

The Anxiety of Influence

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Jane Austen, by Tony Tanner;
Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

In the 1960s and 1970s Tony Tanner edited, and wrote introductions to, the Penguin editions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. These introductions were reworked in the 1980s and, along with chapters on the remaining novels, were published in Tanner's study *Jane Austen* (1986). This 2007 edition is a reissue of that study, with an excellent preface by Marilyn Gaull.

Before his death in 1998, Tanner was a Fellow of King's College and Professor of English and American Literature at Cambridge University. A contemporary of Marilyn Butler, Tanner's study is, in many ways, as revolutionary as hers. After Tanner and Butler there can be no return to criticism that focuses on the author's aesthetic autonomy and ignores the social context of that autonomy. Many of Tanner's critical themes are now normative in Austen studies, like Butler's, and reading him afresh makes much of what comes after him seem derivative. This sense of derivation suggests, perhaps, criticism's version of the anxiety of influence Harold Bloom notices among poets. It's easy to measure the influence of Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, judging from the many studies that have been inspired by or have challenged it. It's harder to measure the influence of Tanner's *Jane Austen*, because one doesn't hear his name mentioned as often as Butler's. Perhaps his insights are more subtle, or were more amenable to the Zeitgeist.

Gaull's preface is a treat that accomplishes several things, as a history of the Austen phenomenon in general, and an overview of Austen studies in particular, which locates Tanner at the vanguard of so much we now take for granted. Born in 1935, raised in south London, educated at Cambridge, Tanner brought a "natural gift for close reading and a boundless curiosity" to his studies of British and American literature. His first distinction was not as an Austen scholar but as an Americanist: "interpreting American literature from his British perspective and drawing the great American works into a Western canon".

In the late-1950s Tanner went to Berkeley on a Harkness Fellowship. Gaull draws powerful analogies between this fellowship experience, which defined much of Tanner's subsequent career, and David Lodge's *Changing Places*, a novel with strong links to Austen that fictionalises the different British and American social and academic

contexts of the 1960s and 1970s. In those days of post-war flux and change, Gaull suggests, the differences between Britain and America were stark: Britons read Austen through a narrow prism as they “visibly shrank” into mini cars and mini skirts; Americans did not read Austen, or many literary novels, as they “materially expanded” into a nation that appeared to Europeans “to be living an extended adolescence”. In spite of the latter, Tanner was inspired, and, like the American authors he admired most, he customarily wrote without the “baggage” he had come to associate with literary studies.

Gaull notices Tanner’s unique style, of having his own say in his own way, “claiming his space and earning his voice with powerful, discriminating, and original readings richly enhanced by allusions to philosophers, writers, critics, and intellectuals, both contemporary and historical”. She reminds us of how Tanner highlighted, as others couldn’t, “those crucial analogies” between what was happening around him in post-war Britain and America and “Austen’s equally precarious society, communities at the edge of dissolution, characterised, then as now, by hypocrisy, materialism, and the degradation of language”. For many of us, the truth of such a reading has become self-evident, because Tanner demonstrates that truth through his own close reading, and because we now see that truth for ourselves in the novels and the ways we relate them to our lives.

It’s worth remembering, however, that Tanner’s reading was once radical, as Gaull explains: “Though Austen was conventionally identified with the stable values of an idealised society, to which people either agreed or objected, in Tanner’s contemporary readings, she depicts individual lives as a succession of liminal experiences, families as historical and geographical refugees, whole communities and societies ‘dispersed’ ... a ‘floating, drifting changing population’ captured at individual and collective turning points”. Like Butler, Tanner “drew Austen into the intellectual and literary conversation of the Western world”. He knew Austen “didn’t need historical referents to illuminate her work” since her novels *became* history and illuminated the minds of readers who “hardly knew the formative or normative role they played in their lives”.

Similarly, as a woman, a novelist, a thoughtful and aware human being, Austen was herself “a great idea, a model of how ordinary people survive in perilous times, as we all do. Like most people she lived tangentially, on the margins, in the shadows of clashing armies and imminent doom, powerless to influence them, to escape, explain, or resist the conflicts or even natural disasters that shape our lives and change us forever ... she experienced the uncertainty, disruption, social confusion, the daily challenges of keeping alive, earning a living, overcoming disease, bereavement, becoming and staying connected ... Like us, she lived in an age of terror, for which she was unprepared, a terror disregarded by those who should have known better”.

These shadows, around and within, are brilliantly conveyed in Austen's representation of Henry Tilney, in *Northanger Abbey*, especially when he reminds Catherine Morland that they live in a rational and English and Christian "neighbourhood of voluntary spies" and admonishes her for suspecting his father murdered his mother. Traditionally, those who assume Henry is speaking for Austen have misunderstood the heavy irony of this passage. Tanner was among the first to suggest that Austen is highly aware that the nation Henry appeals to, "coherent, uncomplicated, open, healthy, benevolent, the green and pleasant land", is in many respects "more of a fiction than the romances that supposedly corrupted Catherine's understanding".

"Like Wordsworth, indeed, like Sir Walter Scott, her very opposite in some ways, she discovered her strength in what can be known, in what can be done, in the real rather than an idealised or theoretical world ... She expressed these realities in a fictional form that was both original and risky—and, despite changes of accent, costumes, and custom, hers is still a compelling view of how human beings accommodate themselves to the conflicts of nature and civilisation, and survive."

This reissued edition of Tanner's *Jane Austen* is essential reading for anyone unfamiliar with the original edition. It's also worth buying for Gaull's preface alone.

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