

Chapter 1

Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion

Jane Austen is an author readers think they know. At least one reader of Austen has described heaven as a place where you would habitually engage in conversation with her. There are Austen societies in England and in the United States. Some readers concern themselves with every detail of her novels and their social settings, down to the cut of dresses and the recipes for the food consumed in them. There is indeed a name for such people, “Janeites.” Henry James objected to all this, writing disparagingly of those who, for commercial gain, in his view distorted her actual (and considerable) achievement by inviting readers to think of her as “their ‘dear,’ our dear, everybody’s dear, Jane.”¹ Rudyard Kipling, by contrast, wrote a story celebrating a particular group of Janeites – a group of World War I soldiers who kept their sanity intact by engaging in an elaborate ritual of giving the military objects around them names drawn from the persons and places depicted in “Jane’s” novels, and testing each other on their details. The palpable realities of her world, its men and women and settings, were apparently sufficient to ward off the horrific realities of trench warfare, if anything could.

The idea that novels contain real people and are told to us directly by their authors is one that teachers of the novel often find themselves combating – usually for good reasons. Readers who think of characters as if they were real people living in the real world have a way of remaking those characters according to the logic of the familiar world they themselves inhabit, which can be a way of short-circuiting a more difficult but in the end more rewarding kind of reading that takes into account historical, cultural, and ideological differences between the present and the past, and is alive to the novelist’s craft. Similar problems can arise if we think of a novel as being told by a real-life author. As we have discussed more fully in the introduction, the voice readers of novels are faced with is not that of the author, but that of the narrator, who has been crafted to tell the story in a certain way for certain purposes.

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Yet for all of that, Jane Austen's characters do tend to strike readers as very real indeed, and Jane Austen's books seem to be by . . . Jane Austen, a woman who lived in Hampshire at the beginning of the nineteenth century, who is said to have hidden her novels-in-progress if anyone entered the room, and who we know never married. We do think we know Jane, and we do think of her world as real and immediate.

The intuitions of large numbers of people who take pleasure in works of great art should never be discounted, though sometimes they can profit by more careful description than those who feel them would trouble to give them. In Austen's novels, and in the other novels with which we will be concerned, the reader is indeed faced with something real and human from the outset – a real and human voice. This is to say that (as is not always the case with novels, and particularly with twentieth-century novels of the experimental variety) we are faced with a narrator very much modeled on a human scale, who seems (except for her access to her heroine's thoughts) to take in the world as we would do. (One commentator has shown that Austen's novels normally include only characters who live within easy visiting distance of wherever the heroine finds herself at a given moment, and that the narrator only penetrates the minds of characters besides the heroine to reveal information that might be gleaned from external observation by a perceptive observer.)² The voice of Austen's narrator seeks to engage us in something akin to a conversation. She wants to amuse, persuade, and move us. With Austen, it is clear enough that the human voice we are hearing is an ideal voice in the precision and discrimination of its language. We cannot quite imagine anyone really speaking that way. But we can just imagine someone thinking with that remarkable clarity. One important reason why we speak so readily of "Jane Austen" is that we want to have a ready way of referring to the remarkable mind behind the voice that tells us her stories. For that mind may be the most important thing about them. It is why the world of her novels seems so "real." Her world seems palpable because, given the underlying network of values that organize it and judge it, it seems in the end completely knowable. We think of it as real because we feel that we can, in principle at least, fully grasp its logic – and more than that, because we are sure that at least one mind, the mind behind the narrator's voice, can do so.

Behind the voice, we sense the existence of a set of standards and values that are, in the end, the most "real" thing about Austen's world. One might reasonably expect Austen's world to be informed by conservative values. She writes about the gentry, a class of well-to-do, genteel people who were neither rich nor titled; she depicts and cares about their privileged mode of life, their social rituals, their houses, their ways. But this may not be quite the whole story, just because of the insistent presence we feel in the narrator's language

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of a clear and austere set of values. The way of life of the gentry at the opening of the nineteenth century may provide the “social basis” for her novels and even for the ethical discriminations constantly reinforced by the precisions of her language. But Raymond Williams, a distinguished left-wing critic, has suggested that in her novels Austen develops “an everyday, uncompromising morality which is in the end separable from its social basis and which, in other hands, can be turned against it.”³ We will return to the issue of the politics of Austen’s novels. For the moment, it will suffice to point out one effect of the powerful ethical underpinnings of her language and the system of values it projects. Behind the real and palpable world of Austen’s novels is always another, ideal world against which the real world is measured. We care about Austen’s heroines, and we want the best for them. Much of the tension, and pleasure, of an Austen novel stems from our underlying awareness of the ideal world Austen’s language projects, and our hope that her heroines will be able to find a place in it as well.⁴

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At times the two worlds seem to meet. As an example of how this can take place, and in preparation for the more extended discussion of *Persuasion* that is the main business of this chapter, we turn to *Pride and Prejudice*. In that novel, blocking figures including obtuse elders and misbehaving siblings stand between the heroine and the man she is destined to marry. One issue is social class: Elizabeth Bennet isn’t, in conventional terms, of quite the same class as Darcy, and the escapades of her family (which culminate in the scandalous elopement of Elizabeth’s sister Lydia) threaten to rob her, by contagion, of all respectability whatever. A meddling relative of Darcy, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, visits Elizabeth to remind her of all this (and more), asking her at one point if “the shades of Pemberley” (Darcy’s country house) are to be “polluted” by such an unsuitable alliance. With a single sentence, Elizabeth brushes away all the complex and (despite the absurd snobbery of the person who voices them) to Austen quite real social considerations Lady Catherine raises: “He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal” (ch. 56). To say this is hardly to sing the Marseillaise; it is to make reference to an ideal realm in which what it means to be a gentleman and a gentleman’s daughter are defined in a way absolute enough to make external complications irrelevant. If you are a true gentleman or a true lady, the assumption seems to be, even disgraceful behavior on the part of your close relatives doesn’t affect that. A certain ideal of personal conduct and individual

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intelligence, arising from education and social position but in the end separable from it, is here turned, as Williams suggests, against anyone (from Lady Catherine to certain kinds of readers, past and present) who would simply reduce the individual to his or her social determinants.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen goes one better than simply making the familiar idealistic assertion that the values of certain exceptional individuals trump the standards of the world that surrounds them. The ideal and real worlds in *Pride and Prejudice* actually coalesce in a scene occurring at that very Pemberley whose “shades” Lady Catherine fears will be polluted, in a way that ultimately defines what it is to be a true gentleman and a true lady, and shows that both Elizabeth and Darcy qualify. Until this point in the novel, Elizabeth and the reader have taken a negative view of Darcy. (So negative has this been on Elizabeth’s part, that she has refused an offer of marriage from him.) He has seemed arrogant and rude, full of the “pride” that half names the novel. But when Elizabeth visits his country house (assuming him to be away) while traveling with her uncle and aunt, a dramatic alteration begins. To begin with, the house and its surroundings are in perfect taste, “neither formal, nor falsely adorned” (ch. 43). This is only the beginning. Elizabeth learns from the housekeeper who shows her party around the house that Darcy is quite a different person there from the one she has thought she knew, unwaveringly polite and humane to his servants, a model landlord, affable to the poor, full of filial piety to his dead father, a model and attentive brother to his younger sister. The suggestion emerges that, to be himself and to be understood for what he truly is, Darcy needs to be and to be seen in the proper, the ideal setting.

This underlying assumption is conveyed by the most exquisite novelistic art. Throughout the opening part of the scene, Elizabeth experiences Pemberley in a mode of aesthetic appreciation; this is of course just how one would take in a great country house one is visiting as a tourist. She views the house and its contents as one would a work of art. But this mode of vision keeps passing over into one involving character, ethics, and a judgment on a whole way of life. Elizabeth knows herself to be no connoisseur of art. In reacting to the paintings that adorn Pemberley, she finds herself instead drawn to the portraits of people she knows. A set of miniature paintings on one wall, for instance, surprises her because it contains a miniature of someone Darcy (for good reasons) despises. Why is it there in Darcy’s own house? Why hasn’t Darcy removed it? The answer is that Darcy’s father was fond of the person. The fact that this particular painting has been left on the wall thus has a larger significance: it is a sign of Darcy’s filial piety. The aesthetic beauty and orderliness of the house and landscape are similarly shadowed by human, ethical considerations, as the housekeeper tells Elizabeth’s party that “there is not one of his tenants or servants but what will give him a good name. Some people call him proud;

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but I am sure I never saw any thing like it. To my fancy, it is only because he does not rattle away like other young men” (ch. 43). In the sentences just quoted, we see a typical move on Austen’s part, the splitting apart of concepts and words into subtler shades of meaning and possibility, to produce ever finer networks of perceptual and ethical discrimination and intelligence – here, with regard to Darcy’s “pride.” We are invited to consider whether a certain reticence might be *mistaken* for pride (“he does not rattle away like other young men”). Later in the novel, Elizabeth finds herself explaining her love for Darcy to her father in part by saying of Darcy, “Indeed he has no improper pride” (ch. 59). The suggestion here appears to be that even though pride is traditionally considered a sin (indeed, the cardinal sin), in the proper context and with the proper basis, it can be a good thing. (Pride of ancestry can, for instance, help lead a person to treat his tenants well.) In the scene we are examining, a wonderfully subtle turn on the notion of pride comes in the following unobtrusive bit of description:

.....
 Mr. Gardiner, whose manners were easy and pleasant, encouraged [the house-keeper’s] communicativeness, by his questions and remarks; Mrs. Reynolds, either from pride or attachment, had evidently great pleasure in talking of her master and his sister. (ch. 43)

At least two interesting things happen in that one sentence. First, what gets slyly suggested is yet another take on “pride”: in Mrs. Reynold’s talk of Darcy and his sister, can one really distinguish entirely between pride and attachment – and ought one to do so? Don’t the two go together, supporting one another? This in turn suggests that Darcy’s own “pride” might, in the proper context, turn out to have its good and even necessary sides and potentialities – which is exactly what turns out to be the case. Second, we as readers enter the circle of those who are contemplating Mrs. Reynolds, assessing her mixture of pride and attachment. We join the group that is touring Pemberley. We too are invited to react in a mode that mixes aesthetic, social, and ethical components. This happens because of a certain softening of focus with regard to “point of view” here. Usually in Austen, we know exactly from whose viewpoint we are seeing things: this control of point of view is one of her strongest and most telling techniques, and it habitually centers in one and only one character at a time. Thus earlier in the scene, when the miniatures are described, it is clear that we are viewing them through Elizabeth’s eyes, both physically and evaluatively. Here, however, the point of view is more general: just who is it in the scene to whom it is “evident” that Mrs. Reynolds is taking pleasure, and just who is it who is speculating about her mixture of pride and

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attachment? Well, the sentence begins with Mr. Gardiner, and so we may be inclined to assign these perceptions to him. But the interest and amusement with which the rest of the party react to her commentary broadens the circle of perception, to include Mr. Gardiner, Elizabeth, the narrator, and ultimately us as readers.

Elizabeth subsequently finds herself faced with a portrait of Darcy, which she views according to the mode of the scene as a whole. When she sees in the portrait “such a smile over the face, as she remembered to have sometimes seen, when he looked at her,” we cannot miss the stirrings of desire in her; when she gazes at the portrait “in earnest contemplation,” we know she is coming to grips with a “new” Darcy suggested by the context of Pemberley. And then, in a moment of supreme artfulness, when she leaves the house and enters the grounds, the picture comes alive: Darcy, the new and “ideal” Darcy, walks out of the frame and stands before her: “As they walked across the lawn towards the river, Elizabeth turned back to look [at the house] again; her uncle and aunt stopped also, and while the former was conjecturing as to the date of the building, the owner of it himself suddenly came forward from the road, which led behind it to the stables” (ch. 43). The rest of the novel gives Darcy the chance to show that the Darcy revealed by Pemberley is indeed the real Darcy. It is particularly significant that he feels, immediately after what we have called his emergence from the picture frame, an immediate liking and affinity for Elizabeth’s aunt and uncle, who as members of the middle, professional class, would be beneath his notice if he had “improper” pride – and who are just the sort of person he did in fact look down upon when he was not in his proper setting, not at Pemberley. It is also true that Darcy warms to Elizabeth’s aunt and uncle because he is in love with her and realizes he must change to win her.

We have been laying the groundwork for our consideration of Austen’s final novel, *Persuasion*, by identifying, describing, and drawing conclusions about the reader’s experience of Austen’s narrator. When we read Austen, we have the feeling that we are in contact with a human intelligence of a very high order, an intelligence that can describe and place every person and circumstance it depicts. This is what makes the voice, and the world it depicts, seem so real and authentically human. But the activity of the mind behind the voice we hear is not limited to brilliant description. It extends also to precise evaluation, implied by the highly refined and nuanced shades of meaning inherent in the language by which people and circumstances are described. People are not simply proud: they have various kinds of pride, some of which are improper, others of which may be allied to more (in Austen’s precise language) “amiable” qualities. This net of evaluative discriminations is also not an end in itself. The mind behind the voice is engaged in imagining an ideal version

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of the world it observes and depicts. Such a vision of the ideal is of course “conservative,” but (as we might expect from Austen), conservative in a special sense. (“Indeed, she has no improper conservatism,” one is tempted to cry.) The visions of the ideal are, to be sure, firmly rooted in what Austen takes to be the social actualities around her. There is absolutely no sense of a visionary alternative to them (as we might find, say, in Austen’s rough contemporary William Blake). But though this conservatism is bound up with the status quo, then, it does not simply ratify the status quo. There are few moments in Austen where a setting we might imagine to actually exist in Austen’s time and Austen’s ideal seem effortlessly to merge, as they do in her depiction of Pemberley. Nowhere is the discrepancy between the two more apparent than in *Persuasion*. But before we pursue this issue, it will be well to take a look at the claims of *Persuasion* as a whole.

***Persuasion*: Love and Narrative Focus**

Persuasion is, first of all, a powerful love story. Among other things, it is a progenitor of what Stanley Cavell has identified as one of the premier genres of the great period of the film studios, the “Hollywood comedy of remarriage.”⁵ No remarriage, to be sure, occurs in *Persuasion*, but we get the next best thing – the story of a love affair that is broken off, seemingly forever, but that leads (after a great deal of pain) to reunion and marriage. We suspect that one reason why she created this unusual love story is that Austen was on a fundamental level an entirely “professional” author. She knew the novels of her day (what we today might refer to as the “novelistic discourse”), and throughout her career she drew upon but never quite repeated their formulas, or repeated herself. This meant striking out into (and delighting in) new territory, creating ever new permutations of the marriage plot.

Whatever its origin, the affective potential of the kind of story Austen chooses for *Persuasion* is enormous. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth advises Darcy to “think of the past only as its remembrance gives you pleasure” (ch. 58), and past mistakes lead easily to present happiness. In *Persuasion*, memories of the past are exceptionally potent and refuse to be so easily forgotten or remolded. The contrast between what Anne Elliot and Wentworth once meant to each other, and his indifference to her throughout much of the novel, provides a sharp backdrop of pain. The pressure of that pain leads Austen to depict moments of perceptual derangement on a very basic level. When Anne finds herself in contact with Wentworth, reality seems to swim before her: she is uncertain of just what is happening, physically; the voices of others become a mere buzz.

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Problems of perception have in Austen's earlier novels involved problems of "perceptiveness"; they have meant misassessing a situation or a person, failing to use one's head. In *Persuasion*, by contrast, one character receives a blow to the head that alters her personality, and the very act of perceiving the world is registered at a basic level, several steps beneath the typical Austen concern with effective mental judgment. Beneath this expansion of view lies an acknowledgment of the power of memory and the reality of loss. The irreversibility of Anne's loss of Wentworth seems, through much of the early part of the novel, indisputable, as Wentworth courts other women before Anne's eyes, in a parade of indifference. Wary readers will recognize that it *is* a parade, or at least suspect that it is. But by keeping the narrative focused through Anne, Austen's narrator keeps us guessing.

We are, to be sure, not always in Anne's mind, and we do not always see things through her eyes. There is a moment, early on, for instance, when we are allowed to enter Wentworth's mind, a moment that will repay careful and extended analysis because of what it reveals about the novel and our relationship to it as we read. Anne's sister has (unkindly) reported to her that Wentworth had said that when he re-met her, Anne seemed to him "so altered that he should not have known [her] again." Anne reacts, as one might expect, with mortification and pain:

.....
 "So altered that he should not have known her again!" These were words which could not but dwell with her. Yet she soon began to rejoice that she had heard them. They were of sobering tendency; they allayed agitation; they composed, and consequently must make her happier.

The passage continues in this way:

.....
 Frederick Wentworth had used such words, or something like them, but without an idea that they would be carried round to her. He had thought her wretchedly altered, and, in the first moment of appeal, had spoken as he felt. He had not forgiven Anne Elliot. She had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shewn a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own decided, confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others. It had been the effect of over-persuasion. It had been weakness and timidity.

He had been most warmly attached to her, and had never seen a woman since whom he thought her equal; but, except from some natural sensation of curiosity, he had no desire of meeting her again. Her power with him was gone for ever.

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It was now his object to marry. He was rich, and being turned on shore, fully intended to settle as soon as he could be properly tempted; actually looking round, ready to fall in love with all the speed which a clear head and quick taste could allow. He had a heart for either of the miss Musgroves, if they could catch it; a heart, in short, for any pleasing young woman who came in his way, excepting Anne Elliot. This was his only secret exception, when he said to his sister, in answer to her suppositions, "Yes, here I am, Sophia, quite ready to make a foolish match" . . . Anne Elliot was not out of his thoughts, when he more seriously described the woman he should wish to meet with. "A strong mind, with sweetness of manner," made the first and the last of the description. (ch. 7)

When we encounter this sequence of paragraphs, we have become so accustomed to experiencing the world of the novel with Anne as its narrative focus that some readers mistake all of it as a record of Anne's thoughts – even the part that depicts Wentworth's internal thoughts. (These they take to be what Anne imagines Wentworth must have thought to himself.) This is a testimony, not so much to the inattentiveness of such readers, as to how fully Austen has immersed us in Anne's consciousness, making us share her pain at hearing Wentworth's remark so deeply that our identification with her emotional perspective can be hard to shake. But of course by the end of the passage there really should be no doubt whatever that we are reading a transcript of Wentworth's thoughts and speech, not of Anne's mental recreation of what he must have been thinking. Otherwise, we would have to suppose that Anne is able to recreate in her mind, not only Wentworth's thoughts about her, but his subsequent conversation with his sister! We will add that Wentworth's thoughts are rendered, as Anne's are often rendered, through the use of "free indirect discourse," an important technique explained in the appendix to this book. Readers who learn to identify free indirect discourse will, among many other things, be less likely to mistake the passage for a transcription of Anne's thoughts, not Wentworth's.

The question remains of why Austen should, exceptionally, break away from Anne as narrative focus, not merely to the extent of adding a comment by the narrator, but to the extent of reproducing Wentworth's thoughts "from the inside." Why does Wentworth become the narrative focus at this point? The answer is multi-layered. On one level, we as readers need to be absolutely sure about Wentworth's attitude. We must also be certain about just what in fact did occur between Anne and Wentworth in the past. Austen doesn't want us to begin imagining, for example, that Anne has come to exaggerate their mutual depth of feeling. On a deeper level, Austen has a delicate task to perform throughout the novel. We as readers need to feel with and through Anne: we must share her pain at Wentworth's indifference, so that

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the contrast will allow us to share her joy all the more when the walls between them fall. But it will not do for us to become completely identified with Anne, particularly when she finds things most hopeless. Our continued interest in the novel depends upon having a sense that change is possible, and some of the pleasure of the novel results precisely from moments when we can see farther than Anne can, despite her intelligence. When we see farther than Anne, we draw close to the consciousness we most admire as we read – the consciousness of the narrator. In this passage, we enter the mode of privileged knowing with respect both to Anne and to Wentworth. A careful reader realizes from the very vehemence of Wentworth's thoughts, that for all his studied indifference, Anne Eliot remains the pivot of his thoughts. (This is what makes the declaration, "Anne Elliot was not out of his thoughts, when he more seriously described the woman he should wish to meet with," so delicious on a second reading of the novel.) This recognition, however deeply it may be buried in our consciousness as we read, gives us enough hope to make us wish to continue reading and allows us to predict, in general terms, the novel's happy outcome. When that outcome arrives, our pleasure is the greater, because it seems both deeply right and entirely plausible, something we have hoped for but also expected all along.

The Letter Scene

The reversal we have been taught to expect, by such means as this rare excursion into Wentworth's mind, occurs most richly in the novel's most celebrated scene, in which Wentworth writes a love letter to Anne based on a conversation between her and one of his friends he half overhears as he sits in a room where they are talking. One of Austen's subtlest readers has recounted how, as a girl, she would sometimes simply read the letter scene over and over, and other times skim through the book just so that she could re-experience the scene when she came to it.⁶ The impassioned words of Wentworth's letter certainly deserve such a response. So does the chance the scene affords for Anne to give her views on woman's constancy, in a context where she will not be ignored (as she has been for so many years in her own family circle) but instead will receive the fullest possible attention by two estimable hearers, one of whom (Harville) simply admires her for what she is, while the other (Wentworth) is hanging on her every word because he is deeply in love with her.

The scene also provides a meditation on the uses of fiction itself. The issue of the relationship between the general and the particular fascinated Austen throughout her career, and the idea that there could be an easy fit between

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general pronouncements and specific situations always excited her suspicion and often amused her – reactions unsurprising in one with her keen powers of nuance and discrimination. (Perhaps the best-known use of the potential gap between the general statements and specific situations underlies the comic opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”) The “letter” chapter in *Persuasion* opens with Mrs. Musgrove loudly proclaiming her general opinion about long engagements, a subject painfully applicable to two quieter people in the room, Anne and Wentworth, though in ways Mrs. Musgrove could never imagine. Anne soon finds herself making generalizations about male and female constancy, but in terms that (though she cannot quite admit this to herself) are directed both to the person with whom she is conversing and also to Wentworth, who is in a position to overhear her. What Mrs. Musgrove has to say, and for that matter what Anne has to say, may or may not be true as generalities; it is actually hard to imagine how, as generalities, they could be either true or false in any absolute sense, since they cover so much ground and therefore must admit to so many exceptions. But if properly understood and if put in a suitably concrete and specific framework, what both say, and particularly what Anne says, can indeed offer crucially valid insights to the right listener. Anne’s insistence that women can be constant in love even when the situation appears hopeless in fact means everything to Wentworth at this particular moment. Her claim that women experience separation differently from men (“we live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us”) and even more the “faltering” acknowledgment that “woman’s feelings” would be too great a burden for an active man to bear, also convey something Wentworth needs to hear: just how painful this separation has been for Anne (ch. 23).

This interchange seems, among other things, a figure for Austen’s own relationship to her readers. Austen offers us truths of a kind, but we must be listening for them and must know how to take them. If, like Wentworth, we are sufficiently interested and sufficiently perceptive, we can become part of a charmed circle where admiration, respect, and even love circulate, because we know how to attend to the pictures Austen paints, and how to apply the general truths of her fiction to our own lives and desires. It is certainly worth attending to the dialogue we have been examining, not only for its covert message to Wentworth, but also for the movement of the argument itself, which conveys a great deal about both what divides men from women and what unites them. Initially Harville and Anne cannot reach agreement on the relative merits of men and women, both because their experiences are so different and because the culture at large encourages a dismissive view of women’s constancy. But when the abstract argument breaks down, the two find common ground

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in sharing their own feelings, and in doing so they create a small community of shared values whose emotional charge can extend to draw in Wentworth as well. Communities of feeling are important in *Persuasion*, as they will be in *Mary Barton*, *Bleak House*, and *Middlemarch*.

Still, there certainly are barriers between Anne and Wentworth in this most intimate of scenes. The layers of indirection, and particularly the frustrating impossibility for Anne simply to tell Wentworth that she still loves him, create a vivid reminder of how difficult it is for people to be simply themselves in any social setting. It is significant that the one exception to this rule in *Persuasion*, the one character who is simply and perpetually himself, Admiral Croft, is at once amusing and lovable, but also clearly not the stuff of which the novel's hero or heroine could possibly be made. In Austen, the rooms in which we live are always full of other people, and only the comically solipsistic can evade this condition of life.

Coping with the Social

On one level, to be sure, the necessity for indirection in the "letter" scene merely adds to our pleasure, following the general principle (applicable in fiction and in life) that a difficulty overcome produces an additional quantum of pleasure. On another level, however, the sense of social constraint underlines the fact that in *Persuasion*, Austen tests the limits and problems both of individual experience (for example, in the reduction of some of Anne's perceptions to jumbles and buzzes) and of social experience. There is something that, in a less deliriously happy context, would ring of hostility toward society in general in the narrator's announcement that when, shortly after this scene, Anne and Wentworth meet on the street and have the chance to engage in a full and frank expression of their feeling toward one another, they do so "heedless of every group around them, seeing neither sauntering [!] politicians, bustling house-keepers, flirting girls, nor nursery-maids and children" (ch. 23). The next step, to overt hostility, is fully taken at the end of Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, when we are informed that the hero and heroine "went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and in shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar." A very different mind from Austen's lies behind *that* voice.

In some nineteenth-century novels, female characters cope with social and familial injustice and constraint simply by remaining unaware of it: they "rise above" such things. (This is certainly a tendency in Dickens.) Another

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alternative is rebellion, such as we find in *Jane Eyre*. Austen's heroines take a different path. Elizabeth Bennet is entirely aware of the impropriety of her family's behavior and of her father's neglect in failing to correct it, and she also knows what these things may cost her and her sister Jane. She nonetheless employs wit and irony to keep these matters from dampening her spirits. The difference between her use of wit and irony as a coping mechanism and her father's is a topic which, if carefully explored, will shed a good deal of light not just on the meaning of *Pride and Prejudice* but on Austen's sense of the dangers of her own narrative mode, since the Austen narrator makes extensive use of an irony that at first glance can seem identical to that of Mr. Bennet.

Anne Eliot, too, is entirely aware of the extent to which she is slighted by her family and hemmed in by her social situation. She knows very well that her father's slight regard for her is unfair and that his overvaluation of her sister is groundless, the simple expression of his own dull egotism. She also realizes that their arrogant stupidity (she would not allow herself to call it that) may lead to trouble for them all. By the same token, she is aware that, when she visits Uppercross full of her own deep concerns about her imminent uprooting from Kellynch, the Musgroves simply ignore her pain, remaining immersed in their habitual round of pleasures and petty annoyances. But she nevertheless finds her own mental world rich enough to allow her to register such facts without allowing them to overwhelm her. Faced with the Musgroves' self-absorption, she decides, with a certain amusement, that to be of any use at all in the situation, it will be "highly incumbent on her to clothe her imagination, her memory, and all her ideas in as much of Uppercross as possible" (ch. 6). (The qualifying phrase "as possible" is important: it suggests that for her, unlike a similar character in Dickens, total self-abnegation will be neither possible nor desirable.) Earlier, the narrator has told us that Anne

.....
 always contemplated [the Musgrove sisters] as some of the happiest creatures of her acquaintance; but still, saved as we all are by some comfortable feeling of superiority from wishing the possibility of exchange, she would not have given up her own more elegant and cultivated mind for all their enjoyments; and envied them nothing but that seemingly perfect good understanding and agreement together, that good-humoured mutual affection, of which she had known so little herself with either of her sisters. (ch. 5)

There is of course potential irony in speaking of the "comfortable" feeling of superiority we all have about ourselves, but in this case, the comfort Anne feels is justified and commendable. Darcy, we recall, is said by his housekeeper to have "no improper pride." Assigning the proper value to her own mind helps

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Anne to assume a useful place in a social unit that is unable to appreciate her at her true worth, without undue resentment and without making herself a blind slave to the situation.

Persuasion and Renewal

The love story in *Persuasion* is superbly managed, with a rare power that arises most immediately from Anne's earlier pain. Some of the power of the novel's ending, however, draws upon sources that lie very deep in our literary, cultural, and even religious backgrounds, sources that Shakespeare evoked in his late plays, above all *The Winter's Tale*. In that play, a woman who was thought to be dead for many years suddenly and miraculously returns to life, as what appears to be a statue of her moves, descends from its pedestal, and reveals the living woman. It needs hardly be said how many rituals draw on the human need for renewal and rebirth. We can trace the beginnings of a pattern of renewal early in *Persuasion*, in the opening chapter and in the midst of some very incongruous material. After the devastating portrait of Sir Walter Elliot's delight in reading the *Baronetage*, and a brief description of his wife's death, we are given the following explanation of why that father did not marry his wife's best friend, Lady Russell:

Be it known then, that Sir Walter, like a good father, (having met with one or two private disappointments in very unreasonable applications) prided himself on remaining single for his dear daughter's sake. For one daughter, his eldest, he would really have given up any thing, which he had not been very much tempted to do. Elizabeth had succeeded, at sixteen, to all that was possible, of her mother's rights and consequence; and being very handsome, and very like himself, her influence had always been great, and they had gone on together most happily. His two other children were of very inferior value. Mary had acquired a little artificial importance, by becoming Mrs. Charles Musgrove; but Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way; – she was only Anne.

To Lady Russell, indeed, she was a most dear and highly valued god-daughter, favourite and friend. Lady Russell loved them all; but it was only in Anne that she could fancy the mother to revive again.

A few years before, Anne Elliot had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early; and as even in its height, her father had found little to admire in her, (so totally different were her delicate features and mild dark eyes from his own); there could be nothing in them now that she was faded and thin, to

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excite his esteem. He had never indulged much hope, he had now none, of ever reading her name in any other page of his favourite work. All equality of alliance must rest with Elizabeth; for Mary had merely connected herself with an old country family of respectability and large fortune, and had therefore *given* all honour, and received none: Elizabeth would, one day or other, marry suitably. (ch. 1)

This passage encapsulates much of the method of the novel, particularly in its manipulation of voice. In the opening section, the narrator's satirical, almost scornful "Be it known" modulates in the course of a few sentences into a voice that sounds very much like Sir Walter's, declaring that his other two children were "of very inferior value." Then the two voices are played off against one another in the following sentence, with Sir Walter's tones predominating in "she was only Anne" – an assessment that condemns him out of his own mouth. After all this unpleasantness (for here even the narrator is, in her own refined way, harsh to the point of unpleasantness), the following, quiet paragraph comes as a lovely oasis, mimicking in its own formal qualities the virtues we are already beginning to assign to Anne, and raising the quiet but persistent theme of rebirth with the words "it was only in Anne that she could fancy the mother to revive again." The reader who attends to similar hints as the novel proceeds will be well repaid. Among the most exquisite of them is one that pits Anne's own elegiac and despairing sense of her loss of Wentworth against nature's own irresistible power of renewal. As she walks among the hedgerows, suffering from Wentworth's attentions to Louisa Musgrove, Anne tries to divert herself by recalling sad poems of autumn; but in the midst of this, we are reminded that the landscape is real and alive, for in their walk Anne's party passes through "large enclosures, where the ploughs at work, and the fresh-made paths spoke [that is, revealed the presence of] the farmer, counteracting the sweets of poetical despondence, and meaning to have spring again" (ch. 10). A further, more lighthearted reference occurs when Anne's "musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy" are said to have been nearly sufficient "to spread purification and perfume all the way" as she walks in Bath (ch. 21). And there are others.

One of the cleverest ways in which the theme of rebirth and renewal is forwarded involves Anne's own physical appearance. The long passage quoted above gives the initial impression that, when the novel opens, Anne's youthful looks have vanished because of suffering at breaking off her engagement with Wentworth and also because of the passage of time. ("A few years before, Anne Elliot had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early; and as even in its height, her father had found little to admire in her, (so totally different were her delicate features and mild dark eyes from his own); there

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could be nothing in them now that she was faded and thin, to excite his esteem.”) But voice and narrative focus are again crucial here. By the end of the passage, we have passed from the narrator’s voice and viewpoint to Sir Walter’s (“*her father* had found little to admire in her”). This has the effect of leaving open the question of just how much her “looks” have really deteriorated, and how permanently. We are left with enough of a sense of loss to make renewal seem desirable; we do not have a sense of loss so dramatic that it would require an actual miracle (hardly allowable in a realist novel!) to be reversed. This double vision creates an illogical but powerful effect, one denied to visual media such as film. A film would have to show us exactly how Anne actually looks at the opening of the action; it could not rest in fertile ambiguity.

The possibility of renewal brings us to the issue with which this chapter began, Austen’s vision of the ideal and how it is embodied in her novels. Earlier we claimed that Austen’s ethical discrimination, most concretely apparent in the precision of the narrator’s language, projects an ideal world that shadows and judges the world her characters inhabit. In *Pride and Prejudice*, real and ideal worlds seem to meet, at least for a moment, embodied in Pemberley. The situation is very different in *Persuasion*. Here, the country house that dominates the early section of the novel, Kellynch-hall, is nearly bankrupt in a quite literal sense – and so are the values of most of those who inhabit it. The lord of the manor is vain and silly, in a way that endangers his tenants as well as his one deserving daughter. His oldest daughter is as shallow, hard, and materialistic as he is, and as ridden by a ridiculous and superficial pride of caste; his younger daughter is less contemptible, but no less egotistical, and her husband and his landed relatives are too ineffectual to be the basis for change. Only Anne and Lady Russell depart from this most unattractive norm, and Lady Russell herself is, besides being rather slow of mind, hardly exempt from overvaluing birth. *Persuasion* offers us no Pemberley, no imagined merging of the real and the ideal in a house inhabited by the representatives of landed society. We do, however, discover something resembling such a merging elsewhere – in the lodgings of Captain Harville, where Anne finds herself “lost in the pleasanter feelings which sprang from the sight of all the ingenious contrivances and nice arrangements of Captain Harville, to turn the actual space to the best possible account.” When she leaves the house, she feels sure that she has “left great happiness behind” (ch. 11).

The power of naval officers and their wives to embody the estimable is further exemplified by the Crofts, who are able to make something even of Kellynch-hall. Admiral Croft removes the full-length looking glasses in which Sir Walter admired himself. (“Oh Lord! there was no getting away from oneself,” the admiral remarks, ch. 13.) The ability of the admiral and his wife to transform their surroundings for the better is prefigured by Mrs. Croft’s

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insistence that women can travel in comfort on a ship of war, whatever genteel prejudice might think of the matter: “I know of nothing superior to the accommodations of a man of war” (ch. 8), she tells the Musgroves. The Crofts’ mode of going about the countryside also contrasts amusingly with the stately journeys made by Sir Walter, who would rather abandon Kellynch-hall than diminish the number of horses pulling his carriage. We see the Crofts, instead, out for a ramble in a one-horse cart, with the admiral’s driving continually putting them in danger of tipping over, and his wife saving them from disaster by “coolly giving the reins a better direction herself” and “afterwards judiciously putting out her hand” (ch. 10).

Yet for all their enterprise and common sense, there is no real sense that the Crofts will somehow breathe new life into country house society. They are, after all, tenants. It is sometimes claimed that *Persuasion* depicts an actual transfer to power from an older, debilitated aristocracy to “new men” like Admiral Croft. This claim cannot really be sustained.⁷ Among other things, no such transformation occurred in England during the nineteenth century; the upper classes has long been adept at avoiding being supplanted precisely by bringing new men and new money into their orbit, by (as we would now say) “co-opting” them. Partly as a result, there had been no French Revolution in England. But this is not to say that there is nothing revolutionary about the sentiments behind *Persuasion*. What we see, unmistakably, is a more negative judgment of the powers that be than in any other Austen novel (save, perhaps, *Sense and Sensibility*), coupled with at least the beginnings of a vision of how things might and ought to be different. As with personal renewal, the focus rests on Anne and what she values. It seems to involve, somehow, the navy, or at least some of the qualities Austen finds in the navy. Anne discovers in its officers (when she meets them on shore) human warmth, matter-of-fact frankness, freedom from a worship of class, energy, a sense of public duty (mixed, to be sure, with a frank desire to make money), and (somewhat surprisingly) a strong value for domesticity. The novel ends with a salute to naval officers as members of “that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance” (ch. 24). Austen’s imagination, like that of many nineteenth-century realist novelists, is “conservative” in that it imagines human possibility in terms of existing institutions or modifications thereof. The fit, and lack of fit, between Austen’s wish to find an embodiment of the ideal, and the British navy (even as she depicts it – and especially if one considers what she does not depict of its membership and activities) shows how strong is the desire to escape the negative aspects of Kellynch-hall.

The hope for renewal also appears to depend on a significant measure of solidity and independence among women, though in ways that modern readers may not immediately recognize (and may not find satisfactory when they do

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recognize them). *Persuasion* conveys a sharp sense of the injustice of women's position in society. (Here again, it is of course well to remember the limits of what counts as "society" in Austen.) This sense focuses most sharply on the figure of Mrs. Smith. Austen stresses her conversion from socially oriented frivolity to thoughtfulness, her basic decency, and her extraordinary natural good humor in the face of suffering and adversity. All play their part in mounting a protest against the legal situation of women which has victimized her. To see such a person denied what ought to be her legal rights simply because of the selfish indifference of a man like Mr. Elliot (appropriately enough, the heir apparent of Kellynch-hall) creates in the reader outrage at the legal and economic nonentity of women in Austen's world. (Mrs. Smith's physical frailty reminds us, too, of something Austen was also quite clear about, namely that a person can literally die, as nearly happens in *Mansfield Park*, from being in economic straits.) But it is only when we see Mrs. Smith assume a complicity in the process that would marry off Anne Elliot, for whom she has sincere feelings of friendship, to the same Mr. Elliot who has treated her with such immoral neglect that we feel fully how intolerable it is that this woman, or any woman, should feel the need to play such an ugly role as a matter of economic survival.

For *Persuasion* is a novel in which female ties, and their lack, vitally matter. Lady Russell is a woman of little imagination, yet even she can imagine Anne filling the place in a female circle Anne's mother's death has left vacant ("it was only in Anne that she could fancy the mother to revive again"). Lady Russell is certainly to blame as the person who centrally persuades Anne to break her engagement with Wentworth in the first place. Yet, in the most surprising moment in the novel, Anne tells Wentworth, after they find themselves engaged again, that she was absolutely right to follow Lady Russell's advice:

.....
 I have been thinking over the past, and trying impartially to judge of the right and wrong, I mean with regard to myself; and I must believe that I was right, much as I suffered from it, that I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend whom you will love better than you do now. To me, she was in the place of a parent. Do not mistake me, however. I am not saying that she did not err in her advice. It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides; and for myself, I certainly never should, in any circumstance of tolerable similarity, give such advice. But I mean, that I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience. I have now, as far as such a sentiment is allowable in human nature, nothing to reproach myself with; and if I mistake not, a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman's portion. (ch. 23)

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This is a remarkable speech for many reasons. We might have expected Anne to triumphantly declare her freedom from her erring mentor, to congratulate herself at having grown beyond her. It is typical of Austen that an adequate response to the situation Anne finds herself in involves, not simple rejection or rebellion, but the making of fine and difficult distinctions (such as the one in *Pride and Prejudice* between proper and improper pride). One of the fine subtle things about this speech is its resistance to a certain kind of girlish giving in to the still dashing and handsome Wentworth: Anne tells him, to his face, that she was not simply right, but “perfectly right” to give him up – and also that he “will” learn to love Lady Russell better than he now does. There are, it seems, other ties between human beings than the romantic love men and women feel for each other, and these include the claims of a certain faithfulness to a female line of solidarity, the one that Lady Russell imagines, truly, that Anne will renew, though Anne does this in a way and with a difference Lady Russell herself could not imagine.

Persuasion is a remarkable novel in which there occurs a significant revision of some of Austen’s deepest concerns. In her other novels, perceptions and ideas often are in need of realignment; here, the very stuff of perception comes into view and into question, with Anne’s experiences of buzzes and blurs, and personal experience is probed to a new depth, as we share Anne’s pain, and then her joy. The issue of a renewal of social values, too, takes on new dimensions in *Persuasion*, with the country house left behind. Pemberley as an embodiment of value is supplanted by a group of naval officers and their wives, and in the background of the domestic scene they create, we feel the stirring of mythic rebirth, as a heroine awakens to a new and fuller life and forges a triumphant connection with her past and what had seemed happiness lost forever.