Conclusion

In devoting so many pages to the ways in which Jane Austen dramatizes her characters through their linguistic habits, I have of course neglected some important qualities of her dialogue. Probably the sheer wit that sparkles in so many of the verbal exchanges is the most memorable feature of her conversations. But they are also distinguished by their lifelike flow. If some of the phrasings sound a little stiff to us today, and some of the sentences rather long, still there is a wonderfully easy movement within the single speech which combines with a natural progress from one speech to the next to give the dialogues an air of artlessness, of truth to life. To what extent the conversational practices of Jane Austen’s culture and local environment may have provided her with models for such ease and wit is a question that hardly admits of a decisive answer. But it is at least clear that none of her contemporaries or immediate predecessors among the novelists commands a dialogue at once so fluent and so brilliant as hers. And we would have to travel on to Henry James, I think, to find a writer whose dialogue is anything like so charged with meaning as Jane Austen’s—though it cannot approach hers in the matter of verisimilitude.

But the qualities that I have just mentioned are evident to any reader of Jane Austen. In fact they tempt us to overlook the actual depth of the characters that the dialogue reveals—and to ignore the more profound implications of the novels. For the underlying motif in Jane Austen’s fiction is surely the disparity between appearance and reality, a problem that has haunted men’s minds for centuries—all of which may suggest again that the works are less limited than is often imagined. The motif becomes explicit in one of Jane Austen’s favorite figures of speech, “blindness.” And each novel, we may recall,
traces the development of at least one major character from the blindness brought on by too exclusive a self-interest, of whatever sort, to the operative clarity that results from a greater self-consciousness and rigorous self-evaluation. The evolution of these characters—and they range from Marianne Dashwood to Captain Wentworth—is defined in their speeches; but it is defined as well through the contrasting behavior of the other characters, major and minor, who reveal in their own speeches their different degrees of blindness and enlightenment, their differing capacities to appraise reality truly and thus to take effective moral action. Indeed Jane Austen's dialogue, taken as a whole, dramatizes the varieties of personality and explores the fundamental terms on which man lives with himself and with the world.

In her novels, the reality to be assessed properly by the characters and then engaged with is pre-eminently a social one. The fact is implied, it seems to me, by the vast number of conversations in this fiction. But surer evidence is at hand in the part these conversations play throughout her work and in their very nature. For the dialogues here are not what they so often are in other stories, a mere accompaniment to some chain of intrinsically interesting events. On the contrary, these public encounters take up the foreground of the fiction: they are its events—events, moreover, which constantly show the individual in relation to his society and its conventions. The central importance of the conventional, the patterned, in the world created by Jane Austen is vividly suggested by the image which David Daiches has used in describing her works, and his comments point as well to the latent gravity of the novels:

There is almost what might be called a ballet movement in many of them—or perhaps something between a ballet and a Mozart opera. The characters circle round each other with appropriate speeches and gestures, and occasionally a grotesque like Mr. Collins joins the dance as a symbol of one kind of fate that threatens the dancers. . . .

It is a stately dance on the lawn—but all around there are the dark trees, the shadows. And if you do not dance well, if you
have not been able, by the end of the day, to secure a permanent partner with whom to walk off the lawn, you are left, when the sun sets, alone amid the shadows. We are never allowed to forget that possibility, never allowed to forget what a serious business this dancing is. One false step can be fatal.\(^2\)

But although convention is powerful and omnipresent in this world, the claims of the individual are not therefore repudiated. Rather, Jane Austen affirms, as Dorothy Van Ghent has noted, that the "spiritual creativity" of the individual "will be able to operate only within publicly acceptable modes of deportment"—that "These modes of deportment, however public and traditional, must be made to convey the secret life of the individual spirit . . . ."\(^8\) And in the dialogues informed by the technique of metaphoric indirection, we have seen that the individual acknowledges the demands of propriety while voicing his deepest personal commitments. The scenes dramatize the contending forces that determine behavior in the novels, and the delicately controlled resonance of the lines is Jane Austen's finest achievement in dialogue.

1. The art of social conversation must have greatly deteriorated by Jane Austen's time, according to Donald Davie, because the literary genres nourished by it—the epistolary novel and the familiar letter—were themselves degenerating (Purity of Diction in English Verse [London, 1952], p. 25).
**A Note on the Author**

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