



Xanadu at Lyme Regis

ALETHEA HAYTER

JANE AUSTEN's description of Lyme Regis in *Persuasion* is unlike any other landscape of hers. The difference is most easily expressed by visual equivalents. One sees Northanger Abbey, and Sotherton with its wilderness, as water-colours in the topographical manner, by Paul Sandby or William Scott. Donwell with its lime-trees and water-meadows, the woods and streams of Pemberley, could be a Richard Wilson. The windy downs and rain-clouds in *Sense and Sensibility* suggest Constable, and the autumnal hedges and reticent afternoon light of the walk in chapter x of *Persuasion* could be a picture by Crome, in the manner of *Mousehold Heath*. But Jane Austen's landscape description of Lyme Regis belongs to a later and explicitly Romantic genre — it is a picture by Turner, or Samuel Palmer; it has a magic timeless enchantment. In it Jane Austen came nearer to the Romantic poets than in anything else that she wrote:

Its sweet retired bay, backed by dark cliffs, where fragments of low rock among the sands make it the happiest spot for watching the flow of the tide, for sitting in unwearied contemplation . . . green chasms between romantic rocks, where the scattered forest trees and orchards of luxuriant growth, declare that many a generation must have passed away since the first partial falling of the cliff . . .

The last time I read that, I heard an echo. 'Huge fragments . . . rocks . . . deep romantic chasm . . . down the green hill . . . forests ancient as the hills . . . ancestral voices.' Had Jane Austen been reading *Kubla Khan* while she was working on *Persuasion*?

She could have been. *Kubla Khan*, written many years earlier and widely circulated in manuscript, was published in June 1816. *Persuasion* was finished on 6 August 1816. Since Jane Austen had been working on it since the previous August, she must have already written the Lyme Regis section by June 1816, the earliest date on which she could have read the published *Kubla Khan*, but we know that she was altering and revising the text of the novel

right up to August 1816, and she could have made changes and additions in the Lyme Regis chapters.¹ At this period the publisher, John Murray, often sent new books for her to see; any book of his, he told her, would always be at her service; and Coleridge's latest volume which Murray published that summer might well have been among the ones sent to her.²

If Jane Austen read it while she was writing *Persuasion*, it could have subconsciously coalesced in her imagination with the situation of her novel's heroine, and with memories of her own. It was during a visit to the Devonshire coast in 1801 or 1802 that she is believed to have met the only man whom she ever loved and would have married, but for his early death;³ and the combination of a lost lover (or one believed to be lost) and the Devonshire coast with its romantic chasms reappears in *Persuasion*. Neither Captain Wentworth nor Jane Austen's hypothetical suitor, Edward Blackall, fits very convincingly into the category of 'demon lover'; Mr Blackall appears to have been a clergyman, and even the discriminating hard-to-please Cassandra approved of him — 'a gentleman whose charm of person, mind and manners was such that Cassandra thought him worthy to possess and likely to win her sister's love'.⁴ Nor is it possible to imagine either Anne Elliot or Jane Austen herself as indulging in 'wailing', in or out of chasms. But it is not inconceivable that when Jane Austen was writing about Anne Elliot at Lyme, and grief for lost love, she might have chanced on a poem which reminded her, more than was welcome, of another grief among romantic Devonshire cliffs. It may have stimulated her to re-write or insert the passage in *Persuasion* in which Anne Elliot discusses modern poetry about broken hearts with Captain Benwick, and warns him, with a secret reference to her own emotions, that 'the strong feelings which alone could estimate it [poetry] truly were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly'. There was to be no wailing; 'moral and religious endurances', not 'a mind destroyed by wretchedness' were what Jane Austen admired with her conscious judgement. But poems like *Kubla Khan* are not easy to banish from the imagination.

¹ B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts*, 1964, p. 87.

² *Letters of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 1952, pp. 432, 433, 446, 453.

³ R. W. Chapman, *Jane Austen, Facts and Problems*, 1948, pp. 63-8.

⁴ J. E. Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen*, 1870, Ch. 2.

The description of Lyme Regis which Jane Austen wrote in *Persuasion* in 1816 was derived from memories of her visit there twelve years before. It had been a busy social visit. In the first few days she had run a temperature and felt rather unwell, but soon she was bathing in the mornings, dancing in the evenings, and busying herself over the household arrangements at the Austens' lodgings, which were dirty and inconvenient. She described it all in a letter to her sister, and added accounts of the fine sunny weather, her mother's games of cards, her father coming home by moonlight from the Assembly Room, the servants walking to Charmouth, and her own dancing-partners and morning calls and strolls on the Cobb.¹ There was not a word about the beauties of Lyme in the letter she wrote from there — it was not her way in writing to Cassandra. The romantic impressions which she may have formed during her visit to Lyme can only be guessed at from very slight references in this chatty letter. She had called in the carpenter, Anning, to value some furniture, she reported. Anning was the father of the geologist, Mary Anning, and himself a collector of fossils.² If Jane Austen saw ammonites in Anning's shop, or noticed their spiral patterns embedded in the cliffs as she walked on the beach, they may have helped to create the feeling of great backward stretches of time ('many a generation . . . the flow of the tide . . . unwearied contemplation') which is such an uncharacteristic element in her description of Lyme, and Coleridge's measureless caverns and ancestral voices would blend with and reinforce this consciousness of the remote past.

The letter of 1804 does not relate how far outside Lyme Jane Austen herself walked; we hear only of an hour's pacing up and down the Cobb, but this would have given her a prospect eastward along the cliffs towards Charmouth, and westwards to the rocks and orchards of Pinney — though I must not identify her memory of this view too closely with Coleridge's blossoming trees, since she was in Lyme in September, and to present the Pinney orchards in blossom then would be to repeat Jane Austen's own solitary mistake with the Abbey Mill Farm orchards in *Emma*. But from the Cobb her eyes would also have been drawn

¹ *Letters*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 1952, pp. 138-43.

² Jaquetta Hawkes, *A Land*, 1951, pp. 72-4.

up the hill behind the town, where there was a stream called Jordan and a green meadow beside it called Paradise,¹ which the sinuous rills and sunny spots of greenery in Kubla's paradise garden may also have recalled to Jane Austen's memory when she came to describe Lyme in 1816.

It may be that it needed the stimulus of *Kubla Khan* to precipitate Jane Austen's memories of Lyme Regis into the romantic landscape vision¹ of *Persuasion*. Till she read the poem, the memories may have been no more than scattered clouds of impressions — a sunlit green slope, a feeling of the far past, a bathe from a sandy beach under high cliffs and a dreamy fatigue afterwards, the moon shining as she came home from a ball at which she had been teased by uncongenial admirers. Then, if she read of a deep romantic chasm down a green hill, of ancestral voices, a shadow on the waves, a waning moon, and a cry for a lost love, a strange glow might be cast across the bustling little resort of shops and ballrooms and grubby lodgings that she remembered, and now it would be the dark cliffs, the rocky fragments, the green chasms, the forest trees, that she felt moved to describe in *Persuasion*, as the setting for Anne Elliot's 'sorrowing heart', secretly yearning over the love that she believed she had lost for ever.

¹ Catherine Hill, *Jane Austen, Her Homes and Friends*, 1902, pp. 133-42.

Robinson Crusoe

A clear sky and a telescope
 Are all that's here to mitigate
 The unchanging calmness of the sea.
 No transferred images, no rope
 To spin a distress signal out,
 No credible false trumpety
 Encourage wanted ecstasy.
 No laughing bold romantic hope,
 No angels then are present. But
 Caught tiny ships might possibly
 Just founder by. Don't underrate
 A clear sky and a telescope.

J. P. FORD