

Jane Austen's Literary World: On *Persuasion* (3) - Part 2

Kunihiro FUJITAKA

Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science,

Okayama University of Science,

Ridai-cho 1-1, Okayama 700, Japan

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As we read *Persuasion*, we come across a variety of words related to 'persuasion': 'persuade' & 'be persuaded,' 'persuadable,' 'persuasive,' 'persuading,' etc. We can speculate that Jane Austen intended to make good use of these words in *Persuasion* for the purpose of producing significant effects on the theme of the novel. In *Persuasion* the words above number no fewer than about 30; and it is an established fact that they can also be found fairly often in her other novels. However it does not matter, we believe, how many times they are used in a novel, but it matters how significantly they are used, or what effective meanings they are apt to give in it. In the present paper, we would like to speculate on several problems involving two particular words in *Persuasion*, 'persuade' & 'be persuaded.'

When we consider the usage of these words, we might perceive something that could be looked upon as an improvement of the author's philosophy of life. If we represent the situation of the heroine Anne Elliot as the pronoun 'she,' we can classify the usage of the words into two basic cases as follows: ¹⁾

She persuades. {A}

She is persuaded. {B}

It is natural that we should admit that {A} is characteristic of the active voice, and {B} the passive voice. Then we can consider possible objective words of the verb 'persuade' in {A}, and we can product two different kinds of sentences: this plan is shown in {A₁} and {A₂}.

She persuades herself. {A₁}

She persuades the people around her. {A₂}

In the same way, we can change {B} as follows:

She is persuaded by herself. {B₁}

She is persuaded by the people around her. {B₂}

There is a subtle difference between {A₁} and {B₁}, in that one is different from the other in its process. As a result though the two are similar, {A₁} is more active, or more willing, in the attitude toward persuasion than {B₁}. We can also see a sharp

different {A₂} and {B₂} in their meanings.

Generally speaking, {A₁} and {A₂} might represent the confident and optimistic aspects of Jane Austen's life philosophy, while in {B₁} and {B₂} we might perceive a kind of modesty and improvement. In all six novels that she composed, both {A} and {B} can be found in the progress of each story. The use of these words is especially noticeable in the thoughts and behavior of the novel's heroine. We acknowledge the fact that Jane Austen wrote her novels so that her heroines were attempting to improve themselves or educate themselves, changing themselves into new women of better character. With regard to *Persuasion*, however, we cannot read the novel without perceiving that Anne's attitude toward living cannot be dealt with by the mere application of either {A} or {B} as mentioned above. We can speculate that Jane Austen's philosophy was in the process of evolution as she described Anne in the progress of the love story. If we assume that Anne was inspired by Jane Austen, this situation might be shown to be different from {A} and {B} and represented as in {C} below.

She is persuaded by something. {C}

What is this 'something' — the 'something' that is neither 'herself' nor 'the people around her'? In order to investigate this 'something,' to begin with, we would like to pay special attention to the following passage.

She was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing — indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it.²⁾

Examining this expression, we might suppose that Jane Austen provided us with a gradual progression from {A} and {B} to {C}. Eight years ago, Anne had tried to persuade her father, elder sister, and, above all, her patroness Lady Russell, who had tried to protect Anne for her late mother. However she was finally persuaded to abandon her marriage to Captain Wentworth: she believed firmly that the marriage was unsuitable — this was her conclusive belief at that time. Judging from the result of her abandonment, however, couldn't we admit that it does not matter at all whether what managed to persuade her was her family or Lady Russell or her own reason, or possibly even God? At this stage, anyway, she had an assured conviction: she was persuaded by 'something.'

Here we are faced with the problem of whether Jane Austen had a view that love is related to Providence. This problem is too complex to discuss in detail here, so we would like to briefly point out her conviction: we might suppose that she considered human beings' love as something resulting from God's work. A good example of her belief in the intervention of God is to be found in the following passage in *Persuasion*.

How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been,— how eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion

and distrust Providence! — She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older — the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning.³⁾

It is true Anne was finally persuaded by the people around her, especially by Lady Russell, but she still seemed to have a strong desire to cope with their attitude — the wrong one which is liable to make fun of a human being's efforts and make light of God's will. So she gives the people's advice critical words 'over-anxious caution.' In her mind, there are two different quality of feelings together at a time: justification and repentance. In the last part of the passage above, she expresses her abandonment chosen in the past in the words 'unnatural beginning,' which means, when we regard the 'unnatural' as against nature, or against God's will, that she acknowledges her behavior was against Providence at that time. Just in this respect, it is probable that Jane Austen associated love between men and women with Providence.

In *Persuasion*, the plot in which one 'persuasion' comes to produce another, which also causes the next, and so on, is skillfully developed, and this technique of Jane Austen's, we acknowledge, is indeed full of great complexity and flexibility. We are likely to be led to a kind of 'persuasion' almost without any resistance. This technique is used not only in the form of {A} or {B}, as shown already at the early stage of the paper, but also in that of {C}. And it can be observed through the whole plot of the work as well as in its beginning parts. This fact tells us that Jane Austen's observation of human beings was being heightened and refined by degrees in respect to the depth and sharpness of her perception. According to her observation, human beings, as they are originally born feeble, may be vulnerable to persuasion by somebody or something — other people, their own judgment, or Nature. Whether what stands on the side 'to persuade' is anybody or anything, what is 'to be persuaded' is usually human beings themselves. This philosophy of hers seems to have a kind of passiveness or resignation, in that human beings are always at the mercy of what is powerful enough to persuade them. But in reality, we cannot but perceive a much loftier sort of philosophy that appears to contain something modest in quality.

What is this lofty philosophy? To work out this question, we would like to speculate on the structure of *Persuasion*, associating it with {A}, {B}, and {C}. Through this speculation, we may get a better grasp of the quality of Jane Austen's philosophy and the probability of changes which may have occurred in those days when she wrote the novel, about one year before her death.

In the early stage of the novel, it was decided that Anne's house would be let to Admiral Croft, because of her father's unfavorable financial state, (this was not unusual in those days in England as the time had already begun when the aristocratic class tended to lose their privilege and authority). Just after the decision, she was taking a walk in the grove of her estate, imagining in her mind Capt. Wentworth, who was Adm. Croft's brother-in-law, and uttering to herself with a gentle sigh: "A few months more, and *he*, perhaps, may be walking here."⁴⁾ He was her fiancé eight years

before, and she had not forgotten him since they had parted from each other. She remembers the one-sided breach of their engagement which was brought about by her. Before her decision to call off this engagement, she had tried to persuade the people around her, but in vain; she had to persuade herself to give him up. Thus, after all, 'she was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing.'⁵⁾ We have already seen this as a slightly-perceptible example of the case of [C]. Now in the course of eight years, remembering him and the events in those days she is trying to persuade herself again as follows:

But it was not a merely selfish caution, under which she acted, in putting an end to it. Had she not imagined herself consulting his good, even more than her own, she could hardly have given him up. — The belief of being prudent, and self-denying principally for *his* advantage, was her chief consolation, under the misery of a parting — a final parting;⁶⁾

Here we can perceive Anne's conflict between giving in to or resisting the 'persuasion' of the people around her. At the first stage of the structure of *Persuasion*, we can observe several examples of [A] and [B].

Soon Capt. Wentworth appears in the story; and the second stage of the structure begins. With his appearance, the author begins to depict Anne's trembling in heart. We readers are more and more likely to be fascinated by the beauty of the trembling of her woman's heart. She imagines his behavior even before their reunion: 'He must be either indifferent or unwilling.'⁷⁾ At the very moment of their reunion, however, Anne's attitude itself toward him begins to change in quality, as we have observed it in Part 1 of this paper: her attitude turns into a more realistic and severe one than she held before that time. In this respect her way of thinking could be regarded as an objective, cool, and critical one: she tries to persuade herself that it is inevitable that she will be neglected completely by him even though she has the same attachment to him as she had before. This situation of 'persuasion' here belongs to the case of [A₁]. As a result, she is even persuaded to reflect on her one-sided treatment of him due to his excessive politeness and disguise of indifference, which could be looked upon as an example of [B₁]. Her thought that it should be natural even if she were deserted by him might be recognized as something like a kind of resignation. However, the two incidents occur which give her a ray of hope that she may regain his favorable feelings toward her. One of these is an event during a walk together with young people: when she was too tired to walk, she was unexpectedly helped by him into the carriage which the Crofts drove. The other occurs during a trip in Lyme: when Louisa, his love on the surface of the story, is seriously injured Capt. Wentworth, perplexed completely, nonverbally asked Anne for help. At this stage, however, she still cannot fathom his true feelings, so she falls into more and more suspense. After a long period of suspense, she has a chance to know his true feelings toward her at a concert, where she comes to recognize them through two events. In the first, he tells her about his friend Captain Benwick's cool

attitude toward his late fiancée, and in the second one Capt. Wentworth departs abruptly during the concert intermission, due to feelings of jealousy toward Mr. Elliot, who always tries to attend to her. In response of Capt. Wentworth's attachment, she feels very glad and happy, while she falls into a new suspense almost at the same time; she wonders if he will dare to put his feelings into real behavior because of his 'jealousy' — he may foresee the probability of marriage of Anne to Mr. Elliot — the thing which seems to her to be fairly strong. When she meets him a few days after the concert, she fears as follows:

Their last meeting had been most important in opening his feelings; she had derived from it a delightful conviction; but she feared from his looks, that the same unfortunate persuasion, which had hastened him away from the concert room, still governed.⁸⁾

This great distress of hers such as has never been experienced by her since their reunion leads her to be faced with the bitterest affliction, and then she is persuaded as follows:

...be the conclusion of the present suspense good or bad, her affection would be his for ever.⁹⁾

Thus 'she tried to be calm, and leave things to take their course; and tried to dwell much on this argument of rational dependance —.'¹⁰⁾ The expressions of 'leave things to take their course' and 'rational dependance' the author uses here seem to be worthy of particular attention. And the author has Anne utter the following words to herself:

"Surely, if there be constant attachment on each side, our hearts must understand each other ere long."¹¹⁾

When we read these parts, we can not but be moved by the generosity of her human nature, and we also feel as though we should pay special attention to her psychology. Could we not suppose that this psychology of hers is a refined kind of realization? We acknowledge that her way of thinking has already been elevated to a lofty spiritual awakening by something, for example, by Providence. We could possibly say that it is likely that she has been persuaded to follow the workings of nature under God's will. Thus this could be thought of as a case of [C].

In the end of the third stage of the structure of the novel, we readers are led to the climax scene:

"...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."¹²⁾

These words of hers during the conversation with Capt. Harville, Capt. Wentworth's good friend, moved Capt. Wentworth, who was engaged in writing a letter near them. This was indeed a casual opportunity for her to disclose her eternal attachment toward

him, and give him the courage necessary to open his heart. As a result, he could confess his true feelings at last by handing her a note: She persuaded him. ... [A₂]

After this remarkable stage, we are led to the last structural stage of *Persuasion*. She could persuade the people around her with ease. ... [A₂] And in time Anne and Capt. Wentworth come to be married. It may seem that the ending of this novel is rather a disappointing one which makes some readers feel dissatisfied: compared with the process of Anne's long and heavy suspense, the ending may be criticized as being too light.

It seems that Jane Austen had character which tended toward being argumentative. Soon after receiving the note from Capt. Wentworth, Anne tells him as follows:

“...If I was wrong in yielding to persuasion once, remember that it was to persuasion exerted on the side of safety, not of risk. When I yielded, I thought it was to duty: but no duty could be called in aid here. In marrying a man indifferent to me, all risk would have been incurred, and all duty violated.”¹³⁾

She emphasizes the virtue of fulfilling her duty and her obligation to safety; she makes an effort to rationally justify her conduct. These words are uttered to him directly. The following passage is also seen in dialogue.

“I have been thinking over the past, and trying impartially to judge of the right and wrong, I mean with regard to myself; and I must believe that I was right, much as I suffered from it, that I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend whom you will love better than you do now. To me, she was in the place of a parent. Do not mistake me, however. I am not saying that she did not err in her advice. It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides; and for myself, I certainly never should, in any circumstance of tolerable similarity, give such advice. But I mean, that I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience. I have now, as far as such a sentiment is allowable in human nature, nothing to reproach myself with; and if I mistake not, a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman's portion.”¹⁴⁾

Her words are still made up of assertion of her strong sense of duty and her propriety. This is a great argument — from her standpoint! Jane Austen seems to have committed a sad blunder: She should have described Anne's argument in the narrative style, or, at least, in monologue, not in dialogue, because her direct words of her assertion toward Capt. Wentworth cannot help but degrade her gracefulness of character. We fear that Jane Austen's liking for argument has clearly made Anne too argumentative.

In the passage above we can find a part worthy of attention: ‘...the event decides; ...’ Anne tells her lover that it is extremely difficult to decide beforehand whether

something like advice will turn out to be suitable in the future or not: The events themselves will show us results in the course of time. This view is true of phenomena in nature as well, with which human beings hardly if ever are able to interfere. Marriage may also be beyond human beings' realm of interference. Jane Austen might have thought it so. She might have developed her philosophy in which human beings are the same as things in nature; both of them are equal in that they are governed by some natural judgment or decision — Providence. She might have thought that the marriage of Anne to Capt. Wentworth was protected and nurtured — persuaded by God. ...[C]

We have speculated on several problems in relation to the cases of 'persuasion.' We have seen 'persuasion' by God as well as that by human beings in *Persuasion*. However, we wonder if Jane Austen intended to advocate that human beings should live by accepting God's will. This would not be the case in *Persuasion*. When we read this novel, we are surely moved by the heroine Anne's bitter trembling in heart and her eternal love. What Jane Austen intended to do in writing *Persuasion*, we believe, was to depict the most beautiful and moving type of love. Couldn't we imagine that she felt like composing a dreamlike, impassioned love story according to her instinctive longing for beautiful feelings in human beings? To realize her longing, she seems to have dared to abandon humor and irony in *Persuasion*, though her novels in general are full of both. Here is a question with regard to *Persuasion*: Does it represent a new tendency in her way of thinking in composing novels or not? Sylvia T. Warner denies it, for *Sanditon*, an unfinished novel written just after *Persuasion*, is very different from *Persuasion* in respect to its character.¹⁵⁾ However, Jane Austen may possibly have begun to develop her new philosophy; so she may have shown the reading public a new type of technique in composing novels even after *Sanditon* if she had lived longer. In this respect, some of us are interested in Virginia Woolf's suggestion as follows:

She is beginning to discover that the world is larger, more mysterious, and more romantic than she had supposed.¹⁶⁾

Notes:

- 1) This way of speculation to be adopted hereafter is largely based on Dr. M. Tanabe's theory published in his writing *Jane Austen no Bungaku*. The writer of the present paper owes much to him for the theory he established.
Jane Austen no Bungaku (Jane Austen's Literature); by Masami Tanabe, Kyoto: Aporon-sha, revised edition 1977, pp. 141–164
- 2) *Persuasion*, The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen Vol. V; ed. by R. W. Chapman, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, third edition, repr. 1979, p. 27
- 3) *ibid.*, p. 30
- 4) *ibid.*, p. 25
- 5) *ibid.*, p. 27 (the same as 2) above)
- 6) *ibid.*, pp. 27–28
- 7) *ibid.*, p. 58

- 8) *ibid.*, p. 221
- 9) *ibid.*, p. 192
- 10) *ibid.*, p. 221
- 11) *ibid.*
- 12) *ibid.*, p. 235
- 13) *ibid.*, p. 244
- 14) *ibid.*, p. 246
- 15) *Jane Austen, Writers and Their Work No. 17*; by Sylvia T. Warner, London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., revised edition 1957, pp. 27–28

A last book carries a valedictory significance that in most cases the author did not intend. The fact that *Persuasion* (a posthumous publication) is slightly out of line with the novels that preceded it, and that before its completion Jane Austen was already in poor health, has led some critics to treat it as a sort of swan-song — pensive because its writer was pensive too — and others to see it as the first example of a new manner which she would have pursued if it had not been for her untimely death. These interpretations are not supported by the last piece of writing she undertook, an unfinished untitled novel that we know as *Sanditon*. *Sanditon* is a work of great gusto, totally objective, and promising to be more akin to *Emma* or the unfinished *Watsons* than to any other of her novels. It shows no sign of declining health, or of farewelling the world, ...

- 16) *The Common Reader, First Series*; by Virginia Woolf, London: The Hogarth Press, 1975, p. 181