COMMUNITY AND COGNITION IN
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

BY WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

The opening of Pride and Prejudice vies with “Call me Ishmael” as the most famous first sentence in English-language fiction, yet that which makes it memorable also makes it anomalous within its author’s corpus. Each of Jane Austen’s other novels begins by introducing one of its principal characters.1 Only Pride and Prejudice begins with an aphorism: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” An aphorism, or rather a mock aphorism, for it is immediately intimated that this “truth universally acknowledged” is in fact nothing more than one of the fixed opinions of the “neighborhood” of “surrounding families” amidst which the novel’s action is to take place.2 The introduction of individual characters is delayed until the third paragraph (even then withholding the usual Austenian fanfare of station, condition, and history), and the community turns out to be the novel’s true point of departure. Indeed, the note on which this opening ends, that our bachelor of property will himself become the property of “some one or other” of the local young ladies, lends, if only for a moment, a teasingly arbitrary air to the identity of the specific family the narrator finally does introduce. In other words, Pride and Prejudice can also be seen as beginning with the introduction of one of its principal figures, only here that figure is a community. One might think this a strange choice given the protagonist with whom we are to be concerned; of all of Austen’s heroines, surely the brilliant, exuberant Elizabeth Bennett deserves star billing. But as one tends to forget in retrospect—so thoroughly does her presence dominate the novel as a whole, so large does her energy and brilliance bulk in one’s imagination—Elizabeth is very far from being the center of attention in the early chapters, scarcely mentioned at all until the third, not clearly emerging as the heroine until the sixth. What is presented in these first scenes is more than anything the story of a community: of communal expectations, communal conventions, communal activities. These pressures drive Mrs. Bennet, and consequently the rest of her family, into the
actions that occupy the novel's first chapters. And in the most important of the early episodes, the assembly at which Mr. Bingley and his friends make their debut in the neighborhood of Meryton gentry, the community itself steps forward, through a kind of disembodied collective consciousness, to engage in acts of observation and judgment that set the course of the rest of the narrative. Elizabeth cannot appear until well into this initial story because it is that story—the story of how a community thinks, talks, exerts influence—that produces her plot, that produces her.

These considerations suggest a relationship between Elizabeth and her community very different from that generally depicted in the critical literature. A host of readers have emphasized her individuality and imaginative freedom, but in crucial ways she is not free and very little of an individualist, ways in which her story must be seen, not as an exercise of freedom, but as an effort to achieve freedom, not as a light-footed dance away from a community that cannot contain her, but as a struggle to wake herself out of a community in which she is all too comfortably embedded.\(^3\) From this point of view, *Pride and Prejudice* can be seen as Austen's most deliberate and sustained critique of community—a constructive critique, since the novel ends by sketching an alternative vision of communal life that corrects what has been shown to be vicious and preserves what has been shown to cherished in it. To trace these processes through the narrative we should take Austen's hint and look at the community first, Elizabeth's place within it only afterwards.

**COGNITION AND THE SINGLE WOMAN**

The essential respect in which the community of the novel shapes the lives and characters of its members turns out to be the least obvious. The community, as one might expect, functions as a set of social activities and behavioral norms, but it also functions as a set of cognitive processes, or in other words, mental habits.\(^4\) Consider the content of the collective consciousness implicitly present in the early chapters: "He was discovered to be proud," "His character was decided," "‘Every body says that.’" Judgments such as these reflect common values, but they first of all require the gathering and transmitting of specific information: "a report soon followed," "the report which was in general circulation," "Mrs. Long says that," "Lady Lucas quieted [Mrs. Bennet's] fears a little by starting the idea of," and on and on. Only then comes the application: "the gentlemen pronounced," "the ladies declared." Such informal circulation of
information and opinion is the focus of communal life. Even dancing seems a mere pretext; what matters is what is assumed, learned, known, believed, communicated. “It is a truth universally acknowledged”: that is, it is a belief ensconced in “the minds of the surrounding families.” The novel takes as its point of departure, not customs or conventions, but cognitive processes. In particular, it begins by setting out the kind of cognitive process that crucially characterizes the community’s thinking, the deductive logic of the syllogism. As we might reformulate it:

All single men in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

Mr. Bingley is a single man in possession of a good fortune

Mr. Bingley must be in want of a wife.

Our “universal truth,” “well fixed” as it is in the minds of the surrounding families, serves as the major premise, the starting-point of deduction. “The feelings or views” of the single man in question—empirical evidence that may be thought to bear on the issue—have no place in the process and are therefore discounted. And because they are discounted, there is no possibility that they will modify the major premise. Without the countercheck of induction, of fresh observation and reconsideration, conjecture crowns itself as certainty (“must be”), and beliefs once accepted harden into “universal truths.”

A host of distortions, mainly rather comic, follows from this basic blindness:

A report soon followed that Mr. Bingley was to bring twelve ladies and seven gentlemen with him to the assembly. The girls were grieved at such a large number of ladies, but were comforted the day before the ball by hearing, that instead of twelve, he had brought only six with him from London, his five sisters and a cousin. And when the party entered the assembly room, it consisted of only five altogether. (10)

The funniest thing about this passage is that Austen manages to write “twelve ladies and seven gentlemen” with a straight face. But it is no surprise that the initial report was so wildly off. The whole idea that Bingley had gone to London to get a large party was simply invented by Lady Lucas on the spot, this being the idea she “starts” in order to “quiet” Mrs. Bennet. Scrupulousness of report is not a great concern in this community, nor is scrupulousness of observation. Darcy’s ten thousand a year leads the ladies to declare that “he was much

William Deresiewicz

505
handsomer than Mr. Bingley," but after the discovery of his pride, "not all his estate in Derbyshire could . . . save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance." The few occasions upon which the collective consciousness returns late in the novel show that the community's confidence in its judgment remains unshaken even when its conclusions have been discredited. After Wickham elopes with Lydia, we learn that

All Meryton seemed striving to blacken the man, who, but three months before, had been almost an angel of light . . . Every body declared that he was the wickedest young man in the world; and every body began to find out, that they had always distrusted the appearance of his goodness. (294)

Revisionism saves the community from an admission of error and what seems an even greater threat, of uncertainty, but at the cost of subordinating perception and reason to expediency, desire, and self-conceit.

These observations might seem fairly unimportant until one recognizes how powerful are the community's cognitive patterns to compel individual action. Induction is a slow and uncertain process; no wealth of observation suffices to prove a general truth. But deduction is certain and swift; it springs like a mousetrap. Given a certain belief about single men in possession of good fortunes, the syllogistic mechanism need only be baited with the proper morsel of cheese, a Charles Bingley, for it to slam down on Mrs. Bennet and thus on her whole family. Syllogistic mousetraps of this kind are scattered throughout the novel, mental reflexes waiting to be triggered, waiting in turn to trigger reflexive behavior. The most important concerns the age at which young women are eligible to be married. That, after all, is the really fundamental "truth" underlying the action of the first scenes, so anxiety-producing that it cannot even be spoken aloud. Thus Mrs. Bennet:

"Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week." (3)

"Monday . . . immediately . . . Michaelmas . . . the end of next week": there's a clock ticking in Mrs. Bennet's head, and it's ticking very loudly. Time to get the girls married. Mechanical thought produces

506  Community and Cognition in  Pride and Prejudice
mechanical behavior, and communal life, like the universal truths of communal thought, remains forever “well-fixed.”

Surely Elizabeth comes, when she comes, as the exception to all this. A stile-jumper by conviction as well as instinct, she not only flouts convention, she holds it up for deliberate mockery. But does she exhibit the same relationship to her community's patterns of thought as she does to its norms of behavior? She makes terrible blunders of judgment, yet don't these also proceed from her energy, freedom, and brilliance—her desire either to laugh at everyone, as she would have it, or “willfully to misunderstand them” (58), as Darcy believes? If anyone is unlikely to have her opinions dictated to her, one would think, it is Elizabeth Bennet. Yet this is precisely what happens, and in the most important of all instances. There is no more crucial judgment in the novel than the one she makes about Darcy at the very start of their acquaintance. Pride, she decides: inexcusable, insufferable pride. The word becomes the tonic note of the book, and the whole course of the heroes' relationship can be charted through the reorchestrations its meaning undergoes. Some three hundred pages later, Elizabeth finds herself telling her father that Darcy “has no improper pride” (376), and the novel is ready to come to rest on its final, glorious harmony.

But how does Elizabeth come to make that pivotal judgment in the first place? Quite simply, it is handed to her by her community. The movement of the word “pride” through the narrative and into Elizabeth's voice and mind follows the course I just traced: from community to family to individual. It begins as one of the judgments made by the collective consciousness at the first assembly, the very first negative judgment rendered against Darcy: “His manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased” (10). By the end of the evening, the opinion has hardened: “His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world.” Mrs. Bennet, we are given to understand, participates in the formation of this opinion, but her feelings are couched in words such as “dislike” and “resentment,” with no characterological judgment made. By the next morning, however, she has ceded both authority and articulation to the voice of her community: “every body says that he is ate up with pride” (19). She is talking here (chapter 5) to her daughters and the Miss Lucases, and the word proceeds to circulate within this inlet of the communal lake. Charlotte accepts the charac-
terization, dissenting only as to its moral valence: “His pride,” said Miss Lucas, ‘does not offend me so much as pride often does, because there is an excuse for it . . . he has a right to be proud.’” Now and only now is the word taken up by Elizabeth: “‘That is very true . . . and I could easily forgive his pride if he had not mortified mine.’” Playing on Charlotte’s emphasis of the personal pronoun, she reverses the moral direction of her friend’s analysis with typical irony, but assimilates the characterological assessment without a thought. Mary affirms the consensus in her own way (“‘Pride . . . is a very common failing, I believe’”), but her remarks serve mainly as a device to end the conversation, and the point of the episode seems precisely to have been the introduction of the word “pride” into Elizabeth’s head. Had Austen simply wished to show her making the judgment herself, either at the moment of Darcy’s snub or afterwards, she could have done so with a great deal less effort.

Even the feeling of “mortification” connected with the snub—at least as important to Elizabeth’s subsequent behavior as is the judgment itself—is urged on her by her community. Elizabeth was certainly not pleased with Darcy’s behavior at first, but neither was she much affected by it: “Elizabeth remained with no cordial feelings towards him. She told the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous” (12). There is a wide space between thinking something “ridiculous” and being “mortified” by it, and if Elizabeth had been mortified at the time, as she certainly is later, she would hardly have “told the story with great spirit among her friends.” Indeed, when she and Jane discuss the ball that same night, Darcy isn’t so much as mentioned, not even when the snobbery of Bingley’s sisters is explicitly canvassed. As Mrs. Bennet perceives (“I beg you not to put it into Lizzy’s head to be vexed by his ill treatment” [19]), Elizabeth’s resentment arises in the course of that next morning’s conversation, when she finds that her friends take the incident as a more serious affront than she was at first inclined to do. In short, while Elizabeth herself sends the story of Darcy’s snub out into the community, she gets her opinion and feeling about it handed back to her.6

Elizabeth’s second important judgment in the early stages of the novel, her delighted approval of George Wickham, is no less an act of unconscious mental conformity. Here the conformity is not to an opinion, but to the very way the community makes and maintains its

508 Community and Cognition in Pride and Prejudice
opinions, that is, to the logical pattern I analyzed above. Another syllogistic mousetrap snaps shut, and it stays shut for twenty chapters. Elizabeth’s response to Wickham is encapsulated in a silent thought that occurs during their long conversation about Darcy’s perfidy and pride. The subject has already rendered her indistinguishable from her mother (“‘He is not at all liked in Hertfordshire. Every body is disgusted with his pride’” [78]), and at one point she exclaims:

“To treat in such a manner, the godson, the friend, the favourite of his father!”—She could have added, “A young man too, like you, whose very countenance may vouch for your being amiable.”

In other words:

All men of good countenance are amiable.
Wickham is a man of good countenance.
Wickham is amiable.

Not only is the logic the same, so is its grounding in desire. Elizabeth, like her community, won’t let the facts stand in the way of what she wants to believe. This is, of course, a well-attested observation in the critical literature; the modification I am making concerns the origin of Elizabeth’s “prejudice.” It may well be that most everyone in the world thinks this way—excessively syllogistic, insufficiently self-critical, blinded by desire—but had Austen wished to make that point, she would have done so. The point she does make is much more specific; Elizabeth is presented not as a typical person, but as a typical member of her community. She assents to and helps propagate collective judgments; she takes her opinions for universal truths; witty as she is, she risks the same mental gridlock as those around her. Darcy, the product of a different community, displays different shortcomings. His errors are ones of behavior, not of thought. But Elizabeth, in one of her least admirable moments, blurts out what could be the motto of all the “good people of Meryton”: “‘I beg your pardon;—one knows exactly what to think’” (86).

The intellectual fault that Elizabeth shares with her community can be understood at its most basic level as an inability to deal with contradiction. Much of Mrs. Bennet’s foolishness, and the humor of that foolishness, consists of an inability to see the contradictions in her own thinking: “‘Well, Lizzy . . . what is your opinion of this sad

William Deresiewicz

509
business of Jane’s? For my part, I am determined never to speak of it again to anybody. I told my sister Philips so the other day’” (227). Mr. Bennet’s moral indolence is made possible through the equivocations of irony: “I admire all three of my sons-in-law highly . . . Wickham, perhaps, is my favorite, but I think I shall like your husband quite as well as Jane’s” (379). The tension between his disgust for Wickham and the recognition that he is responsible for Wickham’s presence in his family is resolved by the use of a single word, “admire,” to name both itself and its opposite. But the leading exemplar of the desire to evade contradiction is Elizabeth herself. The most telling examples occur in dialogues with Jane and Charlotte, her two intimates. In one, Jane tries to suggest that Darcy may not be as bad as Elizabeth has concluded (86). In another, Charlotte simply wants her to understand that she, Charlotte, believes that “happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance” and that “it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life” (23). In neither case does Elizabeth alter her opinion even slightly, and in both she closes the exchange with an arrogantly self-affirming gesture. The first we have already seen: “one knows exactly what to think.” The other is deaf even to the possibility of contradiction: “You make me laugh Charlotte; but it is not sound. You know it is not sound, and that you would never act in this way yourself.” It is no wonder that she spends so much of the novel being surprised.

Finally, even for Elizabeth, cognitive inertia becomes behavioral and emotional stasis. On the fundamental question that confronts her she is, for all her rapid motion, as jammed stuck as her mother ever is. Replying to Charlotte’s suggestion that a young woman should secure a man first and then worry about falling in love, she says: “Your plan is a good one . . . where nothing is in question but the desire of being well married; and if I were determined to get a rich husband, or any husband, I dare say I should adopt it” (22). “Or any husband”: like Richardson’s Clarissa, Elizabeth has forsworn marriage. But though the gesture may have been conventional by this point, Austen does not use it casually. Essentially reflexive, it carries for that very reason a tone of utter finality. And although one may see it as nothing more than a prop that allows Elizabeth to maintain her self-esteem until the right man comes along, that observation points to the essential problem: the right man comes along, yet Elizabeth remains stuck in her old pattern. A complacent consciousness is at war with unsettled feelings, but complacency is winning. The process of breaking this pattern constitutes the burden of the plot: the positive outcome
is a foregone conclusion only in retrospect. At this point, certain of what she knows and of what she wants, Elizabeth has stopped question-
ing herself. She knows exactly what to think, and she knows exactly how to act. She is, like her community, “well-fixed.”

THE PLEASURES OF DENSITY

I have so far been discussing the community as a homogenous totality, but as illustrated by the group conversation of chapter 5, it also possesses a complex internal environment that looks different to each character. Elizabeth’s experience of the community is in large measure her experience within the subgroup of Bennets and Lucases. The importance of such groups is suggested by the remark that introduces that very conversation: “That the Miss Lucases and the Miss Bennets should meet to talk over a ball was absolutely necessary; and the morning after the assembly brought the former to Longbourn to hear and to communicate” (18). While “absolutely necessary” may exhibit, in its extravagance, a rainbow edge of irony, the very fact that the characters think it absolutely necessary makes it at least quite important. In fact, it is clear from the outset that something more is happening than the mere exercise of sociability. The young women get together not, as Lydia and Kitty do, to go out and hunt up officers, but to “talk over”—to discuss and analyze. We may note, as the scene unfolds, the game of one-upsmanship that Mrs. Bennet and Charlotte Lucas play with each other, but even as this tussle progresses to its inevitably inconclusive end, more fundamental purposes are being accomplished. A consensus, as we saw above, is being formed about Darcy’s character; whatever the individual women had thought about him going into the conversation, each leaves knowing that he suffers from “pride.” But it is also clear that none of them (except Mrs. Bennet) had much known what she thought of him. The conversation serves to evoke, shape, and strengthen their opinions. What is more, the clarification that takes place involves both homogeniza-
tion and differentiation: the characters disagree, now that they come to think of it, over the significance of Darcy’s pride. Yet if we examine the structure of the conversation more closely, we discover, not a series of flat contradictions (we already know how poorly the community deals with those), but the gradual shaping of a collective understanding. It is less a debate than a kind of game, a game in which one pivots one’s interlocutor’s statements in an unintended direction even while seeming to agree with them. Mrs. Bennet’s contest with Charlotte Lucas displays this pattern:

William Deresiewicz

511
[Mrs. Bennet:] ‘If [Darcy] had been so very agreeable he would have talked to Mrs. Long. . . . I dare say he had heard somehow that Mrs. Long does not keep a carriage, and had come to the ball in a hack chaise.”

“I do not mind his not talking to Mrs. Long,” said Miss Lucas, “but I wish he had danced with Eliza.” [In other words, “Yes, he snubbed Mrs. Long as well, but that doesn’t make his treatment of your daughter any less humiliating.”]

The group maintains cohesion through the manner in which it manages conflict, allowing it expression within conventionalized bounds. A more important example, for it embodies real differences of opinion, is the exchange we looked at above:

“His pride,” said Miss Lucas, “does not offend me so much as pride often does, because there is an excuse for it. . . . he has a right to be proud.”

“That is very true,” replied Elizabeth, “and I could easily forgive his pride if he had not mortified mine.”

It is a bit like the parlor game, sometimes used with adolescents to teach positive social skills, in which participants collectively create a sentence by taking turns adding one word at a time. The sense of the conversation here (like the sense of the sentence in the game) takes a new direction with each contribution, but is at every point the sum of all previous contributions. Individual expression occurs within collective expression; individual expressions together create collective expression. At bottom, the implicit meaning of this mode of conversation, as it is the implicit lesson of the game, is that every voice is valid. The exceptions underscore the rule. Mrs. Bennet can flatly contradict Jane when Jane quotes Miss Bingley (“I do not believe a word of it, my dear”), not because Miss Bingley isn’t present (Mrs. Long’s testimony is also introduced), but because she is outside of the community (at this point in the novel) and thus merits no voice in shaping the discussion. Mary’s utterance, as always, makes no attempt to play off or play with anything that has already been said and thus has no effect on the conversation whatsoever, except indeed to end it by breaking its momentum. What is going forward is not about the kind of general truths Mary tries to enunciate, but about the play of opinions—valued as opinions—around specific, local truths. That is why the ultimate consensus is only partial and only implicit. What is achieved is not unanimity and is not supposed to be, but a delicate interplay of conflict and agreement.

512 Community and Cognition in Pride and Prejudice
One finds, then, that values differ within the group, albeit within limits, and differ over what may be presumed to be an important matter. What does not differ—what is actively made to be the same—is the perception of the events upon which those values operate. The conversation has served to mark the circle of common judgment and the permissible limits of difference, but it has also performed a more basic cognitive function, for it has constituted what will henceforth be in this group the official version of the events of that night: what Mr. Darcy said to Mrs. Long, what Mr. Bingley said to Mr. Robinson, and also, since this will undoubtedly become part of the story for Mrs. Bennet and Charlotte Lucas (and Lady Lucas and Mrs. Long and so forth), what Elizabeth thinks about what Mr. Darcy did. And even more simply, the conversation has determined that “what happened” at the assembly will mean those points and not others. (Compare the exhaustive account that Mrs. Bennet had tried to give her husband the previous night [12–13].) Elizabeth’s personal history is being made here, but in this community the making is collective. That is why it is “absolutely necessary”—one may not want to take the characterization quite so ironically any more—that the previous evening be “talked over.” The phrase has a certain resonance: the assembly happens over again, in talk.

The application of this episode to the whole of Elizabeth’s relationship to her community is quite suggestive. We see, first of all, the great extent to which her participation in that community helps constitute her sense of reality. We see further how the community gives her a framework within which to work out her responses to that reality. Most importantly for what is to follow in the novel, we see how Elizabeth tends to place herself in relation to that community. That she is a mocker of convention is central to the image she projects—such mockery is her main mode of discourse in group situations—but what we find in this scene we find everywhere her ironic detachment makes itself felt: she could not stand apart from the group were she not standing firmly within it. She mocks convention in just such a way as to affirm its necessity. Probably the most complex and interesting example occurs at a decisive moment in her relationship with Darcy. Wickham has already turned her against him, but she also already recognizes the possibility of finding him attractive. The two are dancing together in silence when Elizabeth decides to begin conversation in a way so conventional that Austen doesn’t even bother to report it directly:

William Deresiewicz
She made some slight observation on the dance. He replied, and was again silent. After a pause of some minutes she addressed him a second time with “It is your turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy.—I talked about the dance, and you ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples.” (91)

Having attempted to use a convention for its proper purpose—to open conversation during a dance—Elizabeth turns to a mocking exposure of both convention and purpose in order to accomplish the exact same purpose. (It works.) In this unusual case, where normal and “unconventional” use occur in quick succession, we are able to see how similar they really are. Elizabeth’s unconventional behavior is a way of including herself within the circle of convention while still marking what she believes to be her superior imaginative freedom. The fine structure of her wit tells the same story: playing with other people’s language as she does means necessarily locating herself within that language.10 In this light it is wholly unsurprising that she accepts the word “pride” as her own; modification, not rejection, is her typical mode of response. In a community that includes everyone by allowing each a slightly different role, the role it allows her—but it is only a role—is that of the person who is not fully included.

For all that can be discerned about the community in Pride and Prejudice through the examination of specific situations and interactions, there remains a certain ambient quality, a texture, that eludes such analysis and yet ought to figure prominently in this or any account. This quality can be characterized, I believe, as the sense of a saturated social environment, an environment in which no space exists that is not social: a sense that at every point towards which a character might turn she will encounter someone she recognizes and with whom she shares all requisite codes of communication; that her every utterance will be met with substantial interest, as immediately touching upon the concerns of the person to whom it is addressed; and most importantly, that her every action will bear consequences for people to whom she feels, and feels she ought to feel, significant responsibility. I will call this quality “density,” in part to denote that it is an aesthetic, not a sociological artifact, a feature not of the community as such but of its narrative representation.11 A narrative is made dense, first of all, by the elimination of everything extraneous to socially significant interaction. Austen’s novels were revolutionary in this respect, and Pride and Prejudice the most extreme case among them.12 Both scenic
description and general reflection—two of the major types of material the novel’s capaciousness had allowed it to develop—are completely absent from its pages. What is even more striking, privacy and introspection are almost completely absent until Elizabeth departs for Hunsford. Within the community, every act and utterance, every moment, is social, and Elizabeth, for all the force and color of her personality, possesses only an implicit interiority. But density is not only a matter of what is left out. It also involves the existence of “multiplex” social relationships—relationships in which individuals are connected in a plurality of ways. That is why we are able to find it in a novel that takes place within a small and relatively stable community. Charlotte Lucas is Elizabeth’s friend, but she is also her mother’s friend’s daughter, and to a certain extent also her mother’s friend. Miss Bingley, while she is part of the community, is Elizabeth’s friend, at least in theory, but she is also her sister’s friend, as well as her sister’s love-interest’s sister. With multiplexity, the array of relationships within a community becomes something more than a family tree or set of family trees, more than a single large circle, more even than a network or web. It is not just that there are several short paths that connect Elizabeth and Charlotte through other people, but that when Elizabeth and Charlotte encounter each other directly they do so in and through a multiplicity of relationships. They are tied together by multiple strands. And because custom dictates that all these relationships carry the right and indeed the responsibility of comment and interference, what we find, in sum, is a large group of people all minding each other’s business and all passing each other’s secrets back and forth all the time. Everywhere a member of the community looks, someone is related to her somehow and has something to say to her about everyone else in her life.

Density involves communication—utterance and response—but it also involves causation—action and consequence. In other words, density provides the matrix of the novel’s plot. Two striking examples occur at crucial moments in the interweaving of the action, both in the ball scene of chapter 18, the long episode in which Darcy is turned against the courtship of Jane and Bingley, and Elizabeth, at a time when she seems to be softening towards him, is turned ever more decidedly against Darcy. The first occurs when Sir William Lucas happens to walk past Elizabeth and Darcy on his way through the dancing set. Because he has already formed a connection to Darcy (disown it though the latter might wish), he stops and bows. And because he has always had connections to Elizabeth, he permits

William Deresiewicz
himself to make a reference, in front of both of them, to the time after which “a certain desirable event, my dear Miss Eliza, (glancing at her sister and Bingley,) shall take place” (92). That is how Darcy is put on guard about the danger of his friend marrying into a family of vulgarians, and that is how Sir William sets the fibers of his community vibrating just by walking across the room.

A short time later, Miss Bingley more deliberately plays a disruptive role: “So Miss Eliza, I hear you are quite delighted with George Wickham!—Your sister has been talking to me about him . . . and I find that the young man forgot to tell you” (94) and so on for a long paragraph of vituperative snobbery about “old Wickham” and “the late Mr. Darcy” that turns Elizabeth decisively against the whole Netherfield crowd. Even given Miss Bingley’s disposition, only density—the possibility and expectation of communication—could have allowed Jane to speak with her about Elizabeth’s interest in Wickham in the first place, and only density—the right of interference—could have justified her presumption in speaking to Elizabeth about Darcy and Wickham’s relationship. If, as I noted above, the novel is structured so as to suggest that its plot emerges from the threshing of communal mechanisms more than from the movements of individual will, here is one of the ways in which that emergence takes place. Chapter 18, which began with Jane and Bingley in the fairest way to happiness and Elizabeth and Darcy in a pretty steady way to indifference, ends with the first pair taking their last looks at each other for a long while, and the latter, as a direct result, careening towards their decisive confrontations. What has ultimately wrought these changes is not the acts of any individual or individuals, but the fact of a dense interconnectivity among individuals.

Now all this may be well and good, but there are more important things one can do in a conversation than communicate information. For instance, one can flirt. Or at least, one can in an Austen novel, for what passes as the talk of eligible young people in earlier works could hardly be dignified by that name. Consider the case of Evelina, one of the novels often cited as a precursor of Austen’s work. Sir Clement has such a tough time of it with the object of his desires because he has no legitimate excuse for talking to her, as well as nothing to talk to her about once he has obtruded himself on her attention. The density of Austenian communities solves both of these problems at a stroke, providing a young gentleman and a young lady both with many topics of conversation—all the concerns of all the

516  

Community and Cognition in Pride and Prejudice
people they know in common—and with many pretexts for conversation—all the ways they are already connected other than as potential mates. Conversation may be serious or light-hearted, sententious or witty, but it need not be overtly personal, and so can be easy and abundant. Under the cover of such talk, potential lovers can share the sustained physical and social proximity that leads to familiarity and, possibly, to intimacy. As one might put it, the first parts of their bodies that touch are their voices. Examples pervade the Austenian corpus: Emma and Frank, Edmund and Mary, Anne and Captain Benwick, and in Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth and both Wickham and Colonel Fitzwilliam, the Darcy cousin she meets at Rosings. For all the surface brilliance of so many of the conversations these young people have, more important things get exchanged than words. Because feelings need not be declared, they can be communicated.

The density of the communal environment also makes possible another essential aspect of Austenian courtship. Not only does Austen show young ladies talking freely with their young gentlemen, she shows them passing judgment on them as well, and not only on their breeding or income, but also on their character, intelligence, and education. This is a possibility that Fanny Burney did not seem to have imagined. Of course, the making of such judgments is central to Austen’s conception of the proper conduct of life—central to her plots, central to her authorial stance—but how are they to get made in the first place? Whether a Sir Clement negotiates the conventions of love-talk well or ill, Evelina will learn nothing about him other than his ability to negotiate the conventions of love-talk; they carry not even the pretense of meaningful external reference. Though the plot of Evelina confirms Lord Orville’s goodness, the heroine renders her rapturous approval immediately, and on the exclusive basis of his breeding. True, we are intended to take breeding as an index of character, but so facile and dubious a substitution is very far from the mature and considered judgment Austen advances as essential. For the Austenian heroine, flirtatious conversation provides the material upon which such judgment can operate. In listening to a Wickham or a Frank or a Wentworth speak about what is most important in their world—the conduct of the people around them—a young lady has the opportunity to assess intelligence, character, and judgment. The opportunity only: as these examples indicate, several of Austen’s novels hinge on the fact that the heroine does not always do so properly. But that she can do so at all is a function of the communal environment in which she lives.

William Deresiewicz 517
Judgment would be of little use to an Austenian heroine, however, did she not have a genuine choice in marriage. It is a third remarkable feature of Austenian courtship that young ladies do have such a choice, whatever pressure they are sometimes placed under by the parental generation. In order to exercise choice, however, a young lady needs room to maneuver. Again the density of the communal context makes this possible. By creating non-romantic premises for young men and women to develop familiar relationships with one another—the many non-romantic forms of connection that also and already exist between potential mates—the communal environment enables those relationships to develop non-romantic dimensions. In other words, the multiplexity of relationships in Austenian communities creates the conditions for friendship between women and men. The point is not that romantic interest is dissimulated—friendship is achieved between potential mates not in spite of erotic energy, but because of it—but that a great deal of space is opened up within relationships that is not marked as romantic. An emotional investment can be made before a decision is required. A young lady can feel affection for a young gentleman, and feel what it feels like, and even discover whether it is requited, without taking irrevocable or potentially embarrassing steps. Many other fictional heroines and heroes, before Austen and after, do not have such freedom. Because romantic feeling is the only form of affection their worlds make available between young men and women, to indicate affection is already to declare romantic interest and, very quickly, to commit oneself to a choice.¹⁵ (Tertius Lydgate learns this lesson in Middlemarch.) I mentioned Colonel Fitzwilliam before because he provides so unusual a case in fiction: a man who turns out to be neither Mr. Right nor Mr. Wrong, neither Darcy nor Wickham, Lord Orville nor Sir Clement. He is simply an appealing young man who walks briefly through the heroine’s life, but not so briefly that she does not consider him as a serious romantic possibility. He is interested in her, and Charlotte is interested for her; that Elizabeth herself had been interested we learn only later, after the upheaval of Darcy’s proposal (209). But before that proposal we see her coming to know this Colonel Fitzwilliam, and coming to be friends with him, in a way that enables her to test her feelings for him, judge him, and then consider what she wants to do about him. What seems to happen between them, on both sides, is a spreading of affectionate feelings along a continuum from eros to amity. The exact status of the relationship is meanwhile held in suspension in a

Community and Cognition in Pride and Prejudice
way that would be unthinkable in other novels, where “maybe” simply doesn’t exist, and where the only possible delay—rather poor in both narrative and human interest—is the lag between a lady’s ritual “no” and her inevitable “yes.” I am not suggesting that this is a situation without peril—Elizabeth has to manage her conversation with Colonel Fitzwilliam rather skilfully at several points—but it is one that enables them to advance to either form of resolution with relatively little pain and a relatively great degree of freedom. It is also quite a lot of fun, and it is exactly the way in which courtship is managed throughout Austen’s work.

By situating her novels within communities, then, Austen transforms the process of courtship as she found it in her novelistic predecessors, making it both more conscious and more emotionally profound and fitting it more naturally into an array of other relationships. It is not too much to say that she also transforms love as it was understood in the novel. No longer an ecstasy antithetical or at least unrelated to friendship, it becomes instead a form of friendship. Indeed, it arises in the context of friendship, in the situations I discussed as creating the opportunity for friendship. To Tobin Siebers’s insight that Austen’s novels are about “the philosophical and conversational play in which men and women engage in order to test and choose each other” I am adding the observation that men and women in Austen’s novels develop the affection that leads them to choose each other through that very philosophical and conversational play. Affection (Austen’s preferred word) rises on the wings of what I have been somewhat clumsily calling cognition. But in Austen, of course, this kind of friendship—the friendship of playful, opinionated conversation—is not confined to lovers. We have already watched it in action in the group conversation of chapter 5, where cognition and affection (albeit somewhat strained) are intertwined in playful, opinionated conversation. Such friendship might indeed be called “communal friendship,” for it becomes possible when proximity and density act as the structural underpinnings of familiarity, ease, and common interest. It could thus hardly be more different from the friendship idealized in the sentimental novels of Austen’s day, with their conventions of instantaneous intimacy and, upon the young heroines’ separation, a correspondence of sufficient avidity and detail to engross three volumes. Austen made it abundantly clear what she thought of such stuff. The ridicule of that kind of intimacy is prominent in the juvenilia and continues into the published work.

As for the convention of girlish correspondence, what we find instead

William Deresiewicz

519
in Austen are false friendships exposed by the neglect or mendacity of such correspondence: Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe, Elinor Dashwood and Lucy Steele, Jane Bennet and Caroline Bingley, Fanny Price and Mary Crawford. For Austen, “closeness” necessitates closeness. In her conception, the energies of friendship and romance are not mutually exclusive, but deeply interfused.

Although I began by speaking of the ways in which Pride and Prejudice criticizes the community it represents, it should be clear by now how powerful were the reasons for Austen’s evident attachment to communal life, how rich in her conception were its satisfactions, embracing not only the social connections one normally thinks of as communal, but also the stronger and more intimate ones of friendship and love. With this in mind it becomes clear that the social process I have been describing, the process of flirtation, courtship, and betrothal, contains a rather bitter contradiction: that which is depicted as sweetest about life within a community—friendship—and that which is depicted as most glorious about it for a young woman—flirtation and courtship—are the vehicles for removing her from it. Austen herself may be presumed to have felt this contradiction with particular sharpness. Though as a young woman she was “the prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly” Mrs. Mitford ever remembered, she finally chose not to complete the logic of flirtation, not to allow marriage to remove her from what we know to have been a large and loving family, a family that seems to have possessed many of the qualities of an Austenian community. Instead, she chose to write novel after novel in which this fate was imaginatively averted, the contradiction that necessitated it, reconciled.

FRIENDLY FIRE

It is the task and privilege of the Austenian heroine to make a new home for herself in the world. In no case is this process more carefully elaborated than in that of Elizabeth Bennet; in Pride and Prejudice, the story of maturation and the story of the creation of a new community are one story. The terms in which Elizabeth’s original community are presented—cognition and courtship (in other words, reason and love)—turn out to be central to her maturation. It is in her dealings with eligible men that Elizabeth is tripped up by and finally fights herself free from the cognitive constraints of her community, and it is through her love for one of those men that she
begins to establish a new and better community. I noted before that Austen’s narrative structures give her young women the opportunity to exercise careful judgment in the evaluation of a potential husband. Fanny Price exercises such judgment relative to Henry Crawford, and we can infer that Anne Eliot did so relative to Frederick Wentworth when they first courted. Emma Woodhouse, however, is blinded by her egotism. What Elizabeth is blinded by we already know: the cognitive faults of her community. Her encounter with Wickham enables her to indulge those faults; her encounter with Darcy at first frustrates and finally forces her to break free of them.

Elizabeth’s judgment is never worse than in her long flirtatious conversation with Wickham in chapter 16, the conversation in which he charms her and reinforces her opinions about Darcy. For all that she can play the gadfly, let it once become clear that she will hear only what confirms her own judgments, and she settles into a steady rhythm of assent. Nearly every one of her utterances during the main part of the conversation begins with (and often includes little more than) such affirmations as, “Indeed!”, “Good heavens!”, “This is quite shocking!”, and “How strange! How abominable!”, matched on Wickham’s side by such replies as “Yes—”, “Probably not” and “It is wonderful” (79–81). Beyond this, her remarks mainly consist of questions or interjections designed to cue further explanation and affirmation. The exchange becomes a kind of a positive feedback loop, a conversational form of circular reasoning (“Darcy is wicked, therefore he does wicked things, therefore he is wicked”). It could hardly have been otherwise; two identical positions are not likely to force each other to change. No wonder we are told, after the passages reported directly, that Elizabeth and Wickham “continued talking together with mutual satisfaction” (84). Austen quite clearly wishes us to understand that “mutual satisfaction” is not the feeling people ought to have in a conversation, mutual agreement not the logical structure a conversation ought to have. Once again, Elizabeth is avoiding contradiction; though Wickham doesn’t undermine her position, he does undermine his own, a fact she will allow herself to recognize only many pages later:

She perfectly remembered everything that had passed in conversation between Wickham and herself, in their first evening at Mr. Philip’s . . . She was now struck with the impropriety of such communications to a stranger, and wondered it had escaped her before. (206–7)
But we do not wonder. Elizabeth’s intellectual complacency does not incline her to question what flatters her own opinion. The communal environment, moreover, while it creates a familiarity that makes searching judgment possible, also creates an intimacy that makes it undesirable. (Like Fanny Price maintaining her resistance to Henry Crawford, an Austenian heroine must be willing to ruffle a few feathers in order to win her creator’s approval.) Recall how the “rule” of the group conversation in chapter 5 managed conflict by smoothing it into a semblance of concord, as well as the manner in which Charlotte allowed Elizabeth to mislead herself about her feelings towards marriage. The more Elizabeth welcomes Wickham into her social circle, the less likely is she to want to question what he says.

The causes of Elizabeth’s failure with Wickham help explain some of the most significant elements of her encounter with Darcy in a fresh way. It is necessary first of all that the man who disrupts the patterns of Elizabeth’s life be unpleasant to the point of cussedness. No affability, and no concern for social harmony, will prevent their conversations from being unrestrainedly oppositional. More important than Darcy’s arrogance, however, even more important than his intelligence, is his insistence on searching out the truth of a situation. At times, in fact, he seems to mistake the drawing-room for a very different setting:

“Allowing the case, however, to stand according to your representation, you must remember, Miss Bennet, that the friend who is supposed to require [Bingley’s] return to the house, and the delay of his plan, has merely desired it, asked it without offering one argument in favour of its propriety.” (50)

Austen seems to be deliberately evoking and affirming the epistemological procedures of a courtroom, where contradictory positions are debated and adjudicated rather than mitigated or dispersed. For Darcy, quite unlike the good people of Meryton, there is no such thing as compromise and no such thing as dropping the subject. His conversations with Elizabeth, particularly those in which they engage during her stay at Netherfield, are fundamentally different from the others we have seen. They are, in a word, arguments, as Darcy readily admits when his host disrupts the longest of them with some good-humored nonsense: “I see your design, Bingley,” said his friend.—‘You dislike an argument, and want to silence this’” (51). Bingley does indeed dislike them, and he knows why he does, as well: “Arguments are too much like disputes.” The distinction that
Bingley is having difficulty maintaining has by our time almost completely disappeared, but the context (as well as the OED) suggests that in the usage of the day the difference between an “argument” and a “dispute” turned on the presence or absence of rancor. Bingley dislikes arguments because he can’t distinguish between rational disagreement and personal enmity. Elizabeth has the identical problem. It is she who loses her poise, with italicized flagrancy, at the conclusion of the final conversation at Netherfield. Darcy has been reflecting on his own character:

“My temper would perhaps be called resentful.—My good opinion once lost is lost for ever.”

“That is a failing indeed!”—cried Elizabeth. “Implacable resentment is a shade in a character. But you have chosen your fault well. I really cannot laugh at it. You are safe from me.”

“There is, I believe, in every disposition a tendency to some particular evil, a natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome.”

“And your defect is a propensity to hate every body.”

“And yours,” he replied with a smile, “is willfully to misunderstand them.” (58)

The contrast with Elizabeth and Wickham’s “mutual satisfaction” could hardly be more sharply drawn.

No wonder Elizabeth recoils. Neither social niceties nor the conventions of intimacy nor her own wit or intellect enable her to eliminate the contradictions Darcy presents. We see now why it takes his letter to break through her resistance. First of all, there is the location of its delivery. Elizabeth, physically outside of her community, is thus outside of it symbolically as well, beyond the confines of its long bourn. But the symbolic dimension is grounded in the social. Had Elizabeth been at home, we know by now how she would have responded both to the letter and to the conversations that surround it. She would have “talked them over”: squared her position on them with her like-minded intimates, resolving them into nothing threatening. But we don’t need to guess about this, because Elizabeth says as much once she is back at home with her sister, pretending to lament how unhappy she had been “with no one to speak to of what I felt, no Jane to comfort me and say that I had not been so very weak and vain and nonsensical as I knew I had!” (226). Talking-over is replaced by introspection when Elizabeth finds herself alone, which is also to say that when she had not found herself alone it had forestalled introspection.

William Deresiewicz

523
It is also essential that Darcy put his apologia in written form. Elizabeth is forced to take its antithetical positions seriously. No longer can they remain externalized, embodied in the person of an interlocutor whose rebuff can be made to stand for their refutation. No longer can the words that express them be driven back on themselves, turned, toyed with, punned into a new meaning, pooh-poohed, or subjected to any of the countless other tactics permitted by the fluidity and impalpability of conversation and by the demand that conversation places on any position to continue generating verbiage for itself. The only way Elizabeth can defend herself against a written text is to choose not to think about it, which is at first precisely what she does. But she cannot be satisfied with this evasion, and when she examines the letter again, this time with care, she must at last admit a contradictory voice into her own mind. Yet while the setting deprives her of the social resources with which she has heretofore resisted such voices, so too does it remove the social context that made an intolerable humiliation the price of the failure of such resistance. Even so, she begins her reconsideration with what is for her the least sensitive question, Wickham's reputation. But because her judgments on these matters constitute a single fabric, they all unravel once she takes up Darcy's arguments at any point. Searching for evidence to refute his claims of Wickham's malevolence, she recognizes the nature of the observations on which she had built her good opinion: “His countenance, voice, and manner, had established him at once in possession of every virtue” (206). In other words, “all men of good countenance are amiable.” Beyond that, “she could remember no more substantial good about him than the general approbation of the neighborhood”—that is, the approval of the voices of her community. The inductive reexamination of deductive conclusions now enters its next phase. New observations having overthrown the major premise that was used to evaluate the original ones (men of good countenance are clearly not all amiable), those original ones are recalled for reevaluation: “She perfectly remembered everything that had passed in conversation between Wickham and herself, in their first evening at Mr. Philip’s . . . She was now struck with the impropriety of such communications.” So begins a page-long bill of particulars, until: “Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.” Having thus turned against herself, against what already begins to feel like her old self (“Till this

Community and Cognition in Pride and Prejudice
moment, I never knew myself”), she can return to those issues—Jane and Bingley’s courtship, Darcy’s proposal—in which she has a far greater personal stake. “Widely different was the effect of a second perusal.—How could she deny that credit to his assertions, in one instance, which she had been obliged to give in the other?” Darcy’s credibility, the conclusion of one line of reasoning, becomes the major premise that governs these others. Elizabeth acknowledges “the justice” both of his description of Jane as not apparently in love with Bingley and of his “charge” of impropriety against the Bennet family, and the scene ends as quickly as Austen can get the job done.  

The crisis has been reached and passed. Elizabeth returns twice more to Longbourn, but no longer does she participate in those communal activities in which we had seen her so deeply and happily embedded: no dancing, no visiting, no gossip. Ultimately this will be the result of a sense that she is soon to relocate to Pemberley (where the reconciling movement begins, again outside the confines of her community), but for a long time it simply marks a profound alienation from her surroundings. The feeling is already there in her first conversation with Jane. Evoking the name of her characteristic error (and this time it is her name, her word), she indicates the communal origin of that error, takes responsibility for having fostered it in herself, and finally distances herself from both error and community:

“...The misfortune of speaking with bitterness, is a most natural consequence of the prejudices I have been encouraging... The general prejudice against Mr. Darcy is so violent, that it would be the death of half the good people in Meryton, to attempt to place him in an amiable light.” (226)

A subtle instance of Elizabeth’s desire for separation, and of the community’s resistance to it, occurs late in the novel. Darcy has returned to the neighborhood but is remaining frustratingly out of reach. When he accompanies Bingley to a party at Longbourn, Elizabeth hopes that the tea table will finally provide a pretext for contact. But the ladies crowd too closely:

And on the gentlemen’s approaching, one of the girls moved closer to her than ever, and said, in a whisper, “The men shan’t come and part us, I am determined. We want none of them; do we?” (341)

The girl’s anonymity is particularly striking (she is the only unnamed speaker in the novel); it is as if the voice of the communal conscious-

William Deresiewicz
525
ness heard so strongly at the beginning of the novel had assumed bodily form and were whispering in Elizabeth's ear.

Elizabeth has had to step outside of her community in order to mature and fall in love, but the manner in which these processes take place remains true to the principles elaborated in the novel's presentation of communal life. Once again, affection rises on the wings of cognition. Elizabeth learns a new way of feeling just where she has learned a new way of seeing and thinking and knowing. A biological metaphor is useful here: a new life, Elizabeth's new life, forms within her only after she has opened her mind to Darcy's antithetical voice. The neighborhood of Meryton, despite its dullness, is not a sexless place; reproduction in the strictest sense of the term (as represented, for example, by the courtship of Charlotte and Collins) is perfectly capable of taking place there. What that community lacks is something that we might call "sexiness": that in sex which is exhilarating and risky because it threatens uncontrollable change, the disruption or even destruction of existing cognitive, psychological, and social structures. Left to itself, the community will reproduce—itself. The creation of a Lydia by a Mrs. Bennet—or an Elizabeth by a Mr. Bennet, for that matter—is a kind of parthenogenesis, reproduction without variation. What is needed, in the biological sphere, is a seed of difference; in the logical sphere, an antithetical proposition; in the sphere of individual psychology and social relations, a challenge to frozen patterns of thinking and feeling. "Growth through contradictions"—the principle Richard Simpson found to be central to Austen's artistic development—is also central to the stories she tells.

In this novel, at least, contradiction can arrive only from outside the community. There is a tendency in literary criticism, prominent especially in discussions of the genre of comedy or the category of the comic, to think of community as the place where divergent voices can encounter one another. We have seen at least one sense, embodied in chapter 5, in which this idea is borne out by the novel, but we have also seen how the community acts to shut out voices that diverge too much. Even so, that community is in other ways indispensable to Elizabeth and Darcy's courtship. Their conversations at Netherfield, though by no means affectionate or even cordial, follow the pattern of communal flirtation and ultimately accomplish its purpose. They give Elizabeth a knowledge of Darcy's intellect and probity that remains in memory until such time as love calls it forth. They also create a degree of intimacy even in the absence of affection.
The word “closeness” is again apt as a description of communal feelings; when proximity is unavoidable, intimacy and enmity cease to be incompatible. Finally, Elizabeth's love for Darcy crystallizes only after he has symbolically identified himself as a member of her community. The man who lost his first chance for Elizabeth's love by disdaining her “connections” now welcomes her uncle and aunt to his estate and then, in an outright act of self-humiliation, becomes the agent for connecting himself to those very connections.

These acts and symbols, however, have more to do with the novel’s second community than with its first. Darcy is already helping to create, hoping to create, that which he cannot yet know will come into being. The new community quickens in the last chapter, Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage at its center, but the narrative swings towards that configuration throughout the whole last third of the book. What resemblance does this new community bear to the one already presented? If the first community is inadequate, what does a good community look like? We are not given the chance to observe the new community in anything like the detail in which we have observed the old, but its character may be inferred from two sources: the last chapter, which gives a précis of the new arrangements; and, because the lovers stand at the center of the new community, what Elizabeth and Darcy do together over the course of the last three chapters but one. What they do together, not surprisingly, is talk. But how do their conversations compare to those that took place in Meryton? Do the lovers find a medium between “mutual satisfaction” and rancorous “dispute”? In fact, these conversations are arguments—albeit mainly over which of the lovers has the right to claim the greater share of blame in their past conflict—yet they are able to remain both incisive and amicable through a complementary interplay between the very qualities of character—Darcy's insistence, Elizabeth's wit—that once clashed so irremediably:

[Darcy:] “I knew enough of your disposition to be certain, that, had you been absolutely, irrevocably decided against me, you would have acknowledged it to Lady Catherine, frankly and openly.”

Elizabeth coloured and laughed as she replied, “Yes, you know enough of my frankness to believe me capable of that. After abusing you so abominably to your face, I could have no scruple in abusing you to all your relations.”

“What did you say of me, that I did not deserve? For, though your accusations were ill-founded, formed on mistaken premises, my behavior to you at that time, had merited the severest reproof.” (367)

William Deresiewicz 527
The difference between this and Netherfield lies not in the weapons used, but in their targets. Both Darcy and Elizabeth are even tougher on themselves than they are on each other. Darcy’s protestations of guilt are not merely attempts to win additional approval from his fiancée. They persist throughout a long exchange, culminating in his rejection of Elizabeth’s dictum that one should “think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure.” As for Elizabeth, she may not believe quite all her self-mockery, but with it she accomplishes several important things: she gives Darcy the rhetorical and emotional space he needs to criticize her himself, she enables herself to receive his criticism without humiliation, and she enables Darcy to continue listening when he does again become the target of her mockery:

“I must ask whether you were surprised [at Jane and Bingley’s engagement]?” said Elizabeth.
“Not at all. When I went away, I felt that it would soon happen.”
“That is to say, you had given your permission. I guessed as much.” And though he exclaimed at the term, she found that it had been pretty much the case. (370)

Even Darcy, for all his strenuous self-examination, cannot see himself clearly without the help of Elizabeth’s eyes. He can recognize his errors, but not his absurdities. Elizabeth is in even greater need of a loving critic; without Darcy’s integrity, she might easily slip back into self-satisfaction (“think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure”). Neither can see themselves without the other, and only together—in the back and forth of critical conversation—can either progress towards greater understanding. Love is pedagogic in all of Austen’s novels, Platonic in that sense, but only in Pride and Prejudice do the lovers lead each other towards truth.25

There is some question, however, as to the nature of this truth and the manner in which Elizabeth and Darcy progress towards it. Is it, in Austen’s conception, a state of definitive knowledge—a right answer—or is it rather a path along which one can progress but at whose terminus one never arrives? I have already said enough to indicate that I share the second view.26 My belief rests in part on the course of Elizabeth’s thinking during and after her great recognition. She does not pass in an instant from total blindness to total insight. There is self-deception even in her immediate response (“Till this moment, I never knew myself”), a compensatory gesture that ought to be taken in the same spirit as the end of Joyce’s “Araby”: too good
an epiphany to be true. What is more, the last chapters of the novel are replete both with fresh errors on Elizabeth’s part and with the narrator’s ironic jibes at her supposed self-knowledge:

Elizabeth walked out to recover her spirits; or in other words, to dwell without interruption on those subjects that must deaden them more. Mr. Darcy’s behavior astonished and vexed her... “Teazing, teazing, man! I will think no more about him.”

Her resolution was for a short time involuntarily kept by the approach of her sister. (339)

Austen sketches an arc of error and correction and error, an upward curve of self-knowledge and maturation that we are meant to see as extending beyond the end of the novel. The work of thought is never done: second impressions are only slightly better than first. One moves from a state of ignorance to a state of slightly lesser ignorance. The only difference between the later parts of the novel and the “afterwards” (385) it projects in its last chapter is that Elizabeth will no longer have to do this work on her own. But though she and Darcy educate each other, neither has access to any source of certainty. I do not question that Austen believed that “variability is a function of human perception and not a characteristic of truth itself,” but in this novel, and indeed in all her novels, human perception is all we have. The best her characters can do is to combine their individual perspectives. By the lovers’ second conversation, Elizabeth herself recognizes the incipient dynamic: “‘My good qualities are under your protection, and you are to exaggerate them as much as possible; and, in return, it belongs to me to find occasions for teazing and quarreling with you as often as may be’” (381). Deciphering the inevitable irony, one reads Elizabeth’s recognition that she will receive no empty flattery from her husband and her announcement that she will return the favor in her own way. An ongoing “conversation” will avert the mental inertia of the novel’s first community, averting too the mechanical behavior that is the evil extreme of social order. One may read the crowning declaration of Elizabeth’s final letter to her Aunt Gardiner in this light: “‘I am happier even than Jane; she only smiles, I laugh’” (383). Laughter signifies many things in this novel, but bliss is not one of them. Bliss belongs to Jane; to Elizabeth belongs the blessing of awakened consciousness.

As we saw, the group conversation in chapter 5—the novel’s most concentrated picture of communal interaction—accomplished several purposes: it shaped perceptions, elicited judgments of value, and

William Deresiewicz

529
established a collective sense of reality. I have just noted how Elizabeth and Darcy’s conversations accomplish the first of these purposes. As for the second, while the cognitive component of judgment becomes more vigorously debated, more open, than in Meryton, the evaluative component—the standards by which what is known is judged—becomes less so. Pemberley is far less tolerant of vice and stupidity than Meryton is (Mrs. Bennet is made to feel unwelcome; Wickham is excluded), and thus far less tolerant of differences in values. The lovers’ conversations contain nothing equivalent to Elizabeth and Charlotte’s unresolved disagreement over the excusability of Darcy’s pride or the proper attitude towards marriage. In this sense, the boundaries of permissible dissent are far narrower than in Meryton, and it is not the business of conversation to draw them. As for the third and most important purpose enumerated above, by spending so much of their time discussing the past, ascertaining its content and meaning, Elizabeth and Darcy together create the foundational myth of their marriage. The very fact that they have two conversations in the final chapters helps to emphasize this: in the first they write the basic plot of their common story, in the second they begin to discuss it as an established thing. In Siebers’s terms, “recounting a story does not necessarily bring an end to . . . conflict,” but it “may at least give us a chance to find a place in the world.”

But I have been avoiding what is the essential question about the novel’s final configuration. What community? Is the novel’s final community Elizabeth and Darcy’s marriage (in which case it isn’t really a community at all) or is it the larger group that includes that marriage? The only answer that makes sense of all the available evidence is that it is both. To say so is already to indicate that this final community has significant structural differences from the one with which the novel began. It is not a community of people all living in the same place. Austen has granted her heroine the privilege of no longer having to live as a social equal among her intellectual (and now, moral) inferiors. The group laid out in the final chapter is thus something of an imagined community, while the marriage assumes many of the functions of a community in the strict sense. As we have just seen, Elizabeth and Darcy do properly what the community of Meryton could not do properly. But a marriage can’t do everything. In particular, it cannot provide the multiplexity of relationships so essential to the value of the novel’s first community. The narrator’s envoi delineates such multiplexity with respect to the second. Jane, Bingley, Georgiana Darcy, Kitty, Mr. Bennet, the Gardiners: all help

Community and Cognition in Pride and Prejudice
to form the array of relationships within which Elizabeth and Darcy will live. Where, indeed, does the marriage end and this larger web begin? As the phrase that concludes the penultimate chapter suggests—“their family party at Pemberley”—the distinction finally cannot be made. Elizabeth will be married to her sister’s husband’s best friend, her surrogate daughter’s surrogate father, her uncle’s shooting partner, and so forth. I return to the observation that love in Austen is a form of friendship, and that friendship is an essentially communal relation. It is often said that comic plots involve the reconciliation of communal and erotic energies, the implication being that the two are necessarily in tension. Austen goes beyond this; for her, the two are one. Friendship steps in as the essential middle term, mediating between marriage and community both as a social form and as a type of feeling, permitting the flow of energy between all three, a single elemental energy that infuses all human bonding.

*Columbia University*

NOTES

1 Two begin with the heroine: *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*, in each of which she is the exclusive center of action. Two begin with the *paterfamilias*: *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, in each of which he is a dominating presence. *Sense and Sensibility*, a partial exception, begins by naming a family, but the Dashwoods can be considered as constituting a kind of collective protagonist.


3 Marvin Mudrick, for example, sees Elizabeth as the novel’s chief exemplar of “people with individuality and will” as against those “who are simply reproductions of their social type” (*Irony as Defense and Discovery* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952], 125). For Alastair Duckworth, Elizabeth represents “individualism” as opposed to Darcy’s “tradition” (*The Improvement of the Estate* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1971], 117). A more recent form of the same position replaces the dichotomization of embodied abstractions (Elizabeth at one pole) with the counterposition of Elizabeth to her community. For Tony Tanner, “it is not at first clear that Elizabeth will consent to be contained within the highly structured social space available to her” (*Jane Austen* [Houndmills: Macmillan, 1986], 135). To Rachel M. Brownstein, Elizabeth “scrutinizes the world so as to assess it and to keep herself at a distance from it” (*Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women in Novels* [New York: Viking, 1982], 124). This view has found its most magniloquent exponent in Harold Bloom, who sees Elizabeth as “a heroine of the Protestant will” and as “incarnat[ing] the standard of measurement in her cosmos” (introduction to *Jane Austen*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House, 1986], 11 and 5).

For other critics Elizabeth’s freedom is more intellectual than existential. Appropriately, there has been much celebration of her intelligence and wit, but often

William Deresiewicz
without sufficient attention to its limitations. And again, the terms of that celebration have commonly been such as to draw the strongest possible contrast between Elizabeth’s mind and those that surround it. Dorothy van Ghent sets Elizabeth’s “emotional intelligence and quickness of moral perception” against an “all-environing imbecility” (The English Novel: Form and Function [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1953], 107). To D. W. Harding, Elizabeth, like Catherine Morland and Elinor Dashwood, is a type of Cinderella, “isolated from those around her by being more sensitive or of finer moral insight or sounder judgment” (“Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen,” in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Ian Watt [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963], 173). More recent critics have turned to the other side of the question, exploring the initial limitations of thought and feeling that make Elizabeth’s story one of growth rather than of simple triumph, but persist in seeing the heroine, even with those limitations, as sharply distinguished from those around her. Susan Morgan, while critiquing Elizabeth’s freedom, still perforce asserts it and indeed characterizes it as “the freedom to think for [one]self” (“Intelligence in Pride and Prejudice,” in Pride and Prejudice, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House, 1987], 85). My purpose here is not to replace one form of unbalance with its opposite, to reinvent Elizabeth as a fool or automaton, but to show that her apparent freedom and mental agility exist within more subtle and more powerful structures of habit and conformity.

4 Questions of knowledge and judgment in Pride and Prejudice have been ably discussed by a number of critics using different approaches from the one I follow here. Such discussion is sometimes couched in terms of the epistemology embodied by the novel as a whole (for example, see Tanner), sometimes, as I have indicated, in terms of Elizabeth’s own mental growth (see Morgan).


6 The point touches upon one of the basic questions that arise in the reading of the novel: does Darcy’s snub make Elizabeth genuinely hate him, or does it provoke a kind of hating love, a burning need to win his esteem? Are Elizabeth’s provocations at Netherfield and Rosings expressions of simple malice or of unwitting desire? (For the latter position, see for example David Monaghan, “Pride and Prejudice: Structure and Total Vision,” in Bloom, Pride and Prejudice, 61; and Brownstein, 119. For the former, see for example Joseph Wiesenfarth, The Errand of Form: An Assay of Jane Austen’s Art [New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1967], 63; and Morgan, 88.) To a great extent these questions can never be put to rest—nor would one want them to be, since they are of the type that tests a reader’s own conceptions. If one sees banter, even fairly hostile banter, as a sign of desire, one will need no additional proof in this case. But it is at least worth noting that the novel does not afford such proof. In my view, Elizabeth does not love Darcy as long as she is under misconceptions about him. Only when those are removed does she begin to realize that “he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her.” Before she can modify her feelings, in other words, she must correct the cognitions upon which those feelings are based. Austen has not forgotten the deeper impulses to which consciousness is tied, but neither does she believe that the line of determination runs in a single direction. Indeed, one of her highest and most persistent themes is the conditioning of deeper impulses by consciousness. The
point is worth emphasizing precisely because the course of intellectual history since 
her time has led to so strong a perception of the opposite process.

7 That is why the word “prejudice” appears so much less than its titular partner. 
Because the narrative looks mainly through Elizabeth’s eyes, it sees Darcy’s leading 
flaw much more than it does hers. “Prejudice” does crop up precisely when 
Elizabeth examines her own character (Heilman, 126–27).

8 This does not mean, however, that every voice is equal, since verbal skill counts. 
What also counts in this conversation, though not in the simpler and more 
formalized game, are such non-verbal factors as age, decidedness, and the ability to 
speak in the name of an outside authority, three factors that give Mrs. Bennet the 
largest voice, the voice that introduces the word “pride.”

9 For a discussion of the ways in which novelists have portrayed gossip as helping 
to create communal myth (more massively than in the episode discussed here), see 
Spacks has illuminating things to say about the relationship of gossip and communi-
ties throughout the later chapters of the book. For a discussion of the functions of 
gossip in another of Jane Austen’s novels, see Casey Finch and Peter Bowen, ““The 
Tittle-Tattle of Highbury: Gossip and the Free Indirect Style in Emma,” Represen-
tations 31 (1990): 1–18. Finch and Bowen insist on gossip as an exclusively repressive force, as if the community constituted in and through it always existed separate from and, as it were, above the individual upon which it fastened its gaze. 
But as my descriptions indicate in the case of this community, at least, individuals 
also gossip about themselves, thus participating in the formation of the narrative that 
constitutes them. The Austenian community is typically small enough to permit a 
dialectical interplay between individual and collective power.

10 The already-cited utterance from the end of chapter 5 is one example (“I could 
easily forgive his pride if he had not mortified mine”), improving upon the other 
moves in that “game” by exhibiting linguistic as well as logical concurrence. Here as 
elsewhere, such banter involves a brilliant probing of the layers of social feeling by 
means of language. In the space of a few words, Elizabeth allows Darcy his pride, 
disallows it for its mortification of her feelings, then rounds on her own criticism by 
admitting that those mortified feelings are the very ones that, in Darcy, commit the 
mortification. Pride can injure only pride; to inveigh against pride is thus to own the 
very vice one condemns. And yet it stings.

11 The danger with Austen is that one will confuse density with what might be 
called “snugness,” or as Virginia Woolf put it, “that sense of security which 
gradually, delightfully, and completely overcomes us” as we read her (“How It 
Strikes a Contemporary,” in The Common Reader [New York: Harcourt Brace 
Jovanovich, 1925], 238). This snug sense of security is a feeling that I believe many 
readers of Austen (including this one) perceive and delight in, but that ultimately 
strikes me as little more than nostalgic projection.

12 The difference between artistic representation and sociological description is 
worth emphasizing. Emile Durkheim, in a perception analogous to the one I am 
developing here, uses the phrase “dynamic or moral density” to describe the 
outcome of the ”drawing together” of individuals into “sufficient . . . contact with 
one another to be able mutually to act and react on one another” (The Division of 
real-world equivalent of a town such as Meryton was far less dense in Durkheim’s

William Deresiewicz

533
sense than was the city of London in Fielding’s day, the social environment of *Pride and Prejudice* is far more dense in my terms than is that of the last third of *Tom Jones*.

13 The term comes from C. J. Calhoun, ("Community: Toward a Variable Conceptualization for Comparative Research," *Social History* 5 [1980], 118–19) who proposes it as a constitutive feature of all real-world communities. Calhoun also notes the moral implication I touched upon above: “The responsibility for meeting the claims of one relationship is enforced by the other strands which also tie its parties together. . . . Such ‘moral import’ forces people to look beyond the immediate instrumental considerations which might otherwise determine their actions.”

14 My discussion here is indebted to Tobin Siebers, "Jane Austen and Comic Virtue," in *Morals and Stories* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1992). In Siebers’s words, “it is tempting to coin the term ‘courtship novels’ for [Austen’s] works because they are about the philosophical and conversational play in which men and women engage in order to test and choose each other” (138).


16 This observation appears in two of Austen’s most important nineteenth-century critics, Walter Scott and Richard Simpson. Scott wrote, of *Emma*, that “Cupid walks decorously, and with good discretion, bearing his torch under a lantern, instead of flourishing it around to set the house on fire” (*Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B. C. Southam, [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968], 67). His review concludes with an appeal to the novel-writers of Britain to restore to some of his ancient rights “that once powerful divinity, Cupid, king of gods and men.” For Simpson, apparently more at home with Austen’s sensibility, “in her ideal love was only an accident of friendship, friendship being the true light of life, while love was often only a troublesome and flickering blaze which interrupted its equable and soothing influence” (Southam, 246).

17 Siebers, 138.

18 See Marvin Mudrick’s discussion of the juvenilia, 1–36. In the novels, with the shift from burlesque to irony, the ridicule becomes more subtle. The sentimental position is undermined indirectly, by being placed in the mouth of a discreditable character: in *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lydia.

19 Quoted in Woolf, 137.

20 The solutions take a number of forms: multiple marriages that create a community where none had been before (*Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*); an incest plot, in which marriage takes place within the original community (*Mansfield Park* and *Emma*); or the establishment of a new community in place of an unsatisfactory one (*Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*).

It is worth noting that Jane Austen’s favorite activity—and the communal activity that appears most frequently in her work—also constitutes a symbolic resolution of the contradiction between the community and the romantic couple. In English country dancing, individuals dance simultaneously as part of a couple and as part of a larger group, the row of couples referred to as a “set.” Each couple makes its way down the set dancing the same four-person pattern, in turn, with each other couple. These quartets thus resemble the groups that carry on so many of the conversations we find in Austen’s novels. The iterated pattern often has the two women of the

*Community and Cognition in Pride and Prejudice*
quartet switching partners temporarily, a woman’s relationship with each of the two
men thereby suggesting, in different ways, the spreading of erotic and amicable
energies I discussed above. Indeed, it is sometimes the case that the two women
take hands during the iteration of the pattern, and likewise the two men, just as one
sometimes detects the presence of erotic energies in Austen’s same-sex friendships.
Finally, the practice of changing partners every two dances, indicated several times
in Austen’s novels (see, for example, Pride and Prejudice, 13), parallels the process
of courtship, providing the women intimate and easy—though regulated and
restrained—engagement with a series of young men. (See Kate Van Winkle Keller
and Genevieve Shimer, The Playford Ball: 103 Early English Country Dances
Dance and Song Society, 1990].) One begins to understand where Austen got her
ideas.

21 The contrast between Darcy and Bingley thus typifies what a number of
thinkers have identified as the transition from the “public man” of the Enlighten-
ment, who kept his feelings removed from the realm of civic discourse, to the
private, emotive individual of modernity, for whom every issue is personal. (See for
example Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition [Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press,
1958]; Lionel Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity [New York: Harcourt Brace
Jovanovich, 1974]; and Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man [New York: Knopf,
1977.]) In other words, though Austen may have been on Darcy’s side, history
turned out to be on his friend’s.

22 The quoted words indicate that Elizabeth’s language has picked up traces of
Darcy’s legalisms. The presence of such a discourse at this point in the text is no
idiomsyncrasy. Northrop Frye, in a passage that helped guide my analysis here, notes
that “the action of comedy . . . is not unlike the action of a lawsuit” and that the
“resemblance of the rhetoric of comedy to the rhetoric of jurisprudence has been
recognized from earliest times” (Anatomy of Criticism [Princeton: Princeton Univ.
Press, 1957], 166).

23 Southam, 243.

24 I am referring among other things to C. L. Barber’s work on Shakespearean
comedy as well as to M. M. Bakhtin’s ideas about heteroglossia, laughter, folk
literature, and much else.

25 The point, that love in Austen may be understood as Platonic, made first by
Simpson, 244, is revisited by Trilling, 76–77, and Tanner, 24.

26 For the first, see, for example, Duckworth and Stuart M. Tave, Some Words of

27 The quotation is from Duckworth, 125.

28 “Conversation” is Siebers’s word, 156.

29 Siebers, 157. My thinking on these points is also indebted to Karl Kroeber,
Retelling/Rereading: The Fate of Storytelling in Modern Times (New Brunswick:

William Deresiewicz