

## Chapter VI

### CONDENSED AND REPORTED SPEECH

Besides the method of telling events by arranging for the reader to listen to direct conversation, the author at times employs condensed or reported speech for that purpose. Condensed speech is a technique of abbreviating long conversations. Perhaps the most delightful example is that of Mrs. Elton's raptures over the strawberry-picking at Donwell Abbey:

The whole party were assembled, excepting Frank Churchill, who was expected every moment from Richmond; and Mrs. Elton, in all her apparatus of happiness, her large bonnet and her basket, was very ready to lead the way in gathering, accepting, or talking -- strawberries, and only strawberries, could now be thought or spoken of. -- "The best fruit in England -- every body's favourite -- always wholesome. -- These the finest beds and finest sorts. -- Delightful to gather for one's self -- the only way of really enjoying them. -- Morning decidedly the best time -- never tired -- every sort good -- hautboy infinitely superior -- no comparison -- the others hardly eatable -- hautboys very scarce -- Chili preferred -- white wood finest flavour of all -- price of strawberries in London -- abundance about Bristol -- Maple Grove -- cultivation -- beds when to be renewed -- gardeners thinking exactly different -- no general rule -- gardeners never to be put out of their way -- delicious fruit -- only too rich to be eaten much of -- inferior to cherries -- currants more refreshing -- only objection to gathering strawberries the stooping -- glaring sun -- tired to death -- could bear it no longer -- must go and sit in the shade ."

(Emma, chapter XLII, page 283)

The gist of many long and tedious speeches is conveyed here through an abridged form of speech involving the sacrifice of most of the main verbs. This not only gives the impression of a whole sequence of speeches without interruption but also makes the reader actually see Mrs. Elton -- like her logic -- jerking and bending. The whole vivid scene is thus presented to us in a highly dramatic form.<sup>1</sup> This passage would not be so effective if the conversation had been written out in full. Here Jane Austen condenses it to produce a greater ironic impact than would otherwise be possible.

Another use of condensed speech is to give the impression of a sequence of speeches without losing narrative pace, since it can be combined more readily with narrative style, making possible a free movement from one to the other. An example is when Catherine questions Miss Tilney about the latter's deceased mother:

"Was she a very charming woman? Was she handsome? Was there any picture of her in the Abbey? And why had she been so partial to that grove? Was it from dejection of spirits?" -- were questions now eagerly poured forth; -- the first three received a ready affirmative, the two others were passed by; and Catherine's interest in the deceased Mrs. Tilney augmented with every question, whether answered or not.

(Northanger Abbey, chapter XXII, page 184)

The context makes it perfectly clear that Catherine's eager questions were asked and answered, or not answered, separately. The novelist

<sup>1</sup>J.F. Burrows, *Jane Austen's Emma* (Sydney: 1968), pp. 126-127.

has chosen to present them as a single speech, instead of a long dialogue partly to avoid a "protracted ding-dong" conversation and partly to emphasize the heroine's curiosity, and to gain speed for the narrative.<sup>2</sup> These are notes on a dialogue rather than the dialogue itself; we are left to infer Miss Tilney's reply and to reconstruct the original form of Catherine's questions. The passage, while gaining economy, does not lose dramatic quality; it has a liveliness which normal direct speech would lack.

At times reported conversation is used in place of direct speech in order to abbreviate what would otherwise be rather tediously conventional dialogues; for example, Jane Austen chooses to report William Collins's conversation with Mrs. Bennet on his first visit to Longbourn, rather than to present a full direct dialogue:

He had not been long seated before he complimented Mrs. Bennet on having so fine a family of daughters, said he had heard much of their beauty, but that, in this instance, fame had fallen short of the truth; and added, that he did not doubt her seeing them all in due time well disposed of in marriage.

(*Pride and Prejudice*, chapter XIII, page 48)

Another example is when Edward Ferrars comes to visit the Dashwoods at Barton Colloge; he is so diffident, so hesitant, so cool that Elinor cannot help contrasting this behavior with that of the Edward she remembers from Norland. All of this is made clear almost

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Wright, *The Novels of Jane Austen* (Middlesex: 1962), p. 107.

at once in a short paragraph of reported conversation:

...(Elinor) forced herself, after a moment's recollection, to welcome him, with a look and manner that were almost easy, and almost open; and another struggle, another effort still improved them. She would not allow the presence of Lucy, nor the consciousness of some injustice towards herself, to deter her from saying that she was happy to see him, and that she had very much regretted being from home, when he called before in Berkeley-street.

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXXIV, page 245)

There are two obvious advantages to this reported conversation: in the first place, the reader is spared a dialogue which could hardly be interesting; in the second, the author presents the paragraph from Elinor's viewpoint so that the heroine's reaction can be clearly perceived by the reader. Moreover, later, the Edmond-Luoy relationship will explain his diffidence here.<sup>3</sup>

Another occasion for reported speech is when Mr. John Dashwood pays a belated call on Mrs. Jennings in Berkeley-street:

His visit was duly paid. He came with a pretence of an apology from their (Elinor's and Marianne's) sister-in-law, for not coming too; "but she was so much engaged with her mother, that really she had no leisure for going any where." Mrs. Jennings, however, assured him directly, that she should not stand upon ceremony, for they were all cousins, or something like it, and she should certainly wait on Mrs. John Dashwood very soon, and bring her sisters to see her.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

His manners to them, though calm, were perfectly kind; to Mrs. Jennings most attentively civil; and on Colonel Brandon's coming in soon after himself, he eyed him with a curiosity which seemed to say, that he only wanted to know him to be rich, to be equally civil to him.

(Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXXIII, page 230)

The intention of this reported conversation is not to give the impression of an entire conversation, but simply to present the thought of the characters. From this conversation alone, the reader is able to understand a good deal about John Dashwood and about Mrs. Jennings: the former's civility and its limits, the latter's insensitivity to the most transparent kind of excuse and her good-heartedness. The thin ground of John Dashwood's civility is exposed only at the end of the paragraph, and the reader is forced to think back on what has gone before. Doubtless he is civil, but not from a wholly pure motive.<sup>4</sup> To spell out a dialogue of this length plus the authorial comment, using the normal direct speech would produce a passage of considerable length. But by using reported speech, the author is able to retain the flavour of direct conversation and the illusion of social relationships while simultaneously presenting her judgment on the characters. The achievement of this reported speech is not only one of economy but also of dramatic vividness.

Furthermore, at times Jane Austen employs reported speech instead of direct speech to avoid shifting attention from a character in focus to another character who is not for the time being the center

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

of attention. One example is the extremely brief mention of Emma's disclosure to Harriet that she has completely misunderstood Mr. Elton's intentions:

The confession completely renewed her first shame -- and the sight of Harriet's tears made her think that she should never be in charity with herself again.

(Emma, chapter XVII, page 121-122)

All this is narrated in a single sentence, with the briefest mention of Harriet's tears. In this way, the author avoids shifting the reader's attention away from Emma by bringing Harriet and her feeling to the center of the stage.

Another example which seems to demand a different explanation is when Marianne, having sprained her ankle, is rescued by the handsome Willoughby. Willoughby appears from nowhere, offers his services, carries her home, introduces himself to her surprised mother and sisters, exchanges social pleasantries, and is enthusiastically discussed after his leave-taking. All this is reported without using a word of direct speech. Though the whole episode might easily have become a substantial and dramatic conversation, Jane Austen deliberately avoids using direct speech because it would have been difficult for her to develop such a scene without slipping into parody (the situation contains many of the ingredients of the kind of romantic fiction which she has frequently ridiculed both in the early chapters of this same novel and in *Northanger Abbey*), and it is important for the future development of the Marianne-Willoughby story that the reader

should not be discouraged at the outset from taking the episode seriously.<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, indirect speech may be deliberately used in contrast to direct speech forming part of the same paragraph to suggest the different attitudes of two speakers. Thus, when Mrs. Bennet (on the first page of *Pride and Prejudice*) presses her unwelcome attentions upon her husband, his coolness is suggested by the indirect form:

"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.

(*Pride and Prejudice*, chapter I, page 1)

Another example occurs in *Emma* when Mrs. Elton effusively questions Jane; her officious anxiety revealed in direct speech is in contrast to the quiet restraint of Jane's reply in the less dramatic, reported form:

"My dear Jane, what is this I hear? -- Going to the post-office in the rain! -- this must not be, I assure you. -- You sad girl, how could you do such a thing? -- It is a sign I was not there to take care of you."

Jane very patiently assured her that she had not caught any cold.

(*Emma*, chapter XXXIV, page 235)

Jane Austen is probably the first novelist to pay so much

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Miesnerfarth, *The Errand of Form* (New York: 1967), p. 86.

attention to the various possibilities of condensed and reported speech. As pointed out in this chapter, these forms of speech may stem from the wish of the author to keep a character in the background, or to abbreviate what would otherwise be a tedious and unnecessary dialogue, or to preserve narrative speed, or to avoid repetition of what has already been related at some length.

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