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Chapter 8

Persuasion

The accident of death makes *Persuasion* Jane Austen's final novel. It deserves its position by its innovative treatment of passion and rhetorical style as well as its development of those themes of memory and time, public and private history, inner and outer lives, language and literature, emotion and restraint that have marked all Austen's previous works. In its wistful longing to privatise a public state, it relates most to the concerns of *Mansfield Park*, while its depiction of emotional tumult recalls *Sense and Sensibility*.

Persuasion opens with 'tangled, useless histories of the family in the first fifty pages', as an exasperated Maria Edgeworth commented.[1] This past meticulously roots the heroine within her noble family's genealogy, only progressively to reveal it as meaningless to her. Like the preceding novels, *Persuasion* considers home and homecoming, but, where they move towards a new or renewed symbolic and physical home for the heroine, this last completed work begins with her ejection and ends with her understanding that home is not a place at all but an ambience and an acceptance of change. Considering the Burkean association of the nation with the hereditary estate, the perception qualifies the patriotism of British victory which also emerges from the novel.

Jane Austen began work on *Persuasion* in August 1815, just as Napoleon sailed to exile in St Helena following his defeat at Waterloo. She ended the first draft in August 1816, when the initial excitement had subsided and the results of twenty-two years of war were being assessed: the economic cost – Britain had an immense national debt with high taxes to service it – and the political price of government-imposed national unity through years of patriotic propaganda. If *Mansfield Park* might be termed a 'state of the nation' work, *Persuasion* might be a 'Waterloo novel', although the battle occurs outside its frame: Austen's contribution to the debate about the new society coming into being through peace. If so, again like *Mansfield Park*, the work expresses its vision obliquely, using the domestic relationships that must underpin, but may not easily influence, any civil and social order.

On 13 March 1817 Austen wrote, 'I have a something ready for Publication, which may perhaps appear about a twelvemonth hence' (*L*, p. 333), a

statement which suggests she was intending either revision or a lengthy process of publication. The former suggestion has led critics to speculate about what she would have changed. They focus on the occasional unsentimental harshness and abrupt transitions which make the novel seem a decline from *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, the slow beginning beside the abrupt synopsis of the ending, the undeveloped characters like Mr Shepherd, and undeveloped relationships like Sir Walter Elliot's with Mrs Clay. Certainly *Persuasion* is less technically brilliant than its immediate predecessors and more polarised in its presentation of satire and sentiment; yet many readers prefer it to all other Austen novels and find its haunting quality little disturbed by awkwardness in plot or incident.

The unfeudal tone

The book might have been called 'The Elliots' – Cassandra claimed this was the most discussed option – implying a group portrait like *Mansfield Park*, although in the end substituting a family of inclination for a claustrophobic blood one. But Henry Austen, who saw it through publication after Jane's death, probably chose the more suggestive *Persuasion*, which draws attention to the novel's pervasive theme of literary and social influence and suited the current fashion for abstract titles like Edgeworth's *Patronage* and Brunton's *Discipline*.

The work contrasts with its predecessor in hero and heroine. The snobbish, conservative, landlocked Emma, who stays at home even after marriage, opposes Anne Elliot, homeless and alienated from her family (the two novels momentarily come together when Emma faces a spinster's life in her father's house), while Captain Wentworth is far from the traditional Mr Knightley – here the hereditary landlord is Mr Elliot, the hollow heir of Kellynch. A candid man of action, an adventurer interested in career and money, Captain Wentworth is the sort of figure who, like Wickham and Frank Churchill in previous novels, has crashed in from elsewhere to unsettle the heroine, a glamorous, ballad warrior who returns to find a sweetheart. In social terms, *Persuasion* contrasts with all other Austen novels, being the first in which the heroine, choosing such a man, marries downward and out of the gentry class, facing, even with his 'independent fortune', a financially unstable life. Outside the protagonists there is no village community, no one who much cares whether a particular squire is present or absent; Highbury and Mansfield are replaced by the shifting society of the navy, whose home is the sea and seaside lodgings and whose cementing talk is of shared encounters and exotic places. In contrast, land society displays only empty rituals of meeting and mourning.

Persuasion is a nostalgic text, stirred by both the warring past and a future of uncharted change, and it refers directly to events in the way no other of Jane Austen's books has done. Here, the patriotism of individual moral effort and of comfortable 'English verdure' no longer suffices for a victorious nation which needs to address its social fissures and accept a new 'unfeudal tone'. Samuel Bamford, a radical weaver, remarked that 'whilst the laurels were yet cool on the brows of our victorious soldiers . . . the elements of convulsion were at work among the masses of our labouring population'.[2] Although there is no dwelling on the miseries of the poor or the polarising of new politicised classes, *Persuasion* implies a need for some change in attitude. The Burkean line of great houses stretching from *Sense and Sensibility*'s Norland through Pemberley to Mansfield Park and Donwell Abbey ends in Kellynch Hall, up for rent with the contemptuous remark: 'they were gone who deserved not to stay, and . . . Kellynch-Hall had passed into better hands than its owners'.

The tenant, Admiral Croft, representing new money and an entrepreneurial naval spirit, removes the looking-glasses that once reflected the static self of Sir Walter Elliot and shifts the umbrellas to beside the entrance, so servants do not always have to fetch them and make a parade of hierarchy. But he is paying money for the privilege of living like a gentleman and is willing to move out if the traditional gentry can afford to return; Kellynch will revert to its owners and the future, including the morally bankrupt though well-bred Mr Elliot, promises none of the renewal suggested for Donwell Abbey and Pemberley.

The novel exists in two times, 1806, the much remembered year in which Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth met and fell in love, and 1814–15 during the temporary peace when he returns. This stretched between Napoleon's defeat and exile to Elba in April 1814 and his escape and return to Paris followed by renewed war early in 1815. Then for a few weeks military men would be wanted again, although only the author and readers know this. Wentworth and Anne are thus embedded in history, their own and the nation's. Other Elliots hardly seem to notice the momentous times since, unlike Anne and her friend Lady Russell (and indeed the narrow Mr Price of *Mansfield Park)*, they read no pamphlets and newspapers and have forgotten the navy's contribution to the life they are still privileged to lead. Sir Walter peruses only the backward-looking *Baronetage*, which traces families from the creation of the rank in the early seventeenth century; he and his eldest daughter (his surrogate wife, rather like Emma with Mr Woodhouse) cannot understand an unsettled country or see their own failure in historic rather than genealogical terms.

Like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma, the heroine Anne Elliot feels the seduction of the great house; when Mr Elliot pays his court, the vision of being mistress of

Kellynch momentarily 'bewitches' her and intrudes the memory of her mother as worthy lady of the manor – it is a 'charm which she could not immediately resist'. The notion of the landed gentry with its responsibilities is still important to Anne, who is appalled at how little her father thinks of them when he worries only about his pleasure grounds and grows proud of his ostentatious lodgings in Bath. But she withstands the 'charm' for a more economically imprudent love, which earlier heroines had found less potent. Thinking of Mr Elliot, she considers the human legacy of marrying an unprincipled man – as her mother had done, leaving on her death three daughters to be damaged by an inadequate spouse. At the end of the novel there is, uniquely in Austen, no indication of where the hero and heroine will live, no promise of mansion or improved parsonage.

Thoroughly aware of the impinging of national on local concerns, Anne is attuned to cultural change. She sees Kellynch turn from a gentleman's seat into rental property, and notices the furniture of Uppercross Cottage and the Great House becoming shabby and outmoded while the daughters clutter formal eighteenth-century spaces with nineteenth-century *bric-à-brac*. Home becomes, in her mind, a place inhabited by affectionate people, anywhere unchilled by the Elliot presence. The snug ships find their counterpart in the rooms made watertight by a sailor's handiwork, as if the Harvilles' Lyme lodgings were a kind of beached vessel. As in *Pride and Prejudice*, the heroine looks at the space the hero inhabits, finds what she lacks and knows she desires; her desire no longer includes the great house of Kellynch.

Nina Auerbach argues that *Persuasion* presents a vision of the navy as a 'brave new world', its triumph a 'revolution of values' in favour of the 'utopian hopes' of Romanticism.[3] It is hard for us to see as revolutionary a service whose policing includes the re-establishment of the corrupt political order of Europe and the quashing of dissent at home, or to find idealism in men who seem more interested in personal gain than national victory. Yet the book does give some of the moral significance partly vested in the clergy in *Mansfield Park* and the 'untainted' landowner in *Emma* to this meritocratic profession, or rather not to the navy itself, but to individual naval men – the admiralty is as corrupt as any other ruling order. The ending claims 'domestic virtues' for naval officers, and depiction of their shipboard life and camaraderie supports this. Sir Walter Elliot and his son-in-law Charles Musgrove cannot easily appreciate men without property, men whose property is in themselves; proud that he has earned 'every blessing' he enjoys, Wentworth has 'nothing but himself to recommend him'. The novel suggests that, although he may be temporarily humbled in regards to Anne, this particular 'nothing' is 'something': it is the Elliots' grand relatives, the Dalrymples, who are

dismissed as 'nothing'. Mary Crawford's denigration of the professions is here echoed only in the shallow Mrs Clay's remark, that professional men lose their 'personableness'.

However, on land, where subtlety and compromise are needed, these martial sailors are often inept. Wentworth is poor at judging people – Louisa, for example, and Captain Benwick. As Anne remarks when her lover assumes her actions at nineteen and twenty-seven would be identical, 'You should have distinguished.' Both Wentworth and Benwick, veterans of sea battles, are portrayed as helpless before one unconscious girl. It seems that much of the heroic glow surrounding the officers comes not from anything we see them do but from Anne's admiring and loving consciousness – rather as Emma invests Mr Knightley with her nostalgic vision of England – for the navy has formed her mental life for the past eight years. As she once implicitly defended a Burkean vision of a hereditary estate by carefully cataloguing the ancestral contents of Kellynch and fulfilling its community duties, so now she supports a vision of the navy as guardian of the nation and the peace. Almost her first words praise the service, and the novel's last words encapsulate her view of combined domestic virtues and 'national importance'.

Through her heroine's manifest admiration Jane Austen here seems trying to reverse a national trend.[4] In 1805, when Nelson won the battle of Trafalgar and saved England from French invasion, the navy achieved great prestige but, although it continued to be the main source of British war power over the next years, its cultural status diminished when it failed to win further substantial victories, not even in the American War of 1812. In contrast, the victorious army under the Duke of Wellington had won the Peninsular War and would go on to the success of Waterloo. The national response emerges in *Sanditon* where the entrepreneurial Mr Parker wishes he had not named his boarding-house Trafalgar but waited for Wellington's later victory. Writing *Don Juan* in September 1818, Lord Byron noted the waning popularity of the navy and the ease with which the public forgot past achievements: 'There's no more to be said of Trafalgar / 'Tis with our hero quietly inurn'd' (I, iv). On 8 May 1815 appeared a caricature, *Things as they have been. Things as they now are*, showing a naval officer in two parts: one smart and assertive, the other more downtrodden.[5] Admiral Croft and his brother-in-law escaped this fate: they were lucky, making money and suffering none of the debilitating shipboard diseases Sir Walter expects, while Admiral Croft is also associated with the glamour of Trafalgar. Now in 1814, with his prize money – in the book no moral opprobrium attends this piratical activity of catching martial and commercial boats – Wentworth is himself a 'prize' in the marriage market, while the high-ranking Elliots have fallen on hard times.[6] He has even acquired some of the

patina of a gentleman and has none of the nautical quirks of Admiral Croft. However, he lacks the 'politeness and suavity' of Mr Elliot, that 'gentleman in manner' (qualities which Darcy had to learn in *Pride and Prejudice)*. At the end he has the wife of his heart but no inherited property to look forward to – as his future sister-in-law Mary smugly notes. He remains a naval officer on half-pay, expecting future commissions.

Despite Captain Harville's limp and the mention of one or two dead friends, the war appears the source less of injury and death than of opportunity for clever or brave young men to rise through merit. Indeed, it seems more perilous to be a civilian in the world of *Persuasion.*[7] Lady Elliot, Mr Elliot's rich wife, and Benwick's beloved Fanny Harville all die, while a crucial event is the injury of Louisa Musgrove, who, trying to impress Captain Wentworth by the 'firmness' she believes he wants, jumps once too often from the Cobb in Lyme Regis. She seems first 'dead' (Mary Musgrove's melodramatic word), then damaged: she recovers but will remain nervous and 'altered', fit lover for the emotional Benwick, who will, through his miniature, get himself new 'set' for his new love. (For Wentworth the blow he indirectly provokes has the contrary effect on his own head, for it brings him back to his original rational senses.) At home, the Musgrove heir has a dangerous accident and breaks his collar bone. Beyond these extreme events there is physical vulnerability quite different from that of war.[8] It starts with Sir Walter looking with distaste on his thin, faded daughter Anne, continues through the unwanted freckles in the widow Mrs Clay, to the crippling rheumatism of Anne's old school-friend Mrs Smith. The miseries of war are subsumed into the general human proneness to damage and death. The environment qualifies Admiral Croft's unseemly remark about 'the good luck' of another war.

The navy is attractive through its defined hierarchy, relative mobility, and partial ignoring of birth. It becomes ironic then that, at the end, the sailor Wentworth helps Mrs Smith re-enter the propertied class from which his own wife will fall. Land society is far from fluid. Even in her lowly position, Mrs Smith held to her original middle-class status by bountifully giving away what little she earned, and she declared she could not have known Mr Elliot's wife since she was so ill-born and -bred. Despite her up-to-date reading and awareness of the outside world, Lady Russell, as a knight's lady, is too impressed with the hereditary rank of the absurd Sir Walter, too unappreciative of any 'tone' outside the feudal one, and her sensible advice about Wentworth in 1806 had been marked by this outlook. She despises Mrs Clay for her status as well as her character as the kind of improperly flattering friend Mr Knightley disapproves in *Emma.* Anne's dislike is in part fear of a social manipulator cannier than herself, but it, too, is class-based and appears before Mrs Clay has displayed

poor morals – indeed, Anne's dismissive attitude prevents her from seeing signs of intrigue between Mrs Clay and Mr Elliot.

The holding to rank can become indecorous. Mary, the least attractive daughter of the 'spendthrift baronet', insists on precedence over her kindly mother-in-law and fears that Wentworth might be elevated to the baronetcy, so rendering less exclusive the rank that provides her status.[9] In Bath, her father and sister, through employing unnecessary servants and stage-managing their lives and lodgings, try in their few rooms to recreate the appearance of importance lost when they gave up the hereditary estate. It is fitting that their stay occurs when Bath is past its prime, more retreat than modish resort: in his obsession with rank and manners, Sir Walter is an anachronism, weirdly unageing – in his own eyes anyway – in the nineteenth century.

In *Emma*, rank had hidden the disadvantages of gender from the heroine. In *Persuasion*, a constant debate about gendered roles is staged, through the depiction both of traditional families and hereditary houses and of the new shifting world of 1815 and returning self-made men. Anne shows what happens when the gender divide is strictly followed: she watches her stupider father destroy the basis of her Kellynch home. Supporting this implied critique is Wentworth's initially shallow and confused notion of women. When he sees Anne again, he thinks only of her appearance, then turns a careless attention to the trivial but pleasing Musgrove girls as if they were another species. Either would do for him according to the admiral. Believing that Anne had been 'weak' to refuse him and yet holding her as his ideal, he wants women to add to their 'sweet' femininity the masculine quality of steadfastness, which, given his restricted idea of their activities, can only show itself in tomboyish or perverse actions.

His sister, the 'square', slightly Amazonian Mrs Croft, who has sailed with her husband – a choice her brother condemns – is Wentworth's antidote. Neatly destabilising the gendered division of intellectual and emotional labour, she excels the blinkered, good-natured admiral in traditionally masculine areas of life. She is more prudent and sensible, knows more about driving and finance (similar here to Lady Russell in relation to Sir Walter), and she is as 'intelligent and keen as any of the officers'. (On the other side, Captain Harville fashions toys and netting needles. Discussing naval education, Maria Edgeworth's father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, urged training with carpenter's, smith's, and turner's tools to keep the sailor occupied onshore;[10] so this is not 'women's work' but it has a domestic air.)

A feminist case may be implied by Mrs Croft and the depiction of the professional Nurse Rooke, who, although in a lowly position, combines the practical and psychological abilities that argue women's fitness to be physicians. But,

although they impinge on the portrait of the heroine, they do not govern it. Anne does indeed gain some of the admirable Mrs Croft's freedom and it remains significant that the only sign in the novel of her new status as chosen woman is not a house but a means of transport, a smart landaulette.[11] And yet the childless Mrs Croft baulks at the traditionally female role of watcher and waiter, falling ill when left alone and unoccupied, where Anne has survived many years of such existence. The heroine may live onboard as Austen's sister-in-law did when Charles's ship was in home waters but, as a future mother, is unlikely to go to sea, and the final paragraph suggests an onshore wife paying the 'tax' of anxiety about a wandering spouse.[12] When Wentworth moves towards Anne, he has to forego some of his traditional assumptions, but not women's role as familial nurses – indeed he shows his first real gentleness and 'glow' towards her when he sees her supporting the stricken Louisa. Anne's instinctive nursing skills and service role of comforter and facilitator relate her less to the professional nurse, whom she fails even to notice, and more to Mrs Harville (herself of lower social standing). If she joins a 'profession', like Fanny Price it is as suitable wife.

A little history

Pride and Prejudice and *Mansfield Park* were concerned with the subjectivity of time and the malleability of memory. *Persuasion* develops this investigation. Anne Elliot's mind is preoccupied with what the narrator calls her 'little history of sorrowful interest'. Although it remains the characters' secret, only fitfully disclosed, and the story-telling hero represses before he recoups it, this romantic 'history' determines Anne's life in the present, and the eight years since it occurred have almost no story. All the reader knows is that the love of 1806 began as a social commonplace, for 'he had nothing to do and she had hardly any body to love'.

In the intervening years most people have aged. Sailors return unrecognisable to the preserved Sir Walter, while Lady Russell moves from prospective partner to old woman who should wear more make-up.[13] Like Anne, Lady Russell has an acute sense of time passing, noting the difference between her friend at nineteen, the optimum time to attract a husband it seems, and twenty-two when she feels that boorish, good-natured Charles Musgrove might do, and twenty-seven when she joins Anne in near hopelessness. There is more stress on precise age here than in any previous novel, more noting of numbers and dates, of specific years and repeated seasons, suggesting always the melancholy passage of time which war and peace, marriage and death never interrupt.

The present of the book begins with Sir Walter contemplating the fixed image of himself in the *Baronetage*, past words controlling his present. His daughter Anne mirrors him for she is equally static, as fixated on the *Navy Lists* as her father on the 'Book of Books', and she emerges only in spurts from this stasis. The novel discovers her alone in autumn, feeling herself one with the declining year, her 'bloom' gone with the single, romantic summer. While she is given more acute sensory impressions than any earlier heroine, her head is filled with the past or a distant naval present rather than with day-to-day events nearby. She has let her life be blighted by a single time, a blight which would have continued but for the accident of Admiral Croft renting her father's house and inviting Captain Wentworth to visit. In a letter to her niece Fanny Knight in 1814 advising her to give up a young man if she does not care for him, whatever *he* may be supposed to feel, Jane Austen denies that people die of a broken heart: 'it is no creed of mine . . . that such sort of Disappointments kill anybody' (*L*, p. 281). In *Persuasion*, Anne is not far from being killed by romance in a way refused to Marianne Dashwood as she submitted at nineteen 'to new attachments' and followed the 'natural sequence' from romance to prudence. From the same age Anne grows more estranged and the first part of the novel presents as vivid a picture of depression as early fiction contains.[14] It is in keeping with a contemporary psychological view that 'Representations of the mind, when frequently renewed by acts of the imagination, at last acquire a degree of vividness which surpasses those derived from external objects.'[15]

The 'romance', a word here used (newly for Austen) with little ironic overtone, has been 'renewed' in memory and become Anne's burden. She has chosen to be a person who waits and looks, reads and lives in books and silent words, and does not dance, so removing herself from the world of courtship the dance floor signifies. (Fittingly, at the rapturous end her 'spirits' go 'dancing' as young Emma's do when she knows herself loved.) She moves quietly round the houses of relatives and friends and for a large part of the first volume speaks hardly a word. Despite being embedded in a numerous family, whether alone or in crowded rooms she exudes solitude; as a result, even Lady Russell is unaware of the extent of her devotion to the past.

Anne Elliot is the most self-conscious of Austen's heroines, existing within a book which stays close to her consciousness – it enters Captain Wentworth's only once to capture his continued bitterness and assumption that his love is dead. She labours to repress feelings while valuing spontaneous bursts of emotion in others. Even more than Fanny Price with her suspicion of her own motives, Anne is represented as correcting her attitudes with intense and occasionally ironic awareness. Often she has to retreat to prepare her mind in

private for the self-control her chosen path demands, then brace herself for the little public scrutiny she will attract. As a result of such rigorous fading, she has diminished any influence she might have with her father and sister. Outside the immediate family she continues withdrawn: seeing the damage Wentworth is unthinkingly inflicting on Charles Hayter, Henrietta Musgrove's suitor, she 'longed for the power of representing to them all what they were about', but she keeps quiet.

Thinking always of her short time of happiness, she is yet presented as fearing the 'oblivion of the past' – after all, she sees her family 'oblivious' of her former engagement. When she meets Wentworth again, it sometimes seems that he intrudes on a sacred memory.[16] Where time may move for him – 'What might not eight years do?' – it stays still for her: 'eight years may be little more than nothing' (*P*, 1:7). Anne is sure that the past cannot be replicated in the future because she and Wentworth have become 'strangers' in 'perpetual estrangement'. Yet she allows his little act of kindness in placing her in the Crofts' carriage to be 'a reminder of former sentiment'.[17]

The two-volume structure of the novel, with emotional descent in the first, ascent in the second, emphasises the final move to Bath. While never obliterating Anne's passionate memory, change of place loosens its hold and pain is 'softened'. Thus she begins a process of unfreezing the present which starts to mitigate the 'perpetual estrangement'. Before arriving in Bath, Anne had feared the worst: she had been unhappy at boarding school there after her mother's death and, we might infer, in her winter with Lady Russell after Wentworth's exit had romantically reprised her maternal loss. The city represents 'glare', meaningless bustle, and snobbish jockeying for place. Yet, paradoxically, it will be the site of Anne's ultimate happiness, and its anonymous, crowded streets prepare her for the crowded, shifting lodgings of naval life – in contrast to Fanny Price's quiet future far removed from the cramped naval space of Portsmouth.

Overall change emerges from interaction not only of time and place but also of body and mind: Anne's frequent 'agitation' connects the two. In the 1790s *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne fell ill under the emotional stress of losing Willoughby, and her sensibility was expressed in her body as well as her language and ethical code. With Trotter, however, there was a subtle shift to a more intimate interaction of mind and body, and *Persuasion* responds to this thinking. Once she leaves Kellynch and Uppercross for the resort of Lyme, out of season in cold November, Anne's body begins to react under natural and human stimuli. She is invigorated by the sea air, the kind that brings life and proper ageing in life. (Against this the attenuated Sir Walter obsessively guards, remarking, 'I have been long perfectly convinced . . . that the sea is very rarely of use to any body.')

As a result of the colour the wind has put in her cheeks, Anne becomes again visible to men: Mr Elliot glances at her admiringly and Wentworth catches the glance – and she sees that he has. Soon Lady Russell notices an improvement in 'plumpness and looks'; under the seaside influence, even querulous Mary grows less self-obsessed. The two younger Elliot sisters together exemplify Trotter's medical theory: they are dispirited women who have led too restricted lives and who gain spirits with a change of air.[18] As they should, for Trotter believes that cheerfulness is a personal patriotic duty. Depression or nervous disorder 'inevitably sap[s] our physical strength of constitution; make[s] us into a nation of slaves and ideots'.[19] Fittingly, the military men Anne admires are associated with the bracing sea. Anne regains knowledge of her own sexuality and this allows Wentworth to realise his own rekindled or – as he will claim – always existing love.

Through all Jane Austen's novels has run a theme of the mind's involvement in literature, sometimes insufficient, sometimes overwhelming. Allied to the simpler eighteenth-century anxiety over the effect of seductive novels on conduct, the use of poetry in *Persuasion* seems rather to comment on the Romantic idea of the 'creation' of life's emotion through powerful books. In the walk to Winthrop, Anne's depression is shown as exacerbated and consoled by eighteenth-century reflective nature poetry, of William Cowper, James Beattie, and Charlotte Smith, with its elegiac dissociation of natural seasons and human life: 'Another May new buds and flowers shall bring; / Ah! why has happiness – no second Spring?'[20] In Anne, assimilated quotations aestheticise and romanticise the pain of change and decay and make her accept single human seasons. The idea inevitably recurs in the verses written about Napoleonic battles, and it would have been an unusual reader in 1818 who, following Anne's musings, would not have brought to mind the elegiac martial theme of lives that could not be renewed, while the grass springs up on battlefields.

Outside elegiac pastoral, however, there are other ways of looking, and these Anne adopts in Lyme and Bath. When she saw herself as ageing and autumnal, a farmer, observing the land rather than its people, regarded autumn as a recurrent stage, and meant 'to have spring again'.[21] The early nineteenth century was fascinated by hot-house cultivation, especially of flowers which could be forced into unseasonable blooming and decay. Anne will never again be nineteen and the past years are lost, but her fading in the hot-house environment of Kellynch may be unnatural because premature: she can learn to 'bloom' again. In Lyme she advises Captain Benwick not to luxuriate in the melancholy Romantic poetry of Scott and Byron, which allows both an indulgence in grief and a heroising of pain; Byron's heroes, Conrad and the Giaour, are men who glory in their refusal to be comforted after loss. Then in Bath, talking

with Captain Harville, she renounces literature altogether as the *prime* tool for interpreting real life. The pen which she has been following has been mainly in men's hands, she claims, and, as she speaks against its authority, it literally falls from Wentworth's grasp.

Dear self is concerned

'What wild imaginations one forms, where dear self is concerned!' Mrs Smith exclaims. Misreading Anne's sparkling eyes as love for Mr Elliot, she is prepared, for her own advantage, to let her old school-friend enter what Colonel Brandon in *Sense and Sensibility* called 'the worst and most irremediable of evils, a connection, for life, with an unprincipled man'. Yet Anne sees something more inspiring in her friend than self-interest. Mrs Smith is resilient because, like Elizabeth Bennet, she lives mainly in the present moment. Widowed, crippled, and poor, she is only occasionally depressed. Anne contemplates the phenomenon, aware of her own depressive years. She concludes that some of Mrs Smith's strength is due to her own efforts, to that inner struggle that Anne also wages to conform herself to her principles. But Mrs Smith has something more: 'that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from Nature alone' (*P*, 2:5). Such 'elasticity' is an amoral aspect of personality rather like Emma Woodhouse's good health and vitality – and the term contrasts with the rigidity Wentworth thinks he wants in a woman. Yet, neither elasticity nor rigidity is deep feeling, and Anne's 'dear self' intrudes in her realisation that she would not trade her 'elegant and cultivated mind' for the apparent contentment of any of her friends.

Despite Jane Austen's remark that her heroine was 'almost too good' for her, Anne is no 'picture of perfection' (*L*, p. 335). She accepts ill treatment without protesting, but she notices it. She smiles in contempt at her less sensitive and subtle relatives, and has little genuine charity of heart where they are concerned, eager in an almost authorial way to 'show them what they were'. She is civil and secretive, yet condemns her cousin for his reserve. When Louisa Musgrove falls and it is unclear whether she will live or die, at this moment of most distress Anne thinks of herself and Wentworth, almost gloating that he would now know the difference between obstinacy and steadiness. From then on, her vitality increases; hearing that Louisa has become engaged to Benwick, again Anne immediately thinks of Wentworth – the colour rushes to her cheeks and she feels 'senseless joy'. Cunningly she seeks information to please herself, asking the Crofts what Wentworth said about the engagement, trying to gauge his

feelings for her through his disparaging remarks about another. (In much the same way she denies Mr Elliot's interest in her when he has virtually proposed, so that she learns the truth of his character from Mrs Smith.)

Once simply waiting to glimpse her beloved, by now she is active in pursuit: her 'elegant' social self with its high-bred sense of good manners is no longer in charge and desire has taken over. Paradoxically, it allows more control of the body: when she and Wentworth meet in Bath, his rather than her body reacts with blushes. Where he becomes unsure of Anne once he feels renewed affection, Anne harbours no doubts of her returning power over him – unlike previous heroines she is no ingénue in courtship. Loving deeply, she never judges or blames Wentworth, who – presumably in striking contrast to his behaviour at sea – walks away from situations he cannot easily control: from Anne in 1806, from his sister when they start to discuss female roles, and, most arrogantly, from Louisa.

Anne shares with Wentworth a mordant humour, which both feel they should contain. She catches him suppressing a contemptuous smile when he thinks of the unlovable Dick Musgrove in Uppercross, for whom his mother is emitting 'fat sighings'. This mockery of the obese is notorious from an author who elsewhere stresses the absurdity of associating beauty with moral worth.[22] It seems to tie the narrator, Anne, and Wentworth to Sir Walter and his snobbish physical judging. However, it is also worth considering that this narrative aside, which has appalled so many of her critics, is probably close to Jane Austen's own wicked humour: her letters are shot through with similar sarcasm, whether it be a simple snide remark on physical shortcomings such as a M^{rs} Blount's 'broad face', 'pink Husband, & fat neck', or an unsentimental joke on poor Mrs Hall, who suffered a miscarriage after a fright – 'she happened unawares to look at her husband', *L*, pp. 17, 61). Wentworth again allows 'disdain in his eye' when he receives a card from Elizabeth Elliot, then checks the 'contempt in his mouth' as Mary remarks on the condescension of the act. Anne, too, smiles with contempt when she sees the littleness of which Elizabeth is proud in Bath, and she is scathing about the aristocratic Dalrymples. She approves of people making much of what they have, as the Harvilles and Mrs Smith do, but mocks the absurdity of showy people in reduced circumstances. As the problem of inviting the Musgroves for dinner makes plain, Elizabeth *does* know the difference between Kellynch Hall and a few rooms in Bath – 'she could not bear to have the difference of style, the reduction of servants, which a dinner must betray, witnessed'. She is aware she is growing older for she averts her eyes from the *Baronetage*, which notes her age and spinsterhood, while her father avoids Lady Russell by day since her crow's-foot wrinkles remind him of his own age. But Anne has no sympathy for sister or father. From such attitudes it

seems that her peripheral position in the family may be as much from her own recoil as from exclusion.

Mrs Smith declares that 'even the smooth surface of family-union seems worth preserving though there may be nothing durable beneath'. In the early part of the novel Anne agrees, as she copes with her relations through moderate flattery and self-repressing tact. Although she baulks at telling her father and sister that the Kellynch tenants miss them, she gives Henrietta the supportive replies about her fiancé she knows she wants and keeps up a correspondence with Elizabeth. She is silent when she sees a parallel between Mrs Smith and Mrs Clay. (It is left to the reader to notice a similar parallel between Mrs Clay and herself in the way both keep others in countenance.) In this social activity she plays a traditional familial role, as she does when she looks after her sick nephew and finds her sister a dry place to sit when out of doors. The servile actions become so habitual that, even when she has emotionally shifted in the second half of the book in Bath, on meeting her relatives, the Musgroves, she 'naturally fell into all her wonted ways of attention and assistance'.

And yet, although she has decided to 'go with the others', Anne is in fact even more appalled at her family than Elizabeth Bennet was at hers, and her father commands noticeably less respect from her than the flawed patriarchs of *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*. She is clear that, whatever she had properly accepted as a young girl, she now thinks passion, sexual passion, more important than anything else in her life, certainly more than security, rank, and kinship. In this she has proceeded contrarily to that other woman of twenty-seven, Charlotte Lucas, who found the years confirming her lack of romance.

Anne's withdrawal from social service is expressed through the power of her inner world. In the *Juvenilia* and her early novels, Austen had mocked sentimental writing developed from Richardson's theatrical prose by women such as Mary Hays in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) and used more recently by Burney in her much criticised final novel *The Wanderer* (1814); despite differing political opinions, both authors had tried to catch the turmoil of a woman's inner response to her confined and repressed existence through deploying a nervous, flamboyant typography and broken, agitated syntax. Austen had begun occasionally to develop this in more restrained form in *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*. Here, she goes farther: as the heroine had learnt romance as she grew older, so her creator has, it seems, come fully to romantic prose in her late novel, and Anne's first encounter with Wentworth is displayed in the broken syntax and repetition which reveal the faltering of ordinary response and control: 'a bow, a curtsey passed; she heard his voice – he talked to Mary, said all that was right; said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to mark an easy footing: the room seemed full, full of persons and voices'.[23]

The external world which had such reality in *Emma* where 'nothing' did not serve does not always serve Anne Elliot. Beside the contented picture of village life Emma observes from Ford's door can be put Anne's bustling drive 'through the long course of streets from the Old Bridge to Camden-place, amidst the dash of other carriages, the heavy rumble of carts and drays, the bawling of newsmen, muffin-men and milk-men, and the ceaseless clink of pattens' (*P*, 2:2). Fastidious about noise, Anne blots out or condenses the world's cacophony when her inner life becomes too powerful here, and at the end, when she is 'heedless' of sauntering politicians and bustling housewives.

Sometimes the moments of absorption are close to the effect of the poet Wordsworth's famous 'spots of time' in 'Tintern Abbey' or *The Prelude*, instances of revelation that become central to human existence. At the same time, they develop a habit Austen had shown even in the earliest novels. In *Sense and Sensibility*, after her sister's painful encounter with her faithless lover, Elinor is lost in thought of her own beloved Edward: she forgets the letters on her lap and walks from the window to the fire and back receiving no warmth; when at the end Edward comes to claim her, he forgets the external world sufficiently to destroy Elinor's scissors and sheath. In *Persuasion*, such moments are more overwhelming, making the heroine dizzy and her surroundings a blur. When she spies Wentworth, 'for a few minutes she saw nothing before her. All was confusion.' When in the Octagon Room Wentworth speaks agitatedly of constancy concerning Fanny Harville and Captain Benwick ('A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman! – He ought not – he does not') she hears every word despite 'the almost ceaseless slam of the door, and ceaseless buzz of persons walking through' (*P*, 2:8). In the White Hart Inn, before the climactic scene of Wentworth's letter, she tries to listen to Mrs Croft speaking of long engagements while watching her lover when she can and musing on her past: 'Anne heard nothing distinctly; it was only a buzz of words in her ear, her mind was in confusion' (*P*, 2:11). When she holds the crucial letter, 'she began not to understand a word' anyone said; her response is so extreme that she appears sick; [24] the unimaginative Mrs Musgrove relates its effect to Louisa's fall. Even in her moment of realisation, when her knowledge of her own desires shoots through her like an arrow, or when she feels the pain of possible loss in her body, Emma never loses sight of her surroundings.

This blurring of inner and outer is informed by another conjunction: of pleasure and pain. When she first sees Wentworth redden at meeting her in Bath, Anne feels bewildered, then bewilderment gives way to 'agitation, pain, pleasure, a something between delight and misery'. Even as the wheel turns and fortune comes towards her, she is still in 'the happiness of such misery, or the misery of such happiness'. Through her years of depression and repression she

had become, like Byron's passionate heroes, a connoisseur of pain, feeling it, stoking it, but hiding it inside: at the end her happiness is so extreme she needs to 'find an alloy in some momentary apprehension of its being impossible to last', and then to temper her 'high-wrought felicity' with serious meditation. Finally, the balance of pain and pleasure tilts towards pleasure: 'when pain is over, the remembrance of it often becomes a pleasure'. Anne grows 'steadfast and fearless in the thankfulness of her enjoyment'. This robust response of 'enjoyment' was very consciously created by Austen, who allows it to surge out of ordinary life and habit. In the first version of the novel's ending, she had medicalised it: Anne is awake all night, having to 'pay for the overplus of Bliss, by Headake & Fatigue'.

Loving longest

While Austen was composing *Persuasion*, Walter Scott's review of *Emma* appeared. In it he digressed to consider how few present instances there were of 'first attachments being brought to a happy conclusion'; modern youth was, he considered, now too worldly wise. Yet, 'after the pain of disappointment is past, those who survive . . . are neither less wise nor less worthy members of society for having felt, for a time, the influence of a passion which has been well qualified as the "tenderest, noblest and best"'.[25] This outburst on the need of a little romance in a man's life must have amused Jane Austen, halfway through writing *Persuasion* with its 'happy conclusion' of a 'first attachment'.

This comes about for Anne and Wentworth through the famous conversation in the White Hart Inn between the heroine and Captain Harville. Continuing the novel's gender debate, it ostensibly concerns men's and women's characters in love.[26] Through it Anne seizes the initiative with Wentworth and wrests the narrative from its bleak, even desolate trajectory of insecurity, age, and waste. Frequently she had lived in the internal world of the subjunctive: 'how eloquent could she have been' or she 'could have said much'; so it is appropriate that here she speaks aloud in the indicative rather than writing or gesturing, and that the story-telling Wentworth is silent as she finally, if obliquely, communicates with him. Her assertions are ideologically at odds with much of the gloomy common-sense of the book and do little to disrupt the quotidian life of selfishness and vanity it portrays; yet they profoundly stir most readers. The power of her rhetoric of personal self-sacrifice contrasts with the impotence of her earlier rhetorical interventions on behalf of the navy's national sacrifice.

Continuing a theme that has surfaced at intervals through the book, she begins the dialogue by denouncing literature as male and untrue: it is a

duplicitous move for she is disallowing it as experience just before appealing most intensely to a literary aesthetic – for what else is her climactic statement of constancy beyond life and hope? She then argues that women are stationary in emotions because physically stationary:

> We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions. (*P*, 2:11)

Harville responds with the apostasy of the stationary Benwick. Anne takes another angle: 'If the change be not from outward circumstances, it must be from within; it must be nature.' Harville demurs, insisting that the virtue of constancy cannot be gendered or, if it is, must be to men's advantage: 'as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings'. He describes the 'glow' of 'soul' in the returning seaman. Anne responds:

> I believe you capable of everything great and good in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion, and to every domestic forbearance, so long as – if I may be allowed the expression, so long as you have an object. I mean, while the woman you love lives, and lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it), is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone. (*P*, 2:11)

This operatic speech vibrates with the rhetoric that has been consciously repressed throughout the novel. (It's hard to imagine that its writing was an afterthought and not the germ of the novel.) Anne says no more than many men and women had said before her concerning the inhibited state of women in society, from the Romantic misogyny of Byron – 'man's love is of man's life a thing apart, / 'Tis woman's whole existence' – to Mary Hays's lament in *Emma Courtney* that social constraint results in debilitating romantic love written on the female 'mind in characters of blood'.[27] Here, the self-sacrificial stance gains beauty through its embedding in a whole life – and its use as part of seduction by (and of) a woman. The ordinary love of young Anne and Wentworth in 1806 depended on the boredom of the one and isolation of the other: the intervening years of suffering have turned it into 'romance'.

Through Anne Elliot's eloquence Austen avoids her usual retreat from female discourse in moments of high emotion. Here, rhetoric, eloquence, or literary style allow us a fantasy, undisturbed by irony, of following to its end what in life would be philosophically and even psychologically irrational. As David Hume

remarked, 'Nothing is more capable of infusing any passion into the mind, than eloquence, by which objects are represented in their strongest and most lively colours' – whatever the melancholy of the content.[28] The narrator had observed that a 'second attachment [was] the only thoroughly natural, happy, and sufficient cure' for first love; here the heroine's contrary statement captures the hero and reader.[29] The rhetorical speech is 'apotropaic', that is it wards off what might have been and what still exists in the reader's mind, the wasted, longing life.

Unlike Captain Benwick, whom Harville castigates for *not* living up to the romantic ideal, and unlike Scott's pragmatic modern gentleman in the review, Anne has been faithful to the notion of a great single love, allowing 'all which this world could do for her' to depend on one man.[30] In *Sense and Sensibility* Elinor tells her sister, 'after all that is bewitching in the idea of a single and constant attachment, and all that can be said of one's happiness depending entirely on any particular person . . . it is not possible that it should be so' (*S&S*, 3:1). *Persuasion* both shows the destructive folly of romantic, self-sacrificial love, and reveals its supreme value.

Although the narrator has teasingly seen pretty 'musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy' walking down the Bath streets, and although she bustles in with the usual sense of fictionality through her infamous questions, asking 'who can doubt of what followed?' the sardonic ending of the other novels is absent from *Persuasion*. There is none of the absurdity of the 'perfect felicity' of Catherine and Henry Tilney, the muted detail of learnt love in *Sense and Sensibility*, the sudden bathetic resolution of *Emma*. Only *Pride and Prejudice* implies such intensity of extra-familial feeling and then only on the man's side. *Persuasion* alone has intensity of both lovers and presents mature sexual love uncontaminated by glamorous possessions.[31]