

***The Language of Jane Austen* by Joe Bray, 2018. London: Palgrave: pp. 182 ISBN 9783319721613**

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It is tempting to assume that most of what can be said about the language use of one of the most canonical writers of modern times has already been said. However, Joe Bray's latest monograph, *The Language of Jane Austen* (2018), soon makes clear that a number of critical lacunae in Austen studies are yet to be filled. Firstly, Bray's identification of the point of view techniques employed across Austen's oeuvre, from her earliest juvenilia to her final unfinished novel *Sanditon*, illustrates her use of a much wider range of speech, thought and writing modes than scholarship has thus far acknowledged. Secondly, Bray's detailed analysis of such techniques and their effects demonstrates the oft-overlooked complexity and subtlety in Austen's use of point of view which, he argues, creates an ambiguity of perspective that is critical to the humour and wit commonly found in her works. Furthermore, the scholarly consensus that point of view is Austen's most remarkable stylistic feature has long presumed upon her use of a single, homogeneous point of view mode, an assumption that Bray systematically dismantles, leading him to question the very notion of narratorial omniscience. Finally, throughout, and particularly in the final three chapters, Bray's focus on identifying and interrogating long-held critical assumptions regarding Austen's stylistic techniques illustrates some problematic trends in previous scholarship.

In Chapter 2, Bray constructs the argument that functions as the backbone of the first part of the book, namely that 'claims of a single dominant, centralising, authoritative point of view in Austen's fiction' are fundamentally problematic and overlook the 'subtle flexibility and mobility of perspective' (4) which characterise her use of point of view. Drawing upon examples from *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, he illustrates that what most critics consider Austen's archetypal use of omniscient narration in the realist tradition is, in fact, a subtle

kaleidoscope of varying point of view modes. For example, in the opening of *Pride and Prejudice*, the omniscient point of view which introduces Mr Bingley to the reader is quickly replaced, as the introduction moves to his friend Mr Darcy, by the focalised perspective of onlookers at the ball at which Mr Darcy is first glimpsed and at which he ‘drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person’. As gossip circulates among the spectators, this initially positive first impression of Mr Darcy is quickly undone by rumours of a proud and disagreeable nature which ultimately render his looks and fortune worthless and the man himself ‘unworthy to be compared with his friend’. The subtlety of this shift from objective to subjective perspective is crucial to the novel given its key thematic focus on the dangers of prejudging character and evidences how Austen varies her overall use of point of view to great effect.

Indeed, the concept of narratorial omniscience in general is challenged as Bray focuses on scholarly attempts to frame omniscience as a philosophical construct, such as Bender’s (1995) application of the Foucaultian appropriation of Bentham’s Panopticon to narrative, such that the inmate is a character viewed from all sides by the ‘omniscient’ narrator. Bray rejects the simplicity of this correlation, which overlooks the complexities and highly nuanced nature of narrative types. In particular, Bray notes that Austen’s varied use of Free Indirect Discourse gives the lie to Bender’s theory, as her body of work evinces a style that ‘challenges, even subverts, the notion of a single “authoritative presence” in Bender’s terms’ (p. 22). As is evident from analysis drawn from her juvenilia, for example, “The History of England”, as well as later seminal work such as *Emma*, Austen’s early ‘scepticism’ (p. 22) of the notions of authority and omniscience persisted throughout her career.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 cover speech, thought and writing representation respectively, drawing primarily from Leech and Short’s (1981) model – augmented by insights from Semino and Short (2004) – to focus on how variations in representation achieve those subtle

though distinctly different point of view effects responsible for ‘the complexity and ambiguity of style which is [Austen’s] hallmark’ (p. 103). As noted in Chapter 3, Austen’s use of Free Indirect Speech (FIS) has been somewhat neglected but, as Bray goes on to show, ‘her representation of her characters’ spoken words within the third-person narrative of her mature novels can be as subtle and sophisticated as that of their thoughts’ (p. 31). Also, as evidenced earlier and throughout the book, it is not merely the use of, but rather the often rapid and always subtle shifts between formal features that generate interesting narrative effects. One such effect, as Bray illustrates, is on characterisation. For example, he shows how subtle alternations in speech modes highlight personality differences, such as those found in the Dashwood sisters: when Marianne receives the gift of a horse from Willoughby, the typical openness and trust with which she accepts the gift are represented through use of the relatively unmediated speech categories of Free Direct (FD) and Free Indirect Speech (FID). On the other hand, Elinor’s misgivings regarding the propriety of accepting an expensive present from a relatively new acquaintance are evident through her representation using the more contained and less direct category of Indirect Speech (IS).

In Chapter 4, the focus turns inwards as thought representation in Austen is examined; once again, it is the alterations between modes which prove most revealing. While the category of Free Indirect Thought (FIT) has garnered most scholarly attention, Bray goes further in delineating and demonstrating FIT’s myriad effects. For example, he illustrates that by representing Elizabeth Bennet’s first impressions of certain characters – such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her daughter – via FIT, her perceptions are given weight by the narrator (p. 62). However, mixing FIT with Narrated Perception (NP) – a category that Bray asserts is distinct from FIT due to additional features including use of progressive aspect and perception modality (p. 61) – in a pivotal episode in *Northanger Abbey* effects a detachment between narrator and character, as the narrator wryly observes the tortures inflicted upon the

character Catherine by her fanciful imagination (pp. 63-65). The ambiguity caused by this distancing of character from narrator, as Bray notes, makes the work of the reader both more difficult and ‘more crucial’ (p. 63), a point he proceeds to strengthen using further examples from *Emma*, *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*.

Chapter 5’s focus on the representation of writing illustrates how, despite moving away from epistolary fiction, Austen was masterful in adapting this form to create, in conjunction with direct narrative, highly complex and varying yet subtle point of view effects. Though often ‘opaque and hard to decipher’, Bray notes that ‘the letter in Austen’s fiction is complex and powerful, capable of generating a wide range of emotional responses’ (p. 83). Letters may appear partially or in full; may be perused in private or debated in public; and may tell us about the character of both writer and reader. The degree of faithfulness with which their contents are reported offers a further effective means of characterisation, as does their internal veracity. In the case of *Lady Susan*, for example, the letter is ‘an unreliable, potentially deceptive form’ and ‘any claims to openness and transparency of emotion and feeling are not to be trusted’ (p. 89). In *Mansfield Park*, letters lack transparency and the very act of interpretation can cause grief to their reader (p. 96). Bray concludes this chapter with an effective example from *Emma*, in which the abovementioned effects co-occur when Mr Knightley endeavours to interpret Frank Churchill’s final letter to Emma (pp. 101-103).

In Chapters 6, 7 and 8 respectively, a single ‘critical commonplace’ (p. 103) is interrogated, the aim being to demonstrate how detailed analysis effectively debunks long-standing critical myths. Chapter 6 addresses the long-held assumption of a direct correspondence between Austen’s characters’ linguistic ability and their moral worth. While Austen herself is seen by many as a ‘prescriptivist in the eighteenth century tradition’ (p. 107), examples drawn from the characters of Lucy Steele and Mrs. Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Emma’s misguided snobbery over the language use of Harriet’s paramour Mr.

Martin and the detestable Mrs. Elton, demonstrate the dangers of over-simplifying the relationship between language use and morality. Lucy Steele's awkward adoption of an inappropriate register betrays her lack of sincerity and education, while Mrs. Jennings's explicit vulgarity accompanies a kind, sympathetic and rather shrewd disposition. The examples provided by Bray are convincing, although recourse to Culpeper's model of characterisation (2001), in which language variety is linked to character morality, may have lent his argument additional rigour.

In Chapter 7, the critical assumption that Austen "has no style, that her writing is an effortless product of her genius" (p. 2) is investigated. According to Bray, critics frequently view her sentences as 'balanced and harmonious, seeing her grammar as one aspect of a well-regulated decorum and propriety which they associate with her writing in general' (p. 127). Bray demonstrates that such a view is 'oversimplified' (p. 127). While there are instances of grammatical balance and harmony, as evidenced syntactically and through use of antithetic phrasing, Bray applies the rules of a contemporary rhetorician to highlight instances of 'looser and less regulated' (p. 132) style when Austen's narrator adopts a first-person voice and directly addresses the reader to justify an unlikely plot conclusion, such as at the close of both *Northanger Abbey* (pp. 131-134) and *Mansfield Park* (pp. 134-136).

The monograph closes with Bray's challenge to the assumption that Austen eschewed figurative language. Drawing from some of Austen's juvenilia, together with multiple examples of the verbal play and double talk employed by the 'dangerous Crawfords' (p. 153) in *Mansfield Park* (including reference to what Bray labels 'the dirtiest joke in Austen's fiction' (p. 147), Austen's use of figurative language for comic and more serious effect is demonstrated. Finally, Bray turns to Austen's unfinished *Sanditon* to demonstrate how, in her later work, she increasingly turned to figurative language as a means, not merely of

characterisation, but also to highlight the nature and consequences of the connection between language and meaning.

Bray concludes by highlighting the role of the reader in Austen, as the ambiguity created by her varied use of point of view and other stylistic techniques necessitates much work on behalf of the reader. But, he asserts, complete knowledge is not, and never was, the point, either on the part of reader or narrator. Rather, in problematising the nature of narratorial omniscience, Austen is simultaneously highlighting the impossibility of complete knowledge in the real world, and the dangers of failing to realise this.

With its clarity, concision and humour, Bray has written a rare book: a knowledgeable and scholarly text that one can enjoy in a few sittings curled up on the sofa. And yet its contribution to Austen studies and stylistics is clear: detailed linguistic analysis demonstrates that long-held scholarly assumptions about a canonical writer can nonetheless be flawed or erroneous. Knowledge has again been revealed as incomplete; as such, there will always be critical lacunae to fill.

References

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