

William Nelles



Omniscience for Atheists: Or, Jane Austen's Infallible Narrator

The comparison of the traditional novelist to God has received many memorable formulations. While Flaubert and Joyce emphasize the author's ubiquity, invisibility, or silence, the quality usually adduced for comparison is omniscience, as in Sartre's complaint about Mauriac: like God, he "is omniscient about everything relating to his little world" (15). For Sartre, of course, this is a bad thing: "God is not an artist. Neither is M. Mauriac" (25). As Meir Sternberg has demonstrated, the god being compared in these formulations is specifically the God of the Old Testament: "Homer's gods," he notes, "like the corresponding Near Eastern pantheons, certainly have access to a wider range of information than the normal run of humanity; but their knowledge still falls well short of omniscience, concerning the past and present as well as the future" (88). Sternberg explicitly includes Jane Austen's narratives within this biblical model: "Surely . . . one assumes that, like all novelists, she enjoys the privilege of omniscience denied to tellers in everyday life. She invokes different rules, we say. But if it is convention that renders Jane Austen immune from all charges of fallacy and falsity, it is convention that likewise puts the Bible's art of narrative beyond their reach. For the biblical narrator also appeals to the privilege of omniscience—so that he no more speaks in the writer's ordinary voice than Jane Austen does in hers, but exactly as a persona raised high above . . ." (34). J. Hillis Miller explains how "This immanent omniscience is . . . like the knowledge traditionally ascribed to God. It is an authentic perfection of knowledge. The omniscient narrator is able to remember perfectly all the past, to foresee the future course of events, and to penetrate with irresistible insight the most secret crevice in the heart of each man. He can know the person better than the person knows himself . . ." (64).¹

William Nelles is Professor of English and Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. His published work in narrative theory includes a book, *Frame-works*, and numerous journal articles.

NARRATIVE, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May 2006)

Copyright 2006 by The Ohio State University

But in the twenty years since Sternberg's book—and in significant measure because of the interest sparked by his book—the premise that all heterodiegetic narrators exercise Godlike omniscience has been questioned.² Sternberg argues that “omniscience is a qualitative and therefore indivisible privilege. . . . The superhuman privilege is constant and only its exercise variable” (183). While this logic would doubtless be true of “real” omniscience, it does not seem compelling with regard to “pretend” omniscience, which might readily be imagined as divisible. The “demand for a God's Eye View or Nothing” (Putnam *viii*) may be a limiting dichotomy that prevents us from exploring alternative models.³ Omniscience might instead be thought of as a toolbox, with different novelists using the different tools within it in distinctive ways. My own survey of discussions of omniscience identifies four primary tools in that box: omnipotence, omnitemporality, omnipresence, and telepathy. To get ahead of myself for a moment, I'll argue that Austen's narrators are more accurately described as “infallible” than “omniscient”: at least on the basis of these four features, the infallible narrator as defined here is not a type of omniscient narrator. I take no position on the larger question of whether “omniscience” is always a misnomer; Austen's narrators, however, utilize so few of these standard tools so sparingly that the label is not useful for discussing her practice. Indeed, it seems to have hampered prior analyses of Austen's method.

Austen's career, at least in her handling of point of view, has long been treated as the exemplification of Haeckel's Law that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” as her novels rehearse in perfect sequence all of the evolutionary stages of the genre. She begins with the early epistolary drafts, in which the novels have no omniscient narrators at all. Later, she revises them into third-person omniscient novels with engaging and judgmental narrators, effectively rendering extinct the earlier genre of the epistolary novel. During the course of writing these novels she gradually weans herself from what Marvin Mudrick calls her “early tendency to assert an arbitrary omniscience over the objects of her irony” (84). Finally, in *Emma* and *Persuasion*, she evolves from the daughter of Dr. Johnson into the mother of Henry James, pioneering the novel with a central consciousness or filter and a more reticent narrator.⁴ In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth outlines the final stage of this progression: “In *Emma* there are many breaks in the point of view, because Emma's beclouded mind cannot do the whole job. In *Persuasion*, where the heroine's viewpoint is faulty only in her ignorance of Captain Wentworth's love, there are very few. Anne Elliott's consciousness is sufficient, as Emma's is not, for most of the needs of the novel which she dominates” (250–51).

Just as a play has a certain number of speaking parts, so an Austen novel has a certain number of what we might call “thinking parts,” characters whose consciousness the narrator reveals to us. Given the critical narrative outlined above, one might expect to see that number start out very large and narrow down to a single central consciousness. If one measures omniscience quantitatively, as Booth suggests, counting how many minds the narrator has access to, then *Persuasion*, in which the narrator reveals the consciousnesses of ten characters, is no different from *Emma*, in which she also reads the minds of ten characters. But not only is there no progression from *Emma* to *Persuasion* in this regard, there is no pattern of progression at all in

Austen's novels: *Northanger Abbey* has ten thinking parts, *Sense and Sensibility* twelve, and *Mansfield Park* thirteen. Only *Pride and Prejudice*, with nineteen thinking parts, stands out.⁵

Discussions of omniscience assign it a broad and variable range of characteristics, many of which have little to do with omniscience per se. Critics often apply the label to passages of exposition, but most of these, at least in Austen, communicate information about incomes or family ties that constitutes common knowledge in that world, known to the characters as well as the narrator. The narrator of *Persuasion* tells us that Anne and Captain Wentworth had fallen in love and separated seven years ago as a courtesy to us as newcomers to the neighborhood, but we learn nothing that Sir Walter, Elizabeth, and Lady Russell don't know. In fact, we are assured that if Wentworth's brother and sister hadn't been out of the country and Anne's sister, Mary, away at school, they would have known all about it too, as would have anyone in the "Kellynch circle" (*Persuasion* 28).⁶

Other critics conflate the idea of narrative reliability with omniscience, but as far as factual or mimetic matters go, virtually all narrators are reliable—lying narrators are very rare—and as far as narrative judgments go, Jonathan Culler seems right in his argument that the narrator's wisdom is "offered for our consideration and assent, in a mode of persuasion." When the narrator asserts, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (*Pride and Prejudice* 3), the reader is being asked to ponder the statement: to accept it literally (as does Mrs. Bennet) or to dismiss it outright are both inadequate responses (the rich single men do turn out to need wives). The universal truth is downgraded to relativistic worldly wisdom. Austen's trademark irony seldom allows such claims to be taken at face value; they must be gauged by the degree to which the events of the novel corroborate them. While omniscient narrators are reliable and do offer exposition and commentary, they share these attributes with non-omniscient narrators, including first-person narrators, with writers of nonfiction, and with tellers of natural narrative. For the purposes of this discussion, then, I'll stipulate that there are four core attributes of omniscience, listed here by degree of Godliness:

The most Godlike narrators of all present themselves as omnipotent, as the creators of their narrative worlds, as in Denis Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste*: "*Vous voyez, lecteur, que je suis en beau chemin, et qu'il ne tiendrait qu'à moi de vous faire attendre un an, deux ans, trois ans, le récit des amours de Jacques, en le séparant de son maître et en leur faisant courir à chacun tous les hasards qu'il me plairait*" (476; "You see, reader, that I am well underway, and that it is entirely up to me to make you wait one year, two years, or three years for the story of Jacques's loves, by separating him from his master and making each of them go through all the perils that I please." [my translation]). Such omnipotence is not strictly speaking an attribute of omniscience, but it logically entails omniscience: since the narrator has invented everything in this world, he must know everything there is to know about it.

The second attribute of omniscience is omnitemporality: as defined here at least, narrators are omnitemporal when they engage in frequent external anachronies of substantial reach.⁷ Most of Balzac's narrators are touchstones for such temporal mobility. They can move freely throughout the past: "But now, the extraordinary

devotion of this beautiful and magnanimous woman demands some explanation; and, briefly, here is Madame Hulot's story" (31). He then pieces together events from 1799, 1797, 1792, 1804, 1806, and so on as he works his way back to 1838 to complete the analepsis. While even extensive knowledge of the past can be rationalized in human terms, complete knowledge of the future is definitively denied to humans and would require a Godlike agent. Prolepses are rarer than analepses in narratives, but Balzac again provides numerous examples: "The following day those three existences . . . were all to be affected by Hortense's naïve passion, and by the singular events that were to be the outcome of the Baron's ill-fated passion for Josépha" (82). Balzac is not just making a general prediction, along the lines of "that's going to cause problems," but demonstrating complete knowledge of the "singular" manner in which each character's destiny will work out.⁸

The third attribute of omniscience is omnipresence, the ability to "go everywhere and see everything," which implies complete knowledge of present events; as J. Hillis Miller explains, "this perfect knowledge is rather that of pervasive presence than that of transcendent vision" (69, 64).⁹ The omnipresent narrator can report simultaneous events widely separated by space, as in these three consecutive sentences from the "Wandering Rocks" section of Joyce's *Ulysses*:

Maggy, pouring yellow soup in Katey's bowl, exclaimed:
—Boody! For shame!
A skiff, a crumpled throwaway, Elijah is coming, rode lightly down the Liffey
. . . between the Customhouse old dock and George's quay.
The blond girl in Thornton's bedded the wicker basket with rustling fibre.
(227)¹⁰

The fourth attribute of omniscience, perhaps the one we think of first, is telepathy or mind reading, the ability to narrate characters' thoughts and feelings. I consider here only the reporting or summarizing of characters' thoughts; commenting upon them once they are known requires no postulate of omniscience.

These four features, then, omnipotence, omnitemporality, omnipresence, and telepathy, are denied real human beings and are uniquely reserved to omniscient narration. Of these, Austen eschews the first three almost entirely.

Austen's narrators do occasionally approach the rhetoric of omnipotence, most often when they step forward on the final pages to wrap things up at an accelerated pace. While the narrator of *Mansfield Park* does admit to being a writer, she adopts the familiar realistic pose that she can direct the presentation of the story, but not alter the fabula itself, as (my) italics suggest: "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects *as soon as I can* . . ." (461). Austen typically couches her comments in phrases suggesting probability or expectation, knowledge of human nature rather than omnipotent control: "My Fanny indeed at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of every thing. She must have been a happy creature" (461); Mr. Rushworth "might set forward on a second, and it is to be hoped, more prosperous trial of the state—if duped, to be duped at least with good humor and good luck" (464); of Mrs. Norris and Maria, "It may reasonably be

supposed that their tempers became their mutual punishment” (465); had Henry stayed the course with Fanny, “there would have been every probability of success and felicity for him” (467). Indeed, by this point in the narratives, the narratee is equipped with adequate knowledge to judge for itself the fitness and probability of these speculations: “Who can be in doubt of what followed?” Austen asks at the end of *Persuasion*, and of course we are in no doubt at all—indeed, the outcome “cannot be doubted” (269, 272).

The major exception to Austen’s refusal of omnipotence is *Northanger Abbey*, in which the narrator on three occasions admits to being a novelist. The first admission is triggered when Catherine and Isabella “shut themselves up, to read novels together. Yes, novels;” (37). The narrator then launches into a two-page defense of that unfairly despised genre, but she never makes any comment about her own control of her story. In the other instances, she apologizes for making her hero realistic rather than romantic with the ironic claim that “the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own” (243) and shows herself “aware that the rules of composition forbid the introduction of a character not connected with my fable” (251). These intrusions are occasions for exercising her wit on the conventions of novel writing rather than for making pronouncements about the fates of her characters.¹¹ I don’t want to appear to be rationalizing exceptions, and there are certainly some inconsistencies in Austen’s handling of point of view. As Booth observes, “Jane Austen never formulated any theory to cover her own practice . . .” (245); “. . . her technique is determined by the needs of the novel she is writing” (250). As a parody of contemporary novel writing, *Northanger Abbey* demands parody of the contemporary delight in claims of narratorial omnipotence; but none of Austen’s other novels claim such a capacity. Her normal narrative persona resembles those of the Victorian novelists analyzed by J. Hillis Miller: “Immanent rather than transcendent, thereby lacking one aspect of divine knowledge, the omniscient narrator . . . has knowledge of a world which he has not created . . .” (64–65).

The second feature of omniscience is omnitemporality, especially knowledge of the future. David Lodge’s survey of novels that display “daring time-shifts backwards and forwards across the chronological span of the action,” convinces him that, “it is perhaps in this respect that authorial omniscience most closely mimics the omniscience of God, who alone knows the beginning and end” (“Uses” 237). Far from having this godlike freedom, Austen’s narrators are temporally quite restricted. As the plot of *Persuasion* winds down, for example, the narrator is obliged to leave us with some loose ends: “Mrs. Clay’s affections had overpowered her interest, and she had sacrificed, for the young man’s sake, the possibility of scheming longer for Sir Walter. She has abilities, however, as well as affections; and it is now a doubtful point whether his cunning or hers may finally carry the day; whether, after preventing her from being the wife of Sir Walter, he may not be wheedled & caressed at last into making her the wife of Sir William” (250). As the shift to present tense and the deictic “now” establish, Austen is imagining a time-bound narrator to whom the future is inaccessible, not at all the sort of omniscient narrator who, as Miller puts it, “has ubiquity in time . . . and knows everything there is to know within that all-embracing span” (10).¹²

In fact, there is a virtual taboo in Austen on any narrator's prolepsis whatsoever, including internal prolepses. The limit of narrative vision into the future is reached in such minor examples as, "She and Mary were actually setting forward for the great house, where, as she afterwards learnt, they must inevitably have found him . . ." (*Persuasion* 53). Even this sort of flash-forward, which only looks ahead a matter of minutes, and to an event firmly within the narrator's knowledge of these past events, is exceedingly rare in Austen.¹³ An Austen narrator is not just bound by a "now" at the end of the story that she can't see beyond; she is also bound by the "now" of the action she is narrating moment by moment, and is prohibited from looking ahead to future events even if they will occur before the narrator's final "now." Such restraint contributes to that reliability without omniscience that defines the infallible narrator. Samuel Johnson hits the nail on the head in a comment aptly cited by Christopher R. Miller: "the truth is, that things to come, except when they approach very nearly, are equally hidden from men of all degrees of understanding; and if a wise man is not amazed at sudden occurrences, it is not that he has thought more, but less, upon futurity" (242). Furthermore, an Austen narrator also has limited access to past events, seldom extending beyond the protagonist's childhood; in this regard they resemble homodiegetic rather than heterodiegetic narrators. When larger analeptic reaches are necessary, Austen takes pains to naturalize the narrator's knowledge, as when the details of Sir Walter's birth and family are given by means of his own reading of his copy of the Baronetage (*Persuasion* 3).

Austen's approach to omnipresence, our third aspect of omniscience, is perhaps the most idiosyncratic aspect of her handling of point of view. Oddly enough, an Austen narrator can only read minds within a radius of three miles of her protagonist; this is specified as being precisely the distance from Longbourn to Netherfield (*Pride and Prejudice* 32) and also from Kellynch Hall to Uppercross Cottage (*Persuasion* 31). And even this level of privilege occurs rarely. Normally the narrator can only read the minds of characters within sight or hearing of the protagonist. Austen's narrator is under house arrest, and the protagonist of the novel is her ankle bracelet. Take *Pride and Prejudice*, for example: in Chapter IV the narrator first presents a scene between Jane and Elizabeth at Longbourn, then summarizes a parallel scene with Darcy and his party at Netherfield, three miles away; this is the absolute limit of an Austen narrator's range in shifting point of view (16–17). The three mile radius appears to always have Elizabeth as its fixed center. On three other occasions the narrator can read a character's mind when Elizabeth is in another part of the house, and once when she is walking in another part of the grounds. And even in some of these cases, the point of view is not shifted across space in the mode of "meanwhile back at the ranch," but "handed off" as it were, from Elizabeth to another character: ". . . Elizabeth soon afterwards left the room. 'Eliza Bennet,' said Miss Bingley, when the door was closed on her . . ." (40). The narrator does not occupy all of space simultaneously like God, nor teleport herself through space like Captain Kirk—she simply stays behind to hear two speeches, after which Elizabeth returns to the room. In every other case of telepathy in *Pride and Prejudice*—and these are numerous—the character whose mind is being read is within Elizabeth's audiovisual field. This degree of spatial restriction hardly seems consonant with handbook definitions of omniscience.

Sternberg pronounces the biblical narrator omniscient on the basis of three of my four factors: “For one thing, the narrator has free access to the minds (‘hearts’) of his dramatis personae. . . . For another, he enjoys free movement in time (among narrative past, present, and future) and in space (enabling him to follow secret conversations, shuttle between simultaneous happenings or between heaven and earth)” (84). Austen’s narrators, by contrast, cannot see the future (or much of the past), and are narrowly restricted in their freedom of movement. The lack of overlap alone would suffice to differentiate her omniscience from biblical omniscience. The single privilege of omniscience that her narrators enjoy, then, is their ability to read characters’ minds. Now, one might reasonably object that this is still a godlike privilege. But let’s take a closer look at how telepathy works in Austen.

In *Mansfield Park* the narrator relays to us Sir Thomas’s reaction to the proposal that he take the poor relation Fanny into the household: “He thought of his own four children—of his two sons—of cousins in love, & c.,” (6). So far, a textbook example of omniscient narration. But I’ve cut Austen off in mid-sentence; the passage continues: “but no sooner had he deliberately begun to state his objections, than Mrs. Norris interrupted him with a reply to them all whether stated or not. ‘My dear Sir Thomas, I perfectly comprehend you. . . . You are thinking of your sons—but do not you know that of all things upon earth *that* is the least likely to happen . . .’” (6). Austen’s narrator does have the ability to read Sir Thomas’s mind, but Mrs. Norris has the same privilege. And Mrs. Norris is not the sharpest tool in the shed by any means.

Emma, which has been the most intensively studied of the novels in terms of point of view, will help illustrate further Austen’s radical attenuation of omniscience, and also suggest how impressionistic some of that intensive study has been. Even at the basic level of enumerating the narrative devices used, we find widely divergent claims. One end of this spectrum is occupied by F. R. Leavis, who asserts, “everything is presented through Emma’s dramatized consciousness” (19n), while Booth, at the other end, claims that there are numerous breaks from Emma’s point of view. Somewhere in the middle we find such critics as Lodge, who lists three exceptions—one glimpse into Mrs. Weston’s mind, one into Knightley’s, and the expository authorial introduction—“but with these reservations,” he asserts, “it is true that the action of the novel is narrated wholly from Emma’s perspective . . .” (“Jane” 177). Yet the narrator also reads the thoughts of Mr. Woodhouse, Harriet, John Knightley, Mr. and Mrs. Elton, Mr. Weston, and Miss Churchill, a total of ten different thinking parts; why do we so seldom recall all these exceptions? In part, because Austen keeps her uses of authorial telepathy under the radar by naturalizing and motivating mind reading as a human rather than divine pursuit, and one routinely exercised by average—and especially above-average—human beings.

The shift away from Emma’s point of view that every critic remarks upon is the first one, found in Chapter V. The chapter is devoted to a single scene, at which Emma is not present (though of course well within the three-mile mind reading limit). As we have noted, such scenes without the protagonist are rare in Austen, and this unusual stretch of her spatial policy may be the real reason critics have seized upon it. The mind reading that actually occurs is quite pedestrian: at the end of the

chapter, which has consisted entirely of dialogue, we are told of Mrs. Weston that "Part of her meaning was to conceal some favourite thoughts of her own and Mr. Weston's on the subject as much as possible. There were wishes at Randalls respecting Emma's destiny, but it was not desirable to have them suspected . . ." (56).¹⁴ Booth chooses this scene to illustrate Austen's use of selective omniscience, and his analysis is that the "shift is made simply to direct our suspense . . . when Mrs. Weston suggests a possible union of Emma and Frank Churchill." As he goes on to note, "One objection to this selective dipping into whatever mind best serves our immediate purposes is that it suggests mere trickery and inevitably spoils the illusion of reality. If Jane Austen can tell us what Mrs. Weston is thinking, why not what Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are thinking?" (254).

My response would be that it's easy to tell what Mrs. Weston is thinking, and difficult to tell what Frank and Jane are thinking. Within about twenty pages we learn that Emma has long since figured out Mrs. Weston's thoughts: "She had frequently thought—especially since his father's marriage with Miss Taylor—that if she *were* to marry, he was the very person to suit her in age, character and condition. He seemed by this connection between the families, quite to belong to her. She could not but suppose it to be a match that every body who knew them must think of. That Mr. and Mrs. Weston did think of it, she was very strongly persuaded; and . . . she had . . . a sort of pleasure in the idea of their being coupled in their friends' imaginations" (79–80). Not only does Emma know what Mrs. Weston is thinking, everybody who knows them knows what she's thinking, and Emma knows what all of them are thinking. Indeed, Mrs. Weston only hopes to conceal her thoughts "as much as possible," naturally apprehending the likelihood of her thoughts being read. Everyone is thinking this because of sociocultural evidence, not telepathy, because of her and Frank's "age, character and condition," because of "the connection between the families." As Alan Palmer remarks, "Our thought is, in many ways, social, public, overt, and observable" (39).¹⁵

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen allows Henry Tilney to explain part of the method: "How very little trouble it can give you to understand the motive of other people's actions. . . . How is such a one likely to be influenced? What is the inducement most likely to act upon such a person's feelings, age, situation, and probable habits of life considered?" (132).¹⁶ Much of the rest depends upon reading body language and expressions, especially of the eyes. Marianne's mind is so easy to read that Elinor has to create a distraction "to prevent Mrs. Jennings from seeing her sister's thoughts as clearly as she did" (*Sense and Sensibility* 167). Like many of Austen's heroines, Elinor has full command of these techniques: she knows how to gauge Mr. Palmer by reference to "his sex and time of life" (304), and is particularly adept at mind reading by means of subtle visual cues: "she could not help believing herself the nicest observer of the two; she watched his eyes, while Mrs. Jennings thought only of his behaviour;—and while his looks. . . , because unexpressed by words, entirely escaped the latter lady's observation;—*she* could discover in them the quick feelings, and needless alarm of a lover" (305).

Not every person is so easily read, however. Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are good at blocking telepathy. When Emma tries to read Jane's mind during an

evening at Hartfield, she is forced to concede, “There was no getting at her real opinion. Wrapt up in a cloak of politeness, she seemed determined to hazard nothing. She was disgustingly, was suspiciously reserved” (111). Knightley is similarly stumped, because she does not have an “open temper” (193). Recognizing that Jane’s manners are designed to prevent her mind being read, Emma says to Mrs. Weston, “Oh! Do not imagine that I expect an account of Miss Fairfax’s sensations from you, or from any body else. They are known to no human being, I guess, but herself” (135), and our human narrator is of course included.¹⁷ My own analysis would thus be 180° from Booth’s: the narrator’s ability to read Mrs. Weston’s mind, but not Frank Churchill’s or Jane Fairfax’s, is thoroughly motivated at the level of realism, and parallels the characters’ own demonstrated abilities.

Anne Elliot also becomes adept at controlling her manners so that other characters can’t read her mind; the climactic scene in which she reads Wentworth’s love letter in company derives its tension from this high-stakes challenge: “The absolute necessity of seeming like herself produced then an immediate struggle” (238). Earlier in the novel, she did react when she saw Captain Wentworth unexpectedly, but fortunately “Her start was perceptible only to herself. . . .” Wentworth, on the other hand, showed his emotions, so that “For the first time, since their renewed acquaintance, she felt that she was betraying the least sensibility of the two.” Having spotted him first, “She had the advantage of him, in the preparation of the last few moments” (175). In the same scene, Anne also reads Elizabeth’s and Wentworth’s minds when they see each other: “She saw that he saw Elizabeth, that Elizabeth saw him, that there was complete internal recognition on each side; she was convinced that he was ready to be acknowledged as an acquaintance, expecting it, and she had the pain of seeing her sister turn away with unalterable coldness” (176). The following morning Anne observes Lady Russell observing Wentworth, and at once “she could thoroughly comprehend” her emotions; her only regret is that, because of the need to conceal her own desires, she can’t herself sneak a peek at Wentworth: “The part which provoked her most, was that in all this waste of foresight and caution, she should have lost the moment for seeing whether he saw them” (179). If Anne were only an invisible observer on the scene, who could look around freely without being watched herself, she could easily figure out everyone’s thoughts and feelings. That is, if she were only a narrator. But despite not being invisible, Anne knows within seven pages that Wentworth still loves her. Wentworth himself is amazed that it takes her so long to read his thoughts: “Have you not seen this? Can you fail to have understood my wishes?—I had not waited even these ten days, could I have read your feelings, as I think you must have penetrated mine” (237).

Many of Austen’s characters who share that “something more of quickness” that characterizes Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice* 5) read minds with nearly the frequency, if admittedly not the accuracy, of the narrators. One might note, for example, that while the narrator of *Emma* reads a total of ten different minds, Emma herself is nearly as omniscient—she reads seven, and would have been able to read a couple of others had she not been out of hearing during crucial conversations. It might be said that omniscience is Emma’s goal in life; rather, it has been said, by Frank Churchill: “I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse . . . to say, that she desires to

know what you are all thinking of" (248). Emma's problem stems not only from the difficulty of reading other characters' minds, but also from the difficulty of reading her own. The infallible narrator's greater perspicacity and reliability are at least partly attributable to her disinterestedness and objectivity. If Elizabeth had not been "blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd," she would have done a better job of fathoming Darcy's character, and her own: "Till this moment, I never knew myself" (208).

To adapt Erich Auerbach's famous distinction from the opening chapter of *Mimesis*, Austen's world is essentially a transparent one, like Homer's, rather than an opaque one, like the Bible's.¹⁸ And the ability to penetrate this world imaginatively is not divine at all, but thoroughly human. Austen's theory of narrative omniscience is implicit in her famous remark that "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on" (Parrish *vii*). Notice, by the way, that these three or four families work out pretty closely to the ten or twelve thinking parts we typically get in an Austen novel. Within this restricted social circle, one can learn people's manners well enough to read their minds. Austen herself claimed the ability, as Park Honan notes in citing one of her letters, "to speak of how 'all Chawton would feel' as she came to know this village virtually in its entirety" (268). The greatest obstacles to mind reading occur when someone from outside the circle enters it, or when the protagonist leaves her circle. As the narrator of *Persuasion* specifies, "Anne had not wanted this visit to Uppercross, to learn that a removal from one set of people to another, though at a distance of only three miles, will often include a total change of conversation, opinion, and idea" (42); "She acknowledged it to be very fitting, that every little social commonwealth should dictate its own matters of discourse . . ." (43). Mind reading is possible because of the characters' intimate knowledge of the mores and manners of their circle; by means of cultural factors such as age, income, and family ties; and on the basis of visual cues such as body language and facial expressions. As may be inferred from these criteria, mind reading can occur only within one's own social class: even the narrator is barred from reading the minds of the lower classes.

Another key element, which I have reserved for the end, is gender. The need to develop telepathy, and its restriction within a three-mile radius, are in part functions of women's enforced passivity and immobility. In *Persuasion* Austen considers the probable effects of this isolation upon even the privileged, in analyzing "Elizabeth Elliot's sentiments and sensations" faced with "her scene of life . . . a long, uneventful residence in one country circle" (7). As often happens in Austen, her protagonist, Anne, makes the same point about women: "We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us" (232). The three-mile limit on mind reading may be realistically motivated by the range of women's physical mobility. The longest walk undertaken in Austen is Elizabeth's three-mile hike to Netherfield, and physical limitations on a woman's opportunities for regular visiting and social interaction would largely dictate the circumference of her social circle: "The village of Longbourn was only one mile from Meryton; a most convenient distance for the young ladies . . ." (*Pride and Prejudice* 28). Again the narrative situation closely parallels Austen's own: "since they had no carriage their visitings could not extend far," but she was able "to walk to Alton [just one mile from Chawton] several times a week in all weather" (Honan 265, 261).

The template for the narrator in Austen is not at all a Godlike omniscience, but a very human skill: the ability of a perceptive and thoughtful person, given enough time and sufficient opportunity for observation, to make accurate judgments about people's character, thought processes, and feelings. Austen's protagonists are markedly less fallible by the end of the novel as they narrow the gap between their growing reliability of judgment and the infallibility of the narrator. Conversely, the narrator shares many of the characters' limitations of mobility. Like her protagonists, she can observe and analyze, but not foresee or control, social and personal outcomes; like them, she cannot really act upon her knowledge—possessing it must suffice. At the risk of making my conclusion too simple and obvious, the model for Austen's infallible narrators is not God in heaven, but Jane Austen, more or less as she describes herself in a letter to Cassandra, written about the time she begins working on *Emma*: “. . . as I must leave off being young, I find many Douceurs in being a sort of Chaperon for I am put on the Sofa near the Fire & can drink as much wine as I like” (Parrish 330, my emphasis).¹⁹

ENDNOTES

1. For J Hillis Miller, the only difference is that, unlike God, “the omniscient narrators of Victorian novels . . . have perfect knowledge of a world they have not made. . . . The narrator . . . is like an immanent God who has perfect knowledge not of his own creation, but of the creation of another God, an eternally existing world which he has somehow been able to penetrate, flowing into it like a ubiquitous sea or like a pervasive perfume which can pierce the most hidden recesses, entering freely everywhere” (65–66).
2. While this dissatisfaction with the traditional model of omniscience stems primarily from the interpretive and theoretical problems it poses, it may be fueled in some part by humanistic suspicion of the religious ideology that ineluctably accompanies that model. David Lodge, writing about Graham Greene's fiction, suggests that “it is not difficult to establish a normative correlation between omniscient authorial narration and an explicitly Christian perspective on events; and, correspondingly, between limited narrators and a more secular, humanist perspective” (“Uses” 236). Nicholas Royle spells out some of the implications of this correlation: “The use of the words ‘omniscient’ and ‘omniscience’ in the context of narrative fiction remains inextricably entangled in Christian motifs, assumptions and beliefs. To assume the efficacy and appropriateness of discussing literary works in terms of ‘omniscient narration’ is, however faintly or discreetly, to subscribe to a religious (and above all, a Christian) discourse and thinking” (260). Jonathan Culler, who, will-he nil-he, appears to be a lightning-rod in the current debate over omniscience, has been admirably open regarding his own reservations in this regard in his chapter on “Political Criticism: Confronting Religion” in *Framing the Sign*.
3. My thanks to Nina Leacock for this citation. Thanks also to Alison Case, Shalyn Claggett, Kimberly Costa, James Phelan, Brian Richardson, and Lori Williams for useful advice and support.
4. C. S. Lewis makes both comparisons: “She is described by someone in Kipling's worst story as the mother of Henry James. I feel much more sure that she is the daughter of Dr. Johnson . . .” (34). In terms of my topic, recall Caroline Gordon's advice to Flannery O'Connor that an omniscient narrator “never speaks like anyone but Dr. Johnson” (O'Connor 923). The James comparison is perhaps better known from Virginia Woolf's comment about the development of Austen's narrative technique: “She would have been the forerunner of Henry James and of Proust . . .” (Southam 283).
5. The flexibility and subtlety of Austen's use of free indirect discourse produces many instances in which readers might disagree about how to count some of these examples. Who hasn't wavered over lines like “He had not forgiven Anne Elliot” (*Persuasion* 61)? Does the third-person reference to

Anne point to the narrator reading his mind, or does the error (he has forgiven her) make it Anne's attempt at telepathy? My figures are necessarily approximations, but I have tried to count things consistently; in this case, Anne is reading Wentworth's mind, on the admittedly circular principle that all wrong guesses are intradiegetic in infallible narration. Furthermore, this particular wrong guess is characteristic of Anne's conservative interpretations of Wentworth's behavior at other points: "She understood him. He could not forgive her,—but he could not be unfeeling" is clearly marked as Anne's mind-reading (91; my thanks to Jim Phelan for the example). While the number of thinking parts is fairly constant in Austen, the frequency with which these consciousnesses are accessed does vary. My numbers bear out Lodge's conclusion that "There is considerable variation between the novels in the amount of switching from one character's perspective to another's and in the degree to which the narrator explicitly invokes her authority and omniscience," and he is certainly correct in having pointed out that "In *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, such effects are frequent" ("Jane" 176). I would add, however, that they are far more frequent in *Mansfield Park*.

6. All citations of Austen are to Chapman's edition.
7. The terminology is of course taken from "Order," the first chapter of Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*. Genette himself calls Proust's narrator "omnitemporal" (70) on the basis of his manipulation of anachronies.
8. A strict constructionist might object that such internal prolepses—or even external prolepses—are effectively rendered retrospective because the narrating instance must occur later than the final story event narrated. By this logic, knowledge of the future is restricted to intradiegetic narrators like God or Cassandra, who can be shown to narrate events that occur after their narrating of them; a story event narrated by an extradiegetic narrator, on the other hand, must occur prior to the narrating of it. But if this makes Balzac's narrators slightly less Godlike, they remain just as easy to distinguish from Austen's in this regard.
9. I do not mean to imply that believers or theologians consider omnipresence, or for that matter any of these factors, to be attributes of the biblical God. My claims are limited to the "beliefs" held by literary critics, who frequently do include omnipresence among these attributes. Richard Maxwell's valuable article demonstrates the importance of omnipresence for narrators in Dickens' novels.
10. Although I'm using "Wandering Rocks" to illustrate omnipresent narration, it might be used just as well to exemplify the spatial limitations so often imposed on omniscient narrators: even the spectacular mobility of Joyce's narrator is confined within the city limits of Dublin, his own version of the three mile island (a gnomon in this case of the literal island of Ireland). One might distinguish such relatively mobile Joycean "multipresence" from the relatively fixed "unipresence" of Austen's narrators and the literally universal "omnipresence" (since the only presence?) of the biblical narrator of the opening of Genesis.
11. Susan Lanser makes a similar point: "Except in *Sense and Sensibility*, all these instances of authorial 'I' are located in the final chapters of the novels and, as in *Lady Susan* (and *Northanger Abbey*), either parody fictional convention, or qualify, personalize, and render ambiguous the resolutions to plots" (72–73). Lanser's valuable discussion of the strategies by which Austen's narrators "disclaim both omniscience and reliability" (68) is couched primarily in terms of a theory of "authority" that extends beyond omniscience as I'm defining it here.
12. Several of the examples cited above under "omnipotence" to illustrate Austen's habitual recourse to locutions like "must have been" and "might" may be reinvoked here as denials of omnitemporality as well.
13. Some of Austen's characters, on the other hand, excel at foreseeing the future: "It seemed as if Mr. Shepherd, in this anxiety to bespeak Sir Walter's goodwill towards a naval officer as tenant, had been gifted with foresight. . . ." His prescience proves, of course, to rest upon Admiral Croft "accidentally hearing—(it was just as he had foretold, Mr. Shepherd observed, Sir Walter's concerns could not be kept a secret,)—accidentally hearing of the possibility of Kellynch Hall being to let . . ." (21). The repetition of "accidentally" cues the reader to dismiss both accident and prophecy as explanations.

14. The passage continues, “and the quiet transition which Mr. Knightley soon afterwards made to ‘What does Weston think of the weather? Shall we have rain?’ convinced her that he had nothing more to say or surmise about Hartfield.” Note that Mrs. Weston reads Knightley’s mind and Knightley assumes both telepathy on Mrs. Weston’s part, in her ability to tell him what her husband thinks, and prophecy, in Mr. Weston’s ability to predict the weather. Mind reading and “foreseeing,” as Austen likes to call it, are regular activities for her characters (although her narrators scrupulously avoid foreseeing events). Austen’s letters demonstrate the historical author’s own propensity for mind reading in real life: “It was a pleasant Evening, Charles found it remarkably so, but I cannot tell why, unless the absence of Miss Terry—towards whom his conscience reproaches him with now being perfect indifferent—was a relief to him” (Parrish 327–28).
15. Palmer’s essay, which includes examples from *Emma*, is one of many valuable recent contributions to cognitive narratology, which aspires to link narrative theory with research on human minds and consciousness undertaken in the social and biological sciences. While no one questions that science can teach us much about narrative theory, the benefits in the other direction are less certain: most cognitive narratologists believe with Lisa Zunshine that “our expertise could make a crucial difference for the future shape of the whole field of cognitive science” (287), while Paul John Eakin, who finds the same scientific work enormously stimulating, speaks for those who consider that the jury is still out: “Perhaps cognitive psychologists will step forward to say that it does” (311).
16. Christopher R. Miller’s illuminating analysis of another instance of a character’s mind-reading reveals a mechanism paralleling that remarked above (note 13) by which characters’ ability to foresee events proves to rest upon their ability to manipulate them. In this case Henry produces the thought that he claims to read: “Henry characteristically plays on probabilities: Catherine must be thinking about *something*, and there is a decent chance that she is thinking about him. In any case, the very presence of a questioning observer determines the nature of the answer: even if Catherine were not thinking about Henry, the question forces her to do so now” (245).
17. Similarly, Mr. Eliot in *Persuasion* is not susceptible to mind reading, even to so accomplished a reader as Anne: “who could answer for the true sentiments of a clever, cautious man, grown old enough to appreciate a fair character?” Mr. Eliot resembles Jane Fairfax in that “he was not open” (161), and therefore—as the book metaphor suggests—could not be read.
18. Sternberg also frequently emphasizes “the opacities of existence” that pervade the biblical world (98).
19. Austen’s niece Caroline noticed of “*her* part of the household work” that “the tea and sugar stores, were under her charge—and the wine” (Park 265; Caroline’s emphases).

WORKS CITED

- Austen, Jane.** *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Edited by R. W. Chapman. 3rd rev. ed. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969.
- Balzac, Honoré de.** *Cousin Bette*. Translated by Marion Ayton Crawford. London: Penguin, 1965.
- Booth, Wayne C.** *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Culler, Jonathan.** *Framing the Sign*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1988.
- . “Omniscience.” *Narrative* 12.1 (2004): 22–34.
- Diderot, Denis.** *Œuvres*. Edited by André Billy. Paris: Gallimard, 1951.
- Eakin, Paul John.** “Selfhood, Autobiography, and Interdisciplinary Inquiry: A Reply to George Butte.” *Narrative* 13.3 (2005): 307–11.

- Genette, Gérard.** *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980.
- Honan, Park.** *Jane Austen: Her Life*. New York: St. Martin's, 1987.
- Joyce, James.** *Ulysses*. New York: Modern Library, 1992.
- Lanser, Susan Sniader.** *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992.
- Lewis, C. S.** "A Note on Jane Austen." In *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Ian Watt, 25–34. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963.
- Lodge, David.** "Jane Austen's Novels: Form and Structure." In *The Jane Austen Companion*, edited by J. David Grey et al., 165–78. New York: Macmillan, 1986.
- . "The Uses and Abuses of Omniscience: Method and Meaning in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*." *Critical Quarterly* 12 (1970): 235–57.
- Maxwell, Richard.** "Dickens's Omniscience." *ELH* 46 (1979): 290–313.
- Miller, Christopher R.** "Austen's Aesthetics and the Ethics of Surprise." *Narrative* 13.3 (2005): 238–60.
- Miller, J. Hillis.** *The Form of Victorian Fiction*. Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1968.
- O'Connor, Flannery.** *Collected Works*. Edited by Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Library of America, 1988.
- Palmer, Alan.** "The Construction of Fictional Minds." *Narrative* 10.1 (2002): 28–46.
- Parrish, Stephen M., ed.** *Emma*. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 2000.
- Putnam, Hilary.** Preface to *Pursuits of Reason*. Edited by Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam. Lubbock: Texas Tech Univ. Press, 1993, vii–xii.
- Royle, Nicholas.** *The Uncanny*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Sartre, Jean Paul.** *Literary and Philosophical Essays*. Translated by Annette Michelson. New York: Collier, 1967.
- Southam, B. C., ed.** *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage 1870–1940*. Volume 2. New York: Routledge, 1987.
- Sternberg, Meir.** *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985.
- Zunshine, Lisa.** "Theory of Mind and Fictional Consciousness." *Narrative* 11.3 (2003): 270–91.