



Jane Austen
Persuasion

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JANE AUSTEN was born in 1775 in the village of Steventon, Hampshire, the daughter of an Anglican clergyman. The Austens were cultured but not at all rich, though one of Austen's brothers was adopted by a wealthy relative. Other brothers followed professional careers in the church, the Navy, and banking. With the exception of two brief periods away at school, Austen and her elder sister Cassandra, her closest friend and confidante, were educated at home. Austen's earliest surviving work, written at Steventon whilst still in her teens, is dedicated to her family and close female friends. Between 1801 and 1809, her least productive period, Austen lived in Bath, where her father died in 1805, and in Southampton. In 1809, she moved with her mother, Cassandra, and their great friend Martha Lloyd to Chawton, Hampshire, her home until her death at Winchester in 1817. During this time, Austen published four of her major novels: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811); *Pride and Prejudice* (1813); *Mansfield Park* (1814); and *Emma* (1816), visiting London regularly to oversee their publication. *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* were published posthumously in 1818.

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JANE AUSTEN

Persuasion



Edited by

JAMES KINSLEY

With an Introduction and Notes by

DEIDRE SHAUNA LYNCH

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INTRODUCTION

On 8 August 1815, English newspapers took note of the departure for Saint Helena of HMS *Northumberland* and, with it, a prisoner. He was Napoleon Bonaparte, whose army had been defeated at Waterloo just weeks before, in a bloody battle (almost 50,000 killed) that brought to a close more than two decades of warfare between Britain, France, and their allies. The former Emperor of the French would spend the remainder of his life incarcerated on that tiny South Atlantic island. In 1821 he died there, almost unremarked. Even before the *Northumberland* left British waters, however, Bonaparte had become a has-been: a relic of a past that Europe was resolutely putting behind it. By the summer of 1815, an era of aftermath had arrived.

On the same day that her contemporaries learned of Bonaparte's journey into exile, Jane Austen began to write *Persuasion*, the last of her completed works, and the one in which, according to Virginia Woolf, the novelist embarked on her 'voyage of discovery'.¹ With this characterization Woolf added her authoritative voice to the chorus of commentators who since the nineteenth century have identified *Persuasion* as a work of exceptional innovation and experiment, one in which Austen heads somewhere new. Having encountered four works from her pen, her audience might in 1815 have believed that they knew just what characters, style, and story line an 'Austen novel' would involve. *Persuasion*, however, is different.

For a start, Anne Elliot, its heroine, is, at 27, older than her predecessors, and old enough, in the period's idiom for sex appeal, to have lost 'her bloom' (p. 11). Disconcertingly, *Persuasion* presents us with a heroine who has completed her growing-up. Anne has already internalized—too well, one could argue—the lessons of prudence and self-restraint that most heroines of the period learn only as their stories conclude. This is why, in the conferences about her family's financial troubles which give us our first glimpse of this heroine, we see Anne, in what we soon recognize as a typical gesture, hardening herself to 'affronts' (p. 33). Her concerns over the plans her family hatches in these opening chapters go unvoiced, because it 'would be

¹ *The Common Reader*, new edn. (London: Hogarth, 1937), 180.

most right, and most wise, and, therefore, must involve least suffering, to go with the others' (p. 32): that line of reasoning suggests, sadly, that Anne accepts *some* suffering as an inevitability. However, as the novel proceeds it becomes clear that Austen will not co-operate with her heroine's resolution to define herself as a has-been. This heroine hopes that she has 'outlived the age of blushing'; Anne seems to aspire to put 'the age of emotion' behind her too (p. 44). Outwardly, then, Anne may look like a model girl ('almost too good for me', Austen herself opined).² But the unspoken script of her mental life is, we find, tremulous with passion. In fact, nothing else Austen published approximates the language of psychological tumult that *Persuasion* pioneers to convey the feel of the many moments in the story when Anne is all but overcome by a heady compound of remembrance, hope, anxiety, and erotic longing.

Many readers have been struck by the energetic, agitated prose—anticipating Virginia Woolf, it is said, more than it recalls Samuel Johnson—that Austen uses to convey the wordless dramas of Anne's inner life.³ Readers have, furthermore, associated this shift in style with a transformation in the novelist's understanding of society. For the upshot of the discussions of the Elliot finances that begin *Persuasion* is that Anne's father, spendthrift Sir Walter, is obliged to vacate his house. Because he must retrench his expenses, Kellynch Hall, though Elliot property for generations, must be rented to others. Austen's glowing depictions of the country houses of Pemberley and Donwell Abbey, in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, glorified a social order made stable by the gentleman's inheritance of landed property. But *Persuasion*, valuing the activities of the professional classes more than the traditions of the country house set, recognizes relocation as a way of life. Its crucial scenes happen in rented rooms. Its most admirable characters are figures like Admiral and Mrs Croft, Sir Walter's tenants, who move into Kellynch only to find themselves regretting the snug quarters they formerly occupied aboard Royal Navy ships. The Crofts are transients by profession, not permanent residents. In associating *Persuasion* with voyages of discovery, Woolf might, in fact, have been noticing how Austen takes the symbolic

² Letter to Fanny Knight, 23–5 March 1817, *Jane Austen's Letters*, 3rd edn., collected and ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 335.

³ Norman Page, in J. David Grey *et al.* (eds.), *The Jane Austen Companion* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 262–3.

value formerly belonging to her country houses and reattaches it, in this novel, to Navy frigates and carriages speeding down country lanes. *Pride and Prejudice* grants Elizabeth Bennet the chance to tour Darcy's handsome house and discover there, just in time, that 'to be mistress of Pemberley might be something' (vol. III, ch. i). *Persuasion*, inaugurating a new, unsettled mode of domesticity, grants its heroine the chance to study the co-operative spirit in which the Crofts steer their carriage (p. 78). This heroine ends this book 'the mistress', not of a country house, but of the latest thing in transportation: 'a very pretty landaulette' (p. 201).

The modernity of *Persuasion* does not, however, reside exclusively with this emphasis on movement or on looking ahead to new social vistas. For all its innovations, *Persuasion* also takes an interest, in ways that are equally modern, in looking backward: in reviewing and historicizing. The novel's wisdom is to insist that there can be no change of place, no experience of new scenes and faces, without the practices of leave-taking that people use to put the past behind them.

Sir Walter Elliot's nostalgia for the good old days is obvious as soon as the first paragraph depicts his reading habits: when Anne's father picks up the *Baronetage*, it is to use this who's-who list of gentry genealogies in order to take note once again of how few really old families have survived to the present-day and in order to re-indulge his snobbish 'contempt' for the new, ancestor-less baronets ('the almost endless creations of the last century') who have taken their place (p. 9). But even the Navy men and their wives, the figures of social change in *Persuasion*, indulge a taste for reminiscing and 'recurring to former days' (p. 84): Austen portrays them regaling their dinner companions with yarns in which they retrace past voyages and fight past battles over again. Begun on the day when Austen's contemporaries were declaring decades of war 'history', *Persuasion* represents Austen's investigation into these uses of retrospection. Austen asks whether the past might be recalled and memories kept alive without disturbing that peace. She asks about how people keep faith with their memories and whether it is possible to be true to the past without living *in* it—without isolating oneself from the dynamism of historical change.

In posing such questions, Austen was recognizably addressing issues of the moment. Britons inhabiting the 'new world order' of 1815 were, in unprecedented ways, invited to see themselves as

time-travellers who had crossed a threshold and passed into a new historical era. During the years of the French Revolution and the two decades of war that followed, the very pace at which history happened appeared to have accelerated. More 'history' had been happening, more quickly, and the past seemed to have receded more rapidly into the distance than it had before. This new experience of time had contradictory consequences. On the one hand, Britons' solicitude about preserving links with a vanishing cultural heritage led to the establishment of museums and of programmes of architectural restoration that aspired to return the nation's old buildings to their past condition. At the same time such preservationism could seem beside the point, for the past had, for many people, become irrevocably distant from, because distinct from, the present. The past had become, as the historian David Lowenthal writes, 'a foreign country'.⁴ The second decade of the nineteenth century is, in fact, when the concepts of historical *period* (a word that only then comes to designate a delimited slice of time possessed of its own distinctive character) and of *anachronism* (a term for what is untimely, for what is out of place in the contemporary moment) first enjoy real currency in British culture. These are concepts propagated in the new literary forms developed in the wake of the Battle of Waterloo in 1815: the era's 'tales of the times', its investigations of 'the spirit of the age', as well as the 'historical novels'—with their settings in bygone times—that had been brought into prominence by Sir Walter Scott's best-selling series of Waverley Novels.

Persuasion both assists with, and reacts against, the new tasks of historicizing and of periodizing that literature was being called on to perform after 1815. It too aims to investigate the past so as to specify the historical location of the present. At the same time, *Persuasion*'s interest in reminiscence—in the persistence of the past as memory—supplies Austen with the device that she uses in order to revise, to exquisite effect, the marriage plot. Austen, with glorious assurance, constructs *Persuasion* as a sequel. Readers' sense that Austen in her last book is taking fiction somewhere new is in part a function of how, centred as it is on a grown-up heroine who begins where other heroines end, *Persuasion* reads as a follow-up to the typical 'Austen

⁴ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Lowenthal's title quotes the opening of the 1953 novel by L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*.

novel'. Some eight years before the story begins, in a sequence of events that the narrator characterizes as a 'little history of sorrowful interest' (p. 28), Anne Elliot met Captain Frederick Wentworth of the Royal Navy. Soon, since 'he had nothing to do, and she had hardly any body to love,' they pledged their love (p. 26). But Anne submitted to duty, and, 'persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing,' gave Wentworth up: 'He had left the country in consequence.' The speed with which Austen recounts the story and arranges for it to reach 'its close' (p. 28) is remarkable. It almost suggests that by 1815 that storyline of youthful romance feels to her slightly dull—as if what interests Austen now is how people who have pasts do their loving. But if Austen dispenses briskly with the 'little history' which accounts for Anne's sense of herself as a has-been, the novel that picks up her story eight years on, when a long-awaited peace brings Wentworth back to England and back into Anne's life, is constructed nonetheless so that the feelings of these characters refer repeatedly to memories of this earlier history:

His profession qualified him, his disposition led him, to talk; and '*That* was in the year six;' '*That* happened before I went to sea in the year six,' occurred in the course of the first evening they spent together; and . . . Anne felt the utter impossibility, from her knowledge of his mind, that he could be unvisited by remembrance any more than herself. (p. 55)

Remembrance presents itself as a return visitor, in a novel that has redefined romance as a matter of return: first Wentworth's return from the sea and then at last—in the foregone conclusion, which Austen somehow has arranged so that it feels like a bolt from the blue and a prodigious stroke of luck—his return to Anne. By working in this double time-frame, by arranging for the backward look of retrospection to pull against the forward momentum of plot, Austen gives life to the abstractions of her contemporaries' philosophies of history. Take, for instance, the narrator's comment in Chapter IV that Anne 'had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning' (p. 30). Here Austen signals how her narrative will be inverting the usual schemes through which her novels of courtship or of female development sort out prelude from aftermath. But this sentence also challenges conventional expectations about the work of time in ways that may signal Austen's wish to complicate our ways of

delimiting the present from the past, a new era from an old one. By recounting a story of second chances, granting its heroine 'a second spring of youth and beauty' (p. 101) in ways that seem magically to run time backward, *Persuasion* makes readers think hard about what it means to close the book on the past. And the process of plotting Wentworth and Anne's way *back* to happiness, of revising that earlier, foreshortened 'little history' of failed union as a story of *reunion*, necessarily raises discomfiting questions about how different people measure time and how, categorized as History, particular experiences of time count, and at the expense of others. *Persuasion* invites readers to wonder, for a start, if a man who 'had nothing to do' and a woman who 'had hardly any body to love' will prove to have been telling and keeping time in sync, according to the same calendar.

Past and Present

In order to survive the heartache caused by Wentworth's return not only to England, but back into her own social circle, Anne reminds herself that time matters. On the first evening on which they are to meet, Anne reasons to herself that it is natural that time should advance and that people should change:

Eight years, almost eight years had passed, since all had been given up. How absurd to be resuming the agitation which such an interval had banished into distance and indistinctness! What might not eight years do? Events of every description, changes, alienations, removals,—all, all must be comprised in it; and oblivion of the past—how natural, how certain too! . . .

Alas! with all her reasonings, she found, that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing. (p. 53)

While it records Anne's struggle with her feelings, this passage testifies to her possession of a constant heart. Austen doesn't require Anne to confess outright that she has never ceased to love Wentworth. This is testimony enough that neither her severing of their engagement, nor the years of solitude that followed, have altered anything in Anne's feelings. The case for Anne's constancy to Wentworth is made here almost through the syntax of the passage alone. The jagged rhythms of the prose mime the intensity of Anne's yearning. They register how, far from being able to consign their

story to the temporally remote epoch which is conjured up through that reference to 'distance and indistinctness', Anne finds herself stirred all over again by Wentworth's presence. For Anne in 1814, it is natural that 1806 should feel like yesterday.

With this episode in Chapter VII, the book sets in motion with its readers the debate weighing the virtues and pains of romantic constancy which its characters soon take up themselves. Virtues *and* pains—because, as Anne says in her famous defence of women's steadfastness in *Persuasion's* conclusion, no man should 'covet' the ability to 'love longest' that she ascribes to the female sex. Nothing is 'enviable' about the lot of the woman who, like Anne herself, still loves 'when hope is gone' (p. 189). As early as the opening chapters, Austen's audience gets the wherewithal to test out that proposition: we are soon able to contrast Anne with Henrietta Musgrove, who finds Wentworth, though a newcomer to Uppercross society, 'more agreeable . . . than any individual among [her] male acquaintance, who had been at all a favourite before' (p. 48) and who, in expressing this opinion, blithely consigns her earlier romantic feelings for her cousin Charles to the category of ancient history. Further on in the novel, Wentworth's friend Captain Benwick, introduced when he is mourning his fiancée's sudden death, will disappoint the onlookers who felt that this star-crossed 'little history of his private life', coupled with his enthusiasm for Scott's and Byron's poetry, equipped him to be a paragon of melancholy romantic fidelity (p. 81). With unseemly dispatch, Captain Benwick will forget his dead fiancée and shed his melancholy. He will fall in love, over the same poetry, with Louisa Musgrove.

Nevertheless, this moment in Chapter VII which demonstrates both that Anne's love of Wentworth has been revived and that it never died also makes painfully apparent the grim truth about the context for such constancy. In Anne's world, time unsettles more than it preserves. At this point in the novel, Austen asks us to prize the 'retentive' heart which doesn't let go, but, at the same time, much in the novel, by emphasizing the inevitability of 'changes, alienations, removals', urges the high costs of such constancy and the wisdom of adaptability. Throughout her novel's first volume especially, Austen attends to the losses that come with the passage of years. She catalogues with merciless attention time's ravages on furniture (as with the 'faded sofa' at Uppercross Cottage, which, with the other

drawing-room furniture, had 'been gradually growing shabby, under the influence of four summers and two children' (p. 35) and also its ravages on people's bodies.

In *Persuasion* people age. Faces acquire wrinkles and bodies break down. '[S]ailors do grow old betimes,' Mrs Clay says, as she obsequiously points out the disadvantages that men working in a profession face when one compares their looks to those of a leisured man like Sir Walter (p. 22). This doesn't always seem to be the case. That first time he calls at Uppercross, Anne determines that the eight years that have 'destroyed her youth and bloom' have merely made Captain Wentworth *more* like himself, more handsome, more manly (p. 53). A reference to Captain Harville's lameness (p. 82) in fact represents one of the novel's very few acknowledgements that Navy men face graver dangers than the damage (on which Sir Walter especially likes to dwell) that the weather might do to their complexions. If we read that limp as the after-effect of a war wound, the reference may serve as a muted reminder that the lot of the men at war who are even unluckier than Harville is to die as well as to 'grow old betimes'. Such reminders are exceptional, however: *Persuasion* generally keeps a guarded silence about the fact that wounding and killing have for two decades represented the vocation of the Captain Harvilles and Wentworths of this world. But that discretion about wartime carnage is offset, all the same, by the fact that security of life and limb is a precarious thing even under the peace that has brought the surviving sailors home.⁵ At the start of Volume I Anne's young nephew Charles has a close call when he falls and breaks his collar-bone. At the end of the volume, Louisa Musgrove mistimes her daredevil leap from the Cobb and is injured gravely in consequence. There seem almost to be as many storms to weather on shore as at sea—as much likelihood there, as in the theatre of war, that time will cut young lives short, and as many testimonies to the frailty of the bodies housing those lives.

Still, *Persuasion* also yields an alternative account of what time can perform—Austen concedes that time can also renew, that, even while it alienates, removes, or hurts, it also brings the future. This is, for instance, the account that Anne absorbs when she observes with

⁵ On *Persuasion*'s stress on physical vulnerability see John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body: 'The Picture of Health'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 155–96.

surprise her old school friend Mrs Smith's 'disposition to be comforted' and 'power of turning readily from evil to good' and when she recognizes how Mrs Smith, though another of the novel's victims of mischance, might be better than she is at actually living *in* time. Mrs Smith manages to combine the 'submissive spirit' that Anne herself cultivates with an 'elasticity of mind' (p. 125).

A similar orientation to time can be discerned when *Persuasion*'s narrator describes the homes at Uppercross and, noting that the Musgrove family, like its two houses, were 'in a state of alteration, perhaps of improvement', (pp. 37–8) conspicuously declines any opportunity to lament the passing of things:

To the Great House accordingly they went, to sit the full half hour in the old-fashioned square parlour, with a small carpet and shining floor, to which the present daughters of the house were gradually giving the proper air of confusion by a grand piano forte and a harp, flower-stands and little tables placed in every direction. Oh! could the originals of the portraits against the wainscot, could the gentlemen in brown velvet and the ladies in blue satin have seen what was going on. (p. 37)

The style Austen chooses for this depiction of the alterations wrought by time is not that of elegy. Instead, passing fashions in clothing and furnishings are annotated and made meaningful as the stuff of what we might call social history. The description evokes a longer timeline than a 'full half hour'. In depicting the parlour almost as a museum or memorial to the changing tastes of multiple eras, Austen enlists the several generations of Musgroves in a long-term process of upward mobility.

This insistence that to be at home in Uppercross is to live through modernization would have seemed to contemporary readers a sign of Austen's interest in her era's new historical novels. As modern scholars observe, this historical fiction operated precisely to domesticate history; in the wake of the extraordinarily eventful quarter-century of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, years that saw politics and warfare become in new ways *mass* experiences, this genre worked to redefine what would count as a 'historical subject', so that history no longer seemed something made exclusively through the actions of Great Men engaged in high politics. This is not to say that *Persuasion* is a historical novel in the manner, for example, of *Waverley*, or, *'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814),

Sir Walter Scott's fictionalization of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. In ways that for ever altered the British novel, *Waverley* grafted the history book onto the *Bildungsroman*: Scott simultaneously traced his fictional hero's journey of self-discovery and chronicled the British nation's journey through an episode of historical transition.⁶ Austen's engagement with historical subjects is of course much more indirect. When they decide Britain's fate at the Battle of Trafalgar, a turning point in the war with Napoleonic France, the Navy men of *Persuasion* do the deed off-stage, after all: Trafalgar takes place before the first phase of the romance between Anne and Wentworth commences. And, even though she is able to bank on her original audience's knowledge that the historical record had made Navy captains (a group including two of Austen's own brothers) the nation's epitome of glamour, Austen has too much tact to portray, for example, her fictional Wentworth being rewarded for his valour at the Battle of Saint Domingo by a real Horatio Nelson. Scott, by contrast, had arranged to portray his hero, Edward Waverley, keeping company with the actual leader of the Jacobite forces, Prince Charles Edward Stuart.

Nonetheless, much in *Persuasion* suggests how responsive Austen was to the arrangements her fellow novelists were developing to portray the complex interconnections between individual lives and larger social structures, as well as to portray the private sphere, where everyday lives are led by ordinary people, as a site of national historical formation. *Persuasion*'s heightened attention to the historicity of the domestic details it uses for scene-setting works, in fact, to similar effect as another of the innovations that makes this Austen novel stand apart from the others. This is the specificity with which Austen measures out the time—whether by the half-hour or week—that the fictional action occupies and the remarkable exactness with which—beginning at the moment in Chapter I where the narrator glosses a reference to 'this present time' with the words 'the summer of 1814' (p. 13)—she identifies the chronological moment at which that action unfolds. The consequence is that when, for instance, we

⁶ When Captain Benwick and Anne mention Scott in their discussion of the poetry 'of the present age' (p. 84), Austen invites her audience to make a connection between her own novels and his. Despite the anonymous publication of *Waverley*, the work in which Scott first moved from poetry onto Austen's own literary turf, Austen had had no trouble identifying its author: the authorship of *Waverley* was an open secret (*Letters*, 277).

learn in Chapter III that the tenant for Kellynch is likely to belong to the Navy because in summer 1814 the 'peace [is] turning . . . [the] Navy Officers ashore' (p. 20), we see private life being rendered in terms that pointedly call up a crucial phase of the nation's public history.

Austen takes pains to lodge the story of Anne's recovery of happiness in the interstices of the historical record, so that it is framed on both sides by great public events. In fact, the span of time in which Wentworth and Anne renew their romance coincides almost exactly with the temporary respite from war which began for Britain with the Treaty of Paris, signed in June 1814, and which terminated abruptly with Napoleon's escape from the island of Elba and return to Paris in February and March 1815. By Michaelmas, 29 September, 1814, Kellynch Hall has been turned over to the Crofts (p. 43). Captain Wentworth, their first visitor, has returned to England and into Anne's life by October. The characters' fateful visit to Lyme occurs in November, an excursion to the seaside that is 'entirely out of . . . season' (p. 84). On 1 February 1815 Mary begins penning the letter to Anne, by this time a resident of Bath, which includes the astonishing news of the engagement between Louisa Musgrove and Captain Benwick (p. 132); the Crofts carry the letter with them when they travel to Bath. '[U]nshackled and free' and ready to profit from rather than regret Louisa's inconstancy (p. 136), Wentworth follows the Crofts there even before they have the chance to promote the city's virtues as a place for meeting girls (p. 140). His first appearance in Bath's wet, wintry streets and first encounter with Anne, who finds then that 'Time had changed him' (p. 142), also occur in February. Within weeks, Wentworth's journey to Bath is repeated by the two Uppercross families and Captain Harville: the hunting season has ended in the countryside, so Charles Musgrove is searching for something to do, and it is time to shop for his sisters' wedding trousseaus (p. 174). Well before winter ends, the majority of Austen's characters have been reassembled in time for the climactic scenes at the city's White Hart Inn.⁷

⁷ Through these measures, significantly, Austen makes the resumption of warfare that followed Napoleon's return to Paris on 20 March 1815 into an event that lies just beyond the frame of the novel, and in the characters' immediate future. It appears likely that Anne and Wentworth will be married by the time that the Battle of Waterloo is fought in June: the Navy in fact was not remobilized that spring, and, as Admiral Croft says when he tells Anne the history of his own marriage, 'sailors . . . cannot afford to make long courtships in time of war' (pp. 77–8).

By pointedly situating the action of *Persuasion* within time, insisting that it matters where we are in history, Austen proposes that large-scale historical processes help determine how private individuals work out their destinies. This means that, even as *Persuasion* invites readers to get romantic about people with steadfast hearts, it likewise acknowledges, in more hardheaded fashion, that Wentworth in 1815 has become an attractive marriage prospect exactly because, in many respects, the entire nation has moved on since 1806. His rise through the ranks and the wealth he has acquired through that professional skill exemplify the historical fact that Sir Walter laments: that war and the infusion of wealth that war has brought have served as the 'means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction' (p. 22).

But history is at issue in the novel's private plots in a second way. By framing *Persuasion* as a sequel, giving it a plot that unfolds under the shadows cast by a prior story, Austen at once obliged Anne and Wentworth to assess the influence of the past and called on her contemporary audience, those new arrivals in a new post-Waterloo world, to grapple along with the characters with the changes wrought by the years that had slipped away since 1806. In order to get past the deadlock of that 'perpetual estrangement' that makes their interchanges at Uppercross so painfully stiff and ceremonious (p. 55), Anne and Wentworth must reach an accommodation about how they will understand the past.

Anne has spent eight years in re-evaluating what her 19-year-old self did in sacrificing her chances for happiness. She has, heartbreakingly, had little else to do. Before the novel opens, Anne has concluded that Lady Russell's advice about Wentworth was mistaken: 'she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement' (p. 29), but she also concludes (and to the end persists in this belief) that she herself was right to be persuaded by her affection for and duty to her friend. For Wentworth, this sort of retrospection occurs belatedly, within the compressed time-frame of the novel, and in a roundabout way. His reintroduction into the book and appearance in Bath in the second volume follow a period in which, off-stage, he has been reviewing the autumn of 1814 and, particularly, the events crowded into the day and a half at Lyme. He has been reflecting on the generosity and presence of mind Anne demonstrated when Louisa was injured and on what that near-

tragedy suggests about the headstrong self-confidence that he had commended in Louisa, which he has prized in himself, and which he has hated Anne for lacking. After this review Wentworth appears to have been prompted to return in memory to an earlier time still and to reopen the closed book of the 'little history of sorrowful interest'.

Austen proposes that such reinterpretation of the past can alter the future. Recognizing the past as the place in time that also harbours unfulfilled wishes and unrealized possibilities (things that might have been, as well as those that had to have been) is the first step in revising the narratives we use to set out the origins of the present. It can make these narratives turn out otherwise. When in autumn 1814 Wentworth returns to England, he has already made up his mind about the past's meanings. He knows, he believes, how *that* story turned out. He remembers selectively and uses remembrance merely to nurse his grievances. The sole passage of narrative adopting his point of view suggests as much: 'He had not forgiven Anne Elliot. She had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shewn a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own decided, confident temper could not endure' (p. 54). But, in the aftermath of the visit to Lyme (which Austen seems designedly to have scheduled so that it would be *untimely* and 'out of season'), *Persuasion* grants memory a role that involves releasing buried potentiality and not just affirming the inevitability of things as they are. Wentworth, the 'decided' character, learns a lesson about the virtue of keeping open those possibilities that make the future uncertain and undecided, instead of a done deal.

In the penultimate chapter, he recalls how jealous he felt when, after arriving in Bath, he witnessed Mr Elliot's attentions to Anne and confesses that 'the late knowledge I had acquired of your character . . . was [then] overwhelmed, buried, lost in those earlier feelings which I had been smarting under year after year' (p. 197). His language here transposes the positions of the late and the early, and makes the present something dead and buried and memory its undertaker. *Persuasion* in its entirety manifests a comparable willingness to perplex time—to tinker with its logic of linearity and irreversibility. That past which the characters thought was finished not only returns, it returns transformed and renewed by reinterpretation. We learn, for instance, that, retroactively, Wentworth is able to resee the woman whose 'weakness and timidity' he deplored first

in 1806, and, all over again, when memory of that earlier hurt was revived in 1814, as having always appeared to him a character 'maintaining the loveliest medium of fortitude and gentleness' (p. 194). In another rewriting of the past that Anne accepts with good grace, Wentworth claims now that this woman who, only months before, appeared to him to be haggard with age and so changed he might not have known her again (p. 53), is someone who, to his admiring eye, 'could never alter' (p. 196).

Persuasion might be said, then, to represent historical fiction in keeping with two understandings of the term. It is the vehicle for Austen's history of the recent past as an epoch of transition and also for her enquiry into what, in a time of transition, the backward glance of the historian might be good for. The reinterpretation of their past that enables Anne and Wentworth to begin again must have invited Austen's original audience to engage in parallel historical reflections of their own. This was a complex task. If military victory, the expansion of the empire, and the influx of wealth from the spoils of war had ushered Britons into a modern era of aftermath, the arrival of this modernity also seemed, strangely, to have restored the political status quo. The year 1815 saw, in fact, the re-establishment across Continental Europe of the old despotic monarchies that had been deposed first by the French Revolutionaries and then by Napoleon's occupying armies; even in celebrating Britain's triumph in the war, many recognized that this victory had signed the death warrant for the possibilities for political transformation that had been opened up by the Revolutions of 1789. In this context, in which history's forward march also felt, uncannily, like a move backward, in which the advent of a new era had resuscitated moribund political formations and made fossilized dynasties like France's Bourbons into historical actors once again, the statements *Persuasion* makes—about the pleasures of memory, about devoted hearts that resist change, and about romance's relationship to lovers' nostalgia for the way they were—were necessarily that much more charged. This may be why Austen had to complicate the terms under which Anne and Wentworth recover their past so that, even in returning to 1806, they might remain open to the future that is on its way. This may be why, through her attention to the new vistas opened up by social change, she had to suggest, ultimately, that her characters have both revived the past and renewed it, 'more

exquisitely happy, perhaps, in their reunion, than when it had been first projected; more tender, more tried, more fixed in a knowledge of each other's character, truth, and attachment' (p. 194). We would be wrong to think of the happy ending to this love story as having merely been delayed for eight years: Austen's point is that this is a different love story, in another time.

The Power of Precedents

In insisting, in the historicist spirit of Sir Walter Scott's historical fiction, that it matters what year it is, *Persuasion* sets itself against the *Baronetage*, the book in which this novel's own Sir Walter seeks consolation for the umpteenth time, at the moment when we readers open our own book:

this was the page at which the favourite volume always opened:

‘ELLIOT OF KELLYNCH HALL.

‘Walter Elliot, born March 1, 1760, married, July 15, 1784, Elizabeth, daughter of James Stevenson . . . ; by which lady (who died 1801) he has issue Elizabeth, born June 1, 1785; Anne, born August 9, 1787; a still-born son, Nov. 5, 1789; Mary, born Nov. 20, 1791.’ . . .

Then followed the history and rise of the ancient and respectable family, in the usual terms: how it had been first settled in Cheshire . . . exertions of loyalty, and dignity of baronet, in the first year of Charles II., with all the Marys and Elizabeths they had married; forming altogether two handsome duodecimo pages. (p. 9)

Like *Persuasion*'s author, who, as we have seen, carefully pinpoints her story's chronology, the compilers of the *Baronetage* prize exactitude of dating. So does Sir Walter, who customizes the Elliot entry by writing in even more dates. But unlike *Persuasion*, the *Baronetage* aspires to bring time to a standstill. In its scheme of things, only one thing about national history is really worth knowing: that nothing that happened was momentous enough to disrupt the bloodlines whose continuity the *Baronetage* celebrates. Anne's ability, on the second occasion in the book on which she speaks, to retrieve from memory details about Admiral Croft's career ('in the Trafalgar action, and . . . [stationed] in the East Indies since' (p. 24)) bears witness to how, since Wentworth's departure, she has found some

consolation in reading the 'navy lists and newspapers' (p. 29) in which he might be mentioned. But this reading has something in common with her memories of her short-lived engagement, which continually occupy her thoughts, but which are never spoken of by the few people privy to the secret of the past: this reading is another thing that isolates her. While her family has cultivated their obliviousness to history, with the result that after two decades of war the names of admirals still mean nothing to them, Anne has had the chronicles of public life—history's raw materials—all to herself.

Reading Sir Walter's favourite entry in the who's-who over his shoulder, we notice how the same names get repeated in it generation after generation: the pattern encompasses even the new blue blood entering the lineage through 'all the Marys and Elizabeths [the Elliots] married'. Those repetitions suggest the resistance to new possibility that distinguishes Elliot life. Because Anne, a good listener, is so useful a sounding-board for the other characters (none of them intuiting that she might have grievances of her own to air), she often finds herself uncomfortably privy to the knowledge that to people like the Musgroves her sisters and father look stiff-necked and silly in their preoccupation with 'precedence' (p. 42). The word contains a pun that hovers over *Persuasion's* discussion of the hold the past has on the present and to its related discussion of the hold books have on their readers. 'Precedence', as the Musgroves use the term when they complain to Anne, refers to the petty rules that dictate, for instance, who should give way to whom when people in polite society enter a dining room or carriage. (This etiquette works in favour of the daughter of a baronet, and so Mary Musgrove insists on upholding it.) But Austen also invokes 'precedence' as she demonstrates how, in the *Baronetage's* scheme of things, the present is understood merely as perpetuating precedents set in the past. Valuing individuals' birth rather than their achievements, the *Baronetage* depicts a world in which people lead their lives along lines set out in a story which is already written.

Even as she writes a book about a heroine's self-determination, Austen reminds her audience that books may write us. In a novel in which several characters (from Sir Walter, to Anne, to Captain Benwick, and, following her accident, Louisa Musgrove) seek out opportunities to lose themselves in books, Sir Walter Elliot's 'book of books' (p. 12) stands, in fact, as Austen's Exhibit A in her

investigation of the influence that words written down in the past wield over the present. As the critic Adela Pinch argues, *Persuasion* connects readers' indebtedness to books to the pressures exerted by a person of influence like Lady Russell, rumoured to be 'able to persuade a person to any thing!' (p. 87): that indebtedness similarly raises the question of the extent to which individuals' thoughts and desires can be their own.⁸ Louisa and Benwick fall 'in love over poetry', after all—and Anne comes close to concluding, flippantly, that poetry—and their second-hand experience of the romantic feelings of the poets—made these two people fall in love (p. 135). One approach *Persuasion* uses to explore how people live in time is to probe the paradoxical way in which books, though esteemed for transcending the immediacy of experience, still persuade readers that they are scripts for living.

The tension built into *Persuasion*'s plotting is the effect of readers' worry that the *Baronetage*—that volume of precedents, commemorating the Elliots' life of 'sameness and . . . elegance . . . prosperity and . . . nothingness' (p. 14)—might give Austen her script. For *Persuasion* is plotted, provocatively, in a manner recalling the narrative patterns of many eighteenth-century novels: books such as Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* or Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* in which legitimate heirs go missing, are found, and finally, in scenes of jubilant family reunion, are restored to the estates that are their birthright. (In his novels Sir Walter Scott resurrected this plot, finding in its linking of the generations and of past and future a way of compromising between his commitment to ideas of historical progress and his longing to turn back the clock.)⁹ In Austen's near-parodic version of this restoration plot, the lead role goes to Mr William Walter Elliot, heir presumptive to Sir Walter's entailed estate. When *Persuasion* opens, Mr Elliot is a fading memory, banished to the past for his immunity to Anne's older sister's charms and his marriage outside his class. (Elizabeth, the narrator explains, 'could not admit him to be worth thinking of again' (p. 13).) We have known him therefore only as so many words inscribed into Sir

⁸ 'Lost in a Book: Austen's *Persuasion*', in *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 139.

⁹ On Scott's use of this plot, and *Persuasion*'s repudiation of that use, see Jane Millgate, 'Persuasion and the Presence of Scott', *Persuasions: Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America*, 15 (1993), 184–95.

Walter's 'book of books', but as soon as that writing comes to life in Volume II of Austen's book, as soon as Mr Elliot returns to the family fold in a homecoming that counterbalances Wentworth's return from the sea, Austen teases readers with the possibility that Mr Elliot's story might conscript Anne. She might end up the heroine of a restoration plot: Mr Elliot is guaranteed the estate, but he might also win the competition for the girl and get his 'wishes that [her] name might never change' (p. 152). Anne *is* named Anne, but we worry that, even so, she might not prove the exception to the disheartening rule set out in the *Baronetage's* list of 'all the Marys and Elizabeths'—the rule that every woman's story is predestined to repeat every other's (p. 9).

That this sort of reincarnation of the past could be Anne's fate adds resonance to the wording the narrator uses in the scene in Volume I that sees Anne, the Musgroves, and Wentworth taking a country walk to Winthrop, the home of the Musgroves' cousin Charles. To numb her pain when she overhears a flirtatious conversation between Wentworth and Louisa Musgrove, Anne tries repeating to herself the lines of poetry with which earlier she had 'occupied her mind', but, in the event, the narrator explains, finds it impossible to '*fall into a quotation again*' (pp. 71–2; emphasis added). This scene suggests some conflicting accounts of what books can do for the bookish. The reader altogether absorbed by 'the sweets of poetical despondence' (p. 72) has erected a buffer between herself and the world. Anne is not that reader, but the fact that she even hopes to find in 'musings and quotations' the wherewithal to 'occup[y] her mind' (p. 71) should not be discounted: *Persuasion* throughout broods on the difference it makes to the relationship between the sexes that men have occupations and women, at least of Anne's class, do not. (Remember how Anne explains her belief that Captain Benwick will recover from his bereavement sooner than she will recover from her loss of Wentworth. Benwick will 'rally' because he is younger than she is 'in feeling, if not in fact; younger as a man' (p. 82), and because, as a man, he has a 'profession, pursuits, business', as Anne comments later to Captain Harville, to 'take [him] back into the world' (p. 187).) On the other hand, however, *Persuasion* does not disguise the costs of Anne's 'fall[s] into quotation'. Anne's tendency to define herself as a looker-on rather than a participant, her preference for 'solitude and reflection' (p. 69), her need to abstract herself

from the agitations of the present moment, make readers feel especially tender toward her. For one thing, we alone are aware of the inner life going on beneath that quiet exterior; for another, Anne's pensiveness as she gets lost in her thoughts resembles our own state as we lose *our* selves in Austen's book. But these traits in Anne's character also amount to a declaration that she has given up on the future and resigned herself to living off musings, quotations, and memories. And when Mr Elliot brings a second, competing marriage plot into the novel, Anne risks become a quotation herself, another in a long line of Lady Elliots of Kellynch Hall.

Lady Russell embraces this prospect. She longs, she says to Anne, 'to look forward and see you occupying your dear mother's place' and see the title of Lady Elliot 'revived' again in Anne, who is, she declares, her 'mother's self in countenance and disposition' (pp. 129-30). This vision of a future which would restore and replicate the past, a vision in which, enticingly, Kellynch figures as property transmitted along matrilineal rather than patrilineal lines, triggers the only instance in the novel when the sense of right that Anne has developed in eight years of reviewing the past looks vulnerable to outside interference. 'For a few moments her imagination and her heart were bewitched' (p. 130). Anne has reason to be stirred by Lady Russell's nostalgic longing. She felt deeply the loss of her mother. So she understands that Lady Russell's match-making is more than another manifestation of the 'prejudices on the side of ancestry' that did such damage in 1806 (p. 15); it continues in another form Lady Russell's own mourning for the lost past she shared with a woman to whom she was, as Chapter I advises, strongly attached (p. 10).

But Anne has never felt much for Mr Elliot. She has been curious about his motives for renewing family ties. She has observed with mingled vexation and amusement his belated conversion to ideas about the value of rank that she herself contravenes when she maintains, despite paternal disapproval, her ties with impoverished Mrs Smith. Flattering as they are, Mr Elliot's attentions represent therefore nothing but 'unwelcome obtrusiveness' (p. 170). They arouse Wentworth's envy and cause him to hang back just when he should advance. They delay the only story whose climax we care about. It is not a disappointment but a relief when the revelations delivered by Mrs Smith and her friend Nurse Rooke bring Mr Elliot's story to an

abrupt close. Cynical, self-serving motives, Chapter ix of Volume II reveals, explain his sudden outburst of family feeling. He has reconciled himself with his relations only to prevent Mrs Clay from snaring Sir Walter: if Sir Walter married again and the union produced a son and heir, his own inheritance would be prevented.

The unmasking of Mr Elliot has so little impact that one could reasonably conclude that his main function in the book is, by amorously eyeing Anne as she walks on the causeway at Lyme, to get Wentworth looking in her direction as well (p. 87). Another hypothesis is possible: perhaps Austen needs to arrange for two figures—first, Wentworth, then Mr Elliot—to return, in order to distinguish between two modes of restoring the past. To propose that Wentworth and Anne are more happy eight years on than when their union was ‘first projected’ (p. 194) is, after all, to suggest that this couple has used the shadows cast by the passing of things to make something new. Austen needs to confirm that the arc of return which her storyline traces should not be equated with immunity to change. One detail suggests the political stakes of making this distinction. In the *Baronetage’s* record of family history, the place that Mr Elliot now occupies was assigned, in the paragraph as it ‘originally stood from the printer’s hands’, to the Elliot heir who was to have been born in the revolutionary year of 1789. Austen has conjured Mr Elliot into life as the substitute for that stillborn son, whose birth announcement (‘Nov. 5, 1789’) does poignant double duty as his obituary (p. 9).

Or perhaps *Persuasion* must contrast possible restoration plots because Austen has concerns about how easy it is to see restoration of the past as women’s work—and so deny women access to the dynamism of historical life. In Volume I, while her father and Elizabeth relinquish their responsibilities as landed gentry and make the move to Bath, Anne is left behind at Kellynch, where she diligently does the work of preservation: ‘making a duplicate of the catalogue of my father’s books and pictures’ (p. 36). To be in thrall to the family heirlooms seems typical of Anne’s plight. But Sir Walter’s land agent, Mr Shepherd, makes a statement suggesting women in general are susceptible to being saddled with the care of the past. Touting Mrs Croft as Kellynch’s tenant, he declares a childless lady like her ‘the very best preserver of furniture in the world’ (p. 24).

In Volume I Wentworth also subscribes to this coercive account of

women's ideal relationship to time and past precedents, as the conversation overheard by Anne as they walk to Winthrop attests. Praising Louisa for her single-minded self-confidence, complaining about timorous, persuadable characters (and so secretly complaining, we infer, about Anne), Wentworth declares: 'It is the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it can be depended on.—You are never sure of a good impression being durable. Every body may sway it' (p. 74). Wentworth is inconsistent when he identifies the problem with persuadableness. In his understanding of over-anxious characters who second-guess themselves and change their minds, the problem is not simply their susceptibility to influence. Wentworth *wants* to influence women. But the possible disappointment with a persuadable woman, he seems to say, is that, once impressed, she remains open to new impressions, rather than being faithful to the earlier one, and (like the 'lady' imagined by Mr Shepherd) preserving it. His view resembles that of William Wordsworth in 'Tintern Abbey', another great Romantic-period exploration of the work of time: a woman—Anne or Wordsworth's sister Dorothy—is to be a mirror in which a man might yet 'behold . . . what [he] was once'.¹⁰ But in their receptivity, the persuadable characters whom Wentworth deplores might be said to live *in* time.¹¹ Depending on context, 'inconstancy' can be just another name for an openness to change.

Anne in fact is less intent on preserving the traditions of an 'ancient family' like her own (p. 103) than she is curious about the globetrotting that Mrs Croft has done under the Navy's auspices (p. 61), about the elasticity of mind that enables Mrs Smith, though crippled and confined to two small rooms, to find 'employment which carried her out of herself' (p. 125), about Mrs Rooke's working life as 'a nurse by profession' (p. 126). These women's lives might well remind her, by way of contrast, of how restricted and home-bound her own life at Kellynch was. For all its romance, *Persuasion* has something unromantic to say about love and narrow horizons. In commenting in her opening that Anne had not been able to recover from her loss of Wentworth in 1806 because 'she had been too

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey', l. 121.

¹¹ Susan Morgan argues with Wentworth's reasoning at greater length and to wonderful effect in *In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 166–82.

dependant on time alone; no aid had been given in change of place' (p. 28), Austen audaciously raises the possibility—explored again when Captain Harville and Anne hold their debate on constancy in the penultimate chapter—that a woman's emotional fidelity might simply be the symptom of her physical immobility.¹² No 'novelty or enlargement of society' assisted Anne in the effort of putting 1806 behind her (p. 28), and yet, as she observes to Harville, 'continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions'. *Persuasion's* promotion of the mobile, active lives of sailors over the landed, immobile life of gentlemen, of naval chronicles over the *Baronetage*, evidences Austen's attention to recent history. But the novel makes it hard to say whether women's lives conform to the same calendar as men's and whether, in 1815, a new historical era has dawned for them as well. What if, as Anne suggests, their role is still to 'live at home, quiet, confined, [where] our feelings prey upon us' (p. 187)?

'No . . . examples in books': An Unscripted Future

This amazing conversation between Anne and Harville, which forms the climax to the novel, is made that much more tense and dramatic by our knowledge that Wentworth, in his corner of the drawing-room at the White Hart Inn, hears it all. During her debate with Harville, Anne voices some powerful social criticism. She proposes that if, as Harville asserts, men and women have different natures it must be because the sexes are granted unequal opportunities, because social codes put men and women in different relations to occupation and change. And, as this debate develops, and as it becomes clear that Anne, in asserting her sex's capacity to love 'longest, when . . . hope is gone', is also speaking out and telling her *own* story (p. 189), Austen returns to the issue of books' hold on their readers. Harville states to Anne that in nearly every book he opens he finds proofs that women are the changeable sex who do not love as faithfully as men. 'I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side the argument' (p. 188). (Invoking the teachings of literature, he momentarily forgets the lessons of events: the counter-example furnished, in his own household, by Benwick, who proposed to Louisa only months after the death of his first fiancée, Harville's sister.)

¹² As Monica F. Cohen notes in *Professional Domesticity and the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 25.

In response, Anne questions the authority Harville grants to books as archives of received wisdom. Her words send the novel back full circle to its opening image of Sir Walter with pen in hand annotating 'the book of books': 'if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story . . . the pen has been in their hands' (p. 188).

This is not the final verdict *Persuasion* delivers on what books do to and for readers. Austen has Anne's and Harville's debate about constancy conclude in a draw, she begins the next chapter hinting that she's uncertain whether the story she's told is 'bad morality' (p. 199), and, in the same relativistic spirit, she keeps her options open in assessing the value of reading. Austen neither requires us to trust in books (or readers), nor requires us to distrust them. If Anne rejects the second-hand experience obtained in reading when Harville wants to authorize his argument with 'examples from books', she herself has earlier recommended a course of reading to Captain Benwick, thinking that he would benefit from acquaintance with 'examples of moral and religious endurance' (p. 85). Certainly, *Persuasion* does not endorse the anxious attitude toward books that Charles Musgrove expresses when he concludes that Benwick's reading 'has done him no harm, for he has fought as well as read' (p. 176). Instead, Austen often shakes up just those gendered oppositions—between manly deeds and womanly words, heroic activity and timorous inaction—which Charles relies on when he reasons that Benwick's war service might compensate for the book-love that has impaired Benwick's masculinity. Remember that the private reading with which Anne has occupied her mind in her years of loneliness is first made visible when Anne uses her knowledge of Navy lists to supply details about Admiral Croft's career. When, with this passage, *Persuasion* begins its discussion of reading, Austen doesn't do as Charles does. She doesn't separate solitary reading from the public service performed by men of action; she puts them into proximity. This entails reconceptualizing the female reader—a figure satirists had long pictured as idle, self-indulgent, and socially irresponsible—in significant ways.

Persuasion illuminates nineteenth-century women's history by suggesting, through its references to the 'navy lists and newspapers' that give Anne her 'authority' (p. 29), how journalism, and the new profession of the war correspondent especially, had made the