



## *Emma* and the Countryside: Weather and a Place for a Walk

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*Look back, for a moment, at the knowable community of Jane Austen. . . . What she sees across the land is a network of propertied houses and families, and through the holes of this tightly drawn mesh most actual people are simply not seen. . . . And it is not only most of the people who have disappeared. . . . It is also most of the country, which becomes real only as it relates to the houses which are the real nodes; for the rest the country is weather or a place for a walk. (Williams 166)*

JANE AUSTEN'S ASTUTELY MINUTE OBSERVATIONS of human relations, and the ironic tone which characterizes her depiction of interactions among families and communities would seem to eclipse the setting in which she situates them. When not the weather or a place for a walk, Raymond Williams contends that "the land is seen primarily as an index of revenue and position" (115). In *Emma*, however, the country functions less in terms of its relation to historical "reality" than in the pastoral tradition that experienced a resurgence in the Romantic period. All the action the reader witnesses first-hand takes place in the countryside, albeit only sixteen miles from London, meeting the most fundamental criteria of the Romantic pastoral tradition: a love story in

a rural location that works as an oblique commentary on the evils of urban life. But what about the finer elements—the way in which the landscape functions in the text and extent to which it is described—the weather, the walk, and the land's weight as revenue and an indicator of social position?

“The weather plays a great part in *Emma*,” writes Lionel Trilling, and points out that, “[i]n no other novel of Jane Austen's is the succession of the seasons, and cold and heat, of such consequence, as if to make the point which the pastoral idyll characteristically makes, that the only hardships that man ought to have to endure are meteorological” (43).

Weather and discussions of the weather do occur throughout *Emma* more frequently than in the other novels, but they serve the text in more complex ways than mentioned here by Trilling. Much is made of the snow the night of the Westons' party, of Jane Fairfax's walk to the post office in the rain, of the heat the day of the Donwell picnic; and the weather in each instance is instrumental to the momentum of the plot. The first occasion prompts the disassembling of the Weston party which sets the scene for Mr. Elton's proposal to Emma; the second drops the clue of Jane Fairfax's engagement to Frank Churchill through her fierce interest in intercepting the mail; the last provides a mask for Jane's telling fatigue and decision to return home, and for Frank's ill-humor.

The weather, however, also operates as a psychological register, reflecting Emma's moods and setting the emotional tenor. Mr. Elton's proposal takes place in a closed carriage in a snowfall at night with all the associations of coldness, darkness, and enclosure, in contrast to Mr. Knightley's proposal, which occurs in the garden in the warmth of a late summer evening. Although the morning following Mr. Elton's ill-fated proposal brings the return of happiness to resilient Emma, the snowfall, in preventing her from leaving the house, also prevents her from recounting the night's events to Harriet, an anticipated confession weighing heavily on Emma's mind. “[T]he atmosphere in that *unsettled state* between frost and thaw,” which leaves Emma “a most honorable prisoner,” corresponds to the “evil hanging over her in the hour of explanation with Harriet, as made it impossible for Emma to

be ever perfectly at ease" (emphasis added, 138-39). Lear-like, Emma's uneasy conscience translates literally to unsettled weather.

The broader cycle of seasonal changes throughout the novel reinforces the correspondence between Emma's mental state and the external atmosphere. When the date of Frank Churchill's long-awaited visit to Highbury is set, Mr. Weston comments that there is "just the right weather for him, fine, dry, settled weather," reflecting Emma's correspondingly high anticipation of meeting Frank (188). Frank arrives in February, yet through Emma's eyes, we see the beginnings of spring with its attendant feelings of expectation: "Emma's spirits were mounted quite up to happiness; every thing wore a different air. . . . When she looked at the hedges, she thought the elder at least must soon be coming out; and when she turned round to Harriet, she saw something like a look of spring, a tender smile even there" (189). Frank's initial visits, a period of happiness and well-being for Emma, coincide with spring, and if the onset of spring occurs only in Emma's heightened sensibilities and imagination, readers nonetheless see from her perspective.

Good weather and humor continue well into the summer for Emma. Mr. Knightley's picnic, which all, Emma included, consider "a particular compliment to themselves," takes place at the height of summer in perfect weather (357). The "sun [is] bright, without being oppressive" in conjunction with Emma's perfect affability as she examines the estate and grounds ostensibly for her nephew, and Mr. Knightley rules the day with unflinching propriety (360). Emma finds the excursion to Box Hill hotter, as conflicts among the party indeed heat up. Malaise and ill-humor grow into thinly veiled affronts, reaching a climax in the confrontation between Mr. Knightley and Emma, and a break between Jane and Frank. Blind to Jane and Frank's true relationship, Emma is affected by the tense atmosphere as she feels the heat, without knowing to what to attribute it.

It comes as no surprise then, that Emma's most wrenching upset is followed by an extended rainstorm. Emma's discovery of her own love for Mr. Knightley through learning of Harriet's, and her misplaced fear of a possible reciprocal attachment causes her to re-examine with shame her every thought and action over the

preceding year. Emma's emotional upheaval precipitates a storm, her remorse translating to the ravaging of the fecund summer landscape:

The evening of this day was very long, and melancholy, at Hartfield. The weather added what it could of gloom. A cold stormy rain set in, and nothing of July appeared but in the trees and shrubs, which the wind was despoiling, and the length of the day, which only made such cruel sights the longer visible. (421)

In perfect synchronicity, the weather anticipates Mr. Knightley's return from London of which Emma remains unaware, and the chapter that includes his proposal opens with the following passage:

The weather continued much the same all the following morning; and the same loneliness, and the same melancholy, seemed to reign at Hartfield—but in the afternoon it cleared; the wind changed into a softer quarter; the clouds were carried off; the sun appeared; it was summer again. With all the eagerness which such a transition gives, Emma resolved to be out of doors as soon as possible. (424)

With the break in the storm comes the shift in Emma's consciousness that anticipates the revelation of Mr. Knightley's true feelings. Summer weather resumes as a prelude to his proposal and to Emma's assurance of being loved and in love. The weather becomes an extension of her very consciousness, anticipating or reflecting her psychological states. This device is partly a consequence of Emma's centrality in the text; and if the reader sees characters and events through her eyes (though often blinded), her lens affects the focus and perspective of the attendant atmosphere and landscape.

For all Jane Austen's reputation for drawing-room wit and depictions of literal and psychological interiors, several pivotal scenes in *Emma* take place outdoors: the Box Hill outing, the picnic at Donwell Abbey, and of course, the final proposal scene. In these climactic moments, a walk is the setting for a confrontation or confession between individuals who enjoy a high level of intimacy. Practically speaking, a walk is a means of acquiring some degree of privacy away from a Mr. Woodhouse or Miss Bates who

rarely leaves home. We can also read these incidents on a metaphorical level: Jane and Frank are headed in opposite directions when they quarrel in the heat on the road near Donwell Abbey, just as their lives are headed on opposite paths, Frank's toward economic and personal liberty and Jane's toward subordination to her future employers and separation from family and friends. The metaphorical aspects of Emma's proposal scene are still more apparent: Mr. Knightley enters the garden of *Hartfield*—the name speaks for itself—and finds Emma taking “a few turns” (424). These physical turns in her garden parallel the turns Emma's mind takes as she faces the implications of her recent discoveries.

The decision to walk also reveals a certain type of character. Whom do we hear of taking walks? Primarily, Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax. Emma may take a walk, but she does not wish to do so alone and her designs on Harriet arise in part from her want of a walking companion. “She had ventured once alone to Randalls, but it was not pleasant; and a Harriet Smith, therefore, one whom she could summon at any time to a walk, would be a valuable addition to her privileges” (26). That Mr. Knightley walks, and does so not as idle wandering but to reach a specific destination, is as distinguishing a feature of his character as is Mr. Woodhouse's taste for gruel or Mrs. Elton's vulgar abbreviations of names. Emma may feel it more dignified that Mr. Knightley use his carriage, yet it is Mr. Knightley and not Emma who sets the moral as well as economic standard here. If we are most susceptible to Emma's moods, then we are most susceptible to Mr. Knightley's judgments. His natural inclination to walk, attributed to “a great deal of health, activity, and independence” (213) (in addition to his keeping no horses), indicates common-sense, naturalness, and a lack of pretension, in contrast to Mrs. Elton's frequent references to the comforts of her sister's barouche-landau for “exploring” (213, 274). Jane Fairfax shares Mr. Knightley's penchant for walking—prompted by more than just economic necessity, as shown in her refusal of Emma's offers of a carriage from Donwell—that reveals a similar temperament of independence and self-command.

Given Austen's awareness of the impact of economics on



individual lives and relationships, and the way in which personal finances dominate the landscape (so to speak) of her fiction, she could hardly relegate the countryside to romantic backdrop. The narration informs the reader within the first few chapters that Mr. Knightley is the largest landholder in Highbury, that Mr. Weston recently purchased his estate after successful employment in trade, and that Mr. Elton “was known to have some independent property” (35). What is valued in Mr. Knightley’s character is not merely his ownership of land, but his interest and involvement in its cultivation. Land carries a moral as well as an economic weight, and the best men are those most rooted to the earth. The narrator relates that,

as a farmer, as keeping in hand the home-farm at Donwell, he had to tell what every field was to bear next year, and to give all such local information as could not fail of being interesting to a brother whose home it had equally been the longest part of his life, and whose attachments were strong. The plan of a drain, the change of a fence, the felling of a tree, and the destination of every acre for wheat, turnips, or spring corn, was entered into with as much equality of interest by John, as his cooler manners rendered possible. . . . (100)

Williams contends that in Austen’s novels “the process of working the land is seen hardly at all,” yet this process, if not seen, is at least discussed in great detail (115). Much is made of Donwell’s famed strawberries and apple trees—(the latter of which, admittedly, as Jane Austen’s brother Edward noted, blossomed out of season). Mr. Knightley is a landowner and a gentleman, but he is also a farmer.

Just as wealth does not insure moral depth or gentility, the absence of wealth and social standing does not preclude these qualities. Witness the young tenant farmer Robert Martin who, like John Knightley, approaches the elder Mr. Knightley in moral value. Martin occupies an odd position in the text: like the very act of working the land he is seen only once from a distance and heard from only indirectly through Mr. Knightley or Harriet Smith. Emma, whose judgment of individuals is consistently flawed, tells Harriet: “I may have seen him fifty times, but with-

out having any idea of his name. A young farmer, whether on horseback or foot, is the very last sort of person to raise my curiosity. The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do” (29). This passage does not reflect badly on Martin but instead places Emma’s snobbery in the worst light. As Trilling explains,

The yeoman class had always held a strong position in English class feeling, and, at this time especially, only stupid or ignorant people felt privileged to look down upon it. Mr. Knightley, whose social position is one of the certainties of the book, as is his freedom from any trace of snobbery, speaks of young Martin, who is his friend, as a “gentleman farmer,” and it is clear that he is on his way to being a gentleman pure and simple. (37)

Although Mr. Knightley is the romantic hero of the story, Robert Martin is strangely central to the text, and the very simplicity of his character more closely approximates the prototypical shepherd of the pastoral idyll. Indeed, his connection with the rituals of country life and love is such that he has his shepherd’s son sing for Harriet as part of his courtship.

By contrast, those not rooted to the land exhibit a corresponding shallowness. Frank Churchill who was at Weymouth when he met Jane, and who impetuously jaunts off to London for a day, whether for haircut or piano, shows a callowness that offsets his fundamentally good character. Mr. Elton, after being rejected by Emma, leaves the countryside for Bath where he courts and becomes engaged to his wife-to-be “with delightful rapidity,”—a clear indication of the superficiality of their relationship (181). Mrs. Elton reveals her own snobbery and vulgarity in her recommendation of Bath society to Emma, for whom she presumes to offer to make introductions. Mrs. Churchill, who moves from Enscombe to London and then directly again to Richmond, is characterized almost exclusively by dissatisfaction, emotional manipulateness, and instability. When Mr. Knightley goes to London it is “to learn to be indifferent,” to submerge or negate the depth of his rooted affection for Emma (432). Traveling and moving, especially to urban centers such as Bath or London, imply a lack of sincerity and sense. To be stationary

in the country is to have deep and authentic emotions.

Does this value accorded to the stationary and sedentary translate to a type of reactionary politics that some critics identify as typical of the pastoral? While Jane Austen's means may be conservative, the ends are not. For all Emma's snobbery, there is social movement in this book, and social movement seen in an unquestionably positive light. Mr. Weston, formerly a tradesman, formerly of the militia, through the success of his trade purchases the estate of Randalls; Mrs. Weston, previously the governess Miss Taylor, through her personal merit becomes the wife of a respected landowner; Jane Fairfax, rescued from the brink of the governess trade, will become a gentleman's wife; and Robert Martin, the gentleman farmer, through the diligence of his labor, to reiterate Lionel Trilling's comment, "is on his way to being a gentleman pure and simple."

This social mobility is predicated on the ideal of diligent individual labor and morality. As Roger Sales explains, "[Austen] succeeds here in uniting the conservatism of the rural gentry with the ethics of capitalist production" (34). Farmers do not need to organize, agitate, nor become politically involved in the making of legislation, but merely to follow a species of Puritan work ethic—to work hard and manage their money wisely. Women must cultivate their virtues, be sensible and sincere, and they will be rewarded with a husband who is a true "gentleman."

In this respect, *Emma* fits surprisingly well into Lore Metzger's definition of the purpose of a pastoral: "to articulate radical ends of social reform attenuated by an insistence on conservative means" (xiv). Radical may seem a strong term for Jane Austen's ends, but when looking at how Metzger continues, we see an even greater correspondence to *Emma* in the relation of the individual to the community:

Romantic pastoral typically foregrounds the belief in the perfectibility of the individual as the means of transforming society into a model of communality. This belief assumes as a given the paradox that the stable institutions of society can be preserved intact while ultimately revolutionary results can be achieved by the transformation of



the individual consciousness. (xiv)

This is the sense in which *Emma* is a type of pastoral idyll. It contains the more superficial elements of the genre: the shepherd's song, the rural locale, the love story; in addition, it contains the moral dimension in its strong attention to individual character, the connection it draws between the land and moral values, and its portioning out rewards to the deserving.

In terms of *Emma's* ideology, there is an interesting tension between an ostensibly apolitical stance which is de facto conservative in working to maintain the status quo, and the extent to which a more progressive agenda can be seen through the social mobility of certain principle characters, albeit by "conservative means." Typically in a pastoral, the "essentially aristocratic codes of conspicuous consumption, idle ease and languid leisure" mask the desire to revert to pre-capitalistic socio-economic striation (Sales 17). Yet, for all the leisure, picnics, and parties that constitute the greater part of *Emma*, labor is evident and valued. The country may be largely "weather and a place for a walk," but in the spirit of the Romanticism of Jane Austen's time, appreciation of and physical and psychological connectedness with the land becomes a virtue, one more component of the moral character.

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