

Approaches to Teaching Austen's *Persuasion*

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¹This distinctive Austenian technique also goes by the name of free indirect discourse in contemporary discussions of narratology. For further discussion of free indirect discourse, see Wood 8–38. See also the introduction to this volume and the essay by Peter J. Capuano.

²D. W. Harding's "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen" was originally published in *Scrutiny* in 1940 and is collected in Harding (5–26).

Thinking with Austen: Literature, Philosophy, and Anne Elliot's Inner World

Magdalena Ostas

Through the form of the novel, Austen thinks in insightful and expansive ways about knowledge, truth, morality, community, subjectivity, identity, and many other concepts whose explication has traditionally belonged to philosophers. When I teach *Persuasion* in courses situated at the intersection of literature and philosophy, I ask students to attend to the ways Austen can help us approach classic concepts like these from a uniquely literary perspective. I suggest that *Persuasion* can help us think from a point of view that reflects the difficulties inhabiting the definitions of such concepts, one that is guided by a willingness to probe and explore rather than fix. Philosophers have always had theories—about people, language, understanding, and fiction—that we can draw on to illuminate literary texts. In my courses on philosophical approaches to literature, I stress a different philosophical avenue into *Persuasion*, and I focus, contrastingly, on Austen as a writer whose novels suspend the traditional priority of philosophical argument over literary insight. My engagement with *Persuasion* in this context differs from my approach to teaching Austen's novels in courses focused on British literary history, Romanticism, or nineteenth-century literature. In the course Literature and Philosophy and the course Art and Ideas, I foreground how *Persuasion* takes up, talks back to, tarries with, and throws light on classic philosophical questions about morality, identity, and the self's inner life. These are questions that were alive for Austen's contemporaries, and my students find that they also resonate forcefully with contemporary debates about identity and ethics.

The breadth of considerations that such an approach opens means that everything is on the table: historical context, social background, class, gender, marriage, love, memory, regret, narrative form, sentence structure, and style. This has the effect of letting students think by means of the novel, because they are asked to enter its world as a whole and to continually consider foundational questions: What is important for Austen in understanding how her characters live? What does she make vivid about their interactions, the connections among them, and their relation to themselves? What aspects or parts of the world are especially significant for her moral explorations? What does a sketch of the coordinates and horizons of Austen's moral interests include? The gap between my students' world and the world of *Persuasion* begins to dissipate as the class works to understand Austen's literary moves as perspectives that have the power to bring aspects of Anne's world into view. I tell my students that narrative can be similar to photography or painting in this regard: like images, novels are bounded by a frame, one that contains things within it but that excludes innumerable other things. If *Persuasion* were a picture, I ask, what is it a picture

of—what is its subject? I encourage the class, then, to conceive of the novel's literary thinking as an open field bounded by horizons that prompt our looking and probing in particular directions. Our philosophical approach thus never yields a distinct moral message or an essential argument, and it never entails distilling Austen's stance about an issue or idea. Instead, the approach encourages students to read with a greater attentiveness to the resonances of Austen's meanings within their context.

Accessing Austen's explorations of human identity in *Persuasion* depends on understanding the novel's protagonist. No character in Austen's novels is as silently intelligent, quietly reflective, and absorbed in her own inner life as Anne Elliot, and as students enter the novel, they slowly register that *Persuasion*'s perspectival frame centers on Anne's solitary consciousness and that the story will not entail any sensational happenings. The families will travel, Louisa Musgrove will fall from steps on the Cobb, and Captain Frederick Wentworth's pen will slip during a conversation so that Anne hears it drop—but nothing more dramatic than that will happen. Rarely had so much happened only on the inside in fiction, at least before the Romantic period, and the observation that *Persuasion* is a drama that initially unfolds only in an inner world steers students' sense of the novel's subject.

Our engagement with the novel as a whole extends from a directed classroom activity that I introduce after students have read four chapters, when I give them the straightforward task of collectively sketching a lucid and detailed characterization of Anne. The activity often elicits enthusiasm and full participation because it calls for a range of answers expressed in each student's own words, and I gather responses and passages on the board. As our portrayal deepens, some responses amend and build on others, and the answers add up to a satisfying and uniquely filled-out portrait visible to the entire class. Suddenly the reserved and vaguely interesting Anne receives complete attention. Characterizing Anne is much more demanding than it might appear, and even advanced students find this activity an appropriately challenging entryway into the novel, as they slowly find that Anne's character carries few outward or definitive signs in the first four chapters. The activity thus forces students to become articulate about and more interested in a character who is unseen to those around her within her fictional world: Anne is passive, isolated, excluded, slighted, and often silent. I push students to get past the too-easy idioms: wallflower, introvert, pushover, and so on. As the class patiently stays with Anne and considers her disposition with attention, we uncover her depth, complexity, and internal range together.

What can emerge from this directed but informal brainstorming is a carefully formed contour of someone living entirely for others and in exile from her own life. Students are eager to cite passages in which Anne allows herself to be serviceable, accommodating herself to others in the roles of nurse, babysitter, caregiver, or quiet confessor. Anne is unacknowledged by others, yet students note that she responds to others' cares and concerns constantly. The class quickly sees the weakness in Anne's cooperativeness and sympathy, and they often conclude that she is self-effacing and tragically cocooned within her own unassertiveness.

As emblematic of Anne's fundamental estrangement—and the unclear, vexed perspective of the narrative voice on her condition of inner exile—students often point to her geographic displacement: “She disliked Bath, and did not think it agreed with her—and Bath was to be her home” (15; vol. 1, ch. 2). Yet students also see that Anne becomes a uniquely perceptive interpreter of the world from such a position. Like a novelist, she stands aside and looks out with calm intelligence, honest emotion, and patient vision at the world around her, registering things with a third-person-like capaciousness. Since Anne lacks an active function in the world, she lives buried within her own contemplative and emotional responsiveness. Students who have read *Pride and Prejudice* (or have seen one of the film adaptations) frequently point out the contrast in this regard between the introspective Anne and the bold and sparkling Elizabeth Bennet, who shares with Anne the fate of being stuck in a silly family from which she requires an escape. Unlike Elizabeth, Anne has a rich inner life that is rarely penetrated by other characters, but for her the world is a place that offers little possibility of fulfillment. To confirm the class's sense of Anne's character in volume 1, I often conclude with Virginia Woolf's comments about *Persuasion*. Woolf writes that Austen sees life in this novel “through the eyes of a woman who, unhappy herself, has a special sympathy for the happiness and unhappiness of others, which, until the very end, she is forced to comment upon in silence” (144).

Equipped with this rich portrait of Anne from *Persuasion*'s early chapters, the class is then prepared to leap conceptually to *Persuasion*'s second volume, where we witness Anne's slow emergence out of the quiet discontent of her inner world. We discuss moments in the novel during which Anne is pressed into action and is thereby rendered visible, particularly the scenes surrounding Anne's reaction to Louisa's falling unconscious from an overhasty jump (J. Austen 118–21; vol. 1, ch. 12). With the shift between volumes as a demarcation line, the class charts Anne's change in a second characterization activity that considers how Anne changes between volumes 1 and 2. For many students, *Persuasion*'s central concern turns out to be Anne's emergence as a character who comes to be known in the world, and students emphasize that the novel dramatizes this process of her coming to be a character outside the rich life of her interiority. In advanced courses I often assign or read aloud in class excerpts from secondary criticism that is similarly attuned to Austen's preoccupation with inner life and its outward or social forms of expression.¹ As Anne's inside comes to make contact with the outside, she takes on the role of a “proper” and “capable” subject (123; vol. 1, ch. 12)—and a proper heroine too. In the end, Anne is acknowledged—by Wentworth, to be sure, by the friends around her, and by her family, but she is also acknowledged by the novel itself, which in its beginnings seems to struggle with the undertaking of rendering this particular heroine visible. Austen, in thinking about human identity, utilizes the novel, a temporal form, to progressively turn her character inside out.

To turn Anne increasingly outward in this way and to give her inner life expressive force, Austen needs the freedom of moving in and out of her character's thoughts and feelings. For example, we know that in the end Anne glories

in her destiny as a sailor's wife, but we register how earnest and complete her contentment is ("happier than any one . . . could have conceived" [266; vol. 2, ch. 11]) only because we have glimpsed firsthand her deepest desires for her life and witnessed her sharpest internal struggles throughout the novel. The novel's moral explorations of identity pivot on Austen's ability to dwell on the experience of being Anne from the inside as much as on Austen's ability to convey Anne's circumstances and actions. I introduce the narrative techniques and structures whereby Austen affords us access to Anne's inner world and thereby "lyricizes the novel" (Tuite 7), giving priority to happenings within her character's internal landscape rather than to events or occurrences: Austen's methods are more than simple narrative devices. I ask the class to entertain the idea that the details of Austen's narrative building in *Persuasion* are expressions of the author's moral imagination. We investigate free indirect discourse as a kind of perspectival mirror that captures points of view whose convergence adds up to meaningful moral exploration. To be carried along by the modulations of free indirect discourse as one reads is to imaginatively involve oneself in the variances of perspective that constitute the moral dimensions of living. Our examination of free indirect discourse, then, focuses on the ways this technique in Austen's storytelling delineates the world and communicates an understanding of it through the shaping and manipulation of prose sentences.

When students near the conclusion of *Persuasion*, I ask them to prepare a brief presentation for the class that explicates an instance of free indirect discourse and that focuses on the broader significance of the technique for the moment they have chosen: What does free indirect discourse allow Austen to convey about the character and situation in this instance? What aspects of character and situation more broadly does this narrative approach allow her to reveal and to consider? To prepare students for the assignment, we practice together with a handful of key passages, and we begin with Austen's emblematic fragment "she was only Anne" (6; vol. 1, ch. 1). A simple question about the fragment often draws out answers that concisely highlight the power of Austen's technique to embed varied points of view. As I ask whose perspective "only Anne" captures, we begin to catalog the phrase's possible issuers: she is "only Anne" from the point of view of her family, all of whom undervalue her; or perhaps from the point of view of just her father, who is even more uncaring and neglects her; or from her own perspective, which results from her having internalized her family's disregard; or perhaps loosely from the narrative point of view, which is momentarily ironic here and thereby doubts the judgment that Anne is supposedly ordinary. Sometimes students discover "only Anne"—her singleness and singularity—echoed in Wentworth's final letter, wherein he has loved "none but" her and her "alone" (258; vol. 2, ch. 11), a statement that transforms Anne's condition of onliness entirely.

When we move through such passages, students begin to see the moral resonances of Austen's technique, which is essential to the way Austen weaves narrative, as the class addresses the differences between free indirect discourse and

omniscient storytelling, the latter of which can appear to transcend perspectives rather than follow their shifting variations. The task, for students, of presenting an interpretive reading to the class demands that they explore the intersection of narrative detail and abstract ideas in the text, finding how the novel's philosophical resonances dwell within the particulars of form and content. The most successful and illuminating student presentations remain tied closely to the modulations of perspective within Austen's sentences.

Students find that sometimes the oscillations in Austen's free indirect discourse suggest the perspectives of actual characters in the novel, and the activity of naming these perspectives can be amusing and engrossing for students, as when Lady Russell seems momentarily to haunt the narrative voice when it suddenly declares, without quotations marks, "Anne Elliot, with all her claims of birth, beauty, and mind, to throw herself away at nineteen; involve herself at nineteen in an engagement with a young man, who had nothing but himself to recommend him . . ." (29; vol. 1, ch. 4). Students also uncover important instances in the novel when the objective or apparently realist narrative voice can be easily intonated with sharp satire and criticism—and when a clear decision about Austen's tonal register is impossible: "The Mr. Musgroves had their own game to guard, and to destroy; their own horses, dogs, and newspapers to engage them; and the females were fully occupied in all the other common subjects of house-keeping, neighbours, dress, dancing, and music" (46; vol. 1, ch. 6). Finally, students are especially eager to trace the rhythms of inner debate and struggle as they emerge into narrative language and, strangely, at times become indistinguishable from third-person commentary. The simple sentence in chapter 7 that relates Wentworth's hard feelings, "[Wentworth] had not forgiven Anne Elliot" (66; vol. 1, ch. 7), certainly might be read as a factual claim about his lingering resentment, but students also perceive Austen's use of the severe "Anne Elliot" as evidence of Anne's cruel self-reproach as she momentarily regards herself through Wentworth's eyes and sees the decision she made seven years ago in the harshest light, now grasping its repercussions. Additionally, this assignment often pushes students to recognize that Austen's allegiance to the details of ordinary life—walks, dinners, conversations, and looks—reflects Austen's moral imagination more broadly. The unextraordinary world Austen portrays is not provincial or limited, in fact, but actually saturated at each step with ethical significance. The ethical charge of the ordinary and trivial in Austen's novels often exceeds that of the supposed dramas of heroism, adventure, politics, and war—and romance as well.

One of the most satisfying aspects of teaching *Persuasion* at the intersection of literature and philosophy stems from Austen's experiments with the genre of romance, her refusal in this novel to indulge the plot of new and spontaneous love. In *Persuasion* Austen shapes a narrative that places the ardent first meeting offstage and within memory. She reshuffles time in *Persuasion* so that the past comes to overlay the present like a transparency. Discussing Austen's decision to deny her reader the satisfaction of an unabridged account of the first

encounter between Anne and Wentworth helps students see that *Persuasion's* plot is much more complex than easy clichés about reviving hope or the triumph of true love would suggest. In fact, the satisfaction of teaching *Persuasion* as a novel deeply engaged with our conceptions of identity and morality and our lives with others stems from students' startling recognition that Austen is occupied with the topic of love precisely because it is not at all a "little," trivial, or indulgent concern (Newman). Marriage is consequential—one might say completely determinative—for the women whose lives Austen sketches in her novels, especially for those who endeavor to find acknowledgment and independence within marriage, an institution that can (as Austen also shows) threaten to swallow or eclipse them instead. To give context to our discussions of marriage, we read from the conversation about the lives of women and men in love at the conclusion of the novel, especially from Anne's public but personal assertions (*Persuasion* 253–56; vol. 2, ch. 11). It can be a revelation for some students that a plot centered on romance can absorb and convey reflections on identity and moral development that have such philosophical weight. Sometimes it is an achievement for students just to have discovered this point. *Persuasion* thus often appears in my courses on literature and philosophy among other works by writers who similarly help us think in complex ways about our identities, our relationships with others, and our inner lives: Mary Wollstonecraft, Emily Dickinson, Henrik Ibsen, and Virginia Woolf. All of them, additionally, recognize that literature can communicate truths that cannot be grasped without the exploratory ground novels, plays, and poems offer us and from which philosophy too can learn.

NOTE

¹In upper-division seminars I assign critical commentary on the topics of social life, inner life, and representation, drawing most often from these sources: Brown, *Jane Austen's Novels* 1–37, 127–50; Cohn, *Transparent Minds* 107–15; Lynch, *Economy* 207–49; and Wiltshire, *Jane Austen* 155–96 and *Hidden Jane Austen* 1–11, 147–68.

Teaching about Persuasion in *Persuasion*

Julie Ann Melnyk

What is the moral status of persuasion? Should you try to persuade others to change their minds about central life decisions? Should you bow to such persuasion in your own life? Jane Austen's novel *Persuasion* is ideally suited to teaching from a humanistic perspective that treats the novel as a form of moral deliberation. By providing a wealth of social and psychological detail, novels such as Austen's stress the inherently contextual nature of ethical thought. Moreover, the dialogism of the novel incorporates many viewpoints, even if in Austen the subtle, ever-present perspective of the narrator guides the reader's deliberations. Thus, the novel helps destabilize simplistic moral categories of right and wrong and leads to deeper discussions of moral issues and responsibilities.

The Central Persuasion

In discussing *Persuasion*, students will immediately want to examine the act that determines much of the action of the novel: Lady Russell's persuading Anne Elliot to break off her engagement with Captain Frederick Wentworth. Many college-age students, just the age of Anne when she makes the decision, will condemn Lady Russell's interference in Anne's romantic life and Anne's weakness of will in giving in to persuasion. But Austen does not make the decision clear-cut. Anne is just nineteen; she has known Captain Wentworth only "a few months"; Wentworth is her first love. Austen's narrator reveals, using free indirect discourse, Lady Russell's prejudices in favor of class and wealth and against enthusiasm, but the narrator also makes clear that Lady Russell believes herself to be acting in Anne's best interests and to have a position as mother substitute to justify persuasion:

Anne Elliot, with all her claims of birth, beauty, and mind, to throw herself away at nineteen; involve herself at nineteen in an engagement with a young man, who had nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining affluence, but in the chances of a most uncertain profession, and no connexions to secure even his farther rise in that profession; would be, indeed, a throwing away, which she grieved to think of! Anne Elliot, so young; known to so few, to be snatched off by a stranger without alliance or fortune; or rather sunk by him into a state of most wearing, anxious, youth-killing dependance! It must not be, if by any fair interference of friendship, any representations from one who had almost a mother's love, and mother's rights, it would be prevented. (29; vol. 1, ch. 4)