

Donna A. Gessell, PhD  
University of North Georgia

### Civilization: Rereading Austen's Constructed Utopia

In her book, *On Rereading*, Patricia Meyer Spacks relates the story of meeting “a group composed of female Holocaust survivors. They convened at regular intervals, year after year, to read Jane Austen aloud to one another. When they finished a novel, they’d go on to the next one; when they finished them all, they’d start over. Why Austen? [she] asked one of them. Because, [her] informant said, she represents civilization” (55).

The anecdote begs for an evaluation of how Austen “represents civilization” in her novels and makes the representation accessible to her readers and rereaders. In each of her novels, Austen uses her narrator to create a utopia through the ideas expressed in direct narrative comments as well as through the filtering of the focal characters’ ideas. This utopia of ideas created by Austen’s narrator constructs a Platonic idealization of society, one that values virtue and brings order to our chaotic and indeterminate reality. Even though each novel presents a somewhat different view of its utopia through its narrator, the overall Austen utopia is one of idealized civilization, which Spacks defines as “the opposite of the barbarity that members of the group had experienced” as well as “refinement of thought, manners, or taste.” She expands her discussion to include “verbal civilization,” or “the mastery of style that declares order and control, opposition to the barbarous in all its forms, the importance of appearances that reflect truth,” about “a world that in its details and its rendering speaks of a structure of social rules, generally obeyed, conveyed through disciplined plot and style” (55). These ideas of civilization are not initially shared equally by narrator and focal characters. The narrator’s utopia is idealized well beyond that of the characters’, whose viewpoints are initially dependent on their

particularized backgrounds. The resulting philosophical tension is resolved only as the characters' considerations of their actions evolve their thinking. The process of rereading the novels makes clear how Austen creates this utopia: it is a perfection of form with its higher order of virtue and morality, an idealized reality for her characters as well as her readers and rereaders, a view into the "civilization" that the holocaust survivors seek.

*Sense and Sensibility*, Austen's first published work, offers insights into the construction of Austen's created utopia. Initially, the two focal characters attempt to create and live in their own utopian worlds, the ones suggested by the title: the older sister, Elinor, lives in a world of rationality or "sense," and the younger sister, Marianne, in a world of romanticism or "sensibility." During the first half of the novel, these separate and contradictory utopias are shown through almost every aspect of the two Dashwood sisters' characters: their activities, their attitudes, their suitors, and even their physical descriptions.

The initial description of Elinor establishes her sense, with its "strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother[ . . . ] She had an excellent heart;—her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge [ . . . ] which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught" (3). The sister, of course, is Marianne, who, though she possesses abilities "quite equal to Elinor's," "was sensible and clever; but eager in everything: her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent" (3). Marianne's physical description also reveals her sensibility: "in her eyes, which were very dark, there was a life, a spirit, an eagerness, which could hardly be seen without delight,"

as opposed to Elinor's description, which merely mentions "a delicate complexion, regular features, and a remarkably pretty figure" (36).

Their views of their physical surroundings further reveal their contrasting sense and sensibility as Elinor comments "The woods and walks [are] thickly covered with dead leaves" and Marianne responds "'Oh, [ . . . ] with what transporting sensation have I formerly seen them fall! How have I delighted, as I walked, to see them driven in showers about me by the wind! What feelings have they, the season, the air altogether inspired! Now there is no one to regard them. They are seen only as a nuisance, swept hastily off, and driven as much as possible from the sight.'" To this, Elinor responds "'It is not every one [ . . . ] who has your passion for dead leaves'" (68). In fact, Elinor sums up Marianne's sensibility by observing "her opinions are all romantic," associating her with the Romantic movement, which privileges the recollected emotions of the individual over the rational thought as received by larger society (43). In her selfishness, Marianne focuses solely on her emotions toward nature, not using nature to grow beyond herself into a larger view of reality. Elinor explains what for Austen and her narrator is the real problem with Marianne's outlook: "'There are inconveniences attending such feelings as Marianne's, which all the charms of enthusiasm and ignorance of the world cannot atone for. Her systems have all the unfortunate tendency of setting propriety at nought; and a better acquaintance with the world is what I look forward to as her greatest possible advantage'" (43). Here, sensibility so privileges the individual's emotions that it can result only in the ignoring of the propriety so necessary for civilizing larger society.

Predictably, each sister falls in love with a man who reinforces her own view. Elinor falls in love with Edward Ferrars, whom Marianne complains has a "spiritless" and "tame"

manner of reading, "with so little sensibility" (13). Marianne falls in love with John Willoughby, who "read[s] with all the sensibility and spirit which Edward had unfortunately wanted" (37). It is only when each loses hope in marrying her love that each sister examines her belief system, realizing the weaknesses of its narrowness. Marianne, suffering from the consequences of indulging her over-emotional reactions, which physically weaken her so that they nearly kill her, finally sees how her lack of rationality in choosing a husband handicaps her. Because Elinor's would-be suitor is already engaged to someone whom she must interact with in society, she eventually has to learn to privilege her emotions to attain him as the husband she desires, despite the strict dictates of society.

Marianne recognizes her differences with Elinor, further revealing the selfishness of her ideas as she feels unfairly treated: "[I]s this fair? is this just? are my ideas so scanty? But I see what you mean. I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank. I have erred against every common-place notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful—had I talked only of the weather and the roads, and had I spoken only once in ten minutes, this reproach would have been spared" (37). In fact, repeatedly in her actions, Marianne has little regard for how her emotions affect others: "But Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve; and to aim at the restraint of sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to common-place and mistaken notions" (41).

The problem with each utopian view becomes increasingly clear: each sister has been too selfish in her view, making it untenable. Each sister realizes the weaknesses of her position: Marianne's exaltation in her own selfish feelings limits her ability to see others

clearly, and Elinor's imposition of her rational views over other characters and situations is impractical. Marianne must admit more rationality into her sensibility, and Elinor must honor her emotions even as she retains her sense.

These utopian visions fall just as Austen's narrator reinforces a larger utopian worldview: the utopia each sister has constructed becomes unsustainable not only with each losing her suitor, but also as the social world of the two sisters expands. Their circle enlarges from their immediate family into their country neighborhood, to include another extended family and their larger circle of friends. Soon after, they travel to London, expanding further their circle of acquaintances. Incorporating the views and manners of the other's worldview, each sister realizes that the utopia she had constructed is not adequate for dealing with the realities of larger society, as captured in an exchange between them:

"I have frequently detected myself in such kind of mistakes," said Elinor, "in a total misapprehension of character in some point or other: fancying people so much more gay or grave, or ingenious or stupid than they really are, and I can hardly tell why or in what the deception originated. Sometimes one is guided by what they say of themselves, and very frequently by what other people say of them, without giving oneself time to deliberate and judge."

"But I thought it was right, Elinor," said Marianne, "to be guided wholly by the opinion of other people. I thought our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of neighbours. This has always been your doctrine, I am sure."

“No, Marianne, never. My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behaviour. You must not confound my meaning. I am guilty, I confess, of having often wished you to treat our acquaintance in general with greater attention; but when have I advised you to adopt their sentiments or to conform to their judgment in serious matters?” (72-73)

Marianne exalts too much in her selfish feelings on nature, not using nature to get beyond herself. Elinor is too wrapped up in using rationality to smooth conflict, not recognizing the full importance of admitting truth. Although neither is inherently at fault for her vision of a personal utopia, the larger issue that Austen illuminates in the novel is that selfishness will not sustain a utopian vision; instead, the individual's views and actions have to support that of the larger society and without the larger view, the individual's utopia will crumble.

Thus, Austen depicts the danger inherent in confusing both rationality and emotionalism with the even more important behaviors needed to mix in society. The earlier false utopian worlds are set up only to be broken down, as her characters learn that they cannot represent reality with selfish idealization and that individuals who try to live these unrealistic visions will fail. The ideals of civilization, then, are not so easily identified as an either/or paradigm of sense or sensibility. Instead, the ideal is in exercising *both* sense and sensibility in correct amounts to support civil discourse and relationships, even when others are not exercising sense or sensibility because of selfishness and an extraordinary interest in materialism.

Even as the Dashwood sisters are realizing the inadequacies of their worldviews, Austen repositions them to represent a larger utopian order. Austen shifts the focus by

introducing a cast of characters whose focus is in a self-serving materialism. They each exhibit selfishness which keeps them from realizing the reality of how society works, that it depends on virtuous behavior, considerate of others. Through their self-serving materialism, these characters exhibit less than admirable “thoughts, manners, or taste,” to use Spacks’s terminology, and represent a dystopia or a place where people are dehumanized by the incivility of others. The Steele sisters, Lucy and Nancy, are only outstripped in their shallowness and selfish obsession with materialism by other characters such as John Willoughby, who is at last revealed in his quest for a marriage that will support his profligate habits at the expense of love, and John Dashwood, whose fixation on wealth, property, and possessions supersedes his concern for other individuals, even those who are close relatives, including his stepsisters, Elinor and Marianne.

Exceeding all of these shallow, selfish characters is Robert Ferrars, whose incivility is revealed when Elinor and Marianne encounter him in a London jewelry store. Not yet aware that he is the younger brother of Elinor’s former suitor, they are in a hurry to conduct their business so as not to inconvenience their hostess. Elinor hopes to catch his eye so that he will hurry his business; however, he is engrossed in the selfish business of buying a toothpick-case, an act of vanity that Austen trivializes through her narrator’s description of the encounter:

But the correctness of his eye, and the delicacy of his taste, proved to be beyond his politeness. He was giving orders for a toothpick-case for himself, and till its size, shape, and ornaments were determined, all of which, after examining and debating for a quarter of an hour over every toothpick-case in the shop, were finally arranged by his own inventive fancy, he had no leisure

to bestow any other attention on the two ladies, than what was comprised in three or four very broad stares; a kind of notice which served to imprint on Elinor the remembrance of a person and face, of strong, natural, sterling insignificance, though adorned in the first style of fashion. (170)

The very triviality and self-serving materialism of the object of a toothpick-case suggests the character of its seeker, who is “beyond his politeness,” a social *faux pas* that is only exaggerated by the accretion of detail: the exorbitant amount of time spent on the task of “examining and debating” something so unimportant; the “inventive fancy” that implies the disconnection with reality; and the “sterling insignificance” of his face “though adorned in the first style of fashion” which characterizes Elinor’s impression of him. “Marianne,” we are told, “was spared from the troublesome feelings of contempt and resentment, on this impertinent examination of their features, and on the puppyism of his manner in deciding on all the different horrors of the different toothpick-cases presented to his inspection, by remaining unconscious of it all” (170). The narrator further hyperbolizes his character:

At last the affair was decided. The ivory, the gold, and the pearls, all received their appointment, and the gentleman having named the last day on which his existence could be continued without the possession of the toothpick-case, drew on his gloves with leisurely care, and bestowing another glance on the Miss Dashwoods, but such a one as seemed rather to demand than express admiration, walked off with a happy air of real conceit and affected indifference. (170)

Indicting Robert Ferrars in his pettiness through his close identification with an object as inconsequential as a toothpick-case, the narrator censures him for his inattention to the



needs of others, an act of rudeness that weakens society, which she implies, if left unchecked and allowed to be adopted by more characters, would lead to dystopia. As Spacks suggests, “The threats [ . . . ] come from inattentive men and women who satisfy themselves with forms, neglecting their meanings. To preserve the values essential to civilized life must never become automatic or even easy [ . . . ] It remains always a vital obligation” (73).

In this example and others, the narrative voice makes clear that the individual’s focus should not center on the specific material objects that civilization has constructed, but rather on the construction of civilization itself. The focus should be on the universals of human interaction, rather than the specifics of a particular time or place. The focus is shifted from the specifics of the novel to an ordered universality of experiences. The narrative vision transcends the immediate, and the reader is left to imagine experiencing those emotions and rational thoughts in a contemporary construction of civilization.

The novel, thus, offers a critique of itself: Austen’s fiction works by careful construction of universality, dependent on few specifics of its physicality. Instead, her prose depends heavily on nominalizations that presuppose a number of indispensable idealized forms. The paradox Austen creates is one that offers generalities that demand the reader to supply the specifics. She universalizes the themes embedded in her plot by insisting on the reader’s personalization of the experience to create a utopian vision of the world. Although fictional, the experience offers the reality of a civilization which at once displaces the reader yet at the same time offers refuge in its utopian construction, a tension that invites constant rereading.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. Hebron NH: Collins, 2010. Kindle Edition.

Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *On Rereading*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011, Print.