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Casey Finch; Peter Bowen

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“The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury”: Gossip and the Free Indirect Style in *Emma*

TOWARD THE END OF *EMMA*, when the news of Emma and Mr. Knightley’s engagement is out, it spreads with a mechanical rapidity. It spreads in a kind of chain reaction from Mr. Weston to Jane Fairfax,

and Miss Bates being present, it passed, of course, to Mrs. Cole, Mrs. Perry, and Mrs. Elton, immediately afterwards. It was no more than the principals were prepared for; they had calculated from the time of its being known at Randall’s, how soon it would be over Highbury; and were thinking of themselves, as the evening wonder in many a family circle, with great sagacity.¹

It is as though this “large and populous village” (7) somehow had telephone connections; within hours, indeed by sunset, the news of the forthcoming marriage is on everybody’s lips. But the ability of this gossip to travel at lightning speed is only partially Austen’s comment upon the smallness of the community and the idleness of its members. It is also, and much more crucially, her articulation of the mechanisms by which gossip binds communities together under a mild system of surveillance and self-control. Gossip travels fast because in a sense it is always already known; it is not news at all but part of a social agenda already recognized by the community and already unconsciously internalized by what Austen—underscoring the theatricality of gossip—calls the “principals” of the marriage plot.

For the engagement of Emma Woodhouse of Hartfield and George Knightley of Donwell Abbey is by no means a “wonder,” as the lovers indulgently imagine, but the politically inevitable fulfillment of the most vigorously enforced social and novelistic expectations. It is, as Austen’s exact diction underscores, neither an aberration nor a convenient device for closing an otherwise unmanageable plot but an instantly recognizable “sagacity,” an aspect of universal wisdom. Indeed, it is so ideologically determined and coded-in-advance that an hour is all that is required for Mr. Weston to turn the “surprise” into a recognition of the deeply familiar:

The news was universally a surprise wherever it spread; and Mr. Weston had his five minutes share of it; but five minutes were enough to familiarize the idea to his quickness of mind.—He saw the advantages of the match, and rejoiced in them with all the constancy

of his wife; but the wonder of it was very soon nothing; and by the end of an hour he was not far from believing that he had always foreseen it.

“It is to be a secret, I conclude,” said he. “These matters are always a secret, till it is found out that every body knows them.” (468)

Mr. Weston’s joke about gossip exposes the uncomfortable secret that there really are no secrets, the fact that there is nothing, however seemingly private, that is not somehow already illuminated by the normalizing light of public scrutiny. Emma’s engagement to Mr. Knightley constitutes a “secret” that is no secret, a surprise that is not one, precisely because it marks the moment when the inevitable is realized, when the subject is brought into perfect correspondence with the imperatives of its social environment, when the heart is lodged properly in the hearth. The very stuff of Austen’s comedic vision always involves such a moment of supreme ideological triumph when political constructions are naturalized and therefore rendered invisible as such: the vicissitudes of the plot reach shimmering resolution; the characters are properly aligned along undamaged social hierarchies; the economic imperative is brought to bear on the very structure of desire.

And in *Emma* gossip operates as the mechanism by which this comedic alignment of public and private spheres is enacted. As Max Gluckman suggests in his study “Gossip and Scandal,” a community is “held together and maintains its values by gossiping both within cliques and in general.”² Gossip marks an oblique mode of control, a socio-discursive practice that both defines the community of its participants—solidifying, as Patricia Spacks has it, “a group’s sense of itself by heightening consciousness of ‘outside’ . . . and ‘inside’”³—and regulates the community *from within* by insinuation, rumor, threat of ostracism, and covert pressure. Rather than operating through overt acts of force imposed from without upon its subjects, gossip coerces by being irresistibly assumed by its subjects, taken up and passed on in an endless system of circulation. Gossip thus naturalizes authority over the home by bringing the home under the purview of the public or, rather, by diffusing itself amongst all homes, where its power is irresistible because it seems to have no fixed, absolutely visible source. Itself never identifiably authorized—who, after all, is ever the originator of a rumor?—gossip functions as a powerful form of authority because its source is nowhere and everywhere at once. In *Emma*, indeed, rumor constitutes authority’s most effective mode because it comprises a discursive strategy that tends to naturalize its operations, to disseminate them everywhere, and therefore to disguise them. Within the novel, gossip ceases to be a matter of this or that piece of “tittle-tattle” (56), this or that idle speculation, and becomes instead the very ground upon which the community is articulated, identified, and controlled.

But if gossip in *Emma* tends to operate as a hidden form of authority, at the same time the novel’s gossips are often perfectly visible, and still more often visibly female. For while gossip functions as a mode of social authority by hiding its

agency, convention, as well as the novel itself, tends to gender female (and therefore specific and visible) the practice and the practitioners of gossip. At once inheriting and renegotiating a vast tradition that links, in Spacks's words, "loose talk with women,"⁴ *Emma* simultaneously trivializes gossip as feminine *and* authorizes such discourse through the mobilization of a narrative voice that critics have rightly read as feminine. And though gossip in *Emma* never quite operates, as Jan B. Gordon argues, as an idiom potentially subversive of patriarchal authority,⁵ it nevertheless serves as a genuinely alternative mode of communication for women who have been historically excluded from dominant discourses; in one and the same movement, gossip is dismissed as feminine "tittle-tattle" and put to use as a serious and privileged form of knowledge (since whatever august truths "naturally" issue from the story itself are generated by a traditionally feminine, gossipy discourse). The "feminine" idiom thus mobilized operates again and again, however, to reinforce what Gordon rightly calls "a recuperative, paternal authority" the novel is concerned to uphold.⁶ Thrown surprisingly into relief, then, is the phenomenon of a conventionally female mode operating ultimately to reinforce patriarchal norms concerned, among other things, to trivialize gossip. Perhaps still more significantly, by simultaneously trivializing and privileging gossip, Austen effectively naturalizes this mode of exchange and renders its "truths" inevitable. Indeed, *Emma's* displacement of traditionally patriarchal imperatives onto a supposedly female discourse is the specific means by which the novel's purposes are both realized and complicated—realized, because the new "feminization" of earlier, tacitly "masculine" discursive techniques marks one of the processes by which *Emma* recasts old lessons and renders them acceptable; complicated, because gossip operates on the one hand to enforce but on the other to disperse and democratize authority.

And if *Emma* is a novel that identifies gossip as the way communities narrate their authority, it is also emphatically a novel that gossips. For if gossip forms a mild system of surveillance and social control over the citizens of Highbury (naturalizing and "feminizing" the voice of authority by subtly disseminating it into a chattering cacophony of voices), then equally the novel's deployment of free indirect style (which Austen first brought to fruition) has the effect of naturalizing *narrative* authority by disseminating it among the characters. Just as the "harmless gossip" (21) narrated in *Emma* forms part of a larger historical trajectory in which overt control over subjects is reformulated as a covert authority evenly spread among and within subjects, so the development in Austen's hands of free indirect style marks a crucial moment in the history of novelistic technique in which narrative authority is seemingly elided, ostensibly giving way to what Flaubert called a transparent style in which the author is "everywhere felt, but never seen."⁷ The very force of free indirect style is the force of gossip. Both function as forms par excellence of surveillance, and both serve ultimately to locate the subject—characterological or political—within a seemingly benign but ultimately coercive nar-

rative or social matrix. It is no coincidence that the first great novelist of gossip should also be the first great technician of the free indirect style.

Specifically what, within *Emma*, is the relation between gossip and the free indirect style? Within the novel's general atmospheric, the narrator maintains a mildly judgmental attitude toward the pettiness of Highbury gossip; yet when specific differences arise among the characters, the anonymous narrator—a free indirect stylist of no small ability—again and again sides not with the individual but with the vague chorus of gossip that permeates the community. Ultimately, the feminine, gossipy, and supposedly low insinuations of Highbury's small talk anticipate the high patriarchal truths the novel is concerned to put into place with the very free indirect style that gossip deploys. How, then, is the operation of this newly wrought narrative technology upon the novelistic character part of the larger operation of gossip upon the psychological subject? If, as John Bender suggests, free indirect style creates for the reader an “illusion of entry into the consciousness of fictional characters,”⁸ does gossip similarly create for a public a means of entry into the privacy of its members? Through gossip do we advance not only the community's secrets but also the community's secret mechanisms of control? How does gossip constitute a community through a class-inflected system of exclusions and inclusions, banishing some citizens even as it naturalizes others? How does gossip as a traditionally female practice engender *Emma*'s otherwise anonymous narrator and authorize the narrative's authority? What, in short, is the novel's grammar of gossip?⁹

It will be helpful, we think, to recall here Ian Watt's placement of Austen within his schematization of two fundamental narrative modalities of the eighteenth-century novel. Watt discerns, on the one hand, a narrative strategy based on a Cartesian epistemology—and embodied, for instance, in Defoe and Richardson—in which emphasis is placed on the psychological condition of the subject, and in which the “author” is formally absent. Novels in this tradition, often rendered in the first person, tend to assume epistolary or pseudo-autobiographical forms in which “the reader is absorbed into the subjective consciousness of one or more of the characters”¹⁰ who promote an understanding that is local and limited: what we know of their world can never be anything more than what they know and tell us. And there is, on the other hand, the narrative strategy—perhaps most perfectly embodied in Fielding—that takes a “realistic,” external approach to character, and in which the intrusive, omniscient narrator suggests an objective, universal understanding that creates and assesses its world by the fixed, eternal standards of human nature.¹¹ Both modes betray certain epistemological anxieties about the nature and source of language's authority to narrate a world and to locate the subject within that world, and in each we confront a very different strategy for such representations.

Now for Watt, Austen reconciles these antithetical modes by creating a “discreet” narrator who gives us not only the “editorial comment” of the social, omni-

scient author but also “much of Defoe’s and Richardson’s psychological closeness to the subjective world of the characters.” The two modes are fused; Austen owes “her eminence in the tradition of the English novel” to the fact that she “was able to combine into a harmonious unity the advantages both of . . . the internal and of the external approaches to character.”¹² Though Watt fails to note the term, he refers here to the free indirect style, the hybridized narrative mode first designated in French by Charles Bally in his 1912 essay “Le Style indirect libre en français moderne I et II,” then in German by Etienne Lorck in his 1921 book *Die ‘Erlebte Rede’: Eine sprachliche Untersuchung*, and finally in Russian by V. N. Voloshinov/Mikhail Bakhtin in the 1930 *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.¹³ Indeed, the free indirect style that Austen brought so skillfully to completion—“the technique,” as Dorrit Cohn defines it, “for rendering a character’s thoughts in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration”¹⁴—marks a reconfiguration of “internal” and “external” approaches to character.

Free indirect style achieves this by drawing characterological utterance into the wider narrative cadences of the novel. In *Emma* the mechanism is clear: the supposedly private ruminations of a character are captured as subordinations in a grand public concern. And ostensibly, what was autonomous in the subject retains its essential integrity even when recontextualized into a narrative hegemony. As Voloshinov/Bakhtin has it, any utterance in free indirect style is treated by the narrative machinery “as an utterance belonging to *someone else*, an utterance that was originally totally independent, complete in its construction, and lying outside the given context.” From its “independent existence,” this utterance is “transposed into an authorial context while retaining its own referential content and at least the rudiments of its own linguistic integrity.”¹⁵ Paradoxically, the free indirect style enables the representation of a seemingly private, independent subject—able to speak his or her own mind at any time—even as it guarantees public access to any character’s private thoughts. Indeed, the dual nature of each character’s interiority—at once perfectly private and absolutely open to public scrutiny—is ensured by the unnameable and unlocatable nature of the narrator’s voice. It is by thus keeping secret the source of community concern—for we can never know precisely who speaks in the free indirect style—that the novel makes public the private thoughts of individual characters.

Yet if for Watt this new epistemological reconciliation of the eighteenth-century “subjective” and “objective” narrative modes seems to alleviate a certain anxiety about how to narrate a world, that anxiety does not entirely disappear from Austen’s novels (and from the free indirect style in general). For while Austen abandons the overtly participating narrator of, say, *Tom Jones* as well as the equally overt epistolary writers of, for instance, *Clarissa*, what is most strikingly absent from a novel like *Emma* is the overtly acknowledged presence of a narrator at all, the explicit identification of the narration’s source and purpose. For the

narrator of *Emma* is not simply unidentified; she is also like any gossip to some degree uncertain of the very source of her information.¹⁶

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. (5)

Emma begins, then, not so much with a factual assertion as with a hermeneutic problem: to whom did Emma “seem” to unite these qualities?

In Austen’s eighteenth-century predecessors, the source of authority—the seemingly stable ground from which knowledge issues—is implicitly supplied by the narrative strategy. In the “subjective” novel, the perceiver’s identity, and therefore the narrative source of knowledge, is obviously announced by the name of the first-person narrator. And in the “objective” novel, the explicitly “confessed” narrator provides the source of authority by functioning as a kind of master of ceremonies and therefore as the master of the novel’s truth. But in Austen no such explicitly articulated authority operates; we experience instead what Watt calls “some august and impersonal spirit of social and psychological understanding,” and what Alistair M. Duckworth identifies as the “*oratio obliqua* of the narrative discourse.”¹⁷ Traditionally, this dispersed spirit of “understanding”—this floating locus of authority—has been defined by Austen critics as *irony*, as that profound distance, as Gordon has it, “between what is said and what is meant.”¹⁸

But the notion of irony—pervasive in Austen criticism—remains strangely unhelpful. We still do not know precisely the relation of the presumed (and presumably female) narrator to the collectivity of gossiping characters to whom Emma seems “to unite some of the best blessings of existence.” For it is on neither the Highbury community nor on the shared assumptions of a community of readers that the narrative authority is based. Indeed, through a strategic deployment of free indirect style, overt narrative authority in *Emma* has been altogether elided as such. Instead, just as there remains throughout the novel a distance between the “august and impersonal” narrator and the characters themselves, so there remains an equal distance between that narrator and her information, a distance of uncertainty that separates her from the novel’s ultimate source of knowledge. And just as gossip *in* the novel is distributed among certain members of the Highbury community, so the narrative authority *of* the novel—by being located nowhere in particular—manages to be everywhere at once.

Emma Woodhouse *seemed* to unite some of the best blessings of existence. To be sure, this opinion comes ultimately from the community that has observed and assessed her, a community of which the narrator may or may not be a member, but which, at any rate, she presumes to represent. But at the same time, since the absolute source of authority is elided, the narrator’s knowledge cannot be equated with the community’s (which, indeed, is often satirized). The narrator thus acts

from the start merely as a *mediator* of privileged communal opinions, as a kind of spokesperson for her community, in short as a gossip who spreads the opinions of certain citizens about others. A new modality that reconciles the eighteenth-century novelistic antinomies, free indirect style locates narrative authority neither explicitly in the “subjective” psychological perspective of an individual nor implicitly in the “objective” law of human nature. Instead, free indirect style operates by hiding, by being neither here nor there, by functioning not as a topos of power but as a dispersed atmosphere of narrative authority.

And while it is not exactly an instance of the free indirect style, nor simply a metaphor for it, gossip in turn operates as a model of social authority that both naturalizes and authenticates the new novelistic authority of the free indirect style. *Like* the free indirect style—but not *as* it—gossip in *Highbury* functions as a dispersed rather than a concentrated form of authority that derives its power neither from the opinion of a single individual nor from the dictates of an identifiable institution—the police, the law courts—but from the collectivity of voices that whisper about neighbors in private rooms and across gateways. Just as the free indirect style of the novel functions as a form of narrative surveillance over the novel’s characters, so gossip in the novel deploys a mild surveillance over the members of the *Highbury* community. Through covert insinuation rather than overt pressure, gossip delineates a circle of consensual values, a circle that simultaneously identifies the community of *Highbury* and exercises mild disciplinary control over its members. In this way, it discursively builds a sort of border of identities beyond which it fails to be of interest, but within which it exercises its fascinations and controls.

Beyond this border, and therefore excluded entirely from the purview of gossip, are those whose interactions cannot significantly affect the mechanisms of social exchange and economic production operative in the “community” thus delineated. Interestingly, then, gossip links by exclusion such otherwise incompatible citizens as, for instance, the invisible liveryman who drives the carriage containing Mr. Elton and Emma from the dinner party at Randalls, on the one hand, and Mrs. Bragge, who, according to Mrs. Elton, “moves in the first circle” of Maple Grove, on the other (299–300). For just as Mrs. Bragge’s properties and activities, important as they are to Maple Grove, lie too far outside the social economy of *Highbury* to be of interest, so the personal lives of the working classes lie too far below the immediate interest of the community’s property owners to merit notice. In *Emma*, we might call this the first of gossip’s two fundamental mechanisms: it constitutes a community by separating who is and who is not crucial to whatever economic (and marital) exchanges are at stake within the novel’s representations. Meanwhile, however, what citizens are thus included within the circle of gossip can in no way be seen as economically or socially homogeneous. For gossip’s second fundamental mechanism concerns the establishment of a “naturally” enforced hierarchy, *within* its circle of inclusion, by which certain cit-

izens are privileged over others. Gossip, after all, enacts and reinforces not only subtle gradations of class between such landless but eligible women as Jane Fairfax and Harriet Smith or such patriarchs as Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. Elton but also specific gender inequalities between such characters of nearly equal rank as Emma and Mr. Knightley.¹⁹

And while the free indirect style ostensibly makes available the psychological perspective of any character within the novel, like community gossip it is not necessarily interested in every character's life. The Woodhouses are "first in consequence" not only in the Highbury community in which "all looked up to them" (7) but also in the narrative that begins and ends, as we might have guessed from the title, with the story of Emma. But in telling the story of Emma, the novel inevitably also narrates the story of Highbury, the civic drama of suspicious glances, mysterious gifts, and annoying newcomers, the story of events that in the narrative economy of the novel returns ultimately to speak about Emma again. The relation between these two stories (between Emma and Highbury; between the private and the public; between Watt's "psychological closeness" and "editorial comment") is entangled and obscured in the novel's description of Emma's home and her community.

Highbury, the large and populous village almost amounting to a town, *to which Hartfield, in spite of its separate lawns and shrubberies and name, did really belong*, afforded her no equals. (7, emphasis added)

Paradoxically both adjacent to and contained within its village, both separate from and an integral part of Highbury, Emma's home is encompassed by and (through the enormous weight of its civic importance) encompasses the community.

This zoning paradox is perhaps no less than the narrative paradox of the free indirect style. For the operations of this new narrative technology have two curious consequences. On the one hand, the independence of the novel's subjects is both ensured and violated by the articulation of their private thoughts in the public space of the novel. And on the other, the public opinion that continually constricts, controls, and, in the end, becomes the private thoughts of individuals is itself guaranteed privacy, if only by the anonymous nature of the narrator who repeats it. "Somebody said . . ." (248); "Somebody else believed . . ." (248); "There was a strange rumour in Highbury . . ." (19)—what is interesting about such phrases is not simply the lengths the narrator has gone to preserve the confidentiality of her sources, but that these anonymous comments, in many ways, serve as their *own* sources; they signify a community of interest. While anyone could say these things, only individuals with knowledge and a vested interest in Highbury in fact would.

Thus in the relation between the novel's two stories (the story of Emma told through Highbury, and the story of Highbury told through Emma), the articulated private thoughts that mark Emma's interiority find their equivalent in the

anonymous public voices that represent Highbury society. This is not to say that the novel does not clearly assign actual names, words, and thoughts to certain citizens but rather that the abstract notion of a community of consensus—as opposed to a genuine heterogeneity—resides in the unassigned opinions that circulate through the novel in the form of gossip. Gossip, operating as a mode of community authority, thus comes to represent the community itself. By acting as a gauge of community interest, gossip maps out the community's circumference with Emma at the center, liminal characters housed at the borders, and more impoverished or irrelevant characters existing nearly outside the scope of representation altogether.²⁰

And since those characters on the threshold of a community are, as Victor Turner suggests, “necessarily ambiguous,” existing “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial,”²¹ their introduction to Highbury (and to the story itself) brings both civil hospitality and community circumspection. When the name of Mrs. Elton, née Hawkins, enters the community of Highbury, for example, less than a week passed “before she was discovered to have every recommendation of person and mind” (181). But while the name preceding the body in the circulation of gossip is thus welcomed, the actual person receives a more thorough examination.

Mrs. Elton was first seen at church: but though devotion might be interrupted, curiosity could not be satisfied by a bride in a pew, and it must be left for the visits in form which were then to be paid, to settle whether she were very pretty indeed, or only rather pretty, or not pretty at all. (270)

Here, the carefully managed passive voice has a curious effect. For the question of agency is rendered as unclear as it is perfectly comprehensible; while the precise citizens who compose Mrs. Elton's welcoming committee are left unnamed, we rightly understand them to represent the community at large, a community whose interests here concern the criterion, crucial to the patriarchally enforced marriage system the novel represents, of female attractiveness.

The interest a community takes in its members, specifically in mapping their identities along the axes of class and gender, transforms private matters of citizens and families, men and women, into matters of public scrutiny and sentiment. The paternal pride that Mr. Weston takes in his (absent) son, Frank Churchill, “naturally” becomes an instance of community pride: Mr. Weston's “fond report of him as a very fine young man had made Highbury feel a sort of pride in him too.” Thus, Frank Churchill's status as a favored son of a prominent Highbury citizen (and as an eligible bachelor) is enough to make him—if only in absentia since “he had never been there in his life” —“one of the boasts of Highbury” and a source of “common concern” (17). As in Mrs. Elton's case, word of Frank Churchill precedes the entrance of his person into Highbury. But unlike the reception that attends Mrs. Elton, gossip here concerns itself with the propriety of his words

rather than the appearance of his body. Frank's "highly-prized letter" written to his new mother becomes quite literally the talk of the town: "For a few days every morning visit in Highbury included some mention of the handsome letter Mrs. Weston had received" (18).

Highbury's adoption of individual citizens' concerns—not to mention their children—marks how deeply private acts and family correspondence are inscribed within community affairs. In fact, the principle of gossip, the gesture by which anyone's business is made everyone's, provocatively questions the very nature of private business or, rather, the business of privacy. And if *everyone*—a term that must remain as univocal as it is anonymous—is curious about the community's members (both leading and lesser citizens), all of this takes place in a novel that, for all practical purposes, *no one* seems to narrate. While the free indirect stylist blurs the narrative distinctions between objective and subjective discourse, she blurs too the proprietary difference between communities and individuals. For if the power of the community is enforced and represented by voices that seem to be everywhere and nowhere at once, the voice of the individual, the community's most private property, is represented in publicly circulating letters and interior monologues that somebody, although it is never clear who, overhears.

It is no wonder, then, that Emma, at the center of both public and novelistic scrutiny, continually displaces private concerns about herself to worry about the affairs of others. Consider Mr. Knightley's celebrated censure of Emma for her inconsiderate comment to Miss Bates at the Box Hill party. As Mr. Knightley says, not only has Emma insulted a woman who has seen her "'grow up from a period where her notice was an honour'"; still more egregiously, Emma's words were heard by "'others, many of whom (certainly *some*,) would be entirely guided by [Emma's] treatment of her'" (375). But this is really no news to Emma. For Emma knows that, more than simply being overheard, she is continually being scrutinized and discussed by the community around her. Her playful conversation with Frank Churchill, for instance,

in her own estimation meant nothing, though in the judgment of most people looking on it must have had such an appearance as no English word but flirtation could describe. "Mr. Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively." They were laying themselves open to that very phrase—and to having it sent off in a letter to Maple Grove by one lady, to Ireland by another. (368)

Although she imagines being talked about as far away as Ireland, the force of such gossip is enhanced by the fact that Emma, in a sense, herself initiates it. Beyond simply locating the perfect "English word," Emma constructs an entire sentence to be passed on in the gossip of letters and neighborly chats. As a protonovelist, she employs the free indirect style—even as her own thoughts are rendered by the same technique—to vocalize internally the silent observations of

her that she imagines others making. In this narrative house of mirrors—a collapsing structure where the private internal monologues of characters echo the voices of the community, while the community, in turn, continually violates the privacy of its members—the free indirect style reflects finally a mechanics of power by which the disciplinary agenda of a community is internalized as the private wishes of the individual.

So far from being oblivious to the effect of her actions upon others, Emma not only vividly anticipates those effects but sees herself completely through the gossip of her neighbors. If gossip secretly imagines the private life of others, Emma herself, at the very center of this economy of “tittle-tattle,” secretly imagines the community gossip that scrutinizes her. Indeed, though Emma has “a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (5), at the same time she tends to think very little *about* herself. What concerns Emma concerns Highbury; what involves the subject involves as well the social context by which it is inscribed—such is the very force and truth of gossip. And the compulsion by which characters in the novel concern themselves with the words and lives of others echoes the very mode of the free indirect style, a technique in which the authority and existence of the narrator derive from the fact that she reveals everyone’s thoughts but her own. In *Emma*, narrative authority is neither dismissed altogether nor enacted, as Watt suggests, simply by conflating the two dominant eighteenth-century modes of narration; instead, like gossip, it operates as a general space of surveillance and knowledge.

Emma’s crucial realization—tellingly rendered in free indirect style—that “with insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody’s feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody’s destiny” (412–13) marks the moment when she subordinates her own perspective and manipulative desires to those of the community. At the same time, though, it describes the very narrative technique of *Emma*. For even as the novelist is able to “arrange everybody’s destiny,” the free indirect style allows her not only the illusion of access to “everybody’s feelings” but the more ideologically significant illusion of the private, autonomous subject violable by gossip and narrative technique alike. *Emma*’s agenda is clear: the heroine must renounce her manipulative tendencies so that the novel itself can realize its own manipulations. What the novel has articulated as publicly and politically imperative must become Emma’s private imperative as well.

Thus Emma’s epiphanic self-realization, like the news of her engagement to Mr. Knightley, constitutes a surprise that is not really a surprise at all but the acceptance of a social (and novelistic) imperative that she has already unconsciously internalized:

A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like her’s, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress. She touched—she admitted—she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love

with Mr. Knightley, than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of a return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!

Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before. (407–8)

Although Emma here believes herself to be experiencing a “clearness which had never blessed her before,” a truth of the body that enters violently from the outside “with the speed of an arrow,” her epiphany in fact marks merely an uncanny moment of *recognition*: the moment when the individual is brought into alignment with social imperatives.

And the moment is therefore only seemingly dramatic; really, it is no more surprising to us than it is, upon retrospection, to Emma herself:

How long had Mr. Knightley been so dear to her, as every feeling declared him now to be? When had his influence, such influence began? . . . When had he succeeded to that place in her affection, which Frank Churchill had once, for a short period, occupied? . . . She saw that there never had been a time when she did not consider Mr. Knightley as infinitely the superior, or when his regard for her had not been infinitely the most dear. She saw, that in persuading herself, in fancying, in acting according to the contrary, she had been entirely under a delusion, totally ignorant of her own heart—and, in short, that she had never really cared for Frank Churchill at all! (412)

The recognition is thus articulated simultaneously as an explosive instant when material from the unconscious bursts forth into consciousness *and* as an implosive moment when the truth enters in from the outside. The truth of Emma's character is obscured even as it is clarified. For if this revelation makes her “acquainted with her own heart,” it does so precisely by revealing to her how “totally ignorant of her own heart” she had been until now. Free indirect style has here literally created the space of the unconscious as the natural source of Emma's inner desires, which, naturally enough, now discover themselves perfectly aligned with the overriding social imperative the novel has been at pains to establish from the start: “Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!”

But if free indirect style narrates the truths of the community's gossip as the inner expressions of the subject's being, it narrates too the truths of the subject as the norms of the community.

At the level of the novel's *plot*, gossip frankly reveals the subject's “secrets,” which, upon revelation, turn out to be universally known, overdetermined, and—as Mr. Knightley likes his neighbors to be—public and open. But the methods of the novel's *narration* operate more covertly. Where an absolute penetration into the interior of the “individual” would have revealed just how thoroughly the citizen is a function of his or her political imperatives, and where a “universal” expression would have revealed how absolutely the community is a function of the private ruminations of its citizens, the free indirect style leaves both the sub-

ject and the community seemingly autonomous of one another even as it insists on their correspondence. As the modern narrative technique par excellence, free indirect style, like gossip, has thus a dual function. On the one hand, it reveals (and constitutes) the subject as a function of public pressures even as that subject is articulated as an inviolable *autonomy* never absolutely enthralled by its social environment.²² And, on the other, it reveals (and constitutes) the community as an extension of the private, individual character of any of its members even as that community is articulated as a *hegemony* impervious to any resistance a subject might wish to make.

Yet we know, for instance, from the very first narrative strokes of *Emma* that the public knowledge of gossip and the private secrets of the heart can never fail to interpenetrate, to reinforce one another. The inside and the outside; the private and the public; the subject's inner desire and political necessity—these must necessarily reach ideological as well as narrative correspondence. In the novel, these “naturally” harmonious polarities are most forcefully embodied, of course, in the ultimate marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley, which marks the climactic moment of political, narratological, and sexual *necessity*. And if, while the story unfolds, we agree as readers temporarily to suspend our foreknowledge of such impulses, temporarily to resist the “natural” affinities of Emma and Mr. Knightley, of the private and public realms, this complicity reveals our desire at once to postpone the inscription of the subject by its social context *and* to facilitate it. We might even call this complicity the narrative impulse within us. To the extent that we enjoy delaying the moment when the subject and its social context—as it were, Emma and Mr. Knightley—are absolutely aligned, we enjoy, too, the tensions of the story and the illusion of the autonomous self; but to the extent that we facilitate the (inevitable) moment of alignment, we enjoy the pleasure of closure, the harmonious reconciliation of self to society.

In Emma herself this dual impulse takes the form of matchmaking; for her propensity to make matches marks her desire at once to unleash stories and to close them, at once to encourage the desires of others and to satisfy them in marriages. And it is Emma's matchmaking, of course, that leads her to the series of blunders over which so many Austen critics are fond of moralizing. But while critics—along with Mr. Knightley—chastise Emma for her weakness for matchmaking, few remember at the same time that the novel itself is unashamedly in the business of matchmaking. Few remember that at the very moment when Emma upbraids herself for attempting to “arrange everybody's destiny,” at the very moment when she attempts to renounce matchmaking forever, the novel itself has brought to shimmering completion its own arrangement of everybody's destiny.²³ At the very moment Emma foregoes matchmaking, in one and the same movement *Emma* has made its most glorious match.

And when Emma renounces her tendency thus to manipulate others, foregoing her pretensions to penetrate into “everybody's feelings” (413), she

renounces at the same time her tendency, like gossip's, to penetrate the lives of others and to transform them into narrative. When at the *beginning* of the novel Mr. Knightley chastises Emma for meddling in the affairs of Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston, his point, of course, is well taken; or rather, by the *end* of the novel, we are made to feel how "natural" and "just" his position is. For Emma is an uneven novelist at best. She tends to lose control of her characters' destinies, and she is just as likely to botch a marriage plot as to bring one to successful conclusion. It is, after all, to the public, anonymous narrator of *Emma* that the privilege of absolute manipulation belongs. And, indeed, the novel as a whole performs the very tasks for which it reproaches its main character. If Emma herself resists marriage and meddles, instead, in making marriages for others, the novel is sure to humiliate her for her matchmaking and to install her—despite her initial objections—within a marriage whose recommendations are unexceptionable.

And after all, the match between herself and Mr. Knightley is imperative; as Mrs. Weston ruminates (in the free indirect style),

It was in every respect so proper, suitable, and unexceptionable a connexion, and in one respect, one point of the highest importance, so peculiarly eligible, so singularly fortunate, that now it seemed as if Emma could not safely have attached herself to any other creature. (467)

The free indirect style is variously deployed throughout the novel: sometimes it simply reports the actual speeches of characters; sometimes it eavesdrops, as it were, on the internal ruminations of individual citizens in order either to satirize or approve them; and other times it ventriloquizes the voice of the community as a whole (or at least the voice of its respectable citizens).²⁴ In this passage, however, free indirect style functions specifically to disguise the ideological imperatives of the novel as the autonomous ideation of one of its characters. The authority for approving good marriages—marriages in which nobility is untainted by the "stain of illegitimacy" (482)—is naturalized and made to seem not as though it impelled itself upon a subject it created for that purpose but as though it issued from a subject wholly free and autonomous. And though Mrs. Elton, for instance, may begrudge the match of Emma and Mr. Knightley, her thoughts, as they are reproduced in the free indirect style, turn out to be limited and inconsequential. The free indirect style may well recognize certain resistances to the novel's political impulses, but it will always do so in order to render them palpably illegitimate; for while this new narrative technology seems to reveal a democracy of independent and differing opinions, individuals' thoughts are finally judged against the overriding social imperatives. When, for example, Emma realizes that she has been "entirely under a delusion" and that her real feelings told her that "Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself," we realize that this epiphany—registering a desire that oddly expresses itself by eliminating all other contenders—echoes and reverses her earlier desire that "Mr. Knightley must never marry" at

all (228), a command that marks less her personal propensity than her concern (really the entire novel's concern) for the larger problem of family inheritance.

Concomitantly, the community is construed as the outcome of the natural desires of its individual citizens. Through "the perfect happiness of the union" embodied in Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightley (as well as the other marriages consecrated at the novel's end), "the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered" (484). Here, in its last sentence, the novel articulates the norms of the community—the rules according to which a farmer, like Robert Martin, must marry a tradesman's daughter, like Harriet Smith, and according to which George Knightley of Donwell Abbey must marry Emma Woodhouse of Hartfield—as the natural realization of its citizens' desires. For though it is but a "small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony," it operates both as a synecdoche and as a metonymy of the community as a whole, a community at once heterogeneous (since it gathers within its scope, for instance, both Harriet Smith and Mr. Knightley) and monolithic (since resistances to its impulses are neutralized by the novel's end).

What has been enacted is a new and formidable technology of truth. In the passage on Miss Taylor's wedding to Mr. Weston, for instance, the joke on Mr. Woodhouse is that he obtusely refuses to believe what is indisputably true. The finicky Mr. Woodhouse hoped to dissuade the gathering from eating the wedding cake, and to this end he had secured the opinion of Mr. Perry, the apothecary who reluctantly "could not but acknowledge, (though it seemed rather against the bias of inclination,) that wedding-cake might certainly disagree with many—perhaps with most people, unless taken moderately." In order to align public tastes with his own, Mr. Woodhouse must mask his private opinions in the guise of medical authority; he must reinforce his personal whims with impersonal—here scientific—truths. "But still," we are told, "the cake was eaten." And what is more, it was eaten—no doubt not only with relish but with the approval of their father—by the Perry children themselves: "There was a strange rumour in Highbury of all the little Perrys being seen with a slice of Mrs. Weston's wedding-cake in their hands; but Mr. Woodhouse would never believe it" (19). What this novel of rumors clearly satirizes here is not simply Mr. Woodhouse's feeble attempts to justify his private idiosyncrasies by recourse to public (medical) authority but his incredulity toward the authority of rumor itself, his refusal to accept what must clearly be *true*. Here the truth of the invisible narrator (located literally nowhere) and the truth of Highbury gossip (located absolutely everywhere) are completely aligned. Almost total authority—a near epistemological hegemony—is staged and enacted because its agency is either elided altogether or spread so thinly that it cannot ever be named as such. Ultimately, the irresistible force of public opinion expresses itself by anonymity, by an authority that is everywhere apparent but whose source is nowhere to be found.

Notes

We would like to thank Claudia Klaver, Perry Meisel, D. A. Miller, and James Schamus for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1. Jane Austen, *Emma*, in *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 5 vols. (London, 1932–34), 4:468. Hereafter, references to this edition will be made in the text.
2. Max Gluckman, “Gossip and Scandal,” *Current Anthropology* 4, no. 3 (1963): 308.
3. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York, 1985), 5.
4. *Ibid.*, 41. See Spacks’s illuminating discussion (37–46) of the fact that though “few writers have asserted that *only* women gossip . . . many have assumed the natural, or at least the socialized, connection between women and trivial or malicious talk about other people” (38).
5. Jan B. Gordon, “A-filiative Families and Subversive Reproduction: Gossip in Jane Austen,” *Genre* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 5–46, provides a very different reading of the function of gossip in Austen’s novels as a whole. For Gordon, gossip in Austen operates as a potentially subversive form of discourse that posits an oral and feminine alternative to the written, logocentric “male discourse of the book” (12). Gordon argues vigorously for the potential of gossip to deconstruct phallogocentrism. And though he concedes that this alternative discourse is ultimately ranged in a “symbiotic relationship” with patriarchal authority, and that “Jane Austen’s text has *already* discounted this subversion,” Gordon nevertheless sees in Austen’s novels “an expansion of the gossip’s oral activity which necessarily entails some degree of penetration into all written [patriarchal] genres, with an attendant dialogization of secondary genres and the general weakening of monological composition in ways that Bakhtin examined in detail in his late work” (40–41). (Spacks, too, makes this argument for gossip in general; see *Gossip*, 44–46.) We remain unconvinced, however, that gossip has any such subversive or deconstructive effect. For gossip, so far from pitting itself against authoritative norms, always operates to reinforce them.
6. Gordon, “A-filiative Families,” 40.
7. Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, ed. and trans. Francis Steegmuller, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 1:230.
8. John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1987), 177.
9. The expression is Spacks’s: “The relation between gossip as social prohibition and as narrative resource becomes explicit here: *Emma* articulates a grammar of gossip”; *Gossip*, 165.
10. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley, 1957), 296.
11. The first chapter of *Tom Jones*—in which the narrator claims to serve up to his customers the “provision” of “Human Nature”—is a classic example.
12. Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, 296–97.
13. See Käte Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, trans. Marilynn J. Rose, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, Ind., 1973); Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (Boston, 1982); Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary*; and [Mikhail Bakhtin], *Markszim i filozofija jazyka* (Leningrad, 1930). For this last text, we have used V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (1973; Cambridge, Mass., 1986). Matejka and Titunik translated *Markszim i filozofija jazyka* as the work of Voloshinov just before the mid seventies,

when it became widely suggested that Bakhtin wrote the book and published it under his friend Voloshinov's name. Though today the work is generally considered Bakhtin's, very legitimate doubt still remains; Bakhtin may well have collaborated, for instance, with Voloshinov (as he certainly did, for instance, on other pieces with Pavel Medvedev). We therefore use Tzvetan Todorov's, and others', convenient hybrid, Voloshinov/Bakhtin. See Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis, 1984), xi, 4–13.

14. Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, 1978), 100.
15. Voloshinov, *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*, 116.
16. By gendering the narrator female, we inherit and extend a critical tradition that tacitly assumes the sex of *Emma's* narrator to be the same as that of the author and of the main character.
17. Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, 297; Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore, 1971), 162.
18. Gordon, "A-filiative Families," 42, n. 7.
19. Somewhere between those characters securely positioned within a community of gossip and those safely relegated to its outside lie others whose place is subject to negotiation. Robert Martin supplies a nuanced and, for *Emma*, an unsettling example. Having drawn himself by hard work and by his courtship of Harriet Smith to the very brink of the propertied classes and social recognition, Robert Martin threatens to transgress the border that separates the inside from the outside of Highbury gossip. Situated on the troubling threshold between the inconsequential and the unavoidable, he must be rendered invisible by *Emma's* exclusionary logic:

The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me; I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or other. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore in one sense as much above my notice as in every other he is below it. (29)
- Here, ironically, *Emma* is able to exclude Robert Martin from her field of vision only after she has determined his social and economic position through her gossipy interrogation of Harriet Smith; what she discovers through a necessarily inclusive gossip, conveniently and paradoxically, are the very grounds upon which to exclude this yeoman farmer from any future discussion. As she explains to Harriet, Robert Martin occupies an invisible border beneath which people are interesting only for sociological reasons and above which people become socially interesting; those who reside on the border, meanwhile, are literally invisible.
20. As we have seen, such characters as the invisible liveryman and Mrs. Bragge do not, strictly speaking, go unrepresented altogether; rather, they exist *nearly* outside the representational space. Here that paradox is in place by which such characters have to be at least minimally included in the narrative economy in order for their banishment to be marked. The operation is rather like that of a magical charm in which an evil spirit must be invoked before it can be warded off.
21. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1969), 95.
22. See D. A. Miller's chapters, "Secret Subjects, Open Secrets" and "Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family, and *Bleak House*," in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, 1988). Our essay is greatly indebted to the spirit of Miller's work.
23. *Emma* attempts to forego matchmaking, but her attempt is not wholly successful. For when the Westons have a daughter, *Emma* renews her scheming: "She had been

decided in wishing for a Miss Weston. She would not acknowledge that it was with any view of making a match for her, hereafter, with either of Isabella's sons; but she was convinced that a daughter would suit both father and mother best" (461). Here the free indirect style functions paradigmatically, for it simultaneously embeds within the narrative discourse Emma's public statements (in which she denies any desire to make matches) *and* gives us access to her unconscious wishes.

24. In a particularly complicated instance of the free indirect style, Emma, boasting to Mr. Knightley over the part she played in the match between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston, herself uses the free indirect style not only to mock the communal opinion but also to gossip about its gossip: "Every body said that Mr. Weston would never marry again. Oh dear, no! Mr. Weston, who had been a widower so long, and who seemed so perfectly comfortable without a wife, so constantly occupied either in his business in town or among his friends here, always acceptable wherever he went, always cheerful—Mr. Weston need not spend a single evening in the year alone if he did not like it. Oh, no! Some people even talked of a promise to his wife on her death-bed, and others of the son and the uncle not letting him'" (12).