



An Open Invitation, or How to Read the Ethics of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

PETER MATHEWS

Peter Mathews is Assistant Professor of English and Graduate Director at Centenary College of New Jersey. His work focuses primarily on the relationship between ethics and literature. A specialist in modern British fiction, he has published articles on authors ranging from D. H. Lawrence to Ian McEwan.

The response no longer belongs to me—that is all I wanted to tell you, my friend the reader.

—Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*

TO UNDERSTAND THE FUNCTION of the invitation in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), it is necessary to question what it is about this novel that makes readers *respond*. One might begin interrogating this ethics of response, perhaps, by considering the book's famous opening line: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (3). What is Austen's strategy in making such a statement? Does she sincerely expect her readers to adhere to such a declaration in a gesture of passive acceptance? Certainly not: implicit in this initial pronouncement is an invitation to the reader to *disagree* with the narrative point of view, to dismiss the authorial voice, on this occasion, as a stuffy advocate of bourgeois morality. William Galperin points out in *The Historical Austen* (2003) that Austen frequently "reverts to the first person in her fictions" as a way of tendering "an invitation to regard the narrator as a character with opinions of her own" (238). In proffering such an observation at the outset, Austen assumes that her reader is familiar with the tradition of the novel, in particular with the eighteenth-century ideology that frames the genre as a vehicle of moral improvement. The book's opening line, therefore, is an ironic

gesture, a deliberate cliché, and, most important of all, a ritual that will bring into question the centrality of such conventions to modern society. Crucial to Austen's strategy is the unstated ability of the reader to *refuse* the novel's invitation to partake of its worldview. What the reader must decide, therefore, is whether this opening statement is an invitation or a demand, one that is so impolite as to brook no conversation, that closes the possibility of other responses even before a dialogue has begun.

The world of Austen's characters is similarly ruled by a complex series of social rules and conventions. Most of these have to do with class—the Bennet family's connections to people in “trade,” for example, as opposed to those who have inherited their titles and wealth, are a major source of tension for aristocratic snobs like Lady Catherine de Bourgh. These rules, which dictate the “polite” terms by which people engage each other throughout the novel, come under the collective term “civility” in *Pride and Prejudice*. To be civil involves a praxis of response, in which each participant is expected, by a set of unspoken rules, to act in a certain manner. Such reactions are not, however, simply mechanical, but are expected to reflect the deeper force of one's beliefs. When Elizabeth is engaged to dance with Mr. Collins during the ball at Netherfield, for example, she feels chagrin at his enforcing that request in spite of her obvious lack of desire for his company. The truly polite or civil set of expectations thus contains not only a duty to perform a particular act, but also the implicit possibility of *refusing* that invitation. Austen thus examines the frequent tension between a desire “universally acknowledged” as being in one's interest, and the adjustment of one's actual desire in relation to that supposed universality.

The pervasiveness of “civility” extends not only to the social context of the novel, but also to the text itself. *Pride and Prejudice*, after all, belongs to the category of the romantic novel, a legacy engendering certain expectations as to what might happen in the course of the narrative. At one level the answer to this problem appears relatively straightforward, since the author can choose simply to follow the mechanical path laid down by her predecessors in the genre. Such a formulaic move, however, would hardly have elevated Austen into the preeminent place she holds in the English literary canon. She partially overcomes this double bind, it is true, by using her celebrated irony to undermine such conventions. But Austen's strategies also involve a complex rethinking of the relationship between ethics and time, as encapsulated in the act of invitation. That these two concepts are crucially intertwined can be glimpsed, once again, in the novel's opening line: the “universality” of the statement and its place at the very beginning of the narrative are both

designed to rob the dictum of all temporal possibility. Therein lies its arrogance, its “impoliteness”—but also its implicit admission of weakness, for such foreclosure is also a tacit indicator of its unwillingness to put its truth to the test. In Austen’s novel, therefore, the reader witnesses the slow emergence of a new kind of ethics, one that eschews eternal truth in order to reorient itself towards the *agon* of the future. *Pride and Prejudice*, in other words, is structured as an open invitation, one continually awaiting the future response of new readers to come.

This textual theme is mirrored in the dilemmas of Austen’s characters, who must negotiate the possible courses their lives might take. The laws of genre thus run parallel to the social expectations that impose themselves on the individual. To an extent, this path has already been decided for Mrs. Bennet’s daughters, who are faced with the choice of either marrying or facing economic hardship upon the death of their father. What saves Lizzy and Jane is the intrusion of the unexpected in the form of Darcy and Bingley. Lizzy’s willingness to let go of her universal assumptions by submitting her prejudices to the test of time eventually rescues her from the drudgery of a Bovary-style connection. Nonetheless, the moral lesson that contrasts with her own successful union with Darcy is provided by the disastrous marriage between Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas, which presents the most immediate stumbling block to an ethics of futurity. After all, Charlotte also seems to align her ethics towards the future, as her worldly-wise ruminations serve to demonstrate:

“Well,” said Charlotte, “I wish Jane success with all my heart; and if she were married to him [Bingley] to-morrow, I should think she had as good a chance of happiness, as if she were to be studying his character for a twelve-month. Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other, or ever so similar before-hand, it does not advance their felicity in the least. They always continue to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have their share of vexation; and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life.” (23)

For Charlotte, however, the future is something that must be manipulated and directed, and even if it cannot be controlled totally, one’s actions must nonetheless be as calculated as possible. Her philosophy thus fails to open itself truly to the random possibilities of the future; it is instead designed to protect her from that openness by shielding her behind the armor of selfishness.

A turn towards the future is not enough, in and of itself, to guarantee

the authenticity of action, as Charlotte's—and later on, Miss Bingley's—example demonstrates. The turn to the future must be made in an *ethical* way, in a manner that seeks to acknowledge and preserve the freedom of the beloved instead of serving as an act of appropriation. Herein lies the importance of the invitation, which cannot—if it is to retain its status as an invitation—be reduced simply to a demand. As Jacques Derrida writes in his essay “Passions”:

An invitation leaves one free, otherwise it becomes a restraint. It should never imply: you are obliged to come, you have to come, it is necessary. But the invitation must be pressing, not indifferent. It should never imply: you are free not to come and if you don't come, never mind, it doesn't matter. Without the pressure of some desire—which at once says “come” and leaves, nevertheless, the other his absolute freedom—the invitation immediately withdraws and becomes unwelcoming. It must therefore split and redouble itself at the same time, at once leave free and take hostage: double act, redoubled act. (14)

Pride and Prejudice locates itself in the awkward space of this dilemma. How does one *respond* to such a predicament? There is, as Derrida points out, the possibility of non-response, of remaining silent. But the real and continual danger is presumption, of seizing the future as fixed, as Charlotte does, instead of welcoming it as an infinitely varied possibility. The connection between time and the authentic invitation is inextricably bound by this ethical interpretation of the future.

Enveloped in the florid language of excessive civility, Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine provide the chief models of presumption in the novel. In a rare moment of insight, for example, Mrs. Bennet perceives Mr. Collins's visit to their estate at Longbourn, which will entail to him upon Mr. Bennet's death, as a way of rubbing salt into the family's wounds. He proceeds to insult Mrs. Philips by comparing her apartment to a “small summer breakfast parlour at Rosings,” a situation which is only alleviated when Mrs. Philips is informed of Lady Catherine's lavish taste in fireplaces (75). This resolution would have been understood in Austen's time as a jab at the vulgar materialism of Mr. Collins, who uses his patroness's name as a ubiquitous calling card.

But the moment at which the reader finds Mr. Collins at his most presumptuous surely occurs in Volume I, Chapter XIX, when he makes his proposal of marriage to Elizabeth. Mr. Collins's speech is less an invitation than a declaration, in which he first gives his own reasons for marrying and then

preemptively outlines the various reasons that Elizabeth *ought* to possess for agreeing to their union. Austen intimates that if Elizabeth had not interjected, he would have presumed, without a word of assent from her, that he had been accepted. Even when she does state her refusal, he reconfigures it according to his own desires:

“When I do myself the honour of speaking to you next on this subject I shall hope to receive a more favourable answer than you have now given me; though I am far from accusing you of cruelty at present, because I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application, and perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character.” (108)

Mr. Collins appropriates the future by presuming that the calculations he outlines in the course of his marriage proposal are irrefutable. It is in Elizabeth’s interest, and in turn her family’s, for her to marry Mr. Collins to stave off the poverty that would accompany their father’s death. As with his comments to Mrs. Philips, Mr. Collins shows himself to be steeped in the assumption that each person is ultimately motivated by vulgar self-interest. His civility is insufferable because his selfishness transforms polite formality from a discursive ground for mutual respect into a barely disguised mechanism for manipulating others. Civility, in other words, is no longer an invitation but a demand that brooks no refusal. Turned into an obligation, it presumes not only that the other will respond, but that he or she will respond in a way that, through the dreariness of conventionality, can be predicted from the very beginning.

Mr. Collins’s behavior is Austen’s magnification of a widespread mode of presumption that extends from the realm of civility into a broader economy of social behaviors. At the base of this presumption lies an outward confusion, one much exploited by Austen’s acerbic wit, between signifier and signified. While these moments of “confusion” often operate in a cynical manner, such slippages make the exploitation of meaning all the more difficult to predict. One example is the elusive category of the aristocratic “gentleman,” a position that is usually obtained initially by birth, but which is also attended by a series of outward behaviors designed to signify one’s social status *as* a gentleman. One mark of a gentleman, for example, is that he must not be engaged in the business of trade, a practice associated with the vulgarity of the common classes. Austen, however, is reflecting back on a time of social change, when the old absolutes of aristocratic privilege are open to a measure

of play. Thus, the reader learns that Sir William Lucas, despite his title and leisurely lifestyle, had in fact risen to his position of eminence through his “trade in Meryton, where he had made a tolerable fortune and risen to the honour of knighthood by an address to the King, during his mayoralty” (18). Similarly, Bingley and his sisters, despite coming from an old family, were beholden to success in trade for their wealth. Thus Austen writes of Bingley’s sisters:

They were in fact very fine ladies . . . , had been educated in one of the first private seminaries in town, had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank; and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others. They were of a respectable family in the north of England; a circumstance more deeply impressed on their memories than that their brother’s fortune and their own had been acquired by trade.

(15)

Being an aristocrat is thus no longer a status laid upon a person by the absolute contingency of birth. The rank of gentleman is being quietly reconceived in Austen’s time as an *invitation* to elevate oneself into the upper ranks of society, as long as one fulfils the obligations that accompany that position. Yet this new openness has a subtle but radical effect on the very notion of aristocracy, which opposes the calculation and profiteering associated with the rise of capitalism. From this point of view, one cannot become a gentleman by an effort of will, for that would indicate an attitude of calculation alien to a true gentleman’s nature. Such is the test of the genuine aristocrat: he is a gentleman in spite of himself, he has no choice in the matter.

In the controversy over social position, therefore, Austen occupies a curious third position between the questionable bourgeois notion of “merit” (which all too often translates into the idea that wealth is the sole measure of worthiness) and the conservative views of the aristocracy, whose unquestioned status at the top tier of society is brought implicitly into question by the very need to justify that position. A true “gentleman,” as far as Austen is concerned, is such not by the signifier attached to his name, but by the way he responds to the “invitation” of gentility. If, like Mr. Wickham or Mr. Collins, his manners are calculated merely to fulfill the obligations of appearing to be a gentleman, then he is inherently counterfeit. By this measure, Mr. Gardiner, who is “settled in London in a respectable line of trade” (28) but is shown nonetheless to possess the *noblesse* expected of a higher rank, is in many ways

as much of a gentleman as Mr. Darcy, a virtue acknowledged by his polite reception in the latter parts of the novel. Similarly, Mr. Darcy's reserved behavior early in the novel is as much a reflection of his nobility as Bingley's candor because, while different in expression, it is an *honest* reaction to the vulgarity he sees around him. To have dissimulated his distaste in order to curry favor with the public, or to please his friend Bingley, would have reduced him to being merely polite.

There is a direct parallel to be drawn between this crisis in the definition of aristocratic status and the changing institution of marriage. People are not, of course, born into a marriage in the same way they are born into a class, making marriage a decision open to possibility even when co-opted by the pressures of family and society, as the union between Wickham and Lydia demonstrates. Nonetheless, Austen sardonically draws the two discourses together via Lady Catherine's desire to see Mr. Darcy married to her daughter, Anne. She says to Elizabeth:

“My daughter and my nephew are formed for each other. They are descended on the maternal side, from the same noble line; and, on the father's, from respectable, honourable, and ancient, though untitled families. Their fortune on both sides is splendid. They are destined for each other by the voice of every member of their respective houses; and what is to divide them?” (356)

Elizabeth points out that Lady Catherine's visit is a tacit acknowledgment of the fact that Mr. Darcy must indeed be interested in something besides the future that his family has presumed for him from birth. At the same time, Elizabeth does not assume that she is the object of Mr. Darcy's affections. When Lady Catherine presses her as to whether she will take Mr. Darcy as her husband, Elizabeth replies that she cannot accept an invitation that has not been proffered. “I am only resolved to act in that manner,” she asserts, “which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me” (358). In the act of falling in love, therefore, there is a crucial parallel to the aristocratic test of authenticity: one must have passion for the other in spite of oneself, without calculation or design.

In making this distinction, Austen forces her readers to rethink the notion of marriage as an act that begins with the proposal and ends with the wedding ceremony. It is the widespread practice of calculation that has turned marriage into a signifier of social prestige, and the inversion of values that has resulted is clearly demonstrated by Lydia's arrogant behavior towards her

sisters upon returning as Mrs. Wickham: Elizabeth “then joined them soon enough to see Lydia, with anxious parade, walk up to her mother’s right hand, and hear her say to her eldest sister, ‘Ah! Jane, I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman’” (317). As the youngest of the Bennet daughters, Lydia is traditionally expected to marry later, if not last. Her ignoble act of eloping with and marrying Wickham, however, undeservedly elevates her in social status above her unmarried sisters. The legal status—the signifier—of being married thus trumps her worthiness in comparison to her sisters. Furthermore, as Elizabeth discovers through Mrs. Gardiner, Wickham did not marry Lydia out of an invitation to passion but from the obligation of his own interests, and Mr. Darcy surreptitiously arranged the matter as a way of mitigating the disgrace of his father’s former protégé.

Austen’s implicit comparison between nobility and marriage thus leads to a common definition of authenticity that weeds out those who seek to be “noble” or “married” in name only. Richard Kearney explores a similar idea, albeit in a rather different context, in his book *The God Who May Be* (2001), in which he rejects “metaphysical” approaches to understanding the existence of God. Rebutting such thinkers as Aquinas, Leibniz, and Bergson, Kearney argues that in “all three approaches . . . the possible is thought of as a sub-category of the real (understood as substance, being, act, reason, existence, or history). . . . My ultimate aim is to . . . [provide] a new eschatological understanding which . . . invites us to consider God in a very different fashion: namely, as *posse* rather than as *esse*” (Kearney 84). Kearney urges the reader to think of the kingdom of heaven not as a final goal (*telos*) to be achieved but as God’s open invitation to all of humanity. Applying this logic to Austen’s novel leads to a reconfiguration of marriage not as a condition that is finally arrived at through a single act of ceremony, but as a continual state of becoming, an *eschaton*, an invitation that one does not accept in just one particular moment but over and over again, for as long as passion endures.

The paradoxical structure of Derrida’s authentic invitation—the invitation that is not an obligation—is reflected in this formulation. Its authenticity derives from an ethics of the future, a future that is not appropriated by calculation and egoism, but leaves itself radically open to possibility. The invitation without obligation thus creates a curious relation between time and possibility. A genuine lover such as Elizabeth, for example, must negotiate between her desire for the other and the ethical necessity of leaving the future open. In so doing, she must acknowledge her blindness to what time has in store; she must confront, in other words, the possibility that her union with

the beloved is *impossible*, while at the same time bowing to the passion she continues to feel in spite of herself. Such is the trial through which Austen masterfully passes her characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. Her lovers must welcome the impossible *without nonetheless desiring it*, creating a test that guarantees authenticity by refusing the lover access to the other. Elizabeth gives herself up to the impossible in this manner, for example, when she visits Pemberley and finds Darcy's kind behavior at odds with her earlier experiences. She says to herself, "Why is he so altered? From what can it proceed? It cannot be for *me*, it cannot be for *my* sake that his manners are thus softened. My reproofs at Hunsford could not work such a change as this. It is impossible that he should still love me" (255). Elizabeth experiences an absurd hope in the face of this impossibility, thus giving herself to a future that *may* be but that lacks any guarantee of fulfillment.

The nature of such a fulfillment, furthermore, is placed continually into question by Austen's narrative. While *Pride and Prejudice* seems at first glance to conform to the idea of moral reward that marks eighteenth-century English fiction, this conventional interpretation of the novel, in which Elizabeth and Jane are repaid in the end for their inherent virtue, is a misreading of Austen's ethics. Such inevitability is denied, for instance, by the plot's heavy dependence on the mechanisms of chance. Chance is what first brings Bingley and Darcy to Netherfield, and it is what causes the Bennet family to have five daughters without a male heir. It is chance that places Wickham in a regiment stationed in the very region his former protector happens to frequent, and that causes Elizabeth and the Gardiners to bump into Darcy, even though they had taken great pains to ensure that he was away during their visit to Pemberley. Marriage itself is referred to at several points as the "chance of happiness," a clever play on a conventional term (23). Thus while the novel ends as a comedy, it does so not out of any sort of moral necessity but at the whim of its author. Austen the novelist swaps the calculating-machine deity of the old morality for an unpredictable and ethically uncertain author-god, a strategy that continues to influence the work of later English novelists such as John Fowles and Ian McEwan.¹ Like Kearney's "god who may be," Austen the authorial "deity" *invites* her readers into her fictional world not in order to indoctrinate them into a morality, but to expose them to the infinitely problematic ethical questions that her work poses.

NOTE

1. See, for example, Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), which contains multiple references to Austen's *Persuasion* (1818). Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) takes its epigraph from Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), and closes with an agonized meditation on the responsibilities of the godlike author.

WORKS CITED

- Austen, Jane. *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Ed. R.W. Chapman. Oxford: OUP, 1933-69.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Passions." *On the Name*. Ed. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993.
- _____. *Politics of Friendship*. Trans. George Collins. New York: Verso, 1994.
- Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Boston: Little, 1969.
- Galperin, William. *The Historical Austen*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2003.
- Kearney, Richard. *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001.
- McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. New York: Anchor, 2003.