

Impartial Spectator Meets Picturesque Tourist: The Framing of Mansfield Park

Karen Valihora

ONE OF Austen's most celebrated achievements is her careful definition of the reader's perspectives on the characters and events of her novels. The reader participates in the point of view articulated within the narrative frame; the reader, in other words, is brought into the world of her novels and judges it on its terms. This technique creates the effect of transparency: the narratives seem to offer a disinterested and objective sense of things, a sense of things that her most celebrated heroines either already possess—Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)—or must struggle to acquire.¹ The clear view Austen offers her readers, the feeling it gives of being both completely immersed and engaged and yet at the same time able to see everything, is perhaps the greatest pleasure of reading her novels.

¹ My argument in this article is informed by Mary Poovey's study of Austen's narration in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Poovey suggests that Austen creates the "common sense" shared by her readers by addressing it as though it already existed: "The family of readers that Jane Austen posited did not necessarily exist; even in her own day, the consensus of values she needed to assume was as wishful a fiction as Elizabeth Bennet's marriage to Darcy" (207). D.A. Miller, in *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), also takes up the question of Austen's narrative detachment, finding it suppresses the self to speak instead in the voice of impersonal authority.

In *Mansfield Park* (1814), Austen experiments with picturesque views to explore the detachment, distance, and impartiality implied in the third-person narrative. In this novel, Austen's heroine Fanny Price occupies the role, not of impartial spectator, but of picturesque tourist. The late-century theory of the picturesque organizes an art of seeing that precludes a disinterested and objective view; instead, it absorbs spectators into the scene, actively involving them in the construction of highly imaginative and entirely illusory—entirely interested—views and prospects. The theory of the picturesque interrogates the eighteenth-century tradition of an aesthetic distance, the space, ideally, created by a work of art to allow for disinterested and impartial reflection on the part of a spectator. It emphasizes instead illusion and absorption, and so stages a major challenge to the idea of, or possibilities for, disinterestedness.

Throughout *Mansfield Park*, carefully constructed picturesque views and arranged landscape scenes offer a subtle, embedded analogy with Austen's control of her reader's point of view. Fanny is immersed in a succession of metaphorical landscaped gardens in a way that highlights the illusory prospects and mediated views of picturesque aesthetics. Fanny's struggles with imposed perspectives—her own included—are so persistent and pronounced that they suggest Austen's engagement in an intense and sustained inquiry into the very possibility of disinterestedness. An early instance, for example, suggests a parody of the whole idea of a picturesque prospect—and along with it the idea of an aesthetic distance. Fanny walks out one morning looking anxiously after Edmund, who has disappeared with both Mary Crawford and Fanny's horse for an inordinate amount of time while Fanny herself waits to ride. She finds a picturesque prospect at her service: "She could look down the park, and command a view of the parsonage and all its demesnes, gently rising beyond the village road." From this vantage, Fanny can see "the happy party" in the middle distance—Edmund, Mary, Fanny's horse, Henry Crawford, Dr and Mrs Grant, and two or three grooms—"standing about and looking on." Everybody is engaged in the scene of Mary's success at riding, and the "sound of merriment ascended even to [Fanny]." Even at this distance, Fanny too is totally absorbed:

She could not turn her eyes from the meadow, she could not help watching all that passed. At first Miss Crawford and her companion made the circuit of the field, which was not small, at a foot's pace; then, at *her* apparent suggestion, they rose into a canter; and to Fanny's timid nature it was most astonishing to see how well she sat. After a few minutes, they stopt entirely, Edmund was close to her, he was speaking to her, he was evidently directing her management of the bridle, he had hold of her hand; she saw it, or the imagination supplied what the eye could not reach. She must not wonder at this; what could be more natural than that Edmund should be making himself useful, and proving his good-nature by any one? She could not but think indeed that Mr. Crawford might as well have saved him the trouble; that it would have been particularly proper and becoming in a brother to have done it himself.²

If this were a picturesque prospect, Fanny, as tourist, would occupy the foreground, which opens onto a long-distance (and vague) view of the park and its lands—the parsonage and “all its demesnes”—gently rising in the distance. While one might think that at this distance Fanny must be an impartial spectator, she enjoys a peculiarly detailed view of everything that passes in the middle distance, which seems dramatically foreshortened. Fanny's eagle-eyed view—can she really see Edmund holding Mary's hand?—however, is the product of anxiety: “She saw it, or the imagination supplied what the eye could not reach.” The interest of the scene is supplied, or imagined, by Fanny. Within the picturesque frame, a proper aesthetic distance seems not to exist.

Distance, and therefore the space for reflection on immediate feeling, for deliberation and appeal to principle, is precisely what the picturesque elides, because picturesque aesthetics are predicated not on distance, but on absorption. Picturesque theory situates the viewing subject within the scene: the viewer is imagined as a picturesque tourist, not surveying so much as included within the landscape. A landscaped garden, for example, was created to be viewed from distinct prospects yielding well-defined perspectives in its bounds. Within a picturesque landscape painting by Thomas Gainsborough, Britain's most revered landscape painter across the latter half of the century, while the picturesque prospect may appear

² Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814), ed. James Kinsley (1970; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 60–61. References are to this edition.

to put the spectator outside the frame, it is in fact carefully constructed from a distinct vantage point—the foreground—included within the frame.³ Similarly, picturesque views described by William Gilpin address the spectator as a tourist, a figure included within the frame of a natural landscape much the same way she is included within a landscaped garden. Picturesque theory makes the correct view a product of holding a certain, clearly defined position *within* the landscape, rather than from some place beyond it. It therefore emphasizes the imposition of a distinct perspective to create a coherent, unified scene. As Gilpin writes, introducing the principles that inform his landscape sketches, “Most of the sketches here offered to the public, are *imaginary* views ... When we speak of *copying nature*, we speak only of particular *objects*, and particular passages—not of *putting the whole together* in a picturesque manner; which we seldom seek in nature, because it is seldom found.”⁴ He hesitates over whether to call his *Observations on the Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland* descriptive or didactic, “as in fact it is intended to be a species between both.” Gilpin’s landscapes are “embellished” by a picturesque eye: “He who works *from imagination*—that is, he who culls from nature the most beautiful parts of her productions—a *distance* here; and there a *foreground*—combines them artificially; and ... admits only such parts, as are *congruous*.”⁵

³ My argument about the way in which picturesque landscape paintings place their spectators and absorb them into their framed scenes takes its cues from the argument of Michael Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980) about the oblivious absorption of the figures in eighteenth-century French paintings, an absorption that denies the presence of a spectator.

⁴ William Gilpin, “Two Essays: On the Principles on which the Author made his Drawings; and the Mode of Executing Them” (1804), in Malcolm Andrews, ed., *The Picturesque: Literary Sources and Documents*, 3 vols. (The Banks, East Sussex: Helm International, 1994), 2:287. There can be no doubt that Austen was well versed in picturesque theory. Aside from the many references throughout her novels, Henry Austen notes, “She was a warm and judicious admirer of landscape, both in nature and on canvas. At a very early age she was enamoured of Gilpin on the picturesque.” See “A Biographical Notice of the Author,” in “*Northanger Abbey*” and “*Persuasion*,” by Jane Austen, 4 vols. (1818), reprinted in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B.C. Southam, 3 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), 76.

⁵ Gilpin, 1:319, 318, 321.

If Austen in *Mansfield Park* is concerned with the arts of immersion and absorption, necessary to creating a view that is integrated and yet which yields a vision of a complete whole, she also tests the idea of aesthetic distance, described by Adam Smith in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* as an effect of the disinterested perspective of a properly impartial spectator.⁶ Impartiality and disinterest are among the most important values of both the moral and aesthetic thought of the period. Yet Austen's narrative suggests that if the apparent distance made available in a picturesque prospect does not preclude interest, immersion, or absorption, neither does the distance of a supposedly "impartial spectator." Once she has refused a part in the rehearsals of *Lovers' Vows* at Mansfield, for example, one might expect Fanny to take on the morally privileged role of an observer to the main action. Fanny's position on the sidelines of the play rehearsals, however, just as in the case of the "picturesque" prospect explored above, is not all that distanced. It seems merely to represent one of the narrative's many "half-and-half doings"—which, as Mary Crawford intones darkly, "never prosper" (46): "Every body around her was gay and busy, prosperous and important, each had their object of interest, their part, their dress, their favourite scene, their friends and confederates, all were finding employment in consultations and comparisons, or diversion in the playful conceits they suggested. [Fanny] alone was sad and insignificant; she had no share in any thing; she might go or stay, she might be in the midst of their noise, or retreat from it to the solitude of the East room, without being seen or missed. She could almost think any thing would have been preferable to this" (143).

Fanny takes in every detail of the performances, and memorizes most of the characters' lines, while feeling left out, neglected, and misused. When she loses Edmund, her only ally in the contest over

⁶ Smith's "impartial spectator" offers a personification of a third-person stance; this "man within the breast" does not represent a set of principles, but a certain stance on the world. See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). I argue elsewhere that Smith models the impartiality of the hypothetical spectator on the distance and disinterest made available in a specifically aesthetic kind of judgment. See Karen Valihora, "The Judgement of Judgement: Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41 no. 2 (April 2001): 138–61.

the staging of the play, Fanny positively quakes with disapproval, betrayal, and hurt. “She could not feel that she had done wrong herself, but she was disquieted in every other way. Her heart and judgment were equally against Edmund’s decision; she could not acquit his unsteadiness; and his happiness under it made her wretched. She was full of jealousy and agitation” (143). Fanny is an impartial spectator in name only; in reality, she is a jealous and agitated conscript to the sidelines.

Mediated, distorted, partial, and obscured views compose the real subject matter of *Mansfield Park*. Fanny’s own East room, a “nest of comforts,” is associated with the illusoriness of certain ways of seeing—the lower panes of one window are actually covered by screens—“made in a rage for transparencies”—of picturesque views: “Tintern Abbey held its station between a cave in Italy and a moonlight lake in Cumberland” (317). Insofar as Austen situates us within the frame, that is, insofar as we are immersed in the novel’s many different settings—Mansfield Park itself, the gardens at Sotherton, the rehearsals of *Lovers’ Vows*, Fanny’s exile at Portsmouth—we are situated on picturesque ground. The impartial spectator we might be expecting to guide us through the action has been recast as a picturesque tourist: absorbed within the frame, and taking her readers there along with her. This is not to say that Fanny Price is not capable of following moral principle disinterestedly—as I shall show, this capacity is Fanny’s saving grace—but that moments of narrative interest come both when Fanny is immediately feeling and responding—absorbed—as well as when she thinks and reflects. Austen’s narrative is interested in the possibilities for engagement and in their quality. It is because, for example, Fanny has reflected a great deal on her situation with Edmund that she is so attuned to Julia Bertram’s disappointment after Henry Crawford has made it clear he prefers her already-engaged sister. Yet while “Fanny saw and pitied ... Julia,” Julia herself has no idea of what Fanny suffers, and so “they were two solitary sufferers, or connected only by Fanny’s consciousness” (146). Fanny’s sense of connectedness comes of her ability for disinterested reflection, while Julia’s self-absorption leaves her merely solitary: “Her heart was sore and angry, and she was capable of only angry consolations” (146).

In Austen’s hands the picturesque as a theory of aesthetics becomes a forum for exploring the dynamics of her own highly

skilled narrative omniscience, in which she oscillates between inviting the reader in to share a collective, and therefore transparent, point of view and imposing a certain way of seeing, a perspective that ultimately may distort. The picturesque troubles Austen's narrative order because it suggests at once a dynamics of vision that could be inclusive, in which one is appealed to as a potential participant in an ideal moral order, or merely an imposition, as when one is asked to share a delusive, distorting, and egregiously self-interested point of view, such as Edmund's of Mary, Mary's of herself, or Henry's of his ability to commit.

The Way Things Ought to Be

The sheer frequency of the appeal throughout *Mansfield Park* to an ideal standard of judgment, to the idea of "what ought to be," suggests Austen's faith in a disinterested, and ultimately imagined, perspective to order judgment in everyday life. Since, however, picturesque prospects are also, ultimately, imaginary, as Gilpin's sketches make clear, deciding which of these imagined perspectives ought to prevail is difficult. Accordingly, if the appeal to "what ought to be" yields an important principle of reflection in the novel, it also brings on comedy. While virtually every character makes an appeal to the "ought" to support their views, the gesture hardly invokes an infallible moral standard. Edmund and Fanny both tend rather loftily, or priggishly, depending on your point of view, to regulate their aspirations for their own conduct by appealing to their firm sense of the "ought." Having been told, for example, that Mrs Norris wishes to live with her after her husband's death, Fanny takes her concerns to Edmund. Rather than reassure his cousin that Mrs Norris is far too stingy to take in a non-paying guest, he declares, "My aunt is acting like a sensible woman in wishing for you. She is choosing a friend and companion exactly where she ought, and I am glad her love of money does not interfere. You will be what you ought to be to her." The tautology of "you will be what you ought to be" depends for its meaning on its reference to an external principle of conduct. Edmund assumes that Fanny will know exactly what "you will be what you ought to be" ought to mean. And indeed, Fanny thinks she does. She

replies a little further on, “how shall I ever thank you as I ought, for thinking so well of me?” (22–23).

Edmund’s “ought,” however, is both sententious and ironic: Mrs Norris is not a sensible woman, nor does she choose Fanny for a companion, never mind as an expensive permanent house guest. Edmund appeals to an idea of the way things ought to be in a way that disregards and discounts reality. His idealism offers as clouded a perspective as any picturesque view. Edmund—in a way he will suffer for—inhabits a world that is better than reality is, a world where the Mrs Norrises, as well as the Mary Crawfords, can be improved through example.

Luckily, Fanny never has to “reconcile” herself to life in Mrs Norris’s guest room—in an Austen novel, things generally unfold exactly as they ought—but her willingness, not only to make the appeal to “what ought to be,” but also to order her actions and feelings by duty and principle, even when, as in the prospect of living with Mrs Norris, it must counter inclination, represents the importance of the idea of an aesthetic distance to moral judgment. Such distance allows for a moment of reflection on an immediate feeling, a moment of deliberation and suspension ordered by, or mediated by, moral principle. It is precisely because her refusal to act in the Bertrams’ proposed performance of *Lovers’ Vows* is automatic and unthinking, for example, that Fanny suspects herself. She later wonders if perhaps her refusal was as principled as it ought to have been. Agitated by the pressure from the Bertrams, who are in need of her for a bit part, Fanny loses confidence. As she paces in the privacy of her East room “[she] had begun to feel undecided as to what she ought to do; and ... her doubts were increasing. Was she right in refusing what was so warmly asked, so strongly wished for? ... It would be so horrible to her to act, that she was inclined to suspect the truth and purity of her own scruples” (137–38).

The novel’s many “oughts” are not just the province of Edmund and Fanny. As Nina Auerbach has noted, the appeal to “what ought to be” is made habitually by every character in the book, and perhaps most frequently by its narrator. Auerbach suggests that the appeal to the “ought” is made so variously by each of the characters in the novel that it is emptied of any real reference or authority: “As a barometer of feelings, morals

and institutions, the word seems an immutable touchstone, but in fact it has no objective validation.”⁷ I would argue instead that Austen’s depiction of the many abuses of the appeal to “what ought to be” only reinforces its legitimacy. The most amusing example of this technique is perhaps the occasion of Mary Crawford’s blaming Fanny for her brother’s affair with Maria Rushworth: “It is all her fault ... I shall never forgive her. Had she accepted him as she ought, they might now have been on the point of marriage, and Henry would have been too happy and busy to want any other object ... It would have all ended in a regular standing flirtation, in yearly meetings at Sotherton and Everingham” (416). While Austen establishes the final authority of the “ought” by linking it to the eighteenth-century aesthetic principle of a moral nature—a nature which cannot be improved—throughout the novel, and most forcefully in its idealized conclusion, Auerbach is correct to note that the content and authority of moral principle is in question throughout much of the novel’s action. And as the novel’s frequent references to picturesque views make clear, if moral principle is not as transparent as it ought to be, neither is the natural.

By the time Austen’s novel appeared, the search for a picturesque prospect was a well-established and extremely popular approach to landscape, albeit one that occupied hotly contested terrain. The Reverend Gilpin’s directions for sketching imaginary views—“[t]rees he may generally plant, or remove, at pleasure. If a withered stump suit the form of his landscape better than the spreading oak, which he finds in nature, he may make the exchange”—were soon followed by Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight’s complex deliberations on the art of nature.⁸ The picturesque made “nature,” as it was represented in the natural landscape, the subject of competing views. Whether elaborately composed, as in an improved estate such as Darcy’s

⁷ Nina Auerbach, “Feeling As One Ought about Fanny Price,” in *Jane Austen’s “Mansfield Park,”* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 115.

⁸ Gilpin, 1:322. The major works of picturesque theory are, chronologically, William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: to which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting* (1792); Uvedale Price, *Essay on the Picturesque* (1794); and Richard Payne Knight, *The Landscape: A Didactic Poem* (1794), and the *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805).

in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), or found, as Catherine Morland finds Beechen Cliff in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), the landscape was seen through a frame.

The theory of the picturesque challenges the very foundation of neoclassical aesthetics: the appeal to an ideal moral nature. The picturesque landscape gardeners' emphasis on the "improvement" of nature threatens to subvert the dominant tradition of eighteenth-century aesthetics, in which "nature" figures as an ideal moral order—the "whatever is, is right" of Pope's "Essay on Man." Art can only struggle to approximate this ideal nature, and it is approachable only through disinterested moral stances.⁹ Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses on Art* (1797), the culmination of the series of annual lectures he delivered to an audience of student painters and their patrons during his tenure as president of the British Royal Academy of Art, in no small way prepared the ground for the sophisticated collapse of nature into art explicitly spelled out in the theory of the picturesque. Reynolds shows how the works of art that a culture values as great are precisely those works which elaborate the ideal of nature, but in a way which also shows clearly that the ideal of nature is itself the creation of works of art. Despite his initial protests to the contrary, in the *Essay on the Picturesque*, Uvedale Price effectively instructs his readers to take what the great works of art teach about perspective and arrangement and learn to view the landscape as he would a painting.¹⁰ In language that echoes Reynolds's directives for the "true art of seeing nature," Uvedale Price suggests that the experience distilled in the history of painting provides "the best and only

⁹ M.H. Abrams, in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), defines the eighteenth-century literary and artistic ideal of a general nature in terms of the moral imperative that informs it. "Universal nature" is primarily a moral concept.

¹⁰ Uvedale Price writes, "however highly I may think of the art of painting, compared with that of improving, nothing can be further from my intention (and I wish to impress it in the strongest manner in the reader's mind) than to recommend the study of pictures in preference to that of nature, much less to the exclusion of it." Price, *Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared to the Sublime and the Beautiful; And on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape*, 2 vols. (London, 1794), 1:i. See the excerpt included in Malcolm Andrews, ed., *The Picturesque: Literary Sources and Documents*, 3 vols. (East Sussex: Helm International, 1994), 2:73.

standards we have” for viewing landscape.¹¹ He is exhaustive on “the reasons for studying *copies* of nature, though the *original* is before us,” and he concludes that the “principles of painting” are “in reality the general principles on which the effect of all visible objects must depend, and to which it must be referred.”¹² The picturesque tourist is, then, explicitly instructed to assimilate his or her view of the landscape to a prior order of painting and composition. The theory of the picturesque emptied out the period’s dominant aesthetic principle, the “standard of nature,” insofar as it advocated the renovation of actually existing landscapes in the service of a higher standard, the principles of painting.

This reordering of the priority of art and nature goes on both within and without the picturesque scene: an arranged or improved landscape might contain artificial elements—fake ruins, “Greek” temples, elaborate water-features—while a natural landscape could be redefined by a new way of seeing. The picturesque tourist’s Claude Glass, for example, also known as “Gray Glasses,” after the poet Thomas Gray, was a small convex pocket mirror that framed a scene in its view, often with colored transparencies over the glass to give it a yellowish or reddish cast. Any dedicated country rambler at the turn of the century would know how to hold this mirror up to nature to frame a scene and impose on it a perspective learned from painting.¹³ Objects such as the Claude Glass suggest that a picturesque scene or view was conceived as, literally, a transparency, a kind of screen through which the “natural” scene was rearranged.¹⁴

¹¹ Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art* (1797), ed. Robert W. Wark (1959; reprint New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), xi.204.

¹² Uvedale Price, 1:i; Andrews, ed., 2:73, 76.

¹³ For a description of the Claude Glass, see Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 67–73.

¹⁴ A transparency became another apt figure for the perspective of the picturesque when Humphrey Repton employed it as an ingenious marketing device in his Red Books: to illustrate proposed estate renovations he imposed an overlay of an existing estate over a sketch of how it could look after extensive improvements, to show “before” and “after” effects in landscaping. Striking visual effects were achieved in pulling the overlay away to bring the newly landscaped estate into view. The use of the overlay in a dramatic unveiling of another scene suggests a picturesque view is accomplished to the

Austen's juxtaposition of the family visit to Sotherton's landscaped grounds with the construction of a home theatre at Mansfield, as many critics have noted, suggests that she deliberately makes of her narrative a kind of theatre, a stage for competing representations and for a struggle between different points of view. David Marshall has shown how the discourse of the picturesque is articulated in the novel in part through the discourse of theatricality, turning the actual landscape into a stage-set for competing representations and points of view.¹⁵ If creating and participating in a shared "scene" is the entertainment of rehearsing a play together, for example, what it is to create a shared scene is the explicit topic of picturesque aesthetics. One can also read from this perspective Henry Crawford's full-fledged attempt to romance Fanny during the middle chapters of the novel. Crawford's romance situates Fanny in yet another potentially deceptive landscape, and Fanny is again threatened with conscription into a role she does not want.

For Crawford, everything is a courtship. He describes the period of the theatricals, for example, in the terms of a breathless courtship: "Always some little objection, some little doubt, some little anxiety to be got over. I never was happier" (203). He experiences his pursuit of a lieutenantcy for Fanny's brother in the same terms: "How impatient, how anxious, how wild I

degree that it successfully imposes another way of seeing; it appears in the Red Books as a potentially transparent view, that is, one that could appear perfectly natural. See Stephen Daniels, *Humphrey Repton* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 4.

¹⁵ Turning to the discourse of the picturesque offers a way of reading the novel's well-documented interest in acting and theatricality as part of a larger thematic interest in representation. See David Marshall, "True Acting and the Language of Real Feeling in Mansfield Park," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1989): 87–106; and Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992). There are, of course, many studies of the picturesque in Austen's novels, beginning with Alistair Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971). The study that has most directly influenced my article is Isobel Armstrong, "Politics, Pride, Prejudice and the Picturesque," in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*—Jane Austen, ed. Robert Clark (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), 159–79. See also work on Austen and the picturesque by Jill Heydt-Stevenson, especially "Unbecoming Conjunctions: Mourning the Landscape of Loss and Love in *Persuasion*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 8, no. 1 (October 1995): 51–71.

have been on the subject, I will not attempt to describe; how severely mortified, how cruelly disappointed, in not having it finished while I was in London!" (271). Fanny cannot believe Crawford is sincere in either his pursuit or his proposal—she has already decided “he can feel nothing as he ought” (205)—yet he thinks he is serious, and this creates the difficulty. His views are an imposition. Crawford’s attentions to Fanny leave her, again, in tumults: “She was feeling, thinking, trembling about everything;—agitated, happy, miserable, infinitely obliged, absolutely angry” (274). Yet Fanny’s resolute stance towards Crawford, her refusal to be swayed by his view of romance, verges on the heroic; the formerly timid and indecisive Fanny manages to maintain her sense of his deficiencies in the face of enormous opposition not just from Crawford himself but from those whose respect and approval she values most. The extended drama of Crawford’s courtship can be read, in other words, as Austen’s extended treatment of the importance of preserving a space for judgment, and refusing, therefore, to be absorbed—or engaged—in arts of illusion, be they one’s own or those of others. At the same time, the proper grounds for engagement are in question until the narrative finds the terms for its resolution.

Picturesque Views

In all her novels, Austen draws from such recognizable modes as the Gothic or sentimental romance in order to situate and differentiate her own brand of narrative realism. In *Northanger Abbey* (1818), for example, Austen achieved the effect of transparency—the construction of a point of view that comes to seem the only possible one—through her parody of the Gothic romance. As the narrator explains, on the event of Catherine’s leaving for Bath, “Every thing indeed relative to this important journey was done, on the part of the Morlands, with a degree of moderation and composure, which seemed rather consistent with the common feelings of common life, than with the refined susceptibilities, the tender emotions which the first separation of a heroine from her family ought always to excite.”¹⁶ The irony turns on the freight placed on the romance-imperative

¹⁶ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818), ed. Anne Henry Ehrenpreis (1972; reprint London: Penguin Classics, 1988), 42.

“ought,” which threatens to obliterate the “common feelings of common life”—but only in other, duller novels. Evidently the “common feelings of common life,” seen from the point of view of “refined susceptibilities,” are not the stuff of a good story. They are clearly, however, the standpoint from which such stories, and their heroines, ought to be judged. The vantage point Austen offers is as seductive as Henry Tilney’s view of Bath: Henry wittily educates Catherine in the discourse of the picturesque, a discourse which offers a way of seeing that promises access to and membership within an exclusive cultural franchise. Characteristically, Austen appreciates both sides of the question Henry’s tutelage poses: Catherine is as naively willing to be educated into picturesque discrimination as she was Gothic romances.¹⁷

If Austen’s narratives differentiate themselves from the Gothic and a sentimental aesthetics, however, they stand in a special relationship to the picturesque.¹⁸ Austen explores the potential of a picturesque emphasis on ways of seeing, while dismissing the attempt to actually, literally, renovate the landscape as another form of imposition. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen is fashionably witty about the vulgarities of picturesque “improvers,” or landscape gardeners. During the heyday of the picturesque, the public talk

¹⁷ Austen’s earlier novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*, offer a vigorous and sustained opposition to popular aesthetic forms and beliefs about novels and romance. Aside from the parody of the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey* and sentimental romance in *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen also incorporates and comments on other genres in her novels as a matter of course: theatre (*Lovers’ Vows* in *Mansfield Park*); the poetry of sensibility (Cowper in *Sense and Sensibility*); portraits and painting in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Emma* (1816). The picturesque and landscape gardening feature in all of her novels, but references are especially pronounced in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* (1818) as well as *Mansfield Park*.

¹⁸ *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* were substantially composed during the 1790s, although they were published much later. The trajectory between these two earlier novels and the publication of *Mansfield Park* actually spans about fifteen years of Austen’s lifetime. If Austen in her earlier works explores the qualities of her own literary realism through her opposition to and parody of other narrative forms, in her later works she incorporates different aesthetic modes, such as the picturesque in *Mansfield Park*, or Pemberley’s landscaped grounds in *Pride and Prejudice*, in a way that suggests she is more fully in command of her materials. In these later works, Austen questions the premises of literary representation and explores the possible dimensions of the novel form.

was all about “improvements” to landed estates according to picturesque principles.¹⁹ Humphrey Repton, who is mentioned by name eight times in the novel, was considered the successor to “Capability” Brown as landscaper of choice of the upper classes, and was infamous for his wholesale—and exaggerated—rearrangement of the countryside in the quest for picturesque views.²⁰ The dim-witted but money-laden Rushworth wishes to hire the fashionable Repton to improve Sotherton, hoping that he would sacrifice all his trees to reveal new prospects. Discussing Repton’s improvements to another estate, Compton, Rushworth speculates, “there have been two or three fine old trees cut down that grew too near the house, and it opens the prospect amazingly, which makes me think that Repton, or any body of that sort, would certainly have the avenue at Sotherton down” (49).

Repton and Brown were associated with the pretentious side of picturesque renovation: its association with social climbing, “enlarged prospects,” the accumulation of property, and the naturalization of that property.²¹ As practical improvers primarily concerned with large-scale alterations to the landscape, first Brown and then Repton, specialists in creating gracious expanses of lawn to flatter the self-image of the landed gentry, represented for Austen, as for theorists like Price and Knight, a picturesque robbed of its potential. Austen gives the charlatan Henry Crawford Repton-like views. He suggests various “improvements” Edmund could undertake that would

¹⁹ Nigel Temple notes, “Over one-hundred architectural pattern books advocating picturesque principles appeared in Britain during eighty years ... The flood [was] between 1790 and 1810.” Temple, *John Nash and the Picturesque Village* (London: Alan Sutton, 1979), 3.

²⁰ Recent scholarship has shown the degree to which, in the debates over picturesque principles and the correct approach to landscape, Humphrey Repton’s reputation for poor taste was exaggerated, by Austen and others. See Richard Quaintance, “Humphrey Repton, ‘Any Mr. Repton,’ and the ‘Improvement’ Metonym in *Mansfield Park*,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 27 (1998): 365–84.

²¹ Richard Payne Knight illuminates the distinction between improvement discourse and picturesque theory in a note inserted into the second edition of his long poem, *The Landscape*: “the system of picturesque improvement, employed by the late Mr. Brown and his followers, is the very reverse of picturesque; all subjects for painting instantly disappearing as they advance.” Cited in Uvedale Price, *A Dialogue on the Distinct Characters of the Picturesque and the Beautiful ... with remarks on Burke and Reynolds* (London, 1801), 87.

turn his prospective vicarage, Thornton Lacey, from a “mere gentleman’s residence” to “a place”: “By such improvements as I have suggested ... you may give it a higher character. You may raise it into a place. From being the mere gentleman’s residence, it becomes, by judicious improvement, the residence of a man of education, taste, modern manners, good connections. All this may be stamped on it; and that house receive such an air as to make its owner be set down as the great land-holder of the parish, by every creature travelling the road; especially as there is no real squire’s house to dispute the point” (220).²²

Austen mocks the idea that one can actually, literally, “improve” on the natural. Edmund and Fanny, for example, enjoy a great many hopeful conversations on the subject of whether the Crawfords are perhaps as capable of “improvement” as the parsonage at Thornton Lacey.²³ Along with the appeal to the “ought,” this is surely one of the key words of the novel. The ironic suggestion is that perhaps their natures are as malleable as the landscape is thought to be. While the smitten Edmund tries to convince himself that his and Fanny’s influence can improve Mary Crawford’s mind and principles, a surprised Fanny remarks, after Henry’s visit to Portsmouth, where he was a model of polite and concerned attention, “the wonderful

²² The class-interested side of the picturesque question has been aptly documented by Ann Bermingham, who argues that the picturesque, as a class ideology, is a consummate art of illusion in *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition 1740–1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Bermingham gives ample evidence to support her suggestive thesis that the loss of common lands to the enclosure movement—a historical event of tremendous significance to the traditional order of land and people—created the occasion for an imaginative recovery. Picturesque landscape aesthetics forged a common sense of the land, and suggested a common landscape, organized along agreed-upon principles, to reinforce a common culture and a common vision. This forging of a common perspective on British landscape is the ideal and important aspect of the picturesque. Its less savoury side involves the transformation of newly private property into a mere fact of natural landscape. As Bermingham notes, “by conflating nature with the fashionable taste of a new social order, it redefined the natural in terms of this order, and *vice versa*” (14).

²³ “Improver,” “improving,” “improvement,” and “improvements” are mentioned thirteen times over six pages of dinner conversation about Rushworth’s plan to hire Repton to renovate Sotherton Court (46–51). The idea of improvements is linked to “blunders” by Edmund (50) and to the “burlesque” by Mrs Norris (48).

improvement ... in Mr. Crawford" (377), an improvement which will soon be revealed, in the scandalous newspaper accounts of his elopement with the newly married Maria Rushworth, to be an illusion. Like Gilpin, Austen was certain of the fundamental integrity of a nature that does not yield to human desires.²⁴ Like the ideal of "what ought to be," Austen's picturesque functions as an idea and ideal, one that is not imposed on the natural landscape but which hovers in the view of it. As Kim Ian Michasiw notes, for Austen "the picturesque was valuable only as an idea, as a taste that was never to be inscribed upon the landscape ... its benignity depended wholly on its not being applied."²⁵

Just as Crawford's view of Thornton Lacey entirely disregards the fact that it is not a manor house but a parsonage—"it is a solid walled, roomy, mansion-like looking house, such as one might suppose a respectable old country family had lived in from generation to generation, through two centuries at least, and were now spending from two to three thousand a year in" (219–20)—various ways of seeing have so taken over the social landscape in the novel that the "natural" seems under threat of extinction, or at least invisibility. The only real view we have of Mansfield Park itself, for example, is from Mary Crawford's limited and partial perspective, that of the tourist and would-be owner: "It was a park, a real park, five miles round, a spacious modern-built house, so well placed and well screened as to deserve to be in any collection of engravings of gentlemen's seats in the kingdom, and wanting only to be completely new furnished" (42). Like Uvedale Price's picturesque, which refers natural landscapes to

²⁴ Underneath the satire of improvement lies Austen's exploration of character as something more or less fixed, as "natural": in *Mansfield Park*, at least, character is not something that is improved; rather, it is revealed over time. Ruth Bernard Yeazell points out that when Henry Crawford has got our hopes up, not to mention Fanny's, after his impeccable behaviour when visiting the Prices at Portsmouth, "the report of the adultery may ... come to the reader as something of a shock—but just because such plotting so harshly insists that the promise of change was an illusion. Events do not compel the heroine to grow; they simply drive others to recognize what has always been." Yeazell, "The Boundaries of Mansfield Park," *Representations* 7 (1984): 142.

²⁵ Kim Ian Michasiw, "Nine Revisionist Theses on the Picturesque," *Representations* 38 (1992): 96.

the beauties of paintings, Mary Crawford sees the Park in terms of “engravings of gentlemen’s seats.”

Nor is Mary alone. Virtually every character is defined in large part through the illusory views they would impose on both themselves and others, but none has a clear view of exactly what they are doing. The words “see” and “judge” figure largely in this novel, and are a primary means by which its characters are placed. Maria Bertram, for example, likes not to see what she does not want to. On the prospect of her imminent marriage to the dim Rushworth, the narrator comments, “it was a gloomy prospect, and all she could do was throw a mist over it, and hope when the mist cleared away, she should see something else” (97). Edmund Bertram employs elaborate and maddening rationalizations to deny or obscure his true feelings and motives. He will beg Fanny never again to mention “that period of general folly,” the period of the home theatricals, when “we were all wrong together” and “I was playing the fool with my eyes open” (318). His sentiments echo Crawford’s, who asks Fanny not to judge him on account of his elopement with Maria from the garden at Sotherton, but to dismiss the day as easily as he does, as merely one of mishap and accident, when “we were all walking after each other bewildered” (221).

Even Fanny Price is not exempt from the general sense that distorting views dominate the narrative. While she stands looking directly out of a window with Edmund, for example, both characters somehow manage to avoid really seeing the landscape outside—instead, they see “the sublimity of nature.” Fanny again sees the landscape through a kind of lens or imposed transparency. In his discussion of this scene, Marshall notes that Fanny is here “reading from the scripts” of picturesque aesthetics as she has been taught them by Edmund.²⁶ Both characters have acquired a “taste for nature” through diligent study:

His eyes soon turned like her’s towards the scene without, where all that was solemn and soothing, and lovely, appeared in the brilliancy of an unclouded night, and the contrast of the deep shade of the woods. Fanny spoke her feelings. “Here’s harmony,” said she, “Here’s repose! Here’s what may leave all painting and all music

²⁶ Marshall, 96.

behind, and what poetry can only attempt to describe ... When I look out on such a night as this, I feel there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene."

"I like to hear your enthusiasm, Fanny," [said Edmund]. "It is a lovely night, and they are much to be pitied who have not been taught to feel in some degree as you do—who have not at least been given a taste for nature in early life. They lose a great deal."

"You taught me to feel and think on the subject, cousin." (102)

The woodenness of the scene suggests that Fanny, like her predecessor Catherine Moreland, has been taught her feelings and thoughts on the subject of nature, and nature has been therefore framed, here quite pointedly by the window casement. The "common feelings of common life" have been enhanced by an aesthetics of "sublimity." The view also recalls that from Fanny's beloved East room, where, as I noted above, the windows are covered by transparencies of picturesque views. These scenes of viewing throughout the novel are paradigmatic: they show a view that is framed and mediated by an external principle. Fanny's intense yearning for the eradication of wickedness and sorrow in the world expresses the moral idealism associated with a nature given only partial expression in painting, music, and poetry, the idealism that orders the appeal to "what ought to be." Mediation is not always this lofty, however. Before Edmund turned to the window with Fanny, his eyes were following Mary "in an ecstasy of admiration of all her many virtues" (101). While Fanny is no doubt sincere in her love for nature, she also speaks these lines in an attempt to secure Edmund's attention, which continues to wander towards Fanny's lovely, and artful, rival. Natural views are here employed with ulterior motives. And despite her best efforts to turn his attention towards the outdoors, and herself, Fanny is once again left out and left behind as Edmund eventually moves off towards Mary and her harp, leaving Fanny to sigh alone at the window.

Such scenes are staged repeatedly throughout the middle chapters of the novel: Edmund's ironic overlooking of the Fanny whom he spends so much time looking after is matched by Mary's self-serving friendliness and Crawford's unwelcome courtship.

The confusions of motive and intent are endlessly frustrating, and so persistent and prolonged they suggest that mediated views are Austen's real subject. Even when stuck on the borders of the scene, Fanny frequently finds herself compromised, as when she is asked to witness Mary Crawford's rehearsal of her part in *Lovers' Vows* with "her lover" Anhalt—Edmund—a scene that Fanny cannot but find "a very suffering exhibition to herself" (153). Or when, again, after Mary, professing to "love" Fanny like a sister (322), secures her promise to write, Fanny finds herself only one among many subjects of a correspondence that forms a double triangle—Mary writes to Edmund through Fanny, while Henry writes to Fanny through Mary:

Edmund would never rest till she had read the chief of Mary's letter to him, and then she had to listen to his admiration of her language, and the warmth of her attachments. —There had, in fact, been so much of message, of allusion, of recollection, so much of Mansfield in every letter, that Fanny could not but suppose it meant for him to hear; and to find herself forced into a purpose of that kind, compelled into a correspondence which was bringing her the addresses of the man she did not love, and obliging her to administer to the adverse passion of the man she did, was cruelly mortifying. (342)

Fanny becomes a cypher for Edmund and Mary, while she is stymied by Crawford, who continues his courtship in little messages appended to Mary's letters: both writers are an imposition. Fanny's position—left out, overlooked, manipulated or used—is imposed upon her throughout the novel. Her struggle becomes, in turn, that of finding a way of seeing that is strong enough to impose itself on others.

The problem explored in these mediated views is this: in its apparent emphasis on the forging of merely shareable perspectives, the discourse of the picturesque risks suggesting that nature and art amount to the same thing, as they do in Henry Crawford's terminology. Crawford confuses a love of courtship plots with love of Fanny, and Fanny's turmoil in response suggests how difficult it is to establish a meaningful difference between art and nature, illusion and reality, within the theatre of the picturesque. Martin Price is wonderfully understated in his elucidation of the central issue in pic-

turesque aesthetics: “there arises the question of primacy.”²⁷ Art in nature or nature in art? The question is at once the topic of the picturesque and the basis of its interest. While Fanny cannot make Crawford’s “true nature” transparent to those around her, she does hold firm to her ability to see “what ought to be”; and the increasing emphasis on this principle in the novel suggests a way out of the confusions of art and nature that dominate the action. It is the distance and disinterest demanded by the appeal to “what ought to be” that identifies art and nature within neoclassical aesthetics.

Aesthetic Distance

Despite her many confusions, the reader relies on Fanny as a guide; she is reliable—perhaps even because of her many agitations and distresses. Within an extended narrative of distorted, obscured, and partial views, which in turn lead to false investments and compromised relationships, the novel holds out the promise of clear vision. Fanny is singled out by the narrative for her good sense, which seems lacking in most of those who surround her.²⁸ She sees clearly and judges candidly—or as clearly and as candidly as possible, under the circumstances—and her vision ultimately prevails. She takes the right side in the debate over picturesque aesthetics. Fanny’s good sense includes a taste for the picturesque. Her nostalgia for the past, for Sotherton “in its old state,” her reverence for tradition and time, are deeply picturesque (50). The association of good judgment with the picturesque

²⁷ Martin Price, “The Picturesque Moment,” in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 280.

²⁸ She is also singled out for attack, both within the narrative—she is “dull” (17), “odd” (16), “stupid” (16), “creepmouse” (131), etc.—and in narratives about the narrative. The range goes from unlikeable, as in “Nobody, I believe, has ever found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*,” as Lionel Trilling writes in *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), where he compares Fanny to Patient Griselda (211), pauses at Gilbert and Gubar’s love of adjectives, in this case mostly negative (see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978]), and goes downhill from there. The absolute low point is probably Auerbach’s comparing Fanny to Frankenstein and his monster in “Feeling As One Ought about Fanny Price” (105ff.).

points towards Austen's perception that a lucid common sense is the product of a certain way of seeing things, and ways of seeing things are elaborated in this novel through identifiable aesthetic practices. Fanny Price is granted the moral authority to counter certain excessive aesthetics—that of the landscape improvers, for example, and the courtship plots of Henry Crawford—only because she seems to be aligned with a superior aesthetic, a version of the picturesque that Austen associates with the force to impose a point of view, a vision of what ought to be.²⁹

As a picturesque heroine, Fanny is associated with memory. In her East room, Fanny meditates along the following lines:

Though there had sometimes been much of suffering to her—though her motives had often been misunderstood, her feelings disregarded, and her comprehension under-valued; though she had known the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, and neglect, yet almost every recurrence of either had led to something consolatory; her aunt Bertram had spoken for her, or Miss Lee had been encouraging, or what was yet more frequent or more dear—Edmund had been her champion and her friend ... and the whole was now so blended together, so harmonized by distance, that every former affliction had its charm. (136–37)

Fanny's memory harmonizes by distance—and suggests an aesthetic distance. Memory allows for the creation of a whole: it blends, associates, and establishes ultimate values; it not only takes stock of the changes wrought by time, or distance, but also incorporates them. Fanny's turn to the processes of memory occurs as a part of her struggle towards a certain wholeness of vision, a wholeness associated with a way of seeing that is so strong, as in this description of memory, it seems able to impose its own order.

Fanny's final journey to Portsmouth allows for a complete revision, from a distance, of her time spent at Mansfield Park. Through this revision, Austen puts the idealism of moral nature, insofar as it is given expression in picturesque views and viewing strategies, in the service of her narrative. Rather

²⁹ Armstrong has noted a similar congruence between Elizabeth Bennet's position in *Pride and Prejudice* and picturesque aesthetics: "Elizabeth is associated not simply with a disruptive and transgressive category, but with an aesthetic classification which disrupted other categories in the eighteenth century" (170).

than dismiss the power of the picturesque emphasis on ways of seeing, in other words, Austen puts it to work. Austen's narrative places her reader outside certain frames—Crawford's visibly misguided courtship of Fanny, for example—to interrogate their function, and also places her firmly within others, such as the moment when an apparently improved Crawford visits Portsmouth and demonstrates such interest and humility we might think, as Fanny dares to think, that he has changed. The most striking example of the force of perspective in the novel comes at Portsmouth, from which a view of Mansfield Park emerges, for the first time, from a distance.

At Portsmouth, memory, association, and distance all work their magic and Mansfield Park emerges as a picture of all it ought to be: "the elegance, propriety, regularity, harmony—and perhaps, above all, the peace and tranquillity of Mansfield, were brought to her remembrance every hour of the day, by the prevalence of everything opposite to them here" (357). How does this happen? And why does the text grant such apparent authority to what seems at first merely wishful and delusional thinking? The Mansfield that Fanny recalls while at Portsmouth is not a Mansfield we recognize—poor Fanny was left out and trodden upon throughout the whole of her years there. The real Mansfield is marked by disorder, disharmony, hypocrisy, undutifulness, and irresponsibility. Both Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram are faulted for failing to properly oversee the education of their daughters, and Lady Bertram is depicted as a model of indolence and self-absorption: "To the education of her daughters, Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children" (17). It is as a result of Mrs Norris's unceasing flattery of her young charges, the narrator points out, that Maria and Julia Bertram turned into such contemptible characters: "it is not very wonderful that with all their promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity and humility" (16). Tom Bertram, the eldest son, is so busy running through the family fortune that he takes a chunk out of the already much more circumscribed hopes and prospects of his younger brother, Edmund. When

ten-year-old Fanny arrives at the Park, she experiences an acute sense of loss and displacement, and although “nobody meant to be unkind,” “nobody put themselves out of their way” either (11). Fanny always felt neglected, was often overlooked, and struggled with discontent and envy, disappointment and depression for days at a time, “sorry for all that she had seen and heard” (90). Yet, at Portsmouth, Fanny arrives at a view of a Mansfield that never existed: “At Mansfield no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence was ever heard; all proceeded in a regular course of cheerful orderliness; everybody had their due importance; everybody’s feelings were consulted. If tenderness could ever be supposed wanting, good sense and good breeding supplied its place” (357).

The elusive moral landscape is finally realized in Fanny’s imagination, and then, in short order, in real life. Fanny returns to a Mansfield that will be totally transformed—the bad expelled, the good married—and in which she takes up a role at its moral centre. That is, the Fanny who returns to Mansfield is a Fanny capable of acting positively—for Fanny now can and does act, taking her younger sister Susan into her care, for example, as “good sense, like hers, will always act when really called upon” (364). The emphasis on a Fanny who decisively acts at the end of the novel recalls the Fanny who could not act at the beginning of the narrative, or, more precisely, who acted only in refusing to act or in being acted upon. Then, not only were the context and setting inappropriate, but Fanny could sway no one, not even Edmund, to her point of view. Austen suggests that attaining a perspective that is morally and aesthetically complex enough to prevail, or to shape a sense of the whole, is much more than merely occupying a certain position—even that of outsider—in narrative terrain, or learning a set of rules with which to view the landscape. Fanny Price gains a foothold at the Park, and a means of acting, by appealing to her moral sense, her felt sense of the way things ought to be. This sense of things is deeply attuned to the eighteenth-century principle of a moral nature. The ordering principle that finally prevails in *Mansfield Park* is the one that can at once appeal to and invoke a moral vision comprehensive enough to be held in common; it is a vision of the way things ought to be which acquires such status only because it can appeal to, rather than impose on, others.

The ideal or proper order, that is, the elusive “natural” order of things, is revealed finally only through a retroactive perspective, a view capable of taking in the whole, and of framing things so that they hang together.³⁰ Fanny arrives at a point of view that can impose an integral order through reflection, contrast, comparison, association, and a moral sense of things, the sense of what ought to be. This slow unfolding over time until the right, even retroactive, perspective is found offers a contrast to the temporality of the picturesque. The picturesque carried most weight as a way of seeing things only at the moment when it was virtually indistinguishable from a certain conception of the natural, when it was transparent. The force of the picturesque perspective is, crucially, predicated on the erasure of its own artificiality, its art of illusion. The point of view it constructs must appear to be the only possible one, or the natural one. Yet the vision the picturesque imposes on nature endured as a truly transparent (“natural”) perspective only briefly before it came into view, like one of Repton’s overlays, and the rules and principles of picturesque aesthetics were revealed as divergent from and imposed upon a nature that can never be fully contained or represented. What makes Fanny’s vision more enduring than the picturesque moment is its fidelity to the principle of “what ought to be” and the ideal moral nature to which this principle gives access.

While the picturesque has been described, somewhat dismissively, as an aesthetics of ownership and property, in some of its other incarnations it is simply about looking on, and the forceful effects of a distinct point of view. As Michasiw notes, the terms of Gilpin’s project assumed that “his readers are powerless tourists obliged by circumstance to leave the landscape as they found it. The Gilpinian landscape is

³⁰ Miller makes this point in “The Danger of Narrative in Jane Austen,” in *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 3–106. Discussing the retrospective view established at the close of Austen’s narrations, which clearly separates the moral closure (the establishment of “what ought to be”) from all that came before, or the narrative itself, Miller notes: “a moral knowledge (if it is to have cognitive status) must reconstitute the empirical phenomena brought before it according to its own principles ... a rigorously maintained distance from the empirical is therefore a condition of its possibility” (80).

inviolable except ideationally, and as such it asserts its identity and integral wholeness as preconditions to the traveler's picturesque pastimes."³¹ Even as the married inhabitant of the parsonage at Thornton Lacey, Fanny will retain her transient status: the occupants of a parsonage are at best life-holders; they can make no claim to ownership. Fanny is not an "owner," one of the daughters of a landed estate, but perennially a visitor, a tourist, and a traveller. She does not belong at Mansfield, nor, after a nine-year absence, does she belong in Portsmouth either. Her exclusion, however, both gives her access to the truths of what ought to be, and enables her to withstand the inducement to merely acquiesce, accept the glittering offers of Crawford, and become a part of what is.

The issue that the picturesque puts centre stage is not how to create a separate and bounded artwork, a framed painting for example—the focus of so much eighteenth-century thought about distance and disinterest—but how much what is seen is always a product of different ways of seeing. The picturesque, at exactly the same moment that it threatens to reveal once and for all that "nature" does not exist outside of our various constructions of it, threatens to expose the frame for what it is, the arbitrary imposition of a certain point of view. Austen's final "act," the closing scene of the book, echoes the generic "Act v" of a drama. Like the Sir Thomas who quickly put an end to all "theatrical nonsense" (165), the dramaturge emerges on stage to direct the resolution, announcing "I [am] impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest" (420). The good are married, at exactly the moment that they ought to be, and the bad are (wishfully) expelled from the harmony that prevails among the central cast. In actually entering in at this point to rush things along, Austen seems to be drawing attention to the frame, her frame, the sign of her imposition of an idealized point of view on us, her readers.

York University

³¹ Michasiw, 94.