Free Speech: Jane Austen, Robert Bage, and the Subversive Shapes of Dialogue

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Abstract
In this essay, I examine Jane Austen's restraint in attributing direct speech to its speakers in *Pride and Prejudice*, a matter on which she reflected explicitly in a letter to her sister, Cassandra. I connect this feature of Austen's writing – free direct speech – with the dramatic qualities of her dialogue, but also specifically with Robert Bage's presentation of speech in his 1796 novel *Hermsprong*, a novel that Austen owned. The political dimensions of Bage's dialogue, its freedom in the discussion of ideas and its subtle omissions of person, resonate with the style and spirit of *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen's interest in free direct speech also bears upon her famed development in presenting the mind, in free indirect discourse.
Keywords: *Hermsprong*, dialogue, speech attribution, style.

1. Dull Elves

On receiving her published copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra, on 29 January 1813, the much-cited words:

> "I do not write for such dull Elves"
> "As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves." (Austen 2011: 210)

Austen's rejection of "dull elves" has become in many ways the manifesto of her precocious talent and, indeed, of her challenge to the contemporary reputation of the novel, by deeming it a form that demands of its readers "ingenuity", which as the *OED* tells us is "High or distinguished intellectual capacity; genius, talent, quickness of wit" (4.a) or "Capacity for invention or construction; skill or cleverness in contriving or making something (material or

immaterial)" (6.a). That Austen rewrites here Walter Scott's couplet in *Marmion* "I do not rhyme to that dull elf, / Who cannot image to himself" (Scott 1992: 244), makes even more evident the emphasis she puts on intellectual work as opposed to the immediacy of Scott's pictorial imagining. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen provided an explicit defence of the novel and a rebuttal of the commonplace diminishment of its value:

> – there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them. (Austen [1818] 2006: 31)

Austen's letter to Cassandra on the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* provides unique, explicit evidence as to her own belief that *her* fiction demanded of its readers a significant intellectual input. And it is in this general sense that Austen's reference to "dull elves" is commonly interpreted: the rejection of "dull elves" is repeated by critics to endorse the multiple complexities and subtleties of her writing.

However, Austen's reference to the ingenuity of her readers is often detached from the narrative feature which she specifies as necessitating that ingenuity. Austen's rejection of the dull elves came about as a consequence of a very specific, linguistic detail on which she was musing. She writes, more fully, to Cassandra:

> There are a few Typical errors – & a "said he" or a "said she" would sometimes make the Dialogue more immediately clear – but "I do not write for such dull Elves".
>
> "As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves." (Austen 2011: 210)

Austen is precise: it is the absence of a "said he" or a "said she" that is ultimately justified by the intellectual capability of her ideal reader. This detail of writing that Austen highlights may seem relatively inconsequential, but in it lies a key to some of Austen's most innovatory work in the history of the novel.

My purpose in this essay is to examine this aspect of Austen's writing, that is her use of free direct speech: direct speech written without a "she said" or a "he said". This is a category of speech which is significantly underexplored, not only in the critical history of Austen's linguistic innovations, but in the history of the novel more broadly. Anne Waldron Neumann is one critic who has seen Austen's

reference to the omission of "said she"s and "said he"s as possibly an allusion to free *indirect* discourse (Neumann 1986: 369). Free indirect discourse is probably Austen's most famed technical innovation, in which the narrative takes on a character's voice without any explicit attribution of speech to that character. Yet, as I shall examine more fully later in this essay, the context of Austen's letter demonstrates that she is referring to dialogue between characters in direct speech. Neumann's observation does, however, have truth to it: free *direct* speech is a cognate category associated with, and possibly contributive to, Austen's innovations in free indirect style.

When referred to at all, free direct speech seems most often associated with modernist literature. Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short in *Style in Fiction* helpfully describe free direct speech, giving the example of Hemingway's dialogue:

> Hemingway is fond of omitting the reporting clause. In *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* he uses this choice to portray the quick to-and-fro of the conversation between the two waiters:
>
> 'He's drunk now,' he said.
> 'He's drunk every night.'
> 'What did he want to kill himself for?'
> 'How should I know.'
> 'How did he do it?'
> 'He hung himself with a rope.'
> 'Who cut him down?'
>
> In fact this is only a portion of some twenty-eight lines of FDS [free direct speech] between the initial direct speech and the next narrative sentence. Without the introductory clauses specifying which waiter says what, it becomes difficult to remember which waiter is which, so that confusion is gradually produced in the reader's mind. Indeed, one critic, David Lodge, has argued that this is precisely the point of Hemingway's story. (Leech and Short 2007: 258f)

It may seem startling to suggest that Austen's style of writing dialogue in this regard could be similar to that of Hemingway's, not least when the long received opinion of Austen's fiction has been that the brilliance of its dialogue resides in the crisp differentiation of its characters, as one early reviewer pointed out in 1830[1]:

[1] Unsigned review by Thomas Henry Lister of *Women as they are* by Mrs Catherine Gore (1830).

> We have seen a good deal of spirited dialogue, in which the parts might be transposed and given to other interlocutors, with very little injury to the effect of the whole. This is never the case in the conversations introduced by Miss Austen. Every thing that is said, however short and simple, belongs peculiarly to the person by whom it is uttered, and is indicative of their situation, or turn of mind. And yet they do not seem to talk for effect; they merely say just what it seems most natural that they should have said. (Southam 1968: 114)

While Austen may not have sought deliberately to promote confusion as to who is speaking, as Hemingway or Evelyn Waugh would later do (Thomas 2002), she manages extended passages of dialogue with very minimal attribution and, as her letter to Cassandra makes evident, she is prepared to eschew the clarity of a "he said" or "she said" in particular cases. This decision to drop attributive clarity in dialogue certainly caused some significant confusion in the printing of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Austen's frequent restraint in attribution may well have links to her interest in and facility for dramatic speech. Austen's novels, from the start, have been praised for their dramatic manner. George Henry Lewes in his influential essay of 1859 described how Austen preferred "*dramatic presentation*" rather than "*description*, the common and easy resource of novelists" (Southam 1968: 157). The omission of speech attribution in Austen's fiction seems part of this drive to the dramatic, in bringing novelistic dialogue in some ways closer to the play-text, in which characters present themselves through speech. However, Austen's dialogue also has affiliations with philosophical dialogue. In particular, I would like to explore in this essay Austen's experiments in speech attribution alongside the work of Robert Bage, who used dialogue innovatively for the discussion of ideas. Bage was prepared to leave speech notably free from attribution. Jane Austen need not have been in sympathy with or influenced by Bage's democratic, or more radically Jacobin, politics, even if she were influenced by his prose innovations and his characters. However, there is a question as to whether, more fundamentally, the absence of attribution in dialogue does have political significance. It is after all, "free speech".

2. Dramatic dialogue

The famous opening to *Pride and Prejudice*, in which Mr Bennet and Mrs Bennet discuss the new tenant at Netherfield Park, demonstrates immediately Austen's commitment to free direct speech.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," **said his lady to him one day**, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," **returned she**; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do not you want to know who has taken it?" **cried his wife impatiently.**

"*You* want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."

"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

"How so? how can it affect them?" […] (Austen [1813] 2006: 3f)[2]

The conversation between Mr and Mrs Bennet consists of twenty-eight turns of direct speech. There is one other instance of indirect speech – further to the second utterance of the dialogue above – the indirectness of which establishes with subtlety the reserve and complexity of Mr Bennet in comparison with his wife. There are only five attributions of direct speech in total and three of those attributions occur in quick succession at the opening of the dialogue, establishing the alternating pattern of only two speakers. Attribution then quickly falls away and the reader depends on their emerging knowledge of the characters' opinions, two direct addresses to "Mr.

[2] All references, unless otherwise noted, are to this edition. Throughout this essay I use bold type to highlight relevant attribution clauses.

Bennet", and the rhythm of the exchange to know who is speaking when.

This opening chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* is celebrated for its minimalism and its dramatic presentation of character. The absence of speech attribution is key to both. By not using a reporting clause to denote a speaker, Austen also disallows the possibility of providing extra information about person, tone, and place. Instead, characters present themselves through their speech almost entirely. The absence of speech attribution does, however, play its own symbolic part in establishing character and scene. Without the interruptions of a narrator, Austen portrays the fractious intimacy of a long-married couple whose antagonism is best conveyed without mediation.

As prose fiction evolved in the eighteenth century, the basic need to frame direct speech by connecting it to its speaker caused some irritation. Jean-François Marmontel articulated his disapproval of "the enervating repetition of the means of speaking" ("*lui dis-je, reprit-il, me répondit-elle*") in his essay "Direct" in the *Encyclopédie* (Marmontel 1754; Mylne 1979: 50). Such expressions are "interruptions which curtail the vivacity of dialogue and make the style tedious when it should be the most animated"[3]. He went on to experiment with punctuation as a means of indicating change of speakers in his own *Contes Moraux* (Mylne 1979: 46f). But there may have been more direct influences on Austen. Samuel Richardson in his epistolary novel *Sir Charles Grandison* – a novel particularly admired by Austen – has one of his characters abandon "says-I's" and "says-she's" to present the dialogue as if it were a play-text:

> By the way, Lucy, you are fond of plays; and it is come into my head, that, to avoid all *says-I's* and *says-she's*, I will henceforth, in all dialogues, write names in the margin: (Richardson [1753-4] 1972: vol. 1, p. 273)

By the time that Austen was composing her fiction, the play-text was being advocated as an aspirational analogy for the novel, largely because of Richardson's influence. Anna Letitia Barbauld in the preface to her 1804 edition of *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, which Austen may well have known (Harris 2014: 240f), described Burney's talents in this regard:

[3] The translation here is my own.

But his [the author's] narration will not be lively, except he frequently drops himself, and runs into dialogue: all good writers therefore have thrown as much as possible of the dramatic into their narrative. Mad. d'Arblay has done this so successfully, that we have as clear an idea, not only of the sentiments, but the manner of expression of her different personages, as if we took it from the scenes in a play. (Barbauld 1804: xxiiif)

Caroline Austen described, in her 1867 *Memoir*, her aunt's skill in reading aloud, remembering her reading of Burney in particular. Aunt Jane picked up "a volume of Evelina and read a few pages of Mr. Smith and the Brangtons and I thought it was like a play" (in Austen-Leigh [1870] 2002: 174). The importance of the theatre and certain plays for Austen's composition has been amply demonstrated in recent criticism (see Byrne 2002; Gay 2002). An aspiration to dramatic dialogue may even have influenced the elision of these small, seemingly inevitable, narrative clauses: a "said he" and a "said she".

But the desire for a dramatic dialogue cannot be Austen's only reason for adopting free direct speech. While unattributed dialogue undoubtedly brings novelistic dialogue closer to drama, the evidence of Austen's letter to Cassandra reveals that unattributed speech also *removes* speech from the dramatic. Reporting clauses act as a form of stage direction, providing scenic and performative information. Furthermore, in a play text, certainly at the time that Austen was writing, it is inconceivable that an utterance would be left undesignated to a specific speaker. Austen, by contrast, accepts the possible ambiguity of an utterance's provenance as a price worth paying. Austen seems occasionally to have privileged the dynamic of conversation itself over a crisp designation of speaker. Why was this the case?

3. Robert Bage's *Hermsprong* and philosophical dialogue

Jane Austen read very widely, yet only 20 books are known definitively to have been owned by her (Gilson 1997: 429ff). Among these twenty books – ranging across history, poetry, travel, periodical and devotional writing – are four works of English fiction.[4] Three of these

[4] This is excluding Austen's copy of the children's book *The History of Goody Two Shoes*.

are by celebrated authors who are known to have had a significant influence upon Austen's fiction, both in terms of imitation and dissent. Samuel Richardson's *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-54), already discussed, was singled out by the Austen family as a work of particular import for her, first in her brother Henry's 1818 "Biographical Notice of the Author" attached to the posthumously published *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (in Austen-Leigh [1870] 2002: 141). James Edward Austen-Leigh's 1870 *Memoir* elaborated on Austen's intense familiarity with Richardson's fiction, down to "Every circumstance narrated in Sir Charles Grandison" (Austen-Leigh [1870] 2002: 71). The title-page of each of the seven volumes of *Sir Charles Grandison* was signed by Austen (Gilson 1997: 444). Jane Austen also owned Frances Burney's *Camilla* and would have had the pleasure of seeing her own name in print in its subscription list. Austen singled out *Camilla* by name in *Northanger Abbey*, as she continues her praise of novels:

> "It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;" or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. (Austen [1818] 2006: 31)

A third work of literary prose owned by Austen – in this case a philosophical tale rather than a novel – is Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (published in 1759 as *The Prince of Abissinia. A tale*). The second volume bears Austen's signature (Gilson 1997: 443), and Austen's reference to *Rasselas* in *Mansfield Park* is only one of the many indications of Austen's indebtedness to Johnson in her writing (Austen [1815] 2005: 454). Henry Austen described Johnson as Austen's "favourite moral writer" in prose (in Austen-Leigh [1870] 2002: 141). Alongside this roll-call of the eminent writers that play such significant parts in the narrative of Austen's development, stands one other English novel, which is not mentioned in the family record. This is Robert Bage's *Hermsprong; or, Man as he is not*, published in 1796, the same year as *Camilla*. Jane Austen's name is written on the front endpaper in each of the three volumes (Gilson 1997: 437).

That Jane Austen's copy of *Hermsprong* survives need not necessarily imply that it had any particular significance for her. The

survival of any book is largely a contingent phenomenon and books can be kept for many reasons entirely separate from their content. But the content of *Hermsprong* does make it a particularly intriguing novel to consider with regard to Austen's intellectual life and her political affiliations, as *Hermsprong* is a novel that, in the context of the 1790s, has politically subversive messages. The novel is centred on the character of Hermsprong who has been brought up among native Americans. On travelling to England he becomes attached to Caroline Campinet, the daughter of an unpleasant aristocrat, Lord Grondale, whose authority and power Hermsprong increasingly undermines. After being incarcerated for his presence at a riot (in fact, there counselling restraint and forbearance) and under fabricated charges of being a French spy, Hermsprong is revealed to be the rightful owner of Lord Grondale's title and estate, as the son of Grondale's traduced elder brother. Lord Grondale suffers a stroke and dies.

Robert Bage was a novelist and tradesman. He was based for most of his life in Elford, near Tamworth in the Midlands, where he ran a business as a manufacturer of paper and cardboard. He was also for fourteen years a business partner in ironworks with, among others, Erasmus Darwin (Kelly 2004) and was a member of the Derby Philosophical Society, founded by Darwin. Bage knew Joseph Priestley and had other friends who were directly affected by the Birmingham riots of 1791, in which rioters attacked Dissenting chapels and homes, burning them down in a three-day assault. Bage's last two novels, published in the 1790s, responded to the political climate of the time, as they became increasingly radical in their advocacy of egalitarian, meritocratic views, though this is done in part in a satirical, comical vein (Kelly 1976: 27). William Godwin is known to have visited Bage in 1797, the year after the publication of *Hermsprong*, Bage's sixth and last novel. Hermsprong, the character, has been described as "a walking Rights of Man" (Johnston 2013: 173) and Bage has the charges that lead to Hermsprong's imprisonment include the reading and circulation of Paine's radical work. Hermsprong is proven to be part of the ruling establishment by birth, but it is his merit and his virtue that allow him to claim it.

The debate about whether Austen was conservative or more radical in her political views continues vigorously. Marilyn Butler

in her ground-breaking work, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, positioned a conservative Austen against Jacobin writers and against Bage specifically: "To trample upon peers of the realm *ex officio* was never Jane Austen's intention" (Butler 1975: 85). By contrast and more recently, Helena Kelly has argued that *Pride and Prejudice* is not only a "self-consciously politicised text", but an explicitly "revolutionary novel" (Kelly 2016: 139f), that thoroughly challenges aristocratic privilege and Burkean prejudice. Stuart Tave in his introduction to *Hermsprong* examines some of the many connections that have been identified between *Hermsprong* and *Pride and Prejudice* and he settles on a temperamental similarity between the two:

> In Bage the freer life is not the product of a doctrine that seems so often to make happiness in political novels so lugubrious, but it is a life of some wit and joy. Freedom really seems to offer a humane spirit and more interesting human beings. It offers an invitation to join in its community of liveliness. That was the sort of invitation Jane Austen could accept with pleasure […]. (Tave 1982: 12)

It is possible that Austen read *Hermsprong* in the year that she began to compose *Pride and Prejudice*. *Hermsprong* was published in 1796 thus tallying with Cassandra Austen's memory of the year of *Pride and Prejudice*'s genesis. According to a memorandum written by Cassandra, probably after her sister's death, the earlier version of *Pride and Prejudice*, known as *First Impressions*, was begun in October 1796 (Sutherland 2005: 16).

Hermsprong is one of the many novels of the period that contains the phrase "pride and prejudice", but there are more convincing resonances with Austen's work than that (Tave 1982: 1f). One of the most noticeable similarities between *Hermsprong* and *Pride and Prejudice* is to be found in the character of Maria Fluart – the spirited, arch, and witty friend of the rather more demure Caroline Campinet – who bears some considerable resemblance to Elizabeth Bennet. At one point, in conversation with Hermsprong and Caroline, Maria pre-empts Elizabeth Bennet's sharp observation to Darcy on accomplished women: "I am no longer surprised at your knowing *only* six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*" (Austen [1813] 2006: 43). A similar rebuke

occurs when Hermsprong speaks of the restricted scope of English women's minds:

"[…] minds imprisoned, – which, instead of ranging the worlds of physics and metaphysics, are confined to the ideas of these routs and Ranelaghs, with their adjuncts of cards, dress, and scan – I beg pardon – I mean criticism."

"And are women such things?" asked Miss Campinet.

"Some women are such things, Miss Campinet," answered Hermsprong. "Some are what they ought to be."

"There are very few of this latter description though," said Miss Fluart archly. "Did you ever see two?"

"Not two at a time, perhaps – out of this company."

"I declare," said Miss Fluart, "I will have nothing to do with your insidious exceptions." (Bage 1796: 212f)

There is another striking and long-noticed resemblance between the characters of *Hermsprong* and those of *Pride and Prejudice*: this is in the family of the Sumelins. Like Austen, Bage dramatises the domestic wrangles between a cynical husband and more intellectually limited wife, as well as their silly offspring. The narrator of *Hermsprong*, Gregory Glen describes how:

Mrs. Sumelin was always at him, with all the agreeable garrulousness of a fretful woman; and the candour of a wife, who is perfectly convinced that her husband is always wrong. (p. 89)

The conversation between the Sumelins on the elopement of their daughter Harriet (much like Lydia Bennet), elicits a Bennet-like exchange long before the Bennets ever saw print. The similarity is especially striking in Mr Sumelin's dour and ironical dealings with his wife:

"Well, and for what is all this noise and pother, Mrs. Sumelin? Your daughter is gone to be married, that's all. I suppose you intended she should marry one day?"

"But to marry so much beneath her, Mr. Sumelin, – and such a coxcomb."

"As to his being a coxcomb, my dear, we must set that down as a circumstance in Harriet's favour; coxcombry being the most approved qualification of man, in the mind of woman […]." (p. 88)

Hermsprong is known for its aspirations to political freedom. However, the work embraces a formal freedom in its presentation of dialogue as this small extract demonstrates. The conversations between the Bennets and the Sumelins are closer in more than just characterisation. In both Bage's and Austen's dialogue, speech is often left quite unusually free from an intervening narrative authority. Bage's skill in dialogue has long been celebrated (Tave 1985: 11). While Marilyn Butler considered Austen and Bage as essentially divergent politically, Bage's worthwhile contribution and legacy lay in:

> […] his emphasis on dialogue as an index of value. Here Bage was no doubt influenced by the French philosophic tale, especially Voltaire's and Marmontel's. But he helped to naturalize the convention of a debate on issues of substance, to make it amenable to the full-length romantic plot, and thus to inaugurate one of the most interesting sub-species of the coming generation, the intellectual comedy of Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, and Thomas Love Peacock. (Butler 1975: 86)

This is a separation between political message and technical innovation that may be disputed.

As Butler pointed out, Bage presents debates of ideological or political significance not narratorially, but through conversation, as chapter 19 of volume 2 notably exemplifies. The chapter contains a discussion between Hermsprong and six others in which conversation ranges across topics including the moral causes of misery; the differences between American and English government; wealth as a corollary of political corruption; and the value and means of female education (with explicit reference to Mary Wollstonecraft). The chapter is almost entirely written as dialogue, beginning with two short narrative paragraphs and followed by 127 turns of speech. There are 35 successive lines without attribution in which the implication is that one of the six characters who talk with Hermsprong (here Mr Sumelin) does not change. The conversation is quick, often using sentence fragments, and in large part emphasises subject rather than speaker. In another chapter (vol. 3, chapter 7), here between two characters only, Bage pulls off a quite extraordinary 65 turns of dialogue with only one attribution. Lord Grondale, while persecuting his daughter Caroline, is pursuing her friend Miss

Fluart, who at every stage outwits him. This conversation with its partly amatory, teasing tone is indeed highly coherent to a comic romance, while also explicitly and seriously connecting parental tyranny over daughters to the larger political sphere. Discussing his daughter, Grondale begins to lose his temper:

"Grant me patience! is there no happiness for her but with Hermsprong?"

"It is a conclusion to which she may soon arrive, if your lordship continues your very politic tyranny in favour of Sir Philip Chestrum."

"Politic tyranny! you are a lady, Miss Fluart. One scarce knows how to apprize a lady, when she takes liberties."

"Oh dear! these are nothing to what I should have taken, had I had the honour to be Lady Grondale. I should have been always blurting out some impertinent truth or other." (Bage 1796: 266f)

Politic here is a term that registers at the personal, domestic level ("judicious, expedient, sensible skilfully contrived", *OED*), as well as at the national.

That Bage was also committed to a dramatic style is borne out by his occasional switching to play-book layout when managing a conversation between multiple speakers. This can happen mid-scene and without explanation (for instance, volume 3, chapters 10 and 27). Bage at one point even has his narrator comment on the preferability of dialogue uninterrupted by digression (p. 123). But in his display of the partly comic head-to-head between Miss Fluart and Lord Grondale, Bage lets his narrator disappear almost entirely. The conversation does not even begin with an attribution – even this is implied – rather, the one single attribution signals a shift into greater formality on Lord Grondale's part:

"Miss Fluart," **said his lordship, increasing the solemnity of his tone**, "I fear Miss Campinet has not had in you so prudent a friend and monitor, as I had hoped." (p. 266)

Earlier in the novel (volume 2, chapter 19) Hermsprong is introduced from the following ironic perspective, as subverting "forms" of politeness:

But he had faults; one for which it would be difficult to procure pardon in the court of politeness. It was a sort of secret contempt for politeness itself;

or rather for its forms; forms so numerous and trifling, that they destroyed its essence. It was quite disagreeable to Mrs. Sumelin and Miss Harriet, to see them, that is to say, the bows, the smiles, and the graces, hurried over to-day, in order to address himself more particularly to Miss Campinet […]. (pp. 208-9)

In a sense, the removal of speech attribution is a removal of the bows and graces attendant upon dialogue. Non-attribution liberates speech from reminders of title and of person, and from authoritative glosses and prescriptions upon behaviour. This is something that Austen seems to have been alert to. It is noticeable that in the course of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen does not extensively dramatise Mr Collins in conversation with Lady Catherine or with Darcy. At the ball, Elizabeth watches Collins from a distance approaching Darcy and there "prefaced his speech with a solemn bow" (Austen [1813] 2006: 109). Elizabeth is unable to hear what is spoken and the narrator eschews the descriptive work that would have to be done in conveying Collins's obsequies. When Elizabeth herself speaks with an imperious Lady Catherine there is very little attribution to signify status or power outside of the conversation. Rather the dialogue between the two women is one in which Lady Catherine tries to assert "who I am" (p. 393), but the narrative voice does little to underpin her status or articulate the relationship between the two. The deference of Mrs Bennet's early role in the conversation is attested to by a reporting clause:

"Yes, madam," **said Mrs. Bennet, delighted to speak to a lady Catherine**. (p. 390)

But after this, attribution attenuates to highlight Elizabeth's fight for her own authority, status and rights in her own words:

"[…]You are to understand, Miss Bennet, that I came here with the determined resolution of carrying my purpose; nor will I be dissuaded from it. I have not been used to submit to any person's whims. I have not been in the habit of brooking disappointment."

"*That* will make your ladyship's situation at present more pitiable; but it will have no effect on *me*."

"I will not be interrupted […]." (p. 394)

As with Bage's fiction such an attack on authority can be read as politically subversive in the terms of the day. Indeed, Helena Kelly writes that Elizabeth is "fundamentally, a radical" (Kelly 2016: 155). Austen may, in the end, disallow unambiguous political messages to be drawn from her fiction, but like Bage, who often himself obscured ideology in comedy, she dramatises a freedom of mind and purpose that is undoubtedly, and with immense subtlety, endorsed by the layout of her page.

4. Free speech: risks and achievements

Bage's dialogue accommodated, in innovatory ways, serious political ideas within the romantic plot. His fiction changed dialogue within the novel but also distanced it from the philosophical tradition from which it at least in part emerges. The steady back and forth of attributions in *Rasselas* for instance – and Bage as well as Austen was indebted to Johnson (Tave 1982: 1) – signal a clearly designated viewpoint. It is not commonly pertinent for philosophical or moral positions to be delivered free of a clear sense of provenance and thus be subject to erroneous attribution. The naturalism of free direct speech, however, has risks. Sometimes, a lack of clarity about who is speaking can be a form of mimesis. Austen's interest in group dynamics seems to permit very occasionally that utterances emerge from one of several people and sentiment pertains as much to a group as an individual. For instance, as the Bingley circle disparage the social connections of Jane and Elizabeth Bennet in chapter 8 of *Pride and Prejudice*, it is impossible to know who brings up the subject of their attorney uncle in Meryton, but this sense of unanimity in gossip may have been Austen's point (Austen [1813] 2006: 39f; Toner 2012: 145ff). Yet free direct speech can also result in error, as was, to Austen's disappointment, the case in *Pride and Prejudice*.

One of the most extended instances of free direct speech in *Hermsprong* occurs in a chapter in which Maria Fluart teases her friend Caroline as to her preference for Hermsprong. Bar one short introductory paragraph, the chapter is comprised entirely of this dialogue in which 26 turns of speech are silently attributed by means of one opening "said Miss Fluart" (p. 234). The friends discuss female marriage choices and they address, in a rapid stream of dialogue, the

realities of marriage and the relative importance of personal worth vis-à-vis personal fortune. As is evident from the long, entirely unattributed, passage of dialogue that follows, one significant risk in freeing speech from reporting clauses is the effort required of the reader to follow who is speaking. Nor does Bage give his readers much internal help, as the characters use little personal address. The potential for confusion is further exacerbated by the characters speaking naturalistically in brief fragments and by their turning from personal situation to more abstract discussion. Caroline begins:

"You think me favourably disposed to him."

"Yes, rather."

"And you think that disposition strong enough to make me risque Lord Grondale's displeasure, and its consequences?"

"Yes, – all but one."

"Pray, favour me with your opinion of Mr. Hermsprong."

"He is moderately tall."

"Pshaw!"

"Tolerably handsome."

"I care not."

"Rather genteel too, if he would dress more en coxcomb."

"Can you praise him no better?"

"I have given him all the attributes which carry our daughters of blood and ton so fast into Scotland; what would the girl have?"

"I had rather hear of the attributes of his mind; his good sense, his knowledge; his cool collected fortitude; his intrepidity; his contempt of meanness; his sentiments so noble, so exalted, so soaring above the reach of common minds."

"Very good my dear. Yes, you will be able, by prayer and fasting, to risque all consequences. I wish, however, we knew something of his birth, parentage, and education; or are you willing to take him, as they advertize for stolen goods, and no questions asked?"

"I am not so far advanced, Maria. That I esteem him, I own; so much, perhaps, that it would be difficult for me to make another choice; but between esteeming and taking, there is some difference. I wish for happiness, and shall not chuse to risque it by imprudence."

"Especially the imprudence of losing a duchess's revenue?"

"If by this I lost only the freaks of greatness, I think I could be comforted."

"You are an apt scholar, my dear; and take your philosophy very fast; if you can get enough of it to overcome female vanity, you will have done a wonderful thing; something like a miracle I believe."

"Does it appear so difficult to conquer that vanity which is to be gratified only by things one does not want?"

"Not want? Change the expression, my dear; vanity creates almost as great wants as hunger, and much more teazing."

"If I can contrive to want the vanity, I can make shift, perhaps, without the gratification."

"Yes – if love can expel vanity – one need not complain of its weakness."

"I will talk no more to such a perverter of meanings; let us mind our business." (pp. 235-6)

By quoting this extract at length, it is evident that in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen did not emulate Bage by such prolonged unattributed dialogue, even between two speakers. Bage might have aimed at naturalism but he also risked undermining that same effect, by his readers' likely need to stop and reread. Nonetheless, this is a passage that seems remarkably to resonate in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Like Maria Fluart, Elizabeth Bennet will play on the preferability of fortune ("a duchess's revenue" in Maria's words) when she jokes about first loving Darcy on seeing Pemberley. But more specifically, this dialogue in *Hermsprong* recalls the scene in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth similarly subjects Jane to teasing for her predilection for Bingley. Caroline calls Maria a "perverter of meanings", which Jane echoes in describing her sister as persuading her to more than she feels:

"It has been a very agreeable day," said Miss Bennet to Elizabeth. "The party seemed so well selected, so suitable one with the other. I hope we may often meet again."

Elizabeth smiled.

"Lizzy, you must not do so. You must not suspect me. It mortifies me. I assure you that I have now learnt to enjoy his conversation as an agreeable and sensible young man, without having a wish beyond it. I am perfectly satisfied from what his manners now are, that he never had any design of engaging my affection. It is only that he is blessed with greater sweetness of address, and a stronger desire of generally pleasing than any other man."

"You are very cruel," said her sister, "you will not let me smile, and are provoking me to it every moment."

"How hard it is in some cases to be believed!"

"And how impossible in others!"

"But why should you wish to persuade me that I feel more than I acknowledge?"

"That is a question which I hardly know how to answer. We all love to instruct, though we can teach only what is not worth knowing. Forgive me; and if you persist in indifference, do not make *me* your confidante." (Austen [1813] 2006: 379-80)

The chapter ends there. In its entirety, the conversation between Elizabeth and Jane lasts for seven turns[5]. But its relative brevity did not defend it from being misconstrued. In the first printed edition of *Pride and Prejudice*, this conversation read differently, as the chapter ends not with Elizabeth speaking but Jane (here implied attribution is supplied in square brackets):

"Lizzy, you must not do so. You must not suspect me. It mortifies me. I assure you that I have now learnt to enjoy his conversation as an agreeable and sensible young man, without having a wish beyond it. […]"

[Elizabeth] "You are very cruel," said her sister, "you will not let me smile, and are provoking me to it every moment."

[Jane] "How hard it is in some cases to be believed! And how impossible in others!"

[Elizabeth] "But why should you wish to persuade me that I feel more than I acknowledge?"

[Jane] "That is a question which I hardly know how to answer. We all love to instruct, though we can teach only what is not worth knowing. Forgive me; and if you persist in indifference, do not make *me* your confidante." (Austen 1813: 3, 220f).

Something goes awry in this passage of *Pride and Prejudice*. Why would Elizabeth describe being persuaded to own more than she acknowledges, when the dialogue dramatises Jane undergoing such persuasion? The compositor has misunderstood here the distribution of utterances, an error exacerbated by Austen's failure to make dialogue clear with reporting clauses. Austen points out this error to her sister Cassandra in the letter that followed the one cited at the beginning of this essay:

The greatest blunder in the Printing that I have met with is in Page 220 – Vol. 3. where two speeches are made into one. (Austen 2011: 212)[6]

[5] That is, if one takes Elizabeth's smile for an eighth, nonverbal response.

[6] Dated 4 February 1813.

This comment elucidates Austen's earlier reference to the missing "said he"s and "said she"s and their association sequentially with "a few Typical errors" (p. 210). But in spite of this mangling of her dialogue in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen resolutely defied those who need help in identifying who says what. In *Mansfield Park*, the novel that would follow *Pride and Prejudice*, not only does Austen continue to refrain from definitive attributions of speech in dialogue (Toner 2012: 146f), but she takes much further her writing of an inner speech that depends so subtly on uncertainty of provenance.

Free direct speech was an experiment in writing dialogue that challenged expectations of the rigidity of written conversation. It developed with vigour at a time when political norms were being radically disputed. Stuart Tave describes *Hermsprong* as a novel that if not wanting or expecting "revolutionary rebirth", "is subversive of prescriptive authority and of stupidity" (Tave 1982: 12). The expression applies equally to *Pride and Prejudice*. In this fiction, Austen writes characters who have a freedom of spirit and purpose that challenge at least in part the habits and expectations of traditional forms of authority. Austen is also "subversive of […] stupidity" in that she grasped so fully the nuances of a new technique – free direct speech – in defiance of the "dull" elves. Free direct speech was a technique that she would pursue and evolve so as to loosen fixity of attribution for a number of purposes, not least to display with unprecedented freedom characters' thoughts in flow. This is in free *indirect* discourse where the inner lives of individuals are liberated even from the demands of fully articulated speech.

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