



“In Vain Have
I Struggled”:
Pride and Prejudice,
Chapter 34

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WHY DOES MR. DARCY SAY, “In vain have I struggled” (*Pride and Prejudice* 189) and not rather “In vain I have struggled” or for that matter “I have struggled in vain”? What is the effect, and perhaps design, of the inversion of the verb? And is the departure from the usual word-order of speech made more natural or less so by the equally unusual opening of the sentence with the adverb?

If I had reflected about these things at all till now, I had found that the word-order was somewhat stilted, or stagy, and wondered if Jane Austen did not hear her characters' voices with complete conviction on every occasion. This disloyal thought was sometimes made worse by the guess that (not being Emily Brontë) even she might have trouble finding credible accents for the throes of male passion. The present note is an expression of penitence, offering as I believe a more understanding answer.

In general, syntax is often this author's best marker, not only of a character's individuality but of the currents and changes of feeling within each character. On the first point Miss Bates's syntax comes to mind, or Wickham's smoothness; and on the second the glorious moment when Mrs. Bennet's verbal flow becomes startled (like a stuck hosepipe) into brevity and exclamation:

“Good gracious! Lord bless me! only think! dear me! Mr. Darcy! Who would have thought it!” (*PP* 378). Following this clue, then, one might guess that Darcy’s unusual word-order is a sign of his passion because of its disarray. Just as he mostly speaks with outstanding elegance, in short fluent sentences which are each apropos and which combine into the expression of a man of sense, so here by contrast he strikes a false, or at any rate awkward note.

While that is part of my answer, it seems insufficient, being based on too mechanical a notion of syntax itself. What syntax does in a line or sentence of Milton’s it does also in Jane Austen’s prose, namely establish a rhythm, then continually modify it so as to energize the evolving meaning. Accordingly, the present conundrum is that neither of the two obvious, safe rewritings would alter the rhythm. The sentence would in *every* case be anapestic (that is, of trisyllabic feet consisting of two unstressed followed by a stressed syllable). In every case, the anapests are then cut short by the thrusting iambs of the next, even shorter sentence (“‘It will not do’” [*PP* 189]). Anapests are not by nature the noblest of English meters (they remind me of Lewis Carroll’s dotty lyric, “You have baked me too brown, I must sugar my hair”). What Darcy does, is to unleash one anapest, then check it; then unleash another (“‘My feelings will not be repressed’” [*PP* 189]). The three sentences and their peculiar rhythm as a whole give overwhelming emphasis to his fourth and last sentence, being a measured fourteen words, his first complex sentence of the avowal: “‘You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you’” (*PP* 189). Since this comprises a main verb governing an infinitive governing a second infinitive governing a coordinate substantive-clause, one thing is very clear. Darcy has by now recovered his syntactical control. Which in turn naturally suggests that earlier he had lost it. The jerky, changeable brevity of his first three sentences marked a short loss of that control, which is surprising if not cataclysmic on the part of a character who is something of a control freak.

It is no surprise that his listener is astounded into silence herself: “Elizabeth’s astonishment,” we read next, “was beyond expression. She stared, colored, doubted, and was silent” (*PP* 189). So on he goes, digging himself a still deeper hole. He does it by

means of a reported, summarizing omniscient comment by the *narrator*, who can thus bring out the deficiencies and self-regard of Darcy's continuation. It is a most economical, swift managing of that moment of recognition to which the whole novel has been leading. More to the present point, this mode of narrative management throws the emphasis back once again to the few sentences which he did make in direct speech.

Accordingly, returning to that speech and to my opening questions, I conclude on the first one that the word-order is made abnormal, not only for emphasis but for awkwardness, which a jingling quality inherent in anapests enhances; which is entirely consistent with the feeling that, as in poetry, the double hyperbaton (or transposition of word order) secures emphasis too, in this case a vehemence quite extraordinary for this character. The vehemence centers on "vain" then on "struggle," which (since the struggle indeed proves vain when Elizabeth replies) may for some readers beget dramatic irony as a bonus. On the second question (effect and perhaps design) I conclude that whether or not Darcy is lapsing in control, the author is not. Darcy is deeply moved, carried into a new social and personal situation. We should be making the most of the syntactical-rhythmical abnormality, because small variations in this author may well mark large distinctions. The effect is of an involuntary lapse of guard, a loss of some poise. It seems indeed tailor-made for the moment of his overt hubris. As for the third question, the co-presence of *two* hyperbatons where usually I notice none makes me think hyperbaton is the currently ruling figure; which helps confirm my conclusion that effect is also design.

Having convicted myself of a lazy or inadequate previous interpretation, however, I wonder if I have not gone to the other extreme. Has anyone else swung in this instance as I have? If so, where and how did the pendulum stop? As for me, I believe that just as in Milton syntax is "articulate energy,"¹ and that at such a climax as this mid-point of *Pride and Prejudice*, the peculiarities of syntax are indeed articulating and energizing *something*, whether or not the something is exactly as I perceive it. The abruptness of syntax, the swirling rhythm it creates, the tiny shock it gives the reader as well as Elizabeth Bennet—these,

though the scale and the economy are different, are the counterpart of the wrenching violence of the opening utterance of Milton's Satan, "If thou beest he; but oh how fallen! how changed. . . ."2

NOTES

1. Donald Davie's phrase, in his book of that title: *Articulate Energy: An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1955.

2. *Paradise Lost*, l. 84, quoted from Alastair Fowler, ed. John Milton. *Paradise Lost* (London: Longman, ed. II, 1998), p. 65. On lines 87-88, "*him, who . . . didst,*" (italics mine) Fowler comments, "Vacillating grammar mimes Satan's agitated uncertainty. . . ."

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