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PAOLA PARTENZA

**REVISITING “PRIDE AND PREJUDICE”:  
P. D. JAMES’S “DEATH COMES TO PEMBERLEY”**

*1. Jane Austen’s characters*

In recent years, critics have repeatedly stressed that the linguistic power of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) resides in the author’s ability to model her characters according to a view based on what might be defined as a specific “life-language relation”.<sup>1</sup> Despite her depiction of female characters through “the representation of ordinary people performing the rituals and routines of daily living”,<sup>2</sup> the author gives life to a heroine who is an autonomous and independent figure. Elizabeth Bennet is “a complicated and penetrating heroine”,<sup>3</sup> who, as she improves as a

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<sup>1</sup> G. Agamben, *The End of the Poem. Studies in Poetics*, translated by D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> J. F. Blackall, *Eudora Welty. The Silent Mentors*, in *American Literary Mentors*, Editors I. C. Goldman-Price and M. McFarland Pennell, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1999, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> A. H. Wright, *Elizabeth Bennet*, in *Elizabeth Bennet*, Edited and with an introduction by H. Bloom, Broomall, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, p. 47.

reflective character, begins to acquire “good reason to credit herself with the ability to discern people and situations extraordinarily well”.<sup>4</sup>

Some scholars have argued that Austen never epitomises a faithful historical picture of the world she lived in,<sup>5</sup> but, conversely, she primarily focuses on portraying characters that symbolise the characteristic stability of the society of her time: “Jane Austen regards the characters, good and bad alike, with ironical amusement, because they never see the situation as it really is and as she sees it”.<sup>6</sup> In contrast,

“for the most part the people are as fixed and repetitive as the linked routines and established social rituals which dominate their lives. Money is a potential (never an actual) problem, and courtship has its own personal dramas; but everything tends towards the achieving of satisfactory marriages [...]”.<sup>7</sup>

The very beginning of the novel presents readers with a situation that is seemingly unchangeable, as expressed by the famous incipit and its “truth universally acknowledged”.<sup>8</sup> As these words categorically state a firmly held opinion in Austen’s society, they convey the idea that everything in the novel is created *by* and *for* the respect of this universal

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Neill, instead, sees the author as being involved in a wider debate that simultaneously focuses on past and present, social change and continuity: “Jane Austen’s fictional discourse is much more politically destabilised and destabilising than the critical convoy for Austen’s work has been at all eager to acknowledge” (E. Neill, *The Politics of Jane Austen*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. IX). See also D. Looser, *The Cult of “Pride and Prejudice” and its Author*, in *The Cambridge Companion to “Pride and Prejudice”*, edited by J. Todd, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 174-185; *Alchimie austeniane. Donne, fortuna e altre storie in “Pride and Prejudice” di Jane Austen*, a cura di P. Partenza, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2015; D. Saglia, *Leggere Austen*, Roma, Carocci, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Jane Austen: A Lecture*, in J. Austen, *Emma*, An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Reviews, and Criticism, Edited by S. M. Parrish, New York, Norton, 1993, p. 355.

<sup>7</sup> T. Tanner, *Jane Austen*, London, Macmillan, 1992, p. 105.

<sup>8</sup> J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, edited by P. Rogers, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 3 (I, 1).

conviction. Indeed, “we see from the beginning that her [Austen’s] observations are likely to bear an ironic relation to the views, and points of view, of her characters”.<sup>9</sup> If it is Mrs Bennet who embodies this belief more than anyone else in the novel does, however, she appears a clumsy strategist who tends to create awkward situations and verbal misunderstandings. Nevertheless, the opening sentence provides a general picture of how language works – its directness is particularly significant – and how this language emerges as an effective means for the interaction between characters, namely, between the members of Mrs Bennet’s family and its *other*, that is “a single man [...] in want of a wife”.<sup>10</sup> It is Elizabeth who most incisively challenges her mother’s *idée fixe*. As the most rational character in the Bennet family, Elizabeth balances her mother’s obsession with matchmaking<sup>11</sup> and questions her mother’s role, thus creating an “interior distance”.<sup>12</sup> Still, she is not exempt from misunderstandings incorrect evaluations of her interlocutors. Although she is portrayed as a reasonable figure gifted with a lively and analytical mind,<sup>13</sup> even Elizabeth Bennet may be deceived by a linguistic manipulator such as Wickham, who

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<sup>9</sup> E. M. Halliday, *Narrative Perspective in “Pride and Prejudice”*, in *Jane Austen’s “Pride and Prejudice”*, in “Nineteenth-Century Fiction”, 15, June 1960, p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, cit., p. 3 (I, 1).

<sup>11</sup> As we might argue, Mrs Bennet’s claim – evident in the first pages of the novel – is symptomatic of a personality inclination. This specific focus on her intention and action is simply and literally envisaging the events in which she and her possible interlocutors will take part. Gradually, her lack of consciousness metamorphoses into an awareness of what she may do in the future, though “she was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper” (ibidem, p. 5, I, 1) The distortion of her perspective is a distortion of the truth; she does not ponder over the will of others, but, consequently, she reinforces her own idea. Actually, she continues to pursue her plan (that might be read as a need for self-reassurance) despite her husband’s reluctance and her daughter’s prudence.

<sup>12</sup> P. Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> This aspect is evident in “Elizabeth’s verbal victory over the interfering Lady Catherine de Bourgh when she arrives to warn Elizabeth against marriage to her nephew, Mr Darcy” (P. D. James, *P. D. James on “Death Comes to Pemberley”*, in Id., *Death Comes to Pemberley*, London, Faber & Faber, 2011, p. 327).

confuses reality with imagination and moral conscience with expediency: “clever and charming, a smooth social being, and for these qualities Elizabeth is ready to believe his long, unsolicited tale of being wronged and even to imagine herself falling in love with him”.<sup>14</sup> Thus, “despite her intelligence, wit, and critical energies”,<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth is subject to mistakes which make reality and people appear to be different from what they really are. Consequently, only after having developed a full awareness of other people’s personalities and characters does she discover the truth. In this way, Elizabeth becomes the instrument of Austen’s reflection on characters and society,<sup>16</sup> and her increasing mature personality acquires the features that P. D. James’s *Death Comes to Pemberley* reprises and develops.

## 2. Revisiting “*Pride and Prejudice*”

Published in 2011, P. D. James’s novel has received considerable attention from criticism; it is not merely a sequel cast in the mode of a murder-mystery narrative, but also a complex tribute to its literary precedent.<sup>17</sup> The novelist has made clear her response to *Pride and Prejudice* and her own work’s relation to it as follows:

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<sup>14</sup> M. Mudrick, *Irony as Discrimination: “Pride and Prejudice”*, in *Elizabeth Bennet*, cit., p. 22. Wickham plays a crucial role in P. D. James’s *Death Comes to Pemberley*.

<sup>15</sup> J. Lowder Newton, “*Pride and Prejudice*: Power, Fantasy, and Subversion in Jane Austen”, in “Feminist Studies”, 4, February 1978, p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to its dialogic nature, *Pride and Prejudice* reveals the author’s complex web of convictions about the importance of a disposition to analyse society critically. Austen herself provided this critical attitude, despite her well-known statement that the novel was “rather too light & bright & sparkling” (J. Austen, *Letters*, Collected and Edited by D. Le Faye, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 20114, p. 212, letter to Cassandra Austen, 4 February 1813).

<sup>17</sup> L. Schillinger, “*Pride and Prejudice*” and Murder, in “The New York Times”, December 16, 2011: “Not infrequently, while reading *Death Comes to Pemberley*, one succumbs to the impression that it is Austen herself at the keyboard”.

“My own feeling about sequels is ambivalent, largely because the greatest writing pleasure for me is in the creation of original characters, and I have never been tempted to take over another writer’s people or world, but I can well understand the attraction of continuing the story of Elizabeth and Darcy. Austen’s characters take such a hold on our imagination that the wish to know more of them is irresistible [...] For me, one of the joys of writing *Death Comes to Pemberley* was revisiting once again the world of Longbourn and Pemberley and finding, as I always do, fresh insights and delights.”<sup>18</sup>

In other words, Austen’s characters are congenial to her own literary experiment: she has rewritten their experiences and conflicts in a novel that is the expression of her “two lifelong enthusiasms, namely for writing a detective fiction<sup>19</sup> and for the novels of Jane Austen”.<sup>20</sup>

Austen’s “paradigmatic marriage plot”<sup>21</sup> is bypassed by James, who offers a novel in which everything seems to be already accomplished and where the heroines have happily followed their mother’s model: “It was generally agreed by the female residents of Meryton that Mr and Mrs Bennet of Longbourn had been fortunate in the disposal in marriage of four of their five daughters”.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the setting, situations and characters appear to be almost the same as in Austen’s novel:

“Meryton, a small market town in Hertfordshire is not on the route of any tours of pleasure, having neither beauty of setting nor a distinguished history, while its only great house, Netherfield Park, although impressive, is not mentioned in books about the county’s notable architecture. The town has an assembly room where dances are regularly held but no theatre, and the chief entertainment takes place in private houses

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<sup>18</sup> P. D. James, *P. D. James on "Death Comes to Pemberley"*, cit., p. 325 and p. 330.

<sup>19</sup> C. Fletcher, “*Death Comes to Pemberley*” by P. D. James, in “Booklist”, 108, December 15, 2011, p. 26: “James places a template of Austen characters and Austen-like language over a traditional mystery plot and even takes on the role of the omniscient Austen narrator herself”.

<sup>20</sup> P. D. James, *P. D. James on "Death Comes to Pemberley"*, cit., p. 325.

<sup>21</sup> A. Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> P. D. James, *Death Comes to Pemberley*, cit., p. 1.

where the boredom of dinner parties and whist tables, always with the same company, is delivered by gossip.”<sup>23</sup>

The Bennets, William Collins, Charlotte Lucas, Mr Bingley, Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, Wickham, the Gardiners, and most of the minor characters in Austen’s scenario return in James’s novel. Each of them seems to have preserved their own basic characteristics. Yet, things are not so simple. James’s interpretation of the Austenian heroine is quite unusual; her critical reading of Elizabeth’s nature reinforces the reader’s idea that she is portrayed as a mature and silent character who formulates rational and objective thoughts and opinions. It appears that her radically changed condition is accompanied by an equally radical displacement of meaning and role. James’s description transforms Elizabeth into a heroine who is the embodiment of an interior narration,<sup>24</sup> a figure who is able to entrust her own reflections only to herself, avoiding useless conjectures which might create further misunderstandings and, consequently, reinforce prejudice.

### 3. *Time and silence*

James’s investigation of social and psychological conflicts and depictions of specific cultural and social environments is a hallmark of Austen’s realism, but James transposes the forces that conditioned and informed *Pride and Prejudice* into her work so as to shape the circumscribed society of *Death Comes to Pemberley*. As an interpreter and a close reader of Austen’s text, James focuses her attention on the interior life of characters whose subjectivity is expressed through language and

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<sup>23</sup> Id., *Death Comes to Pemberley*, cit., p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> See P. Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence*, cit., pp. 13-55.

silence alike.<sup>25</sup> Thus, she delineates and follows a temporal fluctuation informed by inner reflections on past events, which provides the reader with a clear idea of the relationship between “the narrator and the characters and the characters to one another”.<sup>26</sup> For this purpose, she borrows the Austenian chain of events, giving a strong impulse to her characters and creating a movement made of ‘before’s’ and ‘now’s’,<sup>27</sup> which leads to the reconstruction of a microcosm based on a seemingly unexpected and unusual disorder. James rewrites a line of continuity in which the past is the *has been* and the ‘now’s’ of the characters establish a new beginning. Her novel is “a closely-knit fabric composed of both threads”.<sup>28</sup> What she aims at is to show how her views on her characters’ flexibility of movement influence the movement of their minds, producing new events and shaping the temporal rhythm of the novel. This movement also stands for the mechanism of James’s writing, one which “leads the reader from the known to the unknown”.<sup>29</sup>

James analyses the evolution of a few characters focusing on an event, the murder, which constitutes the starting point for an interpretation of the issue and its subsequent influence on the lives and views of the protagonists involved. In this fashion, she explores how their experience reveals mental schemas that result in familiar and recognisable structures, though she also liberates the text from its traditional confines through the

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<sup>25</sup> See, for *Mansfield Park*, J. Preston, *The Silence of the Novel*, in “Modern Language Review”, 74, April 1979, pp. 257-267.

<sup>26</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Time and Intersubjectivity*, in *The Victorian Novel*, Edited with an introduction by H. Bloom, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, pp. 201-216.

<sup>27</sup> See P. M. Bray, *The Novel Map: Space and Subjectivity in Nineteenth-Century French Fiction*, Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 2013, pp. 193 ff. and p. 216.

<sup>28</sup> J. R. Veenstra, *The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt. On Poetics of Culture and the Interpretation of Shakespeare*, in “History and Theory”, 34, October 1995, p. 28.

<sup>29</sup> P. Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence*, cit., p. 15.

concept of an investigation which involves both the characters and the reader, suspending the Austenian love story between two extremes: “crime” and “romantic happy novel”.<sup>30</sup> Though James makes her heroines appear as they really are – frail and resolute, confused and rational – each of them serves as an important link joining all the parts of a macrostructure that otherwise could not be completed.

Her strategically deployed narrative re-creation establishes a powerful connection between a renewed situation and the old context on which she focuses, involving the characters (and mainly the male characters, such as Darcy and Wickham), who existed within the relatively mundane world of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, in a murder mystery, “producing a mixture of suspense and certainty”.<sup>31</sup> James scrutinises the entire situation from the privileged perspective of a contemporary woman who looks at Austen’s society and its transformations, making her novel an instrument for further cultural analysis and renewed interpretation, and giving emphasis to silence and the distortion of her characters’ viewpoint which, consequently, are once more distortions of the truth. In this way, James transposes the Austenian families and social contexts in which the protagonists acquire consistence mainly in terms of what is unsaid and hidden. Silence becomes a space for feeling and thought, a space in which the author draws their developing inwardness.

If, in *Pride and Prejudice*, everything pivots around the five daughters who support their mother’s role and ambition, in *Death Comes to Pemberley*, Elizabeth – happily married to Darcy – acquires the fundamental role of a character that is able to follow the rhythm of events. As words ‘move’, Elizabeth and all the other characters become part of a

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<sup>30</sup> P. D. James, *P. D. James on “Death Comes to Pemberley”*, cit., p. 329.

<sup>31</sup> A. Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, cit., p. 45.

rhythm, so that action itself acquires its own rhythm. James not only makes her characters move in a coherent space (Pemberley) and in a certain period of time,<sup>32</sup> but also in and out of their minds. Such flexibility of the characters oscillates between what is present and what is absent (for example, "Elizabeth missed a little of her previous life"),<sup>33</sup> thus making silence part of the protagonists' interior narration. The novelist becomes an observer who allows them to reflect, act, and speak for themselves. In fact, James seeks to make silence and solitude effective by the balancing presence of dialogue, which, instead, necessarily leads the reader from the private sphere of the individual to that of human relationships:

"[...] recalling her mind to the present, Elizabeth slipped Lady Anne's notebook into a drawer and then, *reluctant to leave the peace and solitude* which she could not now hope to enjoy until the ball was safely over."<sup>34</sup>

In this rich and multifaceted sequel, in which family relationships are continuously subjected to analysis and judgement, the author cannot avoid expressing her own opinion on the attitudes of her own characters, particularly on the connections and misunderstandings that spring from pride and prejudice. They are not far from the type of fictional characters to which Austen refers, yet, some of them, like Lydia, are isolated from those they love by a lack of communication due to their past actions:

"Again there was a pause and then, to her surprise and discomfort, he [Colonel Fitzwilliam] said, 'I take it that George Wickham is still not received at Pemberley?'

'No, never. Neither Mr Darcy nor I have seen him or been in touch since he was at Longbourn after his marriage to Lydia'.

*There was another and longer silence* after which Colonel Fitzwilliam said, 'It was unfortunate that Wickham was made so much of when a boy'."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The novel is set in 1803, six years after Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage.

<sup>33</sup> P. D. James, *Death Comes to Pemberley*, cit., p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 23. Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 31. Emphasis added.

On the one hand, the close affinity between Jane and Elizabeth is established by intuition and mutual confidence:

“The sisters, who had shared a bedroom at Longbourn, had been particularly close companions since childhood and there was no matter on which Elizabeth could not speak to Jane, knowing that she would be totally reliable in keeping confidence and that any advice she gave would come from her goodness and loving heart.”<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, Elizabeth and Lydia have remained mentally separated from each other since Elizabeth received “Jane’s letter with the news of Lydia’s elopement”.<sup>37</sup> In spite of their apparent and superficial relationship, Lydia could not accept Elizabeth’s moral judgement on her decision to follow and marry Wickham, privileging sensibility at the expense of sense, prudence and decorum, thus intensifying the pre-existing tension between them: “Lydia had disliked Elizabeth from childhood and there could never have been sympathy or close sisterly affection between such disparate characters”.<sup>38</sup>

The continuous transformation of the protagonists’ reaction results in a change and a fluctuation of their states of mind. Even scenes of silence and self-reflection in the novel reveal that the author expands the genre from the primarily dialogic method of Jane Austen to a narrative analysis of the inner life of her characters. For example, Elizabeth’s silence – and what it means in terms of “intensely felt, contained emotions” – reflects her thoughts and helps the reader understand the progression of her state of mind. Notably, her role is reversed and her position is used as “a shield to

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<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 38.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 54.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 131.

protect the world of feeling which is not spoken".<sup>39</sup> Thus, the meaning of each dialogue seems to lie in a dimension in which words conceal something instead of overtly expressing it.

#### 4. *Darcy's silence and the past*

The opening chapters give a very entertaining account of Elizabeth's life at Pemberley, of her two sons, new relationships and responsibilities. The narrative pace slows down and everything seems to conform to the orderly world typical of Austen's novels; but, one night, an uninvited Lydia arrives at Pemberley, ruining the quiet atmosphere on the eve of the annual ball. The murmur of the night and the "howling of the wind"<sup>40</sup> accompany the rumbling of the approaching coach at which Elizabeth looks with a sense of foreboding:

"[...] it seemed to Elizabeth that she was seeing a spectral coach of legend flying soundlessly through the moonlit night, the dreaded harbinger of death. [...] At a gesture from Darcy, Stoughton opened the door. The wind rushed in immediately, a cold, irresistible force seeming to take possession of the whole house, extinguishing in one blow all the candles except those in the high chandelier. The coach was still coming at speed, rocking round the corner at the end of the woodland road to approach the house. [...] the coach door was opened and in the shaft of light from Pemberley they saw a woman almost falling out and shrieking into the wind. [...] she seemed like some wild creature of the night, or a mad woman escaped from captivity. For a moment Elizabeth stood rooted, incapable of action or thought. And then he recognised that this wild shrieking apparition was Lydia and ran forward to help. But Lydia pushed her aside and, still screaming, thrust herself into Jane's arms, nearly toppling her. [...] they could hear her harsh broken words.

'Wickham's dead! Danny has shot him! Why don't you find him? They're up there in the woodland. Why don't you do something? Oh God, I know he's dead!'.<sup>41</sup>

The episode marks the first significant event in a plot which seems to

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<sup>39</sup> J. Robinson, *Words and Silence in "L'Idée Fixe"*, in "Modern Language Notes", 87, May 1972 (French Issue: Paul Valéry), pp. 644-645.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 59.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 58-60.

present “the surface simplicity and hidden complications of many sensation novels as well as crime thrillers”.<sup>42</sup> George Pratt, the coachman, gives a further impulse to this plot by answering Mr Darcy’s questions:

“Tell me what happened in the woodland. Make clear and concise, but I want to know the whole story, and quickly. [...] Where are Mr Wickham and Captain Denny?”

‘I don’t really know, sir. When we was about halfway into the woodland Captain Denny knocked to stop the chaise and got out. He shouted something like ‘I’m finished with it and with you. I’ll have no part in it,’ and ran off into the woodland. Then Mr Wickham went after him, shouting to him to come back and not to be a fool, and Mrs Wickham started screaming for him not to leave her and made to follow, but after she got down from the coach, she thought better of it and got back in. [...] then we heard the shots.’

‘How many?’

‘I couldn’t rightly say, sir [...] but I heard one shot for certain, sir, and maybe one or two more.’

‘How long after the gentlemen left did you hear the shots?’

‘Could be fifteen minutes, sir, maybe longer.’”<sup>43</sup>

It is from this detailed description, which gives the episode its unmistakable prominence in the novel, that we can immediately identify Darcy’s character not only as a figure of “detection but also as a figure for its author”.<sup>44</sup> Paradoxically, if in Austen’s novel the authorial persona is mostly identified with a female character (the reader has to face a heroine who becomes the author’s voice), in James’s novel the authorial function is held by Darcy – and later by Colonel Fitzwilliam – who becomes the vehicle for the “author’s aesthetic response”.<sup>45</sup>

After the events described above, the atmosphere at Pemberley is lively once more, and all the characters are excited and nervous as their lives “are dramatically altered by this circumstance”, one that “propels

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<sup>42</sup> A. B. Emrys, *Wilkie Collins, Vera Caspary and the Evolution of the Casebook Novel*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2011, p. 133.

<sup>43</sup> P. D. James, *Death Comes to Pemberley*, cit., pp. 62-63.

<sup>44</sup> N. Jackson, *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 215.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

them through the intricate machinations of the plot that act like fate".<sup>46</sup> And although the narrator's stance presents a certain formality, it is, at the same time, characterised by a state of mental strain, which reflects Darcy's tense mood:

"It seemed to Darcy that the great entrance hall of Pemberley, with its elegant furniture, [...] had suddenly become as alien as if he were entering it for the first time. The natural order which from boyhood had sustained him had been overturned and for a moment he felt as powerless as if he were no longer master in his house, an absurdity which found relief in an irritation over details. [...] No one spoke and when, minutes later Darcy looked back, the great door of Pemberley had been closed and the house stood as if deserted, serene and beautiful in the moonlight."<sup>47</sup>

Darcy looks around with piercing eyes while the nocturnal atmosphere of the woodland gives him the illusion of a return to the quiet world of his childhood; looking around, he experiences again his impressions as a boy, when the future seemed to be full of promise:

"As always when he walked in the woodland, Darcy's thought turned to his great grand-father. [...]. Here in his remote tree-guarded refuge where the birds and small animals could come unimpeded to his home, he could believe that he and nature were one, breathing the same air, guided by the same spirit."<sup>48</sup>

On the one hand, Darcy's attempt to focus his attention on agreeable thoughts is a way of evading the tragic event and avoiding Wickham's death, which is never explicitly discussed. On the other hand, his reflections on the natural world might be viewed as one of the fundamental elements in the author's definition of the landscape of human experience: in fact, Darcy "could believe that he and nature were one, breathing the

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<sup>46</sup> P. Brantlinger, *What is 'Sensational' about the 'Sensation Novel?'*, in "Nineteenth-Century Fiction", 37, June 1982, p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> P. D. James, *Death Comes to Pemberley*, cit., p. 66 and p. 69.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, p. 71.

same air, guided by the same spirit”.<sup>49</sup> However, “the slow intensification of silence” in Darcy’s behaviour “echoes the sense of suffocation and ultimate dissolution”<sup>50</sup> he has already experienced. Shortly afterwards, he finds himself questioning once again the mysterious nature of his relationship with Wickham:

“Darcy walked in bitterness of spirit broken from time to time by surges of anger, like the rush of an incoming tide. Was he never to be free of George Wickham? These were the woods in which the two of them had played as boys. It was a time he could once recall as carefree and happy, but had that boyhood friendship really been genuine? Had the young Wickham even then been harbouring envy, resentment and dislike? [...] The petty, hurtful remarks now rose into his consciousness, beneath which they had lain untroubling for years. How long had Wickham been planning his revenge?”<sup>51</sup>

Darcy seems to be divided between conflicting impulses. This sense of division leads to a more emblematic split between what is imagined and what is real, as symbolised by the contrast suggested by nature, which immediately becomes gloomier, leading Darcy to anticipate the worst: “the wind, which had been hardly heard, suddenly dropped and in the calm it seemed that the secret life of the woodland was stilled by their unwanted presence”.<sup>52</sup> This narrative interpolation expresses Darcy’s personal microcosm by showing the movement of his mind, which transforms his nature according to the degree of consciousness he has reached.

Indeed, his moral attitude is reflected not only by the conflicting ways in which he reacts to the mysterious events he is now facing, but also

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<sup>49</sup> Ibidem. See D. E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Madison – London, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998<sup>2</sup>, p. 35. See also, for Jane Austen, R. Bodenheimer, *Looking at the Landscape in Jane Austen*, in “Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900”, 21, Autumn 1981, p. 610 and B. B. Wenner, *Prospect and Refuge in the Landscape of Jane Austen*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006, p. 67.

<sup>50</sup> M. Parry, *The Theme of Silence in the Writings of François Mauriac*, in “The Modern Language Review”, 71, October 1976, p. 790.

<sup>51</sup> P. D. James, *Death Comes to Pemberley*, cit., p. 72.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 75.

by those past events which made Wickham his own subtle antagonist. Therefore, Darcy's self-reflection leads the reader to reconsider the 'befores' (already present in Austen's novel) which have accompanied the protagonist during the period of transition between youth and maturity, when he had to face the conflicts of adult life in order to create a harmonious family that, he now fears, is a mere illusion. Looking back, Darcy understands that he has achieved a profound consciousness and self-awareness in relation to the places of his youth, when the woods around Pemberley were both his refuge and a backdrop to his *brotherhood* with Wickham. Despite the passing of time, Wickham continues to haunt and torment Darcy, reminding him of those past events which made him feel humiliated, wounding his pride, self-respect, and dignity. Darcy is afflicted by recurring thoughts connected with an unhappy love affair, whose intricacy is defined with precision in the following passage in which Wickham's designs are presented in detail, revealing his ambivalent, *quasi-demonic* character:

"The knowledge that his sister had only avoided social disgrace and ignominy because he was rich enough to buy her would-be seducer's silence was so bitter that he almost groaned aloud. *He had tried to put his humiliation out of mind* in the happiness of his marriage but *now it returned*, made stronger by years of repression, an intolerable burden of shame and self-disgust made more bitter by the knowledge that it was only his money that had induced Wickham to marry Lydia Bennet. It had been a generosity born of his love for Elizabeth, but it had been his marriage to Elizabeth which had brought him the right to call Darcy brother and made him an uncle to Fitzwilliam and Charles. He might have been able to keep Wickham out of Pemberley but he could never banish him from his mind."<sup>53</sup>

If, in Austen's novel, Darcy's perception of reality radically alters his existence, and his past deception sharpens his pride and aloofness, now his love for Elizabeth prompts him to ignore, if only temporarily, his feeling of

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<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, pp. 72-73. Emphasis added.

dislike, being conscious of the immutable nature of human destiny. His only regret concerns the impossibility of banishing Wickham “from his mind”.<sup>54</sup> Darcy becomes progressively more concerned with this situation, until an unexpected scene unfolds before him, Fitzwilliam, and Alveston:

“Captain Denny lay on his back, his right eye caked with blood, his left, glazed, fixed unseeing on the distant moon. Wickham was kneeling over him, his hands bloody, his own face a splattered mask. His voice was harsh and guttural but the words were clear. ‘He’s dead! Oh God, Denny’s dead! He was my friend, my only friend, and I’ve killed him! I’ve killed him! It’s my fault’.”<sup>55</sup>

What they see seems to confirm their worst fears. This shift towards personal guilt occurs through Wickham’s words, which are immediately associated with the scene of death that the three men are witnessing. As the real and the unreal seem to merge, the episode warns readers of the rapid transformation in the development of events, as well as highlighting the sense of bewilderment that besets the characters.

### *5. The distance from Austen*

The murder complicates the role of the narrator who has to unravel the plot through the gradual discovery of truth, until what narrator and reader know coincides. The narration acquires a peculiar intensity. Darcy, Fitzwilliam and Alveston go back to Pemberley and start to unveil what has happened. The initial step in this process of detection concerns the association between Wickham’s bloody hands and his desperate words “I’ve killed him!”.<sup>56</sup> Darcy notifies Sir Selwyn Hardcastle, “the nearest

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<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, p. 73.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, p. 77.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem.

magistrate",<sup>57</sup> of Denny's death. The master of Pemberley feels the disquieting presence of the past, as represented by Wickham: the obscure circumstances might reinforce common opinions about Wickham's proclivity to criminal acts and his own liability for the consequences of his past conduct.

Once at Sir Selwyn Hardcastle's, Darcy paints a dreadful picture of what he, Fitzwilliam and Alveston have found in the woodland. Early in the morning, the magistrate arrives at Pemberley to examine Captain Denny's body, while "Wickham was being guarded by Bingley and Alveston".<sup>58</sup> The conversation about the events of the previous night is balanced by the dialogues between Jane and Elizabeth, who slowly become background figures, as the murder completely absorbs the reader's attention.

During the trial, everyone is waiting for a reconstruction of "the story [that] would be told scene by scene, imposing both coherence and credibility on the narrative and producing in court as it unfolded something of the excited expectancy of a theatre".<sup>59</sup> Witnesses give a detailed account of the facts. Wickham tells his own version of events, too. The inquisitive language used by the court seems to proceed towards a guilty verdict. After his speech, Wickham feels dominated by a silence which suggests the fate that awaits him: his "face had the stiffness and sickly pallor of a mask of death".<sup>60</sup> Though his words resonate in the law court, his sense of impotence only allows him to repeat "with more force, 'I am not guilty, my lord, not guilty'".<sup>61</sup> Soon afterwards:

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<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, p. 87.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p. 105.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 237.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, p. 260.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem.

“Darcy turned his eyes to where Mrs Younge had been sitting [...] He knew that he had to find her, needed to know what part she had played in the tragedy of Denny’s death, to find out why she had been there, her eyes locked on Wickham’s as if some power, some courage were passing between them.”<sup>62</sup>

Darcy knows this is a significant encounter and no coincidence. James’s focus on Mrs Younge’s presence serves to give a new impulse to the narration, as well as highlighting the significance of the murder and its outcome.

Thus, once more, the author, who seems to stress that there is a reason for what happened, emphasises the sense of fatality pervading these sections of the narrative. In this way, James distances herself from Austen’s plot and characters, transforming her own novel into a synthesis of her predecessor’s viewpoint. Indeed, James tellingly moves some female characters to the background, while throwing others into relief with the precise aim of reversing the familiar attitudes of Austen’s heroines, who, for example, looking back in retrospect, after “years of happy marriage, might certainly see their meeting as a matter of fate”,<sup>63</sup> and not as a determined event.<sup>64</sup> For this reason, James focuses mainly “on the dramatic narrative and not on causal accounts”.<sup>65</sup> Wickham’s situation seems to be similar: he, who has always been depicted as an unreliable character, has been involved in events determined by fate and which he is unable to resolve. In other words, through these figures, James alerts the reader’s to a sort of fatalism to which all characters yield, thus distancing her own characterisation from Austen’s.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>63</sup> R. C. Solomon, *On Fate and Fatalism*, in “Philosophy East and West”, 53, October 2003, p. 440. See L. W. Mazzeno, *Austen. Two Centuries of Criticism*, Suffolk, Camden House, 2011, p. 190.

<sup>64</sup> A. Craig, *Not so Happy Ever After*, in “New Statesman”, 140, 5079, 2011, p. 44: “The whole point about Elizabeth as a revolutionary Georgian heroine is that she will marry for love and nothing but love”.

<sup>65</sup> R. C. Solomon, *On Fate and Fatalism*, cit., p. 441.

A theatrical dimension pervades the final part of the novel. Before dying, a seemingly minor figure writes William Bidwell a long letter in which he declares his responsibility for Denny's death, a real *coup de théâtre*.<sup>66</sup> In his long confession, this figure gives "a true account of what occurred in Pemberley woodland on the night of 14<sup>th</sup> October last".<sup>67</sup> He reveals that he killed Denny to protect his sister's virtue, since she "had told [him] that an officer of the militia, stationed at Lambton the previous year, had attempted an assault on her virtue, and [he] knew instinctively that this was the man and he had returned to take her way".<sup>68</sup> Tragically, William misunderstood his intention and killed Captain Denny, who was not his sister's lover. His confession concludes with a disturbing sense of satisfaction: "I felt nothing but pride that I had saved my darling sister. [...] I rejoiced that he would not return".<sup>69</sup>

The letter is the 'place' where the *unsaid* and the *hidden* converge: here James reveals other concealed facts that the reader discovers with uncanny surprise. Bidwell's vengeance can be interpreted as the result of his protection of a woman's virtue. However, what Fitzwilliam adds also explains the involvement of Wickham and the mysterious Mrs Younge, the fatal relationship uniting the three characters. In this respect, Colonel Fitzwilliam acts as the author himself by making the plot follow another path, disclosing a clandestine relationship, hidden to save the decorum of Darcy's family – for Wickham is, as we know, Darcy's brother by marriage. Involuntarily involved in events that he could not avoid, Colonel Fitzwilliam reveals to Darcy that Louisa Bidwell and Wickham:

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<sup>66</sup> William Bidwell is the son of Thomas Bidwell who "had been head coachman to the late Mr Darcy, as his father had been to the Darcys before him" (P. D. James, *Death Comes to Pemberley*, cit., p. 21).

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, p. 263.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, p. 264.

<sup>69</sup> Ibidem, p. 265.

“ [...] met by chance in the woodland [...] They began meeting often, and she told him as soon as she suspected that she was carrying a child. [...] this child, although illegitimate would have been nephew or niece both to you and Mrs Darcy and to the Bingleys. [...] he [Wickham] confided in his friend Denny, and more fully in Mrs Younge, who seems to have been a controlling presence in his life. [...] Mrs Younge wrote to me at my London address, saying that she was interested in adopting the child [...].”<sup>70</sup>

James’s subplot clearly gives prominence to the role of chance and the unavoidable consequences deriving from it. In this case, the author seems to reverse, once more, Austen’s architectural construction, stressing even more the importance of the turning points in the characters’ lives. The numerous intersections, which Fitzwilliam focuses on, serve to unravel the plot, which thus becomes increasingly intriguing and illuminating. All at once, the characters who have dominated the world of Longbourn and Pemberley appear to be secondary figures, subjected to fate and chance. At the same time, a sense of sympathy towards Wickham and Mrs Younge, who is defined by Darcy as “a blackmailer and a kept woman”,<sup>71</sup> emerges through Fitzwilliam’s words, thus disorienting both Darcy and the reader, who do not know what kind of story they are listening to. From this perspective, it is as if there were two different worlds at play in this novel: the world suggested by Jane Austen, in which all things actively contribute to maintaining the appearance of a regular and ordered microcosm, and that of James’s plot, in which the unpredictable takes over the scene and the characters’ lives, and engrosses the reader’s attention.

It is Fitzwilliam who conveys James’s alternative view, when he says: “Darcy, I am occasionally surprised at how naive you are, how little you know about the world outside your beloved Pemberley. Human nature

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<sup>70</sup> Ibidem, pp. 274-278.

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem, p. 280.

is not as black and white as you suppose".<sup>72</sup> Fitzwilliam is James's voice, showing Darcy and the reader a more nuanced and realistic position than Darcy's. His words and his attempts to mitigate his friend's viewpoint serve as an alternative to a misrepresentation of reality informed by past actions and implications bearing on the present. The real focus of Fitzwilliam's words is not the individual, psychological significance of the destruction of the world of Pemberley, which Darcy strenuously protects, but rather the status of that world as a cultural emblem. On the contrary, from Darcy's perspective, Wickham's current predicament is an extension of his past behaviour: what he is experiencing now is the realisation of his destiny. Moreover, this rigidity has its basis in the author's point of view. Darcy's way of looking at Wickham is different from the reader's but is nonetheless a plausible one. The characterisation of Wickham throughout the novel not only gives prominence to his distinctive features, but also endorses Darcy's interpretation of reality.

It is here that the author's plan in writing the novel acquires consistency and her purpose becomes clear: her aim is to give a new form to her characters' consciousness, making them establish a contact with a reality that is distant from what Austen originally depicted. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen shows Darcy governed by misunderstanding and an erroneous perception of reality, appearing unable to comprehend facts and feelings correctly. In James's novel, instead, the author criticises Darcy, highlighting his shortsightedness, and inviting the reader to notice, through Fitzwilliam, how Elizabeth's husband does not have a deep understanding of human nature outside his "beloved Pemberley".<sup>73</sup>

It is not a coincidence if – when the trial is over and Wickham and

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<sup>72</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p. 280.

Lydia plan to move to “the New World [...] to take advantage of the opportunities available there”<sup>74</sup> – James conjures up a predictable conclusion for the characters who aspire to a peaceful existence, removing the problem, and thus revealing the core of her complicated plot. The narrative, in other words, reveals the author’s reflection on human experience and its multifaceted aspects, as well as her reading of the interrelations between self and society. Though her novel departs from Austen’s main plot, James does not marginalise the subplot, but rather integrates it into a new totalising structure. She interprets the original matrimonial aspirations of Jane Austen’s characters by emphasising the thrill of discovering the secret, as well as the sense of mystery, hiding behind unsuspected figures, and by creating a plot that questions their individuality and redefines the central values of their worlds. The circularity of *Death Comes to Pemberley*, which might be read as a hermeneutical one, tends to reassure the reader, who also desires to believe that, in James’s sequel, the orderly world of Pemberley can be restored and preserved, since, as James notes, “duty to the community, learning, tradition and an ordered, civilised lifestyle embody all that is good about the age”.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibidem, p. 289.

<sup>75</sup> Id., *P. D. James on “Death Comes to Pemberley”*, cit., p. 329.

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