

Introduction

“Oh!” cried Jane, with a blush and an hesitation which Emma thought infinitely more becoming to her than all the elegance of all her usual composure.—Jane Austen, *Emma*, 1816¹

Josh: Stop it; you’re making me blush!

Cher: See, now; I need make-up for that.

—Television promo for *Clueless*, 1995²

Only half overcoming rivalry in reserving to herself the joys of estimation, Austen’s Emma Woodhouse registers the attractions of the somatic blush. If the blush of Jane Fairfax proves “more becoming” than her habitual composure, this is because it rejects the monolithic singularity and self-containment of elegance in favor of the duplicitous flirtation and semiosis of intermittence, of advances and retreats, comings and goings. Here, at this point in *Emma*, Austen’s blush is a site of pleasure.

Oddly enough, in this pairing of references, it is Cher’s response to Josh in *Clueless*—the 1995 movie that reimagined Austen’s Emma as a high-fashion Beverly Hills teen with very little to distress or vex her—that touches more directly on the responsibilities of the blush. Though Cher’s exchange with Josh takes place in the early stages of a flirtation, this flirtation occurs in the context of that familiar narrative in which an older and wiser boy educates a sweet but misguided girl into an admission of her defects as prerequisite to a humbled recognition of her worth. If Cher is empowered in this relation by her ability to make Josh blush (or by her ability to elicit his statement that she might), she is nevertheless also startled by these abilities into a complementary confession: though *Clueless* will suggest that Cher is not in fact a jaded denizen of mall culture (revelation: she’s clueless), she thinks herself one, and the inability to blush without Shiseido might betoken a hardened and unfeeling self,

unable to register with the intermittent colors of physiology the moral sense that, in some quarters at least, makes a blush a grace.

Contemporary American culture continues to explore and sometimes to entwine both of these strands—the line of pleasure and the line of moral obligation—in its use of and dependence on the blush. Commerce embraces and reconfigures (the better to eroticize) the uncommitted insubstantiality of the fermented rosé, using advertising for the blush wine to assert its preferences in song (“Your smile is fine anytime, but I love to see you blush”), while a cosmetics print campaign commands that women “Just Blush,” confining us to the exercise of this single obligation within a realm of similarly eroticized legibility.³ The corporation humanizes itself by attempting incorporation, using the language of color to suggest embodiment and authenticity as it asks, “Have you ever seen a bank blush?”⁴ But if the corporation’s transparent bashfulness seems ineffective and nearly harmless, the white-supremacist use of the blush as determinant of Aryan status enlists the blush in order to alibi invidious distinction and authorize a bloody violence. In his book on “the evolution of the racialist right in American politics,” James Ridgeway reports the conversation of Laverne, a Nebraska farmer: “‘What’s the saying, ‘blood in the face?’” asked a visitor. ‘If you can blush you’re not a Jew,’ Laverne nodded.”⁵ Extending its search beyond the usual suspects, the white-supremacist demand for blood in the face embodies and interrogates even the presumed privilege of white manhood, which, if it must not fail in producing on demand what has been called a “mild erection of the head,”⁶ still proves most satisfying when it performs its inadequacy.

Though the culture at large is merely less extreme in its conception of somatic display as a task to be performed—without exempting privilege, assigning that task most often to women and workers, to gay men and to the racially othered⁷—it is also able sometimes to conceive of somatic testimony as an expressive pleasure; certainly envy characterizes Cher’s answer to Josh, but it is he who, as a flirting white boy, identifies and announces (in case you had missed them) the marvels of his responsive complexion. And when African American daytime talk-show host Bertie Berry points to her palm and introduces a sexy segment with a report that she’s blushing (“See?”), the cultural work performed is quite sophis-

ticated in the simultaneity with which Berry accedes to legibility's demands on her body and mocks them with the ambivalent power of her self-consciousness.

In both its notion of the blush as an expressive pleasure and its use of the blush as an instrument of watchful estimation, contemporary culture displays as a disintegrating legacy remnants of the nineteenth-century novel's striking and persuasive understanding, representation, and exploitation of the blush. As a movie of manners, *Clueless* was exceptional in enjoying the status of this lineage: "Actually, the movie is a very loose reworking of Jane Austen's 'Emma,'" wrote the *New York Times*,⁸ and the film's writer and director explained, "It's Jane Austen with f—me socks";⁹ but the influence of the nineteenth-century novel on the twentieth-century blush in American advertising, television, music, film, and language remains most visible in the work of unexamined attitudes and unacknowledged dependences, in the evidence of convention, and in the sense of loss that characterizes popular culture's reference to its blush. In telling here about the nineteenth-century novel's intimate relation to the blush, I mean in part and by implication to understand and to tell about the formation of the well-mannered literary subject, whose pleasures and discomforts in the face of the blush have everything to do with contemporary manners and contemporary aggressions. But in doing so, I recognize that even the self-consciousness that insists upon such acknowledgment accepts and participates fully in an inherited fantasy of the blush.

The attractions of the blush for writing are visible along the two courses (of pleasure and of legible utility) I have begun to outline. As an event of the body, the blush is a temporal phenomenon that has been taken to imply causality; when I read a reddened complexion as blushing, I interpret it already as a response to embarrassment or even to embarrassed delight, rejecting matters of digestion and health, for example, or the urgings of alcohol and anger as its inspirations.¹⁰ And as an act of interpretation, identifying the blush entails imagining it as the writing of the body and, thus, as the product of somatic agency, a means to dispel the alternative fantasy that the obdurate body is obstinate in its refusal to speak. The blush can seem, then, to partake of both body and language—

supplementing language with an ephemeral materiality—and novelistic usage would even suggest that, by means of the blush, body and language are identical and simultaneous in function and effect; the heroine of Harlequin romance, for example, might be seen to speak with her body (“No, no,” she blushed), while Dickens’s Podsnap may be understood to embody his assertion (“‘A gentleman can have no feelings who contracts such a marriage,’ flushes Podsnap”).¹¹

In responding to the blush’s hybrid allure, the nineteenth-century English novel seizes upon its imagined demand for interpretation and, attempting to answer that perceived demand, responds also to the blush as to an invitation to narrative. In its efforts to manage within the confines of a readable sign system both the challenges posed by the body and the anxieties the novel itself imposes on particular bodies, the novel finds in the blush an implicit promise to render body and character legible. The blush’s efficacy in fulfilling its pledge for the novel depends upon its seeming, by means of its involuntarity, to evade the constructive capacities of gesture, disguise, and will. Like Emma Woodhouse, the novel seizes upon blush and context to evaluate character: “When she saw that with all the deep blush of consciousness, there had been a smile of secret delight, she had less scruple in the amusement, and much less compunction with respect to her.—This amiable, upright, perfect Jane Fairfax was apparently cherishing very reprehensible feelings” (243). Reading the deep blush against the delighted smile and against her information about Jane Fairfax’s acquaintance among men, Emma reads the blush in social and somatic context, determining its nature by that context. But reading the blush (reading it *as a blush*) is always reading context, and always asserting against context fancies and *doxa* about those sets of circumstances in which a blush is warranted, demanded, made.

The example of Emma Woodhouse, of course, destabilizes the blush’s utility as legible self-evidence, for Emma’s readings of Jane Fairfax are gloriously wrong. If reading the blush means—as it means for Emma—reading the wrong story, it has also meant for the novel making up the story one may have thought one merely read, even seeking and using the blush as incitement or as alibi for both the licit and illicit pleasures of narration.¹² With Emma, Frank Churchill prepares to observe Jane Fair-

fax, while preparing for purposes of his own to excite Emma's imagination with the fluctuations of Jane's complexion: "You shall see how she takes it;—whether she colours" (222). In suggesting an event to be accounted for or explained, the blush in fact or in prospect offers to "a mind lively and at ease" (233) such opportunities as facilitate and excuse the exercise of a writerly imagination.

The experience of blushing for those who blush also proves narratable and useful for the nineteenth-century English novel. When Emma fears that, with "her heart . . . in a glow," "her face might be as hot" (328), her fear depends on her belief in the capacity of her complexion to reflect a readable self: legibility is as much a fantasy for those of us who blush as for those of us who watch the blushing. Like *Clueless's* flirtatious Josh, Emma might deflect with apparent anxiety a *desire* to be read; within sentences, she relies on the expressivity of her face to thank Mr. Knightley for his kindness to her neglected friend: "Though too distant for speech, her countenance said much, as soon as she could catch his eye again" (328). By means of its attentions to blushing as a perceived event of the body, the novel suggests that—in seeming involuntarily and reliably to betray a deep self—blushing assists at the conversion of legibility into a sense of identity and centrality. The novel values this sense of identity, even or especially when it is produced by the pains as well as the pleasures of mortified self-recognition and self-revelation; the painful blush lends the credible support of the body to the self that is generated, recognized, and revealed in all the felt if ostensible uniqueness of its discomfitting mortifications. Construed in this way, the blush—as an act of self-expression—performs a somatic act of confession.

This last of course begins to sound a little as if it has been suggested by the work of Michel Foucault. Writing of confession as "one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth," Foucault can resemble the smart novelist of manners in seeing confession as an obligation felt as an urge, in seeing confession as (with the force of the *de rigueur*) what one does: "One goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible

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to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about.”¹³ Foucault’s notion of power’s productivity (as opposed simply to its prohibitions) has been useful for this study, which develops the notion that, as a productive response to circumstance, blushing is precisely a social obligation felt as an urge, an act of somatic confession that dazzles with its promise to establish unique identity by revealing the body’s truth.

My argument about the nineteenth-century English novel and the blush, then, takes place within the larger discussion by literary and cultural critics of the novel’s work as an instrument of coercive (if also sometimes seductive) ideology.¹⁴ Like some of the other critics who have been engaged in this argument, I acknowledge most obviously my debt to Foucault. Within a rigidly Foucauldian frame, the blush would be seen as an instrument by which the body is enlisted in the production of legibility in order to serve at surveillance’s creation of domesticable bodies, and the novel’s use of the blush would be seen as institutionalizing that service. And so, in part, I do see the blush and the novel. But, as articulated in Foucauldian terms, all confessions can come powerfully but inescapably to illustrate and to tell the same story: the always interesting but perhaps incomplete narrative of their extraction. The Foucault of my book is a Foucault whose totalizing, terrorizing, and even ventriloquizing authority and allure are tempered by a sense of the real pleasures generated by (and only sometimes in tension with) the novel’s coercions.

The source of these pleasures is a Barthesian reading practice that, in rewriting such coercions, admits and exploits for pleasure (as Foucault cannot) the opportunities afforded by fantasies of the legible body, which in offering itself for reading and interpretation also offers to itself the experience of *being read* as its own pleasure. Seen as affording such opportunities, the novel is able sometimes to engender perversities that complement most precisely the disciplines it would enforce.¹⁵

What this entails as practice is a concerted attempt to retain or to restore the textures and differences that an unbending adherence to the Foucauldian narrative of the blush in the novel could sweep dismissively aside as the glittering distractions made always available to divert a magpie narcissism. In wanting both to respect and to manipulate these textures, I want to supplement Foucauldian discipline (understanding disci-

pline both as a subject pertinent to consideration of the blush and as the governing narrative of power that articulates an account of the blush's social work) with the Barthesian vision of reading as an *ars erotica*. In valuing a pleasure-privileging writerly reading, I do not mean to oppose it to what might seem to occupy here the place of its obvious obverse in a Barthesian evaluative binary: a Foucault-inflected approach that could be seen as readerly in a pejorative sense. Indeed some of the last decade's most attentive readings of the novel have been engendered by Foucault. Rather I want to locate the inspiration of Barthes's writerly reading—as some of these same attentive readers have done—within the realm of Foucauldian operations, to pursue the pleasures of narrative within an examination of the novel as an institution.¹⁶ This betwixt and between methodology is suited to the double-faced (not to say duplicitous) nature of the blush, which supplements the discipline of its (on-again/off-again) commitment to legibility with the flirtatious intermittences characteristic of an erotic art.

Cultural notions about the blush, now as in the nineteenth century, register the blush's utility for both legibility and erotics in fantasies about its circulatory properties. Whether understood as the effect of contagion or as effecting a polite intercourse between bodies, the blush's circulation between and among persons is expressive of social relation. But while it may announce most clearly the subscription of the blushing body to the code of an extensive social network, the blush in the nineteenth-century English novel can also work the work of local resistance, embodying with a flush relations—not always fully articulable in the nineteenth-century novel—that cross or evade the strictures and compulsions of class and gender and the marriage plot.

The resistances wrought by the blush, that is, take sometimes the form of permissions: for all that it both records and advances the public project of the blush as incorporate enforcer of moral regularity (the blush as product of discomfort and of tension), the novel graces the blush with its solicitous attentions, acknowledging and encouraging the blush as well in its issuance of well-mannered license to gratification and release. When, in the midst of a self-indicting self-examination, Emma Woodhouse catches her imaginalist's mind wandering in forbidden directions,

Jane Austen writes that “she stopt to blush and laugh at her own relapse” (137). Blushing and laughing, Emma seems to enjoy her blush, and Austen couples it with what might seem most inimical to the sometimes painful experience of blushing. Her laugh makes Emma’s blush a welcomed interruption of self-correction, enhanced by a leisurely indulgence (she “stopt” to blush and laugh). But it also unveils this blush as a kind of triumph for the English novel; though in the next moment Emma will take up again the “more serious, more dispiriting cogitation” and “unmirthful reflections” her actions may have warranted and that will send her to bed “with nothing settled but the conviction of her having blundered most dreadfully” (137), for this moment, the novel permits her to embody and permits itself to entertain the ephemeral vision of a blush that—without escaping it—refuses the sovereignty of a socializing mortification. Like Emma’s laughing blush, the English novel, while constructing well-mannered textual bodies and well-mannered reading bodies with the help of the blush, manages sometimes also to fantasize the bodies it has made in animating resistance to the constraints imposed by their construction.

In beginning my discussion of the nineteenth-century English novel and the blush with a consideration of works by Jane Austen, I want to identify the novel of manners as the form that—in part by teaching the legible blush—teaches the body to behave itself in public, and I mean to recognize that the compelling pleasures of reading Jane Austen enforce manners lessons. These pleasures prove an enduring, forceful, and difficult inheritance for the nineteenth-century novel, which—when it confronts issues of materiality and textuality—seems inevitably to have to deal with Austen’s recognition and use of the body’s potential for signficatory excess as represented in the blush. In a way, then, this history of the blush in the nineteenth-century English novel is also a history of the novel’s response to the legacy of Austenian manners and their construction of the body. In confronting the challenges posed by Austen’s manipulation of the mannerly blush, nineteenth-century novels turn back to the body as a source of supports (the swoon, the scar, the blunder) that—taking the place of the blush—might signify character more stably. The novel’s man-

agement of the blush, I suggest, participates in the novel's modal procession from manners toward (it will not seem so far) self-consciousness.

Chapter 1 watches "Austen's Blush" at work in *Pride and Prejudice*, where it functions as a stable and reliable index of character. Austen's blush exploits the body's credible and involuntary (credible because involuntary) testimony to supply ready somatic support to manners' interest in regulating the body. But, discovering that pleasures are to be taken with the pains of blushing, Austen recovers a sense of the body in manners. Her erotics of mortification works the perverse conversion of the sign of manners into the sign of desire, though it does so finally in service of the marriage plot's subordination of the body to its social work.

Writing *Persuasion*, Austen undergoes a crisis of faith in her recuperation of the blush from legibility for erotics, and the signs of Austen's mannerly pleasures threaten to collapse into conventionality. Chapter 2, "Mortifying Persuasions, or the Worldliness of Jane Austen," argues that, having redefined mortification as the erotic in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen recognizes and pursues the risk her erotics of mortification necessarily entails: that mortification might end (as it is commonly supposed to) in insensibility rather than sensation. Exploring mortification, Austen articulates its centrality to a set of associations (narrative, knowledge, sophistication, self-possession) that define themselves against the lessons of mortification.

Austen's remarkable negotiation between the pressures of erotics and manners, and her creation of a satisfying and legible blush, prove challenging to Elizabeth Gaskell. In trying to contain the novel of manners within her industrial novel *North and South*, Gaskell confronts class issues that the novel of manners permitted Austen to evade, and Gaskell's own anxious fantasies about class and about the status of the body in fiction compromise her use of the blush. Chapter 3, "Gaskell's Blunders," considers Gaskell's attempts to find a fit substitute for the blush. Her search for a reliable somatic sign that will suit and reflect character leads Gaskell to experiments involving other potential indices of character and virtue (the blunder, the swoon, and even the suitable death) with which she can replace the blush. Though Gaskell's provisional recastings prove finally unsatisfactory, they nevertheless lead her to articulate for the novel its

fantasy that the body is the anxious author of its own signs and that somatic events are records of the body's marked intentions.

If Austen's achievement is that, coincident with her satisfaction of the demands of legibility and manners, she recuperates the blush's significatory excess for erotics and pleasure, Dickens's trouble lies precisely in the realm of Austen's triumph. Chapter 4, "Dickens's Scar," suggests that, moving from manners to melodrama, Dickens foregrounds the blush against the scar, attempting by his physical graphics of mortification to install stability and fixity in the place of instability and intermittence. But Dickens's anxieties about the blush are merely displaced onto Rosa Dartle's scar in *David Copperfield*, which proves—in Dickensian fantasy—elusive of Dickensian authority. The marked body in Dickens comes to be associated with a mode of speech that evokes the body while refusing the commitment of legible meaning.

The final chapter, "The Mechanics of Confusion," departs from the practice of attending closely to a single novel, surveying a number of texts in order to address various ways in which novelists later in the nineteenth century evince dissatisfaction with the blush, even while taking regular recourse to its assistance in delineating character. Through readings of works by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, and Henry James, this chapter registers the increasingly self-conscious tension in the English novel between the sense that the blush is expressive of character and a developing recognition (a recognition acknowledged in more and in less sophisticated forms) that the blush is an inevitable and mechanistic response to and product of circumstance. The nineteenth-century English novel's recurrent fantasy that blushing effects a dissolution of boundaries and a confusion of bodies articulates the mechanistic structure of social relation, as the English novel understands it. In *The Sacred Fount*, Henry James eliminates dependence on the blush as a legible sign of character, while preserving through the novel's central image the structural relation between bodies that the blush has elsewhere helped to outline. Turning in conclusion to the work of Salman Rushdie and to contemporary popular culture, I consider the trajectory of the novel toward self-consciousness, abstraction, and disembodiment as a literary mode, and the direction of the blush toward announcement

(“you’re making me blush”) as its popular form. Even thus diluted, the blush continues to articulate and to reveal cultural fantasies about the attachments of embodiment and the imperatives of social obligation.

In exploiting the blush for its suggestiveness about character, the nineteenth-century English novel is itself touched by what colloquialism calls the blush’s contagion; the colors of the blush reflect upon the novel, rendering it legible and recording its best pleasures. The novel’s dependence on the blush, then, enacts the novel’s own expressive fantasy; the complex network of social relations that is constructed (made, that is, but also understood) by the persuasive fictions of the novel is visible—like Jane Fairfax’s feelings—in the traces of “a blush which showed . . . how it was all connected” (420).