

Jane Austen, Nature and Contentment

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Romanticism is perhaps one of the harder literary terms to pin down. One of its defining elements is the 'elevation of nature as the source of personal contentment and artistic inspiration' (Towheed, 2015, p11). Can evidence to support this view be found in Jane Austen's works? This essay will examine how Austen uses nature to illuminate her novels' themes, how nature affects her characters' personal contentment and what this tells us about Austen's relation to Romanticism.

Austen letters show that she had strong views on nature's influence on men and women. Arriving in London from the countryside in August 1796 she wrote: 'Here I am once more in this scene of dissipation and vice, and I begin already to find my morals corrupted' (Austen, na, letter II) and on May 20th, 1813, after travelling to Godmersham Park, she praised her return to nature: 'I was very much pleased with the country in general. Between Guildford and Ripley I thought it particularly pretty, ... at Esher, which we walked into before dinner, the views were beautiful' (Austen, na, letter XLIII). At other times, she seems less in favour of living within the natural world - in November of the same year she wrote: 'An inclination for the country is a venial fault. He [William] has more of Cowper than of Johnson in him, —fonder of tame hares and blank verse than of the full tide of human existence at Charing Cross' (Austen, na, letter LI). Perhaps she is being ironic.

Her characters also show a similar variability. Although Sir Walter Elliot views 'the greatest blessings of existence are beauty and a baronetcy' (Johnson and Tuite, 2012, p. 193) Sir Walter is admiring personal not natural beauty, as evidenced by his room of full-length looking glasses. Austen uses this self-admiration to depreciate Elliot's lack of interest in the natural world. In contrast, the central characters of Austen's novels have a much more

sympathetic view of the Romantic sublimity of nature and certainly in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* seek contentment and inspiration within it.

In *Persuasion*, the visit to Lyme Regis provides a strong Romantic underpinning to the story. On reaching Lyme, the first priority of the party from Uppercross is to ensure they have accommodation and an evening meal. Once their physical needs are assured, rather than resting from their tedious and tiring journey, ‘the next thing to be done was unquestionably to walk directly down to the sea’ (Austen, 2004, p. 80) – the dramatic and sublime nature of their new environment is irresistible as the party seek to address their emotional and intellectual hunger. Once they see the sea, they immediately feel a sense of fulfilment: ‘as all must linger and gaze on a first return to the sea’ (p. 80). Their behaviour fits well to the model of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943, pp. 370–396), as once they have established their physiological and safety needs will be met, the party is happy to devote effort in satisfying their higher-level needs of love/beauty, esteem and self-actualisation. Austen is depicting a surprisingly accurate psychological profile here - her characters seek personal contentment and artistic inspiration conditional once their more immediate physical needs are satisfied. This model can be found throughout Austen’s works. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte deprioritises her emotional and romantic contentment to ensure her more basic needs are met when she explains to Elizabeth, ‘I’m not a romantic, you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home’ (Austen, 2019, p. 95). And in *Persuasion*, Anne is persuaded not to marry Wentworth because his poverty, lack of social rank and connections made him an unsuitable choice to provide her with physical security and sustenance. As a consequence, she suffers eight years of wretchedness until he returns as a wealthy and socially recognised Captain and they can finally unite.

In depicting nature and the scenery around Charmouth and Lyme Austen uses a sensory narrative voice. Her choice of: ‘green chasms between romantic rocks’ evokes a

sense of awesome, untamed grandeur. Her observation that ‘many generations must have passed this way since the first partial falling off the cliff’ (Austen, 2004, p. 81) underlines the timelessness of the scene and its indifference to the passing of human generations. Austen is linking the processes of nature and the effect these can have on the human mind: ‘the happiest spot for watching the flow of the tide, for sitting in unwearied flow of the tide, for sitting in unwearied contemplation’ (p. 80). In this way Austen directly connects aesthetic appreciation and moral sensibility suggesting that ‘these places must be visited and visited again, to make the worth of Lyme understood’ p. 81).

While the direct and fulsome description of nature and place in Austen’s novels is rather infrequent, when this does occur then the characters’ emotional responses in the scene are highly significant. For example, the depth of description of the scenery and locale at Charmouth is particularly important in *Persuasion*. The Uppercross party are no longer in their pleasant, comfortable (and undoubtedly beautiful) home environment, but in a novel and dramatic new environment, where new possibilities, opportunities and events may be expected to come to pass. It is in this environment that Anne shows Wentworth her true nature and he comes to a new appreciation of her.

In a similar way, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth finds herself in the novel, dramatic environment of Pemberley, which then illuminates a new perception of Darcy to her. Although Austen tantalisingly provides the opportunity of introducing the sublime and Romantic landscape of the Lakes to Elizabeth and her companions on their northern trip, she immediately removes this possibility by curtailing the itinerary to the Peak District. And indeed even the lesser, but still spectacular grandeur of the Peaks receives short shrift from Austen: ‘It is not the object of this work to give a description of Derbyshire, nor of any of the remarkable places through which their route thither lay’ (Austen, 2019, p. 179). Instead the action moves swiftly to ‘the little town of Lambton, the scene of Mrs. Gardiner’s former

residence'. Within a single sentence Austen moves Elizabeth and her party the 170 miles from Longbourne, through Oxford, Blenheim, Warwick, Kenelworth, Birmingham to Lambton (p. 179), discarding all of the great natural landscapes on the way. Nature's beauty is only important to Austen if it serves her purpose in describing her characters' actions and emotional state. In *Persuasion*, Austen uses Pemberley as a turning point in the novel.

Initially Elizabeth felt disinterested in Pemberley and by association, Darcy: '... she had no business at Pemberley and was obliged to assume a disinclination for seeing it. She must own that she was tired of great houses; after going over so many, she really had no pleasure in fine carpets or satin curtains' (p. 179). Once Elizabeth is presented with the view of Pemberley however, she starts to form a different opinion. She sees 'a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills; – and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance' (p. 181). This environment has a strong effect: 'Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste' (p. 181).

Elizabeth's discovery has a transformative effect on her view of what she might become if she were attached to Darcy: 'she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!' (p. 181). Here Austen moves from a descriptive third-party narrative point of view when describing the inanimate house and natural surroundings to the more intimate mode of Elizabeth's indirect discourse to convey Elizabeth's emotional response to the estate any by association, to Darcy. While some commentators take this somewhat further, e.g., 'she reads good government, even erotic attraction, out of this information', (Johnson and Tuite, 2012, p. 119) this seems a step to far. Elizabeth merely says: 'In what an amiable light does this place him!' (Austen, 2019, p. 184) and it is hard to read a sexual undercurrent into such a straightforward statement.

Before seeing Pemberley, Elizabeth views Darcy as arrogant and aloof. From the very beginning of their acquaintance she determines: ‘His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and everybody hoped he would never come there again’ (p. 9). Her view of Pemberley starts the process by which Elizabeth realises the possible pleasures and satisfactions of a union with Darcy, and which concludes when Elizabeth learns of Darcy intervention with Wickham. Austen elegantly and meaningfully segues from Elizabeth’s gaze on the house to a gaze upon its owner: ‘Elizabeth turned back to look again [at the house], the owner of it himself suddenly came forward’ (p. 185). The house and its natural environment thus mediates and reinvigorates the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy.

Walking and experiencing the landscape was a staple of Austen’s life. Austen-Leigh identifies nature as the “cradle” of his aunt’s “genius and suggesting that “strolls along those wood-walks, thick-coming fancies” where the stimulus to her imagination and which her intellect then brought under control in her novels’ (Austen, 2019, p. 24–6).

In *Persuasion* Anne, delights in nature on the walk to Winthrop, recalling the ‘last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves and withered hedges, and ... that season of peculiar and inexhaustible influence on the mind of taste and tenderness.’ (Austen, 2019, p. 71). This is eight years after Anne’s parting with Wentworth and Anne recalls such poetry to illuminate her own feelings of melancholy:

‘repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn, that season of peculiar and inexhaustible influence on the mind of taste and tenderness, that season which has drawn from every poet, worthy of being read, some attempt at description, or some lines of feeling’ (p.71).

Such walking contemplation, used as an aid to reflection on the human relation to nature, is in the tradition of *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782), or of Wordsworth in the foundation text for English romantic verse, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Austen also draws on other nascent Romantics such as Charlotte Smith (Johnson and Tuite, 2012, p. 193). Smith's volumes of *Elegiac Sonnets* (first published in 1784) contain the voice of a melancholy speaker who muses on the natural scenery and her emotions. Critical opinion thus sees Austen drawing upon this melancholy: 'Motifs from many of Smith's novels appear extensively in Austen's work' (Magee 1975). In particular, Smith's focus on the melancholy mind in *Celestina* (1791) provokes a response in *Sense and Sensibility* and a further consideration in *Persuasion*' (Johnson and Tuite, 2012, p. 193).

Austen also relates to the Romantic landscape in *Persuasion* by describing the waves at the Cobb as 'Lord Byron's "dark blue seas"' (Austen, 2004, p. 91). This phrase comes from Byron's *The Corsair*: 'O'er the glad waters of the dark-blue sea, Our thoughts as boundless, and our souls as free' (Byron, 1814, Canto I, l. 1-2). Curiously, when writing to her sister Cassandra about two years earlier, Austen seems quite diffident to Byron's efforts: 'I have read the "*Corsair*," mended my petticoat, and have nothing else to do.' (Austen, na, letter LXXI). Harris suggests Austen's allusions to Byron are 'not just satirical: they affect characterization and signal affinity' (Harris, 2007, p. 156). Together with Knox-Shaw, Harris also notes:

Byronic motifs such as "leaps, strong supporting arms, and 'lifeless' forms," associates Louisa's self-will and nervous prostration with that of Byron's antiheroine Gulnare and observes Byronic negatives in the scene that "summon the unrealizable" for instance in "There was no wound, no blood, no visible bruise, but her eyes were

closed, she breathed not, her face was like death. — The horror of that moment to all who stood around!” (Harris, 2007, p156).

While superficially plausible this critical view does not bear detailed examination. Byron’s Gulnare is a slave girl, who Conrad saves from the burning seraglio, and who thus falls for him and offers to help him escape his imprisonment. Gulnare is both much lower caste and more resourceful and proactive than the rather socially constrained, impetuous and unthinking Louise. It hardly therefore seems a fair comparison. Harris goes on to say that The Corsair ‘calls upon ideas of freedom to justify imperial expansion’ (p. 156) and notes the fact that ‘the “dark blue sea” occurs twice more in the first two cantos of Byron’s Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’ (p. 156). Harris then uses the nationalistic themes he finds in these poems to assert ‘Byron applies Romantic notions of liberty and energy to the national enterprise itself. No wonder Austen, with her two sailor brothers, calls upon Byron in her novel about the navy’ (p. 157). While the presence of Captain Wentworth and Captain Benwick in *Persuasion* provides Austen with ample opportunity to explore the beauty and terror of the naval adventures in a truly Romantically sublime land and seascape, she chooses not to do this. Hers is not the manly world of C.S. Forester’s Horatio Hornblower. Austen’s persistent focus is on the social rules and manners of her day and how they affect her female protagonists. The Romantic sublime for Austen is hidden in the social behaviour of her drawing rooms, her town and country houses, and the balls and excursions of their occupants.

While it is certainly possible Austen admired *The Corsair* and intended it to add, by association, a little frisson of Romantic exoticism to the scene at the Cobb, it may also be that she re-used Byron’s ‘dark blue waves’ simply because she just liked it. Given that, in her letter, she dismissively placed *The Corsair* in the same sentence as her sewing duties she may have even viewed *The Corsair* as one of Byron’s sillier poems (a view taken by Cochran (na)) and was not intending to directly draw parallels with it at all.

Austen's works distance themselves from the sentimental novels of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and are part of the bridge to 19<sup>th</sup> century literary realism. Austen rejected the style and genre of sentimentalists such as Scott, Walpole, Radcliffe and Goldsmith. Walter Scott himself noted Austen's 'resistance to the trashy sensationalism of much modern fiction' (Keymer, 2014, p21). Austen returned to the tradition of Richardson and Fielding for a 'realistic study of manners' (Grundy, 2014, p. 196). Although Northanger Abbey flirts with Gothic fiction with its possibilities of the sublime landscapes, castles and abbeys, Austen eschews such escapism in her later works. Instead Austen imprisons her heroines in the social rules and manners of the elegant rooms of watering places and gentlefolks' residences. Austen's sublime is the southern English counties and contains a much gentler rural beauty in its agricultural landscape and the country houses than the rugged sublime of the northern mountains and moors. Austen's heroines cannot go mountaineering in their muslin dresses and linen or cotton petticoats, and while perhaps her heroes might, there is no real opportunity, as there are hardly any scenes in Austen's novels where no female is present. Austen's characters react to the gentle sublimity of their landscape in profound and important ways: 'Where possible they enjoy a prospect, in which they admire those things which underpin society economically and socially – fertile and well-farmed land offering livelihood to the poor and acknowledging the guiding hand of the well-disposed landowner' (Johnson and Tuite, 2012, pp. 310-311).

Austen's novels are not just a simple Romantic reaction to the Sentimentalism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. She leads a movement into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when novels were treated as 'the natural vehicle for discussion and ventilation of what mattered in life' (Bayley, 1986, p. 24). Austen shows that higher social status or significant wealth are not necessarily an indication of good character, intelligence, compassion or a route to happiness. Indeed, she values correct moral judgment and moral intelligence above material wealth. Hers is a personal and

feminine view and is part of ‘the beginning of a tradition in literature that includes Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf--all very different writers but all joined in their critical concern with the nature and meaning of feminine life’ (Boarcas, 2014). In this way Austen’s unique Romantic view of nature carries us from the distant past of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the very edge of our own era.

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