Conclusion

Writing, to recall Fanny Price’s thoughts during her exile in Portsmouth, connects one with the absent (MP, 394). In Fanny’s predicament the idea is a truism of epistololarity; but we have seen that in moments of greatest tension, even when Austen’s characters occupy the same room or garden, they may resort to writing letters rather than speaking face-to-face. Thus under any circumstances the act of writing is a surrogate medium, an abstract of intentionality to connect the self with the Sartrean other; at best it is a form of role-playing, and usually suspicious. To help overcome the implied distance from the reader, writing, in Austen’s fiction, needs to imitate the situation of actual speech; to communicate “real feelings,” moreover, it needs to contextualize speech so that occasional moments of sincerity can be made credible amidst the usual babble of everyday situations. As in Richardson, Fielding, and Sterne, whose “new species of writing” explicitly turned theory into practice, Austen appears to be quite deliberate in thematizing her reflexive strategy toward the dialogical text and sometimes calling into question the mirage of reading as well as the subterfuge of writing.

Like the eighteenth-century masters of English fiction, Austen was defensive about the literary merit of novel-writing and pursued rigorous narrative economies toward verisimilitude; as a result, by means of parody she discovered a language for rendering consciousness. Parody is commonly regarded as a specific form of literary satire; and in her early spoofs Austen, we know, ridiculed the bathos and pretentiousness of sentimentalism, Gothic horror, epistolary style, and history writing. But already in her first novels she turned parody into an intertextual art that carries out two related purposes: it undermines mimetic conventions by asserting a “deeper” reality supposedly free from convention, and it also discloses the rules of an encounter by showing when they are broken in faulty communication. Above all, by ostensibly circumventing narrative omniscience, through free indirect discourse Austen’s parody achieves the remarkable power of reporting not only a character’s speech but also his or her apparent consciousness.

Although eighteenth-century novelists experimented
with individualizing characters through idiomatic dialogue, Austen appears to have been the first major English writer to grasp fully the technique of using free indirect discourse to represent the lived self in the moment. The discovery of this narrative method, ubiquitous in modern fiction, may have been an accident of changing conventions for indicating various kinds of discourse on the printed page. At any rate, like other means of production in a historical culture, the provenance of literary texts is not wholly conscious but part of what Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling”; and in his illuminating Foucauldian study of “transparency” in later eighteenth-century prison designs, John Bender likens free indirect discourse to the surveillance system instituted in the Panopticon: “Both the realist novel and the penitentiary pretend that character is autonomous, but in both cases invisible authority is organizing a mode of representation whose way of proceeding includes the premise, and fosters the illusion, that the consciousness they present is as free to shape circumstance as to be shaped by it.”

Despite the extent of transparency in rendering her characters through free indirect discourse, however, Austen hardly reveals them completely to the reader; and their strength as individuals, we have seen, may depend on keeping something concealed from the other characters, even from those most admired and trusted.

While exposing the character to the reader without narrative interference, free indirect discourse supposedly uncovers “real feelings” rather than yet another convention of storytelling. This valorizing of sincerity in novelistic discourse can be compared to similar privileged stances in the eighteenth-century semiotics of landscape architecture, stage acting, dancing, public speaking, and other cultural encoding. Austen’s well-known interest in the picturesque helps to explain her own devices in addressing the irrational basis of her characters’ (and presumably the reader’s) responses in an encounter. From William Gilpin she could have learned that the quest for knowledge is hardly the whole of a story:

But it is not from this scientifical employment, that we derive our chief pleasure. We are most delighted, when some grand scene, tho’ perhaps of incorrect composition, rising before the eye, strikes us beyond the power of thought—when the vox faucibus haeret; and
every mental operation is suspended. In this pause of intellect; this deliquium of the soul, an enthusiastic sensation of pleasure overspreads it, previous to any examination by the rules of art. The general idea of the scene makes an impression, before any appeal is made to the judgment. We rather feel, than survey it.  

Austen recognized that challenging the reader with the riddle of the plot—Fanny Price's dilemma in refusing Henry Crawford or the mystery concerning Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax—gives a strong incentive to cope with the text; but, like Gilpin, she attributed the reader's highest pleasure to those encounters that involve ecstatic emotion. When characters do not know what they are saying in the moment but consequently find themselves engaged to marry, their "deliquium of the soul" eludes description and can only be referred to fragmentarily. It is when the "voice sticks in the throat" (nox faucibus haeret), Austen's speech-oriented narrative would persuade us, that the character reveals the "language of real feeling."

Besides the irrational principle of aesthetic pleasure, Gilpin's stressing the reader's complicity in creating the illusion required in any painting, drama, and literary text seems akin to Austen's practice: "How absurdly would the spectator act, if instead of assisting the illusion of the stage, he should insist on being deceived, without being a party in the deception?—if he refused to believe, that the light he saw, was the sun; or the scene before him, the Roman capital, because he knew the one was a candle-light, and the other, a painted cloth?" Austen would have met a similar emphasis in Edmund Burke: "A true artist should put a generous deceit on the spectators, and effect the noblest designs by easy methods. . . . No work of art can be great, but as it deceives." Again, the reader enters into a contract with the artistic work and surrenders to the illusion for the sake of pleasure. Rather than simply ridiculing popular fiction, then, Austen's parodic intertextuality serves the critical purpose of sharpening the reader's awareness of which illusions are worth submitting to.

Although later eighteenth-century theorists stressed the subjective apprehension of the object, of course there was always something more than the reader's willful hallucination involved in constituting the text. Sincere expression implies an objective norm: no matter how much a fine wine depends
Con...
the young body and vanishes with age altogether: "l'enfance & la jeunesse sont l'âge des graces. La souplesse & la docilité des membres sont tallement nécessaires aux graces, que l'âge mûr s'y refuse, & que la vieillesse en est privée." 8 In contrast, Hogarth observed that children "have movements in the muscles of their faces peculiar to their age, as an uninformed and unmeaning stare, an open mouth, and simple grin: all which expressions are chiefly formed of plain curves, and these movements and expressions idiots are apt to retain." 9

In attributing the "language of real feeling" and grace of movement to Nature, Austen, together with late-eighteenth-century theorists, recognized a fundamental principle explored in modern behavioral studies. The pioneer of kinesics, Ray Birdwhistell, for instance, points out the mysterious phenomenon in all societies of a child's acquiring the essentials of communication by the age of six, which cannot be explained by rationalistic criteria: "Communication control is not achieved through a simple additive process which involves the accumulation of parcels of sounds or body motion which carry encapsulated chunks of meaning." Birdwhistell goes on to say how little is yet known about the "patterned way" we learn as human beings. In contrast to neoclassical theorists, who could enumerate more than a score of bodily gestures corresponding to definable passions (they amounted to as many as thirty-two different kinds by the end of the eighteenth century), present studies recognize as many as 250,000 different facial expressions alone. 10 In describing this awesome variability of behavior we have to make do with the handful of emotive words available in our language. It is an important insight of writers in the later eighteenth century that the old moral psychology, with its finite categories of emotion, was no more than a working model for describing a very complex phenomenon.

Despite the emphasis in romantic aesthetics on the fragmented and subjective basis of the picturesque, however, rationalistic theorists like Gilbert Austin were aspiring to describe ever more precisely the semiotics of the bodily expression. With learned citations from classical rhetoric, Austin attacks the cult of primitivism and outdoes any of the seventeenth-century French theorists by devising a geometric system to track every expressive movement of the body within a spherical space. A "strange prejudice," he complains, "has seemed to prevail against every effort to improve delivery." 11
Conclusion

Because of a mistaken idea about wishing to appear natural and spontaneous, although they studied intonations of voice, public speakers entirely ignored the value of countenance and gesture to expression. In Austin's view, this "strange prejudice" arose from inappropriate use of gestures and from the inherent difficulty in determining their decorum in the first place.

Although admitting that theatricality should be avoided in church situations, Gilbert Austin nevertheless rejects Addison's contention that gesture per se is out of keeping with the English character: "Our preachers stand stock still in the pulpit, and will not so much as move a finger, to set off the best sermons in the world." Sincere communication need not be boring, and Austin endorses Thomas Sheridan's view that the Evangelical movement owed as much to rhetorical principles as it did to religious doctrine:

There is no emotion of the mind, which nature does not make an effort to manifest by some of those signs (tones, looks, and gestures), and therefore a total suppression of those signs is of all other states apparently the most unnatural. And this, it is to be feared, is too much the state of the pulpit elocution in general in the church of England. On which account, there never was perhaps a religious sect upon earth, whose hearts were so little engaged in the act of public worship, as the members of that church. To be pleased, we must feel, and we are pleased with feeling.

No matter how fanatical the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Quakers, at least they find their worship stimulating in contrast to the perfunctory Church of England congregation. To prove that body language is "natural," Austin quotes Erasmus Darwin at length on the associationism between gesture and emotional response, and then attempts to work out an exact science of rhetorical encoding.

Despite the lack of direct evidence, it is not unlikely that the Austen family knew about *Chironomia*, especially considering the coincidence of the author's name with their own. In any case, James Fordyce, whose pulpit eloquence Gilbert Austin highly praises, was of course cited by Mr. Collins for the edification of such spirited young women as Lydia and Kitty Bennet. Although Mary Wollstonecraft deplored Fordyce's
"mellifluous precepts" toward subjugating women, in the comically disastrous reading scene in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen shows that Mr. Collins's pompous delivery itself is enough to alienate his captive audience, notwithstanding the antifeminist he educes as an authority; and the context also suggests that he actually welcomes Lydia's interruption of his reading as an excuse to play backgammon with Mr. Bennet (*PP*, 69).

In a much more elaborate reading scene in *Mansfield Park*, which contrasts religious to dramatic discourse, Austen may be alluding to Gilbert Austin and James Fordyce as examples of pulpit eloquence and spiritual poverty. After his momentous reading of Shakespeare to Fanny (*MP*, 337–38), Henry Crawford raises with Edmund the topoi of histrionic art, pulpit eloquence, and audience response that interested Gilbert Austin. Despite his success as a reader of dramatic poetry, Henry quickly loses ground with Fanny when he emulates Austin's harangue on pulpit delivery: "It is more difficult to speak well than to compose well; that is, the rules and trick of composition are oftener an object of study" (*MP*, 341). The implied norm here is clearly something ineffable, not to be communicated either by a mellifluous voice or by "the rules and trick of composition." When Crawford affectingly demands a selective congregation for his eloquence ("I must have a London audience, I could not preach, but to the educated; to those who are capable of estimating my composition"), Fanny "involuntarily shook her head," a sincere gesture that cuts through the premeditated delivery of the speaker and reduces him to guilty bewilderment, "instantly by her side again, in treating to know her meaning" (*MP*, 341). A minute previously she had already responded to his irreverent attitude to hearing sermons by moving her lips (*MP*, 340). Now again she is "vexed with herself for not having been as motionless as she was speechless" (*MP*, 342). The scene culminates in Crawford's becoming intoxicated by his own verbal monopoly; but when he adopts the lover's hackneyed discourse of "angel talk" toward the heroine ("it is 'Fanny' that I think of all day, and dream of all night.—You have given the name such reality of sweetness, that nothing else can now be descriptive of you" [*MP*, 344]), he loses everything that he had gained by reading Shakespeare so well and ends up being a hammy Lovelace.

Presumably influenced by Crawford, Edmund also
appears to be an advocate of the *Chironomia* in finding a pulpit delivery that can compete with the Evangelicals for emotional effect:

"Even in my profession"—said Edmund with a smile—"how little the art of reading has been studied! how little a clear manner, and good delivery, have been attended to! I speak rather of the past, however, than the present.—There is now a spirit of improvement abroad; but among those who were ordained twenty, thirty, forty years ago, the larger number, to judge by their performance, must have thought reading was reading, and preaching was preaching. It is different now. The subject is more justly considered. It is felt that distinctness and energy may have weight in recommending the most solid truths; and, besides, there is more general observation and taste, a more critical knowledge diffused, than formerly; in every congregation, there is a larger proportion who know a little of the matter, and who can judge and criticize." *(MP, 339-40)*

Although Edmund does read "very well," according to Fanny, his progressivism in this scene seems no less vainglorious than Henry's parade of his talents before an apparently passive listener. But Edmund, we know, is "so inconsistent" at the time because he is so "full" of the Crawfords; his uncharacteristic manner here betrays a misplaced emulation of Henry's zeal for an urbane, rhetorically conditioned audience rather than for one responsive to the Word.

As in Austen's ironic allusions to modernist architects like Humphry Repton, Nature is the norm in this conversation; and Edmund's phrase "a spirit of improvement" is as suspect as his abetting Henry's attempts to overcome Fanny's resistance to seduction. Just as insensitive landscape architects were raping the land to display wealth ostentatiously, so high-powered media experts like Gilbert Austen were trying out scientific methods of persuasion without attending to the substance of the message. The fact, reported from someone's point of view, that the wedding service for Maria and Mr. Rushworth "was impressively read by Dr. Grant" *(MP, 203)* should suffice to make us wary of the "spirit of improvement" abroad. It is Dr. Grant who eventually leaves Mansfield for
the "London audience" that Henry required and, true to Tom Bertram's prediction, subsequently dies of an apoplexy brought on "by three institutionary dinners in one week" (MP, 469).

Behind all the competing discourses in the reading scene at Mansfield, then, is a barely discernible revered silence of which Fanny alone is aware. Contrary to a familiar reading of Fanny as a latter-day saint, however, her physicality is no less remarkable than her finely tuned receptiveness to spiritual messages in an increasingly secular world. Within the discourses of Mansfield Park, only she can feel the coarseness of Henry's and even Edmund's attempts to manipulate an audience through methods resembling Pavlov's experiments in a later age. Yet she does nonetheless attest to the efficacy of rhetoric: "To good reading, however, she had been long used; her uncle read well—her cousins all—Edmund very well; but in Mr. Crawford's reading there was a variety of excellence beyond what she had ever met with. . . . —It was truly dramatic.—His acting had first taught Fanny what pleasure a play might give, and his reading brought all his acting before her again" (MP, 337).

As Chironomia proudly proclaimed, the whole geometrical system of gesture was based not only on the best classical authorities but, most importantly, on the principles of Nature—that is, on the way human beings communicate with one another. Jane Austen did not pretend to deny that narrative art means artfulness, deceit, regulated stimulus/response, voluntary delusion, and the whole game of filling in the charade's "empty spaces"; on the contrary, while demonstrating the heroine's model receptivity to mimetic performances of one kind or another throughout Mansfield Park, the author sneaks in the most privileged discourse—the unspoken and unheard religious presence that depends on the onion-peeling of false discourses on elocution like Gilbert Austin's, Henry Crawford's, and Edmund Bertram's. From the strategy of novelistic structure, what matters is our temporary belief in the unspoken and unheard language referred to in Fanny's musings.

Notwithstanding Park Honan's scrupulous analysis of Austen's holograph letter concerning her intentions in Mansfield Park, the ideal of ordination (investing with priestly authority) valorizes the heroine's discourse in her struggle to save Edmund from the Babylonians who have invaded the temple; and what is most remarkable about this apparently re-
ligious novel is its secular method of depicting the poor in spirit. By a process of elimination, all the worldly contenders are found to speak in a defunct language; and at last it is the heroine's silence that is triumphant.

By contrast to this literary quietism, in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* wisdom is perhaps too closely identified with the discourse of conduct books about filial duty; and in the end we are asked to accept Marianne Dashwood's renunciation of passionate love and Anne Elliot's unwavering deference to Lady Russell's original advice against marrying Wentworth. When the ludic spirit is most light and bright and sparkling, as in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, the rival discourses still need the ballast of at least some "serious" talk, as both heroines must undergo a degree of humiliation before winning "happiness." Of all Austen's novels, however, it is mainly in *Emma*, as we have seen, that the reflexive text brackets even the most privileged discourse and calls attention to the essential deceitfulness of any narrative art.