

Jane Austen in the Universe

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Everybody knows:

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

The narrator's joke hinges on 'universally'. Replace it with, say, 'generally', as in 'It is generally evident', and the effect is lost, the voice ceasing to flaunt 'an excess of *Cockylorum*'—Austen's term, as a teenager, for an impudent sort of female confidence.² The sparkling command of her opening sentence is indebted to satires of her parents' generation (and therefore, presumably, the generation of Mr and Mrs Bennet): to works like Henry Fielding's 'Modern Glossary' (1752), a list of short, sharp definitions of words as deployed by the type of vacuous wealthy people with whom a social aspirant might long to be seen. In such chat, meaning and its application have been radically curtailed. The 'WORLD', in this context, signifies nothing more global than 'Your own Acquaintance' (as if to say, in a tone that harbours a certain aggression and exclusivity, 'But darling, *everybody* was there'). Its flipside is 'NO BODY. All the People in Great Britain, except about 1200.'³ Such abuses of language and the blind spots that they perpetuate occupied Fielding throughout the *Covent-Garden Journal*; as to the consequences, opposing himself to 'the World' in its socially restricted form, he observed that 'whilst the Author and the World receive different Ideas from the same Words, it will be pretty difficult for them to comprehend each other's Meaning'.⁴

That Austen inherited the atmosphere and idiom of Fielding's 'Modern Glossary', perhaps as a sort of family shorthand (even if she did not know that work in particular), is evident from her play with the senses of 'every Body' in a letter of 1796:

Miss Fletcher says ... that as every Body whom Lucy knew when she was in Canterbury, has now left it, she has nothing at all to write to her about. By Everybody, I suppose Miss Fletcher means that a new set of Officers have arrived there—. But this is a note of my own.—⁵

As the underlining of the second term and the 'note of my own' seem designed to emphasize, 'every Body' and 'Everybody' are being put to two distinct uses as well as indicating two

different groups of people: first, those who have ‘left’; secondly, those who ‘have arrived’. Those uses map onto the difference between ‘Lucy’ Lefroy (referred to informally, by her first name, as a family friend of the Austens) and ‘Miss Fletcher’ (referred to formally, as a friend of Lucy’s, someone whom Jane Austen has just met and Cassandra does not know). ‘Every Body’ describes a group of people known to another person or ‘Body’, in this case Lucy. ‘Everybody’ means ‘a new set’, hitherto not fully individuated and appealing to Miss Fletcher because of their uniformity—indeed, because of their uniforms (Mrs Bennet says, wistfully, ‘I remember the time when I liked a red-coat myself very well’).⁶ ‘Everybody’ has not yet become ‘every Body’ because these people are not yet familiar, but the strong hope is that they soon will be, a hope that is spelt out in single days of long female sighs in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813): ‘Every day added something to their knowledge of the officers’ names and connections. Their lodgings were not long a secret, and at length they began to know the officers themselves’.⁷

The compound words ‘Everybody’, ‘everyone’, and ‘everything’ do not appear in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755); ‘EVERY’ is ‘Each one of all’. But his practice of separating ‘every’ from ‘body’, ‘one’, and ‘thing’ was, by the late eighteenth century, in the process of changing, and Austen’s manuscripts duly hover between ‘every Body’ (the capitalized ‘Body’ also signalling awareness of physical presence) and ‘Everybody’.⁸ Alternation between the two forms suggests an intuitive or working distinction in her mind between a crowd as a collection of individuals and that crowd considered from a greater distance—a ‘set’, like that of the officers in *Pride and Prejudice*—the latter usage being the more recent. ‘Every Body’ stresses single members of a group, and therefore that any collective is made up of many particular bodies potentially at variance with one another, eluding or striving for attention; ‘everybody’ treats that group itself as an indivisible single entity.

The ways in which those two senses might be tussling for prominence, and the preferences or exclusions implied in identifying yourself with one side or the other, might also be one means of understanding how Austen’s variety of free indirect style—with its alertness to competing points of view, communal and individual—comes into being. Emma Woodhouse, a committed ‘imaginist’, frequently insinuates her faulty and lightly scornful appraisals of other, less fortunate characters, into the narrative.⁹ But when we come to the first sustained third-person account of what Miss Bates really thinks and feels about the world, Emma’s judgement is not permitted to intrude:

Miss Bates stood in the very worst predicament in the world for having much of the public favour; and she had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect. She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness. Her youth had passed without distinction, and her middle of life was devoted to the care of a failing mother, and the endeavour to make a small income go as far as possible. And yet she was a happy woman, and a woman whom no one named without good-will. It was her own universal good-will and contented temper which worked such wonders. She loved every body, was interested in every body's happiness, quick-sighted to every body's merits; thought herself a most fortunate creature, and surrounded with blessings in such an excellent mother and so many good neighbours and friends, and a home that wanted for nothing. The simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature, her contented and grateful spirit, were a recommendation to every body, and a mine of felicity to herself.¹⁰

Miss Bates is, like every other human being, in some sense 'in the world' and in 'public'; she is possessed of 'universal' feelings and stands in a human relation 'to every body' she knows—in her case, that relation is decidedly local, individual, and particular. 'Universal' here means not only that she feels good will towards every single body, but also that she does not resent her own place in the universe. One lesson of *Emma* (1815) is that any human perspective on reality—in particular, the heroine's—should not assume the status of a universal truth (the universe being, in this case, Highbury). But another lesson is that the universal may sometimes be quite properly synonymous with the local. *Emma* inhabits a realm in which the 'small' may not only be made to 'go as far as possible', but should be understood as possessing an importance beyond the claims it would ever think to make for itself. This is the home truth that Emma is brought to learn after her humiliation of Miss Bates at Box Hill. It is also the world of *Middlemarch* (1871-2), the conclusion of which presents Dorothea as a Miss Bates of sorts:

But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.¹¹

Austen's early tale 'Kitty, or the Bower' (begun in 1792, four years before *Pride and Prejudice*) includes some earnest scrutiny of 'every body'. Its apparent breadth of application is shown to mean something cruelly narrow:

[Kitty:] 'But as to the Wynnes; do you really think them very fortunate?'

[Camilla:] 'Do I? Why, does not every body? Miss Halifax & Caroline & Maria all say that they are the luckiest Creatures in the World. So does Sir George Fitzgibbon and so do Every body.'

[Kitty:] ‘That is, Every body who have themselves conferred an obligation on them. But do you call it lucky, for a Girl of Genius & Feeling to be sent in quest of a Husband to Bengal, to be married there to a Man of whose Disposition she has no opportunity of judging till her Judgement is of no use to her, who may be a Tyrant, or a Fool or both for what she knows to the Contrary. Do you call *that* fortunate?’¹²

Kitty’s side of this exchange possesses the same sense of injustice as that which animates Fielding’s definitions of ‘WORLD’ and ‘NO BODY’. ‘Every body’ means, as Kitty vainly endeavours to show her foolish companion, only very rich patrons—in other words, hardly anyone at all. To understand ‘Every body’ in any other way means ignoring the sufferings of a poor girl compelled to marry in order to survive (something of this story’s indignation persists in Elizabeth Bennet’s response to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and in Jane Fairfax’s conversations with Mrs Elton, in *Emma*, about the supposedly fortunate life of a governess). ‘Kitty, or the Bower’ shows how impassioned a vein of social and satirical complaint could be Austen’s.¹³ Her early letters abound, too, in Fielding’s style of comedy, playing narrowness of scope against the seeming breadth of a surface claim implied by words such as ‘Every body’. These jokes, pitching large against small and regulating one by the other, gesture towards the origins of *Pride and Prejudice*’s celebrated ‘universal’ opening, as well as (more obviously) towards the perspective of small-minded characters such as Lydia and Kitty, who ‘could talk of nothing but officers’.¹⁴

Isobel Grundy discerns a resemblance between the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice* and Samuel Johnson’s *Rambler* essays (1750-52). Johnson was undoubtedly fond, as Grundy says, of sending up ‘the aphoristic manner with unreliable matter’; however, Austen’s ‘truth universally acknowledged’ has only an indirect connection with her ‘favourite’ prose moralist.¹⁵ There are many more plausible sources for her best-known words. Jonathan Swift’s *Tale of a Tub* (1704), for one, alights on the ‘universal’ as the satirical pivot of the subtitle (‘Written for the Universal Improvement of Mankind’), and Swift’s truths continually present themselves, in the mouths of absurdly compromised speakers—speakers who anticipate Austen’s ‘partial, prejudiced, & ignorant Historian’—as ‘bold’, ‘momentous’, or ‘universal’.¹⁶ Like Austen, he likes to make large truth claims that are quickly riddled with suspicion. One way in which each of them does this is to contaminate or insinuate doubt into what presents itself as truth by emphasizing its origins as some form of ‘account’ or ‘report’ (reported speech, collective gossip, or a private delusional fantasy). Towards the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Catherine demands ‘a report universally contradicted’, as if by way of reply or rebuke to ‘a truth universally

acknowledged'. Her peremptory request is met with a blank refusal from Elizabeth Bennet, who by now sees how things are.¹⁷

How you take a 'universal truth' will necessarily depend on the limits of your definition of the universe; on where your own world starts and ends. For some characters, the universe very quickly fades into nothing when it extends beyond the immediate gratification of their own wants and needs; this is Mrs Bennet's case, and Mary Elliot's in *Persuasion* (1817). It is also true of Marianne Dashwood for the bulk of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Just before she is struck down by fever, Marianne is said to feel 'herself universally ill'.¹⁸ In other words, she doesn't feel right at all, in any part of her mind or body—but *universally*? This appears to be an elephantine overstatement of some sort, when applied to how one individual might be feeling. But that, it seems, is the whole point of the word: the relationship Marianne has constructed between 'herself' and the world is a form of sickness. She has embraced a code of conduct and form of living that allow her to be entirely engulfed in her own concerns—so that she is, as it were, her own universe. This reading of 'universally' is supported by the fact that she fails to notice that most of the inhabitants of the house where she is staying have been forcibly evacuated due to the gravity of her potentially infectious condition. 'It gave her no surprise that she saw nothing of Mrs. Palmer; and as it gave her likewise no concern, she never mentioned her name.'¹⁹ Such a condition as Marianne's sometime universal selfhood comes close to being the antithesis of Miss Bates's 'universal good-will'.

There is an especially dense cluster of 'truths' being 'universally acknowledged' in publications of the 1780s and 90s, the years of Austen's apprenticeship as an author.²⁰ Going by the deployment in print of such phrasing, 'It is a truth universally acknowledged' might be the opening of a sermon about human fallibility, or of a satirical tract in the Swiftian vein, or of a sweeping historical survey or schoolroom textbook, even of a political argument about (say) the rights and wrongs of democracy, or of a speech concerning the legitimacy of an administration. Edmund Burke is the author who, more than any other, joins these disparate elements together, and whose conclusions—in their concern to unite and to counterbalance the claims of community with those of individuals—are closest to Austen's. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), he asked

Is it then a truth so universally acknowledged, that a pure democracy is the only tolerable form into which human society can be thrown, that a man is not permitted to hesitate about its merits, without the suspicion of being a friend to tyranny, that is, of being a foe to mankind?²¹

A year later, Charles de Calonne presented some universal truths with which Burke would have been happier to agree: 'That this is the present disastrous situation of France, is universally acknowledged'; 'That, in every truly monarchical state, the right of declaring war and concluding treaties resides in the Monarch, is a truth so universally acknowledged'.²²

Like Burke, Austen endorsed both the communal view of things and the moral reality of exceptions to that view. Her near-contemporary John Grose was generally convinced of the power of the local: 'The great force of example', he wrote, 'is a truth universally acknowledged'.²³ He would probably have agreed with Austen that the only proper answer to a universal truth claim is that 'Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken'.²⁴ Not 'never'—that would let everybody off the hook—but 'seldom'.

Austen began from a very young age to think about the motives and scope of universal truths. What purchase, if any, does the universal continue to possess, when exemplified in a number of different situations and individual people? The starting point of *Pride and Prejudice* is that a universal truth means no more than local twittering about a single man (albeit of the general type). A similar reflex appears in a letter to her sister Cassandra: 'I am to be in Bombazeen & Crape, according to what we are told is universal here; & which agrees with Martha's previous observation'.²⁵ The playing off in that instance of the universal against the local—'here', as well as the local endorsement of the truth by Martha Lloyd—is even more extreme.

Another way of thinking about how the 'universal' relates to 'here' would be to ask what happens when 'Everybody' is understood as 'every Body', or when 'the whole World' turns out to be no greater than (say) a neighbourhood. Austen wrote with creative irritation on this latter score to Cassandra in January 1801:

M^r Peter Debary has declined Dean Curacy; he wishes to be settled nearer London. A foolish reason—! as if Deane were not near London in comparison of Exeter or York.—Take the whole World through, & he will find many more places at a greater distance from London than Deane, than he will at a less.—What does he think of Glencoe or Lake Katherine?—I feel rather indignant that any possible objection should be raised against so valuable a peice of preferment, so delightful a situation!—that Deane should not be universally allowed to be as near the Metropolis as any other Country Village.—²⁶

Austen's objections to the foolish Mr Debary start in reasonable vein; Deane, a village and civil parish in Hampshire, is indeed much closer to London than is Exeter or York. It follows

that there are many other places further from London than Deane is, and among those places are the picturesque locations of Glencoe and Lake Katherine (both in Scotland). But when we reach what ‘should’ be ‘universally allowed’—the same province of truth as that with which *Pride and Prejudice* opens—we have also reached an absurdity to parallel Mr Debarry’s. This time it works in the opposite direction, panning out rather than narrowing down: Deane is ‘as near the Metropolis as *any other* Country Village’. Austen cannot resist flipping the perfectly sensible argument against Debarry’s provincialism into a form of universality that in its own, knowingly absurd overreaching offers a satirical counterweight to his excessively bounded views.

The early works repeatedly pitch themselves in this way: as flagrantly above or below an unspoken borderline of respectability or normality, offering us far too much or far too little. There is a relic of that technique in the ways in which the ‘universal’ is set against the ‘single’ in the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, and in how we might understand the workings of ‘everybody’ versus ‘every Body’ in Austen’s fictional and epistolary prose. Perhaps this is especially so in a novel first called ‘First Impressions’: its attention to opening gambits is even more charged than it might otherwise be.²⁷

Margaret Anne Doody suggests that one reason why Austen described *Pride and Prejudice* as ‘rather too light & bright & sparkling’ might have been that, by the time it finally appeared in print in 1813, it had too much of the eighteenth century about it. ‘Sparkle’ is the name of a character in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *The Rivals* (1775); more generally, it stands for ‘that old Augustan style, that taste for paradox and wit, for snip-snap antithesis—all things Jane Austen inherited.’²⁸ It is the kind of word and stylistic quality that the older Austen might well have thought in need of updating. Maybe the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, with its flavour of Henry Fielding, has a sort of fusty, tarnished grandeur about it—like that of the amateur or provincial theatricals beloved of the Austen clan and often featuring seventeenth- and eighteenth-century comedies as part of the repertoire. The same atmosphere of slightly clapped-out or hackneyed brightness governs many of Austen’s teenage spoofs. Part of what she is joking about is how tired and trite the idioms of fiction, history, and conduct books, have become. One of only two authorial notes appended to her early works occurs in the course of the unfinished epistolary novel ‘Lesley-Castle’ (1792). Margaret Lesley is writing about her brother to a friend, Charlotte Lutterell:

Never was there a better young Man! Ah! how little did he deserve the misfortunes he has experienced in the Marriage state. So good a Husband to so bad a Wife!; for you know my dear Charlotte that the worthless Louisa

left him, her Child & reputation a few weeks ago in company with Danvers & dishonour.* Never was there a sweeter face, a finer form, or a less amiable Heart than Louisa owned!

* Rakehelly Dishonor Esq^{re}.

Louisa is abandoning a set of real and abstract things ('him, her Child & reputation'), in exchange for another seeming combination of the human and the non-human, the briskly alliterative pairing of 'Danvers & dishonour'. Austen might have had in mind Imlac's advice to the astronomer in Johnson's oriental fiction, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759)—'fly to business or to Pekuah', as the sage advises—or at least the basic structure of that formula, an abstraction (business or dishonour) combined with a person (Pekuah or Danvers).²⁹ But thanks to the authorial footnote, that structure is itself retrospectively exploded, or realized on earth, and Danvers now becomes one of two people with whom the worthless Louisa has thrown in her lot. This kind of joke is still more or less current. In a 1980s spoof of *Dracula*, Stephen Fry's character talks about leaving 'Prudence' behind, at the gates of Count's castle, but the abstract virtue turns out to be a girl with the same name. Immediately thereafter, he tell us 'Of all the hideous spectacles I ever beheld, those perched on the end of this man's nose remain forever pasted into the album of my memory.'³⁰ This is the coming-down-to-earth strain of humour that shapes *Northanger Abbey* (1817): Gothic is sapped of its capacity to intimidate or frighten, being rendered human, local, and domestic; the personification is reduced to a person, the terrifying and incomprehensible spectacle to an instrument that helps you see things more clearly.

All this doesn't so much suggest the priority of the real over the fictional as the ceaseless reference of one to the other. The movement between abstractions and persons is quick and constant in Austen's adolescent tales, which at the level of action sometimes feature human beings in the guise of abstract qualities, and (at the other end of the scale) inanimate accessories standing in for people themselves. 'Female Masks' in the story 'Jack & Alice' (written at some point between 1787 and 1790) are, metonymically, the masqueraders who wear them. Popular characters to impersonate at such masquerades included Virtue, Hope, Temperance, and Liberty, so that the process of translating a disembodied abstraction or truth universally acknowledged into a real, single person might be tantamount to a genuine human experience, a movement from glancing at something unknown and not yet individuated to recognition of a friend or relative. Lady Williams, also in 'Jack & Alice',

appears in the ‘character of Virtue’ at a ball, for instance, as well as impersonating a virtuous character in the rest of the story. Repeated glimpses of her bitchiness and inconsistency do a lot to compromise this vision, as does the entirely banal and deliberately unconvincing way in which her virtue is stylistically represented.³¹ But you couldn’t say that Austen wants to uncover a *real* Lady Williams behind all this, or even that Lady Williams amounts to a ‘person’ or ‘character’ in any meaningful sense of those words. This is what makes another female masquerader’s studied lament, ‘Oh Cecilia, I wish I was really what I pretend to be’, all the better as a joke.³² Rather, Lady Williams’ personification of virtue permits Austen to adopt the mask of an author for whom perfect men and women are by turns the goal of her spoof conduct-book writing, and the enemy.

One way of construing the relationship of general to particular truth, of types to individuals, is in terms of how Austen gathers her people into large parties and then separates them again. People repeatedly join and part company in all her fiction (even if it amounts to no more than a page); indeed, her plots might be said to consist of little else. The gathering up, pairing off, and dispersal of groups, families, couples, body parts, and words constitute one of the mechanisms that she is testing out in her early tales. She commented in later life to her niece Anna, in a letter, when that niece was working on her own novel: ‘You are now collecting your People delightfully, getting them exactly into such a spot as is the delight of my life;—3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on’.³³ In the early tales, clusters of words (as of people) are often collected, with gusto, by creakily overdone devices such as alliteration. One dedication (to Jane Austen’s cousin, Jane Cooper) runs in its entirety like this:

To Miss Cooper—

Cousin

Conscious of the Charming Character which in every Country, & every Clime in Christendom is Cried,
Concerning you, with Caution & Care I Commend to your Charitable Criticism this Clever Collection of
Curious Comments, which have been Carefully Culled, Collected & Classed by your Comical Cousin

The Author.³⁴

Alliteration—always something of a cheap trick—is both a matter of chance and the result of contrivance. Does anything bind this run of c-words together, the author seems to be asking, beyond the fact that they start with the same letter? But the dedication happens accurately to be reproducing the titles of other collections of ‘curious’, ‘compendious’ and ‘copious’

letters, and Austen's emphasis on the pains of art ('Carefully Culled, Collected & Classed') is more than a joke. She never stopped returning to and revising these early stories, even after she was a published novelist. The figure of 'The Author' in this composition is permitted to stand both within and outside its own tightly woven confines. Jane Austen may be 'your Comical Cousin', sharing a first name with Miss Cooper and allowing that cousin's surname as well as the relationship of cousinhood to determine the first letter of most words in her dedication. But Austen is something and someone else, too: namely, 'The Author', a character whose name does not begin with 'c' and who has a vantage point on the imposition of alliterative uniformity as well as being implicated in it. She is both subject to a rule and (having formulated that rule) an exception to it. In playing the author, we might also say that she is at once impersonating a type and becoming an individual. 'The Author' will be how she is later primarily identified on the title pages of her published novels, where she never appears in her own name.³⁵

Austen's early heroines travel through life under 'the conduct of chance', as Johnson put it in *Rasselas*.³⁶ Apparently subject to a barrage of inescapable rules, they pay attention to none of them—other than to invoke them as transparent cover for rule-breaking. The teenage writings are, fundamentally, anti-conduct books. Full of manically recycled and gleefully perverted advice about how to behave and what to do, they repeatedly let their anti-heroines escape. Bad wives like Louisa evade punishment (we later find out that she has converted to Catholicism and is 'soon to be married to a Neapolitan Nobleman of great & Distinguished Merit').³⁷ Children who steal from and disrespect their elders end up not only surviving but thriving. Truth is not the same thing as justice, a recognition that will persist, in altered but not always thoroughly subdued form, in the later fiction.

'There's a divinity that shapes our ends', says Hamlet, and in the teenage writings that divinity is unmistakably and tyrannically authorial.³⁸ Overly determined syntactical structures enclose unpredictable endings. What seems to be a foregone conclusion turns out to be a punchline that shirks respectability and decorum, as well as the generic requirements either of a marriage plot or a conduct book. It may be true of many child writers that they are trammelled in routines contrived by other people, routines from which their fictions are an exercise in evasion; in other words, their imaginative licence arises from an inability to make their own choices or govern their own lives. J. M. Barrie observed of Daisy Ashford that her writing possessed 'an air of careless power'—an air directly related to the fact that the author herself 'was hauled off to bed every evening at six'.³⁹ But resisting the schematic tendencies of other novels, valuing the exception to a rule, cherishing the possibility of things having

turned out differently—or carrying beyond the formal close of her own fiction a consciousness of things having indeed worked out other than the way it seemed they had—all these things mattered very much to Austen as a grown-up writer, too.

John Bayley pointed out fifty years ago that Austen's freedom in her writing sprang precisely from a lack of it in her life. The fiction, he argued, was located in a 'reality' that 'depends on its inescapability'; "'constraint" for Jane Austen is the condition of life'.⁴⁰ Bayley's suggestion is borne out by comments such as that recorded of a Mrs Pole, about *Mansfield Park* (1814): 'the situations & incidents are told in a manner which clearly evinces the Writer to *belong* to the Society whose Manners she so ably delineates.'⁴¹ Writing from inside that society, belonging to it whether she liked it or not, Austen does not seem to have drafted her novels with an unchanging sense of how they would end (there are two surviving and very different versions of the climactic proposal scene in *Persuasion*).⁴² One reason why she continues to provoke so many sequels or re-writings is that—like Shakespeare—she exhibits such a strong consciousness that human lives, including those within her fictions, are at once confined by and something other than exemplary of the general truths they embody, or of the genres in which they appear. Stephen Wall wrote of Anthony Trollope's characters that 'it is clear that they are not there just to demonstrate something that he wants proved'.⁴³ The same is true of Austen's people, whose lives extended in their author's mind beyond the novels in which they come into being and who contain the potential to behave differently from the ways in which they are shown to behave in print. Austen apparently told her family that Jane Fairfax—having escaped the fate of a governess and, by the end of *Emma*, married Frank Churchill—died young;⁴⁴ the narrator of *Mansfield Park* tells us that Fanny Price would have accepted Henry Crawford's proposal if he had just kept asking (this, it seems, was the conclusion that Cassandra Austen would have preferred).⁴⁵

In one sense, what Austen achieves in the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice* is a sudden narrowing of horizons. Yet her first sentence keeps up the appearance of perfect equipoise thanks to the even-handed syntax and the balance of supply ('possession') and demand ('want') that it deals out to us with a straight face. This is part of what Austen meant when she referred to 'the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile' of *Pride and Prejudice*.⁴⁶ And it is right to feel that we are here reading a truth that does generally hold in some way, as an epigram does, albeit not a truth of the stature heralded by 'universally': could any human truth live up to such a billing? William Empson's gloss upon Fielding's double irony suggests how Austen's truth about men and women might be read as both universal and not universal, and at the same time:

the style of Fielding is a habitual double irony ... Single irony presumes a censor; the ironist (A) is fooling a tyrant (B) while appealing to the judgement of a person addressed (C). For double irony (A) shows both B and C that he understands both their positions; B can no longer forbid direct utterance, but I think can always be picked out as holding the more official or straight-faced belief ... Presumably A hopes that each of B and C will think 'He is secretly on my side and only pretends to sympathize with the other'; but A may hold some wise balanced position between them, or contrariwise may be feeling 'a plague on both your houses.'⁴⁷

The tyrannical perspective in Austen is that which declares a truth universally acknowledged; that superhuman perspective itself becomes the butt of irony when it is yoked to an imperative about nothing more significant than a rich man's marital prospects in the neighbourhood. (It matters, additionally, that this process involves the translation of an epigram into a novel; the expansion of the pithy general truth into its dispersed, multiple, and particularized applications). The supremely even-handed narrator understands both positions, the 'universal' and the 'single', and the compromises—in other words, omissions from a full picture of reality—that each involves when one is taken in isolation from the other. She therefore not only permits but requires the articulation of both within the first sentence. There is a joke in the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*, then, about mere locality, and at the same time a feeling that it is indeed quite true that '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on'.⁴⁸ Such material is not 'everything' or 'every thing'; which is the point. It is, rather, 'the very thing', both general and particular.

To begin with, Austen's works were in general praised more for their moral content—the 'conduct' that they were understood to recommend—than for their stylistic merits. But many reviewers, as well as Austen's immediate circle, were also quickly alerted to the *interest* of her works, the way in which they draw us in. Austen's was a fiction with a broader, more familial scope than was typically the case for novels of the early 1800s, as the *Critical Review* immediately realized in the opening sentence of its appreciative comments on *Pride and Prejudice*:

Instead of the whole interest of the tale hanging upon one or two characters, as is generally the case in novels, the fair author of the present introduces us, at once, to a whole family, every individual of which excites the interest, and very agreeably divides the attention of the reader.⁴⁹

Before we even get to that family, the appeal of Austen's beginning is that it immediately commits itself to at least two perspectives on reality; to more than one way of weighing up

the importance of things. This is itself a truth about Austen's style in general, and perhaps remains its chief draw for readers. Our attention is at once excited and divided: the narrator's perspective never reposes securely in a single consciousness, but takes note of 'every individual'.

In the preface to the revised edition (1907) of his novel *Roderick Hudson*, Henry James came up with his own version of Austen's universal truth claim in order to contrast the achievements of literature with the interconnections and ramifications of real lives: 'Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.'⁵⁰ It is hard to understand how anyone might possess 'a geometry of his own'; for, if any laws are universal, wouldn't they be the laws of geometry? But perhaps what James is getting at is that perfect circularity in literature is not desirable, or that a fictional circle must be not quite finished (even if it appears to be so) in order to satisfy its readers. The opening line of *Emma* could thus be read as the impersonation of completeness, an impersonation whose lacunae we are invited to recognize:

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.⁵¹

The imperfections of this geometry are 'seemed', 'some', and 'nearly'; they leave the surface claim that is 'unite' open to question and investigation. Frank Kermode argued that the novel answers a paradigmatic demand for form, 'an irreducible minimum of geometry—of humanly needed shape or structure'. There is, he says, a connection between fictions, time, and apocalyptic modes of thought, the last of which Kermode suggests provides a useful analogy with the process of reading and writing fiction. In imagining an end for the world, apocalyptic thinkers are imposing a pattern on history, making possible 'a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle'.⁵² But any human prediction of the end is continually being falsified, so we are compelled to adjust our response to such patterns in the light and interests of reality. Austen famously remarked that 'pictures of perfection' made her 'sick & wicked'.⁵³ Samuel Beckett appears to have felt something similar when he complained in 1931 that two novels of T. F. Powys (*Mark Only* and *Mr Tasker's Gods*) exhibited a 'painfully organised unified tragic completeness'. He thought that 'the divine

Jane', by contrast, had 'much to teach me'—even if being taught by her that 'completeness' was not desirable also (later) entailed recognizing that her endings could be 'a mess'.⁵⁴

Beckett's pain sprang from apprehending a work of art that struck him as too finished, too closed. The universal, if not held in check by consciousness of the possible exception to its rule—and such consciousness need not be tantamount to thinking 'the doom of man revers'd for thee'—will become a form too 'unified' to reflect life and therefore not console but discomfort its reader.⁵⁵ Because Austen writes not as one of the elect but as one of her own community, her narratorial perspective is fallible, subject to change and obscurity. Her fictions are not 'universally shut up' as stories perhaps in theory ought to be, at least according to the rules of decorum.⁵⁶ They remain knowingly within the circumstances in which a universal claim is made: by a fallible human voice. *Persuasion* has its own mature and considered view on the limits of universal characteristics; one expression of that view occurs just after Louisa has fallen from the steps on the Cobb:

Anne wondered whether it ever occurred to [Wentworth] now, to question the justness of his own previous opinion as to the universal felicity and advantage of firmness of character; and whether it might not strike him, that, like all other qualities of the mind, it should have its proportions and limits. She thought it could scarcely escape him to feel, that a persuadable temper might sometimes be as much in favour of happiness, as a very resolute character.⁵⁷

Limits need to be set even to the advantageous quality of firmness or resolution—because no such quality is *universally* advantageous. *Persuasion* spells out the cost, to individuals, of thinking otherwise. The limits of types are balanced against the proportions of individuals (and vice versa) from the title pages of Austen's novels onwards. The qualities of pride and prejudice might be applied to either or both of the individuals whose separate ruling passions the respective abstractions seem intended to capture. The adjective 'sensible' encompasses both Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, each of whom possesses a greater or lesser degree of sense and of sensibility (the fact that there is a third sister in the picture, Margaret, seems designedly to unsettle the schematic relationship of titular abstractions to family members). Emma Woodhouse, the only heroine whose fiction is named after her when it appears in print, is rewarded for that distinction by having recognition of herself as a type thrust upon her. At the moment at which she accepts Knightley's proposal, when he expressly asks to hear her voice, she is silenced. She says 'Just what she ought, of course. A lady always

does'.⁵⁸ Having set out to become the exception to a rule, Emma is made to conform to the generic requirements of a marriage plot that is itself the work of 'a lady': Jane Austen.⁵⁹

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¹ The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen, gen. ed. Janet Todd, 9 vols. (Cambridge, 2005-9), *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Pat Rogers (2006), p. 3 [i.1]; 'It was generally evident', p. 23 [i.6].

² 'Cockalorum' (*Oxford English Dictionary*): the sense given as current in Austen's lifetime is 'Applied to a person: = Little or young cock, bantam; self-important little man.' But the sense even more directly applicable to Austen's technique is the second one, which in theory postdates her: 'Self-important narration; "crowing"' (1884). Austen applies the word to Lady Jane Grey in the 'History of England', then crosses it out and replaces it with 'vanity'. Jane Austen, *Teenage Writings*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland and Freya Johnston (Oxford, 2017), pp. 128, 305 n.

³ The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding, *The Covent-Garden Journal and A Plan of the Universal Register-Office*, ed. Bertrand A. Goldgar (Oxford, 1988), *The Covent-Garden Journal* no. 4 [1752], pp. 37, 38.

⁴ *Covent-Garden Journal* no. 4, p. 34.

⁵ Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 15-16 Sept 1796, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre le Faye, 4th edn (Oxford, 2011), pp. 9-10. Samuel Beckett saw a kinship between Austen's 'manner' and Henry Fielding. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, eds. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 2009), i.252-3.

⁶ *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 33 [i.7].

⁷ *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 32 [i.7].

⁸ See *OED* entries for 'Everybody', 'Every one' (under 'Every', sense 10c.), 'Everything'.

⁹ The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (2005), p. 362 [iii.3].

¹⁰ *Emma*, p. 20 [i.3].

¹¹ The Clarendon Edition of the Novels of George Eliot, gen. ed. Gordon Haight, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford, 1986; rep. 1992), p. 825 [viii.finale].

¹² Jane Austen, 'Kitty, or the Bower', *Teenage Writings*, p. 178.

¹³ Camilla refers to 'every body', a term again freighted with stupidity, later in 'Kitty, or the Bower': 'Gold Net. It will be a most angelic thing—Every Body will be longing for the pattern—'; Camilla's brother, Kitty's suitor, says: 'this will be a most agreeable surprize to every body to see you enter the room with such a smart young Fellow as I am' and 'Every body gives Balls now I think; I beleive I must give one myself soon—' (*Teenage Writings*, pp. 180, 189).

¹⁴ *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 32 [i.7].

¹⁵ Isobel Grundy, 'Jane Austen and Literary Traditions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 192-214 (p. 203); Henry Austen, 'Biographical Notice' prefacing *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, in The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. Janet Todd and Antje Blank (Cambridge, 2006), p. 330.

¹⁶ *Teenage Writings*, p. 120; The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift, gen. ed. Claude Rawson, Ian Higgins, James McLaverty and David Womersley, i: *A Tale of a Tub*

and *Other Works*, ed. Marcus Walsh (Cambridge, 2010), p. 3. For ‘bold’ affirmations, ‘momentous Truths’, and ‘universal Benefit’, see e.g. the final paragraph of Section ix of *A Tale*, ‘A Digression concerning the Original, the Use and Improvement of *Madness* in a Commonwealth’, p. 116.

¹⁷ *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 392 [iii.14].

¹⁸ The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Edward Copeland (Cambridge, 2006), p. 348 [iii.7]

¹⁹ *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 349 [iii.7].

²⁰ See e.g. Jacob Duché, *Discourses on Various Subjects*, 2 vols. (1779), ii.270; Anon., *God Justified, Man Condemned, and Grace Magnified. A Sermon on Ecclesiastes vii. 29* (Canterbury, 1795), p. 23; *The Methodist Magazine* (1799), ii.34; Joseph Priestley, *A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters, as such*, 3rd edn, enlarged (Birmingham, 1788), p. 3; Philip Pyle, *One Hundred and Twenty Popular Sermons*, 4 vols (Norwich, 1789), i.121; John Skinner, *A Course of Lectures; delivered on the six Sundays in Lent, to a congregation of the Episcopal Church of Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1786), p. 98; Robert Woodward, *A System of Christian Theology* (Northampton, 1791), p. 15; William Jackson, *The Four Ages; together with essays on various subjects* (Exeter, 1798), p. 87; Charles Rollin, *The Ancient History of the Egyptians, Carthaginians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes and Persians, Macedonians, and Grecians*, 8th edn, 10 vols (1788), viii.96; Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews; translated from the Latin*, 2 vols. (1787), ii.237-8.

²¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London relative to that Event* [1790], ed. Conor Cruise O’Brien (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 228.

²²; Charles de Calonne, *Considerations on the Present and Future State of France ... translated from the French* (1791), pp. 8, 215. See also pp. 78-9, 290.

²³ *Ethics, Rational and Theological, with cursory reflections on the general principles of deism* (1783), p. 437.

²⁴ *Emma*, p. 470 [iii.13].

²⁵ Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 15-16 Oct. 1808, *Letters*, pp. 148.

²⁶ Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 8-9 Jan. 1801, *Letters*, p. 70.

²⁷ The title ‘First Impressions’ had to be changed to *Pride and Prejudice* when the novel, begun in October 1796, was eventually published in 1813. In the meantime, Margaret Holford had published a novel called *First Impressions* (1801).

²⁸ Margaret Anne Doody, ‘The early short fiction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, pp. 72-86 (p. 76). See also *OED* ‘Sparkle’ (sense 6b): ‘Brightness or liveliness of spirit; smartness; wittiness.’

²⁹ The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, xvi: *Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. Gwin J. Kolb (New Haven and London, 1990), *Rasselas*, ch. 46, p. 163.

³⁰ Stephen Fry, ‘The Letter’, Cambridge University Footlights Review (televised version, 1982). ‘Prudence had demanded that I leave her behind, so I was alone’.

³¹ *Teenage Writings*, pp. 10-11.

³² The speaker is Caroline Simpson, disguised as a Sultana. *Teenage Writings*, p. 11.

³³ Jane Austen to Anna Lefroy, 9-18 Sept. 1814, *Letters*, p. 275.

³⁴ *Teenage Writings*, p. 134.

³⁵ *Pride and Prejudice* is ‘By the author of “Sense and Sensibility”’, *Mansfield Park* ‘By the Author of “Sense and Sensibility” and “Pride and Prejudice”’, *Emma* ‘By the Author of “Pride and Prejudice”’. Even the posthumously published *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion* are announced as ‘By the Author of “Pride and Prejudice”, “Mansfield Park”, etc.’, supplemented with a ‘Biographical Notice of the Author’.

³⁶ Johnson, *Rasselas*, ch. 29, p. 108.

- ³⁷ *Teenage Writings*, p. 118.
- ³⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 5, scene 2, line 10.
- ³⁹ Daisy Ashford, *The Young Visitors or Mr Salteena's Plan* [1919] (2008), 'Preface', p. 7.
- ⁴⁰ John Bayley, 'The "Irresponsibility of Jane Austen"', in *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B. C. Southam (1968), pp. 1-20 (pp. 9, 13).
- ⁴¹ 'Opinions of *'Mansfield Park'*, collected and transcribed by Jane Austen' [c. 1815], in *Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Mansfield Park: A Casebook*, ed. B. C. Southam (London and Basingstoke, 1976), pp. 200-203 (p. 203).
- ⁴² See *Persuasion*, pp. 230-75, 278-325.
- ⁴³ Stephen Wall, *Trollope and Character* (1988), p. 13.
- ⁴⁴ 'According to a less well-known tradition, the delicate Jane Fairfax lived only another nine or ten years after her marriage to Frank Churchill. It seems that Jane was not prepared to discuss her characters' lives until after they had finally appeared in print'. Deirdre le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2004), p. 241.
- ⁴⁵ 'His affection had already done something. Her influence over him had already given him some influence over her. Would he have deserved more, there can be no doubt that more would have been obtained; especially when that marriage had taken place, which would have given him the assistance of her conscience in subduing her first inclination, and brought them very often together. Would he have persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward—and a reward very voluntarily bestowed—within a reasonable period from Edmund's marrying Mary.' The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. John Wiltshire (Cambridge, 2005), p. 540 [iii.17]. See also Elizabeth Jenkins, *Address to the General Meeting of the Jane Austen Society (Report for the Year 1980)*, in *Collected Reports of the Jane Austen Society: 1976-1985*, Jane Austen Society (Alton, 1989), pp. 152-73 (p. 166).
- ⁴⁶ Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 4 Feb. 1813, *Letters*, p. 203.
- ⁴⁷ William Empson, 'Tom Jones', *The Kenyon Review*, 20 [1958], 217-49 (p. 219).
- ⁴⁸ Austen, *Letters*, p. 287.
- ⁴⁹ *Critical Review*, 4th ser. 3 (Mar. 1813), 318-24 (pp. 318-19).
- ⁵⁰ Henry James, 'Preface to the New York Edition' [1907], *Roderick Hudson*, ed. Geoffrey Moore and Patricia Crick (1986), pp. 35-48 (p. 37).
- ⁵¹ *Emma*, p. 3 [i.1].
- ⁵² Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a new epilogue* (Oxford and New York, 2000), pp. 132, 17.
- ⁵³ Jane Austen to Fanny Knight, 23-5 Mar. 1817, *Letters*, p. 335.
- ⁵⁴ Beckett, *Letters*, i.94, 250. 'Poor Jane has got herself into a mess at the end of *S. & S.*, the big scene between Elinor & Willoughby could hardly be worse' (Beckett, *Letters*, iii.525).
- ⁵⁵ The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, vi: *Poems*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr. with George Milne (New Haven and London, 1964), *The Vanity of Human Wishes* [1749], l. 156 (p. 99).
- ⁵⁶ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* [1759-67], ed. Howard Anderson (New York and London, 1980), p. 224 [iv.27].
- ⁵⁷ *Persuasion*, p. 126 [i.12].
- ⁵⁸ *Emma*, p. 470 [iii.13].
- ⁵⁹ On the title page of the first edition, *Sense and Sensibility* is said to be written 'By a Lady'.