

Introduction

In December 1813, nearly a year after *Pride and Prejudice* was published, Sarah Harriet Burney, half-sister of the more famous Frances, wrote to a friend:

Yes, I *have* read the book you speak of, 'Pride & Prejudice', and I could quite rave about it! How well you define one of its characteristics when you say of it, that it breathes a spirit of 'careless originality.' – It is charming. – Nothing was ever better conducted than the fable; nothing can be more *piquant* than its dialogues; more distinct than its characters.

Burney then adds, 'I have the three vols now in the house, and know not how to part with them. I have only just finished, and could begin them all over again with pleasure.'¹ Sarah Harriet may have been one of the first readers to feel that the freshness of Jane Austen's novel would not fade with re-reading and that the second time round it might be even more rewarding. A like-minded contemporary of hers was William Gifford, the editor of the *Quarterly Review* and right-hand man of the most prestigious publisher of the time, John Murray. He first tells Murray in November 1814 that having 'for the first time, looked into *Pride & Prejudice*' he finds it 'really a very pretty thing', and then in September or October 1815 he writes that 'I have lately read it again – tis very good'.² He is saying that this novel is certainly something other than a genteel romance aimed at the circulating library market, and encouraging Murray to add Jane Austen to his list – which he did.

Since then, Austen readers tend to identify themselves as re-readers. Much later, in 1838, when Sarah Harriet found that Sir Walter Scott 'thought so highly of my prime favorite Miss Austen – he read her "Pride & Prejudice" three times', she trumped him, saying 'I have read it as bumper toasts are given – *three times three*'.³ Even Mark Twain, despite being 'maddened' by Austen's work, seems to admit to reading it more than once.⁴ In the middle of the century, George Henry Lewes, the partner

of George Eliot, who had been writing about Jane Austen's artistry in the journals for over a decade, published a long and eloquent tribute to her work in which he included a personal, even domestic, note:

We have re-read them all four times; or rather, to speak more accurately, they have been read aloud to us, one after the other; and when it is considered what a severe test that is, how the reading aloud permits no skipping, no evasion of weariness, but brings both merits and defects into stronger relief by forcing the mind to dwell on them, there is surely something significant of genuine excellence when both reader and listener finish their fourth reading with increase of admiration.⁵

Later in the century the note of fandom is sounded. Agnes Repplier gushingly confesses that Austen's novels are her 'midnight friends': 'We have known them well for years. There is no fresh nook to be explored, no forgotten page to be revisited. But we will take them down, and re-read for the fiftieth time'; and a sterner critic, Reginald Farrer, in a famous centenary article in the 1917 issue of the *Quarterly Review*, could declare even more hyperbolically that her work 'is so packed with such minute and far-reaching felicities that the thousandth reading of "Emma" or "Persuasion" will be certain to reveal to you a handful of such brilliant jewels unnoticed before'.⁶ A. C. Bradley, famous for his work on Shakespeare, referred to himself, in an important lecture, as one of 'the faithful', as if he re-read Jane Austen as regularly as he went to church.⁷

David Lodge re-echoed such comments in the late twentieth century. Austen's novels, he wrote, were so 'permeated with irony' that they 'can sustain an infinite number of readings'.⁸ It is established, then, that to best enjoy Jane Austen one should re-read the novels. Each reading makes one even more convinced of Austen's greatness, as Lewes insisted, or of what so many critics following in his wake celebrate as Austen's 'art'. The corollary of re-reading is not only, as Gifford understood, that Austen's comic and romantic novels were serious publications, but that they are so constructed as to invite, perhaps to require, re-reading. This is certainly the case with *Emma*, as Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan argue. 'It was in her writing of *Emma*, and in particular her bold decision to write a novel that demanded repeated re-readings, that Austen made the most striking claim for her profession', they write.⁹ Re-readability, they suggest, was becoming the key distinction between literary work that one might want to purchase and the circulating library trash that one borrowed by the volume and returned quickly in order to pick up the next. Cronin and McMillan go on to suggest further that in writing

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Emma Jane Austen was prepared 'to sacrifice readability' to re-readability, in order to make good her claim to serious professional status.¹⁰

But what re-reading consists of is a trickier question. John Mullan's *What Matters in Jane Austen?* (2012) offers a start towards answering it. Citing their 'minute interconnectedness', he suggests that this 'is the reason why, when you re-read her novels, you have the experience of suddenly noticing some crucial detail that you have never noticed before, and realising how demanding she is of your attention'.¹¹ (Perhaps this is what Repplier had in mind when she wrote of 'nooks'.) Mullan often suggests that first-time readers absorb such effects of detail unconsciously. It is only when the novels are returned to with alert (and possibly more informed) attention that one understands how these effects are gained. One of the objects of this book is to focus on the way the writer shapes and manages her readers' – and her re-readers' – attention as they peruse her novels. It also investigates Austen's interest in attention as a psychological facility, and how it relates to memory, to remembering and to misremembering. After all, one difference between reading and re-reading is that the subsequent reading is informed by at least some memory of the first.

It is the role of criticism and scholarship to equip the modern, the twenty-first century, re-reader with the information and understanding that enables him or her to give Austen's novels the attention they ask for. 'Readers today need to recognize that *Mansfield Park* is consciously set in the post-abolition period', Peter Knox-Shaw states correctly, for example, though, as he also notes, enduring commentary on the novel has been written in ignorance of this.¹² For many years now there has been a concerted critical project to recover the historical and literary circumstances in which Jane Austen's novels were composed and published. This has involved consideration of publication and printing practices in Jane Austen's London, as well as study of the novels and plays that form the context for her writing. Increasingly it has been understood that Austen's writing engages in a form of conversation, if not debate, not only with some of the canonical novelists she knew, but with the fictions pumped out by the circulating libraries (on which, to be sure, she partially depended for the sale of her own novels). At the same time, much attention has been given to the political, legal and social setting in which she wrote, with the result that the earlier assumption that the novels are isolated or sequestered from the historical circumstances of Austen's time has been thoroughly displaced. Thus a critic could write in 2000 that *Mansfield Park*, for instance, which is mostly set in an isolated country house in the English provinces, is 'now often read as a novel engaged with the events of its day – the abolition

of the slave trade, the French revolution, political upheaval in the Caribbean',¹³ and the Napoleonic 'war at a distance' has been shown to echo throughout at least her later works.¹⁴ Austen is thus re-created as a novelist who is intellectually abreast of her literary and philosophical inheritance and well aware of the contemporary context, but who, having chosen merely to allude to this material, to imply her knowledge rather than to display it, requires modern scholarship to recover what might have been taken for granted by her first readers.

This would certainly then be one way of conceiving what is hidden in Jane Austen. This book engages with and draws on this common project and sometimes, as in the chapters on *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*, seeks to contribute to it. But in the main this book focuses less on the allusive and referential aspects of Austen's novels, or on her indebtedness to other writers, than on facets of her writing that might elude the attention of the first-time reader, but that are, as Mullan suggests, the condition and source of her greatness – the reason for which readers are drawn back to her novels again and again. It also proposes that while Austen's work does reference important political, social – and religious – matters, the novels can best be read as single, stand-alone works, each of which has its own shape and agenda. The assumption of this book's structure is that each novel has its own distinct ethos or imaginative co-ordinates, that each develops its own terms, and therefore requires and licenses a different approach and distinct array of critical materials. What is alluded to in Austen's novels is less important here than the implicit suggestions about human motive and behaviour that are conveyed in the pauses and implications of her prose.

My main concern then is with the silences in the novels, not with the silences of the novels, though this cannot be a hard and fast distinction. 'Charming Miss Woodhouse! allow me to interpret this interesting silence', Mr Elton insinuates in the carriage taking them home from the Westons', Austen here allowing the reader to interpret Emma's silence in quite a different way from his (*E* 1: 15, 142). The more famous silence that follows Sir Thomas Bertram's response to Fanny Price's question on the slave trade (*MP* 11: 3, 231–2) is both a silence represented or spoken of in the novel, and a silence of the novel itself, since what Sir Thomas says is not reported, and what the novelist means by raising the issue of the trade is left to the reader to decide. As a silence *in* the novel it suggests the ambiguities of Fanny's reticence: 'It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther', Edmund suggests. She excuses herself by saying that she did not want to put herself forward, but that involves a reflection on her cousins at the same time. She is thus not merely shy. As a silence *of* the

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novel, which can readily be translated into a silence of the novelist, it has prompted critical investigations of a very different order. But for the most part the silences of the novels, for example about what Sir Thomas Bertram did in Antigua, or in Parliament, or, to give a more egregious instance, what Frank Churchill may have been up to in London when he went to order a piano for Jane, though intriguing, and in the first case productive of much controversy, do not concern me here.¹⁵

There is, however, much that is specifically hidden from the reader by Jane Austen's plotting. Far more intricately, deviously and amusingly, but in common with the eighteenth-century playwrights, like Sheridan, and novelists she admired, like Burney, Jane Austen's novels often deceive and play with the first reader's attention. This is most obvious in *Emma*, but the concealment of information, or the delayed disclosure of motive, is a feature of all of them. The reason for Frank Churchill's visit to London, for example, is eventually revealed, but that information is kept back for many chapters; the reason for Colonel Brandon's abrupt departure from the picnic party in an early chapter of *Sense and Sensibility* is that he is rushing to the aid of Eliza. Both events are made the occasion for character commentary: when he hears about it, Knightley thinks that heading off to London for a haircut is just the sort of thing a 'trifling silly fellow' like Frank would do – and at this point neither he nor a reader is conscious of his jealousy; Willoughby whispers spitefully to Marianne that Brandon has probably forged the letter that calls him away, a response whose full nastiness is only apparent much later in the novel.¹⁶ As on so many occasions in Austen's writing, the way people talk about unexpected events reveals their characters, but their speculations divert the first-time reader from guessing the truth, and divert the re-reader who knows it.

Even more interesting to the re-reader of her novels than the secrets of Austen's plotting are what one might name their secretions. This book attempts to probe the inner life of Austen's novels, which she once called, encouraging her niece's own writing, 'the heart & beauty of your book'.¹⁷ In biology or physiology secretions are scarcely perceptible substances extracted or released from a cell or gland which then perform other, benign and useful functions within the entire plant or body. These chapters aim to locate qualities of Austen's writing that perform, without a reader's being necessarily aware of it, the essential functions that generate the serious power of her art. Some of these are minute or local effects; others, drawing on them, are latent structural or conceptual designs that exert their influence more pervasively. These secretions will not be apparent to the

first-time reader, but coming back to the novel one might certainly become more conscious of their presence and power.

Throughout these chapters, then, passages of Austen's writing, sometimes quite lengthy, are displayed and subjected to careful analytic attention. This allows the reader of this book to bring their own reading to a focus, and to agree or disagree with the reading presented here. Austen employs a vocabulary more restricted than many other novelists', and when she uses metaphoric language it is usually to register its banality. Instead she gets her results, and controls her meanings, largely through the precise exercise of syntax: grammatical construction, punctuation, emphasis and rhythm. Her writing therefore rewards the kind of close consideration that poetry requires: a considering attentiveness, both focused on the immediate words and able, if one is a re-reader, to recall or bring into play memories of other passages or episodes in the novel as one responds to the current page.¹⁸ And as in poetry, the pauses, spaces and silences in the writing contribute essentially to its meaning, and to some extent, as in poetry, make it unparaphrasable. The analyses in these chapters all attend carefully to Austen's handling of cadences and movement, and especially to those passages of confessional speech or introspective brooding in which the structure of her sentences, as I argue, traces meanings unacknowledged by the character.

Jane Austen could use the standard or formal phrasing and punctuation that she inherited from mostly masculine writers in the eighteenth century to telling and elegant effect, as every reader knows. But when her characters speak she very frequently employs a distinct register of syntactic markers as signals for the informality of conversational utterance. Moreover, when she glances at, or represents, their private thoughts and reasonings, she employs still more of the stylistic devices she inherited from Richardson and Sterne and the sentimental novelists who followed them, and which are absent from the discursive male writers, like Johnson, whom she admired, and whose influence on her authorial or narrative prose is undeniable. Among such mimetic markers were dashes of varying lengths, exclamation marks, incomplete sentences, italics and repetition. One sure sign that the narrative is moving away from the narrator or author and into a character's inner speech is the presence of dashes in company with repeated words and phrases. 'He must — yes, he certainly must, as a friend — an anxious friend — give Emma some hint, ask her some question' (*E* III: 5, 379). In representing even Mr Knightley's struggle with his conscience Austen is the beneficiary of the sentimental tradition. Here, as elsewhere in her writing, dashes are among 'these discursive cracks where emotion lies', as Ariane Hudelet puts it.¹⁹

There may be risks, however, in assuming that the punctuation of the novels as we have them is Jane Austen's own.²⁰ The manuscripts that survive look very different from the texts of the novels in print. They are full of contractions, random or nearly random capitals, and mostly have no paragraphing. The last chapter of *Persuasion* in manuscript form is sprinkled with underlined words, as in '*she* had a *future* to look forward to', that were not italicised when they were included in the published version.²¹ Printers, working to the house-rules of publishers, also seem to have understood that it was part of their job to bring more order and formality to the author's writing, to add to or alter her punctuation, to change dashes into semi-colons, for instance, or semi-colons into colons. This may be especially the case when John Murray, who was aiming at a more educated market, took over the publishing of Austen's novels.

Austen's employment of the dash is especially interesting. The 'fair copy' she apparently made around 1805 of 'Lady Susan', the short novel that remained unpublished in her lifetime, only uses dashes to indicate sentence or paragraph endings, a habit that persisted throughout Austen's writing life.²² But the manuscript of 'The Watsons', written in the same period in which 'Lady Susan' was copied out, features no fewer than 850 dashes.²³ Many of these again are simply indications of sentence endings, but dashes also appear in the midst of character speech. Most interestingly, the dash starts to be used as a dramatic means. In the presence of Emma Watson, the heroine, Mr Edwards observes that 'elderly ladies should be careful how they make a second choice' of partner; and his wife corrects this: 'Carefulness — discretion — should not be confined to elderly ladies.'²⁴ Here the dash is developed as a plausible imitation of the hesitations of natural speech. When Mr Edwards goes on to add that young women should certainly be careful whom they choose, since they may suffer from a bad choice for more years than their elders, 'Emma drew her hand across her eyes — and Mrs. Edwards, on perceiving it, changed the subject to one of less anxiety to all.'²⁵ This uses the dash as a retardant intensifier, a space which the reader is invited to fill with feeling.

Either in Austen's preparation of her manuscripts for printing or in the printing house itself, most of Austen's dashes, it is reasonable to believe, were replaced with conventional punctuation.²⁶ But those retained are usually essential to her narrative effects. As with the repeated word, or the loosely analogous phrase, the dash as it appears in the published novels can only be the author's own. In her interesting comparison between *Pride and Prejudice* and its first translation into French in 1813 as *Orgueil et Préjugé*, the Swiss critic Valérie Cossy shows how crucial such effects in Austen's

novels are. Elizabeth Bennet at Pemberley, for example, searches for ‘the only face whose features would be known to her’ (though this in the French becomes merely his ‘portrait’: ‘le seul portrait qui l’intéressât’). Then Austen writes, ‘At last it arrested her — and she beheld a striking resemblance of Mr Darcy.’ ‘It “arrests” her’, as Cossy comments, ‘in the same way as, in the text, a dash arrests the narrator and the reader.’²⁷ The French omits this sentence with its dash and thereby loses what it intimates: that Elizabeth is already primed to feel something strongly about a picture of Darcy. Such minute, but original, mimetic effects of syntax are means by which Austen extracts meaning from language that in itself is little more than commonplace.

Jane Austen’s novels were able to convey not only a sense of natural speech and conversation but also, as in these examples, to actively lock in the attention, to feed the narrative greed, of the reader. In her later novels, and in *Emma* especially, the dash is put to even more daring uses, as when Emma’s unwilling overhearing of Mrs Elton’s talk is rendered as a series of mere topics separated by dashes so as to display its inconsequentiality (III: 6, 389–90). Perhaps Gifford, or John Murray’s printers, recognised the dynamics of Austen’s punctuation, for they kept such effects as those in Emma’s wondering whether she dare use Frank Churchill’s name in public: ‘Now, how am I going to introduce him? — Am I unequal to speaking his name at once before all these people? Is it necessary for me to use any roundabout phrase? — Your Yorkshire friend — your correspondent in Yorkshire; — that would be the way, I suppose, if I were very bad. — No, I can pronounce his name without the smallest distress’ (II: 16, 321). Since Emma thinks she is in love with Frank, but isn’t, the repeated dashes – the false hesitations – convey a hilarious performative parody of what she imagines to be the inner conflicts of a true romantic heroine.

But it is in the realm of genuine inner conflict, or in eliciting the complexities of motive, that Jane Austen’s ability to extract the maximum of meaning from the smallest devices comes into its own. In his earliest commentary on Austen, published when he was 30 in 1847, George Lewes was already claiming that she was greater than the then more famous Walter Scott, who, he declares, is certainly not comparable to Shakespeare: ‘He had not that singular faculty of penetrating into the most secret recesses of the heart, and of shewing us a character in its inward and outward workings, in its involuntary self-betraysals and subtle self-sophistications.’²⁸ By implication, though he does not say as much, what is true of Shakespeare would be true of Jane Austen too. This is not today such an extraordinary claim to make for Austen’s novels as it was then. (Throughout this book,

Shakespeare is a presence in the wings, and makes brief appearances in the chapters on *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*.) Through her capacity to write sentences that are both elegantly shaped and carry implicit suggestion – sentences that are both Augustan and romantic – Jane Austen certainly, as I shall argue, displayed the involuntary self-betrays and traced the intricate, devious and even unconscious ways her characters protect themselves from knowing themselves and their motives. Largely dispensing with the poetic language of feeling, Austen can nevertheless lodge emotion in other discursive gaps besides dashes – in the silences or pauses that the prose dramatises, in what the narrator understates, and in what she simply elides by shifting the reader's focus. All of these strategies are germane to the project of this book.

But the remit of the hidden is certainly not confined to such local textual effects. What is hidden in Austen's novels is equally the conceptual structure or organisation that gives coherence and its specific focus to each of the books. What is hidden in all of them is this structure (one might almost say this topic), but it is distinct in each. Taken-for-granted aspects of human experience and behaviour, however, are typically mined for their salience and operative power as structural components of Jane Austen's texts. 'Elizabeth turned away to hide a smile' (*P&P* I: II, 63): her response to a pompous remark by Darcy early in *Pride and Prejudice* both draws the reader into her orbit and features an ongoing motif of the novel. Such an apparently everyday act of social life as the smile becomes much more than an incidental feature of company behaviour. Easy to pass over, too, are the many moments in the text in which characters recall previous events, but remembering, and misremembering, good and bad memory, cumulatively becomes the groundwork not only of the novel's psychological understanding, but also of its ethical structure. Memory in its various forms, including the reader's, then actively operates as a controlling mechanism in *Pride and Prejudice*'s onward development. In *Emma*, the only one of Austen's novels to which the description of 'three or four families in a country village' accurately applies, another apparent accident of quotidian life, the overhearing of others' conversations, is developed into a means by which the reticulations of such a closed community can be communicated, and eventually supports and underscores its most telling moments. *Persuasion* deploys the same phenomena of overhearing others' speech, but here it serves, among other things, as I argue, the quite different project of illuminating and contesting the stereotypes of gender. What at first seems inconsequential in this novel about contingency and accidents is thus revealed to be the cornerstone of its structure.

The Hidden Jane Austen, then, offers re-readings of the six completed novels. There are many aspects of Jane Austen's art that are common to all of her published works, but the notion of a homogeneous 'Jane Austen novel' (frequent among those who do not read them) is quite misleading. So that while there is certainly a common focus on the 'hidden' here, the mode in which the hidden is addressed varies with the novel under consideration. The two chapters on *Mansfield Park* thus consider two further aspects of the hidden. They have in common a focus on the recesses of the characters' psychological life, as rendered in the various techniques at the mature Austen's command. Mrs Norris, the primary focus of the first, is Austen's most egregious example of a personality able to bury truths about herself, truths that the writer, very rarely venturing to touch on her inner life, nevertheless proposes through the novel's conceptual structure. The chapter approaches this through attending to Mrs Norris' speech and its distorted relation to Anglican religion. In contrast, the focus of the second chapter on *Mansfield Park* is on the dexterity, subtlety and persuasiveness with which the psychological damage done to the young heroine by her abrupt removal from her home to the quite different world of the Bertrams is communicated. It challenges the re-reader of this text to recognise what Austen conveys by her most indirect and subtle means. To write of the hidden in *Mansfield Park* is thus to invoke not only what the heroine conceals by her demeanour and behaviour, but also what she conceals from herself. In this chapter I suggest moreover that important truths about Fanny's predicament have in effect been hidden from too many of its critics.

This book begins with chapters on the two early novels, the first of which Jane Austen decided not to publish. *Northanger Abbey* is a frankly open text. Its plot sets out to reveal that there is nothing to be excited about in the secret places its heroine explores, nor is there anything mysterious about its two dominant characters, Isabella Thorpe and General Tilney, whose pretensions it consistently lays bare. Nor is there anything the reader might need to discover in Isabella's brother, or in Captain Tilney, or in Catherine herself. The novel's narrative content is reflected in a style which, like its heroine, is explicit, frank and open. Thus while *Northanger Abbey* displays what the novelist later learned to hide, the book's characterisation, plot and style all cohere together. I suggest also that *Northanger Abbey* amusingly initiates that enquiry into attention and memory which is taken up in Austen's later works. Quite different is the troubled world Jane Austen conjures up in *Sense and Sensibility*, a milieu in which all the gentlemen keep information about themselves secret, and in which the necessity of