"Not a day went by without a solitary walk": Elizabeth's Pastoral World

MARY JANE CURRY
Mary Jane Curry, JASNA life member, left a tenured position in English at AUM for administration at Wesleyan College, Macon, Georgia. Appropriately for her specialization in Austen, Wesleyan is the world's first college granting degrees to women (1836).

Of all the Austen heroines, Elizabeth Bennet thinks most about that part of nature that is unbounded; where boundaries exist, she crosses them. A three mile walk from Longbourn to Netherfield "is nothing" when Jane lies ill there, and she exuberantly makes the trip, "crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity, and finding herself at last within view of the house, with weary ancles [sic], dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise" (*Pride and Prejudice* 32). Four months later, at Rosings, Elizabeth makes her favorite walk "along the open grove which edged [the rectory] side of the park, where there was a nice sheltered path, which no one seemed to value but herself, and where she felt beyond the reach of Lady Catherine's curiosity" (169). Her freedom is curtailed as, first, Mr. Darcy joins her on several mornings (182), and second, Col. Fitzwilliam meets her, giving her the opportunity to discover his cousin's part in keeping Mr. Bingley from Jane in London (182-86). After Mr. Darcy's first proposal of marriage (189-93), he interrupts Elizabeth's solitary "ramble" when he discovers her taking a new route (to avoid him) and gives her the letter that elicits the exclamation, "'Till this moment, I never knew myself'" (195, 208).

Elizabeth's walks — solitary or in company with Mr. Darcy and the Gardiners — figure a gradual change in her. Austen places this change in the context of what I argue is her proto-feminist version of the pastoral novel (Curry 1, 5). What makes *Pride and Prejudice* and the other five Austen novels incipiently feminist is the heroine's ideology of serious pastoral as a context for establishing her identity. Serious pastoral implies that country life, if enriched by intellectual and aesthetic pursuits, is better than city life; Austen's novels imply that such a country life is better for young women than city life. For her main characters, nature is a source of comfort and freedom as well as beauty.

Peter Marinelli defines *serious pastoral* in contrast to *decorative pastoral*, which is the lighter, simplistic version with stock characters (versions of the shepherd and milkmaid) and stock conflict such as two young men vying for a young woman's love (3, 6-13, 17-18). In European literature, both kinds begin with Theocritus's *Idylls* and Vergil's *Eclogues*, or *Bucolics*. Decorative pastoral is what Elizabeth Toohey discusses in her 1999 *Persuasions* paper when referring to Mrs. Elton's image of the strawberry-picking party at Donwell as presenting "the more superficial elements" of the pastoral idyll: "the shepherd's song, the rural locale, the love story" (52). Similarly, Laura Mooneyham White's "Emma and New Comedy" examines the "green world" of comic romance to establish Austen's "both enjoy[ing] and rebel[ling] from the conventions of comic romance" (131).[1] I agree, and add that Austen's treatment of decorative pastoral is only part of what serious pastoral does. In "Travelling to the Self," White's reading of Austen's open spaces as ambiguous, representing potential selfhood or loss of identity (199), interprets the psychological within a green world. My reading focuses on Austen's transforming the conventions of serious pastoral through figurative language, which operates on both the personal and the social levels.

Serious pastoral is concerned with complex problems and characters that it does not idealize, and the microcosm of serious pastoral can contain (in both senses) insidious forces. Other English novelists, of course, had already written woman-centered pastoral novels — Frances Burney, for example. The difference between their pastoral elements and Austen's is subtlety (not that Burney is not subtle in other equally important ways): Burney's Mr. Villars

describes his ward Evelina as "quite a little rustic, [who] knows nothing of the world" (9). Evelina and Mr. Villars's disapproval of London social life is registered in overtly pastoral language (e.g., 13, 27-28); Evelina calls the social world's late hours "a terrible reversal of the order of nature!" (28). In contrast, Austen transforms pastoral ideology without displaying its conventional language—except, of course, when she satirizes it in such scenes as Mrs. Elton's attempt to play shepherdess at Donwell (356).

During Austen's young adulthood serious pastoral poetry was being transformed by William Wordsworth, who was only five years older than she.[2] Wordsworth, like Austen, read William Cowper, whose Book I of *The Task* expresses a typically pastoral appreciation of nature:

> For I have loved the rural walk through lanes
> Of grassy swath, close cropp'd by nibbling sheep,
> And skirted thick with intertexture firm
> Of thorny boughs; have loved the rural walk
> O'er hills, through valleys, and by river's brink,
> E'er since, a truant boy, I pass'd my bounds,
> To enjoy a ramble on the banks of Thames.

Except for the "thorny boughs," Elizabeth Bennet's "ramble" through the woods, across the valley, and over the stream at Pemberley Woods (245, 253-54) resembles Cowper's. Like his poetry and Wordsworth's, Austen's novels attribute the protagonist's self-understanding to a calming freedom produced by viewing the non-human physical world. *In Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth credits his memories of nature's "beauteous forms" with his "tranquil restoration" amid the human conflict he experienced in cities (ll. 23-31).

Austen's narrator tells us that Elizabeth's walks at Rosings and at Longbourn provide her the solitude to reflect on her own conflicts—encounters with Mr. Darcy (and release from those confining interiors that Charlotte Brontë so disliked). The morning after Mr. Darcy's proposal at Hunsford Parsonage, she must escape outdoors:

> She could not recover from the surprise of what had happened; it was impossible to think of any thing else, and totally indisposed for employment, she resolved soon

> after breakfast to indulge herself in air and exercise. She was proceeding directly to her favourite walk, when the recollection of Mr. Darcy's sometimes coming there stopped her, and instead of entering the park, she turned up the lane, which led her farther from the turnpike road. The park paling was still the boundary on one side, and she soon passed one of the gates into the ground. (195)

Pastoral in Austen's fiction is associated with boundaries—fences, gates, ha-has—those "tropes of the big novel" that Margaret Ann Doody explores (75-76). Metaphorically, the gate that separates Elizabeth from Mr. Darcy as he hands her his letter may signal her exclusion from the de Bourgh-Darcy family because of her family's *faux pas* as well as her relatives in trade. And it might also suggest Mr. Darcy's self-imposed imprisonment in excessive family pride. However, Austen places emphasis on Elizabeth's *choice* to remain outside Lady Catherine's domain and away from the place she has walked with Mr. Darcy. More importantly, Elizabeth may have just chosen, she can assume, the spinster's genteel poverty over marriage to "'the last man in the world whom [she] could ever be prevailed on to marry'" (193). Elizabeth's conflict with him is, rather than the generalized antagonism of Wordsworth's urban "din," a private clash of values: Mr. Darcy's family pride versus Elizabeth's self-worth, tied to her family. Pride in rank and wealth is anti-pastoral; judging an individual on her own merits is part of the pastoral egalitarian impulse, as we see so clearly in Shakespeare's Arden (Ettin 108). This novel asks us to respect a woman's need for freedom, both physical and social.

As Lady Catherine holds forth at Rosings, Elizabeth thinks it lucky that the great lady monopolizes the conversation with so many questions, "or with a mind so occupied, she might have forgotten where she was. Reflection must be reserved for solitary hours; whenever she was alone, she gave way to it as the greatest relief; and not a day went by without a solitary walk, in which she might indulge in all the delight of unpleasant recollections" (212). The narrator's irony here is Elizabeth's, too: she is aware that she is obsessed with the scene between Mr. Darcy and herself, and aware of her tendency to isolate herself. The solitary walk is also a way to escape the social control that Lady Catherine exemplifies in the extreme.

Another reason for lone walks is positive. Standing or moving outside park gates, Elizabeth delights in the beauty of the natural world. As for the younger Wordsworth in *Tintern Abbey*, for Elizabeth nature is "[a]n appetite, a feeling, and a love" (l. 80). Continuing the description of her walk just before Mr. Darcy gives her his letter, the narrative focus is upon Elizabeth's enjoyment of early spring:

> After walking two or three times along that part of the lane, she was tempted, by the pleasantness of the morning, to stop at the gates and look into the park. The five weeks which she had now passed in Kent, had made a great difference in the country, and every day was adding to the verdure of the early trees. (195)

The next passage, describing her accepting the letter, seems to drop the subject of Elizabeth's enjoyment, but considered with later passages describing Pemberley Woods, we can read into the image of "verdure," above, a trope that suggests an expansion, not a breach: March greenness is birth in nature, and Mr. Darcy's letter induces the "birth" of Elizabeth's self-knowledge. His handing it to her and the letter itself are framed by passages describing Elizabeth's "wandering along the lane" (209). Here and at Pemberley Mr. Darcy's unexpected appearances are juxtaposed to Elizabeth's response to nature. Both of these appearances are surprise encounters described with overtones that are—contrary to what Charlotte Brontë, Henry James, and W. H. Auden thought about Austen—sensuous. At Pemberley the emphasis is on open topographical curves; whatever natural boundaries exist are easily crossed "by a simple bridge, in character with the general air of the scene" (253). Elizabeth's response to nature suggests a new openness to feeling, even physicality, not her customary exercise of rational thinking expressed in wit.

Introducing the estate, Austen takes a full page to describe its woods and water (a record length for her). The chapter introducing Pemberley begins with a wide prospect:

> They gradually ascended for half a mile, and then found themselves at the top of a considerable eminence, where the wood ceased, and the eye was instantly caught by Pemberley House, situated on the opposite side of a valley, into which the road with some abruptness wound. It

> was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of woody hills;—and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal, nor falsely adorned. Elizabeth was delighted. (245)

We do not usually think of Austen's language as poetic, but here assonance (the repetition of soft vowel sounds) reinforces one's impression of sensuous sweeping curves of hills and stream. Another layer of meaning exists in those descriptions of Elizabeth's first impressions. Following the first image of the woods and water, we read that after crossing a narrow bridge Elizabeth, barely aware of her surroundings or her companions, imagines Mr. Darcy inside his house (253). Near the end of the novel, the last walk, when Mr. Darcy proposes and Elizabeth accepts, recalls her state at Pemberley when she cannot attend to the nature before her because she is absorbed in thoughts of the man, and here the narrative attributes this state to Mr. Darcy, too, suggesting a meeting of minds: "They walked on, without knowing in what direction. There was too much to be thought, and felt, and said, for attention to any other objects" (366).

At Pemberley, her notice of the exterior returns just after the party ascends a forested slope; they reach "a descent among hanging woods, [at] the edge of the water, in one of its narrowest parts . . . a spot less adorned than any they had yet visited" (253). She becomes aware of their "narrow walk amidst the rough coppice-wood which bordered [a stream]. Elizabeth longed to explore its windings" (253-54). Suggesting a wish for solitary freedom to think about Mr. Darcy rather than having to talk even to her dear aunt and uncle, her longing occurs between the first and second encounter with the new, civil Fitzwilliam Darcy, now full of "such gentleness" (252). The language suggests a merging of desires—experiencing natural beauty with forming a relationship with Mr. Darcy. The grounds' natural beauty, described in all their fertility, seem a projection of his masculinity (fertility as ability to reproduce) and his imagination (fertility of mind) as well as his capacity to create himself anew for Elizabeth (fertility as ability to become a new individual).

In a passage mentioning the Lake District, widely associated in her lifetime with a male poet, Wordsworth, and the male perspective

of Romanticism, Austen associates the Lakes with a woman in love with wild nature. "'What are men compared to rocks and mountains!'" Elizabeth only half-jokingly exclaims to Mrs. Gardiner when she explains their itinerary (154). When Elizabeth later learns their tour must be curtailed, she is "excessively disappointed" (239). At Pemberley in July, another terrain, the Peak District of Derbyshire (also retaining some "wildness"), becomes something other than a consolation for having to forego the Lakes because of Mr. Gardiner's business (237, 238-39). Left alone with Mr. Darcy, she and he are desperate to find a neutral topic, and they "talked of Matlock and Dovedale with great perseverance" (257). Matlock and Dovedale are reduced to safe topics when the personal cannot yet be discussed. The plot diverts Elizabeth from a solitary, Wordsworthian retreat into "rocks and mountains," and re-focuses her emotional responses on the man and his extension, the estate , where "natural beauty [is] so little counteracted by an awkward taste." A secondary focal point of the Pemberley chapters is Lambton with its happy memories of a community for Mrs. Gardiner. We shall see that the individual's relationship to the human community becomes an important part of Austen's pastoral.

Until she visits Pemberley Woods, Elizabeth metaphorically if not always literally chooses to place herself outside boundaries. White argues that "open space has potentially benign or malign significance; it may stand either for transcendence or the dissolution of selfhood" ("Traveling to the Self" 199), and Elizabeth's wit as well as her walks are attempts to avoid that dissolution. In serious pastorals, space outside man-made boundaries can also signify something larger than the individual; although the Romantic version of pastorals requires a new focus on the solitary mind, Austen's pastorals, like Shakespeare's, always conclude by bringing the central character into a new society, if not ideal at least better than the point of origin. This closure occurs in every Austen novel. Specifically, in *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet's marriage to Fitzwilliam Darcy creates a microcosm at Pemberley in which stewardship of people as well as land receives emphasis.

The exceptional goodness of Mr. Darcy's assistance to the poor is mentioned twice, once by the housekeeper Mrs. Reynolds (249) and once in Lambton (265). This repetition resonated with

Austen's contemporaries. The novel takes place from 1811 through 1812, Chapman's Appendix notes (403, 405), and 1812 was a particularly bad year for the poor: they suffered from "low wages, high bread prices, and more enclosure of common land," historian David Spring explains (551). Roy Porter writes that enclosure had worsened the landless poor's desperate situation from the mid-eighteenth century on: farmers "improving" their lands found it cheaper to hire laborers only seasonally and these were always available from the pool of the homeless. "Such pressures were exacerbated where enclosure further reduced independence by depriving labourers of customary access to common land, which had helped them eke out a living from firing, grazing, nuts and berries, and the odd rabbit" (94). The southern counties suffered the most because there only the lowest-paying seasonal employment was available, and there were no nearby industrial towns to which the poor could migrate for work; the result was increasing expenditure by the government for charity. "By 1800, 28 per cent of the population was in receipt of poor relief," Porter notes. As Cobbett pointed out at the time, land owners had no financial incentive to help the poor since paying taxes for poor relief, though skyrocketing, was still cheaper than keeping more permanent laborers (Porter 94). Mrs. Reynolds brags that Mr. Darcy is "just as affable to the poor" as his father (249); this allusion implies that throughout this difficult period the Darcy men did not practice the kind of mercenary policy that many other landowners adopted. Elizabeth's mental response to this praise suggests her awareness that Mr. Darcy could, if he chose, act otherwise without condemnation by his peers: "As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship!—How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow!—How much of good or evil must be done by him!" (250-51). In Lambton, the consensus is this: "It was acknowledged . . . that he was a liberal man, and did much good among the poor" (265).

The goodness in Mr. Darcy's character, shown in these passages, marks Austen's serious pastoral as groundbreaking in the same way, at roughly the same time as Wordsworth's: both incorporate pastorals' sister form, georgics, which existed alongside each other since Vergil's composition of the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*.[3] Traditional georgic poetry is "concerned with the agricultural foundation

of a great nation"; it celebrates the physical labor of farmers and hired laborers as necessary to a country's moral as well as physical well being (Griffin 866). In English poetry of the Romantic period, this georgic theme was expanded to labor of another kind: mental and emotional. Again influenced by Cowper, especially *The Task*, Wordsworth merged georgic elements with pastoral to focus on work—intellectual and spiritual as well as physical—as a means to giving one's life order and meaning. For Wordsworth, sensing the harmony of nature elicits intellectual and spiritual labor; such thought, in turn, motivates the individual to benevolent action. The epigraph of Book VIII, *The Prelude*, states: "Love of nature leads to love of man." However naïve this belief may seem to us, Wordsworth expresses it with conviction here and in *Tintern Abbey*, in which the memory of the Wye Valley brings

> feelings . . . perhaps,
> As have no slight or trivial influence
> On that best portion of a good man's life,
> His little, nameless, unremembered acts
> Of kindness and of love. (ll. 30-35)

Those acts remain generalized in Wordsworth, but not in Austen. Her georgic elements, most evident in Mr. Knightley's and Mr. Martin's agricultural improvements at Donwell Abbey and Abbey Mill Farm, but also evident in Mr. Darcy's helping the poor, turn her pastoral outward toward the larger community. As Toohey says of Mr. Knightley, "Land carries a moral as well as an economic weight, and the best men [in Austen's novels] are those most rooted to the earth" (49).

Against this backdrop of benevolence and community, the conclusion focuses on people drawn into the Pemberley microcosm. Kitty divides most of her time between Pemberley and the Bingleys' new estate only thirty miles away "in a neighbouring county to Derbyshire" (385). "Pemberley was now Georgiana's home; and the attachment of the sisters was exactly what Darcy had hoped to see. They were able to love each other, even as well as they intended" (387). "With the Gardiners they were always on the most intimate terms. Darcy, as well as Elizabeth, really loved them; and they were both sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the persons who, by bringing her into Derbyshire, had been the means of uniting them" (388).

Pastorals also eject or neutralize antagonistic forces, and Austen's follow this pattern. Lydia and Wickham usually remain at a safe distance, overstaying their welcome with the Bingleys and taking advantage of Jane and Elizabeth's generosity, certainly (386-87). To avoid being cut off from Pemberley entirely, Miss Bingley puts on a mask of amiability towards Elizabeth and is "fonder than ever of Georgina, [and] almost as attentive to Darcy as heretofore" (387). Lady Catherine is eventually reconciled to her nephew by Elizabeth: "after a little farther resistance on the part of his aunt, her resentment gave way, either to her affection for him, or her curiosity to see how his wife conducted herself; and she condescended to wait on them at Pemberley, in spite of that pollution which its woods had received, not merely from the presence of such a mistress, but the visits of her aunt and uncle" (388). The only charming force antagonistic to pastoral is Mr. Bennet, whose passivity as a father many readers must see as ultimately the cause of his wife's and youngest daughter's most grievous errors. He is punished by the absence of Elizabeth, for which he compensates by leaving Longbourn to see her "oftener" than he has ever left home before; he "delight[s]" in doing so "especially when he [is] least expected" (385).

Readers may leave this fictional world a bit uneasily knowing that Lady Catherine's visits and Lydia's pleas for money will continue, and that Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth Darcy will tolerate Miss Bingley. The kinds of compromises necessary to an otherwise ideal life remind us of the contingencies in real life. This fact and the appeal of nature as a refuge from conflict are two of the reasons Austen's novels enjoy such popularity today. The tangible results of our pastoral longing surround us: planned communities, tours of great estates in Britain, people renouncing careers and city life for small farms and low-stress occupations, the resurgence of interest in Austen's novels and the film versions of them, even the L. L. Bean and Eddie Bauer style. Since the sixties—with Joni Mitchell's anthem "Woodstock": "We've got to get back to the Garden"—we have confronted, and many of us have sought, a pastoral ideal, and we found our own flaws in the process. Nevertheless, we continue to find solace in whatever contact with nature we can make. At the same time, reading Austen reminds many of us that nature and the "improvement" of our minds necessary to appreciate it are luxuries

available to a minority of the world's population, those luckily at the right place at the right time. The conclusion of *Pride and Prejudice* implies that chance (the Gardiners' happening to bring Elizabeth into Derbyshire at just the moment when Mr. Darcy arrives a changed man) plays a role in the happy ending. The novel also implies that becoming mistress of Pemberley is Elizabeth's one good option; the alternative fate, had Mrs. Bennet's forecast proved correct, would have been homelessness — a dis-location from the natural world necessary to her identity. Who can imagine Elizabeth Bennet as a governess on someone else's estate?[4]

NOTES

1. White's approach to pastorals, she notes, is influenced by Northrop Frye's 1957 classic of genre and archetypal theory *Anatomy of Criticism,* whose categories of comic mode and romance archetype articulate what my study, following Marinelli, calls "pastoral," both "serious" and "decorative."

2. On Wordsworth's contribution to pastorals, see Gill 129-30; Garber 153-55; Marinelli 4-6; and Curran 99-100. Thompson's book explores Austen's affinities with Wordsworth.

3. Dwight L. Durling argues that classical georgics influenced English poets of the last half of the eighteenth century, including Cowper, to abandon neoclassical general description in favor of more realistic detail.

4. Thanks to Sarah E. Brown for presenting my paper at the 2000 AGM in Boston; her slides from eighteenth-century prints of the Peaks, the Lakes, and from pictures of early nineteenth-century estates with features like Rosings's and Pemberley's made a true improvement.

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