

Chapter IV

THE EPISTOLARY FORM

Beyond the narrative carried on by the impersonal narrator and by the characters, lies narrative that comes in the form of letters. The letter has long been considered by many novelists and critics as a means of "talking on paper".¹ Part of the intention of having letters in a novel is to provide the illusion of an intimate (though one-sided) chat; a prolonged correspondence may resemble a protracted dialogue. Jane Austen once wrote to her sister Cassandra:

I have now attained the true art of letter-writing which we are always told, is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth.²

And this is exactly what she has done; almost every letter that appears in her novels is a substitute for conversation. The true-to-life quality of Mary Musgrove's letter results from her translation of others' talk into her own idiom; for example, she writes:

...Mrs. Musgrove protests solemnly that she knew nothing of the matter. We are all very well pleased, however; for though it is not equal to her marrying Captain Wentworth, it is infinitely better than Charles Hayter; and Mr. Musgrove has written his consent, and Captain Benwick is

¹G. Sherburn, The Correspondence of Alexander Pope, (Oxford, 1956), p. 10.

²R.W. Chapman (ed.), Jane Austen's Letter to her sister Cassandra, (London, 1952), p. 102.

expected to-day. Mrs. Harville says her husband feels a good deal on his poor sister's account; but, however, Louisa is a great favourite with both. Indeed Mrs. Harville and I quite agree that we love her the better for having nursed her. Charles wonders what Captain Wentworth will say; but if you remember, I never thought him attached to Louisa...

(Persuasion, chapter XVIII, page 176)

Mr. Collins' letters, like his talk, are composed of clichés and written in pompous and pedantic style:

The disagreement subsisting between yourself and my late honoured father always gave me much uneasiness, and since I have had the misfortune to lose him, I have frequently wished to heal the breach; but for some time I was kept back by my own doubts, fearing lest it might seem disrespectful to his memory for me to be on good terms with any one with whom it had always pleased him to be at variance...

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter XIII, page 46)

Moreover, every letter is distinctive; each bears the idiosyncrasies of its writer; the letters written by the male characters of the novels afford good examples. Frank Churchill's letter is full of elaborate compliments:

"If I made myself intelligible yesterday, this letter will be expected; but expected or not, I know it will be read with candour and indulgence. - You are all goodness, and I believe there will be need of even all your goodness to allow for some parts of my past conduct. - But I have been forgiven by one who had still more to resent. My courage rises while I write. It is very difficult for the prosperous to be humble. I have already met with such success in two applications for pardon..."

(Emma, chapter V, page 342)

Mr. Darcy's letter is expressed in formal and firm language:

Be not alarmed, madam, on receiving this letter, by the apprehension of its containing any repetition of those sentiments, or renewal of those offers which were last night so disgusting to you. I write without any intention of paining you, or humbling myself, by dwelling on wishes which, for the happiness of both, cannot be too soon forgotten; and the effort which the formation and the perusal of this letter must occasion, should have been spared, had not my character required it to be written and read. You must, therefore, pardon the freedom with which I demand your attention; your feelings, I know, will bestow it unwillingly, but I demand it of your justice.

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter XXXV, page 146)

Letters play a very important part in Jane Austen's novels. In Pride and Prejudice alone, twenty-one letters are quoted or given in full, and ~~twenty-two~~ letters mentioned or implied. Apart from occasional letters from one character to another, there are several cases of regular correspondence; between Jane and Elizabeth, between the sisters and Mrs. Gardiner, between Elizabeth and Charlotte Collins, between Jane and Caroline Bingley, and between the Collins and Lucas families. Several of these letters reveal a number of facts of first importance.³

Letters can be a useful plot-device; they may be used to speed or to report action, and to disclose information.⁴ A letter of this kind is the one received by Mrs. Dashwood in the fourth chapter of

³Joseph Wiesenfarth, The Errand of Rom (New York, 1967), p. 42.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 55.

Sense and Sensibility. From it, we learn that she is offered a cottage in Devonshire, and she promptly sends her acceptance, after showing her reply to her two daughters. Or during Fanny Price's stay at Portsmouth, the time when the heroine is isolated from the other principal characters, news comes from two directions: from Mary Crawford in London, and from Edmund in Northamptonshire, to keep Fanny in close contact with events in other parts of the world. Or when Elizabeth is with the Gardiners' she learns about Lydia's elopement from a letter she receives from Jane.

At certain points, Jane Austen deliberately avoids dialogue and makes use of letters to provide information instead. Where one might have expected a long dialogue between Darcy and Elizabeth to explain the matters which have prejudiced her against him, such a conversation is deliberately put aside by the device of a letter. His letter gives her time to reflect upon her past behaviour. After her slow digestion of it, comes Elizabeth's awakening.

"How despicably have I acted!" she cried. --
 "I, who have prided myself on my discernment! --
 I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who
 have often disdained the generous candour of
 my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless
 or blameable distrust. -- How humiliating is
 this discovery! -- Yet, how just a humiliation! --
 Had I been in love, I could not have been more
 wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has
 been my folly. -- Pleased with the preference
 of one, and offended by the neglect of the
 other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance,
 I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and
 driven reason away, where either were concerned.
 Till this moment I never knew myself."

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter XXXVI, page 154-155)

The importance of the letter lies in the various reactions it evokes from Elizabeth. Elizabeth begins reading it with a strong prejudice against everything he might say. Then as she reads it for the second and third time, one or two things begin to strike her as being true. Once she has brought herself to accept one statement as being true, then she realizes that she must ultimately accept every fact as true or reject them all. This letter is obviously essential to the plot, for it deepens the frustration occasioned to Elizabeth by her sense of Darcy's superior social standing.⁵ Though in the past Elizabeth has always been well aware of the vulgarity of her mother and of her younger sisters, it must be the first time she has heard an outsider comment on it frankly; so "she felt depressed beyond anything she had ever known before". (Pride and Prejudice, chapter XXXVI, page 155). The impression remains with her: "not a day went by without a solitary walk, in which she might indulge in all the delight of unpleasant recollections... In her own past behaviour, there was a constant source of vexation and regret, and in the unhappy defects of her family a subject of yet heavier chagrin. They were hopeless of remedy" (Pride and Prejudice, chapter XXXVI, page 152). The reader, like Elizabeth, needs time to take in all this information and, had it been given in dialogue, the interview would have required most improbable self-control in Mr. Darcy.

More important than these informatory letters are the kind used to reveal character and relationships between the characters. An

⁵W.A. Craik, Jane Austen: The Six Novels (London, 1965), p. 87.

example is the letter which Lucy Steels shows to Elinor, thereby disclosing Lucy's engagement to Edward Ferrars as well as revealing her character and motives. Another communication of this kind is Mr. Collins' letter to the Bennets in which he reminds them that the estate is entailed to him and announces his approaching visit. In it Mr. Collins writes that he wishes to assure Mr. Bennet of his readiness to make his wife and daughters all possible amends for his future possession of the estate. This phrase receives various responses from the members of the Bennet family, each of whom responds to it in a way that illustrated his or her own character. The tolerant Jane Bennet cannot see how he can make amends; however, "the wish is certainly to his credit" (Pride and Prejudice, chapter XIII, page 47). Elizabeth immediately sees through him:

"He must be an oddity, I think," she says
 "I cannot make him out. -- There is something very pompous in his stile. -- And what can he mean by apologizing for being next in the entail?
 -- We cannot suppose he would help it, if could.
 -- Can he be a sensible man, sir?"

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter XIII, page 47)

Mr. Bennet has "great hopes of finding him quite the reverse". He remarks: "there is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him" (Pride and Prejudice, chapter XIII, page 47). Mary the "literary" sister, sees his letter as not defective "in point of composition". Catherine and Lydia are not interested in anyone who does not wear a scarlet coat. Mrs. Bennet; however, "was preparing to see him with a degree of composure, which astonished her husband and daughters"

(Pride and Prejudice, chapter XIII, page 47). And this is because she correctly reads his "amends" to mean that Mr. Collins wishes to marry one of her daughters.⁶

And more important still is the use of letters as a means of giving an insight into the letter-writer's mind, character and motives. In chapter thirteen of Pride and Prejudice, the letter with which Mr. Collins introduces himself to the Bennet family is typically pompous and pedantic in its addiction to cliché, and to impressive but empty phrases like "bounty and beneficence," "promote and establish". This letter of introduction prepares one to dislike him even before he arrives. And later, having heard of Lydia's elopement, Mr. Collins writes a delighted letter to Mr. Bennet in which he expresses how glad he is that he has not married into the family and advises Mr. Bennet to throw off Lydia. As a whole, his letters reveal him as a conceited, pedantic person.

Lydia Bennet's letter written after her elopement allows us to see her folly and irresponsibility. "Oh, thoughtless, thoughtless Lydia! What a letter is this, to be written at such a moment!" comments Elizabeth (Pride and Prejudice, chapter XLVII, page 215). And any sympathy the reader may have had for Lydia evaporates after reading her letter.

Mary Crawford is intelligent, so her abuse of language must be regarded as wilful. She uses vulgar terms in spite of recognizing them as such. For example, she writes to Fanny Price that Mrs. Rushworth

⁶Ibid., p. 90.

will feel "to use a vulgar phrase -- that she has got her pennyworth for her penny" (Mansfield Park, chapter XL, page 397); and in another letter to Fanny where she states her opinion and feeling towards Tom Bertram's sickness:

If he is to die, there will be two poor young men
 less in the world; and with a fearless face and
 bold voice would I say to any one, that wealth
 and consequence could fall into no hands more
 deserving of them.

(Mansfield Park, chapter XLV, page 423)

Her letters are described as being written with "some degree of elegance", but the offending expressions, like the joking on serious matters, suggest a certain hardness in the user's character.

Another example of using letters as a means of revealing the letter-writer's character is the letter that Isabella Thorpe writes to Catherine Morland reasserting her love for James after ending her engagement to him.

...I am quite uneasy about your dear brother,
 not having heard from him since he went to
 Oxford; and am fearful of some misunderstanding.
 Your kind offices will set all right: -- he is the
 only man I ever did or could love, and I trust
 you will convince him of it. The spring fashions
 are partly down; and the hats the most frightful
 you can imagine...

(Northanger Abbey, chapter XXVII, page 216)

The inconsistencies, and falsehood of Isabella appear clearly in black and white, in the form of contradictions, and juxtaposition of ideas. She states that she is "uneasy" about James; yet she is the one who

causes his misery. The juxtaposition of her reassertion of love for James with her remarks on the spring fashions shows that Isabella puts both on the same level, and therefore she cannot be quite serious about Catherine's brother. Such a shallow pretension cannot even impose upon the innocent Catherine. The letter lays bare Isabella's hypocrisy.

On the other hand, Robert Martin's letter reveals the good sense and warm attachment of the writer. On reading it, Emma, though prejudiced, cannot help accepting the fact that it is much beyond her expectation:

There were not merely no grammatical errors, but as a composition it would not have disgraced a gentleman; the language, though plain, was strong and unaffected, and the sentiments it conveyed very much to the credit of the writer. It was short, but expressed good sense, warm attachment, liberality, propriety, even delicacy of feeling...

(Emma, chapter VII, page 53)

And after she finishes reading it, she forms this opinion of him:

...No doubt he is a sensible man, and I suppose may have a natural talent for -- thinks strongly and clearly -- and when he takes a pen in hand, his thoughts naturally find proper words. It is so with some men. Yes, I understand the sort of mind. Vigorous, decided, with sentiments to a certain point, not coarse. A better written letter, Harriot, (returning it,) than I had expected."

(Emma, chapter VII, page 53)

Most important of all, however, is the use of letters as centers of dramatic situations.⁷ The mere sight of a letter may be charged with dramatic and emotional force; just as Lucy Steele wounds Elinor by showing her the letter she has received from Edward -- "you know his hand, I dare say, a charming one it is" (Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXII, page 155), so Marianne is bitterly disappointed to see "the handwriting of her mother, never till then unwelcome." (Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXVII, page 186). But the most memorable example is the scene in which Elinor finds Marianne "almost choked with grief" (Sense and Sensibility, chapter XXIX, page 195), clutching a letter in her hand with three others scattered around her. The cause of this emotional crisis is the receipt of a cold and formal note from Willoughby.

One may conclude then that letters written, received, or awaited play an important part in the development of the action. Such letters occur in many episodes in the novels of Jane Austen.

⁷Wiesenfarth, op. cit., p. 65.

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