The Absent-Minded Heroine: Or, Elizabeth Bennet has a Thought

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What should be made of the way Elizabeth Bennet falls in love with Mr. Darcy in his absence? For even if one fondly believes that Elizabeth is attracted to Darcy from the start, it is not until midway through the novel that she begins to know that she is. In the first half of the novel, Elizabeth answers Darcy's proposal by calling him "the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry."[1] It is only in the subsequent months that her "sentiments" undergo "so material a change" that she decides the exact opposite (366). And yet throughout this period of change, Darcy is rarely before her. After he proposes in March, Elizabeth does not see him again until July, when he appears while she is viewing Pemberley; the next morning Darcy waits on Elizabeth at her inn for "above half an hour" (263); Elizabeth goes to Pemberley the following day for a visit "that did not continue long" (270); and Darcy subsequently visits the inn, arriving just as Elizabeth learns of Lydia's elopement and leaving almost immediately thereafter. Even by a generous estimate, Elizabeth has been with him for maybe three hours. Nevertheless, when Elizabeth next sees Darcy in September she is sure of her attachment. She is so, we are meant to understand, because Darcy's absence has ignited new thoughts—because, thanks to his body's disappearance, her own mind is enlarged.

That *Pride and Prejudice* is about the unreliability of physical appearances or of "First Impressions" hardly needs belaboring. That it also aligns absence with productive thought is the subject of this article. In what follows, I argue that

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Elizabeth is confused in Darcy's presence and thoughtful about him (and much else) in his absence, and that this contrast reflects one of the most basic tensions of early modern epistemology. Elizabeth's confusion suggests that human perception of the material world is necessarily uncertain; thus, when Elizabeth actually sees the object of Darcy she routinely misunderstands him. But her thoughtfulness suggests that the absence—whether of a physical object (like Darcy) or of certainty itself—can be intellectually fruitful and rewarding. Thus, it is precisely when Darcy is missing that Elizabeth is most mindful. Critics have long recognized Austen's interest in epistemology. Susan Morgan writes that all of Austen's novels concern the "relation between the mind and its objects," and Tony Tanner describes *Pride and Prejudice* as a dramatization of the "whole problem of knowledge."[2] My goal is to extend this conversation by considering the particular—and the particularly gendered—relationship between material absence and the mind both in *Pride and Prejudice* and in the broader philosophical and novelistic traditions to which the text alludes.[3]

To clarify, let me offer a few choice examples from Austen's novel. When Elizabeth visits Pemberley, for instance, she does so only after being repeatedly "assured of [Darcy's] absence" from it (256, 241, 246). Nevertheless he suddenly and unexpectedly appears on the lawn. The two greet each other awkwardly, after which Darcy retreats into the house and Elizabeth becomes "[in]sensible" of the surroundings:

> [A]nd, though she . . . seemed to direct her eyes to such objects as they [her aunt and uncle] pointed out, she distinguished no part of the scene. Her thoughts were all fixed on that one spot of Pemberley House, whichever it might be, where Mr. Darcy then was. She longed to know what at that moment was passing in his mind. . . . At length, however, the remarks of her companions on her absence of mind roused her. (253)

Narratively, Elizabeth's mind fills the space that Darcy exits. "Objects" fade before her "eyes" as she "fix[es]" on the immaterial and indeterminable "spot" in Pemberley House into which he has vanished. Her ignorance about Darcy's whereabouts and her "long[ing] to know what . . . was passing" in his unseen "mind" bring Elizabeth's own mind into textual relief. The less she physically "distinguish[es]" of him, the more pensive she becomes. Her "companions" remark on Elizabeth's "absence of mind" because she seems mentally detached from the present "scene." But Elizabeth might just as profitably be called *absent-minded* in that absence fuels her "thoughts."

As the novel's famous opening makes clear, most of Elizabeth's neighbors suffer from the contrasting and deluded belief that they can know the object world. The "truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" is "fixed" only in the "minds of the surrounding families." That such a man physically exists is hardly certain. For, as Austen continues, even should an eligible bachelor (like Mr. Bingley) actually enter the neighborhood, "little" can be "known" of his true "feelings or views" (3). On the one hand, a single man raises basic epistemological problems for any person who tries to perceive him.[4]

On the other hand, though, Austen insists that women—especially single ones—are particularly disadvantaged. It is, after all, because they rarely have a "good fortune" that women are far more likely to "want" rich men than the other way around.[5] Families may see a man like Mr. Bingley as the "rightful property of . . . one . . . of their daughters" (3). But "rightful property" is exactly what daughters both lack and need to become for a willing husband. Like countless novels before and after it, *Pride and Prejudice* is structured around women's inability to own objects and around their own objectification. And this, I argue, genders epistemological problems. However difficult it is to know the material world, *Pride and Prejudice* shows that it is more so for women who possess neither worldly goods nor full rights to their own bodies. For a heroine like Elizabeth Bennet, the things outside her are literally less available—and in this way more absent—than they are for a landed hero like Mr. Darcy. Such absence, the novel suggests, places greater restrictions on woman's knowledge.[6]

As consolation, Elizabeth acquires both the freedom of interpretation, and, more dubiously, the provocation to fall in love. The narrative advantage of uncertainty is that it creates the need for thought. Or, to put it oppositely, those who are certain they know things may have little cause to think about them. This helps explain why the dispossessed heroine is such a fixture of the early novel: she epitomizes the doubt that renders a character's mind complex.[7] But their dispossession also helps explain why so many heroines—including, of course, Elizabeth Bennet—are designed to think about men. As objects that women depend upon but never possess, men are ever absent and—at least in many novels—thus likely to occupy the female mind.

In terms of philosophical history, Elizabeth's problems of knowledge are less gender-specific than they are reflective of epistemological skepticism. In the eighteenth century skepticism propelled the very emergence of epistemology as a topic and led Immanuel Kant to declare that "there always remains this scandal for philosophy and human reason in general: . . . that we have to accept merely on *faith* the existence of things outside us (even though they provide us with all the material we have for cognitions)."[8] The skeptical link between absence and uncertainty is especially important for this article. From a skeptical perspective absence does not simply refer to the removal of a previously present object (as when Darcy disappears from Elizabeth's view). It also evokes the difficulty of comprehending any object—whether present or not—when the mind's idea of that object is merely a representation and never the thing itself. In this way, objects are always absent in the mind and the mind is bound to be uncertain about them—bound to be in doubt.

Precisely because of its oft-quoted optimism about human knowledge, John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) is especially revealing about absence and uncertainty. On the one hand, Locke celebrates the mind's ready reception of the physical world. The mind is a place like "white paper," "wax," an "empty cabinet," a "storehouse," or a "presence-room," that is "imprinted" or "furnished" with the "materials" of ideas "by external things."[9] On the other hand, though, the mind's materials can decompose, just as "print" on paper "wears out" like the moldered "inscriptions" on old "tombs," or a seal "will be *obscure*" when wax is too hard or too soft.[10]

Indeed, the Lockean mind is ultimately divided from external objects, however full its own "storehouse," because its ideas share the same representational failures as language. Because they refer to but never are the things they name, words have "naturally no signification."[11] So too, an idea impressed on the mind by an external body is only "a sign or representation of the thing it considers"; an idea is not the "thing" itself, which is, after all, never literally "present to the understanding." As Charles Landesman explains, "Locke thought it obvious that ideas *are* and bodies *are not* present" to the mind (emphasis added).[12] Thus, external objects are always absent in the mind, whose cumulative furnishings mark empty spots. The problem is exacerbated when an external object is itself absent from view—when, though it may exist elsewhere, an object is missing from the present landscape. Locke explains that "if I saw a . . . *man*, . . . one minute since, and am now alone, I cannot be certain, that the same man exists now. . . . [A]nd much less can I be certain of the existence of men, that I never saw" (*Essay*, 4.11.9). How different from the neighbors in *Pride and Prejudice* who believe universally accepted truths about unseen bachelors!

As an empiricist, convinced that all knowledge is founded on personal experience, Locke disparaged this kind of universal acknowledgment. The "*giving up our assent to the common received opinions*, either of our friends, or party; neighbourhood or country" keeps "more people" in "ignorance, or error" than any other "*measure of probability*." But Locke also recognized that to privilege personal experience required the rejection of most general truth claims. For if "*general knowledge*" can lie "only in our own thoughts," then "our knowledge goes not beyond particulars."[13]

Nobody impugned the logic of deriving general truths from particular observations more memorably than David Hume. As Frederick Copleston puts it, Hume argued that "we are confined to the world of perceptions and enjoy no access to a world of objects existing independently of these perceptions."[14] Hume's much-noted riddle of induction specifically discredits generalizations made about the future. Even if we have persuasive evidence about a past object or event, Hume writes, it is illogical to extend "this experience . . . to future times, and to other objects" because "the course of nature may change."[15]

Hume also suggested that the mind is itself a particular object about which the mind has no certainty. In the Appendix of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) he instructs philosophers to be "reconcil'd to the principle" that "with regard to the mind, . . . *we have no notion of it, distinct from particular perceptions*."[16] Nor can the mind escape the riddle of induction. Because the mind's perceptions may change its future is independent of its past and unpredictable. As Hume famously puts it, "the mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures." But we have neither the "most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, [nor] of the materials, of which it is compos'd."[17] In Locke, the mind is a storehouse of absent referents, but for Hume the "place" of the mind is itself absent, its "materials" too "distant" for human "notion."

As I have suggested of *Pride and Prejudice*, the early modern novel also associates problems of absence with problems of knowledge. In novel studies,

there is a long tradition of attention to the latter. Ian Watt originally defined the genre's "formal realism" as, in part, a response to "Nominalist skepticism about language"; but Watt later adjusted "realism" to include the narrative separation of mental or "inner life" from the "outer world" of "physical objects." Among Watt's many revisionists, Michael McKeon is especially useful here. He argues that the novel registers an "epistemological crisis . . . in attitudes toward how to tell the truth in narrative." The same crisis, McKeon adds, creates the early modern mind: "Henceforth . . . knowing something will consist in having it 'in mind,' and knowing it well will require that we refine the capacity of our ideas for the accurate, inner representation of external objects."[18]

I would stress that novel protagonists, both male and female, are routinely incapable of such refinement. Consider, for instance, the famous moment when Robinson Crusoe is "exceedingly surprized" to see the "print of a man's naked foot on the shore" of his Caribbean island. Though the print leaves an indelible "impression" in the sand, it is only a sign of a now absent object. The more Crusoe thinks about the print's missing referent the less he grasps the material world. Crusoe returns to his fortification "not feeling, as we say, the ground I went on"; he confounds absence and presence, "mistaking every bush and tree, and fancying every stump at a distance to be a man"; and his ideas so supersede reality that he cannot begin to "describe [in] how many various shapes affrighted imagination represented things to me."[19]

Whereas Crusoe suffers from his uncertainty about an absent object, a half century later Tristram Shandy and his uncle Toby suffer when the absence of an object appears too certain. For they suffer when those around them should—but do not—doubt that they have been either partially or fully castrated. Thus the wide-ranging gossip about Toby's wounded groin overpowers Tristram's claim that "nothing was ever better" than "my uncle['s] . . . fitness for the marriage state" (596–7). Similarly, when the sash crashes as little Tristram urinates out the window, Susannah screams that "[n]othing is left" (369). Tristram says the accident was "nothing," but "all the world" believes the worst (419). As his puns suggest, for Tristram even nothing is indeterminable and proves nothing about itself.

At least Crusoe and Tristram own property, which—though no cure for the absence of objects in the mind—offers some modicum of power in the object world. The consolation is clear when Crusoe "march[es]" around the island with a "secret kind of pleasure . . . to think that this was all my own" (113–4). The footprint interrupts this security, but soon enough Friday arrives and reestablishes Crusoe's mastery by setting Crusoe's "foot upon his head."[20] Even Tristram—who fears for his own head—is (thanks to the untimely death of his older brother) "heir-apparent to the Shandy" (332) family. Uncle Toby is not so lucky. As a younger son, he is "born to nothing" (279), his wounded groin and miniature fortifications fitting symbols of male landlessness.

Female characters generally have it worse because, in addition to being "born to nothing," they can be owned by men. For the heroine who both lacks—and is treated as—property, absence is a constitutive condition and the uncertainty accompanying it can be intense. Think of Clarissa Harlowe. She inherits but never commands her grandfather's estate, and first her family and then Lovelace

seek possession of her body. The crucial scene where Lovelace abducts her from her father's garden indicates the epistemological hazard of such deficiency. Here, Lovelace is able to seize Clarissa and (as if mimicking her landlessness) to lift her off the land by confusing her about external objects. Though Clarissa's family is absent, Lovelace convinces her otherwise: "Now behind me, now before me, now on this side, now on that, turned I my affrighted face . . . expecting a furious brother here, armed servants there, an enraged sister screaming and a father armed with terror in his countenance." Lacking both knowledge about materiality and material control, Clarissa doubly loses her ground. "I ran," she says, "yet knew not that I ran; my fears at the same time that they took all power of thinking from me adding wings to my feet."[21]

In one sense, the scene closely recalls Crusoe's uncertainty when he ran from the footprint, "not feeling . . . the ground I went on," and "fancying every stump at a distance to be a man" (162). But once he acquires Friday as well as other subjects and slaughters the natives, Crusoe regains his "undoubted right of dominion" (240–1) on the island. The same can never be true for Clarissa after her flight. Rather, her right of dominion contracts as Lovelace's expands, culminating in the rape that completes her dispossession. It is a testament to the uncertainty from which it descends that the rape is famously unrepresented in the novel. As if epitomizing the failures of perception that led Clarissa to the moment, the rape simply is not there.

Elizabeth Bennet also runs—or nearly does, and the oft-quoted scene where this occurs provides a fit return to *Pride and Prejudice*. When Jane is sick at Netherfield and their father cannot spare the carriage, Elizabeth walks there "alone, 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, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise" (32). Though she flees no danger (and, in fact, happily glows despite Jane's illness) Elizabeth resembles both Crusoe and Clarissa in barely touching down. Her greater affinity, however, is with the latter. Elizabeth makes enough contact with the ground to have "weary ancles" and "dirty stockings." But this is hardly the kind of impact Crusoe has when he overcomes the footprint by claiming "dominion" of the island. Rather than marking the land she cannot own, Elizabeth, like Clarissa, shares the mark (and the mud) of valuable property. No wonder Darcy is so smitten when she enters Bingley's home.

From its opening chapter, *Pride and Prejudice* coordinates women's lack of property with their lack of knowledge, as if one absence informs the other. Mr. Bingley's arrival in the neighborhood is symptomatic. Since men control both their own—and their female relatives'—bodily movements, the Bennet women can meet Mr. Bingley only if Mr. Bennet visits first and arranges their introduction.[22] That Mr. Bennet visits without telling them and teases his wife by pretending otherwise suggests the magnitude of women's uncertainty. However little Mr. Bennet knows about this particular "single man in possession of a good fortune," Mrs. Bennet is physically bound to know less.

Elizabeth's misunderstanding of Darcy repeats the basic paradigm. Though both she and Darcy initially misperceive and dislike each other, Darcy quickly knows better. A few pages after Elizabeth hears him declare her "not handsome

enough to tempt *me*" (12), Darcy "discover[s]" that her "uncommonly intelligent" eyes, her "light and pleasing" figure, and her "easy playfulness" are indeed tempting. "Wish[ing] to know more of her"—and using her outer appearance as his gauge—Darcy begins to discern her inner character. While Elizabeth remains "perfectly unaware" of his attraction and continues to misperceive him, he accurately appraises her personal worth (23–4).

And yet such accuracy is of virtually no narrative interest, for the mind the novel clearly prefers is the unknowing one. The only time Austen uses free indirect discourse to recount Darcy's perspective, for instance, is when he is confused. Thus, we learn that he is "mortif[ied]" to recognize the beauty of Elizabeth's eyes and that her walk to Netherfield leaves him torn between attraction and "doubt as to the occasion's justifying her coming so far alone" (23, 33). But as soon as Darcy falls entirely in love—as soon as what he perceives of Elizabeth's body begins to correspond with her delightful character—all passages from his consciousness vanish, as if only misperception qualifies for narrative thought.

Elizabeth, of course, perfectly meets this skeptical standard, and she does so, in part, because she is misled by language. This is hardly surprising given that news, gossip, secrets, disagreements, misunderstandings, and lies saturate her social world. Indeed the detachment of language and meaning is so pervasive that Mr. Collins can ridiculously claim to be "run away with by my feelings" when proposing to Elizabeth and then can dismiss her sincere rejection of him as "merely words of course" (105, 108). As with other epistemological problems, however, women are particularly susceptible to linguistic imprecision. It is telling, for instance, that Elizabeth first emerges as the novel's heroine only after overhearing Darcy's insult. Though for Darcy the comment ultimately has no signification, as Locke would say, Elizabeth long believes it an accurate account of his view. Along with other female characters, she is also easy prey for lies. Thus, while Mrs. Bennet is deceived by her husband and Jane suffers from false reports about Bingley's indifference, Elizabeth is readily seduced by Wickham's distortion of Darcy's history, much like Georgiana Darcy and Lydia are seduced by Wickham's lies about loving them. Elizabeth's gravest mistakes occur when she takes language too literally—when she assumes words are really true.

At other times, though, Elizabeth not only recognizes but also makes a virtue of language's misdirection. She may overestimate Darcy's insult, but she also repeats the story with such incongruously "great spirit" that—publicly at least—Darcy's words become "ridiculous." Indeed, it is her "delight[t]" in the "ridiculous" that makes Elizabeth so delightful (12). Laughing "whenever [she] can" at "[f]ollies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies" (57), she at least finds "absurdities" amusing (152). Austen's celebrated irony takes linguistic advantage of such moments. In that it concerns the divorce between language and reality, irony invokes—but also exploits—the skeptical difficulty of representing the external world. Words are ironic when their patent nonsense, ridiculousness, or inconsistencies become significant, when the gap between what is said and what is real is where meaning itself inheres. To enjoy irony, as Elizabeth often does, is to make comic sense of the absence of literal truth. Or, to put it another way, the absence in irony leads the capable mind to new thought.[23]

Elizabeth becomes most thoughtful in the novel's second half when she is faced not simply with the inevitable and general absence of literalism, but also with the particular and literal absence of Darcy. Here the peculiar benefits of uncertainty become especially apparent. Could Elizabeth simply grasp Darcy as an external object she would have little need to think about him. Her detachment from Darcy is advantageous in alerting her to her lack of knowledge, which ironically elevates her mind by forcing it to work.

The elevation begins after Elizabeth rejects Darcy's first proposal and he disappears. Having routinely misunderstood him in his presence, Elizabeth is now left with only signs—first Darcy's letter, then his Pemberley estate, and finally, her aunt's second-hand account of his help with Lydia. As she interprets one piece of evidence and then another, Elizabeth is almost always alone. Her isolation suggests both the general subjectivity of any interpretive act and Elizabeth's particular and growing capacity to resist what Locke calls the "ignorance, or error" of "*common received opinions*" (which, in this case, involves the neighborhood's disdain for Darcy and admiration of Wickham).[24]

That the process reflects both her epistemological limits and her mental growth becomes clear when she reads Darcy's letter and experiences a "contrariety of emotion" and "perturbed state of mind" (204, 205). As when she visited Jane at Netherfield, Elizbeth walks restlessly as she reads. But whereas the earlier scene described her feet jumping over stiles and puddles—here it is her "thoughts that could rest on nothing" (205). The object world recedes as Elizabeth reads and re-reads "every line" of Darcy's account of Wickham's perfidy, her own "thoughts" becoming a "line" to be re-read and reinterpreted (205, 208).[25] Hume describes a mental theater where perceptions "pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations."[26] Similarly, Elizabeth "see[s] [Wickham] instantly before her," but "[h]ow differently did everything now appear." His solicitude now cast as impropriety, Elizabeth watches as "[e]very lingering struggle in his favour grew fainter and fainter" (206, 207).

In recognizing the "variety" (209) and instability of thought, Elizabeth makes her most extraordinary and "humiliating" discovery. When she famously declares "Till this moment I never knew myself" (208), her mind becomes its own uncertain object—uncertain because it can change without warning and uncertain because it can be unknown. Arguing that the mind's perception of itself is as dubious and disconnected as any other perception, Hume insists "*we have no notion of it, distinct from the particular perceptions*" (*Treatise*, 677). Elizabeth Bennet may be more optimistic (she never knew herself but now she thinks she does). Nevertheless, she learns that her own thoughts can be as deceptive and inaccessible as Wickham and Darcy, that, like the external reality they so easily misinterpret, thoughts can misread themselves. Thus, Elizabeth concludes that although she had "prided" herself on her "discernment" of Darcy, she was actually so "offended by" his "neglect" that she drove "reason away." She now sees herself as "blind, partial, prejudiced, [and] absurd" because what she thought she was thinking was not what she really thought—or at least not entirely (208). If such a formulation prefigures the Freudian unconscious it does so because Austen makes the mind ironic. As with the linguistic absurdities Elizabeth so enjoys, there is a difference between what the mind articulates and what it really means.[27]

When, a few months later, Elizabeth agrees to visit Pemberley in Darcy's absence, she arrives knowing enough of her own "ignorance" (208) to be free for new perceptions. Her notorious attraction to Darcy's "large, handsome" and clearly phallic property ("standing well on rising ground" [245]) suggests that even in a non-referential world his material power is reasonably certain. But Elizabeth's ability to know his character from it is not. Still, Pemberley does have an advantage all of Elizabeth's previous information lacked. Until now she has depended either on direct perceptions of Darcy or on testimonies about him (supplied by Wickham, her neighbors, and Darcy in his letter). With its varied grounds, "trees," "rooms," "furniture," and, of course, portraits, Pemberley is the first space to provide objects that represent him in his absence (246). Together they constitute what Ian Hacking would call "the evidence provided by *things*"—the distinctly modern concept at the heart of probability theory.[28]

Elizabeth also receives new testimony, this time from Darcy's housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, who has "known him ever since he was four years old." Convinced that she speaks "the truth, and what every body will say that knows him," Mrs. Reynolds remembers Darcy as "the sweetest-tempered, most generous-hearted, boy in the world." Now, she claims, he is "the best landlord, and the best master," and the best brother "that ever lived." In another context Elizabeth might, like her uncle Mr. Gardiner, be "highly amused" by this "excessive"—arguably even ridiculous—praise; but here (as she once did with Wickham) Elizabeth listens trustingly (248–50).

Earlier, Elizabeth had seen miniatures of both Wickham and Darcy. Now she ascends to the gallery where she sees the "finer, larger picture" (247) of only Darcy (perhaps painted by the artist to whom Mrs. Reynolds's name alludes).[29] The servant's words repeat almost verbatim in her stream of consciousness: "As a brother, a landlord, a master, [Elizabeth] considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship!" The experience is both empirical and subjective. Mrs. Reynolds knows her master but she is biased; the portrait, in which Elizabeth sees "a striking resemblance of Mr. Darcy," is more than five years old (250, 200).

Ultimately, the material reality—both of the portrait and of its absent referent—proves less important than Elizabeth's passing thoughts. "There was certainly at this moment, in [her] mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance." Replacing the "original" Darcy with her own idea of him, Elizabeth Bennet makes a man. She thinks of Darcy's "regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before," and, as if *she* were the painter, "soften[s] its impropriety of expression" (250–1). That such command depends on Darcy's absence is made clear when Elizabeth subsequently leaves the house and meets him on the lawn. Unlike with her inspection of the portrait, now she "scarcely dared lift her eyes to his face" (251). The detachment typifies Elizabeth's material deficiency in Darcy's presence. Darcy often looks at her; she rarely does the same.[30]

The next night Elizabeth's "thoughts were at Pemberley," and she lies "awake two whole hours, endeavouring" to decipher her feelings for Darcy (265). Her confusion is resolved once she becomes convinced she cannot have him. Lydia elopes with Wickham, Darcy is present when Elizabeth hears the news, and

"never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be in vain" (278). "When it was no longer likely they should meet" (311), her love for Darcy is the one thing Elizabeth knows. In *Pride and Prejudice* absence makes the heart grow fonder in particularly gendered terms.[31] Darcy first falls in love with Elizabeth when watching her body. But for Elizabeth, who cannot appraise objects as Darcy does, male absence is a prerequisite for love. As if confirming the paradigm, Darcy responds to Lydia's elopement by telling Elizabeth "I am afraid you have long been desiring my absence" (278). Elizabeth may not literally desire Darcy's absence at this moment (though at others she does [268]), but she must think about his absence to desire him. For a woman like Elizabeth (and also Jane) to love is to fixate on a missing man; to love is the consummation of missing that man.

Incidentally, other female characters develop alternative approaches to male absence. After marrying Mr. Collins, for instance, Charlotte wisely cultivates his absence by choosing an unattractive room as her parlor so as to discourage his attendance (168). Lydia, on the other hand, depends upon male presence. Whereas Elizabeth philosophically accepts her apparent loss of Darcy, Lydia can so little tolerate the idea of the officers leaving the neighborhood that she literally follows them to Brighton, from where she follows Wickham to London.

In one extraordinary passage preceding Lydia's departure for Brighton, there is a full paragraph rendered from her mind:

> She saw with the creative eye of fancy, the streets of that gay bathing place covered with officers. She saw herself the object of attention, to tens and to scores of them at present unknown. She saw all the glories of the camp; its tents stretched forth in beauteous uniformity of lines, crowded with the young and the gay, and dazzling with scarlet; and to complete the view, she saw herself seated beneath a tent, tenderly flirting with at least six officers at once. (232)

The vivid physical detail (the camp "dazzling with scarlet," tents "stretched forth in beauteous . . . lines," crowds of the "young and the gay") is unusual for Austen and speaks to the material basis of Lydia's near ruin. Lydia's mistake is to imagine that her visions can become "realities" (232). In a world where women are "object[s]," Lydia truly believes that—like the master of a harem—she will sit "beneath a tent," and control "scores" of "unknown" men.[32]

Not only does Elizabeth have no such illusions, but it is also finally thanks to Lydia's pursuit of Wickham and to her own continued separation from Darcy that she completes the mental work of loving him. For Elizabeth secures her final evidence of Darcy's virtue when she learns about his success in arranging Lydia's marriage.[33] As earlier, the information arrives in the form of a testimonial letter—now from Mrs. Gardiner, who has herself only second-hand access to the details of Darcy's rescue. That report is enough for Elizabeth who, upon reading the letter, overcomes her "vague and unsettled . . . uncertainty" about Darcy and concludes that what had seemed "an exertion of goodness [in him] too great to be probable" had "proved" to the "greatest extent to be true!" (326).

But even this truth about Darcy's "goodness" raises epistemological problems—this time about continuity and change. For Hume, past experience has no

bearing on the future for the "course of nature may change" (*Enquiry*, 4.2.21). Similarly, we might ask whether Darcy's heroism marks the emergence of his fixed and essential goodness (which Elizabeth simply needed to discover) or whether time has altered him. Mrs. Reynolds would claim the former. "I have always observed, that they who are good-natured when children, are good-natured, when they grow up; and he was always the sweetest-tempered, most generous-hearted, boy in the world" (249). Yet Darcy later confesses to Elizabeth:

> I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child I was taught what was *right*, but I was not taught to correct my temper. . . . I was spoilt by my parents, . . . allowed, encouraged . . . to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world. (369)

For Mrs. Reynolds, Darcy has the same, coherent good-nature that he demonstrated when "four years old" (248). But Darcy insists that he was selfish "from eight to eight and twenty" and that Elizabeth has reformed him: "such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth!" (369).[34] Perhaps Mrs. Reynolds and Darcy are both right. Darcy may have always had some goodness and still have needed to improve. And Mrs. Reynolds's account of her master's history (in his "family circle") may be just as true for her as Darcy's account is true for him. What their conflicting perceptions preclude, however, is the possibility of reaching an absolute truth about Darcy (or indeed anyone) at any time—past, present or future.

Elizabeth's romantic victory is to decide that such truth is irrelevant when one can be absent-minded. Affirming what Susan Morgan calls Austen's "optimistic skepticism," the heroine finally assumes that it is not the mind's certainty about either the external world or internal thoughts that matters.[35] Happiness is born in imaginative selection. Thus, at the conclusion of the novel, when she and Darcy disagree about the spirit in which he wrote his letter, Elizabeth tells him to "[t]hink no more of the letter. . . . You must learn some of my philosophy. Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure" (368–9). By the end of the nineteenth century, Freud will describe forgetting as a form of repression and neurosis. But for Elizabeth, to forget is to relish uncertainty and incompleteness and to enjoy mental health.[36]

To put it another way, Elizabeth achieves the "pleasure" of loving Darcy by ridding her mind of certain memories—she achieves it via absence. Darcy rejects Elizabeth's forgetfulness, telling her "with *me*, it is not so." But then again, as a man Darcy has never much needed to console himself for—or with—absence. He declares that the "contentment arising" for Elizabeth from her retrospections "is not of philosophy, but what is much better, of ignorance" (369). And perhaps he has a point. For if, as I have argued, Elizabeth's experience of absence generates her intellectual triumph—if the dispossessed heroine epitomizes the uncertainty that renders a protagonist's mind complex—then her final "pleasure" in obliterating memories is a kind of defeat.[37] Elizabeth enlarged her mind in Darcy's absence. Now that she is again in his presence, she willfully absents her own thoughts. Though they are "merely words" (108), of course, what for Darcy requires "ignorance" and for Elizabeth "philosophy" we might just as well call "wifehood."

NOTES

I thank Allyson Booth, Corrinne Harol, Claudia L. Johnson, Eve Keller, and Kimberly Latta for their generous help with earlier versions of this essay.

1. Jane Austen, *The Novels of Jane Austen*, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 5 vols. (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966–9), 2: 193. Hereafter *Pride and Prejudice* is cited parenthetically in the text.

2. Susan Morgan, *In The Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), 4. Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), 105. For specific discussions of epistemological uncertainty in *Pride and Prejudice* see Martha Satz, "An Epistemological Understanding of *Pride and Prejudice*: Humility and Objectivity," in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. Janet Todd (New York and London: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1983), 171–86; Tara Ghoshal Wallace, *Jane Austen and Narrative Authority* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 45–58; and Felicia Bonaparte, "Conjecturing Possibilities: Reading and Misreading Texts in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*," *Studies in the Novel* 37 (2005): 141–61. On Austen's response to the politically progressive implications of—and the stigma attached to—the word "philosophy" in the wake of the French Revolution see Claudia L. Johnson's superb *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 10–14, 78.

3. I have written elsewhere about absence and the creation of the unconscious in Austen's *Emma*. See my *Mothering Daughters: Novels and the Politics of Family Romance, Frances Burney to Jane Austen* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2002), 145–68. I make a related argument about absence and the mind in "Money or Mind? *Cecilia*, the Novel, and the Real Madness of Selfhood," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 33 (2004): 49–70.

4. The syntax suggests that even the single man may not know his own "feelings or views." For excellent discussions of the epistemological problems reflected in the opening lines see Tanner, *Jane Austen*, 110–11 and Claudia Brodsky Lacour, "Austen's Pride and Prejudice and Hegel's 'Truth in Art': Concept, Reference, History," *ELH* 59 (1992): 607–10.

5. Lady Catherine De Bourgh and her daughter are unusual in having independent fortunes.

6. Mary Wollstonecraft specifically uses the term "absence of mind" to describe women's ignorance in a world that commodifies their bodies and lets their "mind[s]. . . lie fallow"; *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston (New York and London: Norton, 1988), 192.

7. On the popularity of "dispossession in the [eighteenth-century] rhetoric of authorship"—especially of female authorship—see Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1994), xxi. On how eighteenth-century epistemological problems influenced the development of the romantic mind see M. H. Abrams *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), 57–69; and James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), 3–10.

8. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason: Unified Edition*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1996), Bxl, note. On how skepticism influenced the emergence of epistemology see Charles Landesman, *Skepticism: The Central Issues* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 70. Also see David Bates, "Idols and Insight: An Enlightenment Topography of Knowledge," *Representations* 73 (2001): 17. Though space prohibits elaboration, eighteenth-century skepticism anticipates both Marxist and Freudian accounts of human detachment from external objects. See, for instance, Richard Terdiman on the "*de*-valorization of the object in a world [of mass production] in which objects are counted by the trillions" and on "the power of psychical presentations . . . to displace the reality of the material world"; *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), 52, 258.

9. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 1997), 1.2.15, 2.1.2, 2.3.1, 2.10.2. Locke suggests that certain "simple ideas" or sensory impressions can be fully and entirely known; see, for instance, 2.2.25. For more on Locke's distinc-

tion between "simple" and "complex ideas" see Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, 9 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 5:79–107.

10. Locke, *Essay*, 2.10.5 and 2.29.3. Also see Locke's famous image of the mind as a dark closet (2.11.17). Laurence Sterne offers a hilarious parody of Locke's wax image in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Graham Petrie (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 107–8.

11. Locke, *Essay*, 3.9.5. Michel Foucault offers one of the best-known accounts of the early modern crisis in representation that separated things and words; see *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 34–44.

12. Locke, *Essay*, 4.21.4; Landesman, *Skepticism*, 24. As Locke writes elsewhere in the *Essay*, "[t]here is nothing like our ideas, existing in the bodies themselves" (2.8.15).

13. Locke, *Essay*, 4.20.17, 4.6.13, and 4.6.16; also see 4.15.6. On probability in Locke see Bates, "Idols and Insight," 14. On how the problem of generalizing from particulars informed the early modern emergence of probability theory see Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975). On how the same problem informed the "history of the modern fact" see Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).

14. Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 293; also see 291–9. My reading of Hume is much influenced by Copleston; Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability*; Landesman, *Skepticism*; and Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*.

15. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 4.2.16, 4.2.21; for Hume's famous comments on whether or not the sun will rise see 4.1.2.

16. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 677.

17. Hume, *Treatise*, 301.

18. On formal realism as a response to "Nominalist skepticism about language" see Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1957), 27–30. Watt describes realism in more skeptical terms in "Flat-Footed and Fly-Blown: The Realities of Realism," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 12 (2000): 157–58. McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987), 20, 83. Georg Lukács's work remains one of the most lyrical and valuable accounts of the novel's skepticism about human knowledge: "the objectivity of the novel is the mature man's knowledge that meaning can never quite penetrate reality"; *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 1996), 88; also see 60–1, 70–1, 75. Catherine Gallagher describes the novel as an "alternative" to referential truth telling (*Nobody's Story*, xvi).

19. Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Angus Ross (New York: Penguin, 1983), 162. John Richetti writes that the footprint makes "Crusoe's interior life" appear "to him as mysterious and chaotic as its external provocations"; *The English Novel in History, 1700–1780* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 68.

20. Friday puts Crusoe's foot on his head twice (*Robinson Crusoe*, 207, 209).

21. Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady*, ed. Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 380.

22. Later, Charlotte Lucas says that because Jane cannot control how often or under what circumstances Bingley will see her she must "make the most of every half hour in which she can command his attention" (22).

23. Marvin Mudrick's discussion of Austen's use—and Elizabeth's appreciation—of irony remains valuable; *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), 1–4, 94–5, 120–22.

24. Locke, *Essay*, 4.20.17.

25. I am indebted to Jennifer Luongo for some of these observations about Elizabeth's reading.

26. Hume, *Treatise*, 301. For a fuller discussion of Hume's relevance for Austen see Tanner, *Jane Austen*, 108–10, 139–40.

27. Hume arguably anticipates the Freudian unconscious, but Locke explicitly states that it is "hard to conceive, that anything should think, and not be conscious of it" (*Essay*, 2.1.11; also see 2.1.19).

28. Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability*, 32.

29. On the name's "jokey allusion to Sir Joshua Reynolds" see Vivien Jones, ed., *Pride and Prejudice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 332n.

30. See, for instance, 51, 263, 335, 366.

31. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot memorably tells Captain Harville "[a]ll the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone"; *The Novels of Jane Austen*, *Persuasion*, 5: 235.

32. Lydia generally sees men as commodities. When she visits Meryton, her "eyes" wander "in quest" either of the "officers" or of a "very smart bonnet . . . or a really new muslin in a shop window" (72).

33. In keeping with his privileged access to knowledge and material power, only Darcy knows where to find Wickham and he alone satisfies Wickham's financial demands. Darcy also blames himself that "Wickham's worthlessness had not been . . . well known" (321).

34. In an oft-quoted passage Elizabeth anticipates her own transformation when she says that people "alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them for ever" (43). The uncertainty about whether Elizabeth has uncovered the "real" Darcy or whether he has changed is reflected in critical discussions; for instance, Tanner argues that *Pride and Prejudice* is concerned with "[j]ust what constitutes a person's 'real character' " *(Jane Austen*, 115), whereas Johnson emphasizes the progressive implications of Darcy's improvement (*Jane Austen*, 83–4).

35. Morgan, *In the Meantime*, 10; similarly, Bonaparte argues that "Austen seeks an answer not beyond but within. . .skepticism" by recognizing that "knowledge and understanding are partial, imperfect, and indistinct" ("Conjecturing Possibilities," 152).

36. In his early work on hysteria, co-authored with Josef Breuer, Freud writes that "*[h]ysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences*" that they are "genuinely unable to recollect"; "On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication" [1893], in *Studies on Hysteria*, ed. Irvin D. Yalom, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 7, 3; for the first use of "repressed" in the psychoanalytic sense see 10. For other accounts of memory in *Pride and Prejudice* see Nicholas Dames, who argues that *Pride and Prejudice* reflects a "modern nostalgic consciousness . . . in which the old is overthrown"; "Austen's Nostalgics," *Representations* 73 (2001): 129; Margaret Anne Doody suggests that the novel shows that "[w]ithout some intelligent check on memory, neither freedom nor love is possible"; "'A Good Memory is Unpardonable': Self, Love, and the Irrational Irritation of Memory," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 14 (2001): 94.

37. Forgetting is clearly a problem in earlier passages. The Bingley sisters' "memories," for instance, are "more deeply impressed" with the respectability of their family than with the "circumstance. . . that their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade" (15). Also, after receiving Darcy's letter, Elizabeth realizes how much she has "endeavoured to forget what she could not overlook" of the "impropriety of her father's behavior as a husband" (236).