Narrative Perspectives in *Pride and Prejudice*
by Jean-Philippe Lembeye

*(See text referred at the end.)*

In this passage from *Pride and Prejudice*, at the end of chapter 1, volume III, Jane Austen uses different narrative perspectives to describe Elizabeth Bennet's second great opportunity to recognize that she has failed to fully appreciate Darcy's true personality. She became aware of her prejudices for the first time when a letter from Darcy made her realize her ill-grounded judgement 'Til this moment, I never knew myself' (p. 159). In this dense passage, the narrator alternates direct speech, to show, and indirect speech, to tell, as the heroine is experiencing intense emotional turmoil that is propitious for sharpening her insight into Darcy's real character.

In this novel, third person narration is used as it allows a great deal of flexibility for telling and showing. Here, the omniscient narrator tells in the first paragraph how a mixture of embarrassment and bewilderment plunges Elizabeth into a dream-like perception of reality. Expressions such as 'She wanted to talk, but', 'At last she recollected' are used to describe the scene through the eyes of Elizabeth, who is the main focalizer in the novel. The narrator then emphasizes her slightly altered state of consciousness by using two different subjects for the same verb (a zeugma): 'Yet time and her aunt moved slowly'.

Elizabeth is then confronted with her previous prejudices by her aunt and uncle. The narrator allows them to voice their astonishment to show how wrong she has been in expressing her subjective opinion about Darcy. This offers a different point of view than the one the reader is accustomed to from the main focalizer, so it is more interesting to hear it verbatim in direct speech. Above all, this dialogic narrative helps the reader to form a personal judgment.

For instance, at the beginning of volume III, the narrator casually illustrates Mr. Gardiner's interpersonal skills with Mrs. Reynolds: 'Mr. Gardiner, whose manners were very easy and pleasant, encouraged her communicativeness by his questions and remarks;' (p. 187). Later, when the same gentleman states of Darcy that 'he might change his mind another day, and warn me off his grounds.' one might argue that this is a rather surprising and unrefined judgement from the mouth of a 'sensible, gentlemanlike man, greatly superior to his sister, as well by nature as education.' (p. 108). In a novel where a lot of characters seem to be prone to self-deception, the Gardiners stand out in the crowd. They have been characterized as highly perceptive and display a great deal of common sense. But as the statement is made in direct speech, the narrator does not feel compelled to give any clue as to how this statement should be construed. Does Mr. Gardiner sincerely think that Darcy could act in such a way as to warn him off his grounds after such a warm welcome? Or is he already suspecting something ('there was no necessity for such attention. ') and is he trying to probe the inner thoughts of his niece one step further? Here the narrator does not tell, but clearly shows and beckons the reader to decide.

In any case, the result is that in the antepenultimate paragraph, Elizabeth needs to initiate a lengthy explanation in order to clarify the situation, and to put an end to the Gardiners' gentle quizzing. The reader is already acquainted with all the details, so indirect speech is essential here to quickly summarize in order to keep up the pace. Elizabeth speaks 'in as guarded a manner' as she can. She certainly does not want to divulge that she has received a letter from Darcy, but she may also not want to repeat the same past mistake in distorting reality. Therefore, she probably tries to be as objective as possible. And in telling so, the omniscient narrator chooses the words with circumspection, aiming at a high level of reliability. We are far from the unreliable 'moments of necessary non-disclosure' highlighted by Pam Morris (*The
Realist Novel, p. 59), where free indirect discourse is disguised as authorial narrative, misleading the first time reader (e.g.: 'Elizabeth was now to see Mr. Wickham for the last time', p. 178). If this was a contract, the focalizer, the narrator and even the reader on a second reading, would be likely to agree on the terms of the cautious wording. This 'dual mode of vision' (Hernadi, 1972, p. 36) gives a certain solemnity to this crucial paragraph. In mimicking the focalizer in such a fashion, the narrator may wish to attract attention to the fact that Elizabeth is sharpening her objective perception of Darcy (a central theme in this novel). This refined insight is no longer confined to her inner thoughts or to the sphere of Jane Austen's confidence, but is freely shown to the outside world. After having been so openly critical of Darcy, her willingness to vindicate him signals clearly the formalization of the heroine's psychological evolution and confirms her as a round character.

The chapter ends smoothly with normal daily life taking over. Indirect discourse allows here to compress several hours into a few lines, highlighting the time Elizabeth spends in deep meditation.

In conclusion, this decisive section prepares - with a great degree of psychological realism - an event, which would have been previously considered as unlikely. A few pages after this passage, Elizabeth will realize that she is falling in love with Darcy: 'and never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be vain' (p. 210). Here Jane Austen employs dialogic narrative skilfully in order to tell and show in great detail how Elizabeth is disconcerted by Darcy's genial behaviour and to what extent it affects her. The narrator sheds lights from different angles and solicits the reader's attention and involvement so that the impending change in sentiment of the heroine towards her perseverant admirer will appear as credible as possible.

Bibliography

Austen, J., Pride and Prejudice (1813) Oxford University Press

They now walked on in silence, each of them deep in thought. Elizabeth was not comfortable; that was impossible; but she was flattered and pleased. His wish of introducing his sister to her was a compliment of the highest kind. They soon outstripped the others, and when they had reached the carriage, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were half a quarter of a mile behind.

He then asked her to walk into the house–but she declared herself not tired, and they stood together on the lawn. At such a time much might have been said, and silence was very awkward. She wanted to talk, but there seemed to be an embargo on every subject. At last she recollected that she had been travelling, and they talked of Matlock and Dove Dale with great perseverance. Yet time and her aunt moved slowly–and her patience and her ideas were nearly worn out before the tete-a-tete was over. On Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner’s coming up they were all pressed to go into the house and take some refreshment; but this was declined, and
they parted on each side with utmost politeness. Mr. Darcy handed the ladies into the carriage; and when it drove off, Elizabeth saw him walking slowly towards the house.

The observations of her uncle and aunt now began; and each of them pronounced him to be infinitely superior to anything they had expected. “He is perfectly well behaved, polite, and unassuming,” said her uncle.

“There _is_ something a little stately in him, to be sure,” replied her aunt, “but it is confined to his air, and is not unbecoming. I can now say with the housekeeper, that though some people may call him proud, I have seen nothing of it.”

“I was never more surprised than by his behaviour to us. It was more than civil; it was really attentive; and there was no necessity for such attention. His acquaintance with Elizabeth was very trifling.”

“To be sure, Lizzy,” said her aunt, “he is not so handsome as Wickham; or, rather, he has not Wickham’s countenance, for his features are perfectly good. But how came you to tell me that he was so disagreeable?”

Elizabeth excused herself as well as she could; said that she had liked him better when they had met in Kent than before, and that she had never seen him so pleasant as this morning.

“But perhaps he may be a little whimsical in his civilities,” replied her uncle. “Your great men often are; and therefore I shall not take him at his word, as he might change his mind another day, and warn me off his grounds.”

Elizabeth felt that they had entirely misunderstood his character, but said nothing.

“From what we have seen of him,” continued Mrs. Gardiner, “I really should not have thought that he could have behaved in so cruel a way by anybody as he has done by poor Wickham. He has not an ill-natured look. On the contrary, there is something pleasing about his mouth when he speaks. And there is something of dignity in his countenance that would not give one an unfavourable idea of his heart. But, to be sure, the good lady who showed us his house did give him a most flaming character! I could hardly help laughing aloud sometimes. But he is a liberal master, I suppose, and _that_ in the eye of a servant comprehends every virtue.”

Elizabeth here felt herself called on to say something in vindication of his behaviour to Wickham; and therefore gave them to understand, in as guarded a manner as she could, that by what she had heard from his relations in Kent, his actions were capable of a very different construction; and that his character was by no means so faulty, nor Wickham’s so amiable, as they had been considered in Hertfordshire. In confirmation of this, she related the particulars of all the pecuniary transactions in which they had been connected, without actually naming her authority, but stating it to be such as might be relied on.
Mrs. Gardiner was surprised and concerned; but as they were now approaching the scene of her former pleasures, every idea gave way to the charm of recollection; and she was too much engaged in pointing out to her husband all the interesting spots in its environs to think of anything else. Fatigued as she had been by the morning’s walk they had no sooner dined than she set off again in quest of her former acquaintance, and the evening was spent in the satisfactions of a intercourse renewed after many years’ discontinuance.

The occurrences of the day were too full of interest to leave Elizabeth much attention for any of these new friends; and she could do nothing but think, and think with wonder, of Mr. Darcy’s civility, and, above all, of his wishing her to be acquainted with his sister.