"I Prefer Walking": Jane Austen and "The Pleasantest Part of the Day"

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"Jane Austen's world is one of interiors," asserts David Selwyn (89). This observation is only partially true. Although Regency women of the gentry were largely confined to home and carriage, to Austen herself, as well as to her fictional heroines, the most enjoyable and significant moments of life were spent not indoors but "walking out." In contrast to the immobility of female life inside four walls, the daily walk, whether sociable or solitary, is shown in Austen's letters and novels to be a valuable, even treasured, habit. Austen would contend that walking has a salutary, healing effect on health and vitality. It also promotes and advances social relationships, develops aesthetic sensibilities, and leads to proper understanding of correct behavior and thinking. Readers note that walking moves the female body voluntarily forward through time and space in a shift from stasis to mobility, increasing a woman's power to see and experience the world "on her own two feet." Walking similarly moves the events of Austen's plots forward, emphasizing sequence, process, and change: in a sense, her narrators "walk" the reader through the story. For Austen, then, "taking a turn in the shrubbery" is a way of moving both literally and metaphorically "in the proper circles." In making this daily circuit, women observe the boundaries of taste and convention; reconcile past, present, and future; and redraw the lines of social connection.

For Austen and for her characters, walking is a habitual part of daily life. In letters written in 1805 and in 1806, Austen says, "we do nothing but walk about" and "we walk a good deal" (196). She characterizes herself as a "desperate" walker, and this disposition is shared by her heroines. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, Sir John speaks of Miss Marianne's "'usual walk to Allenham'" (111); Edmund reassures *Mansfield Park*'s Fanny that if she goes to live with aunt Norris she will "'have the same walks to frequent'" as she would have if she stayed with the Bertrams (27). *Emma*'s Robert Martin "'thought [Emma and Harriet] walked toward Randalls most days'" (32), and in *Pride and Prejudice* the Bennet girls find that "a walk . . . was necessary to amuse their morning hours and furnish conversation for the evening" (28). For varying reasons, older characters do not walk as regularly as the young, but most of the main characters demonstrate prodigious stamina, by today's standards, in the amount of ground they daily cover for health and exercise. Secondary Austen characters walk regularly, too. Confronted with a walk in the rain to see her sister Jane at Netherfield, Elizabeth Bennet points out that "'The distance is nothing, . . . only three miles'" (32); *Persuasion*'s Mary Musgrove protests that she is "'very fond of a long walk'" (83); and the Dashwood sisters of *Sense and Sensibility* discover interesting sights a mile and a half from their cottage. Walks routinely take about half the morning or afternoon, and provide a pleasant and healthful way of passing the time.

Health, however, being fragile in a 19th-century world, is always paramount, and walking must never jeopardize this asset. This means that when the weather is cold or wet, or the roads muddy, walking is unwise. Austen's letters lament an occasion in late November when it was "too dirty . . . to get out of doors" (Austen-Leigh 153), although the Bennet girls of *Pride and Prejudice* manage to walk to Meryton during January and February, even when it is "sometimes dirty and sometimes cold" (151). *Emma*'s sister Isabella is "not at all afraid" to walk a half mile in bad weather on Christmas Eve, despite her husband's disapproval—"'I could change my shoes, you know, the moment I got home'" (127). But Austen's narrator keeps Emma home the next day when "the ground [is] covered with snow, and the atmosphere in that unsettled state between frost and thaw, which is of all others the most unfriendly for exercise" (138). And even *Sense and Sensibility*'s impetuous Marianne Dashwood cannot, in early April, "fancy [walking in] an heavy and settled rain" (303). Typically, Austen's heroines want to go walking but are counseled into staying home

in bad weather by their older and more cautious male counterparts, who see the protection of young ladies' health as part of their stewardship.

Beyond health and exercise, walking in an Austen novel functions as a social event. If we consider only the occasions mentioned in her letters, we must believe that Jane Austen almost never walked alone. On December 18, 1798, at the age of twenty-three, she writes, "I enjoyed the hard black frosts of last week very much, and one day while they lasted walked to Deane by myself. I do not know that I ever did such a thing in my life before" (Austen-Leigh 117). This was a distance of some two miles. Seven years later, an 1805 letter mentions that "after dinner I walked to Weston" (186), a mile and a half, and eight years after that occasion, the by now thirty-seven-year-old author writes, "I have walked once to Alton [a distance of one mile]" (260). Perhaps conventions of chaperonage and protection limited solitary female walking. Significantly, the distances of these solitary walks are considerably less than those covered by social walks. All other references in the letters to walking include the pronoun "we" and the name of Austen's walking companion(s), such as "yesterday Miss Papillon and I walked together" (260). Frequently, in fact, social intercourse seems the main attraction of the occasion, as on May 21, 1801:

> Our grand walk to Weston was again fixed for yesterday, and was accomplished in a very striking manner. Every one of the party declined it under some pretence or other except our two selves [Jane and Mrs. Chamberlayne] and we had therefore a tête-à-tête, but *that* we should have had, after the first two yards, had half the inhabitants of Bath set off with us. (168)

Austen's emphasis on "that" seems to indicate the tête-à-tête as the primary ingredient of the "grand walk," as well as Cassandra's good understanding of that fact. Either Austen and her friend were speedier walkers than fifty percent of Bath's population, or else conversation was the one element of the walk that was certain to be included. Austen's love of verbal communication makes the latter more probable.

Sometimes the social walk is so much of an event as even to require the formality of advance planning: in 1800, Austen records that "our plan [Martha Lloyd and I] is to have a nice black frost for walking to Whitchurch" (154). Other intricacies of social planning are revealed in the 1805 letter when "my evening engagement and walk was with Miss A . . . I soon forgave her, and made this engagement with her in proof of it" (186). There may have been protocols involved in social walking of which

we are unaware today: in one letter, Austen records a walk with another woman (who was married) in which she observes, "for many many yards together on a raised narrow footpath I led the way" (169). It is unclear why this circumstance should be significant enough for mention, unless perhaps outdoor walking carried the same hierarchal lineup conventions as dining-room progressions.

In the novels, the walk performs a host of social functions, all aimed at expanding women's options. By taking a walk, choosing a direction and destination as well as a pace, a companion, and a time, a woman restless and dissatisfied with her constricted role could advance toward several enabling social goals. One of these is the achievement and maintenance of feminine solidarity. To *Pride and Prejudice*'s Jane and Elizabeth Bennet, "walking together in the shrubbery behind the house" (301) is a regular activity that makes possible and promotes the agreement the sisters share on issues where they must wield influence against their mother and siblings. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood likewise cement their relationship "in their usual walk" (85), where they console and strengthen each other in dealing with problem relationships. Emma Woodhouse uses the same walking habit to become intimate with Harriet Smith and to further her persuasive power over Harriet's life. In *Northanger Abbey*, Isabella Thorpe achieves intimacy with Catherine Morland in the same way, and Catherine also comes to know Miss Tilney by engaging herself to walk with her. These two alliances enhance the first woman's connection to, and power over, a brother of the second woman, aligning both women in the projected goal of romantic conquest.

If walking in the novels develops intimacy between friends, it is also essential to achieving a lovers' understanding. Edward Ferrars "walk[s] himself into the proper resolution" (361) to approach Elinor Dashwood about marriage in *Sense and Sensibility*; *Pride and Prejudice*'s Darcy is accepted by Elizabeth while "walking several miles in a leisurely manner" (370). In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney succeeds with Catherine as "they began their walk . . . and before they reached Mr. Allen's grounds" (243); and Edmund finally gets around to proposing to Fanny in *Mansfield Park* "after wandering about with Fanny . . . all the summer evenings" (462). Emma and Mr. Knightley come to one accord walking together in the shrubbery; Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth acknowledge and explain themselves "as they slowly pace the gradual ascent" of "the quiet and retired gravel-walk" (*P* 240). It is as if Austen requires not only the privacy

afforded by walking to cement the togetherness of her fictional matches, but also the forward movement of the plot. Ideal Austen marriages are contracted voluntarily, for love; the characters must be shown to be entering into the relationship by their own physical volition, rather than by passive constraint or because of limited choices.

The physical configuration of the lovers' walk also adds, literally and symbolically, to our understanding of their relationship as Austen sees it. In walking, the protagonists are positioned side by side as equal participants in activity, encountering together both delightful views and obstacles to progress at the same time. In contrast to the dance, where unmarried partners move singly, alternately facing each other and turning away towards others, lovers who have achieved an "understanding" demonstrate their acceptance of the marriage state by moving in the same direction together. This significantly evokes what would have been in Austen's time the ubiquitous sight of a pair of horses, carrying out the useful work of their lives by pulling together a carriage or wagon. The symbolically yoked couple thus prepares to assume the burden of a household and family, and to move it into the next generation. For Austen, ideal marriage consists not of gazing into one's partner's eyes, but of facing outward together as a team. The engagement walk demonstrates this emotional shift and therefore signifies the participants' readiness to assume a new focus on life. Characters such as Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas, who are destined to contract less-than-perfect marriages for faulty reasons of convenience, meet face-to-face when deciding to plight their troth, while Darcy and Elizabeth finally get it right the second time by walking together along the same path that her sister and Bingley followed.

Another symbolically freighted emphasis in walking is upon the sequence of events: step by step, one scene leads to the next until "the happiest, wisest, most reasonable end" (347). Walks by the characters, then, move forward the plot action figuratively as well as literally. The lovers' walks toward the close of the novels not only speed the arrival of the conclusions, but at the same time, each end is suggested to be only part of an ongoing procession: a continued march into the future. This impression is reiterated by the epilogues, which allow readers a peek at future developments. The final-chapter image of the lovers walking together away from the reader also enables the narrator strategically and in a natural way to withdraw from the thoughts and actions of her characters. Strolling off with their fiancés, the heroines leave the companionship of both the nar-

rator and the reader, transferring their intimacy to their lovers as they move on into the territory of marriage where Austen cannot follow.

Although walking furthers intimacy in affectionate relationships, examples also abound in the novels that demonstrate walking as a ploy for moving ahead toward other, less straightforward social ends. In *Sense and Sensibility,* Lucy Steele uses walks as an opportunity to get close enough to Elinor Dashwood to find out how well she knows Edward Ferrars, and to warn her that he is already engaged. Not only do these walks ensure privacy for the two young women, but the disclosures they make define the social turf, enhancing each young woman's knowledge of her own social status and possibilities. The same kind of information sharing and territorial warning occurs in *Pride and Prejudice* when Lady Catherine de Bourgh visits Longbourn and invites Elizabeth to "'take a turn'" in the "'little wilderness on one side of your lawn'" (252), as a pretext to intimidate Elizabeth and warn her off the pursuit of Darcy. Elizabeth uses this same tactic herself, with better effect, when she warns her new brother-in-law Wickham that she knows of his past. "'I am afraid I interrupt your solitary ramble, my dear sister?'" he begins, as he joins her (327). When he opens the subject of Darcy, she squelches him while "walking fast to get rid of him" (329); and by the time they reach the house, she has "said enough to keep him quiet" (330). In these walks, characters seek to advance themselves, expanding not only their physical coverage of territory, but also their sway over the social landscape. Walking therefore demonstrates their powers of strategic advance and retreat in the same way that chess pieces move about a chessboard.

One obvious example of strategic expansion in *Pride and Prejudice* is the Bennet girls' regular walking forays to and around Meryton to meet and become acquainted with the regimental officers, with the blatant goal of making "conquests" that will improve their economic and social establishments. Mr. Darcy also uses walking as a tactic to run into Elizabeth during his visit to Rosings, similarly in order to further their relationship and draw her into his sphere. Even Mr. Collins exploits the social-expansion possibilities of walking, as when he "invited [his cousins] to take a stroll in the garden" (156) in order to become better acquainted, with a view to making his marriage selection. When Charlotte Lucas sees him "as he walked towards the house," she seizes her opportunity to make a match and "instantly set out to meet him accidentally in the lane" (121). Her strategic purpose, as well as his, is thus accomplished.

Social advancement is joined by mental and emotional progress in walking, which contains curative and healing powers beyond those of the physical exercise involved. Young women in *Sense and Sensibility* "unable longer to bear the confinement" of their indoor lives find both physical and emotional freedom while experiencing the "animating gales" and "delightful sensations" (41) to be had outdoors, particularly in "the air, the liberty, the quiet of the country" (279). But walking also moves them toward wisdom and perspective. Marianne Dashwood recovers her strength and emotional stability by "'tak[ing] long walks every day'" with her sister, as a token of "rational employment and virtuous self-control" (343). Even a semi-villain like John Dashwood settles at last into a right frame of mind by "walking together [with Elinor] one morning before the gates of Delaford House" (375). In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine is also relieved of her "embarrassing associations" about General Tilney under "the influence of fresh objects and fresh air" (214).

Austen's walkers, therefore, explore more than just the scenes around them, and they advance in understanding and mental health as they advance through the woods and shrubberies. It has been noted that a pedestrian sees objects one at a time, and has the opportunity to evaluate them from both distant and near perspectives (Wallace 23-29). Austen extends this faculty to the other circumstances and relationships in her characters' lives, enabling her walking heroines to see different aspects of behavior, thus changing their own. Although in her final walk with Darcy, Elizabeth tells her mother she has been wandering about "till she was beyond her own knowledge" (372), she has actually walked *to* knowledge, as a destination, having in her walks through the environs of Rosings and Pemberley begun to see Darcy's behavior from a different perspective. In *Emma*, Jane Fairfax uses a walk similarly, to re-evaluate her feelings about her engagement to Frank Churchill, and *Persuasion*'s Wentworth comes to realize his love for Anne Elliot in his walks in and around Lyme during Louisa Musgrove's convalescence.

Whereas certain physical dangers may accompany walking, such as Louisa's unlucky fall from the Cobb and *Emma*'s gypsy attack on Harriet, Austen minimizes these and subordinates them to greater benefits. Although Louisa is initially hurt, she recovers completely from the incident, emerging ultimately healed, enlightened,—and engaged. As for the gypsy attack in *Emma*, Austen's narrator pooh-poohs the danger, saying "the young ladies of Highbury might have walked again in safety before

their panic began" (336). Furthermore, following the gypsy incident Harriet matures into forming her own evaluations of men, rather than depending upon Emma's misguided recommendations. Once again, the walk emerges as positive forward motion.

Jane Austen's enthusiastic advocacy of walking accords with the Romantic trend of her times. In the late 1700s, upper-class Englishmen didn't walk, Robin Jarvis tells us, because they were "too rich, lazy, and proud" (1). But at the end of the century, travel walking and pedestrian tours became popular, so much so that in 1815 the editor of the *Bristol Journal* referred to "this age of Pedestrianism" (1). Nature walking coincided with nature writing; walkers were stimulated by Romantic literature, and vice versa. The 1794 appearance of Gilpin's *Essays on Picturesque Beauty*, encouraging readers to look at natural scenes aesthetically, prompted many to walk for this purpose. Leslie Stephen attributes the literary movement at the end of the eighteenth century "in great part, if not mainly, to the renewed practice of walking" (qtd. in Jarvis *ix*). Certainly Romantic verbal art's creativity was at least partly due to, and concerned with, the body in motion, the travelling self discovering hitherto unrealized freedom.

As a reader, a walker, and a writer, Jane Austen participated trifold in this Romantic renaissance. According to early biographer Oscar Adams, "to a greater extent than was perhaps common in her day, Jane Austen was a lover of natural scenery" (242). Austen's narrator assures us in *Northanger Abbey* that the Romantic movement urged readers such as Catherine Morland into aesthetic walking, a form of walking Jarvis tells us was done to explore the hidden beauties of nature, to develop the picturesque gaze, and to stimulate the imagination and play (44). Aesthetic walking subordinated the destination to the passage itself, emphasizing not only an appreciation of beauty, but a reconnection with nature and the divine, and a recreation of the self. This idea harks back to Rousseau, extoller of the reverie, the leisurely wandering that releases the mind from the labor of thought and the material bounds of the body so as to achieve flights of fancy (Wallace 60). The image of the walk, adds Jeffrey Robinson, is in fact a Romantic code for wonderment, transcendence, and spirituality (6), all benefits enjoyed by Austen's heroines as they venture outdoors.

There is written evidence that Austen's own walking, although primarily done for health and social reasons, also included elements of the aesthetic. Most descriptions of her walks in her letters to Cassandra are primarily news accounts, written from and about places being visited.

Although Austen never rhapsodizes about scenery in these letters, she writes in 1800 of a visit to Bath that included "a very charming walk from six to eight up Beacon Hill, and across some fields, to the village of Charlecombe, which is sweetly situated in a little green valley" (Austen-Leigh 129). Other such walks are described in later letters as "very pleasant," "nice," "agreeable," and "very beautiful." She would not have been what she describes in November 1800 as "such ⌈a⌉ desperate walker" across hills and fields had she not enjoyed and appreciated the natural beauty of her surroundings. In an 1811 letter Austen says, "You cannot imagine—it is not in human nature to imagine—what a nice walk we have round the orchard. The row of beech look very well indeed" (252).

Austen's physical surroundings were full of the beauties of the countryside, available for the stroller to view. William Austen-Leigh describes the Steventon neighborhood, where Austen lived and walked for twenty-four years, with its "beauties of rustic lanes and hidden nooks" (12). "The chief beauty of Steventon," he says, "consisted in its hedgerows . . . an irregular border of copse-wood and timber, often wide enough to contain within it a winding footpath" (12). One such hedgerow, radiating from the parsonage garden, "was formed into a rustic shrubbery, with occasional seats, entitled 'The Wood Walk.' The other ran straight up the hill, under the name of 'The Church Walk.'" Austen also lived two years in Southampton. James Edward Austen-Leigh describes the place where she stayed: "My grandmother's house had a pleasant garden, bounded on one side by the old city walls; the top of this wall was sufficiently wide to afford a pleasant walk, with an extensive view, easily accessible to ladies by steps" (82). Austen's niece Caroline describes "the Cottage" at Chawton: "A high wooden fence shut out the ⌈Winchester⌉ road all the length of the little domain, and trees were planted inside to form a shrubbery walk—which carried round the enclosure, gave a very sufficient space for exercise" (3-4). Caroline notes that, "After luncheon, my Aunts generally walked out . . . to make a visit—or if the house ⌈Chawton Great House⌉ were standing empty they liked to stroll around the grounds—sometimes to Chawton Park—a noble beech wood, just within a walk" (7-8).

The novels, too, provide evidence that Austen was aware of walking's aesthetic value. Her narrator in *Pride and Prejudice* comments that "every park has its beauty and its prospects," and Austen endows all her heroines with superior awareness of natural beauty. For example, at Hunsford, Elizabeth Bennet frequents "a nice sheltered path, which no one seemed to

value but herself" (169), and her appreciation for Pemberley's "beautiful walk by the side of the water" (253) and the "rough coppice-wood which border[s] it" (253-54) causes her, only half in jest, to attribute her love for Darcy to his "'beautiful grounds at Pemberley'" (373). Emma Woodhouse also finds Romantic value in walking outdoors:

> Never had the exquisite sight, smell, sensation of nature, tranquil, warm, and brilliant after a storm, been more attractive to her. She longed for the serenity they might gradually introduce; . . . she lost no time in hurrying into the shrubbery.—There, with spirits freshened, and thoughts a little relieved, she [took] a few turns. . . . (424)

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen's narrator is herself an aesthete; she takes occasion to comment on Catherine Morland's walk to "Beechen Cliff, that noble hill, whose beautiful verdure and hanging coppice render it so striking" (106). "Turf and shrubs, and all the sweets of pleasure-grounds" (90) are likewise apparent to Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, although Fanny is much less likely to go wandering than the rest of Austen's heroines.

Although women's walking is our primary concern here, it is worth noting that all of Austen's male protagonists likewise find aesthetic value in walking. *Mansfield Park*'s Edmund observes that "'they are much to be pitied who have not . . . been given a taste of nature in early life'" (113). Austen's other masculine heroes are also attracted to aesthetic walking. *Persuasion*'s Captain Wentworth says, "'The country round Lyme is very fine. I walked and rode a great deal; and the more I saw, the more I found to admire'" (183). Edward Ferrars of *Sense and Sensibility* finds that his morning "walk to the village" generates "fresh admiration of the surrounding country," which had exceedingly pleased him (96).

But, although Austen and her characters share a love of walking to appreciate the beauties of nature, this propensity, like most others in Austen, is shown to need circumspection and subordination to conventional limits. Walking, especially solitary walking, is a medicine to be taken sparingly. We see the dangers of unbridled walking and reverie in Marianne Dashwood's unwholesome emotional excesses, which warp her judgment and cost her her youthful health.

Space constraints forbid a comparison of pleasure walking and pleasure driving in Austen's life and novels. However, the reader's reflection will show carriage driving to be associated with dissolute characters and untoward incidents in Austen, so that we must conclude that it is walking,

rather than driving, that through its social, physical, and emotional benefits promotes the social harmony, civility, morality, and expansion Austen sees as paramount. Austen's ideal life is home-centered, and walking along the gravel paths, shrubberies, and nearby lanes of a place emphasizes and enhances one's ties to it. By regularly tracing her way back to that place as the center of her daily wanderings, the heroine symbolically strengthens the home and her own grounding in it. Austen's novels involve movement, process, and change, primarily toward the enhanced independence of a marriage. But her heroines always return, like the participants in a round dance, to end in an orderly pattern of life in a stable home. The habitual walk around the park or the shrubberies illustrates this scheme, replicating and emphasizing its unity.

The enlargement of a person's physical, social, and emotional powers through walking are joined, in Austen, by enhanced intellectual awareness. Robin Jarvis observes that the lingering gaze and the backward look, as well as the freedom to stop and rest, allow the walker to form an insight superior to observations gained by other means (67-69). We see this illustrated in Austen novels, where the clear-thinking characters are those who walk. Both Elizabeth and Jane Bennet, for example, are far more intelligent than their mother, who "never stirs out of doors"; and *Emma*'s Mr. Knightley, whose habitual walking is criticized by his brother and by Emma herself, always forms right and just assessments, compared to the misjudging Mr. Elton, who complains about "the walk he had had for nothing" (457). Certainly the walking characters in Austen are better able to "put their best foot forward" in social interactions and relationships. Moreover, by exercising their powers of observation in walking, rather than by standing in front of a mirror indoors, they are habitually focused outward, rather than inward, a self-shedding change that Rachel Bowlby comments is necessary to disinterested reflection and clear thinking (38). Austen would certainly concur that selfishness equates with shallowness and self-deception.

Jeffrey Robinson takes this notion further, observing that the focus on others outside oneself which results from walking, also promotes the democratization of society (6). Although one would be hard-pressed to call Austen a democrat, we can see some evidence substantiating this idea in the novels. Mr. Knightley's respect for underlings such as Robert Martin contrasts with the snobbery of the non-walking Mrs. Elton—evidence of this pressure toward recognizing the rights of the individual. Similarly, in

Persuasion, when Anne Elliot tells Captain Wentworth, "'I walk. I prefer walking'" (176), she asserts her independence to befriend the indigent Mrs. Smith, whereas her elitist sister Elizabeth, who prefers to consort with the Dalrymple set, is never seen outside of a carriage. And in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet disregards upper-class convention in order to walk through the mud to visit her sister, despite the distaste of non-walker Caroline Bingley. Pedestrians, then, feel a certain amount of kinship with those in "all walks of life."

Jane Austen, the consummate walker and keen-eyed observer of human nature, recognized that process is often as important as outcome; that behavior, not heredity or position, is paramount in evaluating human beings. And it is clear that one of those markers of proper behavior is walking. As Anne Wallace notes, the union of hero and heroine in most Austen novels is a union of walkers, and a taste for walking becomes a sign of the virtues of the landed gentry and freeholders (99). With all the symbolically and literally health-giving properties attached to moving oneself forward, then, we must conclude that mobility, within the natural limits of the body in time and space, is for Austen and her characters so desirable as to be essential, as an exercise in growth and freedom. While too much motion endangers the proper order of one's world, a little movement outdoors is a very good thing.

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