"So Many Friends!"

Gregariousness and its Discontents in Austen

In *Pride and Prejudice,* when Charles Bingley has somewhat inexplicably vanished from the Bennets' social orbit, Mr. Darcy advises them not to expect to see too much of his friend in the foreseeable future. "'He has many friends,'" Darcy declares, "'and he is at a time of his life when friends and engagements are continually increasing.'"[1] Whatever their limitations as an account of the particular reasons behind Bingley's absence from Netherfield, Darcy's comments usefully delineate a structural truth about the lives of young, unattached, privileged people in the world of Jane Austen's fiction. Every one of her full-length fictions, from *Northanger Abbey* to *Persuasion*, is the story of a crucial interlude in a young person's life when sociability takes on a powerful momentum of its own as new friends–and indeed new kinds of friendship–make exciting and exacting demands on her time. Catherine Morland weighs the versions of friendship offered by the Thorpes and the Tilneys. The refined Dashwood sisters spend excruciating hours in the company of the Middletons and their philistine coterie. Elizabeth Bennet vets an influx of potentially charming newcomers in her social world as she regretfully renegotiates her previous intimacy with Charlotte Lucas. Fanny Price hovers pensively at the edge of the uproarious in-group who convene at Mansfield Park in her uncle's absence. Emma Woodhouse rotates an array of candidates for close friendship as she presides over a complex and shifting social landscape in Highbury. Anne Elliot can't help feeling guilty at how much she enjoys the pleasures of extra-familial sociability on offer at Lyme and Bath.

Every Austen novel is framed as a narrative of heterosexual courtship but so much of its experiential substance will be devoted to friendship–its practices, its forms, its meanings,

its value, and its complex relations with other forms of human attachment and association.[2] Her heroines have to get good at friendship–to understand its grammars and navigate its pitfalls–but not too good: the point is to emerge from the exhilarating whirlpool of "friend and engagements" onto the firm ground of marriage.[3] Austen has her own struggles with friendship, a term she habitually misspelled "freindship." Nor are her struggles with the term purely orthographic. Writing friendship at the macro-level of plot and character isn't any easier, resistant as the concept is to singular definition and unambiguous evaluation. "'Quite delightful; so many friends!'",[4] gasps Miss Bates, thrilled simply to be part of one typically crowded social event in *Emma*. Austen, for all that she attaches considerable significance to friendship, is a long way from sharing Miss Bates's ingenuous delight in gregarious sociability. In the discussion that follows, I want to show how an escalating scepticism characterizes her narratives of amity, where misgivings about the authenticity of this or that friendship often intensify into doubts about the very category of friendship. Her agnosticism about friendship, I will contend, is inspired not by its vanishing scarcity but by its oppressive excess–the sheer number of candidates for amity in her social worlds is what undermines or even vacates the category of friendship. Whereas some critics have read her work as a search for that rare commodity, "true" friendship, I want to argue for more contradictory understanding of Austen as novelist of amity *par excellence* who harbours a subliminal animus against sociability and whose fiction is drawn repeatedly to a fantasy of friendship without friends.

I

Friendship is one of those terms that is easy to recognize but hard to define. As the historian Naomi Tadmor has shown, the term was a complex and multivalent one in Austen's lifetime.

A friend in the eighteenth century could be a family member, an influential ally, a significant business partner, or an intimate companion chosen on the basis of personal affinities.[5] We can hear some of the different senses of the word in *Pride and Prejudice* when Darcy endeavours to persuade the wayward Lydia Bennet, who has eloped from Brighton with Wickham, to "'return to her friends'" (p. 357). Lydia's "friends" in this context are not, of course, her disreputable pals on the south coast but rather the circle of authoritative and influential people back in Hertfordshire who have her welfare and best interests at heart and who can offer her material support and firm moral guidance.

Friendship also resists easy definition because it overlaps and co-exists with other categories of personhood. Elizabeth Bennet's best friend is her sister. Emma Woodhouse gets married to her best friend. Friends in Austen are friends, but they are also parents, uncles, aunts, siblings, cousins, and neighbors. In a detailed discussion of how these different meanings of "friend" dance before our eyes in *Emma*, William Deresiewicz describes friendship as "the ambiguous relationship *par excellence*"[6] in that novel. Recourse to legal or bureaucratic thinking isn't much help in resolving these ambiguities. Unlike familial or matrimonial identities, the figure of the friend has no legal or contractual status. One cannot be born a friend, or apply to be a friend, or be sued for breaking a friendship, or have a friendship declared null and void in the courts. We know friends exist but they don't leave much in the way of an official paper-trail. Nor can we appeal to practices or emotions as somehow definitive of or unique to friendship. It's hard to think of an amicable activity (talking, walking, playing, dancing, eating, drinking, visiting, exchanging letters and gifts) or emotion (affection, loyalty, esteem, delight) that would not also be characteristic of pleasurable interactions between family members.

With no origin in family ties, no basis in law, and no teleology in matrimony, friendship in Austen is prone to seek validation in giddy overstatements of its security and

longevity. Her teenage writings are alive with lavishly vacant protestations of ardent and lasting friendship on the most slender acquaintance, as in "Henry and Eliza" and "Love and Freindship," both of which feature friendship-at-first-sight episodes and friends-for-life pledges.[7] Her droll take on hyperbolic idealizations of friendship persists into her full-length fiction. When the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* says that "Friendship is certainly the finest balm for the pangs of disappointed love,"[8] or when Mrs. Bennet sighs that "'there is nothing so bad as parting with one's friends'" (*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 366), Austen's ironic narrative discourse tartly distances itself from the saccharine triteness of this language of friendship. As William Deresiewicz puts it, Austen "cared far too much about friendship to make the mistake of idealizing it.[9] A quick glance at the rogues' gallery of problematic friends in Austen–from Isabella Thorpe to Lucy Steele to Mary Crawford–provides abundant evidence of her resistance to sentimental narratives of friendship, though such resistance sometimes finds expression in the form of a negative idealization of friendship as a relation whose value is a function of its scarcity. As Laura Thomason has shown in her reading of *Emma*, Austen is as much a novelist of friendlessness as she is one of singleness.[10] In the discourse of her fiction, "friend" is often belatedly revealed as misnomer or invoked as ideal category on a more or less forlorn quest for real-life exemplification. "'There is so little real friendship in the world!,'" sighs Anne Elliot's old school friend Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion*.[11] It's a surprising lament to hear in a novel that has been read as one of Austen's most full-throated celebrations of friendship,[12] but Mrs. Smith seems to speak for Austen when she implies that friendship is precious precisely to the extent that it is hard to come by and easy to lose. Nor is *Persuasion*'s scarcity theory of the value of friendship without significant philosophical pedigree. Audible in Mrs. Smith's remark to Anne is an echo of some of the most renowned and enigmatic philosophical words about friendship: "*O my friends, there is no friend*." Attributed by Diogenes Laertius to Aristotle, quoted by Montaigne in his essay on friendship,

and obsessively iterated by Jacques Derrida in his meditation on the philosophical history and political futures of friendship, these are words in which the existence of friendship is simultaneously affirmed and negated–the philosopher's "friends" are summoned into being only for as long as it takes for them to hear the lamentable news of their own non-existence.[13]

If we turn from the apocryphal to the canonical Aristotle, we will find a much more reassuring reckoning with friendship–one, indeed, whose applicability to Austen has been noted by many readers.[14] In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, the philosopher draws up a threefold division between *pleasure* friendships (where friends revel in the fun of one another's company–think Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*); *utility* friendships (where friends offer one another practical assistance and support–think of the indispensable helpfulness of Colonel Brandon in *Sense and Sensibility*); and *virtue* friendships (where friends hold each other to high ethical standards–think of Mr. Knightley's relationship with the protagonist in *Emma*). When applied to Austen, Aristotle's model can be understood both as a *hierarchy* in which virtue friendships are the supreme form of amiable relationship and as a *teleology* where virtue friendships are that to which her heroines ultimately aspire as they cast aside the irresponsible playmates of their youth. What passes for friendship in Austen–low-key amiability, pleasurably inconsequential togetherness–is repeated cancelled in the name of a higher friendship whose value is deemed to lie in extraordinary scarcity. In her narratives of amity, two seemingly contradictory perceptions–that there are "so many friends!" and that "there is no friend"–are rotated and re-iterated so insistently that they will, in the end, become paradoxically synonymous.

II

In Austen's first full-length novel, *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland receives a fast-tracked apprenticeship in the making and unmaking of friendships. Her life, prior to the events of the novel, has been a sheltered one, and such knowledge as she does possess about friendship beyond the family home appears to have been imbibed exclusively from her reading of John Gay's short poetic fable, "The Hare and many Friends," a text, the narrator dryly informs us, that our heroine learned "as quickly as any girl in England" (p. 6). In this compact cautionary tale, when the Hare's life is threatened by hounds, its nominal friends–the horse, bull, goat, sheep, and calf–melt away apologetically, leaving the naively gregarious protagonist to save herself. In the symbolic logic of this text, the hounds represent a potentially deadly stress-test of the resilience and authenticity of the Hare's friendship networks–and a no less rigorous test of the Hare's judgement. The fable is a double lesson in distrust: the Hare was wrong to trust her friends and wrong to trust to her naïve conviction that "every creature was her friend."[15] Indeed, those "friends," in their culpable inaction, disqualify themselves from membership of the Hare's friendship group–and the disqualification is back-dated. The horse, bull et al were never *really* the hare's friends. This narrative of estrangement and un-friending rehearses what's to come in *Northanger Abbey*–and indeed in Austen's later novels–though Catherine, for all that she relishes the vivid narrative substance of Gay's fable, will take a bit of time to absorb its lessons about the security and authenticity of friendly relations.

A keynote of Catherine's exhilaratingly swift plunge into friendship with Isabella Thorpe is the experience of temporal anxiety that will define her social life in Bath. Of all Austen's novels, *Northanger Abbey* is the one with keenest eye on the clock and the calendar, and a lot of its nervy clock-watching focuses on efforts towards a consensual synchronization of social arrangements. Friendship brings with it all the gratifications of social desirability but also obliges Catherine to juggle her social calendar as it fills up with rival commitments.

With the Thorpes and the Tilneys competing for her attention, Austen's heroine experiences clashing demands on her time, and she has to manage the desire to be in two places at once, with two friendship groups at once. Her daily social experience will be beset in seemingly compelling if ultimately spurious ways with a sense of pressing urgency: decisions need be made promptly, intimacies escalated quickly, and commitments acted on speedily in a breathless chasing of time-sensitive opportunities. "'Make haste! make haste!'", barks John Thorpe, when an expedition to Bristol is on the cards, "'[…] put on your hat this moment– there is no time to be lost'" (p. 82). Contemplation and reflection are luxuries that no one can afford in a social world where nothing is more demoralizing than a missed opportunity for an expedition or an impromptu get-together, and even a moment's hesitation can seem like a monstrous betrayal. The Thorpes' is an aggressive style of socializing, one that makes every moment an on-the-spot test of Catherine's commitment and loyalty to her new friendship group. With its pressurized heroine, *Northanger Abbey* can be read as a book-length re-imagining of "The Hare and many Friends" in which Catherine is hounded not by alien adversaries but her own friends.

At stake throughout *Northanger Abbey* is the question of *choice* in relation to friendship–do we choose our friends? do we have to choose *between* our friends? and do we have to choose, in the end, between friendship and romantic love? Just as the novel has a love triangle, of sorts, between Catherine and two unattached and potentially eligible men, John Thorpe and Henry Tilney, so too does it construct what we can describe as a friendship triangle between Catherine and two candidates for exclusive social intimacy, Isabella Thorpe and Eleanor Tilney. On the face of it the two triangles are perfectly congruent. Catherine's choice between candidates for friendship (Eleanor or Isabella?) maps precisely onto her choice between candidates for romantic attachment (Henry or John?), and in both cases the "correct" choice is for the Tilneys and against the Thorpes. The novel's love story and its

friendship story thus seem to run in pleasingly instructive parallel: if you can choose the right best friend, it seems, then you can choose the right romantic partner, and *vice versa*. Except that the choice offered by the love triangle in this novel is laughably easy to resolve–so easy, in fact, that when John Thorpe broaches the subject of marriage, Catherine doesn't even notice that he is making a significant declaration of romantic interest; *Northanger Abbey*'s love triangle collapses around Thorpe's comic ineptitude. But the friendship triangle in this novel is different. The choice between Isabella and Eleanor is harder than that between John and Henry not simply because Austen's heroine spends many undeniably pleasurable hours in Isabella's company but also because at some level the choice is *unnecessary*. Heterosexual courtship in Austen's world eventuates in an exclusive, permanent couple whereas there is no such limitation on friendship, no obligation to make an irrevocable either/or choice between friend A and friend B. Why can't Catherine be friends with both?

From the outset, *Northanger Abbey* presents the friendship between Catherine and Isabella as something that both is and isn't real: "The progress of the friendship between Catherine and Isabella was quick as its beginning had been warm, and they passed so rapidly through every gradation of increasing tenderness, that there was shortly no fresh proof of it to be given to their friends or themselves. They called each other by their Christian name, were always arm in arm when they walked, pinned up each other's train for the dance, and were not to be divided in the set; and if a rainy morning deprived them of other enjoyments, they were still resolute in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt, and shut themselves up, to read novels together." (p. 30). The very speed with which Catherine and Isabella's acquaintance escalates into intimacy and seeming inseparability is meant to sow doubts about the authenticity and durability of the connection between them. Implicitly espoused by Austen's narrator here is a gradualist model of friendship as something that needs to be tested and proved during a decently prolonged interlude of tentative courtship. Sure enough, Catherine

and Isabella's friendship will not survive the events of the novel, not least because the latter's motives are decidedly mixed, and as good readers of "The Hare and many Friends" we may sagely decide that it was never a *real* friendship in the first place. But can the friendship be annulled as quickly as it was contracted? To put it another way, if this litany of pleasurable shared experiences–walking, dancing, reading, getting dressed up–aren't friendship, then what are they? What other word do we have for what happens between Catherine and Isabella? It's revealing in this context that the philosopher Alexander Nehamas cites this interlude between the two as an example of something that is too easily missed in grandly idealistic account of the value of friendship, namely its genial and valuable uneventfulness.[16] Friends are the people we are happy to do (almost) nothing with, for whom no pretext for togetherness is too flimsy, and no category of activity too minimal to deserve enthusiastic shared participation. The relationship between Catherine and Isabella only loses the name of friendship when we move from a neutrally *descriptive* to a rigorously *evaluative* model of the term – that is, when only the most perfectly achieved friendships can be named as such. Catherine's fitfully enjoyable interlude with Isabella, especially when compared with her high-minded, improving and seemingly permanent rapport with Eleanor, doesn't in the end qualify as authentic friendship. However, if the vulgar Thorpes are effectively banished from her inner circle, this is not to say that they are wholly excluded from the novel's narrative logic. There is after all something ever so slightly Thorpe-like about *Northanger Abbey*'s hierarchical narrative of friendship. Much as it invites us to deplore the way Catherine is badgered and hustled into all-or-nothing decisions about her social availability and relational preferences, Austen's novel mimics the Thorpes in the way it obliges its heroine–and, by extension, its readers–to make all-or-nothing decisions between different kinds and categories of friendship.

III

Austen frequently places considerable geographical and/or temporal distance between erstwhile friends. A playmate or sidekick who was vividly present in the early stages of the novel will be relocated elsewhere or–and it amounts to the same thing–consigned to the past. The cartography of estrangement in these novels is easy enough to read. The distance between Northanger Abbey and Bath is not a bad measure of the psychological distance between Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe, just as the many miles between Portsmouth and Northamptonshire help us envision the chasm in values and temperament between Fanny Price and Mary Crawford. Efforts are of course made to close these gaps. In the second halves of both *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*, there is something of an epistolary turn as the separated friends enter into correspondence with one another. Letters are the very substance of friendship in Austen's teenage writings but the same cannot be said for her full-length works; one might even be tempted to say that epistolarity is where friendship goes to die–or, indeed, to be exposed as always-already fragile and illusory. As Catherine ponders her letters from Isabella Thorpe or Fanny Price pores over hers from Mary, epistolary discourse lets the heroine, however reluctantly or disappointedly, achieve a certain critical distance from someone who had won her affection, as though the inauthenticity of a given friendship is revealed when it is obliged to put itself in writing. As we contemplate the letters that are sprinkled through the second halves of these novels, we may begin to suspect that writing itself may be at least partly to blame for the ruptures between Austen's female friends. It could be that even the warmest intimacy will struggle to thrive when it relies on a supplementary technology of inscription rather than on the enlivening thrills and pleasures of face-to-face interaction. But it is not enough to say that writing is the enemy of friendship. As Mary Ann O'Farrell notes in her discussion of friendship in *Mansfield Park*, 'it is not so clear

what friendship is without its signs'.[17] Implicit in *Northanger Abbey*, where Catherine and Isabella's intimacy is secured via their shared passion for gothic fiction, is the hunch that there is no friendship without signs and writing. And what matters is not how simply how friendship is written but how it is read–the way that the texts of friendship are construed and deciphered. Austen's heroines have to learn how to read their friends, and they normally get two chances to do this–in person, via their charming words and deeds, and at a distance, via letters that will add up to a dossier of reasons to discontinue the friendship in question. The problems with Isabella's letters to Catherine are comparable to those with Mary's to Fanny: they are oppressively over-familiar, morally unserious, and demoralizingly infrequent. To paraphrase an old joke, they are bad and unsatisfactory letters–and there are so few of them! The slow process of estrangement is complicated, always, by lingering affective attachments to the friendship that is being officially dissolved.

Even as they try to write themselves back into the heroine's affection, the friend in Austen is always being written off, written into the past. As they come into their own, her protagonists are defined not simply by the romantic partners they have chosen but by the friendships they have disowned or de-emphasized. If you want to know the truth of an Austen heroine, then it's good to know whom they have spurned. Catherine Morland is not Isabella Thorpe, Elizabeth Bennet is not Charlotte Lucas, Fanny Price is not Mary Crawford, Emma Woodhouse is not Harriet Smith, and so on.[18] The gesture of disavowal is iterated so dependably from one novel to the next as to become a recognizable component of the grammar of Austen's fiction. In each case there is a more or less painful disengagement of a central character from the habits and associations of an earlier period of their lives, as when Prince Hal coldly disowns Falstaff in Shakespeare's *II Henry IV* en route to (re)constituting a sovereign selfhood untainted by any kind of unbecoming prehistory. Yet in Austen, as in Shakespeare, estrangement discloses sameness in the very moment of fastidious

disaffiliation. Emma wouldn't have to make such a formal effort to distance herself from Harriet Smith if there wasn't a significant rapport between them. When Elizabeth Bennet affectionately brands Charlotte Lucas a "'very strange creature by way of a friend!'" (*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 27), she captures something of the chiastic structure of friendship in Austen–the strangeness that dwells in intimacy and the intimacy that survives any formal gesture of estrangement. Such a chiastic model is certainly preferable to the kind of unproblematically binary model of *real* and *false* friends that often governs discussion of amity in her fiction.[19] The distinction between real and non-real friends is itself never of more than dubious or questionable reality in the work of a novelist where friendship is constituted by narrative and structured by fantasy and exclusion. The fact that Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith befriend imaginary versions of one another doesn't make their friendship wholly unreal; nor does the fact that Catherine and Isabella bond over their shared love of gothic make their relationship a sheer work of fiction. What stirs and vexes Austen's imagination is not the suspicion that there may be one or two imposters in the ranks of our friends; rather, it is the more troubling inkling that, at some level, *all* friends are imaginary friends.

Let's take one–admittedly egregious–example of an imaginary friend in her work. In *Mansfield Park*, when it is delicately suggested that Mrs. Norris might consider taking in one of her poor nieces from Hampshire, she rules out the possibility because even though she may have enough space to accommodate a ward, it is imperative that she keep a "'spare room for a friend.'"[20] Who, exactly, is the mysterious "friend" in this sentence? In the absence of any evidence that Mrs. Norris has the kind of friends who will come and stay over, this is one instance where the Aristotelean suspicion that "there is no friend" is literally true. The "friend" of whom Mrs. Norris speaks is a nothing more than a convenient rhetorical figment, albeit one whose imaginary existence is real enough to block the novel's protagonist from

access to or membership of her aunt's household. A shrine to Mrs. Norris's friendlessness, that permanently unoccupied spare room marks out a paradoxical (in)hospitality built into the architecture of her domestic life. Honoring friendship without having friends, Mrs. Norris's formal commitment to hospitality is matched by a practical allergy to it. When she declares that she will "'always have a bed for a friend'" (p. 33), it is as though the only thing that would compromise her noble stance of infinite hospitality would be the prospect of a flesh-and-blood person ever occupying that bed. We may seem to have nothing to learn about friendship and its value from Mrs. Norris, but it's nevertheless possible to argue that in her comically transparent unfriendliness we catch a revealing glimpse of the truth of pious idealizations of friendship. Those who idealize friendship risk making it such a rarefied and exclusive category that they honour it without populating it. The category of friendship, like Mrs. Norris's spare room, is ideal to the extent that it remains immaculately unoccupied.

Emma has its own story of imagined friendship. This novel examines the curious limbo between real and imagined friendship occupied by the hapless Harriet Smith, a young woman from an obscure background whom the novel's heroine is convinced of being "exactly the young friend she wanted–exactly the something which her home required" (p. 25). Emma greets Harriet as an impeccably tasteful acquisition who answers to her social and emotional needs, an adoring sidekick or loyal pet rather than an equal partner. Harriet is literally objectified when Austen's heroine sketches a portrait of her new best friend, one that Mr. Knightley–on duty and on patrol, as always, as Highbury's censorious virtue friend at large–deems to be inaccurate because the two-dimensional Harriet rendered by Emma is "'too tall'" (p. 49). There's more than verisimilitude at stake in Knightley's critique of the portrait. The possibility that Harriet might be too tall–elevated or heightened in any way–evidently troubles the status-conscious Knightley. Throughout *Emma*, descriptive references to Harriet's stature function as normative statements about her social status. When Harriet is

described as Emma's "'poor little friend'" (p. 27), "'sweet little friend'" (p. 57), "'pretty little friend'" (p. 129), and so forth, she is embraced by Highbury in a language of affectionate belittlement that makes her quasi-infantile status the condition of admission to its inner circles. Harriet is not a high-status member of the Highbury community and Knightley is eager to keep things that way. Even to have been deemed portrait-worthy is an honour that brings her into the ranks of Emma's intimate family and friends; the portrait, in other words, is an act of accelerated social promotion that constitutes for Harriet the more elevated and ladylike persona that she will acquire as a special favourite at Hartfield–and, if Emma's matchmaking fantasies are successful, as the wife of the Highbury vicar, Mr. Elton. Knightley's objections to the portrait are thus, implicitly, an attempt to belittle or de-magnify Harriet, to keep her in what he sees her rightfully humble place. It is not enough, then, to say that Emma's perceptions of Harriet are mediated by the pencil and distorted by the fantasies of art; Knightley's response to the portrait, and his implicit counter-portrait of a smaller Harriet, is itself a corrective re-imagining of Emma's friend, one that is shaped and conditioned by hierarchical views of rank and social status. Where the "real" Harriet is in all of this is not quite clear.

Emma contains one of the more brutal de-friendings or un-friendings in Austen. When Harriet emerges, late in the novel, as an unlikely candidate for Knightley's romantic attention, Emma's feelings for the master of Donwell are clarified. At this point, she decides that "Harriet was nothing; that she was every thing herself" (p. 469). The effective annihilation of Harriet–her transformation from the "something" that Emma absolutely needs to the "nothing" she ruthlessly disavows–is represented as the necessary precondition of our heroine's coming into her own as Mrs. Knightley. It remains for Emma to re-write the history of her friendship with Harriet not as an intimacy that was broken off but as a friendship that never happened. Looking back penitently on her mistakes and misadventures, she reflects

that Knightley "had spoken prophetically, when he once said, 'Emma, you have been no friend to Harriet Smith'" (p. 438). Here, Emma recollects verbatim Knightley's sharp verdict, in the immediate aftermath of the Robert Martin debacle, that Emma had been "'no friend to Harriet Smith'" (p. 66). Knightley is speaking here as a stern historian of recent events, but for Emma his words function not as history but as prophecy–that is, as an utterance that will find corroboration in the future rather than the past. Even as she accepts the truth of Knightley's words, she subtly re-inflects their temporality by converting a verdict into a forecast. By understanding "you have been no friend to Harriet Smith" as a prediction of what's to come rather than a ruling on what's just happened, Emma re-imagines her friendship with Harriet not as *what didn't happen* but rather as *what will not have happened*. It's a small but vital difference between Emma and Knightley, one that subtly resists the latter's brutal annulment of the emotional history between the two young women. For all that Emma seems to internalize Knightley's paternalistic disapproval of her friendship with Harriet, then, she does so in a way that, at the very least, lets the friendship happen in its own impossibility.

IV

From Catherine and Isabella to Emma and Harriet, Austen's fiction is littered with broken–or, to borrow Ruth Perry's term, "interrupted"[21]– friendship couples. Friendship in her work seems to be as brittle as it is rare. But whatever its fragility at an interpersonal level, the friendship couple is a durable and reliable narrative entity in her writings. Individual friendship couples may fail or split but the trope of the couple marches on from one novel to the next, a dependably robust container in which the complex and unruly dynamics of friendliness and sociability can be enclosed, contained, managed, judged, and analysed. The

friendship couple lets Austen model sociability as a series of vividly neat binary choices between good and bad, real and unreal, temporary and permanent friends–choices governed by an either/or logic that, as we have seen, reproduces the logic of her novels' courtship plots. The friendship couple is also a formal solution, of sorts, to the question or problem of *numerousness* that haunts Austen's representations of friendship. Beyond the small world of intimate duos in Austen, there is always a wider landscape of friendship and sociability where friends are encountered not as individual candidates for amity but as groups with their own collective identities and complex internal dynamics. From the circle of fun-loving young people in *Mansfield Park* to the clique that centres on Hartfield in *Emma* to the ensemble of old and new friends in whose company Anne Eliot is socially rejuvenated in *Persuasion*, Austen displays a quasi-anthropological fascination with how friendship groups are constituted, what they get up to, how they manage their collective identities, and how they police their own limits. [22] Such groups tend to live from one social event to the next. They exhibit a restless desire to go somewhere or do something–a trip to Bristol or Lyme; card games or amateur theatricals; a ball, or a party, or a walk. Cliques in Austen are forever hatching "plans" or "schemes," short-term blueprints for renewed pleasure that provide the group with gladdening evidence of its own continued existence. Collective friendship is an intersubjective relation whose affective content is defined by anticipation of its own imminent renewal and consecrated by a routine that can never become tradition.

Membership of groups, even lively and select ones, is not without its downsides. The element of choice, so important in defining what's distinctive and valuable about friendly relations, can seem to dwindle as the size of the party grows. What exactly does Anne Eliot submit to, for example, when she yields to the "demands of the party" (p. 201) in the crowded Octagon Room in *Persuasion*? The Austen heroine will be obliged to insert her private self into a lively public space, to make herself visible, expose herself to critical

appraisal, and let her personal business and romantic prospects be narrativized in the form of promiscuous gossip and chatter. The demands of friendly sociability can be onerous, though they tend to be framed as "invitations." In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood sisters enjoy–if that's the word–all the demanding privileges of a culture of what we can call compulsory sociability: "'You *must* drink tea with us to night'", says Sir John Middleton; "'you must and shall come,'"[23] says Mrs. Jennings. As so often in Austen, modal verbs do a lot of society's ideological dirty work. Every *must* and *shall* is an impeccably civilized microaggression, one that polices desire and enforces normative behaviour by daring its addressee to reject an invitation to conform. In Austen's world, it can be easier to issue a single emphatic *no* to the petition of an unwanted suitor than to withstand the insistently renewed overtures of friendship by which her heroines are plagued.

At stake in Austen is the question of where intimate friendships end and freewheeling, open-ending sociability begins. Repeatedly her heroines are placed on a trajectory from comparative isolation towards what has been called "hyper-gregariousness"–a term coined by Irving Goh, in his commentary on Derrida's book on friendship, to refer to the frenetically accumulative practices of friend-making in online social spaces in the twenty-first century.[24] Austen's fiction may surely be read as a vivid chapter in the prehistory of the contemporary practices of hyper-gregariousness mapped by Goh. Sometimes Austen singles out one exemplary offender as a walking, talking personification of untrammelled sociability. The personification of hyper-gregariousness in *Emma* is Mr. Weston, whose love of "what is called *society*" (p. 104; emphasis on original) is so witheringly scorned by John Knightley. Described by one critic as a "one-man principle of social inclusion,"[25] Weston dilutes and cheapens friendship by dispensing it around with undiscriminating generosity; we are meant to suspect that anyone who is quite so liberal with "general friendship" (p. 346) can't be much of a friend. Sir John Middleton, the master of Barton House in *Sense and Sensibility*,

displays a similarly incontinent appetite for friendship and sociability. With his love of parties, Sir John presides over sociable activities in this novel like an unenigmatic Gatsby figure who seeks validation in the sheer frequency of the parties he convenes and the supposedly impressive numbers he can attract to them.

There is sometimes a tipping point in Austen during planning for social events when talk of named individuals shifts into a reckoning around numbers.[26] Numbers certainly matter a lot to Sir John Middleton. What he refers to as the "pleasure of sitting down nearly twenty to table" (*Sense and Sensibility*, p. 78) has as much to with the quantity of guests as it does with the food, drink, and conversation on offer. In *Emma*, the Westons are similarly prone to envision social events in terms of a competitive arithmetic of friendship. As they get swept up in arrangements for the ball at the Crown inn, the Westons are soon crunching the numbers: "'You and Miss Smith, and Miss Fairfax, will be three, and the two Miss Coxes five; and for five couple there will be plenty of room'" (*Emma*, p. 267). There is no indication here that there might be something problematic in the conversion of names into numbers, of *Smith* and *Fairfax* and *Cox* into *two* or *three* or *five*. The absence of any such scruples in the Westons' discourse of friendship is highlighted when we read *Emma* through the prism of Derrida's comments on the "necessity of having to *count* one's friends."[27] "Must friends be *in number*?", he pointedly asks, in *The Politics of Friendship*. "Numerous? In great numbers? How many will there be? At what point do 'great numbers' begin?" (p. 101; emphasis in original). There is something distasteful, even unfriendly or anti-friendly, in the act of totting up one's friends; to think of named persons as interchangeable units that add up to a grand total is, after all, to efface the singularity of each individual friend who is being counted. At the same time, it's not enough simply to announce a taboo on the counting of friends. After all, we wouldn't know that we have friends–or, in the spirit of Mrs. Smith, we wouldn't know how many friends we *don't* have–if we didn't conduct the occasional

headcount. The counting of friends, whether in search of mightily impressive numbers or for confirmation of friendship's poignant scarcity, is a necessary evil. What is more, the arithmetic in both cases, whether we are counting how many or how few friends there are, has the same outcome–the grand total of friends will, in the end, tend towards zero. Derrida notes that one possible translation of "O my friends, there is no friend" is "he who has too many friends has none" (p. 209), and these words are eminently applicable to the hyper-gregarious friend-makers in Austen's social worlds.

Hyper-gregariousness in Austen is validated only to the extent that it inevitably fails and fractures. Extended social groups in her fiction tend to be as short-lived as they are hyper-active, and one dependable pattern in her narrative endgames is a dissolution of cliques and the reconstitution of social experience around married couples and close-knit families. In the final chapter of an Austen novel, the heroine will have emerged from her adventures in hyper-gregariousness into a streamlined, consolidated and family-centred friendship group such as the one centred at an idyllic Barton in *Sense and Sensibility* or the "small band of true friends" (p. 528) who witness the protagonist's marriage to Knightley in *Emma*. Friendship in other words is valuable to the extent that it enables or facilitates the being-towards-marriage that seems to define the existential trajectory of the Austen heroine. Compulsory sociability in her world is an enabler of compulsory heterosexuality, another manifestation of the "omnipresent marriage culture" [28] that pervades and dominates Austen.

Whatever its official role in heteronormative narrative, however, hyper-gregariousness may have desires and trajectories of its own, ones that are scandalously at variance with the ambitions and values of heteronormative culture. Friendship in Austen can take on a life of its own or at least threaten to become an end in itself. A later interview with Michel Foucault, in which he meditates on friendship as an affective relation that is not validated and policed by heteronormative institutions, was published as "Friendship as a Way

of Life."[29] Just such a possibility seems to haunt the margins of Austen's fiction. To call friendship a way of life is of course to mark it out as at odds with the heteronormative courtship as the official teleology of an Austen narrative. The idea that friendship without marriage could ever be enough, that doing friendship could even be a long-term or even open-ended practice of being in the world, is borderline unthinkable in Austen's heteronormative imagination. In her fiction, friends are allowed–indeed obliged–to imagine romantic futures for each other; but friendship is not permitted to imagine a future for itself or make pleasure in its own existence a principle of its indefinite continuation. When Darcy remarks that Bingley is at a "time of his life" when "friends and engagements are increasing," he prudently doesn't pass comment on whether, as he approaches something like peak gregariousness, Bingley may also be having the time of his life.

Austen's most explicit story of hyper-gregariousness has a decidedly cautionary flavor. In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas's eldest son Tom Bertram is, in all sorts of ways, a delinquent underachiever–financially profligate and socially hedonistic, he seems to have no affinity with Mansfield Park's grand traditions and no sense of the weight of destiny and responsibility that comes with being his father's first-born. Seemingly uninterested in getting married and settling down, Tom is at no point in the novel even speculatively aligned with a member of the opposite sex. But he does seem to have a talent for friendship. He has a lots of friends–a "hundred particular friends" (p. 214), as his father disgustedly perceives it–and spends lots of time with them. Even allowing for considerable hyperbole, Tom is quite the most spectacularly and subversively gregarious individual in Austen's fiction. In the moral logic of *Mansfield Park*, he is in the grip of a dangerous category error, a misunderstanding of quantity for quality, and of friendship as a way of life rather than a stopover en route to marriage. The dangers soon enough become real and indeed life-threatening. When Tom accompanies some of his friends to Newmarket, he contracts a fever after a fall and a good

deal of drinking. In what readers of *Northanger Abbey* will recognize as a "Tom and many Friends" scenario, he is abandoned by his delinquent drinking companions at a moment of grave, possibly life-threatening danger. As he is nursed back to health by his family at Mansfield Park, Tom will have plenty of time to ponder the lessons of his desperately narrow escape from the deadly camaraderie of his pleasure friends.

In Austen's austere moral universe, friendship as practised by Tom Bertram has been not a way of life but of a threat to life, a near-death experience; his spell of fever, meanwhile, provides symptomatic corroboration that his friendship group was itself a kind of illness for which only a spell of social quarantine in the parental home at Northamptonshire can provide a cure. As Erin A. Spampinato has argued in a discussion of Tom's "commitment to male amity," Tom's illness marks him as queer and other, as though, in the novel's heteronormative dance of romantic rivalries, love triangles, respectable pairings-off and adulterous affairs, the most truly perverse thing one can do is maintain an enthusiastic commitment to same-sex friendships.[30]

With its punitive crackdown on hyper-gregariousness in the name of traditional family structures, *Mansfield Park* grants particular salience to the problem of friendship that Austen's fiction repeatedly negotiates. Friendship becomes more elaborately vexing the more her fiction thinks about it–from the orthographic problem of spelling it, the semantic problem of defining it, the experiential problem of negotiating its powerful demands, the moral problem of evaluating it, and the ideological problem of determining its proper relationship with heterosexual courtship. Throughout Austen, the problem is not just with friends with but their numerousness. There are *many* friends–which is to say, many kinds of friendship and inconveniently large numbers of individuals who belong to this category, even if this abundance may in the end be a sign of friendship's scarcity or even non-existence. In such a context, Mrs. Smith's remark about the non-existence of friends might be understood not as a

lament but an aspiration that governs Austen's perceptions of the "many friends" who populate and problematize her narratives. As it maps and explores a set of social spaces that teem to the point of overflow with hyper-gregarious souls, Austen's fiction can't help dreaming that friendship will one fine day be a category as immaculately vacant as Mrs. Norris's spare room.

Michael Greaney

NOTES

[1] Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Pat Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 200. Further references will be given parenthetically in the main body of the essay.

[2] Important interventions on Austen and friendship include: Ruth Perry, "Interrupted Friendships in Jane Austen's *Emma*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5:2 (1986), 185-202; Mary Ann O'Farrell, "Jane Austen's Friendship," in Deidre Lynch, ed., *Janeites: Disciples and Devotees* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 45-62; Laura E. Thomason, "The Dilemma of Friendship in Jane Austen's *Emma*," *The Eighteenth Century* 56, 2 (2015), 227-41; and William Deresiewicz's chapter on *Emma* in *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets* (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 86-126.

[3] For a discussion of the "zero-sum" game between friendship and marriage in Austen, see Eric C. Walker, *Marriage, Writing, and Romanticism: Wordsworth and Austen after War* (Stanford CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2011), pp. 159-76 (p. 162). See also Perry's argument that the "story of women's friendship has no place in the novel of marriage." "Interrupted

Friendships in Jane Austen's *Emma*," 192. For a discussion of the erotic subtexts of friendships between women in Austen, see Misty G. Anderson, "'The Different Sorts of Friendship: Desire in *Mansfield Park*," in *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism* ed. Devoney Looser (New York NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 167-83.

[4] Austen, *Emma*, ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 264. Further references will be given parenthetically in the main body of the essay.

[5] Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth Century England: Household, Kinship, and Patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 167-271.

[6] Deresiewicz, *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets*, p. 95.

[7] Austen, *Juvenilia*, ed. Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 40, 114.

[8] Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Barbara M. Benedict and Deirdre Le Faye (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press), p. 25.

[9] William Deresiewicz, *A Jane Austen Education* (New York NY: Penguin, 2011), p. 187.

[10] Thomason, 'The Dilemma of Friendship in Jane Austen's *Emma'*, 227.

[11] Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, eds Janet Todd and Antje Blank (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 169.

[12] For detailed commentary on friendship in *Persuasion* see Walker, *Marriage, Writing, and Romanticism*, pp. 165-78 and Karin Berndt, *Narrating Friendship and the British Novel, 1760-1830* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 191-209.

[13] Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins ([1994] London: Verso, 2020). Further references will be given parenthetically in the main body of the essay.

[14] Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. by David Ross (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 195-7. For Aristotelean takes on Austen and friendship, see: Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 191-208 and Deresiewicz, *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets*, pp. 101-2.

[15] John Gay, "The Hare and many Friends," in *Fables* (London: Darton and Harvey 1793), pp. 135-8.

[16] Alexandar Nehamas, *On Friendship* (New York NY: Basic Books, 2016), p. 87.

[17] O'Farrell, 'Jane Austen's Friendship', p. 57.

[18] In "Rejecting Friendship: Towards a Radical Reading of Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* for Today," *Cultural Capital* 79 (2011), 94-124, Irving Goh argues that if friendship is structured by rejection then the figure of the reject is the protagonist of any drama of friendship rather than an abject *persona non grata* on its fringes.

[19] For a representative reading in this vein, see Bruce Stovel, "Emma's Search for a True Friend," *Persuasions* 13 (1991), 58-67.

[20] Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. John Wiltshire (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 34. Further references will be given parenthetically in the main body of the essay.

[21] Perry, "Interrupted Friendships in Jane Austen's *Emma*', p. 186.

[22] For a compact, fascinatingly suggestive account of groups, collective selves and abundance in Austen, see Yoon Sun Lee, "Austen's Swarms and Plots," *European Romantic Review* 30, 3 (2019), 307-14

[23] Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Edward Copeland (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 115 (emphasis in original); p. 130. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

[24] Goh, "Rejecting Friendship,"98. For a lively discussion of Austen as a novelist of social networking *avant la lettre*, see Ivan Ortiz, "Selfies with Emma: Jane Austen's Social Media," *Studies in the Novel* 54, 2 (2022), 159-78.

[25] Robert P. Irvine, *Jane Austen* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), p. 79

[26] For brief but suggestive thoughts on Austen and numbers, see Lee, "Austen's Swarms and Plots," 308.

[27] Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p. 22.

[28] D. A. Miller, "Austen's Attitude," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 8, 1 (1995), 1-5, 4.

[29] Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York NY: The New Press, 1997), pp. 135-40.

[30] Erin A. Spampinato, "Tom Became What He Ought to Be: *Mansfield Park* as Homosocial Bildungsroman," *Studies in the Novel* 51, 4 (2019), 481-98, 484.