

Jane Austen's Literary World :

On *Persuasion* (3) – Part 1

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I.

Persuasion might be said to be a wonderful novel with the characteristics of a lyric poem. The author Jane Austen (1775–1817), according to R. W. Chapman, began to compose this novel at the latter part of 1815, finishing it on 18th July, 1816.¹⁾ When it was published in 1818, accompanied by another novel *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen had already died (on July 18, 1817). Thus this novel has been situated in the group of her later works, along with *Mansfield Park* (written between 1811–3 and published in 1814) and *Emma* (written between 1814–5 and published that same year), so it is, in fact, her final work as a complete novel.

In the preface of the first edition of *Persuasion*, she referred to her own feelings toward the novel as follows:

... a little bit of ivory, two inches wide, on which I work a brush so fine ...²⁾

Judging from these words of hers, we believe she tried to produce a dreamlike world full of beauty in writing this work. Of her six novels, *Persuasion* has the most beautiful love story in both its plot and its description. It gives us readers the impression that we are wandering about in a poetic world when we read it.

Though it is a beautiful work, *Persuasion* has been criticized on several minor points which have been pointed out by a number of literary critics and scholars. One of them centers on the description of the characters who appear in the story; for example, Captain Wentworth, the partner character of Anne; the description of Capt. Wentworth is criticized in that he is lacking in both descriptive concrete-

ness and comic elements. In particular, he was not given enough psychological complexity. He strikes us as having the quality of a dummy doll which is merely used for decoration as the partner of the heroine Anne. He is described as a heavy good-natured man who is at the mercy of Anne; in this respect, some readers may be dissatisfied with Jane Austen's techniques of description of her characters. She tends to have ignored his psychology so much because she was occupied with depicting Anne's psychology. Focusing on another of the minor points, we can take up the matter of structural uncertainty. We can see an example of this in the union between Mr. Elliot, who has a prominent role as the seeming partner of Anne in the story, and Mrs. Clay, who takes care of Sir Walter, Anne's father. Mr. Elliot and Mrs. Clay greatly surprise us when we are told that they have united secretly. At first she appears to be a cunning type of a woman wishing to marry Sir Walter, who lost his wife. At the same time Mr. Elliot, who lost his wife and had originally gotten married to her for the purpose of getting her fortune, tries to marry Anne, and obtain the advantages of peerage and riches. — The two characters originally appear to be competing with each other. However, they sometimes talk in secret to each other on the street, and then they suddenly report that they live together in London. This greatly surprises us because we have not been given enough description of the process by which they have been united in such an unbelievable way: we cannot find convincing information in the plot describing the process through which the two characters came to their mutual cooperation. This fact cannot be prevented from being pointed out as one of structurally unfavorable points of *Persuasion*.

There is a decisive difference between this novel and Jane Austen's other novels: a difference centering on the setting up the images of the heroines. In all Jane Austen's other novels, the heroines appear as characters who have various defects in their personality as well as a variety of good points. In *Persuasion*, the heroine is described as having a very positive character, that is to say, a character with only outstanding merits in her personality. All her other heroines — Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride And Prejudice*, Emma Woodhouse in *Emma*, Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, and Elinor Dashwood in *Sense And Sensibility* — turn into more attractive heroines in the course of time in the novels through their self-recognition of or self-education concerning their individual defects. This is one of the favored techniques Jane Austen used in writing her novels: she made it a rule to make the best of the heroines' defects;

the heroines, owing to their character weaknesses, sometimes make a variety of mistakes or form extraordinary misconceptions. It is through this technique that the author gives a lot of enjoyment to the reading public. In other words, the heroines' defects arouse the interest of the readers, and comprise one of the enjoyable elements of the novels.

It is a well-known fact that Jane Austen originally hated people who had absolutely no defects in their personality because they were not interesting to her as a writer (or also as a woman). As evidence of this, we find the following few lines in one of her own letters in which she describes her true feelings toward people without any defects:

— pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked —³⁾

The words above are enough to tell us that Jane Austen was not interested in heroines who had perfect characters. In the same letter, she also expressed her thoughts of 'having another ready for publication,'⁴⁾ which we believe could be the novel *Persuasion*:

— You will not like it, so you need not be impatient. You may *perhaps* like the Heroine, as she is almost too good for me.—⁵⁾

The word 'she' is probably Anne Elliot — so 'Anne Elliot is almost too good ...' in Jane Austen's opinion. We realize from this quote that she intended to make Anne Elliot appear in *Persuasion* as a 'good' heroine.

Jane Austen dared to depart from her own favorite, often used system of writing, and sought to fashion the perfect image of a heroine. Knowing that such a perfect heroine's love story would not likely be interesting to her, Jane Austen dared to compose the story of *Persuasion*. It is hard to fathom what the author meant to advocate in writing this work. She ran the risk of losing something vital by depicting a heroine that she herself did not find interesting. This problem will be further discussed in Part 2 of the present paper, together with some other problems concerning *Persuasion*.

II.

Anne Elliot, aged 27, the second daughter of Baronet Sir Walter Elliot, lives

in the country of Somersetshire with her father and elder sister. Her mother has been dead. She has a married younger sister who lives in the neighborhood. Eight years ago when she was nineteen years old, she fell in love with a navy officer called Captain Wentworth. For the first time she experienced passionate love, and then promised to marry him, but later she decided to give up the marriage, breaking the promise between them. The reason for her sudden breach of promise was that she was persuaded not to marry him by Lady Russell, who was her late mother's good friend and who had looked after her for many years. Lady Russell's arguments were that Capt. Wentworth was a little too young, not rich, and that besides as a navy officer his career was apt to put his life in danger. At that time, France was involved in the Napoleonic Wars, so England had a good probability of going to war. Her lover's future was considered to be very unstable for this reason. So Lady Russell, as Anne's patroness, preferred that she would not get married to him, and persuaded Anne to take her advice. Anne and Capt. Wentworth ended their relationship, and he left her behind. However, he now re-appears before her eight years later as a successful, promoted and wealthy navy officer. In the course of eight years, she has never met a more attractive man than Capt. Wentworth, though she has had some marriage proposals. His re-appearance causes a great sensation in her feelings. Thus the story of *Persuasion* begins.

Jane Austen skillfully describes Anne's solitude, sadness, and affliction in her state of suspended feelings as beautifully as possible. We can classify this state of suspense she creates in several stages, according to the contents and degrees of trembling of her woman's heart.

When Anne heard of Capt. Wentworth's calling at Kellynch, she felt her own feelings begin to tremble in various ways, partly because of the expectation of meeting her lover whom she once gave up marrying in spite of her love for him, and partly because of fear that he might harbor cold or even hostile sentiments toward her as she had broken the promise between them in her one-sided fashion. In particular, she wished to know his feelings toward her.

She would have liked to know how he felt as to a meeting. Perhaps indifferent, if indifference could exist under such circumstances. He must be either indifferent or unwilling. Had he wished ever to see her again, he need not have waited till this time; he would have

done what she could not but believe that in his place she should have done long ago, when events had been early giving him the independence which alone had been wanting.⁶⁾

She was afraid that he was surely either 'indifferent' or 'unwilling' to her. When she imagined what she would do if she were in his place, she could guess at his feelings toward herself. The following is the description of the scene in which she meets him again:

Her eye half met Captain Wentworth's; a bow, a curtsy passed; she heard his voice —⁷⁾

At last she experienced the half long-awaited moment. As might be expected, she could not look at him boldly or converse with him, while her great interest in him, which worked subconsciously, made her feel like listening only to 'his voice.' Then she was filled with disordered feelings, but soon after the brief meeting she tried to be calm, persuading herself as follows:

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! It included nearly a third part of her own life.

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

Now, how were his sentiments to be read? Was this like wishing to avoid her? And the next moment she was hating herself for the folly which asked the question.⁸⁾

Naturally, she was eager to recognize 'his sentiments': she was afraid that he wished to 'avoid her,' while she blamed herself for such a foolish question to herself — she found that she was then not entitled to suppose his like or dislike of her. After this meeting, she had occasional opportunities to catch sight of

him in various gatherings in society. This situation is the first stage of Anne's suspense. At a party one evening, she entertained the people present by playing a musical instrument for dancing:

On its being proposed, Anne offered her services, as usual, and though her eyes would sometimes fill with tears as she sat at the instrument, she was extremely glad to be employed, and desired nothing in return but to be unobserved.⁹⁾

While she was playing the piano, she was so sad that her eyes were full of secret tears, observing Capt. Wentworth, who was being elevated by general admiration, especially by all the young ladies. 'His cold politeness, his ceremonious grace, were worse than any thing.'¹⁰⁾ The more courteously he tried to behave toward her, the more bitter she could not but feel. She felt herself as miserable as if she were walking along a thorny way. He was once her own lover: she still now loves him in secret.

She told herself that he would no longer show her the tender feelings such as those shown in the past, and that it was rather natural that he should keep her at a distance. However, though she indulged in such a melancholy mood, she fortunately happened to have an opportunity to acknowledge his kind sentiment toward her. In visiting her sister Mary's house to take care of her injured son, she was extremely troubled by another son of hers who would get upon her back for fun, when 'she found herself in the state of being released from him'¹¹⁾ by some one; some one — Capt. Wentworth: he, in fact, helped her with her great trouble. Recognizing the very fact, she could not speak any word. Surprised at this kind behavior of his, she was not able to utter any thanks: she was indeed feeling 'most disordered.'¹²⁾

His kindness in stepping forward to her relief — the manner — the silence in which it had passed — the little particulars of the circumstance — with the conviction soon forced on her by the noise he was studiously making with the child, that he meant to avoid hearing her thanks, and rather sought to testify that her conversation was the last of his wants, produced such a confusion of varying, but very painful agitation, as she could not recover from,....¹³⁾

Afterwards, she would take great joy from this event which had been totally unexpected; she perceived that it was toward her that he showed his kind action at that time. Her feelings mentioned above represent the beginning of the second stage of her suspense; the following statement can also be included in this same stage.

In spite of such a joyful sentiment, she was obliged to feel sad again because she could not ascertain Capt. Wentworth's true sentiments toward herself. But she was fortunately given a chance to do this; one day when some young people and Anne and Capt. Wentworth went out for a walk, and she was too tired to walk any more, he was kind enough to help her and ask the Crofts, his elder sister and brother-in-law, who happened to pass by, to drive her home by carriage. Then he, 'without saying a word, turned to her, and quietly obliged her to be assisted into the carriage.'¹⁴⁾ The following is the description of Anne's inner reflection just after his tender treatment of her.

Yes, — he had done it. She was in the carriage, and felt that he had placed her there, that his will and his hands had done it, that she owed it to his perception of her fatigue, and his resolution to give her rest. She was very much affected by the view of his disposition towards her which all these things made apparent. This little circumstance seemed the completion of all that had gone before. She understood him. He could not forgive her, — but he could not be unfeeling. Though condemning her for the past, and considering it with high and unjust resentment, though perfectly careless of her, and though becoming attached to another, still he could not see her suffer, without the desire of giving her relief. It was a remainder of former sentiment; it was an impulse of pure, though unacknowledged friendship; it was a proof of his own warm and amiable heart, which she could not contemplate without emotions so compounded of pleasure and pain, that she knew not which prevailed.¹⁵⁾

She tried to judge his feelings toward herself: 'He could not forgive her — but he could not be unfeeling..., still he could not see her suffer, without the desire of giving her relief...; it was a proof of his own warm and amiable heart,

....' She was confused to a great extent with such a pleasant but also painful thought, and she was further forced to be put into the situation of a note of deeper suspense. It seems that in this incident she came to know his sentiments to some or rather much better extent than ever, though she could feel neither completely glad nor sorrowful; she could recognize that he did not have unfeeling sentiments or indifference toward her: this second stage represents a heightening of her suspense.

At the seaside in Lyme, where several people including both the heroine and hero were enjoying a walk together, an unexpected accident occurred. In the middle of the walk, Louisa, who is Capt. Wentworth's love at least on the surface of the story, was suddenly hurt seriously. Capt. Wentworth did not know what to do with the fainted lady. He nonverbally asked Anne for help, who gave him suitable, instant directions. After this incident, Anne obtained much satisfaction from the fact that he had relied upon her in the face of great trouble; she also guessed that he still likely valued her as a woman of sense as much as ever: this became in her mind a decisive proof that she was not completely ignored by him. At the same time, however, she was haunted by the acute, lurking fear of his lack of attachment toward her. This situation of suspense was getting more and more trying.

At about this time Lady Russell suggested that Mr. Elliot might be a respectable man worthy of getting married to her. Her suggestion was as follows: "... A most suitable connection every body must consider it — but I think it might be a very happy one."¹⁶⁾ In spite of these words of her patroness', Anne could not seriously consider them because of her secret, eternal love of Cap. Wentworth. She contradicted her patroness' opinion by saying; "... we should not suit."¹⁷⁾

At a confectioner's shop in Bath, Anne experienced extremely complicated feelings upon seeing and talking to Capt. Wentworth. Because she had caught sight of him before he entered the shop, she was prepared to some extent for the bewildering encounter.

Still, however, she had enough to feel ! It was agitation, pain, pleasure, a something between delight and misery.¹⁸⁾

When she, accompanied by Mr. Elliot, who treated her as if he were on special

terms with her, was about to leave Capt. Wentworth alone in the shop, she felt so embarrassed that she could say only a few words "good morning to you."¹⁹⁾ Here in this scene, one can speculate that Capt. Wentworth was possibly afraid that Anne, to whom he had not been completely unfeeling or for whom he had been unable to abandon his liking or attachment, was about to shift her heart to another man — Mr. Elliot. However, as the author always has a strong tendency to write almost exclusively about the heroine Anne's inner sentiments, there is no way we can discern his feelings except by way of intuition. Considering these situations, we can speculate from this scene that not only Anne's heart but also his was no doubt trembling in secret. The two incidents — the one of his reliance upon her judgement following Louisa's injury, the other in his attitude at the confectioner's shop just mentioned above — may well represent the third stage of her suspense.

Soon after this meeting she learned that a concert would be held in several days, and she expected to see him there, because of the fact that he was very fond of music. She now had a strong desire to use every opportunity to meet him, and she abandoned her previous wishes to avoid meeting him if at all possible. Her feelings at this stage which can be called the fourth stage are depicted as follows:

If she could only have a few minutes conversation with him again, she fancied she should be satisfied; and as to the power of addressing him she felt all over courage if the opportunity occurred.²⁰⁾

As she had expected, she was fortunate enough to meet him at the concert, and talk with him. Before the beginning of the performance, they were able to have some time to talk with each other. During this conversation he told her an interesting tale about his friend Captain Benwick's cool oblivion toward his late fiancée, Fanny Harville by name.

"... A man like him, in his situation ! With a heart pierced, wounded, almost broken ! Fanny Harville was a very superior creature; and his attachment to her was indeed attachment. A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman ! — He ought not — he does not."²¹⁾

These words of his were enough for her to grasp his feelings: she had only to replace 'a man' in his words for 'I.' She could see that he still harbored feelings for her in secret.

... Anne ... was struck, gratified, confused, and beginning to breathe very quick, and feel an hundred things in a moment.²²⁾

And during the concert intermission, when Capt. Wentworth had departed quickly, she immediately began to interpret his sentiments as follows:

Jealousy of Mr. Elliot! It was the only intelligible motive. Captain Wentworth jealous of her affection! Could she have believed it a week ago — three hours ago!²³⁾

By means of her woman's intuition, she realized that he most likely held jealous feelings toward Mr. Elliot and also feared she might hold affectionate feelings toward him. She felt that this could be regarded as proof of his strong, honest affection toward her. Her realization of the truth gave her great joy, but in a moment it turned into great distress such as had not been experienced by her since the first reunion of the two people.

How was such jealousy to be quieted? How was the truth to reach him? How, in all the peculiar disadvantages of their respective situations, would he ever learn her real sentiments?²⁴⁾

She wished him to 'learn her real sentiments.' His jealousy, she was convinced, came from Mr. Elliot's attentions toward her, the evil of which seemed to be incalculable to her, so she felt it necessary to try and quit his company. This was the only and best possible way to come closer to the realization of her wishes.

Anne began to avoid the company with Mr. Elliot; she only tried to think of Capt. Wentworth. It was true that there were a lot of things which she regretted when she thought over all the situations that had occurred, but she was convinced that to make him recognize her real sentiments she should surmount every obstacle: 'she owed him gratitude and regard, perhaps compassion.'²⁵⁾ It was indeed owing to the existence of Capt. Wentworth that she found her life worth living.

Faced with the great fear of suspense, she tried to solve the affliction in her heart:

... be the conclusion of the present suspense good or bad, her affection would be his for ever. Their union, she believed, could not divide her more from other men, than their final separation.²⁶⁾

Though she could grasp his heart, she could not be sure whether he would put his feelings into a real behavior or not. She sank more and more into a miserable state of suspense, while trying to make herself calm:

"Surely, if there be constant attachment on each side, our hearts must understand each other ere long. ..." ²⁷⁾

The time came at last when Anne's seemingly never-ending suspense would find a complete solution: the fifth stage of her suspense was coming to a close. In a talk with Captain Harville, a good friend of Capt. Wentworth's, at the White Hart (Hotel) in Bath, she told him as follows, conscious of Capt. Wentworth writing a letter near them in the room:

"... All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone." ²⁸⁾

In fact, these words of hers were uttered to Capt. Wentworth, not to Capt. Harville. Perhaps she came to express her real sentiments to him without any hesitation on account of excitement. We have only to replace the words 'for my own sex' with the words 'for me.' It would not have been difficult for him to do this: at last he was given a good opportunity to cast off 'the attempts of angry pride'²⁹⁾ which he had long held in his feelings. Thus he acquired the courage to give Anne a letter expressing his true attachment to her. At this stage Anne's long suspense was finally brought to an end, and the story ends happily.

In contrast to her usual way of composing novels, in this novel Jane Austen devoted herself to describing a very beautiful and painful romance much in the

style of a touching lyric poem. We cannot read *Persuasion* without being moved to a great extent by Anne's inner feelings during her period of suspense — by the beautiful and even pathetic trembling of a woman's heart dedicated to eternal love. Fortunately, Anne's romance led to a happy ending: Love is the loadstone of love.

(To be continued in our next.)

Notes:

- 1) *Introductory Note to Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*; The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen Vol. V, ed. by R. W. Chapman, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, third edition, repr. 1975
- 2) *Biographical Notice*, prefixed to the first edition *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*; pub. by John Murray, London: 1818
- 3) *Jane Austen's Letters to her sister Cassandra and others*, p.p. 486–7, Letter to Fanny Knight, Sunday 23 March <1817>: col. and ed. by R. W. Chapman, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, second edition, repr. 1979 [first edition 1932]
- 4) *ibid.*, p. 487
- 5) *ibid.*
- 6) *Persuasion*, p. 58; The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen Vol. V, ed. by R. W. Chapman, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, third edition, repr. 1975 [first edition 1923]
- 7) *ibid.*, p. 59
- 8) *ibid.*, p. 60
- 9) *ibid.*, p. 71
- 10) *ibid.*, p. 72
- 11) *ibid.*, p. 80
- 12) *ibid.*
- 13) *ibid.*
- 14) *ibid.*, p. 91
- 15) *ibid.*
- 16) *ibid.*, p. 159
- 17) *ibid.*
- 18) *ibid.*, p. 175
- 19) *ibid.*, p. 177
- 20) *ibid.*, p. 180
- 21) *ibid.*, p. 183
- 22) *ibid.*
- 23) *ibid.*, p. 190
- 24) *ibid.*, p. 191
- 25) *ibid.*, p. 192

- 26) *ibid.*
- 27) *ibid.*, p. 221
- 28) *ibid.*, p. 235
- 29) *ibid.*, p. 242