

THE MORAL IMAGINATION:
BIBLICAL IMPERATIVES, NARRATIVE AND HERMENEUTICS
IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

JANE Austen has been described as the writer above all others whom it is hardest to catch in the act of greatness (Woolf 155). In this essay I shall consider the way in which the third-person omniscient narration of her text provides a moral perspective, despite the supple use of free indirect discourse that enables the introduction of other subjective points of view. The shaping power of omniscient narration, as Austen uses it, balanced by dialogue, has affinities with the method of biblical narration described by Robert Alter and invites a similar kind of imaginative engagement.¹ I shall then consider the moral vision that informs Austen's text and its relationship to biblical theology and a particular understanding of the ideal human *telos*, whether Aristotelian, relativistic, Christian, or a synthesis of perspectives,² examining particularly the form of the novel as comedy and its resolution in a marriage of romance and complementarity. Finally, I will look at Austen's presentation of prejudice and the way it intersects with the hermeneutical acuity and challenges that face Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy especially, in relation to the tiny *polis* of which they are a part, and their encounters with one another. There are many other moral dimensions which could be explored, but this essay will focus on the concepts of *telos*, self-understanding, perception and action. These patterns of engagement with the other and growth in self-knowledge are often modelled on a Christian narrative of self-awareness, repentance, and reconciliation leading to transformation and ultimately happiness. This situates Austen's romance within the biblical metanarrative of ultimate salvation imaged in the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 21.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen uses the 'imaginative form' of 'dramatic prose,' which entails that the 'moral "sense" or "philosophy"' informing the text is implicit in its form. Any attempt to 'translate' this moral philosophy of necessity alters or reduces it (Woolf 111); the aim of this essay is to consider the implications of this *imaginative form* when seeking to elucidate both Austen's moral vision and, more generally, the working of the literary imagination. In refusing to separate 'imaginative form' and 'moral "sense"' in this way, I am following the line of reasoning put forward by Martha Nussbaum:

Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content – an integral part, then, of the search

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for and the statement of truth. . . . [C]ertain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist. . . . The telling itself — the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary. . . Life is never simply *presented* by a text; it is always *represented* as something. (*Love's Knowledge* 3,5)

Given this premise, the third-person omniscient narration developed by Austen, as she represents a particular fictional world in her novel, has significance in itself.³ This kind of narration is by no means unique to Austen, and the observations made here can be equally applied to any number of other novelists. However, she was instrumental in forging this method of narration at the initiating stages of the novel's efflorescence in England, (Bray 108-114, 131) and her use of it enables the connection between biblical and literary narrative art to be made explicit, also demonstrating the similar function attributed to the imagination in both.

It has frequently been recognised that Austen's method of narration was shaped by her familiarity with the epistolary fiction of the eighteenth-century. Joe Bray suggests that Austen displays her mastery of the style by shifting 'the tensions within consciousness,' which the epistolary novel privileges, to 'the interaction between character and narrator.' Her deployment of free indirect thought enables subtle transitions in point of view from the omniscient perspective of the narrator, to the subjective experience of various characters (108-9). While the shift in form is not disputed, the significance and implications ascribed to Austen's choice have been interpreted in a variety of ways. Bray argues that 'the widespread infiltration' of omniscient narration 'by the perspectives of characters . . . hinders moral unity and closure, preventing rather than enforcing judgement.' Rather than restricting subjectivity, third-person narration, as Austen handles it, reveals the tension that defines subjectivity through the 'fraught debate' between the consciousness of the narrator and that of the characters revealed in free indirect thought (117). April Alliston also observes the transition from epistolary form to free indirect discourse in Austen's novels; however, she claims that the omniscient narration 'frames for the reader the interiors inhabited by her heroines,' 'fixing [the heroine] more squarely in its exemplary frame,' and thus placing her in the tradition of criticism that suggests Austen's third-person narrative provides an authoritative voice offering 'clear moral judgements' in place of the moral anarchy and untrammelled subjectivity of epistolary fiction (Qtd. in Bray, 117).⁴ It seems unnecessary to dichotomise these two schools of interpretation so rigidly, though. The self-effacing narrative voice of Austen's texts gains an omniscient authority similar to that present in the biblical narratives, through selective disclosure and a general opaqueness of pres-

ence. But this also foregrounds the individuality of various characters that are effectively dramatised through direct speech and action. Nevertheless, the form of third-person omniscient narration does appear to me at least to frame the interiors of Austen's heroines, in the sense of possessing ultimate moral authority in the context of the narrative as a whole (Alliston 234-9).

Jesse Wolfe explores the implications of this tension between objective morality and individual subjectivity in a slightly different form, which is more specifically related to Austen's method of narration, suggesting that her novels have a structure which 'encouraged moralizing of a supple kind. The suppleness grows from an honest and thoroughgoing exploration of human psychology. Ambivalence, partial knowledge, confused sexual longing, egocentrism . . .' (130). Wolfe argues that Austen represents a transitional phase in the history of ideas between 'traditional Christian metaphysics and moralism' and 'an amoral behaviorist-existentialist view of human conduct' (111). Austen's novels, she asserts, do not assume the presence of God, even in the hand of a directing providence: they explore morality within the constraints of human psychological interiority, an objective external standard summarised in Murdochian terms as 'love and justice,' and concern for concrete others (126). Wolfe celebrates what she sees as Austen's ability to 'depict psychological awakenings, or conversions, which have all the profundity, all the weight . . . of religious awakenings — but are nevertheless thoroughly mundane,' resulting in the curious anomaly of a 'view of reality and morality' that 'can be strategically described as Christian in its ethical outlook, but secular (i.e., strictly non-metaphysical) in its ontology' (113). Additionally, Wolfe speaks approvingly of the complex interiority of the moral life as depicted by Austen, suggesting that such complexity is essential to the capacity for moral growth and development, and concluding with a stoic ideal that valorises the *process* of self-improvement as ennobling in itself and the best that can be hoped for (113).

However, there are several problems with this account of Austen's novels. It is far easier to separate the ontological from the moral dimension when 'translating' Austen's vision into 'expository' form, as this inevitably entails a degree of abstraction from 'the determinate social context,'⁵ which both Alasdair MacIntyre and Alan Jacobs see as central to her ability to unite the Christian and Aristotelian themes that Wolfe argues she successfully separates to achieve a supple secularised morality. Against Wolfe's postulation that 'an act of significant faith' is required 'on the part of the reader' to connect the ontological or metaphysical dimensions of Christian belief with Austen's novels, is the notion of a desirable *telos*

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that is written into the very genre of romantic comedy that Austen adopts. This sits oddly with Wolfe's thesis that *process* is to be celebrated over and above the ultimate hope of moral perfection, though this lies beyond the boundaries which Austen considers appropriate to fiction. For the purpose of analysis in this discussion, I will make the biblical substructure underlying Austen's work more obvious. The teleological orientation, itself dependent upon an implicit acceptance of the biblical metanarrative, can be seen to inform every aspect of the ordinary circumstances, transformation of character, and moral strivings which Austen depicts within concrete social situations: 'she sees the *telos* of human life implicit in its everyday form' (MacIntyre 226). Additionally, it is her commitment to Christian metaphysics or ontology as well as an Aristotelian practical morality that defines the notions of 'love' and 'justice' against which her characters measure themselves, undergirding also the standards that regulate their relationships to others. Finally, it renders rich and meaningful the 'intelligent love' that finds expression in the complementary union of Darcy and Elizabeth at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*.⁶

Complexity is not an essential prerequisite to moral growth, as Wolfe assumes, though it is often desirable. Jane Bennett's generous and at times indiscriminating charity, for example, stands as a critique of Elizabeth's arrogant pretensions to immediate discernment of character in relation to both Darcy and Wickham. Though quite simple in her goodness, Jane does achieve a degree of moral growth throughout the novel, by refusing to again become the dupe of Miss Bingley's regard. Thus, I would conclude with C.S. Lewis that

[t]he hard core of morality and even of religion seems to me to be just what makes good comedy possible. '*Principles*' or '*seriousness*' are essential to Jane Austen's art . . . Unless there is something about which the author is never ironical, there can be no true irony in the work. 'Total irony' — irony about everything — frustrates itself and becomes insipid. (185)

Lewis' connection here between 'morality' and 'religion' is not inadvertent. The kind of supple relativism in ontology and teleology which Wolfe ascribes to Austen would prevent this hard core and consistent, full-blooded standard against which all characters are implicitly measured, creating the fixed boundaries that allow both the human depth and the delightfully ironic humour of *Pride and Prejudice*.

While it is easy to make generalisations about morality and genre, if Nussbaum's observations on the intimate connection between form and content, style and truth stand, then it is important to consider how the genre of romantic comedy shapes our understanding of Austen's novel.

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Some critics have seen her decision to end her novels in marriage simply as a concession to novelistic convention or the social norms of early nineteenth-century England. However, her realistic depictions of marriage, her consideration of the alternatives (it is not a foregone conclusion that each of her heroines will *necessarily* marry any man who comes along), and the mutuality and commitment to others which shape the way her heroes and heroines come together, indicate a genuine appreciation of marriage as a covenant of companionship and complementarity that helps to promote the development of a civil society. The notion of marriage as a covenant between two people which furthers the health of society is, itself, a logical deduction from the biblical text (Malachi 2:13-16). Anne Crippen Ruderman's careful analysis of the way in which Austen valorises happiness over self-fulfilment, interpreting the former to be found in the pursuit of virtue objectively defined, makes attending to the symbolic echoes of the portrayal of marriage in the biblical text that informs her novels a plausible venture (10-14).

It is important to note, though, that the happiness which marriage brings to an individual heroine is never the supreme motivating factor in Austen's work. In true biblical spirit, her characters are required to acknowledge principles higher than their own happiness, often involving a denial of self: 'For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it' (Mark 8:35). For example, when Elizabeth is talking to Darcy at the inn in Derbyshire, and reflecting on whether or not it would be conducive to the happiness of both of them if she should 'employ the power, which her fancy told her she still possessed, of bringing on the renewal of his addresses', she discovers that Lydia has eloped. The supposed implications of this upon her relationship with Darcy are immediately apparent, but 'self though it would intrude, could not engross her' (Austen 234, 245).⁷

Michael Edwards has commented on the scriptural significance of the 'marriage of the lovers,' which is, he suggests, 'the clearest and most traditional sign of the comic intention.' He argues further that a biblical interpretation would connect it to both the 'Edenic' marriage described in Genesis, and to the church. Adam's well-known observation, 'this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,' as he beholds the woman created from his rib, is accompanied by the narratorial comment: 'Therefore shall a man . . . cleave to his wife: and they shall be one flesh.' To marry is thus a recovery, in some measure, of the 'primal unity that preceded the Fall.' It can also be connected to the other end of the story: the hero winning the bride corresponds to Jesus acquiring a bride in the form of the church. (Edwards 47). The relevant biblical reference, of course, is Paul's exposition of marriage in Ephesians 5:

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Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish . . . For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church (vv. 25-27, 31-2).

Thus 'the marriage of the lovers, which is the success of the comedy, looks towards the supreme success . . . in so far as that too is a marriage, both spiritual and eternal' (Edwards 47). Following this kind of analogical correspondence, a recent study of the role of religion in *Pride and Prejudice* has read the idealised family party at Pemberley as an allusion to Paradise.⁸ This also needs to be understood within the context of the biblical metanarrative: 'the redemption of our intimate human relationships, indeed like the redemption of our relationships with God, is an already — not yet phenomenon.' So, the biblical presentation of marriage begins with perfection in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1); it acknowledges sin, tension and death introduced by the Fall (Genesis 3). However, it also presents through Christ the hope that relationships will be redeemed; the interim state for love, caught between sin and the hope of perfection, can be seen in the Song of Songs (Longman 63-70).

The concepts of fidelity, a paradise to be obtained, of values that must be cherished above one's own personal happiness when making decisions, are all biblical principles that shape Austen's work and exemplify important aspects of what it means to imagine according to the trajectories opened by the biblical text (Proverbs 5:15-21, 12:22; Psalm 16:11; Matthew 10:22,39). The euphoric celebration of marriage at the conclusion of her novels often has a symbolic valence that suggests more than the happiness of two people:

[Elizabeth] began now to comprehend that [Darcy] was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance.

But no such happy marriage could now teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was (275-6).

... she looked forward with delight to the time when they should

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be removed from society so little pleasing to either, to all the comfort and elegance of their family party at Pemberley (342).

With the Gardiners, they were always on the most intimate terms. Darcy, as well as Elizabeth, really loved them; and they were both ever sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the persons who, by bringing her into Derbyshire, had been the means of uniting them (345).

The importance of purity and faithfulness is underwritten by a commitment to principles understood to possess ultimate and eternal significance, orientating life in this temporal world in the light of a future beyond this world.

In addition to the theological and moral implications suggested by the biblical structure and *telos* of the novel, Austen explores other themes that are central. These include the relationship between moral development and the ability to interpret and relate to others; the necessity of linking principle to praxis; a vision that is both stringent in its standards and generous in its charity, and the incarnation of these themes in narrative form. Michael Giffin suggests quite persuasively that *Pride and Prejudice* can be 'read as a novel of neoclassical hermeneutics The heroine and the hero recognise the sins of pride and prejudice that influenced [their] first impressions, reason and reflect their way into maturity, and learn to give and receive love' (92). As readers we are invited through 'the normative gaze represented by the unified narrator' to enter a 'fully imagined world,' which is the 'aesthetic effect' of the 'omniscient narration' of characters' thoughts through 'free indirect discourse,' and to experience the 'interiors inhabited by [Austen's] heroines' and to a lesser extent her heroes (Al-liston 234).

This deft combination of omniscient narration, incorporating the subjective individualities of characters through free indirect discourse, enables Austen to create the imaginative experience of each character for her readers, whilst simultaneously maintaining a framing moral vision. Charmed by Elizabeth, delighted by her wit and sympathetic to her frustrations as a dependent young woman and member of the Bennett family, the reader finds it easy to sympathise with her initial dislike of Mr. Darcy, as she allows the prejudice inspired by her wounded pride to colour all her subsequent contact with him and knowledge about him. Austen clearly demonstrates that Elizabeth has sufficient information to question her settled opinion about him, but so wholly does the heroine engage us as readers, that it is not until her moment of 'undeception' (in Lewis' terms) that we actually realise just how prejudiced and wilful Elizabeth's response to Darcy has been. Here the balance between the subjective experience of the

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character and the authoritative moral frame of the omniscient narration plays a crucial role. As readers we are taken upon the same epistemological journey as the heroine, being educated in the process as to the way that a prejudice engendered by hurt pride can lead to unjust interpretations of others. Imaginatively, we engage with Elizabeth's initial self-deception, growing self-awareness, repentance, and gradual reconciliation to Darcy as she herself learns to lay aside her initial prejudice when interpreting his character, through a 'hermeneutics of love.'⁹

The vocabulary with which Elizabeth registers both her mistake and the need for repentance indicates Austen's moral concerns and the theological presuppositions that underpin her text:

Every line proved more clearly that the affair, which she had believed it impossible that any contrivance could so represent, as to render Mr. Darcy's conduct in it less than infamous, was capable of a turn which must make him entirely blameless throughout the whole . . .

She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. — Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.

'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 so 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' (182, 185).

Elizabeth recognises the self-centered preoccupation that has rendered her incapable of interpreting either Wickham or Darcy accurately, 'pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other.' In addition to this, she has succumbed to the vanity that is a perennial temptation for one as quick-witted and humorous as herself: to be 'uncommonly clever in taking so decided a dislike to him, without any reason. It is such a spur to one's genius. . .' (199).

As Lewis observes, Elizabeth employs the 'abstract nouns' of the moralists in order to define her own fault, critiquing herself for a failure in 'generous candour,' and concluding with a knowledge of self that will provide the foundation for a right appraisal, a more mature and just rela-

tionship with Darcy and Wickham, and the capacity to grow (178). This pattern can be seen as both classical and Christian; it fulfils the Socratic injunction to: 'Know thyself,' but also evidences the desire of the psalmist: 'Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting' (139:23-24). Austen emphasises the need for 'generous candour' and 'humility' in order rightly to judge and understand others. The latter virtue is Christian rather than classical, and finds expression in the apostle Paul's injunction: 'Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others' (Philippians 2:3-4). Elizabeth acknowledges that she has been motivated by a 'vainglory' which has blinded her to the needs and worth of others.

None of this is to suggest, however, that Elizabeth had no grounds for offence in her original encounter with Darcy. But, as she notes later when conversing with her friend Charlotte Lucas, her pride was wounded by his and it was this that made his refusal to dance with her so offensive. Darcy was at fault, but his masculine arrogance and class prejudice are no excuse, though they provide extenuating reasons, for Elizabeth's readiness to credit Wickham's tale and her own 'immoveable . . . dislike' (172). Darcy himself acknowledges a measure of justice in her emotional response to his behaviour: 'What did you say of me, that I did not deserve? For, though your accusations were ill-founded, formed on mistaken premises, my behaviour to you at the time, had merited the severest reproof' (326). It is one of the charms of *Pride and Prejudice* that the hero and heroine are equally fallible and equally open to transformation, rendering the mutuality of Austen's ideal of 'intelligent love' in this novel more satisfying than if Darcy played the role of mentor-lover. While the coming to self-awareness and moral transformation of the hero is not represented with the same narrative intimacy as that of Elizabeth, Darcy also learns to recognise the blindness induced by his pride, and the 'unpardonable' arrogance of his behaviour towards a woman 'worthy of being pleased,' though she had relatives whom he could not respect (326, 328). The writer of Proverbs notes: 'When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom' (11:2). Darcy, like Elizabeth in relation to Jane, implicitly comes to endorse the more 'generous candour' of his friend Bingley, who had earlier observed of the elder Bennett sisters: 'If they had uncles enough to fill *all* Cheapside . . . it would not make them one jot less agreeable' (31). Darcy describes his growth into self-knowledge and gradual recognition of the need for repentance and moral development in the same strong vocabulary as Elizabeth. He acknowledges the force of her reproofs, 'though it was some time' before he was 'reasonable enough to allow their justice'

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(326). He refuses to credit the philosophy that the past should be thought of only 'as its remembrance gives . . . pleasure,' stating that the past cannot be thus ignored. He traces over his childhood and youth recognising that though taught right principles, he was never nurtured in right practice, following the moral and social standards his parents inculcated with motives of selfishness and disdain. Again, it is humility that is the requisite virtue, which ultimately enables him to value the worth and gain the favour of 'a woman worthy of being pleased' (327-28).

The magnanimity and rectitude of the aristocrat is insufficient. Principles must be linked to practice, and action needs to be informed by love. In the words of 1 Corinthians 13:1,4: 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal . . . Charity suffereth long, and is kind . . . charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.' Darcy, when reflecting upon the familial education that had shaped his character, recognised his inability to follow the 'good principles' he had received with a right heart. Only when his desire to act was tempered by humility could he truly respect and lovingly reach out to those 'beyond (his) own family circle' (328). This linking of principle and practice is crucial to a biblical religion of the heart: 'Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world' (James 1:27). Biblical love requires an empathetic, self-giving of oneself for the other, not a detached altruism: one may do, but not necessarily be, and the one who has not loved is still in debt to the other, 'for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law' (Romans 13:8). The necessity of a correlation between inner principle or emotion and external action runs throughout the entire biblical text. To cite just one reference in order to make the point: God says to the prophet Samuel when he is choosing a king, 'Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7).

Humility, self-knowledge and love are crucial to the progress of both Elizabeth and Darcy in coming to a true knowledge and appreciation of each other that facilitates a complementary mutuality in 'all the comfort and elegance of their family party at Pemberley' (342). But the novel also probes further than their relationship, examining the connection between intelligence, love and discernment in interpreting or responding to others, and the necessity of linking conviction to action, through the characters of Mr. Bennett, Mr. Bingley and Jane. As noted earlier, Elizabeth and Darcy in a moment of self-revelation compare themselves unfavourably to the 'generous candour' of both sister and friend, recognising that had they

allowed their own thinking of and relating to others to be shaped by such love, it would have prevented them from being blinded by the prejudices of pride and self-esteem: 'Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.' Or again, 'owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law' (Romans 12:9; 13:8). However, the novel does not endorse an unthinking candour either. Austen's ideal is undoubtedly 'intelligent love,' in biblical terms, for Jesus states: 'be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves' (Matthew 10:16). It does not necessarily follow that goodness or virtue demands complexity of character or 'quickness of perception.' Jane for instance is virtuous, though not always discerning, as Elizabeth notes — 'to be candid without ostentation or design — to take the good of everybody's character and make it still better, and say nothing of the bad — belongs to you alone' (12). Yet, a failure accurately to perceive the faults of others is seen as a weakness that must be rectified, an intelligence that renders love aware, whilst not preventing its exercise. Mr. Bennett points out with typically wry humour the lack of discernment that characterises the love and generosity of Bingley and Jane: 'I have not a doubt of your doing very well together. Your tempers are by no means unlike. You are each of you so complying, that nothing will ever be resolved on; so easy, that every servant will cheat you; and so generous, that you will always exceed your income' (309).

A far more serious fault than generous love incapable of truly or quickly perceiving the nature of others is the power of discernment coupled with an unwillingness to act. Mr. Bennett *is* able to discern the faults and virtues of others. He knows what his duties are as a father and a husband, and what he ought to do in order to protect, train and provide for his wife and daughters. But he fails to couple his discernment with action. Elizabeth recognises this and it grieves her, though she is 'grateful for his affectionate treatment of herself' (209). Mr. Bennett forms a telling contrast to Darcy; he knows the principles, but through an ironic, disappointed (or possibly embittered) indifference, fails to act. There is the suggestion that this apathetic withdrawal from his family ultimately begins to affect his ability intelligently to discern the characters and situations of those around him, even as Darcy's recognition of his false dignity and pride leads him to become actively involved in the lives of those he had previously despised. Elizabeth, moved by a real love for Lydia and her family, strongly urges upon her father the dangers of allowing her younger sister to go to Brighton. Mr. Bennett, simply wanting to avoid trouble, fails to pay any real attention to her concern: only in the aftermath of Lydia's flight with Wickham is he able to acknowledge Elizabeth's more perceptive reading of the situation; 'Lizzy, I bear you no ill-will for being justified in your

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advice to me last May, which, considering the event, shews some greatness of mind' (264). However, Elizabeth does not so much evidence 'greatness of mind,' as the perceptive insight of an emotionally involved member of the family, concerned with what is right, and anxious to preserve the reputation of an ill-governed sister. The contrasting responses of Mr. Bennett and Elizabeth, when they receive the news of Lydia's elopement, show the importance of loving involvement in promoting true discernment and effective action. Mr. Bennett was 'shocked . . . could not speak a word' and subsequently angry and unforgiving (257, 277). Elizabeth though also shocked, felt most of all for others: 'self, though it would intrude, could not engross her. Lydia — the humiliation, the misery, she was bringing upon them all, soon swallowed up every private care.' And later, 'for the sake of [her] sister's feelings and consequence,' she 'urged . . . earnestly,' 'rationally' and 'mildly' that Lydia be received by her father upon her marriage (245, 277).

The inextricable connection between self-knowledge, right perception and a willingness to act on behalf of others and in order to achieve happiness, which Austen presents in her novel, ultimately reflects a moral imagination informed by the biblical text and the *telos* it envisages for a fulfilled human life. Some aspects of the way in which Austen traces the implications of these values in the form of everyday life have been considered here: her fusion of omniscient third-person narration with free indirect discourse, offering an authoritative moral centre which mediates various individual subjectivities that invite the engagement of the reader; the hermeneutic challenges that confront Darcy and Elizabeth and the way they overcome these through a hard-won knowledge of self and judicious mixture of love and discernment; the juxtaposition of various characters in order to highlight the necessity of love, wisdom and praxis being combined in order to rightly interpret, understand and relate to others. The connection between liberty, love, well-being and the wholesome community that such virtues foster is thoroughly biblical, as can be seen in Paul's epistle to the Galatians:

For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. . . . Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself (5:13-14; 6:2-3).

While I do not wish to suggest that reading *Pride and Prejudice* inculcates moral values in the reader, it does model the way in which literature engages and shapes the imagination, through its representation of real-

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ity *as something* (Nussbaum 5). Austen achieves this by forging a unique narrative form, creating a cast of memorable characters, and assuming a moral code which is implicit in all judgements and the overall shape of the novel.

Finally, Gene Koppel has offered the plausible suggestion that the narrator in Austen's fiction exemplifies the same kind of charity that is celebrated in her main characters. He quotes Jan Fergus who observes

Morality . . . is not a code, or norm, or principle, which one can live and die by. Instead, it is a way of seeing which includes within its definition some sort of candor or affection. Judgment is seldom conclusive, never infallible. So we understand best and judge best when aided by sympathy and imagination. Austen lets us understand [her characters] by allowing us, for a little while, to live in [their] mind[s].

He suggests that this type of 'sympathy and imagination' can be connected to Christian love, and as has been argued throughout this essay, 'perception' is 'an epistemological as well as a moral question' (48). This is directly in line with Paul's interpretation of love in Romans, where liberty and freedom of conscience are never to be exercised at the expense of another: 'Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another . . . For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself . . . We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification' (Romans 12:10; 14:7; 15:1-2).

Thus Alan Jacobs' kenotic interpretation of the moral law is the controlling vision embodied in the narrator of Austen's novels, demonstrating both a generosity of spirit in evaluating her characters, but also a firm adherence to objective standards of right and wrong. To take the next step and suppose that Austen would have 'consciously . . . striven to incorporate these insights . . . into . . . her fiction' is not an implausible conjecture. Koppel offers in support of his thesis the fact that 'the narrative that generates the idea of the person called Charlotte Lucas in our imaginations endows our conception of Charlotte with enough vitality and coherence to allow us to speculate legitimately' on what kind of person she would be like in situations beyond what the narrative relates. The 'unwritten possibilities for Charlotte's character *must* exist since the illusion of her reality is strong enough to compel us to contemplate her as we would an actual human being' (47-9). This has affinities with Frank Palmer's notion that artistic creation is to some extent engendered by love and that our response to characters in fiction must first and foremost be *as if* responding to persons, fully realised in a fictional world that engages our imagination and

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inevitably has a moral component (Palmer 1-39, 164-8). Nevertheless, the illusion of personhood which the text creates entails that even with Charlotte Lucas, 'though we do not hesitate to condemn the spiritual and moral blindness and the psychological callousness revealed by her actions,' the love which inspired the imagination of her creator grants a sense of possibility, which invites an imaginative empathy on the part of readers that prevents a 'completely negative opinion' (Koppel 48).¹⁰

Robert Alter notes that in biblical narration 'character is revealed primarily through speech, action, gesture, with all the ambiguities that entails; motive is frequently, though not invariably, left in a penumbra of doubt,' much is left to the imagination of the reader, as they conjecture as to plausible motives, possible inferences.¹¹ This failure to provide the kind of detail given by a Victorian novelist is not due to a lack of knowledge on the part of the narrator, but rather works to remind readers that they are flesh-and-blood, with limited access to the fulness of divine reality. It also helps to preserve a sense of the depth and mystery of human character, the possibility of change, and the responsibility of individuals to act. This sense of interplay between freedom and necessity that characterises human existence is engendered by 'studied contrasts' on the part of the biblical writers 'between the variously limited knowledge of the human characters and the divine omniscience quietly but firmly represented by the narrator' (Alter 157-8). The biblical text thus requires that readers engage their imaginations thoroughly and freely if they want to understand what it means to live as a human being, created in the image of God, acting responsibly in time. Imagination, in this account, is crucial to theological and moral understanding and growth. Austen's fusion of omniscient narration and free indirect discourse requires a similar response from the reader: we are invited to engage with the characters as individual people, full of possibility, but also provided with a framing moral perspective that guides our interpretation and shapes the range of imaginative response.

Notes

1) See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1981.

2) See, for example, C. S. Lewis, "A Note on Jane Austen" *Selected Literary Essays* by C. S. Lewis. Ed. Walter Hooper. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, 175-86; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981; Anne Crippen Ruderman, *The Pleasures of Virtue: Political Thought in the Novels of Jane Austen*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995); Jesse Wolfe, "Jane Austen and the Sin of Pride," *Renascence* 51.2 (1999) 111-31.

3) I am thus arguing for a less ideologically absolutist interpretation of third-person

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narration than that typical of post-structuralist theory as exemplified by Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 52-77. While I agree that classic realism is an artful literary device, I do not agree with the deterministic understanding of 'ideology,' which manifests itself in more extreme readings of this narrative style, as an attempt by the bourgeoisie of Regency or Victorian England to impose their understanding of reality upon others less fortunate than themselves.

4) Alliston explores the way in which Austen creates a realised imaginative world with a narrative voice that maintains moral authority through its ironic and comprehensive poise.

5) MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 223; Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*. Oxford: Westview Press, 2001 p. 3.

6) Richard Simpson identifies 'intelligent love' as the ideal that informs Austen's work in a perceptive article. Richard Simpson, *North British Review* 52 (1870).

7) Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Oxford U P, 1970), pp. 234, 245. All subsequent citations are taken from this edition.

8) I have certain reservations about literalising these symbolic echoes too firmly in what is after all a fallen world. The resonances seem to me more appropriately applied in an eschatological, or typological sense.

9) I have taken this phrase from Jacobs' explication of Augustine's exegesis of the greatest commandment in *A Theology of Reading*.

10) The contrast between Elizabeth's response to Mr. Collins, and the appreciation which the narrator has for the good motives which also inspired him to propose to his cousin is perhaps an even more telling example.

11) So also A. D. Nuttall on Shakespeare's method of characterisation, cited by Martin Price in *Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel*. New Haven: Yale U P, 1983, pp. 57-8.

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