Jane Austen’s Novels
The Fabric of Dialogue
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By Howard S. Babb

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For
Hugh and Persis Babb
and
Alice Meyer
Preface

This book really originated in a sense of perplexity I had while reading that passage of dialogue at Rosings, in *Pride and Prejudice*, during which Darcy and Elizabeth talk of her piano-playing. Although their conversation struck me as intensely charged with personal feeling, and indeed as deeply moving, yet its surface appeared witty, restrained, suitably public. To resolve my perplexity, I turned back to study the speeches closely, and I seemed to find several linguistic devices serving to dramatize subtly the full behavior and emotions of the characters. So I began looking for comparable practices in the rest of *Pride and Prejudice* as well as in the other works by Jane Austen; and in trying to tie down the expressive values of these practices, I was led to investigate her style. The chief result of these explorations for me has been the growing conviction that Jane Austen's novels are not in fact so limited in range and in intensity as they are often thought to be. This is the thesis underlying the pages that follow, and I pursue it in the main by analyzing dialogues to show how, and how much, Jane Austen communicates in them.

Thus the book does not pretend to be either a general introduction to Jane Austen's writings, or a study of them in relation to the history of the novel, or an investigation of her irony—to name a few of the ways in which others have dealt tellingly with her fiction. In analyzing so much dialogue so intensively as it does, this book makes unusually heavy demands on the reader's attention, to say nothing of his fortitude, and for this I am sorry. But intensive treatment seemed to me required by the richness of Jane Austen's dialogue, and I felt the ex-
tensive examples necessary to satisfy the reader that an occasional rabbit was not being pulled out of a hat. The reader's compensation for my method, I have to hope, is a sharpened insight into Jane Austen's art.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge how much this book owes to other persons. Every student of Jane Austen is indebted to R. W. Chapman for his magnificent edition of her writings, and I am grateful to the Oxford University Press for allowing me to quote so extensively from it. The Editor of *The Kenyon Review* has kindly given me permission to reprint, as part of Chapter V, a slightly different version of the essay published as "Dialogue with Feeling: A Note on *Pride and Prejudice*.'

In a more personal way, I am deeply indebted to Charles M. Coffin and John Crowe Ransom, who first acquainted me at Kenyon College with the study of literature. W. J. Bate of Harvard University introduced me to the ideas of the eighteenth century, and Andrews Wanning to the investigation of style. My friends Philip Finkelpearl, David Ferry, and Robert O'Clair stimulated me continuously when I was first thinking about Jane Austen. And Douglas Bush and Albert Guerard, Jr. read one version of this book with patience and care, making suggestions from which the final product has benefited greatly.

I owe much, as well, to my colleagues at the Ohio State University. Robert C. Elliott and Andrew M. Wright have given me help of various sorts. Roy Harvey Pearce has been a constant source of encouragement to me, as to others. And Robert M. Estrich not only read the final version of the book; he also made its preparation possible by giving me all the backing within the power of a department chairman and all the attentions of a friend.

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