

Jane Austen, *Emma*, and the Impact of Form

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One of the criticisms leveled at formalist criticism is that it claims to be a universal method but that its practice belies those claims. Skeptical commentators on the New Criticism have regularly conceded its effectiveness with a variety of poetic texts and have granted that a Cleanth Brooks might have had a few useful things to say about the poetry of well-wrought urns and other similarly small and obviously formed objects, but they have at the same time suggested that formalism was out of its depths when it tried to deal with prose. The looseness, bagginess, and monstrosity of the novel, they have said, were more than formalism could swallow.¹

This dissatisfaction with formalist criticism's purchase on the novel is especially striking because many Russian formalists—including Shklovsky, Propp, and Bakhtin—took the novel and the tale as their special projects. How are we to understand the charge that they somehow failed to deal with the novel when their criticism occupied itself with the novel and fictional narratives more often than not? One explanation is that some Russian formalists, Shklovsky in particular, treated language as if its highest form were poetry, understood as an intense figurativeness rather than an overarching formal structure. When Shklovsky identified poetry and prose as the twin poles of literary language, poetry could be said to appear in novels whenever one released the surprise lurking in language. "Defamiliarization" meant that the novel could be infused with such poetic moments and, indeed,

¹ Catherine Gallagher's essay in this issue strongly argues along these lines in asking for a more diverse and more flexible sense of what our critical paradigms ought to be.

that the very success of a novel at achieving such "estrangement" seemed to militate against a consciousness of the novel as a long prose narrative.² Shklovskian formalism's ability to uncover the poetic in the novel came to appear as a denigration of the prosaic and quotidian in the novel. By contrast, Propp's account of narrative, based on the anonymous prose of the folktale, stressed the relationship between a whole narrative action and its parts, so that issues of sequence and variation loomed large. Propp's formalism explicitly argued that the anonymity of the folktale's authorship—the sense that anyone and everyone in a community had had a role in the tale's development and preservation—applied to the agents of the tales themselves: agency became such a capacious and formally empty notion that one no longer needed human actors or characters to achieve it; animals and pots and kettles could carry the narrative action as well as a human could.³ Action, in other words, displaced character, and any sense of characterological depth looked misplaced in an analysis in which both animals and inanimate objects might play active roles.

This essay argues that what formalist criticism has missed in the novel is character and, indeed, that the criticism developed in response to Foucault's work has been formalist not only in its way of identifying discourses but also in its efforts to dispatch character to the shadows. In his classic Foucauldian study *The Novel and the Police* and even in his earlier *Narrative and Its Discontents*, for example, D. A. Miller argues that the novel's self-reflexive operations that give readers the sense of entering a character's consciousness are discursive structures rather than the products of individual consciousness.⁴ Discursive

² See particularly Victor Shklovsky, "The Resurrection of the Word," in *Russian Formalism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973), 41–7.

³ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Louis A. Wagner, trans. Laurence Scott, 2d ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), esp. 43–50.

⁴ Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

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regimes, that is, become the pots and kettles of Proppian analysis, the actors that make it clear that activity in no way requires actual persons. Insofar as self-consciousness is identified with policing, the project of inventorying and distribution that Adam Smith describes as a basic function of civil society, self-consciousness does not provide an independent standpoint from which to judge one's society but is instead one of that society's most flexible and effective tools.

As a critique of the techniques of self-reflection that have been formalized in the social sciences, Foucauldian criticism found a new set of grounds on which to eliminate character. It seized on that peculiar novelistic formal invention—*style indirect libre*, also known as “free indirect style” or represented speech and thought—in such a way as to stunt the force of its identifiability as a form. Since I believe that free indirect style is the novel's one and only formal contribution to literature, this essay attempts to explain precisely what that contribution is and what its consequences are. The difficulties may seem to begin with the term itself, which appears to be associated with the unanalyzable notion of style rather than with the more substantial notion of representable form. Style exploits the allusive capacities of the novel or any other verbal medium and its ability to place itself in various genealogical relations with other novels, plays, and poems; style involves all of the things about a novel that prompt literary interpretation and that sometimes approach the palpability of form. With any analysis of a novel from a stylistic point of view, a critic may claim that certain chapters count as distinct and recognizable units (as in Mark Schorer's account of *Emma*), but in the process the critic always assumes that the recognition of the units is very much part of the interpretive work and must be argued for as a critical insight rather than taken as a formal given, as the recognition of the octave and sestet of a sonnet would be.⁵

In calling attention to the question of literary form, I do not mean

⁵ Schorer, “The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse,” in *Emma: A Casebook*, ed. David Lodge (London: Aurora, 1970), 170–87. Making this claim for the unique importance of free indirect style means treating the chapter less as the novel's defining formal unit than as a divisional marker. Even though the chapter becomes a widely used novelistic unit, it is closer, in my view, to the comma and the period and other formal markers of the units of thought than it is to a formal feature that can detach itself from such markers of thought.

to suggest that formal devices are formal insofar as they are always being recognized. Obviously, people read sonnets before they know that there are characteristic ways of dividing them up, and their inattention to the octave and sestet does not count as latent knowledge. Before they are conscious of the value of such formal divisions, their impressions of turns and groupings in the sonnet are exactly on a par with the perceived groupings of chapters in a novel; a critic always argues for them as conceptual rather than formal divisions. But the statement that a sonnet contains an octave and a sestet is a formal claim to exactly the same degree as it takes itself to be unimpeachable and past all debate. Even if you failed to notice that the sonnet that Romeo and Juliet speak between them was a sonnet the first time you read Shakespeare's play, you would be able to recognize it as such from the moment that someone pointed it out to you. While you might also want to argue that the conceptual work of the sonnet echoed its formal procedures, much as the sound might echo the sense, you would not need to rely on either a conceptual or an acoustic backup to prove that the sonnet remained a sonnet. It could be said to be formally achieved, in that it would not disappear simply because you were not attending to it. It could regularly be found, pointed out, or returned to, and the sense of its availability would not rest on agreements about its meaning.

To suggest that formalism works in a sonnet the way free indirect style works in novelistic prose is merely to argue, in the first place, that free indirect style is just as formal as any formal feature of poetry and, in the second, that criticism has habitually missed this fact in such a way as to represent it in conceptual rather than formal terms, as if it were a stylistic matter. Indeed, ideological or discursive criticism has consistently treated free indirect style as an example of what I have called the stylistic as opposed to the formal. Such criticism claims that free indirect style is yet another aspect of the deeply conceptual link between individuals and discursive regimes: since certain ideas or ways of proceeding are widely available to members of a general population, the ideas themselves come to have such a strong existence that they effectively eliminate the particularity of their individual agents or operators. Ideological criticism, that is, arises from the classic social-scientific

assumption that one can learn something about individual persons' situations by continually comparing them with an aggregative account, inasmuch as the individual and the aggregate are essentially smaller and larger versions of one another. While this body of criticism emphasizes that persons are necessary to operate the tissue of aggregative thought, it also implies the equality, or at least the equivalence, of persons by insisting on the radical interchangeability of all members of a class. The brilliance of ideological criticism, particularly in its supple Foucauldian version, is that it has an answer to the question of the relationship between the social system and the individual. Whereas apparent deviations from social convention might once have looked like a challenge to the society that produced them, Foucault made it clear how unusual it was for persons to challenge their society radically, because the society—conceived as an implicit system—spoke and so made it all but inevitable that anyone would offer a fairly recognizable response. If power came from everywhere, the system of power would ultimately reveal our places in it to us. Individual persons might be rebellious or exceptional or noncompliant in the moment, but these moments would themselves come to look exceptional or more apparent than real, instances not of rebellion but of conventional deviation.

Casey Finch and Peter Bowen, in their fine essay "The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury': Gossip and Free Indirect Style in *Emma*," provide an excellent example of the critical stance I want to identify. In their view, "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.'"⁶ The "very force of free indirect style is the force of gossip," because both "function as forms par excellence of surveillance, and both serve ultimately to locate the subject—characterological or political—within a seemingly benign but ultimately coercive narrative or social matrix" (3–4). Unlike Patricia Meyer Spacks, who stresses the way in which the authority of gossip is minimized by its being gendered female, and Jan B. Gordon, who sees gossip as a challenge to the

⁶ Finch and Bowen, "The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury': Gossip and Free Indirect Style in *Emma*," *Representations* 31 (summer 1990): 1–18.

"recuperative, paternal authority' that the novel is concerned to uphold," Finch and Bowen point to the ambivalent acknowledgment of gossip as, on the one hand, the "loose" and trivial talk of women and as, on the other, "a serious and privileged form of knowledge" (3).⁷ Thus they characterize Austen's use of free indirect style as making each character's interiority "at once perfectly private and absolutely open to public scrutiny" and emphasize the secrecy that attaches to "the source of community concern—for we can never know precisely who speaks in the free indirect style" (5).

For Finch and Bowen, the difficulty of connecting the narrative authority of gossip and of free indirect style with a specific individual is identical with its force. They therefore conclude that "almost total authority—a near epistemological hegemony—is staged and enacted because its agency is either elided altogether or spread so thinly that it cannot ever be named as such. Ultimately, the irresistible force of public opinion expresses itself by anonymity, by an authority that is everywhere apparent but whose source is nowhere to be found" (15). The kinds of questions that Austen criticism once registered in terms of irony or the unreliability of the narrator disappear from their account, and rightly so, since it is difficult to speak of either irony or unreliability that cannot locate itself against an endorsed or at least a stated or reliable position. For them, the collective voice of communal gossip achieves its force by taking over the internal vocal cords of individuals without making them entirely available as individuals, so that Mrs. Weston's approving thoughts about a match between Emma and Mr. Knightley strike them as a good example of how "free indirect style functions specifically to disguise the ideological imperatives of the novel as the autonomous ideation of one of its characters" (14). As Mel Brooks might say, all the characters are speaking, but Mrs. Weston "has the mouth."

The Finch-Bowen approach, in line with Foucauldian criticism generally, can identify a social collective, but only in such a way as to make all the individuals who are part of it look as if they ought to be relatively interchangeable. Even though they point out not only that gossip "constitutes a community by separating who is and who is not

⁷ Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Gordon, "A-filiative Families and Subversive Reproduction: Gossip in Jane Austen," *Genre* 21 (1988): 5–46.

crucial to whatever economic (and marital) exchanges are at stake within the novel's representations" but that its "second fundamental mechanism concerns the establishment of a 'naturally' enforced hierarchy" (7), the scare quotes around the word "naturally" are designed to make it appear as if the hierarchical gestures of the novel were themselves illusory. Characters in the novel might appear to perform the assessments of value that, as John Barrell has suggested, the eighteenth century introduces into general discourse,⁸ but their terms are the social system's unconscious imperatives.

But what does the social system think or feel or say? If, as John Rawls proposes, governments attempt to produce a voice of public reason by instituting procedures to represent the social structure as a subject and to give it a language to speak, his project is an interesting one because of his consciousness of the difficulty of saying exactly when a community speaks.⁹ The problem with representing the general will, not just for Rousseau and Kant but for a host of other political thinkers, is that it is extremely difficult to determine—not because it is impossible to take the pulse of popular opinion but because it is too easy. As the professionals who comment on and consult with politicians regularly remind us, George Bush was seventeen percentage points behind Dukakis but won the presidential election in 1988, and he had a 91 percent approval rating during the Gulf War but lost the presidential election in 1992. The moral is not that public opinion is fickle but that changeability means virtually nothing when one attempts to describe public psychology, because what public psychology lacks is precisely the connective tissue that enables individual psychology to count as psychology: the memory and the anticipation that make it possible for one to tell the difference between one's own thoughts and someone else's and that make one feel bound to one's own thoughts and feelings as one is not to other people's thoughts and feelings. What public psychology lacks is the ability to be self-conscious, which is not so much the ability to be accurate about one's own statements and

⁸ Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*: "The Body of the Public" (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 1–68, esp. 8–10.

⁹ This position is so very nearly omnipresent in Rawls's work that it makes little sense to identify a specific essay. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999); and Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

assessments (in the way that Finch and Bowen, for instance, suggest in talking about how individual epistemologies line up with the technology of truth) as the ability to see oneself as an interconnected whole. What keeps public psychology from being a psychology is that, in never being able to see itself as a whole, it never recognizes its changeability as significant. A person may feel the need to explain a point of view and the changes in it; public opinion never does.

The peculiarity of the Foucauldian analysis is that it imagines that the social system is already constituted as a self-sustaining and self-renewing whole, when in fact that wholeness needs regularly to be supplied, either by the kinds of strongly articulated bureaucratic structures that someone like Bentham engineered or by the kind of attention that Rawls pays to introducing the rhythms and reviews of procedural justice into his account of government. It is therefore particularly surprising to hear that any structure that can scarcely recognize itself as a structure is said to be capable of lending fully formed identities to individuals, that it has assignments to give them, words to put in their mouths, and so forth. But if I am arguing that social structures have the appearance of durability and authority only because the demands on their persistence are so minimal, I do not mean that consciousness is merely an individual project. Nor does Austen. The brilliance of her deployment of free indirect style is that it recognizes what we might want to think of as a communal contribution to individuals.

The notion of a communal contribution helps explain a persistent problem in the criticism of *Emma*: that Emma Woodhouse is the heroine even when she produces a series of misjudgments and statements that are rude or at least insensitive. A communal contribution enables us to recognize Emma as good even when she is not. Its voicing in free indirect style taps into the approach of the social sciences that allows us (and direct marketing firms) to see that someday we may well do what many people roughly like us would do. In other words, the sense of a communal contribution makes quantification operate as a strong narrative principle in the novel. Whereas the bildungsroman, in traditional descriptions, emphasizes education as an individual matter (in which one is proved right or wrong by the world), Austen uses a community to foreshadow an individual's actions—to say of Emma, from the very outset, that she will have come out right by the end. In that,

the community is simply a version of Freud's much maligned statement that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," which is not so much a claim that each individual progresses through every stage of human evolution as an assertion that the individual can be seen as an individual only through a chorus. It assimilates the narrative present of an individual to the future perfect tense.

The sheer force of communal numbers projects a future from what would otherwise be the simple relation of a series of statements in the present tense. This narrative approach shares a deep affinity with the basic procedures of the social sciences, which project a time line and a series of prophecies for individuals less from their own histories than from an analysis of the group. Derrida's deconstructive analysis may have taught us to question the transfer of the communal or aggregative analysis to the individual, but Austen's fiction anticipates this difficulty in the form of a conundrum: individuals can be described as having temporal extension and a traceable history only from the standpoint of the constant comparison of their current situations to a projected communal stance, but individuals would cease to be individuals (would become indistinguishable from one another) if they ever actually coincided with the communal stance.

This problem dictates the importance of the marriage plot in Austen and enables us to see that her treatment of it is, finally, formal to an extraordinary new degree. This claim may seem counterintuitive, if one thinks of the enormous significance attached to marriage plots in a host of eighteenth-century novels from *Pamela* to *Evelina* and beyond. Yet one can begin to see the extent of Austen's innovation by comparing *Emma* with the eighteenth-century novels thus plotted, in which the marriage serves chiefly to round off the action. Indeed, these novels reflect the vestigial influence of the drama in that they seem to be plotted backward from their endings: the death or deaths for the final scene of a tragedy, the wedding or weddings for the conclusion of a comedy. This large-scale narrative unit, in which the beginning and the ending define the forms of narrative unity that someone like Propp analyzes, can accommodate a great deal of to-and-fro within its framework. (In *Pamela* or *Clarissa* an almost infinite number of reprises and complications can take place without affecting the basic movement of the narrative, just as the tales that Propp describes are

open to various complexifying gestures without sustaining any impact to their basic structure.) Yet while *Emma* echoes and relies on this unifying marriage-plot structure, Austen adds a new feature to it: ever attentive to the formation of public language, an amalgam of the thoughts and judgments of many people, she also recognizes the pressure that this formation exerts on individuality.

The eighteenth century had frequently been intrigued with the problem that the emotions posed for communicability, since being able to hear others talk about their emotions and empathize with them was patently different from actually feeling those emotions. Hume had been struck by the difficulty of finding any help for depression in his friends' comfort. Burke had claimed that in principle we could experience other people's emotions if we bothered to put our bodies in the same postures that they adopted, but he was conscious of how rarely we did so. For Hume, individual emotions—certainly those of depression—marked the emotions' inertness in the face of public language. For Burke, individual emotions could speak a completely transmissible language, but individuals rarely exercised the option of acting out other people's bodily movements enough for this communication to take place. (The complications of trying to experience the emotions of several interlocutors at once are immediately apparent.) For Austen, by contrast, the emotions are not so much to be experienced as deduced.

Insofar as free indirect style involves a representation of thought rather than an expression of it, it sharply distinguishes itself from either direct or indirect discourse. In English it does not possess its own distinctive verb forms as it does in French, where it appears in the exclusively written form of *récit*. English free indirect style may share its verbs with expressive statements, but even so it has clearly identifiable differences from them. We can illustrate this point by translating a statement from direct discourse to indirect discourse and then to free indirect style. Thus the sentence "Susan said, 'God is coming in anger'" in direct discourse becomes "Susan said that God was coming in anger" in indirect discourse. The two are more or less equivalent statements about the state of affairs that a speaker is reporting. But both formulations are, I think, accurately recast in free indirect style if we describe Susan speaking or thinking, break off, and produce the

sentence “God is coming, and is she pissed” (with the last three words in free indirect discourse).

The emphasis on a representation that implies what must be thought is strong enough to justify a critic like Ann Banfield in describing free indirect style as producing “unspeakable sentences.”¹⁰ Obviously, we do speak in this way a considerable amount of the time—when we tell stories, however much or little they may be based in reality. We speak in this unspeakable mode whenever we proceed as though we could speak from within another person’s consciousness. It marks the advent of fictionality in the most ordinary exchanges of daily life. But while free indirect style is not an exclusively literary phenomenon, it is regularly associated with the novel. It is, like the capitalism of the Middle Ages or the class system before Marx, something that one can recognize as a practice even before it has a name. Indeed, many people have wanted to claim a special affinity between the novel and free indirect style and to suggest that it most fully came into a name with the novel. The importance of this connection becomes clear when one looks at the differences between the drama and the epistolary novel, and between the epistolary novel and what we think of as the novel proper. In the theater’s basic format of characters representing themselves through their speech and actions, we readily see a basic limitation. It is not that characters are required by the genre to say what they think in the presence of the characters they are both speaking to and interacting with, that they must dare to have views of other characters in their presence—though one of the pleasures of drama is that it depicts characters delivering insults and parodic responses under the cloak of effective invisibility. Simply put, the limitation of theater is that it consists of almost nothing but direct quotation, so that drama must continually create an unfolding plot that motivates individual characters to present their views, to have thoughts that rise to the level of the expressible.

The epistolary novel as Richardson practices it may seem to move in the opposite direction from drama by insisting on the importance of its characters’ closeting themselves and not having a reliable audience

¹⁰ Banfield stresses this notion by titling her study of represented speech and thought *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).

(since their letters may or may not be read). Yet in one crucial respect it coincides with the imperatives of drama, expanding and exaggerating the requirement that characters represent themselves and the details of daily life in their own persons, and only through their words. The implausibility of such massively examined life has long occupied commentators. Critics from Fielding through Michael McKeon have argued that one could not—indeed, should not—believe that anyone could manage both to live and to conduct such constant self-representation as Pamela does.¹¹ They charge that the epistolary novel presents its characters with lives that are too extensively self-representing to be true. Moreover, they say, such representations of one's own experience constitute a falsification of it. Fielding suggests in *Shamela* that conscious self-representation is unimaginable without a will to deceive others, and he aligns the representation of experience with an essentially Machiavellian consciousness of others and the impact one might hope to have on them. McKeon describes the possibility of extreme skepticism that arises when these self-representations seem to know no limit and when one begins to wonder if there are not more letters out there somewhere to alter the record.

The epistolary novel of Richardson and Rousseau, which began in repudiation of the theater's commitment to the spectacular, was quickly faced with an inability to authenticate itself. I do not mean to identify simply the problem of covert authorship implicit in Richardson's pose as editor of the letters of a Pamela or a Clarissa. Indeed, that problem can be said to have been laid to rest in Rousseau's preface to *La nouvelle Héloïse*: "Although I carry nothing but the title of editor here, I have worked hard on this book, and I don't disguise it. Have I made the whole thing up, and is the entire correspondence a fiction? People of the world, what difference does it make to you? It's certainly a fiction for you."¹² With that statement, the tables were turned. In saying that the epistolary novel was "certainly a fiction" for worldly readers, Rousseau raised two points at once. First, he made an explicitly realist claim: even the most truthful statements that other

¹¹ McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), esp. 47–64.

¹² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie; ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Pléiade, 1969), 5.

people make to us must be fictional to us, insofar as they are reports on their own experience rather than on ours. Rousseau would not be led astray by the effort to bolster the epistolary novel's claim to have stumbled on the letters that it merely packaged for distribution but would stand up and identify himself without disguise. The second aspect of his remark—its emphasis on audience—was more problematic for the novel. For as Rousseau went on to say that “this book wasn't at all made to circulate in the world” and that “the style will repel people of taste” (5), the epistolary novel came to look less like a fiction than like a denunciation of everyone who found it unreal. It was not merely that the protagonists of epistolary novels like those of Richardson and Rousseau should reside in the country and appear almost as hermits who had sacrificed experience for the representation of experience. It was also that the readers of epistolary novels were asked to occupy the representations of such solitaires. As the “man of letters” who engages in an imaginary dialogue with the “editor” puts it, it is worthwhile, before publishing such a volume, to “remember that the public isn't made up of hermits” (18). Moreover, the publishing world is organized such that the only path by which a solitary's novel can be delivered to its proper audience of solitaires is *through* the public world that it challenges and offends.

The epistolary novelist may divide himself into the “man of letters” and the “editor” for the sake of a dialogue with himself; he may produce letters on behalf of characters who are aware of the persons they direct their correspondence to; but the epistolary novel tries, ultimately, to present those characters as individuals rather than as persons in society. When, as at the end of *Pamela* or *Clarissa* or *La nouvelle Héloïse*, the novels fill with testimonials to their heroines, the characters who make them are identified less as representatives of the public than as refugees from it, saved by the force of the example of the novels' heroines.

This brief history (which is simultaneously historical and conjectural, in that it tries to locate both a chronological progression and a logic for it) puts us in a position to see the force of free indirect style more clearly. The theater consists of nothing but direct quotation so as to insist on speakability; the epistolary novel regularly confines itself to indirect quotation in the most expansive self-representation imagin-

able and makes one's individual moral position look like a debating point; but the novel of free indirect style has characters and society speaking the same language. Free indirect style carries with it the implicit claim that characters have what Dorrit Cohn has called "transparent minds," highly legible to their narrator even when they are not directly speaking or acting.¹³

In the mode that Cohn calls "psycho-narration," the narrator is a mind reader, credited with "superior knowledge of the character's inner life and his superior ability to present it and assess it" (29). Yet this very mode threatens the narrator's own individuality: the free-standing and audible narrator of a Fielding becomes an endangered species. For Wayne C. Booth, markedly dissonant psycho-narration that attempts to recuperate that independent narrator becomes an absolute requirement for the ideal novel, the novel of moral guidance whose characters are sorted into good and bad, better and worse.

In the way that Booth or A. Walton Litz reads *Emma*, free indirect style operates as something of a plot against its central character, a thorough record of her errors seen from without, as errors.¹⁴ Taking that record seriously, Booth must first find Emma highly blameworthy and then demonstrate how she is redeemed by the affectionate interest that the other characters have in her. But the standard that Booth establishes for Emma is infinitely higher than any that most of us could meet. At a stretch, we can accuse her of (1) snobbishness toward Robert Martin, the yeoman farmer who is in love with Harriet Smith, and the Coles, the newly prosperous business family in the neighborhood; (2) misplaced disparagement of Robert and excessive optimism about Mr. Elton as prospective spouses for Harriet; (3) a moment of heedless cruelty toward Miss Bates, when she insists that Miss Bates limit herself to three contributions in an improvised parlor game committed to collecting dull observations or clever ones; and (4) a moment of ungenerous speculation to Frank Churchill that the piano given anonymously to Jane Fairfax might have come from Mr. Dixon

¹³ Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).

¹⁴ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 243-66; Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 132-49.

and thus might be a gift from the man whom Jane's close friend has recently married.

Booth is able to parlay these minor social infractions into serious lapses of judgment and signs of Emma's willful imaginism, and Litz can criticize her for failing to acknowledge that "freedom is dependent upon a recognition of limitations" (149), because they fundamentally misconceive the authorial relationship to character in Austen's use of free indirect style. While they insist that there is a clearly available narrative position from which to judge Emma, I would argue, by contrast, that the novel is hard on Emma to exactly the same extent that it is committed to her. Moreover, it is hard on her *because of* this attachment. In reporting Emma's words and actions but especially in using her memory as the central locus for remorse, the novelist makes Emma's blameworthiness inseparable from her privileged position. Emma has been identified to us at the opening of the novel as "doing just what she liked, highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgment, but directed chiefly by her own."¹⁵ The novel immediately flags the "real evils" of Emma's situation as "the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself," (1) and critics have followed by remarking that Emma is headstrong and spoiled. Yet it is hard to imagine any character we would take seriously—in fiction or in life—who was not "directed chiefly" by her own judgment and who did not suffer from the "real evils" of "having rather too much her own way" and of thinking "a little too well of herself." When Emma and Knightley disagree about the wisdom of Emma's having strongly suggested to Harriet that she should reject Robert's proposal, it is Knightley rather than Emma who is described, by that composite voice that both is and is not Emma's alone, as "absolutely satisfied with" himself and "so entirely convinced that [his] opinions were right and [his] adversary's wrong" (44). Neither in his case nor in hers is it a fault to think that the opinions one holds are the right ones, because that is what it means to hold an opinion.

Austen's free indirect style does not, however, simply align itself most closely with Emma and make her memory the one that will be the basis for acknowledging the mistakes that she has made. It also

¹⁵ Austen, *Emma: An Authoritative Text*, ed. Stephen M. Parrish, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1993), 1.

helps operate as a version of the problem that Emma—or any other person or character—must face, namely, that the most nearly indisputable representation of a general will or social character appears in the narrator's free indirect style. Just as our sense of Emma's preeminence in the novel develops from the fact that her mistaken assessments and predictions are taken as seriously as only the person who committed them could take them, so the novel credits Emma and other characters with a sociological knowledge that can be learned only experimentally.

This sociological knowledge of gossip and free indirect style can be developed by trial and error, moreover, precisely because it does not have a consistent enough logic to be predictable. The novel provides exact information about the ages of its eligible young persons: Emma is almost twenty-one (1); Knightley is thirty-seven or -eight (4); Elton is twenty-six or -seven (7); Harriet is seventeen (13); Robert is twenty-four (17); Frank is twenty-three (62); Jane is, at twenty-one, described as "exactly Emma's age" by those who would like them to become friends (67). Yet it provides it so scrupulously that one recognizes that there is no fixed age at which a man or a woman expects to marry and no fixed similarity or degree of difference in ages between the partners in marriages. Further, although the novel identifies its characters according to their social circumstances, it does not make the socioeconomic data amount to a real sorting device. Robert is a yeoman farmer; Harriet is the natural daughter of an unnamed somebody (later identified as a tradesman) who has the means with which to send her to a modest boarding school; the Woodhouse family is "first in consequence" in Highbury (2-3); and Knightley is similarly well established at Donwell Abbey in the next parish (11). But if the eventual marriages of these couples seems to have been predicted by the happy fit between the partners' individual social circumstances, think of some of the novel's other couples. The Miss Taylor who has just married the widower Mr. Weston at the opening of the book has held "the nominal office of governess" (1) in the Woodhouse family, as if to justify Emma's sense that Harriet might well end up as Elton's wife, and Frank and Jane are likewise an economically mismatched pair. Emma and Knightley make a marriage that preserves the economic status quo

and even looks as if it could have been arranged just as easily as it could have been entered into exclusively by its principals (particularly given the parallel marriage of her sister and his brother). Yet it is clear that even the traditional understanding of matches is unrecognizable when so many other marriages do not follow the same pattern of identifying partners of equivalent status. There are, then, good reasons that Emma is not as clear-sighted a matchmaker—either for others or for herself—as she might be. Although her mistakes are preserved and foregrounded for us, others are frequently wrong as well. If Emma exaggerates her own success in matching Miss Taylor with Weston and proceeds to try to achieve similar success in marrying Harriet to Elton or to Frank, the Westons make their own miscalculation in trying to pair Emma with Frank.

It may seem as if we were talking about universal mystification when it comes to marriage, so that making a mistake about who ought to marry whom and even about whom or whether one ought to marry oneself is so nearly inevitable that the wisest course is to avoid prediction altogether. But complete indifference to other people's marriages—represented so amply in Mr. Woodhouse's sense that marriages, in producing change, are distressing and best not thought of—is neither common nor highly valued in the novel. Marriages and the courtships that lead to them have become a popular public recreation. If Lord Hardwick's Act of the 1750s decreed that marriages be agreed to in public and that wedding ceremonies themselves be a matter of public concern (so as to thwart what legal language called "abduction of heiress"), the social world of *Emma* has so far absorbed its function as a witness that it constantly promotes marriage. Indeed, the pleasure that the community takes in marriages is so intense that a marriage can effectively wipe an individual's slate clean: in Highbury a "young person, who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of" (121). Just as Wordsworth essentially says that death makes all of its subjects look good to the living, so Austen suggests that marriage performs the job of transformation and transvaluation.¹⁶

Marriage counts so much as a breaking of the bank that the first time Emma is recorded as contemplating marriage comes when Mrs.

¹⁶ "Essay upon Epitaphs," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 2:56–7.

Weston realizes that "all their wishes of giving Emma" the distinction of beginning the ball cannot prevail, that Mrs. Elton "must be asked to begin the ball; that she would expect it" (220). "Emma must submit to stand second to Mrs. Elton, though she had always considered the ball as peculiarly for her. It was almost enough to make her think of marrying" (221). Marriage might look as though it revolved around public distinction, as it surely does for Augusta Hawkins Elton, with her references to her *caro sposo* that begin to seem especially pretentious when she calls Elton her *cara sposa* (or, in the Chapman edition, her *caro sposa*) (205).

Marriage is less a state or a contract than a distinction, so that characters like the Eltons marry largely to be able to display marriage. Indeed, marriage serves the purposes of conspicuous consumption so effectively for both Eltons that they are never happier than when goading one another to have Elton try to humiliate Harriet by refusing to recognize her as a suitable dancing partner. In this little scene, which Knightley puts an end to by dancing with Harriet himself, it is easy to see the Eltons as people overreaching themselves and pretending to a status they do not have. Yet they are almost as accurate about their standing in the world as it is possible to be. After all, both George and John Knightley, in warning Emma against her design of pairing Elton with Harriet, have pointed to Elton's consciousness of his value in the world; after all, Mrs. Weston and everyone else automatically if belatedly realizes that Mrs. Elton's being a new bride gives her precedence over every other guest.

With the Eltons one can see the emergence of the concept of a social rule. The Eltons' accurate sense of their standing in the social hierarchy and of the rules of the social game enables them to succeed *against* others' wishes—without, that is, continually being liked or endorsed by them. Mrs. Elton can stand first in the dancing despite the fact that Emma, Mr. and Mrs. Weston, and Frank have thought of it as Emma's ball; Mrs. Elton can wrest an invitation to Donwell Abbey from Knightley in the face of his distinct lack of enthusiasm for her; and Mrs. Elton can find Jane a place as governess even though such a favor is not at all what Jane wanted (261). While she looks always in the wrong, Mrs. Elton is identified as never mistaken, both in the sense of never acknowledging herself as mistaken and in the sense of being

right about the rules, as if she had consulted Amy Vanderbilt or Martha Stewart for the proper way to stage a picnic. If the novel insists on a relationship between correctness and amiability, free indirect style might involve a representation of a social game that one must learn to read correctly (as Booth and Litz argue). Yet it is a peculiar thing for the successful application of the rules to be associated with a character (Mrs. Elton) or characters (Mr. and Mrs. Elton) singled out for the opprobrium of everyone who is more or less of their generation. Moreover, the Eltons seem to embody exactly the position that Emma always recommends: one that converts the apparently haughty reserve of a Jane into public expression and goes along with Emma's denunciation of Frank and Jane for having "come among us with professions of openness and simplicity" and having "completely duped" those who fancied themselves "all on an equal footing of truth and honor," as Emma so memorably puts it (275).

The depth of Emma's indignation is striking, because her principal objection to Frank and Jane's secret engagement is that the two of them have been able to piece together conversations that each has had with other people: they "may have been carrying around, comparing and sitting in judgment on words that were never meant for both to hear" (75). This may seem only Emma's self-defense: to say that "they must take the consequence, if they have heard each other spoken of in a way not perfectly agreeable" (275) is to mask her criticism of them and to substitute it for the plausible embarrassment of her speculating about a possibly scandalous relationship between Jane and Mr. Dixon to the one person in the world who is most likely to be offended by criticism of Jane. Yet this is not Emma's concern. To hear her talk, one would think that Frank and Jane's relationship amounted to collusion, to devising in advance and bringing out some extra combination in the game of charades, which figures so prominently in the novel.

Charades is, after all, introduced early on as an instance of what it means for there to be a game of translation that depends on combination. A four-line description of grief yields "woe," a four-line description of someone who has an experience of grief yields "man," and the overall solution is "woman." Emma and Harriet are represented as particular fans of charades and are, in what Austen calls "this age of literature" (44), making a collection of them early in the novel. In catego-

rizing charades as copybook schlock rather than the kind of book that Knightley thinks Emma should read, Austen is being more than high-minded. Charades fail to be great literature by exactly the degree to which they operate as tests for their readers. Emma enjoys them because they enable her to "get" them—and to get them faster and more accurately than anyone else in her party, especially Harriet. When Elton produces his charade—the one in which the verses yield the words "court" and "ship" to make up the word "courtship"—part of the reason Emma does not understand his meaning is that she is absorbed in relating to the game as if it were, at least for her, only a test of her skill. Her commitment is not simply to displaying her own cleverness at unpacking coded messages but to imagining that she has no special advantages in doing so.

In that, Emma treats charades and alphabets (an avatar of what we now, at least in the United States, call Scrabble) as if they conformed to Jean-François Lyotard's alignment of *récit* with the circulation of stories in a community in which a person may be listener or teller and *anyone* can participate. The importance of the anonymous story lies in the way it produces a social equality that assists social cohesion.¹⁷ In Emma's view, games should function in just such an impersonal way, a point underscored when we learn that Harriet and Emma have been anthologizing examples. Originality is no more the point than beginning from a preferred position.

But now a question emerges about free indirect style, which I have described as employing the verb forms of *récit* in French. These forms suggest that a statement might be offered by anyone in a society. I have suggested two things in some tension with this: Austen's Emma is foregrounded by her remorse, and games like charades, in principle equally open to all participants, afford Emma a chance to demonstrate her own quickness and insight—her superiority. Her greatest delusion is her assumption of a stable standpoint for evaluation—exactly the view that her harshest critics ironically recapitulate. Booth and Litz argue that Austen gives us a *bildungsroman* because the central character learns to understand her own situation more accurately. Count-

¹⁷ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 20–1.

less readings stress the clarity of the victory through which Emma is awarded Knightley, the husband who counts as the finest trophy in the marriage competition. Their position, moreover, would seem to be justified by Austen's representing Harriet as having made progress because she too has fallen in love with someone "so superior to Mr. Elton" (232), Knightley, and to be strengthened by the suggestion that love is merely an assessment of the relative merits of the characters in the social game.

Were this view the whole story, D. H. Lawrence's estimate of Austen as a nasty old maid committed to "knowing in apartness" would be entirely justified, as would his suggestion that she creates a world of "personality" that identifies characters in terms of their interests and evaluations.¹⁸ She would be, that is, wholly committed to writing out a utilitarian calculus in the form of a novelistic plot. The marriage game would itself be the perfection of free indirect style and its notion of a *récit*, in that anyone could assume any position. It would not simply be that Emma and Knightley wanted to marry one another; every man would want to marry Emma, and every woman Knightley. The novel comes perilously close to this outcome. Elton and Knightley have both wanted to marry Emma; Frank has recognized that it would be plausible for people to think that *he* would; in his own little charade Mr. Weston has spelled out the two syllables of Emma's name to say that they add up to "perfection." Harriet's infatuation with Knightley repeats this pattern in only slightly less emphatic terms. In a Girardian light, desire is always triangulated, simply because Austen's novel looks as though individual choice and larger societal choices—what "everyone" thinks—were being aligned.

Were the marriage plot to identify Emma as the universally acknowledged winner, marriage would simply be one game among others that created a rank order for the characters—that would, this time, privilege Emma in its new version of free indirect style not for being more often mistaken than other characters but for being more often right. Moreover, the line "I shall never marry," which is uttered both by Emma and by Harriet, and the line "Knightley must not

¹⁸ "A Propos of 'Lady Chatterley's Lover,'" in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, ed. Michael Squires, *The Cambridge Edition of the Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 333.

marry," uttered only by Emma, would occupy prominent places in the novel as mistaken assessments that dramatized the appeal of what look like winning lines.

The marriage plot, enacted through free indirect style as an externalized game, is the one in which Emma does not so much enlist her author as demonstrate what an author might do as a composite voice of author and character. While she "entertains no doubt of her being in love" with Frank, Emma herself diagnoses and solves a kind of puzzle in saying of her feelings on his departure, "I do not find myself making any use of the word 'sacrifice'" (169). As she disappointedly but energetically banters with Frank later, she sounds like someone completing a crossword puzzle: she and her author say that "no English word but flirtation could very well describe" and then give the full sentence that might be reported: "Mr. Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively" (237). This same deductive model is the one through which Emma infers that Harriet, having just fainted during her encounter with importunate gypsies and having been rescued by Frank, must now be in love with him: "Could a linguist, could a grammarian, could even a mathematician have seen what she did, have witnessed their appearance together, and heard their history of it, without feeling that circumstances had been at work to make them peculiarly interesting to each other?" (215).

The trick of the novel is both to suggest why any and all observers would think what they did and to insist that they all would be wrong. Yet just when it might seem important to dispute the claims of this socialized and externalized inference and to defend private experience against it, we have the example of Frank and Jane to contend with. For they do not simply have a secret, their engagement; they also have a secret that they preserve in the kind of private correspondence that the epistolary novel so regularly features and that they adapt to the public world of parlor games with a certain clumsiness. While Emma makes errors, Frank practically trademarks the word "blunder" as he goes from using it in the game of alphabets to apologize for his previous indiscretion to accusing first the post office and then himself of having "blundered." That blunder was the failure to forward his letter of clarification to Jane, so that it remained in his drawer and so compounded his earlier blunder. In two different ways, the epistolary mode of direct testimony and shared secrets comes to look precarious.

First, like the coded writing that Caesar is credited with inventing to communicate with his allies, it occupies a peculiarly strained relationship with the surrounding public language in imagining itself more effectively secret than it is (so that one can mistakenly assume that one can say out loud what one intends only for one other person's ears). Second, if its testimony looks as though it represented the voice of experience in protest against an external account, it has a real technological vulnerability: it stakes everything on being able to get this testimony through, past desk drawers and postal services.

But if it now seems as if Austen's whole point in *Emma* were to render romantic communication—whether as direct testimony about one's own feelings or as a deductive statement about what one should feel—so vulnerable as to make marriages look like a near impossibility, the most surprising turn of the novel is to unite the two chief pairs of lovers in a common view. The “blunder” that Frank made, and that he meant to apologize for by labeling it a blunder, was to spell out the name Dixon in the game of alphabets and to show it, first to Emma and then to Jane, in an ambivalent reference to Emma's earlier speculation that Mr. Dixon had been the one who had sent the mysterious piano to Jane. Jane's response, of course, was to invoke the rules of the game, “saying only, ‘I did not know that proper names were allowed’” (224).

It might seem as if the rules of alphabets were a detail so minor as to be irrelevant to any significant issues in the novel. Yet Jane's invocation of the rule has broader applicability than might at first appear. For at its conclusion the novel pivots on what we might think of as the exclusion of the proper name—for a small number of cases. While the marriage plot of the novel has been seen to trace out the process by which a woman exchanges one surname (her father's) for another (her husband's), Austen's *Emma* marks engagement and marriage as a retirement of the first name. Emma, on agreeing to marry Knightley, announces to him that she cannot call him by his name—“George”—or rather, promises to call him by his proper first name “once,” “in the building in which N. takes M. for better, for worse” (299).

This moment conspicuously repeats one in *Pamela*, when Pamela tells Mr. B— that she will still call him “Master” even after their marriage. It has therefore looked to Nancy Armstrong like a moment in which Austen becomes uncomfortable with a woman's authority, and it

has led her to agree with McKeon that gender produces a problem of upward mobility for the novel, so that women can be raised in class by marriage but must always display their subordination in gender.¹⁹ Yet Emma's gesture of avoiding Knightley's first name is not linked to the status hierarchy of *Pamela*, or else it would not find such a ready companion piece in Frank's way of talking about Jane. In the letter in which he tells Emma "the whole story" of his engagement to Jane, he objects to Mrs. Elton's officiousness and "imagined superiority" toward Jane because it has been part and parcel of the "needless repetition" of Jane's name. "You will observe," he writes, "that I have not yet indulged myself in calling her by that name, even to you" (285).

Free indirect style, like any external or logical representation, does not provide the basis for any individual and individualized point of view for author or character. Austen emphasizes this aspect of the device of represented speech and thought by depicting games as situations in which the players share not only a consciousness of accepting the same rules but also the same assumptions about the preferred outcomes. In suggesting that marriage might be the ultimate social game as seen from without, Austen puts considerable pressure on the marriage plot, since it would seem more likely for the marriage game to issue in everyone's marrying everyone else than in marriage between two persons. Marriage would be not merely bigamous but genuinely communal, because the most desirable partners would look the most desirable not just to one person but to all. Austen's contribution to the marriage plot is to have worked out this understanding with almost fanatical zeal and to have suggested that Emma and everyone else in the novel might eventually arrive at the same evaluations, might produce the absurd outcome of universal marriage. In the face of this problem, the marriages of the novel insist on taking names that have been in the public sphere—for instance, the Emma so widely spoken of as to appear in the title of the novel—and retiring them, as if marriage depicted an intimacy so intense as to create the effect of distance by dispensing with the forms of address that might be used in public, by just anyone.

¹⁹ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 151–3; McKeon, 378–81.

