

‘Labours not her own’: *Emma* and the Invisible World

Bharat Tandon

Invisible People

Although she died almost a quarter of a century before Poe published ‘The Purloined Letter’, Jane Austen knew all too well about the phenomenon of things being hidden in plain sight. Throughout her fiction, from the violent slapstick of the juvenilia to the scarcely less displaced and deranged world of the *Sanditon* fragment, one of the distinctive features of her narratives is their ability, in various ways, to make a virtue of indirectness and obliquity, to make the offstage, the unheard, the unseen – all the features that hover in that hinterland beyond the story in front of our eyes – register their presences in a reader’s imagination as she reads. When Humberstall, in Rudyard Kipling’s masterful short story “The Janeites”, has trouble squaring his addiction to Austen’s novels with the fact that ““there was nothin’ *to* ’em nor *in* ’em. Nothin’ at all, believe me,”” (741) he is touching on a quality that Austen’s readers have frequently noted, and found puzzling: both her staunchest admirers (like Kipling’s soldiers, finding a meeting place in ‘Jane’ amid the casual slaughter of trench warfare), and her detractors. Why, one might ask, do these novels keep readers coming back to them; why do so many readers, both specialist and non-specialist, experience the sensation of ideas and possibilities crowding around them every time they do reread, when, as Humberstall suggests, what is right in front of us is often so comparatively spare in its content or its rendition? Of course, there’s no way I could provide one all-encompassing answer, one Key to All Austenian Mythologies, in the space available to me – even if I wanted to, which I don’t. What I

would like to do here, though, is to suggest some possible answers to that question, as I explore the different ways in which “what’s there” in the world of *Emma* (Austen’s most stylistically imaginative and suggestive novel) also involves the ghostly presence of what lies beyond its immediate field of vision. Moreover, I’d like to suggest that the particular invitation that the novel makes for readers to imagine its invisible worlds offers a model of how we might understand Austen’s attitude to the very medium and form in which she works.

To begin with, though, I would like to look at one of the most intriguing marginal presences in the novel, not least because it sheds a light on some of the long-running aesthetic and political arguments that have been made about the social ‘reach’ of Austen’s writing. My title comes from a famous passage in the five-Canto 1714 version of Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*: the virtuoso set-piece at the end of Canto I, where the heroine Belinda’s morning toilette is transfigured by Pope’s mock-heroic style into the arming of a classical warrior:

Now awful Beauty puts on all its Arms;
The Fair each moment rises in her Charms,
Repairs her Smiles, awakens ev’ry Grace,
And calls forth all the Wonders of her Face;
Sees by degrees a purer Blush arise,
And keener Lightnings quicken in her Eyes.
The busy *Sylphs* surround their darling Care;
These set the Head, and those divide the Hair,
Some fold the Sleeve, whilst others plait the Gown;
And *Betty’s* praised for Labours not her own. (222-223)

This passage, like the whole of *The Rape of the Lock* itself, is both beautifully absurd and deeply in tune with the subject which its style would seem to be exaggerating. After all, in a poem sending up an eighteenth-century “battle of the sexes” over the lost lock of Belinda’s hair, the “arming” of the heroine with cosmetics might not be such a small matter (a famous British advertising campaign for “Boots 17” in the late 1990s ran with the tag-line “It’s not make-up – it’s ammunition”). Over and above this, though, the comedy of manners staged within the lines by Pope’s verse creates its own suggestive collisions of the visible with the invisible. Since this is a burlesque version of a classical epic, there need to be some traces of divine intervention in the human actions (“The *Machinery*, Madam, is a Term invented by the Criticks, to signify that Part which the Deities, Angels, or Dæmons, are made to act in a Poem” (Pope, 217)); and this second version of the poem duly introduces them, in the form of the Sylphs, these air-spirits from Rosicrucian mysticism. Pope’s mock-heroic technique here is indebted to the advances that had been made in microscopy in the late seventeenth century, most famously in Robert Hooke’s *Micrographia*, first published in 1665. By the early 1700s, both experts and informed laypeople had become fascinated with what the microscope could reveal – the fact that we live surrounded by a whole invisible world, invisible not because it isn’t there, but because it’s too small for us to see with the naked eye. In effect, what *The Rape of the Lock* is doing is turning Hooke’s microscope on the fabric of aristocratic manners, so that tiny objects and actions are made to look far larger and more significant than they really are. However, the invisible world which Pope’s verse magnifies into visibility also offers a pointed commentary on those manners. For one thing, this extended, precisely timed ritual, in which Belinda is gradually armed for her day with layers of cosmetics and clothing, cannot but bring home to a reader the enormous

efforts invested by the society in order to look “natural” (not unlike Pope’s own poetic art). But what about the presence of the Sylphs, these invisible, airy spirits brought to our sight through the lens of Pope’s satirical microscope? “Some fold the Sleeve, while others plait the Gown; / And *Betty*’s praised for Labours not her own”: Pope’s couplet concludes the long sequence of the toilette with a brilliant multiple irony of scale: not only is Belinda’s beauty shown to be dependent on the efforts of Betty the lady’s maid, but within Pope’s comic fantasy, those efforts themselves are shown up in turn to be performed by the Sylphs. And the effect of the nested ironies is to focus the microscope tellingly on one particular aspect of this world: what is being brought to light is invisible labour.

This moment in Pope’s poem offers a suggestive precedent for thinking about Austen’s practice a century later, since Austen’s readers and critics have often made much of the aesthetic and political resonances of invisible labour. Juliet McMaster has suggested that “[t]hough Austen doesn’t usually give servants speaking parts, she recognizes the unobtrusive influence they have on the lives of their masters” (127); Judith Terry, too, notably figured the presence of servants as being “like movie extras, filling the background spaces, with hardly a recognizable face among them, absolutely necessary, almost always dumb” (104). Likewise, the stylistic and political logic of an imaginative revisiting of Austen’s world such as Jo Baker’s *Longbourn* in 2013 is predicated on the idea that the invisibility of the servants and their labour is a significant absence that can be creatively filled in, an imbalance that can and should be redressed. Now, all these responses to invisible, or barely visible, labour are cogent ones; but I’d also like to put a rather different emphasis into play here: namely John Mullan’s argument from *What Matters in Jane Austen?*, that “to her first readers, as

habituated to the presence of servants as the novelist, they would not have been invisible at all. Indeed her novels rely on the readers ‘seeing’ these servants in a way that we have forgotten to do” (118). I would even go a little further than Mullan here, and point out that when reading a novel, “seeing” isn’t the only thing that a reader can be called upon to do. Something that is invisible in a narrative is not always necessarily *inaudible*, after all, and fiction can often harness its own knockings and rumbles to stylistic ends; in a novel as intricately patterned in its acoustics as *Emma* is, Austen also has the capacity to invite her readers to hear things emerging and echoing across the novel even when they aren’t obviously visible. As I suggested earlier, to explore how invisibility works in these areas can offer an insight into the much larger aesthetic and ideological implications of how Austen figured the relations between foreground and background, onstage and offstage, direct reference and suggestive implication.

Looking at Austen’s writing as a whole, it is clear that an ambivalence towards the sheer fact of narrative matter and business is a vital element of her art. Juvenile fictions such as “The Beautifull Cassandra”, “The Generous Curate”, and “Love and Freindship” gain much of their comic force from the young writer’s preternaturally acute sense for the conventionally accepted ratios between the amount of plot-business and the available textual space: time and again, Austen plays on the fact that there’s simply too much *stuff* going on in too small a space, too many ices, too many fainting fits, too many Newfoundland dogs. Compare the famous joke she made when writing to Cassandra about the first finished copy of *Pride and Prejudice*: “The work is rather too light & bright & sparkling;—it wants shade;—it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter—of sense if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense—about something unconnected with the story; an Essay on

Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte—or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile.” (4 February 1813) Once again, we see Austen picking away at the received notion that the artistic worth of a novel depends simply on the quantity of overt subject matter that it puts right before us to be consumed, those gobbets of essayism that lesser writers might anxiously insert in order to underwrite the relevance and intellectual credibility of their main narratives. In this light, the metaphor of “stretched out here & there with a long Chapter” is especially felicitous, as it imagines this alternative *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of stuffing or adulteration, mixing in random contemporary references in order to make the plot “go further”, like a kind of intellectual meatloaf. (These speculative additions are therefore, in both the ancient and modern senses, a “farce”.) Even when we get to the time of *Emma*, Austen’s last great occasional squib on the absurdities of plotting, the “Plan of a Novel, according to hints from various quarters”, makes a comic virtue out of the perceived anxiety of not having enough matter to make a plot. Picking up, among other responses, James Stanier Clarke’s presumptuous suggestions as to what she might add to make her next novel even better, she runs into an extraordinary flight of over-eventfulness:

Often carried away by the anti-hero, but rescued either by her Father or the Hero—often reduced to support herself & her Father by her Talents and & work for her Bread;—continually cheated & defrauded of her hire, worn down to a Skeleton, & now & then starved to death—. (430)

So if Austen's writing is always creatively and comically wary about trusting too much in the simple fact of event, then how might one describe and account for the alternative model of "aboutness" which it does display, this quality that keeps Humberstall and the other Janeites coming back to the novels even if there's "nothin' to 'em nor in 'em'"? It comes down to the way in which novels like *Emma* can employ the matter that is front and center, the main frame of the narrative, as a finely tuned seismograph, registering, however faintly, the echoes and rumbles coming from the invisible world offstage. At a broad level, this has to do with that aspect that John Mullan mentions, and which I also frequently remarked in my annotations to the *Emma* edition: the fact that Austen relies on her contemporary readers to share a default frame of knowledge with her, so that references can be summoned up and implied without having to be stated directly, in the manner of that "Essay on Writing" or the "critique of Walter Scott" which she thankfully *didn't* include in the published version of *Pride and Prejudice*. Of course, one corollary of this is that since cultural and sociolinguistic contexts tend to morph and evolve faster than we can document, a glancing nudge or wink in a text, which might be fairly obvious to an original reader, can become less so with each passing year – which is where the kind of historical annotation I was able to do for *Emma* can do something to rectify matters.

However, it is not just the assumption of a shared frame of reference that allows Austen to contrive such suggestive relationships between what is stated and what is implied in *Emma*. Within the imagined world of the novel's text, too, she relies on the fact that once something has been mentioned, it can't be unmentioned, with the result that the memory of it will shadow, however subliminally, everything that a reader subsequently encounters. And in this light, the invisible world of labour in *Emma* may

not be quite so undetectable after all. Take, for example, the very opening of the novel. Now, readers and critics have, rightly enough, pointed out that, along with being the only one of Austen's published works to be named after its protagonist, *Emma* is the only one of the novels to open with that name ("Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich" (5)), with the result that a reader might well imagine that Emma is going to govern the text that we've just begun reading as surely as she 'runs' the social world of Highbury. But, just as the words "seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence" (5) immediately introduce a note of uncertainty, so Emma's story, while clearly the dominant one, does not necessarily crowd everything else completely out of sight.

For one thing, while "Emma Woodhouse" might be the first words of the novel's narratorial backstory, the first words spoken out loud in the real time of the plot are Mr Woodhouse's "Poor Miss Taylor!" (8), and in the conversation that follows, the emphasis is as much on James the Hartfield coachman and his daughter Hannah at Randalls – two characters whose existence is almost entirely marginal and offstage. Between the first mention of Randalls and the end of the conversation with the arrival of the backgammon table and Mr Knightley, Mr Weston is named twice, and "poor Miss Taylor" (still not "Mrs Weston"!) only once; whereas James gets five name-checks, and Hannah two mentions by name, and ten other references in the space of less than a page.

For sure, Austen is staging this conversation slyly as a further exposition of Mr Woodhouse's character – since he can only think positively of the Westons' marriage as it relates to himself – but he also declares "Whenever I see her, she always curtsies and asks me how I do, in a very pretty manner; and when you have had her here to do needlework, I observe she always turns the lock of the door the

right way and never bangs it” (9). *Emma* is notable for Austen’s ability to wrest complex aesthetic achievements out of her characters’ flaws (think of the great jokes that the novel derives from Mrs Elton’s terrible ones), and so it is here: even as he’s displaying his own genteel selfishness, he allows Austen to give her readers a brief sketch (and, with “Whenever I see her”, a brief sight) of a life and personality which are otherwise largely hidden later in the novel. Hidden, but not wholly lost: as I’ve been suggesting, once a narrator mentions something in a story, it cannot completely be un-mentioned, so when the novel finally does get to Randalls, a reader’s sense of that space will be conditioned (however glancingly) by their prior knowledge of an invisible inhabitant, as Austen populates the house with the ghostly presence of servants decades before Henry James gave us *The Turn of the Screw*.

Nor is this careful structuring of *Emma*’s textual timing and memory the only means by which Austen makes invisible labour detectable in the novel. Earlier on, I described her style as being a kind of seismograph, a register of the various vibrations from elsewhere; and in *Emma*, the grammatical details of language itself can often work to this end. For example, when the advent of Mrs Elton and her unflappable confidence begins to threaten Emma’s assumed dominance of Highbury society, Austen’s narrative responds to this shift by making Emma the subject of passive verb-forms for the first time in the novel, as when, after Mrs Elton’s pig-headed insistence that Surrey is the proverbial “garden of England”, the narrator reflects Emma’s shock in the phrasing “Emma was silenced” (274). In this light, a couple of grammatical oddities in Austen’s verb-forms elsewhere might reward closer scrutiny. In Vol. II, Ch. 6, Emma and Frank Churchill visit Ford’s, in order that Frank might prove himself a true initiate of Highbury by buying something (“It will be taking out my freedom,” he suggests, not wholly jokingly (200); when they arrive, Austen’s

language has an odd little flicker. “They went in,” we are told, “and while the sleek, well-tied parcels of ‘Men’s Beavers’ and ‘York Tan’ were bringing down and displaying on the counter, he said—‘But I beg your pardon, Miss Woodhouse, you were speaking to me, you were saying something at the very moment of this burst of my *amor patriae*.’” (200) Later in the same volume, in Ch. 18, we encounter the same momentary displacement of mood:

They were interrupted. Tea was carrying round, and Mr. Weston, having said all he wanted, soon took the opportunity of walking away.
(310)

“[B]ringing down and displaying on the counter”; “Tea was carrying round”: at a first glance, one might imagine that we’ve suddenly entered the animistic world of Dickens’s Christmas Books, *Alice in Wonderland*, or the Disney version of *Beauty and the Beast*, a world where gloves leap off the shelves by their own volition, and tea-things move around independently – presumably, like Mrs Potts in *Beauty and the Beast*, singing “Be our guest, be our guest, be our guest” as they do so. In fact, though, far from this being an ideal capitalist fantasy of labour appearing to perform itself, what Austen is doing in these bizarre little moments is creating a special grammatical mood to describe an action being done by an invisible agent – which, like Pope’s Sylphs, has the effect of highlighting that invisible, and perhaps too often unacknowledged agency.

So, if one considers together the three techniques that I’ve discussed at work so far – Austen’s assumption of a shared background of information, her structuring of narrative time so as to create internal textual memories and prompts, and her staging of little moments of linguistic oddity in order to alert a reader to what they might otherwise ignore – one can begin to formulate some possible answers to

Humberstall's bewilderment. "I do not write for such dull Elves"/ "As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves", Austen wrote to Cassandra on 29 January 1813; and one reward for trying to be this ideal reader, the anti-Elf, is the reward of recognizing how the visible and invisible worlds of her fiction shadow and illuminate each other, how that fiction's field of vision lives in an oblique intimacy with the larger concerns which it might seem to be excluding. This much is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of all Austen's fiction; however, as I reread *Emma* repeatedly in recent years, I found myself noticing something particular and peculiar about this novel's articulations between visibility and invisibility, which opens up much larger questions about how fiction itself relates to the invisible world beyond it, and it is to this that I now turn.

Synecdoche, Surrey

I began my first section with a poem, and I shall begin my second with another: this time, it is a poem composed in its first complete form six years before Austen published *Sense and Sensibility*, but which never appeared in her lifetime. In Book VII of the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth's autobiographical projection of himself remembers the delight he took in the crude theatre of the London streets, including

The champion, Jack the Giant-killer; lo!
He dons his coat of darkness, on the stage
Walks, and achieves his wonders, from the eye
Of living mortal safe as is the moon
'Hid in her vacant interlunar cave'.
Delusion bold! – and faith must needs be coy –
How is it wrought? His garb is black, the word

Invisible flames forth upon his chest. (266)

One of the most aesthetically radical aspects of *The Prelude* is the way in which it so often stumbles by accident upon what turns out to be most influential on Wordsworth's poetic consciousness, finding the raw material of sublimity in the unglamorous contingencies of daily existence; and so it is here, where a little moment of fairy-tale pantomime ends up offering Wordsworth an image of how we might respond to art. Jack the Giant-Killer in his magic invisibility cloak is invisible onstage because his clothing is very clearly and visibly marked with the word '*Invisible*': a prompt to that suspension of disbelief on which writing depends, which allows us to imagine the visible as invisible, and infer the existence of an invisible world beyond the words.

As I have been discussing here, Austen's writing calls upon similar acts of readerly trust for all kinds of purposes – acts of trust which are frequently articulated through literal or figurative vision. At a broad level, the moral vocabulary of the novels inherits that focus on enlightenment and unenlightenment which descends from the Bible, gains a new pertinence in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century empiricist thought, and filters down to Austen via novelists such as Fielding, Richardson, Sterne, and one of her "favourite moral writers" (*Memoir*, 141), Samuel Johnson. (Indeed, it might give us pause to consider how many of the metaphors that we live by are conditioned by modalities of the visible: "point of view", "self-image", "Enlightenment", and so on.) Just think of the ways in which characters and readers are tasked to scrutinise and "read" the visible social surfaces of people and scenes in the novels, only to find that their initial reading is mistaken and in need of revision. *Emma* features an especially pointed play on this insufficiency, in the novel's repeated references to characters' inability to see into each other's hearts. Musing on

her own genuine contrition after the Box Hill incident, Emma comforts herself with the thought that “could Mr. Knightley have been privy to all her attempts of assisting Jane Fairfax, could he even have seen into her heart, he would not, on this occasion, have found anything to reprove” (391); on the revelation of Frank and Jane’s engagement, Harriet credits Emma with a clairvoyance that Emma and the reader know she doesn’t have (“You (blushing as she spoke) who can see into everybody’s heart” (404)); and even Mr Woodhouse gets in on the act after Knightley’s proposal, when the narrator tells us of his obliviousness to what’s really happening: “Could he have seen the heart, he would have cared very little for the lungs” (434).

Unfortunately, in this earthly, embodied world, hearts and souls, those entities we would most desire to see directly, are always inevitably either occluded or completely invisible, and so, as Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* once put it, “we must go some other way to work” (97).

For fictional characters and fiction readers, that “other way” usually involves the interpretation of evidence, piecing together what we can perceive in order to reconstruct what we can’t. However, this involves a set of practices and beliefs that *Emma* puts under intense scrutiny over the course of the novel. For one thing, *Emma*’s most audacious narrative coup is the revelation that there has been an entire romance plot – the kind of plot that a lesser writer might instinctively have put up front – taking place in the invisible insterstices of what’s ostensibly a much less eventful and “romantic” story; and the terms in which the hidden eventually comes to light are worth examining. Assuring Knightley that she was never seriously attached to Frank, Emma remarks: “It was merely a blind to conceal his real situation with another.—It was his object to blind all bout him; and no one, I am sure, could be more effectually blinded than myself—except that I was *not* blinded—” (427). Austen

deliberately plays two senses of “blind” off each other here; “a blind” as in a decoy, which the other characters were too “blind” to see through, which lends a particular force to the delicious pun the narrator provides in the penultimate chapter, when

A glimpse was caught through the blind, of two figures passing near the window.

“It is Frank and Miss Fairfax,” said Mrs. Weston. (476)

Whether at this microcosmic level of clues and hints, or at the much larger level of reference to the social and cultural world beyond the text, *Emma*, like Austen’s other fiction, and like all (ostensibly) realist art, depends at root on a version of synecdoche: we trust that the visible parts and fragments that the novel does give us can help us meaningfully reconstruct, or at least imagine, the invisible, offstage whole from where they originate. The novel has more than once been compared to a detective story, perhaps because its way with synecdoche anticipates the principle that Sherlock Holmes articulates so influentially in his anonymous magazine article on “The Book of Life”:

“From a drop of water,” said the writer, “a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link of it . . .” (22)

And yet, and yet...when reading *Emma*, can one always be so sure that there is a stable rate of exchange between the visible and invisible worlds? Take the novel’s location, for a start. All the other major novels feature at least one major shift of the narrated action to a verifiable place out in the real world (London, Bath, Lyme Regis, Portsmouth, Derbyshire), which has the effect of anchoring and underwriting

Austen's imaginative creation. *Emma*, on the other hand, remains resolutely static in imaginary Surrey, between Highbury, Hartfield, and Donwell. Even when the characters make their one excursion to a real place, Box Hill (hardly a long way away), the link between the two dimensions cannot but be blurred by the way in which Austen, with her impossible triangulation of Highbury's location, also makes it impossible to place Highbury at a stable distance from the hill, from Richmond, and from London. As a result of this stasis, all the other locations in the real, contemporary frame of the novel – London, Bath, Bristol, Dublin, Southend – only exist in the characters' and narrator's reports of them, like the virtual nation summoned up onstage in the messenger speeches of Shakespeare's histories. So how can a reader be sure exactly how they are supposed to relate them to the internal world of *Emma*'s plot? There is one sequence in the novel in particular, a sequence of strange, bravura experiment in which Austen seems to be coming close to exploding the technique on which so much of the rest of her fiction depends. While Austen may not have been as mathematically precise about her chapter divisions as a predecessor like Fielding, she does avail herself of a reader's spatial awareness of the textual material they're handling: using volume breaks as thresholds of plot-business, for example, or joking knowingly about the "tell-tale compression of the pages" (250) as the end of *Northanger Abbey* approaches. In which light, it may not be coincidental that this oddest passage in *Emma* sits almost at the dead physical centre of the novel. It comes in Vol. II, Ch. 9, as Emma surveys the street scene of Highbury:

Harriet, tempted by every thing and swayed by half a word, was always very long at a purchase; and while she was still hanging over muslins and changing her mind, Emma went to

the door for amusement.—Much could not be hoped from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury;—Mr. Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox letting himself in at the office door, Mr. Cole’s carriage horses returning from exercise, or a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects she could presume to expect; and when her eyes fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarrelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker’s little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread, she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused, enough; quite enough still to stand at the door. A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer. (233)

In her excellent introduction to the 1996 Penguin edition of *Emma*, Fiona Stafford highlights the novel’s overtly and obliquely pictorial elements. “The implicit parallels with visual art,” she notes, “are frequently suggested, through pictorial imagery, specialist language or the arrangement of scenes reminiscent of contemporary paintings.” (xv) In this light, the passage works very well as a street-scene after the manner of Sir David Wilkie, and the detached images of village life could be read like a series of details from a tradition going back to older Flemish models. That said, they could also be read as a medley of what Roland Barthes was much later to call “reality effects”: seemingly random, throwaway details put into texts in order to convince us that what we’re reading about has a real, three-dimensional existence¹. The closer one looks, the more there appears to be something odd about the way in which Austn

presents these realist details. Firstly, those “two curs” strike a slightly incongruous note, “cur” having a tang of archaism about it, as witnessed by the frequency of the word in the novels of Walter Scott.² And even when not being part of the vocabulary of historical fiction, it often carries a specialised association at this time; in an essay first published a couple of months after *Emma* appeared, William Hazlitt likewise recalled the traditions of Flemish painting: “A brick-floor, a pewter-plate, an ugly cur barking, a Dutch boor smoking or playing at skittles, the inside of a shambles, a fishmonger’s or a green-grocer’s stall, have been made very interesting as pictures by the fidelity, skill, and spirit, with which they have been copied” (II,11). Whether as an archaism or as a term of art, then, “cur”, by the 1810s is part of the language of types; and in Austen’s world, types can shade all too easily into stereotypes, into the “novel slang” against which Austen warned her niece Anna (28 September 1814). In addition, consider the freeze-frame effect produced by the long string of present participles (“walking . . . letting . . . returning”), so that it is almost as if Emma could, if she wanted, walk through and see around the frozen figures, as in those bizarre moments of frozen time in Powell and Pressburger’s *A Matter of Life and Death* (aka *Stairway to Heaven*). Nowhere else in *Emma*, maybe nowhere else in the whole of her fiction, does Austen come so close to raising the awkward question that I have been studiously avoiding thus far: what does it mean to speak of the “visible” and the “invisible” in a story that’s all made up anyway, where nothing’s really there at all? Now, I am not attempting to claim Austen as some kind of post-structuralist before the fact, celebrating the fictive and non-referential nature of all stories; after all, if that were the case, she would hardly have spent so much effort fashioning *Emma* as the finely calibrated cultural seismograph that I have been describing. However, the acts of readerly faith that this novel invites are always shadowed and patrolled by that

scepticism that lurks just behind the stage-like front of Highbury's main road – and if *Emma* is, as I believe it to be, one of the great imaginative works of the nineteenth century, then this is in part down to the mappings it asks us to perform between its different worlds.

By way of illustration, literally: the beautiful map that my publishers commissioned Isabelle Lewis to create for the frontispiece to the *Emma* edition marks both real places like London, Southend, and Box Hill, and fictional ones such as Maple Grove, Baly-Craig, and most importantly, Highbury. Being a topographically impossible place, Highbury is given a plausible location on the map and demarcated with a question-mark to flag it as conjectural, which is as much as one could do in the format available. In an imaginary world, though, one could hypothesise a version which placed Highbury on a separate transparency that a reader could lift up and overlay on the “real” map, or had it hidden behind a lift-up flap, like the “improved” landscapes in Humphry Repton's “Red Books”— since that would offer a more accurate simulation of how the novel's dimensions fit together. Later nineteenth-century novelists, like the Brontës and especially George Eliot, tend to encourage their readers to think of their fictional locations as corners of the real world that they simply haven't visited yet. In contrast, Highbury is more like Brigadoon: a spectral place which periodically projects itself into the world of real experience. Lionel Trilling famously described *Emma*'s world as an “idyll” (49), at its etymological root, literally a little picture of pastoral life – which rather underplays what Austen is doing to root that pastoral amid the urgent pressures of the actual. Perhaps we might better apply Barbara Everett's suggestion that ‘Highbury is not a pastoral place. It is a romance place . . . Highbury is real, but nowhere. Its reality is that the people in it live naturally’ (14). Austen's astonishing achievement in *Emma* is that fiction and reality

each become the other's invisible world: as I have been exploring, the imaginary narrative is enriched by the innumerable offstage echoes from the social and historical actuality, even as the real world of the reader is permeated by a ghostly, romance version of itself, one that affords the pleasure of a greater shape and order than any real life could produce. When Humberstall and the Janeites wonder at the draw exerted upon them by the seeming “nothin'” in Austen's fiction, what they are wondering at is this double movement which *Emma* performs, in which two dimensions, and their visible and invisible worlds, meet and illuminate each other—a meeting that can only happen in the moment of reading, in the delicate medium of art itself. To end with another poem, the final lines of William Empson's ‘This Last Pain’:

Feign then what's by a decent tact believed,
And act that state is only so conceived,
And build an edifice of form
For house where phantoms may keep warm.

Imagine, then, by miracle, with me,
(Ambiguous gifts, as what gods give must be)
What could not possibly be there,
And learn a style from a despair. (33)

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¹ See Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect", in Tzvetan Todorov (ed.), *French Literary Theory Today*, trans. R. Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 11-17.

² "He therefore signified gruffly, that he could not waste his time in waiting for a useless cur" (*Waverley*, 1814); "I remember in India he had picked up somewhere a little mongrel cur" (*Guy Mannering*, 1815); "the cur of the runaway slave Gurth" (*Ivanhoe*, 1819).