



Watercolour drawing of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra,
dated 1804.

JANE AUSTEN IN CONTEXT

Edited by
Janet Todd



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2007

Landscape

ALISTAIR M. DUCKWORTH

In the decade in which Jane Austen was born, the English landscape garden was at the peak of its renown, and the picturesque vogue was in its early stages. The spacious park landscapes of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1715–83) at such places as Blenheim, Chatsworth and Harewood displayed the taste of landed gentlemen who resided on their estates. The mountains of Wales, the Lake District and the Scottish Highlands catered to a different group: prosperous but unlanded tourists mostly, women as well as men. Equipped with guidebooks, sketchbooks, maps, pedometers and Claude glasses, enthusiasts for the picturesque sought out wild scenery, preferred ruined abbeys to Doric temples and valued a native Gothic past over the classical heritage admired by those who took the European Grand Tour.

Both tastes in landscape had their champions. Horace Walpole, in his *History of the Modern Taste in Gardening* (printed 1771, published 1780), promoted the Whig view that the natural style of the English garden was an expression of liberty, whereas the geometric formality of the French garden signified political despotism. In the landscapes of William Kent (1684–1748), he found 'the delicious contrast of hill and valley', 'the beauty of the gentle swell, or concave scoop'.¹ Such descriptions might equally refer to Brown's landscapes, with their rolling lawns, grouped trees, serpentine lakes and encircling belts of woodland, and they accord with Edmund Burke's definitions of the beautiful in his *Inquiry into . . . Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). Walpole had praised Brown in passing, but it was left to Thomas Whately, in his *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1770), to provide the rationale for Brown's system. Whately criticised the devices, 'rather emblematical than expressive', used in earlier gardens such as Stowe and The Leasowes. Elevating gardening to a liberal art, he analysed natural materials (ground, wood, water, rocks, buildings) and

encouraged designers to express the 'original' character of a place (*Observations*, 3rd edn, pp. 151, 153).

As for the picturesque, the vogue was already being promoted as William Gilpin (1724–1804) was taking his tours to various parts of Britain in the 1770s, and before he began to publish his *Observations*, beginning in 1782. Dr John Dalton in his *Descriptive Poem* (1758) and Dr John Brown in his letter describing the vale of Keswick (1767) had 'discovered' the Lake District, and Thomas West had published his *Guide to the Lakes* (1778); in the second edition (1780) Thomas Gray's journal appeared as an appendix. West and Gray not only provided much of the descriptive vocabulary of the picturesque; they also mapped a succession of 'stations' from which the tourist might appreciate picturesque views.² But, if Gilpin was not the first to promote the picturesque, he was its most influential pedagogue. His successive *Observations* provided leisured amateurs with verbal and visual instruction. Born in Scaleby Castle, he had a native love of the rugged scenery of Cumberland and Westmorland and preferred irregular, weather-stained ruins to modern buildings. His aquatint illustrations followed a simplified set of compositional principles. Thus, on the assumption that the picturesque signifies 'that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture' (*Essay Upon Prints*, 1768, p. x), scenes should have a foreground, middle distance and background; each part should contribute to the whole; care should be taken in the distribution of light and shade; the texture should be varied and the expression animated; and the mood of the place and time captured.³

The works of Walpole, Whately and Gilpin, along with those of Repton, Price and Knight, which will be discussed shortly, were all to be found in the libraries of the polite. That Jane Austen knew these works is likely. She was, as her brother Henry wrote in his 'Biographical Notice' (1818), 'a warm and judicious admirer of landscape, both in nature and on canvass'; and, 'at a very early age she was enamoured of Gilpin on the Picturesque'. As a well-connected gentry woman, she would have had an interest in landscape. At Chawton, the formal gardens of the Jacobean house had been replaced with a more modern landscape between 1763 and 1785. At Godmersham, a Palladian house sat in a park between wooded downs, on one of which a Doric temple gave an Arcadian

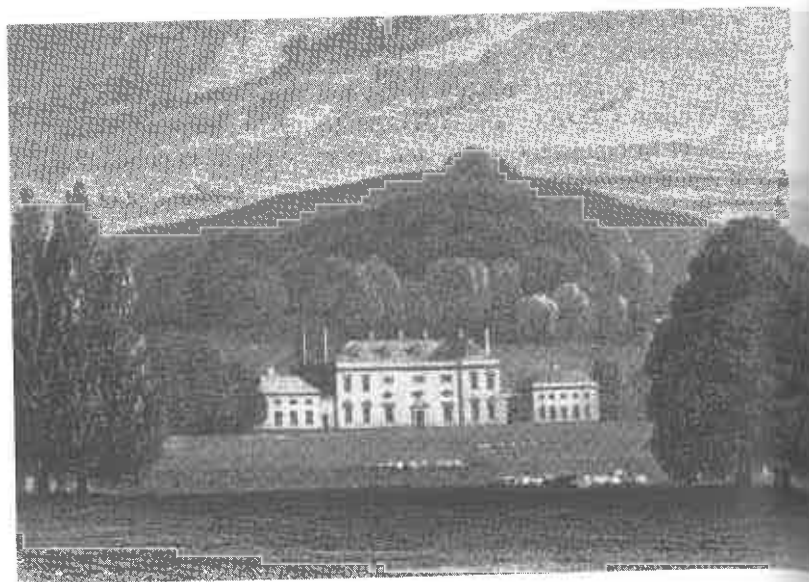


Figure 40. 'Godmersham Park', from vol. 2 of John P. Neale's *Views of the Seats of Noblemen and Gentlemen in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland* (1825).

air to the scene (fig. 40). At Adlestrop, the grounds were improved in 1799 by Repton, who made a landscape out of the gardens of the rectory and the great house and created a stream that flowed down through a flower garden and over ledges of rock into a lake.⁴ At Stoneleigh Abbey, Repton was also active; his Red Book (1809) shows the removal of walls, opening of prospects and redirection of the river Avon. Austen knew these places and others, such as Esher, from whose beautiful grounds (improved by Kent), she wrote to Cassandra in 1813, 'there could not be a Wood or a Meadow or a Palace or a remarkable spot in England that was not spread out before us, on one side or the other' (*L*, 20 May 1813).

As her enthusiasm suggests, she was no enemy to tasteful modern landscapes. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Pemberley is a tribute to Darcy's taste. The house stands on rising ground in a large park; the approach road is winding; oaks and Spanish chestnuts are scattered over the lawn; a stream has been tastefully enlarged. The landscape

is devoid of buildings (such as the Doric temple at Cleveland in *Sense and Sensibility*, or the Hermitage at Longbourn in *Pride and Prejudice*) aimed at directing the viewer's response. Instead, natural materials (Whately's water, wood and ground) are the source of Elizabeth's delight. A simple bridge is 'in character with the general air of the scene' (*P&P*, 3:1). Pemberley's landscape has been attributed to both Brown and Gilpin, which may not be contradictory if we recall that Pemberley is set in the Peak District, not far from such scenic spots as Matlock and Dovedale. If the park is Brownian, a nearby 'glen' offers Elizabeth picturesque points of view. She has joined her aunt and uncle (a prosperous London businessman) on a tour to the Lake District; the tour is curtailed, but it seems to have been based on the itinerary of Gilpin's *Observations . . . on the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland* (1786).

Having described a tasteful modern landscape in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen went on, in *Mansfield Park*, to show improvements in a bad light, and, in *Emma*, to praise a conspicuously unimproved estate. In so doing, she joined a line of writers who criticised false or extravagant improvements on both aesthetic and social grounds.⁵ As the pre-eminent improver of the time, Capability Brown came in for his share of abuse as well as praise. William Chambers, in his *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (1772), claimed that Brownian landscapes were indistinguishable from common fields, while Oliver Goldsmith in *The Deserted Village* (1770) castigated the Brownian improvements of the 'man of wealth and pride' who 'takes up a space that many poor supplied; / Space for his lake, his park's extended bounds, / Space for his horses, equipage and hounds' (lines 275–8). A little later, William Cowper, in Book III of *The Task* (1785), viewed Brown as an 'omnipotent magician' (line 766) at whose command 'woods vanish, hills subside, and valleys rise' (line 775). Cowper deplored improvements as 'the idol of the age' (line 764) in a critique that continues the traditional complaints of country house poems from Ben Jonson to Alexander Pope against ostentatious display and neglect of hospitality. With the removal of cottages from the park, and the siting of mansions in solitary splendour, the landscape garden seemed to a range of legal, constitutional and religious writers to be destructive of traditional customs and ideas of charity.⁶

Austen does not name Brown in her novels, though she does associate his nickname with Henry Crawford's schemes for Sotherton and Frank Churchill's for the Crown Inn. She does name Repton during the debate over improvements in chapter 6 of *Mansfield Park*. As Brown's heir, Humphry Repton (1752–1818) was the target of attacks made on professional improvers by connoisseurs. Richard Payne Knight in his poem *The Landscape* (1794) and Uvedale Price in his *Essay on the Picturesque* (1794) affirmed gentlemanly taste by urging improvers to find inspiration in the landscape paintings of such artists as Claude and Salvator Rosa. In his *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1795), Repton defended Brown by arguing that practical considerations should outweigh picturesque ones in landscape design. The quarrel was political as well as aesthetic. Knight and Price were Foxite Whigs who believed that the new fashion introduced by Brown destroyed the distinctive character of diverse localities and betrayed Whig patriotic ideals. Against what they took to be formulaic in the Brownian landscape Knight and Price set their versions of the picturesque, elaborating ideas from Gilpin but redirecting them to the ends of estate management. Their advocacy of picturesque forest over tended lawns, rough textures over smooth and even neglect over improvement outraged Brown's defenders. Knight's proposal in *The Landscape* that Brownian parks be destroyed was particularly inflammatory in 1794; Anna Seward accused him of a 'Jacobinism of taste', and Horace Walpole claimed that he wished 'to guillotine Mr. Brown'.⁷

Price's picturesque was less libertarian than Knight's. As a conservative country Whig, he defended a paternalist rural order, rooted in landed property, against 'levelling' improvements that, in his view, weakened 'the voluntary ties' binding together the different social ranks.⁸ Price's theories were consistent with the arguments of Edmund Burke who, in *Reflections On the Revolution in France* (1790), made frequent analogies between the condition of estates and of the nation at large. Price's views also accorded with those of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, who took a political interest in landscape improvements (Everett, *Tory View*, pp. 153–78).

Austen's response to the debates over improvements is not recorded, and it is difficult to derive from her novels a view consistent with that of any one of the major proponents. She may

have shared with Knight, Price and others concerns over the socially divisive effects of Brownian emparkment, but she would not have endorsed Knight's primitivism in *The Landscape* or Price's sentimental fondness for 'old, neglected bye-roads and hollow ways' (*Essay*, p. 19). As for Repton, Austen's association of him with dubious characters in *Mansfield Park* has posed problems for scholars who believe his ideas of improvement were close to her own. Repton increasingly departed from Brown's formulas, reintroducing terraces near the house and planting shrubberies not unlike those at Mansfield Park and Hartfield. Moreover, from being the critic of 'ancient' gardening in *Sketches* Repton turned full circle and became an advocate, in *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1816), of old estates and gardens.⁹

On the other hand, Repton was a figure of controversy. George III thought him a 'coxcomb', John Byng described him as 'Capability R.', John Claudius Loudon, in his *Treatise on Forming, Improving and Managing Country Residences* (1806), accused him of 'quackery' in his deceptive use of 'before and after' illustrations and Thomas Love Peacock in *Headlong Hall* (1816) satirised him as Marmaduke Milestone. That Jane Austen was exploiting his notoriety cannot be ruled out. It is also possible that she shared the Tory views of her Leigh ancestors and disliked the improvements Repton made at Adlestrop and Stoneleigh.¹⁰ A critique is evident, in any case, in the parody of Repton's prose that appears in Henry Crawford's discredited proposals for the improvement of Thornton Lacey (*MP*, 2:7).¹¹

Improvers like Crawford, who seek change while neglecting their social responsibilities as landowners, are criticised in Austen's novels. General Tilney's grandiose improvements at Northanger Abbey not only disappoint Catherine Morland's Gothic anticipations but identify him as an avaricious consumer capitalist. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the selfish materialism of John Dashwood is evident in his enclosure of the common at Norland, purchase of a neighbouring farm and – to his sister Elinor's dismay – removal of old walnut trees to make way for a greenhouse and flower garden for his wife. In the same novel, Colonel Brandon's Delaford, with its great garden walls, dovecote, stewponds and canal, all in close proximity to the parsonage and village, testifies to Austen's fondness for estates that have missed, or rejected, the hand of the improver (*SS&S*, 2:8). Of all

such places, Donwell Abbey in *Emma*, with its low and sheltered situation, 'old neglect of prospect,' irregular house, ample gardens and 'abundance of timber in rows and avenues, which neither fashion nor extravagance had rooted up', is the most chauvinistic expression of her social ideal. From Donwell's grounds, the Abbey-Mill farm can be seen: it is 'a sweet view . . . English verdure, English culture, English comfort' (*E*, 3:6). Mr Knightley takes his Christian name from England's saint, and his surname implies traditional values going back to feudal times. But, while he keeps improvements out of his gardens, he pursues them in his fields; like his tenant farmer, Robert Martin, he reads the Agricultural Reports, and with his brother discusses questions of drainage and crop-rotation. Donwell combines commitment to a traditional community (Knightley consults his neighbours before moving a path) with agricultural improvement in the manner of Arthur Young.

Somewhat later than the attacks on the Brownian garden, the picturesque also became the target of satire. For all its promotion of real nature over ideal landscapes, the picturesque had produced its own clichés. Among works that criticised its absurdities were James Plumptre's comic opera, *The Lakers* (1798), and *The Tour of Doctor Syntax in Search of the Picturesque* (1812), in which William Combe's satirical verse accompanied Thomas Rowlandson's burlesque illustrations of the eponymous tourist's mishaps amid mountain scenery. More serious critiques appeared in Wordsworth's 1806 *Prelude* and Scott's *Waverley* (1814). Wordsworth objected to appreciations of landscape that relied on comparisons with paintings, privileged the visual over the other senses and were oblivious to the affective resonance of place; Scott in his description of the village at Tully Veolan observed how the picturesque and poverty were interdependent. Gilpin himself propounded a troubling paradox, when he argued that though cultivated landscapes were pleasing in a moral light, they were disgusting to the picturesque eye. By the same perverse logic, 'the industrious mechanic' was not fit for representation, though 'the loitering peasant' was.¹²

Critics of the cult from the time of John Ruskin have been hard on its nostalgia for a harmonious rural world that supposedly existed before agrarian reform; its condescending look at peasant life; its aesthetic mystifications of rural poverty and ruins; and its avoidance of historical analysis in favour of sentimental reflections on the

effects of time and accident. Austen was not blind to the ambiguities of the picturesque, but she was less concerned to expose the cult's political deficiencies than to exploit the opportunities it afforded for irony and humour. She was not a picturesque writer after the manner of Ann Radcliffe; she never invokes Claude to paint a beautiful scene in words or Salvator Rosa to paint a sublime one. As author, she seldom composes her scenes according to picturesque principles, though she does make fun of a character for doing so: Henry Tilney, responding to Catherine Morland's admission of ignorance in drawing, 'talked of fore-grounds, distances, and second distances – side-screens and perspectives – lights and shades', with such persuasiveness that Catherine rejects the city of Bath, viewed from Beechen Cliff, as 'unworthy to make part of a landscape' (*NA*, 1:14).

From her earliest works, ironic allusions to Gilpin are frequent.¹³ Sometimes, they are amusingly obvious, as when Augusta in 'Love and Freindship' (1790) explains her sudden presence in Scotland as the consequence of having read Gilpin's *Tour to the Highlands of Scotland* ('Letter the 14th'). In other instances, they assume a discerning reader, as when, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth refuses to join Darcy and the two Bingley sisters on a walk, because 'the picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth' (1:10). The (insulting) joke here depends on the reader's knowledge of Gilpin's theory, expounded in words and drawings in his *Observations on the Lake District*, that three cows form a group (vol. 2, pp. 258–9). In *Sense and Sensibility* occurs the aesthetic debate between Edward and Marianne. Edward's denial of any knowledge of the picturesque is false modesty, while Marianne is perfectly aware that 'admiration of landscape scenery is become a mere jargon' and that Gilpin's taste and elegance have been depreciated by his followers. Neither speaker wins, but Edward's definition of 'fine country' as that which 'unites beauty with utility' is a traditional view (as old as Horace's *utile dulci*), while his preference for 'a troop of tidy, happy villagers' over 'the finest banditti in the world' suggests he has been reading Repton's *Sketches and Hints* (*SES*, 1:18).

Gilpin is an unnamed presence in *Mansfield Park*. In the windows of Fanny Price's room are transparencies of Tintern Abbey and a moonlit lake in Cumberland (*MP*, 1:16; fig. 41). Fanny combines a picturesque sensibility with more practical views. She wishes to

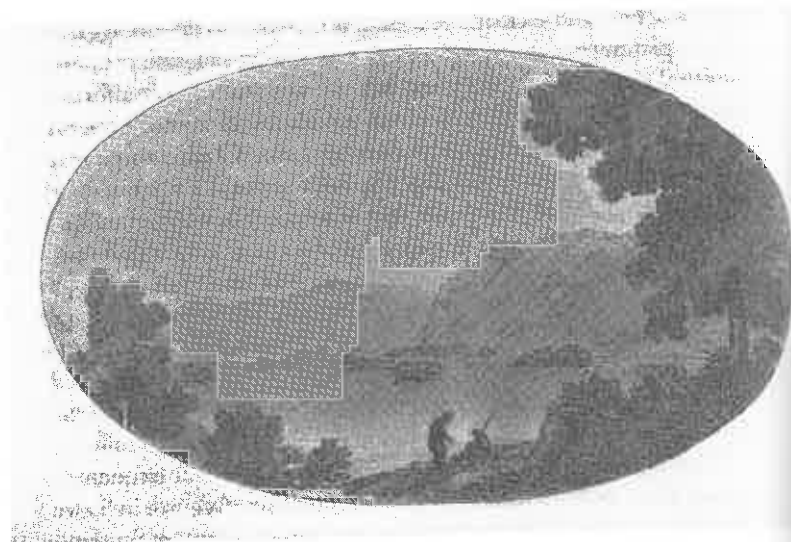


Figure 41. 'A view of Lake Windermere', from vol. 1 of William Gilpin's *Observations on the mountains and lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland* (1786).

see Sotherton in its old state, quotes Cowper as she deplores Rushworth's plan to cut down the avenue and refers to Scott when the chapel is not as ancient as she hoped. But on the way to Sotherton, she observes 'the appearance of the country, the bearings of the roads, the difference of soil, the state of the harvest, the cottages, the cattle' (MP, 1:8), as if she were taking notes for Young's *Annals of Agriculture*.

In her late novels, Austen's attention often veers from landscape to nature, as her descriptions express her heroines' sensitivity to atmospheric conditions and seasonal moods. Fanny's response to the rural spring, 'that season which cannot, in spite of its capriciousness, be unlovely' (MP, 3:14), is quite different from Marianne's 'passion for dead leaves' (SSS, 1:16); and her response to the view from the ramparts of Portsmouth, though it may be influenced by Gilpin's account of the city in his *Observations on the Coasts of Hampshire, Sussex, and Kent* (1804), reveals her synaesthetic sensibility (MP, 3:11). Emma, who insults Miss Bates on Box Hill, a beauty spot praised by Gilpin in *Observations on the Western Parts*

of England (1798), soon after welcomes 'the exquisite sight, smell, sensation of nature, tranquil, warm, and brilliant after a storm' (E, 3:13); while Anne Elliot, during her period of loss and separation, is alive to the external autumnal scene, and to the poetic associations it arouses (P, 1:10). In the same novel, something of the guidebook pertains to the narrator's descriptions of Charmouth, 'with its high grounds and extensive sweeps of country,' and Pinny, with 'its green chasms between romantic rocks' (P, 1:11). The picturesque is not merely a frame for viewing scenery, however, but a means of deepening the novel's concern with the passing of time. Typically, Austen chastens excessive introspection; Anne Elliot, sensing her self-indulgent mood on the walk to Winthrop, rouses herself. What she sees would not be picturesque for Gilpin: 'large enclosures, where the ploughs at work . . . spoke the farmer, counteracting the sweets of poetical despondence, and meaning to have spring again' (P, 1:10). But the scene would please Edward Ferrars and Mr Knightley, and it is a late affirmation of Austen's own belief that the art of landscape need not be in conflict with its cultivation.

NOTES

1. *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*, ed. Isabel W. U. Chase, in her *Horace Walpole: Gardenist* (1943), p. 26.
2. Esther Moir, *The Discovery of Britain: the English Tourist, 1540-1840* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), pp. 139-41.
3. Carl Paul Barbier, *William Gilpin: His Drawings, Teachings, and Theory of the Picturesque* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).
4. Humphry Repton, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Modern Gardening* (1803), p. 161.
5. Edward Malins, *English Landscaping and Literature, 1660-1840* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), ch. 5; Alistair M. Duckworth, 'Improvements', in *The Jane Austen Companion*, eds. J. David Grey, A. Walton Litz, Brian Southam (New York: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 223-7.
6. For anti-improvement sentiments in William Blackstone, Edmund Burke, Sir Thomas Bernard and others, see Nigel Everett, *The Tory View of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). Subsequent references are included in the text.

7. Stephen Daniels, *Humphry Repton: Landscape Gardening and the Geography of Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), ch. 3; Everett, *Tory View*, p. 116.
8. Uvedale Price, *Essay on the Picturesque*, (1794), pp. 27–9; *A Letter to H. Repton, Esq.*, second edition (1798), pp. 178–9. Daniels, *Humphry Repton*, p. 115. Subsequent references to *Essay* are included in the text.
9. See ch. VI of *Sketches* ('Of the Ancient Style of Gardening') and, by way of contrast, Fragments XIX, XXVI, and XXXII of *Fragments*. For a comprehensive account of Repton's career, including attention to his political conservatism and accommodation of some of the views of Knight and Price, see Daniels, *Humphry Repton*.
10. Mavis Batey, *Jane Austen and the English Landscape* (London: Barn Elms, 1996), pp. 80–93.
11. Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate. A Study of Jane Austen's Novels*, new edition (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 48–55.
12. William Gilpin, *Observations . . . on the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland* (1786), vol. 2, p. 44.
13. John Dixon Hunt, 'The Picturesque', in *The Jane Austen Companion*, eds. Grey *et al.*, pp. 326–9.