II. Desire

When characters play games in Austen’s fiction, we are led to believe, they may be sublimating “real-life” conflicts or actually revealing quite serious, even dangerous, intentions within the encounter. As we ponder their behavior, moreover, we are subscribing to a more fundamental game that the author has initiated in her parodic text—namely, the metaphor of lived experience. In this quixotic reflexivity, as the reader watches characters play tricks on other characters, he or she forgets about being manipulated within the linguistic frames arranged by Austen. Without quite knowing it, once our curiosity about the players is aroused, we fall into the role of spectators at an event and project our wishes onto the story.

To begin with, even before the reader himself can become actively engaged with the text, characters are already shown to be prying into each other’s affairs and thus stirring up trouble; and almost at once patterns of discourse are set in motion to elicit a finite set of responses among the actors and external witnesses involved. At one level of abstraction, the narrative text insinuates itself like a crossword puzzle, providing just enough information to stir the reader’s interest in filling in the empty spaces. Similarly, the charades in *Emma* function reflexively as a play-within-a-play, imitating in miniature the whole enterprise of constituting the text of the novel. In their textual roles, then, narrators/characters intentionally or unintentionally speak in fragments—revealing themselves sufficiently to attract attention yet all the while concealing some part, not merely to keep the story going but because the whole story can never be told. In this way parody brings us to a solipsistic standstill in our efforts to fathom the truth of what is said.

Just as it is the precondition of reading, so desire is inherent in the discourse of character. Not surprisingly, therefore, novels tend to stress knowledge as the protagonist’s goal; and to this extent the modern detective story answers a primary need of realistic fiction. Of Austen’s novels, *Emma* is most obviously plotted on the heroine’s ignorance of a central mystery; and her discovery of the truth coincides, we are to
Desire

understand, with a new self-awareness leading to her own engagement to marry. In the other novels some element of knowledge is also at stake: Marianne Dashwood comes to see that passion is suicidal; Catherine Morland learns the real evil of General Tilney's greed; Elizabeth Bennet sees Darcy in a new light on her visit to Pemberley; Fanny Price comprehends the full impact of Mansfield during her exile in Portsmouth; and Anne Elliot finds at last that Wentworth still loves her. Knowledge and character development, essentials of the bildungsroman formula, are important to Austen's method; and Tory interpretations generally press hard the lessons the errant heroine must learn, as if this didactic gratification itself were not part of the author's game plan.

But in past readings this epistemological emphasis has ignored the dialogical text, which articulates the language of human consciousness in a rhythm of desire and boredom without end. While one part of the story satisfies the appetite for the resolution of conflict, another brings into doubt not only the possibility of fulfillment but even the freedom of the character engaged in the process of willing. It is this primary concern with the state of being that the Austen narrator/character articulates in one form or another throughout the story. Rasselas's demand, "Give me something to desire," implies the fundamental paradox of narrative dynamics: the subject cannot exist literally without some intention, and of course the subject is no more than a cipher without the reader's prior act of conjuring her up from the printed page. As it already expresses a desire, Rasselas's demand is tautological; and Imlac's moral psychology is in keeping with the quest motif of the romance: "Some desire is necessary to keep life in motion, and he, whose real wants are supplied, must admit those of fancy."¹

In practice, however, the fictional subject is no more free to choose his terms of desiring than the victim of passion is to alter his feelings.²

Desire is not merely a theme in, say, Johnson's and Austen's texts: it is inextricably woven into the fabric of narrative itself; and some authors call attention to this fact more than others, deliberately frustrating the reader's impatience for closure. Recent semiotics help to explain the phenomenon:

Because signs are used to communicate not only a finished product, the message, but also the processes which make the ongoing production of that message
Desire possible, a text functions much like a painting, which communicates a clearly identifiable narrative message, while also displaying the diacritical marks of that message all across the canvas without allowing a clear distinction of what is form and what is substance.\(^3\)

If the distinction between tenor and vehicle is illusory, Blanchard further points out, the dual structure of showing and telling, axiomatic in any representational theory, no longer obtains; instead of a single, unified text imaging an original, authoritative consciousness, narrative reveals the usual vagaries of overlapping codes and omissions intrinsic to speech.

Programmed within an erotic field, characters sometimes emerge to reflect on the tenuous source of their being and even to complain of their textual fate, as in Don Quixote's allusions to the evil enchanter (the author) who holds him in thrall: "I am in love, for no other reason than that it is incumbent on knights-errant to be so."\(^4\) Austen's parodic narrators take a similar predeterministic stance toward their subject. Marianne Dashwood is duty bound as sentimental heroine, we are told, to match feelings to her situation and "would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby" (SS, 83). By contrast, opposing texts jostle for control of Catherine Morland's mind:

Whether she thought of him so much, while she drank her warm wine and water, and prepared herself for bed, as to dream of him when there, cannot be ascertained; but I hope it was no more than in a slight slumber, or a morning doze at most; for if it be true, as a celebrated writer has maintained, that no young lady can be justified in falling in love before the gentleman's love is declared, it must be very improper that a young lady should dream of a gentleman before the gentleman is first known to have dreamt of her. (NA, 29–30)

Although "falling in love" is an attitude imitative of romance and is thus inevitably suspect, not all language of undying devotion is insincere simply because it has been used before; indeed, as Thackeray recognized,\(^5\) there are conditions when acting a role becomes identical with the role itself, when all the world becomes truly a stage. In another context, free indi-
rect discourse obviates the lover’s standard aria and thereby communicates deep feeling without any hint of posturing. What matters is Anne Elliot’s heartfelt reception of his words:

Of what he had then written, nothing was to be retracted or qualified. He persisted in having loved none but her. She had never been supplanted. He never even believed himself to see her equal. Thus much indeed he was obliged to acknowledge—that he had been constant unconsciously, nay unintentionally; that he had meant to forget her, and believed it to be done. He had imagined himself indifferent, when he had only been angry; and he had been unjust to her merits, because he had been a sufferer from them. Her character was now fixed on his mind as perfection itself, maintaining the loveliest medium of fortitude and gentleness. (P, 241; my emphasis)

Wentworth’s actual speech at the time may have been the outpouring of the individual soul, and nothing in the passage raises doubts about his sincerity; but it also belongs to a literary type, a category of the lover’s discourse that Roland Barthes identifies as “The Intractable.”

Love is more a situation than a sentiment; and in Austen the situation is nearly always triangular, mediated through a variety of rival claims on the protagonists. Although characters appear to move at random and undergo encounters by happenstance, even the everyday world turns out to be regulated by kinetic contraries. Despite the illusions of the moment, therefore, desire is not free and unconditional; rather, as characters discover by hindsight, it arises from certain opposing tensions in discourse, subject to no higher authority than the laws of motion. As we see in the same context quoted above, for instance, Wentworth frankly acknowledges the impact a rival has in enhancing his desire for Anne in the last hours before his declaration:

She had not mistaken him. Jealousy of Mr. Elliot had been the retarding weight, the doubt, the torment. That had begun to operate in the very hour of first meeting her in Bath; that had returned, after a short suspension, to ruin the concert; and that had influenced him in every thing he had said and done, or omitted to say and do, in the last four-and-twenty
hours. It had been gradually yielding to the better hopes which her looks, or words, or actions occasionally encouraged; it had been vanquished at last by those sentiments and those tones which had reached him while she talked with Captain Harville; and under the irresistible governance of which he had seized a sheet of paper, and poured out his feelings. (P, 241)

In this passage, rendered entirely in free indirect discourse, emotion is found to be the work of the moment, a product of energy generated from impetus and resistance, tension and release. Despite the "serious" tone of this confession, moreover, the mechanical forces involved are reminiscent of Pope's epigrammatic style:

When bold Sir Plume had drawn Clarissa down,
Chloe stept in, and kill'd him with a Frown;
She smil'd to see the doughty Hero slain,
But at her Smile, the Beau reviv'd again.  

Again, the parodic disclosure of character, with all its finite dependence on signs for its existence, operates uneasily with the narrative presentation of a moral consciousness, free and unconditioned. But it is this peculiar contradictory sense of character that is distinctive of Austen's comic art.

Because it is most outspokenly "French" in spirit, a fulfillment of the promise shown already in Lady Susan, Emma is our set piece for the interpretation of desire in Austen. Daring in its untrammeled will-to-power, the narrative of self here moves through one situation after another in an amoral dialectic usually embraced by the villainous characters in the other novels and openly avowed by the Crawfords. As in the other novels where the triangular situation culminates in an ordeal testing the heroine's strength to surrender her desire, Emma must suffer pain and humiliation before she attains the pleasure of at last dominating her world; but she differs from all the other Austen heroines in having a voice in her world from the outset.

From the analysis of the magnitude and direction of desire in Emma our inquiry turns to the "body language" of desire, mainly references to food and drink as signs of intentionality. Generally speaking, Austen places a Fieldingesque emphasis upon the appetite as a measure of good or bad nature, as well as of good or bad physical health; and though the
Desire

motif of food appears in the earliest novels, it is most symbolic in Mansfield Park and Emma. As the opening metaphor in Tom Jones suggests, the reader’s primary role is to cannibalize the character, to taste his humor directly on the palate after the narrator-chef has dressed it: “we shall represent Human Nature at first to the keen Appetite of our Reader, in that more plain and simple Manner in which it is found in the Country, and shall hereafter hash and ragoo it with all the high French and Italian Seasoning of Affectation and Vice which Courts and Cities afford.”

Processing the text, to extend the metaphor, incorporates language emotively, just as eating food incorporates the object into the self: appetite and consuming (tasting, mastication) are primary impulses, whereas critical judgment, the finesse of comparison, is secondary.

In contrast to desire, which is verbally structured on social relations, appetite, often to our embarrassment, is a basically visceral, nonsituational, and nonverbal urge of the body. Neither wish-making nor hunger is entirely subject to the conscious will, however, but is partly autonomous in the character’s emotional life. It is such blind forces within the “real-life” encounter that Austen recognizes in her intriguing phrase “the work of a moment,” a sudden release of energy after a period of tension that may seal the character’s fate without further ado. Textually these moments lie beyond the margins of words and are represented as interruptions—silence. Without some fragmentation of the character’s speech there is no apparent energy behind the words. Of course, not all instances of fragmentation are indubitable proof of “real feeling” but may simply indicate mindlessness, as in Mrs. Allen’s nervous ejaculations by the window (NA, 60) or in Mr. Elton’s feeble attempt to defend Emma’s portrait of Harriet (E, 48). Hence, by a tactical shift in narrative direction, the parodic voice not only signals the artificiality of representing the self but also the inadequacy of words to convey the lived self.

I. Emma in Love

Emma is probably the most Gallic novel in English, imbued with the acuity of La Rochefoucauld, Diderot, and Laclos, even to the extent of warping the rural English into
caricatures of plain dealers, vulnerable to the sly cynicism from across La Manche. It is not Austen's particular attitudes toward French culture that matter, however, but rather the convenience of this intertextual locus for a discourse on the radical egoism of desire called for in her undercutting of romantic situations. One announced game within the narrative concerns getting the heroine to fall in love the way attractive young women are supposed to do when courted by attractive young men; and, given the strategies of the interlopers in the story, only the exertion of a penetrating intelligence (emulating the author's and external reader's)—and of course the happenstance that conditions any moment—will preserve her from her predicted textual fate. Mary Crawford's jocular remark that selfishness needs to be forgiven because it is incurable (MP, 68) ignores, to be sure, the positive alternatives of egoism often borne out by Fanny who, besides exercising prudence, also feels compassion toward those who deserve it. In contrast to Fanny, Emma Woodhouse seems to have everything in her favor for the pursuit of happiness; and at times her self-esteem amounts to Mary's version of egoism. If Fanny's project is to become important to someone, Emma's is no less than that of being "first." The converse of Fanny in physical health, emotional temperament, social privilege, and worldly ambition, Emma nonetheless must undergo the same struggle for self-esteem in an environment felt to be competitive and often hostile; and whatever the advantage of her material comfort, she lacks her little predecessor's flawless judgment of others, which is finally the self's best defense. Yet despite her quixotic fantasies involving others, she is surprisingly accurate in assessing her own state of mind—at least more so than Mr. Knightley ever perceives. His project toward the heroine, moreover, ironically parallels Henry Crawford's toward Fanny: "I should like to see Emma in love, and in some doubt of a return; it would do her good" (E, 41). He is wrong, we know, in suspecting Frank Churchill to be the one to make her fall in love; and for all his perspicacity in the many offices he performs in the community, right down to the moment of his proposal to Emma he underestimates his own hold over her mind. In many ways Emma's selfishness is no more than her effort to be assertive as an individual, free from his authority; and the momentous events in Highbury are usually beyond her control.
Despite the narrator's introductory judgments of the heroine, Emma's situation from the beginning is anything but secure, as her behavior subsequently implies: her dependence on her father and her competitiveness with Mr. Knightley, her hatred of Jane Fairfax and Miss Bates, her vicarious pleasure as matchmaker, and her continual anxiety over social class. The project of being "first" entails at once a sufficient degree of self-esteem and a belief in the inferiority of the other, and to her credit Emma often has the honesty to admit her failure to meet these requirements. Even in moments of euphoric egotism, moreover, Emma appears uneasy that her own ambitions contradict the Woodhouse ideal of fixed hereditary order.

Her pervasive concern with social rank, reflected throughout the narrative, leads inevitably to making Miss Bates the pharmakos of the action. As Northrop Frye explains this ritual scapegoat: "The pharmakos is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes, like the mountaineer whose shout brings down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence." The pressure for something like Emma's violence to Miss Bates that fateful day at Box Hill had been mounting from the outset of the story: "Emma could not resist" (£, 370); and notwithstanding Mr. Knightley's lecture on how she should comport herself toward the pitiable old maid, the trauma of this scene surpasses anything the hero, heroine, or narrator can formulate in language.

According to Bernard Paris, the irresistible pressure involved her dislike of Miss Bates for constantly lauding Jane, her fear of being associated with the lower elements of her society, her hatred of the woman for being too good-natured and silly, and for being a spinster burdened with a senile mother and yet apparently content in spite of it, approving of everything and everyone indiscriminately. But to invoke Johnson's Hobbesian point (in Rambler no. 166) about the dangers of obsequiousness in receiving charity, Miss Bates clearly brings the violence on herself by talking too much about gratitude, an interpretation that will be elaborated upon in my fourth chapter. Briefly stated, a lack of self-esteem is universally contemptible, whether in the giver or in the receiver. It goes without saying that all this anxious discourse on patronage and
Desire

subordination reflects the unsettling effects of the new economic and political order that accompanied the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars.

A youthful urge to be free of a tiresome society is enough to account for Emma’s abhorrence of Miss Bates, but the poor woman’s obsessive speeches only make matters worse by reflecting embarrassingly on the giver/receiver roles in egoistically motivated charity. Emma especially resents the woman’s fulsome gratitude and even mimics her manner (E, 225), as does the narrator, eliciting the reader’s own aggressions toward the scapegoat. Again, the situation automatically generates responses from the various participants in the encounter. Knightley’s reprimand, however, implies that one is free to feel sympathy when called upon: “She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion” (E, 375). But in spite of this lofty instruction, Emma is not free to choose the appropriate emotions for the circumstance, especially since as a woman it is her burden, after all, to have to enter into conversation with this garrulous fool. The pride of the moment had possessed her.

Although the narrator informs us that Emma “was very compassionate; and the distresses of the poor were as sure of relief from her personal attention and kindness, her counsel and her patience, as from her purse” (E, 86), the heroine’s dialogue with Harriet immediately after visiting the sick cottagers reads like an antidote to the modish sentimentalism: “If we feel for the wretched, enough to do all we can for them, the rest is empty sympathy, only distressing to ourselves” (E, 87). Her delight at seeing Mr. Elton on his way to the same poor family drives home again the eighteenth-century moralists’ stress on the superior pleasures of giving as opposed to those of receiving: “To fall in with each other on such an errand as this,” thought Emma; ‘to meet in a charitable scheme; this will bring a great increase of love on each side. I should not wonder if it were to bring on the declaration” (E, 87–88). The meditation is self-serving and made at the expense of the poor as well as of the imagined lovers. To be fair, however, except for some religiously inspired selflessness, the alternative to this crisply rational “scheme” is the maudlin discourse on the poor that Austen shunned. Whatever the actual feelings involved, muddled as they must be over such a hopelessly vague and perennial
Desire

evil, there is a language commensurate with what one can do to alter real circumstances. Furthermore, if her tone seems glib on this occasion, Emma at other moments is sincere enough to send the “whole hind-quarter” of the Hartfield porker to the Bateses’ without consulting her father beforehand (E, 172); and the “child from the cottage, setting out, according to orders, with her pitcher, to fetch broth from Hartfield” (E, 88) also testifies to her genuine charity, comparable to Mr. Knightley’s own quiet ministry. Mute actions, rather than banal sentiments, are the best evidence of charitable feelings. Thus his lecture on her duty to the poor was hardly necessary; what is more to the point is whether anyone in Emma’s situation could honestly avoid expressing contempt for Miss Bates. In an unusually probing conversation Harriet herself ventured the comparison between Emma and Miss Bates:

“That is as formidable an image as you could present, Harriet; and if I thought I should ever be like Miss Bates! so silly—so satisfied—so smiling—so prosing—so undistinguishing and unfastidious—and so apt to tell every thing relative to every body about me, I would marry to-morrow. But between us, I am convinced there never can be any likeness, except in being unmarried.”

“But still, you will be an old maid! and that’s so dreadful!”

“Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public!” (E, 84–85)

As Emma goes on about the crucial difference between being a single woman with means and one without, her vindictiveness toward Miss Bates is clear-cut (“she is only too good natured and too silly to suit me” [E, 85]) and yet guarded at the same time: “Poverty certainly has not contracted her mind: I really believe, if she had only a shilling in the world, she would be very likely to give away sixpence of it; and nobody is afraid of her: that is a great charm” (E, 85). It is a strange concession for Emma to make, the most positive ever in the story, after ridiculing her enemy’s behavior; and she may indeed fear some likeness between themselves other than in being unmarried. Whatever the hidden motives, Emma cannot exercise the requisite charity unless she is confident that her wealth
distinguishes her from the poor woman; and Knightley never recognizes this instability.

Emma's situation resembles that described by Stendhal, who explored the structure of egoism against the cataclysmic changes of the Napoleonic era and identified the stock character of the *vaniteux*. Raised by sycophants who had flattered him into the belief that he should be happier than others, the *vaniteux* enters the world with a metaphysical handicap: "It is because the *vaniteux* feels the emptiness mentioned in Ecclesiastes growing inside him that he takes refuge in shallow behavior and imitation. Because he cannot face his nothingness he throws himself on Another who seems to be spared by the curse." If in orthodox Christian morality pride and vanity are illusory states produced by a turning away from God and a withdrawing into the self, the major European novelists from Stendhal to Proust, as Girard states, have shown that the contrary conditions of other-directedness are imitative to the extreme of self-abandonment known as *bovarysm*. While Emma Woodhouse's possessive desire may culminate only in painful embarrassment in contrast to Emma Bovary's suicidal narcissism, both characters nevertheless experience the need to transcend their circumscribed conditions ("so absolutely fixed, in the same place" [E, 143]) and to seek escape in a mediator of some kind. If Emma Bovary is shown to have read the wrong material for dealing with the everyday situations, Emma Woodhouse is no less romantically inclined when it comes to "reading" the movements of others. Her fantasy of Jane Fairfax's erotic link with Mr. Dixon, for instance, plays upon the conventional triadic arrangement of romantic passion.

Perhaps the clearest tie between the two Emmas is their bourgeois malaise of snobbism. The antithesis of good citizenship, snobbery is, ironically, a problem arising from a more or less egalitarian society, where class distinctions no longer protect the individual from the anxiety of status: significantly, the age of the prince regent and Beau Brummell abounded with controversy over dress and manners. The faithful medieval mind, absorbed with the vanity of human existence, could look upward to the divine mediator for deliverance; after the collapse of the ancien régime, the desiring subject was reduced to making a god of others in the finite world while still condemned to self-contempt. Since the mediator was no longer divine but merely possessed of some in-
Desire

tangible social advantages like nobility, the snob was likely to hate himself in the person imitated: “Hatred is individualistic. It nourishes fiercely the illusion of an absolute difference between the Self and that Other from which nothing separates it.”

Deprived of the means of skirting this illusion, Emma tacitly shares her father’s phobia toward social mobility in principle; and like Mrs. Elton’s Maple Grove snobbery, Emma’s resentment of any aspirant among the middle ranks contradicts the same ambitious individualism which both women endorse for themselves. Their emulation of Mr. Knightley is symptomatic: while Mrs. Elton tries to vulgarize him by breaching decorum of address, thus pretending an unwarranted familiarity, Emma values him all the more as a role model by keeping him on a pedestal for the public to admire at a distance. Despite the wishful thinking embodied in the comic plot, which finally assigns appropriate places to the various female contenders, there is a lingering suspicion to the very end that not even an exemplary gentleman like Mr. Knightley can protect the social hierarchy from the egalitarian rhetoric, on the one hand, and from the elitist overreaching of the nouveau riche, on the other.

Emma’s disapproval of Robert Martin for being a farmer, of the Coles for their former connections in “trade” (her father refuses their invitation on the grounds of his health and Mr. Cole’s temperament, but clearly it is the presumption of upstarts that bothers him most), of Mrs. Goddard for being merely a teacher, and of Miss Bates for having nothing but the memory of her clergyman father, shows her own dread of the second- and third-rate; simultaneously, it betrays her own lack of a clear identity in this society. An exception to this behavior is her kindness toward Mr. Weston and an attractive loyalty to the woman who married him; nevertheless, in later scenes she privately resents his indiscriminate affability.

Throughout this story the language of desire is emphatically based on difference and hierarchy. Mr. Elton’s proposal shocks Emma into evaluating her present status as the heiress of thirty thousand pounds: “Perhaps it was not fair to expect him to feel how very much he was her inferior in talent, and all the elegancies of mind. The very want of such equality might prevent his perception of it; but he must know that in fortune and consequence she was greatly his superior.”
Desire

(E, 136). Though acknowledging the inferiority of her talent to Jane's, whose social life otherwise seems predetermined to fall well below hers, Emma needs everything at her disposal to condemn Elton's presumptuous claim on her. In the midst of what the narrator terms her "raving," however, is the important revelation that the Woodhouses stem from the "younger branch" of an old family, that Hartfield is only a "notch" in the Donwell Abbey estate, and that "their fortune, from other sources," [that is, from trade] made them "scarcely secondary to Donwell Abbey itself, in every other kind of consequence." Scarcely secondary, but secondary nonetheless! Not fully apparent to the heroine is her deep-seated rivalry with the hero on account of his greater power derived from family, fortune, talent, and male prerogative, even as she paradoxically upholds his standards for her own strivings. In spite of her outward self-assurance, therefore, Emma yearns with other womanly aspirants, including Mrs. Elton and Mrs. Churchill, to find the means of her own personal legitimacy in a man's power structure; and the consequence is her neurotic fear of bearing any resemblance to a disturbingly nimble, if impoverished, old maid.

Implicit in the dynamics of desire is a falling-off of energy, when the mind becomes temporarily depressed by nothing to wish for; and, again, the character must exert herself if only to prevent redundancy and oblivion. The failure of the Box Hill scheme, in sharp contrast to the brief happiness attained at the Crown Inn ball, is simply a moment of truth revealing the spiritual anarchy of the Highbury world, which threatens to sink under its own ennui; and not even the audacious gamesters can stem the contagion: "At first it was downright dulness to Emma. She had never seen Frank Churchill so silent and stupid. He said nothing worth hearing—looked without seeing—admired without intelligence—listened without knowing what she said. While he was so dull, it was no wonder that Harriet should be dull likewise, and they were both insufferable" (E, 367).

Since blaming Churchill for Harriet's dullness only shows how far afield Emma's perception can stray, a moralist might take the view that this ennui is an evil of egoism and that the hero's stoic rationalism provides immunity from this disease. Thus Mrs. Weston's earlier remark could serve as the norm here: "I do not think Mr. Knightley would be much dis-
Desire

turbed by Miss Bates. Little things do not irritate him” (E, 225–26). Yet elsewhere Emma’s mind can also be provident toward little things, and without any assistance from Knightley. While waiting for Harriet to finish her purchases at Ford’s, Emma converts all the trivial activities outside the door into a picturesque townscape: “A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer” (E, 233). But neither reason nor the imagination can save Emma from the paucity of objects to contemplate on that particular day; the very necessity of mingling with unwanted company has a claustrophobic effect, forcing her into aggressive speech for release. Until this moment, access to her hostile feelings was mainly the privilege of the dilatory Harriet or of the narrator. As her own recommendation to Frank Churchill on self-command (E, 364) assures us, Emma knows painfully well her duty at Box Hill but cannot resist her attack anyway.

Emma is not to blame, however, for the ennui that brought on the offending words. At Donwell the day before, we recall, not even Mr. Knightley’s flawless hospitality could prevent the comic world from falling apart; and Emma’s most enjoyable moment was spent alone in reverie over a pastoral, harmonious world: “It was a sweet view—sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive” (E, 360). This is the daytime equivalent to Fanny Price’s nocturnal repose by the window, away from the madding crowd; thus, rather than polar opposites, both heroines respond to the “luxury of silence” (MP, 278) and to the “comfort of being sometimes alone” (E, 363).

In another context, for instance in Marianne Dashwood’s narcissistic moods, Austen might have invoked Johnson on activity as therapy against the insatiable desires spawned in solitude and idleness; but Emma is no solipsistic dreamer and attempts to carry out her social duties. Lacking the opportunity of private indulgence in the scenery at Box Hill, a pleasure that seems unaccountably lost on the others, she enters the play of conversation as a modus vivendi to cope with the existential emptiness felt from the beginning of the day. Emma’s problem here is not self-deception, nor is it an uncritical love of games, but rather the disturbing absence of a saving illusion: “She laughed because she was disappointed;
and though she liked him [Churchill] for his attentions, and thought them all, whether in friendship, admiration, or playfulness, extremely judicious, they were not winning back her heart" (E, 368). In the predicament of having nothing to desire, Emma resorts to a familiar aristocratic text, to erotic play, "glad to be enlivened" (368) for the moment by imagining (self-consciously) her part as female libertine, with Miss Bates as the prescribed petit bourgeois victim of her wit. It was Mary Crawford's predicament as well; but Emma, in contrast, shares Fanny's concern, if not her talent, for feeling the emotion appropriate to the situation.

No matter that the plot's didactic contour requires it, Emma's humiliation by Knightley's rebuke discloses yet another French text in her erotic pleasure derived from pain. Despite the requirement by the Protestant ethic of a conversion, her visceral hatred of Miss Bates remains constant to the end of the novel; and her real change of heart appears mainly in the mediating friendship formed with Jane Fairfax after her discovery of the engagement, a friendship anticipated at various moments in the heroine's consciousness earlier in the story. What is most significant about the energy released in this encounter, however, is that Mr. Knightley's angry words arouse a new feeling in her that neither she nor the narrator ever interprets: the thrill of being punished. As long as she can remain detached, Emma's relationships with others, when not merely boring, involve mainly vicarious pleasure. Harriet, for instance, is a delightful plaything, a "walking companion," perhaps a David Hamilton daydream, with "those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces" (E, 23). But in contrast to her usual lackadaisical interest in others, Emma's response to Mr. Knightley's wrath is passionate—a rare feeling of ecstasy, a complete surrender of the self to the other on the model of Christian agape:

In this ecstatic love, then, we are far from egocentric love. The lover has no thought of himself, except that he would willingly give his all for the other. Secondly, this love is almost a dark passion; it is a fire and a wound; it is violent and sacrificial; it cares nothing for reason, because it is a madness and a rapture, and lastly it has no ulterior purpose; it seeks no reward;
Desire

love is the end and consummation. Love, therefore, of this kind is above all; it looks outside itself to another person, and it is beyond reason and nature.\textsuperscript{17}

The "wound" inflicted drives her on a mission of "penitence" to Miss Bates; and during Knightley's farewell before going to London she experiences something akin to rapture (a word usually bracketed in Austen's text for feelings imitative of romantic texts) at his slightest gesture of approval:

—It seemed as if there were an instantaneous impression in her favour, as if his eyes received the truth from her's, and all that had passed of good in her feelings were at once caught and honoured.—He looked at her with a glow of regard. She was warmly gratified—and in another moment still more so, by a little movement of more than common friendliness on his part.—He took her hand;—whether she had not herself made the first motion, she could not say—she might, perhaps, have rather offered it—but he took her hand, pressed it, and certainly was on the point of carrying it to his lips—when, from some fancy or other, he suddenly let it go. (E, 385–86)

There are few scenes anywhere in Austen that come as close to depicting the heroine's utter trust in the male counterpart, without the least hint of ridicule, as this one of unfulfilled desire. Although oblivious to the fact, Mr. Knightley, in contrast to Henry Crawford's experiment on Fanny, has succeeded in his project of making Emma fall in love and be in doubt of having it returned.

The violence of this encounter has unleashed new energies and refined the heroine's awareness of herself as a sexual being through reference to quasi-religious texts on suffering and humiliation. Emma Woodhouse, of course, is not Emma Bovary; and it may be that she is simply exaggerating her guilt and indulging in masochistic dreams as an alternative to the ultimate crisis of Box Hill, the utter dearth of eros at the moment. Having savored this frightening experience of ritual bondage, however, she readily snaps back to her former self and overcompensates for her brief defeat by dreams of grandeur, feeling most in command of events just before discovering Harriet's love for Knightley. Armed with the knowledge of
Jane’s and Frank’s engagement, she mitigates her anger at having been used by considering what the news will mean for “Harriet, poor Harriet!”—now presumably reduced to the carrion of dark passion. Furthermore, though having been duped all along by Churchill, she takes comfort in the thought that her vain flirtation had given her real power over Jane: “—Emma could now imagine why her own attentions had been slighted. This discovery laid many smaller matters open. No doubt it had been from jealousy.—In Jane’s eyes she had been a rival; and well might any thing she could offer of assistance or regard be repulsed” (E, 403).

Emma is an imaginist, as many readers have said, but the narrative only superficially declares her need of abandoning this talent. On the contrary, she emulates her author’s own intertextuality as she “reads” Jane’s story. Mock heroic metaphors of torture imply all the sadism of imagining the Gothic heroine’s writhing agonies: “An airing in the Hartfield carriage would have been the rack, and arrow-root from the Hartfield storeroom must have been poison” (E, 403). It was only a passing thought; but nevertheless, to the narrator’s secret delight, it could not be stifled. The next sentence weighs the degree of power gained by her newfound knowledge against the quantity of charity to be allotted to either Jane or Harriet under the circumstances: “She understood it all; and as far as her mind could disengage itself from the injustice and selfishness of angry feelings, she acknowledged that Jane Fairfax would have neither elevation nor happiness beyond her desert. But poor Harriet was such an engrossing charge! There was little sympathy to be spared for any body else” (E, 403). As if rewound all the more tightly after her momentary selflessness and dependence, Emma’s ego glories in the knowledge of the secret engagement and its apparently dire consequences for her protégée.

While deriving self-esteem from her exclusive grasp of events (“She understood it all”), Emma can rise to being charitable toward her rivals; but with the return of self-contempt at Harriet’s traumatic declaration, she loses control and suffers the deepest jealousy ever. Like Victor Frankenstein confronting the monster of his own creation, Emma panics at the metamorphosis of the sweet, docile, and selfless object into a discriminating judge of gentlemen, who repeats the very words of an earlier lesson on the differences between a farmer and
a man of quality. Now, in imitation of other Austen heroines, strength in defeat is all that Emma can hope for as she endures Harriet’s detailed account of her romance with Knightley until they are happily interrupted by Mr. Woodhouse’s entrance; but after all the compression of outward demeanor, when finally alone, “this was the spontaneous burst of Emma’s feelings: ‘Oh God! that I had never seen her!’” (E, 411). At this point one may surmise that she actually regrets Harriet’s recovery from the “putrid sore throat.” Now that the distance in triangular desire has dangerously narrowed and brought the three participants almost face to face, there is no brooking the usurper (“there would be no need of compassion to the girl who believed herself loved by Mr. Knightley”).

Whatever her personal loss in this matter, Emma resorts to a snobbish elevation of the beloved to vindicate her hatred of the rival; and the whole reverie is in free indirect discourse:

Mr. Knightley and Harriet Smith!—It was an union to distance every wonder of the kind.—The attachment of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax became commonplace, threadbare, stale in the comparison, exciting no surprise, presenting no disparity, affording nothing to be said or thought.—Mr. Knightley and Harriet Smith!—Such an elevation on her side! Such a debasement on his!—It was horrible to Emma to think how it must sink him in the general opinion, to foresee the smiles, the sneers, the merriment it would prompt at his expense; the mortification and disdain of his brother, the thousand inconveniences to himself. (E, 413)

Aside from her obvious rivalry with her female charge, Emma dreads the possibility that the man she had always admired from a sexual distance, without the threatening necessity of marriage in adult life, should stumble into the mill of the conventional and deprive her of further imitative desire: his sterling class is her only assurance of that “absolute difference” to distinguish herself from the second- and third-rate. Her eventual sympathy with Jane, however, shows a liberal impulse that contradicts this obsession with hierarchy and assures us that the sentiments toward Harriet are greatly distorted by jealousy.
A major twist to this novel, nevertheless, is its refusal to bow to conventional plot solutions to restore a neat equilibrium between the heroine and her rival. Characters have no way of escaping the “evil of their situation.” If Emma’s feelings toward Harriet immediately after the fateful discovery are unrelievedly selfish, they do not improve even after Knightley’s proposal abruptly allays her worst fears. Upon his spontaneous words of love, Emma’s immediate reaction is to gloat over her enemy’s defeat: “to see . . . that Harriet was nothing; that she was everything herself” (E, 430). With a perverse gush of egotism, she hugs herself for not having revealed to him the truth about Harriet’s error: “there was time also to rejoice that Harriet’s secret had not escaped her, and to resolve that it need not and should not.” Although her self-esteem had enabled her to take a charitable view of Jane’s fortune, here it requires a persistent rejection of Harriet as a friend because of the imagined rivalry between them. While listening to Knightley’s proposal, Emma can think only of Harriet’s demise and her own determination to withhold any assistance: “for as to any of that heroism of sentiment which might have prompted her to entreat him to transfer his affection from herself to Harriet, as infinitely the most worthy of the two . . . Emma had it not” (E, 431). Then, in a parody of religious sacrifice, which warns us against taking too seriously the whole business of the heroine’s moral reform: “She felt for Harriet, with pain and with contrition; but no flight of generosity run mad, opposing all that could be probable or reasonable, entered her brain” (E, 431). As in the conjunction of Mars and Venus, sexual love is warfare; and the narrative leaves few doubts about how deeply felt were the “pain” and “contrition” for her vanquished enemy.

Although from this stage on Harriet is merely “dead weight” to Emma, a continually irksome reminder of past errors, the former is still full of surprises: for instance, her quick return to Robert Martin (“it really was too much to hope even of Harriet, that she could be in love with more than three men in one year” [E, 450]); and the discovery of her humble origins (“The stain of illegitimacy, unbleached by nobility or wealth, would have been a stain indeed” (E, 428)). Hence, as Emma’s self-esteem reaches new heights by the end of the story: “—The intimacy between her and Emma must sink: their friendship must change into a calmer sort of good will;
Desire

and, fortunately, what ought to be, and must be, seemed already beginning, and in the most gradual, natural manner" (E, 482). A question never raised in the text is whether Emma would ever have gone so far as to become engaged had it not been for Harriet's misapprehension of Mr. Knightley's love; in any case, the heroine is too caught up in the mechanics of triangular desire to see that her power over the rival has obviated her former detachment. Emma's ego now depends precariously upon Mr. Knightley's favor, and the alternative is too frightening to contemplate—an utter void equivalent to death.

In view of her entrapment in the text, therefore, Emma could readily say, with Don Quixote, that she is in love because it is incumbent upon the heroine of romance to be so. If love proves to be more a situation than an idea, perhaps La Rochefoucauld best describes the motive: "It is difficult to define love; what can be said is that in the soul it is a passion to dominate another, in the mind it is mutual understanding, whilst in the body it is simply a delicately veiled desire to possess the beloved after many rites and mysteries." Another maxim of the great French egoist suggests why desire is inevitably triangular in Austen: "Jealousy is in some measure just and reasonable, since it merely aims at keeping something that belongs to us or we think belongs to us, whereas envy is a frenzy that cannot bear anything that belongs to others." Compassion, charity, and friendship are surely possible in Austen's fictional world; but what is most remarkable about her comic art is the moral neutrality it shows toward such traditional vices as hatred, jealousy, envy, pride, and other modes of self-aggrandizement condemned by Christian tradition. From our brief analysis of Emma as desiring subject, the reason for this neutrality should be clear: emotion (the character's emotion, to give it a place in the text) is not free and spontaneous but inherently contextual and triadic in structure. "Some desire is necessary to keep life in motion"; unless a character is given the situation necessary for desire, however, there is no life. This is the vicious circle that Emma comprehends in the end and exploits unconscionably to be first. Throughout her struggle to avoid the pitfalls of romantic passion and the degradation of being among the second- and third-rate heroines of pulp fiction, Emma nevertheless emulates other texts, especially from the eighteenth-century French
libertine tradition; and thus without always knowing it, she has no choice but to play the game prescribed for her.

2. "The Power of Eating and Drinking"

As events prove, Emma's following remark is dramatically ironic: "There does seem to be something in the air of Hartfield which gives love exactly the right direction, and sends it into the very channel where it ought to flow" (E, 75). At the moment, her words are derisive of Mr. Elton's "falling in love" as a ridiculous loss of selfhood. When she herself falls, as we have seen, the experience is not the self-destructive desire, the "dark passion" that de Rougemont traces to medieval cults; rather, it is a form of agape, an ecstatic surrender of ego to the beloved that seems both sacred and sexual. It does not take long, of course, for Emma to revert to her old self and "bad faith" roles; nevertheless, the evocation of desire and renunciation in her narrative has a quasi-religious intensity that sets her apart from the other characters. It is this mythical deliverance from the ritual bondage that A. O. J. Cockshut observes when citing Austen, along with Richardson and D. H. Lawrence, as a writer who renders sexual conflict with unusual candor.

Yet because of censorship, literary decorum, and other historical restraints, in Austen's text the body is scarcely described at all, whether clothed or naked. It is known or "lived," however, through certain metonyms, especially those of food and drink; and, as in Fielding and Sterne, even these references sometimes depend on innuendo to avoid the viscera. Although Don Quixote is usually regarded as the prototype of the novel, its attack on conventions of romance employs the digestive tract more boldly than any fiction before Joyce; to a large extent its form resembles what Frye calls the anatomy of satire, which tends "to become what the world calls obscene," forcing us to contemplate "excretion, copulation, and similar embarrassments." Like Don Quixote and Sancho, Gulliver is disarmingly frank about urination and defecation, though all are reticent about sexual intercourse and, together with Uncle Toby, Walter Shandy, and Leopold Bloom, may be impotent.
Desire

By contrast, the romance usually has such "high" norms of reality that not only bodily functions but even the mention of food seems inappropriate. The witty narrator in Gottfried von Strassburg's Tristan, for instance, distinguishes between everyday reality and the erotic world:

Some people are smitten with curiosity and astonishment, and plague themselves with the question how these two companions, Tristan and Isolde, nourished themselves in this wasteland! I will tell them and assuage their curiosity. They looked at one another and nourished themselves with that! Their sustenance was the eye's increase. They fed in their grotto on nothing but love and desire. The two lovers who formed its court had small concern for their provender.23

Lacking such passionate abandonment, however, Austen's characters do have physical appetites; and their interest in food belongs to the text of festive comedy.

Mimetic criticism, as seen in Frye and Cockshut, assumes an Aristotelian hierarchy of mind over body and thus credits realism to a text that refers to "low" aspects of physical and social existence not mentioned in other genres. Although limited for the most part to investigations of a privileged class, Austen's novels do reveal by innuendo and symbolic allusion a surprising frankness toward the human body; and occasionally there are traces of the Augustan satirist's voice anatomizing characters as fundamentally material beings subject to blind appetites. A basic element of exchange, the concrete nexus of subject and object, food initiates a variety of behavior among donors and recipients alike, ranging from simple gustatory impulses to the most neurotic fixations in self-affirming, from such stock comic humors as gluttons and hypochondriacs to discriminating gourmets and good providers. Although stereotypes exist independently and invite predictable responses, the discourse involving food and drink has a wide range of intentions in the Austen text.

For the early-nineteenth-century woman writers especially, the allusion to appetite had political significance. Set against the ascetic moralists of the time, who, like Dr. Gregory, believed that the "luxury of eating" for a woman "is beyond expression indelicate and disgusting,"24 Austen's cheerful reference to food in her letters and novels betrays a meaningful
aplomb. Even before the Victorian period, when angel worship reached its peak, the mores of woman's "delicacy" made it unthinkable for her to have any appetite at all—whether sexual or gustatory; and thus Austen seems puckish in reporting an acquaintance's aberration: "Mrs. F. A. has had one fainting fit lately; it came on as usual after eating a hearty dinner, but did not last long." 

While overeaters come in for attack in her fiction, the ones without a real zest for food seem the least sympathetic; and, of course, her satire on the cult of sensibility ridicules neurotic pretensions concerning diet. Rather than take laudanum to settle the nerves, as her hypochondriacal mother was used to doing, Austen held the commonsensical view that eating well was the best remedy. When her brother Edward arrives in Bath looking "fagged," she trusts that the "bustle of sending for tea, coffee, and sugar, &c., and going out to taste a cheese himself, will do him good." Similarly, when Frank Churchill came "out of humour" to the party at Donwell, Emma "knew that eating and drinking were often the cure of such incidental complaints, she recommended his taking some refreshment; he would find abundance of everything in the dining-room—and she humanely pointed out the door" (E, 364). As a stereotype of sensibility, Marianne Dashwood is unwilling to dance and becomes quickly exhausted by the exercise; and true to form, she has no appetite for days on end. Likewise Jane Fairfax, while enduring the uncertainty of her secret engagement, has special dietary problems; and Mr. Woodhouse's dread of food, above all of the wedding cake, seems to imply his morbid repression of sexual desire.

Aside from its more narrowly feminist implications, food can generally be a means of expressing power and influence in society. Despite all her other faults, Mrs. Bennet redeems herself near the end of the story by providing a festive board for her well-to-do guests: "she did not think any thing less than two courses, could be good enough for a man, on whom she had such anxious designs, or satisfy the appetite and pride of one who had ten thousand a-year" (PP, 338). The result of her good sense is propitious: "The dinner was as well dressed as any I ever saw. The venison was roasted to a turn—and everybody said, they never saw so fat a haunch. The soup was fifty times better than what we had at the Lucas's last week;
and even Mr. Darcy acknowledged, that the partridges were remarkably well done; and I suppose he has two or three French cooks at least" (PP, 342). In *Mansfield Park* the food service seems identified less with any particular person (Lady Bertram is too indolent to provide comfort herself) than with the house as an institution. Thus, while entrapped like Clarissa by an unwanted suitor, Fanny feels joy upon being interrupted by a domestic ritual: “The solemn procession, headed by Baddely, of tea-board, urn, and cake-bearers, made its appearance, and delivered her from a grievous imprisonment of body and mind” (MP, 344). In contrast, she perceives the misery at Portsmouth, “the boys begging for toasted cheese, her father calling out for his rum and water, and Rebecca never where she ought to be” (MP, 387). Whereas Mansfield’s Baddely can minister such a sumptuous ritual, Portsmouth’s Rebecca codifies the utter despair of poverty:

She [Fanny] was so little equal to Rebecca’s puddings, and Rebecca’s hashes, brought to table as they all were, with such accompaniments of half-cleaned plates, and not half-cleaned knives and forks, that she was very often constrained to defer her heartiest meal, till she could send her brothers in the evening for biscuits and buns. After being nursed up at Mansfield, it was too late in the day to be hardened at Portsmouth. (MP, 413)

At least in consciousness, Fanny is safely removed from T. S. Eliot’s typist, who “lays out food in tins”; she is also hardly Trilling’s ascetic Christian heroine when envying Henry Crawford’s freedom to enjoy the “best dinner that a capital inn afforded” (MP, 412).²⁷

For transparent economic reasons, epicurean indulgence is regarded as a male prerogative; but it appears to be more a compulsive disorder, not a pleasure, as in Sir John Middleton’s manic hospitality as compensation for his wife’s cold aloofness. Similarly, Mr. Weston’s married life, in Mr. John Knightley’s view, depends “much more upon what is called society for his comforts, that is, upon the power of eating and drinking, and playing whist with his neighbours five times a-week, than upon family affection, or any thing that home affords” (E, 96). Taxed by another chronic mingler, the Dashwoods decline Middleton’s aggressive hospitality: they
Desire

had “no curiosity to see how Mr. and Mrs. Palmer ate their dinner, and had no expectation of pleasure from them in any other way” (SS, 108–09). Not having such power of their own to bolster selfhood, the visit would be only a punishment to the Dashwood women. Yet, even the Middletons' company is more welcome than that of the John Dashwoods: “The dinner was a grand one, the servants were numerous, and every thing bespokethe Mistress's inclination for shew, and the Master's ability to support it” (SS, 233). At this ostentatious event, there was “no poverty of any kind, except of conversation.” Again, the power of eating and drinking is ruthlessly exploitative of the disenfranchised.

In other contexts, besides sheer self-aggrandizement, behavior associated with food reveals less conscious forms of giving and taking. Because of political inequality, Mary Wollstonecraft asserts, one sex is more prone to gourmandizing than the other:

Men are certainly more under the influence of their appetites than women; and their appetites are more depraved by unbridled indulgence and the fastidious contrivances of satiety. Luxury has introduced a refinement of gluttony which is so beastly, that a perception of seemliness of behaviour must be worn out before one being could eat immoderately in the presence of another, and afterwards complain of the oppression that his intemperance naturally produced.  

Austen's humorous gluttons, in keeping with this contemporary view, reflect some of the traditional harangues against luxury; but, of greater interest to the modern reader, they embody nuances that go beyond such tendentiousness. Besides addressing a social evil, her overeaters are mainly ciphers in a pattern of frantic acquisitiveness. Although General Tilney, for instance, is not the Gothic villain that Catherine had imagined, nevertheless his voracious appetite signifies the shameless greed subsequently demonstrated. At Woodston, Henry triumphs in offering his father a meal good enough to eat but falls short in the quantity of food expected:

She could not but observe that the abundance of the dinner did not seem to create the smallest astonishment in the General; nay, that he was even looking at the side-table for cold meat which was not there. His
son and daughter’s observations were of a different kind. They had seldom seen him eat so heartily at any table but his own; and never before known him so little disconcerted by the melted butter’s being oiled. (NA, 214–15)

Unlike her friends, who are accustomed to their father’s eating habits, Catherine feels a Gothic “astonishment” toward the giant masticator, a monster almost on the scale of Kronos and equally capable of consuming his own children.

Among all the overindulgers in Austen’s repertory, Dr. Grant is self-destructively hedonistic and of course a disgrace to his profession; yet, compulsively driven in his vice, he is too easy a target for the alazons in the story. Not only is Mrs. Norris’s criticism of him superfluous, but her own niggardliness is a worse evil because it is hypocritically represented as thrift. Besides alluding to the stereotype defined by Wollstonecraft, Austen doubtless has in mind the eighteenth-century moralist’s topic of the “contempt of the clergy,” which culminated in the Evangelical movement; and with such a helpmeet as Fanny, Edmund, by contrast, will become an exemplary preacher.

So much is clear. But if Dr. Grant lacks any real authority in his calling, he nevertheless “talks for victory” against Mrs. Norris on a subject he knows best—food, after her pious remark about the apricot tree planted by her deceased husband:

“The tree thrives well beyond a doubt, madam,” replied Dr. Grant. “The soil is good; and I never pass it without regretting, that the fruit should be so little worth the trouble of gathering.”

“Sir, it is a moor park, we bought it as a moor park, and it cost us—that is, it was a present from Sir Thomas, but I saw the bill, and I know it cost seven shillings, and was charged as a moor park.”

“You were imposed on, ma’am,” replied Dr. Grant; “these potatoes have as much the flavour of a moor park apricot, as the fruit from that tree. It is an insipid fruit at the best; but a good apricot is eatable, which none from my garden are.” (MP, 54)

Like most other references to food, the conversation here occurs without any narrative interpolation; and the reader is on
his own to determine its significance. At the level of allegory, the spiritually barren Mrs. Norris is not only childless but, as is implied by her preoccupation with the price of the tree, a blight on her husband’s husbandry as well (Chaucer’s “shiten shepherde”). Dr. Grant’s own marriage is also sterile; and his gluttony seems to have displaced his sexual drive, as Tom Bertram, who should know, shrewdly observes to Fanny while Mrs. Grant is dancing with Mr. Yates: “between ourselves, she, poor woman! must want a lover as much as any one of them. A desperate full life her’s must be with the doctor,’ making a sly face as he spoke towards the chair of the latter” (MP, 119). This motif of gourmandizing as a perversion of the sexual appetite already appeared in the character of Mr. Hurst, whose motions include ragouts, claret, or cards as alternatives to sleeping on the sofa. What is particularly interesting about the conversation above, however, is the way an otherwise negative stereotype like Tom can suddenly gain a voice in the text and direct our attention to meanings neglected in the “normative” commentary.

Curiously, a related stereotype, the drunkard, far from the impotence of the glutton, seems to have a dangerously overactive sexual appetite, and is not only given to producing, like Mr. Price, a number of unwanted children but is also callous, withdrawn, and hostile toward women as companions. Tom Bertram himself cannot take Fanny seriously because from the first she exhibits, more than his sisters, a feminine vulnerability. In general, Austen’s topers are coarsely physical toward women and assume that their whole purpose in life is to catch rich husbands. The uncertain sexual connotation of “tumble” implies that the female is a mere object of appetite, without any mind of her own. While advising Elinor about Willoughby’s potential, Sir John Middleton remarks bluffly: “if I were you, I would not give him up to my younger sister in spite of all this tumbling down hills” (SS, 44); and on their way to Claverton Down, John Thorpe makes a similar jest to Catherine: “They want to get their tumble over” (NA, 61). Thorpe’s allusion to the quantity of drinking at Oxford further implies the sort of masculine bawdy that his inebriated conversation would involve.

At the opposite extreme of the gluttons, though sometimes just as compulsive, are the good providers, usually jovial and healthy nurturing parental types. Mrs. Jennings is an amiable host on the journey to London, “only disturbed that she
Desire

could not make them choose their own dinners at the inn, nor extort a confession of their preferring salmon to cod, or boiled fowls to veal cutlets” (SS, 160). During Marianne’s crisis this maternal surrogate tries a “variety of sweetmeat and olives, and a good fire” (SS, 193) to raise her spirits, but to no avail: “And I declare if she is not gone away without finishing her wine! And the dried cherries too!” (SS, 194). Finally, when the ultimate medicine is proffered, “some of the finest old Constantia wine in the house” (SS, 197–98) that Mrs. Jennings’s husband used to imbibe for his gout, Elinor herself takes it, “its healing powers on a disappointed heart might be as reasonably tried on herself as on her sister” (SS, 198).

Like Goldsmith’s endearing philanthropists, the most exemplary providers in Austen work behind the scenes to reduce the onus of giving as well as of receiving. Moreover, it is the action itself, not the personal donor, that finally impresses the recipient. Without himself overcoming the stigma of a flannel waistcoat, Colonel Brandon nevertheless has power in his country estate; and if Lucy Steele is in raptures over his Grandisonian beneficences (SS, 293), Mrs. Jennings is on hand to register the happiness Marianne is destined to enjoy at Delaford: “exactly what I call a nice old fashioned place, full of comforts and conveniences; quite shut in with great garden walls that are covered with the best fruit-trees in the country: and such a mulberry tree in one corner! Lord! how Charlotte and I did stuff the only time we were there!” (SS, 196–97). Appetite is primal, obviating all sexual and social distinctions, and thus “irrational” and blind in its intent. The two women “stuff” themselves to visceral content and then feel gratitude toward the place more than toward the owner per se.

Although Mr. Darcy’s secret beneficence saves Lydia and her family from disgrace, previous to that action his estate already spoke for itself, not merely in the testimonies from Lambton of his charity to the poor (PP, 265) but directly on the palate in the abundance of his trees and vines: “There was now employment for the whole party; for though they could not all talk, they could all eat; and the beautiful pyramids of grapes, nectarines, and peaches, soon collected them round the table” (PP, 268). The narrator’s rendering of Elizabeth’s point of view here imparts again the feelings beyond words: “though they could not all talk, they could all eat.” In his nurturing role Darcy gains for the first time what he had lost abruptly at Hunsford in his blunt proposal.
Desire

Austen's unabashed sensuousness about food and drink is not far from Keats's pagan "beaded bubbles winking at the brim, / And purple-stained mouth." Like the air at Hartfield, there is something contagiously erotic in the exchange of food: pyramids of fruit can do what no words can. Mr. Martin walks three miles to oblige Harriet with walnuts, her favorite; and with less self-interest, his mother had given a "beautiful goose" to Mrs. Goddard (E, 28). In spite of her conscious stance as a stiffly detached egoist, Emma herself is as quiet a provider as Mr. Knightley, with his famous apples. Besides recommending the "minced chicken and scalloped oysters" (E, 24), as well as other luxurious dishes, to old Mrs. Bates and Mrs. Goddard, who can enjoy eating well if nothing else in their physical state, Emma, the narrator informs us, has also instructed the cottagers to send their child up to Hartfield with a pitcher for some broth (E, 88). Whatever the barely mentioned social and economic evils threatening this pastoral Eden, the benefactions of the privileged spread a warmth throughout the community that, at least temporarily, closes the distance between self and other. When Mr. Knightley invites the Highbury society to Donwell, "Come, and eat my strawberries," he offers the delights of "English culture" (E, 354, 360), and in a sense he is equivalent to the bounty of the land.

Food, then, is an important metonym in Austen's text for reifying the character as body and positioning the reader toward the action. Just as the word taste connoted moral qualities in the Shaftesburyan ethos of the eighteenth century, so the objects of appetite themselves take on surprising nuances of a character's intention, often ignored by the narrator. Desire, as most of the quotations above suggest, occurs mainly in the form of direct discourse, with little or no narrative interpretation. A character responds to another without the mediation of language, and moral taste is quite literally an experience to be gained at the table. On one of those admittedly rare occasions (Elizabeth at Pemberley, Emma at Ford's shop, Anne at Lyme), Austen abandons dialogue and approaches Flaubert's descriptive technique by allowing objects a life of their own in a character's perception—as in the scene where Fanny Price enters alone after her brother and bogus suitor have departed Mansfield:

After seeing William to the last moment, Fanny walked back into the breakfast-room with a very saddened
heart to grieve over the melancholy change; and there her uncle kindly left her to cry in peace, conceiving perhaps that the deserted chair of each young man might exercise her tender enthusiasm, and that the remaining cold pork bones and mustard in William's plate, might but divide her feelings with the broken egg-shells in Mr. Crawford's. (MP, 282)

Table scraps, as any garbage collector knows, tell their story of the particular appetite involved; and William’s “cold pork bones and mustard” and Henry’s “broken egg-shells” may be read as a contrast between a robust masculine nature and one that needs to destroy things for the sake of amusement. The description here effectively collapses the dualism of tenor and vehicle, of subject and object, much as in Flaubert’s description of Emma Bovary after she reads Rodolphe’s farewell letter that had been hidden in a basket of apricots. When Charles samples one of the apricots and tries to tempt Emma to taste them, she identifies the fruit so intensely with her lover that at the sight of her husband eating she is overwhelmed with nausea. The letter has been made flesh in her imagination, and this reaction to the husband’s cannibalizing of the lover also implies the same double bind of loathing and desire that Fanny suffers that morning at Mansfield.

By capturing the thingness of the perceiver’s environment, Austen’s text renders emotion on almost any page, turning the subject into object, and the object into subject. While desire reveals the individual self to be the product of impersonal forces in an encounter, appetite renders objects as food—hence as erotic extensions of the self.


So far I have been discussing Austen’s narrative erotics in geometric (triangular desire) and biological (appetite) terms. Another text for describing the impersonal forces involved in any encounter alludes to classical physics. Once again, it is a way of talking about character as part of an autonomous system. Even if, presumably, the individual has a choice and can move at will, it is the material rather than efficient cause that
Desire

is stressed: "There is nothing which energy will not bring one to."35 Austen's remark to her sister in 1801 stems as usual from a commonplace of domestic life, in this case the need to overcome the disappointment of not having Cassandra for company on the journey to Bath; but this brave assertion is about something primordial to the self—energy.36 How this resource becomes available to motivate the self is another matter, and hardly a topic to discuss with Cassandra.

Energy held a certain political mystique for the times, and Austen was sensitive to its cant appeal. In 1813, when victory over Napoleon seemed imminent, Austen read Sir Charles William Pasley's Essay on the Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire (1810) and confessed: "—the first soldier I ever sighed for—but he does write with extraordinary force & spirit."37 Pasley's vigorous exhortation to his country to achieve world supremacy by military conquest had an understandable appeal to a reader with two brothers in the Royal Navy, but his zeal in the national will carried with it a behavioral psychology that seems especially pertinent to her characters' conflict:

It is not always however, perhaps seldom, that the ambition of a nation has been directed with a permanent degree of energy towards any object, before the necessity of succeeding in that pursuit has been deeply felt. This strong sense of necessity will often precede, or lead to ambition; and when that ardent passion, the spirit of exertion arising from it, have once been called forth in bodies of men, and have been confirmed by habit, so as to grow into principles or rules of conduct; they will generally survive the causes which may at first have given birth to them. Hence a nation may go on increasing its power, after the necessity which first compelled it to adopt that policy may no longer exist.38

Not only Pasley's atomistic differentiation of what causes national policy but also his particular terms energy, ardent passion, and exertion are characteristic of Austen's style. Even if her remark to Cassandra about energy is partly ironic, alluding to the more awesome contexts for the term, nevertheless, the idea of exertion as a means of affirming the self in the world is familiar enough throughout her novels.
A related term, *power*, is much more pervasive in Austen's text, carrying several discrete meanings. The first has to do with a person's ability to act, and for the woman the power of refusal may be an answer to the man's freedom of choice (*NA*, 77; *E*, 208; *PP*, 183). Not surprisingly, the female is more subject to the loss of this power to act: trapped in the Thorpes's carriage and prevented from joining the Tilneys in the promised walk, Catherine "had no power of getting away" (*NA*, 87); later, while under the Radcliffean spell of terror at Northanger, "She had no power to move" (*NA*, 194). With the intrusion of Mary Crawford at Mansfield, Fanny is denied the "power of riding" (*MP*, 74); but when called upon to demonstrate her clandestine lover's gift of the Broadwood piano, Jane Fairfax "must reason herself into the power of performance" (*E*, 240).

Another meaning of power contains the idea of acting forcibly and even automatically, as in Mr. Darcy's retort to Mr. Bingley: "The power of doing any thing with quickness is always much prized by the possessor, and often without any attention to the imperfection of the performance" (*PP*, 49). Despite this debunking of effortless motion, however, it is the involuntary process itself that is repeatedly at issue, irrespective of the agent involved. After her raptures over Edmund's expression of love, Fanny is then depressed to find the "superior power of one pleasure [Mary] over his own mind" (*MP*, 262). Henry's proposal forces her into another dilemma: "She could not have supposed it in the power of any concurrence of circumstances to give her so many painful sensations on the first day of hearing of William's promotion" (*MP*, 303). Again, it is the triadic structure of desire, the "concurrence of circumstances," not the personality of the agent or patient in a given situation, which is the motivating force.

Finally, because it is detachable from the self and operative in a kinetically charged universe, power is an elusive commodity to be valued for its own sake, the gaining of dominion over another being only the originating purpose (Pasley's theory). In the business of attracting a man, for instance, it is the woman who wields power. As a quick matchmaker, Mrs. Jennings "enjoyed the advantage of raising the blushes and the vanity of many a young lady by insinuations of her power over such a young man" (*SS*, 36). After seeing Darcy's behavior at Pemberley, Elizabeth wondered "how far it would be for the
Desire

happiness of both that she should employ the power, which her fancy told her she still possessed, of bringing on the renewal of his addresses" (PP, 266). Not only is Lydia reprehensible for having "thrown herself into the power of—of Mr. Wickham" (PP, 277); but what is worse, Elizabeth’s “power was sinking; every thing must sink under such a proof of family weakness” (PP, 278). When Maria Bertram is excluded from the invitation to the parsonage, “As Mr. Rushworth did not come, the injury was increased, and she had not even the relief of shewing her power over him” (MP, 70). In the scene where Edmund tries to persuade Fanny into accepting Henry: “Full well could Fanny guess where his thoughts were now. Miss Crawford’s power was all returning” (MP, 349). After his infatuation with Fanny, Henry’s abrupt return to Maria, we are to believe, was a circumstance of seducing himself while engaging her affections: “but in triumphing over the discretion, which, though beginning in anger, might have saved them both, he had put himself in the power of feelings on her side, more strong than he had supposed” (MP, 468). Free indirect discourse renders Anne Elliot’s despair after the more than seven years since her engagement have left her haggard: “He had been most warmly attached to her, and had never seen a woman since whom he thought her equal; but, except from some natural sensation of curiosity, he had no desire of meeting her again. Her power with him was gone for ever”(P, 61). A major contradiction between the narrator’s opening claims and the actual working out of the story in Emma, however, is that despite the heroine’s alleged “power of having rather too much her own way” (E, 5), most of the events prove to be coincidental and for the most part beyond her control; she is the last to fathom Mr. Elton’s and Frank Churchill’s real intentions.

If power is circumstantial and continually in flux, selfhood is hardly a birthright in Austen’s world. In fact, given the ultimate standard of social perfection implicit in Emma, characters are ever in peril of annihilation. After Emma explained her objections to the engagement to Robert Martin, for instance, “Harriet had not surmised her own danger, but the idea of it struck her forcibly” (E, 53). Similarly, although jealousy of Frank Churchill taints his observations, Mr. Knightley does feel a genuine concern, according to the narrator, to protect Emma’s reputation when he detects his rival’s intimacy
with Jane: "He could not see her in a situation of such danger, without trying to preserve her. It was his duty" (E, 349). Without trying to preserve her: threatened with loss of power, the Austen character, even the first in rank, faces instant death on every page of consciousness.

Yet somehow the heroine prevails. Austen's world no longer reflects the providential teleology still apparent in the eighteenth-century novel, and skepticism toward the individual's grandiose plans for the future is chronic in the narrative tone. No amount of energy will suffice to carry the self through impossible situations, and since eros is blind, even the best intentions may come to naught unless events take place fortuitously. It is the unforeseen place and timing of circumstances that give the moment long-range consequences. Originating in the Latin momentum, with its sense of movement, moving power, and measurement of time, moment associates energy with the time spent in producing the effect; hence, Austen's alazons usually make false claims about the duration of an event and the work accomplished.

In general, there are at least three discernible meanings of moment in the novels. The first is simply a measure of time, as in Isabella Thorpe's pretended difficulty with clocks because of the pleasure she derives from the Morlands' company: "to have doubted a moment longer then, would have been equally inconceivable, incredible, and impossible; and she could only protest, over and over again, that no two hours and a half had ever gone off so swiftly before" (NA, 67). A second category denotes a turning point in the story; and since rapid attachments are always suspicious, the romantic convention of love at first sight comes under particular scrutiny, though for Mrs. Jennings the swiftness of Marianne's passion is what authenticates it: "Don't we all know that it must be a match, that they were over head and ears in love with each other from the first moment they met?" (SS, 182).

Rather than a neutral measure of time or a turning point in the consciousness of events, "moment" in Austen often refers to the juncture of circumstances that results in an important change; and this meaning brings together the ideas of kinetic energy, exertion, force, and work within a temporal dimension. Hence, when Marianne Dashwood and her sister Margaret are caught in the rain, a negative event becomes linked with a positive: "One consolation however remained for them, to which the exigence of the moment gave more than
usual propriety; it was that of running with all possible speed down the steep side of the hill which led immediately to their garden gate” (SS, 41). In a more ironic juxtaposition, the narrator describes how Lady Middleton's polite indifference came as a relief to Elinor after her sister's jilting: “Every qualification is raised at times, by the circumstances of the moment, to more than its real value; and she [Elinor] was sometimes worried down by officious condolence to rate good-breeding as more indispensable to comfort than good-nature” (SS, 215).

From classical physics, “moment” as the product of forces acting at a point represents yet more specifically the way a phenomenon occurs without human interference; and this autonomy of the process itself creates wonder in the thinking agents on hand, who resemble the fascinated observers of a scientific experiment in the well-known painting by Joseph Wright of Derby. Marianne’s remark on Willoughby’s abrupt departure from Barton focuses defensively on the action instead of on its disturbing motives: “It is all very strange. So suddenly to be gone! It seems but the work of a moment” (SS, 77). When a letter imagined to be from him turns out to be from her mother, the narrator describes the sequence abstractly: “The work of one moment was destroyed by the next” (SS, 202). The description implies a mind primarily interested in the phenomena themselves, as if tinkering with the way things work could compensate for one's inability to control events.

Like those infrequent occasions of agape, when the heroine entrusts herself to another unconditionally, the work of a moment comes about freely, without deliberation. At the least significant level, it may reveal simply mechanical behavior, as in Darcy’s convincing Bingley of Jane’s indifference—“scarcely the work of a moment” (PP, 199). In an environment where spontaneous overflow of emotion is highly valued, to be persuasive requires at least the appearance of the moment; hence, Mr. Bennet’s question to Mr. Collins: “May I ask whether these pleasing attentions proceed from the impulse of the moment, or are the result of previous study?” (PP, 68). Since not only the juncture of events but the energy expended goes into the work done, the turning point in the Austen story, especially the making of a tryst, depends on a chance encounter that begins with quite opposite expectations:

“I had gone a few steps, Fanny, when I heard the door open behind me. ‘Mr. Bertram,’ said she. I looked
Desire

back. 'Mr. Bertram,' said she, with a smile—but it was a smile ill-suited to the conversation that had passed, a saucy playful smile, seeming to invite, in order to subdue me; at least, it appeared so to me. I resisted; it was the impulse of the moment to resist, and still walked on. I have since—sometimes—for a moment—regretted that I did not go back; but I know I was right; and such has been the end of our acquaintance!' (MP, 459)

A major obstacle to Fanny's happiness, we know, has been Edmund's almost spineless admiration of Mary's energetic mind; in this scene, however, the concatenation of a dire family crisis and an inappropriate smile triggers for once a definitive response that even the speaker fails to understand afterward. Had it not been for the electricity of this fateful moment, Fanny may well ask, could Edmund ever have resisted Mary's power?

Austen's comic text reveals character both as a consciousness generated by triangular relations with other persons and things, and as a material body moved by impulses of the moment. Instead of the traditional hierarchy of mind over body, her narrative implies a psychosomatic doubleness about one's being that recalls Tristram's equating of the jerkin with the jerkin's lining. Rumple the one and you rumple the other. During peaks of emotion in an encounter, characters undergo sudden changes of energy and often become strangers to themselves; and, as in Fielding's world, the mechanics of intention proves benevolent in the end. Rather than an absolute duality between spirit and matter, there is one continuum of energy giving rise to phenomena. At one extreme, to render consciousness, Austen's free indirect discourse fuses the perceiver with the thing; at the other, to render the thing devoid of an individual perceiver, her 'objective' voice describes the moment of an encounter in impersonal, quasi-scientific terms.