

## 18. Shadow and Substance in *Persuasion*

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Let us borrow from Mrs. Langer the proposition that the novel is a piece of “virtual life.”<sup>i</sup> This is not a “real” definition. A “real” definition of such an artificial category as “the novel” is hardly conceivable. But for someone who is studying the ethical views of a writer of fiction, it is very useful. The works of Jane Austen are certainly pieces of “virtual life.” Now why should we attend to *virtual* remembered life, to something *imagined* that never actually happened, rather than to our own memories or those of others (since we do need some alternative to being bored with ourselves). Part of the answer lies in the *range* of “virtual life.” The “virtual” can include the frankly “impossible,” yet it is still *interesting*. Why? At the extreme of the plainly fantastic, our interest must spring precisely from the awareness of a human mind in full control of everything that happens. But all that can interest other minds then, is the *pattern* that the controlling mind chooses to impose on its material.

At the other extreme there are works of imagination that are absolutely “lifelike.” But this only exacerbates the puzzle. Why should we not prefer real memories to imaginary ones? The adventures in the book cannot be more interesting on account of their lifelikeness than those of people who have actually lived the sort of life that they are *like*. So the element of *control* must be crucial here, too; and again, what the control produces that is not there in real life is a *pattern*. At both extremes, it is the “form” of the fiction that matters. But what is the “form” of a novel?

There is no general answer to this question, just as there is no general response to the demand for a definition of the novel. But at the “lifelike” extreme, the object of the novelist has to be to *show* us something about life, to teach us some lesson, by organizing the “virtual reality” into a

pattern. Thus the “form” of a novel of this kind, is absolutely inseparable from the life-content. When Schiller — whose own work was generally too philosophical, to be quite lifelike — said that “The form should be everything, the content nothing,” he meant that there should be nothing in the artistic fiction that was extraneous to the pattern of the whole which the artist wanted to create.

The most evident kind of *pleasing pattern* that a story can have by design, whereas real life can only have it through the accidental concurrence of many uncontrollable circumstances, is one in which everything turns out *happily* for those whose fortunes enlist our sympathetic interest. Jane Austen’s novels almost all have this pattern (the exception is *Mansfield Park*, where our sympathy is aroused on behalf of one character whose fate is not definitely settled, but whose prospects of happiness are left in abeyance).

This pattern of simple wish-fulfilment, though it may be one of the deepest roots of storytelling and of our delight in it, does not of itself make a work of art. Something more is needed; and at the lifelike extreme it is clear that, for one thing, the “happy ending” must come about naturally and, as far as possible, spontaneously — i.e. through the operation of structures and dispositions that are integral to the situation and the characters themselves, not through some cause intervening from outside (which, however natural it may be, will always have the character of a *deus ex machina* breaking up the properly human pattern). Jane Austen’s novels all satisfy this canon too. We sometimes meet young women who do not have a very sound idea of what the real world is like. This is true, most obviously of Marianne (in *Sense and Sensibility*) and of Catherine Morland (in *Northanger Abbey*). But their errors are a natural result of their restricted commerce with the world, and of their domestic education. Their stories interest us because we like to watch them learning to know the world better. Marianne’s mother is almost as naive as she is; and they both have serious lessons to learn about the wickedness of the world. Catherine’s mother already knows everything that Catherine needs to learn; but in *Northanger Abbey* the wickedness is all imaginary. Mrs. Morland is not a sentimental romantic like Mrs. Dashwood. But she would hardly know how to deal with John Willoughby.

In *Northanger Abbey* we may well feel that the rock of General Tilney, upon which Catherine's fantasies fasten and break, is rather too close to her dream-world. But when we look properly we see that he is not an alien, non-human, demonic force, but an adequately realized human character. The only realistic problem about the Tilney family is how this outrageously selfish and self-satisfied man could be the father of two such humane and self-conscious children. The dead mother, of course — along with money and absolute security of social position — is crucial to the answer. But the *problem* is not itself squarely raised and faced in that novel. It is *one* of the problems raised and illustrated in *Persuasion*.

This digression, occasioned by the laying down of the principle that in the realistic comedy of manners everything must happen *naturally*, and as far as possible *spontaneously*, within the self-contained society of the comedy, has not only brought out one of the problems of the novel that we are directly concerned with. It has shown why novels (even in the happiest convention) have to deal with problems. The “form” has to be “suspended” (as Mrs. Langer would put it). The suspense is not *real*. We are never in doubt that things will end happily (and even if we are in doubt about that initially, the *real* suspense cannot be present during the second reading that is absolutely essential if we want to study the “form” of a literary work). Human beings must suffer, work and act (even though it is only in our imagination and the writer's) in order to achieve the form. Something as natural and spontaneous as the unfolding of a flower from a bud will not do for a piece of interesting “virtual life.” That is not what human life is like, when it is interesting. There must be choice and struggle to give *tension* to what happens. (Schiller is right, I think, to insist that the consciousness of our freedom begins in our play; but moral existence begins in struggle, labor and self-discipline.) The happy ending must come about either through self-discovery, or through conquest of circumstances, or both. (One discovers that one has *moral* freedom by discovering that one has done the *wrong* thing — i.e. there was something else that one could have done that would have been right, and for the future one must be more careful, and choose one's course in the consciousness of one's previous error. The mistake may arise either from character or from circumstances. One can be wrong either through doing what comes naturally (in which case one need not have any awareness of *choosing* at all, or even the slightest intimation of the possibility of coming to regret

what one is now doing); or through resisting what comes naturally, and doing what seems right (a case which is a paradigm instance of choosing — not the only type but one essential type). But in that case, one is bound to be conscious of the possibility of future regret, because the sentiment of regret is already vividly actual in one's present choice.

*Pride and Prejudice* is an example of the first kind of tension, *Persuasion* of the second. *Pride and Prejudice* (originally "First Impressions") depends on the spontaneous expression of a social attitude that a rich young man (on the fringes of social *nobility*) has adopted as a defense against being "caught" by the wiles of gold-digging, prestige-hunting girls; and the equally spontaneous response of a young woman who wants more than a social position out of marriage. The mistake on both sides is *necessary* if each is to reliably discover what the other party is like. Darcy first gives occasion for Elizabeth's prejudice; and is then "caught" by his emotions in spite of himself and his social defenses. This *could* have landed him in a situation far more invidious than that of Mr. Bennet — and with all Mr. Bennet's understanding of it. For if Elizabeth accepted his first offer he could not help suspecting her motives, and even the sincerity of her professed feelings (since he is quite well aware of her being attracted to Wickham). But how can Elizabeth undo the results of *her* prejudice, when she discovers that it is one? The *contretemps* produces self-understanding for each of them as they come to understand the other. They might quite well get over their false start, and settle into the conventional happiness of Jane Bennet and Charles Bingley. But that is only shown to us so that we can appreciate the real form of what happens. Instead of the shadow of Wickham hanging over a happiness of that kind, Wickham, who was the principal agent of Elizabeth's more serious prejudice, and of the resulting emotional collision, becomes the agent of "recognition" for Elizabeth (just as, by largely causing the collision, he is the agent of "recognition" for Darcy).

Thus *Pride and Prejudice* is a story of how spontaneous feeling leads to self-knowledge; it is a drama of *recognition* and *reversal*. The organic unity of it, the "form," is all focused in the single figure of *Wickham* — for Wickham is as much the cause of Darcy's "pride" as he is of Elizabeth's "prejudice" and he is the agent of recognition and resolution for both. He acts with calculating self-

interest towards Georgiana Darcy, and with spontaneous abandon towards Lydia Bennet, but he is always superbly himself, calculating only to manipulate others in his own interest, and spontaneous only to please himself at the given moment. “First Impressions” was (quite probably) a *story* about Darcy and Elizabeth. *Pride and Prejudice* is a conscious *work of art* about Darcy, Elizabeth and Wickham. The new title, by directing our attention to the working of those two passions in the story, tells us how to find the form — which Jane Austen herself (perhaps) only caught sight of when she was pondering over her first draft. (This is a *hypothesis* only — the point is that she did not have to have the “form” fully matured when she began to write the story. When Schiller said that “the form should be everything, the content nothing,” one part of what he *must* have meant is that the author cannot have the form perfect in her mind from the start. This is confirmed even for the visual arts by the amount of experimental playing that artists do.) *Persuasion*, however, is different. All three of Jane Austen’s early manuscripts were completely rewritten (*Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Northanger Abbey*). *Emma*, *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* were not (though a vital chapter of the last was rewritten and no doubt piecemeal revision of the others went on as they were written too). But all of her novels were works of conscious *art*.

This becomes plain when we perform the elementary Aristotelian test of looking at the beginning and end. *Pride and Prejudice* begins with a witty apothegm about marriage, which refers directly to Charles Bingley (not to Darcy or Elizabeth). But the opening explains Darcy’s “pride,” just as the closing sentence about Elizabeth’s “bourgeois” relations with the Gardiners puts that pride in its true perspective, after prejudice has been removed. It is true that one would not spontaneously *connect* the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* with the end. The first chapter sets the scene, and the last one tidies up. Mrs. Bennet’s hopes provide the opening and they are first to be recalled in the closing; but the last chapter reviews the consequences of all the marriages for everybody. Thus it does return to the beginning — but it is easy not to notice the reflective unity of the whole, because marriage is, after all, the one and only string to Jane Austen’s fiddle. Morally speaking, Jane Austen was a little dissatisfied with *Pride and Prejudice*, because it is so “light and bright and sparkling” (*Letters*, 1952, 300; 1997, 203). It does not encourage us to think seriously enough.

How different is the opening and closing of *Mansfield Park*, which begins with that awful house to which Sir Thomas brings his bride, the amiably stupid Maria Ward, and ends again with the village and the parsonage “within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park” as the intelligently amiable Fanny and her more sensitive Edmund are married. Edmund is lucky enough to be the second son, and so destined not to become quite the solemn mandarin that Sir Thomas is; but he is firmly in the grip of that house, with all the consciousness of rank and responsibility that it represents. (Here, before the nineteen-year-old who said “I will be good” in 1837 was even born, we have *the* novel of Victorian *noblesse oblige*. This time all readers are bound to be serious enough. But it is still the case that we are too easily satisfied. Jane Austen would never call Mansfield Park an *awful* house, as I have done; but in her eyes it is far from being the moral paradise that many critics have taken it to be.)

In *Emma* we have a simpler and more obvious but equally apt case. Here Jane Austen took the fairy-tale formulas, and put them into words appropriate for the century of “enlightenment.” She begins with “Once upon a time there was a princess . . .” and ends “and so they were married and lived happily ever after.” Thus, in what is by common consent her most considerable achievement in social comedy, because she brings the whole life of a small town before us and shows us the interaction of servants, middle class and gentry, Jane Austen carefully underlines what her title already tells us. Her subject in *Emma* is the self-discovery of a person, just as in *Mansfield Park* it was the genius — in my view, but not quite in hers, the *evil* genius — of a place. To study the “form” of *Emma* would be to see how the whole of Highbury life reveals the heroine’s character first to us, and finally to herself. Similarly *Mansfield Park* is about how the ethos of the “country seat” triumphs over all the temptations of sophisticated “high life.” Henry and Mary Crawford do not belong to this ethos — and they never could belong properly. Henry cannot belong to any ethos; he is primitively unethical. Mary could be assimilated but the ethos would then be *changed*. Edmund and Fanny would escape from that puritanical place where playacting is instantly known as the work the Devil finds for idle hands, but Fanny’s destiny would not be “happy,” and the novel would need a new title. When Lady Catherine said that Pemberley shades would be polluted by the advent of

Elizabeth she was wrong. Pemberley is *visibly* ready for Elizabeth — and she for it. But Mansfield Park *would* be “polluted” if Mary Crawford were at the gate in the Parsonage house, with Fanny and her brother Henry as her lifeline to a wider world (at Everingham in Norfolk). Everyone else might perhaps be morally happier and healthier, but Fanny could never be happy. This time Jane Austen chose to side with Lady Catherine. She could not make her kind of “complete whole” on any other basis. So the interesting *characters* had to suffer. (What is worthy of notice is the fact that Henry, who *deserves* to suffer, gets off more lightly than Mary, who does not; and, as between Henry and Maria, who are *both* guilty, Jane Austen carefully underlines this contrast.)

Let us turn now to consider the “form” — i.e. the organic unity — of *Persuasion*. *Pride and Prejudice* in its “naive” state was called “First Impressions”; on this analogy the naive title for *Persuasion* could have been “Second Thoughts.” For it is the story of a *reflective* error, an attempt by the heroine to do what she thought was right against all her spontaneous inclinations. That mistake has cost her eight years of quiet unhappiness. She expects as a result of it to die an “old maid”; and although she could, without doubt, have been completely happy (Jane Austen *says* so — I, v, 28) if a *genuine* “second chance” had come her way, the fact is that no second chance did come, and there are sound reasons for holding that in her father’s new circle of acquaintance no fair opportunity of happiness is likely to come. The most plausible of accidents brings the original young man back into her circle, and the only problem left for the novelist at the naive level is to bring the hero to the point of speech. This is so slight a problem compared with the catastrophic situation that Elizabeth and Darcy were in by the time they knew what they were doing, that the remarkable thing is that anyone could make a novel out of it at all. Jane Austen does it with a marvelous artfulness that one might easily mistake for the sum of her art. Actually her *artistic* concern is principally with something much more ambitious (which the delicate tracery of personal relations between the two principals is meant to illuminate). The title tells us that contrary to all of our natural assumptions, the novel is *not* so much about the events of the autumn of 1814 as it is about the *grounds* of the decision made in the autumn of 1806. Everything that happens before Captain Wentworth writes his letter under Anne’s very eyes, and the sun comes out after eight years behind the clouds, reflects for us that summer of eight years ago when a girl of nineteen was

persuaded by a woman who had been her mother's only close friend, and who but for her father's vanity, might very well have been by 1814 her much loved stepmother, to break her engagement to a young naval officer with some career prospects but nothing else (I, iv, 26-7). "Persuasion" crops up as a topic several times — but even when it is not specifically mentioned, the "persuasion" of 1806 is the contextual background of the mutual consciousness of the hero and heroine, until the catastrophe on the Cobb at Lyme. And through this tugging of eight years of memory, a subject far greater than the personal feelings and happiness of two intelligent and serious young people is brought into the action. What were the grounds of the decision of 1806 *really* worth? That the decision of 1806 was a mistake is a presupposition of there being any story in 1814. But it could still have been a well grounded decision, the only one that a responsible person could reach or support at that time. Having good grounds for one's actions does not guarantee their success. "Living well and doing well" as Aristotle would say, does not guarantee good fortune.

Many novels have been written about the disappointment of reasonable hopes, or the defeat of intelligent endeavors. But *Persuasion* is a novel precisely about the *ambiguity* of values. It opens with the *zero* value — personal vanity. The father of the heroine is strictly a *non*-entity, a big round O that *seems* to embrace everything valuable within itself, the frog who could not dream of wanting to be an ox, or anything else, because he already knows that he is a prince. It closes with a fulfilled human unit — for the husband of the heroine is a model of active virtue. As a sea captain Frederick Wentworth cannot help having some practical wisdom, and the chastening of time has even made him a little bit philosophical.

But look again: along with Sir Walter, in the opening sentences there comes before us his favorite book — the *Baronetage*; and at the very end Captain Wentworth is made to yield pride of place to his *profession*. Anne "gloried in being a sailor's wife . . . belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance." This surprising judgement is carefully justified by the book, as we shall see. But that is not our most immediate concern. The genuine national importance of the Navy is set against the supposed local importance of the *Baronetage*. No one, except Sir Walter, supposes that *he* is of any real



importance, but everyone acts as if Kellynch with its baronet's seat is important. Charles Musgrove, the young squire of Uppercross, wanted to marry into the *family* — and although he would have preferred Anne, he is content to take her sister Mary. Lady Russell is very tender of what is *due* to Sir Walter (everything conspires to suggest that she would have married him if he had only asked her, precisely because he needed someone with a proper consciousness of the responsibilities of his position, someone like Anne's mother, to keep the position up properly). Anne tells Mary (I, v, 39) that she went “to almost every house in the parish as a sort of take-leave. I was told that they wished it.” Who told her? (No prizes are offered.) This is how Lady Russell regards Kellynch. Emma might do the same, and Mr. Knightley would be pleased; Fanny Price would do it on Lady Bertram's behalf, and Edmund would approve (so would Sir Thomas if he heard about it, while Mrs. Norris would carp because of the implicit reflection on herself); even Lady Catherine de Bourgh would do it (if one could imagine her getting into Sir Walter's financial pickle, which one cannot).

The value of the Baronetage is ambiguous. Mr. Walter Elliott used to say that he would sell it for £50, before he married money himself (II, ix, 202). That is about what Sir Walter is worth. He is the equivalent of “thickheaded, unfeeling, unprofitable Dick Musgrove” (I, vi, 51) on the naval side of the ledger. Similarly Charles Musgrove should be set against commander James Benwick. Both are quite willing to switch to another girl. Benwick is a good officer (we have this from Admiral Croft); and Charles Musgrove will be a good squire when he comes to it (this is the opinion of Lady Russell, and we have the evidence of his sensible evaluation of the Hayters). In character these two are at opposite poles (as are Sir Walter and “poor Richard”). The book does not offer us any really *worthy* squires. The elder Musgroves make an even showing against the Harvilles, but there is no comparison between the Crofts and Sir Walter and Elizabeth; and the contrast between Mr. Elliott and Frederick Wentworth is an *absolute* one. Mr. Elliott is very clearly set up as the landed counterpart of Captain Wentworth; but he is a whited sepulcher — not *empty* like Sir Walter and Elizabeth but even worse — a respectable shell inhabited by an evil spirit. This is deliberate. In other books Jane Austen gives us ideal squires like Mr. Darcy or Mr. Knightley; and in *Mansfield Park* we have Lady Russell's ideal of a Baronet: Sir Thomas Bertram — who is worthy but stupid in exactly the way that she is. They cannot distinguish shadow from substance except in the most

extreme instances; Sir Thomas is a bit worried about Mr. Rushworth, but he would be happy to accept Henry Crawford for Julia.

The truth is that the position of a Baronet's daughter *is* worth something. The problem is how should it affect her judgment, how should it be weighed, when she has an offer of marriage? Lady Russell does not know how to weigh it (any more than she knows how to weigh character — she is *put off* by Wentworth personally [I, iv, 27; II, xii, 249] and even *misevaluates* his real prospects [I, iv, 27]). She sees the specter of “love in a cottage” (cf. Mrs. Price in *Mansfield Park*) and this infects Anne (for Wentworth's sake — I, iv, 27-8). The contrast here is with Sophy Wentworth cheerfully setting up house at North Yarmouth or Deal with her Commander (soon to be Captain) Croft. About that Lady Russell would say “Yes but she is a sailor's *sister*, and not *our class*.” How could a well brought up young lady of Kellynch do something like that? Anne, however, has considerable practical ability, and no distaste for humble tasks. She shows this in her handling of Mary Musgrove's children, and above all in her reaction to the crisis at Lyme. But she would not know how to argue about that at nineteen; and Lady Russell thinks all of it is disgraceful for someone in her station anyway. (Not that Anne, or even Sophy Croft, would ever have to do the washing-up in any case.)<sup>ii</sup> Anne knows what matters, but she estimates *herself* too low. Wentworth naturally assumed that it was not just Lady Russell's *advice*, but her standards that Anne accepted. That made him *angry* (and social insecurity sustained his anger — see II, xi, 243-4). When he returns to the scene, it is with the Musgrove girls that he associates. He sees Anne as weak and irresolute, and everyone else involved as just what they are: shadows — people who think the shadow is more important than the reality. In the Navy no such mistake is possible, at least as far as *active* life is concerned. When a sailor takes to intellectual life — like Benwick — other sailors do not know what to make of him; and they may be taken in. Wentworth thinks Benwick may perhaps be worthy of someone more intellectual than Louisa Musgrove; and this is surely a mistake? But the Admiral (who thinks Benwick's intellectual interests are all window dressing) knows better.

The Navy first appears when the Crofts take over Kellynch Hall as Sir Walter's tenants. Here we have the domestic virtues of the Navy at their highest, and the man is a *rear admiral*, the

most advanced rank that we encounter in the book (a rank achieved by one of Jane Austen's sailor brothers, and surpassed by the other). With the first mention of the Crofts, the story of that summer begins to emerge; and their takeover of Kellynch offers clear evidence that the objectively rational grounds for the decision made in 1806 (Lady Russell's grounds) are now quite valueless. Anne has known that for years. Her first direct speech in the book is in defense of the Navy's domestic claims (I, iii, 19) — never mind the domestic *virtues* of sailors yet! Sir Walter's response only makes one wonder how any sensible person, even a motherless girl of nineteen, could ever have been influenced by *his* values. But Anne has two sisters, one younger than herself, and they are both in different ways their father's daughter; Anne is her mother's daughter (I, i, 5-6), but she *too* has her own form of Kellynch consciousness. How could she avoid it, when Lady Russell has the infection so strongly (I, ii, 11-2)?

The scene is set in 1814 : the war at sea is about over, and the sailors are coming ashore. Those with prize money will retire in comfort; others, no doubt, will starve on half pay, and jolly Jack himself will become a merchant seaman. But the real story was in 1806 (the year after Trafalgar). We are told the facts of that story straight in the fourth chapter of Volume I; and we can see that the death of Anne's mother when she was fourteen is what caused the catastrophe. Had Lady Elliott died earlier, Anne would have been a Fanny Price, and there would have been no romance. Had she lived till 1806 there would have been no eight year frost. If she had all the virtues that Jane Austen allots to her, it is obvious that since the young folks were both endowed with a high degree of good sense, she would have persuaded them to hold still for a couple of years with permission to correspond — compare the view of Sophia Wentworth Croft (II, xi, 230-1). Then it would have been all roses. But as things were, Frederick Wentworth was left violently angry by the way he was treated. One might ask how Anne could think she was doing anything for *him* by breaking it off? But we must remember that Kellynch, like the Bennets' estate at Longbourn, was entailed; and then we must consider Lieutenant and Mrs. Price in *Mansfield Park*; and finally we must ponder the awkward situation of Edward Ferrars. Frederick Wentworth was already a Commander in 1806. But he had not then begun to think seriously about his future. Even by Mrs.

Croft's standards, Frederick and Anne could not be married very soon; and in the meantime he might meet someone else.<sup>iii</sup>

The point is that Wentworth never was a Lieutenant Price, nor was Anne a Frances Ward or a Miss Churchill (Captain Weston's first wife in *Emma*). She has Sophy Croft's down-to-earth practical competence, without her forthrightness. So her real self only becomes visible in the crisis at Lyme (*we* know that she manages the children well, but what Wentworth knows is that he had to haul one of them off of her back — “even for the kids she is a doormat” is what he must think). In the crisis he learns two things: first that it may not be wrong for a nineteen-year-old to listen to advice; and second, that one who listens to advice at nineteen can be firmly in charge of herself at twenty-seven. (Jane Austen puts the first thought in *Anne's* mind, but both are in Frederick Wentworth's — see I, xii, 114; II, xi, 242, 246.)

Starting with no one but the squires on stage, we move gradually to a scene dominated by sailors (Lyme). The Lyme episode brings the sailors to the solid squirearchy — the false images of the landed gentry disappear to Bath, before the sailors arrive at all (Sir Walter and Elizabeth meet the Crofts just once). Only Mary Musgrove, worrying about the precedence due to a Baronet's daughter, reminds us of the false values. After Lyme, however, the sailors enter the world of the squires in force; and when Anne visits Kellynch with the feeling that it is now in *better* hands (II, i, 125) the *main* contention of the book is established. Now the scene shifts to Bath. Frederick Wentworth's eyes were opened at Lyme. The proof that Anne has her eyes open is given when she says (I, xi, 98) “These would have been all my friends”; and it is confirmed by her Kellynch visit. Bath is a place of shadows exactly calculated to make Mr. Elliott look good. If she married him Anne would take her mother's place as Lady Elliott (this causes her a twinge — II, i, 125; compare v, 160); but as soon as she hears of Louisa's engagement the wind is set fair for home.

The sailors come to Bath (in the person of the Crofts) but they can't be introduced to Lady Dalrymple. So when Wentworth comes, there is something of a struggle before he can reach Anne properly. But the Musgroves bring the Harvilles — and we see that the solid squires assimilate easily with the sailors — their values are the same after all. Charles Musgrove finds Benwick likes

rat-catching (II, x, 219); and he gives the squire's view of titled connections (II, x, 224) as roundly as Admiral Croft and those "several odd-looking men . . . who I [Sir Walter Elliott] am told are sailors" would. Anne says the same in *her* way.

Then we see the womenfolk agree (II, xi, 230-1) on the question of short engagements and marriage as soon as feasible, even with a few difficulties; but that long engagements, or engagement in uncertain circumstances, should be discouraged in every way possible. The working values are the same (and they are more on Lady Russell's side than Frederick Wentworth would allow in 1806 — but he could have been brought to reason if Lady Russell had wanted that).

So we come to Anne's summing up (II, xi, 232). The men have their *profession*; the women are confined, and must live on their feelings. This does not apply to the Benwick case, so we have a little contest of analogies — but the analogies are all of them mere conversation. The initial statement is real because it is a challenge to Frederick Wentworth; it is not concerned with Benwick at all. This is what Anne returns to at the end of the conversation (II, xi, 235). Meanwhile Frederick Wentworth is writing his letter; and thus the couple can come to their declared understanding. The buried issue of their personal relations can at last be discussed. We can see, by comparing their acts and feelings that each is recasting the past into a slightly more determinate shape than it had. Had they not been in contact with one another, Frederick Wentworth's declaration to his sister (I, vii, 61-2) might have come true; and but for Anne's admission of there being another man, Mrs. Smith would never have spoken and Anne might have married Mr. Elliott (II, ix, 199).

Now that we have grasped that what is intended is a study of two worlds of value — and of concretely embodied as opposed to abstract formal values — let us see whether the form is completely organic.

If there is any fault in the *construction*, it is in the way that Mrs. Clay is disposed of. Jane Austen says that "Mrs. Clay's affections had overpowered her interest" (II, xii, 250) and implies that she actually became enamored of Mr. Elliot. This is implausible. Mrs. Clay hoped to ensnare Sir

Walter. Anne's belief that her own warning might bear fruit, even though Elizabeth disdained it outwardly, would (with all the moments when Mrs. Clay herself was nervous that her design might be apparent) have provided a rather better solution. Mrs. Clay would be readily persuaded to switch her attentions to Mr. Elliot, by the velvet glove combination of a bribe with a threat. Mr. Elliot had only to hint that he would "look after her" — and that if she did not listen, he would put a word in Elizabeth's ear. For, since Mrs. Clay knew that Elizabeth wanted to marry him, that would be decisive for her. Mr. Elliott does in fact prefer Anne — and that is entirely credible. But he is naturally devious, and he is well aware that Elizabeth is only too ready to marry him. So the threat, which he would not scruple to use, would have been quite effective. With an appropriate revision of just one sentence, everything else is neatly in place to produce the situation that Mrs. Clay is actually left in.

Two faults in the *treatment* have been claimed. In the first place, one novelist claims that the tale of Mrs. Smith is "undeniably bald and flat";<sup>iv</sup> and some other critics agree. Now, of course, Jane Austen is beyond the range of her own direct experience here. She is depending on novels and newspapers, etc. But it seems to me that everything is just right. Mrs. Smith is a remarkably resilient person, who was completely devil-may-care in her early marriage. Anne sees that her account is not perfectly objective — and her behavior is not perfectly sincere, either. But we can easily enter into her point of view. In her situation it was no light thing she would risk, by attacking Mr. Elliott while she believed that Anne meant to have him. She *does* speak (regardless of her own interests) as soon as she is sure Anne's affections are not engaged. Anne forgives her for the concealment, and regards her as one of the two respectable friends that she brings to Frederick Wentworth. Myself I think Mrs. Smith is as well realized as Lady Russell (and *more* real and admirable in herself). So I do not see Jane Austen making revisions here had she lived. (There are some who think that Mrs. Smith is a superfluity, because she is not necessary to the *plot*.<sup>v</sup> Anne decides to refuse Mr. Elliott quite independently. But this criticism confuses the "form" with the unity of the action. It is essential that Anne should trust her own judgment at twenty-seven, and resist the persuasion of Lady Russell. But it is also essential that her judgment should be shown to

be justified. To have it confirmed by someone who might have stayed silent if Anne had made a mistake is a fine dramatic stroke.)

The other supposed fault is Mrs. Musgrove's tears: *Are* they ridiculous? The incongruity that Jane Austen speaks of is real; and for a naval officer who knew the boy, Mrs. Musgrove's way of speaking might touch his funny-bone (cf. Anne's smile — I, viii, 64), just as a mother's view of a troublesome midshipman often would, dead or alive. But the boy *is* dead and Mrs. Musgrove, though not educated or cultivated, is a very real person for whom her own family are *always* first (cf. I, vi, 47 etc.). Surely everyone should feel some sympathy for her whitewashing of her black sheep? That Frederick Wentworth's lips *might* momentarily twitch at a memory, is in character — just as his controlling the urge would be. But Jane Austen makes too much of his virtue here.<sup>vi</sup> The whole treatment of Dick Musgrove is wrong. The treatment of Mrs. Musgrove's tears Jane Austen ought to have softened a bit (and would have in a twelvemonth — I, viii, 67-8). But the *introductory treatment of* Dick Musgrove should come out altogether. To speak of a mere boy as already a lost soul, while at the same time suggesting that his Captain could influence him — offering a neat and quite convincing sentence from one of his letters to prove it — is not consistent at all (I, vi, 50-2).<sup>vii</sup> The absolute worthlessness of Dick Musgrove at eighteen, is something we cannot be expected (and must not even be *allowed*) to believe in. Jane Austen would have excised this comment, certainly, had she lived to revise her manuscript for the press. A novelist can legitimately speak with this godlike certainty in declaring her characters' destiny. Jane Austen often does it, as for instance when she says that Mrs. Norris would have played Mrs. Price's role better; but her verdict on Dick Musgrove is inconsistent with her whole approach to the novel (and to *youth* generally). Above all it makes the portrait of the whole Musgrove *family* inconsistent. They *do* care about each other, and they would care about a black sheep *more* than he deserved, while he was alive. We should not be asked to believe that they have started pretending to care about him because he died while he was still young.

Thus the *sustaining backbone* of the novel — the “persuasion” of 1806 and the *reconciliation* of 1814 — is quite flawless. The pattern is completely realized, and every element properly belongs

to it. The assimilation of the sailors to the squires, and the demonstrated nullity of the town-existence of position without social responsibility, is flawless likewise. The only tiny warts are in the *ornamentation* (Mrs. Clay's motives, and the Musgroves' feeling for "poor Richard"). *Pride and Prejudice* has a much less ambitious theme (social health and decadence in the family of two squires), though its *story-unity* is unsurpassable, and there is almost no false note in it anywhere. Even *Emma*, also flawless in detail, and with a similar *organic* unity of its story with its world, does not sustain so large a world as *Persuasion*, within a material compass twice as great.<sup>viii</sup> Jane Austen produced four novels that are near-perfect works of art. Of them all, the last (though she did not live to polish it quite perfectly) is the most amazing example of absolute compression.



**Notes**

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- i. See further S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 19 , chapter .
  - ii. Mrs. Price's Rebecca does it very badly in Portsmouth (*MP*, III, xv, 439); but we can be sure that both Sophy Croft and Anne would have it done properly.
  - iii. Mrs. Croft is presented to us as a very sensible woman. But one wonders how she would have managed if she had been as prolific as Mrs. Price. (We know that *she* had no fortune to speak of; we do not know how far Commander Croft's family would have been able to help them. But we must assume that they considered the problem carefully before their marriage.)
  - iv. Elizabeth Jenkins, *Jane Austen*, 1949, 349.
  - v.
  - vi. Elizabeth Jenkins is exactly right this time (1949, 351-2).
  - vii. The judgment: "the Musgroves had the ill fortune of a very troublesome, hopeless son; and the good fortune to lose him before he reached his twentieth year" is a terrible error on the part of a Christian moralist. Jane Austen is drawing a valid contrast between the way in which the Musgroves actually regarded Dick when he was eighteen, and the way in which they remembered "poor Richard." But the quotation from his letter itself shows why she ought not to treat his death (even ironically) as a piece of "good fortune."

viii. 484 pages to 252 in R.W. Chapman's edition — cf. Elizabeth Jenkins, 1949, 335-6.