

Resorting and Consorting with Strangers: Jane Austen's "Multiculturalism"

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To speak of Jane Austen's multiculturalism might seem a bit strange, especially given how little Austen actually travelled, and how little direct contact she had with other "cultures"—even other European cultures, let alone cultures in more remote parts of the world. Given her relatively sheltered life, we might think that Austen's would be an unimportant voice in modern debates about unity and diversity, or about the importance of local culture versus national culture. However, if we view the multicultural debates a little more broadly, and think about what the word means more literally, Austen may actually have much to add to our thoughts about belonging, isolation, intimacy, and estrangement—and to the possibility of growth or decay attached to these issues. My purpose in addressing Austen's version of multiculturalism and in using the word in an unconventional manner, will, however, not be to tie it to contemporary issues, but to present a persistent theme that appears prominently in *Sanditon*, and other Austen novels, about what it means to have intense encounters with "otherness"—what it means to meet strangers, or even to be a stranger oneself.

On the surface, *Sanditon* would seem a fruitful place to look for such a theme, for it features characters that suggest Austen might have been expanding her horizons in interesting ways, such as Miss Lambe, the wealthy West Indian who is described as half-mulatto. Family tradition also has it that Austen intended to entitle her novel, *The Brothers*: it would then also have been the first of her works to feature men in the title. And indeed, the oldest Mr. Parker does dominate a surprising number of pages of the eleven chapters of *Sanditon* in our possession. However, my primary reason for choosing this topic in relation to *Sanditon* is that its pages are so dominated by the would-be resort itself. I have also long been fascinated with the symbolic role of travelling in Austen's novels—especially travelling to what we would call resort towns. I find it curious that Austen refers so frequently to Bath in her novels (every novel has references), and chooses it as a setting for both her first and last complete novels, only to invent a *fictional* resort for both the location and thematic topic of her final fragment. These resort towns and the role of travelling can help us understand the way Austen's heroines must encounter "otherness" in order to learn to negotiate between self-

interest and public-interest, local attachment and broader allegiances. In these and other ways, *Sanditon* interestingly combines elements of the "Bath novels," and is particularly reminiscent of *Persuasion*'s darker presentation of a more deserted Bath.

As we will see, the resort town in the later novels contributes to what many have called their "modern" atmosphere: *Persuasion* and *Sanditon* portray splintered societies characterized by superficial, short-lived connections and lack of shared moral purpose—an atomistic society that suffers from the lack of a "center." This atmosphere is clearest when we compare *Persuasion* and *Sanditon* to *Pride and Prejudice*, or even more so to *Emma*, the novel where there is the greatest degree of social stability and the closest coincidence of the moral center, the traditional social center, and the legal center, since Mr. Knightley unites character or moral authority with social pre-eminence and with power and legal authority. Even though these attributes are unevenly and unjustly distributed elsewhere in the novel's social world, there is no question that things are done well at Donwell. The world of *Persuasion*, on the other hand, is significantly without a center. Not only does Sir Walter Elliot vacate his family estate and rent it out to others because of his financial follies, but the family is divided by greed and pretention. As you will remember, the novel opens with the famous scene that reveals that Sir Walter has replaced the Bible with the Baronetage as the "book of books" (P 7), as selfishness and vanity erode his moral and even his social authority. The Baronetage opens of its own accord to his favorite page: the one carrying the Elliot family entry. As has oft been noted, *Persuasion* is also the only novel that does not end with the heroine's ascension to an estate. Instead, Anne finds her home on the sea, married to a naval officer, with the threat of war looming ahead. Within this splintered society, without a moral or social center, the normally itinerant naval officers become the most stable, exemplary group.

Whereas in *Persuasion*, the reader sees the financially and morally impoverished petty aristocracy, like Sir Walter Elliot, rather *unwillingly* moving to fashionable spots where one can "be important at comparatively little expense" (P 14), in *Sanditon*, we see landed gentry *willingly* trade their estates for more fashionable locations. The Parkers' move is all the more astonishing in this last work, given the two "Sanditons" (suggesting redundancy in the creation of the second town), and because of the needlessness of the move, the short distance they travelled to relocate, and the reckless positioning of their new home on top of a steep, windblown cliff. Mrs. Parker does feel some regret at the sight of their "snug" old estate and its many

“comforts.” The new location of their house is symbolically precarious, as is the new foundation of their life, Speculation: the Parkers are “rocked in [their] beds” by storms that don’t affect their old house in the slightest; their (significantly) rented carriage overturns; their seedling “plantation” seems likely to be uprooted in the “grandeur of the Storm[s].” Their fragile arrangement lacks stability, as it rocks, overturns, and is nearly uprooted, suggesting negative impacts of the quickly changing world of capitalistic speculation and urbanized fashions that they have embraced. *Sanditon* too, then, depicts a society without a center—not only where vanity and social pretension have often led to financial failure, but where finance and speculation have become a way of life.

No one exemplifies this way of life better than Mr. Parker. For Mr. Parker, the narrator informs us, “Sanditon was a second Wife & 4 Children to him—hardly less Dear—& certainly more engrossing.—He could talk of it forever.—It had indeed the highest claims;—not only those of Birthplace, Property, and Home,—it was his Mine, his Lottery, his Speculation & his Hobby Horse; his Occupation[,] his Hope & his Futurity” (372). The religious language here of “hope and futurity,” along with Mr. Parker’s being perceived as an “Enthusiast” (371) (“Enthusiasm” connoted “ill-directed or misdirected religious emotion” in the eighteenth century¹) also suggests, similarly to the opening scenes of *Persuasion*, that other concerns—in this case financial, capitalistic ones—have usurped the place of religion as central moral authority in the context of *Sanditon*. In *Mansfield Park*, Speculation was just the name of a popular eighteenth-century board game; in *Sanditon*, it is a *modus vivendi*.² The first agent in the very first sentence of the novel, is notably not a human being, but rather an abstract concept: “Business.” The Parkers are “induced by Business,” in this passive sentence, to attempt a very rough lane, and Business is therefore at least partially culpable in their overturn; it is business that leads them away from the prudent path in this scene as elsewhere, the narrator suggests. Business interests dominate the narrative, as the reader encounters character after character who disguises his or her own material self-interest as being in service of the community, when there is no community to serve. The reader also encounters greater details about material culture than we are used to finding in Austen’s novels: we learn of many purchased and purchasable goods, such as fashionable white dresses, harps, blue shoes, fashionable Nankin boots, and even the canvas awnings and parasols that Mr. Parker has purchased to replace the shade of the old trees at his family home.

In her completed novels, Austen often used Bath to symbolize snobbery, elitism, vanity, superficiality, and sometimes hedonism, despite Bath's many charms and excellent shopping opportunities. Some of these venal aspects seem less threatening in the nearly-deserted Sanditon. (In so far as seduction and gluttony are still present, they may be found, respectively, in the caricatured forms of Sir Edward Denham and Arthur Parker.) Another feature, however, unites Bath and Sanditon—namely, a strange anonymity, where visitors are displaced, far from home, relations, responsibilities, and from the places which have lent them their identity, far from the well-delineated roles and social hierarchies of rural villages. From Austen's perspective, this uprooting seems to come at a certain cost to tradition and family connection, and is memorably portrayed in *Sanditon*. But the effect is not merely that of urban vs. city lifestyles, for even at its most populated seasons, the anonymity of a resort like Bath is very different from London's. Unlike London, these smaller towns, especially with central gathering places like Bath's Pump Room or the preordained walking paths at Sanditon, provide a sense of focused (and forced) community, and yet it is community which shares no common bond greater than fashion or, at best, the love of bathing or sea air. Here strangers would see the same sights and the same people daily, attend the same gatherings, and even bathe together. It is a society that encourages acquaintance with strangers and which is based on seeing and being seen.

In fact, there is no better example of forced and superficial intimacy of the resort town than the intricacies of the bathing itself—a curious combination of vulnerable undress and complicated machinations to enable courtesy and a degree of privacy. In Bath, we have men and women bathing together in wet, clinging Regency gowns (and Regency gowns cling even when they are dry). The participants wear hats and patches while fully immersed in water, walking about as though taking a turn in an English Garden, all the while pretending not to be soaking wet, and being transported in carriages intended to reveal as much as conceal. To top this off, the bath itself is a stage, with an audience directly above in the Pump Room windows. This forced and awkward intimacy with strangers interested Austen, in my opinion, as well as the strange relationship between public and private that accompanied it in bathing resorts. The bathing machines of sea-bathing resorts, such as Sanditon, were only marginally more private, and even there, we see Diana Parker officiously intending to accompany Miss Lambe, a total stranger, in her bathing machine at Sanditon.³

According to the way Austen uses bathing resorts imaginatively in her fiction, it seems that this intimacy always remains superficial. Friendships, like romances developed in such places, tend to remain superficial. We need only to think of Frank Churchill's words describing the circumstances of Mr. and Mrs. Elton's engagement in *Emma*: "they only knew each other, I think, a few weeks in Bath . . . [and] as to any real knowledge of a person's disposition that Bath, or any public place, can give—it is all nothing" (*E* 240). It is in this isolation in the midst of the artificial and superficial intimacy with strangers—the sense of being a stranger oneself, of being "nothing"—that Austen saw an artistic opportunity.

This brings us to another way in which Austen portrays the "center" of both *Sanditon* and *Persuasion* as weak, and increasingly devoid of moral authority—namely, through the presence of characters whose sense of self-importance prevents them from seeing their own "nothingness"—that is, prevents them from seeing themselves as strangers. Sir Walter's desire for admiration leads him to assume that outside his dressing room, in the wide expanses of Bath or even London, all eyes are constantly observing him and his minutest actions. Of course the joke is that, just as in his dressing room covered with mirrors, all the eyes are his own: "[he] was the constant object of his [own] warmest respect and devotion" (4), as the narrator informs us early on. He is terribly conscious of his public appearances—to the point that one suspects he must think they are recorded in an appendix to his book of books. Even the young Mr. Elliot's offensive behavior is a greater blow to his *vanity* than to his sense of propriety or justice, "'for they *must have been seen together*,' he observed, 'once at Tattersal's, and twice in the lobby of the House of Commons'" (8, my emphasis). His lawyer knows how to use this trait in Sir Walter to achieve his own ends: "Consequence has its tax—," he says fawningly, "I, John Shepherd, might conceal any family matter that I chose, for nobody would think it worth their while to observe me, but Sir Walter Elliot has eyes upon him which it may be very difficult to elude" (17).⁴

In *Sanditon*, the Miss Beauforts exhibit some of the same desire to be seen, if not quite the same confidence in achieving it: "they meant to be very economical, very elegant & very secluded; with the hope on Miss Beaufort's side, of praise & celebrity from all who walked within the sound of her Instrument, & on Miss Letitia's, of curiosity & rapture in all who came near her while she sketched—and to Both, the consolation of meaning to be the most stylish Girls in the Place" (421). The size of Sanditon's population ironically guarantees them greater success (and greater importance) than Sir Walter: The "Miss

Beauforts, who would have been nothing at Brighton, could not move here without notice" (422-23).

There are many interesting comparisons to be made between Lady Denham and Sir Walter Elliot in this regard: both share the presumption that their private affairs must be of general public knowledge and interest. In a wonderfully hypocritical moment, for example, Lady Denham claims, "I am not a Woman of Parade, *as all the World knows*" (393, my italics), the latter half of the sentence effectively cancelling out the claim of the former half. Like Sir Walter, Lady Denham is also concerned about the effects of urbanization and democratization, and the concomitant decay of the social hierarchies that have given her importance: "Aye . . . and because they have full Purses, fancy themselves equal, may be, to your old Country Families" (392). However, the interesting difference is that for Sir Walter, class and family traditions (albeit in their most distorted, superficial senses, even deteriorating to mere physical appearances) remain his highest priority, whereas for Lady Denham, it is the morally bereft standard of money alone that matters, even further removed from traditions and semblances of virtue. Ultimately she cares solely about "full Purses" and whether those who come will contribute to her self-importance and financial well-being, and whether they buy her "Asses' milch."

Interestingly, even the much more sympathetic Mr. Parker also exhibits the same parochialism, or the tendency to assume that his private business is publicly known in neighboring countrysides and therefore to judge the world by very subjective, local standards. In the opening scenes, he insists to Mr. Heywood that the internal affairs of Sanditon *must be known*: "—My name perhaps—tho' I am by no means the first of my Family, holding Landed Property in the Parish of Sanditon, may be unknown at this distance from the Coast—but Sanditon itself—everybody has heard of Sanditon. . . ." In this instance, Mr. Heywood has actually heard of Sanditon, but his reply suggests the lack of importance he attributes to the place: "Yes—I have heard of Sanditon. . . —Every five years, one hears of some new place or other starting up by the Sea, & growing the fashion—" (368).⁵ Mr. Parker also assumes that Mr. Heywood has heard of Brinshore, when he launches into a colorful and fluent description of this rival resort. As he finishes his disparagement of Brinshore ("—Depend upon it Sir, that this is a faithful Description of Brinshore—not in the smallest degree exaggerated—& if you have heard it differently spoken of—"), Mr. Heywood's response reveals that Mr. Parker has again fallen into the trap of forgetting that his interests and concerns are not those of the society in which he is a

stranger. "I did not know there was such a place in the World" (369). Mr. Parker's own concerns loom so large in his "enthusiasm," that he cannot imagine that they do not equally engage perfect strangers as well.

But what is a stranger, anyway? "Someone we don't know," most of us would say. But what constitutes knowing someone? Is knowing their name enough to make them cease being a stranger? When does a person shift from being "nothing" to you to meaning "something"? It seems that Bath had its own special rules for determining such things. According to the "Order of 1787," made by James King, the same Master of Ceremonies who helped Catherine Morland, all ladies and gentlemen were invited to sign their names and lodgings in the public books in the pump rooms (Lane 22). Writing your name in a public book was the official entry into society, and the same information was available in the two local weekly papers that featured a list of the week's new arrivals. You will remember Henry Tilney's offer: "I will get the Bath paper and look over the list of new arrivals" (NA 172). It was also in the Bath paper that Sir Walter gained his joyful news: "The Bath paper one morning announced the arrival of the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple, and her daughter, the Honourable Miss Carteret" (P 98). *Sanditon*, too, has its parallel—only it is a far less active volume located in the Library, and readers witness Charlotte and the Parkers judging the size of the town and the success of the season by the entries in the pages of this volume (389).

In a letter to her sister from Bath, Austen once quipped: "The Duchess of Orleans, the papers says, drinks at my Pump" (L 462). The humor here is dependent on the same awkward proximity without intimacy, or intimacy without substance. One knows one's neighbors not through family connections, nor by having grown up together, but rather by reading their names in a book or in the newspaper. In fact, in *Sanditon*, it seems that names are often the last aspect that one learns about others (408, 411). For example, the narrator of *Sanditon* takes an unusually long time before revealing to the reader the names of the "Gentleman and Lady" in the overturned carriage at the beginning of the novel (compare this to the straightforward introductions in the completed novels). Mr. Heywood and Mr. Parker are almost finished with a long conversation before we learn Mr. Parker's name. (Perhaps this is to emphasize the effect I described above of his assumption that it is already known. . . .) Even acquaintances, like the ones represented by Diana Parker: "You must have heard me mention Miss Capper, the particular friend of *my* very particular friend Fanny Noyce;—now, Miss Capper is extremely intimate with a Mrs. Darling, who is on terms of constant correspon-

dence with Mrs. Griffiths herself.—Only a short chain, you see, between us, & not a Link wanting” (408). Although there is an element of this in all of Austen’s busybodies, it takes on a particularly significant tone in *Sanditon*, given the lack of a “centre” and the changing boundaries of public and private knowledge.

This brings us to another important aspect of Mr. Parker’s opening conversation with Mr. Heywood. Much of the confusion that results from the quickly changing boundaries between private and public take hold from the moment Mr. Parker insists that his *newspaper*—even the advertising in his newspaper⁶—is not only the unambiguous representative of the private affairs of Willingden, but also a more authoritative, more reliable source of personal knowledge than Mr. Heywood’s own empirical evidence: “Sir, I can bring you proof of your having a Surgeon in the Parish—whether you may know it or not” (366). “Sir,” Mr. Heywood replies “with a good-natured smile,” “if you were to show me all the Newspapers that are printed in one week throughout the Kingdom, you would not persuade me of there being a Surgeon in Willingden,—for having lived here ever since I was born, Man and Boy 57 years . . .” (366).

If we compare this with Sir Walter’s source of all significant knowledge, the *Baronetage* or the purely oral “universal acknowledge[ment]” that opens *Pride and Prejudice*, we will see that the sources of personal knowledge have grown less personal and more public in nature in these last two novels.⁷ The emphasis on these written media and upon the public nature of the communication points out the painful combination of isolation and atomization on the one hand and lack of privacy on the other. This is an unusual and perhaps particularly modern double whammy: normally one would think that the silver lining of isolation would be privacy, but this is not the case in *Persuasion* and *Sanditon*. Charlotte notices this effect when pondering the plight of Miss Clara Brereton: “Charlotte could not but think of the extreme difficulty which secret Lovers must have in finding a proper spot for their stolen Interviews.—Here perhaps they had thought themselves so perfectly secure from observation! . . . Yet here, she had seen them. They were really ill-used” (427). One is both isolated and constantly observed.

So far I have focused on what seem like fairly negative aspects of the societies portrayed in *Persuasion* and *Sanditon*, but let me suggest that Austen also finds a large silver lining in these developments. Austen finds a way, especially in these two works, to show a very positive role of strangers and of the particular kind of knowledge afforded by “perpetual estrangement” (*P* 64), a phrase that appears in *Persuasion*. In fact, words like “estrangement,” “im-

prisonment," "alienations," "removals," and "alone" have an unusual prominence in *Persuasion*.⁸

Let me suggest that Austen finds a very important role for the heroines within these resort towns and within these atomized societies devoid of central moral authority. As we have noted, with all their preoccupation with being seen, Sir Walter Elliot and Lady Denham both reveal that they are unable to see themselves through the eyes of others. As foils to the heroines, however, they reveal that Anne and Charlotte figure as natural strangers and gain a perspective on the others in the novels that ultimately allows them greater self-knowledge. Charlotte comes to Sanditon only by virtue of an accident caused by a misreading of an ambiguous newspaper notice and has no natural (or even long-term) ties with anyone there. Arguably, she was brought there in order to be a name in the Library's registry, brought there, at least indirectly, as a result of a business speculation and capitalistic enthusiasm. Her opportunity to travel and this stance as a stranger allows Charlotte, however, to gain an opportunity for a new sort of independence and growth, appropriate to her surroundings.

In this she very much resembles Anne Elliot. *Persuasion* describes an expanding world, full of strangers, and a heroine who learns to travel to foreign places. Anne doesn't travel to the exotic locales that the Crofts have visited; instead she travels from Kellynch to Uppercross to Lyme, and then from Uppercross to Kellynch to Bath. It is the narrator who makes it clear that Anne *travels*. In the beginning of Chapter six, the narrator rather grandly describes Anne's moves from household to household as moving from "commonwealth" to commonwealth: Anne "acknowledged it to be very fitting that every little social commonwealth should dictate its own matters of discourse; and hoped, ere long, to become a not unworthy member of the one she was now transplanted into" (43). She accomplishes this by "cloth[ing] her imagination, her memory, and all her ideas in as much of Uppercross as possible" (43). Anne learns the lessons of travelling even without moving very far:

Anne had not wanted this visit to Uppercross to learn that a removal from one set of people to another, though at a distance of only three miles, will often include a total change of conversation, opinion, and idea. She had never been staying there before, without being struck by it, or without wishing that other Elliots could have her advantage in seeing how unknown, or unconsidered there, were the affairs which at Kellynch-hall were treated as of such general publicity and pervading interest. (42)

Through this, Anne learns what she calls "the art of knowing our own nothingness," a keen awareness of the *absence* of other eyes on

matters of Elliot importance.⁹ In this Anne poses as a foil to her father, who has not learned to travel in this sense, and who constantly assumes that his private affairs must be of universal knowledge and interest, such as when he says of Admiral Croft: "I suspect . . . that Admiral Croft will be best known in Bath as the renter of Kellynch-hall" (166). Whereas travelling allows Austen's heroines to learn to negotiate between self-interest and public-interest, Sir Walter sees no distinction between private and public interest, and shows himself unable to see himself as those around him do (or don't). He is, in that sense, unable to travel. However, Anne functions as a natural stranger and gains a perspective on the others that ultimately allows her greater self-knowledge.

Although we have less evidence of Charlotte's development, the same seems to hold for the heroine of the incomplete *Sanditon*: As I said, Charlotte comes to Sanditon only by virtue of an accident and has no significant ties with anyone there, just as Anne learns how little others care what happens to her family, even at a relatively small distance, and recognizes the need to learn a new "language" for each "commonwealth" she visits. This feeling of isolation and "otherness" allows each of them to understand what they otherwise could not. In contrast, Mr. Parker assumes the whole world speaks his language, in more than one sense: "All that he understood of himself, he readily told, for he was very open-hearted;—& where he might be himself in the dark, his conversation was still giving information" (371). He does not have enough self-understanding to understand the limits of his own knowledge.

It is in such a way that Austen uses the role of the stranger (both meeting strangers and learning to see oneself as a stranger would) in the moral development of her heroines, and therefore uses the forced intimacy and simultaneously intense isolation of splintered societies and resorts like Bath and Sanditon to allow her heroines to grow to a fuller understanding of self. The "multiculturalism" (an intense encounter with otherness) of this experience causes Charlotte and Anne to recognize boundaries between private and public knowledge.

We cannot know how Austen intended to end Charlotte's story, but the ending of *Persuasion* suggests that the exquisite private happiness that Anne and Wentworth achieve by the end of the novel, is only realizable within their very public surroundings: at the crucial moment there was only "a most obliging compliance for public view; and smiles reined in and spirits dancing in private rapture" (240). Private happiness, we are to understand, is only achievable within the recognition of something larger than ourselves. Within the confines of the public gaze, Anne and Wentworth manage to communicate with their eyes and by overhearing each other, and how appropriate that their final union be announced at an Elliot "evening party," the

epitome of the awkward intimacy with strangers that Austen found so painful and simultaneously such a fruitful artistic subject.

As we have seen, both *Persuasion* and *Sanditon* portray societies where the moral center is unravelling with the separation of moral authority and social authority. Both Anne and Charlotte, the travelling heroines, carry their "centres" with them, and function as models of the "new" moral agent in this changing, decentralized context. The locus of authority and responsibility of this new moral agent in a changing, decentralized, world is clearly the self. Anne the traveller is the silent center of her novel; in the course of the novel, she gains authority, but a different sort than her mother's. She functions as the central moral authority of the novel (even though she has no social authority), and gradually some of the others unconsciously acknowledge this. We have hints in *Sanditon* that Charlotte learns a similar lesson about moral autonomy, although the tone of the lesson is different, given the solid home she has left behind in Willingden.¹⁰

In *Sanditon*, even in the early chapters of the fragment in our possession, we see a similar scene in which Charlotte takes upon herself the burden—and opportunity—of moral autonomy. Interestingly her moral lesson is first introduced by Mr. Parker who, like Mary Bennet, occasionally speaks words of wisdom that seem beyond his own comprehension: "Those who tell their own Story you know must be listened to with Caution," he remarks, "—When you see us in contact, you will judge for yourself" (376). But it takes a little while for Charlotte to learn this lesson. Her most important moment of insight and of growth in *Sanditon* may be when Charlotte first recognizes precisely the subjective obsession that distorts Mr. Parker's understanding of what passes before him. By the end of Chapter 7, Charlotte finally allows her own empirical observations of Lady Denham to challenge the authority of the much rosier description she previously heard from Mr. Parker. Charlotte concludes: "she is thoroughly mean. I had not expected any thing so bad.—Mr. P. spoke too mildly of her.—His Judgment is evidently not to be trusted—His own Goodnature misleads him.—He is too kind hearted to see clearly.—I must judge for myself.—" The crucial phrase here is, of course the last one—that Charlotte has assumed responsibility as a moral authority in her own right. Her understanding of Mr. Parker's lesson, however, is only partial. But after a few more ruminations, she understands the blinding force of self-interest a little more fully: "[T]heir very *connection* prejudices him.—He has persuaded her to engage in the same Speculation—& because their object in that Line is the same, he fancies she feels like him in others . . ." (402). Mr. Parker has allowed his "enthusiasm" to blind his judgment, with the result that he can no longer observe Lady

Denham as a stranger can. And Charlotte has learned one of the important benefits of being a stranger, and of allowing oneself to understand the different languages of the "little commonwealths" one visits. But plaguing questions still remain: Does such responsibility and autonomy necessarily come at the price of lost community, tradition, or stability? Does one lose the advantages of being a stranger as soon as one begins to "belong"? Or has belonging now been transformed into a crass sense of shared Speculation? Is there no escape from the isolating effects of human subjectivity?

Without attempting to answer those difficult questions, I would like to turn, in conclusion, to the character who seems most likely to have been Austen's choice of a hero of *Sanditon*, Mr. Sidney Parker. Sidney Parker plays a very interesting role in terms of the stranger theme, for Sidney is constantly presented *as a stranger*, even by his own family members. "What would Sidney say if he were here?" (385), Mr. Parker frequently asks, as though expecting that Sidney's response would surprise him with its "otherness," its sheer unexpectedness. Other remarks emphasize the same characteristic: "Sidney says anything you know" (382), Mr. Parker remarks, and later calls him a "saucy fellow" (385). In another context, such as in *Emma*, we could easily imagine Mr. Knightley's disdain for such characteristics. These descriptions could well have been negative remarks about past anti-heroes—the shifty, flighty ones, like Frank Churchill, Henry Crawford, and Willoughby, who are always running about and seem to have no stability in so far as they have no firm principles to guide them. We might be especially reminded of them when Sidney is described as being: "here & there & every where" (382). But in the context of *Sanditon*, such qualities take on added importance and seem distinctly more positive.

Consider the occasion when Mr. Parker is reading Diana's letter full of hypocrisy and hypochondria. Mr. Parker replies: "Though I dare say Sidney might find something extremely entertaining in this Letter & make us laugh for half an hour together I declare *I* by myself, can see nothing in it but what is either very pitiable or very creditable . . ." (387-88). Mr. Parker's limitations are made clear by the fact that "by [him]self" he cannot "see" the true content of the letter, that he relies upon Sidney's wit to enable him to see the humor or contradictions in Diana's self-representation. The sheer existence of an unaccountable Sidney in his family, however—the presence of a stranger in that sense—allows him to conceive of the possibility that there might be other, contradictory or at least complementary ways of reading the letter. The role of laughter here is also important in enabling one to see oneself as others do—as an antidote for parochialism and for narcissism.¹¹ The fact that the other members of the Parker family are referred to as "the whole Parker race" suggests

their homogeneity, and that Sidney's role as outsider, or simply as a stranger, may be of benefit to the communities he visits, if not also to himself. By being "here & there & every where," Sidney shows his separation from the limitations of local knowledge, and in this sense his lack of belonging serves a beneficial purpose.

In these ways, I would argue Austen is very interested in the beneficial role of the stranger (that is, in the importance of meeting strangers, in learning to see oneself as a stranger would, and even in becoming a stranger);¹² therefore, the forced intimacy and simultaneously intense isolation of resorts like Bath and Sanditon allow her heroines to grow to a fuller understanding of self. The "multiculturalism" (in the sense of an intense encounter with otherness) of this experience causes Charlotte and Anne to recognize boundaries between private and public knowledge.

It is important to note that the deterioration of central moral authority, the splintering of society, and the rapid historical and economic changes that Austen recounts in these novels does not seem to lead Austen to despair or relativism. Instead, these developments seem to provide an opportunity for heroines to exercise new-found moral authority, even at the loss of community. If we think that because of her relatively sheltered life, Austen has nothing to add to our understanding of modern encounters with otherness, it is possible that we are falling into Mr. Darcy's trap, of remarking alongside him in *Pride and Prejudice*, that the country ". . . can in general supply but few subjects for such a study. In a country neighbourhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society" (42-43). Austen might well respond like Elizabeth to such an observation, by remarking that "people themselves alter so much that there is something new to be observed in them forever." In other words, it is not how much or how far one travels, but *how* one travels—whether one sees the world as a narcissistic projection of oneself, or is willing to be surprised by differences, and perhaps even by one's own "nothingness"—nothingness either in the scope of larger world events and perceptions—or simply as our private interests and concerns naturally diminish in the eyes and interests of others.

NOTES

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 3:216.

² See Tanner, 253, 257, for an excellent discussion of the omnipresence of business and the missing center of *Sanditon*.

³ For an example of such intimacy, consider Lady Denham's actions toward Charlotte: "Taking hold of Charlotte's arm with the ease of one who felt that any notice from her was an Honour, & Communicative, from the influence of the same conscious Importance or natural love of talking, she immediately said . . ." (399).

⁴ Brodey, "Vanity," 236-37.

- ⁵ The passage clearly also suggests that time, experience, and stability can provide perspective on societal trends, and can act as an antidote to subjectivity and parochialism.
- ⁶ "[Y]esterday morning's ads in the Morning Post and Kentish Gazette" (*S* 366).
- ⁷ Here, too, gossip is active and unreliable, as in *Pride and Prejudice*, but rather than being unitary and "universally acknowledg[ing]," even gossip splinters in *Sanditon*: for example, while in *Pride and Prejudice*, the report of the arriving Bingley party fluctuated over time, in *Sanditon*, we simultaneously receive two conflicting accounts of Mrs. Griffiths.
- ⁸ Litz in Halperin, 231.
- ⁹ This ability to see oneself through the eyes of others was significant in eighteenth-century moral philosophy, stemming largely from Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Anne, for example, can monitor her linguistic progress in the various languages of the little commonwealths she visits, for she has an internal standard from which to judge—that is, she gains a clear enough sense of herself, by seeing herself from afar, as Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" would, to be aware of her harmony or disharmony with her surroundings (see Brodey, "Vanity," for further discussion of this connection).
- ¹⁰ There is a similar development in *Mansfield Park*, where, in his first harsh words to Fanny after she refuses to consider marrying Henry, Sir Thomas makes the following complaint: "you have shewn me that you can be wilful and perverse, that you can and will decide for yourself, without any consideration or deference for those who have surely some right to guide you—without even asking their advice" (*MP* 318). In this passage, Sir Thomas equates her willfulness and perversity with a "willingness to decide for [her]self" rather than seek out an external authority figure. Sir Thomas does not realize the significance of internalized moral authority. By the end of the novel, we learn that Fanny has displaced Sir Thomas in a sense, and has adopted a new "office of authority" (*MP* 396). She becomes the quiet, hidden authority, the new moral center of the novel (Brodey, "Papas and Ha-has," 94-95).
- ¹¹ Sidney Parker's wit may remind the reader of Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Since we have no direct contact with Sidney in the fragment, we are unable to ascertain the degree of cynicism in his wit. The phrase "as satire or morality might prevail" has led many critics to suggest that Austen intends to separate these qualities in *Sanditon*, much as Mr. Bennet himself does. However, the use of laughter and wit to counteract parochialism and subjectivity suggests that satire may provide an important means toward a moral end.
- ¹² This theme is quite prominent in the writings of T. S. Eliot, as well. See my forthcoming article in *Mosaic*: "Alienation, Difficulty, and Surprise: 'Multiculturalism' in the Writings of T. S. Eliot."

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