

'The Best Chosen Language': Stylistic modes in Jane Austen

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REPEATEDLY, in reading Jane Austen's novels, we are made disconcertingly aware of a disparity between subject-matter and significance. A heroine is involved, it may be, in committing herself to a line of conduct in relation to some question in itself trivial enough: Catherine Morland declines the Thorpes' invitation to join them on a pleasure jaunt, Elizabeth Bennet gets her feet wet in visiting her sick sister, Fanny Price resists all attempts to involve her in amateur theatricals — similar instances might be multiplied many times over. Yet, on each occasion, the sense of momentous implications, of profound moral overtones, is unmistakable. This feature of her work may help to account for the most striking aspect of its critical history: the contrasting, even contradictory, judgements which have at various times been passed on the novels. For those who see only the surface, her work is inevitably limited in range and open to a charge of triviality; on the other hand, an awareness of the power of minor incidents to suggest major issues reveals her as an artist of, in F. R. Leavis's words, 'profound moral significance'.

How is this sense of the far-reaching importance of the local and the ephemeral conveyed? Very largely, it can be argued, by stylistic devices: it is Jane Austen's finely-controlled use of language which signals to the attentive reader the crucial and revealing import of episodes and conversations apparently slight in themselves. Her use of certain staple items of vocabulary to delineate, with precision and consistency, human character and motive has recently been examined¹ and attention paid to other

¹ In the present author's 'Standards of Excellence: Jane Austen's language', *A Review of English Literature*, VII, 3, 1966, 91-8.

aspects of her style, including her use of dialogue and the epistolary element in the novels;¹ still further aspects, such as the important question of the syntax of her prose, await critical consideration. The present article is concerned with a more general stylistic theme: the role of language in two of the earlier novels. For it is possible to argue that many novels, including Jane Austen's, may be profitably discussed not only by means of the traditional concepts of plot, character, moral intention, and so forth, but also in terms of the linguistic mode or modes which characterize their style.

One such mode is the ambiguity of *Northanger Abbey*. It is surely no accident that the novel begins and ends with statements that possess this quality:

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine.

. . . I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience.

At the outset, Catherine's status is deliberately equivocal: the opening sentence can be interpreted as meaning 'She became a heroine against all odds', or, with equal justification, 'Obviously she never at any time had any of a heroine's qualities'. At the conclusion, the moral of the novel is presented as a joke upon fictional didacticism. Even the writer's attitude to the reader is far from clear: is the latter the sharer in, or the victim of, this gentle mockery? Conventional expectations are teasingly disappointed: the appearance of a familiar word such as 'heroine', or a novelist's cliché such as 'the tendency of this work . . . to recommend . . .' must be reinterpreted as a signal of ironic rather than literal meaning.

Between this opening and close, there occur many instances of ambiguity, not all of the same kind. Sometimes the confusion is lexical, turning on the intrinsic capacity of words to mislead. There is a good example of this in Chapter 14, when the naive Catherine observes to Henry Tilney and his sister, 'I have heard that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in

¹ See Howard S. Babb, *Jane Austen's novels: the fabric of dialogue*, Ohio, 1962; Ian Jack, 'The Epistolary Element in Jane Austen', *English Studies Today*, ed. Bonnard, 2nd series, Berne, 1961, pp. 173-86.

London”’. Tilney quickly grasps the nature of the misunderstanding, and characteristically turns the tables on Catherine by continuing the conversation, which has begun with an accidental ambiguity, in deliberately ambiguous terms: “‘There must be murder, and government cares not how much”’. Each of the key-words in this dialogue is capable of different interpretations: *come out* (be perpetrated, be published), *author* (criminal, writer), *murder* (in fact, in fiction). When the line of misapprehensions is broken by Miss Tilney’s exclamation (‘‘have the goodness to satisfy me as to this dreadful riot”’), her brother continues it for a moment longer: ‘My dear Eleanor, the riot is only in your own brain. The confusion there is scandalous.’ The reader is again the victim of authorial deception when Catherine penetrates to the forbidden regions of the Abbey. Prepared to sup full of horrors, she enters the mysterious room and beholds ‘what fixed her to the spot and agitated every feature’ — a neat and perfectly ordinary bedroom. Astonishment and agitation are ambiguous emotions, and in this case they are produced by the commonplace rather than the extraordinary. The sentence quoted is the pivot of the skilfully-written paragraph in which it occurs.¹ The point is made explicit a few lines later: ‘Catherine had expected to have her feelings worked, and worked they were’, which has in turn its own ambiguity.

A somewhat different kind of effect is produced by passages in which reason is shown to be unreason: what appears to the immature Catherine to be logic is in fact highly illogical, and this facet of her nature is again conveyed by a device of style — in this case, by sentence-structure. At the beginning of the second volume, she tries to account for her uneasiness in the General’s company:

It could not be General Tilney’s fault. That he was perfectly agreeable and good-natured, and altogether a very charming man, did not admit of a doubt, for he was tall and handsome, and Henry’s father. (p. 129)

In terms of character-portrayal, this delightfully revealing *non sequitur* is worth a paragraph of direct statement. Later, Catherine’s

¹ See Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. R. W. Chapman, Oxford, 1923, p. 193. Subsequent references are to this edition.

suspicious concerning the General lead her to become distressingly aware of what she takes to be gross hypocrisy. In church, her eye is caught by 'the highly-strained epitaph, in which every virtue was ascribed to her by the inconsolable husband, who must have been in some way or other her destroyer': she is by now (p. 190) coming to learn that words do not always mean what they appear to say, though she is in fact again mistaken.

The main purpose of the novel, indeed, is to show that things are not always what they seem; and, given this purpose, the use of ambiguity as a marked feature of its style is hardly surprising. A related feature is the use, particularly notable in passages where the satire on the romantic novel is most prominent, of language which is of a strength strikingly in excess of what would seem to be demanded by the subject in hand. Thus, when Catherine is let down by her dancing-partner, the author comments:

To be *disgraced* in the eye of the world, to wear the appearance of *infamy* while her heart is all *purity*, her actions all *innocence*, and the *misconduct* of another the true source of her *debasement*, is one of those circumstances which peculiarly belong to the heroine's life, and her *fortitude* under it what particularly *dignifies* her character. (p. 53; the present author's italics)

In isolation, such a sentence might be taken seriously; in this context, it is appropriate to the satire but wildly out of proportion to the situation by any reasonable scale of values. The joke derives from the disparity between the words used and their referents, and is at the expense not only of the heroine's inexperience but also of the kind of fiction which adopts this hackneyed style.¹ In another passage, the reader is alerted to irony and ambiguity by the signalling device of repetition: in Chapter 15, when Catherine asks Maria Thorpe 'for some particulars of their yesterday's party', she learns that 'it had been altogether the most delightful scheme in the world; that nobody could imagine how charming it had been, and that it had been more delightful than any body could conceive'. Clearly, the

¹ There are, in Jane Austen's *Letters*, many instances of the same deliberately disproportionate use of language for comic-satiric purposes: e.g. she writes of the 'wondrous happiness' of a trunk arriving safely, and 'the never failing regret' for a dress that has been unsuccessfully dyed. See *Letters*, ed. R. W. Chapman, Oxford, 1952, pp. 190, 215.

reader is not to take Miss Thorpe's epithets at their face value: repetition is here not a dramatic but an ironic device, casting doubt upon the speaker's sincerity. The same irony extends to the authorial comment which follows: 'Such was the information of the first five minutes . . .' (p. 116).

In contrast to such characters as Miss Thorpe, whose poverty of language betrays their intellectual limitations, and even their moral shortcomings, the novel's hero, Henry Tilney, shares his creator's concern for precision in language. His sister says of him that 'He is for ever finding fault with me, for some incorrectness of language' (p. 107), and he is prompt to react to the thoughtless exaggerations and inaccuracies of female conversation. Apart from his well-known strictures on Catherine's use of the word *nice* (pp. 107-8), he also takes her up on *amazingly* (p. 107) and *faithfully* (pp. 195-6): when she innocently observes that 'Isabella promised so faithfully to write directly', he exposes the hollowness of the conventional phrase and of the attitude that lies behind it. And Catherine herself, we may surmise, is easily taken in not least because she is insensitive to the insincerities of polite speech: one of the key-passages of the novel expresses her puzzlement at the General's inconsistency:

. . . why he should say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while, was most unaccountable! How were people, at that rate, to be understood? (p. 211)

In a world in which the innocent are beset by the unaccountable ambiguity of word and action, the problem of knowing how people are to be understood becomes of supreme importance.

Precision, and the lack of it, in using language is also one of the themes of *Sense and Sensibility*, a novel through which runs an alert interest in language as an aspect of social behaviour, and particularly as a clue to the strengths and frailties of human character. The use and abuse of language by the various characters resembles the line traced by a sensitive recording instrument, and even minor quirks and deviations from the norm of what is acceptable may reveal the presence of disturbing elements. In the third chapter, Elinor and her mother discuss Edward Ferrars:

'It is enough,' said she; 'to say that he is unlike Fanny is enough. It implies everything amiable. I love him already.'

'I think you will like him,' said Elinor, 'when you know more of him.'

'Like him!' replied her mother, with a smile. 'I can feel no sentiment of approbation inferior to love.'

'You may esteem him.'

'I have never yet known what it was to separate esteem and love.'

Mrs Dashwood's enthusiasm overrides verbal distinctions that are important, as representing necessary differences of feeling, and as implying appropriate differences of behaviour. She does not share her daughter's sense that such terms as *like*, *love* and *esteem* need to be handled with care, and her unawareness of, or indifference to, these gradations of meaning is symptomatic of her confused moral perceptions. The conversation quoted above is echoed a few pages later, when Elinor uses similar terms in discussing Edward with her sister:

'I do not attempt to deny,' said she, 'that I think very highly of him — that I greatly esteem, that I like him.'

Marianne here burst forth with indignation: 'Esteem him! Like him! Cold-hearted Elinor! Oh! worse than cold-hearted! Ashamed of being otherwise. Use those words again, and I will leave the room this moment.'

Marianne is evidently her mother's daughter; and her passionate rejection of words which suggest anything less than the strongest emotion prepares us for the misjudgements that she makes later in the novel.

Another kind of differentiation is shown when Sir John Middleton tells Marianne, in Chapter 9, what he knows of Willoughby:

'And what sort of a young man is he?'

'As good a kind of fellow as ever lived, I assure you. A very decent shot, and there is not a bolder rider in England.'

'And is *that* all you can say for him!' cried Marianne indignantly. 'But what are his manners on more intimate acquaintance? What his pursuits, his talents and genius?'

Sir John was rather puzzled.

'Upon my soul,' said he, 'I do not know much about him as to all *that*. But he is a pleasant, good humoured fellow, and has got the nicest little black bitch of a pointer I ever saw. Was she out with him today?'

In an almost literal sense, Marianne and Sir John do not speak the same language: the latter sees Willoughby not in the

abstract terms of *manners*, *talents* and *genius*, each denoting a carefully-defined aspect of personality — his practical man's contempt for 'all *that*' is obvious — but in the physical terms of his shooting, his riding and his dog. When Sir John does attempt to describe character rather than behaviour, he slips into the easy clichés of gossip, as when he describes the Miss Steeles as 'the sweetest girls in the world', and a few lines later tells the Miss Dashwoods that they are 'the most beautiful creatures in the world' — a manner of speech that cuts no ice with Elinor, who 'well knew that the sweetest girls in the world were to be met with in every part of England, under every possible variation of form, face, temper, and understanding'.

As in *Northanger Abbey*, the hero is not only the spokesman for common sense in the satire directed at romantic excesses of feeling, but also insists upon a use of language that shows respect for truth, as in his speech to Marianne in Chapter 18:

'... remember I have no knowledge in the picturesque, and I shall offend you by my ignorance and want of taste if we come to particulars. I shall call hills steep, which ought to be bold; surfaces strange and uncouth, which ought to be irregular and rugged; and distant objects out of sight, which ought only to be indistinct through the soft medium of a hazy atmosphere. You must be satisfied with such admiration as I can honestly give.'

Such honesty, Jane Austen seems to suggest, is all too rare. In different ways, other characters reveal their moral natures through the words they use: Lucy Steele's bad grammar, and her addition to the word *beaux* ('I do not perfectly comprehend the meaning of the word', Elinor somewhat frigidly tells her), convict her of vulgarity out of her own mouth; and Mr Palmer significantly remarks to his foolish wife, "Don't palm all your abuses of language upon me". By such means, unobtrusively but, to the reader attuned to the matchless subtleties of her style, quite unmistakably, Jane Austen adds a new dimension to the language of fiction, and gives style itself a central importance in the discussion of her novels.