

## Chapter V

### DIRECT SPEECH OR CONVERSATION

In examining Jane Austen's narrative techniques one will notice that she seldom describes anything. Instead of describing what her characters are, and what they feel, she presents them to the reader and lets them reveal themselves. In so doing, she gives a dramatic air to her narrative.

Jane Austen uses conversation as a means to direct her reader's attention to particular circumstances. In Emma, very rarely are the events presented by other characters than Emma, and this occurs only when the reader must be put in possession of ideas which Emma cannot give. The conversation between Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston discussing Emma and her new friend Harriet is an example. This conversation is necessary for several reasons; it shows Mr. Knightley and Mrs. Weston as reliable judges and at the same time reveals the relation between them and Emma. What does Mr. Knightley mean when he says that it would not be a bad thing for Emma "to be very much in love with a proper object. I should like to see Emma in love, and in some doubt of a return; it would do her good." (Emma, chapter V, page 46)? Or what does it mean when Mrs. Weston answers "I do not recommend matrimony at present to Emma" (Emma, chapter V page 46), and Jane Austen adds "There were wishes at Randalls respecting Emma's destiny, but it was not desirable to have them suspected." (Emma, chapter V, page 46)? This conversation is designed to put the reader into a state of critical

awareness.<sup>1</sup> The reader must be made aware of the different viewpoints of two older people with regard to Emma. If two loving friends can disagree about Emma's character, Emma's view of herself cannot be accepted at its face value.

Conversation may be used to provide tension; for example, it is Mrs. Bennet's vulgarity in discussing Jane's prospective marriage to Mr. Bingley which convinces Darcy that any alliance with Mrs. Bennet's family - for his friend or for himself would be imprudent and degrading:

...Mrs. Bennet seemed incapable of fatigue while enumerating the advantages of the match. His being such a charming young man, and so rich, and living but three miles from them, were the first points of self-gratulation...It was, moreover, such a promising thing for her younger daughters, as Jane's marrying so greatly must throw them in the way of other rich men...

In vain did Elizabeth endeavour to check the rapidity of her mother's words, or persuade her to describe her felicity in a less audible whisper; for to her inexpressible vexation, she could perceive that the chief of it was overheard by Mr. Darcy, who sat opposite to them. Her mother only scolded her for being nonsensical.

"What is Mr. Darcy to me, pray, that I should be afraid of him? I am sure we owe him no such particular civility as to be obliged to say nothing he may not like to hear."

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter XVIII, page 75)

Having decided that Darcy is too haughty to pursue any of her daughters, she goes out of her way, in fact, to offend him.

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Calder Marshall, An Introduction to Emma (London, 1969), p. 10.

Another example is the dialogue between Elinor and Lucy Steele in which the latter reveals her secret engagement. Let us observe how tension is developed from this conversation.

Lucy starts her conversation with Elinor by asking about Mrs. Ferrars:

"You will think my question an odd one, I dare say," said Lucy to her one day as they were walking together from the park to the cottage -- "but pray, are you personally acquainted with your sister-in-law's mother, Mrs. Ferrars?"

Elinor did think the question a very odd one, and her countenance expressed it, as she answered that she had never seen Mrs. Ferrars.

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXII, page 149)

And when Elinor does not show her any interest in furthering the chat on Mrs. Ferrars, Lucy brings the subject back again.

"I am sure you think me very strange, for inquiring about her in such a way;" said Lucy, eyeing Elinor attentively as she spoke; "but perhaps there may be reasons -- I wish I might venture; but however I hope you will do me the justice of believing that I do not mean to be impertinent."

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXII, page 150)

This time Elinor remains silent. Lucy renews the subject:

"I cannot bear to have you think me impertinently curious. I am sure I would rather do anything in the world than be thought so by a person whose good opinion is so well worth having as yours. And I am sure I should not have the smallest fear of trusting you; indeed I should be very glad of your advice how to manage in such an uncomfortable situation as I am; but however

there is no occasion to trouble you. I am sorry you do not happen to know Mrs. Ferrars."

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXII, page 150)

This is enough to arouse Elinor's curiosity, and Lucy gets the desired response:

"I am sorry I do not," said Elinor, in great astonishment, "if it could be of any use to you to know my opinion of her. But really, I never understood that you were at all connected with that family, and therefore I am a little surprised, I confess, at so serious an inquiry into her character."

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXII, page 150)

So Lucy seizes the chance and related to Elinor her being secretly engaged to Edward. Elinor reacts to this news with confusion and shock:

What felt Elinor at that moment? Astonishment; that would have been as painful as it was strong, had not an immediate disbelief of the assertion attended it. She turned towards Lucy in silent amazement, unable to divine the reason or object of such a declaration, and though her complexion varied, she stood firm in incredulity and felt in no danger of an hysterical fit, or a swoon.

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXII, page 151)

After this conversation comes Elinor's long reflection over what Lucy has said. She knows that Lucy has purposely told her of their engagement in order to warn her in good time that Edward is not the man for her. However, she decides that she must have a further conversation with Lucy on that matter:

Much as she had suffered from her first conversation with Lucy on the subject, she soon felt an earnest wish of renewing it; and this for more reasons than one. She wanted to hear many particulars of their engagement repeated again, she wanted more clearly to understand what Lucy really felt for Edward, whether there were any sincerity in her declaration of tender regard for him, and she particularly wanted to convince Lucy, by her readiness to enter on the matter again, and her calmness in conversing on it, that she was no otherwise interested in it than as a friend, which she very much feared her involuntary agitation, in their morning discourse, must have left at least doubtful. That Lucy was disposed to be jealous of her, appeared very probable; it was plain that Edward had always spoken highly in her praise, not merely from Lucy's assertion, but from her venturing to trust her on so short a personal acquaintance, with a secret, so confessedly and evidently important. And even Sir John's joking intelligence must have had some weight. But indeed, while Elinor remained so well assured within herself of being really beloved by Edward, it required no other consideration of probabilities to make it natural that Lucy should be jealous; and that she was so, her very confidence was a proof.

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXIII, page 159--160)

Therefore, while they work on the filigree basket, they go over the same subject again, Lucy steadily and solemnly affirming her tender attachment to Edward and her certainty that her warm feelings are returned. The more Lucy affirms her conviction of Edward's continued attachment for her, the clearer it becomes to Elinor that Lucy is losing Edward and suspects Elinor of stealing him from her. So the covert duel goes on, and the effect of it is that:

...Elinor sat down to the card table with the melancholy persuasion that Edward was not only without affection for the person who was to be his wife; but that he had not even the chance

of being tolerably happy in marriage, which sincere affection on her side would have given, for self-interest alone could induce a woman to keep a man to an engagement, of which she seemed so thoroughly aware that he was weary.

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXIV, page 168)

The conversation between Lucy and Elinor provides a dramatic tension which is sustained to the very end of the novel. For a long time, Elinor suffers silently: from every gesture of Edward indicating his love; from the efforts of his mother and sister to prevent her from marrying; and from Lucy's constant reminders of their engagement. Besides, Elinor's inward suffering provides a dramatic contrast with the outward sorrow of Marianne.

Much of the conversation found in the novels is evidence of Jane Austen's dramatic skill. The opening chapter of Pride and Prejudice is one of the most celebrated examples of that skill. At the outset one has a sense of a curtain rising on the Bennets' drawing-room. Here Jane Austen displays her ability to handle a large group of characters simultaneously. With the minimum directives from the author, conversation, without superfluous exchange, is carried on providing useful information not only about those characters themselves but also about their neighbours. The scene is a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet interrupted by their daughters. The interruptions are in significant order; Elizabeth, being the most important character, speaks first; Lydia speaks last which gives her an important position second only to Elizabeth; Kitty's cough brings forward Mrs. Bennet's "nerves" as a force to be reckoned with.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>W.A. Craik, Jane Austen: The Six Novels (London, 1966), p. 64.

The types of character also emerge from this conversation. Mr. Bennet is a man of quick parts and sarcastic humour; Mrs. Bennet speaks a very different language from her husband: her speech is not seasoned with irony and epigram like his, her sentences ~~are~~ in quite another mould, either going on too long or breaking up awkwardly in impulsive exclamations. Such characteristics of speech indicate Mrs. Bennet to be a person of "mean understanding" and "uncertain temper" (Pride and Prejudice, chapter I, page 3).

Several remarks addressed to different people may be fused into what appears like a single speech in order to gain speed and concentration.<sup>4</sup> Take Mr. Woodhouse's characteristic expressions of anxiety in the third chapter of Emma for example:

"Mrs. Bates, let me propose your venturing on one of these eggs. An egg boiled very soft is not unwholesome, Serle understands boiling an egg better than any body. I would not recommend an egg boiled by any body else - but you need not be afraid - they are very small, you see - one of our small eggs will not hurt you. Miss Bates, let Emma help you to a little bit of tart - a very little bit. Ours are all apple tarts. You need not be afraid of unwholesome preserves here. I do not advise the custard. Mrs. Goddard, what say you to half a glass of wine? A small half glass - put into a tumbler of water? I do not think it could disagree with you."

(Emma, chapter III, page 34)

It seems hardly possible that the speech above would have been delivered as an uninterrupted monologue, since Mr. Woodhouse addresses three

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<sup>4</sup>Page, op. cit., p. 105.

ladies in turn, of whom Miss Bates at least would hardly have remained silent; it might well have been presented as three separate speeches with appropriate responses. The author does not record the ladies' replies because they are not so important. What is important is the cumulative effect of the old gentleman's frettings. Because this conversation is presented as monologue, it becomes a significant character portrayal. In this monologue alone, Jane Austen has caught the timidity in the face of experience of Mr. Woodhouse, though in a mild form exemplified by a boiled egg and an apple tart. His timidity is also emphasized by the repeated negatives and the diminutives.<sup>5</sup>

A more glaring example occurs in *Northanger Abbey*. Anxiously awaiting her friends, and hearing the clock strike twelve, Catherine Morland declares:

"I do not quite despair yet. I shall not give it up till a quarter after twelve. This is just the time of day for it to clear up, and I do think it looks a little lighter. There, it is twenty minutes after twelve, and now I shall give it up entirely..."

(*Northanger Abbey*, chapter XI, page 100)

Unblushingly, the author permits twenty minutes to pass during the uttering of less than forty words. For the sake of narrative economy, what might be a conversation, or at least a one-sided series of remarks, has been compressed into a single paragraph.

A critic once said that the greatest pleasure in reading Jane Austen's novels is conversation because she uses speech whenever

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<sup>5</sup>Arnold Kettle, *Emma* (London, 1951), p. 92.



possible to advance the story and make trivial events significant.<sup>6</sup> When characters notable for folly or simplicity are dwelt upon at length, their speech has a narrative function. Jane Austen's mastery of narrative technique can be seen in her ability to convey inter-related information intelligibly through the talk of the most unpromising characters, namely those characters who are delineated by marked idiosyncrasies of speech. Miss Bates, for example, does not seem well fitted to convey to the reader significant information. One would not, at first sight, choose her as the likeliest person to make clear to the reader so complicated a comedy of errors as Emma; yet this is her office and she does it without using any mode of expression inconsistent with her usual habits of speech. The impression of randomness in her speech is contrived by two factors. The first is that she seldom completes a sentence, though she usually carries it far enough to show how it should have been completed:

"...poor dear Jane could not bear to see anybody - anybody at all - Mrs. Elton, indeed, could not be denied - and Mrs. Cole had made such a pain - but, except them Jane would really see nobody."

(Emma, chapter XLIV, page 299)

Secondly, as Miss Lascelles points out "each sentence flies off at a tangent from the last, but so characteristic are the trains of thought that, when need is, every sentence elucidates its curtailed predecessor"<sup>7</sup>,

<sup>6</sup>Page, op. cit., p. 108.

<sup>7</sup>Mary Lascelles, Jane Austen and Her Art (London, 1939), p. 120.

for example:

"...upon my word, Miss Woodhouse, you do look -- how do you like Jane's hair?"

(Emma, chapter XXXVIII, page 256)

Miss Bates' chat while achieving an impression of random speech, is capable of providing information highly significant to the plot. When she rambles on aimlessly, almost in stream-of-consciousness fashion, she does so to good purpose and sometimes dramatically. What she says is not merely amusing in itself but also furthers the course of the story by giving us information about other characters and the whole background of the novel; for example, she makes a definite contribution to the story when she recalls that it was to her that Mrs. Perry confided as a great secret that her husband was thinking of buying a carriage, or that it was after Jane had heard of Churchill's sudden departure that she decided to take a post as governess with Mrs. Smallridge. Such rambles are clues to the secret relationship between Jane and Frank. Moreover, at times Miss Bates' remarks unwittingly reveal the thoughts and motives of other characters; for example, she lets us see Mrs. Elton's relentless desire to be "the queen of the evening" (Emma, chapter XXXV, page 240); she lets us perceive that Jane's attention is firmly fixed elsewhere by revealing her own vain attempts to catch her ear. Through her, we learn such details as the matting in the passage and the lighting in the hall, of her being served soup and her mother being denied asparagus; through her, in short, the ball and the fictitious town of Highbury with its population grow real. Thus, every one of Miss Bates' speeches condenses

a great deal of asserted information.

With such varied ingenuity, the conscious and unconscious revelations of the characters are used as a means of communication between the author and her reader. At this, Jane Austen has never perhaps been surpassed; as one critic puts it: "If ever living beings can be said to have moved across the pages of fiction, as they lived, speaking as they spoke, and feeling as they felt, they do so in Jane Austen's novels".<sup>8</sup>

Although dialogue in Jane Austen's novels does much to advance the plot, its chief role is to reveal the character of a speaker. "Talking", a critic observes, "is necessary in a tête-à-tête, to distinguish the persons of the drama from the chairs they sit on".<sup>9</sup> In Mansfield Park, Lady Bertram, who remains silent through most of the novel, fails to distinguish herself from her sofa.

The conversation between the Allens and Catherine on the impropriety of her going out with John Thorpe reveals the differences of character between the Allens:

These schemes are not at all the thing. Young men and women driving about the country in open carriages! Now and then it is very well but going to inns and public places together! It is not right and I wonder Mrs. Thorpe should allow it. I am glad you do not think of going; I am sure Mrs. Morland would not be pleased. Mrs. Allen, are not you of my

<sup>8</sup>Page, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup>R.A. Brower, The Fields of Light (New York, 1951), p. 162.

way of thinking? Do not you think those kind of projects objectionable?

"Yes, very much so indeed. Open carriages are nasty things. A clean gown is not five minutes wear in them. You are splashed getting in and getting out; and the wind takes your hair and your bonnet in every direction. I hate an open carriage myself!"

"I know you do; but that is not the question. Do not you think it has an odd appearance, if young ladies are frequently driven about in them by young men, to whom they are not even related?"

"Yes, my dear, a very odd appearance indeed. I cannot bear to see it!"

"Dear madam," cried Catherine, "then why did not you tell me so before? I am sure if I had known it to be improper, I would not have gone with Mr. Thorpe at all; but I always hoped you would tell me, if you thought I was doing wrong!"

"And so I should, my dear, you may depend on it; for as I told Mrs. Morland at parting, I would always do the best for you in my power. But one must not be over particular. Young people will be young people, as your good mother says herself. You know I wanted you, when we first came, not to buy that sprigged muslin, but you would. Young people do not like to be always thwarted!"

(Northanger Abbey, chapter XIII, page 119)

The three are shown in relation to the one topic so that the reader can make a judgment on all of them at once. Mr. Allen, a sensible man, firmly states his opinion which is taken up by Mrs. Allen. This amusingly displays Mrs. Allen, since Mr. Allen and Catherine spend the whole of the conversation discussing the propriety of Catherine's conduct and Mrs. Allen, though agreeable, has no sense at all. Any

ideas she receives are promptly transmuted in the light of her preoccupations. Her speeches show that she constantly confuses important matters with trivial ones, and this is Jane Austen's principal method of labelling her comic characters.<sup>10</sup> The whole conversation shows how Jane Austen can make what seems to be a most commonplace topic reveal the personality, principles and conduct of a character. The apparent ease and naturalness of this conversation conceals the substantial amount of necessary information it presents. This is not merely clever or amusing talk, but talk that performs some essential functions in relation to characterization.

Sometimes the conversations define not only the speaker but also the person spoken about. Take Mr. Darcy for example. He is hardly recognizable as the same man when projected through the conversation of different people. When described by Mr. Wickham, he is hardly recognizable as the person described by his housekeeper, or by Elizabeth, or by Mr. Bingley. R.A. Brower observes that Jane Austen's dialogue is "dramatic in the sense of defining characters through the way they speak and are spoken about".<sup>11</sup> In his conversation with Elinor, Robert Ferrars describes his own feelings about the projected marriage between Lucy Steele and his brother:

"We may treat it as a joke," said he at last, recovering from the affected laugh which had considerably lengthened out the genuine gaiety of the moment - "but

<sup>10</sup> Norman Page and Basil Blackwell, *The Language of Jane Austen* (Oxford, 1972), p. 152.

<sup>11</sup> Brower, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

upon my soul it is a most serious business. Poor Edward! he is ruined forever. I am extremely sorry for it - for I know him to be a very good-hearted creature; as well-meaning a fellow perhaps, as any in the world. You must not judge of him, Miss Dashwood, from your slight acquaintance. - Poor Edward! - His manners are certainly not the happiest in nature. - But we are not all born, you know, with the same powers - the same address."

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter XLI, page 296)

The utterly ridiculous attitude of Robert is underlined by the fact that he reports the incident so extravagantly, and so foolishly. Yet there is another purpose to this conversation; it is also an oblique comment in favour of Edward's faithfulness to his word, and therefore it sharpens our respect for him.

One or more of these skilful uses of dialogue to produce certain calculated effects upon the reader or to advance the story can also be found in the works of writers other than Jane Austen. However, it is doubtful whether many other writers have used them with such singular success and very sure that she was well in advance of her contemporaries in making such admirable use of these techniques.

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