On the smaller scale of daily events as opposed to momentous questions of human destiny, there are forms of desire that reach completion and even become absorbed in the individual’s future actions. The exigencies of time and place imposed on the Austen story give significance to the most minute circumstances and invite something like a game theory of behavior, as described in John Dewey’s empirical model:

We have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experiences from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience.¹

Dewey’s indefinite article before the noun emphasizes experience as a quantity, as something to be measured, evaluated, and stored up; and, like power, it may be recalled by the agent as a commodity to be compared, priced, and exchanged in the daily give-and-take. Dewey’s examples of conversation and games are especially apropos to the main action in the Austen novel; but his idea of closure as fulfillment and consummation is bracketed in her world, where play, though usually an “educational experience,” tends to be disruptive and fragmentary, even portentous, as in her elliptical endings that disarmingly remind us to finish the story in the conventional way.

But reducing the scale of the everyday uncertainty through play brings consciousness into temporary focus and permits control over desire; and at some point the miniature, whether it is Uncle Toby’s bowling green or the game of speculation at Mansfield, throws into relief what is essential to the
relations and objectives in question. If art imitates life, there must be a structure to everyday situations that can be imitated. For this reason it is misleading to set "culture against play" in spite of Austen’s tendentious narrators. A more accurate dichotomy would be the contrast she draws between good and bad forms of playing—between encounters that allow the individual participants to lose themselves, say, in the flow of conversation and encounters that end in boredom or despair. Rather than opposing the sentimentalist’s sincere ideal to the ironist’s role-playing, Austen’s text implies that the language of “real feeling” comprises both these aspects within a given moment. Without emotion, nothing is expressed; without form, nothing is communicated. It is the experience of regulated activity brought to some sort of limited fulfillment that gives meaning to leisure; and Austen’s comic world, like any cathartic fiction, resolves “real-life” conflicts under privileged circumstances.

Since characters themselves are verbal and behavioral imitations, to speak of them as playing games is yet another Cervantic trick of representation, denying their fictionality by having them mimic their own roles reflexively and implying at the same time that they have genuine, inner selves in abeyance. Characters so engaged also reflect, of course, the parodic author, who cleverly exposes the various masks, gestures, and props of her trade by slipping in a new illusion of reality. As mimetic ruse as well as symbolic action, therefore, play is important to Austen’s metaphorical enterprise, being revelatory of character in specifically defined situations.

No matter what we imagine the characters to be doing in the story, all that is concretely before us is the printed text; and if play in Austen is not simply a thematic contrast to the morally “serious” actions represented, we need to ask exactly how it affects the novel’s discourse. Apart from such allegorical analogies as those between the country dance and marital trust or between the Kotzebue drama and marital infidelity, the narrative uses play activities of various kinds for three main purposes: (1) to frame characters within a “text”—that is, within a controlled situation already known to us from other sources—not only to give them prescribed roles to perform but also to give them a specific vernacular for conversation; (2) to allow narrators/characters to perceive other characters in motion, when the slightest gesture may communicate some-
thing only hinted at in the dialogue; and (3) to render the character's emotions, whether excited, bored, or depressed, while engaged with another in some performance.

As in other areas of Austen's text, the description of any given activity is spare; and readers today require little knowledge of the particular recreation alluded to in order to understand its manner. What is at issue is how the characters move within a certain discourse and find their voice—or lose it—during moments of interaction. The following discussion turns on the experience of the encounter as conveyed by the narrator, the performer, and the spectator within the scene. Since dancing at a ball was no idle pastime to the unmarried author but the most opportune moment for knowing the other sex, it is perhaps not surprising that some of the most crucial encounters involve this activity; and our focus here is on this not-so-innocent diversion.

I. Performance

Not play in the abstract but the particular performance, the experience of the moment, is usually what matters in Austen. Unless read in context, an action, whether performed well or not, may have quite contradictory values for the agent. For instance, John Thorpe's rude driving, dancing, and talking are a comic foil to Henry's grace in these same activities, which enhances his role as hero; but Willoughby is a far more sinister alazon because of his smooth horsemanship and conversation. Whereas Mr. Collins's clumsy dancing reveals a flawed personality that the narrator even ascribes to a deprived childhood, Admiral Croft's reckless driving betrays only a lovable, childlike humor. Nonperformances themselves can be problematic: at given times Darcy, Elton, and Knightley all are reluctant to dance, and for very different reasons, even though all move like gentlemen. Likewise, Fanny's refusal to play a part in the theatricals may reflect a scrupulous sincerity; nevertheless, as a spectator she freely enjoys Henry's acting in the Kotzebue play and his reading of Shakespeare. Furthermore, her heartfelt indulgence in the country dances obviates any puritanical feeling against recreational activity in principle. More complex than this configuration of good and bad
performers and nonperformers, Austen's stories tend to divide characters according to their inclination toward play or work (or rather being "serious"); a small third category includes those who are mainly bored or inactive. Of course, if the conditions are right, characters may move from one category to another. Again, as with the classification of performers, there is no fixed hierarchy: being serious is not always better than being playful; and being bored, if usually an anomaly, may even have merit. Austen's comic irony seems deliberately to thwart any complacent schematization. The Marianne/Willoughby (play) versus Elinor/Edward (work) contrast, for example, seems clear from the beginning; but Marianne's sufferings and nearly fatal illness, and Willoughby's honest confession elevate both to seasoned realists in the end. Although entering the novel as the bored husband of a garrulous, pregnant woman, Mr. Palmer later proves to be an attentive host and parent at Cleveland. Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet at first share a detached view of their world in contrast to the others, who either assume the "universal truth" of economic unions or simply have no theory at all; yet, even before Lydia's elopement disgraces the family and exposes her father's irresponsibility, the heroine has been touched by Darcy's seriousness. Nevertheless, in the end, though renouncing her father's cynicism, Elizabeth regains some of the liveliness that Darcy admires; and thus the dichotomy between play and seriousness (the unbridled energy of Lydia and Kitty versus the unimaginative pedantry of Mary) is subject to as many variations as a figure in music.

From the foregoing survey, we can see that characters gain an identity and form alliances by the quality of their movements. A performance separates at once not only two interest groups—the performer(s) and the spectator(s), but inevitably splinters these constituencies into rival factions and maybe even a few disinterested observers. An artificially concentrated acting out of desire, the performance is a kinetic situation rendered in the text by positioning contrary, often tenuously balanced, attitudes in discourse to imply an encounter, in Erving Goffman's sense. Various kinds of focused activity (a dinner or tea, a card game, a dance, a polite conversation) bring persons together for a limited duration according to a set of rules; and such encounters tend toward euphoria or dysphoria to the extent that the self is assimilated in the performance. What is of primary interest to those involved is not
the particulars of the ritual act itself (the dinner party may be a success despite the mediocre food served) but its power to create a field in which individual selves merge for the moment of the experience. It is the "we rationale," to quote Goffman, "a sense of the single thing that we are doing together at the time," that prompts the individual to join the dance and transcend for a while the insignificant motion of daily life.

This rationale creates a sense of intimacy between partners while presenting themselves in public, an idea implicit in Henry's analogy between the country dance and marriage: "Fidelity and complaisance are the principal duties of both; and those men who do not choose to dance or marry themselves, have no business with the partners or wives of their neighbours" (NA, 76). As Catherine understands, his point about "duties" has less to do with a moral imperative than with the state of mind sought in the activity of the country dance itself: "'when once entered into, they belong exclusively to each other till the moment of its dissolution... it is their duty, each to endeavour to give the other no cause for wishing that he or she had bestowed themselves elsewhere'" (NA, 77). Clearly, the likelihood of rivalry with the other dancers in the set is an unavoidable risk worth taking; and John Thorpe's bogus claim on Catherine as a promised partner gives Henry an occasion to ask assurances of her "fidelity" in their present engagement, culminating in her emphatic, "I do not want to talk to any body [else]" (NA, 78). Later, on their way to Northanger, we learn how much emotion is compressed in her response here; and all their dialogue in the story confirms the partnership initiated in a physical activity that defined their mutual opposition to the others (the Thorpes, General Tilney, the Allens, Bath society). From this bonding experience, furthermore, Catherine gains insight for judging the alazons correctly: on seeing Isabella and Captain Tilney as partners in a dance after each had protested against joining the group, she is witness to the incipient betrayal of her brother; and her "pain of confusion" and good-natured alibi for their treachery have the advantage of raising Henry's esteem for her (NA, 133). Hence, the first triangle of desire (Catherine and Henry versus John Thorpe) gains all the more by opposing the second, illegitimate one (Isabella and Captain Tilney versus James).

Although the encounter is always regulated, aside from the more obvious rules of decorum, the most valued
principles lie hidden in the actual performance, one reason why even a champion tennis player or professional opera singer must still depend on a coach's expert eye and ear. Furthermore, an irony that serves the parodic narrator's interest, the important rules of a performance are mostly to be observed when they are broken, as in the example of Isabella's "infidelity" with Captain Tilney and the consequent consternation registered by Catherine and Henry. It is only when an apparently inchoate happening is interrupted, the faithful dancers suddenly confronted by their unfaithful counterparts, that the rules of "irrelevance" can be comprehended. As Goffman states: "an encounter exhibits sanctioned orderliness arising from obligations fulfilled and expectations realized."

Using the model of a game, Goffman illustrates how participants in an encounter focus their attention on a single objective for the duration of the gathering (the moving of the chessmen until the fulfillment of winning or losing) and tacitly banish any aesthetic, economic, or sentimental interest that would interrupt this attention. Ideally, if the encounter is going well the participants will experience the autotelic immersion of self in the activity, without any thought of time or place. Breaking the rules, "irrelevance," however, will suddenly wrench one's attention away from the event as when, say, the self-indulgent piano recitalist lingers a trifle too long in a mellifluous passage and turns Beethoven into schmaltz. One of the pleasures of playing a game as opposed to engaging in "serious" activities is that specific rules are in effect to protect the performer from external causes of interference (the audience's mandatory silence, hence also irrepressible coughing); and perhaps for similar reasons, numerous other activities in everyday life, conversation above all, turn out to be structured events. At any rate, Austen's novels take a peculiar delight in both the ecstatic experience of a performance and the embarrassment caused by its interruption.

Without "flow" any performance is doomed to fail—the performer shrinking back into her solitary self and becoming an alien observer of the scene at hand. Despite their habitual reflectiveness, all of Austen's heroines experience such moments of ecstatic performing; but, in contrast to the less self-conscious characters, they do not usually sustain their euphoria very long. One obvious reason for this abridgment is
that without a self-interested awareness of time and place, narrative in Austen's classical style would have little material to develop. In the stream-of-consciousness technique of later novelists, of course, the lyrical state of mind can last for many pages without flagging.

Failed performances, nevertheless, are useful to Austen's parodic characterization, as in the opening conflict of *Pride and Prejudice*, when the protagonists share dysphoria together toward the community-sponsored event. Thus Darcy's predicament at the Meryton ball is not unlike Elizabeth's own antagonism to that lackluster occasion:

Bingley had never met with pleasanter people or prettier girls in his life; every body had been most kind and attentive to him, there had been no formality, no stiffness, he had soon felt acquainted with all the room; and as to Miss Bennet, he could not conceive an angel more beautiful. Darcy, on the contrary, had seen a collection of people in whom there was little beauty and no fashion, for none of whom he had felt the smallest interest, and from none received either attention or pleasure. (*PP*, 16)

By means of free indirect discourse, the narrator contrasts each character's attitudes without taking sides, though Bingley's angel worship, like Henry Crawford's, connotes a sinister obsequience to the female, which enhances Darcy's blunt honesty.

Failed performances may not only form unexpected intimacies but also cause tension and hence store up energy to be involuntarily released later in a "flow" experience. For instance, when Darcy and Elizabeth do at last dance together at the Netherfield ball, it is a portentous moment for the love/hate theme of the story, the entire performance uniting them in the same way experienced by Catherine and Henry vis-à-vis the Bath world. Again, as in the use of Thorpe, a clown mimics the rival's role in the triangular arrangement: "they were dances of mortification. Mr. Collins, awkward and solemn, apologising instead of attending, and often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her all the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give. The moment of her release from him was extacy" (*PP*, 90). In a comic reversal of the norms for an encounter, Elizabeth is in ecstasy.
after the performance! Then, while in this dazed state, she feels no resistance to Darcy's request to dance with her ("without knowing what she did, she accepted him" [PP, 90]).

Once together in the performance, however, the protagonists use the dance as a pretext for verbal dueling, the only kind of exchange immediately available to us in direct discourse. But instead of giving expression to mutual hostility, the situation actually draws them together as ironic commentators on their assigned roles. Although these are presumably not mortifying dances, there is no description of the hero's movements; the fact that he is a gentleman bred implies the requisite grace. Rather than fuss with such details, the narrator remarks Elizabeth's indulgence in the attention they are drawing: "Elizabeth made no answer, and took her place in the set, amazed at the dignity to which she was arrived in being allowed to stand opposite to Mr. Darcy, and reading in her neighbours' looks their equal amazement in beholding it" (PP, 90). What happens next resembles the tit for tat between Catherine and Henry at Bath, undercutting the conventional chatter expected of first acquaintances engaged at a ball; but here it is the woman who is on the attack:

They stood for some time without speaking a word; and she began to imagine that their silence was to last through the two dances, and at first was resolved not to break it; till suddenly fancying that it would be the greater punishment to her partner to oblige him to talk, she made some slight observation on the dance. He replied, and was again silent. After a pause of some minutes she addressed him a second time with

"It is your turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy.—I talked about the dance, and you ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples."

He smiled, and assured her that whatever she wished him to say should be said. (PP, 91)

After the initial triumph of exhibitionism, the dance itself is valuable mainly for occasioning their first tête-à-tête; yet the actual words said here are as unimportant as the particular figure of the dance in process. It is Elizabeth's power to command the situation, skillfully using the tension of silence as a preparative to aggressive speech, which is at stake. Appar-
ently without being aware of it, she has scored a direct hit, not through the dance itself but the erotic freedom it has released. The two signs—the smile and the assurance—are enough to validate for us, if not for them, an intimacy bound toward eventual wedlock.

In this encounter, it may be observed, Elizabeth is at first aware of being publicly humiliated while dancing with Mr. Collins; then, after recovering self-esteem by her place with Mr. Darcy, she loses all sense of the others at the ball and concentrates exclusively on her partner. Neither one is at ease, not only because of their personal differences but more importantly because they are unable to lose themselves in their roles. Dancing is more a social obligation than a pleasure for Mr. Darcy, and Elizabeth knows it. The usual resort would be to create small talk to avoid the mounting tension caused by an all too self-conscious exercise of the body. However, by stepping out of her role, Elizabeth suddenly impresses upon her counterpart that she has a mind of her own; and the lively conversation that ensues is just the diversion that Mr. Darcy most enjoys.

The rationale here is the characters' equivalent to the author's parody, what sociologists call “making a situation.” Goffman educes the above scene to illustrate how an individual can “tamper” with the “frame” (the implicit rules in a given encounter) deliberately to project the self. After jumping course in the dance, Elizabeth keeps her partner off balance in the repartee and prophetically ventures to note a likeness between them: “I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds.—We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the eclat of a proverb” (PP, 91). When this admission of her own pride forces him to demur, she responds discreetly: “I must not decide on my own performance.” Despite the initially overwhelming experience of being singled out to dance with the hero, Elizabeth not only reduces the tension between them by recasting their roles as outsiders to the event but also elicits both parodic and sincere conversation from him—a fine performance.

Because a performance, like conversation, is usually triadic in the narrative structure—the two principals and the storyteller or other witness—it is not only associated with
desire but almost inevitably with "frame tampering" to project the self. At Rosings, Elizabeth's encounter with Colonel Fitzwilliam is another classical mediation of desire, no matter that it is unplanned:

He [Colonel Fitzwilliam] now seated himself by her, and talked so agreeably of Kent and Hertfordshire, of travelling and staying at home, of new books and music, that Elizabeth had never been half so well entertained in that room before; and they conversed with so much spirit and flow, as to draw the attention of Lady Catherine herself, as well as of Mr. Darcy. His eyes had been soon and repeatedly turned towards them with a look of curiosity. (PP, 172)

Again the actual words are beside the point: it is the vertiginous phenomenon of immersing themselves "with so much spirit and flow" in conversation that depresses the spectators with a sense of being excluded from the euphoric "togetherness." The narrator does not analyze Darcy's motive beyond "curiosity," but there is little doubt that his cousin's ease with Elizabeth here is a cause for jealousy.

As if charged from the energy of her encounter with Colonel Fitzwilliam, Elizabeth feels the power to compensate for the weakness of her piano-playing by "making" the situation accommodate her superior wit: "You mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, by coming in all this state to hear me? But I will not be alarmed though your sister does play so well. There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me" (PP, 174). Her acknowledgment that her "fingers do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women's do" slyly reduces a piano performance to mechanical agility rather than allowing for the whole interaction of mind and body with the motion. As before, during their dance together at Netherfield, Elizabeth attacks Darcy's radical individualism as her own, but this time with the added advantage of a witness in Colonel Fitzwilliam. While presumably intent on reducing the tension of the encounter, Elizabeth again claims Darcy's shyness in public to be a zone of selfhood they have in common: "We neither of us perform to strangers" (PP, 176). The hero's and narrator's
silence toward this remark is typical of the many indeterminacies in the reliance on dialogue to carry a scene; but in contrast to an egregiously bad performance like Mary Bennet's "long concerto," mere ego gratification that fails to communicate anything to her audience, Elizabeth's ironic undercutting of her situation (the piano-playing, after all, was obligatory at this moment) is exactly what answers to Darcy's refusal to play without purpose.  

Although "frame tampering" may have the positive effect of uniting characters as outsiders to their official roles (Catherine and Henry, Elizabeth and Darcy), the rules of "irrelevance" may apply to situations where the actor only pretends to be playing as a ruse to manipulate the other, sometimes with dangerous consequences. The much debated crisis over the theatricals in *Mansfield Park* illustrates this kind of encounter. Lionel Trilling's stress on Austen's link with Rousseau in distrusting histrionic art in principle not only ignores the biographical evidence to the contrary but also repeated scenes in the novels, like those between Elizabeth and Darcy, where the presentation of self requires artfulness in communicating with the other. Within the story, the chief objection to producing the Kotzebue play is the implicit rebellion against Sir Thomas in his absence. Rather than condemning acting as immoral, Austen seems remarkably close to Diderot's insight in *Rameau's Nephew*: "There is only one man in the whole of a realm who walks, and that is the sovereign. Everybody else takes up positions." Edmund, we recall, does not condemn the impropriety of *Lovers' Vows* but worries instead about the kind of performance likely to result: "True, to see real acting, good hardened real acting; but I would hardly walk from this room to the next to look at the raw efforts of those who have not been bred to the trade,—a set of gentlemen and ladies, who have all the disadvantages of education and decorum to struggle through" (*MP*, 124). If Mr. Yates bears out Edmund's worst fears on this account, it is the "good hardened real acting" of the Crawfords that disrupts the Bertram amateurs, who are incapable of disinterested playing and inject the irrelevance of their selfish pursuits into the rehearsals. The sinister Crawfords have it both ways, acting their roles persuasively while enjoying their power over the others; and serious trouble brews when the amateur comes
"alive with acting" and still feels herself a pathetic heroine off-stage when her Frederick departs from Mansfield:

—The hand which had so pressed her's to his heart!
—The hand and the heart were alike motionless and passive now! Her spirit supported her, but the agony of her mind was severe. (MP, 193)

Free indirect discourse renders Maria's confusion of play and seriousness, where histrionic gesture becomes equivalent to feeling to the extent that sincerity can no longer be distinguished from role-playing. It is a confusion, however, that Fanny herself experiences momentarily later in the story, during Henry's reading of Shakespeare. One's autonomy depends on breaking the spell.

A performance is ideally the work of the moment, its agents transcending the normal self/other relationships to the environment. Just as agape in the religious sense occurs through divine grace, so loss of self-consciousness in the activity is a phenomenon of being in motion, with all one's feelings concentrated on the purpose at hand. Surrendering one's rational faculties to the current of involuntary forces obviously involves a certain risk; and whether one is walking, playing the piano, singing, or engaged in polite conversation, there is always some danger of falling, of a wrong note or a faux pas to damage the ego during the moment of exertion. But at some point it becomes more dangerous to resort to reason than to trust the instincts of the body. (One can imagine the consequences if a ski jumper began to reconsider his move once he was launched into the air.) The danger, furthermore, is a vital element of the tension that generates the energy to perform in the first place; and for this reason the spectator, real or imagined, is necessary to the actor's reaching his peak of performance. The spectator, at least vicarously, takes part in the action—ideally, to the extent of feeling himself in danger (Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief").

Always a risk for the spectator, no matter how otherwise secure, is the surrendering of critical judgment, of being seduced by the artist's deceptions; and for a repressed personality the experience does not come without guilt feelings. In her capacity to lose herself in a performance yet regain her personal freedom to judge, Fanny Price is a model spectator as well as reader of plays: she is responsive to Henry's skillful act-
Playing for the moment but afterward is detached enough to distinguish between art and life. A tendentious scene, which explicitly interrelates the topos of histrionic art, pulpit eloquence, and the language of “true feeling,” casts Edmund as pander, while Henry tries to win Fanny through the contagion of reading Shakespeare—presumably with all the voice, countenance, and gesture that authorities on eloquence recommended. While Lady Bertram dozes as usual upon the sofa (a convenient defusing of the chaperone, as in the case of Mrs. Bates’s poor eyesight and broken spectacles), Fanny’s cousin indulges in voyeurism throughout the performance:

Edmund watched the progress of her attention, and was amused and gratified by seeing how she gradually slackened in the needle-work, which, at the beginning, seemed to occupy her totally; how it fell from her hand while she sat motionless over it—and at last, how the eyes which had appeared so studiously to avoid him throughout the day, were turned and fixed on Crawford, fixed on him for minutes, fixed on him in short till the attraction drew Crawford’s upon her, and the book was closed, and the charm was broken. Then, she was shrinking again into herself, and blushing and working as hard as ever. (MP, 337)

It is a strange moment for Edmund, almost sexual, and though at present he is interfering on Henry’s behalf, it is not an inappropriate feeling toward the woman he will eventually wed. For her part, troubled by her lapse in self-control, Fanny refuses to give the expected compliments afterward: “Her praise had been given in her attention: that must content them” (MP, 338). To gauge the effect of the reading, Henry observes that even the indolent aunt is aroused: “Crawford was excessively pleased [free indirect discourse mimics his insincere hyperbole].—If Lady Bertram, with all her incompetency and languor, could feel this, the inference of what her niece, alive and enlightened as she was, must feel, was elevating” (MP, 338). He quickly dispels the charm, however, by his subsequent harangue on pulpit eloquence and then almost drives Fanny out of the room with his hackneyed gallantry (“it is ‘Fanny’ that I think of all day, and dream of all night.—You have given the name such reality of sweetness, that nothing else can now be descriptive of you” [MP, 344]). In contrast to
his natural eloquence while reading Shakespeare, Henry's bad performance as a polemicist and a suitor is blatantly self-serving and wholly underestimates his audience.

Yet bad acting is morally useful. The failure of performance not only reveals grease paint, meaningless gesture, and borrowed speech; but, far worse, it also exposes the artist as a déclassé member of the community, an unscrupulous trickster rather than an inspired prophet. Without the benefit of illusion, the spectator is at liberty to go behind the scenes and contemplate manipulative behavior there in terms of real-life encounters; and the shame of having once been taken in adds to the moral condemnation of the impostor. All the while we are engaged with Fanny in this enterprise, however, we ourselves are caught in the illusion of her sincerity as a real presence.

2. The “Irresistible Waltz”

Performances recalled become significant in conversation at a later point in the story, and hence they give characters a certain depth of experience as well as a basis for alliances and rivalries. Because performances create a memory bank or field, sometimes only a word or phrase is enough to call forth associations in a character's mind. Moreover, since the narrator may choose to withdraw from the storytelling for a while, leaving the responsibility to the protagonists themselves, there are many encounters in Austen that rely heavily on innuendo in dialogue to suggest meaning. The scene where Jane Fairfax demonstrates the Broadwood piano for Emma, with Frank Churchill present, is an example of a performance rendered with very little narrative assistance; but it bears out what is said elsewhere concerning the politics of politeness.

Nonperformances, we have noted, may be a means of affirming selfhood against socially predetermined behavior. Both Darcy and Knightley demonstrate “good faith” by refusing to dance simply because it is expected of them, and their blunt manners are even made to reflect the national character. Mr. Knightley's warning to Emma about Frank Churchill's gratuitous amiability invokes an ancient distrust of Gallic politeness among the British upper classes: “he can have no En-
elish delicacy towards the feelings of other people: nothing really amiable about him” (E, 149). It also shows that Knightley can detect a ham actor when he sees one, and to the end he triumphs while others are taken in by the interloper. But, like Fanny, he avows the sincere ideal without knowing that what he really demands is good acting. Habitually in “bad faith,” Churchill is merely “aimable”; and, long before the heroine, the reader is privileged to witness his infidelity through the action at the Coles’s party in chapter 26 (E, II, 8), when Mr. Knightley becomes angry with his rival for exploiting Jane Fairfax’s singing, and when subsequently Emma outshines her rival by leading the impromptu dance with the encroacher (“They were a couple worth looking at”).

To render his amiability as underhanded, even treacherous, the narrative suppresses the information of Churchill’s actual part in manipulating the event that night: “soon (within five minutes) the proposal of dancing—originating nobody exactly knew where—was so effectually promoted by Mr. and Mrs. Cole, that everything was rapidly clearing away, to give proper space” (E, 229). As on other occasions, notably at the Crown Inn ball, Churchill is a shadowy presence, in fact, a double agent whose real motives go undetected; and the narrator captures in free indirect discourse a few superlatives associated with the text of the aimable: “Mrs. Weston, capital in her country-dances, was seated, and beginning an irresistible waltz; and Frank Churchill, coming up with most becoming gallantry to Emma, had secured her hand, and led her up to the top” (E, 229).

At first glance the phrase “irresistible waltz” seems harmless enough, eliciting no more than the idea that the participants, if not Mr. Knightley among the bystanders, were fond of dancing. But as in Isabella’s “infidelity” with Captain Tilney at the Bath ball, the irresistible power of attraction once more stems from the triangular desire latent in the social occasion. In the second chapter after this scene, when Emma visits the Bateses’ to hear the intriguing Broadwood piano, Frank Churchill’s cryptic dialogue with Jane goes unheard except by the wary outside reader:

“If you are very kind,” said he, “it will be one of the waltzes we danced last night;—let me live them over again. You did not enjoy them as I did; you
appeared tired the whole time. I believe you were glad we danced no longer; but I would have given worlds—all the worlds one ever has to give—for another half hour.”

She played.

“What felicity it is to hear a tune again which has made one happy!—If I mistake not that was danced at Weymouth.”

She looked up at him for a moment, coloured deeply, and played something else. (E, 242)

Here two previous moments of an intimate encounter converge in a simultaneous lie and betrayal. The man who had danced with Emma the night before and had expressed his relief at escaping Jane’s “languid dancing” continues at this point to tyrannize over his fiancée unbeknownst to the others. Because of the secret that gives him the power, Jane is reduced to a mere instrument again and made to play the same tunes from the previous night at the Coles’s, apparently including the “irresistible waltz” rendered on the keyboard by the pregnant Mrs. Weston and danced with Emma as his partner. Churchill’s innuendo, furthermore, about hearing this same tune previously at Weymouth suddenly brings out the horror of his infidelity: having danced with a rival the “irresistible waltz” that symbolizes his promise to the beloved.

Apart from their situation of having to keep their intimacy secret, Frank Churchill, it would appear, enjoys the author’s prerogative of manipulating character as well as plot; and his mischief in punishing Jane throughout various intrigues belongs to the trickster’s role in comic fiction. One of his most sadistic moments occurs when he forces Jane to sing to the point of exhaustion at the Coles’s, before the hero intervenes to rescue her:

Towards the end of Jane’s second song, her voice grew thick.

“That will do,” said he, when it was finished, thinking aloud—“You have sung quite enough for one evening—now, be quiet.”

Another song, however, was soon begged for. “One more;—they would not fatigue Miss Fairfax on any account, and would only ask for one more.” And Frank Churchill was heard to say, “I think you could
manage this without effort; the first part is so very trifling. The strength of the song falls on the second.”

Mr. Knightley grew angry.

“That fellow,” said he, indignantly, “thinks of nothing but shewing off his own voice. This must not be.” And touching Miss Bates, who at that moment passed near—“Miss Bates, are you mad, to let your niece sing herself hoarse in this manner? Go, and interfere. They have no mercy on her.” (E, 229)

They have no mercy on her. Being victim is a large part of Jane’s charm in this story, and this scene invokes reflexively the text of the Gothic heroine that Mr. Knightley is recalling in emotional terms.

This anxious performance is notable for what the narrator does not describe, especially the motive for Mr. Knightley’s anger and the reason for Jane’s exhaustion. As Patrick Piggott observes: “It is part of Mr. Knightley’s personality to be frank and outspoken, but his manner of addressing Miss Bates on this occasion was as near to plain rudeness as makes no matter.” Piggott also explains that Jane’s condition after only two songs “does not speak very well for the soundness of the vocal training she had received in London.”

Surely this is to miss the significance of the whole encounter. What is at issue is not Mr. Knightley’s politeness or Jane’s vocal training but the severe tension she is under while performing with her secret lover. Mr. Knightley not only resents Churchill’s exhibitionism here; but, perhaps drawing on his Gothic imagination for the moment, as does Emma in other places, he also suspects him of abusing Jane almost perversely.

In contrast to her rival caught in yet another double bind, Emma sings blissfully, aided by the flattering attention that Churchill bestows on her in this encounter:

She knew the limitations of her own powers too well to attempt more than she could perform with credit; she wanted neither taste nor spirit in the little things which are generally acceptable, and could accompany her own voice well. One accompaniment to her song took her agreeably by surprise—a second, slightly but correctly taken by Frank Churchill. Her pardon was duly begged at the close of the song, and everything usual followed. (E, 227)
Although Emma’s “little things” were probably simple folk songs as opposed to Jane’s Italian arias, what matters is her ease of performance while being abetted by a male admirer. Unlike Mary Bennet in her “long concerto,” Emma “knew the limitations of her own powers too well to attempt more than she could perform with credit”; and the narrator’s approbation on this account, we may assume, is identical with Mr. Knightley’s attitude toward the heroine.

Since play is activity that ideally involves a loss of self-consciousness within regulated encounters, Frank Churchill’s behavior, on the contrary, is quite serious, capable of inflicting injury upon the betrothed and her family. On the mistaken assumption that Emma is in on the secret, he acts out duets with her in the manner of a Don Giovanni intriguing with a Leporello. If this behavior qualifies as play in the stageable sense, his covert intimacy with Jane, which he goes to great lengths to protect, may be serious enough to make his flirtation with Emma mere child’s play, a game of pretended sexual innocence without the requisite euphoric loss of self in the performance. In fact, to grant him a measure of sympathy, his frequent discomfort while concealing his intimacy with Jane may help to account for his occasional petulance toward her. His situation disallows the true ludic spirit, an idea brought out when he tries to play the alphabet game with his cheerless partner at Hartfield as a pretext for communicating with her in front of the others. Having blundered about Mr. Perry’s carriage, Churchill seems to be at a loss to carry on the performance and squirms like an amateur under Mr. Knightley’s disapproving gaze: “Disingenuousness and double-dealing seemed to meet him at every turn. These letters were but the vehicle for gallantry and trick. It was a child’s play, chosen to conceal a deeper game on Frank Churchill’s part” (E, 348). But, as we know, the “deeper game” is not really a game at all; and Jane’s blush at seeing herself observed signifies that playing is out of the question. She “pushed away the letters with even an angry spirit, and looked resolved to be engaged by no other word that could be offered” (E, 349). Despite her share of guilt in the deceit practiced against the others, Jane has no real inclination to play the roles thrust upon her; and the only moment of euphoria for her comes after the truth can be revealed, when at last she can stand with Emma in a triumphant duet against Mrs. Elton. Churchill does enter into the game.
for the fun of it, but his self-centered apartness while actively engaged with others, his moping and lack of spontaneity, hardly represent the "ludic" personality as fulfilled in Huizinga's sense.  

3. **The Crown Inn Ball**

To judge from her biography, Austen had no qualms about playing games; and her letters to Cassandra abound with private jokes and witticisms, including some "black humor." As a novelist, from the beginning to the end her parody of fictional forms is central to her art. Yet the ideal of play as euphoric encounter is a rare moment in her stories, a respite from nervous conflicts proliferating on every page; at least among the young, recreation proves to be disruptive, a gratification at the expense of others, until some authority appears to repress the frolicking. Nevertheless, a too solemn moralization of the play element is precisely what Austen's comic irony militates against in retrospect; and, significantly, all her heroines are good performers in some kind of diversion. The Austen text, then, is simply ambivalent about the will to pleasure. There is an eerie foreboding at the margins of her comedy, as if at any moment something might happen to dispel the joy, a note of sadness resembling Don Quixote's moods when contemplating his textual fate. It is not easy, after all, to inhabit the world of parody, where at any moment a character may discover his illusions to be not even his own. Perhaps it is this contingency that haunts play in the most ludic novels, a persistent reminder of biological as well as literary mortality.

Less conspicuous than the repeated dichotomy between players and nonplayers in Austen's novels is the implied distrust rampant in the community as a whole; and it is in *Emma* that the hazards of village recreation loom darkly in the central action. Highbury's decline reflects the snobbism analyzed in the next chapter, and the Woodhouse humor to fidget behind the shrubbery is part of the general malaise. No wonder that in this stultifying atmosphere the heroine seems to await the arrival of Frank Churchill as if for her deliverance. To some readers, however, it seems that Churchill is at fault for initiating the Crown Inn ball and, in general, for introduc-
ing “movement and flexibility into a landscape of peace and stability,” a belief that would make Mr. Woodhouse’s dread of the whole event the norm for the reader to accept. The terms “peace and stability” hardly fit the deep social changes attested throughout the novel and neurotically shunned by the nominal patriarch of Hartfield.

Frank Churchill is told, we recall, “the history of the large room visibly added” to the Crown: “it had been built many years ago for a ball-room, and while the neighbourhood had been in a particularly populous, dancing state, had been occasionally used as such;—but such brilliant days had long passed away, and now the highest purpose for which it was ever wanted was to accommodate a whist club established among the gentlemen and half-gentlemen [!] of the place” (E, 197). Despite Churchill’s fickle language of the improver and his fascination with the building’s “capabilities,” the objection against reviving the “former good old days of the room” because of the “want of proper families in the place, and the conviction that none beyond the place and its immediate environs could be tempted to attend” (E, 198) is not satisfactory. The mocking narrator adopts the Woodhouse humor to set forth the current divisiveness in the community. Not only has Mr. Woodhouse never met Mrs. Stokes, the present occupant of the Crown, but his daughter “was rather surprized to see the constitution of the Weston prevail so decidedly against the habits of the Churchills” (E, 198) when Frank suggests a public entertainment at the inn. Free indirect discourse shades in Emma’s consternation at the interloper’s proposal: “Of pride, indeed, there was, perhaps, scarcely enough; his indifference to a confusion of rank, bordered too much on inelegance of mind. He could be no judge, however, of the evil he was holding cheap. It was but an effusion of lively spirits” (E, 198). Without endorsing either the extreme of democratic leveling or that of a rigid caste system, the narrative warns from the outset of the story that the old Woodhouse order is rigid and needs pumping with new energy to keep viable. Churchill may be a nuisance, but his intrusion is necessary to arouse desire and bring about the change in Emma’s situation near the end of the novel.

Perhaps the overall success of the Crown Inn ball in bringing a rare moment of euphoria to the Highbury world is
enough to justify Churchill's manipulative scheme. Far from being the subversive activity the theatricals at Mansfield Park were, this event brings together for the only time in the novel such diametrically opposed characters as Emma and Miss Bates in a surprisingly celebratory mood; and, of course, after forcing Mr. Knightley into action to rescue Harriet from the Eltons' vendetta, the ball climaxes in uniting him with Emma in the dance, their first consciously erotic moment together.

Highbury will never again meet under such relatively cohesive conditions; and just as the social contract depends on the subordination of the individual will to the common good, so the country dance once more proves its efficacy in animating the spirit, for the moment at least, needed to achieve this end. It is as if Austen were deliberately showing us the power of the dance by allowing its temporary revival at Highbury to put into motion the traditional steps of village life that summon a less fragmented culture than the present one now abandoned by the Hartfield squire; after the Crown event, the activities at Donwell and Box Hill will increasingly fail as group play, notwithstanding Mr. Knightley's hospitality and noblesse oblige. Although the Eltons try to sabotage the festivities at the Crown and the hero has to come into the dance to rescue Harriet (a serious rather than ludic motive), as far as is possible the community is temporarily in step.

The teleology of plot implies an aesthetic and moral rationale; but the sequence of events in Austen's story, like the experience of daily life, does not occur as a suspended part of a final cause awaiting fulfillment in the last chapter. Instead, characters undergo continually changing circumstances and register levels of energy on a scale from ennui and low self-esteem to euphoria and a sense of power. They usually have a short memory, or almost none at all, precisely because what matters happens to them in the course of a few days, weeks, or months. Not even Anne Elliot, the most retrospective of Austen characters, summons up any particular event from the distant years with Wentworth; it is their shared experience during the crisis at Lyme that works on their present consciousness.16

Play, we know, is inherent in religious ritual and provides a culture with a measure of control over the essential issues of life and death. With the perspicacity of a modern an-
thropologist, the "authorial narrator" in *Emma* declaims on the cathartic function of a ball:

It may be possible to do without dancing entirely. Instances have been known of young people passing many, many months successively, without being at any ball of any description, and no material injury accrue either to body or mind;—but when a beginning is made—when the felicities of rapid motion have once been, though slightly, felt—it must be a very heavy set that does not ask for more. (*E*, 247)

The interesting point here is the difference between the initial motives toward the event and the actual euphoria of motion, when the I-thou relationship gets lost in the dance.

Regardless of his selfish motives in promoting the ball, therefore, Churchill, with Jane as sacrificial lamb, is needed to instill energy into the stagnant Highbury community just when the titular heroine is in danger of never marrying, as well as never dancing. Apart from his welcome injection of play into the community, furthermore, his sincere alliance with Emma against the presumptuous Eltoms, supplemented later by Jane's equally sincere friendship with her former rival, demonstrates that he is *not*, in fact, indifferent to a "confusion of rank," after all. Churchill's arrival on the scene is threatening to the "peace and stability" of the town, but the event at the Crown proves well worth the risk, if only because it unites hero and heroine in the dance with a heightened consciousness of their fidelity toward one another. Of course, various complications still lie ahead before the novel reaches its ending: to modify Dewey's principle, this performance is neither a "consummation" nor a "cessation"; besides arousing false expectations in Harriet, it also stirs new feelings in Emma, which will not be clear to her until the discovery that her poor friend is no less than a serious rival.

The ball at the Crown Inn, above all, reveals Emma's capacity for agape, a loss of self-awareness in motion, social love, and other redeeming qualities that distinguish Mr. Knightley's values. Although from the earliest stage of planning she had flattered herself that the ball was intended for her personally, by the time of its happening not only has Mrs. Elton as bride taken precedence but also Churchill's mind seems oddly distant from her throughout the event. While preparing for the
ball she had desired the occasion "even for simple dancing itself, without any of the wicked aids of vanity" (E, 247), a motive she could fathom, if not Mr. Knightley, from her experience of being "well matched in a partner" (E, 230) at the Coles's. What was "wicked" about that event was the egotism: "They were a couple worth looking at," a thought that would have caused some discomfort to Jane sitting in the shadows. At the Crown affair it is Mrs. Elton who enjoys the advantage of a "vanity completely gratified" (E, 325); but since the "felicities of rapid motion" obliterate the heroine's concern with a "confusion of rank," nothing can disturb her: "—In spite of this little rub, however, Emma was smiling with enjoyment, delighted to see the respectable length of the set as it was forming, and to feel that she had so many hours of unusual festivity before her" (E, 325).

As usual in this novel, the narrator closely imitates the rhythms of the heroine's consciousness; even the privileged view of the historian seems compatible with her finite sense of things at this time: "The ball proceeded pleasantly. The anxious cares, the incessant attentions of Mrs. Weston, were not thrown away. Every body seemed happy; and the praise of being a delightful ball, which is seldom bestowed till after a ball has ceased to be, was repeatedly given in the very beginning of the existence of this" (E, 326). Miss Bates's exclamation, "This is meeting quite in fairy-land!—Such a transformation!" (E, 323), is prophetic; and in running off to her usually recessive mother she extends the festive spirit even beyond the Crown room. Under these ideal circumstances, therefore, Mr. Knightley's heroic action is not just for Harriet's sake but to preserve the communal happiness from the Eltons' rudeness.

Since any encounter is a kinetic arrangement of intentions lasting only for the moment, its historical existence is subject to doubt even for those who had directly experienced it. That the event is ultimately a phenomenon created in the minds of the participants rather than something objectively "out there" is the emphasis of the narrator's peculiarly ontic description: "after a ball has ceased to be . . . the very beginning of the existence of this" (E, 326). Maybe the whole thing has been an illusion in the first place, the magic of Aladdin's lamp, to use Miss Bates's figure; and like most occasions in daily life it has little or no significance to the nonparticipant:
“Of very important, very recordable events, it was no more productive than such meetings usually are” (E, 326). Yet, strangely enough, not only this entire chapter but nearly all the chapters, from the first anticipation of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax in the story, are preoccupied, directly or indirectly, with this one social occasion.

Despite its momentous importance to Highbury at the time, nevertheless, the encounter is doomed to oblivion, as the following anticlimactic chapter reveals, when the blissful mood of the community gives way abruptly to hysteria over Harriet’s scrape with an alien reality beyond the shrubbery: “It was the very event to engage those who talk most, the young and the low; and all the youth and servants in the place were soon in the happiness of frightful news. The last night’s ball seemed lost in the gipsies” (E, 336). The fanfare over this melodramatic incident gives edge to the narrator’s “very important, very recordable events” and illustrates again the easy transition from play to seriousness, and vice versa, in daily life.

4. “Every Savage Can Dance”

Since play often connotes a childish indulgence, a nonproductive activity enjoyed by the leisured classes, even in comic fiction the ascetic voice may sound most authoritative and put a damper on the gamboling mood. Furthermore, if for one reason or another the game separates the participants too exclusively from the rest of the community, it is likely to be held in suspicion by those without the franchise. In contrast to most encounters in Austen’s novels, the ball at the Crown Inn reduces the divisions in the community for its duration and proves costly to the malcontents who would interrupt its progress. Like the more explicit attack on Churchill’s frenchified amiability, this village diversion, organized around a centuries-old form of group dancing, alludes tendentiously to the traditional national character threatened by the new urban wealth and manners.

Because the English country dance evolved to simplify the movements of address between the sexes, by the end of the eighteenth century it had become a national institution and an almost unavoidable ritual of courtship.9 Not surprisingly, therefore, it is an important activity for several Austen
heroines—Catherine, Elizabeth, Fanny, and Emma—who discover their marriage partners in the shared experience. Although the English country dance usually included persons of all ages and ranks, married or unmarried, Austen's novels give the impression that it is intended only for the eligible singles; small wonder, then, that both Darcy and Knightley prefer to remain on the sidelines, not wanting to perform with "strangers" and risk unwanted entanglements. Once they do engage in the dance, however, to judge by the effect on their partners, they perform with all the felicity of motion expected of trueborn English gentlemen.

Since the country dance had declined, at least in Austen's novels, to a mating game rather than a diversion for the whole community, at times it is almost incumbent on the heroine to refuse a partner, if only to assert her personal freedom. But then, by a wry twist, the refusers themselves may form an alliance against the indiscriminate herd. Darcy's and Elizabeth's dislike of performing gratuitously, we have noted, turns out to be a bond between them. Although most readers stress the memorable crisis at the Meryton ball when Darcy scandalizes the company by his unwillingness to dance with anyone except Bingley's sisters, the action at the Lucases' party soon afterward more than redeems his "pride," though even more than usual in Austen the narrative omits any explicit interpretation. A subtle refinement of the dance motif in the novel's discourse, this scene brings out at once Darcy's first attraction to Elizabeth by the discovery of their mutual contempt for the London trend-setters (Sir William Lucas is the local Beau Brummel), metonymically represented by the new wave of Scottish and Irish dance forms.

The Lucas party foregrounds masterfully the principal dialogue to counter the mindless diversions elsewhere in the room. After Elizabeth has been forced by Charlotte to play the piano ("pleasing, though by no means capital" [the narrator's judgment, but presumably Darcy's and Elizabeth's as well]) and to sing a few songs, her sister Mary, "always impatient for display" (PP, 25), ostentatiously interrupts the mood established by a good attitude in a weak performer:

Elizabeth, easy and unaffected, had been listened to with much more pleasure, though not playing half so well; and Mary, at the end of a long concerto, was glad to purchase praise and gratitude by Scotch and Irish
airs, at the request of her younger sisters, who with some of the Lucases and two or three officers joined eagerly in dancing at one end of the room.

Mr. Darcy stood near them in silent indignation at such a mode of passing the evening, to the exclusion of all conversation, and was too much engrossed by his own thoughts to perceive that Sir William Lucas was his neighbour, till Sir William thus began.

“What a charming amusement for young people this is, Mr. Darcy!—There is nothing like dancing after all.—I consider it as one of the first refinements of polished societies.”

“Certainly, Sir;—and it has the advantage also of being in vogue amongst the less polished societies of the world.—Every savage can dance.” (PP, 25)

The narrator renders Mr. Darcy’s point of view toward Mary’s pedantic performance and especially the younger Bennet and Lucas sisters’ capers with the officers “to the exclusion of all conversation”; at the same time, moreover, we are free to assume that Elizabeth shares his “silent indignation” at this noisy exhibitionism and has thus already entered his mind-set.

But a crux occurs when Sir William intrudes like Polonius upon the melancholy hero, “too much engrossed by his own thoughts” to be in rhythm with the sham world without. The rejoinder “Every savage can dance” cuts right through the metaphysical illusions of politesse to the primal urges of bodily motion; and even if it is a sign of his excessive shyness in public, Darcy’s remark is probably not intended as an attack on “savages” or on dancing as a recreation. In the context of social history, Darcy is witnessing a provincial version of the latest fad at Almack’s which, besides pretentiously aping the folkways of Scotland and Ireland (much like Beau Brummel’s adoption of the miners’ long trousers), is wholly indifferent to the rest of the company and is being performed “at one end of the room” by a few individuals. By contrast, the traditional country dance could include as many as thirty couples in a long room and allowed both exercise and conversation. Whatever thoughts engrossed Darcy at this point will be forever unknown: but perhaps Edmund Burke’s worst fears came to his mind: “All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off.” Besides displaying proud contempt, Darcy ap-
pears from the beginning to resent the disruptive motions that threaten to destroy village culture. Sir William Lucas, who has grown ashamed of that culture, fully deserves the sarcasm his fatuous comment receives. Under the circumstances of the regent’s well-known interest in fashions, when Sir William, failing to understand the previous remark, only smiles and asks whether he dances often at St. James’s, Darcy’s impatience with his fawning interlocutor is comparable to Mr. Bennet’s toward Collins:

“Never, sir.”

“Do you not think it would be a proper compliment to the place?”

“It is a compliment which I never pay to any place if I can avoid it.” (PP, 25–26)

To judge by the positioning of characters in the scene, this dialogue is tête-à-tête; its privacy, however, makes all the more grotesque the distance between alazon and eiron.

Immediately afterward, a third person arrives to join forces against the common enemy: Sir William, upon seeing Elizabeth moving toward them, attempts to do “a very gallant thing” by steering Darcy into dancing with her; the latter “with grave propriety requested to be allowed the honour of her hand; but in vain” (PP, 26). Free indirect discourse here spares the hero some embarrassing verbiage, and we may infer Elizabeth’s amused recognition of the anomaly. Rather than a spiteful return for his proud behavior at the Meryton ball, her declining to dance, “Mr. Darcy is all politeness,” seems actually to enhance her role as a kindred spirit opposing the master of ceremonies.

Darcy’s gentlemanly behavior here involves a risk that usually escapes notice. Given his open attack on any dancing that prevents conversation, when we remember that the music in progress calls for the modish reel or jig, his offer to Elizabeth shows the pluck of a hero. Later, at Netherfield, it is Miss Bingley’s turn to be playing as much out of character as the bookish Mary, again “a lively Scotch air,” which prompts Darcy to tease Elizabeth as someone with whom he has already reached an understanding:

“Do not you feel a great inclination, Miss Bennet, to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel?”
She smiled, but made no answer. He repeated the question, with some surprise at her silence.

"Oh!" said she, "I heard you before; but I could not immediately determine what to say in reply. You wanted me, I know, to say 'Yes,' that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste; but I always delight in overthrowing those kind of schemes, and cheating a person of their premeditated contempt. I have therefore made up my mind to tell you, that I do not want to dance a reel at all—and now despise me if you dare."

"Indeed I do not dare." (PP, 52)

Perhaps as her silence implies, Elizabeth may not see the connection between the music of the moment and the reels played at the Lucases' when she declined to dance with him; but doubtless still grateful for her having spared him the ordeal before, Darcy now assumes an intimacy with her on that account. Best of all, for one who abhors any dancing that rules out conversation, Elizabeth's witty repartee in the process of the music answers his taste exactly.

Polite conversation, then, supported by the unaffected bodily movement of the country dance, is what distinguishes a civilized society. Characters, we know, are valued by what they say or by what is said about them; and no matter what else they do, they come to us mainly through discourse of some kind. Both Darcy and Elizabeth prevail over the other characters in the story by the power of their speech; yet they would be amiss as English types if they did not perform together in the country dance.

Rather than allegorize moral seriousness over play, then, it is more pertinent to Austen's comic aesthetic to grasp the characters while they are in motion and at risk in an encounter. Against all the self-conscious, deliberate intentions in the story, some of the most significant moments reveal the character swept up in the performance, the dancer at one with the dance, and yet feeling a rare intimacy with another. Through this bond, discovered in the temporary control over situations that play gives, characters stand apart from their peers who uncritically accept the everyday world and remain entrapped as stereotypes of parody.