accustomed to a social position that permits him to have his own way, an old man confirmed in his distaste for any change and in his worry about illness, Mr. Woodhouse keeps voicing his whims as universal truths. Thus he translates his own sadness at the departure of Emma’s governess to marry Mr. Weston into a general opinion—“What a pity it is that Mr. Weston ever thought of her!” (p. 8)—and assumes thereafter that everyone must agree with him in regarding her as “poor Miss Taylor,” unfortunate because she has left Hartfield. Or he feels that his own diet of thin gruel should be standard for mankind. In fact his ruling passion for health may lead
him beyond generalizing to an indecorous particularity, as when he hears that Jane Fairfax has been out in the rain: "Young ladies are delicate plants. My dear, did you change your stockings?" (p. 294). This remark will also suggest, however, what is no more than the truth: that Mr. Woodhouse is gentle and kindly for all his selfishness. And most of the time, far from imposing his notions on anyone else, he is merely humored by others, who then proceed to manage him. He serves in the first two-thirds of the novel primarily as a foil to Emma, making her selfishness seem less by his own. Throughout these pages he also has a more positive function, in the sense that Emma shows her better nature, a capacity to love and to serve someone else, in her dealings with him. Yet once, just once, he is allowed a triumph at the expense of Emma. She has been maliciously trying to stir up in him the same contempt that she feels for Mrs. Elton, and she goes about her business by rocking his hobby-horse, appealing to his prejudice against marriage, that signal of change. But Mr. Woodhouse stands firm, holding through a series of statements to the position that proper treatment of Mrs. Elton "is a matter of mere common politeness and good-breeding, and has nothing to do with any encouragement to people to marry" (p. 280). Although the passage sets him off to better advantage than Emma, Mr. Woodhouse has no idea of what she is up to, and he cannot be said to rebuff her here—or anywhere else.

Emma meets with a much higher degree of consciousness in Mrs. Weston, but with the same indulgence. Mrs. Weston is affectionately disposed toward everyone and the reverse of overbearing. When in her turn she kindly advises Jane Fairfax against walking in the rain, for instance, she refuses to be dictatorial, advancing her opinions as her own and separating her "I" from an autonomous "you": "The spring I always think requires more than common care. Better wait an hour or two, or even half a day for your letters, than run the risk of bringing on your cough again. Now do not you feel that you had? Yes, I am sure you are much too reasonable" (p. 295). The unassertiveness of Mrs. Weston owes a good deal to the "mildness
...of her temper" which Jane Austen mentions, but I would guess that it also reflects the habit developed by a former governess, by a person somewhat inferior socially. She often seems uneasy about the socially prominent Frank Churchill, and not merely because he is her stepson. Certainly she defers to Emma almost always. But of course she loves Emma, loves her so much that, when on one occasion she is faced with Mr. Knightley's differentiation between the attractions of Emma's "person" and the faults of Emma's "mind," Mrs. Weston glosses over the distinction to praise both the "person" and the "mind" (pp. 39-40).

In spite of her partiality for Emma, Mrs. Weston never appears foolish or trivial (as her husband often does). Warm as her feelings are, she accepts their consequences. Thus, when the news breaks of the engagement between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, Emma bursts into a tirade because she has been duped and because she has made indiscreet remarks about his fiancée to him, but Mrs. Weston replies: "as I have always had a thoroughly good opinion of Miss Fairfax, I never could, under any blunder, have spoken ill of her; and as to speaking ill of him, there I must have been safe" (pp. 399-400). She has been "safe" concerning Frank Churchill because she loves her husband and Frank Churchill is his son. The sentence is typical of Mrs. Weston in that it conveys no more, I think, than her declarations about herself. At least I cannot hear in it any reproof for Emma's indiscretion in speaking as she has with Frank Churchill or for her snobbish attitude toward Jane Fairfax.

And Emma is a snob, a snob in her attitude toward many others besides Jane Fairfax. The quality is another expression of Emma's drive for uniqueness. In the act of patronizing others, she elevates herself above them. Yet there is a further point to make. Snobbery, predicated on one's sense of being apart from others, is in the case of Emma the social counterpart of her desire to keep herself emotionally detached as an individual. That she is bent on remaining personally disengaged we can see in her talk about marriage with Harriet (pp. 84-86), in her reveries on Frank Churchill (pp. 261, 265, 315-16), or in this typical meditation: "Harriet rational, Frank Churchill not too much in love,
and Mr. Knightley not wanting to quarrel with her, how very happy a summer must be before her!” (p. 332). All this is not to say, by any means, that Emma is incapable of becoming attached. The cause of her compulsive disengagement is her inability to recognize and to admit what she feels for Mr. Knightley. Once she has been shocked into taking a good look at herself by listening to Harriet’s words about him, detachment is impossible for Emma. But the reader has understood all along that her stance is a fraud, for in a number of passages like the following (Jane Austen’s editor cites several in a note), Emma gives away her real feelings:

She was more disturbed by Mr. Knightley’s not dancing, than by any thing else.—There he was, among the standers-by, where he ought not to be; he ought to be dancing,—not classing himself with the husbands, and fathers, and whist-players so young as he looked!—He could not have appeared to greater advantage perhaps any where, than where he had placed himself.  

(pp. 325–26)

It is the novel’s major irony that an Emma so frequently wrapped up in herself, and one who cultivates detachment, should so radically misconceive her real attachment.

Both her snobbery and her wish to keep herself emotionally inviolate condition Emma to seize on Harriet as a companion. By fashioning a career for Harriet, whom Jane Austen presents as a mere “parlour-boarder” in a school for girls and “the natural daughter of somebody,” Emma can demonstrate her social authority; and Harriet is altogether too insignificant as a person to make any heavy demands on Emma’s emotions. The conversation of Harriet reveals her as artless and rather ignorant. The staple of her talk is facts, facts which demand more often to be reported than interpreted, as we can see in one of her speeches to Emma about Robert Martin:

“He did not think we ever walked this road. He thought we walked towards Randalls most days. He has not been able to get the Romance of the Forest yet. He was so busy the last time he was at Kingston that he quite forgot it, but he goes again to-
morrow. So very odd we should happen to meet! Well, Miss Woodhouse, is he like what you expected? What do you think of him? Do you think him so very plain?” (p. 32)

Clearly these facts are reported at the pitch of her interest in Robert Martin, and perhaps the even rhythmic units will suggest how far Harriet’s feelings are from being threatened by her mind. Invariably she speaks, as it were, to the beat of her heart. Despite this emotional intensity Harriet rarely generalizes, possibly the sign of an utterly naive involvement in herself, or possibly the sign of her intuition that she is socially inferior. In the following passage her first generalization declares her respect for Emma, who has just foreseen that Harriet will marry Mr. Elton, just as the second one she comes to declares her respect for that gentleman:

“Whatever you say is always right . and therefore I suppose, and believe, and hope it must be so; but otherwise I could not have imagined it. It is so much beyond any thing I deserve. Mr. Elton, who might marry any body! There cannot be two opinions about him. He is so very superior. Only think of those sweet verses—‘To Miss ———.’ Dear me, how clever!—Could it really be meant for me?” (p. 74)

She can adjust herself to the first generalization—in effect, to Emma’s opinion—only through the degrees of “suppose, and believe, and hope,” and by the close of her remarks she has hardly adjusted herself to the second generalization at all. As the story develops, she learns from Emma to rate herself much higher than she does here, and it seems especially fitting that at last Emma should bring about her own greatest misery by forcing a set of generalizations on her protégée and insisting that Harriet identify herself with them.

Naturally Emma has no qualms herself about generalizing, or, for that matter, about setting Harriet a snobbish example in passing judgment on Robert Martin:

“A young farmer, whether on horseback or on foot, is the very last sort of person to raise my curiosity. The yeomanry are pre-
cisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore in one sense as much above my notice as in every other he is below it.” (p. 29)

Whereas Harriet’s generalizations spoke an ideal which she struggled painfully toward, Emma’s generalizations smugly catapult herself to a social elevation almost unapproachable. Her words are informed not only by her desire to appear socially exclusive but also by her irritation with Robert Martin for having attracted Harriet—which is to say that Emma, like her father, unhesitatingly converts private feelings into principles. She reveals the same habit and the same snobbishness when she discusses Mr. Elton with her brother-in-law:

“Mr. Elton’s manners are not perfect but where there is a wish to please, one ought to overlook, and one does overlook a great deal. Where a man does his best with only moderate powers, he will have the advantage over negligent superiority. There is such perfect good temper and good will in Mr. Elton as one cannot but value.” (pp. 111-12)

While Emma pretends to evaluate Mr. Elton accurately, she in fact describes the sort of man she feels a proper partner for the rather naïve young girl whom Miss Woodhouse has so kindly noticed and thus raised in the world. In addition, this passage conveys the personal detachment mentioned earlier: it is implicit, I think, in Emma’s easy settling of Mr. Elton’s merits, and indirectly of Harriet’s, while allowing each of them a claim on her own good will. This particular house of cards comes tumbling down when Mr. Elton proposes to Emma, naming the realities which she has ignored: the “encouragement” in her manner toward him and the fact that his “visits to Hartfield have been for yourself only” (p. 132).

Really Emma should have been under no illusions about Mr. Elton, for his conversation leaves little doubt about what he is up to. Not the equal of the Woodhouses socially, Mr. Elton keeps trying to boost his status by means of a spirited manner and a willingness to agree, both of these expressed in the phrase
with which Jane Austen tags him, "exactly so." Often he displays his verve through a heightened phrasing or diction which sounds modish: "Let me entreat you," "so charming," "How could you," "Is not this room rich in specimens," "imitable figure-pieces" (p. 43). In generalizing, he is likely to aim at allying himself with his superiors, as in his defense of the portrait Emma has made of Harriet:

"Oh, no! certainly not too tall . Consider, she is sitting down—which naturally presents a different—which in short gives exactly the idea—and the proportions must be preserved, you know. . it gives one exactly the idea of such a height as Miss Smith's. Exactly so indeed!" (p. 48)

Yet these are merely social devices with Mr. Elton. When Emma spurns his proposal, he thumps out his real convictions: "I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance, as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith!" (p. 132). And his sense of his own importance is amply fed by the wife whom he soon brings in triumph to Highbury.

Mrs. Elton is snobbish and pretentious—indeed a vulgar and extreme instance of the tendencies we have noted in Emma herself. In whatever Mrs. Elton says, she is campaigning to establish her prestige. She may generalize, just as Emma does, to articulate the sort of view which proves her socially superior, though Mrs. Elton will frequently add another sentence to make sure that no one misses the significance of the trick: "The advantages of Bath to the young are pretty generally understood."

I could immediately secure you some of the best society in the place' (p. 275); "Ah! there is nothing like staying at home, for real comfort. Nobody can be more devoted to home than I am' (p. 274). And, just as Emma does, Mrs. Elton will generalize in order to launch herself into a region where she may shine in lonely majesty: "A bride, you know, must appear like a bride, but my natural taste is all for simplicity. But I am quite in the minority, I believe; few people seem to value simplicity of dress,—shew and finery are every thing" (p. 302). She has the field all to herself in the matter of figurative lan-
guage. She means it to show her vivacity, but actually it indicates her appalling lack of taste through the wild disproportion between the expression she uses and the situation she describes. She calls herself “cautious as a minister of state” (p. 454), for instance, in affecting to keep back from Emma the word of Jane Fairfax’s engagement, and she alludes to her marriage with Mr. Elton in terms of “Hymen’s saffron robe” being “put on for us” (p. 308). The same vulgarity is exhibited in Mrs. Elton’s particular expressions. With them she may dramatize her supposedly brilliant past. Or by a careless particularity she may underline her present claim to social eminence: not only in addressing an obvious inferior like Jane Fairfax as “You sad girl” (p. 295), but in describing the more prominent Frank Churchill as “without puppyism” (p. 321), and—the trait which offends Emma more than anything—in constantly referring to “Knightley.”

Emma herself, however, can be venomously particular, even though she is usually much more careful than Mrs. Elton to preserve some form of propriety. And few things irritate Emma more than her own relations with Jane Fairfax. Her snobbishness breaks out once more after Frank Churchill has in effect threatened her exclusiveness by intimating that she and Jane must be close friends: they are not, Emma assures him, and “I hardly know how it has happened; a little, perhaps, from that wickedness on my side which was prone to take disgust towards a girl so idolized and so cried up as she always was, by her aunt and grandmother, and all their set” (p. 203). Blended with Emma’s snobbishness in these particular terms is another ingredient: her personal dislike for Jane. She feels bitter about Jane because, deep in her heart, she regards Jane as her rival, because she finds in Jane, as Mr. Knightley has once observed, “the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself” (p. 166). In the novel, the two of them are juxtaposed both socially and personally.

In spite of her many accomplishments, Jane Fairfax is destined to be a governess, for the remains of her family—deaf Mrs. Bates and talkative Miss Bates—are the next thing to paupers.
and occupy the lowest rank in Highbury's society. It is Jane's acute social consciousness, at least as much as the engagement she must conceal, which forces her to subdue herself so severely. Perhaps we can best approach her usual manner by way of a very untypical speech, one that she utters in great emotional stress when excusing herself to Emma for leaving the party at Donwell: "I am fatigued; but it is not the sort of fatigue—quick walking will refresh me.—Miss Woodhouse, we all know at times what it is to be wearied in spirits. Mine, I confess, are exhausted. The greatest kindness you can show me, will be to let me have my own way" (p. 363). Jane's generalization about "we all know" makes an almost direct plea, though less for Emma's sympathy, perhaps, than for the indulgence of a superior. And the major weight of what she says is still borne by the personal "I's" and "me's." Most of the time Jane keeps herself at a much greater distance from her generalizations, characteristically speaking in her own person and reserving them, as it were, for the opinions of those above her. Her first report on Frank Churchill, for instance, is sprinkled with such phrases as: "She believed he was reckoned a very fine young man"; "He was generally thought so"; "She believed everybody found his manners pleasing" (p. 169). Jane talks in this way, I take it, not merely because she wants to hide her interest in Frank Churchill, but because her lack of position makes it improper for her to judge authoritatively. A few pages later, indeed, she explicitly separates herself from "the general opinion" when Mr. Dixon's name comes up: "Oh! as for me, my judgment is worth nothing. Where I have a regard, I always think a person well-looking. But I gave what I believed the general opinion, when I called him plain" (p. 176). If personal pressures condition Jane's rhetoric, forcing her to hide her love for Frank behind generalizations, so do social pressures, which impose on her a rhetoric depending heavily on "I." But when her attachment finally becomes known, removing at least one reason for her reserve, Jane does not hesitate to call up a series of moral generalizations with which to measure her own behavior in agreeing to a secret engagement:
"The consequence . . . has been a state of perpetual suffering to me; and so it ought. But after all the punishment that misconduct can bring, it is still not less misconduct. I never can be blameless. I have been acting contrary to all my sense of right; and the fortunate turn that everything has taken is what my conscience tells me ought not to be." (p. 419)

She makes it clear here that she has, since the beginning of the engagement, accepted full responsibility for her feelings, a point we must remember when we turn back to Emma after a moment.

But first a few comments on Miss Bates, the aunt of Jane Fairfax and an irritant in her own right to Emma. Miss Bates has no accomplishments, only a good will as boundless as her speeches. These are one of the artistic triumphs in *Emma*. Not only does Jane Austen develop each monologue in accordance with some chain of association, thus preventing the talk of Miss Bates from disintegrating into a host of unrelated phrases, but she also employs this associative chain brilliantly to convey several buried hints of Frank Churchill's interest in Jane Fairfax (pp. 323, 329–30, 346). The conversational habits of Miss Bates, however, do not mark her merely as the bore which Emma finds her. Surely what in part motivates her to report so many facts and to speak so often of herself (even more than Jane does) is Miss Bates's awareness that she and social authority have nothing at all to do with each other. In the following passage, we can see how quickly she backs up to "I" after her excitement has momentarily betrayed her into a decisive generalization: if I must speak on this subject, there is no denying that Mr. Frank Churchill might have—"I do not mean to say that he did not dream it—I am sure I have sometimes the oddest dreams in the world—but if I am questioned about it, I must acknowledge that there was such an idea last spring" (pp. 345–46). By and large, however, Miss Bates will generalize only when moved by her love for Jane—"Nobody could nurse her, as we should do" (p. 161)—or when paying compliments to the rest of the world. And underlying those compliments is the deep gratitude of Miss Bates for the favors which her family has received, a gratitude that she declares more openly in such sen-
tences as: ‘. . . our friends are only too good to us. If ever there were people who, without having great wealth themselves, had every thing they could wish for, I am sure it is us’ (p. 174).

Given the humility of Miss Bates, Emma’s joke at her expense during the outing to Box Hill is one of the nastiest bits of behavior in the novel. And, if we bear in mind the continuous judgment to which Jane Fairfax has subjected herself, Emma’s reaction to the event at Box Hill becomes specially significant. Charged by Mr. Knightley with having been insolent, Emma retorts: “Nay, how could I help saying what I did?—Nobody could have helped it. It was not so very bad. I dare say she did not understand me’ (p. 374). She instinctively shields herself from responsibility by the generalization in her second sentence, her words carrying a more than latent tone of social superiority. With “bad” she offers a moral judgment, but one that still minimizes her offense, and she finally acquits herself by dismissing the incident out of hand.

But Mr. Knightley—whose character provides the major contrast in the novel to Emma’s—will not let her off so easily. First he sets out the reality of the affront: “She felt your full meaning. I wish you could have heard how she talked of it— with what candour and generosity’ (p. 375). Then he goes on, with the richest union of sense and feeling, to anatomize Emma’s new rationalization:

you must allow, that what is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended in her.”

“‘They are blended,’” said he, “‘I acknowledge; and, were she prosperous, I could allow much for the occasional prevalence of the ridiculous over the good. 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!’” (p. 375)

Mr. Knightley’s sense shows in the basic structure of his reply: its move from a concession of Emma’s point, to the entertaining
of a hypothesis about Miss Bates, through an examination of her actual case, to an inevitable conclusion. Perhaps his sense is also implied by the fact that through much of his analysis he uses a vocabulary which deals in fixed concepts—and entrusts the primary judgment he arrives at to terms of this sort: "Her situation should secure your compassion." Yet plainly the whole speech is also shot through with feeling. It shows in the accumulation of clauses beginning "were she"; in the metaphor of "sunk," itself repeated in "sink"; and especially in the closing exclamation—"It was badly done, indeed!"—which seems to utter a much more personal reproach than the official judgment preceding it. Everywhere in the novel Mr. Knightley reveals this same sympathy, this same emotional responsiveness, and thus he never strikes us as a prig or a stuffy partisan of reason. Through his fusion of feeling and sense in the passage at hand, he achieves the kind of rounded evaluation impossible for Emma until she has developed an integrity to match his.

The sharp contrast between them that emerges through most of the novel may be suggested by one more brief comparison of passages. The first belongs to Mr. Knightley, who is protesting to Mrs. Weston—in a speech too long to be reproduced in full here—about Emma's influence on Harriet (pp. 38–39). Mr. Knightley builds this speech mainly on an antithetic handling of the two girls, as in: "She knows nothing herself"—"and looks upon Emma as knowing every thing"; "How can Emma imagine she has any thing to learn herself"—"while Harriet is presenting such a delightful inferiority?" And he sustains the major antithesis (while fashioning some new ones) up to the close: Harriet "will grow just refined enough to be uncomfortable with those among whom birth and circumstances have placed her home"—for "I am much mistaken if Emma's doctrines give any strength of mind, or tend at all to make a girl adapt herself rationally to the varieties of her situation in life.—They only give a little polish." In these conclusions, furthermore, Mr. Knightley depends heavily on diction of the type we have heard him use before, words such as "birth," "strength of mind," or "varieties of her situation," which rest his decision on settled categories.
This soberness has been preceded by exasperation, however, for near the beginning of his protest Mr. Knightley was saying, “I think her the very worst sort of companion that Emma could possibly have.” Perhaps clearer than this rather muted shift from a mode of feeling to a mode of sense is the change that the text records in the kind of statement made by Mr. Knightley. He starts the body of his speech by referring to the particular Harriet—“But Harriet Smith—I have not half done about Harriet Smith”—and goes on to draw the specific contrast between Emma and Harriet. But he ends up with what amounts to a generalization about the effect that the “doctrines” of Emma will have on “a girl.” If these claims about the passage sound a little strained, still I think I have not misrepresented its basic tendencies—or Mr. Knightley.

If we look now at one of Emma’s protests, against Harriet’s continuing interest in the married Mr. Elton, we can see how radically the case is altered. Emma’s rhetoric impulsively piles one verbal unit on another, moving by accumulation rather than through antitheses, until even the real distinctions that she feels between herself and Harriet become blurred, or at least reduced to the difference between “pain” and “greater pain”:

“I have not said, exert yourself Harriet for my sake . . . because for your own sake rather, I would wish it to be done, for the sake of what is more important than my comfort, a habit of self-command in you, a consideration of what is your duty, an attention to propriety, an endeavour to avoid the suspicions of others, to save your health and credit, and restore your tranquillity. These are the motives which I have been pressing on you. They are very important—and sorry I am that you cannot feel them sufficiently to act upon them. My being saved from pain is a very secondary consideration. I want you to save yourself from greater pain. Perhaps I may sometimes have felt that Harriet would not forget what was due—or rather what would be kind by me.”

(p. 268)

The dissimilarity between this and the speech by Mr. Knightley is not simply a matter of different occasions and different audiences. Certainly Emma wants to persuade Harriet, is to some
extent conscious of her audience, but Mr. Knightley's situation was roughly analogous, at least in that he could be as sure as Emma of addressing a woman with strong feelings. Yet instead of concluding with an emotional appeal—to Mrs. Weston's or his own friendly affection for Emma, say, or to their good will for Harriet—Mr. Knightley rested his decision on a highly conceptual vocabulary. But Emma, though using such words freely in the first part of her speech, will not entrust her case to them finally, turning rather to the more directly emotional "pressing," "sorry," and "kind" in her closing sentences. This passage does not provide us, unfortunately, with any statement by Emma that we can properly compare with the trustworthy generalized evaluation we saw Mr. Knightley moving toward concerning the effects of "Emma's doctrines" on "a girl." So maybe it is worth reminding ourselves, by just glancing at another passage, of how unreliably Emma generalizes when evaluating the behavior of someone she is interested in; of Frank Churchill's jaunt to London, presumably to get a haircut, she reflects:

"I do not know whether it ought to be so, but certainly silly things do cease to be silly if they are done by sensible people in an impudent way. Wickedness is always wickedness, but folly is not always folly.—It depends upon the character of those who handle it." (p. 212)

In spite of the sobriety that she affects by the first clause, Emma's decrees about "silly things" and "folly" have no basis in reason; they are founded solely in her wish to find Frank Churchill pleasing.

Near the end of the novel Emma admits to "a little likeness" between herself and that gentleman. In fact, both of them are self-indulgent, he often more consciously so than Emma—or than his father, whom he also resembles. Of course through most of the story Frank Churchill is playing a role, that of a prodigal, of Emma's gallant, in order to hide his attachment to Jane Fairfax. One way in which he projects this role is by a
spirited divergence from some sort of norm. It may be from the opinions and attitudes of those whom he is with, or from a more inclusive generalization, as in his reply on being asked by Emma how he has thought "Miss Fairfax looking":

"Ill, very ill—that is, if a young lady can ever be allowed to look ill. But the expression is hardly admissible, Mrs. Weston, is it? Ladies can never look ill. And, seriously, Miss Fairfax is naturally so pale, as almost always to give the appearance of ill health. —A most deplorable want of complexion." (p. 199)

Then, too, Frank Churchill can put up a fine show of feeling by using emotionally intense terms. Thus he declares, apropos of arriving at Highbury a day earlier than expected, "It is a great pleasure where one can indulge in it though there are not many houses that I should presume on so far; but in coming home I felt I might do any thing" (pp. 190–91). But Frank Churchill seems quite unaware—and in this he reminds one of Henry Crawford—that the part he acts in public is almost indistinguishable from his private self, that he really is the emotionally extravagant, rather wayward young man he pretends to be. When he is deeply upset by a quarrel with Jane, and no longer playing a role with Emma, his sentences reveal the usual emphasis on "I," the emotive words, and the concern with his own gratification: "I am tired of doing nothing. I want a change. I am serious, Miss Woodhouse, whatever your penetrating eyes may fancy—I am sick of England—and would leave it tomorrow, if I could" (p. 365). Indeed Frank Churchill never loses his tone of fatuous vanity, for in one of his very last speeches, after all has come right between himself and Jane, he can still appear far more interested in celebrating and adorning the beauty he has won than in praising Jane's merits:

"Look at her. Is not she an angel in every gesture? Observe the turn of her throat. Observe her eyes . —You will be glad to hear (inclining his head, and whispering seriously) that my uncle means to give her all my aunt's jewels. They are to be new
set. I am resolved to have some in an ornament for the head. Will not it be beautiful in her dark hair?” (p. 479)

If Frank Churchill does not really change in the novel, Emma does, but not until she has been through a crisis brought on by her own self-indulgence and her will to dominate. Largely ignoring the misadventures to which she has exposed Harriet with Robert Martin and Mr. Elton, Emma gaily encourages her protégée in a new attachment, this time—so Emma thinks—with Frank Churchill. “Let no name ever pass our lips,’ she says piously, affecting to have learned her lesson from the past. But she immediately starts manipulating Harriet by such generalizations as ‘more wonderful things have taken place, there have been matches of greater disparity” (p. 342). As usual, the fancy in which Emma indulges straightway becomes a law. Appropriately enough, this manipulation of Harriet and these words themselves come back to haunt Emma in that scene when Harriet, who has interpreted all this as her license to aspire to Mr. Knightley, finally reveals her heart to Emma, explains how Emma has taught her to hope, and declares her reasons for imagining herself favored by him.

These disclosures shatter Emma’s complacency and, by releasing her true feelings about Mr. Knightley, compel her to see her real self for the first time. Once she has started becoming acquainted with that self, she can also begin to accept the personal responsibility that she has shunned all along. One of Jane Austen’s major successes in the novel, it seems to me, is the almost naturalistic accuracy with which she charts Emma’s slow progress from snobbish self-absorption toward integrity. The old habits are not easily thrown off. Emma can feel that “there would be no need of compassion to the girl who believed herself loved by Mr. Knightley” (p. 408). Even later on, when she imagines that her disappointed friend must be kept away from a Hartfield containing Mr. Knightley and herself, “Emma could not deplore her future absence as any deduction from her own enjoyment. In such a party, Harriet would be rather a dead weight than otherwise” (p. 450). But precisely side by side with
these relics of Emma's earlier attitude are proofs of an invigorated moral sensibility. Thus "a strong sense of justice by Harriet" informs Emma's behavior during the disclosures, and "justice" also demands of Emma that Harriet "should not be made unhappy by any coldness now" (p. 408). Similarly, she can continue her reflection on excluding Harriet from Hartfield by saying: "it seemed a peculiarly cruel necessity that was to be placing her in such a state of unmerited punishment" (p. 450). Certainly Harriet's recital of her hopes for Mr. Knightley makes Emma bitterly resentful. But if Emma's musings betray her animosity toward Harriet, they also show her recognizing to the full her own guilt: "Who had been at pains to give Harriet notions of self-consequence but herself? If Harriet, from being humble, were grown vain, it was her doing too" (p. 414). More than this, although Emma is under greater emotional stress than ever in her antagonism to Harriet and her love for Mr. Knightley, her feelings do not issue in what they always have before, some prediction or some attempt to mold reality. For the first time, that is, she accepts the consequences of an error and submits herself to the course of events—utterly resigned to taking her chances with Harriet for Mr. Knightley, even though she fears that Harriet has the advantage. Of course Emma turns out to be the winner at last, but not until the change in her nature has become reasonably secure. If we sometimes feel a little restive in the closing pages when she considers Harriet's social inferiority, we should at any rate recollect that the status which Emma now assigns Harriet—no longer fancying her friend the daughter of some rich gentleman—is the same status which Mr. Knightley has assigned Harriet from the beginning. And surely one of the last estimates by Emma of Mr. Knightley shows not only that she has learned well how to value him but that she remains conscious of her own failings: "What had she to wish for? Nothing, but to grow more worthy of him, whose intentions and judgment had been ever so superior to her own. Nothing, but that the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in the future" (p. 475). In her advance toward integrity, as the passage suggests, Emma be-
comes capable of attaching herself to Mr. Knightley and of orienting herself to the real world.

III

This change in Emma's behavior is not merely something asserted by the expository passages in the novel; it is rendered in the dialogue itself. And to see the change most accurately, we must turn at last to some of her conversation with Mr. Knightley. I have already said that he and Emma reveal a more and more intense feeling for each other as the novel goes on, and often they do so in dialogues which exhibit Jane Austen's technique of metaphoric indirection. The prime example in *Emma* is the proposal scene, which I shall be dwelling on in a few moments. But in order to highlight what happens there, I want first to take up briefly one of the early interchanges between Emma and Mr. Knightley, using it to suggest again their typical modes.

The bit of dialogue acts as a prelude to the long quarrel between them over Harriet's refusal of Robert Martin, a refusal engineered by Emma. In the scene as a whole Jane Austen makes some use of metaphoric indirection, for Harriet, the ostensible subject of the talk, off and on becomes a vehicle by which Mr. Knightley and Emma define their attitudes toward each other. As usual, he has reason on his side, but he keeps being exasperated by her foolishness—partly because he likes her so well. And as usual, Emma adopts a calmer manner, the outward proof—so she imagines—of her superior reason, though in fact her thinking reflects her feelings only. Some of these motives and something of the scene's technique appear in its prelude (p. 58), which Mr. Knightley begins with a sensible evaluation of the Harriet whom he expects to marry Robert Martin:
“Her character depends upon those she is with; but in good hands she will turn out a valuable woman.”
“Of course I am glad you think so; and the good hands, I hope, may not be wanting.”

Probably Mr. Knightley has Robert Martin’s “good hands” mainly in mind. But surely the phrase refers as well to Emma, the molder of Harriet. In such a context it seems most likely a reminder of Emma’s responsibility, though the entire clause may also compliment Emma very discreetly by praising her friend. She assumes, of course, that he is thinking only of herself. While she pretends to remain properly objective by taking over the oblique phrasing of “good hands,” she actually preens herself on her ability and presses him for a franker compliment.

Mr. Knightley brings her desire into the open with characteristic bluntness, but he holds back his own feelings for Emma, deliberately citing a minimal improvement in Harriet:

“Come . you are anxious for a compliment, so I will tell you that you have improved her. You have cured her of her school-girl’s giggle; she really does you credit.”
“Thank you. I should be mortified indeed if I did not believe I had been of some use; but it is not every body who will bestow praise where they may. You do not often overpower me with it.”

Stung by his refusal to cry her up, Emma at first stands on her dignity with a highly formal phrasing. But then she strikes back with the generalization about “every body”; for just a moment the words sound like a compliment to Mr. Knightley, yet they become, by her last sentence, a measure of his usual perversity. Needless to add, Emma feels convinced that the generalization proves her cool sanity, and indeed her moral superiority, to Mr. Knightley. The same assurance sustains her throughout the quarrel about Harriet that follows. The dialogue moves toward a climax when Emma, having indulged in all her fancies about Harriet’s birth and personal attractions, assumes herself to be a better judge of men’s taste than Mr. Knightley by proclaiming,
over his objections, that "such a girl as Harriet is exactly what every man delights in" (p. 64). But Emma is doing more here than converting her wish into law. Since she has already admitted that Harriet lacks sense, yet still makes her friend the measure of man's delight, Emma's generalization has the effect of thrusting her sensible self—and she has paraded her sense all along—beyond the reach of men. Snugly untouchable, she goes on to declare complacently, "Were you, yourself, ever to marry, she is the very woman for you." It is fitting that this vision should return, after some three hundred pages, to cause Emma her greatest misery.

How much she has altered as a result of discovering her love for Mr. Knightley and how richly human he remains—both of these are unmistakable in the proposal scene (pp. 425—30). The dialogue itself compounds the technique of metaphoric indirection with ambiguity, the major dramatic technique of the novel. To be more specific: through talking about the engagement between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, Mr. Knightley and Emma betray their emotion for each other; yet he suspects that her feelings relate to Frank Churchill, and she suspects that his relate to Harriet. The scene comes about because Mr. Knightley, having learned of the engagement and imagining that it must upset Emma, rushes back from London to comfort her. But Emma, not realizing that he has heard the news, fears that he wants to tell her about an engagement of his own with Harriet.

Yet Emma dreads not knowing his heart even more than knowing it. So she sets about discovering it by announcing the match between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, hoping that the subject of marriage will lead him to show his intentions. Given her purpose, she tries hard to hit a purely informational tone with Mr. Knightley at first:

"You have some news to hear, now you are come back, that will rather surprise you."
"Have I?" said he quietly, and looking at her, "of what nature?"
"Oh! the best nature in the world—a wedding."
He interprets her tone very differently, as her attempt to remain composed in the face of losing Frank Churchill; and he reads her remark as indicating her "surprise" and mortification at having been replaced by Jane Fairfax. The reserved tone in which he himself speaks suggests to us mainly that Mr. Knightley wants to make sure of the facts and of Emma's reaction before responding more fully, and perhaps that he has no wish of encouraging her to grieve deeply over a man whom he has always distrusted. Naturally, his reserve does not help Emma understand his plans, so she pushes on in her last sentence, her tone becoming almost shrilly cheerful. She has to rejoice over "a wedding" because she must convince Mr. Knightley that she approves of them all, will not be hurt, that is, by a marriage between him and Harriet.

That Emma has indeed been trying to draw him out is implied by a tiny logical flaw at the start of the speech to follow. After learning from him that he already knows of the engagement between Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, Emma speculates that he was "less surprised than any of us," a phrase that clashes ever so slightly with her earlier mention of "news that will rather surprise" him. More important, in what Emma now goes on to say, a complete reversal of her earlier behavior in the novel begins to make itself apparent:

"You probably have been less surprised than any of us, for you have had your suspicions.—I have not forgotten that you once tried to give me a caution.—I wish I had attended to it—but—(with a sinking voice and a heavy sigh) I seem to have been doomed to blindness."

Emma both accepts the "blindness" with which she has acted and admits to the superior insight of Mr. Knightley, who has given her a "caution" about Frank Churchill's intimacy with Jane Fairfax. This self-recognition on Emma's part also has highly emotional implications, for she realizes not only that her "blindness" to Frank Churchill has been caused by her fancy, so typical, of matching him with Harriet, but that this scheme
has kept her from regarding Harriet as a rival to herself for Mr. Knightley. Especially in the passionate close, Emma betrays how deeply she feels about Mr. Knightley, though her words only plead with him to sympathize as a friend with her faults. Now a suppliant, she has completely abandoned her earlier pose of haughty detachment.

And Mr. Knightley responds to her plea, even though he believes all her distress generated by the loss of Frank Churchill, the man whom he has considered his rival. There may be a touch of irony at Mr. Knightley’s expense in the fact that he praises Emma’s "sense" here while quite misconceiving her situation:

"Time, my dearest Emma, time will heal the wound.—Your own excellent sense—your exertions for your father’s sake—I know you will not allow yourself—. The feelings of the warmest friendship—Indignation—Abominable scoundrel! I am sorry for her. She deserves a better fate."

Yet it is typical of Mr. Knightley that, while betraying intense private emotion by his broken clauses, he should undertake to direct Emma toward her proper reaction of "sense," unselfishness, and justice to Jane Fairfax. But clearly what moves him most deeply is the sight of suffering in the woman he loves—and a lingering resentment against his former rival.

Jane Austen writes that "Emma understood him," but the statement is no more than a half-truth. Emma realizes only that Mr. Knightley thinks her attached to Frank Churchill, and she takes pains to set him right about that in several long speeches. One feature of them is Emma’s running distinction between appearance and reality. The following extracts will reveal the trait, most obviously in the contrast Emma draws near the start between her ‘manners’ toward Frank Churchill and her lack of feeling for him, and in her later contrast between the "blind" of his behavior and "his real situation":

"Mr. Knightley, I am in a very extraordinary situation. I cannot let you continue in your error; and yet, perhaps, since my
manner of confessing that I never have been at all attached to the person we are speaking of, as it might be natural for a woman to feel in confessing exactly the reverse.—But I never have.”

“I have very little to say for my own conduct.—I was tempted by his attentions, and allowed myself to appear pleased.—An old story, probably—a common case—and no more than has happened to hundreds of my sex before; and yet it may not be the more excusable in one who sets up as I do for Understanding.

He never wished to attach me. It was merely a blind to conceal his real situation with another.—It was his object to blind all about him; and no one, I am sure, could be more effectually blinded than myself—except that I was not blinded—that it was my good fortune—that, in short, I was somehow or other safe from him.”

But, if we are struck by Emma’s ability to make distinctions here, what of her generalizations? Toward the close of the first extract, she certainly pretends to no more than the level of generic “woman”: “I have as much reason to be ashamed as it might be natural for a woman to feel in confessing exactly the reverse.” In the second speech, she gives up all claims to uniqueness through linking herself absolutely with “hundreds of my sex,” now describing her “case” as “common,” “An old story.” And in the next breath—“it may not be the more excusable in one who sets up as I do for Understanding”—Emma does not generalize to escape responsibility, as she has done so frequently before, but to judge herself. The last lines of the speech show her private feelings welling up, half anger at Frank Churchill, half despair of Mr. Knightley. The emotions are interrelated because Emma’s plotting about Frank Churchill has led her to ignore Mr. Knightley, and the interrelationship is dramatized through the shifting logic behind Emma’s references to blindness. But in speaking so warmly, Emma comes too near disclosing that the source of her feeling is Mr. Knightley, and so she must break off.

She has at least convinced him, however, that she never gave her heart to Frank Churchill, and Mr. Knightley feels so cheered
by the information that he immediately raises his estimate of the man somewhat. Although this turnabout has its mild irony for us, the speech as a whole attests again to the integrity of Mr. Knightley, for he will not let Frank Churchill off without further reform, nor will he forget the claims of Jane Fairfax. And he maintains this basically sensible and sensitive grip on reality when he is even more deeply moved—by a remark from Emma about the happiness of the engaged couple. Once more Mr. Knightley can take stock intelligently and firmly of the whole relationship between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, but he speaks so feelingly of them because they are enjoying exactly the happiness that he has yearned to share with Emma and believes an impossibility:

"He is a most fortunate man! So early in life a period when, if a man chooses a wife, he generally chooses ill. At three and twenty to have drawn such a prize!—What years of felicity that man, in all human calculation, has before him!—Assured of the love of such a woman—the disinterested love, for Jane Fairfax's character vouches for her disinterestedness; every thing in his favour,—equality of situation—I mean, as far as regards society, and all the habits and manners that are important.—A man would always wish to give a woman a better home than the one he takes her from; and he who can do it, where there is no doubt of her regard, must, I think, be the happiest of mortals.—Frank Churchill is, indeed, the favourite of fortune. Every thing turns out for his good.

"You speak as if you envied him."

"And I do envy him, Emma. In one respect he is the object of my envy."

Emma is well aware, obviously, that his words reverberate with emotion. Indeed, she cannot bring herself to reply at all to his last remark, for she imagines him "within half a sentence of Harriet." It is a signal irony that Emma, whom we have seen attempting all through here a clarity of vision unobscured by wishful thinking, should fall victim to this last confusion of appearance and reality.

Thus the groundwork is laid for the multiple ironies that arise when Mr. Knightley addresses himself to Emma more explicitly. For one thing, the principals work at cross purposes,
Mr. Knightley trying to propose in spite of Emma's unencouraging manner, and Emma fending off what she most wants because she fears him to be thinking of Harriet:

"You will not ask me what is the point of envy.—You are determined, I see, to have no curiosity.—You are wise—but I cannot be wise. Emma, I must tell what you will not ask, though I may wish it unsaid the next moment."

A further irony inheres in Mr. Knightley's transposition of the roles to which he and Emma have been assigned through most of the novel. He now presents himself as the one governed by feeling—"I cannot be wise," "I must tell," "I may wish"—and Emma as the partisan of reason—"will not ask," "determined to have no curiosity," "wise." In this characterization of Emma, however, Mr. Knightley speaks a truer sense than he perhaps realizes, for she now behaves with the richest integrity. For a brief moment her dread of losing him, perhaps mixed with some antagonism toward Harriet, rules Emma, and she begs Mr. Knightley not to speak. Yet she transcends this selfishness immediately, in part through an act of will, to be sure, but mainly through being almost literally moved beyond herself by her tenderness toward Mr. Knightley, and also by some sense of justice toward Harriet:

Emma could not bear to give him pain. He was wishing to confide in her—perhaps to consult her;—cost her what it would, she would listen. She might assist his resolution, or reconcile him to it; she might give just praise to Harriet, or, by representing to him his own independence, relieve him from that state of indecision, which must be more intolerable than any alternative to such a mind as his.

Surrendering every chance for her own happiness, as she believes, Emma invites Mr. Knightley to go on. And she then learns, of course, that he loves no one but herself. Yet this fortunate result must not tempt us to undervalue what we have just witnessed: Emma shouldering her responsibilities fully in the gravest crisis that she ever endures.

The entire scene seems to me wonderfully successful in con-
veying—through the gestures of speech—the deep emotions of Emma and Mr. Knightley, the principles by which they act, and the moral decisions that they make. In achieving what it does, the scene invites us to question such a commentary on Emma and Jane Austen as this: “Here, as always in her work, the moral, or rather the philosophy, is not ethical in the stricter sense; it has to do with manners more than with morals.” For the dialogue shows that one’s ‘manners,’ one’s verbal habits, cannot help dramatizing one’s ‘morals,’ one’s ethical commitments.


2. Mary Lascelles discusses this point acutely (Jane Austen, pp. 94–95).

3. Mudrick describes Emma as a “dominating and uncommitting personality” (Jane Austen, p. 192), and he implies that she never really changes in the novel. He speaks at one point of her reaction to Harriet’s disclosures as “the act of self-abasement that claims sin, in order to avoid the responsibility of self-knowledge” (p. 189). And he allows Emma to be honest about herself, or nearly honest, only when it costs her nothing emotionally: by telling Frank Churchill of their mutual good fortune in attracting such “superior” persons as Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax, Emma reveals, according to Mudrick, that she “has finally—almost—got to know herself; but only because the knowledge is here painless” (p. 205). Yet, as I have tried to point out in my text, the scene between Emma and Harriet insists not only that Emma does see herself clearly but that she accepts the responsibility for having encouraged Harriet as well as the consequences of the act. And surely Emma’s insight in the scene, even if one ranks it lower than I do, is accompanied by a good deal of pain. In general, it seems to me that Mudrick overrates Emma’s emotional detachment. He treats it as a permanent fact of her personality, a fact that leads her to prefer women to men (p. 192), indeed to be “for a time in love with” Harriet, yet to use Harriet, at the same time, as a “proxy” for herself, as her means of experiencing vicariously what she cannot involve herself in personally (p. 203). According to my view, Emma’s detachment is a temporary condition—caused by her failure to realize what she feels for Mr. Knightley—and disappears when her feelings are liberated by the revelations of Harriet.

4. Emma is incapable of tenderness according to Mudrick (Jane Austen, pp. 192–94, 200), but it seems to me that her tenderness at this critical moment in the novel is unquestionable.