

Persuasion and its “Sets of People”

Sir Walter Elliot's last action in *Persuasion*, perhaps his most purposeful action in the whole course of the novel, is “to prepare his pen with a very good grace for the insertion of the marriage in the volume of honour”.¹ Captain Wentworth's handsome person and “his well-sounding name” (p. 248)—not everyone will know that his branch of the Wentworths is “‘quite unconnected; nothing to do with the Strafford family’” (p. 23)—count for more, with Sir Walter, than his personal merits or his professional achievements. And so Sir Walter ends as he began, absorbed in the *Baronetage*, an uncommonly well-preserved fly rejoicing in his amber. We know, moreover, how deliberately Jane Austen set him there: the sentence first-quoted was introduced, as a last deft stroke of irony, when she was revising her manuscript of the novel.² After trials unknown to Sir Walter and in a richer sense than he could possibly imagine, his second daughter also finds her end in her beginning. Anne Elliot's first words are of the navy's claim on the community (p. 19). Her next show her close acquaintance with the Navy List and—in “the Trafalgar action” (p. 22)—her grasp of the laconic idiom of that profession. And, when we take leave of her (in a sentence that Jane Austen excised but afterwards restored),³ it is of one who

gloried in being a sailor's wife, but . . . must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance (p. 252).

The opposed values of Sir Walter and Captain Wentworth are nicely epitomized by the attitude each takes to his particular “volume of honour”. If the *Baronetage* feeds Sir Walter's sense of rank and station, the Navy List, with its record of appointments and promotions, reflects Captain Wentworth's ideas of personal endeavour and personal achievement, of the career open to talent.⁴ So far as they remarked any contrast of this kind, the early

1 *Persuasion* (ed. R. W. Chapman, Oxford, 1923: 3rd edn., 1933), p. 249. All page-references not otherwise assigned are to this edition and all references to Jane Austen's other writings are to the companion volumes.

2 See B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts* (Oxford, 1964), p. 97.

3 *Ibid.*

4 In both *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, the part played by “influence”, especially in promotion from the junior ranks, is plainly acknowledged: but it is shown as operating with a strong regard for merit.

critics of *Persuasion* were inclined to stray into by-paths about Jane Austen's sailor brothers and her affection for them.⁵ More recently, however, the contrast has been given serious attention and has been generalized into a large conflict between two whole views of life or even two class-attitudes. In leaving Kellynch, Sir Walter is seen as abdicating his estate: and that "estate" is interpreted in more than material terms. In becoming Sir Walter's tenant, Admiral Croft is seen as taking up something of the responsibilities that go with a great house, responsibilities to the community that had gone neglected by all the living Elliots except Anne. And, if Sir Walter and Elizabeth are shown at their most characteristic in the sterile glitter of Bath, the naval officers are shown to advantage in their snug quarters at Lyme Regis, within sight of their beloved sea.

To emphasize the contrast between "the Bath circle" and "the naval circle" and to pursue its implications for the whole novel, then, is no new thing. But it is possible, I believe, to define that contrast more exactly than has been usual. If that can be done, we may also find it possible to meet some of the justifiable objections that have been raised against this line of interpretation and may even come to a better understanding of the novel itself and Anne Elliot's part in it.

For some critics of *Persuasion*, the novel shows (at least in part) the triumph of an energetic middle class, represented by the naval officers, over an effete aristocracy, represented by Sir Walter and his allies.⁶ In a comment on Mr Duffy's early version of this argument, Dr Chapman reminds us that baronets were not members of the "aristocracy" (being rather the highest order of the landed gentry); that, far from representing a different social class, most naval officers of the day sprang from the gentry; and that the aristocracy were decidedly less "effete" and "fossilized" than Mr Duffy asserts. "There is no hint [Dr Chapman continues] that

- 5 Both Francis and Charles Austen were naval captains before the end of the Napoleonic wars (and within Jane Austen's lifetime); and, as captain of the "Peterel" sloop, Francis fought with just such verve as Captain Wentworth. Both brothers far outlived their sister, Francis eventually becoming Admiral of the Fleet and Charles a Rear-Admiral. See J. H. and E. C. Hubback, *Jane Austen's Sailor Brothers* (London, 1906), *passim*.
- 6 See, for example, Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton, 1952), p. 232; Joseph M. Duffy Jr., "Structure and Idea in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, viii (1953-54), 272-89; Malcolm Bradbury, *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel* (London, 1973), pp. 70-71.

Wentworth—who narrowly escaped marrying his sister—thought of Musgrove as belonging to a different class, or that Jane Austen thought in those terms.”⁷

Without acceding altogether to Dr Chapman’s opinion of how Jane Austen thought, we can accept at once that his comments on the social structure of that time are more accurate than those of his opponents. If evidence is called for, it can be seen, for example, in the demographic tables cited by Peter Laslett.⁸ As a first token of Jane Austen’s own attitudes, consider the implications of words like “aristocracy” and “class”, so much in currency among modern critics of a sociological cast of mind. As *OED* indicates, “aristocracy” had long been used in English as a term for oligarchic forms of government, cognate with “democracy”. But in Jane Austen’s day, it was only beginning to take on its modern usage as a loose generic term for the nobility itself. (This shift of emphasis may have been stimulated by events in France, where the “aristos” had so recently been overthrown as rulers *and* attacked as a whole “class”.) In Jane Austen’s novels, the word is seldom used—and then in a way that usually verges on the derogatory. When we are told, for example, that Lady Russell was “aristocratic in her ideas of what was due” to the Elliots of Kellynch, Jane Austen finds it necessary to shield Lady Russell by adding a protective rider to the effect that such ideas, moderately held, need not be altogether lacking in “sense and honesty” (p. 11). The implied dislike for “aristocratic” pretensions holds a shred of comfort for Mr Duffy and his colleagues. But Jane Austen’s infrequent and cautious use of the word itself makes it an uneasy foundation for the weight they place on ideas that have come more recently to be associated with it.

Jane Austen’s use of the word “class” leads to similar conclusions. The complex history of that word, in its sociological applications, is illustrated in *OED*. Most of the applications to which we are accustomed—“lower class”, “working class”, “middle class”, and so forth—were only beginning to pass into common usage in the early nineteenth century. And most of the instances cited in *OED* differ from more recent usage in a subtle but revealing way. We have come to use (or to avoid) the word as if the members of a given social class actually have, and are gene-

7 R. W. Chapman, “A Reply to Mr Duffy on *Persuasion*”, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, ix (1954-55), 154.

8 Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1965: 2nd edn., 1971), pp. 36-39.

rally recognized as having, essential attributes in common. In the early nineteenth-century examples, there is rather the suggestion that certain attributes, perceived by the user of the word, are being offered, a little tentatively, as evidence for the existence of a recognizable class. For them, the caution and the air of discovery of a Linnaeus: for us, a bold air of certainty more appropriate to the classifying of chairs or tables than of human individuals. (Perhaps that kind of over-confidence is on the wane today and the euphemistic habit of speaking of almost everyone as "middle class" marks yet another change.) In *Persuasion*, the word "class" takes on a social aspect on only three occasions. Speaking of Nurse Rooke, Anne says that "'women of that class have great opportunities'" (p. 155): the context indicates that she is not thinking of the "lower class" but of women who follow a particular avocation, moving freely from one household to another and accordingly well placed as students of human nature. The two other examples come together in an earlier passage:

. . . while the Musgroves were in the first class of society in the country, the young Hayters would, from their parents' inferior, retired, and unpolished way of living, and their own defective education, have been hardly in any class at all, but for their connexion with Uppercross (p. 74).

This distinction, drawn by the narrator, is obviously more in keeping with modern ideas of social class. Even so, "in the first class of society" and "hardly in any class at all" are less firmly settled than "upper class" or "middle class" would be. Beyond that, the evident social divergence of the Hayters from the Musgroves points to a highly volatile social climate. Beyond that again is the sheer infrequency of the word "class" in a novel where so many of the characters make so much of social distinctions.

The words in which social distinctions actually are couched in *Persuasion* are also most revealing. Jane Austen uses words like "rank", "order", "station", and "situation" much more frequently: for, in reflecting something so definite, so immitigable, as birth and blood, words like these need imply neither pride nor deference in their user. But an excessive pride of station makes itself felt in too habitual a concern for matters of this kind, too frequent a recourse to these words and others like them; that is the province of Sir Walter and Elizabeth, and even more strikingly, of Mary, whose insecurity makes her ever more strident an advocate of anything that seems to set the Elliots immutably above their fellows. (The word "rank" stands a little apart from these others. If Mary must grimly preserve her claims to the rank into which she was born, Admiral Croft, Captain Wentworth, and their fellows

make their own way through a series of "ranks" of quite another kind.) The social vocabulary of *Persuasion* is also marked by another, more neutral usage. When they speak of a number of people as a group, both Anne and Jane Austen, as narrator, often speak of "a set of people". This courteous avoidance of a categorizing more rigid than occasion requires—for most "sets" may easily vary—can, of course, be twisted to serve the calculated deference of a man like Shepherd (p. 17) or hardened into an expression (p. 150) of William Elliot's sense of the social verities—much those verities that govern more recent "smart sets". But, in general, it is courteously used; and on one occasion, it is transformed into the pleasant metaphor of "a little knot of the navy" (p. 168).

The evidence cited so far favours Dr Chapman and suggests that Jane Austen's sociologically-minded critics might take example from her exact use of language. To say this, however, is not to dismiss their line of argument wholesale. For, even if baronets and most naval officers *do* stand with Charles Musgrove as scions of the landed gentry, it does not follow that they regard each other as social equals or that Jane Austen thinks they do. Certainly there is a convention by which, within the enclave of the English gentry, all men can meet as equals and can marry, without odium, into each other's families. Elizabeth Bennet, indeed, appeals openly to that convention in her splendid counter-attack upon Lady Catherine de Bourgh: "He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal" (*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 356).

But a social convention is not an unchallengeable law. It is by Mr Darcy's own choice that he sets aside ideas of "connexion" or "alliance" and marries from "attachment". In doing so, he is behaving, on a question of high importance in all Jane Austen's novels, like others of her sympathetic characters and giving no more than a fitting weight to the considerations that so occupy Sir Thomas Bertram and Emma Woodhouse (until they both learn better), considerations that quite govern the attitudes of the Lady Catherine and Sir Walters. Yet considerations of "alliance" and "connexion" are sufficiently in evidence in Jane Austen's novels to show that, within the gentry itself, there is ample room for marrying acceptably or not, that the distance from Longbourn-house to Pemberley is something besides a span of miles.

Elizabeth Bennet's word "gentleman" is an effective test of these finer distinctions and an illustration of the uneasy realities

that lie behind the convention that all gentlemen are equal. These matters cannot be examined clearly until one leading application of the word is considered and then set aside. It is the range of usage (*OED*, s.v. "gentleman", 3) in which a man's gentle birth is either confirmed or negated by his actual behaviour, and conversely, in which a man's behaviour can transcend (if seldom quite obliterate) a dubious origin. *OED* carries these meanings of the word back as far as Chaucer: but I have the impression that they were to take on increasing force as the nineteenth century continued and to reach an apogee in the novels of Anthony Trollope. These uses of the word are in the air when Mr Darcy accepts Mr Gardiner as an intimate; when Mr Knightley avows that Robert Martin's "mind has more true gentility than Harriet Smith could understand" (*Emma*, p. 65); when Fanny Price reflects on Henry Crawford's improprieties; when Anne Elliot has the pleasure of finding Captain Harville "a perfect gentleman, unaffected, warm, and obliging" (p. 97); and again, when Anne finds it "a secret gratification . . . that the future owner of Kellynch was undoubtedly a gentleman" (p. 106). Anne, of course, has much to learn of this gentleman; but in tacitly acknowledging that there *might* be a disparity between his personal qualities and his unquestionable social standing, she shows that she is already possessed of better judgment than Lady Russell, for whom the two considerations are very nearly one. Accordingly, Mrs Smith's disquieting revelations about the gentleman will come only to corroborate the emerging lessons of Anne's own instinct. Although the complex relationships between the "character" and the "station" of a gentleman are a source of moral energy in Jane Austen's novels, although they pervade the whole question of the comparative importance of "alliance" and "attachment", we must still set them aside in order to fix our minds on possible disparities of station within the gentry.

The word "gentleman" plays no very active part in *Mansfield Park*, where the divisions among the Bertrams, the Crawfords, and the Rushworths have less to do with rank than with upbringing and temperament. Among those whose station is assured, we hear less of what it is to be a gentleman than of what makes for a suitably "gentleman-like" appearance, whether in the deportment of an individual or in the improvements he contemplates for his house or his estate. And, when Rushworth feels obliged to assert a superiority over Henry Crawford, he can only fluctuate between naked comparisons of wealth and a ludicrous reliance on being the taller man.

Even so, the superbly modulated opening passage of *Mansfield Park* rests on distinctions of the kind we seek. One of the Ward sisters has "the good luck to captivate" a baronet; another eventually "found herself obliged to be attached" to a clergyman, a friend of the same baronet; and the third fixed on "a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections". The first match makes all Huntingdon—all Huntingdon—exclaim; the second proves "not contemptible" chiefly because the baronet finds a prosperous living for his clergyman-friend; the third is so untoward a choice as to remove Miss Frances beyond the social pale and even beyond the reach of the baronet's powers as patron. Whatever view is taken of more senior officers, a lieutenant, soon afterwards on permanent half-pay, stands on uneasy social ground; and, as the quoted phrase makes clear, Lieutenant Price has no other claims to acceptance. The relationship between Sir Thomas Bertram and the Rev. Mr Norris begins in friendship: it continues, however, as an association between patron and protégé; and, presumptuous as she is, the widowed Mrs Norris never presumes to think of herself as truly a member of Sir Thomas's "family". The forms of equality are preserved throughout, as courtesy requires: but these gentlemen are equal in form only.

That energetic social arbiter, Miss Woodhouse, has scant respect for such forms. She is often wrong-headed, and in this as in all other things, Highbury affords her a sorely limited field of operations. But she does not hesitate to distinguish between the man who is a gentleman, the man who is only "quite the gentleman", the man who purports to be a gentleman, and the man who is not a gentleman at all. Better still, for our purpose, she rarely scruples to declare her grounds if only to her intimates:

"You might not see one in a hundred, with *gentleman* so plainly written as in Mr Knightley" (*Emma*, p. 33);

. . . quite the gentleman himself, and without low connections; at the same time not of any family that could fairly object to the doubtful birth of Harriet (*Emma*, p. 35);

"There can be no doubt of your being a gentleman's daughter, and you must support your claim to that station by every thing within your own power, or there will be plenty of people who would take pleasure in degrading you" (*Emma*, p. 30);

". . . nothing but a gentleman in education and manner has any chance with Harriet" (*Emma*, p. 65);

She brought no name, no blood, no alliance. . . . And all the grandeur of the connection seemed dependent on the elder sister, who was *very well married*, to a gentleman in a *great way*, near Bristol, who kept two carriages! (*Emma*, p. 183);

"I had imagined him, I confess, a degree or two nearer gentility."

“To be sure,” said Harriet, in a mortified voice, “he is not so genteel as real gentlemen” (*Emma*, p. 32).

As a first step towards drawing these many threads together, we should take account of a celebrated definition from an earlier period of our history, a definition that would admit as gentlemen everyone so far considered except for Robert Martin, the yeoman. Despite his having come so lately to his estate near Bristol, Mr Suckling’s claims would certainly pass muster; and even the claims of a Lieutenant Price are not extinguished:

Whosoever studieth the laws of this realm, who so abideth in the university giving his mind to his books, or professeth physic . . . and the liberal sciences, or beside his service in the room of captain in the wars, or good counsell given at home, whereby his commonwealth is benefitted, can live without manual labour, and thereto is able and will bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman, he shall for money have a coat and arms . . . be called master, which is the title that men give to esquires and gentlemen, and reputed a gentleman ever after.⁹

Many of the examples cited in *OED* show that just such an acceptance of lawyers, officers, and *quondam* merchants lives on down the centuries. It does not follow, however, that the station of such people is proof against assault. Since the established gentry can always defend their preserves by laying emphasis on low connections, lack of education, recency of purchase, and the like, the boundaries are always open to dispute. This line of defence, moreover, seldom requires the embarrassing admission that some gentleman are less than others: it is generally possible to maintain that some would-be gentlemen are not “really” gentlemen.

The same line of defence, more strenuously invoked, is available to those whose self-esteem leads them to contest the claims of admirals and new-made viscounts. The Castilian arrogance of Sir Walter Elliot is evident in his strictures on “‘Lord St. Ives, whose father we all know to have been a country curate, without bread to eat’” (p. 19); in his sarcastic rebuttal of Shepherd’s phrase, “‘the gentlemen of the navy’” (p. 18); and in his dismissal of

“Mr Wentworth, the curate of Monkford. You misled me by the term *gentleman*. I thought you were speaking of some man of property: Mr Wentworth was nobody, I remember; quite unconnected; nothing to do with the Strafford family” (p. 23).

On one occasion, moreover, Sir Walter takes the final step: in rejecting a plan of economy that would deny him what he calls “‘the decencies even of a private gentleman’” (p. 13), he proclaims the existence of an enclave within an enclave.

9 William Harrison, *Description of England* (1577): quoted by Peter Laslett, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

It is not enough to recognize the gulf that separates opinions like Sir Walter's from Elizabeth Bennet's bold assertion that she is Mr Darcy's social equal. It is necessary to recognize that Sir Walter's opinions are not entirely idiosyncratic. Beside the liberal views already instanced, *OED* sets some examples (s.v. "genteel", "gentle", "gentleman", "gentry") that would satisfy Sir Walter Elliot; and the comment in Johnson's *Dictionary* that associates the word "gentleman" with "*homo gentilis*, a man of ancestry. All other derivations seem to be whimsical" has implications not often found in etymologies. Whatever Jane Austen's private opinions, she writes of characters some of whom, while piously maintaining that gentlemen are equal, would exclude half the gentlemen of England as no gentlemen at all. Hence, while Dr Chapman has the better of the semantic argument about the "aristocracy" and the "middle class", there is ample room, within the ranks of the gentry, for those contrasts between Sir Walter and the naval officers upon which much else in *Persuasion* depends.

Yet another difficulty arises. Mr Duffy points the way to more recent criticism of many nineteenth-century novels when he takes Sir Walter and the naval officers as *representative* figures. Are Stephen Blackpool and Alton Locke, Felix Holt and John Barton, we are asked, appropriately rendered as representatives of their class?¹⁰ But another question, logically prior, seems to have gone unnoticed: on what grounds are we entitled to regard such and such a literary character as "representative" of anything at all? Is Sir Walter Elliot or Sir Thomas Bertram the representative baronet? Mr Darcy or Mr Rushworth the representative magnate? Admiral Croft or Admiral Crawford? William Price or poor Dick Musgrove? Edmund Bertram, Henry Tilney, Philip Elton, or the egregious Mr Collins? The novels themselves must tell us. But they will do so only if we pause to ask. The generalizing, almost allegorizing, processes of the "industrial" novels are often such as to warrant the idea that their heroes should be regarded as representative figures. Even so, we must distinguish between ideal specimens and typical cases: some easy strictures upon the "rendering" of these heroes spring from the assumption that only the typical is truly representative, an assumption more in keeping

10 See, for example, John Lucas, "Mrs Gaskell and Brotherhood", in David Howard, John Lucas, and John Goode, *Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London, 1966), pp. 141-206. Other instances are to be found in this book and in the writings of Raymond Williams and Arnold Kettle.

with the methods of sociological inquiry than with the conventions of fiction. The grounds on which and the ways in which one man can properly be seen as representative of others are sufficiently complex and important to repay more attention than recent literary critics have given them. Earlier critics are more helpful: the different meanings they attach to the idea of representativeness are among the many great points of difference between Johnson and Coleridge as critics of Shakespeare. With all due allowance, an analogy with political representation is also instructive. Edmund Burke is sufficiently a man of Johnson's century to maintain that he can "represent" the electors of Bristol without even apprising himself of their opinions: at bottom, he seems to imply, men of good faith can expect to be of one mind in matters of national importance.¹¹ For J. S. Mill, on the other hand, it is among the "elementary maxims of prudence" that "each is the only safe guardian of his rights and interests": and that maxim puts strict sanctions on the manner in which one man can justly represent others.¹² For Mill as for Coleridge, a fundamental emphasis on human individuality calls the idea of "representativeness" in question.

If Sir Walter Elliot is representative of anything, it is not, I suggest, of that station in society which makes one of his few points in common with Sir Thomas Bertram. It is rather of certain habits of mind that he shares with people dispersed throughout polite society or even society in general. Although his idleness is not peculiar to his station, the opportunity to be idle was certainly more open to members of the gentry: one is reminded of the emergence of "otiose", in its pejorative senses, from the fruitful tranquillity and repose originally associated with "otium". In this particular, however, Sir Walter has more in common with Mr Bennet and Mr Woodhouse than with men of estate like Sir Thomas and Mr Knightley. "Snobbery" is the modern word for another cluster of attitudes that flourishes not only among Sir Walter's associates in "the first set at Bath" (from the Irish "aristocrat", Lady Dalrymple, to Colonel Wallis, whose tolerable appearance and "very good style" of living—p. 139—protect him

11 Edmund Burke, "Speech to the Electors of Bristol", 3 November 1774: *Works and Correspondence* (London, 1852), iii. 236-37.

12 J. S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861): quoted from Hanna F. Pitkin (ed.), *Representation* (New York, 1969), pp. 177-97. For conversation on these questions, I am indebted to Professor R. N. Spann of the University of Sydney. But, if my analogy is too bald, the fault is mine.

from questions he might find it hard to answer) but also among people like Mrs Elton, Isabella Thorpe, and the Steele sisters, people whose social pretensions Sir Walter would not even stoop to despise. As for the particular form of vanity that makes "the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character" (p. 4), the vanity that isolates him in a wilderness of mirrors, Sir Walter is unique.

The naval officers are men of strongly marked individuality. The romantic attitudinizing of Captain Benwick contrasts with the bluff good sense of Admiral Croft: Admiral Croft's genial blundering among the egg-shells of difficult relationships is quite foreign to the gentleness and tact of Captain Harville. No one of them has Captain Wentworth's incisiveness of mind or the asperity that can express itself in "a certain glance of his bright eye, and curl of his handsome mouth" (p. 67). And yet these officers are at one in their *esprit de corps*, in energy, self-reliance, and a willingness to set all they have at risk. We hear a good deal of their luck: but "luck" is frequently a more modest synonym for skill and daring, as when Captain Wentworth, in the "Asp" sloop, has "the good luck" (p. 66) to fall in with a French frigate. Even among his immediate audience, few are aware that, quite apart from the unseaworthiness of "Asp", he would have been out-gunned by more than two to one. The thought of prize-money is a stimulus that he and his fellows do not find it necessary to conceal: in the genteel idiom of Sir Walter, it is "the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of" (p. 19). But their concern for each other (whether in trying to make something of an intractable midshipman, in assuaging a bereavement, or in giving each other house and harbour), their enthusiasm for their profession, and their cheerful devotion to duty transcend the hopes of monetary reward. And, if their personal appearance is blemished by the weathers of the world, we need not share Sir Walter's exquisite distress: a mark of honour, rather, and uncommon in hothouse plants. Throughout *Persuasion*, from the time of Anne's first acknowledgment of what the nation owes to the navy, Sir Walter's expressions of polite disgust, and Mrs Clay's insistence on the harmful propensities of the professions generally to the miniature *coda* of the novel's last paragraph, we are left in no doubt that these officers are to be seen as representative of their profession and that Jane Austen holds their profession in as high an esteem as ever she permits herself. The quirks of Admiral

Croft and the shortcomings of Captain Benwick do not escape her irony; "shabby fellows" (p. 170) like Admiral Brand and ne'er-do-wells like Dick Musgrove do not go unscathed. But these are no more than necessary concessions to a larger truth.

Professor Kenneth Moler is understandably troubled by the fear that critical emphasis on the contrast between "the Bath circle" and "the naval circle", emerging in so high an estimation of the latter, may lead to a less appreciative view of Anne Elliot than the novel itself requires. Since Anne is always the "moral ideal" of the novel, more fully so than any other Austen heroine, we cannot accede, he argues, to anything that entails our supposing that, in turning from her father to Captain Wentworth, she undergoes a significant moral growth. He resolves the difficulty by laying a justifiable emphasis on Anne's virtues, treating Captain Wentworth a little severely (most notably by associating him with "modern philosophers" like Godwin), and rather playing down the importance of the contrast between Sir Walter and the officers.¹³

There is no need to dispute that Captain Wentworth has far more to learn than Anne. He learns the difference between steadfast altruism and wilful self-assertion. He learns to respect Anne's motives for breaking off their earlier engagement. He comes eventually to value the friend who had persuaded her to do so. And he learns that the worst error had been his own: returning to England in "the year eight" (p. 247) with his first ambitions realized, he had still felt too proud and resentful to approach Anne a second time. All this is easily conceded. To go further along Professor Moler's lines is to tilt the balance too sharply against one of Jane Austen's most attractive heroes. Such evidence as we have enlists Jane Austen with the conservative opinion of her time on many controversial issues including the radical individualism of the nineties. In her only recorded allusion to William Godwin, in a letter of 1801, she tells Cassandra that a Mr Pickford is "as raffish in his appearance as I would wish every Disciple of Godwin to be" (*Letters*, p. 133). Having less cause, perhaps, to fear his political influence, we may think more highly of Godwin's ideas than many of his contemporaries felt able to do. But when Jane Austen writes with "modern philosophers" of that stamp in mind, the result is Sir Edward Denham, the clown-villain of

13 Kenneth L. Moler, *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1968), pp. 187-223. Phrases like "the moral ideal of the novel" are applied to Anne Elliot on pp. 191, 220, and 222.

“Sanditon”. To associate Captain Wentworth with *them* (notwithstanding Professor Moler’s careful reservations) is to harden a young man’s errors of judgment into absurdities or vices.

Jane Austen said of Anne Elliot that “she is almost too good for me”: but, earlier in the same letter, she had said of novel-heroines generally, “pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked” (*Letters*, pp. 486-7). For all her virtues, Anne Elliot is more various and interesting than any “picture of perfection”.

In the opening chapters of *Persuasion*, we are shown a young woman who is sadly conscious of having turned away the man she had loved (and whom she still loves without quite knowing it). Obligated to remain, on sufferance, in the house of such a father as Sir Walter, she can find consolation but no happiness in the knowledge that, in rejecting Frederick Wentworth (then a new-made commander), she had placed his interests above her own and had accepted the advice of those who were entitled to give it. Alone of her family, she does not complain to everyone of her misfortunes. Alone of her family, she tries to calm their many rancours and allay their petty anxieties. Alone of her family, she continues energetically and unselfishly in her duties among her neighbours, the tenants of Kellynch. And in her alone, the notorious “Elliot pride” is entirely judicious, aroused to anger—for her father’s sake—by the sedulous Mrs Clay, expressing itself in a strict belief that debts must be paid in full, and quite untouched by a concern for outward show.

The portrait is made more telling by occasional deft strokes of quite another kind, small indications that a lonely and emotionally impoverished future is already becoming present. “‘Lord bless me! [cry the genial Musgroves] how those little fingers of yours fly about’ ” (p. 47): and Anne is left to remember a short period when her musicianship was better understood. Captain Wentworth asks one of the Musgrove girls whether Miss Elliot never dances and is told, in Anne’s hearing, that “‘she had rather play. She is never tired of playing’ ” (p. 72). Captain Wentworth discourses on naval matters and the responses of the Musgroves remind Anne of “the early days when she too had been ignorant” (p. 64). The word “wonder” epitomizes a less elegiac side of Anne’s feelings when the Musgrove girls compete for the attentions of Captain Wentworth. In *Mansfield Park*, the word often signalizes the jealousy and censoriousness aroused in Fanny by Mary Crawford’s attentions to Edmund and by other forms of behaviour that she

cannot approve. Fanny restrains these feelings as best she can and eventually, at Portsmouth, learns to regard the mysteries of human behaviour with the more generous "wonder" she had formerly reserved for the mysteries of nature. In *Persuasion*, the same word is associated with Anne's moments of asperity: "if he were a little spoilt by such universal, such eager admiration, who could wonder?" (p. 71). Or again, after the accident on the Cobb, when Captain Wentworth blames himself for what had happened to "Dear, sweet Louisa", "Anne wondered whether it ever occurred to him now, to question the justness of his own previous opinion as to the universal felicity and advantage of firmness of character" (p. 116). (This passage is often chosen to illustrate Anne's essential rightness of judgment: without gainsaying that, it is fair to add that she is not quite dispassionate.) A similar asperity, aroused by the Musgroves' adulation of Captain Wentworth, lies behind the smile that Anne suppresses when Mrs Musgrove's natural regrets for the son she had lost and her half-ashamed half-recognition that she had valued him as little as he deserved are transformed into a specious parade of all that a mother is supposed to feel. Anne is not alone in her asperity on this occasion. Not long afterwards, Captain Wentworth has to set aside his memories of the son before he can show "the kindest consideration for all that was real and unabsurd in the parent's feelings" (p. 68). And the sense of strain in the narrator's ensuing comment suggests that, for once, Jane Austen is too close to her subject, attuned (as if from her own experience) to the feelings of her heroine and yet uncertain of having rendered them exactly.

It is no wonder—if that word is permissible—that the return of Captain Wentworth and his association with the Musgroves should evoke emotions that Anne must labour to conceal. By the same token, Anne is almost pitifully alert to every nuance of his behaviour and of the comments others make. Like Fanny Price, once more, Anne is attentive to "seemings" and "appearances". But, whereas these words reflect Fanny's necessary concern for the impression her behaviour will make on others, they are used most often in *Persuasion* to mark Anne's silent efforts to discern a meaning in all that Frederick Wentworth says and does. Even when she can allow herself a question, it has to be couched so indirectly that the answer is often beside the point. When, for example, she inquires discreetly about an invitation to the two captains, Mrs Musgrove is happy to answer for Captain Harville. Worse still, the anxious moments she spends while Lady Russell

seems to be looking across the street at Captain Wentworth are rewarded by something about a set of window-curtains. In a comment that goes to the heart of Jane Austen's unrivalled ability to unite the poignant and the sardonic, Anne is once led to exclaim, "What wild imaginations one forms, where dear self is concerned!" (p. 201).

Anne's flashes of asperity and her searching of nuances both grow in force as her feeling for Captain Wentworth is revived and yet seems, at least to her, unlikely to be returned. But, at the beginning of the novel, where her future appears more sombre altogether, her emotional vitality has even less to support it and is almost in danger of extinction. Critics have drawn attention to a new "liberation of feeling"¹⁴ in the mature Jane Austen and have associated it with the autumn landscapes of *Persuasion*. Without seeking to detract from the evocative power of those scenes, one must think also of their observer. That Anne, at twenty-seven, should be "grieving to forego all the influence so sweet and so sad of the autumnal months in the country" (p. 33) is not so much a tribute to her poetic imagination as a reminder that her spring has waned too soon. By the time of the walk to Winthrop, she can smile wryly at her own melancholy musings. And, when she tries to cure Captain Benwick of too poetical an indulgence of his grief, she is amused by her own inconsistency.

There is no such ambivalent quality in another characteristic of Anne as first we meet her. The vocabulary in which Jane Austen registers the perceptions and responses of her characters is a neglected facet of her writing. Emma's vaunted powers of imagination, Mary Crawford's confidence in what she can see, and Fanny Price's keen feelings are only three leading instances of the way Jane Austen differentiates her characters' responses to the endless variety of life. In the opening chapters of *Persuasion*, however, Anne Elliot, who is to become the subtlest and most judicious observer of them all, is almost an automaton. For her father and her elder sister, throughout the novel, the faculties of perception and cognition are limited to an ability to arrive at certain predictable "findings", an ability to draw sterile conclusions from glimpses of the obvious, and an ability to choose, from a narrow repertoire, the response most becoming to an Elliot and least de-

14 The phrase is from Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton, 1952), p. 207, where it makes the title of the chapter on *Persuasion*. But Virginia Woolf is only the most notable of many who have made this emphasis.

pendent upon any personal exertion. Without ever approaching their condition, Anne is certainly in danger, more preoccupied with reflections on the past than with immediate perceptions. We hear too much of what she had been "persuaded to believe" (p. 27); of how Frederick Wentworth "stood in her memory" (p. 28); of how "she could not doubt" this or "had no reason to believe" that (p. 30); and of how she must "harden her nerves" (p. 30). At the beginning of the fifth chapter, where she twice "found it most natural" (p. 32) to behave artificially, a resemblance to Sir Walter and Elizabeth is actually beginning to emerge.

And yet Anne has already arrived at something akin to her eventual opinion of Lady Russell's original advice, her own reception of it, and the way in which she would behave "were *any young person*, in similar circumstances, to apply to her for counsel" (p. 29: my italics). She has already formed eloquent but seemingly vicarious 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!" (p. 30). So early an expression of attitudes like these is enough to show that *Persuasion* does not trace Anne's moral *progress*. Their co-existence with the desolate serenity of her attitude to her own future suggests, rather, that the novel deals with the lifting of a spell. Long before criticism of *Persuasion* took on a sociological dimension, the contrast between Sir Walter and the naval officers was formulated by Miss Lascelles in metaphors that catch the very note of Anne Elliot's personal history and quietly evoke its more general implications:

. . . the story of *Persuasion* can be described not solely as the reconciliation of Anne and Wentworth, but also as the bursting open, for Anne, of the prison that Sir Walter and Elizabeth have made of Kellynch—the expansion of her world. . . . In *Persuasion*, the opening shows us the Kellynch party significantly grouped. . . . They seem immovable; but presently the Crofts begin to be heard of, and a fresher air stirs—faintly at first, but when they actually appear, irresistibly, for light as it is it has crossed the Atlantic.¹⁵

For some, perhaps, even this delicate and exact formulation of the contrast that has occupied us may not seem quite to answer to Professor Moler's insistence that Anne must be recognized as having a kind of moral precedence over Captain Wentworth and his associates. Any such doubt is easily overcome by the recognition that Anne's actions, in her sphere of life, are closely in keeping with those of the naval officers and that her convictions

15 Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (London, 1939), pp. 181-82.

include and transcend the best of theirs. Heroic action is not exclusively a masculine prerogative. Energy, judgment, self-possession, fortitude, and altruism can express themselves in many forms. And the sense of duty that informs these other virtues, "that sense of duty which can alone suffice" (*Mansfield Park*, p. 463), is as evident in Mr Knightley or the Rev. Edmund Bertram as in Captain Wentworth—and as evident, again, in Miss Anne Elliot.

In his well-known essay on *Mansfield Park*, the late Professor Trilling had characteristically penetrating things to say about the new sense of professionalism that emerges in nineteenth-century England, when

the ideal of professional commitment inherits a large part of the moral prestige of the ideal of the gentleman. Such figures as the engineer Daniel Doyce of *Little Dorrit* or Dr Lydgate of *Middlemarch* represent the developing belief that a man's moral life is bound up with his loyalty to the discipline of his calling. The concern with the profession was an aspect of the ethical concept which was prepotent in the spiritual life of England in the nineteenth century, the concept of duty.¹⁶

Even without this stimulus, it would be a shallow reader of Jane Austen who supposed that the virtues of the naval circle were peculiar to their profession. Mr Knightley of Donwell Abbey and Mr Darcy of Pemberley do honour to a traditional conception of duty that is also celebrated in "To Penshurst" and "Upon Appleton House". Their conception of duty has much in common with that of those other gentlemen, the more admirable of Jane Austen's clergymen and sailors. (Her lawyers, too: for John Knightley's professional virtues offset his irascibility of temperament. In his conversation with his brother, moreover, we are shown the continuing link between profession and estate.) It was no novelty, of course, for members of the gentry, younger sons especially, to embark on a professional career; but Professor Trilling is right to speak of an increasing "moral prestige", "a developing belief that a man's moral life is bound up with his loyalty to the discipline of his calling".

Yet we must broaden the argument a little further. Although the mannishness of Mrs Croft sometimes amuses her, Anne

16 Lionel Trilling, "Jane Austen and *Mansfield Park*", in Boris Ford (ed.), *The Pelican Guide to English Literature* (London, 1957), v.119. See also David Spring, "Aristocracy, Social Structure, and Religion in the Early Victorian Period", *Victorian Studies*, 6 (March 1963), 263-80; and Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 78.

takes heart from the recognition that Mrs Croft and Mrs Harville are as admirable as their husbands and as attentive to their duty. In her own "utility" to her family and her neighbours, Anne assumes her mother's duties at Kellynch. As a guest at Uppercross, she uncomplainingly accepts responsibilities that her sister complains of and neglects. After the accident on the Cobb, she shows more initiative and composure than even Captain Wentworth. And, in resisting the temptation of becoming the next Lady Elliot of Kellynch, she not only shows her constancy in love but also remains true to a deeper conception of herself. If Anne Elliot has anything important to learn in the course of *Persuasion*, it lies in the discovery of her own ability to emulate her less fortunate friend, Mrs Smith. As we have seen, Anne has long acknowledged the importance of "a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence!" (p. 30). These ideas are given a compelling reinforcement by Mrs Smith's cheerful and resilient acceptance of the illness, poverty, and loneliness to which she has been so unexpectedly reduced. She even continues (*pace* Professor Duckworth¹⁷) to work for the benefit of those poorer than herself. Even Anne, who has suffered her own misfortunes so uncomplainingly, is able to take example from Mrs Smith:

She watched—observed—reflected—and finally determined that this was not a case of fortitude or of resignation only.—A submissive spirit might be patient, a strong understanding would supply resolution, but here was something more; here was that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from Nature alone. It was the choicest gift of Heaven; and Anne viewed her friend as one of those instances in which, by a merciful appointment, it seems designed to counterbalance almost every other want. (p. 154).

Perhaps this conception of duty as operating in distinguishable spheres would not satisfy a modern feminist: but, though Jane Austen is not a modern feminist, there can be no doubt that, in transforming Anne Elliot's original "fortitude" and "resignation"

17 In *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (London, 1971), p. 192, Alistair M. Duckworth would have it that Mrs Smith's handiwork is foisted on the rich for her own financial advantage: but see *Persuasion*, p. 155. When he goes on to detect a "Mandevillean . . . cynicism" in Mrs Smith, his argument cannot be rejected so simply. To my mind, however, we are being shown an inurement to harsher experiences than any Anne has known, an inurement that makes Mrs Smith's continuing good nature the more worthy of Anne's attention.

into something so positive and magnanimous as this "choicest gift of Heaven", she is according her a high degree of moral precedence. At bottom, of course, it is a Christian sense of duty transcending the differences between the sexes and the differences between professional men and men of property.¹⁸ We need not wonder, then, that Mrs Smith stands beside Anne herself in the final version of the last paragraph of the novel, where Jane Austen allows her to improve in health, to form new friendships, and—with a smiling side-glance at *The Rambler*¹⁹—to remain contented *despite* the recovery of some of her worldly goods. "Her spring of felicity was in the glow of her spirits, as her friend Anne's was in the warmth of her heart" (p. 252).

In his wide-ranging study of the idea of the "estate" in Jane Austen's novels, Professor Duckworth finds ill omens in the resolution of *Persuasion*. Unlike Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse, Anne is dissociated from her estate, and upon her marriage, left

on the brink of the Victorian, especially Dickensian, resolution in which the love of two people (or at most the affection of a small group) purifies an enclave within society, while society as a whole remains unredeemed.²⁰

Implicit in the novel . . . there is an incipient doubt as to the continuance of a socially based morality, and it is not fanciful to see *Persuasion* as the first in a line of English novels in which the felt inadequacy of secular values to embody ultimate truths leads to the end of a moral tradition based in Christian rationalism. Even the titles of such works as *Parade's End*, *Howards End*, and *Unconditional Surrender* are suggestive in this context of where *Persuasion*—on one of its tangents—leads.²¹

Taken as a whole, Professor Duckworth's argument shares with mine the familiar emphasis on the novel's contrast between two "sets of people" and on Anne Elliot's passage from one set to the other. There the resemblance ends. Beginning with a comparatively minor difference, the supposed Mandevillean cynicism of Mrs Smith, one can acknowledge that she might have tried harder to warn Anne about William Elliot: yet there is support for a

18 Although Jane Austen does not parade her religious convictions, they make themselves felt in the novels and the letters from time to time. One pertinent example occurs when she is lamenting the death of Sir John Moore, at Corunna, and pauses to "wish Sir John had united something of the Christian with the Hero in his death" (*Letters*, p. 261).

19 See Mary Lascelles, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

20 Alistair M. Duckworth, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-202.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

favourable overall opinion of her in Anne's growing admiration and in the climactic position she is given in the novel's ending. When Professor Duckworth insists that "Anne, in a phrase that bears repetition, has 'no Uppercross-hall before her, no landed estate, no headship of a family,'"²² one can readily acknowledge the fact itself but recall that this backward-looking interpretation is placed upon it by so narrow and emulous a witness as Mary Musgrove, still dwelling on the—sorely dwindled—glories of her blood and state. When he argues that the novel places so strong an emphasis on difficulties of communication that we are made conscious of a collapse of the socially-based moral vocabulary of Jane Austen's earlier novels, one can answer that these difficulties are not enduring and that, as soon as their circumstances permit, Anne and Wentworth find words enough and well know how to use them. Nor should we place a modern emphasis on the darker possibilities of a naval career: the "quick alarms" are clearly recognized but only enhance the consciousness of duty.²³ Should we regard these naval officers, then, as "men enough to face the darkness", the type of those gentlemen who were to serve Britain, as soldiers and civilians, in every continent throughout the century that followed? Conrad's idealism is so shrouded in retrospective ironies that it is better to turn back to *Persuasion*.

If one can put a fundamental disagreement courteously, I suggest that Professor Duckworth is standing in the long evening shadow of Britain's imperial decline and forgetting that, in this respect at least, Jane Austen was a novelist of the morning. Much as she values the best of her men of property in the earlier novels, *Persuasion* treats the duties and certainties of the landed proprietor in a way that makes them seem parochial. Worthy as they are, the Musgroves and Lady Russell seem petty, self-absorbed, and lacking in "utility" by comparison with those characters in the novel who cheerfully embrace a larger world.²⁴ The great Vic-

22 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

23 The mischance that Francis Austen felt most keenly *denied* him his place in the Trafalgar action. *Canopus*, under his command, was part of Nelson's Atlantic fleet in all the long pursuit of Villeneuve. Shortly before the battle eventuated, however, she was ordered into Gibraltar to fetch supplies and, to the chagrin of her captain, missed the events that followed. See J. H. and E. C. Hubback, *op. cit.*, ch. ix-x.

24 Although their sister did not live to see it, the after-history of the Austen brothers supplies examples enough of this larger sphere of action. After the war, Francis was to serve chiefly in the home fleet but he spent some years as Commander-in-Chief of the North

torian novelists were to show the pains of isolation in the city and the world. Their Edwardian successors were to question the whole ethic of imperialism. But, at their best—and so Jane Austen represents them in *Persuasion*—those members of the gentry who entered the professions were supported by a corporate ideal of service and took the world itself as their estate.

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American and West Indian station. Charles, meanwhile, played an active part in putting down the West Indian slave-trade, was in action off Syria in 1840, became Commander-in-Chief of the East Indian station, and died on service near Rangoon. See J. H. and E. C. Hubback, *op. cit.*, ch. xviii.