

Where Is Jane Austen in *The Watsons*?

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The Watsons is unique among Jane Austen's works in many ways, not the least of which is that it is the only work of her maturity which she deliberately chose not to complete. Beyond that, the experience of reading *The Watsons* seems to me to be strikingly different from the experience of reading her other works. Something is missing—or almost missing—something which is characteristic and even essential in her completed novels. That something is the narrative voice of Jane Austen telling us the story, informing us, guiding us, shaping our responses, standing between us and her characters as we together watch them live their lives. In a very real sense, despite her profound skill in presenting her stories dramatically, every Jane Austen novel is to some degree an extended conversation with Jane Austen herself. One need only recall the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* as perhaps the most famous illustration of this voice:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. (*PP*, 3)¹

Of Sir Walter Elliot's passion for the Baronetage, we hear:

Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch-hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; . . . there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs, changed naturally into pity and contempt, as he turned over the almost endless creations of the last century—and there, if every other leaf were powerless, he could read his own history with an interest which never failed. (*P*, 3)

It is the voice that begins *Emma*:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. (*E*, 6)

This is the Jane Austen voice—a voice of wit, irony, grace, perception, discrimination, judgment, and above all clarity. It is a voice we can trust to guide us and a voice that is, I suspect, one of the principal sources of the joy that comes from reading a Jane Austen novel.

This voice operates in Jane Austen's novels in many ways but especially in two ways that bear on a consideration of *The Watsons*. It is, first of all, a source of necessary information, particularly the initial information that we as readers must have in order to proceed with comfort and confidence. By the end of the opening chapters of most of Jane Austen's novels, we have all the information about the characters and their circumstances that we need. We are quickly acquainted with the Dashwoods' situation, Catherine Morland's personality and family, the history of the entire

Bertram clan—including Fanny Price—Emma Woodhouse's new independence and her relationship with Mr. Knightley, and the plight of the Elliot family as well as their respective attitudes toward each other. And when new characters are introduced or new questions raised, our considerate narrator pauses to explain. We learn of Frank Churchill's history in the second chapter of *Emma* and of Miss Bates's character and her place in Highbury society in the next. When the possibility that "he" may soon be walking at Kellynch-hall is raised at the end of the third chapter of *Persuasion*, the following chapter is devoted entirely to an explanation of who "he" is and of Anne Elliot's earlier relationship with "him." And so on throughout most of Jane Austen's novels. When questions are raised, answers are supplied. When history and background are required, they are provided. Jane Austen as narrator assures us that we will be told all we need to be told, that she will play openly and fairly with us, that we may rely on her not to puzzle or perplex us, and above all that we may trust her to lead us with consideration and clarity. We may put ourselves confidently in her hands and relax. This is an illusion, of course. She withholds information when it suits her purposes, but it is the illusion that matters. Admittedly, *Pride and Prejudice* is something of an exception, as it is exceptional in many ways, but, I trust, the exception that proves the rule. In *Pride and Prejudice* we are thrust immediately into the dramatic scene between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet regarding the new tenant at Netherfield, we move quickly to the assembly at Meryton, and only after the assembly, during the first scene between Elizabeth and Jane, does the narrator pause to fill us in on Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, and their party. But she does fill us in, and from there on we are informed as we need to be.

An equally important function of the narrator in Jane Austen's novels is editorial rather than informative. That is, through her commentary—sometimes elaborate, sometimes fleeting and brief—the narrator establishes a perspective, a framework of judgment through which we witness her stories. She places herself between us and her characters, and as a result, we have a clear sense of where we and she stand in relation to them. However close we may be to some of them much of the time, Jane Austen is careful, in varying degrees, to keep some distance between us—and between her—and her characters, even those with whom she seems to be extremely intimate. Her distance from Sir Walter Elliot, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Harriet Smith, and Mrs. Norris, for example, is rather obvious and needs no explanation. But what is especially interesting in thinking about *The Watsons* is the distance the Jane Austen narrator manages to maintain from her heroines. To be sure, in all of her completed works we spend a great deal of the novel inside the consciousness of the heroine, and the overwhelming bulk of the commentary we are given concerns the thoughts, feelings, responses, and reactions of the central character. But even with those characters with whom the narrator identifies most closely, she slips outside briefly to maintain some degree, however slight, of critical detachment. This detachment is, of course, more pronounced in some novels than in others, but is almost always there. Jane Austen as narrator apparently wants—and perhaps needs—the independence from

her heroines that will allow her and us to see them and think of them with at least minimal objectivity. The schematic contrast between the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility*, the almost allegorical manner in which they seem to dramatize two extremes of temperament, and therefore to be illustrations of abstractions, is in itself a kind of distancing device. In terms of the narrator's comments, Marianne comes off more explicitly worse than Elinor, but the descriptions of both suggest that they are personifications of concepts, neither of which the narrator identifies with closely. The narrator's distance from Catherine Morland is equally clear, since the opening chapter of *Northanger Abbey* establishes it in some detail and the entire novel maintains it consistently. In *Emma* narrative distance from Emma Woodhouse is more subtly handled but clearly present. Early in the opening chapter the narrator tells us:

The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her. (*E*, 5-6)

That is very little, but it is quite enough. We know that the narrator sees Emma as spoiled, complacent, self-indulgent, and unaware of her shortcomings, and we can relax comfortably in that context of judgment and watch as Emma learns her lessons. There is little or no need for further narrative comment. We understand Emma from the outset. And of course Mr. Knightley is there to tell her when she's wrong, as she is and he does repeatedly. *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* are somewhat different cases. *Mansfield Park* is a more sober and more serious novel than Jane Austen's other works. In her moral judgments and in her actions, as most critics have observed, Fanny Price is right, at least in Jane Austen's mind, and though she is not Jane Austen in any sense, the narrator seems to endorse her virtually throughout. Thus the need for the narrator's distance from her heroine may be less crucial. Even here, however, the narrator pulls herself back from Fanny Price and puts her at least at an arm's length. When Fanny is in the throes of trying to discourage Henry Crawford's suit, the narrator steps in briefly:

Fanny knew her own meaning, but was no judge of her own manner. Her manner was incurably gentle, and she was not aware how much it concealed the sternness of her purpose. Her diffidence, gratitude, and softness, made every expression of indifference seem almost an effort of self-denial; seem at least, to be giving nearly as much pain to herself as to him. (*MP*, 327)

Though we have been with Fanny so closely, we are here outside her with a wiser and more perceptive judgment than her own. Somewhat later, when Fanny is reflecting on her certainty that Edmund will never be able to change Mary Crawford after they marry, the narrator observes:

Experience might have hoped more for any young people, so circumstanced, and impartiality would not have denied to Miss Crawford's nature, that participation of the general nature of women, which would

lead her to adopt the opinions of the man she loved and respected, as her own. (MP, 367)

Again, Fanny's agony is seen in a context of wisdom and experience not her own. There seems to be very little narrative distance from the heroine in *Persuasion*, but then there is very little, if anything, in Anne Elliot to be distant about. Her judgment is sound, her perceptions are accurate, her temperament is balanced, and her intuitions are proven to be justified. We, and the narrator, are with her, inside her, for virtually the entire novel. But even with Anne Elliot there are instances, however infrequent and brief, when the narrator steps back from her and speaks about her rather than from within her. In the opening description of the Elliot family and their relationships, the narrator says:

Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne. (P, 5)

Surely this is not the way Anne would think of herself; surely this is the narrator interpreting her and judging those who treat her so shabbily. And later, after a summary of Anne's reflections on her earlier experience with Frederick Wentworth, we read: "She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning" (P, 30). Again, this passage seems not to be quite what Anne herself would think but rather the narrator commenting on the meaning of her feelings.

You will notice that I have left *Pride and Prejudice* until last—with good reason. In terms of the narrator's distance from the heroine, *Pride and Prejudice* is perhaps the most dramatic of any of Jane Austen's novels, and thus I find it extremely difficult to argue that the narrator separates herself from Elizabeth by means of anything substantial she says about her. However, no matter how much the narrator "likes" Elizabeth—and there is some evidence to suggest that she was Jane Austen's favorite—Elizabeth is clearly wrong in her judgment of Darcy, but her errors are dramatized rather than described by the narrator; and the progress of the story concerns the process of discovery through which Elizabeth comes to realize her errors, modifies her judgments, and grows. The narrator's voice is abundantly present in *Pride and Prejudice*, but not in commentary on Elizabeth.

The Watsons is a different matter with regard to both the information the narrator furnishes and the distance the narrator places between herself and Emma Watson. Professor A. Walton Litz has described *The Watsons* as "an attempt to cast everything in dramatic form" and has observed that Jane Austen "fails to give us a double vision of her heroine."² On both counts, this method causes some rather perplexing problems for the reader and created, I suspect, even more serious difficulties for Jane Austen herself. At the beginning of *The Watsons* we are given a brief announcement of the winter assembly in the town of D. in Surrey and then thrust immediately into an extended conversation

between Emma Watson and her sister Elizabeth as they travel to the home of the Edwardses. We learn that Emma has "very recently returned to her family from the care of an Aunt who had brought her up" (*MW*, 315). Why had the aunt brought her up? Why had she returned? Later we learn that she had been away for fourteen years and that there had been little communication between her and Elizabeth. Why so little communication? Why so long? Subsequently, in Emma's conversation with Mr. Edwards, we learn that Emma's uncle had died, that her aunt had married again, that her name is now O'Brien, that she has gone to settle in Ireland, and that it did not suit Captain O'Brien that Emma accompany them. Why not suit? The picture is improved, but it is still incomplete. Only much later, near the end of the fragment, when Emma is in conversation with her brother Robert, do we learn that Emma had been led to expect that she would become heiress to a considerable fortune and that the prospect of that future has now been taken away from her. The details of Emma's circumstances are now relatively complete, but it has taken us almost 16,000 words to piece them together. We also learn late in the fragment that Robert and Jane Watson had visited the Watson family in Stanton. Why had Emma never visited? In the opening exchange between Emma and Elizabeth, Penelope, Margaret, Sam, and Robert are mentioned. Who are they? Margaret and Penelope are shortly identified as sisters, but only during the later conversation between Emma and Mr. Edwards do we discover, with certainty, that Sam is a brother, and we do not learn that Robert is also a Watson until he and Jane arrive for their visit. The case of Mr. Watson is even more enigmatic. Elizabeth sends a note to Emma informing her that Mr. Watson feels well enough to attend the visitation. Is this perhaps a bishop's visitation? Why would he be interested in attending? His later remarks to Emma and Elizabeth identify the occasion as a church affair; we learn that he has seen many of his old friends there and that he has decided opinions about the sermon Mr. Howard delivered. Is Mr. Watson a clergyman? Not until the arrival of the carriage bringing Tom Musgrave and Lord Osborne for their surprise visit are we told that the Watsons' home is the parsonage. Aha! Mr. Watson must be a clergyman! But the question is still enough of a question to persuade R. W. Chapman to place a question mark after the identification "Rev." in his notes to the novel (*MW*, 467). These questions, this confusion and incompleteness, and this perplexity are not at all what we experience in Jane Austen's other works. The informing narrator has stepped aside. The clarity we find elsewhere is missing, and the dramatic method in *The Watsons* simply does not work as it does in *Pride and Prejudice*. It is, of course, possible that Jane Austen might have solved some or all of these problems in revision. She did revise what she had written of *The Watsons* rather extensively, but according to Brian Southam in his study of the manuscript, her revisions involve changes in word choice, phrasing, dialogue, and selection of details, but "Nothing in the manuscript suggests that Jane Austen had any radical second thoughts about the design or treatment."³

In addition to the informational problems in *The Watsons*, there is also

an editorial presence quite different from that in her other works. The narrator does make brief evaluative comments about the Osbornes and Robert and Jane Watson. Indeed, the initial section of the episode of Robert and Jane's visit is a good example of what is more typical in the completed novels. Both Robert and Jane are introduced with brief paragraphs describing and commenting on their characters, and this passage is then followed by a dramatic scene which further develops and illustrates those features of their temperaments which the narrator has already suggested. But I can find not even the slightest suggestion of any occasion in which the narrator steps back from Emma Watson and looks at her thoughts and feelings from outside or with any discernible distance. When the narrator is inside Emma, she is totally and unequivocally with her. This intimacy is most telling in Emma's reflections when she retires to her father's room at the end of the fragment:

Emma was at peace from the dreadful mortifications of an unequal Society, & family Discord—from the immediate endurance of Hard-hearted prosperity, low-minded Conceit, & wrong-headed folly, engrafted on an untoward Disposition.—She still suffered from them in the Contemplation of their existence; in memory & in prospect, but for the moment, she ceased to be tortured by their effects.—She was at leisure, she could read & think,—tho' her situation was hardly such as to make reflection very soothing. The Evils arising from the loss of her Uncle, were neither trifling, nor likely to lessen; & when Thought had been freely indulged, in contrasting the past & the present, the employment of mind, the dissipation of unpleasant ideas which only reading could produce, made her thankfully turn to a book. . . . she was become of importance to no one, a burden on those, whose affection she could not expect, an addition in an House, already overstocked, surrounded by inferior minds with little chance of domestic comfort, & as little hope of future support. (*MW*, 361-62)

This is not the quiet melancholy of Anne Elliot or the innocent moral earnestness of Fanny Price. It comes close to being unqualified hopelessness and despair. Professor John Halperin has argued persuasively that there is a great deal of autobiography in Jane Austen's novels but that none of the heroines are Jane Austen herself.⁴ Emma Watson seems to be an exception. At the very least, Jane Austen as narrator seems very close to Emma—perhaps too close. That apparent closeness and the consequences of it are questions I want to explore.

It is generally agreed that the "Bath period" from 1801 to 1806, during which *The Watsons* was written, was a particularly low time in Jane Austen's life. To begin with, she is reported to have fainted when her mother surprised her with the news that the family was moving to Bath. She had apparently never liked Bath, and her opinion of it reflected in *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* is decidedly unfavorable. The tone of her extant letters from Bath is generally either neutral or more often irritable, querulous, and critical, in sharp contrast to the tone of the letters from Southampton and those from Chawton. And on 30 June 1808 she wrote to Cassandra: "It will be two years tomorrow since we left Bath for Clifton, with what happy feelings of Escape!"⁵ Except for *The Watsons*, this period was a virtual nadir in her creative activity.

It was a time of disruption, dislocation, disappointment, frustration, alienation, anxiety, loss, grief, and uncertainty about the future. She first had to suffer the trauma of leaving Steventon. The period immediately after she and her parents arrived in Bath was filled with a series of frustrating and unsuccessful searches for a possible family residence, and the letters written during this time are filled with the details of repeated investigations of unsuitable locations. One has only to see the house at 4 Sydney Place where the family finally settled to realize how small, confined, and restricted it must have seemed to Jane Austen in contrast to the comfort of Steventon Rectory and the healthy openness of the countryside there. Some time in 1801 or 1802 she is reputed to have fallen in love with a mysterious, unnamed clergyman only to learn a few months later that he had died unexpectedly. In addition, in 1802 she suffered the humiliation of accepting a proposal of marriage from Harris Bigg-Wither and then rejecting it the next morning. The first real promise of literary success came when the novel that was to become *Northanger Abbey* was sold to a publisher in 1803; but it was not published as had been announced, and nothing more came of the venture. Because of her father's increasing debility, the family moved from Sydney Place to Green Park Buildings in 1804. Interestingly, there are no extant letters from 26 May 1801 until 14 September 1804. One wonders if Cassandra destroyed them and, if so, why. After the death of George Austen in 1805, Mrs. Austen and her two daughters made two more moves in Bath before they left it for good, "visited" in Clifton, Adelstrop, and Stoneleigh, and finally settled in Southampton in 1806. For Jane Austen the entire Bath period seems to have been unsettled, uncertain, and unhappy.

All of these circumstances have been suggested as contributing to Jane Austen's decision not to return to *The Watsons*. Undoubtedly. But I want to suggest an additional speculation—and it can only be a speculation—of a possible reason for that decision. The parallels between Emma Watson's circumstances and Jane Austen's at the time suggest that *The Watsons* is, in part at least, a dramatic rendering of the way the author saw her plight while she was living in Bath. Emma Watson is abruptly removed from the home where she had lived for fourteen years and forced to move to radically different surroundings she did not choose. She had lived in relative elegance and comfort and now is in a much poorer, more confined home in a place where she is a stranger. Her expectations for the future—inheritance, possibly marriage, and certainly security—are no longer promising. Her circumstances require her to be dependent on the charity of strangers—the Edwardses. She is virtually a stranger to her family and a total stranger to their friends. She is faced with the more immediate, day-to-day anxiety over her father, who, because of illness and age, is no longer able to perform his duties as a clergyman. She is subjected to the sycophancy of Tom Musgrave and the condescension of Lord Osborne—both perhaps a reflection of Jane Austen's view of the superficialities of Bath society. In her sisters she perceives the almost obsessive preoccupation with the security of marriage in women who have no fortune to commend them, and she senses the likelihood that her

brother Sam will be unsuccessful in his courtship of Mary Edwards. Both cases would seem to reflect Jane Austen's increasing anxiety about marriage for herself and Cassandra. Emma's brother Robert and his wife Jane are consistently unpleasant and superior—another reflection of the contrast between the Austens' circumstances in Bath and the greater affluence of those they associate with. And according to Cassandra, Jane Austen's plan was that Emma was to be subjected to more of the same from her brother and his family—in other words, to further unpleasantness and uncertainty. In addition, Emma's independence—the certainty and clarity of her perceptions of others and her readiness to say candidly what she thinks of Tom Musgrave, to reply directly to Lord Osborne, and to disagree with Elizabeth's comments about marriage—is very much the same kind of independence and critical frankness reflected in many of Jane Austen's letters, especially her letters from Bath. Indeed, except for a difference in age, there is even some similarity in the physical appearance of Emma Watson and her author; at least both are said to have had a “brown” complexion.⁶ As it is presented in Emma's final reflection in her father's room, Emma's situation as well as her mood is bleak and depressing. She is virtually alone and alien to everything around her, and her circumstances are significantly darker than those of any other of Jane Austen's heroines.

This brings me to the question I have used as a title: where is Jane Austen in *The Watsons*? She seems to be only minimally present as a narrator and commentator, but she seems very close to being Emma Watson herself—and without the distance she employed with Fanny Price and Anne Elliot. That proximity, I suggest, may be yet another reason—in addition to those previously suggested—and perhaps the most compelling reason—that Jane Austen chose not to continue with *The Watsons*. Once she had settled in the modest comfort and relative stability of Chawton, in circumstances more like those she had enjoyed in Steventon, she could return to earlier works begun in Steventon—to what became *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Northanger Abbey*—and she could go on to *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. But she could not—or would not—return to *The Watsons*, and especially to the plight of a heroine who was so much like herself, without recalling and suffering more unpleasantness and pain than she was willing to endure.

Jane Aiken Hodge has said of Jane Austen's response to her world that “She had to choose between laughter and tears, and I think sometimes the choice was a very near thing.”⁷ In *The Watsons* she seems to have crossed that narrow line for a time and then to have chosen not to cross it again.

NOTES

¹ All quotations are from *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed., 5 vol. (London: Oxford UP, 1932-34), or from *The Works of Jane Austen*, Vol. VI, *Minor Works*, ed. R. W. Chapman, rev. B. C. Southam (London: Oxford UP, 1954, rev. 1969).

² A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965) 89.

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- ³ B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts* (London: Oxford UP, 1964) 72.
- ⁴ John Halperin, *The Life of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984) 307.
- ⁵ *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1952) 208.
- ⁶ Caroline Austen, quoted in Halperin, 186.
- ⁷ Jane Aiken Hodge, *The Double Life of Jane Austen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972) 14.