Introduction

“Writing, when properly managed... is but a different name for conversation.”
—Tristram Shandy, II, xi

Jane Austen’s narrative art excels in rendering the texture of actual speech, and almost any scene in her novels alludes to the precarious circumstances of conversation: “The meeting was generally felt to be a pleasant one, being composed in a good proportion of those who would talk and those who would listen” (MP, 238–39). Even when the participants in the social event seem to be interacting, the narrator hints, there is usually a residue of mistrust about the gestures of the moment, something that remains open to interpretation.

The dual card games in chapter 25 of Mansfield Park, for instance, are activities symbolic of the “real-life” roles played by the characters in the room, reflecting not only the Crawfords’ competitive energy, expressed in their conversation on improving Thornton Lacey, but also the heroine’s quiescent spirit. In response to Edmund’s cautious rejection of Henry’s expensive plans for the parsonage, Mary insinuates her libertine indifference by playing a card recklessly:

Miss Crawford, a little suspicious and resentful of a certain tone of voice and a certain half-look attending the last expression of his hope, made a hasty finish of her dealings with William Price, and securing his knave at an exorbitant rate, exclaimed, “There, I will stake my last like a woman of spirit. No cold prudence for me. I am not born to sit still and do nothing. If I lose the game, it shall not be from not striving for it.” (MP, 242–43)

Mary wins the hand, we are told, but at too high a cost. In contrast to this selfish motive, Fanny, who resorts to the game mainly to conceal her interest in the conversation about Thornton, almost squanders her queen on William, much to Henry’s dismay, causing Edmund to observe that she would rather have her brother win the game: “Poor Fanny! not allowed to cheat herself as she wishes!” (MP, 244).
In the other part of the room, at the whist table, there is “steady sobriety and orderly silence” during concentrated play until Mrs. Norris, “in high good-humour” after taking a trick with her partner, Sir Thomas, against the Grants, enters into the conversation in a predictably self-seeking way. While the older members of the group engage conventionally in winning and losing without any thought of the future, the younger ones express their “real-life” attitudes through the metonym of the game of speculation; and just as the activity defines a sphere of interest, so it also marks off the nonplayers and strengthens their ties as outsiders: “William and Fanny were the most detached. They remained together at the otherwise deserted card-table, talking very comfortably and not thinking of the rest, till some of the rest began to think of them” (MP, 249). The card games in this scene thus rehearse the parts that are played elsewhere on more “serious,” less categorical occasions.

This scene illustrates Austen's general narrative strategy of bringing her characters together in an encounter, a radically focused interaction, to reveal nuances of behavior; and we have seen that it serves at least four important functions: (1) it divides the group into playing two ideologically different games—the young at speculation (Lady Bertram is encouraged to participate here mainly because her husband does not want her for a partner in his game) and the old at whist; (2) it divides them according to the rules of the game as “winners” and “losers” without any connection to their status in the everyday world (both Mary Crawford and Mrs. Norris “lose” by the end of the novel despite their momentary triumphs here); (3) it divides them according to their competitive or noncompetitive motivation, thus isolating the heroine and her brother from the others; and (4) it subdivides them into various fields that restrict or prevent communication among certain persons in the room (at one extreme the whist players are wholly absorbed in the game, silent, without any ulterior purpose, while at the other extreme, the speculation players use their game to supplement conversation about life choices or to cover up their interest as listeners). As in other “play-within-the-play” situations in Austen's novels, this particular encounter symbolically conveys the participants' attitudes and intentions; and if the nominal activity in the scene is significant in forming political alignments, it also defines the alienation of the individuals outside the frame of reference.
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Such deliberately choreographed performances add weight to the idea of writing as another name for conversation. Despite occasional emphasis on sprained ankles, putrid sore throats, colds, fevers, hoarse voices, concussions, and similar dire consequences of physical exertion, the principal action in Austen's world is talking; and hence the represented encounter fosters the illusion of spontaneous, if contingent, speech. It is Austen's art of coloring narrative and dialogue to render a character's point of view within carefully arranged encounters that is the subject of this book.

Although Austen, as we shall see, was astonishingly innovative in bringing into play a variety of competing discourses, her narrative art is generally indebted to the eighteenth-century novelist's relentless experiments in imitating actual speech within typographical space. Just as printed texts since Gutenberg's invention had usually retained traces of an oral culture, so the early novel parallels the first newspapers in exploiting facticity, including the means of representing living speech by certain contextual devices. Of these devices the two most conspicuous are the temporal dividing up of the story through self-conscious narrators and the depiction of the reading process within the story as the primary conflict to be resolved.

In the epistolary novel the temporal separation between story time and narrative time is an inevitable part of the mise-en-scène; and thanks to Samuel Richardson's own extensive comments about the rhetorical effects of "writing-to-the-moment" in storytelling, until recently his achievement has been highlighted at the expense of other early eighteenth-century novelists equally concerned with voice and time in narrative. Daniel Defoe's first-person fictional accounts on the pattern of spiritual autobiography, for instance, imply a temporal as well as a moral split between a regenerate narrator and a culpable agent. Furthermore, as Paul Alkon has argued, Defoe's gratuitous anachronisms not only obviate any intention of giving the story historical authenticity but, more importantly, diminish the significance of past time to augment the narrator's present time. What matters to the reader finally is not an imaginative leap into the distant past of the story's action, as in Scott's novels, but rather the effect of hearing a story being told by a weathered observer: "He [Defoe] viewed writing as a more permanent kind of talking. . . . His readers are often encouraged to imagine themselves listening while
someone talks to them.” This privileging of living speech over writing (as inert, dead language) is a predominant rhetorical strategy in the whole genre of the early novel and attains a remarkable technical sophistication in the novels of Jane Austen.

Perhaps to compensate for the age-old neglect of Defoe's conscious artistry, Alkon ignores Richardson: “His [Defoe's] fiction, more successfully than any later in the century except Tristram Shandy, adapts oral forms to typographical media by combining strategies from traditions of speaking and traditions of writing to work together, instead of concentrating mainly on one or another mode of appeal within the framework of printed pages.” Without denying Defoe's real interest in the material artifact of the printed page, we should not find it surprising that a major London printer like Richardson had a professional advantage over him and most of his contemporary authors, not only in being able to edit his own manuscript into a typographical analogue, but also in making full use of the technical resources of the press to simulate the conditions of oral discourse by using various prompter's marks, indentations and spacings, footnotes and afterwords, and the like, producing in the end a monument of fictional hermeneutics.

As a result of the strategy of foregrounding “present” narrative time and emphasizing “spoken” over written language, the early eighteenth-century novel, doubtless influenced by the Don Quixote vogue, often thematizes the act of reading and thus mirrors our own struggles with the text. Because of its requisite context, the letter-novel draws attention to this narrative device most transparently: “As we read Les Liaisons,” Janet Altman remarks, “we develop the illusion that we are reading a novel in the process of being written. Merteuil and Valmont speak self-consciously of themselves as creators of their own novel, as 'historiens,' playwrights, and directors. . . . we the external readers are not the only readers of this novel in the making, for the vicomte and the marquise themselves gradually become privy to almost as many letters as we.” Both in Richardson and Laclos, the power of reading is the ultimate intellectual act and the basis of any significant writing. Only good readers make good writers, and those characters who prevail to the end—Pamela, Clarissa, and Merteuil (despite her final punishment by the author)—are the ones in
control at the “switchboard.” Clarissa’s posthumous letters, moreover, even give her a power beyond the grave, in contrast to Lovelace, whose last words, “LET THIS EXPIATE!” remain dubious.

Temporalizing narrative stances and thematizing the reading process are not the only means of contextualizing and privileging “speech” in the novel. The most immediate quality of oral communication is the sense of its circumstantial uniqueness, its ability to place a character both as a social class member and as an individual. Under the aegis of Mikhail Bakhtin, current linguistic criticism has stressed the dialogicity of the novel as a fictional genre; and despite the recent pioneering work of such scholars as Paul Alkon, Janet Altman, Walter Reed, and Michael McKeon, we have hardly begun to analyze the various kinds of discourse in eighteenth-century fiction. Direct discourse, for example, is a principal means of creating present time within the story, wresting the story away from the narrator-observer and allowing the characters a moment of autonomy; and the merest hint of dialect or other speech peculiarities may prejudice our responses in any given scene. Yet we still lack a poetics for this phenomenon.

As McKeon points out, among the early English novelists, Bakhtin mentions Fielding, Sterne, and Smollett to illustrate his theory of polyvocal structure; because of the prevalence of certain foil characters in comic myth—the alazon and eiron that Frye has defined—these particular English novelists seem especially germane. Thus Squire Western’s wildly explosive speech in Tom Jones casts him as the premoral, libidinous Silenus, as Robert Alter ingeniously remarked, in contrast to the morally upright but sterile Allworthy, as well as to the sadistic and impotent young Blifil and the foppish Lord Fellamar. On the other hand, despite their offensive entrances into the story as naked déclassé protagonists, both Tom Jones and Humphry Clinker speak like romantic heroes, at once betraying their real identity to the reader, if not to the other characters. Although Winifred Jenkins’s observation of the hero’s “skin as fair as alabaster” already signals his leisureed-class origins, Jery Melford’s account of Clinker’s reply to Matt Bramble fails to note anything unusual about the speaker: “—My uncle, having surveyed him attentively, said with an ironical expression in his countenance, ‘An’t you ashamed, fellow, to ride postilion without a shirt to cover your backside from

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the view of the ladies in the coach?" 'Yes, I am, an please your noble honour; (answered the man) but necessity has no law, as the saying is—And more than that, it was an accident—My breeches cracked behind, after I had got into the saddle—.'" 10

Besides his mock-deprecatory address, Clinker’s articulate defense that he had been seriously ill and impoverished by doctors’ fees rings true with Bramble’s own criticism of the medical profession, and thus announces a character who will be discovered as worthy of membership in the family.

Notwithstanding Bakhtin’s emphasis on the English comic novelists, Defoe (though to a lesser extent) and Richardson also employed the dialogical principle in their texts, as is seen most tellingly in the conversations between Crusoe and Friday, Roxana and Amy, Pamela and Mrs. Jewkes, Clarissa and Anna Howe, and of course between Clarissa and Lovelace. An annoyance to some of his first readers, Richardson’s use of slang, as well as his continual underscoring to emphasize the delivery of speeches, testifies to his conscious imitation of spoken language. 11 Furthermore, his potential as a comic novelist is evident even in Clarissa, “a work of tragic species,” when he fills out dramatic scenes with servants and other working-class people. For instance, the episode with the Widow Bevis playing Clarissa as if “bloated, and in a dropsy” offers a humorous contrast between the clown’s idiom and the supposed heroine’s relatively standard usage:

\begin{quote}
Widow. Dost thou know my right name, friend?
Fellow. I can give a shrewd guess. But that is none of my business.
Widow. What is thy business? I hope Miss Howe is well?
Fellow. Yes, madam: pure well, I thank God. I wish you were so too.
Widow. I am too full of grief to be well.
Fellow. So belike I have hard say.
Widow. My head aches so dreadfully, I cannot hold it up. I must beg of you to let me know your business.
Fellow. Nay, and that be all, my business is soon known. It is but to give this letter into your own particular hands—here it is. 12
\end{quote}

So much had been attempted, indeed, between Richardson’s time and Scott’s in representing regional and class differences
of character through a quasi dialect, that in reaction Austen appears to have eschewed the more percussive effects of colloquial usage and instead sought the finer shades of mental difference traceable in polite conversation. Just as innuendo and incomplete sentences often carry the most weight in an Austen encounter, in contrast to the all too lucid meanings conveyed by the smooth talkers, so perhaps because of her recognition that deflating a character by colloquialisms reveals social disadvantages rather than evil intentions, Lucy Steele's poor grammar is a rare instance in Austen's presentation of a coarse intelligence.

Concomitant with experiments in direct discourse, the early eighteenth-century news/novel media recognized the subtle effects of reported speech in conveying information with an aura of authority. The mere recording in print of what has been said confers privilege upon the reporter as it did upon the old town crier in an oral culture. Although the printing press had been in use for centuries before Defoe, it was not until the late seventeenth century that the improved political climate, enhanced printing technology, economic growth, and increased literacy combined to bring about the remarkable book and pamphlet industry surrounding the novel as a historical genre. With this abrupt development of reportage came a more rigorous encoding by typographical conventions, though compared to nineteenth-century standards, Augustan writing basked in a semiotic playground. After years of groping for more and more exact methods of rendering speech in print, by the 1790s novelists had become adept at handling time and voice in various forms of indirect discourse. Jane Austen thus came along at a propitious moment to grasp the whole range of meanings possible in closing the traditional distance between narrator and character to effect the spontaneous, undiluted flow of speech and thought only a few steps removed from the Flaubertian technique of depicting a character's daydreaming.

More than other kinds of fiction, the novel centers on the whole complex problem of enabling an authoritative discourse within an ostensibly random vocal structure, to the extent that the principal action within the story concerns the intention and meaning of the other characters. Pamela, for instance, opens with the crux of the word kind in the heroine's description of her young master's attitude after his mother's death; and Clarissa begins with the basic question of whether
the duel between James Harlowe and Lovelace really does portend a love story. Both Pamela and Clarissa are immediately hard put to interpret the meanings of what people are saying and to defend themselves against their readers’ intentions of drawing them into the “mill of the conventional.” Without trying to be a paragon of virtue, Moll Flanders nevertheless has a similar difficulty with what others are saying and exerts herself—or at least seems to do so—to be fair in her reporting. Although much of her narrative involves perfecting her own terms for describing events, the episode with the counterfeiters is notable for her efforts to distance herself from her underworld colleagues’ euphemisms: “I durst see them no more, for if I had seen them, and not complied, tho’ I had declin’d it with the greatest assurances of Secresy in the World, they would have gone near to have murther’d me to make sure Work, and make themselves easy, as they call it; what kind of easiness that is, they may best Judge that understand how easy Men are, that can Murther People to prevent Danger.” Like Polly in The Beggar’s Opera, whose sentimental ideal of marriage conflicts with her parents’ cutthroat “business,” Moll is appalled at the professional criminal’s cant, thus proving that she is not really incorrigible.

As the eighteenth-century novelists at least partly understood, imitating speech is a form of parody, a repeating of what was said with a difference; and by this means narrative gains authority even while abandoning omniscience and assigning to characters the main burden of the storytelling. When Austen began writing fiction in the 1790s, she had ample models in Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Sterne, Smollett, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Charlotte Smith, Ann Radcliffe, and many other authors whose works were available in the Steventon parsonage; but what is most striking, from Austen’s first juvenile spoofs to her last, incomplete novel, is her radically critical eye toward literary forms in general and toward novelistic discourse in particular. Indeed, Viktor Shklovsky’s insight that “any work of art is created as a parallel and a contradiction to some kind of model” is germane to Austen’s own theory of the novel.

That Austen’s narrative art is essentially parodic has been long recognized; just as she participated with family members in theatricals, charades, epigrams, and other forms of literary fun, so she delighted in ridiculing the popular cults
of sensibility and Gothic horror. *Love and Freindship* capitalizes on the most obtrusive weaknesses of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel—the embarrassing need to refer to one's own virtues, as in *Pamela*, and the often annoying interruptions of a narrative thread to keep within the physical limits of the letter. In the process of debunking, however, Austen also raised serious questions for the novelist, like how to render emotion convincingly. In *Love and Freindship*, Laura's effusions are pointed clichés from sentimental novels rather than the feelings of the moment: “A sensibility too tremulously alive to every affliction of my Freinds, my Acquaintance and particularly to every affliction of my own, was my only fault, if a fault it could be called. Alas! how altered now! Tho' indeed my own Misfortunes do not make less impression on me than they ever did, yet now I never feel for those of an other. My accomplishments too, begin to fade—I can neither sing so well nor Dance so gracefully as I once did—and I have entirely forgot the Minuet Dela Cour” (*MW*, 78).

Austen's intention in such parody has always been transparent, namely, to burlesque a literary fad as well as affected social behavior. Yet a similar irony directed against Marianne Dashwood's expression of feeling about the leaves at Norland in the autumn has a more complex effect: “How have I delighted, as I walked, to see them driven in showers about me by the wind! What feelings have they, the season, the air altogether inspired! Now there is no one to regard them” (*SS*, 87–88). Within the story's plot, of course, Marianne will have to pay the price for her “transports”; but, nevertheless, invoking the pathetic fallacy here deepens her character in contrast not only to Laura's sentimental plagiarisms in *Love and Freindship* but also to Elinor's and Edward's wooden attitude in the scene. Austen implies that any language of feeling has precedents in literary texts, which include the most cherished lyric poetry as well as the many forgettable sentimental novels of the day; and the fact that discourse has a doubling effect is not necessarily negative or proof of insincerity. Even though expressed in the fashionable romantic idiom, we are to believe that Marianne's emotions are nevertheless visceral.

Parody as a genre has a wider purpose than merely subverting another literary text the way a parasite feeds on its host; and recent theoretical discussions of this ironic form in contemporary metafiction suggest that it is only a special case
of the intertextuality inhering in most autoreferential discourse, from Greek comedy and Augustan mock-heroic to James Joyce's and T. S. Eliot's retrospectively allusive texts. Biographical evidence that Jane Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey* with an awareness of a reader who did not believe in novels (James Austen as the source of the monitor-hero Henry Tilney) supports the thesis of this study concerning her primary interest in the literary illusion—that is, in representing spoken language and creating the "realistic" effect of the quixotic, multiple discourses of a text. Aside from the satire on Gothic romance and sentimental mannerisms, Austen's first novel, *Park Honan* argues, focuses generally on education as a deciphering of spoken language: "Bath, then, becomes a place of social talk in which Catherine learns what a girl can never gather from Addison's essays or from James and Henry Austen's *Lotterer*, the very difficulty of intuiting human character in a society in which men and women shield themselves with words. Ironically her mother searches upstairs at Fullerton for a 'very clever essay' to help her—and one detects in that search a laughing reply to Austen family essayists." That the novel is a polyvocal structure, a palimpsest of "living" and only partly erased "dead" writing, is fundamental to Austen's practice; and with her extraordinary ear for timbre in conversation, mere gossip is transformed into a vibrant parodic art, a critical refining of thought through aggressive amendment of defunct expression.

Considering the simultaneous upsurge in readership and book production during her youth, Austen's reflexive art was timely, as Honan emphasizes: "The English novel with few exceptions was degenerate in the 1790s because there was no coherent and deeply based theory of fiction to inspire new artistic developments of the genre or to defend it against its moralistic attackers. Jane Austen joined the debate over the moral value of novels not by theorizing, but by showing that what a novel imitates is far less important than its technical 'forms of expression.'" Even as she perfected these forms, however, Austen never doubted the primacy of voice in reproducing character and quickly noted interpretive weaknesses in the oral delivery of family members trying to read her text: "Our second evening's reading [of *Pride and Prejudice*] . . . had not pleased me so well, but I believe something must be attributed to my mother's too rapid way of getting on:
and though she perfectly understands the characters herself, she cannot speak as they ought” (Letters, 299).

“She cannot speak as they ought” — this may be just another hint of Mrs. Cassandra Austen’s wearying presence, but it also serves as a warning to future readers of the Austen novel to listen carefully to how words are spoken. An analytical approach is not enough for enacting the lived character within the suspended moment: ideally, reading is a performance, an imitating of the individual voices in the polyvocal text. But “speaking as they ought” also implies listening to how they speak: and though all the major Austen characters must exhibit prowess as listeners, from the beginning both Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse misconstrue what others say and suffer as a consequence. To some extent all six completed novels focus on some problems in communication — several characters in each story have secrets to keep or to reveal and pose a challenge to the heroine’s powers of interpretation. But Emma is most radically structured on a game theory, with the charade presented as the model of how people interact with each other in an encounter; and only those who can listen to the words of the moment turn out to be winners. Or to put it in another way, only those with a gift for parody can gain control over the babel of rival voices in the world represented.

With all her faults, Emma Woodhouse, then, is Austen’s chief candidate for reflecting our own indulgence in the “pleasure of the text.” Unlike the other central characters, including Elizabeth Bennet, Emma has an incurable ludic spirit and to the end confronts the fact that some things always lie hidden in the layers of narrative, that no matter how much can be revealed to the understanding, something remains unheard in the most sincere exchange of feeling. It is only in Emma, furthermore, that minor characters hold such a large share of the central mystery to be solved; of all the many talkers in Austen’s repertory, none has the shamanistic insights into the language of the text that Miss Bates and Mr. Woodhouse reveal on important occasions.

Because of Austen’s refusal in Emma to tidy up everything that has aroused our curiosity, perhaps directly resisting the Radcliffean commonsense ending, this novel will always be a stumbling block for readers insistent on eternal verities and smooth surfaces. Comic conventions do hold the larger units
of the story together, to be sure; unlike *Tristram Shandy*, it does have a linear plot and reaches a conclusion of sorts. But it also compares with Sterne’s anatomy of discourse and shows the ultimate solipsism involved in communication. The truth always lies hidden; even to the exemplary listener, words are ever fragmentary and deceitful.

Rather than follow past custom of devoting a chapter to each of the six novels and repeat efforts to find unities, I have chosen *Emma* as the centerpiece of Austen’s parodic art and tried to fathom what its discourses reveal about reading a text and conjuring the intended illusion.

The first chapter centers on play as regulated activity that imitates certain behavior in the “serious” world but enables the performers to fulfill limited objectives without the worry of a “real-life” commitment. As desiring subjects, Austen’s characters are usually hard put to find something to do; and if not directly involved in matchmaking, they are nevertheless engaged largely in “reading” the actions of others according to some predictable trajectory. Against the arbitrary and open-ended consciousness of mere daydreaming, her characters focus on the events of the moment as if they were participating in some activity whose rules might be discerned by an energetic mind. Except for Anne Elliot, who has felt the personal loss of eight years of solitude after rejecting an offer of marriage, the distant past has little apparent influence on the heroines’ present consciousness; and the future is seldom more than a few months away. What counts above all is the moment at hand—a dinner party, a dance, a card game, a walk in the garden, a carriage ride, and other framed actions useful to promote conversation among the principals.

All play involves performance of some kind; but not all performances are play—many are “serious” encounters. Even the more narrowly self-disciplined minds are called upon to execute what the occasion requires: for example, Elinor Dashwood’s mandatory conversations with Mrs. Jennings on the journey to London and afterward, Fanny Price’s walk with Henry at Portsmouth, and Anne Elliot’s first-aid assistance to Louisa at Lyme. Such performances demonstrate the heroine’s exemplary will in discharging her social obligations and are surely important moments in the characterization. But to highlight the meaningful ritual action in Austen’s most festive
novels, I have concentrated for analysis on the playful scenes, especially those involving music and dancing, in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*.

The second chapter looks at the narrative structures of desire that underlie the presentation of character as subjective consciousness and also at the cathetic objects described that give the consciousness its raison d'être. It has been usual to see Austen's characters as moving toward some kind of knowledge—of self and of others—before being assimilated to their world; but my stress is upon their states of being, their encounters in everyday situations, which may be discrete experiences and do not always contribute to the resolution of the plot. By selecting certain speech patterns to individualize a given point of view, Austen's narrative renders the character as perceiving subject, caught in the exigencies of the moment and absorbed in the implicit rules of an encounter. Because she is a more elaborate development of Catherine Morland and Elizabeth Bennet in a comedy of illusions, Emma Woodhouse is of primary interest here in the erotics of the text.

In the third chapter I examine the provenance of character itself in Austen's text, especially the means of interiority and temporality deriving from her fictional predecessors. Discontinuous narrative forms, as in Richardson's epistolary modes and in Sterne's similar use of fragmented texts, demonstrated the major illusional effect of splitting the self into past and present consciousness. Through a method of contrapuntally arranged voices within the storytelling, Austen's parodic novels present character both as an individual, thinking subject and as a stereotypical imitation, a composite of other texts borrowed for the moment.

Although previous scholarship has generally assumed a mimetic model to describe Austen's characterization, this approach has been at odds sometimes with a parodic art that calls attention to literary analogues and deliberately subverts trusting the text. The aesthetic of representation, however, tends to be a contradictory mixture of the natural and the artificial: the Meissen porcelain figurine delights not only by its lifelike resemblance but also by its cold, fragile composition—the two opposite qualities being somehow interdependent. Similarly, even fictional characters most patently rooted in motivations of the plot and contrived for thematic purposes can strike us
as psychologically reified beings. An assurance of the characters' artificial origins seems actually to enhance their mimetic value.²²

In contrast to other performances represented, speech acts, as the fourth chapter will explore, can have a deceptive immediacy, especially when conventional markers of dialogue like inquits are reduced or omitted.²³ No matter what a character is said to be doing, all that the text can provide is written language; it is up to the reader to imagine the action referred to in the narrative. Rather than “fill in” a scene with static description, however, Austen notes only the barest essentials of the setting and relies instead on multiple discourse to create the impression of persons talking and thinking aloud “characteristically.” Perhaps the first English novelist to grasp the full mimetic implications of imitating other language within the text, Austen renders not only humorous talkers who seem to live by words alone but also derisive interlocutors who parody the original comic discourse while addressing yet another stratum of the comic audience.

Conversation in Austen’s scheme of things may appear to be spontaneous, an arbitrary act of individual wills; but it is usually represented as an encounter between “those who would talk and those who would listen,” whose rules are best known once they are broken. A character may talk from a variety of motives—whether ejaculating to assert a presence for oneself while remaining schizoidally indifferent to any audience, sympathizing with another’s happiness or distress, or asserting an opinion determinedly to hold sway over another. What matters most, however, is not the actual spoken words but their perceived intent within a given situation. If the encounter is competitively triangular, for instance, a mere token of address is sufficient to arouse desire or antagonism: Elizabeth’s euphoric tête-à-tête with Colonel Fitzwilliam at Rosings arouses Darcy’s jealousy and seems to bring on the marriage proposal (PP, II, 8), and Anne’s gratuitous chat with Mr. Elliot during the concert at Bath has a similar effect upon Captain Wentworth (P, IV, 8). I shall emphasize the humorous talkers in Austen’s repertory, whose performances in carefully staged moments may appear, to the inattentive within the story, to be empty gestures but may actually disclose important clues to the plot, articulate some otherwise unnoticed as-
pect of a character, and even give voice to the anxiety or boredom inherent to his or her consciousness.

The last chapter rounds off our opening inquiry into Austen's game theory of writing by examining her textual reflexivity. Despite the novelist's artful tactics, a character is finally no more than the reader's mirage; the agency of desiring, playing, and talking attributed to the cipher named Elizabeth, Fanny, or Emma, say, depends on our willing suspension of disbelief while engaged with the text. Just as the sonata that we really hear is an event—the interpreter's performance, not the abstract arrangement of symbols in the musical score—so the mimetic information encoded in the author's written language only comes to life in the temporal act of reading; a dramatic production of the Austen text would complete my musical performance analogy.

As if to overcome the inertia of the static medium itself, the novel represents not only "real life" but its own devices of illusion-making; and hence Austen's characters "listen" as well as "talk," even to the extent of eavesdropping on others behind hedgerows. Richardson's scribblers refer to their cacoethes scribendi to account for their obsession and comment nervously on their requirements of pen, ink, and paper to write the letters we read. Austen's characters also value the letter as proof of the writer's mind, but they are much more self-conscious about the role of the reader in constructing the story. Besides writing implements, reading materials of all sorts—Gothic romances, agricultural reports, poetry, charades, conundrums, and alphabet games—enter into the action of puzzling the text.

To highlight the truly perceptive mind, however, Austen subordinates the activity of reading books to the ongoing process of "reading" character. In emulation of the author's role, her principals occasionally step out of their fictional frame to discuss strategy toward an implied reader. Henry Tilney's first speech to Catherine about what they are expected to say in their situation at a Bath assembly automatically sets them apart from the stereotypes addressed ironically; and Admiral Crofts plans for Wentworth after an important turn in the plot mirror the author/reader at her work: "I think we must get him to Bath" (P, 173). By interrupting the narrative movement reflexively, Austen thus adopts the Cervan-
tic principle of negating the conventions of reading to imply a more elusive reality beyond representation.

In view of the many studies over the past forty years that have seen Austen as the prototype of political, moral, and aesthetic order, my general emphasis here on her fragmentary representation of character in purposefully staged scenes may appear eccentric at the outset. Without denying the authoritative voice in her novels, familiar to even the most cursory reader and inspiring confidence in resolving any social obstacle, I argue that her artistic strength lies not so much in the larger design of the story as in its minute encounters, the ivory miniatures revelatory of the character's inner life.

In opposition to the familiar view that Austen's novels are stylistically polished but lacking in substance, I hope to show that they give unusual significance to the most ordinary events and, indeed, that in this respect they deserve comparison with the worldly metaphysics of such modern thinkers as Heidegger and Sartre. But to glance back to her predecessors, it was the eighteenth-century novelists who depicted the intensity of personal being in the contingent moment; hence, one of Austen's great merits as a writer today is her adroit narrative craft in evoking the lived self implicit in the spoken word.