

Also by Tara Ghoshal Wallace

FANNY BURNEY'S 'A BUSY DAY'
WOMEN CRITICS 1660-1820 (as co-editor)

Jane Austen and Narrative Authority

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Straight Talk in *Persuasion*

'Art' is an important word in Austen criticism. Used admirably, it turns up in almost all discussion of her work, its centrality asserted in book titles from Mary Lascelles' *Jane Austen and Her Art* (1939) to Roger Gard's *Jane Austen's Novels: The Art of Clarity* (1992).¹ When writing about Jane Austen's art, critics generally refer to her narrative control, her subtle indirections, her mastery of refracted discourse. *Emma* is usually taken to represent the apogee of this artistry, while *Persuasion* is often seen in slightly different terms – sometimes as a shift to a new Romantic mode, and sometimes as a draft which has yet to attain *Emma*'s level of polish.² Of course, no reader of *Persuasion* argues that it is not artful, and its subtleties are usually organized into three categories: control of viewpoint through a particularly reliable and admirable heroine, use of indirect speech and physical gesture as modes of communication, and careful layering of narrative voice and characters' speech. My reading of *Persuasion* does not deny any of these artistic techniques, but argues that even while Austen deploys them, she simultaneously questions her own artful constructs, inscribing into her text interrogations and even subversions of her own subtleties. *Persuasion* disavows some of Austen's habitual narrative practices, making room for a voice that may or may not be more romantic, but is certainly more apt to question cool certainty and narrative distance. In *Persuasion*, I suggest, Austen takes away the code book that had allowed readers to interpret, in familiar ways, the subtleties of her text, forcing us to acknowledge our own bemusement and to engage not with a disembodied narrative voice, but with a flesh-and-blood author.

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Anne Elliot, that heroine 'almost too good' for her creator, is unquestionably the centre of the novel, and, to some readers, the

infallible and dependable locus of authority.³ The narrator's endorsement of Anne is strong and explicit, from the early description of her 'elegance of mind and sweetness of character' to the comparison, in Chapter Twenty, between the two sisters' happiness, 'the origin of one all selfish vanity, of the other all generous attachment' (5, 185). Along the way, Anne's virtue and authority are demonstrated in a number of ways: in her dutiful exertions at Kellynch, when she, rather than the official heads of the family, undertakes the 'trying' task of 'going to every house in the parish, as a sort of take-leave' (39), while Sir Walter merely prepares 'condescending bows for all the afflicted tenantry and cottagers who might have had a hint to shew themselves' (36); in her services to all the Musgroves, from attending the injured young Charles to hearing Henrietta's plans for marriage; and in her loyal friendship to Mrs Smith. All these actions, as much as narrative statement and representation of internal monologue, attest to what Marilyn Butler characterizes as the 'the inference . . . that Anne's inner life has an unassailable quality and truth'.⁴

Readers of Austen know, of course, that no character entirely escapes Austen's ironic vision – not Jane Bennet, not Fanny Price, not George Knightley, and decidedly not Anne Elliot. Anne's romanticism, for example, is gently mocked in deflationary passages like the one following Louisa and Wentworth's dialogue about love – 'Anne could not immediately fall into a quotation again' (85) – or the narrative commentary after Anne becomes convinced of Wentworth's returning heart: 'Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy, could never have passed along the streets of Bath. . . . It was almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way' (192). I would suggest that the irony directed against Anne is wider and deeper than is encompassed in these moments, and that it has precisely to do with 'high-wrought love and eternal constancy'.

Anne sees her feeling for Wentworth as permanent and independent of time, place or outcome. That conviction surely lies behind her declaration to Captain Harville that 'All the privilege I claim for my own sex . . . is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone' (235). Distinguishing her love from the situation-driven romances of the Musgrove sisters or of Mary and Charles, Anne construes herself and Wentworth as a couple

naturally made for one another. Thinking back on their first courtship, she claims that, 'With the exception, perhaps, of Admiral and Mrs Croft . . . there could have been no two hearts so open, no tastes so similar, no feelings so in unison, no countenances so beloved' (63–4). Anne's vision of a match made in heaven must be read, however, against the narrator's more prosaic articulation of the intimacy: 'He was, at that time, a remarkably fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit and brilliancy; and Anne an extremely pretty girl, with gentleness, modesty, taste, and feeling. – Half the sum of attraction on either side, might have been enough, for he had nothing to do, and she had hardly any body to love' (26). In effect, the narrator depicts the Anne/Wentworth romance in the same way that Anne characterizes the intimacy between Louisa and Benwick – 'Where could have been the attraction? The answer soon presented itself. It had been in situation. They had been thrown together several weeks' (166–7). In other words, Louisa and Benwick, whose engagement elicits such general astonishment, have re-enacted the first romance of Anne and Wentworth, thereby rendering the earlier courtship less exalted and special than Anne imagines it to be.

The corollary to high-wrought love, is of course, eternal constancy, which both Wentworth and Anne claim. Wentworth's assertion that he was 'never inconstant' (237) hardly demands rebuttal; after all, he enters the text 'ready to fall in love with all the speed which a clear head and quick taste could allow', with 'a heart, in short, for any pleasing young woman who came in his way, excepting Anne Elliot' (61). Even if we interpret his determination as resentful self-deception, it is still not constancy, either of feeling or behaviour. Anne, on the other hand, seems to be genuinely constant, nursing her hopeless love for more than seven years. But how much of this constancy is due to her strong immutable love?⁵ This is what the text says:

[T]ime had softened down much, perhaps nearly all of a peculiar attachment to him, – but she had been too dependant on time alone; no aid had been given in change of place . . . or in any novelty or enlargement of society. – No one had ever come within the Kellynch circle, who could bear a comparison with

Frederick Wentworth, as he stood in her memory. No second attachment, the only thoroughly natural, happy, and sufficient cure, at her time of life, had been possible to the nice tone of her mind, the fastidiousness of her taste, *in the small limits of the society around them*. (28; emphasis added)

The narrator, then, reminds us that Anne's constancy may be externally imposed rather than internally motivated, a result of 'the small limits of the society around them', of 'the sameness and the elegance, the prosperity and the nothingness, of . . . a long, uneventful residence in one country circle' (9). For over seven years Anne has inhabited one country circle that can apparently offer only Charles Musgrove and Charles Hayter as suitors for its young women; Anne's constancy, therefore, is a contingent rather than an absolute quality, as she herself partially acknowledges when she tells Harville that women 'live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us' (232).⁶

Once Anne Elliot escapes the confined circle of Kellynch and Uppercross, she exhibits, in spite of rekindled feeling for Wentworth, a very healthy interest in other men, an interest not entirely compatible with hopeless fidelity. Aware of the admiration of the as-yet-unidentified Mr Elliot, Anne not only enjoys his attention, but prompted by nothing more than his appreciative look and gentlemanly manners, she 'felt that she should like to know who he was' (105). Equally responsive to Benwick's interest, she not only 'gladly [gives] him all her attention as long as attention was possible' (109), but also turns Louisa's accident to good account: 'united as they all seemed by the distress of the day, she felt an increasing degree of good-will towards him, and a pleasure even in thinking that it might, perhaps, be the occasion of continuing their acquaintance' (115). In other words, even while she is painfully attuned to Wentworth, Anne is able to feel and articulate to herself her interest in other men, connecting her improved looks to 'the silent admiration of her cousin' and 'hoping that she was to be blessed with a second spring of youth and beauty' (124). She eagerly anticipates a visit from Benwick, unable to 'return from any stroll of solitary indulgence . . . or any visit of charity in the village, without wondering whether she might see him or hear of him' (133). Such alertness to other men,

to potential admirers, demonstrates a receptivity which argues against an absolutely committed heart.

Anne's desire to be loved and courted, to 'enter a state for which she [Lady Russell] held her to be peculiarly fitted' (29) and her equally strong desire for one particular lover jointly inform the complex and shifting narrative of her relationship with Mr Elliot. Although Anne assures Wentworth that she never entertained the possibility of marrying her cousin, and though she tells herself that she 'never could accept him' even to become 'what her mother had been' (160), her rejection is neither so certain nor so easy as these assurances imply. Seeing Mr Elliot again at Bath, Anne is scarcely less besotted than her father and sister: 'He was quite as good-looking as he had appeared at Lyme, his countenance improved by speaking, and his manners were so exactly what they ought to be, so polished, so easy, so particularly agreeable, that she could compare him in excellence to only one person's manners. They were not the same, but they were, perhaps, equally good' (143). Like Elizabeth Bennet, Anne Elliot instinctively compares two men who interest her – recall that Elizabeth says of Colonel Fitzwilliam that she 'was reminded by her own satisfaction in being with him, as well as by his evident admiration of her, of her former favourite George Wickham' (PP 180). And like Elizabeth again, she is not as certain about her own feelings as she would like to believe.

It may be objected that Anne clearly articulates, quite early in their intimacy, suspicions about Mr Elliot's character and motives, but such suspicions do not entirely overcome her attraction to this admiring and persistent wooer. Chapter Nine of the second volume of *Persuasion*, which tends to remain in the reader's mind as entirely devoted to Mrs Smith's revelations about Mr Elliot, also exposes the shifting, confused state of Anne's emotions. Anne begins the day with 'a great deal of good will towards him', regretting that she must hurt him, and implicitly acknowledges the possibility of marrying him: 'How she might have felt, had there been no Captain Wentworth in the case, was not worth enquiry; for there was a Captain Wentworth' (192). Then, after hearing Mrs Smith's narrative, Anne not only credits every word her friend says, but asserts that Mrs Smith only confirms what she already knew: 'you tell me nothing which

does not accord with what I have known, or could imagine. . . . I have heard nothing which really surprised me' (207). In other words, Anne seems to say, her opinion of Mr Elliot is already so low that it can easily accommodate Mrs Smith's characterization of him as 'black at heart, hollow and black!' (199). But if that is indeed the case, how can she have contemplated being his wife, or even his intimate friend? That she did so speculate is clear from her sense of reprieve at the end of the chapter: 'Anne could just acknowledge within herself such a possibility of having been induced to marry him, as made her shudder at the idea of the misery which must have followed' (211). Later, in the glow of her renewed engagement to Wentworth, she can once again pity Mr Elliot (245), as she had done before Mrs Smith's story had cancelled all compassion, when she had felt 'There was no longer any thing of tenderness due to him. . . . Pity for him was all over' (212).

I enumerate these vacillations and inconsistencies not in order to deny Anne's goodness or truth, but to make a point about the pitfalls awaiting the reader of *Persuasion*. If the good and truthful heroine falls into misrepresentations and self-deception, then how can we trust her to guide us through the complexities of a text full of the 'manoeuvres of selfishness and duplicity' (207)? Isn't there, in fact, some duplicitous manoeuvring in Anne's interrogation of Admiral Croft as she tries to ascertain Wentworth's feelings about Louisa's engagement to Benwick? When she expresses her hope that 'there is nothing in Captain Wentworth's manner of writing to make you suppose he thinks himself ill-used by his friend' and adds that she would 'be very sorry that such a friendship as has subsisted between him and Captain Benwick should be destroyed' (172-3), Anne disingenuously cloaks her selfish desire in disinterested concern. Because we consider love a worthier motive than ambition, we do not fault her for this as we fault Mr Elliot's careful surveillance of Sir Walter. Because the text presses us toward admiring and loving Anne, we overlook her solipsism in privileging her own sorrow for a lost lover over Benwick's grief for a dead one (97). And because we have shared her suffering through Wentworth's flirtation with Louisa, we even applaud her uncharitable speculation, after Louisa's fall, about firmness of character - 'whether it

might not strike him, that, like all other qualities of the mind, it should have its proportions and limits' (116). These lapses, like the ironies surrounding Anne's constancy, remind us that once again we are dealing with a fallible Austen heroine; at the same time, all readers notice the extent to which we are dependent on Anne's authority, an authority at least partially resting on claims to objectivity. P.J.M. Scott alludes to this doubleness when he says that 'so much of the narrative deals directly or indirectly with her feelings that we seem locked into the *self*-concern of a heroine who after all is allegedly not egoistic. Her uprightness becomes too self-conscious for us, her virtue the theme too much of *her* vision. . . . [T]he issue which has to be dramatized and brought to life for us is the quality of individual perception in a world where knowledge is partial.' While agreeing absolutely with the second part of this assessment, I would argue that the problem of self-conscious virtue is not the crucial one. What is crucial is Austen's representation of a problem having to do with readers' expectations: that is, our habit of assuming that virtue equals authority, and that a good heroine's point of view should be unblemished by self-deception or misrepresentation. Anne Elliot is indeed the most admirable of Austen's heroines, but she is not a picture of perfection and cannot claim interpretive authority from a position of wholly disinterested observation.

* * *

Perhaps, however, Anne can claim authority simply because she is a subtle and careful reader, especially of obscure texts. Indeed, as many critics have pointed out, *Persuasion* demonstrates the importance of interpreting oblique, coded language and gesture. Judy Van Sickle Johnson says that '[p]hysical gestures and exchanged glances are crucial to the reunion of Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth.' Laura G. Mooneyham and Tony Tanner explain why this is so, Mooneyham arguing that '[s]ince only indirect communication is allowed in the world of *Persuasion*, Anne must learn to use language's potential for communicating hidden meaning', and Tanner referring to the problem of 'private communication in a predominantly public world in which various taboos on certain forms of direct address between the

sexes are still operative'. Janis P. Stout offers an explanation having to do with romance rather than propriety: 'certain kinds of emotions have a quality of ineffability, putting them beyond the representation afforded by everyday speech.'⁸ Whatever the reason, Anne and Wentworth do indeed spend a good deal of time decoding each other's indirect speech and gestures. However, even as Austen presents a courtship conducted through indirect communication, she problematizes the whole enterprise, in part by showing how other characters engage in the same form of coded communication and in part by demonstrating the ultimate inefficacy of indirection and subtle interpretation.

The first practitioner of indirect communication we meet is that 'civil, cautious lawyer' (11) Mr Shepherd. Carefully manipulating Sir Walter's impulsive threat to quit Kellynch Hall rather than economize, he not only prepares his client for the sudden and fortuitous appearance of a naval officer as tenant, but also manages to rein in the baronet's arrogance, so that he is 'flattered into his very best and most polished behaviour by Mr Shepherd's assurances of his being known, by report, to the Admiral, as a model of good breeding' (32). Like Anne at Uppercross, Mr Shepherd can 'listen patiently, soften every grievance, and excuse each to the other' (46). Sir Walter himself can master indirection, as he does in response to Anne and Wentworth's first engagement: 'without actually withholding his consent, or saying it should never be, [he] gave it all the negative of great astonishment, great coldness, great silence' (26), thus expressing denial without direct speech. Indeed, readable gesture and indirection seem to be universal in *Persuasion*, from Charles Hayter's jealous reprimands to young Walter to the 'smiles and intelligent glances . . . [of] two or three of the lady visitors, as if they believed themselves quite in the secret' (222) of Anne's romance with Mr Elliot. Mr Elliot himself communicates with Anne indirectly, as when he refers to Sir Walter's friendship with 'those who are beneath him': 'He looked, as he spoke, to the seat which Mrs Clay had been lately occupying, a sufficient explanation of what he particularly meant' (151). Anne's other admirer, Benwick, also reveals meaning through action and gesture, repeating, 'with such tremulous feeling the various lines which image a broken heart' and looking 'so entirely as if he meant to be understood'

that Anne feels compelled to warn him away from too much poetry. Surrounded by coded gesture and speech, Anne is a practised and generally self-assured interpreter.

The text to which she devotes the most attention is, of course, Wentworth, and Anne often articulates her confidence as a reader of his codes. She is particularly certain of his moments of hidden contempt. His facial expression convinces Anne that he loathed the unfortunate Dick Musgrove, though 'it was too transient . . . to be detected by any who understood him less than herself' (67); his 'artificial, assenting smile, followed by a contemptuous glance' (86) informs her that he despises Mary's snobbery toward the Hayters; and the 'disdain in his eye', together with 'a momentary expression of contempt' (226-7), convey to her his resistance to the Elliots' belated social patronage. All this Anne knows, however, because 'she knew him' (226); that is, she can decode his subtle gestures of contempt in the context of her previous knowledge of him – knowledge gained, presumably, from earlier, direct conversations about sailors or society. Anne replicates, in other words, the kind of interpretative strategy commonly used by readers of *Persuasion*. Readers 'know' Austen; twentieth-century readers, especially, have access not only to the finished and unfinished works but also to her juvenile writings and extant letters, and base their interpretations on that knowledge. Suspicion of the charm and general plausibility of Mr Elliot derives from our acquaintance with Willoughby, Wickham and Crawford; we know that the heroine who helplessly witnesses her beloved's attentions to another woman will very likely win him in the end; we know that Lady Russell's pleasure in Bath society is a weakness, since the Austen sisters both disliked the town;⁹ and we know that Wentworth's determination not to marry Anne, like Emma's resolution never to marry, 'means just nothing at all' (E 41). In other words, we decode this text, uncover intention and meaning, understand veiled judgements because of our previous knowledge of other Austen texts. Like Anne reading Wentworth, we read *Persuasion* with a confidence generated by earlier encounters with text.

But how accurate are Anne's readings of Wentworth? W.A. Craik says 'Anne only once loses her judgment', when she argues that Wentworth should have known that she could no longer

be influenced by Lady Russell.¹⁰ Other readers have noted, however, that Anne does indeed misread Wentworth at other moments, as when she construes his interventions on her behalf as disinterested gestures of chivalry. Speaking of Wentworth's gallantry in rescuing Anne from little Walter, or in securing her a place in the Crofts' carriage, John Wiltshire attributes Anne's misinterpretation of his gestures to the problem of acknowledging sexual desire; James L. Kastely, referring to the first incident, argues that Anne's desire is itself the cause of her mistake – 'in her misreading a self-inflicted injury masquerades as a virtue. Unlike Wentworth, she acknowledges her passion, but her openness to this passion causes her to undervalue herself, to grant Wentworth an authority he does not deserve, and to over-interpret his gestures.'¹¹ It seems problematic, however, to attribute to low self-esteem the misreading of a heroine who notes the good fortune of the Musgrove sisters but 'would not have given up her own more elegant and cultivated mind for all their enjoyments' (41).

How then to account for Anne's conviction at Lyme that to Wentworth 'she was valued only as she could be useful to Louisa' (116) and for her certainty that Wentworth and Louisa will marry: 'There could not be doubt, to her mind there was none, of what would follow her [Louisa's] recovery' (123)? I suggest that Anne does not misread Wentworth in the sense of failing to decode signs; rather, she reaches wrong conclusions about his feelings because he has given her misleading or incomplete information. He has avoided talking with her, he has publicly courted Louisa, and he has exclaimed 'Dear, sweet Louisa!' (116) in Anne's presence. Anne would have to be an ingenious reader indeed to construe such behaviour as signs of his reviving passion for herself. His later assertion that he 'had not cared, could not care for Louisa' (242) may be true, but all his previous signals support Anne's sad conclusion that Uppercross would soon 'be filled with all that was happy and gay, all that was glowing and bright in prosperous love, all that was most unlike Anne Elliot!' (123).¹²

If, then, Anne does not interpret Wentworth's behaviour at Uppercross and Lyme as loving toward her, that is surely because nothing in it signifies love. She may know from past intimacy how to read his veiled contempt for others, but that knowledge cannot help her to read his friendly concern as love. She is a careful, intent and passionate reader of Wentworth's

every gesture and word, but she cannot uncover intentions and feelings which are buried so deep that no sign of them is visible. Anne's codebook on Wentworth allows her to decipher 'a certain glance of his bright eye' as scorn for Dick Musgrove but it does not translate 'Dear, sweet Louisa' as 'he had not cared, could not care for Louisa'. The only way Anne *can* discover in Wentworth a 'heart returning to her' (185) is through *conversation* with him, including his direct articulation of 'Louisa Musgrove's inferiority' (185). To discover it any earlier would be both wrong and embarrassing, an anticipation of romantic intentions prior to any evidence of them. It seems to me that Austen alerts readers, through Anne's experience of reading Wentworth, to beware excessive confidence. Even experienced and sensitive readers, she reminds us, cannot presume to know everything about the text, cannot absolutely rely on previous encounters or on heightened intuition. Interpretation will always depend on how much factual and specific information the author chooses to grant, and readers who speculate too far or too certainly simply display their own hubris.

The notion of inevitable misreadings is thematized in *Persuasion*, inscribed in almost every level of the narrative. Consider, for example, Anne's complete ignorance of the intrigue between Mr Elliot and Mrs Clay. Unlike her father and sister, Anne has very early on uncovered the designing nature of Penelope Clay, and she has suspicions about Mr Elliot's character. She has watched both of them closely and has questioned their behaviour to her family, even comparing their different degrees of hypocrisy. Yet she is so thoroughly convinced that the two are antagonistic that she 'admired the good acting of the friend, in being able to shew such pleasure as she did, in the expectation, and in the actual arrival of the very person whose presence must really be interfering with her prime object. It was impossible but that Mrs Clay must hate the sight of Mr Elliot' (213). So confident is Anne of her own understanding of that relationship that she quickly accounts for their clandestine meeting as well as Mrs Clay's discomfort when detected:

having watched in vain for some intimation of the interview from the lady herself, she determined to mention it; and it seemed to her that there was guilt in Mrs Clay's face as she

listened. It was transient, cleared away in an instant, but Anne could imagine she read there the consciousness of having, by some complication of mutual trick, or some overbearing authority of his, been obliged to attend . . . to his lectures and restrictions on her designs on Sir Walter. (228)

Why does Anne, knowing their duplicitous natures, seeing them inexplicably together, noting the guilt on Mrs Clay's face, reach such a spectacularly wrong conclusion? W.A. Craik argues that Austen has bungled this part of her story, that '[t]he only hint of [Mrs Clay's] intrigue with Mr Elliot is that she is once seen meeting him in the street. . . . Jane Austen, who revealed so well the underhand intrigue between Henry Crawford and Maria, could certainly have done better with this.' Yasmine Gooneratne, on the other hand, asserts that 'on looking back [the reader] will discover that Jane Austen has scattered clues enough' and that Anne and the reader fail to read them correctly because 'Anne's attention is very far away from Mrs Clay and Mr Elliot, and so is the reader's'.¹³ But Anne is sufficiently focused on the two to interrogate Mrs Clay and to reach her own conclusions about the secret meeting. The reason for Anne's (and the reader's misreading), I believe, lies not in Austen's inept handling nor in inattention; it lies in excessive dependence on previous knowledge. We, like Anne, have witnessed Mr Elliot's indirect communication of distrust regarding Mrs Clay, as we have been privy to Mrs Smith's account of the relationship: 'He thinks Mrs Clay afraid of him, aware that he sees through her, and not daring to proceed as she might do in his absence' (208). Anne, as Marylea Meyersohn points out, 'believes Mrs Smith because she knew her before, because Mrs Smith has palpably suffered, and because she is an intelligent older woman.'¹⁴ For twentieth-century readers, Austen's authority rests on similar claims: we feel we know her well, we know she suffered even as she was writing *Persuasion*, and we will always consider her an intelligent older woman, no matter how far we outstrip her forty-one years. It is therefore significant that the text shows that Mrs Smith's authority is flawed. Not only is she ignorant of the relationship between Mrs Clay and Mr Elliot, she also misinterprets and misrepresents the scraps of information she has gathered.

Mrs Smith claims to read Anne's body just as Anne has read Wentworth's. She tells Anne, on the morning after the concert, 'Your countenance perfectly informs me that you were in company with the person, whom you think the most agreeable in the world' (194). She is right, of course, but, ignorant of the existence of any such person as Wentworth, and assured by Nurse Rooke that Anne is to marry Mr Elliot, she simply names the wrong man. She has relied on the authority of Mr Elliot's friend Mrs Wallis and on 'finding how much you were together, and feeling it to be the most probable thing in the world to be wished for by every body belonging to either of you' (197). Her misreading, then, occurs despite an accurate interpretation of Anne's feelings, indirect testimony from a reliable source, and a sense that the match is natural and inevitable. It occurs not because Mrs Smith is a bad reader but because she lacks a crucial piece of information that *only* Anne can provide, that is simply not available through indirect evidence, and that no careful decoding, no attentive observation could possibly uncover. Having misinterpreted, Mrs Smith then misrepresents: convinced that Anne will marry Mr Elliot, she recommends him to her as a 'gentlemanlike, agreeable man' and assures her that she will be 'safe in his character' (196). I need not rehearse here the exigencies that cause Mrs Smith to lie; I want rather to point out that her misrepresentation is a direct result of her misreading, and that she eventually tells the truth only in response to the directness of 'Anne's refutation of the supposed engagement' (211).

Poor Lady Russell, the other intelligent older woman in Anne's life, doesn't even begin to embody authority, since she has 'prejudices on the side of ancestry' (11), prefers the urban roar of Bath to the domestic noise at Uppercross, and, most damningly, has failed to see the worth of Wentworth. More significantly, for the purposes of my argument, she is crucially uninformed of Anne's sentiments. Because Anne and Lady Russell never talk about the blighted romance, '[t]hey knew not each other's opinion' (29), and their mutual ignorance remains even after they discuss the accident at Lyme: Anne does not articulate her rekindled attachment and Lady Russell does not express her 'angry pleasure' (125) that Wentworth has lowered his romantic standards. Lady Russell may be a 'truly sympathising friend' (42), but she is

remarkably in the dark about Anne's feelings. The odd scene in Bath, in which Anne constructs a full narrative about Lady Russell's 'fascination' with Wentworth only to find her friend has been studying window-curtains (179), underlines the estrangement between these two intimate friends; we note that while Anne 'sighed and blushed and smiled' (179), she failed to tell Lady Russell of the misunderstanding. Even when Anne prepares to acquaint Lady Russell with her new knowledge of Mr Elliot, she remains determined to keep back her blossoming romance: 'her greatest want of composure would be in that quarter of the mind which could not opened to Lady Russell, in that flow of anxieties and fears which must be all to herself' (212). Between these two friends there lies a massive misunderstanding simply because Anne does not divulge her feelings and Lady Russell does not ask. And the text shows how quickly open communication does away with error, for once she is informed, Lady Russell finds 'little hardship in attaching herself as a mother to the man who was securing the happiness of her other child' (249).

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Open communication triumphs at the end of *Persuasion*: Lady Russell accepts Wentworth, Mrs Smith has 'the comfort of telling the whole story' (211) of her dealings with Mr Elliot, Anne and Wentworth come together, enjoying 'moments of communication continually occurring, and always the hope of more' (246). As Meyersohn says, '[c]onversation, which has been in some danger in *Persuasion*, grows strong again in the reconciliation', in part, according to Kastely, because of Anne's 'generous passion': 'By the use of her language, a rhetor makes a self available to an Other. And in a world in which community is often not available because of self-regard or sentimentality, the rhetor's role is to risk himself by giving that self generously to the Other to read.'¹⁵ It can be argued that in *Persuasion* Austen represents the value of straight talk over artful discretion, the importance of risking exposure of the authentic self. Such a reading needs, however, to account for Austen's famous ironic mode, her use of refracted speech and indirect discourse.

David Lodge, in an illuminating discussion of Austen's negotiations between diegesis and mimesis, says that '[f]ree indirect speech . . . allows the novelist to vary, from sentence to sentence, the distance between the narrator's discourse and the character's discourse, between the character's values and the "implied author's" values, and so to control and direct the reader's affective and interpretive responses to the unfolding story.'¹⁶ Jane Austen's masterful manipulation of such double-voiced discourse is of course one of the reasons her novels are so admired. But we need to note also that there are moments in all the works when subtle shading between character and narrator leads to some confusion. For example, the aphorism in *Northanger Abbey* that '[f]riendship is certainly the finest balm for the pangs of disappointed love' (NA 33) is ironized because of its context and exaggerated language, but otherwise contains a perfectly reasonable truth. The communal voice which opens *Pride and Prejudice* is distinguished from the narrative judgemental voice at the end of the chapter only because the communal or universal truth is made specific and risible in the passage which follows it. Distinctions between voices and values are sometimes difficult to unravel, requiring a certain amount of careful narratological work. In *Persuasion*, these confusions are further problematized because the narrative voice frequently aligns itself with some of the novel's least attractive characters, thereby changing once again a code that readers habitually follow. Recall, for example, the Wordsworthian formulation regarding Elizabeth Elliot's 'thirteen years. . . Thirteen winter[s] . . . thirteen springs' living in 'the sameness and elegance, the prosperity and the nothingness, of her scene of life' (6, 9). The language describing a stultifying life is picked up later, when Anne regrets 'the elegant stupidity of private parties' (180) at Bath and echoes Miss Bingley's characterization of society at Lucas Lodge: 'The insipidity and yet the noise; the nothingness and yet the self-importance of all these people!' (PP 27). All three passages comment on the limitations of a small social circle, yet surely our responses are meant to differ. Surely we deplore sympathetically Anne's confinement, acknowledge grudgingly Elizabeth's social dilemma, and condemn righteously Miss Bingley's snobbish intolerance. At the same time, each passage must alter the way we read the others,

ultimately preventing us from reaching any definite conclusions about Austen's real view of restricted society, and prohibiting access to what Bakhtin calls 'unmediated equivalence of intentionality'.¹⁷ A similar interweaving or blurring of voices and values occurs when Anne worries about Sir Walter's possible entanglement with Mrs Clay: 'She did not imagine that her father had at present an idea of the kind. Mrs Clay had freckles, and a projecting tooth, and a clumsy wrist, which he was continually making severe remarks upon' (34). We can attribute the brutal language to Sir Walter, but we cannot ignore the fact that neither Anne nor the narrator modifies or comments on it, so the description seems to have narrative endorsement. Such a conclusion is validated, to some extent, by the famous passage about Mrs Musgrove's 'large fat sighings' (68) and by the characterization of her discourse on Henrietta's wedding as '[m]inutiae which, even with every advantage of taste and delicacy which good Mrs Musgrove could not give, could be properly interesting only to the principals' (230).¹⁸

Based on the harsh language used about Mrs Clay and Mrs Musgrove, one could speculate that Austen expresses in *Persuasion* a distaste for unattractive women. One could also accuse Austen of gender disloyalty in the passage making Mary Musgrove responsible for her husband's fatuousness – 'a more equal match might have greatly improved him . . . a woman of more real understanding might have given more consequence to his character, and more usefulness, rationality, and elegance to his habits and pursuits' (43). At the same time, however, we need to note how carefully Austen points out gender inequities, not only in Anne's well-known commentary on who holds the pen, but in small moments throughout the text. When we learn that Sir Walter's pride, 'the book of books' (the Baronetage), causes Elizabeth pain, or that Mrs Clay has returned home 'after an unprosperous marriage . . . with the additional burthen of two children (15), then we know that Austen is attentive to the social realities of women without secure establishments. When Admiral and Mrs Croft justify their short courtship with *her* 'I had known you by character' and *his* 'and I had heard of you as a very pretty girl' (92), then we see the double standard at work even among admirable characters. When Wentworth says that the conviction of *others* that he loves Louisa makes him 'hers in

honour if she wished it' (242), while Anne considers herself entirely at liberty despite similar expectations about herself and Mr Elliot, then we have to rethink the relative freedom of men and women in sexual relations. *Persuasion's* stance toward women's place in society defies easy categorization because the text articulates complex and even incompatible views, which seem to shift with each current of the narrative.

Similar contradictions attach to the text's representation of the navy. Anne's early praise of sailors 'who have done so much for us' (19) prepares us for the narrator's closing celebration of 'that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance' (252), and certainly the text repeatedly evokes the courage and brotherhood among sailors. Still, no reader can miss Wentworth's reference to a brutal admiralty who 'entertain themselves now and then, with sending a few hundred men to sea, in a ship not fit to be employed' (65), nor the pervasive tendency toward callousness in the discourse of even the most worthy sailors. Note, for example, Wentworth echoing the admiralty's attitude when he describes his time on the *Asp* – 'taking privateers enough to be very entertaining' (66) or his single-minded recollection of the *Laconia*: 'How fast I made money in her' (67). Admiral Croft extends this conjunction of violence and money into the domain of sexual relations, arguing that Wentworth will become more tolerant of women on ships '[w]hen he is married, if we have the good luck to live to another war', and attributing his brother-in-law's bachelorhood to 'the peace. If it were war now, he would have settled it long ago' (70, 92). Even as the text sincerely praises the virtues of sailors, it simultaneously exposes ways in which the profession coarsens those sensibilities which the world calls civilized – revulsion from violence and greed. Once again, refracted voices produce values apparently in conflict, and the reader is left to wonder how to decode narrative gesture.

* * *

My reading of *Persuasion*, like my discussions of the other novels, has foregrounded ways in which Austen deliberately compromises her own narrative authority and indeed questions sources of any narrator's authority. Each novel approaches the

issue from a different perspective, from *Northanger Abbey's* refusal to control plot to *Emma's* legitimization of competing interpretations of narrative. In *Persuasion*, narrative authority seems to be in disarray or even full retreat, matching the novel's portrait of a fragmented social world.¹⁹ How are we to depend on a narrative voice which has uncovered inconsistencies in a purportedly reliable heroine, has exploded the myth that intelligent close reading together with previous reading experience leads to correct interpretation, and has exposed its own ideological contradictions and prejudices? How are we to read a text that challenges and destabilizes the interpretive codes on which we rely?

I suggest that the uncertainties in *Persuasion* gesture toward a risky and aggressive narrative mode: Austen wants, I believe, to return herself to the text, to reach beyond art to an open engagement with the reader. To do so, she deliberately writes out (*not* encodes) her personal ambivalences about fat or ugly women, sailors, lower classes (remember the mob at Lyme, gathered to 'enjoy the sight of a dead young lady, nay two dead young ladies, for it proved twice as fine as the first report' [111]), the virtuous heroine, and, especially, the author who effortlessly controls viewpoint and voice. *Persuasion* is the only Austen novel which employs the present tense at its conclusion, prophesying that 'a change is not very probable' for Elizabeth Elliot, and speculating about Mr Elliot and Mrs Clay: 'She has abilities . . . and it is now a doubtful point whether his cunning, or hers, may finally carry the day' (250). The author, like the reader, cannot *know* the world, but can speculate with authority because she *is* the author.

Austen begins to reclaim, in *Persuasion*, the authority she had earlier ceded, when she had decided, according to Susan Sniader Lanser, 'that reticence made sense'.²⁰ And the reader can trust the authenticity of this authority precisely because it speaks directly, asserting the right to be inconsistent or even cruel, banishing that careful, artful narrator who so carefully guarded her identity and beliefs. We cannot do better, for once, than follow Anne Elliot's lead: 'She felt that she could so much more depend upon the sincerity of those who sometimes looked or said a careless or a hasty thing, than of those whose presence of mind never varied, whose tongue never slipped' (161).

of any other man; young spectators fix their eyes upon him with closer attention, and hope by observing his behaviour and success to regulate their own practices . . .' (11–12).

18. Sulloway 21; Mansell 168–9.
19. Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 432.
20. This tendency of the text has been characterized in various ways. Tony Tanner uses Bakhtinian terms in referring to 'the range of speech habits displayed in the novel' (201) and connects language to social change when he points to the 'dispersals' in the novel: 'the felicitous personal "union" here coincides with something approaching social dissolution. . . . It would seem that Jane Austen was growing distinctly more pessimistic about her society's ability to reestablish and renew its vital bonding and cohering power. Society has not collapsed. But in this novel it has started to scatter' (205–6). Richard Handler and Daniel Segal, in an ethnographic study of Austen's novels, argue that 'Jane Austen's representation of Emma's world suggest various competing views or models of the Highbury social hierarchy, none of which is granted absolute authority. . . . [N]o single character's actions and attitudes can tell us what the social order *really* was' (58). Deborah Kaplan puts these ambiguities in the context of authorial self-reflexivity: 'Austen's earliest, extant compositions suggest that she recognized the courtship novel as a peculiar medium not only for flawless heroines but also for perfectly didactic female friendships. . . . The relationships served, in effect, as a textual emblem for the pedagogical relationships that novelists may have wished to have with their readers. Focusing on the transmission of advice central to the didactic friendship, Austen's parodies launch attacks against such relationships' (*Jane Austen among Women* 142). I believe that Austen's interrogation of the didactic novel survives well beyond the *Juvenilia* – that it is, in fact, at the heart of her most carefully constructed narrative.
21. Scott 77.
22. J.E. Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen in Persuasion, with A Memoir of Jane Austen*, ed. D.W. Harding (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 375–6.

CHAPTER 6: PERSUASION

1. See also Jocelyn Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* (1989), which continues the work of Kenneth Moler's *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (1968), and Joseph Wiesenfarth, *The Errand of Form: An Essay of Jane Austen's Art* (1967).

2. Virginia Woolf sets the tone for discussions of *Persuasion* as a new departure: 'There is a new element in *Persuasion*. . . . She is beginning to discover that the world is larger, more mysterious, and more romantic than she had supposed' (*Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage* ii.282). Butler agrees that the novel is transitional, but finds its uncertainties a weakness 'because it neither takes up an intelligible new position, nor explicitly recants from the old one' (291). Craik speculates that 'If she had lived to write more, and if she did not intend to revise this novel into something more like her others, *Persuasion* shows that Jane Austen was moving towards a more introspective writing . . .' (200).
3. *Letters* 487. Craik strongly asserts Anne's authority when she says 'Anne's view is the true one and there is nothing left for the author to hint or the reader to guess. . . . There is no place here, therefore, for that exquisite regulation of tone shown in *Emma*, for those distinctions between what events seem to be and what they are, and for whole situations to be distorted by what the heroine thinks of them' (168–9). Moler finds that 'Anne is remarkably clear-sighted throughout the novel' (219), and Paris locates the difference between Fanny Price and Anne Elliot in the fact that 'Fanny is proved to be perfectly good, whereas Anne is proved to be perfectly right' (167). Tanner, while compellingly arguing that *Persuasion* represents the dissolution of community and therefore of clear communication, says that 'Anne comes to embody what we might call the conscience of language. She, and she alone, always speaks truly, and truly speaks . . .' (220). Ann W. Wastell connects feeling and truth when she says that 'Anne's affections increase, rather than limit, her powers of perception . . .' ('Anne Elliot's Education: The Learning of Romance in *Persuasion*', *Renaissance* 40.1 [Fall 1987] 11). And John Wiltshire echoes this view: 'Anne's authority in the narrative is promoted by the self-reflection that distinguishes the character's thoughts' (*Jane Austen and the Body: 'The Picture of Health'* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992] 156).
4. Butler 278.
5. Harris argues that 'Anne's relationship with Wentworth is a contest in constancy' (208) and that both lovers are indeed constant. Butler says that 'Anne's deep emotional commitment to her first attachment pays unexpected homage to the truth and beauty of private experience' (291). William A. Walling problematizes these views when he suggests that *Persuasion* 'conveys to us at least something of a peculiarly modern terror: that our only recourse amid the accelerations of history is to commit our deepest energies to an intense personal relationship, but that an intense personal relationship is inevitably subject to its own kind of terrible precariousness' ('The Glorious Anxiety of Motion: Jane Austen's *Persuasion*', *The Wordsworth Circle* 7.4 [Autumn 1976] 336).

6. Anne's distinction between active men and constrained women evokes a later and not so admirable heroine. Byron's Julia, confined to a convent as punishment for her adulterous affair with Don Juan, writes:

Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
 'Tis a woman's whole existence; Man may range
 The Court, Camp, Church, the Vessel, and the Mart;
 Sword, Gown, Gain, Glory, offer in exchange
 Pride, Fame, Ambition, to fill up his heart
 And few there are whom these cannot estrange;
 Men have all these resources, We but one,
 To love again, and be again undone.

(Don Juan I.cxciv)

7. P.J.M. Scott 192.
 8. Judy Van Sickle Johnson, 'The Bodily Frame: Learning Romance in *Persuasion*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 38.1 (June 1983) 45; Laura G. Mooneyham 174; Tony Tanner 235; Janis P. Stout, *Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen*, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990) 60.
 9. Writing to Cassandra of friends who have chosen to live in Clifton rather than Bath, Austen says 'she is as glad of the change as even you and I should be, or almost' (*Letters* 391). Park Honan apparently does not overstate the case when he says the Austens' move to Bath was, for Jane Austen, 'as bad as a naval disaster for Frank might be' (166).
 10. Craik 187. Other critics assert the readability and authenticity of indirect communication. Gloria Sybil Gross says 'A word, a gesture, a look, a tone of voice . . . are the clues to the deepest sources of feeling' ('Jane Austen and Psychological Realism: "What Does a Woman Want?"', *Reading and Writing Women's Lives: A Study of the Novel of Manners*, ed. Bege K. Bowers and Barbara Brothers [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990] 20). Keith G. Thomas argues that *Persuasion* demonstrates the efficacy of non-verbal communication: 'knowledge itself is as frequently reached by means of gazing at the object, noticing who notices or talks about the object, and noticing whether the object looks back or responds, as by attending to the object's language . . . as if the return of perceptual attention were more significant in itself than the actual content of the looks or words exchanged' ('Jane Austen and the Romantic Lyric: *Persuasion* and Coleridge's Conversation Poems', *ELH* 54.4 [Winter 1987] 920).
 11. Wiltshire 173; James L. Kastely, 'Persuasion: Jane Austen's Philosophical Rhetoric', *Philosophy and Literature* 15 (1991) 81. Van Sickle

- Johnson points out that Anne's certainties about Wentworth are 'qualified . . . Anne's understanding is not so confident as the initial words [about knowing Wentworth's state of mind] indicate. John Hardy attributes this lack of confidence to the lapse of time and closeness: 'Because of their long estrangement, she and Wentworth can no longer occupy the kind of shared space or privacy that presumably marked their earlier intimacy' (*Jane Austen's Heroines: Intimacy in Human Relationships* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984] 111).
 12. Hardy says that '[t]hough not daring to admit it to herself . . . [Anne] knows that Wentworth is not in love with either Henrietta or Louisa Musgrove' (113). I argue that the questions of Anne's knowledge or Wentworth's feelings are more complicated; I agree with Keith G. Thomas's suggestion that Anne cannot properly understand Wentworth 'unless Wentworth himself . . . communicated his own intentions, making himself less remote, less opaque. Ultimately, the object's responsive echo is arbiter of whether an imagination proves wild or correct' (903).
 13. Craik 175. Yasmine Gooneratne, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 180.
 14. Marylea Meyersohn, 'Jane Austen's Garrulous Speakers: Social Criticism in *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*', *Reading and Writing Women's Lives* 46.
 15. Meyersohn 46; Kastely 82, 85.
 16. David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990) 126. Louise Flavin makes the same point in her article 'Austen's *Persuasion*': 'Jane Austen is the first English novelist to make extensive and sophisticated use of free indirect discourse, a mode of speech or thought presentation that allows a narrator the privilege of commentary and selection, while retaining the idiomatic qualities of the speaker's words or thoughts' (*The Explicator* 47.4 [Summer 1989] 20). Both critics, of course, employ Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogics, which at least partly informs most recent studies of Austen. For the purposes of my argument here, one passage from Bakhtin's work seems particularly relevant. Rejecting traditional stylistic methodology, Bakhtin warns against the impulse to unitary readings: 'Even when we exclude character speech and inserted genres, authorial language itself still remains a stylistic system of languages: large portions of this speech will take their style (directly, parodically, or ironically) from the language of others, and this stylistic system is sprinkled with others' words, words not enclosed in quotation marks, formally belonging to authorial speech but clearly distanced from the mouth of the author by ironic, parodic, polemical or some other pre-existing 'qualified' intonation' (*The Dialogic Imagination* 415-16).
 17. Bakhtin 415.
 18. Once again, we are reminded of *Pride and Prejudice*. Like Anne,

who hopes 'the gentlemen might each be too much self-occupied to hear' (230) Mrs Musgrove's talk, Elizabeth Bennet vainly wishes her mother's conversation about Jane and Bingley's marriage might be kept from Darcy's hearing (PP 99-100).

19. A number of critics have commented on the loss of a stable centre in *Persuasion*. Elizabeth Deeds Ermath alludes to its 'uncertainty about the social bases for individual life... the apparently unredeemable disorder of society' (*Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983] 171). Robert Hopkins says that 'Clearly Jane Austen is struggling in *Persuasion* with the problem of moral judgement under uncertainty' ('Moral Luck and Judgement in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 42.2 [September 1987] 153-4). Glenda A. Hudson points to the novel's 'wider critical view. Families are in upheaval: the Elliots are divided, and the Musgrove household is noisy and chaotic. The only families who seem to escape censure are those of the naval officers, but even they are not idealized' (93). Tony Tanner puts it most strongly when he notes in *Persuasion* 'the absence of any real centre or principle of authority... all such potential sources of authority have gone awry, gone away, gone wrong; they are absent, dispersed or impotent; they have become ossified, stagnant or - worse - totally unreliable and misleading' (210), and Gene Koppel recommends a wholly subjective response to a mysterious text: 'Each person must peer into the shadowy middle ground of *Persuasion*'s textual world and the world of his own consciousness, and decide for himself' ('The Mystery of the Self in *Persuasion*', *Persuasions* 6 [1984] 52).
20. Lanser 63. Although my conclusion differs from Lanser's argument that in *Persuasion* Austen attempts 'gradual authorization through a nonironic, nondistanced free indirect discourse, of Anne Elliot as wholly reliable focalizing consciousness' (77), I am deeply indebted to her insight that *Persuasion* reaches towards 'overt authoriality' (77).

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