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Thinking locally: novelistic worlds in provincial fiction

Of all situations for a constant residence, that which appears to me most delightful is a little village far in the country; a small neighbourhood, not of fine mansions finely peopled, but of cottages and cottage-like houses. . . . Even in books I like a confined locality. . . . Nothing is so tiresome as to be whirled half over Europe at the chariot wheels of a hero, to go to sleep at Vienna, and awaken at Madrid; it produces a real fatigue, a weariness of spirit. On the other hand, nothing is so delightful as to sit down in a country village in one of Miss Austen's delicious novels, quite sure before we leave it to become intimate with every spot and every person it contains; or to ramble with Mr White over his own parish of Selborne, and form a friendship with the fields and coppices, as well as with the birds, mice, and squirrels, who inhabit them.

(Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village*)

In the first chapter of *Our Village*, her collection of rural sketches (published as a collection 1824–34), Mary Russell Mitford stages her taste for a confined rural locality through three points of divergence from eighteenth-century aesthetic tastes. First, she shifts attention from the finer classes and their country estates to the village and its inhabitants. Second, she esteems residence over travel. And third, she prefers a detailed, specific, and intimate knowledge of a single place to a broad cosmopolitan knowledge of many places, achieved by propertied aristocratic gentlemen through extensive travel, education, and leisure.¹ Mitford gently mocks this cosmopolitan knowledge gained from a whirl “half over Europe” and subscribes instead to a competing model of knowledge espoused by Gilbert White in *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789): “Men that undertake only one district are much more likely to advance natural knowledge than those that grasp at more than they can possibly be acquainted with: every kingdom, every province, should have its own monographer.”² Here “monographer” means someone researching and writing about a particular place; in this chapter I use the term monograph to refer to both factual and fictional studies of rural places, such as White's *Selborne* and Mitford's *Our Village*.

White and Mitford privilege the paradigm of a resident's specialized perspective gained by industrious observation over many years. As resident monographers they find a worthy and complex subject in their immediate neighborhood.

White marks an early stage and Mitford a later (and more sentimental) stage of a major shift in epistemological and aesthetic values during the Romantic period that brings various kinds of rural locales (villages, towns, coasts, marshes, and other waste places) and a new conception of place as a specific kind of locality, into the literary landscape. The very term "locality," instead of the more ancient British term "parish," has empirical connotations designating specific material conditions that usefully differentiate it from the place as determined by church and state.³ In natural-historical writings from the late eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century, locality is synonymous with the less commonly used scientific term "habitat," derived from the Latin *habitus* or *habitatio*, which arrives in English in the 1790s as botanical guides shift from scholarly Latin to vernacular English.⁴ Both terms designate the kind of environment where a species commonly thrives.

Mitford's suggestion that natural history played a central role in the development of the taste for new forms of representations of village life as localities is demonstrated by three provincial authors' reliance on the empirical discursive forms of natural history to achieve the major change in rural perspective and taste outlined above. This chapter examines Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800), George Crabbe's *The Borough* (1810), and John Galt's *Annals of the Parish* (written 1813, published 1821) which adopt the scholarly paradigm of the local parson-scholar and take a provincial locale as their main subject. These exemplary fictional monographs experiment with form, combining non-fiction conventions from local histories such as White's with fictional inhabitants or specimens. The texts illustrate how natural history's quest for comprehensive knowledge of all forms of life and their economies, its method of habitual *in situ* observation, and even its forms for reporting its findings structured representations of provincial novelistic worlds in provincial fiction by initiating changes in narrative perspective, persona, and form. Calling themselves, respectively, a domestic biography, a local history, and a theoretical history, they imagine a new kind of British rural world, not chorographic, topographic, or pastoral, but one consisting of diverse provincial localities, each worthy of study because of their unique environment and local society. The imagined localities of Edgeworth, Crabbe, and Galt represent historically situated environments constituted by a particular assemblage of inhabitants. Their tales all exhibit a deep interest in the economy of the locale and in the individual domestic economies of the various inhabitants.

The segregation of Crabbe's work from discussions of fiction because it is verse, and the usual categorization of Edgeworth's and Galt's earliest fictions as national tales of the Celtic periphery, have isolated all three texts from critical analysis within the larger context of rural fiction throughout Britain. Local tales and village anecdotes are not merely a product of the Celtic periphery, they are part of a very broad range of variously flavored, but distinctively rural literature in the Romantic period: didactic tales on the domestic economies of cottage life by Hannah More, Mary Leadbeater, Elizabeth Hamilton, and Alexander and John Bethune, didactic morality tales of provincial middle-class and gentry life by Maria Edgeworth, George Crabbe, and Amelia Opie, folkloric tales by Robert Bloomfield and James Hogg, and tales for children by Harriet Martineau. Cross-fertilization between natural history and fiction, as between rural Ireland, Scotland, and England, produced more complete and complex descriptions and analyses of rural localities and their socio-economic systems than are found in eighteenth-century fiction.

The emergence of these provincial perspectives was due in part to the new economic power of industrializing provincial towns and the concurrent growth of provincial intellectual communities that included the Lunar Society near Birmingham and circles in Bristol, Edinburgh, and around Manchester near the Warrington Academy for dissenters. These circles of entrepreneurs, teachers, doctors, and clergy with shared scientific interests reflect the increased economic and cultural capital of the rapidly industrializing rural periphery, and begin to diffuse the intellectual dominance of the southern Oxbridge–London center.

Amidst the variety of rural fiction, Edgeworth's, Crabbe's, and Galt's rural tales stand out. Like scientific monographs, they are narrowly focused and clearly exhibit the well-researched basis for the information that they deliver to a national and largely metropolitan audience, which, presumably, does not understand the diversity and difficulties of provincial life in Britain. Their anecdotal narratives capture the reader's interest through the characteristic idiosyncrasies and life cycles of specimen inhabitants instead of the mysteries of plot and complications of romance. *Castle Rackrent* and *Annals of the Parish* are widely recognized as the comedic masterpieces in their authors' oeuvre. Together with Crabbe's unjustly forgotten satiric verse monograph *The Borough*, they must be understood as leading examples of a particular kind of British realism that is rooted in the ability of early nineteenth-century provincial writers to imagine their local novelistic worlds with the help of the practice and discourse of natural history.

Rural perspectives

Perhaps the most striking difference between the rural tales and eighteenth-century fiction is the switch in perspective from a view of the countryside from the country house to a view of the countryside from the village. In much eighteenth-century fiction, London and the country house constitute the dominant axis of action. Although characters in Gothic and picaresque novels roam between these two axes, down turnpikes and into country inns, the particularities of specific rural locales are rarely described. The major locus of country fiction, the landscaped country house, was artfully insulated from surrounding arable lands, villages, and provincial towns by various landscaped territories such as outer parks of meadows and woodland, more formal inner gardens and terraces, and distinct boundaries such as hedges, terraces, walls, and ha-has, famously evoked in Jane Austen's 1814 *Mansfield Park*.

The ha-ha (as the name indicates) perpetrates a visual joke on the viewer inside a country house garden. In the mid-eighteenth century, Lancelot "Capability" Brown created serpentine landscapes with a central grazed park that demonstrated the productive use of a rich owner's vast spaces. An invisible ditch was required to keep the livestock out of the surrounding woods.⁵ The ha-ha, a ditch with a steep wall on the country-house side and a gently sloping rise on the pasture side, invisibly separates livestock in the park from adjacent areas. Standing within the garden a few feet from the unseen ha-ha, the viewer believes it possible to walk right up to the grazing sheep and wonders why they aren't cropping flowers. Depending upon its position within the landscape, a ha-ha makes a "natural" meadow seem continuous with either the inner formal gardens or the outer wilderness, until one stands at its very edge or approaches from the opposite side. The ha-ha creates and conceals the division between spaces of leisure, agriculture, and nature so that the upper classes can enjoy the pleasurable aesthetics of agricultural life without destructive encroachment from livestock or the discomfiting activities of real farming.

Like other tricks in the sister arts, such as elevated prospects in topographic poetry and shadows in chiaroscuro painting, ha-has construct an imaginary, "green" England from and for the point-of-view of the upper classes by disguising or distancing less pleasing aspects of rural life and labor.⁶ They performed simultaneous exclusionary and appropriative functions. They enabled the urban and upper-class eye to overlook the grayer, grimmer scenes of rural British life, to appropriate the land and the landscape for aesthetic pleasure, and to ignore the condition of the laborers who work the agricultural landscape and live in the neighboring village, so carefully

kept from sight. So long as the viewpoint remained unidirectional from the estate to the working land, from the city to the country, from the space of the upper class to the space of the lower – these visual and verbal ha-has performed their aesthetic and hegemonizing functions. But Edgeworth's, Crabbe's, and Galt's monographs suggest the demise of the country house and the reversal of perspective, a new "change in literary bearings" from country house to village, from aristocratic and gentry classes to middle and working classes.⁷

The Borough offers the most direct refutation of the limited perspective from the country house in its first letter, "General Description," addressed to an imaginary gentleman correspondent who resides in a tranquil country house securely bounded by hedges and a bubbling brook. From his library he sees the paddocks and pastures of the sleepy pastoral upland, but the dirty, vigorous, vital town hovers beyond his view behind a smoky veil. Crabbe compares this country house landscape to town gardens, guarded by spikes, ditches, traps, and guns designed to keep poor poachers at bay.⁸ The country gentleman's perspective is out of touch with important aspects of provincial reality and requires the burgher's corrective point of view from within the smoky coastal town.

In *Castle Rackrent* and *The Annals of the Parish*, the country house literally falls into ruin. Castle Rackrent disintegrates slowly as three generations exploit it by the practices designated in its name. Its slow ruin illustrates the end of a semi-feudal era of colonial exploitation and a country ripe for improving landlords like Maria Edgeworth's father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth. The perspective outward from the country house is subverted by the servant narrator's inside perspective. In *Annals*, Breadland, the local estate which serves as the primary source of subsistence (and therefore power) within a simple, undiversified, grain-based agrarian economy, is rented out after the death of the last Scottish laird and burns to the ground only four years later. The power and patronage of the local laird eventually pass to an absent, occasionally attentive, English landowner, Lord Eaglesham, and an emigrant American entrepreneur, Mr. Cayenne. The narrator Rev. Balwhidder becomes the primary mediator between the villagers and the new capitalists, while a succession of industrious Mrs. Balwhidders lead the way toward a diversified agricultural economy. The perspective on rural life from the country house is replaced by the parson-narrator's view from within the village.

The perspectives of the provincial burgher, the servant insider, and the parish parson contest the country house perspective on rural life and the socio-economic dominance of the landed classes. The tales demonstrate the threatened obsolescence or irrelevance of the country house in the face of



4 Thomas Bewick, Tailpiece to Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village," in *Poems by Goldsmith and Parnell* (London: W. Bulmer, Shakespeare Printing Office, 1795), p. 51.

the increasing importance of provincial villages and towns. If, in the view of these provincial authors, the country house no longer dominates the community, then what scenes and perspectives take its place?

Thomas Bewick, the foremost wood engraver of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the first provincially located engraver (in Newcastle on Tyne) to develop nationwide repute, visually represents the new perspective of provincial authors. In 1795 Bewick engraved a headpiece and tailpiece for Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village*, itself a critique of the artificial landscape of the country house and its threat to traditional village life.⁹ In both pieces the point of view is from a low point outside the village and upward toward distant hills. In the headpiece, villagers and livestock occupy the foreground; the cottages of the village are spread across the middle ground; and a church is elevated in the background at the center. In the tailpiece (see Figure 4), the overgrown foreground is devoid of people; thatch is missing from the neglected cottage roofs in the middle ground; and just above the village, separated from it by a sweeping park, sits the new neoclassical country house. In the tailpiece's background, the church is displaced from the highest spot in the center to a lower hill on the right, and on the left ships leave a harbor. The irony is clear: the moral foci of the scene, villagers and church, have been replaced by the false stewardship of the ostentatious neoclassical country house. Crabbe's introductory descriptive letter to his upland correspondent in *The Borough* enacts the same view upward toward the elevated country house, but replaces Auburn's weedy foreground with the smoky, bustling coastal town. In both cases, the moral authority and knowledge of the gentry in their emblematic country houses proves hollow.

The perspective that takes the place of the view from the country house over a pastoral landscape is best illustrated by Bewick's most famous later



5 Headpiece to the Introduction of Thomas Bewick's *History of British Birds*, Vol. I: *Land Birds* (Newcastle: Beilby & Bewick, 1797), p. vii.

work, *History of British Birds* (Vol. I, 1797; Vol. II, 1804), the book that fires the imagination of young Jane Eyre on a rainy day. Bewick revolutionized the art of animal and bird illustration by drawing upon his own observation of live birds, drawing from dead specimens only when absolutely necessary. He is noted for being the first to illustrate species with indications of their natural habitats. In addition to the beautifully detailed wood-engravings of individual birds, chapters end with remarkably detailed vignettes of rural life that are bereft of country houses and picturesque landscapes, but instead depict wildlife, travel, and the comedy and struggle, the sports and travails of the lower rural classes. In Volume I, *Land Birds*, the Introduction's headpiece (see Figure 5) sets forth the full range of his avian subjects: domestic fowl in the foreground, wild swallows soaring overhead, and dead specimens of large birds adorning the gable end of the barn, with farm labor, the winnowing and bagging of grain taking center stage. It announces a new intent to represent birds and laborers in the immediacy and totality of their shared rural environment. The natural-historical values

of detailed and comprehensive representation of all types of inhabitants determine the composition of the scene instead of picturesque aesthetics. Wild and domesticated animal life encompass the seasonal work of the rural inhabitant. The level, egalitarian representation depicted from a pedestrian point of view, the essential perspective for investigating the life and conversation of humans and animals, supersedes the upward gaze in the engravings for *The Deserted Village*, where elevations emphasize the power structure within the social strata. In Bewick's illustrations for *British Birds*, Crabbe's *The Borough*, and Galt's *Annals*, the lower levels of these strata assume a new importance and centrality in rural life. The new representations reveal that Britain is not as seamlessly green, idyllic, prosperous, or stable as the limited and false view from inside the ha-ha and the country estate would lead the reader to believe.

Borrowed forms

The discursive forms of the earliest fictional monographs by Edgeworth and Crabbe provide the most direct evidence for the powerful effect of natural history on fictional representations of provincial worlds and mutual influences between British provincial authors. Form gives the clearest indication that provincial novelists borrowed the accumulating cultural capital of the discourse of natural history to support their representation of provincial worlds previously marginalized or nondescript in literature.¹⁰

Footnotes and appendixes are the most obvious markers of empiricist discourse in *Castle Rackrent* and *The Borough*. They are reminiscent of the explanatory footnotes found, for example, in Erasmus Darwin's verse popularizations of natural history, with which both authors were familiar. With the exception of the first footnote, most footnotes in *Castle Rackrent* are natural historical in style instead of antiquarian, like the glossary notes that speculate on origins or cite other authorities. The natural-historical footnotes focus on small details of appearance and behavior gleaned from direct observation, such as Thady's characteristic wig worn atop grown-out hair and frequently used as a duster.¹¹ Edgeworth's habitual collection of vivid physical and behavioral descriptions may be partly indebted to her familiarity with White's empiricist descriptions of animal behavior.¹²

Of all three monographs, *The Borough* most closely approximates a specific empiricist genre, the local county history. Like White's *Selborne*, it is written in epistolary form (albeit in heroic couplets). The genre of the local history was devised by Robert Plot in the early seventeenth century to offer a comprehensive account of a county's topography, flora and fauna, great homes and churches, economic products, and parish statistics. *The Borough*

adapts the general categories of local history to Crabbe's specific interest in the lives of the middle and lower classes. During the 1790s, Crabbe contributed "A Natural History of the Vale of Belvoir" and several parish descriptions to John Nichols's eight-volume, folio size, antiquarian *magnum opus*, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* (1795–1815), whose title-page purports to offer "an account of its Religious Foundations, Public Institutions, and Parochial History, With Annals of that Antient Borough."¹³ The twenty-four letters in *The Borough* certainly fit under these categories, with letters on religion ("The Church," "The Vicar – The Curate, &c," and "Sects and Professions in Religion"), on public institutions, a category Crabbe expands to cover informal social activities ("Amusements," "Clubs and Social Meetings," "Inns," and "Players,") and formal public institutions ("The Alms-House and Trustees," "The Hospital and Governors," "The Prisons," and "The School"). In place of parochial annals, which usually consist of lists of past clerics and population statistics, he substitutes descriptions of particular inhabitants.

The most memorable characters in *The Borough* are found in the series of letters on the lower classes, "Inhabitants of the Alms-House" and "The Poor of the Borough". In these letters, Crabbe arrives at the subject that interests him most, the imagined lives of various specimens of the lower class of inhabitants: Celia, a silly flirt, falls from the middle class to the alms-house; the Parish Clerk steals from the collection plate and is ostracized; misled by profligate young men, the young clerk Abel Keene finally commits suicide; the blind teacher Ellen Orford is the sole exemplar of blameless poverty; and Peter Grimes, a fisherman and murderer of apprentices, is the most depraved inhabitant of the borough (and the only character still famous, through Benjamin Britten's 1945 eponymous opera). Like Edgeworth's generations of Rackrents, the lives of Crabbe's characters are tales of moral failure and economic decline. His tales sketch the psychology of their moral choices and the environmental and socio-economic contexts for their behaviors. Like Bewick and any good natural historian, he includes all classes. However, as a satirist, he depicts their behaviors with less sympathy and humor than Bewick, Edgeworth, or Galt.

By drawing on the standard epistolary forms of scientific communication, by using the annotative apparatus common to literature drawing on scientific knowledge, and adapting the categorical structure of a local history, Crabbe transforms the eighteenth-century, moral-philosophical verse epistle into a natural-historical, moral verse epistle concerned with exactly the kind of detail that Alexander Pope avoided – the specific relations, manners, and situation of the inhabitants of a provincial port. *The Borough* complicates the simplistic dichotomy between city and pastoral countryside with a more

complex, less idealistic representation of another kind of provincial locale. It slyly subverts the genre of local antiquarian history that focused on the property and institutions of the landed classes by borrowing the structure and categories of the gentry's genre of local history and then filling it with the tales of the middle, laboring, and indigent classes that were mere statistics in local antiquarian histories.

Another form of local history was the annal or annals, yearly records of events, a form turned into fiction by both Crabbe and John Galt. In 1807, Crabbe's poem "The Parish Register" provides an early instance of the fictionalization of this form, taking its epigraph from "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor.¹⁴

Crabbe's poem is ostensibly the result of a country parson's reflections on the lives of his parishioners as he reviews his parish register's births, marriages, and deaths. Gray's phrase, "annals of the poor," is repeated throughout Crabbe's poem. John Galt's *Annals of the Parish* also echoes Gray's phrase in its title, and Galt's narrative persona is a close cousin to Crabbe's parson-narrator. Rev. Micah Balwhidder's fifty-year memoir recounts the yearly events in his parish in the west of Scotland between 1760, when he arrives as a young pastor, and 1810, when he retires.

Both Crabbe's and Galt's texts construct themselves as answers to Gray's call for "short and simple annals of the poor" that more fully and realistically describe the lives of the lower classes in rural society than his elegiac homage to stereotypical cottage life. The provincial pastor as narrative persona draws upon such figures as Gilbert White, George Crabbe, and many other rural clergy who contributed to empiricist projects that document rural locales. In the 1790s as Crabbe was contributing statistical and antiquarian descriptions of parishes within Leicestershire to John Nichol's county history, parish ministers all across Scotland, "locality by locality," were completing their local surveys of population, local topography, natural history, and economy for the *Old Statistical Accounts of Scotland* (published 1791–9). Galt's novel legitimates the fictional rural world of western Scotland by linking its annalistic title and form with Gray's poetic stature (and perhaps Crabbe's, which was much higher in the early nineteenth century than it is now), and from the well-known empiricist activities of country parsons.

In their formal intertextual referentiality, the works of natural history and local history by Darwin, White, Nichols, and others and the fictions of

Edgeworth, Crabbe, and Galt share forms of provincial literary discourse that circulate across rural Britain and not merely around the Celtic periphery. This distinctive provincial literary discourse indicates the writers' shared concern for the visibility of provincial life and the social and moral problems of the rural poor within an increasingly metropolitan and industrializing nation. The overt empiricist forms of Edgeworth's and Crabbe's monographs and Galt's later, indirect allusion to natural-historical and antiquarian activities of local pastors also suggest early nineteenth-century provincial authors' need to legitimate the factual basis of their fictions for readers whom they imagine as sceptical or ignorant of the interest, merits, and problems of their provincial subject. Thus the preface to *Castle Rackrent* justifies the editorial apparatus as a solution to the problem that Thady's "Memoirs will perhaps be scarcely intelligible, or probably they may appear perfectly incredible. For the information of the *ignorant* English reader, a few notes have been subjoined by the editor" (author's emphasis).¹⁵ To combat these anticipated problems with readers' scepticism and ignorance, early provincial writers used tactics that drew on the discursive power of natural history and important poetic predecessors such as Gray in order to present a new subject of fiction, the diversity of life in a rural locale. In so doing, of course, they in turn impose a new set of power relations on rural places in which the resident, educated, middle-class intellectual, the man or woman of science, has a dominant role as a translator of local dialect and custom, or an onsite empiricist gathering raw data on behaviors, customs, and the economy. Fictional monographs about locales do not represent a Romantic reaction against empiricism; they deliberately draw upon the widely popular discipline of natural history in order to imagine neglected and marginalized rural societies.

Persona tactics

And yet throughout the works of early provincial monographers, a common anxiety betrays itself about being identified solely as an inhabitant of marginalized and misunderstood rural culture. White, Edgeworth, and Crabbe feel compelled to defend the importance of their subject to a reading audience that they imagine as ignorant or unappreciative. This defensiveness is first visible in White's seminal monograph on place addressed to two different correspondents, in which he positions himself and his project relative to the tension between the localist and the generalist and their two forms of knowledge, the monograph and the national survey.

Edgeworth and Crabbe also exhibit the anxiety of the provincial monographer with respect to a readership of metropolitan outsiders more accustomed

to the “whirl half over Europe” than to the particulars of a “confined locality.” Their anxieties about “belonging and not belonging” to the broad republic of letters find direct expression not only in their empiricist forms, but in the mutual constructions of narrative persona and reader persona. The use of a narrative persona is a distinctive tactic in the early fictional monographs to relieve the tension between the author and his/her audience. By deploying narrative personae and natural-historical forms, provincial authors situate themselves, Janus-like, as both direct observers within a particular locale and as knowledgeable participants in wider empirical circles.¹⁶ These formal tactics are, in Michel de Certeau’s words, “an art of being between,” whereby they define themselves and their world against metropolitan chauvinism and idealizing nationalistic constructions of rural life.¹⁷

In *Castle Rackrent*, Edgeworth creates personae who are both insiders and outsiders to the locale. Thady Quirk, cunning servant and steward to generations of Rackrents, provides the quintessential inside, secret family history, “pour[ing] forth anecdotes, and retail[ing] conversations, with all the minute prolixity of a gossip in a country town.”¹⁸ An Anglo-Irish resident, Edgeworth uses an Editor’s annotation both to address a presumably uninformed English audience and to substantiate the ethnographic facts of Thady’s ostensibly oral and definitely self-interested account. This Editor carefully elides identification as an Anglo-Irishman (or woman) by shifting between first person and third person sources of anecdotal evidence, but the erudite footnotes lead the English reader to identify him as a cosmopolitan participant in the gentlemanly Republic of Letters.¹⁹ The Editor is both a local empiricist and a cosmopolitan antiquarian.

George Crabbe confronts a different insider–outsider dichotomy by imagining his monograph, *The Borough*, as a correspondence from a provincial burgher to a country gentleman. By using a country gentleman as his foil and stand-in for the reader, he avoids alienating his metropolitan readership with charges of ignorance like those found in Edgeworth’s preface while asserting the diversity of provincial situations to metropolitan readers who would idealize country life as that pastoral perspective visible from the grounds of a country house. Already his first description of the town gardens contrasts the placid pastoral scene from the country house with the visible class tensions manifest in a marshy coastal town:

We scent the Vapours of the sea-born Gale;
 Broad-beaten Paths lead on from Stile to Stile,
 And Sewers from Streets, the Road-side Banks defile;
 Our guarded Fields a sense of danger show,
 Where Garden-crops with Corn and Clover grow;

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Fences are form'd of Wreck and plac'd around,
(With tenters tipp'd) a strong repulsive bound;
Wide and deep Ditches by the Gardens run,
And there in ambush lie the Trap and Gun²⁰

In the borough, a highly visible ditch filled with man-traps separates upper and lower classes. The noxious urban ditch of mingled brine and sewage is the antithesis of the ha-ha that seamlessly incorporates the sanitized pastoral scene into the garden view (and the bubbling stream surrounding his correspondent's country house). In Crabbe's imagined rural world, upper and lower classes and nature and society cannot be either invisibly or painlessly separated or intentionally oblivious of each other.

Writing in 1813 only three years after *The Borough* was published, Galt, like Crabbe, also creates an imaginary village in a very specific part of Britain – Dalmailing in western Scotland. Like Edgeworth, Galt publishes anonymously and, like both predecessors, he too utilizes a local inhabitant as a narrative persona: Reverend Micah Balwhidder, originally shunned as an unwanted outsider to the town that he describes, has earned his right to narrate its history by fifty years of service as its resident pastor. Unlike the cunning insider Thady Quirk, whom the reader suspects of withholding crucial information about his own role in the fall of the Rackrents, Balwhidder is a mild reactionary, adapting unwillingly to local socio-economic pressures, whose account reveals the relations between his locality and the British economy and empire. Galt offers no editorial apparatus to create a truth effect. Instead he aligns his authorial point-of-view with his audience: both are assumed to be more knowledgeable and cosmopolitan than the narrator and therefore able to interpret events (and Balwhidder) within a broader explanatory historical context than his simplistic providential explanations provide. By 1813, when *Annals* was written, Galt no longer needs personae to function as Janus-like characters facing both the city and the country, or center and periphery, because the readership for provincial monographs, didactic tales, and memoirs has been thoroughly developed by White, Edgeworth, Crabbe, and other provincial authors. In addition, Galt's social location as an established London writer is quite different from the provincially located Edgeworth and Crabbe.

Without an editorial apparatus like Edgeworth's, Galt turns this seemingly naive account into a sophisticated analysis of a small community's progress from a subsistence agricultural economy to a diversified economy based upon commercial agriculture, mining, and textile manufacture. This Whiggish history, told through the eyes of a conservative Tory, imagines the development, not of the wealth of a nation, but of the wealth of a parish

gained through increasing intercourse with the larger world. Although initially the parson's means are limited and his knowledge of the world is quite circumscribed, over the course of fifty years both his income and his knowledge are enlarged through the influx of energetic entrepreneurial strangers (including his two wives) and by the export of inhabitants into the merchant marine, the navy, and the army and their periodic returns. Balwhidder's strong Christian beliefs enable an occasional critique of the moral and social ills that accompany economic development. Except when facing sectarian competition, Balwhidder has, by the annals' end, become a conciliatory, mediating figure between the social classes, helping to ease the transition to a cash economy for the poor and mediating the rise of impoverished families such as the Malcolms into the middle class through his contacts with the aristocracy.²¹ Galt's stance with respect to Dalmailing is clearly that of an outsider casting an affectionate backward glance toward an earlier time, but ultimately supporting the industrial and social advancements from the face-to-face village community to a modern socially heterogeneous industrial town.

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Do these long-vanished local worlds matter as more than a source of nostalgic laughter and sighs? They offer ways to think locally in a world increasingly enmeshed in a global economy and culture. In *Annals of the Parish*, local worlds do not persist in unchanging isolation from the global; economic development and social change are intimately tied to exchanges with the broader world. Dalmailing's youth leave as sailors and soldiers and return with the goods of the world: parrots, limes for the pastor's tropical punch, and tea, the commodity so vital to the impoverished Malcolm family's return to middle-class standing. Emigrants from America and Ireland threaten the hegemonic church and gentry power structure with their entrepreneurial and radical activism, but they also enrich the community with their books and newspapers. *Castle Rackrent* demonstrates that a class's refusal to change old exploitative ways that failed to consider the land and all its inhabitants leads eventually to its own demise.

In Crabbe's borough, where the sea's water, sound, and smell penetrate every corner, poorer inhabitants are constantly reminded of their human vulnerability to nature's powerful forces and to the power of the richer classes. *The Borough* insists upon the brutalizing influence of a poor and polluted environment where "reformers come not" and "Infant-Sailors" pretend to be Nelsons in the ponds of effluent between cottage "ash heaps."²² In *Annals* such middens are the signs of present squalor and instruments of future

improvement when Lord Eaglesham is unceremoniously overturned in his carriage into the middens that crowd the village street, an incident that incites him to initiate road construction that is vital to economic development of the nearby mines.²³ *Castle Rackrent* offers few details of habitat and exterior description, except the images of a barren bog with puny planted trees and a gentry midden, a broken carriage abandoned at the estate's gate. Middens and ditches are the persistent signs of provincial poverty that none of these tales allow the reader to overlook. What these texts render invisible are the farms, arable land, and pastures. The fictional monographs have undone the work of the invisible ha-has. Pastoral images are excluded in favor of beaches and bogs, the barren environments that are one cause of uneven development. As each monograph makes evident, none of the locales they describe, including Selborne, were naturally fruitful, easy places to live. The fortified gardens of the borough imply that if the situation of all is not improved, then inhabitants become locked in a ruthless battle for resources.

These texts lay the essential groundwork for thinking of locality as a combination of a natural and social environment. Like Bewick's headpiece, they represent social nature and thereby nudge the reader beyond the aesthetic appreciation of a landscape or wildlife and into the harder questions of the economic relations between an environment and its local society. Thinking locally about the economies of social nature poses questions of environmental justice instead of simply fostering an aesthetic appreciation for landscapes and nature. These texts move away from overly simplistic dichotomies – country/city or nature/metropolis – toward the complexities of provincial life. British localities are not pure sources of pleasure as Mitford's introduction suggests; as her own anecdotes also prove, a confined locality makes social and economic tensions manifest.

The opening epigraph from Mitford and my analysis of imagined rural localities' indebtedness to the empirical naturalist tradition of White suggest one last line of inquiry: What is the relationship between the imagined rural worlds of anecdotal fictional monographs and Jane Austen's imagined novelistic worlds? Her novels use third-person omniscient narrators instead of clerical or empiricist personae. They do not attempt comprehensive accounts of all classes of inhabitants, but restrict themselves mostly to the lower gentry and middle class. Austen's novels absorb imagined rural localities, which appear in the best rural tales as entities with their own socio-economic character capable of either development or deterioration, into the terrain of the *Bildungsroman* that focuses on the maturation of individual heroes or heroines instead of places. However, like the rural tales, Austen's narrative perspective is largely displaced from the country house. With the exception of *Emma*, her heroines are alienated from the country house in various ways.

Catherine Morland is a stranger at the Gothic house of Northanger Abbey. The Bennet girls face future alienation from their small estate through an entail. Upon their brother's inheritance, the Dashwood sisters must leave Norland Park for a modest, distant country cottage. Fanny Price is a poor relation, dependent on the charity of her aunt at Mansfield Park, and Anne Elliot becomes virtually homeless when her father economizes by renting Kellynch Hall.

Important differences between Austen's later fiction (written after 1811) and her earlier novels may be due in part to the imagined worlds of British village literature published in such quantities in the first fifteen years of the nineteenth century. Her admiration for Crabbe, whose most popular works were published between 1807 and 1819, is well known. She publicly acknowledges his influence by transforming his character Fanny Price, a "Damsel, meekly firm" who refuses a womanizer in *The Parish Register* into her own "meekly firm" heroine in *Mansfield Park*.²⁴ Although she shows little of Crabbe's moral didacticism or his comprehensive representations of classes, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* exhibit a more marked concern with the representation of a locality, its economy, and its relations between classes than the earlier novels.

Provincial tales open up the range of rural life and rural worlds beyond the ha-ha, so that when Austen represents the country house in her later fiction, it is with a different vision of its relationship to a locality. Fanny Price recognizes immediately that local wagons should not be requisitioned to deliver Mary Crawford's harp while the grain is being harvested. Mr. Knightley eschews an improvement that would lengthen a long-established path and inconvenience the village laborers. Emma Woodhouse must learn her proper role within local society and understand the serious repercussions of her mockery and neglect of impoverished Miss Bates and her inappropriate mentoring of illegitimate Harriet Smith. Although Fanny and Emma may still regard the village from the country house, and the ha-ha still marks moral boundaries that should not be crossed, in these later novels the country house perspective no longer limits Austen's novelistic worlds, which now extend to include villages, farms, and other classes.

NOTES

- 1 John Barrell, *English Literature in History, 1730–80: An Equal, Wide Survey* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), pp. 36–8.
- 2 Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, ed. Richard Mabey (London: Everyman, 1993), p. 106.
- 3 Despite the fact that surveys were given to parish ministers for completion, Sir John Sinclair explains that the Statistical Accounts of Scotland provide "a unique survey

- of the state of the whole country, locality by locality.” Quoted by Charles J. Withers in “Statistical Accounts of Scotland,” www.electricscotland.com/webclans/statistical_accounts.htm, par. 9.
- 4 The *OED* cites the first English usage and definition of habitat in William Withering’s 1796 edition of *British Plants*. In 1810 George Crabbe defined it in a footnote in Letter VIII as the “favourite soil or situation of the more scarce species” in *The Borough, George Crabbe: The Complete Poetical Works*, eds. Norma Dalrymple-Champneys and Arthur Pollard, 3 vols., Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 436.
 - 5 For an excellent schematic representation of the history of landscape gardening see “Garden History Style Guide,” www.gardenvisit.com/s/estyle2/estyle.htm.
 - 6 See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) on the apparently aesthetic, but actually moral and social constraints, that governed representations of the poor in landscape and genre painting and pastoral and georgic poetry.
 - 7 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 166–8. Williams dates this change in bearings and the emergence of knowable rural communities to George Eliot’s fiction and attributes its emergence to Eliot’s knowledge of economic power and her social location outside the gentry.
 - 8 Crabbe, *The Borough*, Letter I.115–34, p. 364.
 - 9 Goldsmith, Oliver, *The Deserted Village, Poems by Goldsmith and Parnell* (London: Shakespeare Printing Office, 1795), pp. 29 and 51.
 - 10 Since at least the eighteenth century, nondescript has been a scientific term for species not yet recognized through description in the scientific literature. The discovery and classification of nondescript species was the central focus of eighteenth-century natural history. However, as White argues in *Selborne*, the domestic economies and behavior of fauna should also be an important part of a naturalist’s mission. These two goals of providing a complete taxonomy of local life and accurate descriptions of their behaviors and domestic economies also motivate the fictional monographs and justify writers’ efforts to describe lesser known places, and the behaviors of the lower classes.
 - 11 Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent, Novels and Selected Works*, 12 vols., (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999–2003), Vol. I, eds. Jane Desmarais, Tim McLoughlin, and Marilyn Butler, p. 40.
 - 12 Edgeworth refers to White’s *A Naturalist’s Calendar* (John Aikin’s 1795 posthumous compilation of White’s journal notes into a calendar of flora and birds) in *Practical Education* by Edgeworth and her father Richard Lovell Edgeworth, 2nd edn. (London: J. Johnston, 1798).
 - 13 John Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicestershire*, 4 vols. (London: John Nichols, 1795–1815).
 - 14 Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” *The Longman Anthology of British Literature: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, 3rd edn., Vol. I C (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), ll. 28–32, p. 2855.
 - 15 Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, p. 6.
 - 16 On the issue of an author’s “divided consciousness” see Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 174.

- 17 Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 30.
- 18 Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, p. 6.
- 19 For a fuller discussion of the liminal narrative personae in *Castle Rackrent* see my "Tales of Locales: The Natural History of *Selborne* and *Castle Rackrent*," *Modern Philology* 100 (2003), pp. 407–10.
- 20 Crabbe, *The Borough*, Letter I.124–32, p. 364.
- 21 On Galt's empiricism and Balwhidder's mediating role see Keith M. Costain, "The Community of Man: Galt and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Realism," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 8 (May 1981), pp. 10–29.
- 22 Crabbe, *The Borough*, Letter VIII.274–9, p. 529.
- 23 John Galt, *Annals of the Parish and the Ayresshire Legatees* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1895), Vol. I, pp. 60–1.
- 24 Crabbe, *The Parish Register*, p. 251, ll. 558–9.