

Jane Austen's Modernism: The Free Indirect Discourse

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Abstract

The multi-faceted criticism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has yielded scholarly articles about Jane Austen's narrative techniques. There is almost critical consensus on the opinion that Austen was artistically conscious from the beginning of her creative career. The issue of inwardness was one of the technical matters she observed. Her novels evince some modern traits especially those related to free indirect discourse (speech, style) through which Austen cultivated inwardness. She, in this case, was the precursor of Virginia Woolf's and James Joyce's stream-of-consciousness.

Key terms: Free indirect discourse, stage soliloquy, stream-of-consciousness, focalization

The multi-faceted criticism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has yielded scholarly articles about Austen's narrative techniques, her feminist leanings, and her use of irony. There is critical consensus on the opinion that Jane Austen was artistically conscious from the beginning of her creative career. The issue of inwardness was one of the technical matters she observed. James Wood, in his essay, "The Birth of Inwardness" (1998), commences his study of Austen's development of inwardness with his



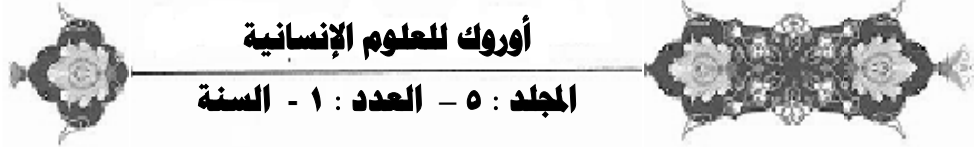
observation of the character of Elinor in Austen's first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. He perceives that Austen allows Elinor to have thoughts of her own but stays inside conventional narrated thought by remaining outside Elinor. He shows, by quoting from the novel, that we do not really enter Elinor's mind:

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. 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 no danger of an hysterical fit, or a swoon. (25)

He demonstrates that in her later novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen allows us briefly to enter Elizabeth's mind with her self-conversation by again quoting: " All liveliness and goodness as she is! Her understanding excellent, her mind improved, and her manners captivating" (26). Wood perceives that, at first, Austen allows these entrances into the heroine's mind to be short-lived before the heroine's self-examination brings on a headache. However, as the novel progresses, Austen permits Elizabeth's character to begin voicing what he calls "stage soliloquies". As an example, he refers to Elizabeth's speech to herself after she reads the letter Darcy has written to her when he again quotes Austen, this time from *Pride and Prejudice*:

"How despicably have I acted!" she cried. – "I who have prided myself on my discernment! – I who have valued myself on my abilities! Who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blamable distrust... ." (28)

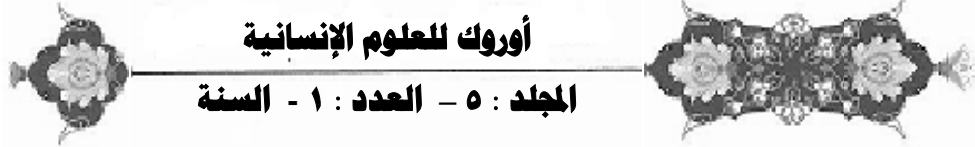
This deft combination of omniscient narration, incorporating the subjective individualities of characters through free indirect



discourse, enables Austen to create the imaginative experience of each character for her readers, whilst simultaneously maintaining a framing moral vision. Charmed by Elizabeth, delighted by her wit and sympathetic to her frustrations as a dependent young woman and member of the Bennett family, the reader finds it easy to sympathize with her initial dislike of Mr. Darcy, as she allows the prejudice inspired by her wounded pride to colour all her subsequent contact with him and knowledge about him. Austen clearly demonstrates that Elizabeth has sufficient information to question for her subtle opinion about him, but so wholly does the heroine engage us as readers, that is not until her moment of 'undeception' (in Lewis' terms) that we actually realize just how prejudiced and willful Elizabeth's response to Darcy has been. Here the balance between the subjective experience of the character and the authoritative moral frame of the omniscient narration plays a crucial role. As readers we are taken upon the same epistemological journey as the heroine, being educated in the process as to the way that a prejudice engendered by hurt pride can lead to unjust interpretations of others. Imaginatively, we engage with Elizabeth's initial self-deception, growing self-awareness, repentance, and gradual reconciliation to Darcy as she herself learns to lay aside her initial prejudice when interpreting his character, through a 'hermeneutics of love'. (Alison, 2006: 26)

Wood (1998: 28) further describes Austen's development and evolvement of her "stage soliloquy" style:

Austen uses it with ever greater sophistication, dispensing with quotation marks, and lending the heroine's soliloquy with her own third-person narration, so that she is able to move in and out of a character as she pleases. [...] In her later novels, Austen tends to alternate free indirect style with a first-person stream-of-consciousness. [...] Austen's heroine's are separate, different from

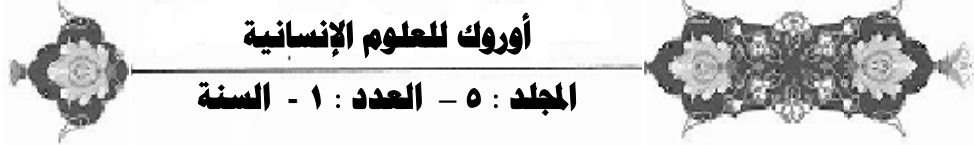


everyone else in the novels by virtue of their ability to speak themselves.

He tracks the evolution of Austen's unique technique and comments establishing that, by the time she gets to *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, Austen uses this technique with greater refinement. In *Mansfield Park*, she uses an assortment of styles to establish her narrative thought, and a close analysis of each variant reveals the underlying manipulations of the reader's vision of the characters. Free indirect discourse, which linguistically equates a character's thoughts with the rest of the narrative, serves also to establish a deeper connection between the speaker of the thoughts and the narrator. Linguistically, free indirect discourse places thoughts in the main clause rather than a secondary one. This structurally aids Austen's efficacy of bringing Fanny to the forefront of situations, when she wants to be, rather than an afterthought. This style is also especially effective in this novel because the narrator presents a seemingly straightforward and unbiased account of the happenings at *Mansfield Park*, which creates a trust in which the reader accepts the narrator's accounts as unquestionable. The ability of free indirect discourse to diminish boundaries between the narrator and speaker permits an interesting analysis of specific passages on their importance to the entire novel.

The following passage illustrates Fanny's response to Henry's marriage proposal with the free indirect discourse technique:

She was feeling, thinking, trembling, about every thing; agitated, happy, miserable, infinitely obliged, absolutely angry. It was all beyond belief! He was inexcusable, incomprehensible! – But such were his habits, that he could do nothing without a mixture of evil. He had previously made her the happiest of human beings, and now he had insulted – she knew not what to say – how



to class or how to regard it. She would not have him be serious, and yet what could excuse the use of such words and offers, if they meant but to trifle? (206)

This passage not only reveals Fanny's intricacy with her conflicting emotions, but it also internalizes her thoughts, rather than quoting them as spoken dialogue, which makes them feel more personal.

Since this narration style questions the luminal boundary between the narrator and the character's thoughts, it also seems to encourage readers to accept the characters opinions and feelings through the narrator's assertions. Thus, Fanny's alleged declaration that Henry is "inexcusable" and "incomprehensible" might actually be the narrator's opinion, which legitimates Fanny's dislike of his character. Austen manipulates the reader by allowing this narrative style to imply that the idea that Henry "could do nothing without a mixture of evil" is not necessarily limited to only Fanny – even if the rest of the family encourages the alliance between the two. Instead, some unseen, superior force acknowledges Fanny's acute judge of character and applauds her decision, thus encouraging the reader to advocate Fanny's refusal.

In Emma, as in other novels, Austen dispenses with quotation marks and the staginess of the speeches, making them more conversational, and she blends the heroine's soliloquy with her own third-person-narration so that she is able to move in and out of a character as she pleases. Emma, as the novel's name implies and Austen's style declares, is the most important character in the novel, and Wood (1998) implies that this novel is filled with her self-disputations. Also focusing on Austen's narrative techniques, Joe Bray examines even more closely her expression of her character's consciousness and tracks the blurring movement of Austen as the narrator and Austen as voice of her characters. In his

article "The Source of 'Dramatized Consciousness': Richardson, Austen, and Stylistic Influence" (2001, 19-20), he analyzes Austen's method of "slippage inside a character's consciousness," of allowing Emma's narrative to slip out of Austen's and into Emma's consciousness. He explains that such a style of narration "typically involves a combination of language 'colored by a particular character's point of view' with the third person and past tense associated with indirect report, or the narrator's perspective". It can clearly be seen from reading the novel that, in this case, Emma has been chosen as the particular character from which to emanate the point of view. According to Bray's analytical perspective of the seamless alternation between the narrator and character, "the mingling of the narrator's voice with the character's consciousness allows the possibility of an alternative, ironic, perspective on her thoughts". In his essay, "Austen's Emma" (2001), John K. Hale provides a more thorough examination of this alternative, ironic perspective on Emma's thoughts. He begins his analysis with his observation that Austen's free indirect style aids in her use of irony by moving the character constantly between the author's mind and her characters' minds.

Finch and Bowen (1990: 57) connect the gossip ever present in Emma with Austen's free indirect style. They argue that Emma's realization of the importance of her relationship to her society is one of the ways she matures. They list the ways the free indirect style is used in Emma:

The free indirect style is variously deployed throughout the novel: sometimes, as it were, on the internal ruminations of individual citizens in order either to satirize or approve them; and other times it ventriloquizes the voice of the community as a whole (or at least its respectable citizens). (14)

According to their theory on the way that Austen uses her narrative style to reflect both individual and collective opinion, she disseminates her narrative authority among her characters:

... the novel's development of free indirect style (which Austen first brought to fruition) has the effect of naturalizing narrative authority by disseminating it among the characters [...] so the development in Austen's hands of free indirect style marks a crucial moment in the history of novelistic technique in which narrative authority is seemingly elided, ostensibly giving way to what Flaubert called a transparent style in which the author is "everywhere felt, but never seen." (3)

Austen is thus able to give the reader the authorial inside story on her protagonist without appearing to be there at all – theoretically, most of the time it is not Austen revealing Emma's thoughts, it is Emma herself telling us the story. When it is time to state something that Emma cannot possibly know, Austen moves back to the omniscient narrator's voice, whose identification or gender we do not really know but can only guess.

Kathy Mezei (1996) explores the ambiguous gender roles in Emma in her article, "Free Indirect Discourse, and Authority in Emma, *Howards End*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*". She speaks to the reader's active role in deciphering who the narrator in Austen's novels might be, as well as Austen's use of her characters to focalize the action in the novels. She also differentiates between free indirect discourse and focalization, citing free indirect discourse as "an instance of reported discourse, an utterance, whereas focalization is a representation of a character's perspective, of what that character sees" (70). She terms these focalizers generally as character-focalizers, and the female protagonists as heroine-focalizers. She maintains that there is a "shifting of agency between narrator and focalizers" in the novel as

well as an "inquiry into societal models of male and female positions" (71). She has much to say relating to the character's emergence from the text and what she terms "the shifting, viscous relations between author, narrator, and these heroine-focalizers" and what she further describes as this "confusion of voices, confusion of gender"(66) Interestingly, Mezei sees the blur between the author and narrator not only as a small-scale struggle between narrators and character-focalizers for control of the text, but also as a larger-scale conflict between "conventional gender roles and of the resistance to the traditional narrative authority in which a masterly male subject speaks for and over the female object of his gaze" (Ibid). She posits the location for this travail at the feet of free indirect discourse:

The site for this textual battle between author, narrator, and character-focalizer and between fixed and fluctuating gender roles in the narrative device "free indirect discourse"... . The undecidability inherent in the structure of free indirect discourse makes it an appropriate space for the complicated interchange between author, narrator, character-focalizer, and reader. Its structural indeterminacy shelters and accentuates forms of gender indeterminacy. (67)

Mezei, in this case, deconstructs the concept of free indirect discourse by trisecting the term into the significance of its three fundamental parts. She signifies that "free" indicates the narrator "has delegated a certain authority and equality to the character and has deliberately repressed overt markers of his or her control." She terms the significance of "indirect" as implying the "indeterminacy of this discourse, an 'indirect' discourse into which the reader must insert him/herself and try to determine the positions of narrator and character-focalizer." Finally, she defines the significance of "discourse" as embracing "both form and content, both speech and

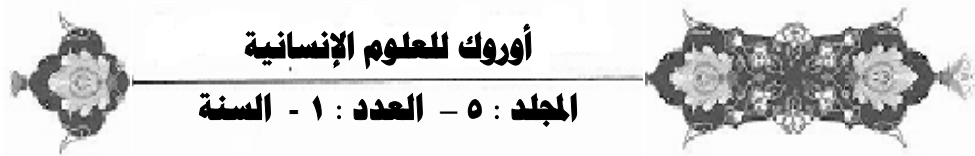
writing; it includes monologue, conversation, dialogue, dialect; it is the very substance of dialogue" (68)

The dialogue presented in free indirect form "is not understood as actual spoken words, but as words heard or perceived, registering on some consciousness" (Banfield, 1973 :31). This is clear when we look at the following passage from Emma:

... not all that either could say could prevent some renewal of alarm at the sight of the snow which had actually fallen, and the discovery of a much darker night than he had been prepared for. "He was afraid they should have a very bad drive. He was afraid poor Isabella would not like it. And there would be poor Emma in the carriage behind. He did not know what they had best do. They must keep as much together as they could;" and James was talked to, and given a charge to go very slow and wait for the other carriage. (128)

The passage is reported as it must have sounded to Mr. Knightley and Mr. Weston, and the effect is a concentration of the absurdity of Mr. Woodhouse's fears. Because it is an echo of his words, not the words directly reported as he must have spoken them, a greater distance is put between Mr. Woodhouse and the reader.

Often, the free indirect discourse is filtered through Emma, upon whose consciousness it registers. In most cases, the free indirect discourses are concerned mainly with the heroine's words, although the reader's empathy is not diminished greatly. As Dorrit Cohn (1978: 117) points out, even an impersonal narrator shows commitment to irony or sympathy through the use of this technique (what he calls narrated monologue):



Precisely because they cast the language of a subjective mind into the grammar of objective narration, they amplify emotional notes, but also throw into ironic relief all false notes struck by a figural mind.

A narrator may "exploits both possibilities, even with the same character". Emma's sincerity and honesty are often sympathetically felt by a reader – when she admits fault, for instance, or expresses her feelings for her father (Ibid).

As it is clear from the above discussion, the craft of Jane Austen's fiction has reached a very sophisticated level in Emma. While it is not possible to know that Austen was consciously aware of free indirect discourse as a stylistic device, there appears to be striking evidence that she understood its significance as a means of controlling the reader's sense of distance from characters. Emma's position within the community of Highbury – her distance from its centre and her closeness to her own set – corresponds with how closely readers ally with her thoughts and words. Near the end of the novel Emma hears that knightly may have involved himself with Harriet, and that such a match would mean the desertion of two more of her friends from Hartfield. At this point, her lowest in the novel, she fears that she and her father will be left alone, her circle of friends diminished to just themselves:

If all took place that might take place among the circle of her friends, Hartfield must be comparatively deserted; and she left to cheer her father with the spirits only of ruined happiness. (422)

Emma goes on to acknowledge that should her foreboding prove true, it would have been "all her own work" (423). Emma's realization, shared with the reader as sympathetic free indirect thought, is that she has been responsible for the loss of friendships, that her attempts to rival the circle of friends set up by Miss Bates and the town, her exclusivity, may have in fact determined her own

exclusion. However, Mr. Knightley does not marry Harriet Smith, and the heroine so used to the best treatment is married to Knightley himself, a ceremony witnessed by " a small band of true friends" (484) The final word of the novel is "union," and perhaps the lesson our heroine has learned is that the greatest cleverness can best be exercised, not in solitude, but among the best and truest friends.

Daniel P. Gunn (2004) believes that, like Emma, the narrator is flexible, playful, always open to parody and imitation in her own discourse. Since the narrator in Emma provides an authoritative centre for our judgments and responses throughout the text, her free indirect discourse renderings have a different status from Emma's; whatever we might think of the reader's mockery, we have no textual position from which we might judge or comment on her sensibility, while, in Emma's case, the narrator herself (or a character like Mrs. Weston or Mr. Knightley) frequently provides just this sort of frame. Still, the same technique or purposeful incorporation and appropriation of the speech of others is evident in both Emma's and the narrator's discourse, and we can no more discount the narrator's mediating role in free indirect passage than we can discount Emma's in her parodic imitations.

Sometimes the verbal echoes in the narrator's discourse are quite brief, as when the narrator refers to one character by the name another might use. Thus Emma is always "Miss Woodhouse" when Harriet is in question – "They remained but a few minutes together, as Miss Woodhouse must not be kept waiting" (28) – and Isabella is likely to become "poor Isabella" even when Mr. Woodhouse is being described in a narratorial sentence: "and it was therefore many months since they had been seen in a regular way by their Surry connections, or seen at all by Mr. Woodhouse, who could not be induced to get so far as London, even for poor

Isabella's sake" (78). But more frequently the narrator shifts her voice into an imitation of figural subjectivity for longer periods, falling into passages that make sustained use of free indirect discourse. Even in these sustained passages, the narrator is a consistent presence, always capable of stepping outside of the imitated figural thought and speech to comment or describe.

The narrator's subjectivity provides a gently ironic frame for Emma's free indirect discourse thoughts, which are mediated and inflected by their incorporation into narratorial discourse. We are able to derive moral instruction from the contemplation of Emma's subjectivity precisely because her free indirect discourse is represented for us through the medium of Austen's narrative voice.

Sometimes, the narrator's representation of figural subjectivity extends through several levels of filtering, as when Harriet reports what she has heard from Miss Nash about Mr. Elton's conversation with Mr. Perry:

Miss Nash had been telling her something, which she repeated immediately with great delight. Mr. Perry had been to Mrs. Goddard's to attend a sick child, and Miss Nash had seen him, and he had told Miss Nash, that as he was coming back yesterday from Clayton Park, he had met Mr. Elton, and found to his great surprise that Mr. Elton was actually on his road to London, and not meaning to return till the morrow, though it was the whist-club night, which he had been never known to miss before; and Mr. Perry had remonstrated with him about it, and told him how shabby it was in him, their best player, to absent himself, and tried very much to persuade him to put off his journey only one day; but it would not do; Mr. Elton had been determined to go on, and had said in a very particular way indeed, that he was going on business that he would not put off for any inducement in the world; and

something about a very enviable commiseration, and being the bearer of something exceedingly precious. (58-59)

Her several successive layers of transmission are represented by means of free indirect discourse echoes. Harriet's report in the breathless stringing together of clauses with "and" and the repetitions of "Miss Nash"; Mr. Perry's account of his conversation in phrases like "how shabby it was" and "in a very particular way"; and Mr. Elton's own language in "a very enviable commiseration" and "the bearer of something exceedingly precious." All of this is reported with detached interest by the narrator, who observes at the outset that Harriet repeated Miss Nash's story "immediately" and "with great delight."

In a similar manner, the narrator sometimes in a single passage will represent both the idiom of Emma's thinking and the idiom of the speaker about whom Emma thinks:

To restrain him as much as might be, by her own manners, she was immediately preparing to speak with exquisite calmness and gravity of the weather and the night; but scarcely had she begun, scarcely had they passed the sweep-gate and joined the other carriage, than she found her subject cut up – her hand seized – her attention demanded, and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her: availing himself of the precious opportunity, declaring sentiments which must be already well known, hoping – fearing – adoring – ready to die if she refused him; but flattering himself that his ardent attachment and unequalled love and unexampled passion could not fail of having some effect, and in short, very much resolved on being seriously accepted as soon as possible. It really was so. Without scruple – without apology – without much apparent diffidence, Mr. Elton, the lover of Harriet, was professing himself her lover. She tried to stop him; but vainly; he would go on, and say it all. Angry as she was, the thought of the moment

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made her resolve to restrain herself when she did speak. She felt that this folly must be drunkenness, and therefore could hope that it might belong only to the passing hour. (108)

Both Emma's subjectivity and Mr. Elton's speech are represented by means of free indirect discourse here. But they are represented in the context of the narrator's framing discourse, from which each of the figural languages provides a departure. At the outset of this passage, it is the narrator who reports that Emma hoped to "restrain" Mr. Elton and that she was "preparing" for speech, just as, after the proposal, it is the narrator who provides the important information that Emma resolved "to restrain herself when she did speak," in generous allowance for Mr. Elton's having drunk too much wine. In between these narratorial reports, the hint of Emma's subjectivity in "exquisite calmness and gravity" opens first into a representation of her bewilderment in the repetition of "scarcely," the alarmed dashes which surround "her hand seized," and the word "actually" in "Mr. Elton actually making love to her," and then, in the same sentence, into a burlesque of the proposal itself, with all of its stock phrases, hesitations, and excesses. Because of the double free indirect discourse filtering here, the comic play in the way Mr. Elton's language unfolds and adjust itself ("hoping – fearing – adoring – ready to die") must be read both as self-conscious narratorial invention – it is the rhetoric of parodic excess, each turn adding to the comic portrait – and as a representation of Emma's heightening surprise and resentment: this is also the rhetoric of indignation. From both perspectives, the comedy involves the narrator imitating figural language for our amusement – for, of course, Emma's surprise is every bit as funny as Mr. Elton's lovemaking: "Mr. Elton, the lover of Harriet, was professing himself her lover." What must impress us, in a passage like this one, is the tremendous flexibility of Austen's narrative

language, which moves in and out of the figural languages effortlessly, evoking them by sheer exactness of her ear, her sensitivity to diction and the rhythms of speech, and the human presence, the orchestrating voice behind it all. This is energetic play, presented to us by the narrator, as in most of Austen's free indirect discourse.

Of course, the increasingly sustained use of free indirect discourse to represent Emma's thoughts and perceptions in volumes 2 and 3 of Emma invites the reader to fall into Emma's imaginings and deceptions, Austen must suppress the sort of overt compelling narratorial judgments and reports that might provide a corrective to Emma's mistakes. There is an increasing tendency to blur the distinction between the narrator's report and Emma's focalizing perceptions in innocuous, unproblematic cases, so that inattentive readers will be more likely to trust Emma (and so err) when she makes judgments on thematically important material. Finally when Emma recognizes her mistakes, Austen tends to represent her thoughts at great depth, inviting the reader to experience embarrassment and shame along with her. Thus it is not difficult to find sequences of several consecutive sentences without any narrative intrusion or commentary at all, particularly toward the end of the novel:

How Harriet could ever had the presumption to raise her thoughts to Mr. Knightley! - How she could dare to fancy herself the chosen of such a man till actually assured of it! - But Harriet was less humble, had fewer scruples than formerly. - Her inferiority, whether of mind or situation, seemed little felt. - She had seemed more sensible of Mr. Elton's being to stoop in marrying her, than she now seemed of Mr. Knightley's - Alas! Was not that her own doing, too? Who had been at pains to give Harriet notions of self-consequence but herself? - Who but herself had

taught her, that she was to evaluate herself if possible, and that her claims were great to a high worldly establishment? – If Harriet, from being humble, were grown vain, it was her doing too. (340)

Passages like these are highly rhetorical – often featuring question marks, exclamations, and subjunctive transformations, as in this example – and they are close enough to direct representations of figural thought to be sometimes placed in quotation marks. The narratorial comments that introduce the passage provide a context that influences our reading: Emma is trying to "understand, thoroughly understand her own heart": she uses "every leisure moment" in this endeavour; she is "ashamed of every sensation" aside from her love for Mr. Knightley (339). These observations establish the narrative frame within which we read the extended free indirect discourse that follows, and they guide and influence our response to Emma's mortified thoughts. Thus, even as we find ourselves fully inside of Emma's consciousness in a passage like this one, her thoughts are still inflected by the surrounding narratorial context. Emma cannot be said to have "escaped from her creator" in any meaningful way.

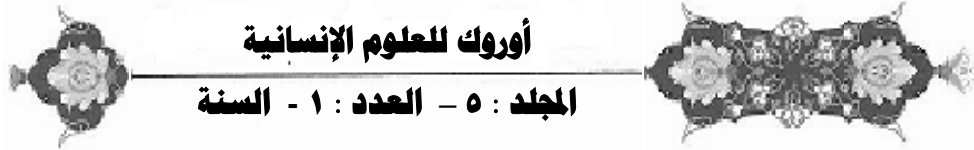
Wayne Booth wrote extensively on his studies of Austen and stood strong in his support of Austen's masterful control of her narrative. His 1961 article, "Control of distance in Jane Austen's Emma, " demonstrates the effectiveness of Austen's narrative technique. In this piece, he speaks to her self-imposed difficulties in maintaining control of her narrative in this novel as she openly illustrates Emma's flaws while at the same time keeping her heroine sympathetic to the reader. Booth states:

It is clear that with a general plot of this kind Jane Austen gave herself difficulties of high order. Though Emma's faults are comic, they constantly threaten to produce serious harm. Yet she

must remain sympathetic or the reader will not wish and delight sufficiently in her reform. Obviously, the problem with a plot like this is to find some way to allow the reader to laugh at the mistakes committed by the heroine and at her punishment, without reducing the desire to see her reform and thus earn happiness. (401)

Booth (1991) maintains that the solution to Austen's problem of maintaining this sympathy was to use Emma herself as a kind of third-person narrator, reporting her own experience. He feels that by "showing most of the story through Emma's eyes, the author insures that we shall travel with Emma rather than stand against her" (402). On the other hand, Booth points out that we attain our sympathy for Emma not only through our interiority, but also because Austen was able to heighten that sympathy for Emma by reason of her withholding inside views of others (405). He points out that Austen most probably would have committed a fatal mistake by giving the reader any extended inside view of Jane Fairfax. Not only would Jane have taken away our sympathy for Emma, but also, according to Booth, such an interior point of view would have been fatal to the author's plans of mastery surrounding Frank Churchill. Although Booth's observations about Emma's holding and keeping the reader's commiseration through her controlled intimacy and distance of the characters make sense, it would also appear that another aspect of the reader's continuing sympathy toward Emma is Austen's negotiated balance between Emma's mistakes and her punishment. She never escapes the commission of her errors without some form of retribution, and the appropriate administration of justice to transgressors generally arouses a satisfactory response from most people, particularly where characters eminently redeemable are concerned.

While Booth's observations relate to Austen's control of the reader's interior view of certain of her characters, other modern



critiques concentrate on additional devices she developed to express such an interior perspective. Particularly noticeable in her novels is Austen's cultivation of the free indirect style of writing. In their article, " 'The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury': Gossip and the Free Indirect Style in Emma (1990)," Casey Finch and Peter Bowen quote from a study by V.N.Voloshinov and Mikhail Bakhtin that essentially deconstructs the free indirect style:

[...] any utterance in free indirect style is treated by the narrative machinery "as an utterance belonging to someone else, an utterance that was originally totally independent, complete in its construction, and lying outside the given context." From its "independent existence," this utterance is transposed into an authorial context while retaining its own referential content and at least the rudiments of its own linguistic integrity. "Paradoxically, the free indirect style enables the representation of a seemingly private, independent subject – able to speak his or her own mind at any time – even as it guarantees public access to any character's private thoughts. Indeed, the dual nature of each character's interiority – is ensured by the unnameable and unlocatable nature of the narrator's voice. It is by thus keeping secret the source of community concern - for we can never know precisely who speaks in the free indirect style – that the novel makes public the private thoughts of individual characters. (5)

This is a thorough explanation of the complex process the reader faces as he reads Emma – the reader does not always know who is speaking. Finch and Bowen go on to compare Austen's technique with her eighteenth-century predecessors. They name and expand upon the various forms of narrative those predecessors used, namely, the subjective novel, whose first-person narrator is obviously announced; and the objective novel, with its confessed narrator. Both forms of narrative supply an identifiable source of

authorial authority. Emma falls under neither of these categories. Such a specific diviner does not exist in Emma, where the narrative authority of the novel is both nowhere and everywhere.

John Bender, in *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (1987), also offers a brief explanation of Austen's innovation, which he terms a "specialized form of third-person narration, also known as style indirect libre and erlebte Rede" that he says "absorbs the narrator within an impersonal, apparently unmediated representation that creates the illusion of entry into the consciousness of fictional characters" (177). He further implies that Fanny Burney and other female writers were able to consolidate the use of free indirect discourse and, as her contemporaries, influenced Austen in her use of it (212).

It has frequently been recognized that Austen's method of narration was shaped by her familiarity with the epistolary fiction of the eighteenth century. Joe Bray (2001: 19) suggests that Austen displays her mastery of the style by shifting the tensions within consciousness, which the epistolary novel privileges, to the interaction between character and narrator. Austen's deployment of free indirect thought enables subtle transitions in point of view from the omniscient perception of the narrator, to the subjective experience of various characters. Rather than restricting subjectivity, third-person narration, as Austen handles it, reveals the tension that defines subjectivity through the 'fraught debate' between the consciousness of the narrator and that of the character's revealed in free indirect thought (Ibid: 117). April Alliston (1996: 117-18) also observes the transition from epistolary form to free indirect discourse in Austen's novels; however, she claims that the omniscient narration 'frames for the reader the interiors inhabited by her heroines ... fixing [the heroine] more

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squarely in its exemplary frame, and thus placing her in the tradition of criticism that suggests Austen's third-person narrative provides an authoritative voice offering 'clear moral judgments' in place of the moral anarchy and untrammelled subjectivity of epistolary fiction.

The framing presence of the narrator plays a greater role in Austen's free indirect discourse than has usually been acknowledged. Rather than disappearing or suffering a diminution of authority, the narrator provides a consistent discursive context within which shifts into figural thought or speech register as imitations, in an atmosphere of pervasive mimicry and comic play. Hough (1970: 203-05) speaks of the "continued diversification of the surface" in Austen fiction, which is "very largely a matter of continual slight shifts in the point of view", and it is likely that many readers would agree that this effect is part of what is distinctive about Austen's narrative style. But rather than creating "an indeterminacy of narrative voice" or a "destabilization of the reader," these continual shifts and modulations are indications of Austen's prodigious artistic control.

It is clear that the heroines of Austen's novels have shown some modern traits, especially those related to this innovative technique. Austen shows a continuing sophistication, in each of her successive novels, of the inward thinking of her protagonists. Her cultivation of such inwardness was the precursor of Virginia Woolf's and James Joyce's stream-of-consciousness mode of expressing the thoughts of their characters. A comparison of Austen's heroines to modern characters since Henry James shows that they differ with those modern characters in that they do not change by discovering things about themselves, or what is best about themselves. Rather, each heroine is gradually allowed to see the world more clearly and discovers what is best for herself and

for others, and more of what Wood (1998) terms the heroine's "stable essence" is revealed to the reader, thus enabling the reader to see the character more clearly. While it seems Austen formulates Emma to become much more self-aware than Wood acknowledges.

The free indirect style of consciousness is saved for only Austen's most important characters:

The inwardness of Austen's heroines is precisely what makes them heroic in the novels. This is measurable, because Austen maintains a hierarchy of consciousness: the people who matter think inwardly, and everyone else speaks. Or rather: the heroines speak to themselves, and everyone else speaks to each other. The heroines are the only characters whose inner thought is represented. And this speaking to oneself is often a secret conversation, which Austen almost invented a new technique, a precursor or modernist stream-of-consciousness, to represent. (Wood, 1998: 26)

Because, in her later novels, Austen tends to alternate free indirect style with a first-person stream-of-consciousness, moving rapidly between different modes, Wood concludes that she is a much more radical novelist than Flaubert (27). He asserts that she has endowed her characters with consciousness, and he contends that the biggest modern difference between Austen and Woolf or Joyce is the manner in which Austen's heroines tend to conceal this solitary thought when off by themselves, while Woolf's and Joyce's characters need go nowhere in particular to think.

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