

Conversion: Ontological & Secular from Plato to *Tom Jones*

Treating conversion mainly as psychic, ontological, and secular, my paper is oriented to understanding its form in novels of Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding and Jane Austen. The foundational representation is that of the Cave and the Line in the *Republic*. There the gods and religious practice are not mentioned, either as the goal or means of the conversion. They stand in the background, because Parmenides' *The Way of Truth* lies there. They are certainly found as end and means in the ἀναγωγή described by Diotima in the *Symposium* and in the *Gnothi seauton* of the *Alcibiades* to which the Cave conversion is assimilated in the Platonic tradition. The divine and religious practice will belong to the Platonic ἀναγωγή, not only for the Middle and Neo Platonists, but also when they merge with the Abrahamic monotheisms to determine a fundamental of the Western religious and philosophical traditions. There, most notoriously in Augustine's account of the Trinity and in its Latin successors, even the Divine Being will convert upon Itself.

I. From the Cave to the Divine Mirror: Conversion in the *Republic*, the *Symposium*, and the *Alcibiades*

By way of the analogy of the Cave, the movement, of the prisoners bent down by their chains, up the Line from ignorance, non-being, and darkness to knowledge, being, light and their source, the Good, is "to turn around" (στρέφειν). A journey upwards, a conversion (περιαγωγή) is required. This demands someone with the art of leading around (τέχνη...τῆς περιαγωγῆς), who can convert (μεταστραφήσεται). Someone who has seen the light must return to the dark and help the prisoners break their chains, turn around, move upwards and out. The resulting soteriology is most completely worked out philosophically by Iamblichus and Proclus. Religions, pagan, Jewish, Christian, Muslim have this idea and these images at their centre and a converting saviour or saviours (Protagoras, Moses, Jesus).

Convergence of the Abrahamic religions and Platonism in respect to this Platonic conversion was assisted by ἐπίστρεψον in the repeated refrain "Turn us again, O Lord; show us the light of thy countenance (πρόσωπόν) and we shall be saved" of Psalm 79 in the Septuagint, translated in the Vulgate by *converte*. Equally, the representation of that from which we are saved encourages assimilation. We are bent down, *incurvatus* in Latin. Anselm links the Psalm with Boethius, who knew Plato's text, when he describes the fallen children of Adam as "bent over double so that they can only see down". Bonaventure gathers the elements when he describes fallen blind humanity as "incurvatus in tenebris."

Boethius' Christianity in the *Consolation* is secularized by assimilation Platonism, never showing itself directly. The conversion of the prisoner begins with his eyes cast down "in terram defixo", so that saving *Philosophia* must sit and bend down to him. Its centre is the prayer "O Qui Perpetua", sung by *Philosophia* on the authority of Plato's *Timaeus*, and summarizing its doctrine. It effects the conversion of human *ratio* beyond itself up the Line to *intellectus*. Beatrice, "wearing Minerva's crown", effects the same for Dante. Tom Jones is converted to and by *Sophia*. The result in Boethius and Dante is the Plotinian simplification of vision drawing reason toward the divine intuition. Its means is a knowledge of the nature of Fortuna, unceasing change, mostly gained from the experience of practical life. In common with the Platonic tradition, Boethius teaches that Fortune operates under and for Providence which brings good out of evil. This use of Fortune, and the Providential drawing of good out of evil, are essential to *Tom Jones* and the other secular conversions.

Plato and Aristotle turn the Delphic *Gnothi seauton* into a means of conversion by reversing the Socratic philosophical religion where it agrees with the poets. For them, it commands us to know what we are through the divine, so (to quote Aristotle taken up by Plotinus) "being human we are not to think like mortals" but rather strive to participate the divine life.

The *locus classicus* for Platonic self-knowledge is the *Alcibiades*. Socrates, the faithful lover, argues with Athens' most fatally beautiful *kouros*. The Oracle's admonition is interpreted to require knowledge of self through the higher namely: the soul, the true lover, and, ultimately, God. Mirroring is essential to understanding both what is (as theophany) and our knowing. Matching it, Paul, writing about the *itinerarium* love travels from lower to higher kinds of knowing until reaching the mutual divine- human intuition Boethius sought, compares the beginning to vision through a mirror. With such a convergence of Platonism and Paul, it is not surprising that mirroring is essential to Augustine; the *De Trinitate* moves back and forth between the Divine Trinity and its images in creatures. Dante meets Beatrice in and as mirror. Critically for the representation of Sophia and Allworthy in *Tom Jones*, mirroring enables transcendence and immanence simultaneously. Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* is conversion out of the Cave and up the Line from one kind of mirroring to a higher.

The ultimate goals of conversion are given in the analogy of the Line. The two ideas of God which develop in the Western tradition are the identity of thought and being, at the top of the Line, and, above it, the Good as the source of thought and being, beyond both. The first is deified in Aristotle's highest substance, the self-thinking thought. It merges with the divinity of the Abrahamic religions when the Septuagint translates "I am that I am" by *einai*, which, as *idipsum esse*, became the proper name of God for Augustine and

Aquinas. The Good *ἐπέκεινα*, when merged with the One Non-Being of the *Parmenides*, points to Plotinus' Father God beyond *nous* and, when Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides* is added, will direct us to the ultimate of Greek theologians like the Areopagite.

The goal of conversion is not theory in the limited sense, but is given in the *Theaetetus* "ὁμοίωσις θεῶ." For Jews and Christians this explains Genesis. The goal is to move from "image" to "likeness". In Antiquity and the Middle Ages, those converted to contemplation and the *ἐπέκεινα*, sought union with the First, or ecstasy by moving with the divine activities. In the classical modern Protestantism we are treating, these are replaced by the union of man and wife. The monkish contemplative depicted in Fielding's "Man of the Hill" is made ridiculous and heartless: he is inhospitable to the man who saves his life and ignores the attempted murder of a woman.

Our conclusion demands one more Platonic depiction of conversion, the way of the love of Beauty in the *Symposium*. Diotima sets out an *ἀναγωγή* to *ὁμοίωσις θεῶ* by love's movement from physical particulars to the universal and intelligible. She begins with individual beautiful forms. However, Diotima, like Richardson, Fielding, and Austen, has us "consider that the beauty of the mind is more honourable than the beauty of the outward form." From love of the virtuous soul, the ascent will arrive at the loveliness of one science. Diotima goes on: "He who has been instructed thus far in τὰ ἐρωτικά, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty... absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which, without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things." Knowing this beauty by a power of sight raised to it, the lover brings forth true virtue and can "become the friend of God and be immortal, if humans may." Thus, the love of beauty also converts us to God and makes us *ὁμοίωσις*. Importantly for both philosophy and religion, according to Diotima, ascent to the highest beauty and good is by love, a divinity.

II. Ontological Conversion

For the tradition I have sketched the soul must have access to its own essence in self-reflexivity and to the noetic by way of mental interiority. An alternative tradition comes from the Neoplatonic understanding of thinking and being as the return of the One upon itself; it is especially worked out by Proclus, and by Christians under his influence, directly (like Dionysius) or indirectly (like Eriugena). It is determining among Latin Christians after they have assimilated Proclus by way of philosophy in Arabic.

For Proclus, all reality beneath the One – Good is structured by *mone*, *proodos*, *epistrophe*. All is in the First, proceeds from it and is converted back towards its source when it achieves its proper good. Typically, Christians like Aquinas, under the influence of both Augustine’s Trinity and Proclus, will import this conversion into the First itself and structure their entire theological cosmic systems by it. I shall say something about ontological conversion in Eriugena and Aquinas and conclude with enough about Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to provide the transition to Richardson’s Pamela and Fielding’s Sophia.

Eriugena’s hugely but covertly influential system had a Greek title, *PERI PHYSEŌN*, *Concerning Nature*. Nature includes “what is and what is not”; its principle is the divine superessential nothingness, beyond all things which are and which are not. Nature is completely divided and returns to itself according to the same logic: “first, into that which creates and is not created, second into that which is created and creates, third into that which is created and does not create, fourth, that which neither creates nor is created”. These divisions produce four subjects: 1) God as creator, 2) the primary causes, 3) what is subject to generation in place and time, including the human and its fall. It, as the terminus of the procession, becomes the point of departure for the return into 4) God as end, the final object of investigation.

Eriugena understood human nature as “that in which all things are created”. The human is the medium in which God creates himself and the universe of beings out of his own nothingness because, uniquely among beings, the human possesses all the forms of knowing and ignorance. Because God does not know what he is apart from human reason and sense, these perspectives are theophanies even for God; divine manifestations of which God and the human are co-creators. Reality is mirroring.

In Eriugena: “the Dionysian ‘anagogy and *epistrophe* ... to God’ became *AD DEUM REDUCTIO ET CONVERSIO*”. Thus, Bonaventure on the Hexaemeron: “Such is the uplifting metaphysical centre, and this is the sum total of our metaphysics: concerned with emanation, exemplarity, and consummation, that is, to be illuminated through spiritual rays and uplifted to the highest”.

Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae* gives the subject its proper order, beginning in and determined by its treatment of God in Himself. The logic of the *Deus in se* is manifested first in the *Quinque Viae* to the Existence of God and its basic structure does not vary until its completion in the Sending of the Divine Persons. This logic continues into the questions on creation, and thus into the *Summa* as a whole. The structure is stunningly simple.

From the *Liber de causis* and Dionysius, Aquinas knows that simple substance has perfect self-return, a shape he has manifested, following Dionysius in the sillage of Proclus, in his initial questions on the divine names, beginning at

Simplicity and circling around to Unity. In consequence, *ipsum esse subsistens* is, by the absolute necessity of its nature, knowing and willing. By way of the notion of motionless motion, Aquinas attributes the characteristics of Plotinian *NOUS* to Aristotle's God as self-thinking thought. In the next step, the divine self-diremption becomes real: "*Et licet motus non sit in divinis, est tamen ibi accipere.*" *Accipere* and its correlative *dare* are essential to the logic of infinite *esse*, as the form under which it is the relation of opposites. The differentiation of the essence in the opposition of action and reception forms hypostases, or persons. The circumincession, or *περιχώρησις*, of the subsistences in the Divine essence, is the fundamental conversion determining all the others. It makes understandable the emanation of finite beings, creation.

Thomas' *thearchy* unrolls and rewinds by way of linked concentric circular motions ever more inclusive of otherness until the *Summa theologiae* even encircles evil within the *mone, proodos, epistrophe* of the tripartite system of God, human, and Christ as the man-God. The *conversio*, which is the divine trinitarian life, is realized in the cosmos fallen in the human *exitus*, by a Chalcedonian interpretation of the hypostatic union in line with the humanism of the 12th century Renaissance. The *Summa's* consummation, the *Tertia Pars*, is *de Christo, qui secundum quod homo, via est nobis tendendi in Deum.*

Aquinas' system gathers in itself all we have treated. Dante's *Commedia*, which, like the *Summa theologiae*, is nothing but a complete cosmic conversion and only thus, as with Augustine, a personal one, contains even more.

Like the author of *Tom Jones*, Dante is conscious of being a literary creator. In the *dolce stil nuovo* he created a Poetic-comic-epic in which, as with Fielding and Cervantes, he gave us the "History of the World in general". Beatrice tells her prisoner, he was so far gone she sent him all the way to Hell to convert him. She accuses:

He set his steps upon an untrue way, pursuing those false images of good that bring no promise to fulfillment... 'He sank so low that every instrument for his salvation now fell short except to make him see souls in perdition.' And so I visited the threshold of the dead and, weeping, offered up my prayers to the one who has conducted him this far.

"Dì, dì"

"Speak, Say whether this is true: to so grave an accusation your confession must be joined". Beatrice, thus, in the Adamic Paradise at the top of the *Purgatorio's* mountain of repentance.

She brings to mind the judgment in the Myth of Er, in *Aeneid VI*, and the questions of *Philosophia* to the prisoner in the *Consolation*. Beatrice's demand anticipates Sophia with the penitent Tom and the exigent lady confessors of Jane Austen. Nonetheless, Beatrice and they convert differently.

Their means are not so different, and their understanding of the act of repentance is fundamentally the same, but the end is altogether other. Beatrice comes to Dante as the one who particularly moves him by her innocence and beauty of body and soul, but, as only one agent in a long chain of mediators including Christ, the Mother of God, and saints above her in the hierarchy. Because she is moved from above, she leads Dante beyond herself. After his completed repentance, she will return to her place in the *Paradiso* and he will rise with her. He will not possess her nor she him. Dorothy Sayers writes:

She was thus in fact the vehicle of the Glory — the vessel in which the divine experience was carried — she is, in the *allegory*,... likened to, or equated with, those other "God-bearers": the Church, and Divine Grace in the Church; the Blessed Virgin; even Christ Himself. She is the image by which Dante perceives all these, and her function in the poem is to bring him to that state in which he is able to perceive them directly; at the end of the *Paradiso* the image of Beatrice is... taken up into the images, successively, of the Church Triumphant, of Mary, the historic and universal God-bearer, and of God, in whom Image and Reality are one and the same.

Put differently, coming to her, even to reconciliation with her and with God by her help, is not the end of the journey. Another whole Cantina, the *Paradiso* of contemplation, remains. This England rejected when Henry VIIIth dissolved the monasteries, expelled or executed the monks and nuns, refunded the aristocracy, and expanded bourgeois wealth. Except for some Gothick moments our secular novelists follow him without regret.

Heaven for them is future reward, whose promise, together with the threat of Hell, are used as the ultimate incentives to morality: personal, social, and political order. Heaven's joys serve the absolutizing of morality, a stance which Nietzsche so convincingly exposed as atheism that their successors recognised themselves in his descriptions and gave up the Christian religion and morality both. Heaven is distant and without content; its God hidden. We never enter a substantial spiritual realm or reach out to it. Features of their own society left over from the revolutions in Church and state are forgotten. Not even Jane Austen, buried in Winchester Cathedral, sends us a rumour of the Men and Boys choirs in Cathedral, Royal and Collegiate chapels continuing medieval offices.

Despite frightening descriptions of the miseries of most of them, the ultimate present felicity is marriage.

III. Conversion in Protestant Secular Romance: Beatrice converts to Protestantism and Marries Dante

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*

Tom Jones' Sophia, the beauty of eternal Wisdom heavenly and incarnate, comes after Richardson's Pamela and before Austen's Fanny Price. Both of the latter reiterate the kenotic Christ as well as the irresistibly attractive loveliness of Person or Virtue which all share. As such they are the ends and means of conversion or of damnation. Here, and in the romances I shall treat, ultimate felicity consists in marriage to these descendants, in conscious lineages of Plato's form of Beauty or unconscious of Dante's Beatrice. Flesh and blood marriage to what is heavenly either as the blessed, inspiring, but never possessed, intercessor or as transcendent deity is their "secularization", but it means more than this. As we move from Richardson to Fielding and, at the extreme, to Austen, the forms of religion: prayers, sermons, liturgies, theological debates, either disappear or become more and more external to the conversion, or to its representation. The operation of Providence is by way of social and psychological forces and religion is hidden, being manifest in these but not alongside them.

Pamela is a fifteen year old universally loved, and irresistibly beautiful, servant in an aristocratic household. On the death of her mistress, Pamela becomes the object of first the lust and, then, converted by her, the love, of the heir. He confesses repeatedly after his conversion that he made the Platonic move from, and by way of, the love of "the Charms of her Person" to "the Graces of her Mind". After attempting to make her his mistress, outraged by the impudence of resistance from a servant, he comes repeatedly to the physical edge of rape. He meets with unbreakable, consistent, and endlessly ingenious resistance. Squire B. then transgresses the social boundaries, subdues his pride, and marries Pamela.

Presented as a series of letters, mostly from the pious Pamela, determined to preserve her "honesty", the novel is full of the prayers of one dependent on God's grace in the terrible exigencies of preserving her virtue against cozening, kidnapping, deceit, and violence, and of the constant self-humiliation and self-blame of the believer. By a deception which belongs to the ceaselessly repeated Augustinian pattern of good brought out of evil, determinative in Richardson, Fielding and Austen, which manifests the government of Providence, Squire B. reads the letters. They enflame his determination to possess their author. Her resistance increases her desirability, and, he sees that Pamela's dutiful prayers

for him as her master continue during his abuse. That a love for him her enemy rules her is what in the final analysis converts Squire B. The terrible moment for her,—terrible because she recognises that she is falling in love with him and that he might use this to seduce her—and simultaneously the converting moment for him, is her realization that she could not be his accuser on Judgment Day.

An important character is an unbeneficed cleric, Williams, entirely dependent on Squire B., who courageously attempts to rescue her—though he is opposed by established clergy against any resistance to “the powers that be”. Indeed, religion is so much present in its own dress, that we go through the moments of the marriage liturgy.

The turnings where Pamela acts as *alter Christus* are crucial. In the final attempted rape Pamela is held down cruciform-wise on her bed by her master and her jailor. Imprisoned, she is utterly in the power of “Lucifer in the Shape of my Master”. In the hands of the wicked, as Jesus is described in the Passion narrative, Pamela cries out to God for death or deliverance. She faints into a fit so deathlike that Squire B. mistakes it for the reality. Resurrected by his ministrations, his pity is aroused, and he asks for her forgiveness. Her forgiving works his conversion. She blesses God in the words of Paul, “who, by disabling me in my Faculties, enabled me to preserve my Innocence; and when all my Strength would have signified nothing, magnified himself in my Weakness!”

Tom Jones' Platonic Sophia

The extravagant piety of Pamela cannot survive Fielding's sense of the ridiculous, and his determination to be true to nature prevents snow white characters. Fielding is explicit that theologically, morally, dramatically, and essential to his new genre, the heroic figures in *Tom Jones* must have flaws. Nonetheless, the most learned of our romancers depicts his paradigmatic heroine though the notion of the naked vision of a Platonic form. We are told of Sophia that one might almost say “Her Body thought”; “Her Mind was every way equal to her Person; nay the latter borrowed some Charms from the former”. Indeed, her virtue of mind so shines through her beauty that Tom, her true lover, is converted, not from lust for her, but to complete fidelity; his lust is for others.

Tom's rival Blifil moves in the opposite direction. As his aversion to Sophia increased, so did his lust. Thus, the heavenly Sophia too is subjected to schemes for rape made by the aristocrat cousin, Lady Bellaston, and by her father, proposing that Blifil use force. At the mansion of Bellaston, who is maintaining Tom as her amour, Sophia encounters Tom by accident. She views herself and him through a mirror. In their conversation Sophia asks: “Can every Thing noble and every Thing base, be lodged together in the same Bosom?” Nonetheless, when Tom formally proposes Marriage, she accepts. Almost

immediately after, they are discovered by Bellaston and in the ensuing intercourse between the three they all conceal truths known or suspected by the others. Sophia self-consciously enters the mirror world of appearances and reluctantly teaches herself the "Practice of Deceit". So totally is Wisdom made earthly. The union of the heavenly pattern with the flawed earthly is the heart of the understanding of which Fielding aims to persuade us. Writing of "*Platonic Affection* which is absolutely detached from the flesh", he reports: "I cannot pretend to say, I have ever seen an instance of it."

Described as an "Angel", "Adonis", and even as uniting that delicate beauty with Heraclean masculinity, Tom's extraordinary natural beauty, like his too trusting nature, match the same in Sophia. With his lack of chastity, this is as much a destructive snare for him as an attraction for others. However, his universally beneficent good nature makes him habitually charitable according to Squire Allworthy's definition: "giving what even our own Necessities cannot well spare". This active, spontaneous charity brings the friends who save him from the hanging for which he seemed predestined.

Tom is converted to chastity through the joint influence of Sophia and Allworthy, the great Patterns of Wisdom and Goodness. Allworthy is also heavenly: "Heaven only can know him, can know that Benevolence which it copied from itself, and sent upon Earth as its own Pattern." But though, like Sophia, he is irresistible, Allworthy is also frequently deceived. Tom's reconciling full confession made to him is a response to Allworthy's own repentance for blameworthy faults.

Imitating what he called Cervantes "History of the World in general", Fielding tells us that *Tom Jones* is a "great creation of our own" in form and content. Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* with its comparison between a poem and the universe taken from Plotinus is adduced. Experience of all social classes, along with Genius, Humanity, and Learning, are necessary to its writing, needing knowledge of "the Manners of Mankind." The plenitude of its Great Chain of Being reaches around the globe and up and down the hierarchy from the divine to "Insects and Vegetables". Sophia is Tom's "goddess". Finally, she is described as sitting "Like a Queen receiving homage, or rather like a superior Being receiving Adoration from all around her", and she helps conclude the work by a rain of graces procured by her "Mediation" or "Instance".

However, lest we mistake her either for Beatrice or Pamela, at the point when, owing to her "very deep sense of Religion", she contemplates, with "an agreeable Tickling", the thought of making herself "a Martyr to filial Love and Duty" by marrying the hated Blifil, Fielding remains faithful to his

Latitudinarian principles. There is no predestination of pure characters, he writes:

Sophia was charmed with the Contemplation of so heroic an Action, and began to compliment herself with much premature Flattery, when *Cupid* ...like *Punchinello* in a Puppet-shew, kicked all out before him. In Truth (for we scorn to deceive our Reader, or to vindicate the Character of our Heroine, by ascribing her Actions to supernatural Impulse), the Thoughts of her beloved Jones... immediately destroyed all which filial Love, Piety and Pride, had...been labouring to bring about.

The comic journey of Tom's conversion begins when Sophia flees her father and Blifil, seeking refuge with Bellaston in London. Chancing on the path Tom, also in flight, had taken, she pursues him. Tom in turn follows his beloved to the hellish city, where the two sides of his personality, his "naturally violent animal Spirits", and his universal beneficence, have the space to develop their opposition. In prison, likely to be hanged for murder, he is cast off by Sophia and is convinced that he missed meeting her because he was "a-Bed" with his own mother! Tom repents, crying out:

"Fortune will never have done with me, till she hath driven me to Distraction. But why do I blame Fortune? I am myself the Cause of all my Misery. All the dreadful Mischiefs which have befallen me, are the Consequences only of my own Folly and Vice."

Later, Tom will make a full confession in due form: sorting out what his sins were, taking responsibility, discerning the roots of each fault, with contrition and the promise of amendment of life.

Fortune, which has brought Tom to this complete mortification, operates under Providence. Its "nice train of circumstances" is already moving things in the other direction. Tom's charity and basic goodness have won him friends who clear him of the false charges and his mistaken self accusations. Fielding gives the operative law: "The Good or Evil we confer in others, very often...recoils on ourselves."

Providence exposes the traitors. Tom changes places with Blifil, as nephew and heir, who turns "Methodist". Sophia's maid who went over to Bellaston is known to be "Honour Blackmore". Black George is seen to have "a most remarkable Beard, the largest and blackest", his robbery is uncovered and he disappears into oblivion. Tom and Sophia marry on Christmas Eve and move into her mansion. They are neighbours to "Paradise Hall", Allworthy's

“Gothick” house. Tom’s tendency to Vice is corrected by “continual Conversation with” Allworthy “and by his Union with the lovely and virtuous *Sophia*.” “He hath also, by Reflexion on his past Follies, acquired a Discretion and Prudence very uncommon in one of his lively parts.”

Conversion in Jane Austen’s Novels: Secularization Completed and the Beginnings of a Critique

Readers of Jane Austen’s novels will be spared attending a liturgy or hearing prayers. They never listen to a sermon and only briefly witness one being read. A sermon will convert no one, and no clergyman will function as a saving hero. There are no lengthy theological debates to be understood. The villains are neither now Methodists nor ones in the making. No Latitudinarian Divines are required to comprehend theological debates. The abundantly present clergy vary from the ridiculous, gluttonous, greedy and manipulative, to the husbands of three of her six principal heroines. These comparatively weak beneficed husbands are pluralist servants of the social hierarchy provided with livings by their friends or families. None are heroic resisters of powerful evil doers.

Yet this is not the loss of conversion in the Christian Platonist tradition but its complete passage into the processes of social and individual life, i.e. secularization, so that religious forms need not be represented along side them. Jane Austen is Sophocles in his difference from Euripides and Aeschylus. Indeed, there is a sense in which her novels are the deepest treatments of conversion in the genre. Two other differences from her predecessors in her representation of conversion, as well as an important difference of style and domain, are notable.

Austen’s romances are in the tradition of those we have treated, but the contrast is striking. We have nothing of Fielding’s “great creation” and his exhibition of the social chain of being. She generally keeps people within their social spheres. No Pamela leaps from the servant’s hall to become the Squire’s wife. Austen’s world is almost entirely the small one of the country gentry and those with pretensions for it, or falling out of it. Her great power was for the close ironic observation, and epigrammatical description, of the psyches which constitute it. Heaven and Hell in a handful of dust. In exchange for the smallness of her world, we are admitted to terrible intimacies of the spirit unopened by her predecessors.

Jane Austen’s heroines are not exemplars of the irresistible beauty of Pamela and Sophia. And, although Austen has heroines whose virtue is perfect from the beginning and fix the stable centre around and towards which conversion takes place, she has heroes and heroines who undergo mutual conversion.

The union of beauty, goodness, and wisdom in Beatrice, *Pamela*, *Joseph Andrews*, and *Tom Jones* has disappeared. Austen's heroines are not ugly, but they may, sometimes, be "plain". More tellingly her great beauties have faults or worse. They may be charitable through refusing to discriminate, or self-destructive selfish romantics. A deadly villain has "manly beauty and more than common gracefulness." Another has "all the great part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address" and the more he lies the more handsome he seems.

The virtue of several heroines and heroes is fixed unerring judgment, when others err or are incapable of action. Moreover, because of humiliations suffered early and at length, or, of a self-effacement and self-conquest in the service of others, their virtue comes from suffering. Besides the following of Christ in the acceptance of mortification by these heroes, the most striking *imitatio Christi* in the novels appears in the self-humiliation of the noble Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. Having rejected Darcy's proposal of marriage, Elizabeth desires him after "a gulf impassable" opened. Uniting with her would join Darcy to the villain who had injured and defamed him. There could be no "rational expectation" of his return to her. Being mortal he must triumph in having escaped what he once proposed. However, soon after these miserable reflections, Elizabeth discovers Darcy's "exertion of goodness too great to be probable". His pride conquered, he bridged the gulf, to make reparation for his faults and for love of her. Thus, her family were "under obligations to a person who could never receive a return." Gratitude moves her own repentance. Elizabeth thanks him for "that generous compassion which induced you to take so much trouble, and bear so many mortifications." Incredibly, Darcy proposes again and Elizabeth accepts. So great the condescension, so marvellous the love.

The second difference of Austen's conversions is seen most notably in the same novel. Elizabeth and Darcy are equally filled with pride and prejudice, tho' differently, and must both come to self-knowledge, mortification, and conversion separately and through their interchange.

Through the mortifications accepted and purposefully employed for spiritual deepening by her heroines, and through their repentant self-knowledge, we are admitted to their inner life in a way not found earlier. Without the sermons and theological debates of her male predecessors, Austen works out the same questions of grace and works, predestination and freedom in the questions of the relative roles of character and condition, education and breeding, principles and effort which her predecessors treated.

Within the predestination which the social order sets, Austen's theology is standard anti-Papist and anti-Enthusiast, rational English Pelagian 18th century Protestantism. However, those formed by the *Book of Common Prayer*, as she was,

will recognise the source of the need her converting characters have for mortification and condemning self-knowledge. Their confessions are lengthy, laborious, and as theologically exact as those in Dante's *Purgatorio*. As on that holy mountain, they will usually require a public aspect. When what has been worked out inwardly is told to the beloved, it enables reconciliation and the *henosis* of marriage. Confession is not cheap; nor is guilt to be generally diffused. There is even sometimes the correct refusal to repent for what is wrongly supposed to be sin.

God is a mystery too high to be spoken of in her romances, but all things move towards the conversion of those destined for the felicity of matrimony. When rightly taken in hand, a situation very rare in these romances, it is a communion of spirits which is heavenly felicity come to earth. The alternative often wished on the wicked is tempers locked in mutual punishment. Under perfect felicity, there are many more makings-do and living hells.

The decoupling of beauty and goodness and the depiction of marriages which, though not ideal, work in their own way, suggests that the ever perceptive and shockingly ironic Austen may be exposing the limit of marriage as the secularized ideal of conversion.

Conclusion

Soul is a subsistent cosmic reality in the Platonic tradition, thus, psychological conversion is also ontological. We have only considered Christian versions of Proclean system. In them the mediating role of the human replacing soul, and thus humanization, reaches an extreme never known in Hellenism. The secularization and humanization of the human and cosmic *telos* and the means to it goes much further when we move from the culmination of conversion as contemplative or ecstatic *henosis* with the Divine Good to felicity as marriage of the Protestant gentry. It is evident that such an incredible representation of matrimony must depend on its filling in for the transcendent divine goal of the ancient and medieval quest. Moreover, by the accounts of those who most enchantingly depict this humanized *telos* and process of conversion, its heaven is very sparsely populated and the *massa damnata* is the multitude which no man can number.

It seems clear the honourable estate of matrimony has not been able to bear the weight placed upon it. The fact that, in the Northern European Christian world and its offshoots, it is now mostly an on and off affair for those who attempt it at all is, at least in part, owed to the impossible expectations it bears. The best corrective would be a restoration of the contemplative goods alongside it, but in our society distraction is sought above all else. So we seem to be left

with neither contemplation nor union in the flesh. Must, and can, we go further back? Will there be a renaissance by a *conversio ad fontes*? Or is the spiral now ever downwards?

February 10, 2014