In the foregoing discussion, my emphasis has been on Austen's situating of characters within temporary but regulated activities. Erving Goffman's behavioristic model of the encounter describes the largely unconscious role-playing in everyday communication, which has remarkable parallels in the more explicitly controlled conditions of playing games. Although Austen's educational theme generally articulates a dichotomy between play and work, with the flawed heroine finally discovering her duties to family and community, elsewhere her text implies that writing the story itself is a form of play and that the imagination transforms all the world into a stage for comic revelations. The many scenes involving play—card games, charades, piano-playing, singing, acting, dancing—are focused situations that reflect the larger enterprise of representing the lived self within typographical space.

From this play-within-the-play reflexivity, characters gain or lose in their competing discourses. With Emma as the paradigm of this activity in creating the self at the expense of the other, we have explored the intertextual structures of represented consciousness. Giving a character something to desire is tantamount to giving her life, the kinetic principle within any narrative that reflects the external reader's design on the story as well as the protagonist's alleged disposition. As if wary of readers—whether within or without the story—trying to entrap her in the convention of falling in love, Emma Woodhouse patterns her defenses on the antiromantic texts of the eighteenth-century French tradition. To demonstrate the variety of manifesting desire in Austen's narrative, our focus moved from a character's conscious willing to the implicit intentionality of her object world, where the description of physical things reflects the mind perceiving them.

Until now our interpretation of Austen's narrative strategies has been mainly local and empirical, while the whole concept of novelistic character remains elusive. Having reached its apogee during the Victorian period, character as an element of fiction has been deprecated among postmodern experimenters. As Thomas Docherty sees it, "Cartesian selfhood, 'I
am that which thinks,' is replaced here by the Todorovian "homme-recit, 'I am that which speaks.'" In contrast to the un­
critical positing of a noumenal being, often initiated simply by a proper name, say Pip or Jane, who supposedly exists inde­
dependently of author and reader, a writer like Robbe-Grillet
shuns such pretense of godlike authority and shifts the burden
of illusion-making onto the reader. The Cartesian dualism of self and other has been so axiomatic in the early realistic novel
and in the mimetic criticism traditionally associated with the
genre that until recently Austen's novels have always seemed
immune to the modern neurosis of ambivalent attitude and in­
decisive action. Yet, as Scott recognized immediately, her
writing is not of the "bow-wow" kind that sweeps across time
and distance without questioning the author's privilege. Moreover, notwithstanding their ostensibly insistent Cartesian self­
hood, Austen's characters also have a way of being that which
speaks.

But what is character in fiction? To begin with, it is a
noun or pronoun, as Chekhov's advice to his brother suggests:
"Don't try for too many characters. The center of gravity should
reside in two: he and she." At the most fundamental linguistic
level, these subjects take on life as patients or agents when
joined to a predicate and qualified by adjectives and adverbs.
In general, there are two mutually opposed ways of under­
standing character: the semiotic and the mimetic. According
to the first, characters are no more than textual segments,
"patterns of recurrence," whose meanings shift with their con­
textual motifs. In contrast to our illusions of a continuous per­
sonality while reading linearly, this approach, which comes
naturally to the parodist, alerts us to the limitations of the text
itself and to the "dissolution" of all those relationships that ini­
tiated our responses. The second and more familiar way of
reading simply regards characters as individuals with a unique
history and personhood, as imitations of real life to be com­
prehended by all the means available to the human sciences.

Once forced back to its originating logos, character
may blend readily with its context to the extent of disappar­
ing altogether. As we shall see, for example, the line between
narrator and character is at best often tenuous in Austen; and
this marginality is itself an important stylistic feature to be
considered in any interpretation of the story, on a par with her

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reflexive conclusions that wrench the illusive beings from their plot conventions:

I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people.—I only intreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire. (MP, 470)

As the parodic narrative voice reminds us, aesthetic closure not only reduces the variables of real life but also taxes the reader’s complicity in shaping a character’s behavior. Yet breaking the illusion of flesh-and-blood life by this editorial interference is only another mimetic subterfuge, which momentarily elevates the narrator as a presence at the expense of the storytelling.

Our concern in this chapter, then, will be to examine the peculiar locution that gives rise to the Austen character. Although finally a composite of written language, no more than ciphers on a printed page depending on certain conventional responses, what the reader takes for living beings in a story are the effect of represented speech within selective contexts. Just as Austen’s reflexive narratives may abruptly call attention to the fictional methods elsewhere quietly assumed, so throughout this book my approach to her characters will alternate the psychological model of consciousness/unconsciousness with the semiotic model of signifier/signified. For instance, sometimes Catherine Morland is a young woman in love and determined to have her way against all familial, social, and financial obstacles; at other times, she is only a satirical persona intended to undermine the generic roles of the “heroine” in romance, and thus speaks, or is spoken about, in a self-deprecating language. For many readers of Northanger Abbey, of course, these separate functions pose no difficulties at all but become blurred as the desire to articulate the character’s personhood prevails over any other consideration.⁶

Whether regarded primarily as psychological entities or as linguistic artifacts, however, Austen’s characters exist as
modes of represented speech; and our analysis should begin with four categories of discourse that interlock to render the individual voice: the dualities (1) of self and other; (2) of inner and outer self; (3) of narrative authority and readerly freedom; and (4) of subjective and objective description.

1. Self and Other

The dualism of self and other verges between the "classical" notion that the self must be balanced by social norms and traditions or suffer from the delusions of pride (Pope) and the "romantic" notion that the real self is essentially opposed to the public sphere (Wordsworth). The one stresses the need of subordinating the individual's desires to the general wisdom of the community; the other exalts the value of original insight that can only be gained in solitude and usually includes hostility toward the status quo. Although both extremes appear in early fiction, the critical realists emphasize the former pattern and define the person's identity in terms of his social function. In its absolute physical isolation of the main character, Robinson Crusoe brought into relief, Ian Watt argues, man's inherently social nature. According to Hume, "We can form no wish which has not a reference to society"; and it is this tenet that the realistic novel presumably implements in opposition to Defoe's allegory of individualism. Contrary to Watt, however, though Crusoe may discover unexpected resources, especially his Protestant conscience, in his loneliness, he never forgets that he is an English property owner with certain rights and privileges in relation to anyone who encroaches on his island; and thus, if in the end he has no difficulty in returning to "civilization" it is because he never really ever left it. In the novels after Defoe, the protagonist—whether Pamela or Parson Adams, Clarissa or Tom Jones, Yorick or Primrose, Evelina or Matt Bramble—may stand apart from the unthinking crowd but ultimately relies, nevertheless, on the approval of worldly opinion. Not even Clarissa is content to make her exit without first receiving her earthly father's forgiveness for her original disobedience.

Under the spell of the female quixotic motif, conser-
vative readers of Austen have exaggerated some form of external authority as a norm for selfhood. Wayne Booth formulates the reader's moral responsibility in judging Emma Woodhouse's flawed character: "We have been privileged to watch with her [Austen] as she observes her favorite character climb from a considerably lower platform to join the exalted company of Knightley, 'Jane Austen,' and those of us readers who are wise enough, good enough, and perceptive enough to belong up there too." Similarly, Marilyn Butler's recent thesis about an explicitly anti-Jacobin roman à clef posits the heroine's education within a historically specific political context: "The theme, then, is the struggle towards a fixed and permanent truth external to the individual; and chastening, necessarily, to individual presumption and self-consequence." Opposite to this approach, the "regulated hatred" school of D. W. Harding, Marvin Mudrick, and Barbara Hardy stresses the integrity of selfhood vis-à-vis the community. Hardy observes: "Within her social groups, Jane Austen frequently shows a serious restlessness, critical and even subversive, which looks beyond social limits." Clearly, no matter what versions of the Austen text commentary may produce, one assumption remains intact—the duality of self and other as the basis of realistic presentation.

Yet Austen's fictional world resists either/or solutions. E. M. Forster, we have noted, observed that even her minor characters are round. Likewise, Gilbert Ryle places her outside the Christian ideology of saints and sinners; in place of the old faculty psychology describing the hierarchy of reason over the passions, she renders human nature with the wine connoisseur's sensitivity to barely discernible gradations of feeling. But these fine shadings of character are mainly implicit in behavior; Austen seldom attempts the elaborate narrative analyses given by George Eliot or Henry James. As Martin Price states, "Manners . . . are supremely important for Jane Austen because they are the field in which the moral self is revealed and defined. Manners are a form of role-playing. We use them to order our relations with each other; we can use them for disguise and deceit; or we can make them a game, an end in themselves, mere empty formalism." Since in both real life and fiction the self interacts with others in all this role-playing, to a large extent the old dichotomy vanishes in actual
practice: character is nothing without intention toward another person or thing—its emotional existence is inseparable from its field of action.

The "otherness" of the Austen character, especially when intoned in the narrative, has sometimes attracted notice. As if excited by his discovery, R. W. Chapman pointed out coincidences in language between hero and heroine in Emma: "I venture, at the risk of exceeding my editorial function, to call attention to this and some other places in which Mr. Knightley comes unbidden, and sometimes unrecognized, into Emma's thoughts." Although Chapman was satisfied that this coincidence anticipated the marriage of true minds eventually borne out in the plot, there is actually a more pervasive sharing of language in Austen's narratives than his few egregious examples would suggest.

Character is inseparable from its field of action; and in Austen, we have said, this action is mainly speech represented with varying levels of directness. Just as the narrator may absorb the character's point of view in telling the story, so one character may appropriate another character's language at certain moments to become effectually one voice. Emma feels so completely Mrs. Weston's state of excitement at meeting Frank Churchill for the first time that in a deep reverie she projects herself onto Randalls:

"My dear, dear, anxious friend,"—said she, in mental soliloquy, while walking down stairs from her own room, "always over-careful for everybody's comfort but your own; I see you now in all your little fidgets, going again and again into his room, to be sure that all is right." The clock struck twelve as she passed through the hall. "'Tis twelve, I shall not forget to think of you four hours hence; and by this time tomorrow, perhaps, or a little later, I may be thinking of the possibility of their all calling here. I am sure they will bring him soon." (E, 189–90)

In terms of the story, Emma's wishful daydream is unnecessary, as Frank Churchill had arrived in Highbury a day early and is in fact sitting at this very moment with her father in their parlor. But in terms of Austen's narrative technique, the passage illustrates how readily the character's consciousness
appropriates another character's field and, at least for a brief
duration, loses all sense of apartness.

Still more importantly, it illustrates how thinking in
Austen is, after considerable refinement of narrative tech­
nique, only a matter of talking. As scholars have pointed out,
Austen is the first English novelist to have grasped the full
range of effects produced by what is commonly known as
"erlebte Rede," "le style indirect libre," or "free indirect dis­
course." To some degree this hybrid form of representing
speech may have been an accident of eighteenth-century print­
ing history, the result of attempts to standardize typographical
marks for dialogue. Thus until about the time of Dickens
quotation marks could be used for reported as well as direct
speech, and it is likely once again that the medium was the
message.

Private thoughts often have the same status as dia­
logue in Austen's text, the assumed psychological/rhetorical
dichotomy softening in the grey area of reported speech:

"You will stay, I am sure; you will stay and nurse her;" cried he,
turning to her and speaking with a glow, and yet a gentleness,
which seemed almost restoring the past.—She coloured deeply;
and he recollected him­
self, and moved away.—She expressed herself most
willing, ready, happy to remain. "It was what she had
been thinking of, and wishing to be allowed to do.—A
bed on the floor in Louisa's room would be sufficient
for her, if Mrs. Harville would but think so." (P, 114;
my emphasis)

As if consciously seeking a privileged space for her character's
mental life somewhere between direct and indirect discourse,
Austen depicts Anne Elliot's thinking/speaking to be simulta­
nous with Captain Wentworth's thinking/speaking: the two
principals are united here in one field of discourse set in pro­
cess by an unforeseen event.

Not only does free indirect discourse merge the self
with the other, but once the field is established it can reduce
the self to a mere atom, to an allusion that assures us mini­
mally of the character's presence:

This topic was discussed very happily, and others suc­
cceeded of similar moment, and passed away with simi-
lar harmony; but the evening did not close without a little return of agitation. The gruel came and supplied a great deal to be said—much praise and many comments—undoubting decision of its wholesomeness for every constitution, and pretty severe Philippics upon the many houses where it was never met with tolerable;—but, unfortunately, among the failures which the daughter had to instance, the most recent, and therefore most prominent, was in her own cook at South End, a young woman hired for the time, who never had been able to understand what she meant by a basin of nice smooth gruel, thin, but not too thin. Often as she had wished for and ordered it, she had never been able to get any thing tolerable. Here was a dangerous opening. (E, 104–05, my emphasis)

Until the middle of this passage ("the failures which the daughter had to instance") the report avoids identifying any speaker at all but instead focuses on how the physical object—the gruel—prompts nervous responses with embedded stances, the vocal proponents dominating over the quiescent dissenters. Obviously the speaker herself has no opinions of her own to express but essentially simulates her father's in order to humor him and if possible to stave off any attack from her increasingly annoyed husband, an impression wrought by his conspicuous silence during verbal explosions from the others. Although the conversation is superficially about gruel, the real issue, we discover fully by the end of the chapter, is whether the hypochondriacal father can uphold his will over his daughters and ally them against his male rivals. Yet Mr. Woodhouse himself is never mentioned by name as in a conventional report; instead, the motif of the gruel alone implies the character's idiosyncrasies and fears without the least interference from the narrator. In a linguistic sense, the gruel not only alludes to, but is Mr. Woodhouse in this scene. His otherness is all.

2. **Inner and Outer Self**

Besides questioning the character's viability in isolation from others, Austen's speech-oriented style also tends to
challenge the hallowed assumption of an internal, “real” self as opposed to an other-directed, role-playing self. Although the ideal of sincerity may have the highest value among the romantic poets, it does not come easily to a parodic artist like Austen; hence, even *Mansfield Park*, a novel sometimes praised for its Wordswornian spirit, presents a main character who rebels against acting *Lovers’ Vows* but lacks the inner strength to resist Henry Crawford’s eloquent reading of Shakespeare even while doubting his good intentions in the encounter.  

But whence the illusion of inner and outer self? M. M. Bakhtin (Volosinov) sees language as the most elemental basis of the personality, which is no more than a pattern of language: “Consequently, a word is not an expression of inner personality; rather, inner personality is an expressed or inwardly impelled word.” Instead of plumbing the depths of psychoanalysis to account for a character’s motivation, Bakhtin suggests that we begin with what we know—the actual text of personality; and his conception of the polyvocal novel underscores the arbitrary spaces of mimetic characterization. Bakhtin’s heteroglossia involves both the direct discourse and the free indirect discourse that imply points of view. Unless we are to disregard entirely the wealth of analysis in Freud, Jung, and their numerous successors, however, it seems facile to suggest that mental life is only a verbal phenomenon; and despite the inconsistency with the linguistic approach to character, as already indicated above, our discussion will take into account psychological models of behavior as well.

Nevertheless, if we give primacy to the word, the illusion of “inner” and “outer” self derives from constrasting narrative voices. The opening chapter of *Emma*, for example, is approximately three thousand words long, more than half of which takes the form of dialogue; and however the voices are named—the narrator, Emma, Mr. Woodhouse, or Mr. Knightley—all converge on the theme of triangular relationships. The first ten paragraphs of narrative, which Graham Hough calls objective, set in motion two very different, even contradictory, attitudes toward the heroine. The initial stance is ironic and promises a story about an affluent, attractive, and egocentric woman destined for trouble: “The real evils of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of her-
self” (E, 5). A second voice, beginning in the sixth paragraph, is sympathetic, however, and closes ranks with Emma’s perspective. While the first narrator introduces a female quixote, the second creates a protagonist with a mature insight into her situation: “she was now in great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude. She dearly loved her father, but he was no companion for her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful” (E, 7). Although presumably “outside” the character, the point of view is identical with her perspective: under no delusion of being free and powerful, she feels trapped in her situation and for the moment lacks any hope of finding a worthwhile social role. Rather than maintaining a detached, judgmental role, the second narrator merges continually with the character in the process of free indirect discourse; hence, the overall effect is to collapse the distinction between thought and speech, between inner and outer communication.

Sometimes reverie anticipates dialogue. After being privy to Emma’s quiet assessment of the change (“that great must be the difference between a Mrs. Weston only half a mile from them, and a Miss Taylor in the house”), the reader can sympathize with her valiant “exertions” to cheer her father by emphasizing the proximity to Randalls; and the scene immediately bears out the narrator’s (and surely the character’s) judgment that “He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful.” Besides absorbing her father’s objections to the change, Emma, in an instant of agape, takes sincere pleasure in her friend’s happiness and ingenuously applauds the marriage in words that Mr. Knightley repeats later in the scene.

What is not articulated in conscious thought or direct speech may be significant. Although father and daughter talk at cross purposes concerning the departure of Miss Taylor, both are depressed by the loss of a congenial household companion. Furthermore, Mr. Woodhouse’s humor against marriage may, under the cover of senility, possibly betray the darker aspects of the institution—the violence of sexual intercourse and the dangers of childbirth. Because of her adherence to “rational or playful” discourse, therefore, Emma disregards the import of her father’s words and, confident of her superior understanding, talks mainly to pacify him.

As the embodiment of the “rational or playful” talker desired to replace the father, Mr. Knightley enters the scene just when there was “no prospect of a third to cheer a long
evening” and the ubiquitous backgammon table seemed impending. His cryptic remark, “it must be better to have only one to please, than two,” the first of many riddles in the discourse of this novel, puts the Woodhouses immediately on the defensive and elicits humorously predictable responses:

“Especially when one of those two is such a fanciful, troublesome creature!” said Emma playfully. “That, is what you have in your head, I know—and what you would certainly say if my father were not by.”

“I believe it is very true, my dear, indeed,” said Mr. Woodhouse with a sigh. “I am afraid I am sometimes very fanciful and troublesome.”

“My dearest papa! You do not think I could mean you, or suppose Mr. Knightley to mean you. What a horrible idea! Oh, no! I meant only myself. Mr. Knightley loves to find fault with me you know—in a joke—it is all a joke. We always say what we like to one another.” (E, 10)

In accordance with their established game plan, Emma freely gives the requisite interpretation in deference to Mr. Knightley’s familiar role as her mentor and accepts the riddle as an attack on herself. But the term joke is always suspect in Austen’s vocabulary, implying something unstable in the speaker’s motives and alerting us to the more serious quarrels to come later in the story, culminating in Emma’s humiliation at Box Hill. Thus, after having caused both father and daughter to acknowledge themselves “fanciful, troublesome creatures,” Mr. Knightley innocently explains his original intention: “I meant no reflection on any body. Miss Taylor has been used to have two persons to please; she will now have but one.” If this solution comes as an anticlimax, the riddle nevertheless succeeded in forcing each of the Woodhouses to make public their respective self-images; and after their confessions Mr. Knightley plays his trump card by pretending that his only meaning was a tautology.

By drawing out each character’s subjective response, this verbal encounter illustrates J. L. Austin’s basic distinction between constative and performative speech acts—the first having to do with the truth or falsehood of statements, the second, with the success or failure of utterances toward the auditor. In conversation the denotative aspect of language weighs
very little compared to what it does, whether persuade, warn, surprise, deceive, command, and so on. To judge by their effectiveness in triggering self-deprecating replies, Mr. Knightley's words, we may infer, were carefully chosen for their performative value, and his dullish explanation of himself here undercuts his interlocutors' own guilt feelings. To invoke a psychological speculation at this point, despite his aplomb in the repartee, however, perhaps not even the triumphant hero is conscious of yet another meaning to his cryptogram: unconsciously he is defending the idea of marriage not only for Miss Taylor but for Emma as well. Given the treacherous ambiguity of speech acts, as attested here, the dialogue has a tendency to behave much like the narrative in denying any clear division between a character's private and public stance.

Because of its thoroughgoing dialogicity, Austen's text may balance sincere feeling with epigrammatic undermining without any serious damage to either purpose. Among the high points of her use of free indirect discourse are those scenes where some vital information is communicated after a period of increasing tension and doubt:

He had found her agitated and low.—*Frank Churchill was a villain.*—He heard her declare that she had never loved him. *Frank Churchill's character was not desperate.*—*She was his own Emma,* by hand and word, when they returned into the house; and if he could have thought of Frank Churchill then, he might have deemed him a very good sort of fellow. (*E,* 433; my emphasis)

This passage reveals the complex distancing effects possible in Austen's narrative. The underscored clauses indicate the usual free indirect discourse mode of reporting, and if transposed to conventional indirect discourse could be worded as follows:

Mr. Knightley felt that *Frank Churchill was a villain.*
Mr. Knightley felt that *Frank Churchill's character was not desperate.*
Mr. Knightley felt that *she was his own Emma.*

To avoid the monotonous repetition of the introductory formula is perhaps sufficient reason for taking the shortcut of free indirect discourse; but, clearly, it is the antithesis between
simple declaration of fact and the hero's instantaneous re-
sponse to it that represents the very rhythm of desire. In con-
trast to these closeups, the last conditional and main clauses, it
will be noticed, imply a narrator's distant perspective, with
the question of what Mr. Knightley was in fact thinking at this
moment left unanswered. Although superficially the dialogical
structure registers his thoughts in response to each stage of
enlightenment concerning Emma's feelings, the staccato sen-
tences allow us to hear his actual words, whether or not they
were actually spoken to her in this scene.

3. **Narrative Authority and Readerly Freedom**

Given the kinetic nature of Austen's polyvocal text, it
should be evident by now that character is not something
rigid and detachable, but rather is equivalent to a field of re-
lated intentions that may be shared with a narrator and other
discourses signaling different speakers. From the standpoint
of the Austen novel's linguistic structure, therefore, the hu-
morous matchmaking so explicit in each plot does not merely
reflect the English gentry's preoccupation with marriage settle-
ments but parallels nicely the whole jostling for communi-
cative authority in the text itself. Whenever the storytelling
relies heavily on scenic rather than narrative presentation,
characters appear to act autonomously, entering freely into al-
liances or rivalries while pursuing their own ends. Although
never very far from the participants, Austen's narrator, unlike
Fielding's or Sterne's, only intermittently interferes in our day-
dream of the story and instead usually fades into the central
character's point of view, becoming identical with it through
free indirect discourse.

Despite her reputation among Tory readers, then, Austen
takes surprising risks in the storytelling process. It is
a commonplace of modern criticism that the author can no
longer play God. We see this fact in Sartre's well-known attack
on Mauriac's indiscriminate use of omniscience: 'He takes
God's standpoint on his characters. God sees the inside and
outside, the depths of body and soul, the whole universe at
once. In like manner, M. Mauriac is omniscient about every-
thing relating to his little world.” 21 Roland Barthes’s apothegm, “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author,” is only a drastic metaphor of the same critical preference for allowing the text its autonomy, or to be more exact, for allowing the reader his freedom to constitute the text. 22 In condemning the modern writer’s and critic’s abnegation of authority, W. J. Harvey is quite open about his preference of a mimetic model of character; and of course such a model presupposes a reality about which there is general agreement. 23

But Sartre’s attack on authorial omniscience and Harvey’s dread of textual autonomy are both anachronistic in claiming too much for modern theory. By tracing the “birth of the author” to the lives of Renaissance artists as witnessed in Vasari’s biographies, Mukařovský shows that despite personal, even petty, reasons for identifying himself with his work (Michelangelo’s signature on the Virgin’s girdle in the Pietà) the autonomy of his product was never in doubt: it was always for the perceiver rather than for the originator to generate meaning from the object:

The perceiver’s active participation in the formation of intentionality gives the intentionality a dynamic nature. As a resultant of the encounter between the viewer’s attitude and the organization of the work, intentionality is labile and oscillates during the perception of the same work, or at least—with the same perceiver—from perception to perception. It is a common experience that the more vividly a work affects a perceiver, the more possibilities of perception it offers him. 24

What follows in Mukařovský’s argument is something resembling Hutchinson’s principle of “co-operative conflict” between author and reader: a dialectic between the aesthetic displeasure of unintentionality (what is perceived to contradict meaning) and the aesthetic pleasure of intentionality (what is perceived as a unity but always as partial). To understand the experience of “reality” in art, therefore, we need to recognize its essential openness. 25

Just as the author’s intentionality has a history of only a few hundred years in Western culture, so the problem of accounting for the unconscious or unintentional element of art dates mainly from the aesthetic controversy over the “rules” in
the French neoclassical academies. Leonardo, for instance, while subscribing to a thoroughgoing scientific approach to artistic representation, nevertheless anticipated the elusiveness of aesthetic grace that Boileau, Pope, and others emphasized against rigid conventions: "When the work is equal to the knowledge and judgment of the painter, it is a bad sign; and when it surpasses the judgment, it is still worse, as is the case with those who wonder at having succeeded so well." In the eighteenth century, when aesthetics and literary criticism became firmly established disciplines, this principle of unintentionality in art underlay the concept of grace, which evolved from the "je ne sais quoi" of the rationalistic academicians to a quality of movement perceived.

A witness to an era that amused itself with the trompe l'oeil, Jonathan Richardson advised against a fully determinate representation in general: "So far should the Painter be from inserting any thing Superfluous, that he ought to leave something to the Imagination. He must not say all he can on his Subject, and so seem to distrust his Reader, and discover he thought no farther himself." Similarly, Diderot observes: "True taste fastens on one or two characteristics, and leaves the rest to the imagination. . . . If an artist shows us everything, and leaves us nothing to do, he leaves us weary and impatient." Hogarth, as Ronald Paulson remarks, applied his aesthetic theory of lines to a practice of sketching an object with the barest essentials, for the perceiver to complete. Perhaps not despite, but because of, the abiding concern of the Enlightenment with freeing the mind of superstition and fear, Edmund Burke stresses the effectiveness of obscurity as a means of communication in language and art: "so far is a clearness of imagery from being absolutely necessary to an influence upon the passions, that they may be considerably operated upon without presenting any image at all." Throughout the eighteenth century, then, unintentionality, far from being an aesthetic flaw, went hand in hand with the artist's conscious purpose and became a basic principle of romanticism.

Another context for this dialectic between the known and unknown in the dynamics of perceiving the object is in the late-eighteenth-century theory of the picturesque, which compared the principles of landscape painting with those of landscape gardening. Not only does Austen allude to the picturesque in her letters and novels, but her brother Henry's
“Biographical Notice” specifically mentions her admiration of Gilpin on this subject. Though the “improvers” themselves sometimes admitted to being despots in sacrificing cottages, orchards, and gardens to carry out their ends, the idea was to give expression to a landscape; and again the principle of the unfinished is at work in the aesthetics of intricacy: “that disposition of objects,” according to Uvedale Price, “which, by a partial and uncertain concealment, excites and nourishes curiosity.” Because of its power to motivate the perceiver, artificial torsos and classical or medieval follies have special value as fragments: “A temple or palace of Grecian architecture in its perfect entire state, and with its surface and colour smooth and even, either in painting or reality is beautiful; in ruin it is picturesque.” Likewise, the rough symmetry of Gothic architecture is picturesque as opposed to the symmetry of classical styles, which are paradigms of beauty.

Neither one quality nor the other, however, is in itself sufficient; rather, each reciprocates psychologically to offset the other. Price argues that deformity is to ugliness as picturesqueness is to beauty: the main difference is in their communicative effect. Like the picturesque, deformity “corrects” the cloying regularity of beauty and the monotony of ugliness by making a “quicker impression” and arousing interest in the mind after a state of passive enjoyment. In view of the constant stress on the active role of the perceiver, whether the “reader” of art objects, including landscapes, or the reader of written texts, it is astonishing to find Roland Barthes’s assertion: “Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature.”

While it may be true that earlier periods had a lower threshold for realism than ours and hence risked relatively much less in surrendering the artifact to the viewer’s imagination, nevertheless the authority of the artist, we have seen, was hardly absolute in any way.

In view of the long history of the reader’s role in completing the author’s purposely fragmented work, therefore, it is not surprising that Austen grasped the principle implied in Keats’s “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter.” As we shall see in the final chapter, reading her novels is very much an encounter, an action that often tests the full mental powers of her characters to constitute the text, and
Character

is hence on par with writing. Austen's well-known comment on *Pride and Prejudice* should serve as a warning to those uncreative readers who insist on allegorical reductions of her comic playfulness: “The work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story.”

Clearly, in admitting that her work is unfinished and resistant to closure, Austen agrees with Tristram's theory of narrative: “no author who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good-breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.”

If Austen acknowledged this principle of the unfinished regarding *Pride and Prejudice*, she became all the more venturesome, as we shall see, in *Emma*. The author's advice to her niece Anna, written during the composition of *Emma*, hints at the many omissions she had to decide upon in the interest of engaging the reader: “You describe a sweet place, but your descriptions are often more minute than will be liked. You give too many particulars of right hand and left.”

Doubtless, it was this finely honed narrative language, in contrast to his own habit of telling everything, that impressed Walter Scott most about Austen's “exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting.”

It is an irony of literary history, then, that, unlike many of her twentieth-century admirers, Austen trusted the tale and eschewed the narrative authority often attributed to her novels. As in other Tory interpretations, Graham Hough supports a widely held view of closure in her art and educes her familiar Johnsonian cadences without seeing their reflexively subversive contexts. The famous opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, mimics the aphoristic manner of the Augustan moralist to ridicule the mercenary attitudes toward marriage in the period: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (PP, 3). Superficially, the proposition appears to describe the actual desires of rich bachelors in any society; but the absoluteness of the “truth” falling abruptly on the periodic “wife” makes the tone suspicious, no
longer a mere statement of fact. It suddenly discloses the motives for courtship to be integral to the prevailing economic system, which made daughters the pawns of their families in settling property. With this situation brought to mind, the proposition, far from being universal, applies specifically to parents burdened with unmarried daughters, who look upon any rich bachelor as the one hope of deliverance. Finally, in the ensuing dialogue, we quickly see that what began as an assertion about life in general has narrowed to the blinkered vision of Mrs. Bennet. Not authority, therefore, but only the threadbare authoritarian manner is what the narrative tone implies.

By contrast to Austen's mock dogmatism, Johnson's style in *Rambler* no. 85 has the strategy of making an opinion seem deductively true: "It is certain that any wild Wish or vain Imagination never takes such firm Possession of the Mind, as when it is found empty and unoccupied." Why is it certain? On the authority of the "old peripatetick Principle, that Nature abhors a Vacuum," Johnson infers a universal mechanism to account for daydreaming as well as for atmospheric pressure. Since the mind "will embrace any Thing however absurd or criminal rather than be wholly without an Object," Johnson concludes that work of any kind, if only embroidering or knitting, is therapeutic against this natural tendency. The essayist's persuasive authority seems incontrovertible, and Austen presses its declamatory voice into comic service while pursuing her errant characters' ambitions. As Reuben Brower observes, Austen's style is a triumph of combining the "traditions of poetic satire with those of the sentimental novel." Thus, rather than attribute the "voice of the author" to Johnson, it is more accurate to trace the influence to the Augustan mock-heroic: "All human things are subject to decay, / And when fate summons, monarchs must obey." Closer to home, Austen universalizes a less awesome fate: "Human nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting situations, that a young person, who either marries or dies, is sure of being kindly spoken of." A striking quality of her narrative is its self-conscious undermining of the artistic illusion to create a yet deeper impression of reality, the onion-peeling effect first exploited in *Don Quixote*. By this strategy the "voice of the author" itself is
bracketed in Austen, inevitably related to some character's point of view and hence only another fictional element. Paradoxically, Austen gains authority in her narrative by seeming to renounce any claim to it, allowing her characters to speak for themselves and her readers to indulge in vicarious virtue or naughtiness, whatever the textual encounter calls for. Occasionally the "voice of the author" is invoked to implicate the reader in a character's private sarcasm at the expense of another, unsuspecting character.

Perhaps the most embarrassing example of this technique is in chapter 8 of *Persuasion*, when Anne is relishing an intimate glimpse of Captain Wentworth's secret contempt for the deceased Richard Musgrove while outwardly showing "the kindest consideration for all that was real and unabsurd in the parent's feelings" (P, 68). On numerous other occasions two characters confide in attacking a third, usually a loquacious one—Catherine and Henry versus Mrs. Allen; Elinor and Marianne versus Mrs. Jennings; Elizabeth Bennet and her father versus Mr. Collins; and Emma and Mrs. Weston versus Miss Bates. But in this scene the "voice of the author" adds support to the heroine's rare moment of triumphant egotism while shielded on the sofa by the corpulent Mrs. Musgrove, whose "large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody cared for" are presumably a test of Wentworth's self-restraint from laughter: "Personal size and mental sorrow have certainly no necessary proportions. A large bulky figure has as good a right to be in deep affliction, as the most graceful set of limbs in the world. But, fair or not fair, there are unbecoming conjunctions, which reason will patronize in vain,—which taste cannot tolerate,—which ridicule will seize" (P, 68). If this moment of Johnsonian sententiousness seems out of place here, remote from the spirit of Mr. Rambler, it is owing largely to Austen's very different aesthetic purpose. Mrs. Musgrove, we are being reminded, is only a comic character, not a flesh-and-blood creature entitled to genuine grief and thus to our human compassion. The issue is nevertheless confused because Anne Elliot otherwise never expresses such nastiness toward even foolish characters and generally maintains a tone of high seriousness. To the carnivorous author—and reader—even a character who has exerted a certain hold on life as a free individual with a private history becomes fair game as a textual
stereotype, to be devoured as food at the narrator’s table. Again the semiotic model of representation competes with the psychological one.

4. Subjective and Objective Description

Inclusive particularity, “thingness” as an end in itself, reduced scale, “low life”—these have been features of description usually conducive to the illusion of the lived character. Together with the bifurcations of self and other, of inner and outer awareness of self, and of dominant author and passive reader, minute presentation of the character’s mental and physical environment has seemed generic to the novel’s form. Moreover, as opposed to narrative, description is usually taken to be static language from the omniscient author and hence without voice, often dead weight in the storytelling process and most safely skipped if one is in a hurry. Austen’s caution to Fanny against describing too much recognizes this fact, and her own novels exemplify an Augustan economy in this respect. Unlike Radcliffe, Scott, or the great Victorian novelists, Austen rarely attempts to paint a scene with words and is likewise sparing in describing her character’s emotions. Always the spectre of Tristram’s blank, black, or marbled page prompts her to leave something for the reader to do.

Description in Austen’s world has generally appeared to reflect a limited but solid grasp of things, a welcome relief from the modern condition; and until recently her playful irreverence, most conspicuous in Pride and Prejudice and in Emma, could be dismissed as a temporary aberration. Yet, despite the reassurance of the Olympian narrative manner, the Austen environment is remarkably circumstantial and fragmented; consequently, not only is sentimental love anathema, but even the most positive attachments have some degree of distrust and tend to occur by accident. Daniel Cottom observes: “As opposed to the providential pattern of communication which proceeds from a loss of truth through various confusions and errors to a final reclamation of that original truth, communication in Austen’s novels generally proceeds by half-measures and half-truths.” In Cottom’s view, Austen marks
the end of the eighteenth-century scheme of subordinating everyday events to a universal plan; and although she preserved the convention of happy endings in her comic plots, she differs from her predecessors in stressing the minute complications of story rather than their formal resolutions. The fragility of individual judgments and the evident incoherence of the social background are what her selective description invites the reader to see.

Description in Austen, however, serves two primary and opposite functions: to render emotional states by means of a "scientific," disinterested vocabulary and to render the physical world by means of an individual perspective. To paraphrase the authors of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Austen's aesthetic works toward making the private feelings part of communal experience and toward revealing the ordinary outside world to be capable of unexpected perceptions. In the first instance, she uses a commonplace diction based on the eighteenth-century sensationism deriving from Hobbes, Descartes, Locke, Hume, Hartley, and others; in the second instance, she positions the character in a scene with remarkable exactitude and then plays upon the vagaries of the lonely mind that images the reality.

For tracing the character's linear movement of feelings in a one-to-one causality of stimuli, Ann Radcliffe is probably an important source:

Her mind was, at length, so much agitated by the consideration of her state, and the belief, that she had seen Valancourt for the last time, that she suddenly became very faint, and, looking round the chamber for something that might revive her, she observed the casements, and had just strength to throw one open, near which she seated herself. The air recalled her spirits, and the still moonlight, that fell upon the elms of a long avenue, fronting the window, somewhat soothed them, and determined her to try whether exercise and the open air would not relieve the intense pain that bound her temples.

The mind/body interaction here may be reduced schematically: agitation (caused by the aunt's interference and the lover's departure) produces faintness; revived spirits (under the influence of fresh air and moonlight) result in the desire for exercise to overcome headache. Although mechanically applied in
Radcliffe, this nomenclature from eighteenth-century physiology gained new force in Sterne’s comic fiction; and Austen assimilates it in a style parallel to the economic and arithmetical language of measurement recognized by Mark Schorer and Dorothy Van Ghent. 46

Just as the mock-heroic “voice of the author” plays against omniscient authority, however, so the descriptive matrix in Austen helps to bolster up provisionally the threatening circumstantiality by alluding to forces that operate according to universal laws, though its obsolescent epistemological basis also raises doubts about the long-term effect of these forces in human affairs. Deriving from what Foucault understands as one of three avenues to knowledge in the classical episteme—Taxinomia, the science of finding identities and differences—this matrix of classification already had a quaintly archaic connotation in the period of Wordsworth. 47

A few categories of Austen’s affective description will suffice to show the implicit hierarchy of values in the nomenclature. “Agitation” (agitare, “to put in motion”) is a word reserved for the most crucial moments in her novels and almost always is applied to a character when unobserved except by the privileged narrator and reader. Inevitably the emotion results from a conflict with another person. After the first news of Edward Ferrar’s disinheritance, for instance, “Elinor had heard enough . . . to agitate her nerves and fill her mind” (SS, 297). Catherine Morland’s “agitation as they entered the great gallery was too much for any endeavour at discourse” (NA, 191). The thought of the breach between Bingley and Jane is traumatic to Elizabeth: “The agitation and tears which the subject occasioned brought on a headach [sic]” (PP, 187). Since agitation is an involuntary motion produced by some outside force, in an ethical world that places the highest value on the freedom of the will, it is always met as a danger to the self; and the Austen protagonist usually has to exert herself to overcome it.

In terms of the novel’s overall textuality, as opposed to the individual character’s psychology, however, agitation is a stimulus to perceive the world of minute things being put into motion and acquiring an autonomous life in the narrative: bed curtains, door locks, pens, pencils, scissors, pianos, watches, toothpick cases, spectacles, and carriages suddenly become equivalent to the nerves and spirits, reminding us of Burke’s idea taken from Stoic philosophy “that the influence of most
things on our passions is not so much from the things themselves, as from our opinions concerning them.” Alan McKillop has noted how both Richardson and Sterne reduced the scale of perception, the latter even to a microscopic extreme; and Barbara Hardy has shown that this focus on everyday objects is shared by all the major writers of the genre: “The novel can create a second coming of things, beautiful or functional, lucid or inscrutable, friendly or obstructive, outside ourselves but connected with us for better or worse.” It is this materialistic/kinetic thingness in Austen’s description that renders fully public the character’s innermost feelings.

“Animation” is Austen’s principal term for the overcoming of rest, the ennui inevitable to sensationist beings caught in the flux of stimuli. As Newton remarked soberly: “[M]otion is much more apt to be lost than got, and is always upon the Decay.” This biological sign tends to be invoked in social contexts to register an individual’s energy level, and often the aristocratic character is perceived to be deficient. Pamela’s conquest of Mr. B. is a likely paradigm for Elizabeth’s advantage over Mr. Darcy, who “seldom appeared really animated” (PP, 180). Elizabeth’s function is to make him smile more, just as his is to make her smile less. In contrast to these complementary spirits, Mrs. Bennet’s and Lydia’s laughter suggests an animal energy that endangers polite society. Yet, as Fielding implies through the character of Blifil, a dearth of libido results in sinister behavior; and thus Anne Elliot’s first judgment about her cousin’s polished demeanor is ominous: “There was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others” (P, 161).

Even the most lively temperaments, however, are subject to depression, though readily activated again by the least change in the environment: Frank Churchill’s return to Randalls “was a most delightful re-animation of exhausted spirits. The worn-out past was sunk in the freshness of what was coming” (E, 188). If humors at a fixed, low energy cannot be reanimated, they can be altered by external events: Mr. Woodhouse’s acceptance of Emma’s marrying comes about not by “any wonderful change of his nervous system, but by the operation of the same system in another way” (E, 483). The raiding of the poultry houses (“Pilfering was housebreaking to Mr. Woodhouse’s fears”) poses a somewhat worse threat than the marriage contract to his wombed space.

“Flutter of spirits” or simply “nerves” denotes the
involuntary operations of the mind, with “fidgettiness” at
the bottom of the scale of meaningful motions. Marianne’s
“spirits still continued very high, but there was a flutter in
them which prevented their giving much pleasure to her sis­
ter, and this agitation increased as the evening drew on” (SS,
161). Elizabeth’s “spirits were in a high flutter” as her carriage
approaches Pemberley (PP, 245); but after contemplating the
house and grounds, hearing Mrs. Reynolds’s account, and see­
ing Mr. Darcy’s picture in the gallery amidst his ancestors, her
opinion rises: “There was certainly at this moment, in Eliza­
beth’s mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original,
than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance” (PP,
250); then, just before Mr. Darcy himself appears unexpect­
edly, “she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of
gratitude than it had ever raised before” (PP, 251). Harriet’s
“all flutter and happiness” (E, 73), by contrast, is as mechani­
cally reflexive as Mr. Woodhouse’s “peculiarities and fidget­
tiness” (E, 93), Isabella Knightley’s “little nervous head-aches
and palpitations” (E, 103), and Mr. Elton’s and Emma’s “irrita­
tion of spirits” (E, 132). A similarly unconscious mind goes
through the same movements: Maria Bertram’s “spirits were
in as happy a flutter as vanity and pride could furnish” (MP,
83) at Sotherton, while the machinelike Mrs. Norris “fidget­
ted about” (MP, 104) without more purpose than supplying
herself with some eggs and cheese from the kitchen, niggardly
behavior for one associated with Mansfield Park. Anne Elliot
was “quite ashamed of being so nervous” in the scene when
Wentworth rescues her from little Walter’s clutches (P, 81);
but at the time of Louisa’s accident she resembles Captain
Harville, who “brought senses and nerves that could be in­
stantly useful” (P, 111). In this last context, it will be noticed,
“nerves” denotes purposeful energy, in contrast to the neu­
rotic behavior of Mary Musgrove or the hysterical fits of
Henrietta.

A singular term that implies the interest at the time
in galvanism as containing the secrets of life occurs early in
Persuasion: Anne Elliot meets Mrs. Croft “full of strength
and courage” until she is “electrified” by the first mention of
Wentworth. The word electrified used to describe Anne’s in­
stantaneous metamorphosis recalls Erasmus Darwin’s experi­
ments on electrifying a strand of vermicelli thus giving it the
appearance of life, an experiment that inspired Mary Shelley
to write a tale about animating a corpse. The static electrical "bath" treatment, which Austen's brother Edward tried for his gout, is also a probable analogy to the shock Anne feels in that moment. In contrast to this au courant image, used only once or twice in all of Austen's writing, a traditional allusion conveys the moment of recognition in Emma: "It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow" (E, 408). Characters who lack this force, the product of the impetus on a body that resists the movement, die off before the end of the novel: Mrs. Churchill, who had "no more heart than a stone to people in general" (E, 121); Mr. Norris, who "could no more bear the noise of a child than he could fly" (MP, 9); Dr. Grant, who, as Tom Bertram said, "was a short-neck'd apoplectic sort of fellow, and, plied well with good things, would soon pop off" (MP, 24); and Mr. Elliot, whose cold politeness is metaphorically rewarded by his union with Mrs. Clay. In sum, Austen's nomenclature for describing a character's emotion and bodily changes implies a whole microcosm of kinetic forces that operate at different moments and intensities. Though her minor characters are comically limited to a few behavioral tics, her central characters are rendered as beings with a complex consciousness who struggle against their circumstantiality.

From this brief review of her sensationist taxonomy, it should be evident that Austen's descriptive purpose is hardly to render a visual image of her character but rather to provide a zone of kinetic energy, an environment in which communication of some sort is possible, ranging from the lowliest twitching to the most ecstatic impulse. In contrast to such details of movement, the Austen character's physical appearance—her hairstyle, complexion, physiognomy, manner of dress, and the like—is left significantly vague for the reader to "fill in"—one reason why attempted dramatizations on stage and in films are especially difficult with this novelist. It should also be evident, furthermore, that this system of vectors obviates the character's individuality by showing her to be participating in impersonal and universal forces, and hence not wholly responsible for her behavior.

At the other end of the spectrum from this "objective" description, the Austen character projects herself in the act of perceiving and experiences her environment as a phenomenon. In the earliest novels this technique mostly delineates a culpable intentionality, an idea brought home when the
Dashwood sisters disagree about the identity of a man seen in the distance:

Amongst the objects in the scene, they soon discovered an animated one; it was a man on horseback riding towards them. In a few minutes they could distinguish him to be a gentleman; and in a moment afterwards Marianne rapturously exclaimed,

“It is he; it is indeed;—I know it is!”—And was hastening to meet him, when Elinor cried out,

“Indeed, Marianne, I think you are mistaken. It is not Willoughby. The person is not tall enough for him, and has not his air.”

“He has, he has,” cried Marianne, “I am sure he has. His air, his coat, his horse. I knew how soon he would come.” (SS, 86)

Of course, Elinor is right as usual: the figure turns out to be the lacklustre, commonsensical Edward instead of the dashing Willoughby; and the narrative does not suggest that her intentionality is involved in spotting her lover. Presumably, here the ideal of disinterested observation has its own reward; and the reader will never be the wiser about the air, coat, and horse of either man.

Elsewhere, in less morally tendentious encounters, positional description renders a character’s timbre along with the object perceived. Thus Emma’s daydreaming at Ford’s is a tour de force to illustrate how “A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer” (E, 233). Although Mr. Knightley maintains Elinor Dashwood’s ideal of objectivity, Emma provides a deeper insight concerning the inevitable subjectivity of vision; the attempt to describe things, she recognizes, is always positional, and ultimately circular. Despite Tory insistence on his voice as norm throughout the story, Mr. Knightley is not flexible enough to see that Emma deliberately improves Harriet’s picture for Mr. Elton’s benefit:

“You have made her too tall, Emma,” said Mr. Knightley.

Emma knew that she had, but would not own it, and Mr. Elton warmly added,

“Oh, no! certainly not too tall; not in the least too tall. Consider, she is sitting down—which
naturally presents a different—which in short gives exactly the idea—and the proportions must be preserved, you know. Proportions, fore-shortening.—Oh, no! It gives one exactly the idea of such a height as Miss Smith's. Exactly so indeed!” (E, 48)

What is important here is not that Mr. Knightley is right and Emma knows it, but that they are each approaching the object from different perspectives: the one, moral; the other, aesthetic. Mr. Elton, we may safely assume, is merely spouting the jargon of art appreciation classes without seeing anything. But Mr. Knightley insists on a scientifically objective duplication, no matter what the cost to Harriet's self-esteem and interest as a subject (also, of course, as a possible object of desire); and Emma insists on the artist's prerogative to enhance nature and create something suitable for the mantelpiece, a point Mr. Elton confusedly supports in his misguided designs on the artist. Thanks to the author's own designs, again the reader will never find out whether Harriet is relatively tall or short, or merely average, in her particular society: the hard scientific information of whether she is 5'4" or 5'6" would be wholly irrelevant and even destructive to the narrative purpose.

With the help of such dramatized encounters involving problems of intentionality, Austen seems almost at pains to align her taut descriptions of place with the lessons provided by Fielding and Sterne before her. The narrator of *Tom Jones*, for example, refused to paint the landscape on the journey to London in any detail but instead focused on the disposition of the observer:

The same Taste, the same Imagination, which luxuriously riots in these elegant Scenes, can be amused with Objects of far inferior Note. The Woods, the Rivers, the Lawns of Devon and of Dorset, attract the Eye of the Ingenious Traveller, and retard his Pace, which Delay he afterwards compensates by swiftly scouring over the gloomy Heath of Bagshot, or that pleasant Plain which extends itself Westward from Stockbridge, where no other Object than one single Tree only in sixteen Miles presents itself to the View, unless the Clouds, in Compassion to our tired Spirits, kindly open their variegated Mansions to our Prospects.
In the same vein, Austen abrogates her narrative privilege and assigns the reader the task of knowing the places alluded to: “It is not the object of this work to give a description of Derbyshire, nor of any of the remarkable places through which their route thither lay; Oxford, Blenheim, Warwick, Kenelworth, Birmingham, &c. are sufficiently known. A small part of Derbyshire is all the present concern” (PP, 240). When we arrive at Pemberley immediately after this passage, the narrator cites only broad architectural features to register the datum of Mr. Darcy’s sound Augustan taste, features reminiscent of Squire Allworthy’s estate or those of the Man of Ross. At first glance the description of Pemberley itself may appear to stem from an omniscient narrator’s point of view; but if we recall the explicit fact that it is seen from the heroine’s perspective, even the few details given take on a positional significance:

Elizabeth’s mind was too full for conversation, but she saw and admired every remarkable spot and point of view. They gradually ascended for half a mile, and then found themselves at the top of a considerable eminence, where the wood ceased, and the eye was instantly caught by Pemberley House, situated on the opposite side of a valley, into which the road with some abruptness wound. It was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills;—and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal, nor falsely adorned. Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. They were all of them warm in their admiration; and at that moment she felt, that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something! (PP, 245; my emphasis)

Who is speaking the words emphasized in this passage? Ostensibly the impartial narrator; but the context indicates that these judgments may be read as free indirect discourse, to be attributed primarily to Elizabeth and seconded by the Gardiners. Once individualized, the description becomes appropriated to the temporal scheme of the heroine’s musings on the scene; and so every detail suddenly takes on a personal
Character significance, a heightened awareness of Mr. Darcy as perceived through the metonyms of the building and grounds. Apart from their being proof of the owner's good taste, the details symbolize masculine power, in the stone edifice as well as in all the rising and swelling of the ground and stream. Almost as if awed by this immediate sexual apprehension and supported by her parental surrogates' admiration, Elizabeth's lips cannot resist forming the words in silence: "To be mistress of Pemberley might be something!"

Another example of how positional description fuses place and personhood in the viewer's mind appears in Emma's reverie at Donwell:

She felt all the honest pride and complacency which her alliance with the present and future proprietor could fairly warrant, as she viewed the respectable size and style of the building, its suitable, becoming, characteristic situation, low and sheltered—its ample gardens stretching down to meadows washed by a stream, of which the Abbey, with all the old neglect of prospect, had scarcely a sight. . . .

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, 358–360; my emphasis)

Unlike Elizabeth at Pemberley, Emma does not discover anything new about the hero in her perception of this landscape, and the abrupt sight of him together with her young friend only increases the pleasure of the place rather than arousing any jealousy at this stage. Instead, Mr. Knightley and the Donwell estate are perceived as a unity, connoting all that is good in an agrarian culture; his attention to Harriet is part of his nurturing role in the scene. The positional description moves from this state of tranquil receptivity to a more aggressive, judgmental intentionality:

There had been a time also when Emma would have been sorry to see Harriet in a spot so favourable for the Abbey-Mill Farm; but now she feared it not. It might be safely viewed with all its appendages of prosperity and beauty, its rich pastures, spreading flocks, orchard in blossom, and light column of smoke ascending. (E, 360; my emphasis)
With complete confidence that Mr. Knightley belongs to her, Emma never questions the tête-à-tête before her but gloats instead on her having separated her protégée from Robert Martin, represented by Abbey-Mill Farm. Conveyed by free indirect discourse, the few attributes of the picturesque scene, however, are enough to assure us not only of what Harriet Smith is in danger of losing, thanks to her friend’s overreaching, but also of a mind open to pastoral beauty, a mind worthy of Mr. Knightley. The details themselves, it will be seen, are the barest essentials of almost any landscape painting of the day, with its requisite column of smoke rising from the cottage chimney. What matters is that Emma perceives it under the particular conditions of the moment: and at this moment the place is infused in her mind with the spirit of Mr. Knightley.

Character in Austen, we have seen, is an image of individual life stemming from a variety of represented speech within meaningful contexts. Although singled out in the story as a person with a particular name and a certain history, when not merely referred to but actually doing something, the character is a voice within a multiple structure of discourse. She may be reified and given psychological motives in the reading process, but her textual existence is linguistic, subject to the limits of words and empty spaces, with intentional and unintentional mimetic effects. Austen’s parodic art mixes uneasily with her “serious” moral realism, and consequently at times the sincere ideal appears to conflict with role-playing as a way of being.

Traditional dichotomies for understanding the individual consciousness are still useful; but Austen’s reflexive text shows the provisional otherness of self called forth in her original use of free indirect discourse. Instead of having rigid identities, characters in her novels inhabit a field and often quite literally speak the same language as well as share the same mind-set. Although the narrators may project authority and normative stances, their main function is to render the character’s finite point of view without invoking the privileges of authorial omniscience; and in free indirect discourse the storyteller and the subject become indistinguishable. Through the same positional strategy, Austen turns even description into a kinetic language, which merges subject and object in the phenomenon of the encounter.