

Ah, Lord God! I said, *I do not know how to speak. I am too young!* Then the Lord extended his hand and touched my mouth . . . *See, I place my words in your mouth!* (Jeremiah 1: 6-10)

*Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating, in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress. She touched – she admitted – she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley, . . . Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of a return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself.*

That's just a few lines from Jane Austen's enduring novel *Emma* – a twenty year old of an English country village around the early 1800's. The above quote tells of Emma's shock when she discovers that her protégée Harriet Smith is drawn not to the matches Emma has encouraged but to a Mr. Knightley – because it now dawns on Emma that Mr. Knightley is the very man whom *she* hopes to marry! But aside from the story itself, I chose the quote to illustrate *how Jane Austen writes*: the language, it's very proper syntax as well as its musical quality – as though the words were less prose and more like notes on a scale. You can almost feel the suddenness of her anxiety (*It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow*), her rising concern.

But I'm taken especially by her mastery of the English language, her attention to the order imposed upon it by centuries of use. Back in parochial school, classes in which the Sisters would have us diagram sentences fascinated me. You know: subject / verb / object with appendages for adjectives and adverbs to modify their sense – as well as subordinate clauses that were also sentences but amplified the main sentence as to its why, how, if, when, where, introducing changes of mood – all linked logically together and, if we kept at it, approaching the way Jane Austen writes – as literature. Language! What a powerful, often beautiful event out of the history of our universe – and terribly powerful if misused - as by the serpent in Eden and demagogues. Which raises the question: when did language begin.

From what I read, science hesitates to reply; it's not sure. One philosopher I know ventures a non-scientific guess. Language began when we began to hear someone or something calling us (“hailing” us as in “hailing a taxi”) out of or from beyond nature itself. Like someone trying to engage us in conversation, that draws us into noticing things, questioning them, giving them names like rose or seagull or ocean or sky; as if the seemingly mute things of creation plead with us to give them voice, which both human scientists and poets do, each in their particular way. And so we begin to speak – and begin to live in our world as a *familiar place*, a *neighborhood*, not just an environment.

Sounds a lot like our biblical notion of language. God speaking the universe: “Let there be light.” And then conversing with Adam in the cool of the evening and with patriarchs and prophets, with minds and imaginations everywhere – speaking to us in him whom we call the Word made Flesh. And out of such dialogues we ourselves begin to speak, to say more than ouch, or hey, or wow . . . but things like *Emma* or Lincoln's Gettysburg Address . . . which raises the question: how can we let a lifetime go by and read or listen to only the “talk” of the media that would claim our attention without even caring who we are? Unless we care who we are!