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Chapter 1

I'm All Ears: *Pride and Prejudice*, or the Story Behind the Story

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1 La double entente déborde largement le cas limité du jeu de mots ou de l'équivoque et
2 imprègne au fond, sous des formes et des densités diverses, toute l'écriture
3 classique. . . . Le lecteur est complice, non de tel ou tel personnage, mais du discours
4 lui-même en ce qu'il joue la division de l'écoute, l'impureté de la communication.[1]

5 Barthes, *S/Z* (1970) 24

6 Words learn'd by rote a parrot may rehearse,
7 But talking is not always to converse.

8 Cowper, "Conversation" (1782) 25

9 Almost everyone who has read Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* or 1b
10 seen William Wyler's 1939 film version remembers the dramatic scene in 2
11 which Catherine, unaware of Heathcliff's presence on the other side of the
12 kitchen wall, confides her feelings for him to Nelly. Heathcliff stays only
13 long enough to overhear Catherine say, "it would degrade me to marry

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Heathcliff now." Thus, he never learns of Catherine's love for him, and her complete identification with him ("he's more myself than I am. . . . Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff").[2] This eavesdropping scene is crucial to the very existence of the narrative, a story based primarily on the miscommunication and resulting separation of the two central characters. If Heathcliff had not overheard this conversation, or if he had stayed to hear it in its entirety, *Wuthering Heights* as we know it would not exist; the story set in motion by this partial acquisition of information (or misinformation) would not unfold because there would be nothing to tell.

This essential scene, in which what is not overheard is as important as what is, demonstrates both Roland Barthes' theory of narrative as being the presentation of an enigma and the deliberate postponement of its solution[3] and D.A. Miller's related theory of "the narratable": the condition of lack, "the instances of disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency from which a given narrative appears to rise."[4] The ensuing narrative attempts to overcome this "insufficiency" or solve the "enigma" that confronts either characters, the reader, or both. Paradoxically, the story's existence presupposes the delay of the very condition that it presumes to overcome. Eavesdropping scenes often figure moments of narrative beginning, for they represent how narrative lack is created.[5] Such scenes operate

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simultaneously on both a metafictional level, involving the snares that a writer has left for the reader's comprehension, and internally, exploring gaps in characters' understanding—usually in the form of erroneous or incomplete information—that cause them to act in ways that forestall narrative closure.[6] Conversely, eavesdropping, by providing necessary information which would otherwise be unavailable to characters, can also provide narrative closure and entrance into the "nonnarratable," where supposedly "every mystery has been solved, every major lack liquidated and rift made good."[7] Eavesdropping is thus a Janus-faced narrative element, creating and erasing opportunities for story.

The linguist Graham McGregor has demonstrated how, in situations of controlled eavesdropping, an individual listening to a conversation between two others makes inferences about both the conversation and its participants.[8] McGregor points out that interpretive activity constitutes more than three-quarters of listeners' responses to overhearing. Significantly, most interpretive responses consist of *creating* stories to explain the overheard conversation.[9] Thus, eavesdropping produces additional storytelling; such listening is not passive, for it generates new narrations (acts of telling) as well as retellings. McGregor's research also reveals that such interpretive responses to listening are often flawed or

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inaccurate, based as they are upon partial information.[10] His studies suggest great implications for examining literary representations of such overhearing. In the novel, a scene that proliferates stories is significant, for it dramatizes the act of hermeneusis that underlies storytelling and signals narrative's origin in the attempt to understand (a situation, an event, another person, oneself, a relationship, etc.) and convey that understanding to others.

Eavesdropping is aptly suited to narratives replete with dramatic scenes, as is *Wuthering Heights*, abounding in episodes, or as Emily Brontë's sister Charlotte would say, filled with "story." A great deal happens in Emily Brontë's novel precisely because this eavesdropping scene occurs. But an analysis of eavesdropping and its relation to the creation and resolution of narrative situations can also be applied to Jane Austen, a writer whose novels the elder Brontë censured for not having "story enough for me."[11] In his classic 1917 essay on Austen, the novelist and playwright Reginald Farrer modifies Brontë's pronouncement. He traces a progression in Austen's novels from *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), which he considers "a story pure and simple," to her final novel *Persuasion* (1818), which he characterizes as being "entirely devoid of any 'story' at all."[12] Yet in both these books, Austen uses an eavesdropping scene either

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to initiate or resolve her narrative, the “story” which Brontë misses. The fact that two vastly different novelists—one representing Regency, the other coming out of the English Romantic tradition—both employ eavesdropping scenes at crucial, emotionally charged moments in their narratives suggests the overall importance of eavesdropping as a narrative device and central thematic concept. Austen’s novels offer a logical starting point for a discussion of eavesdropping in the nineteenth-century novel. Overhearing provides “a constantly recurring device in Jane Austen’s novels.”[13]

In Austen’s fiction, eavesdropping represents the coincidence of narrative stratagem and the thematics of miscommunication.[14] Barthes terms “idyllic” the “communication which unites two partners sheltered from any ‘noise’ (in the cybernetic sense of the word)” and he contrasts this interaction with “narrative communication” where “lines of destination [of information] are multiple” and potentially misdirected.[15] Eavesdropping presents an incomplete or faulty relay of information which produces erroneous conclusions—conclusions which frustrate the “idyllic” communication of both characters and the nonnarratable, and which thus engender the misunderstanding of characters and the delay of narrative closure. Austen’s novels often demonstrate how eavesdropping can be

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1 enabling, allowing individuals to overcome their isolation from each other.
2 Even more frequently, however, it becomes divisive, creating gaps of
3 understanding among individuals, as ruptures in the actual words
4 overheard mar the content and, hence, perceived the message of an
5 overheard conversation. In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, such a device f14 16
6 not only provokes "narratability;" it also underscores one of the novel's 29
7 central considerations: that of an individual's judgment of others, and the 17b
8 range of accuracy that this evaluation can present. f10
9 *First Impressions*, Austen's initial title for *Pride and Prejudice*,
10 signals a concern about an individual's ability to evaluate others. The novel
11 reveals that conclusions about people's character based upon superficial
12 "first impressions" are often false because they are founded on partial
13 information. Tony Tanner suggests that "the 'activity' which is recorded by 18
14 Jane Austen is largely an activity of seeing and saying, thinking and
15 feeling, wondering and assessing, hoping and fearing, conjecturing and
16 interpreting. The movements are predominantly movements of the mind
17 and heart,"[16] movements largely internal, hidden, and thus appropriate to
18 novels concerned with the representation of the early nineteenth-century
19 woman's limited range of social and political action.[17] Eavesdropping, an 30b
20 event that involves less physical movement than the cerebral acts of

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perception, inference, and cognition, figures this "activity." It represents a surreptitious appropriation of the information in other people's conversations and an evaluation of their characters. Illicit listening, even more than overt participation in a conversation, is prone to errors in judgment; partial or inaccurate information produces similarly flawed conclusions.

f30

This may strike us as a counterintuitive proposition. At first, eavesdropping would seem to be a shortcut that reveals another individual's "true" character or intentions and that obviates the prolonged process of becoming acquainted. In early nineteenth-century England, getting to know someone particularly of the opposite sex was often frustrated by the difficulty of finding opportunities for private interaction. Information gleaned by eavesdropping would initially appear to be all the more "authentic" for having been obtained secretly, without the speaker's knowledge: it would represent an involuntary revelation of character or events. However, this shorter epistemological path, rather than creating more rapid and reliable judgment, often leads to similar misunderstandings, misinformation, and, consequently, erroneous conclusions that first impressions produce. Eavesdropping becomes less of a shortcut than a short-circuit of information, one that, by its creation of

31b

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enigmas, engenders the possibility for narrative.

Austen's works appeal to and transform a tradition of eavesdropping in the English novel. Specifically, her novels reveal a debt to Frances Burney's, which Austen read and which involve similar scenes of eavesdropping. Several critics have perceived that Austen drew heavily upon Burney's *Cecilia* for the title of *Pride and Prejudice* as well as the social and emotional configuration of its protagonists: a proud, socially elevated hero and a worthy but socially inferior heroine.[18] However, no one has explored the parallel between the initial eavesdropping scene in Burney's first novel *Evelina* and the corresponding episode in *Pride and Prejudice*.[19] In *Evelina*, the heroine's friend overhears a conversation between Lord Orville and Sir Clement Willoughby. Although Lord Orville admires Evelina's beauty, he calls her "a poor weak girl" who is "ignorant or mischievous."[20] In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet overhears a conversation between Darcy and Bingley in which Darcy, assessing the people at the Meryton ball, makes disparaging comments about her beauty and reveals his snobbish pride. Thus, both novels present scenes in which the heroine learns how unfavorably she has impressed the hero in their first encounter. In both novels, the result is the same: this eavesdropping scene produces a misunderstanding between the protagonists that takes the length

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of the narrative to overcome. However, in *Evelina*, the heroine learns of this indirectly, through a friend. She is much more a heroine in the Richardson-Burney tradition, whose merit consists less in what she does than what she does not do: she does not listen to other people's conversations; her virtue resides in saying "no," remaining inactive. In contrast, Elizabeth Bennet directly overhears the unfavorable comments about herself. Instead of bemoaning Darcy's negative impression of her, Austen's heroine acts. She creates a humorous story out of a mortifying incident and tells it "with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous" (59).[21] Evelina is criticized for her apparent want of intelligence and education; Elizabeth, merely for not being as conventionally pretty as she might be and later, for her undesirable connections, not because she lacks mental acuity.

The two novels also differ considerably in the consequences and eventual correction of this "first impression." Burney's book concludes happily through another eavesdropping scene that does not implicate the heroine; instead, a friend overhears how Lord Orville loves Evelina and respects her "natural love of virtue" and her "mind that might adorn *any* situation" (346). In this second conversation, Lord Orville refutes, one by one, the objectionable remarks he had made earlier about Evelina. Burney

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1 stages the vindication of her heroine using the same device she had
2 employed to denigrate her: an episode of overhearing. Moreover, Burney
3 returns to eavesdropping in the final pages of the novel by relating an event
4 that, before the novel's beginning, generated the larger narrative. In it,
5 Dame Green confesses how she eavesdropped upon the conversation
6 between Evelina's dying mother and her guardian, Mr. Villars, and thus
7 acquired the knowledge that enabled her to substitute her own baby
8 daughter for Evelina in the home and heart of her father. Through the
9 revelation of such secrets, the solving of all enigmas, Evelina regains her
10 birthright—her name and dowry—and can therefore marry Lord Orville.
11 She acquires her father, her history, and her future. Evelina's situation is no
12 longer one of mystery and misunderstanding, of surrogacy and substitution,
13 but one of comprehension and re-union, of reinstatement and reward. f21
14 Although similarly created, the misunderstanding in *Pride and*
15 *Prejudice* plays out in a completely different manner and indicates less a
16 concern for the identification of the heroine's social status and a testing of
17 her innate virtue than for presenting her *bildung*, the development of her
18 intellectual and moral understanding, within the context of an increasingly
19 complex and changing social world.[22] Eavesdropping in *Pride and*
20 *Prejudice* dramatizes the danger of miscommunication through 23

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appropriation of information not intended for a hidden listener. It also proliferates points of view and stories, and complicates our sense of the people who tell them and the characters of the individuals they concern. Darcy and Elizabeth (as well as the reader) must learn to distinguish the "true" story and not to anticipate how the story will end—not to "jump to conclusions." In a novel that begins with an ironic assurance of "a truth universally acknowledged," Austen examines the validity of such assumptions, and of an individual's quick judgments about others (51).

A concern for the truth and true stories resonates throughout the book. Forms of the word *true* recur in moments of storytelling or of verifying an individual's character. In his letter to Elizabeth, Darcy asserts "of the *truth* of what I shall relate, I can summon more than one witness of undoubted veracity" (229, emphasis added), and thus presents his story as the "true" one. Lydia's exclamation to Sir William when he announces his daughter's engagement to Mr. Collins displays the ease with which people confuse the true and the false, and links such errors of judgment to narrative: "How can you tell such a story?" (167). The reader of *Pride and Prejudice*, "a studier of character" like Elizabeth Bennet (88), could also declare about many of the characters, "I hear such different accounts of you as puzzle me exceedingly" (136); she, too, finds herself in the position of making

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judgments about characters and situation, and of trying to anticipate marriages and endings.

Conversation comprises a direct, unmediated form of communication between two individuals. In contrast, eavesdropping represents an oblique means of acquiring information about another. It offers an understanding gained not through openness and willingness to listen *to* another person, to enter into his or her mental world; rather, it indicates a desire to gain information about the other in a way which not only contradicts “proper” conduct book rules of behavior, but also demonstrates a lack of respect for the other individual.[23] In *The Way of the World*, Franco Moretti characterizes *Pride and Prejudice* as a novel that operates on an opposition between suspicion and willingness to listen.[24] However, suspicious people are actually eager listeners; they wish to hear anything that will confirm their unfavorable opinions of others. Elizabeth, contrary to Moretti’s assertion, is thus both suspicious of Darcy, ready to believe ill of him, and eager to have her early impressions confirmed by others stories about him; she is an all too avid listener.

Elizabeth believes she knows “the whole story” about Darcy, when actually, she possesses only part of it. Her conversation with Wickham confirms Elizabeth’s premature judgment. She is the misled reader that

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Barthes constructs in his reading of *Sarrasine*: the one who falls in all the traps, or "snares," erected for her, in the same way that the artist in Balzac's tale misjudges characters and situations. A crafty storyteller, Wickham corroborates her false narrative about Darcy by not telling "the *whole* story," creating narrative delay and obfuscation through what Barthes calls "equivocation."[25] Wickham's narration extends the partial transmission of information and resulting incorrect narrative that Elizabeth's eavesdropping began.

Eavesdropping in *Pride and Prejudice* not only prolongs Elizabeth and Darcy's story; it also produces other stories and narrative complications. Hence, in the discussion after the ball, Charlotte Lucas complacently relates how she eavesdropped, and how her "overhearings were more to the purpose than" Elizabeth's (66). Her secret listening, by providing "proof" of Bingley's high opinion of Jane, authenticates the partiality that everyone has been suspecting. However, Elizabeth's eavesdropping is "more to the purpose" of our narrative, for in providing only a partial truth, it creates the misunderstanding around which the central story revolves. Darcy's most consequential eavesdropping, on Mrs. Bennet's conversation, makes him aware of the danger Bingley is courting in wooing Jane and compels him to remove his friend from Netherfield, thus delaying the resolution of this

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1 marriage plot (141). His "overhear[ing]" compels Darcy's "judgment;" it
2 provokes him "to decide on the propriety of his friend's inclination . . .
3 upon his own judgment alone, to determine and direct in what manner that
4 friend was to be happy" (141, 218).

5 In contrast, Mrs. Bennet is a gossip rather than an eavesdropper: one
6 who relays information she has heard, rather than actively seeking it out
7 and drawing conclusions for herself. She functions as the voice of hearsay:
8 the person most susceptible to believe other people's stories and to relay
9 them as absolute fact. Quick to disparage Darcy, she eagerly relates how
10 "every body says that he is ate up with pride" (66). She encourages stories
11 about Jane and Bingley's engagement to circulate; her concern throughout
12 the novel is with what "every body" will think, rather than with any
13 attempt to evaluate the situation and form her own opinion. If her daughter
14 represents an intelligent, if flawed, example of what Bakhtin calls a "living
15 hermenuetics," then Mrs. Bennet stands for the uninformed or
16 overinformed weight of public opinion in understanding and interpreting
17 other people's words and actions.[26] *Pride and Prejudice* cautions its
18 readers to evaluate people and situations carefully, to rely neither on the
19 hearsay of uninformed busybodies nor on the partial understanding that
20 eavesdropping or snap judgments offer.

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Although not a gossip, Elizabeth, like the reader, proves an eager listener to these first- and second-hand stories. While staying at Netherfield in order to nurse her sister, Elizabeth at first tries to read, but she is "so much caught by what passed [in conversation among the others], as to leave her very little attention for her book; and soon laying it wholly aside, she drew near the card-table, and stationed herself between Mr. Bingley and his eldest sister, to observe the game" (84). The story taking place around her—which she is learning through primarily aural means—is more engrossing than the story she is reading. A few pages later, Elizabeth amuses herself by pretending to do some needlework, but really by "attending to what passed between Darcy and his companion [Miss Bingley]" (92). Austen continually presents Elizabeth as a recipient and evaluator of stories, and as a creator of her own. She listens to first Wickham's and then Darcy's version of the Pemberley story: Wickham's failed attempt to elope with Georgiana. Predisposed to dislike Darcy, Elizabeth initially believes Wickham's version; her eavesdropping has supposedly afforded her insight into his character, so that she thinks she knows the "real" Darcy, when it has actually conditioned her to regard him adversely. Eager as she is to having her negative impression confirmed, Wickham's story does not fall on deaf ears. In addition, when Miss Bingley

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warns Elizabeth about Wickham, she merely assumes that the "malice of Mr. Darcy" has prompted the "interference" (137), although the only damaging "interference" here is Elizabeth's preformed opinion that makes the true story inaudible. Because of this particular narrator's questionable motive, the "true" story is not fully heard or heeded, but instead appears, like Darcy's letter does at first, as "the grossest falsehood" (233).

Even the sensible Charlotte Lucas allows herself to listen to other people's conversations. Presented, like Elizabeth, at the beginning of the novel as an admitted eavesdropper, Charlotte continues to listen to the conversations of others when it is in her best interest, and ceases when it proves otherwise; she has very pragmatic, selective hearing. "Pretending not to hear" the conversation between Mr. Collins and Mrs. Bennet in which he admits defeat in courting Elizabeth, Charlotte thus learns she may woo Mr. Collins for herself (154). Her subsequent sympathetic listening to his woes, which Elizabeth believes Charlotte endures out of friendship for herself, later proves to be quite motivated by self-interest (162). Only when she has secured Mr. Collins for herself does Charlotte "wisely not hear" her husband's pontificating (192). Charlotte has learned not to listen.

No wonder, then, that in this very small world of Longbourn and Meryton, people are consumed by fear of being overheard by others. The

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hypocritical Miss Bingley is afraid that she and Darcy "ha[ve] been overheard" as she has been criticizing Elizabeth to him (97); such a disclosure would irrefutably reveal her true stance toward the Bennets. Her anxiety about information's being put into circulation is justified, for, as Darcy's cousin Fitzwilliam remarks to Elizabeth, when he unwittingly reveals that Darcy has been discouraging Bingley from pursuing Jane, "if it were to get round to the lady's family, it would be an unpleasant thing" (217). Yet as much as everyone fears, with reason, the revelation of his or her own private knowledge that can create this "unpleasant thing," everyone is also filled with curiosity about other people's stories and conversations. Indeed, this unpleasantness among characters actually creates the reader's source of pleasure, for the misunderstanding between Elizabeth and Darcy, with its verbal sparring, constitutes and prolongs the narrative. When Elizabeth witnesses the silent, antagonistic exchange between Darcy and Wickham, she wonders "What could be the meaning of it?—It was impossible to imagine; it was impossible not *to long to know*" (116, e.m.). Eavesdropping dramatizes this longing to know—the urge to possess not just secret information, but the larger stories that make such information meaningful. Such larger stories turn information into knowledge.

Characters in *Pride and Prejudice* constantly weigh the advisability of

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1 telling versus withholding stories. Often, bearing news can confer upon an
2 individual greater status than he or she would normally have; the urge to
3 tell is motivated more by egotism than concern for others or for
4 communication. Alternately, a character may decide not to divulge stories
5 either for self-protection or to shield others. Thus, while Maria Lucas
6 gleefully declares with self-importance "how much I shall have to tell!" of
7 her visit to the Collinses, Elizabeth privately adds, "And how much I shall
8 have to conceal," even though her very next thought is "to know that she
9 had the power of revealing what would so exceedingly astonish Jane . . .
10 was such a temptation to openness" (245). Everyone has stories to tell, and
11 the temptation to tell them is great. But just as stories are continually being
12 told, they are also covered up (as Wickham does), as well as imperfectly
13 heard. Consequently, the desire to listen to stories is tempered by
14 knowledge that of certain tales, it is best not to "believe a word" (66).
15 In novels that demonstrate a theory of "more talk, less action," an
16 individual's manner of speaking and the language she uses, even in
17 conversations not overheard, offer critical revelations of character.[27]
18 Besides a person's appearance and associates, his conversation presents
19 one of the few means to judge his character: not only what he says, but
20 how he says it, and to whom. Scholars have long recognized the crucial

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role of dialogue in Austen's texts.[28] Contrary to Tanner's statement that dialogue "does not . . . serve to advance the narrative plot" (41), an analysis of eavesdropping as narrative catalyst—an activity predicated on the existence of dialogue and on its being overheard—reveals that conversation does advance the plot and is essential to the very existence of narrative. The novel, in particular, "always includes in itself the activity of coming to know another's word, a coming to knowledge whose process is represented in the novel."[29] Appearing to be a shortcut, eavesdropping is revealed eventually as a detour in this process of "coming to knowledge."[30] Elizabeth Bennet, who prides herself on her own powers of discernment and who possesses a "quickness" (52) and a "lively, sportive manner of talking" (395), is particularly responsive to others who display similar ability. Wickham attracts her initially through his engaging manners and "happy readiness of conversation" (116). When they meet for the second time, Austen plays with the reader's facile assumption that Wickham is the intended partner for Elizabeth. Through the use of the word "happy" to refer to both Wickham and Elizabeth in the same sentence, the narrator suggests a future union between them (120).[31] The narrator sets up readers as acknowledged eavesdroppers and entices us to make this association between verbal and emotional affinity—and to draw false conclusions. As

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a result, we too undergo the same learning process as other stories' recipients: by narrative's end, we, like the characters, are disabused of our initial judgments of character and story.

Austen positions characters as skilled or inept talkers and listeners to disclose their moral or intellectual acumen. More perceptive characters listen more attentively, and hence are more open to other people's ideas and more willing to delay forming opinions. Conversely, those who too readily talk rather than listen lack an awareness of others and possess an inflated sense of their own significance. In this second category, Lady Catherine monopolizes conversations (198), speaks in "so authoritative a tone, as mark[s] her self-importance" (197), and insists on knowing the substance of everyone else's conversations (206). The impetuous Lydia "seldom listen[s] to any body for more than half a minute" (247), but only prattles, like her mother. Pompous Mr. Collins's discourse is filled with trite expressions appreciated only by the equally pedantic Mary (108). Whereas Elizabeth derives great amusement from listening to other people's conversations (84, 92), Miss Bingley quickly "tire(s) of a conversation in which she ha[s] no share" (101).

In contrast, gifted individuals not only "catch on" more quickly; they also "catch" more than others, so that "part of [Mr. Denny's] intelligence,

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1 though unheard by Lydia, [is] caught by Elizabeth" (132). Elizabeth and
2 Darcy, both as eager eavesdroppers and acknowledged participants in
3 conversation, learn to postpone making judgments until they have heard
4 "the whole story." Characters like Jane, "a willing listener" (253), accept
5 other people's views and often refrain from passing judgment upon them
6 (128). The Gardiners are talented listeners and speakers, so that Elizabeth
7 feels proud to have her uncle converse with Darcy: "She . . . gloried in
8 every expression, every sentence of her uncle, which marked his
9 intelligence, his taste, or his good manners" (276). Unlike Wickham, who
10 "smile[s], look[s] handsome, and sa[ys] many pretty things," but who is as
11 empty as his words (341), Darcy only speaks to the purpose; "he does not
12 rattle away like other young men" (271), and indeed, admits his inability of
13 "conversing easily with those [he] ha[s] never seen before" (209).
14 Throughout the course of the novel, the reader, like Elizabeth and Darcy,
15 "soon [find] that [s]he ha[s] a very different story to hear" than the one that
16 eavesdropping produces (60). Our willingness to hear this other story
17 indicates an ability to change for the better, to enter into a conversation
18 with another, rather than insist on telling the story from our own point of
19 view. Elizabeth's response to Wickham's inquiry about whether Darcy has
20 improved registers this alteration: "When I said that he improved on

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acquaintance, I did not mean that either his mind or his manners were in a state of improvement, but that from knowing him better, his disposition was better understood” (260–261). It is less Darcy than Elizabeth’s *understanding* of him that has changed.

By the end of the novel, both she and Darcy have learned the necessity of a different kind of listening: an unmediated and open listening that allows the other a chance to tell his story directly without prior “pre-judice,” which Moretti defines as “to emit a verdict before having had time to think.” Such listening requires both time and patience—qualities that, by definition, “first impressions” preclude.[32] When Elizabeth and Darcy jettison prejudice (a predisposition to judge, and judge unfavorably, other people) and pride (an over-confidence in oneself and one’s own abilities to judge), they reach an understanding about each other based upon tolerance and compromise. Their relationship is built less on a complete coincidence of thought, disposition, and character, as is the case with Jane and Bingley, than on premise of the need to communicate continually: to listen with an open ear to the ideas of another and not to judge until the other has spoken, told “his story.”

Consequently, Elizabeth and Darcy finally reach their “good understanding” through a direct conversation in which both parties are, in

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turn, listeners and talkers (375). Because their interaction has been so mediated and distorted by prior information—through eavesdropping or other people's stories—direct communication becomes essential in surmounting misunderstanding. For this to occur, they must be *willing* to enter into a conversation with an other who is of both a different class and sex.[33] Thus, Elizabeth longs to talk to Darcy when he returns to Longbourn, so that "She [is] in no humour for conversation with any one but himself; and to him she ha[s] hardly courage to speak" (346). Instead of the polite, perfunctory, and utterly public forms of communication that group interaction has afforded them, she desires "to enter into something more of conversation than the mere ceremonious salutation attending his entrance" (350). Only when they leave the busy parlor and walk alone outside can this private conversation occur, one that helps them come to an understanding because it does away with all enigmas, snares, and red herrings.

In his "Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce," John Milton states that "a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and noblest end of marriage, for we find here no expression so necessary implying carnal knowledge as this prevention of loneliness to the mind and spirit of man."[34] Stanley Cavell explains how Milton's definition of *conversation* is broader than our

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contemporary use of the word: it encompasses relating to and living with others and is "something more like our concept of intercourse."[35] Indeed, both words have a sexual significance. Although we rarely associate "conversation" with sexual intercourse, English legal terminology until 1970 used the phrase "criminal conversation" to refer to the "action by a husband for damages against the seducer of his wife, the seduction being described as a 'criminal conversation.'"[36] Particularly to an eighteenth-century public, but under the English legal system at least until the mid-nineteenth century, adultery was considered a form of trespass, since a woman was deemed her husband's property and had no separate legal identity from his own.[37] Such an illicit "conversation" transgresses social norms in thought and in deed, and like eavesdropping—another trespass whose etymology is bound up with legal history—involves the appropriation of something private.[38] This meaning rests upon an earlier, more comprehensive conception of "conversation," as "the action of consorting or having dealings with others; living together; commerce, intercourse, society, intimacy,"[39] a significance implicit in Milton's assertion that God's "end" in creating marriage was "the apt and cheerful conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evil of solitary life, not mentioning the purpose of generation till

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1 afterwards" (703). Milton also speaks of the soul's "desire of joining to
2 itself in conjugal fellowship a fit conversing soul" (709), so that
3 conversation comprises not just sexual but intellectual and spiritual
4 intercourse.

5 The more comprehensive meaning of "conversation" resonates
6 throughout Austen's novels, and explains why creating situations where
7 characters can enter into conversation with each other is of vital
8 importance.[40] Discussing comedies of marriage, Cavell points out that
9 "talking together is fully and plainly being together, a mode of association,
10 a form of life . . . [in which] the central pair are learning to speak the same
11 language," or at least languages that can be mutually understood.[41] The
12 same holds true in *Pride and Prejudice*. Thus, Bingley's offhand
13 compliment that "[Darcy] can be a conversible companion if he thinks it
14 worth his while" (125) becomes, at second hearing, a necessary attribute
15 for our hero. And Elizabeth's desire to keep Darcy "to herself, and to those
16 of her family with whom he might converse without mortification"
17 becomes more understandable (391). This conversation involves the
18 exchange of ideas, emotions, and attitudes with an other; it comprehends
19 an association and familiarity with that other. The reserved Darcy shrinks
20 from "conversing" with strangers. He must grasp that only by determining

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1 to "give himself the trouble," by entering into conversation with an other,
2 can the strange become the familiar—a lesson he learns by talking with,
3 rather than about Elizabeth (209).

4 Cavell writes, "Comic resolutions depend upon an acquisition in time
5 of self-knowledge . . . this is a matter of learning who you are" (56). In
6 *Pride and Prejudice*, self-knowledge is spurred as much by interaction
7 with another as it is by introspection, so that, after reading Darcy's letter,
8 Elizabeth declares, "Till this moment, I never knew myself" (237).
9 Learning about the other provokes an understanding of the self; those who
10 never bother to understand anything outside themselves—the Lady
11 Catherines, the Mr. Collinses, the Lydia Bennets—will never truly know
12 themselves. Austen sees "man . . . not as a solitary being completed in
13 himself, but only as completed in society."[42]

14 By the end of the novel, Darcy and Elizabeth possess all the
15 ingredients for "an [sic] union that must [be] to the advantage of both"
16 (325), based upon mutual "respect, esteem, and confidence" (262). The
17 last of these, with its double valence of "trust in" and "confiding in" is
18 particularly significant in considering the protagonists' conversation as a
19 relational mode as well as a verbal exchange. The word *confidence* recurs
20 repeatedly after they have traded stories of their sisters' meditated and

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actual elopements. Their reciprocal "confidence" comprehends information that could be compromising, and yet whose telling to this particular person assumes that a secret will be kept. This confidence depends upon not only a trust in the other, but also a confidence in language to communicate. In contrast, Lydia's marriage, like her mother's, will rest on none of these foundations. In her first encounter with her family as a married woman, Lydia reveals a secret: Darcy was present at the ceremony, and in fact helped arrange it. She unconcernedly responds to Elizabeth's amazement at his presence, "I quite forgot! I ought not to have said a word about it. I promised them so faithfully!. . . . It was to be such a secret!" (332). The justice of this betrayal at the level of plot seems evident. Elizabeth's refusal to betray Darcy's confidence leads Lydia to elope with Wickham; in contrast, Lydia's unthinking revelation of Darcy's goodness helps reconcile him to Elizabeth. Elizabeth and Darcy's "conversation" will remain private and profound, whereas Lydia and Wickham's will be ever subject to a public audience and its disapproval.

The public performance and the private conversation offer two models of social relationship in *Pride and Prejudice*; these social models have narrative implications as well. Darcy recognizes a similarity between himself and Elizabeth, and tells her, "We neither of us perform to

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1 strangers” (209). Barthes explains how

> 2 Idyllic communication denies all theater, it refuses any presence *in front of which* the
> 3 destination can be achieved. . . . Narrative communication is the opposite: each
> 4 destination is at one moment or another a spectacle for the other participants in the
> 5 game. . . . of which the reader is the ultimate beneficiary . . . the various listeners (here
> 6 we ought to be able to say *écouteur* as we say *voyeur*) seem to be located at every
> 7 corner of utterance.[43]

8 Barthes stresses the oral nature of narrative communication, in which
9 the reader is the final eavesdropper, the last participant in a chain of aural
10 reception in a world of “distinct cacography” (132). The Wickhams are
11 constant exhibitionists, and their life together will be one performance.
12 Their narratable “conversation” will always be overheard, and in fact,
13 requires an eavesdropper to instill value in it, for it exists less as an
14 inherently meaningful interaction than as a spectacle, an activity for the
15 benefit of an outsider, upon whom it depends. Conversely, the Darcys’
16 “idyllic” conversation will never be subject to eavesdropping; their
17 marriage removes them and *Pride and Prejudice* from the realm of the
18 narratable.[44] The Darcys do not perform; they converse. Their idyllic
19 conversation is private, not subject to overhearing, fundamentally not
20 “narratable.”

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* * *

Another illicit activity is often required to resolve the narrative situation that eavesdropping unleashes. In *Pride and Prejudice*, this second transgression facilitates Darcy and Elizabeth's reconciliation. As in *Evelina*, the protagonists achieve direct communication through the workings of intermediaries: Lady De Bourgh and Mrs. Gardiner. Austen writes that Elizabeth "soon learnt that they were indebted for their present good understanding to the efforts of his aunt, who *did* call on him in her return through London and there relate . . . the substance of her conversation with Elizabeth" (375). Through Lady De Bourgh's unconsciously revelatory narrative, Darcy learns to hope that Elizabeth returns his affection. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth holds a more active position than Burney's Evelina, whose friend eavesdrops for her. Consequently, Austen resorts to a form of narrative transgression in which all participants are actively engaged: the betrayal of the secret that Darcy has paid Wickham to marry Lydia. Elizabeth compels her aunt to reveal Darcy's covert role in Lydia's marriage. As Elizabeth abashedly notes, their "comfort springs from a breach of promise" (389).

This transgression is part of an almost complete revelation of information necessary to conclude the narrative. The only information not

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revealed is that which would dispose Jane not to like Darcy: his dissuading Bingley from pursuing Jane, based on his opinion that Miss Bennet did not really care for Bingley. This last narrative thread is never completely tied up. As Elizabeth recognizes: "Here was knowledge in which no one could partake; and she was sensible that nothing less than a perfect understanding between the parties could justify her in throwing off this last incumbrance of mystery" (253–4). Yet, in the narrative we are given, this "mystery" is never revealed, despite the fact that Jane and Bingley do reach "a perfect understanding." "'Closure' is not to be equated with full 'disclosure.'"[45]

Although the conclusions to Austen's novels present situations of communication and "closure," rarely do they admit total "disclosure." There is always some remaining information that is not revealed, as Austen herself acknowledges in *Emma*: "seldom . . . does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken."[46] That residue contains the potential for other narratives. Narrative closure is, in essence, the author's point of discretion, the point where she declines to give us more information or to present to us any more mysteries. The potential still remains, but fictional closure covers it up with the appearance of full disclosure. Narrative resolution occurs in *Pride and Prejudice* when characters and the narrator

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are content to converse and not to eavesdrop.

Austen's *Persuasion* resorts to eavesdropping to resolve a narrative produced by the interference of a well-intentioned maternal surrogate. *Persuasion*'s primary story revolves around the elements of the secondary plots in *Pride and Prejudice*: persuasion—wielding oratorical powers to convince someone else to act (or refuse to act)—and discretion—determining when to speak and when to remain silent. The novel dramatizes the power of language, particularly its oral manifestations. Whereas Lady Catherine fails in her efforts to prevent Darcy and Elizabeth's union, Lady Russell initially succeeds in convincing Anne not to marry Wentworth. Thus, *Persuasion* is a book about a "second chance," a second story; it begins where most books would end, or more precisely, at the point where it has "thwarted" the more typical Austen ending.[47] A novel preoccupied by endings, *Persuasion* uses eavesdropping to achieve its fictional resolution.

f26

Notes

1. "*Double understanding* [la double entente] far exceeds the limited case of the play on words or the equivocation and permeates, in various forms and densities, all classic writing. . . . The reader is an

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accomplice, not of this or that character, but of the discourse itself insofar as it plays on the division of reception [l'écoute], the impurity of communication" (Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, pref. Richard Howard [New York: Hill and Wang, 1974], 145).

2. Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. William M. Sale, Jr. (New York and London: Norton, 1973), 72–74.

3. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*. Barthes identifies the "hermeneutic code . . . whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay the answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution" (17). He notes how "an enigma leads from a question to an answer, *through a certain number of delays*" (32). The enigmas of *Pride and Prejudice* are not only how will misunderstanding be overcome, but also what conjugal pairings will allow for reconciliation and resolution.

4. D.A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), ix. Miller's theory of narrative has influenced my discussion of eavesdropping. However, his progression from novelists who force novelistic closure to those who advocate a "release from the tyranny of

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1 narrative control" positions Austen as a conservative author who
2 "disapproves of" the narratable, rather than as a writer who, while
3 signaling the limitations of narrative conventions, continues to use
4 them (xii, xv, xiv). Austen's novels present a critique of the potentially
5 anarchistic "narratable," rather than an imperious suppression of it.

6 5. We can consider eavesdropping is a "narratable element" because of its
7 capacity "to generate a story" (Miller, 5).

8 6. Barthes' discussion of enigma also examines the intended double
9 audience of such narrative devices. Narrative "snares" entrap both
10 readers and characters (pp. 31, 32, for the reader, and throughout *S/Z*
11 for the characters Sarrasine and Mme de Rochefide—the internal
12 recipient of the narrator's tale).

13 7. Miller, 50.

14 8. Graham McGregor, "Listeners' Comments on Conversation,"
15 *Language and Communication* 3.3 (1983): 271–304. McGregor
16 asserts that the eavesdropper has "the ability to 'interpret' the verbal
17 behaviour of others" (302).

18 9. McGregor, "Eavesdropping and the Analysis of Everyday Verbal
19 Exchange" in *Methods in Dialectology*, ed. and pref. Alan R. Thomas,
20 intro. Martin J. Ball (Clevedon and Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters,

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1988), 368.

10. McGregor, "Listeners' Comments," 302.

11. Charlotte Brontë, as quoted in B. C. Southam, ed. *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2 (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 205. Similarly, Edith Wharton asserts in *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) that "Jane Austen has given the norm, the ideal" of "novels preeminently of character, and in which situation, dramatically viewed, is reduced to the minimum" (Southam, *The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2, 284). See also H. W. Garrod, "Jane Austen: A Depreciation," *Discussions of Jane Austen*, ed. and intro. William Heath (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1961), 32–40.

12. Reginald Farrer, "Jane Austen, *ob*. July 18, 1817," in Southam, vol. 2, 259, 262.

13. D.W. Harding, ed. and intro., *Persuasion* by Jane Austen (London and New York: Penguin, 1985), 15. Harding observes without elaborating that eavesdropping is inevitable in a society where privacy is rare.

14. *Emma* is the only Austen novel that does not contain some form of eavesdropping as an integral part of its narrative structure or thematic concerns. Emma is so adept at creating misunderstandings and at fabricating "riddles" to be solved that eavesdropping is unnecessary as

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a generator of plot. (Jane Austen, *Emma* [New York and London: Norton, 1972], 193). *Emma* displaces onto its heroine the structural and dramatic conditions that create situations of "narratability."

15. Barthes, *S/Z*, 145.
16. Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen*, (London: Macmillan, 1986), 9, 36. Tanner's argument and mine converge in our discussion of communication in Austen's work but differ significantly in their conclusions. See Chapter Two.
17. Austen's texts grapple with concerns of politics, gender, and class obliquely, through what Claudia Johnson calls "various means of indirection" (*Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988], xxiv).
18. See A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 100; R. W. Chapman, ed. *Pride and Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; rptd.1988), 408–409; Tanner, 107–108; Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 199, 212–213; Kenneth Moler, *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968). Mark M. Hennelly, Jr. notes in passing *Evelina*'s probable influence on the novel's plot ("*Pride and*

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1 *Prejudice*: The Eyes Have It," *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed.
2 Janet Todd, *Women and Literature*, New Series, vol. 3 [New York and
3 London: Holmes and Meier, 1983], 193).
4 19. Moler terms Darcy's remarks about Elizabeth a "parody of Lord
5 Orville's unfavorable first impression of Evelina," and mentions but
6 does not stress that both episodes involve overhearing (90).
7 20. Frances Burney, *Evelina* (1778; Oxford: Oxford University Press,
8 1990), 35, 36. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will
9 be cited parenthetically.
10 21. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 1813 (London and New York:
11 Penguin, 1972), 69. All other references will be to this edition and will
12 be cited parenthetically.
13 22. See Franco Moretti's discussion of *Pride and Prejudice* as a
14 *bildungsroman* in *The Way of the World: The* Bildungsroman *in*
15 *European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), esp. Chapter One.
16 23. Tanner analyzes the association between the words "property" and
17 "propriety" in Austen, noting how "the ideal marriage at the end of a
18 Jane Austen novel . . . offers itself as an emblem of the ideal union of
19 property and propriety . . . on which the future of her society depends."
20 (19). He asserts that "the ultimate propriety on which all other

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1 proprieties depended was true propriety of language" (20). Hence, a
2 transgression of conversational proprieties is a serious offence indeed.
3 24. Moretti, 60.
4 25. Barthes, 32, 38.
5 26. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 338. Noting the prevalence of
6 gossip in everyday life, Bakhtin describes how "people talk most of all
7 about what others talk about—they transmit, recall, weigh and pass
8 judgment on other people's words, opinions, assertions,
9 information. . . . Reflect how enormous is the weight of 'everyone
10 says' and 'it is said' in public opinion, public rumor, gossip, slander,
11 and so forth."
12 27. In *Mansfield Park*, Edmund asks Fanny to evaluate Mary Crawford
13 through her conversation; both cousins conclude that there is
14 something morally "not quite right" about this attractive, playful
15 Londoner (Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* [1814; London: Penguin,
16 1985], 94). That Mary considers Henry's seduction of a married
17 woman as mere "folly" provokes Edmund's recognition that between
18 the two of them, nothing could "be understood" (441).
19 28. See for example Tanner, 25, 41; Ian Watt, "Introduction," *Jane Austen:*
20 *A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall,

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1963); Lloyd W. Brown, *Bits of Ivory: Narrative Techniques in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), esp. Chapters 5 and 7.

29. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 353.

30. Several critics focus on visual rather than aural means of perception in *Pride and Prejudice* and emphasize the metaphoric import of words such as "insight" or "observation." See Hennelly, 187–207; Lesley H. Willis, "Eyes and the Imagery of Sight in *Pride and Prejudice*," *English Studies in Canada* 2 (1976): 156–62. In her introduction to *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, Janet Todd notes how "looking" is "much the subject of these essays" (*Women and Literature*, New Series, vol. 3 (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1983), 8.

31. See also Willis, 159.

32. Moretti, 57. He also notes the second "semantic field" which the word "prejudice" evokes: "partisanship, partiality." This second meaning characterizes Elizabeth's initial willingness to listen to Wickham's story, which confirms her good opinion of him and her disparaging one of Darcy.

33. David Monaghan identifies the initial antagonism between Darcy and Elizabeth as one of social class: "Elizabeth's view of Darcy is

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obscured by the middle-class prejudice that all aristocrats are snobs, and he is blinded by the aristocratic conviction that to be middle-class is to be automatically vulgar.” (Monaghan, “The Complexity of Jane Austen’s Novels,” Todd, 90).

34. John Milton, “Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce,” *John Milton: complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), 707.

35. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 87. For all the meanings of *conversation*, see *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 1: 545–546.

36. Lawrence Stone, *The Road to Divorce: England* 1530 *–1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 233. Stone states that the number of suits brought for “crim. con.” reached its height during the years 1790–1829 (255).

37. See Stone, 7, 13, 30.

38. The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that the term “eavesdrop” is “chiefly used with reference to the ancient custom or law which prohibited a proprietor from building at a less distance than two feet

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from the boundary of the land, lest he should injure his neighbor's land by 'eavesdrop'" (*OED*, 1: 829).

39. *OED* 1: 545. Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* defines conversation as "commerce; intercourse; familiarity" or "behaviour; manner of acting in common life" (New York: Arno Press, 1979 reprint) n. pag. It defines "To converse" as "to cohabit with; to hold intercourse with; to be a companion to." All of these definitions imply a broader and more sustained interaction of individuals than does the modern meaning.

40. In this, my discussion of the word *conversation* approaches Bakhtin's notion of "dialogue," which stresses the very particularity and situatedness of individuals that becomes part of the activity or process of communication. See, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 143–144, 148.

41. Cavell, 87.

42. Anonymous reviewer, *North British Review* lii (April 1870): 129–52, as quoted in Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge,

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1 MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 81.

2 43. Barthes, 132. See also 145, 149, 151, 160.

3 44. Austen extends the story of privacy beyond the conclusion of the novel.

4 After describing her visit to an exhibition of fictional portraits that

5 included one of Jane but not of Elizabeth, Austen concludes, “I can

6 only imagine that Mr. D. prizes any Picture of her too much to like it

7 should be exposed to the public eye.—I can imagine he wd have that

8 sort of feeling—that mixture of Love, Pride & Delicacy” (May 24,

9 1813, *Letters*, vol. 2, 312).

10 45. Tanner, 207.

11 46. *Emma*, 297.

12 47. See also Tanner, 211, 212.

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