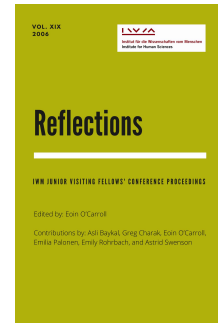


Disturbing “the torpid tranquillity of the soul”: Austen’s Textual-Historical Critique

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In 1791, Jane Austen composed her *History of England*, covering about 250 years of English rule in about twenty-five pages:

Henry the 5th

This Prince after he succeeded to the throne grew quite reformed and amiable, forsaking all his dissipated Companions, & never thrashing Sir William again. During his reign, Lord Cobham was burnt alive, but I forget what for...

Henry the 6th

I cannot say much for this Monarch’s sense. Nor would I if I could, for he was a Lancastrian. I suppose you know all about the Wars between him & the Duke of York who was of the right side. ... It was in this reign that Joan of Arc lived & made such a row among the English. They should not have burnt her – but they did... (134-135)

Partial, superficial, moralizing, forgetful: Austen’s historian was himself the target of her satire, the critical effect of which registered a serious critique that she was early among her contemporaries to make. While a late eighteenth-century rise of nationalism was driving the popularity of totalizing versions of historical progress – narratives of the progress of nations and civilization – Austen’s satirical voice was debunking certain strategies of popular historical prose; it was also insisting that the past was important other than in the ways these histories were representing it. For Austen, representing the life of the mind as it encountered historical social change and constructed a relation to the past was as important as recording the conventional historical events.

In a short essay of 1797 titled “Of History and Romance,” English political philosopher turned cultural critic William Godwin lists recent varieties of historical investigation: the progress of civilization he notes as the predominant form, but he also mentions the

history of philosophy, of eloquence, of the arts of refinement and pleasure, of the progress of revenue and the arts of taxation, of commerce, and of medals and coins. What these varieties of history share, Godwin observes, is a neglect of the individual:

There are those who conceive that history, in one or all the kinds here enumerated, is the only species of history deserving a serious attention. They disdain the records of individuals. To interest our passions, or employ our thoughts about personal events, be they of patriots, of authors, of heroes or kings, they regard as a symptom of effeminacy. Their mighty minds cannot descend to be busied about anything less than the condition of nations, and the collation and comparison of successive ages. Whatever would disturb by exciting our feelings the torpid tranquillity of the soul, they have in unspeakable abhorrence. (454)

Austen shares deeply Godwin's impulse to disturb this "torpid tranquillity of the soul" – a torpidity displayed in the mental disposition that could be satisfied by the historical abridgements of their day, the form of history she parodies in her own *History of England*; and she shares it to the extent that her entire career might be seen as a pondering of how best, in novel form, to weave a "knowledge of the individual" together with "the records of our social existence" (Godwin, 457).

What is now considered Austen's first novel, *Northanger Abbey*, though later revised and finally published in 1818, was originally written in the late 1790's. The novel's audacious narrator defies a self-deprecating trend when she defends her genre specifically against the celebrated historical abridgements of her day:

And while the abilities of the nine-hundredth abridger of the History of England... [are] eulogized by a thousand pens – there seems a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them" (5: 37).

Godwin puts the critique more bluntly when he says, "To read historical abridgements, in which each point of the subject is touched upon only, and immediately dismissed, is a wanton prodigality of time worthy only of folly or madness" (457). Austen, whose sense of history until recently has been dismissed by most critics, certainly had serious reservations about the way in which history was being recorded and consumed by the eighteenth-century British reading public; from her very first novel, her art is centrally concerned with cultural and historical memory and the problems that ensue from its forgetting. My thesis is that *Northanger Abbey* appears above all concerned with probing the problems and possibilities of a textual solution.

The central characteristic of the heroine is a fascination with gothic romance, and this preference drives her deep into misunderstandings that she must find her way through in that she mistakes gothic representation for a verisimilitude of human nature, assuming these books represent literally the way people are. Catherine's gothic penchant contains important implications, moreover, in respect to her sense of the past. She specifically avoids books of information – in particular, histories. When her new friend Miss Tilney asks Catherine if she is fond of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* genre, Catherine responds: "To say the truth, I do not much like any other. That is, I can read poetry and plays, and things

of that sort, and do not dislike travels. But history, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in.....the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome” (5: 108). Catherine’s response, however naively put, points to a larger problem of gender inequality in textual-historical forms of cultural memory; that is, historians simply were not representing women virtually at all.[1] What Catherine’s consequent preference for gothic fiction over history means in respect to the plot, however, is that when Catherine is invited to her friends’ home, Northanger Abbey, she imagines it and its former and present inhabitants in all the tropes of gothic fiction.

The central example of Catherine’s imagination gone wild is when she learns of the death (by natural causes) several years earlier of Mrs. Tilney, mistress of Northanger Abbey and the late mother of her friends. The story quickly sparks Catherine’s gothic skepticism: “[She] had read too much not to be perfectly aware of the ease with which a waxen figure might be introduced, and a supposititious funeral carried on” (5: 191). Austen’s satire is not aimed at book learning as opposed to experience (as Byron has it in *Don Juan*), but rather at the way Catherine has been reading the books she does, that is to say exclusively and uncritically, for she sees in them a direct illustration of social life. When she enters the abbey’s library, Catherine “gathered all that she could from this storehouse of knowledge, by running over the titles of half a shelf, and was ready to proceed” (5: 182-183). Knowledge is not Catherine’s pursuit: mystery is. What Catherine avoids, Austen suggests, is books that might enlarge her own “storehouse of knowledge” and help her understand the world around her.

Educated by Radcliffe’s novels and unaware of their tropes as literary conventions, Catherine makes peculiar sense of the world. And as her lack of interest in reading history suggests, this sense derives from a very light relationship to the actual past. Most often, Catherine is absorbed, instead, in the sensuous, social present and thus forgets the troubling past almost instantly. When she angers her brother and her friend Miss Thorpe by insisting on fulfilling her promise of a walk with the Tilneys in Bath, rather than going out for a drive with them, the thought of their grievance hardly disturbs her in the presence of the Tilneys: “The morning had passed away so charmingly as to banish all her friendship and natural affection, for no thought of Isabella or James had crossed her during their walk” (5: 114). Catherine’s capacity to proceed untroubled by unpleasant memories – symptom of a disposition that cares as little for the historical past – is the object of Austen’s gentle satire, visible in the idea that merely an enjoyable morning could do the work of eradicating “her friendship and natural affection.” At Northanger, when she suffers a “double distress” over her late arrival to dinner (chronological time is taken very seriously in this bourgeois household), her memory of it does not last the length of a sentence: “Catherine could not at all get over the double distress of having involved [Miss Tilney] in a lecture and been a great simpleton herself, till they were happily seated at the dinner-table, when the general’s complacent smiles, and a good appetite of her own, restored her to peace” (5: 165).

Catherine’s impatience with the historical past is matched by her lack of interest in the political future. General Tilney’s claim to stay up late reading out of his concern for politics and the future of the nation raises her suspicion. When he explains his “eyes will

be blinding for the good of others” (5: 187), Catherine spots a front for mischief. Her comic blindness to the fact that people can be genuinely concerned about national affairs nevertheless points to an insight: her more general suspicion of the father’s concern “for the good of others,” that is, turns out not to be entirely unfounded (as I’ll explain below).

Anticipation and retrospection do shape Catherine’s thought, but the regions of the past and future exist to her only in the terms of gothic fiction. Her arrival at the actual Northanger Abbey thus registers only the absence of these regions in her present experience: “she was actually under the abbey walls, was springing, with Henry’s assistance, from the carriage, was beneath the shelter of the old porch, and had even passed on to the hall, where her friend and the general were waiting to welcome her, without feeling one awful foreboding of *future misery* to herself, or one moment’s suspicion of any *past scenes of horror* being acted within the solemn edifice” (5: 161, emphasis mine). The future she can feel only as a foreboding of misery, the past as a scene of horror; the absence of these gothic sensations in her experience of an actual abbey – for the most part a rather banal, modern affair – leaves her with no alternative framework for conceiving of the past and future, and thus no strong sense of anything but the present.

No knowledge of the (Tilneys’) past, Catherine appears to conclude, can be found in modern surroundings – a conclusion, in fact, supported by the abbey’s architectural description. The modern additions to the abbey are, from an aesthetic point of view, entirely incongruous with its ancient structure:

Within the walls of the kitchen ended all the antiquity of the Abbey; the fourth side of the quadrangle having, on account of its decaying state, been removed by the general’s father, and the present erected in its place. All that was venerable ceased here. The new building was not only new, but declared itself to be so; ... no uniformity of architecture had been thought necessary. (5: 184)

As Julia Brown has observed, an “awkward, clumsy relation to the past [is] suggested in this image of architectural discord” (141). A widespread cultural disregard for the past might additionally be traced in anything from Mrs. Allen’s obsession with new clothes to Mr. Allen’s interest in “join[ing] some gentlemen to talk over the politics of the day and compare the accounts of their newspapers” – only the latest clothes and news articles matter, both of which will rapidly become obsolete (5: 71).

The awkward architectural division nevertheless illustrates Catherine’s mind under the virtually exclusive influence of the gothic literary fashion and suggests a curious irony about the late eighteenth-century fad of gothic romance fiction: its particular variety of history and fascination with the medieval period in fact serve to disconnect the present from an actual historical past. Northanger Abbey itself, Austen suggests, has a history to tell of its entry into modernity, a story that intertwines History with family history. We only glimpse that intriguing potential narrative, however, in the narrative discourse of what Catherine probably missed in a moment of distraction: “Many were the inquiries [Catherine] was eager to make of Miss Tilney; but so active were her thoughts, that when these inquiries were answered, she was hardly more assured than before, of Northanger Abbey having been a richly endowed convent at the time of the Reformation, of its having

fallen into the hands of an ancestor of the Tilneys on its dissolution, ..." (5: 141-142). In a sense further developed elsewhere in Austen's work, here we can glimpse a subtle proposal for a family or social history woven in with History, or "the [public] records of our social existence" (Godwin, 457). Catherine's inattention to the abbey's history repeats, in a finer tone, the disjointed modern condition of the building, as its historical condition remains irrelevant to her experience.

That an architectural image would figure as an image of Catherine's mind delivers us into the related notion that Catherine experiences mystery as less a temporal phenomenon than a spatial one. The unknown is to be encountered not in the past or future, but behind a trap door. When Catherine is disabused about the Tilney family history – Mr. Tilney has *not* secretly murdered his wife as she had suspected – she does finally appear to see the importance of reflecting on the past and even sees the past *in* her mistakes and embarrassment of the present: "She did not learn either to forget or defend the past. ... She remembered with what feelings she had prepared for a knowledge of Northanger. She saw that the infatuation had been created, the mischief settled long before her quitting Bath, and it seemed as if the whole might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had there indulged" (5: 199-200). A poor young woman, ruined by reading, and repentant: so ends the second paragraph of the chapter beginning "The visions of romance were over" (5:199).

Catherine is not a heroine completely reformed, however, and that sense of finality is quickly overcome in the very next paragraph – and in spatial terms. She muses to herself: "Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for" (5: 200). The geographical qualification that Catherine makes here is important, and it enables her not to forego a gothic imagination entirely; she simply displaces it onto the rest of Europe:

Of the Alps and Pyrenees, with their pine forests and their vices, [gothic romance] might give a faithful delineation; and Italy, Switzerland, and the South of France, might be as fruitful in horrors as they were there represented. Catherine dared not doubt beyond her own country, and even of that, if hard pressed, would have yielded the northern and western extremities. But in the central part of England there was surely some security for the existence even of a wife not beloved, in the laws of the land, and the manners of the age. Murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves, and neither poison nor sleeping potions to be procured, like rhubarb, from every druggist. Among the Alps and Pyrenees, perhaps, there were no mixed characters. There, such as were not spotless as an angel might have the disposition of a fiend. But in England it was not so. ... (5: 200)

Catherine's conclusion that gothic fiction still holds true on the Continent allows her to think in the same way about continental Europe as she had been about her immediate surroundings, even if her opinion of (midland) England must change. She derives this framework for understanding apparently from Henry Tilney, an avid reader of Hume and Robertson, both proponents of an eighteenth-century philosophy of historical progress.

(5:109). What sparks Catherine's reevaluation of her present, and of the Tilney family, is a remonstrance from Henry Tilney, who bases his own perspective – which he takes to be the English point of view – on political geography and eighteenth-century historiography:

“... Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? *Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians.* Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them?” (5: 197, emphasis mine)

In the “Christian” (that is, Protestant) nation of England at the end of the eighteenth century, educated people do not murder each other (or if they do, the law punishes them) Henry informs Catherine, attempting to replace her gothic imagination by educating her in a highly politicized, nationalistic form of “remembering” England.

Austen figures Henry Tilney's sense of history and political geography in contrast to Catherine's gothic sensibility, which of course has led the heroine into some considerable misunderstandings. But almost immediately following Henry's reminder to Catherine of the where and when of the civil society in which she lives – as a way of demonstrating the trust she ought to have in his father's decency – narrative events and disclosures erode the validity of Henry's historiographical beliefs. That is, Catherine's adoption of Henry Tilney's historiographical picture of contemporary Europe leads her even further from the social reality. For the General's capacity for incivility, to the point of social cruelty – rubbing against the grain of Henry's progressive model of English civilization – bursts onto the scene, disturbing what we might call contemporary historiography's “torpid tranquillity”; suddenly and without explanation, the General orders Catherine to leave Northanger immediately and without anyone to accompany her on an entire day's journey home: now “[h]er anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability” (5: 227). While General Tilney's earlier pacing and brooding have not gone unnoticed by Catherine (though she misconstrues their cause), hitherto Henry has appeared insensible to a certain capacity for cruelty and greed in his father's character. Claudia Johnson has thus observed, “Gothic novels teach the deferent and self-deprecating Catherine to do what no one and nothing else does: to distrust paternal figures...” (39). The heroine, though not literally on the mark, has been more insightful about the nature of the general's character than Henry has, for Henry appears unsuspecting about the dark side of his father's motivations, that is, his motivation to court Catherine for the estate he mistakenly thinks she will inherit from Mr. Allen.

Although Claudia Johnson thus concludes that the novel parodies Catherine's literature of choice finally out of respect and a sense of affinity, it would be a loss to dismiss Austen's critique of Catherine's sense of the past fostered by her reading, and outlined above.[2] Haunted by the French Revolution, Catherine's final illusion that gothic tropes guide human behavior only on the Continent would find support in the Continental settings of British gothic fiction. This suggests Austen's further critique of the British Gothic: that it formally abjects (or casts off) and renders in exaggerated fashion aspects inherent in contemporary British society that do not coalesce with its narrative of national progress.

What remains is an overriding sense of the poverty of kinds of textual history available, a statement about the inadequacy of a cultural memory whose only official textual channel was histories by Hume, Robertson, and the like: that is, totalizing visions of national historical progress framed by distinct periodizations. Their illustrations of royal quarrels and of war, “good for nothing [men], and hardly any women at all,” would presumably have prepared Catherine no better than did gothic romance to understand the household evils she encounters (5: 108).

Catherine’s comically blithe consideration of the past – figured in her reading, in the architectural ekphrasis of the abbey’s aesthetic, and in the narrative discourse of her consciousness – leads directly to her distortions of the present. But the national-historical narratives of progress informing Henry Tilney’s world view, momentarily entertained as a corrective to Catherine’s extremes, are equally found wanting in cultural or social knowledge insofar as they lead Henry to assume that social evils are not to be found in such an advanced nation as England. While one might argue that Austen’s sympathies fall closer to Catherine’s reading than to Henry’s, the author’s point of view rests entirely with neither genre, for we are left both with Catherine’s inattention to the real family history and the way that might be intriguingly woven in with cultural history on the one hand, and, on the other, the daunting gap between philosophies of historical progress and the social dynamics of English households. In these aspects of disconnection lies an implicit historical critique of the kinds of history that were available in textual form and a suggestion about other kinds that might be. To that end, Austen’s novel was in subtle ways treading on sacred historiographical ground generally assumed to be the intellectual territory of men – and this in addition to its having “genius, wit, and taste” to recommend it.

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Notes:

1. What I illuminate about the political implications of representation in Catherine's observation here is perhaps enabled by a shared concern in recent Romantic criticism for recovering forgotten figures of (literary) history. If *Northanger Abbey* can be considered a subtle proposal for a different kind of history that brings women's experiences (or works) into purview, we might understand the recent reorganization(s) of the Romantic literary canon as beginning to carry out the very project proposed in Austen's novel, from the point-of-view of literary history. [[return to text](#)]

2. Johnson writes: "Austen's display of human nature in *Northanger Abbey* is necessarily coupled with Radcliffe's, and is executed by showing the justification for gothic conventions, not by dismissing them" (48). [[return to text](#)]

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