

## Jane Austen, Happiness and Moral Luck

This paper has an epigraph. It comes from Lionel Trilling's Sincerity and Authenticity:

It was Jane Austen who first represented the specifically modern personality and the culture in which it had its being. Never before had the moral life been shown as she shows it to be, never before had it been conceived to be so complex and difficult and exhausting. Hegel speaks of the “secularization of spirituality” as a prime characteristic of the modern epoch, and Jane Austen is the first to tell us what this involves.<sup>1</sup>

For Trilling, Austen was the first Modern English novelist; that is to say, the first novelist born of modernity to narrate – or thickly describe – the experience of being modern. I believe Trilling is entirely right. If so, Austen's traditional absence from ‘Romanticism’ (by which I mean the critical tendency to categorize her as Augustan, Johnsonian, or, simply, as a Tory rationalist and therefore un-Romantic) is somewhat strange. Strange, because Romanticism is usually conceived of, as a particular, and peculiar, phase of modernity. So if Austen is, as Trilling maintains, the first Modern English novelist, she must surely also be, or have some affinity with, Romanticism.

I say ‘traditional’ because recent work has sought to restore Austen to her rightful place within Romanticism. This critical work generally rests on the assumption that Austen's fans – and the Austen industry – mis-read her; that their *consumption* is a form

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<sup>1</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 308.

of mis-recognition. As her first reviewers noted, Austen's world was refreshingly middling; Janeites, on the contrary, think her social world is aristocratic. The attentive reader will note Austen's capacity for spite: for her fans, she is sweet Aunt Jane. For Janeites, butter wouldn't melt; for her critics, it would. As Deidre Lynch observes, co-eds read her for dating tips, whereas her critics note a homo-social world where the unnameable (spinsterhood; sapphism) is obliquely hinted through form. For her commonsense reader, Austen is a stalwart champion of things rational, traditional, timeless, but especially the glories of companionate marriage and the domestic system: her critics, on the other hand, spy Jacobinism through the gaps. Pleasurable consumption produces one kind of novelist, strenuous engagement, quite another.<sup>2</sup>

I am with the Janeites on this one. In opposition to most recent criticism on the issue, I believe Austen's modernity is most evident, not through what it is her fans' misread, but in and through the enjoyment that sustains the Austen industry. The fundamental fact of Austen's longevity, as a writer, is that she makes us happy.

Although happiness might feel like a transcendental state, it isn't: on the contrary, the way in which happiness is conceived, and experienced, is subject to history, so much so that I think we can invert Tolstoy's dictum: all unhappy societies are alike (privation, starvation, depredation) but happy societies are all happy in their own distinct ways. Ok, I exaggerate: the point remains that as a concept 'happiness' exists within history, and our sense – Austen's sense – of happiness is inextricably bound up with secularization and modernity. If we have a conflicted attitude towards happiness, as post-Romantics, it is because we have inherited Romanticism's hostility towards one of the buzz words of its

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<sup>2</sup> For full references and discussion of recent criticism see Robert Miles, 'New Historicism, New Austen, New Romanticism', in *Romanticism, History, Historicism: Essays on an Orthodoxy*, ed. Damian Davies (London & New York: Routledge), pp. 182-202.

prior generation. The fathers of the American constitution inserted the 'pursuit of happiness' into the constitution precisely because it was a commonplace, and therefore an inoffensive alternative to the ready alternative, "life, liberty and property", phrasing apt to kindle the incendiary issue of slavery. When Robert Burns helped form the Tarbolton Bachelor's club, a favourite topic was happiness – something the counter-enlightenment would shortly construe as heedless libertinism. In his great essay on Wordsworth and the fate of pleasure, Trilling notes that for the early Wordsworth 'pleasure' still retained a positive connotation, where pleasuring the senses was co-extensive with ennobling the mind. Romanticism changed all that. Coleridge's particular contribution was to desynonymize sensory (good) from sensual (bad); in concert, Wordsworth's redrafted The Prelude so that unlike the 1805 version, the final one vigilantly discriminated between (and against) the bodily, despotic eye and a purifying inner vision. Keats, Hunt and Hazlitt remained true to the radical potential of Enlightenment pleasure, but theirs was the losing cause: art, and the aesthetic, was increasingly identified with unpleasure, the complex, and the challenging.

As post-Romantics we may not be convinced by the claim that Austen's capacity to make her readers' happy is also sign of her modernity and Romanticism (as opposed to the more familiar claim that it marks her Augustanism). Vincent Pecora, in Secularization and Cultural Criticism, helps us understand why we have trouble connecting Austen, happiness, and modernity.

Pecora is interested in a paradox at the heart of modern, Western, secular culture. On the one hand, this culture is marked by the liquidation of everything Gottfried Herder would hold dear: the local, the particular, or an openness to magic: 'in the standard

account secularization and modernization are a linked process marked by three historical developments: '(1) social differentiation... (2) societization, that is, the increasing dependence on large-scale administrative institutions... (3) rationalization of religious beliefs...' (Pecora, 7). At the same time this modernizing process has given rise to a culture of criticism that attacks the very process that brought it into being: the

accepted hallmarks of such a culture entail not only the spiritual and intellectual autonomy of the individual, with all the duties and rights of "free expression" this demands, but, further, that culture comes increasingly to define itself in its opposition to all that is "Official": "Culture is only true when implicitly critical" (Adorno, *Prisms* 22).

We find our Romanticism in 'kulturkritik', in a deepseated opposition to all that is official, a resistance that is also a fundamental assertion of, not just the rights, but the existence of the individual as a social fact. Accordingly, those who wish to rescue Austen from her staid existence as a Tory, and Augustan, rationalist, have ascribed to her texts a peculiar vocation for kulturkritik, in direct opposition to the Janeities, all too often represented as unconsciously sucking on country pleasures tainted by their proximity to the official policies of hearth, home, and county. If kulturkritik is the price of admission for joining the Romantic club, Austen must be critical of the very things she seems to uphold, most especially, the domestic ideology supporting the capitalist system that alienates us from our true selves, even as the system provides the conditions for such self-understanding. If Austen is Romantic, she can't be what she seems: hence the recent

critical tendency to create an alternative, hidden Austen, one obscured by the systematic misrecognition of her fans, of which William Galperin's 'Historical Austen' is the most obvious example, and D.A. Miller's spinster-aesthete, another.

I argue, to the contrary, that it is in the superficial Austen – the Austen we know, on first, second and third reading, as the magic is continually refreshed – it is in this superficial Austen that we discover Austen's Romanticism and Modernity. To explain how, I now turn to Charles Taylor's A Secular Age.

Taylor's reading of Western secularization is deeply revisionary, not least in locating the shifts he's after, not in the contradictions of the ethics, aesthetics and ideologies of secularization (Pecora's territory), but in what he calls its 'background'.

In A Secular Age Taylor takes issue with the common ways in which secularization is understood, as either the growing separation of the public and religious spheres, that is, of church and state (secularization 1), or that religion retreated before the onward march of Enlightenment (secularization 2) – in other words, the older, Whig history of triumphant reason and vanquished superstition. His concern, rather, following Heidegger and Wittgenstein, is with 'background', meaning a pre-philosophical understanding that conditions thought, that is universal within the culture, and invisible, or subconscious. Taylor detects a quality in the background of Western culture which he claims is unique in history, one that begins in the early modern period, that 'transitions' during the age we usually refer to as 'Enlightenment', and which finally achieves its modern expression around the start of the nineteenth century: the time we think of as 'Romantic'. The essential feature of this quality is our common expectation that we have a choice before us as to whether we locate the experience of 'fullness' immanently, or

transcendentally; within the realm of the quotidian, or in a sense of something 'beyond'; in this world, or in some other on a transcendental plane; in, for instance, faith in ecology, or Southern Baptism. It is the unconscious assumption that faith is ultimately a lifestyle choice that fundamentally constitutes 'secularization 3'. Taylor's version of a secular age is thus predicated, not on the disappearance of religion (a claim that would fly in the face of the facts), but on a change to our common, pre-reflective understanding of the 'real'. Taylor uses Schiller's classic terms, from his definition of Romanticism, to open up this changed 'real': naïve and self-conscious.

My claim will rather be something of this nature: secularity 3 came to be along with the possibility of exclusive humanism, which thus for the first time widened the range of possible options, ending the era of "naïve" religious faith. Exclusive humanism in a sense crept up on us through an intermediate form, Providential Deism; and both the Deism and the humanism were made possible by earlier developments within orthodox Christianity. Once this humanism is on the scene, the new plural, non-naïve predicament allows for multiplying the options beyond the original gamut. But the crucial transforming move in the process is the coming of exclusive humanism.

From this point of view, one could offer this one-line description of the difference between earlier times and the secular age: a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or

better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people. This is the crucial link between secularity and a self-sufficing humanism.<sup>3</sup>

From the point of view of subjectivity, the major change between ‘the era of “naïve” religious faith’ and Western modernity is the transition from what Taylor calls a ‘porous’, to a ‘buffered’, self. The ‘naïve’ or ‘porous’ self is one unprotected from the animistic forces of the cosmos, whether good or evil, where time is understood in a non-secular fashion, that is to say, as one where there is simultaneity between the quotidian and the supernal. The ‘buffered self’ conceives itself to be impervious to such animistic forces. Instead time is understood in a linear fashion, while the world is conceived as a realm of inert material (forms depleted of animistic content) subject to instrumental reason. The buffered self is itself a form of interiority, and in this regard Taylor’s analysis accords with that of Jurgen Habermas, who interprets the rise of the bourgeois public sphere, or ‘republic of letters’, as a series of practices that have as their upshot the protection, and indeed nurturing, of an historically new sense of the private, that is, where private has lost the negative overtones of privation, and gained the positive ones we have come to associate with Romanticism, where individualism, interiority, and genius are closely allied.

Taylor opposes his thesis to what he calls ‘subtraction stories’, where secularization is understood as a series of deletions, of chimeras slain by reason: ‘Against this kind of story, I will steadily be arguing that Western modernity, including its

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor, A Secular Age, 20.

secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can't be explained in terms of perennial features of human life'.<sup>4</sup>

The novel (and this is the key point I really want to stress) the novel is an instance of what Taylor means by 'new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices' that produce secularization 3. Or rather, it is a cultural practice that works to shift the background, such that secularization 3 materializes as an altered state of consciousness. But not just any novel, or even the novel, as a whole: it is the Austenian novel that does the heavy lifting.

Using Taylor's terms one can conveniently distinguish Romanticism from Enlightenment, or at any rate, from providential Deism, by saying that Romanticism turns on nature being a site of ambiguity as to whether its meaning is transcendental or immanent (a condition of secularity 3), whereas for Providential Deism it is axiomatic that it is both at once. Critics have traditionally referred to the ambiguous play with transcendence and immanence as 'Romantic irony'. It is not a quality critics have often found in Austen. I argue, to the contrary, that she is a centrally Romantic writer, precisely because her texts play ambiguously with whether human happiness, or fullness, is to be found transcendently or immanently. Beneath Austen's endlessly enticing, nearly perfect, but finally elusive style, her novels are fairy tales of domestic fulfillment. The arc of the marriage plot parallels the traditional Christian progress of self-knowledge, repentance and grace (Giffin). My working hypothesis is that her novels appeal to her enormous readership, not because they are cryptic Christian texts, but because they cannily map the core condition of the 'background' of our 'Secular Age', where

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor, A Secular Age, 22.



transcendence and immanence are held in ambiguous equipoise. To put matters at their simplest, Austen's fans absorb her endings as if the heroine's marriage were a transcendental experience. Austen's fans read her, because she makes them, us, happy.

Austen's novels do not only map Taylor's background, but constitute it, in and through their form (where, as Nancy Armstrong reminds us, it is through form that novels think). For contemporary critical practice, 'cultural work' seems an indispensable notion. As a concept it is only useful if narrowly applied; and one necessary condition for its application, is that cultural work should be understood as a secret ministry, one happening at the 'background' level; that is to say, it belongs to a class of phenomena that are both material (they have concrete consequences) and unconscious (they are 'hard for thought'). Secondly, cultural work is never performed at the level of content: 'form' is its medium. Thirdly, it is deeper than ideology (if only by definition, as we are talking about those changes in background that condition the terms ideological strife takes).

I have, then, seven theses relating either to Austen's form or its effects:

1. No novelist prior to Austen marries desire and narrative with such success
2. No novelist prior to Austen so successfully suffuses the domestic with the immanent
3. No novelist prior to Austen creates characters suffused with such presence
4. No novelist prior to Austen masters the trick of seamlessly stitching together the fairy tale with the quotidian, disguising the 'twice-told' with the first.
5. No novelist prior to Austen perfects free indirect speech.

6. No novelist prior to Austen narrates history within the 'moment' so successfully (Trilling's 'manners').
7. One to Six are structurally connected

Taylor's comments on the porous and buffered self are suggestive if also somewhat schematic. Still, I think one can grant his main point, which is that secularity 3 is supported by some fundamental assumptions about the individual, assumptions that help constitute the individual as an effective agent. At its simplest, in Taylor's scheme, the porous self is at the mercy of the environment, whereas for the buffered, the environment is at the mercy of the individual. But only if she succeeds in becoming an effective agent. The logic is circular, but so is it in Austen. For instance, in Mansfield Park, no explanation is ever offered for why Fanny, and later, her sister, Susan, are marked for election, containing the capacity for effective action, whereas her other siblings (barring William) are not. Being marked is not in itself sufficient: Austen's heroine's prove their mettle through a Christian trial, of error, self-knowledge, repentance and grace, where the plots are so structured as to be always setting traps for the complacent heroine: even when she believes she sees, she is revealed as, still, purblind. If she eventually triumphs as an effective agent – as a self buffered from environmental contingency – it is because she follows the contours of this Christian eschatology, through to the end. The key point, though, is not that the novels are unfolding a method – a 'care of the self' – that is Christian: the key is that it is both at once: both transcendent (full of Christian promise) and immanent (luminous with this-worldly happiness). I am not saying that Austen's novels are Christian novels that one can read in a secular fashion. I am saying that

Austen's most startling formal innovations (as outlined in my seven theses) perform cultural work, helping shift the background that constitutes our modern, secular age.

Hence my contention that we arrive at Austen's modernity, not by recasting her as an agent of Kulturkritik, but by beginning with what her texts do: and what they do, better than any previous novelist, is make her readers happy. Her novels have this capability, because Austen articulates, better than any previous novelist, the core condition of what Taylor calls secularization 3, which is, he also claims, an historically unique formation. We must not understand this as a passive reflection (something mirrors do), or as text/context. On the contrary, it concerns form operating in a deep, constitutive fashion, at a level otherwise hard for thought. One might quote Pope, and say 'what oft was thought, but ne'r so well expressed', but only if we conceive of 'thought' at the pre-philosophical level of 'background', an even more challenging realm than philosophy itself.

I want to end by giving a brief example of what I mean by the peculiarly historical, and expressive, aspect of Austen's form. It speaks to my first two theses:

1. No novelist prior to Austen marries desire and narrative with such success
2. No novelist prior to Austen so successfully suffuses the domestic with the immanent.

I shall come at my point from the perspective of 'moral luck'. The philosopher Bernard Williams coined the phrase to deal with a particular problem in moral philosophy, which is based on the premise that moral judgement ought to be based on the intentional states

of agents, on what it is they voluntarily did, or did not do. So what do we say about this example: two motorists in identical circumstances drive through a red light as a result of the bone-headed and illegal act of texting on their Blackberry. In one case there is an old lady crossing the road, in the other, through sheer luck, no one. Motorist A kills the old lady; Motorist B sails through, pedestrians unscathed. Are both equally reprehensible? What do we do about the moral luck of motorist B?

In a perfect Christian universe – certainly in a low Calvinist one – moral luck would be a contradiction in terms. If motorist B were lucky, it would be because of some obscure merit known only to God, and in any event the moral philosopher could rest assured that there would be a final reckoning, and a settling of scores. So - if the luck is deserved, it isn't luck, but just deserts. Ergo 'moral luck' is self-contradictory.

In general terms we refer to novels that exhibit such a Christian outlook as 'providential'. The overlap between providential structures and the plots of eighteenth century novels is a core finding in the literary history of the novel: as in *Pamela*, virtue is eventually rewarded. One could only logically think that Pamela herself was morally lucky, if one also thought she was no better than she ought to be, a scheming minx; and while one may conclude that she is, it is somewhat against the grain. By way of contrast, Austen's novels make no bones about the fact that the worlds they depict abound in moral luck (think Frank Churchill or the unpleasant branch of the Dashwood family); at the same time, and in contradiction, her heroines are morally lucky, earning their luck through an instinct for moral strenuousness they vigorous exercise (the most obvious example being Fanny Price).

I earlier noted that the ambiguous play of transcendence and immanence is characteristic both of 'Romantic irony' and what Taylor calls fully instantiated secularity

3. In Austen the ambiguity – the moral paradox – is that hers is recognizably the modern secular world, devoid of providence, where 'moral luck' is an ethical problem; on the other hand, her heroines are morally lucky, and deservedly so. To put the same point in a different register, her narratives set new standards for probability – essentially defining what probability meant in fiction, for the next hundred years – while also being fairy tales where Cinderella finds her prince charming. Her narratives are thus not just stories of sexual desire fulfilled, but the expression of a deepseated human desire for what Northrop Frye would call the anagogic, meaning the revelation of the transcendental in the immanent. And in Austen, it is the domestic plot – the establishment of the household – that carries this burden, in what one might call a narrative solution: an act of closure so dispersed through her form as to be, finally, inseparable from the medium itself.

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