



## “It must be done in London”: The Suburbanization of Highbury

TARA GHOSHAL WALLACE

Tara Ghoshal Wallace is Associate Professor of English and Director of Graduate Studies at George Washington University. Her publications include an edition of Fanny Burney's *A Busy Day*, *Jane Austen and Narrative Authority*, and articles on Austen, Scott, Johnson, and Smollett.

JANE AUSTEN'S FAMOUS LITERARY ADVICE to her niece Anna—"3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on" (9 September 1814)—has been widely accepted as a summary statement of her own praxis, and *Emma* is the novel most frequently cited as the exemplar of Austen's focus on isolated and insulated country communities. From Walter Scott in the early nineteenth century to Nancy Mitford in the early twentieth, readers have commented on Austen's rigorous economy of scale. Scott likens her work to "the Flemish school of painting" (67), and Mitford focuses on the pleasures of its rural insularity: "nothing is so delightful as to sit down in a country village in one of Miss Austen's delicious novels" (3).<sup>1</sup> Much twentieth-century scholarship, while providing wide-ranging reconsiderations of Austen's achievement, retains, on the whole, this theme of *Emma*'s geographic miniaturism. Marvin Mudrick's provocative re-reading of Austen's irony finds in *Emma* a "delicate ordering of a small calm world, the miniature world of the English rural gentry at the start of the nineteenth century"; Malcolm Bradbury labels Highbury "a more or less self-contained social unit"; and Adena Rosmarin calls *Emma* "the most spatially and socially circumscribed" of Austen's novels (Lodge 98, 158-59, 214).

Recent critics have turned their attention to the ideological uses of such social and spatial limits: Deidre Lynch points out how both Austen's and Mitford's texts can be deployed as "vehicles of securing the continuity of every-

day Englishness across cultural divides” (1106); John Wiltshire, who describes Highbury as “provincial and confined,” reads in its insularity an analysis of class and gender issues as well as “the fantasy of the pastoral paradise” (67); and William Galperin uncovers the novel’s ideologically nostalgic effect, one that enables readers to imagine “either an oasis, delightfully removed from the bustle of metropolitan life, or a sharply demarcated social space in which a normative, increasingly partial idea of Englishness is postulated on behalf of specific class and ideological interests” (180).

Certainly, *Emma* provides ample justification for this continuing emphasis on its narrow boundaries. While it narrates episodes referring to places as distant as Ireland, all of the novel’s action occurs within Highbury and its environs. The reader is taken on no jaunts to Bath or Derbyshire or Portsmouth, and Emma, unlike all other Austen heroines, never leaves home. In this essay, I want to argue that Highbury, for all its seeming insularity, mirrors and participates integrally in the demographic, geographic and cultural forces that were changing the face of England. In *Emma*, London, a mere sixteen miles away, is an urgently encroaching presence, a mega-metropolis that diminishes Highbury’s autonomous existence and has already penetrated into its communal and domestic spaces. Read in relation to earlier fiction and in the context of social history, *Emma*’s small scale registers some very weighty changes, and its minimalism encodes a careful and knowledgeable consideration of the historical phenomenon of urbanization. The novel records a shift in Highbury’s status as London increasingly co-opts its economic and social life, slowly but inexorably colonizing this corner of Surrey, turning the once flourishing rural enclave into a suburban satellite. However, as I will argue, the novel shows Highbury and London participating in a mutually enriching reciprocal social and cultural traffic. In *Emma*, Austen has constructed a society that ensures its own survival in an organically evolving socio-demographic reality by re-casting itself as a thriving hybrid of the urban and rural.

I will begin with what *Emma* does not do: unlike earlier novels by Austen and her predecessors, it does not demonize—either irascibly or ironically—London and its dangerous urban culture. A quick glance at some canonical eighteenth-century novels establishes the pattern. Daniel Defoe’s criminal Moll Flanders (1721) flourishes in what Peter Ackroyd calls “the disorder and mutability . . . , the speed and acceleration of the London streets” (343-45), and twenty-five years later, Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* depicts a London in which urban anonymity enables a libertine to incarcerate his victim. Frances Burney’s heroine in *Evelina* (1778) finds herself perpetually in danger because public spaces—Vauxhall, Ranelagh—are teeming with un-

desirable and unregulated populations. Even William Godwin's protagonist in *Caleb Williams* (1794) goes to ground in the capital, "London being a place in which, on account of the magnitude of its dimensions, it might well be supposed that an individual could remain hidden and unknown" (262).

Caleb's characterization of the metropole is echoed in *Pride and Prejudice*, when Mr. Bennet knows Lydia and Wickham must be in London because "where else can they be so well concealed?" (*PP* 299). London's size and compartmentalization enable another kind of social sin, when Miss Bingley and Darcy conceal from Bingley Jane's presence in town. In *Mansfield Park*, of course, London not only houses and nurtures the immoral Crawfords but unleashes Maria Bertram's worst impulses. In *Sense and Sensibility*, London is the site of Willoughby's betrayal of Marianne, and it offers to the immoral Lady Susan "the fairest field of action" (*MW* 294). These early novels, then, seem to enact Catherine Morland's breathless announcement "that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London" (*NA* 112). Austen's own correspondence playfully references this sense of the menacing metropolis: "Here I am once more," she writes to Cassandra on 23 August 1796, "in this Scene of Dissipation & vice, and I begin already to find my Morals corrupted"; a month later, she writes again to Cassandra that she has decided not to accompany their brother Frank to "Town" because, were her friends the Pearsons not at home, "I should inevitably fall a Sacrifice to the arts of some fat Woman who would make me drunk with Small Beer" (18 September 1796).

In *Emma*, on the other hand, London is neither a den of iniquity nor even a carefully distinguished metropolitan "other" against which country pleasures and ethics can be measured. It is, rather, a constant stage-sharing presence, woven into the fabric of the narrative just as it is into the lives of Highbury's inhabitants. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued that Emma the character "is clearly an avatar of Austen the artist" (Lodge 207). If Austen has created a heroine whose imaginative powers resemble those of the author, she has also reproduced the mobile environment in which that author lived. The letters, as we know, frequently recount the family circle's multiple visits to the capital, journeys undertaken without any particular sense of adventure or arduousness. Indeed, when Mr. Peter Debarry declines the curacy of Deane because "he wishes to be settled nearer London," Austen berates his "foolish reason": "as if Deane were not near London in comparison of Exeter or York.—Take the whole World through, & he will find many more places at a greater distance from London than Deane, than he will at a less. . . . I feel rather indignant . . . that Deane should not be universally

allowed to be as near the Metropolis as any other Country Village” (8 January 1801). Of course, Austen’s playfulness obtains here too, but at the same time, she registers the foolishness of thinking fifty-five miles an insuperable distance from the city.

Highbury, only sixteen miles from London, cannot therefore be thought of as any distance at all. Mr. Weston, characteristically, thinks London far only when the Churchills settle even closer to Highbury, having earlier gloried in the proximity to London that would allow Frank to visit “at any hour” (309). Weston himself makes nothing of the distance, joining a party at Hartfield immediately after returning from a day’s business in London. Only John Knightley comments (internally and sardonically) on this casual attitude to the journey, and only because “[a] man who had been in motion since eight o’clock in the morning, and might now have been still, who had been long talking, and might have been silent, who had been in more than one crowd, and might have been alone!” (303) would choose a social engagement rather than a quiet evening at home. Others, too, travel back and forth as a matter of course. Mr. Elton assures Emma that “he could ride to London at any time” (49) to have her picture framed. Frank, famously, undertakes a day’s journey to London to acquire a piano for Jane Fairfax. We first meet Mr. George Knightley himself when he replicates Mr. Weston’s walk to Hartfield after having “returned to a late dinner” (9), and later in the novel he races back from Brunswick Square to console Emma in her supposed grief over Frank’s engagement to Jane. Indeed, the only character who thinks of London as dauntingly remote is Mr. Woodhouse, and he, of course, finds the half-mile to Randalls “such a distance” (8).

The London to which all these Highbury residents travel was, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, not only home to almost a million residents, but also the financial, commercial, and cultural center of England: the capital “already seemed disproportionately large both in numbers and influence. . . . There were many complaints that London for long had sucked the vitals of trade to herself and attempted to set the tone of the whole of English society . . .” (Briggs 41). London’s size and sprawl had grown rapidly through the eighteenth century. Elie Halévy says that “[t]he population of London, which was only 864,000 at the opening of the century, had exceeded the million by 1811” (256), and George Rudé places the significance of these figures in a European context: “In 1750 . . . about one Englishman (and Welshman) in ten lived in London, whereas one Dutchman in eleven may have lived in Amsterdam and no more than one Frenchman in forty lived in Paris” (ix). Since death rates in the period exceeded birth rates, the discrepancy

“could only be made up by a steady inflow of new settlers from the provinces” (Rudé 6).<sup>2</sup> In 1771, Tobias Smollett, in the voice of the protagonist of *Humphry Clinker*, describes the capital’s insatiable appetite for more bodies:

the capital is become an overgrown monster; which, like a dropsical head, will in time leave the body and extremities without nourishment and support. . . . [O]ne sixth part of the natives of this whole extensive kingdom is crowded within the bills of mortality. What wonder that our villages are depopulated, and our farms in want of day-labourers? . . . The tide of luxury has swept all the inhabitants from the open country. (118)

Matthew Bramble particularly deplores the migration of farm workers to the city, and certainly the majority of new Londoners were of the laboring class, but, as he points out, even gentry and aristocrats flocked to the capital—“The poorest squire, as well as the richest peer, must have his house in town . . .” (118).

While Smollett’s text inveighs against those who migrate because of greed or ambition, Austen represents this demographic shift as an organic outcome of social change; indeed, when Alistair M. Duckworth says that Emma presides “[a]t the center of a world apparently unendangered by any possibility of discontinuity” (148), we must emphasize the word “apparently” and note that Austen makes very clear that she is representing a society on the move. She tells us, early in the novel, that Mr. and Mrs. John Knightley have settled in London; as a younger son, John Knightley must practice a profession, and London is the natural home for a rising attorney (7). Moreover, since Emma after her engagement to Mr. Knightley is “never struck with any sense of injury to her nephew Henry, whose rights as heir expectant had formerly been so tenaciously regarded” (449), we can assume that the younger Knightley branch will perforce become Londoners. The Westons, too, have migrated to London, and although Mr. Weston never quite abandons his native town, it can be assumed that the “brothers already established in a good way in London” (16) have made a permanent shift.

The influx of population to London has necessitated a geographical spread so extensive that its separate urban districts manifest not only class divisions but even distinctly different ecologies. Isabella counters her father’s conviction that London cannot be a healthy place to live with an eager defense of her own environment:

“we are not at all in a bad air. Our part of London is so very superior to most others!—You must not confound us with London in general, my dear sir. The neighbourhood of Brunswick Square is very different from almost all the rest.” (103)

Isabella here is not merely deflecting Mr. Woodhouse's anxiety but articulating a material reality: for at the same time as it was drawing populations from the countryside, London was expanding into the rural districts on its outskirts. As early as 1726, Daniel Defoe described an urban sprawl that erased the boundaries between city and country: "We see several villages, formerly standing, as it were, in the country, and at a great distance, now joined to the streets by continued buildings, and more making haste to meet in the like manner" (287-88). At mid-century, Horace Walpole's correspondence chronicles this inexorable expansion: in 1774 he writes to Horace Mann, "London increases every day; I believe there will soon be no other town left in England"; two years later he tells Mann that "London could put Florence into its fob pocket. . . . Rows of houses shoot out every way like a polypus . . ." (23.569, 24.228).

Surrey, the county in which Austen sets Highbury, was certainly being swallowed by the metropole. Official recognition that London had in effect appropriated contiguous territories was reflected in government documents. H. C. Darby tells us that "[b]y the time of the first Census in 1801, the population of this built-up area [Greater London] amounted to nearly 960,000, . . . 210,000 to the south, in the counties of Kent and Surrey" (87). In other words, a large part of Surrey, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, is considered to be part of what Defoe had already characterized as "this overgrown city" (307). London's exponential growth raised fears that it would effectually colonize the rest of the country, which would exist only to feed its appetites. William Roscoe writes to Walpole in 1796 that "if the present tendency towards the metropolis should continue for another century, the rest of the kingdom will only be considered as farms, manufactories, or sea-ports, to furnish supplies to the modern Babylon" (15.282).

Highbury seems well on its way to becoming a part of this megalopolis that has commandeered populations, acres and economies previously attached to rural areas. It has, as we have seen, lost members of gentry families to London. The draining away of gentry has a material correlative in the Crown Inn's large public space, which "had been built many years ago for a ball-room, and while the neighbourhood had been in a particularly populous, dancing state, had been occasionally used as such;—but such brilliant days had long passed away." Indeed, when Frank presses Emma to revive the tradition of balls, she points to "[t]he want of proper families in the place" (197-98). The Crown also fails to serve as the kind communal center described in William Howitt's 1838 memoir of English country life: "There is nothing more characteristic in rural life than a village alehouse, or inn. It is the cen-

tre of information, and the regular, or occasional rendezvous of almost everybody in the neighbourhood" (480). Although Mr. Weston speaks of his "'business at the Crown about his hay'" (193), and although it functions as a place to meet on parish business (456-57), it has dwindled into a space "to accommodate a whist club established among the gentlemen and half-gentlemen of the place" (197). Too close to London to thrive as a posting stage, it has become emblematic of a one-horse (or perhaps a two-horse) town, "where a couple of pair of post-horses were kept, more for the convenience of the neighbourhood than from any run on the road" (197).

Highbury's economic life, too, seems dominated by London's huge industrial and commercial reach. One small example demonstrates London's economic stranglehold; whereas the production of local ales had traditionally been both a source of income and a matter of pride in country towns, by 1800 "[t]he great London breweries supplied most of the ale houses in Middlesex and large numbers in Kent and Surrey. . . . London produced almost all the gin drunk in the country" (Prince 137). If even plebian drink had been appropriated by London, more refined commodities were even more within its province. According to Roy Porter, "As the nation's only dynamo of fashion, London attracted provincials to come and spend on clothes and finery; pictures, *objets d'art*, books, and the theatre" (34). Porter's list of famous retailers who opened shops in London during mid-eighteenth century includes Wedgwood, Bowler, and Fortnum and Mason; genteel customers who craved dainty treats served on tasteful china to fashionably hatted guests would naturally have to make frequent expeditions to the city. Porter invokes Austen herself when he describes the powerful draw of retail shopping in London (145). Among the many articles Austen acquires from London are silks for netting (27 October 1798, 23 January 1799), drawing paper (18 December 1798), Steele's Lavender Water (14 January 1801), . . . and news. In a letter of 25 January 1801, she tells Cassandra, "I shall expect you to lay in a stock of intelligence that may procure me amusement for a twelvemonth to come." While the commodification and exchange of "intelligence" is worth investigation in the context of *Emma*—remember that Mr. Weston, fresh from London, proceeds to "spread abroad what public news he had heard" (303)—I want merely to point out how routinely Austen and her family made London their shopping destination, frequently to purchase desirable commodities unavailable in country villages.

Like Steventon and Chawton, Highbury provides only limited retail resources. While Ford's may sell "'gloves and everything'" and stimulate Frank's "*amor patriæ*" (200), it cannot furnish the accoutrements of elegant

life. The Coles, we recall, postpone issuing their invitation to the Woodhouses because they “‘had been waiting the arrival of a folding-screen from London” (208). Though we see Harriet Smith dithering over muslins sold at Ford’s, we never witness Emma shopping there, and when Emma’s sketch of Harriet has to be framed, there is no question but that “‘it must be done in London” (48). Local craftsmen who presumably serve the more quotidian needs of the neighborhood lack the skill (or the cachet) to produce an appropriately distinguished setting for Emma’s art, nor is amateur mounting by the artist herself adequate. The absolute and uncontested assumption that Emma’s picture must be framed in Bond Street attests to refined tastes that can be catered to only in the metropolis.

When Frank Churchill dashes off to Broadwood’s to buy the pianoforte, he screens his lover’s errand with the indisputably frivolous story of a haircut. Emma initially reacts harshly to such superficial vanity:

There was certainly no harm in his travelling sixteen miles twice over on such an errand; but there was an air of foppery and nonsense in it which she could not approve. . . . Vanity, extravagance, love of change, restlessness of temper, . . . heedlessness as to the pleasure of his father and Mrs. Weston, indifference as to how his conduct might appear in general; he became liable to all these charges. (205)

But Emma quickly forgives Frank his “‘little blot” (205). Certainly Frank’s self-mocking charm conduces to Highbury’s tolerance of the extravagant gesture; but equally certainly, the ostensible motive of the journey falls sufficiently within the parameters of acceptable upper-class behavior that it provokes only temporary charges of foppery. Miss Bates alone remembers the episode with disapproval, when, with her usual indirection, she delivers a reproof: “[H]ow do you like Jane’s hair? . . . Quite wonderful how she does her hair!—No hairdresser from London I think could” (323). When we compare Highbury’s easy accommodation to Frank’s “‘little whims” (206) to the furor raised by Mary Crawford’s desire for a horse and cart to convey her harp, we see how carefully Austen distinguishes between the effects of being seventy miles from London and sixteen miles from it in the early nineteenth century.

The interpenetration of London and Highbury, then, creates a kind of cultural seamlessness absent in the earlier novels of Austen or her eighteenth-century predecessors. This kind of homogeneity of values stems in part of course from the demographics alluded to earlier in this essay; the fact



that at least a sixth of England's population knew London "must have acted as a powerful solvent of the customs, prejudices and modes of action of traditional, rural England" (Wrigley 50). O. H. K. Spate recasts this benign blending in a more imperial light, arguing that despite the rise of industrial centers in the north, London "continued to exert its magnetism. . . . The momentum of London, the attractive and reproductive power of that vast aggregate of human needs and wills, carried it on to a new domination" (547). Even Howitt's celebration of English country life concedes that urban habits seep into rural life through the upper classes' regular pilgrimages to London: "One of the chief features of the life of the nobility and gentry of England is their annual visit to the Metropolis; and it is one which has a most essential influence on rural life itself" (594). Highbury's proximity to and interconnection with London creates a climate of urban values in which even the egregious act of riding thirty-two miles for a proper haircut is merely fatuous.

Of course not all visits to London stem from sophisticated tastes. When, after her engagement to Knightley, Emma wants to extricate Harriet from a forced intimacy painful to both, she depends on London to "give her some amusement.—She did not think it in Harriet's nature to escape being benefited by novelty and variety, by the streets, the shops, and the children" (435). Happily, a perfectly legitimate excuse lies ready because "Harriet really wished, and had wished some time, to consult a dentist" (451). Mark Blackwell's fascinating account of this episode examines the way it transmits cultural information and exemplifies Austen's narrative technique. "Dentistry," he says, "was a recently delineated medical specialty when Austen composed *Emma*, one strongly associated with trendy metropolitan tastes and social aspiration" (478-79). Accordingly, argues Blackwell, Emma continues to construe Harriet as part of a social class to which she has no claim: "Thus, Harriet's trip to London at once advances and retards the plot. Bundling Harriet off to the city permits the development of Emma's romance with Knightley, yet it arrests her moral reformation. . . ." (489). Austen's own narrative about her nieces' visit to a London dentist validates Blackwell's argument about the social prestige of metropolitan dentistry while also demonstrating her own skepticism about these new medical professionals. Mr. Spence treats the children of the prosperous and socially upscale Edward Austen Knight, and Austen ends a rather gruesome description of cleaning, filing and extracting (complete with "two sharp hasty Screams") with an acid allusion to Spence's desire to drum up business: he "continued to the last to press for their all coming to him. . . . The little girls teeth I can suppose in a critical state, but I think

he must be a Lover of Teeth & Money & Mischeif to parade about Fannys” (16 September 1813). However, since not even Mr. Knightley detects any inappropriate social elevation attached to Harriet’s medical purpose, and since Austen’s bland language—“she was fortunate in having sufficient reason”—deflects too much critical (if not actual dental) probing, the episode also serves to underline Highbury’s habitual recourse to London’s multiple resources.

So how does Highbury survive as a town when its population, its economy, and its autonomy feel the pressure of the giant city at its back? As a provincial market town belonging in the category that “looked towards the past” (Briggs 38), it should, one might expect, entirely cease to exist as an autonomous entity, especially given its proximity to London. In fact, this very nearness provides Highbury with an identity and a future, for Highbury takes up the burden of housing a population connected to both country and city; both gentry and the rising middle class take up either permanent or weekend residence in locations within easy reach of London. As Prince points out, “On the great roads out of London government officials and citizens of London built themselves comfortable brick boxes. . . . New brickwork and stucco was to be seen far beyond a half day’s journey from the City” (98).<sup>3</sup>

Highbury, it would seem, is particularly successful at integrating urban and rural cultures, constituting itself as a highly desirable example of this new hybrid—the suburb. When Galperin claims that “the world of the novel . . . is irretrievably moribund,” he elides, I think, some of the dynamism represented in the text. While Highbury may be dominated by Donwell Abbey, it makes room for many who are not landed gentry, including the Woodhouses themselves, who are “first in consequence there” (7), with so much money “from other sources” than land “as to make them scarcely secondary to Donwell Abbey itself” (136). Indeed, Hartfield “may have been built originally as a weekend retreat from a London business” (Delaney 539). Highbury, moreover, offers to London residents something more significant than an opportunity to join the ranks of country gentry and thereby forget, as do the Bingley sisters, “that their brother’s fortune and their own had been acquired by trade” (*PP* 15). On the contrary, this enclave of Surrey welcomes those who want to work in the great capital and live in the “countryside,” a desire and social development that is recognizably modern. Mr. Weston spends twenty years commuting between his “useful occupation” in London and his house in Highbury, and still has business in town. Highbury embraces the new ethos that combines gentility and work, not by mutating into an indus-

trial center like northern towns, but by providing a reposeful home for those whose professional lives require proximity to the financial and cultural giant that is London. Far from fearing or resenting the powerful presence or pressure of London, Highbury quietly adapts to its new role, sacrificing its old autonomy but claiming a vital identity in the new geography of England.

Raymond Williams observes that in Jane Austen's novels, "much of the interest, and many of the sources of the action . . . lie in the changes of fortune—the facts of general change and of a certain mobility—which were affecting the landed families at this time" (113). I would extend this formulation to include a much larger segment of English society. In *Emma*, Austen meticulously reproduces some of the sweeping demographic and social changes visited on country towns near an ever-growing London. She does so not with despair or even dismay, but with an even-tempered fidelity to historical realities. Moreover, in her representation of Highbury's survival, she argues that country society need not collapse or atrophy, as apprehended by Smollett, Walpole, and others, and that the environs of London can flourish by entering into a profitable partnership with the metropole. The world of *Emma* may be painted on a very small canvas, perhaps even on two inches of ivory, but the frame that sustains that canvas is very large indeed, and must, at least in part, be constructed in London.

#### NOTES

1. Mitford has her own version of Miss Bates, the "Talking Lady" of whom she says: "Her knowledge is astonishing; but the most astonishing part of all is how she came by that knowledge. It should seem, to listen to her, as if, at some time of her life, she must have listened herself; and yet her countryman declares that, in the forty years he has known her, no such event has occurred; and she knows new news too! It must be intuition" (50).

2. Daniel Defoe attributes the discrepancy to the fact that "it is not the number born, but the number christened that are set down, which is taken from the parish register; so all the children of Dissenters of every sort, Protestant, Popish and Jewish are omitted, also all the children of foreigners, French, Dutch, &c. which are baptized in their own churches, and all the children of those who are so poor, that they cannot get them registered: so that if a due estimate be made, the births may be very well supposed to exceed the burials one year with another by many thousands" (336).

3. The introduction to *The Country and the City Revisited* points out that "[t]he paradox of country life as the desirable end of urban aspirations was often resolved then, as it is now, with the convenience of a suburban residence" (15).

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