Like dancing, playing cards, or writing a novel, conversation is a structured event, usually involving three roles—a speaker, a listener, and an observer of the exchange. Tristram addresses the reader while recording his mother's interruption of his father, and likewise Walter addresses his wife while spying on Toby and Mrs. Wadman at close quarters. In Austen, except for occasional narrative interference, the third role goes unnoticed for long stretches, as the external reader quietly eavesdrops on direct discourse. Although the topics of conversation may vary from the weather, travel time and distance, food and health, gardening, novels and poetry, preaching, the navy, the poor, and entailments, gossip is what exercises the participants the most; and so a fourth part in conversation may be filled by the person spoken about, who is usually identified by certain roles each time he or she is mentioned.

Numerous characters, especially servants, owe their existence in the text solely to the way they are perceived by other characters. Robert Martin, for instance, does "actually" make a brief appearance but never says a word himself; his function throughout the story is mainly as a referent; even his letter to Harriet is used as a text (without any specimens reproduced) for a lesson on the writing style of a gentleman. A far more peripheral character like Hannah, the daughter of the Woodhouses' servant, James, owes her textual life to a single item—her exemplary deference to authority and poor nerves alike: "Whenever I see her, she always curtseys and asks me how I do, in a very pretty manner; and when you have had her here to do needlework, I observe she always turns the lock of the door the right way and never bangs it" (E, 9). Similarly, the Bennet's housekeeper, Mrs. Hill, attains existence when Mrs. Bennet wants to speak to her about the scarcity of fish on the day that Mr. Bingley is mistakenly supposed to dine with them (PP, 61); at a later point, this same referent is allowed a few words of joy over Lydia's wedding plans (PP, 301, 307); and finally, without being named or credited, this good woman is doubtless to be thanked for the succulent roast venison served to Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy (PP, 342). Not just servants but
many other voiceless members of the community, including the deceased, exert a significant hold on the discourse at center stage.

Not words per se but the expressed intentions of the principals are what structure conversation: the whole encounter depends on cooperation between the speaker and the listener to permit the rhythm of stimulus and response. Without a partner who agrees to interact appropriately, not only remaining silent out of deference, but also reciprocating with the corresponding sounds and gestures when called upon, the speaker is at a loss in the performance; and hard feelings ensue. Because of their primordial rivalry for control over the drawing room, Austen's older women especially have difficulties in conversation and often depart from an encounter in deep discontent. By contrast, the heroines, as we have seen, are both model speakers and listeners, capable of repartee or moral sentiment, depending on the situation; and if they do not know exactly how to cajole their counterparts in the heat of the moment, they are lucky enough to produce an effective response anyway, as in Catherine Morland's disarming ingenuous replies to Henry.

Amidst the variety of speaking in Austen's novels, besides conversation as an experience having a direct impact on the character's thoughts, there are moments of unstructured talk, discourse run wild in the text like mutational sports that lacks proper listeners. Humors appear who assert their presence by the energy of sheer ejaculation, often without the least concern for a response from an interlocutor. Like the useful instruction given by bad actors, who by breaking the rules reveal what is requisite of art, their unedited flow creates a needed waste in the text to put into relief the highly selective language used to etch the central characters. Despite their inconsequential talk in dramatic situations, these comic humors season the narrative feast, particularly when mimicked by another character in free indirect discourse.

Among all of Austen's heavy talkers, Miss Bates is the most capacious source of meaning not only for the story but, more importantly, for the author's technique of representing speech in general. Although Mary Lascelles pointed out years ago the importance of Miss Bates's speeches in letting the reader in on the secret engagement of Jane Fairfax and Frank
Churchill, their value as discourse of the mind has usually escaped notice, though Marilyn Butler comes close to the point by recognizing the essential isolation of this character. In studying the way in which characters perceive each other, Susan Morgan probably declares a widespread assumption about this loquacious humor: “Miss Bates tells everybody everything; facts, feelings, details jumbled together, as fast as she thinks of them. . . . Unlike those who perceive according to preconceived structures, Miss Bates doesn’t shape or select or distinguish at all.”

On two important occasions, however, Miss Bates surprises us by showing that indeed she does shape, select, and distinguish: during the visit to Hartfield, when she almost perversely insists on the truth in contrast to Frank Churchill’s flimsy alibi about Mr. Perry’s plans to set up a carriage; and, of course, on Box Hill when she suddenly penetrates Emma’s witticism and confronts the heroine with her tactlessness. At times this prolific word-maker acts like the author’s fifth columnist by stepping into a scene and playing havoc with the “clever” talkers in the story; and among Miss Bates’s various functions, perhaps the most intriguing is the expression of an existential loneliness that no other characters can voice in their polite conversation. Through direct discourse, unfiltered by the narrator and usually ignored by the other characters, a voice enters the text to disclose the possibility of an “inner” life omitted in the story proper.

In contrast to the speech acts of real-life situations, with all the variables of physical sound, gesture, and countenance, a fictional character’s direct discourse needs to be rigorously contextualized to have meaning; and in Austen there are some surprisingly indeterminate moments because of the spare narrative economy. To help read Miss Bates’s humor, it will be useful to examine less complex talkers in the repertory. Mrs. Jennings comes closest to Miss Bates as a good-natured talker, whereas Mrs. Bennet’s language rarely includes non-contingent relationships. Though not presented as a humorous talker, Mrs. Allen has stretches of unforgettable discourse and surely belongs to the archetype of monologist that is most complete in Miss Bates. One liability shared by all these characters is the unwillingness of others, doubtless including many external readers, to listen to their prattle.
1. Mrs. Allen: “No Real Intelligence to Give”

Among the many samples of pointless talk in Northanger Abbey, Mrs. Allen’s discourse reveals the most narrow form of associationism: “Dress was her passion” (NA, 20); and on every occasion without fail she is the materialistic half of Pope’s antithesis, “Or stain her honour, or her new brocade,” oblivious to the moral significance of events: “With more care for the safety of her new gown than for the comfort of her protegée [sic], Mrs. Allen made her way through the throng of men” (NA, 21). Besides not having children of her own, she is hopelessly incompetent as a foster-parent to Catherine during their visit to Bath. The most serious problem of her obsession with clothes, in brief, is its utter replacement of normal human relationships, which is evident in her inane effort at conversation. When Catherine is dejected by being alone at the dance, “Mrs. Allen did all that she could do in such a case by saying very placidly, every now and then, ‘I wish you could dance, my dear,—I wish you could get a partner.’ For some time her young friend felt obliged to her for these wishes; but they were repeated so often, and proved so totally ineffectual, that Catherine grew tired at last, and would thank her no more” (NA, 21). What makes Mrs. Allen’s speech acts “so totally ineffectual” is their schizoidal separation from the other’s presence, a handicap underscored summarily by the narrator, for instance, in the meeting with Mrs. Thorpe, “talking both together, far more ready to give than to receive information, and each hearing very little of what the other said” (NA, 32). Overwhelmed by the latter’s plethora of information to give, thanks to a numerous family, Mrs. Allen “was forced to sit and appear to listen to all these maternal effusions, consoling herself, however, with the discovery, which her keen eye soon made, that the lace on Mrs. Thorpe’s pelisse was not half so handsome as that on her own” (NA, 32). Despite this fundamental barrier, however, the two women come together almost daily “in what they called conversation, but in which there was scarcely ever any exchange of opinion, and not often any resemblance of subject, for Mrs. Thorpe talked chiefly of her children, and Mrs. Allen of her gowns” (NA, 36). In its transparent reduc-
tionism, the humorous split between the two contending speakers highlights other individualized discourses in the story that pretend to express real feeling by emulating sentimental and Gothic texts.

Mrs. Allen’s total withdrawal from any concern with others is one of Catherine’s early discoveries about her environment, and the woman’s speech habits are the means to this truth:

from habitude very little incommoded by the remarks and ejaculations of Mrs. Allen, whose vacancy of mind and incapacity for thinking were such, that as she never talked a great deal, so she could never be entirely silent; and, therefore, while she sat at her work, if she lost her needle or broke her thread, if she heard a carriage in the street, or saw a speck upon her gown, she must observe it aloud, whether there were any one at leisure to answer her or not. (NA, 60–61)

Conversely, later in this same chapter Catherine tries to give a signal for help from Mrs. Allen while fending off John Thorpe’s Claverton Down scheme; but it is in vain, for the woman “not being at all in the habit of conveying any expression herself by a look, was not aware of its being ever intended by any body else” (NA, 61). If Mr. Allen, among the first of the sullen counterparts to loquacious humors in Austen’s gallery, objects to “young men and women driving about the country in open carriages” on grounds of impropriety, his wife objects simply because “a clean gown is not five minutes wear in them” (NA, 104). Yet neither one shows any emotion upon the announcement of James’s engagement to Isabella: “It was to Catherine the most surprizing insensibility” (NA, 125). Apparently the Allen marriage “works,” we are to understand, because it is based on a mutual insensibility and psychological isolation, an arrangement implied by La Rochefoucauld: “Good marriages do exist, but not delectable ones.”3 After her ultimate crisis of expulsion from Northanger to Fullerton, Catherine can expect even less consolation from the Aliens than from her own parents: while Mrs. Morland at least looks for an appropriate text of morality to suit her daughter’s situation, Mrs. Allen can only repeat her husband’s “wonder,” “conjectures,” and “explanations” (NA, 237).

Since Mrs. Allen is radically cut off from her environ-
ment in all but the instrumentality of clothes, she has little to communicate, not even whether the Tilneys are dead or alive: “Catherine inquired no further; she had heard enough to feel that Mrs. Allen had no real intelligence to give” (NA, 69). Though the primary meaning here of “intelligence” is “information,” the narrator may also be invoking Henry’s sense of “intellectual poverty.” Emma Woodhouse is often in a parallel position with Miss Bates as Catherine is with Mrs. Allen; but there is one very significant difference: Miss Bates’s speech, as we shall see, almost always offers information to anyone who cares to listen.

No real intelligence to give: Mrs. Allen’s discourse fails both as constative and as performative speech, but the narrator emphasizes the former specifically. It is for Catherine, however, to register firsthand the boredom Mrs. Allen’s monotonous conversation elicits; and her discernment here aligns her perfectly with Henry when he pronounces on the quality of life at Fullerton: “What a picture of intellectual poverty!” (NA, 79).


While Mrs. Allen is the ejaculating solitary self, Mrs. Jennings, in Sense and Sensibility, introduced misleadingly as “full of jokes and laughter” (SS, 34), is vicariously involved in the lives of the young—whether in their throes of courtship or their fears during pregnancy—and immediately feels compassion when called upon, as in the jilting of Marianne: “Poor soul! I am sure if I had had a notion of it, I would not have joked her about it for all my money” (SS, 195). Despite first appearances, her busy talk is never really malicious, as Elinor comes to learn and later instructs her sister, but shows a genuine interest in others and always has something to communicate.

Devoid of any illusions concerning herself, she is “invariably kind” (SS, 168) and exposes the egocentric blindness of Marianne, who “expected from other people the same opinions and feelings as her own, and [who] . . . judged of their motives by the immediate effect of their actions on herself”
Unlike other matchmakers, particularly Mrs. Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, Mrs. Jennings is remarkably observant and often lucky in guessing at the potential outcome of the action. Her power of instilling fear in Elinor as well as in Marianne is a function of her penetrating curiosity and quickness in discovering relationships in reflexive imitation of the author. Far from being incidental to the action like Mrs. Allen, Mrs. Jennings serves at least three important functions in this novel: (1) as a comic humor to ventilate the presumed opposition between “sense” and “sensibility,” or between rational judgment and emotional response; (2) as a maternal figure to give support, rarely shown in Austen, against the status quo; and (3) as a dramatized reader whose responses to the story are a proximate version of the outside reader's.

From the beginning, Mrs. Jennings's loquacious presence helps to free the narrative from the rigid eighteenth-century dichotomy implied by the title of this novel and thus to allow a broader range of ethical language than Elinor's conduct-book vocabulary provides. Both characters demonstrate that perception must involve both the feelings and the intellect in order to interact with others fully, but the good widow also shows a visceral response to Marianne's pathos that would be unthinkable in the exemplary heroine. Against the narcissistic sensibility of Marianne, Mrs. Jennings's honest self-deprecation is a welcome antidote of common sense: "Aye, it is a fine thing to be young and handsome. Well! I was young once, but I never was very handsome—worse luck for me. However I got a very good husband, and I don't know what the greatest beauty can do more" (SS, 163).

Likewise, her ebullient speech relieves the sententious exactitude in Elinor's discourse. Perhaps spoken on her sister's as well as on her own behalf, nevertheless Elinor's refusal ("a grateful but absolute denial") to accompany Mrs. Jennings to London may be a trifle self-complacent and may warrant the volley of parental advice that follows: "I am sure your mother will not object to it; for I have had such good luck in getting my own children off my hands, that she will think me a very fit person to have the charge of you; and if I don't get one of you at least well married before I have done with you, it shall not be my fault" (SS, 153-54). If the sentiment sounds absurdly coarse to the delicate ears of the Dashwood sisters, nevertheless it represents not only the way of the world but probably
the author’s buried aggression against literary paragons of virtue. Elinor herself offers no argument against the woman’s well-intentioned pragmatism; and thus Mrs. Jennings’s prediction turns out to be right, her voice fulfilling the implied reader’s desires in comedy.

In a society where “female sensibility” prohibited allusions to the body, Mrs. Jennings’s frankness about sexuality and pregnancy brings some fresh air to the stuffy drawing room. Pamela, we recall, was deeply embarrassed by Mr. B.’s slightest hint of their expecting a child; similarly, Mrs. Jennings’s pointed references to Mrs. Palmer’s condition shocks her more correct daughter: “Lady Middleton could no longer endure such a conversation, and therefore exerted herself to ask Mr. Palmer if there was any news in the paper” (SS, 108). Later, however, her proud speculation, “I warrant you she is a fine size by this time” (SS, 163), fails to disturb Colonel Brandon, thereby proving his ingenuousness. Ironically, by rumoring him to be the natural father of little Eliza, her fantasy hints of a sex life otherwise unthinkable in this virtuous bachelor, and hence spices up the dullish Grandisonian ur-text.

A humorous composite of both sense and sensibility, Mrs. Jennings can alternate effortlessly between the economic advantages of a match and the claims of the heart; but in serving eros she can also substitute one partner for another without any qualms. For instance, she mistakes Colonel Brandon’s remark to Elinor (“I am afraid it cannot take place very soon”) for a postponement of their marriage. Earlier, she had matched him to Marianne: “Astonished and shocked at so unlover-like a speech, she was almost ready to cry out, ‘Lord! what should hinder it?’—but checking her desire, confined herself to this silent ejaculation. ‘This is very strange!—sure he need not wait to be older’” (SS, 281). Her jumbling together fragments of conversation to spin out yet another romantic match is not merely quixotic, however, for Elinor herself feels such gratitude for his beneficence that their interview does have the emotional intensity of a proposal scene. As a festive spirit secretly urging the couple toward union, Mrs. Jennings reflects impatiently on Colonel Brandon’s age and presumably weak libido (“This is very strange!—sure he need not wait to be older”). Thus her role here is to say what neither the narrator nor any character other than Marianne is allowed the honesty to say.
Remnants of a medieval folk tradition about garrulous and concupiscent widows survive in Mrs. Jennings's matchmaking role, but her indiscriminate benevolence and democratic championing of virtue in distress probably owe something to the eighteenth-century vogue of Don Quixote, represented most successfully in Fielding's Parson Adams. Being a mixture of quite different ethical and psychological attitudes, Mrs. Jennings at times evokes the aggressive sexuality of a Wife of Bath or a Mrs. Jewkes; and at other times she can suddenly become the surrogate mother of the Dashwood sisters, replacing the ineffectual, even harmful, guidance of their own sentimental mother. Already on the road to London she is the jovial benefactress, ever solicitous toward the girls' physical comfort and "only disturbed that she could not make them choose their own dinners at the inn" (SS, 160). Although Elinor does grow to love this woman by the time of Marianne's critical illness, when the widow risks her own health to assist with the nursing (SS, 308), nevertheless it is not clear in the structure of the story what impact, if any, this awakened sensibility is to have on the heroine. Likewise, the narrator hastily notes Marianne's changed feelings toward Mrs. Jennings (SS, 341), but again without indicating their consequences. Some of this ambiguity, it seems safe to assume, reflects the author's own unfinished business in working out all the details of the story.

Perhaps most remarkable is the resistance, sometimes hostility, felt toward Mrs. Jennings's nurturing offices. Quite apart from all her unwanted conviviality in previous scenes, upon discovering that Marianne has been jilted, Mrs. Jennings suddenly speaks "in a voice of great compassion" (SS, 192), but to no avail. That Mrs. Jennings is perfectly sincere is never in doubt: the interpretative problem is the Dashwoods' reluctant acceptance of her effort to comfort them, as if someone who talks too much is irredeemable under any circumstances; the same problem reappears in Emma Woodhouse's implacable hatred of Miss Bates.

The narrative renders suspicious how the recipients of charity are to comport themselves under the circumstances: the emphasis on "all the indulgent fondness of a parent towards a favourite child on the last day of its holidays" (SS, 193) is hardly reassuring to a wounded ego like Marianne's; and the beneficence of "sweetmeats and olives, and a good fire" is sec-
ondary to what poor Elinor endures on behalf of her mute sister in properly acknowledging the widow's services, whose "effusions were often distressing, and sometimes almost ridiculous" (SS, 193). Given their social deprivation at the moment, something seems askew in Elinor's tone toward one who is trying to salvage what little is left to them. When Mrs. Jennings produces her ultimate remedy, "some of the finest old Constantia wine in the house that ever was tasted," for Marianne's indisposition, the report that it was her husband's favorite tonic for "his old cholicky gout" causes Elinor to smile "at the difference of the complaints for which it was recommended" (SS, 198). Within the matrix of giving and receiving, Elinor, as well as her more obviously indulgent sister, cannot help but resent the power they must surrender to the donor.

Minor characters can be useful indicators for confronting the text; in fact, they are texts themselves, blue books for reading the larger fabric of the novel. Mrs. Jennings's penchant for matchmaking is humorously reflexive of the reader's own prying into the narrative and into the characters' cryptic messages; and at some moments she, like the narrator, observes more of the story than Elinor herself, no matter how self-disciplined. The widow may be "a great wonderer," but her uninhibited gusto counters the delusions of sensibility. On the contrary, her discourse always expresses a genuine humility at the cost of an outspoken earthiness: and if its "form" may cause Elinor to smile, its substance is often worthwhile. Without suspecting Lucy Steele's secret engagement, for example, she nevertheless fathoms her character: "but as for Lucy, she is such a sly little creature, there is no finding out who she likes" (SS, 148). Described from the beginning of the story as "remarkably quick in the discovery of attachments" (SS, 36), she is the first to detect Colonel Brandon's falling in love with Marianne and to find out that the latter has been with Willoughby to Allenham (SS, 67).

Mrs. Jennings is so observant, indeed, that until Marianne's emotional collapse in London, a large part of the story's suspense involves Elinor's careful maneuvering to keep the truth hidden from her; and after that crisis, all three women, like a trio in a Mozart opera, vie with one another in interpreting the events leading up to Willoughby's stormy confession at Cleveland. Mrs. Jennings's most telling humor, therefore, is in her privilege to the truth that those with either
an excess of reason (Elinor) or an excess of emotion (Marianne) are bound to distort. From the perspective of the 1790s, it is tempting to see her as the author’s parodic foil to the tired eighteenth-century debate over which was essential to human perception (reason versus the imagination). If Austen herself never theoretically resolved the problem so brilliantly discussed by her contemporaries Wordsworth and Coleridge, at least she could find a voice, no matter how secondary, to express the anxiety of human existence in general. Mrs. Jennings is not to be ignored on this account.


Talk as oral aggression and silence as defense, a frequent pattern in Sense and Sensibility, are keyed in the structure of Pride and Prejudice, where the conflict between parents and children becomes a major subject in the narrative. Introduced flatly as a “woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper” (PP, 5), Mrs. Bennet’s discourse promises to be tedious and yet surprisingly throws light on the central agon. Though not so repetitive as Mrs. Allen’s preoccupation with clothes, the same refrain of material/moral dichotomy appears in her good opinion of Mrs. Hurst’s gown (PP, 13), of Colonel Forster’s regimentals (PP, 29), of Mrs. Gardiner’s information about long sleeves (PP, 140), and of Lydia’s marriage once “all the particulars of calico, muslin, and cambric” (PP, 307) are decided. Unlike Mrs. Jennings’s matchmaking pursuit, Mrs. Bennet’s obsessive interest is in the economic disposal of her children without any sentimental lingering: “If I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at Netherfield . . . and all the others equally well married, I shall have nothing to wish for” (PP, 9). An insensitive manipulator, she interferes even to the extent of commanding her daughter to accept a ridiculous marriage proposal: “Lizzy, I insist upon your staying and hearing Mr. Collins” (PP, 104). Possessing few redeeming qualities, this character functions mainly as an obstacle, a sena irata of comedy, whose tactless words threaten the progress of romance.

Though outre in the manner of Mrs. Allen and Mrs.
Jennings, Mrs. Bennet's principal role in the novel is to compensate for woman's inferior social position by wielding power through offensive speech and by resorting to her "nerves" as a defense whenever convenient. Often she is a mouthpiece to spew out ideas prohibited in civil conversation but relevant to the circumstances, as is demonstrated emphatically in the scene upon Elizabeth's return from Hunsford:

"And so, I suppose, they often talk of having Longbourn when your father is dead. They look upon it quite as their own, I dare say, whenever that happens."

"It was a subject which they could not mention before me."

"No. It would have been strange if they had. But I make no doubt, they often talk of it between themselves." (PP, 228)

To suspect the Collinses of gloating over their eventual inheritance of Longbourn may betray a "mean understanding" and "little information," but granted the egocentric norm of this comic world it is distinctly possible that they do, after all, "often talk of it between themselves." Mr. Collins's previous gesture of "atonement" to the Bennets made plain that the entail was very much on his mind, and Mrs. Bennet has good reason to believe that the "Lucases are very artful people indeed" (PP, 140).

Despite her muddled reasoning in an argument, Mrs. Bennet is at times disquietingly right about other characters; and her talk has the advantage of filling in many empty spaces in the dialogue and narrative, and of thus imitating the reader's activity. As is already clear from the opening chapter of the novel, her speech has two basic functions: to play alazon to the other's eiron\(^6\) in dialogue, and to demonstrate the false intent of polite conversation. But indirectly, her free talk is useful in expressing the various moods of frustration that arise from woman's subjugation in a male-dominated society; hence, as if to reify a self perpetually disappearing in a void, her words explode spontaneously to release energy and create a presence.

The Bennets' humorous dialogue plays upon the motif of marital asymmetry, the ideal situation for point/counterpoint discourses, which intrigued the author in the lives of her real acquaintances and recurs throughout her novels.\(^9\) Mrs.
Allen, for instance, “was one of that numerous class of females, whose society can raise no other emotion than surprise at there being any men in the world who could like them well enough to marry them” (NA, 20). The Allen marriage, we have seen, is a schizoidal partnership; and a similar defensive withdrawal afflicts other couples, like the Palmers, the Collinses, the John Knightleys, and the Bertrams. Mrs. Palmer’s disposition, “strongly endowed by nature with a turn for being uniformly civil and happy” (SS, 106–07), is the elixir that enables two disparate individuals to interact harmoniously, “‘Mr. Palmer is so droll! . . . He is always out of humour’” (SS, 112). The usual rhetorical pattern of these asymmetrical couples sets in opposition a malcontent who refuses either to talk amiably or to talk at all and a gregarious character who talks uncontrollably; and in all of this comic exchange we see the persistent loneliness of selfhood. Although not really a conversation, nevertheless if it proves to be a euphoric experience, talk can be another play activity for escaping self-consciousness.

In the brilliant first chapter of Pride and Prejudice, Mrs. Bennet’s imperviousness to her husband’s wit initiates the underlying antagonism between male and female, between parents and children, and between courter and courted, which the story develops in the protagonists. While Mr. Bennet has the upper hand throughout this conversation and the narrator dismisses his spouse summarily as a fool, in retrospect we see that neither husband nor wife really disagrees over the “truth universally acknowledged,” but that the issue between them is what appropriate verbal strategy to adopt in coping with the urgent need of marrying off their five daughters within the allotted time.

Whereas Mrs. Bennet loudly testifies to the “truth” and echoes the literal terms of the proposition about “A single man of large fortune,” Mr. Bennet pretends to a serene detachment from which to bait his wife in a cat-and-mouse game. A cynical recluse who had married a woman for her looks and now must endure her vulgarity, Mr. Bennet functions as yet another interloper in Austen’s comic world, one who delights in mocking the predictable language that situations call forth. In this he resembles Henry Tilney when he parodys a young woman’s diary at Bath or her thrill at visiting a Gothic mansion, and also Frank Churchill when he teases Mr. Woodhouse about drafts or Jane Fairfax about their secret engagement. If
such meddlers may not escape reproach, they still represent the writer’s privilege toward the text.

In all this discourse usually one speaker needs to tamper with the frame to gain control over the situation. By a strange twist of reflexivity, Mr. Bennet’s self-deprecation is a means of ruling others in a situation where the imminence of his own death—the ultimate detachment—can arouse a sardonic laugh rather than fear and trembling. Like Don Quixote and Mr. Yorick, this character is quite aware of his textual mortality and has no real choice but to submit to his all-seeing author:

“My dear, do not give way to such gloomy thoughts. Let us hope for better things. Let us flatter ourselves that I may be the survivor.”

This was not very consoling to Mrs. Bennet, and, therefore, instead of making any answer, she went on as before. (PP, 130)

If Mrs. Bennet may be counted upon to articulate what polite conversation rules out, it is Mr. Bennet’s prerogative to reflect sardonically on his textual fate, leaving his interlocutor speechless within the scene. At the story level he may be a disgruntled husband and father, but from the perspective of the author and reader he is often the “dramatized narrator” and consequently seems like a lonely prankster among fools, listening to Mr. Collins “with the keenest enjoyment, maintaining at the same time the most resolute composure of countenance, and except in an occasional glance at Elizabeth, requiring no partner in his pleasure” (PP, 68).

A less satisfactory role than as butt for her husband’s ridicule is Mrs. Bennet’s inclusion in the satire on false politeness illustrated at length by Mr. Collins’s speeches and stereotyped by Mrs. Philips, who was “quite awed by such an excess of good breeding” (PP, 73). Sincerity of feeling and expression is the norm in this novel, and Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s candor—even rudeness—sets them apart from most of the other speakers. No less a flatterer than Mr. Collins recognizes the value of sincerity and admits that, while “suggesting and arranging such little elegant compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions, I always wish to give them as unstudied an air as possible” (PP, 68). Though usually remembered for
her bluff form of address, Mrs. Bennet occasionally falls in with Mr. Collins's mode of speech whenever something is to be gained by it; and her design inevitably fails.

During the "ceremony of leave-taking," for example, she invites Mr. Collins "with great politeness and cordiality" to return to Longbourn soon only to learn a moment later of his engagement to Charlotte Lucas. Similarly, while aping his obsequiousness toward Lady Catherine, "Mrs. Bennet, all amazement, though flattered by having a guest of such high importance, received her with the utmost politeness" (PP, 351) but in turn is spurned "very resolutely and not very politely." Her susceptibility to flattery, however, is more convincing than her attempt to conjure an effect in others; and she responds automatically to her husband's compliment on her alleged beauty and to Mr. Collins's report of her sister's graciousness. Of course, the mere hint of a marriage proposal changes her completely: "the man whom she could not bear to speak of the day before, was now high in her good graces" (PP, 71). Since mainly functional as the voice of unmentionable ideas, Mrs. Bennet's role in the satire on false politeness is neither consistent nor important, possibly yet another example of remnant cloth from the cutting room.

In the eighteenth-century moral psychology incorporated in Austen's narrative, repressed emotion is a means of some personal autonomy under circumstances that are finally beyond the individual's control. Consequently, moments of greatest tension translate into incomplete messages, like Darcy's abrupt proposal (PP, 189), which requires a long letter of explanation afterward, like Georgiana's "short sentence" (PP, 267), painfully produced during a hostile conversation, or like the total silence at certain points in the text, whether remarked briefly by the narrator or simply left as a gap. Difficulty in speaking, in any case, is one proof of sincerity; however, an eruption of words may be proof of a different kind. Against this ideal of self-discipline in emotion and speech, Mrs. Bennet voices frustrations that motivate Elizabeth's own rebelliousness toward male hegemony in general and economic motives to marrying in particular; yet the rationalistic narrator categorizes her simply as a hypochondriac: "When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous" (PP, 5). But Mrs. Bennet's view of the world, far from being illusory, bears
out the opening sentence of this novel; and “poor nerves” are her best weapon against an economic and social caste system that trivializes the woman as pawn.

Like any other form of play, polite conversation is regulated, framed activity. Mrs. Bennet’s emotional abandon, however, renders her ineligible for any disinterested game: “The sight of Miss Lucas was odious to her. As her successor in that house, she regarded her with jealous abhorrence. Whenever Charlotte came to see them she concluded her to be anticipating the hour of possession” (PP, 130). Her joy as well as despair is too visceral to meet the narrator’s rational standards; for instance, upon hearing that Lydia is to be married: “She was now in an irritation as violent from delight, as she had ever been fidgetty from alarm and vexation. To know that her daughter would be married was enough. She was disturbed by no fear for her felicity, nor humbled by any remembrance of her misconduct” (PP, 306). Later, the prospect of Lydia’s departure for the north brings a renewal of depression until “her mind opened again to the agitation of hope” (PP, 331) at the news of Mr. Bingley’s return to Netherfield. Turning mechanically like a weather vane to every change of mood, Mrs. Bennet’s humor registers the emotional currents in the story at any moment. Under the impact of Elizabeth’s announcement of her engagement, she fleshes out all the responses that her daughter could never own to on the occasion, or even permit others to overhear: “Three daughters married! Ten thousand a year! Oh, Lord! What will become of me. I shall go distracted” (PP, 378).

Finally, the most revealing aspect of Mrs. Bennet’s talk is that, except for infrequent moments of tactical maneuvering and polite design, it is compulsive and unpremeditated—sometimes in the form of quasi-argument and at other times in the associational form of thinking out loud. The simplest example of her “talking for victory” is her attack on the young Lucas boy, who vowed that if he had Darcy’s money he would “keep a pack of foxhounds, and drink a bottle of wine every day” (PP, 20). Although her scruples against alcoholism may be well-founded, her threat of seizing the bottle from him, if necessary, collapses ethical doctrine into a see-saw for dominance: “The boy protested that she should not [take the bottle away from him]; she continued to declare that she would, and the argument ended only with the visit” (PP, 20).
Without any hope that Mr. Darcy would ever be a candidate for husband to one of her daughters, Mrs. Bennet luxuriates in hostility toward him and thus provides a context for reading Elizabeth’s own deep-seated prejudice. The mother’s argument with him at Netherfield over the relative complexity of city as opposed to country people astonishes everyone by its audacious support of her daughter’s assertion about human nature in general. Instantly, after having “fancied she had gained a complete victory over him,” however, she “continued her triumph” by distorting his original point and forcing Elizabeth to his defense (PP, 43).

Mrs. Bennet’s comical determination to win a case by any verbal expedient backfires when she attempts to explain away Elizabeth’s rejection of Mr. Collins’s proposal:

“She is a very headstrong foolish girl, and does not know her own interest; but I will make her know it.”

“Pardon me for interrupting you, Madam,” cried Mr. Collins; “but if she is really headstrong and foolish, I know not whether she would altogether be a very desirable wife to a man in my situation, who naturally looks for happiness in the marriage state. If therefore she actually persists in rejecting my suit, perhaps it were better not to force her into accepting me, because if liable to such defects of temper, she could not contribute much to my felicity.” (PP, 110)

By denigrating her own daughter before the suitor as a way of gaining more time for persuasion, Mrs. Bennet inadvertently appeals to his self-interest and bungles everything.

Performative speech may become almost hallucinogenic when the agent surrenders to the current of words. A small but significant part of Mrs. Bennet’s talk has the same vatic quality demonstrated at length in Miss Bates’s monologues—a freely associational outpouring of words without self-consciousness and without communicating anything specific to the listener; it is language, furthermore, that the narrator as well as other characters in the story tend to ignore. Mrs. Bennet’s “rapidity” (PP, 99) of words and her “rapacity” (PP, 342) toward others indicate an aggressive release that is her only means of presence; and, as she candidly admits to Elizabeth, she is indifferent to her audience. Apparently it is the feeling of momentary power that is therapeutic for her.
“poor nerves.” Performative speech abounds in this novel, and some of the best scenes show the protagonists engaged in brilliant verbal dueling in sharp contrast to characters encoded in clichés (Mr. Collins, Mary Bennet, Miss Bingley, Lady Catherine).

Talk has the power of presence, and the threat of its cessation is always ominous. A glimpse into Mrs. Bennet's existential vacuum comes with the information that she “was not in the habit of walking” (PP, 365), a marked difference from her vigorous daughter, who jumps over stiles and leaps puddles in defiance of woman's conventional fixity, to counteract her restrictive physical role, talk is manifest destiny. No matter how vexing to Elizabeth and to others in the story, Mrs. Bennet's oral freedom belongs indispensably to this novel's wordscape; and the loss to the text caused by her absence is abruptly clear after the Netherfield ball when Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley snub her:

They repulsed every attempt of Mrs. Bennet at conversation, and by so doing, threw a languor over the whole party, which was very little relieved by the long speeches of Mr. Collins, who was complimenting Mr. Bingley and his sisters on the elegance of their entertainment, and the hospitality and politeness which had marked their behaviour to their guests. Darcy said nothing at all. Mr. Bennet, in equal silence, was enjoying the scene. (PP, 102–03)

Something is strangely out of line. Without this woman's discourse, which, as the narrator implies, contains a needed stimulus to move people in a way the wholly predictable “long speeches” of Mr. Collins do not, only the fictional rejector of the feast, Mr. Bennet, can enjoy the ensuing languor.¹¹

4. Miss Bates's Secrets

A crux of interpretation in *Emma* has always been the heroine's relentless hostility toward Miss Bates, a jovial talker who, unlike Mrs. Allen, Mrs. Jennings, and Mrs. Bennet, barely survives at the fringe of the privileged society. No other woman character in Austen is so obdurate against a vulner-
able, older person except for Elizabeth Bennet, who readily deplores her mother's indiscretion without ever seeing the family likeness in her own behavior. Perhaps the mirror of diffidence is Catherine Morland, who never raises an objection either to her real or to her surrogate mother's failings; even Fanny Price dares to criticize her parents. Mrs. Jennings, we saw, has Miss Bates's liability in exuding good humor to mostly negative recipients; but despite her widowhood, her place in the family and in society is secure. Emma's hatred of Miss Bates is all the more curious because of the latter's circumstances, and it invites attention to problems of competitiveness and ego defense by way of filling in character.\textsuperscript{12}

But a more general approach to the I-thou relationships in Austen's novels should probably begin with Jean-Paul Sartre, whose succinct analysis of positional strategies in discourse helps to account for the latent motives in a given encounter: "The occasion which arouses hate is simply an act by the Other which puts me in the state of being subject to his freedom. This act is in itself humiliating."\textsuperscript{13} Sartre's analysis of intentionality goes more deeply into the hidden, and mostly self-defensive, motivations than Goffman's relatively hedonistic model of the encounter, which is morally neutral. Although not all "open spaces" in a literary text imply "existential" vacuums, Austen's parodic art deliberately focuses on character as an artifact of language and on the potentially sinister motives of rival discourses. Until the crisis at Box Hill revealed how her transgression provided Miss Bates's talk, for once, with an attentive audience, Emma had pretended to be free from this woman's discourse; but then Mr. Knightley bursts upon her in a frenzy ("I must, I will,—I will tell you truths while I can" [E, 375]):

"She felt your full meaning. She has talked of it since. I wish you could have heard how she talked of it—with what candour and generosity. I wish you could have heard her honouring your forbearance, in being able to pay her such attentions, as she was for ever receiving from yourself and your father, when her society must be so irksome." (E, 375)

Whatever the justice, according to the external reader's desires, of Mr. Knightley's reprimand, the awful truth, which his brother would quickly acknowledge, is that anyone's society
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can be irksome outside the “small band of true friends” (E, 484) who matter.

Sartre carries the principle to its existential limit: “The Other whom I hate actually represents all Others. My project of suppressing him is a project of suppressing others in general; that is, of recapturing my non-substantial freedom as for-itself.”

While engrossed in the game, Austen’s participants concentrate mainly on strategies of meeting the opponent while ignoring the reasons for competing with the other inherited from the “real” world—and text. What no one inside the story addresses is the possibility that Miss Bates’s “dreadful gratitude” may conceal a reciprocal hostility toward Emma herself: “to be grateful for a kindness is to recognise that the Other was entirely free in acting as he has done.” Of course, on this particular occasion, Emma knows perfectly well that she does not deserve this woman's gratitude and hence feels under attack by the very word; but it never enters her mind (that is, it is missing in the printed representation of her consciousness) that Miss Bates may resent her as an object who denies her freedom of being.

In a novel profoundly structured on the problems of discourse and reading, *Emma* needs a humorous character who can focus on the subversiveness of language; and as a speaker whose power of words is her sole means of presence in the Highbury world, Miss Bates augments the dilemma, shown elsewhere in the story, of being “open” in communication and likewise repressing what is forbidden to say. Consequently, her humor is a blend of Mrs. Allen's schizoidal talk, Mrs. Jennings’s compassionate utterance, and Mrs. Bennet’s gregarious energy; but, unlike those more securely fixed identities, she is too vulnerable to afford enemies and thus is under constant stress to say that which is not as well as that which is true. At least three functions appear in her most significant monologue: (1) her “polite speech” is automatic gesture and premeditated design; (2) her talk is the principal medium not only for interpreting the secret engagement but also for revealing the secretiveness in any communication; and (3) though unperceived by others in the story, her verbal exuberance hints at a darker reality which her role as festive spirit is supposed to guard against, and from this ambiguous language the reader may glimpse the ontological void underlying the text. Once Miss Bates performs these valuable services, how-
ever, the author casts her off, leaving her in the end with Mrs. Elton's unproductive speech habits.

Because of her subordinate status and familiar chatter, most of the characters misread Miss Bates as a simpleton who may be relied upon to say whatever is ingratiating. The scene at the Crown in the second volume shows how each regards her condescendingly. To Churchill's suggestion of inviting her to their council, Mrs. Weston hesitatingly assents, "if you think she will be of any use"; but Emma flatly objects: "She will be all delight and gratitude, but she will tell you nothing. She will not even listen to your questions" (E, 255). Earlier, at the Coles's party, Emma had mimicked the poor woman's reiterative expression of gratitude and her indiscriminate blending of moral and material things in one breath (E, 225), an idiosyncrasy in the other humorous talkers already discussed. Emma's contempt for Miss Bates's obsequious speech arises partly from feeling it to be insincere, but perhaps mostly from taking it for granted and not really listening to it. By contrast, while Frank Churchill has his private reasons for finding Miss Bates "so amusing, so extremely amusing," Mr. Weston as master of revels deems her a "proper person for shewing us how to do away difficulties" and asserts categorically: "she is a standing lesson of how to be happy" (E, 255). No one in the scene reads this character sympathetically. If Mr. Weston believes that Miss Bates is a "standing lesson" of the "sublime and refined Point of Felicity, called the Possession of being well deceived," he is, as usual, imperceptive about manners. Whenever called upon by her society to perform, Miss Bates stands rather like Watteau's Gilles—momentarily isolated and awkward, pathetically aware of the clown costume she is expected to wear for her part in the Highbury world; and her eventual banishment to Mrs. Elton's company is hardly less satisfactory than her niece's dubious marriage at the end. Again, the play/"serious" dichotomy comes into question; and though required to perform as the happy and harmless simpleton of the village, she cannot entirely disguise a self-consciousness bound to disturb the other.

On many occasions an ideal performer, in "flow" and oblivious momentarily to her personal misery, nevertheless at times Miss Bates can be quite deliberate about what to communicate and thus undermines her assigned play roles. Faced with Emma's same domestic arrangement of coddling an in-
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valid parent, for instance, Miss Bates keeps secret from her mother anything alarming, like Jane's not eating properly, and when necessary uses talk to divert her attention from any painful subject: "so I say one thing and then I say another, and it passes off" (E, 237). But on reading of Jane's illness she spontaneously blurts out the news and alarms the old woman, who then requires a yet more abundant dose of words to soothe her nerves. At the height of Jane's crisis, however, when Miss Bates herself is too distressed to conceal the truth, her mother immediately begins to regain her sight and hearing: "'I am afraid Jane is not very well,' said she, 'but I do not know; they tell me she is well'" (E, 378). Far from the Panglossian optimist that Mr. Weston imagines, Miss Bates is rather a "standing lesson" of how best to appear happy in a world that denies her the right to be otherwise.

Double-bind situations cause unavoidable difficulties in speech. An important secret revealed at moments in Miss Bates's discourse is that, contrary to Emma's interpretation of her insincerity (she hides the truth even from herself in Sartre's concept of "bad faith"), her deepest plight is in attempting to be both "open" and "reserved" simultaneously, to be free in releasing her expressive impulse, on the one hand, and in guarding her socially predicted obeisance, on the other; and what is most remarkable for a person on the outskirts of society, she arrives, however inconsistently, at the same truth the principals consciously uphold. Just as Emma comes to value Mr. John Knightley's blunt honesty above Mr. Weston's spineless diplomacy, so Miss Bates, even when caught up in verbiage to the choking point (indicated in the shards of her sentences), shows insight into the evil of polite conversation while desperately sputtering out the words needed to meet its standards and is implicitly aware of Mr. Knightley's attack on Frank Churchill's role-playing: "the practised politician, who is to read every body's character, and make every body's talents conduce to the display of his own superiority; to be dispensing his flatteries around, that he may make all appear like fools compared with himself!" (E, 150). Unlike Churchill, who even surpasses his own expectations of performance (his erroneous assumption of Emma's being in on their secret), and also unlike Mr. Woodhouse, who always escapes behind Emma's verbal shield, Miss Bates can never be sure of herself in social
speech confrontations unless she is absurdly submissive in every word to her superior auditors. Only once does she yield to temptation and try to exploit her situation as a dependent by flaunting her benefactor, Mr. Knightley, in front of company gathered in her apartment (E, 244-45).

As elsewhere in Austen's text, bad performances communicate by the rules of "irrelevance." Hardly the "practised politician," Miss Bates seems to be haunted by the necessity for false relationships and insincere language in response to the least gesture of beneficence. While trying to find words for Frank Churchill's special solicitude in repairing her mother's spectacles, she intuitively distrusts both his "excessive" praise of the baked apples (his mockery of her exhibitionistic display of Mr. Knightley's gift) and perhaps his alleged reason for being there at all, and her language short-circuits under the stress: "That, you know, was so very. . . . And I am sure, by his manner, it was no compliment" (E, 238). Though instinctively "open" in Mr. Knightley's sense, nevertheless Miss Bates feels compelled to flattery or "stroking" as her only means of being in society; and sometimes natural inclination and political tact hopelessly conflict.

Compliment is the code word for "bad faith" messages. On her arrival for the ball at the Crown, for instance, an inner voice reminds Miss Bates, "Must not compliment, I know" (E, 323); but she goes ahead and admires Emma's hair anyway and then solicits a compliment in return on behalf of Jane's hair, insinuating pointedly that her niece had done it herself and could match any London hairdresser in skill. In the same breath that she worries about Jane's feet getting wet, though admitting the rain "was but a drop or two," she praises Frank Churchill for being "so extremely—and there was a mat to step upon—I shall never forget his extreme politeness" (E, 323). Miss Bates remains without anything of her own to offer except the outright ridicule, intentional or not, of the situation, an effect shown most devastatingly after Box Hill, when Emma comes as a penitent and hears the old words with a new force:

"So very kind!" replied Miss Bates. "But you are always kind."

There was no bearing such an 'always;' and to
break through her dreadful gratitude, Emma made the direct inquiry of—

“Where—may I ask?—is Miss Fairfax going?”

In a moment when the heroine believes herself to be fulfilling at least the letter of the hero’s moral law, Miss Bates’s “dreadful gratitude” mocks her long habit of acting in bad faith; and thus the topic of Jane is preferable to any further agony of self-consciousness. Psychoanalytical interpretation of Emma’s hostility as a “discharging onto Miss Bates feelings which she has, but cannot admit, toward her father” accords plausibly with Freud’s family romance; but in metaphysical terms, it is enough to recognize the heroine’s language as a defense against the dreadful truth of her being-in-the-world, with which this woman’s rampant talk threatens her.

Interpretations of Emma that stress knowledge as goal have emphasized Miss Bates’s capacity for giving away secrets. To the external reader, if not to the characters within the story, her discourse indirectly reveals the clandestine lovers, whom Mr. Knightley begins to suspect well before the truth is disclosed; and as Marilyn Butler and others have observed, her failure to communicate the actually valuable information contained in her speech betrays the fundamental solipsism dividing members of the community at large. When listened to, however, Miss Bates’s words, because of their proximity to the daily life of Highbury as opposed to the snobbish detachment at Hartfield, suddenly gain power at critical moments to expose Frank Churchill’s blunder and Emma’s insult.

Her role as town crier is particularly disturbing to the elitist heroine; again, Sartre’s existential I-thou formula is apposite: “The Other whom I hate actually represents all Others.” For someone who has “no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect,” Miss Bates holds an astonishing grip on Emma’s mind; and the violence at Box Hill erupts as an involuntary discharge from that bondage. Until her crime subjects her all the more to this woman’s freedom, Emma has enjoyed the illusion of being in full control over her; but Mr. Knightley steps in to pronounce the nightmarish truth of public humiliation: “She felt your full meaning. She has talked of it since. I wish you could have heard how she talked of it.” Never before or after does Miss Bates stand so triumphantly
for the voice of the community, with her "candour and generosity" displayed against the heroine's private joking; and rather than "reforming" her, Mr. Knightley's chastisement is mostly valuable in leading Emma to face the deep hostility that her behavior toward this poor victim has exposed and to turn to him in order to regain her social standing, which all the thrill of her new submissiveness to him entails. Her contempt for Miss Bates, however, remains to the end of the novel.

Description, no matter how "objective," usually bears some traces of a particular perspective and thus only pretends to leave out the narrator completely. Thanks to subtle intonation with free indirect discourse, a rare moment shows Emma having a consciousness of the community that rivals the concrete imagery of her enemy's speech and also voices an important difference in their perceptions:

—Much could not be hoped from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury;—Mr. Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox letting himself in at the office door, Mr. Cole's carriage horses returning from exercise, or a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects she could presume to expect; and when her eyes fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarrelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker's little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread, she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused enough; quite enough still to stand at the door. A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer. (E, 233)

In contrast to Miss Bates's effusive, unorganized recording of the villagers, this view from Ford's begins and ends under Emma's critical eye, objective to the extent of Keats's "negative capability" and yet intentional in selecting the subject matter for contemplation. Bored with Harriet, who "was still hanging over muslins and changing her mind," she escapes the immediate situation by losing herself in the vision of the street; instead of seeing the few people she had expected and knew by name, "her eyes fell only on" some lowly creatures, including the dogs and carriage horses, usually beneath her
notice. Her aesthetic powers "with seeing nothing," however, create all that is needed to satisfy her will; her mind is "at ease" because it is free from the objects seen passively as opposed to the many occasions when the other intrudes upon her private space.

Since her description is usually held subordinate to narration within the storytelling economy, unlike her contemporary Walter Scott, Austen deliberately chose not to give fine brush strokes to her scenes, as if anything other than dramatic function would be superfluous matter. But a compulsive talker can readily furnish details omitted by a restrained narrator, just as Emma’s daydreaming at Ford’s provides the reader with a glimpse of town life excluded from the story. Miss Bates’s speech incorporates other characters’ discourse voraciously but nevertheless mentions only the positive:

"Then the baked apples came home, Mrs. Wallis sent them by her boy; they are extremely civil and obliging to us, the Wallises, always—I have heard some people say that Mrs. Wallis can be uncivil and give a very rude answer, but we have never known any thing but the greatest attention from them. And it cannot be for the value of our custom now, for what is our consumption of bread, you know?" (E, 236–37)

Rather than Emma’s detached pleasure in visual objects themselves, Miss Bates’s circuitous narrative digresses from the main story but serves as a description of pertinent moral relations—unraveling all the interactions and obligations created by the gift of the apples as they proceed from Mr. Knightley’s orchard, which in itself has become a social institution ("My mother says the orchard was always famous in her younger days"), and thence to her table by way of demonstrating Mrs. Wallis’s true benevolence. As if to reflect the strain of always being judged by superiors, Miss Bates, in direct contrast to Emma’s ironic tendency, makes a special point of improving someone else’s reputation.

Encounters are always risky, but in Emma the threat of annihilation is unusually strong even for Austen’s text. Though Miss Bates offends Emma by her mere presence, by her freedom of words as an expression of her subjective being, their antithetical relationship is also a blatant form of the general conflict between self and other unresolved in the novel.
Like Austen's ironic narrator, the nontheistic Sartre uses religious associations for his theory of positional perception: "It is before the Other that I am guilty. I am guilty first when beneath the Other's look I experience my alienation and my nakedness as a fall from grace which I must assume." 22 Just as the self experiences guilt in the other's gaze, so the assertion of one's own subjective freedom is a denial of the other's existence. From the freedom to transcend her instrumentally limited world and to look at the other as mere object, Emma "falls from grace" at Box Hill and is punished by being "looked at" as an alien and subject to Miss Bates's generosity, exacerbated, of course, by Mr. Knightley's attestation. While the moralizing narrator posits her "anger against herself, mortification, and deep concern," her heartfelt guilt springs from her ontological nakedness in front of all the witnesses Miss Bates's verbal discharge calls to account; after an initial effort at an apology to this woman, not only does Emma never look back with regret, but the author herself seems constrained to rid the novel of this humorous character.

Memory, we have said, is short-lived in Austen's text; but occasionally the past intrudes in conversation with an unanswerable force. Besides her power to conjure up the whole community's threatening presence in her flow of speech, Miss Bates's age endows her with the authority of the collective past and makes available an awesome range of language against Emma's narrow intent on living in the present. Except for readily admitting her permissive upbringing, the heroine is notably silent about her childhood, which Mr. Knightley suddenly calls forth in his reprimand:

"—You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her. humble her—and before her niece, too—and before others, many of whom (certainly some,) would be entirely guided by your treatment of her." (E, 375)

Hegel's aphorism, "Wesen ist was gewesen ist," according to Sartre, means that the past is in-itself and intrinsically separate from the present, which is for-itself: "everything which can be a For-itself must be it back there behind itself, out of reach." 23 Emma's apparent avoidance of the past doubtless

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bears on the mother whom she has replaced at Hartfield; and the spectacle of Miss Bates’s nurturing role toward her mother and niece uncannily arouses a hostility in the heroine’s consciousness that is far more pronounced than in those other characters, discussed previously, who also spurned the maternal ties.

This rivalry between the past (in-itself) and present (for-itself) calls forth conflicting voices in the text that seriously undermine the hero’s explicit ideal of sincerity, an ideal some readers have attributed to the author as well. But Miss Bates’s “open” discourse exposes a problem in lingual communication that Mr. Knightley’s romantic standard misses altogether. At the simplest level of truthfulness, the secret engagement has been a deliberate imposition on all concerned; and after the discovery of this “most dangerous game,” only Frank Churchill’s words of sympathy for Jane have any credence with his severest reader (E, 445). But the narrator recognizes a more general difficulty of communication than the hero’s pristine judgment will allow: “Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken” (E, 431).

In Sartre’s phenomenology, that “something” lies in the past, “out of reach,” not consciously withheld but simply absent to the for-itself. By repressing the past, Emma accommodates the present by living in bad faith, “a perpetual game of escape from the for-itself to the for-others and from the for-others to the for-itself.” The moralist may denounce Frank Churchill’s “game” (not really a game at all, as we have seen), when once known, as a “system of hypocrisy and deceit,—espionage, and treachery” (E, 399); Emma’s “game,” more fully knowable to the reader than it ever is to herself, is at bottom a system of existential defenses through vicarious role-playing (Harriet as princess in disguise, Jane as the “other woman,” Mrs. Weston as happy newlywed). Her irresistible attraction to Mr. Knightley, her almost desperate longing to prove worthy of him, is a desire to regain selfhood after the annihilation suffered in previous encounters: “Bad faith is possible only because sincerity is conscious of missing its goal inevitably, due to its very nature.” It is this darker truth of being-in-the-world that Miss Bates’s torrent of words uncovers, and it remains far from clear whether the heroine will actually escape from bad faith encounters even after winning the hero.
Besides her function in reflecting the insincerity of polite discourse and the inherent fragmentariness of any communication, Miss Bates also embodies, more emphatically than other characters in this novel, the affective responses expressed in speech. Just as both the “clever” talkers—Frank Churchill and Emma—are thrown off guard in the moments of Miss Bates’s startling penetration, so elsewhere in the text her words bear comparison with the most authoritative voices heard, including the hero’s. Perhaps uneasy about presenting this character so inconsistently, Austen has little use for her once the secret engagement becomes known and in the end consigns her to Mrs. Elton’s patronage, which mitigates—even justifies—Emma’s rudeness.

Earlier in the novel, however, Miss Bates exerts a mysterious power and sheds light on the other characters’ struggles to grasp the hidden truth. Her insight into the difference between perception and illusion, for example, sets her apart from the deceivers and self-deceived: “Very odd! but one never does form a just idea of any body beforehand. One takes up a notion, and runs away with it” (E, 176). Despite her notion of there being a resemblance between Mr. Dixon and Mr. Knightley here, she does not have the heroine’s quixotic imagination and is, surprisingly, one of the few in the story to detect Mr. Elton’s amorous interest in Emma (E, 176). Given this quickness of observation at such moments, her seeming obliviousness to Frank Churchill is one of the most unaccountable “empty spaces” in this text; and the more we learn about this woman’s speech acts, the more plausible it is that she indeed should have had an inkling of the secret engagement soon after Jane’s arrival in Highbury. The simplest answer to this crux, of course, is that Austen had not worried adequately about the loose ends of her characterization to avoid this interpretive problem. Nevertheless, in moments of inspired clarity Miss Bates is a reliable judge of reality and shares Mr. Knightley’s fear of solipsism, as expressed in Cowper’s lines, “while with poring eye / I gaz’d, myself creating what I saw” (E, 344).

However “ridiculous” otherwise, Miss Bates’s discourse shows that without the capacity for sympathetic responses, knowledge of the other, hence reading itself, is impossible. Emma’s standards of objectivity, by contrast, sound hackneyed: “It is very unfair to judge of any body’s conduct, without an intimate knoweldge of their situation. Nobody,
who has not been in the interior of a family, can say what the
difficulties of any individual of that family may be” (E, 146). Similarly, her terse remark on poverty echoes Mary Bennet's tautological wisdom: “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). Such a concern with the measure of evidence and response, no matter how relevant to the author's moral economy in other contexts, belies the heroine's deficient feelings toward others and her consequent blindness until the revelation at Box Hill. Miss Bates, however, feels too much for her own good, caught as she is in an irreconcilable predicament of having to please others while also having to express herself openly.

Again, the ball at the Crown Inn is a pivotal encounter in the characterization. As if to carry out to the letter Mr. Weston's pronouncement on her as a standing lesson of being happy, Miss Bates arrives at the scene in a torrent of civilities that imbues the occasion with the festive mood. The ironic narrator conjures up the woman's wondrous entry as a virtuoso performance to the extent that even Mrs. Elton's “words, everybody's words, were soon lost under the incessant flow of Miss Bates, who came in talking” (E, 322). Aside from the valuable information her speech imparts concerning Frank Churchill's peculiar interest in Jane and herself, her spontaneous outbursts of joy help free the occasion from the Eltons' subversive plots: “Well! This is brilliant indeed!—This is admirable!—Excellently contrived, upon my word. Nothing wanting. Could not have imagined it.—So well lighted up.—Jane, Jane, look—did you ever see anything? Oh! Mr. Weston, you must really have had Aladdin's lamp. Good Mrs. Stokes would not know her own room again” (E, 322). Nothing wanting except the playful humor, “flow,” to transform the drab room into “fairy-land”; Miss Bates enters the ball to dispel the tensions and rivalries of the Highbury world, and to unite it for the moment in a fragile accord.

Comic characters defy the laws of gravity. Her public role as word-maker fulfilled in opening the rites of spring, Miss Bates vanishes magically during the sets of dances and returns only in time for the late supper; nobody appears to have noticed her absence, perhaps further proof of the company's absorption in the rhythm of the event rather than just another “empty space” in the text. Only the outside reader is
privileged to eavesdrop on her confiding to Jane an astonishing physical feat: "Yes, my dear, I ran home, as I said I should, to help grandmamma to bed, and got back again, and nobody missed me.—I set off without saying a word [!], just as I told you" (E, 329).

In contrast to her noisy entrance to the ball—her expected social role—Miss Bates's wordless exit demonstrates the sincerity of her private behavior, though the action of running off alone on a wet night to Hartfield, escorting her mother home and putting her to bed, and then slipping back into the company at the Crown unnoticed may be a strain even on Aladdin's lamp. Her report to Jane here, the only one in the novel without Emma or some other outsider on hand to interpret, gives us a glimpse into the "interior of a family" that Emma had supposedly demanded before making judgments; and like Wemmick's games with his senile father in *Great Expectations*, her narrative assumes the fundamental split between social and kinship loyalties. 27

While the main Highbury folk are celebrating at the Crown, the valetudinarians have a parallel feast at Hartfield, grandmamma coming alive with "a vast deal of chat, and backgammon" and not letting the "little disappointment" of Mr. Woodhouse's sending back the sweetbread and asparagus, the old woman's favorite dish, spoil the mood for the others. Moreover, this "little disappointment" binds the family members in a pact to uphold the social order: "we agreed we would not speak of it to any body, for fear of its getting around to dear Miss Woodhouse, who would be so very much concerned!" (E, 329-30).

Simple affection among kin of an impoverished family, however, holds little interest for those in power who distrust the feelings. Although quietly affectionate toward her father and his small circle of friends, Emma never gives way to lingering emotions; and her hostility toward Miss Bates's public demeanor—her flow of words to express the requisite gratitude (parodied by the narrator herself)—results in a loss of perception that isolates her from the central mystery and its solution, provided by this woman's speeches. From the beginning, Emma's disdain for Miss Bates has distorted her reading of her words about Jane and prompted the romantic fantasy of a triangle with Mr. Dixon: her dread of the actual text sent ("though she had in fact heard the whole substance of Jane Fairfax's letter, she had been able to escape the letter itself")"
[E, 162]) belongs to a pattern of selective responses to her counterpart, including the refusal to admit any evidence linking her with Frank Churchill.

Emma's imagining Jane to be a victim of a hopeless passion for a married man not only testifies to her shoddy intentionality but also to her predatory instincts as a reader—both implicit motives of the romantic genre; and, not surprisingly, when Miss Bates announces her niece's decision to go into slavery as a governess, the heroine's sympathy is forthcoming: "this picture of her present sufferings acted as a cure of every former ungenerous suspicion, and left her nothing but pity" (E, 379–80). But this "picture," of course, stems from Miss Bates, who, as usual, intercedes during Jane's absence and expresses genuine grief in the spaces between the formulaic words of gratitude owed to those in authority:

"It is a great change; and though she is amazingly fortunate—such a situation, I suppose, as no young woman before ever met with on first going out—do not think us ungrateful, Miss Woodhouse, for such surprising good fortune—(again dispersing her tears)—but, poor dear soul! if you were to see what a headach she has. When one is in great pain, you know one cannot feel any blessing quite as it may deserve. She is as low as possible. To look at her, nobody would think how delighted and happy she is to have secured such a situation." (E, 379)

On a visit to Miss Bates's in atonement for her sins at Box Hill and with an awareness of Donwell Abbey, Emma still cannot converse with this woman sympathetically, and not because of a moral deficiency on her part: it takes two to communicate, and Miss Bates is in the habit of protecting herself against hostile superiors behind a camouflage of polite words. Failing to touch base, Emma immerses herself in Jane's apparent downfall in Highbury society, relishing the pathos much as any detached newspaper reader does accounts of fallen celebrities.

Emma's failure to learn anything from Miss Bates's discourse throughout the story is at one with her habitual failure to identify with her tone as narrator of events; and this insurmountable barrier to conversation vitiates the many potential signals in either woman's words and gestures. Ironically, Emma's complete indifference to the storyteller's emo-
tions causes her to ignore the important reference to the ostler who saw Frank Churchill leaving town hastily; and, in contrast, Miss Bates's associational imagination drifts away from the intellectual problem of solving the puzzle of events to the simple fact of human misery: "Poor old John, I have a great regard for him; he was clerk to my poor father twenty-seven years; and now, poor old man, he is bed-ridden, and very poorly with the rheumatic gout in his joints—I must go and see him to-day; and so will Jane. I am sure, if she gets out at all" (E, 383). Although Emma's explicit avoidance of "empty sympathy" rules out any concern for the unknown lame father of the witness to Churchill's sudden departure, the author's own complicity in this monologue on human suffering implies that her reticence elsewhere in the text is not callous.

For the purposes of the story, however, the most relevant fact is Emma's unimaginative response to the aunt's account of Jane in the first place; and this failure to listen properly results in yet another misreading of the situation: "There was nothing in all this either to astonish or interest, and it caught Emma's attention only as it united with the subject which already engaged her mind. The contrast between Mrs. Churchill's importance in the world, and Jane Fairfax's, struck her; one was everything, the other nothing—and she sat mus­ing on the difference of woman's destiny" (E, 384). Emma's snobbish predilection to value what is said by the speaker's social standing not only closes her off from the mystery of the plot and from what is unsaid, but it also leads her to the banal contrast between Mrs. Churchill, who is "everything"—though at this very moment, dead, unloved, and unmourned—and Jane Fairfax, young, talented, and admired, who is presumably "nothing." It is possible, of course, to interpret the tone here as showing Emma's heartfelt sympathy with Jane's predicament, and the absolute categories as mimicking the way of the world. But in view of Emma's abhorrence to the end of the second- and third-rate, it is more likely yet another failure on the heroine's part to comprehend the moral life of her community and another opportunity to escape through games of illusion.

Conversation is an art, and thus, like other forms of play, it is a means of representation as well as of expression. Surely what draws many readers to Austen's novels is their apparent simplicity and clarity, a luminescent discourse un-
paralleled in the genre. Yet, if her clever talkers were to stand alone, their reputation among the author’s detractors for not saying very much, at least not very much about their contemporary social and political world, might be partly justified. By also representing speech that is artless, however, Austen does not merely provide a backdrop to polite conversation in the way some Renaissance paintings depict tawny servants to offset their radiant mistresses in the foreground. Rather, by breaking the rules of an encounter, the manic talkers appear to come closer than any of the other characters to revealing the truth that lies concealed in all discourse—the truth that words alone signify nothing. It is this truth, of course, that is instrumental in rendering the illusion of “real feelings” as opposed to the regulated and derivative text.