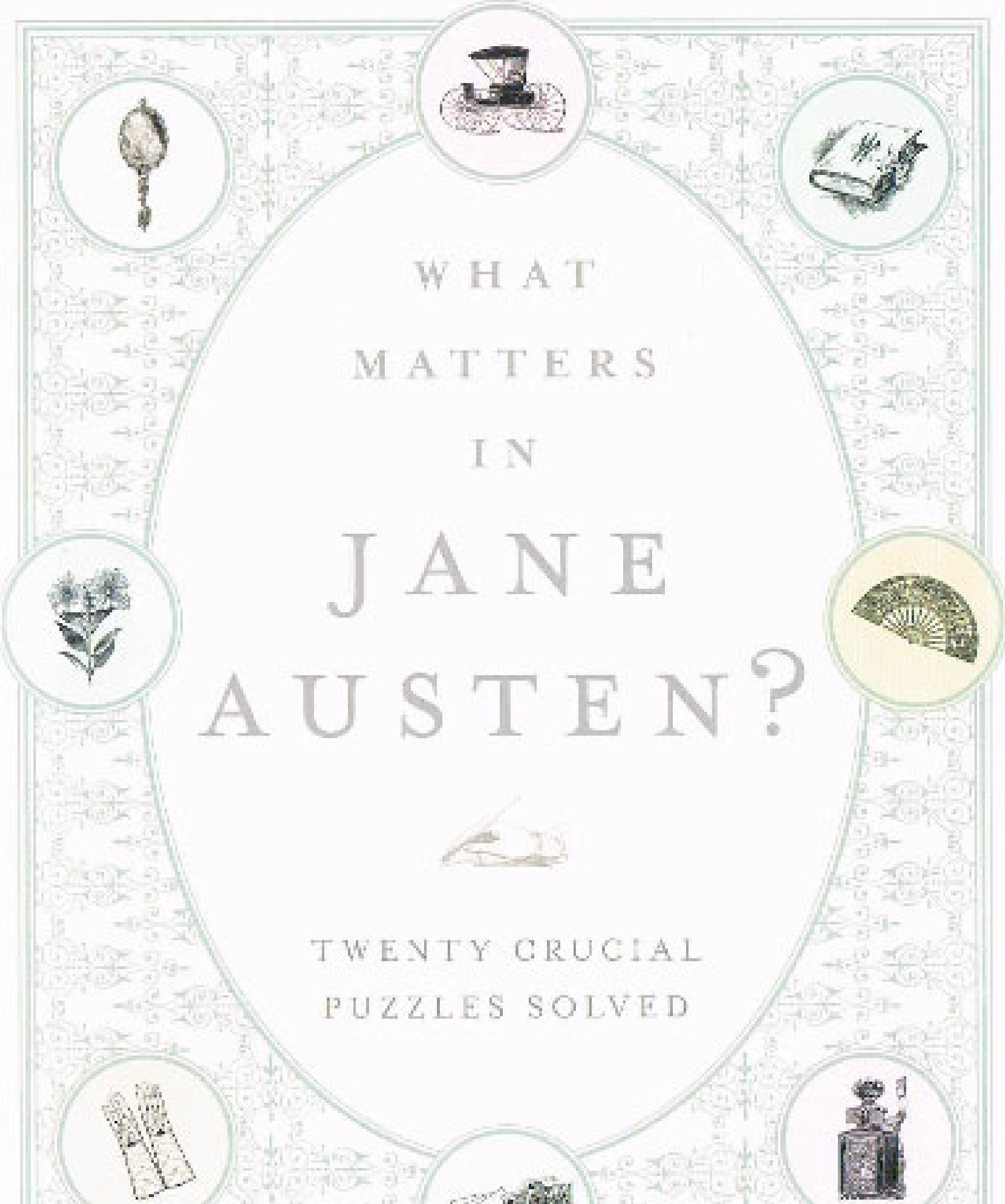

WHAT MATTERS IN JANE AUSTEN?

TWENTY CRUCIAL PUZZLES SOLVED

JOHN MULLAN

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TWENTY

How Experimental a Novelist Is Jane Austen?

> Mr. Collins, to be sure, was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband.
>
> *Pride and Prejudice*, I. xxii

Jane Austen knew that her novels were different. You can see it in her 'Plan of a Novel, according to hints from various quarters', which she wrote in around 1816, not long after publishing *Emma*. Based on the 'hints' (by which she means requests) of particular relations and acquaintances, it is also a list of ingredients learned from the very many novels that she had read. There was no doubt what would be expected of a female protagonist: 'Heroine a faultless Character herself—, perfectly good, with much tenderness & sentiment, & not the least Wit . . . All the Good will be unexceptionable in every respect—and there will be no foibles or weaknessses but with the Wicked, who will be completely depraved & infamous.'[1] Her own notes indicate that her niece Fanny Knight, whom she elsewhere recorded 'could not bear *Emma* herself', had wanted a faultless protagonist, and that family

friend Mary Cooke had preferred a heroine without wit. No more Elizabeth Bennets. The notion that a heroine should be faultless, which now sounds psychologically so improbable, would have been entirely familiar to a keen novel-reader of the period. It went back to the hugely influential fiction of Samuel Richardson, who, according to Henry Austen, was his sister's own favourite. When he revised his great novel *Clarissa* in response to what he thought were misreadings of the novel, Richardson upbraided critics who had suggested that his heroine was at fault in her conduct towards either her family or her would-be seducer, Lovelace. 'As far as she could be perfect, considering the people she had to deal with and those with whom she was inseparably connected, she is perfect.'[2]

'Pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked,' Austen wrote in a letter to Fanny Knight just a few months before her death (*Letters*, 155). Fanny had set a suitor, James Wildman, to read her aunt's novels (without telling him the identity of their author) and he had evidently objected that her female characters were not exemplary. 'I particularly respect him for wishing to think well of all young Ladies; it shews an amiable & a delicate Mind.' So 'faultless' is a word for heavy irony. In Austen's novels it is first used of a woman in *Mansfield Park*, and incredibly it is applied to Maria Bertram. 'Maria was indeed the pride and delight of them all—perfectly faultless—an angel' (I. iv). As a fragment of narration it seems extraordinary, but in context we see that it reflects Mrs Norris's opinion, and probably her words: not just 'faultless', but 'perfectly faultless'. The phrase dooms her. In *Emma*, it is Mr Knightley's word for Emma, immediately after she has accepted his proposal. 'He had ridden home through the rain; and had walked up directly after dinner, to see how this sweetest and best of all creatures, faultless in spite of all her faults, bore the discovery' (III. xiii). Even at his most enamoured, Mr Knightley knows that it is a lover's paradox. For has he not qualified to be her husband by being 'one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them' (I. i)?

Austen's interest in her heroines' faults and errors was in itself something extraordinary in fiction. Yet the novelty went beyond this. She also developed techniques for showing the contradictoriness or even obscurity of her protagonist's motivations. Here is a typical heroine of a late eighteenth-century novel by probably the most accomplished woman novelist before Austen. It is from the opening chapter of Fanny Burney's *Cecilia* (1782).

> But though thus largely indebted to fortune, to nature she had yet greater obligations: her form was elegant, her heart was liberal; her countenance announced the intelligence of her mind, her complexion varied with every emotion of her soul, and her eyes, the heralds of her speech, now beamed with understanding and now glistened with sensibility.[9]

From 'her countenance . . .' onwards it is impossible to imagine Austen writing any of this. This heroine's outward and inner self are, in a sense, the same. She looks as she is. Her every feeling is apparently legible. And because she has to possess in fullest measure the qualities of a heroine – 'understanding' and 'sensibility' – we get all that beaming and glistening. Cecilia has much to endure before she manages to marry the man she loves, but, like most heroines before Austen, she never has to endure discovering that she has been fooled by her own feelings. Austen gave her readers an entirely new sense of a person's inner life, but through new kinds of narrative rather than new insights into human nature.

Nothing is more important in fiction than the means by which a novel renders a character's thoughts.

The managing of the attraction between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy, for instance, is a triumph of technique as much as of psychological subtlety. Elizabeth Bennet is an unprecedented creation not just because of her wit and 'archness', but because Austen is able to give us a sense of her self-ignorance. At the ball at Netherfield she is disappointed by Wickham's absence and dances first with Mr Collins and then with one of the officers.

> When those dances were over, she returned to Charlotte Lucas, and was in conversation with her, when she found herself suddenly addressed by Mr. Darcy who took her so much by surprise in his application for her hand, that, without knowing what she did, she accepted him. He walked away again immediately, and she was left to fret over her own want of presence of mind. (I. xviii)

'Without knowing what she did'. It is the most innocent of phrases, but read one way directs us to perhaps the most important fact about *Pride and Prejudice* for most readers: the strong current of attraction between two characters who are superficially at odds. Elizabeth does something despite herself and by accepting the character's own version of what has happened – fretting over 'her own want of presence of mind' – the narrator encourages the reader to imagine another explanation. She does the same thing with Mr Darcy.

> He wisely resolved to be particularly careful that no sign of admiration should *now* escape him, nothing that could elevate her with the hope of influencing his felicity; sensible that if such an idea had been suggested, his behaviour during the last day must have material weight in confirming or crushing it. (I. xii)

That 'wisely' is exquisite. You could call it Austen's irony, as she commends the self-control that will eventually turn out to have been a self-delusion. But it is also something like Mr Darcy's self-commendation, for the sentence clearly adopts his own stiff and self-important turn of phrase: 'nothing that could elevate her with the hope of influencing his felicity'.

'Till this moment, I never knew myself,' Elizabeth famously cries when she has read Mr Darcy's letter and reflects on her own folly at having believed everything Wickham told her (II. xiii). Austen's most powerful innovation was to realise this lack of self-knowledge in the very voice of the narration. In *Emma* she concentrates this effect as never before, narrating almost entirely from her heroine's point of view and bending reality to match her preconceptions. We hear Emma, as we heard Mr Darcy, commending her own judgement. As Harriet Smith's visits to Hartfield become 'a settled thing', Emma congratulates herself: '. . . in every respect as she saw more of her, she approved her, and was confirmed in all her kind designs' (I. iv). That 'kind' is Emma's complacent thought about her own motivations; the approval is not so much for Harriet as for herself. Emma's self-delusions are not the subject of the narration, they are its very substance. Here she is with Frank Churchill, who has been summoned back to Yorkshire, and who she thinks is on the verge of a marriage proposal.

> He was silent. She believed he was looking at her; probably reflecting on what she had said, and trying to understand the manner. She heard him sigh. It was natural for him to feel that he had *cause* to sigh. He could not believe her to be encouraging him. A few awkward moments passed, and he sat down again . . . (II. xii)

We pass easily from what Emma supposes, to what she hears, to what seems to be fact. The cause of his sighing is not at all what she thinks. The drama of the moment is all in her imagination: he is, we later discover, considering telling her of his engagement to Jane Fairfax. Yet the narration behaves as if ruled by her consciousness.

Much later, in the twentieth century, critics came to call this technique 'free indirect style'. It is the most important narrative technique of novelists like Gustave Flaubert, Henry James, James Joyce and Franz Kafka. A third-person narrative takes on the habits of thought or even speech of a particular character. It is a style in which, as one admirer of Austen's formal daring has put it, 'the narration's way of *saying* is constantly both mimicking, and distancing itself from, the character's way of *seeing*'.[4] Nothing is more important in fiction than the means by which a novel renders a character's thoughts. This is what novels were designed to do. 'The real world becomes fiction only by revealing the hidden side of the human beings who inhabit it.'[5] The critic who wrote this, Dorrit Cohn, acknowledged Jane Austen as 'the first extensive practitioner' of what she calls 'narrated monologue' – her name for free indirect style.[6] There is some disagreement about how easy it is to find earlier examples of the technique. David Lodge acknowledges Austen as the first great pioneer of the technique, while finding some sparse examples in Fanny Burney's later fiction.[7] Jane Spencer detects glimmerings of free indirect style in the fiction of Austen's most notable contemporary, Maria Edgeworth, and something like the germ of the technique in the same novel that

Lodge scrutinises, Fanny Burney's *Camilla* (1796).[9] Certainly it is possible to find contemporaries of Austen who inserted the thoughts of their characters into the narrative without quotation marks. Here is Laura Montreville, the heroine of Mary Brunton's *Self-Control*, after she has been propositioned by the 'impetuous' Colonel Hargrave: 'He might now renew his visits, and how was it possible to prevent this? Should she now refuse to see him, her father must be made acquainted with the cause of such a refusal, and she could not doubt that the consequences would be such as she shuddered to think of.'[10] Yet this is close to the omniscient reporting of her thoughts by the narrator. There is no room to doubt either what she is feeling, or what the reality of her situation is.

Extraordinarily, Austen not only discovered the possibilities of free indirect style, she produced in *Emma* an example of its use that has hardly been matched. So confident did she feel about her control of the technique that she made her plot depend upon it. When Harriet tells her that there is another man to whom she is becoming attached, Emma thinks she knows just what her protégé is saying. After the debacle of the Mr Elton misunderstanding, she imagines that she is being self-controlled when she tells Harriet that they will not actually mention the man whom she wishes to marry: 'Let no name ever pass our lips'. In fact Emma is condemning herself to the most painful of errors. Her mistakenness is dutifully followed by the narrator, who shares with her the illusion that Harriet wishes to marry Frank Churchill. So committed is the narration to this error that there is no room for any other perspective. When Emma meets Harriet after both women have learned of the death of Mrs Churchill, we have this: 'Harriet behaved extremely well on the occasion, with great self-command. Whatever she might feel of brighter hope, she betrayed nothing. Emma was gratified, to observe such a proof in her of strengthened character, and refrained from any allusion that might endanger its maintenance' (III. ix). To wonderfully comic effect, the narration copies Emma's confidence. Utterly wrong-headed as is this vision of events – Harriet is in fact entirely apathetic about the consequences of Mrs Churchill's death – it is also unwavering. It serves the plot of the novel because it is quite likely that a first-time reader will not even discern that this passage is revealing Emma at her most deluded. For the reader who does see this, there is the deeper pleasure of seeing how Emma is working against herself. Harriet has her eyes on Mr Knightley and Emma has encouraged her. All that queenly pleasure at her own influence ('Emma was gratified, to observe . . .') means she is heading for a fall.

One of the qualities of *Emma* is that the warping of reality by its heroine is at its least obvious when it is at its most complete. This would not work so well if there were not passages where Emma's thinking is more directly dramatised. 'The hair was curled, and the maid sent away, and Emma sat down to think and be miserable.—It was a wretched business indeed!—Such an overthrow of every thing she had been wishing for!—Such a development of every thing most unwelcome!—Such a blow for Harriet!—That was the worst of all.' The exclamation marks are the sure sign that we are following the movement of Emma's thoughts. Indeed, attending to this punctuation mark should help guide us past some of the pitfalls for critics, who might mistake Emma's judgments for the author's. Here, from near the end of the novel, is the revelation of Harriet's parentage.

> She proved to be the daughter of a tradesman, rich enough to afford her the comfortable maintenance which had ever been hers, and decent enough to have always wished for concealment.—Such

> was the blood of gentility which Emma had formerly been so ready to vouch for!—It was likely to be as untainted, perhaps, as the blood of many a gentleman: but what a connexion had she been preparing for Mr. Knightley—or for the Churchills—or even for Mr. Elton!—The stain of illegitimacy, unbleached by nobility or wealth, would have been a stain indeed. (III. xix)

Emma may have been happily relieved of some illusions by Mr Knightley's declaration, but we can still follow her prejudices.

In *Emma*, narrative is refracted almost entirely through the consciousness of one character: Emma. In both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* it allows access to the minds of many different characters, even if the heroines predominate. Here is an almost surreptitious example from *Mansfield Park*. We have been watching the Crawfords and Bertrams argue over the allocation of parts in their performance of *Lovers' Vows* and have seen Maria gain the desired role of Agatha ahead of her sister Julia. Now she will be able to enjoy all her tender scenes with Frederick, played by Henry Crawford. Julia is left to sulk.

> The sister with whom she was used to be on easy terms was now become her greatest enemy: they were alienated from each other; and Julia was not superior to the hope of some distressing end to the attentions which were still carrying on there, some punishment to Maria for conduct so shameful towards herself as well as towards Mr. Rushworth. (I. xvii)

The sentence opens with the provision of information about Julia's unstated feelings, but soon begins to slide into something more indirect. If we ask ourselves what 'some distressing end' might actually mean, we see that it is an evasive phrase for a scandalous outcome: Maria's disgrace in the eyes of her husband-to-be. The sentence ends with a whole-hearted adoption of what must be Julia's own thought pattern, imagining Maria's punishment 'for conduct so shameful towards herself as well as towards Mr. Rushworth'. 'Shameful' is not the author's word, it is Julia's, as she pretends to herself that she is exercising moral judgement rather than feeling mere envy. You can see her make herself believe that she feels as she does towards her sister because of her conduct towards Mr Rushworth. You might almost have forgotten that Julia really wants Henry Crawford for herself. Austen's extraordinary narrative sophistication allows us not just to know but somehow to experience Julia's hypocrisy.

One suspects that it was a special delight to Austen to smuggle in the judgements of some of her characters. A good example is Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* reflecting on her success in coaxing Mr Collins into a proposal of marriage, which she has just accepted. 'Her reflections were in general satisfactory. Mr. Collins, to be sure, was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband' (I. xxii). Without 'to be sure', the first half of that sentence might be the narrator's assertion; the otherwise redundant phrase lets us hear it as Charlotte's internal speech. Equally, if it said 'his attachment to her was imaginary' we would be being told something. The 'must be' makes it into the character's unspoken reflection. The narration takes on the logic of Charlotte Lucas's thoughts and lets us almost hear her calculating. 'Must' often works like this in Austen's free indirect style. When Emma first has Harriet Smith visiting Hartfield, we are told that she is so becomingly deferential and 'artlessly impressed' that 'she must have good sense' (I. iii). This is the echo of Emma's self-regard. Or again, 'The friends from whom she had just parted, though very good sort of people, must be doing her harm . . . they must be coarse and unpolished.' This has nothing to do with reality: each 'must' is Emma building her own self-gratifying story. A little later, describing Harriet's traces of 'taste', the narrative adds 'though strength of understanding must not be expected', and we have the smack of Emma's complacent superiority (I. iv). When Emma thinks about Harriet's supposed attachment to Frank Churchill, a 'must' realises Emma's strange preoccupation. 'Its tendency would be to raise and refine her mind—and it must be saving her from the danger of degradation' (III. iv).

The trick is used to very different effect in *Persuasion*. We can feel the hopelessness of this self-lacerating, self-deceiving 'must' in the passage describing Anne Elliot's reaction to her sister's report of Captain Wentworth's comment about her: '"So altered that he should not have known her again!" These were words which could not but dwell with her. Yet she soon began to rejoice that she had heard them. They were of sobering tendency; they allayed agitation; they composed, and consequently must make her happier' (I. vii). 'Must make her happier'? This is self-delusion of a special kind. We might call it self-mortification. That rejoicing is an effort of correct thinking on Anne's part, beneath which we can sense her pain even more painfully. We are caught up in the very effort to make something good of something so excruciating. In *Persuasion* Austen takes to a new extreme the narrative technique she had pioneered. Take a small part of the description of Anne Elliot's meeting with Captain Wentworth after eight years apart.

> Her eye half met Captain Wentworth's; a bow, a curtsey passed; she heard his voice—he talked to Mary; said all that was right; said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to mark an easy footing: the room seemed full—full of persons and voices—but a few minutes ended it. Charles shewed himself at the window, all was ready, their visitor had bowed and was gone. (I. vii)

As Gillian Beer notices, we often seem to be not just in Anne Elliot's mind, but in her body. 'When she looks down, the scene is described to us only through hearing; when her eyes are lowered we see only what falls within her field of vision.'[10] Even the contraction of time, an ordinary fact of much narrative report, here becomes foregrounded. It all hurries past us, as it hurried past her.

Such impressionistic effects were new to fiction and are hardly paralleled before the twentieth century. Austen carried them over into dialogue, where she showed that direct speech could be used to represent not so much what was said as what others might have heard. Here is Mrs Elton at the party at Donwell Abbey, talking as she picks strawberries.

> 'The best fruit in England—every body's favourite—always wholesome. These the finest beds and finest sorts.—Delightful to gather for one's self—the only way of really enjoying them.—Morning decidedly the best time—never tired—every sort good—hautboys infinitely superior—no comparison—the others hardly eatable—hautboys very scarce—Chili preferred—white wood finest flavour of all—price of strawberries in London—abundance about Bristol—Maple Grove—cultivation—beds when to be renewed—gardeners thinking exactly different—no general rule—gardeners never to be put out of their way—delicious fruit—only too rich to be eaten much of—inferior to cherries—currants more refreshing—only objection to gathering strawberries the stooping—glaring sun—tired to death—could bear it no longer—must go and sit in the shade.' (III. vi)

It is an extraordinarily impressionistic rendering of talk that becomes a slightly mad monologue. 'Such, for half an hour, was the conversation.' Conversation with Mrs Elton is not much like an exchange, so there is justice in stripping out all voices except hers. The ability to enter into dialogue at all is an achievement. Marilyn Butler observes of *Emma*: 'The comic characters are monologuists, whereas Emma, like Mr. Knightley, is supreme in dialogue.'[15] The condensation of Mrs Elton's outpouring is fitting because the other guests at the party must be in the habit of not listening to much of what she says. A dedicated talker, she is condemned on this hot day to talk herself into exhaustion.

In his standard work on speech in fiction, Norman Page talks of the convention 'much favoured by Jane Austen, whereby the novelist is permitted to conflate into a single speech what must probably be supposed to have been uttered as several separate speeches'.[16] In fact, this convention seems invented by Austen. At one extreme it is used for the 'incessant flow' of Miss Bates. Other people must sometimes be speaking during her unstoppable monologues, but their interventions or responses are excised. Take a slice of her talk at the ball at the Crown.

> 'Thank you, my mother is remarkably well. Gone to Mr. Woodhouse's. I made her take her shawl—for the evenings are not warm—her large new shawl— Mrs. Dixon's wedding-present.—So kind of her to think of my mother! Bought at Weymouth, you know—Mr. Dixon's choice. There were three others, Jane says, which they hesitated about some time. Colonel Campbell rather preferred an olive. My dear Jane, are you sure you did not wet your feet?—It was but a drop or two, but I am so afraid:—but Mr. Frank Churchill was so extremely—and there was a mat to step upon—I shall never forget his extreme politeness.—Oh! Mr. Frank Churchill, I must tell you my mother's spectacles have never been in fault since; the rivet never came out again. My mother often talks of your good-nature. Does not she, Jane?—Do not we often talk of Mr. Frank Churchill?—' (III. ii)

Other people are saying things, but their words are simply smothered. The contraction of time is part of the effect, as if the dialogue were boiling down the effects of listening to this character.

Even better, if we were to be able to hear what Jane Fairfax or Frank Churchill were saying we might detect their awkwardness. Miss Bates goes on about Weymouth and Frank Churchill's visit to mend the spectacles, and the subtext is the relationship between these two. In fact, Miss Bates is the novel's most reliable witness, being so circumstantial that no one listens to what she is saying. She provides a record of the goings-on in Highbury from which you could, if you were attentive, derive the true story. The fact that her monologues contain all the clues to the hidden plot of *Emma* was first pointed out by Mary Lascelles in her book *Jane Austen and her Art*, but readers and critics continue to miss the fact.[17] Examine Miss Bates's speeches closely enough and you will get all that is hidden and important – but you will never look closely enough. P. D. James wrote of *Emma* as a detective story, but even she missed what would properly belong to a detective story: that the important clues are to be found in the unattended ramblings of a character beneath our notice.[18]

> 'I am a talker you know; I am rather a talker; and now and then I have let a thing escape me which I should not. I am not like Jane; I wish I were. I will answer for it *she* never betrayed the least thing in the world. Where is she?—Oh! Just behind. Perfectly remember Mrs. Perry's coming.—Extraordinary dream indeed!' (III. v)

This is just after Miss Bates has revealed Frank Churchill's blunder about Mr Perry getting a carriage. In another ramble, she lets anyone who is attending know that Jane Fairfax's decision to accept Mrs Elton's implicitly hellish posting as a governess with the Smallridges was connected to, and directly followed, news of a chaise having been ordered to Randalls to take Frank Churchill off to Richmond (III. viii). Just listen to Miss Bates and you will understand what has been going on! As she says herself, she betrays everything.

The impression of Miss Bates's outpouring is shared by everyone present. All hear her, though none interpret her. With Miss Bates, everything is spoken. What free indirect style is able to render for Austen is the opposite of this, what cannot be spoken. *Persuasion* is characterised by the heroine's absence from speech and events around her – an inwardness so absorbing that things happen to her in a kind of blur, even though we can be sure that the other characters are not noticing. Thus when Captain Wentworth helps Anne into the Crofts' carriage – 'Yes, —he had done it. She was in the carriage, and felt that he had placed her there' (I. x). The narration is accurate to her feelings, though hardly at all to the objective reality. 'She understood him. He could not forgive her . . .': but she does not understand him at all. Austen pioneered a narration that could mimic not just how a character might think, but also how she might avoid thinking. An early, unsettling example is this description of Elinor Dashwood's reaction to the news that she, her mother and her sisters are to leave their home in Sussex for Devon.

> Elinor had always thought it would be more prudent for them to settle at some distance from Norland, than immediately amongst their present acquaintance. On that head, therefore, it was not for her to oppose her mother's intention of removing into Devonshire. The house, too, as described by Sir John, was on so simple a scale, and the rent so uncommonly moderate, as to leave her no right of objection on either point; and, therefore, though it was not a plan which brought any charm to her fancy, though it was a removal from the vicinity of Norland beyond her wishes, she made no attempt to dissuade her mother from sending a letter of acquiescence. (I. iv)

The language of this is very close to Elinor's own reasoning process, but in following this it fails to mention the subtext: that Elinor loves Edward, and that moving to Devon means moving away from him. The narrative has taken on all her slightly chilly self-control.

As well as allowing the narrative to be shaped by a character's thoughts, Austen also had a technique for the suggestive avoidance of those thoughts. In *Mansfield Park* Edmund and Mary Crawford are discussing the character and occupation of clergymen, with the latter using the example of Dr Grant to show that members of the clergy are often not admirable men. Miss Crawford wishes Fanny a better fate than to be married to such a man, 'quarrelling about green goose' all week.

> 'I think the man who could often quarrel with Fanny,' said Edmund, affectionately, 'must be beyond the reach of any sermons.'
>
> Fanny turned farther into the window; and Miss Crawford had only time to say, in a pleasant manner, 'I fancy Miss Price has been more used to deserve praise than to hear it,' when being earnestly invited by the Miss Bertrams to join in a glee, she tripped off to the instrument, leaving Edmund looking after her in an ecstasy of admiration of all her many virtues, from her obliging manners down to her light and graceful tread (I. xi).

Fanny turns into the window, and turns away from us too, for Austen absents herself from knowing, or anyway from telling us, what her heroine feels. The turning away dramatises the pitch of Fanny's feeling. Mary Crawford senses something, and covers the awkward moment graciously, but she does not know the half of what Fanny feels. The narrator's own reserve about Fanny's feelings enacts the character's own tenderness on the subject of her love for Edmund. She hardly dare admit to herself her impossible passion. Austen's audacious narrative technique allows Fanny's feelings to be the undercurrent of the narrative, without becoming its subject. Any novelist can tell us what a character feels; Austen developed a means of declining to tell us. In doing so she bequeathed new technical possibilities to later novelists. Catch the dramatic and narrative subtlety of what Austen is doing as Fanny turns away from us and we indeed catch her in what Virginia Woolf called 'the act of greatness'. Characteristically, this moment of audacious fictional experiment is also an instance of the most perfect reticence.