

ONE Secret Love

I

All of us who read Jane Austen early—say, at eleven or twelve, the age when she began writing—were lost to the siren lure of her voice. “How nicely you talk; I love to hear you. You understand every thing.”¹ Yet whereas Emma’s talk merely held Harriet with the charm of a *person*, what Austen’s writing channeled for us was the considerably more exciting appeal of no longer being one. Here was a truly out-of-body voice, so stirringly free of what it abhorred as “particularity” or “singularity” that it seemed to come from no enunciator at all. It scanted person even in the linguistic sense, rarely acknowledging, by saying *I*, its origination in an authoring self, or, by saying *you*, its reception by any other. We rapt, admiring readers might feel we were only eavesdropping on delightful productions intended for nobody in particular. And in the other constituents of person—not just body, but psyche, history, social position—the voice was also deficient, so much so that its overall impersonality determined a narrative authority and a beauty of expression both without equal. The former, bare of personal specifications that might situate and hence subvert it, rose to absoluteness; while the latter, likewise emptied of self, achieved classic self-

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containment. No extraneous static encumbered the dictation of a grammar that completed, and an art that finished, every crystalline sentence. Altogether, such thrillingly inhuman utterance was not stylish; it was Style itself.² In other words—the words of every lover at first sight—it was the thing that (our youth notwithstanding) *we had been waiting for all our lives*. From that singularity which, as Lady Russell knew, “makes the worst part of our suffering” (P 12), hadn’t we longed for the same exemption? Let dull, docile Harriet be always content to “love to hear” Emma; in the boldness of our precocity, we were henceforward resolved to *speak* Austen Style, and to write it too. In the meantime, until we should acquire it, we indulged the fantasy of having done so. With the creative eye of daydream, we saw ourselves already wielding, already flashing the wondrous brand: saw its brilliant surface dazzle our enemies, and its sharp point, when they persisted in attack, pierce them to the quick; saw, to crown everything, its genius for detachment—for clean cuts—sever us once and forever from all the particulars of who and what we were, including of course those most responsible for the pain of our being thought peculiar.

Yet sooner or later, this experience of reading Jane Austen found itself contradicted—felt itself disabled—by the quite different experience of *being read* reading her. If the one moment, private and elective, united us all in common ecstasy, the other, public and compulsory, brought alienation into our midst, the mutual alienation of “girls” and “boys.” For eventually—whether the “event” followed on our raptures, or occurred even before they had commenced (with trauma, who can be certain of sequence?)—popular opinion let us know that what should have sundered us from all identifying labels had in fact glued onto us one in particular: in short, that what we took for Style, everyone else took for Woman. Like a handbag or fragrance, the works of Jane Austen were deemed a “female thing”; and

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just as they were considered to bespeak the most distinctive depths of womanly being, so they were equally regarded as unreadable by those out of their natural element there. How could our reading not have noticed, not have suspected, so obvious and universally stamped a fact? Or, if informed by this fact, how could our reading have so far forgotten it as to sustain the very different fantasy of unconditioned being? Make no mistake: the girl reader as well as the boy had to negotiate the contradiction between the ghostly No One of enthralled imagination and the all-too-creaturely Woman of general consensus. But she at least had at her disposal some conspicuous sources of reconciliation. For one thing, what people said about Jane Austen could only enhance a girl's right relation to the sex system and to the culture it governed; she had done what a female not only would, but ought. Even better, by virtue of already anticipating, in her choice of books, the *grown-up* state of a female, she might think of herself as receiving precocity's most precious recognition, a certificate of adult-worthiness. But best of all, if Austen meant Woman, then perhaps in turn Woman might mean Austen, and a girl's command of the language of the one—a dialect, apparently, of her native tongue—would increase as her body continued developing the mature form of the other.

But the same discovery that, sometimes even despite herself, made the girl a good girl, made the boy all wrong. Plied with a Style whose unknown strength went straight to his head, he had fancied himself conquering the world with his swank Excalibur; now he woke to sobering sounds of derision and found that, during his intoxication, just as Lydia Bennet had done to another would-be soldier in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen had put him in a dress.³ And upon the asinine transvestite spectacle he had been made to make of himself, one of two fates seemed necessarily to follow. Either he would no more be able to grow

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into Austen Style than into the Woman in whose name and nature the received idea had rooted it; or, on the contrary, in some less literal way, he might indeed grow into her, all the more easily in that apparently he had already begun doing so. But the completed process, if his present shamed state were any indication, would spell the most awful social doom imaginable. (When Mr. Knightley pronounces Frank Churchill's script "like a woman's writing," even the women he is addressing, Emma and Mrs. Weston, leap to vindicate it against what they consider a "base aspersion" [E 297].) In spite of her being, then, as Henry James famously put it, "one of those of the shelved and safe," Jane Austen had got the boy into trouble, and it was trouble that augured worse to come. Albeit her works regulated erotic desire so well that the world had judged them sexless, and made their author's very name a byword for chastity, they wound up giving their puerile reader, still at an age of sexual inexperience and vagueness, as much credit for an inclination to sex perversion as if they had been the wrong kind of pornography.

As Proust is always reminding us, though, we will do pretty much anything not to have to give up a pleasure; if occasionally the boy may have aborted his Austenophilia in repression, far more frequently he went on to indulge it in secret. "Let no name ever pass our lips. We were very wrong before; we will be cautious now" (342). Of his enduring attachment, then, consider this later example, in which, the general prophecy having come to pass, he is finally *practicing* his perversion.

The butch number swaggering into a bar in a leather get-up opens his mouth and sounds like a pansy, takes you home, where the first thing you notice is the complete works of Jane Austen, gets you into bed, and—well, you know the rest.

This is Leo Bersani, ferociously ventriloquizing what he calls "the classic put-down" by gay men of one another's pretensions

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to manhood.⁴ Even to its own sense of itself, the joke couldn't be more banal. Yet could it ever be too "tired," as we say, to *work*, to elicit automatically, from virtually any audience, the knowing laugh of folkloric literacy? On the contrary, the synergy of stereotypes motors an irresistible farce in which no sooner has the Woman been announced in the drawing room than, with duly inopportune eagerness, the Woman Inside charges out of the closet to rejoin her. And so continues into sexual maturity, even by his own kind, the shaming of the boy Austen reader, who seems (if we might keep up the shaming a bit longer) to have learned so little from past experience, to have amassed so meager a store of pop culture capital, that his childhood indiscretion is likely to go on being repeated till the end of his clueless days. As compulsively as the author of a "perfect crime" is undone by his unconscious need to get its perfection recognized, this incurable queen can't help laying his closet open to the view it was built to obstruct.

But the joke depends equally on a second recourse to Jane Austen, as secret as the first was open, and presupposing, besides the instant turnoff produced by her name, the thing perhaps least compatible with that reflex: a long and intimate acquaintance with her works. As anyone who dares boast a similar acquaintance may observe, this hidden Jane Austen ordains—both at large and, she would say, "at small" (L 163)—the very structure and tone of the joke. No doubt, this trick anecdote is as far from a marriage plot as the language in which it is related is free of the lexical and grammatical archaisms that signify Jane Austen in, for example, those misguided modern continuations of the novels where someone "is come" and something "put by." Precisely in the absence of these conventional signs of her, however, she is allowed to determine virtually everything else in the joke, from the confident ironic presentation of a universally acknowledged truth, to the wit that

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hones this truth into trenchant epigrammatic point, to the even more terrible sophistication that, while leaving its ostensible victim unaware of how he is being judged, keeps the dark cloud of shame that fails to descend on *him* hanging ominously over *us*, as our own prospective downfall if we should fail, or fail to pretend, to “know the rest.”⁵ Even a more literal kind of paper trail lies directly at hand in the precision of imitation that betrays, under the semblance of coarse sexual candor, the prim rhetoric employed by Miss Elizabeth Bennet with Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*:

My youngest sister has left all her friends—has eloped;—has thrown herself into the power of—of Mr. Wickham. They are gone off together from Brighton. *You* know him too well to doubt the rest. (PP 277)

But most of all, we recognize Austen in that *frozen* speech which at the moment of reaching us (as Roland Barthes once said of myth) “suspends itself, turns away and assumes the look of a generality.”⁶

Ultimately, then, the joke allows us to distinguish two male readers of Jane Austen, a foolish and a clever. The foolish one has evidently fantasized “being” Jane Austen—being the woman she was—but ends up only being the object of ridicule in a quasi-Austenian comedy; while the clever one, more intelligently bent on “performing” Austen—on writing that comedy—mocks, scorns, disowns the very name of Jane Austen, and so contrives, anonymously and in secret, to carry on her work. He has transcended the status of a character whose slips are by definition always showing, by arrogating that of a narrator who, also by definition, makes use of those slips to confer volume and outline on the fictive person whom, ubiquitous and incorporeal, he can no longer resemble. For as he has understood it, Austen’s work most fundamentally consists in *de-*

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materializing the voice that speaks it. From the very start, his “I” has been commuted into a generalized “you”; and as for his voice, which in writing itself up as Austen Style, has lost its telltale vocal accents, who will ever be able to decide whether it sounds like a pansy’s or not? This so-called narrator has in fact faded into that universal utterance which, even in Austen’s own works, we can never quite read as *hers*; hence, in its appropriation here, isn’t quite *his* either. Indeed, this fading somehow shifts our sexual understanding of him; from his role in the anecdote as a disappointed bottom, his accession to narration virtually refigures him into the voice of a supercilious top showing what Proust called “the contempt of the least homosexual for the most homosexual”⁷—and even into the general voice of heterosexuality itself, mocking the faggotry it observes from the unassailable distance of a spectator. And so, the contumely that the foolish queen draws on himself *for* reading Austen, that is, for being Woman, the clever one escapes *through* reading Austen, through having taken, practically as well as intellectually, the point of (her) Style.

But why do we speak of an escape, when such distinct traces allow us to catch the aspiring escape artist in the act, an act that thus would seem—along with the artist—*manqué*? Why do we call him clever, and not careless, when we may see, not far beneath his depersonalized, defeminized irony, his personal rage at having to forego the “female” sexual position; when we may show how his hard-hearted prose is as much—and ultimately, as transparent—a disguise as any leather getup; when, in sum, we possess all the wherewithal to do to this clever one just what he has done to his foolish other? It would be premature to answer these questions, which touch on what might be thought of as the *secret* of Style, before the extent of their bearing has been better grasped. I have so far presented the feminizing shame of Style (a shame that Style at once incurs and in-

flicts) as a very *narrowly* distributed abjection, peculiar to the minuscule band of juvenile Austen readers by whom it is first sustained, or to the closed company of the gay subculture in which it is post-traumatically confessed and mimed. A vulgar psychological reading might even find it most relevantly peculiar to myself, whose interest in Austen and the question of (her) Style would be reducible to this “personal” history. One way or another, in short, this question must seem circumscribed within the already vehemently circumscribed social category of the male homosexual; it is his “thing,” or not even that: his thingy.

Yet the homosexual is never just himself, never constituted merely by his own aberrant desires and delights. A peripheral being, he nonetheless discharges a central function: that of a depository where certain disturbing experiences, desires, fantasies of the culture at large are placed for safe keeping, at once acknowledged and confined. The homosexual’s “classic” pursuit of style is, among other things, his heroic way of rising to meet the fate projected on him in any case by a culture fearful of the extreme, exclusive, emptying, ecstatic character of *any* serious experience of Style. Whether in literature or film, few of modern narrative’s master stylists—or *stylothes*, as we do better to call them, for positing Style as the first principle, the a priori of their work—have failed to mount just this kind of lightning rod. From Wilde’s too-pretty Dorian Gray, to Hitchcock’s anal murderers with their “neat little touches,” to Fellini’s affected fairies—the logical fulfillment of a *dolce vita* in which, sooner or later, “we will all be homosexuals”—examples abound of a homosexual or analogously queered figure meant to draw off the charges of excess and aberrance from the excessive and aberrant oeuvre under construction. And against the tendency to regard such anxious, ambiguous scapegoating as an exclusively male practice, recall this fierce sarcasm from a

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woman not widely known for homophobia but famous for a style of her own. “Anyone who has the temerity to write about Jane Austen,” an evidently brash Virginia Woolf wrote at the outset of an essay on that same subject, “is aware . . . that there are twenty-five elderly gentlemen living in the neighborhood of London who resent any slight upon her genius as if it were an insult to the chastity of their Aunts.”⁸ Already, in 1923, Austen Style needs to be acquitted of the peculiarities of a maiden aunt; and already, the means of acquittal is to pitch them, like some scalding hot potato, at the male aunties who love her for them. But of this maneuver, there is an even better, more pertinent example than Woolf’s (which is complex enough, as she is implicitly arguing the case not just for Austen, but also, against Austen, for her own fiction). The whole elaborate and rather brutal game I have been describing, in which Austen Style may be collapsed into Woman and Woman into (male) Homosexual—or in which Austen Style, so as *not* to be collapsed into Woman, is collapsed into Homosexual directly—is not just played “around” Jane Austen. With equal ferocity and unrivaled skill, it has been played, first and foremost, “in” Jane Austen, as the shadow boxing of the great stylothete against herself. By way of once more affirming the deep Austenophilia of the gay man who ridicules Austen, the better to achieve (her) anonymous, defeminized Style, we turn to a symmetrical episode in Austen’s own work, where she ridicules what might almost be a gay man, for a similar reason.

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