

Aspects of Narration in *Persuasion*

MICHAEL ORANGE

Persuasion has one of those titles that echoes throughout the work it describes. And its range of meanings varies widely, from conveying a sense of coercion and duress to delicate, scarcely perceptible intimations of right conduct such as Anne Elliot offers to Captain Benwick.¹ This becomes a major source of enjoyment in the novel, in that many readers of Austen find that the relationship established between narrator, characters and readers — that blend of action, consciousness and brisk meditation on both — is central to the particular pleasure derived from her own skills in all kinds of persuasion.

This is to suggest that *Persuasion* is at once a title, a theme and a mode of discourse, the last because throughout all her novels no other single epithet can so well describe Jane Austen's style. In that sense alone *Persuasion* is a fitting title for her final completed work. But it is not only appropriate to Austen's fiction. The novel as a form emphasizes persuasion, often in the late eighteenth century by making the suggestion that what may seem fanciful or 'romantic' is historical. Fiction assumes the voice of history, as a not unusual opening indicates. The third paragraph begins: 'Whoever has read Guyot de Pitaval, the most faithful of those writers who record the proceedings in the Parliamentary Courts of Paris, during the seventeenth century, must surely remember the striking story of Pierre de la Motte, and the Marquis Philippe de Montalt.'²

In the nineteenth century, indeed, fiction will claim to be a kind of history, when Tolstoy himself rejects the title of novelist. His closure of *War and Peace* shows how far the attempt to persuade can go, as he offers an essay on the philosophy of history in a confrontational address. Austen's means are at the other end of the spectrum from this. She is greatly at pains to persuade her readers by a variety of means, directing and shaping the responses of readers by means of laughter, fellow-feeling, surprise, thoughtfulness and above all by the assent that sheer mastery of technique can evoke from a reader for whatever a particular author may be doing. On closing *Mansfield Park*, for

1 Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818), ed. John Davie, The World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp.97-9.

2 Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), ed. Chloe Chard, World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.1.

example, a reader may want to reserve judgement on an issue like the treatment of the Crawfords, but compulsion and confrontation will hardly seem apt terms to describe the reading experience: persuasion — remorseless persuasion perhaps! — will seem a more appropriate term.

The central instrument used by Austen in *Persuasion* to convince readers of particular interpretations of the events recorded is one familiar from all her other completed works. The narrator takes a position close to, but by no means identified with, the central female consciousness and this becomes the novel's dominant point of view. As Catherine Morland or Emma Woodhouse travel towards right thinking and feeling, the reader is induced to assent to the complex definitions proposed for these categories largely by means of the intimacy with which we share the inner life of these figures. Not that they have one, of course. But we are made to think that these are living people with inner lives because of the skill with which Austen organizes her hierarchies of narration.

An example makes clear the way in which characterization is a convention of narrative. It is one of those well known occasions which occur in all of Austen's novels when the reader cannot decide finally who is responsible for the thoughts on the page, 'narrator' or 'character'. This instance occurs in *Persuasion* at the beginning of Chapter 8 of Volume I, when Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot have begun to meet again frequently after an interval of almost eight years. The narrator canvasses the leading narrative interest in the novel: 'Whether former feelings were to be renewed must be brought to the proof'. It will take all of *Persuasion* to resolve this issue which provides the motivation for many of the succeeding devices of plot development, even though it is purposefully submerged or otherwise obscured from time to time. It is typical, too, that Austen announces such a major theme indirectly. Her technique operates by deferral of interest, as all narrative must, but her method is always to make the reader responsible for unearthing significance, however much she may direct proceedings as narrator.

This central issue of Wentworth's feelings is subordinated at once to what is made to seem a more pressing concern, which is the question of what Anne Elliot must be feeling in Captain Wentworth's company and the extent and quality of his consciousness of her:

Whether former feelings were to be renewed, must be brought to the proof; former times must undoubtedly be brought to the recollection of each: *they* could not but be reverted to; the year of their engagement could not but be named by him, in the little narratives or descriptions which conversation called forth.(p.63)

The immediacy of social intercourse defers the matter of feelings with which the paragraph begins, converting it into one of anecdote and recollection centred on interest in Wentworth's career. Only after this is there an overt indication that the paragraph may represent Anne's musings rather than the narrator's:

His profession qualified him, his disposition led him, to talk; and '*That* was in the year six;' '*That* happened before I went to sea in the year six,' occurred in the course of the first evening they spent together: and though his voice did not falter, and though she had no reason to suppose his eye wandering towards her while he spoke, Anne felt the utter impossibility, from her knowledge of his mind, that he could be unvisited by remembrance any more than herself. There must be the same immediate association of thought, though she was very far from conceiving it to be of equal pain. (p.63)

Some readers might suggest that all of this paragraph represents Anne's mind and feelings in a dialogue with themselves, as these meetings between Wentworth and her become more frequent. Others might mark the changeover from narrator to Anne at the phrase 'and though his voice did not falter'. But it is impossible to be dogmatic, and the difficulty persists in the next paragraph where arguments can be made either that all is the narrator's voice or that it is all Anne's musings:

They had no conversation together, no intercourse but what the commonest civility required. Once so much to each other! Now nothing! There *had* been a time, when of all the large party now filling the drawing-room at Uppercross, they would have found it most difficult to cease to speak to one another. With the exception, perhaps, of Admiral and Mrs Croft, who seemed particularly attached and happy, (Anne could allow no other exception even among the married couples) there could have been no two hearts so open, no tastes so similar, no feelings so in unison, no countenances so beloved. Now they were as strangers; nay, worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement. (p.63)

Perhaps the first sentence of this paragraph must be attributed to the narrator because of its element of reporting objectively on a situation in which Anne is involved. But in both of the paragraphs quoted the narrator carefully draws our attention to Anne's involvement in these thought processes ('Though she had no reason to suppose', 'Anne could allow'), and by doing so suggests that they may all be hers.

Such overlapping demonstrates that characterization is a function of narration, and that it cannot properly be described as autonomous or inner-directed. Action and character are aspects of a complex inter-relationship in which a Wentworth, a William Elliot and a Sir Walter Elliot are presented not so much in terms of contrast or comparison as of conceptual differentiation. Sir Walter's vanity, for example, is

deprived of meaning if its context does not include the lack of self-conceit presented by Wentworth, Admiral Croft and the other naval officers. William Elliot's and Captain Wentworth's 'characterizations' are partly generated by a differentiating process centred on honour and opportunism. To insist on their status as autonomous creations works to devalue the complexity of a narrating consciousness which can divide itself up and label some of its differing parts to distinguish them from each other as 'characters', but is nonetheless a totality for that. It is a measure of the unity of each of Austen's novels that characters cannot be imagined straying from one work to another, a William Elliot in *Northanger Abbey* or an Isabella Thorpe in *Persuasion*. (A faltering memory might play tricks, however, in and among the early Dickens novels — and this helps to define those works, as well as one's memory. Nadgett, for example? Mr Grimwig?).

And as was mentioned earlier, narration in *Persuasion* possesses the further complication that to the complexity of a narrative discourse in which characters are conceived in terms of grouping and interaction as well as of individuation, and in which the narrator and central character converge, must be added the consideration that the dominant point of view by means of which other characters are presented is Anne Elliot's. The reader for the most part sees through her eyes. It is scarcely possible to make an independent assessment even of Captain Wentworth, for example, because his presence is palpable only as Anne registers it. Or to revert to the earlier point, it might be better to say that the narration filters knowledge of aspects of one part of itself, which it represents as 'Captain Wentworth', by means almost exclusively of another, labelled 'Anne Elliot'. There is no Captain Wentworth beyond Anne Elliot's point of view until very late in the novel, and no Anne Elliot outside this narration.

However, as Mary Lascelles pointed out many years ago, Austen does make a couple of variations to this dominant technique in the novel. The narration presents Wentworth in Anne's absence once early on when he's talking to his sister about his matrimonial intentions and then much later when he hears gossip about Anne in Bath. Lascelles ascribes these variations to lack of revision time, suggesting that otherwise Austen would have excised such narrative anomalies.³ It is an interesting, if necessarily hypothetical contention. In any case, whatever Austen's eventual decisions might have been, the passages in question are full of interest as they stand. Here he is discovered before the reader, unfiltered by Anne's consciousness of him (and his

3 Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp.204-5.

of her), the essential Wentworth — if such a construct can be predicated. There is none of that speculative self-persuasion ('Anne felt the utter impossibility from her knowledge of his mind, that he could be unvisited by remembrance any more than herself.') The unfolding of a different Wentworth from Anne's conception of him is a tantalizing prospect.

However, it turns out, not unexpectedly, that Anne is right after all. Austen doesn't offer a glimpse of a dissolute, cynical Wentworth soured by early amatory experiences and a demon with the rum bottle. The early sighting of him away from Anne in chapter 7 of Volume I has him talking to his sister just before the passages quoted earlier, and his presentation accords with that of the following chapter. He is, indeed, as conscious of Anne as she will shortly surmise:

He had not forgiven Anne Elliot. She had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shewn a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own decided, confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others. It had been the effect of over-persuasion. It had been weakness and timidity.

He had been most warmly attached to her, and had never seen a woman since whom he thought her equal; but, except from some natural sensation of curiosity, he had no desire of meeting her again. Her power with him was gone for ever. (p.62)

Still angry after all these years: Austen dramatizes a consciousness determined not to be influenced again ('her power with him was gone for ever'), and at the same time registering the influence powerfully in that very determination.

Yet Austen corrects any impression that this consciousness of Anne is permitted a prominent place in Wentworth's present state of feelings as he articulates them to someone else. He makes jocular remarks about how indiscriminating he means to be in his choice of wife, and his ability to be ironic has the force of a demonstration that hurt, angry feelings are quite submerged beneath a playful, urbane manner: 'He said it, she knew, to be contradicted.' But the narrator returns nevertheless to the central issue of Wentworth's consciousness of Anne before leaving him and this rare glance of him in Anne's absence: 'Anne Elliot was not out of his thoughts, when he more seriously described the woman he should wish to meet with' (p.62). That woman looks rather like the Anne that the reader is getting to know already, but that Wentworth has yet to recognize.

That is all that the narrative reveals of Wentworth without the filter of Anne's consciousness until late in the novel in Bath when they meet at Molland's, the confectioner's in Milsom Street, where Anne and

her party are taking shelter from the rain. This gives a very clear example of manipulation of point of view and its implications for interpretation. When Captain Wentworth walks into the shop and shows himself confused and embarrassed in Anne's presence the reader may infer, guided by Anne's response, that he has at last changed towards her: 'They had, by dint of being so very much together, got to speak to each other with a considerable portion of apparent indifference and calmness; but he could not do it now. Time had changed him, or Louisa had changed him. There was consciousness of some sort or other' (p.166). Such speculation is entirely typical of *Persuasion*, so much so that the anxiety of interpretation and accompanying efforts at persuasion are the novel's dominant mode and motif. Anne continually reads Wentworth, interprets and re-interprets his speech and silences. She constantly hazards the optimistic conclusion that this language partly reveals and partly conceals a meaning that will emerge in time (unlike the reader of *Persuasion* for whom there will only ever be its language and no single determinate 'meaning'). And on this second occasion when the reader is shown Wentworth without the presence of Anne acting as a screen, the result is more provoking than the earlier one. At least on that occasion Wentworth spoke seriously as well as ironically. Even though his seriousness did not prevent some misunderstanding in himself of Anne's continuing power with him, at least the reader seemed to be put in possession of some clear signals from the narrator. Now, however, all is inference again. Readers perhaps suppose that Austen inserts the following in order to make Wentworth uneasy and jealous:

As soon as [Anne and William Elliot] were out of sight, the ladies of Captain Wentworth's party began talking of them.

'Mr Elliot does not dislike his cousin, I fancy?'

'Oh! no, that is clear enough. One can guess what will happen there. He is always with them; half lives in the family, I believe. What a very good-looking man!'

'Yes, and Miss Atkinson, who dined with him once at the Wallises, says he is the most agreeable man she ever was in company with.'

'She is pretty, I think; Anne Elliot; very pretty, when one comes to look at her. It is not the fashion to say so, but I confess I admire her more than her sister.'

'Oh! so do I.'

'And so do I. No comparison. But the men are all wild after Miss Elliot. Anne is too delicate for them.' (p.168)

No editorial assistance is rendered, however. The narrator presents the dialogue and then turns to Anne and William Elliot as they walk away together. The reader is compelled to interpret.

It will emerge shortly that Anne's (and probably therefore the

reader's) provisional inferences about Wentworth and his feelings will be confirmed. This is indeed a measure of Austen's faith in the stability of that 'community of interpreters' for whom she wrote.⁴ There is present something of a neo-Classic or Johnsonian confidence that readers will agree on how decency of behaviour should be defined or on how an essentially well-meaning, cultivated person like Wentworth will be feeling. It informs the strategy behind the presentation of Mr Knightley in *Emma*: the significance of his presence is assumed to be plain to the reader in the context of Emma's own thoughtless underestimating of it (although some modern readers have found him a more problematical figure than this might suggest).⁵ Austen keeps faith with Anne's developing interpretations of Wentworth: 'She had not mistaken him' (p.227), we hear eventually. Hence the reader's confidence in this interpreter of Wentworth is rewarded too: we had not been mistaken in her.

One potentially awkward consequence of confining Wentworth to Anne's view of him highlights that sense of constriction which is, at the same time, both narrative technique and thematic development. Keeping Wentworth out of sight for most of the novel has the effect of making him pop out like a champagne cork at the end, as the narrative foams into a rapid exposition of his feelings, denied direct expression for so long. For four pages (pp.227-31) in reported and direct speech Wentworth offers evidence of the fact that 'Anne had not mistaken him,' going over all the old ground, only this time in his own voice, and confirming all those inferences about his developing feelings. Yet Austen manages to turn even a technical necessity to good account. The sense of 'spirits dancing in private rapture' (p.226) informs a retrospect in which the lovers, and readers, re-read the novel together in summary. Anne's dreadful isolation is over at last.

Keeping faith has been a central theme therefore. Austen plays no tricks on the reader. Anne remains constant to Wentworth. And Wentworth himself is finally able to keep faith with his own early feelings towards Anne. But the realization of this theme is itself the consequence of much persuasion. And perversely enough, its sheer extent may cause resistance. For example, at the card-party which immediately follows the reconciliation of Anne and Wentworth, the narration takes up the theme yet again, as though it wants to make absolutely sure of correct interpretation. Anne offers a last, subtle

4 Stanley J. Fish's term when discussing writing conventions and reader responses: "Interpreting the *Variorum*", *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1976), 465-85.

5 See, for example, J. F. Burrows, *Jane Austen's "Emma"* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1986), *passim*.

reading:

'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.' (p.232)

Despite Anne's little joke about 'nothing to reproach myself with' (surely it *is* a joke?), persuasion here is in danger of becoming insistence. Austen has Wentworth agree with her, with some amusement directed at Lady Russell, but he immediately goes on to underscore the drift of Anne's remarks by raising the issues of his return to England 'in the year eight' and of whether Anne would have accepted him then ("Would I!" was all her answer,' pp.232-3). All the issues are clarified unambiguously. Yet to me it all sounds the least bit uncertain, if only by the mere fact of reiteration. It is almost as though Lady Russell has taken over the narration and persuasion has become an index of anxiety. The novel makes a magnificent affirmation, after all, and it is perhaps not surprising that a small note of self-doubt should be heard amid all the rejoicing at 'true attachment and constancy' (p.224), at love still triumphant despite division and after eight or nine years.

Whatever the degree and kind of persuasion, though, fiction remains conditional. Its claims as history are suspect. By the laws of fictional geometry what may be interpreted as absolute, as 'the truth' in one novel, may be rendered partial or relative or even quite untrue in another, even when both are by the same author. Anne has remarked in the passage just quoted 'I am not saying that [Lady Russell] did not err in her advice.' But in *Mansfield Park* Lady Russell would have been absolutely in the right, had she dissuaded Miss Frances Bertram from *her* naval officer:

Miss Frances married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections, did it very thoroughly. She could hardly have made a more untoward choice . . . By the end of eleven years . . . Mrs Price could no longer afford to cherish pride or resentment, or to lose one connection that might possibly assist her. A large and still increasing family, an husband disabled for active service, but not the less equal to company and good liquor, and a very small income to supply

their wants, made her eager to regain the friends she had so carelessly sacrificed.⁶

Lieutenant Wentworth was no Lieutenant Price, of course, but the congruity of their situations with respect to early marriage and the divergence of their courses thereafter indicate how partial and particular are the discourses of individual novels. And Austen is usually cleverer than her critics. She anticipated this point in the next sentence of Anne's, which I temporarily suppressed in order to make mine — may even have thought back to *Mansfield Park* as she did so: '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'. As a writer of fiction the role Jane Austen chose for herself was, precisely, to decide events — and to persuade us as to their outcome.

6 *Mansfield Park* (1814), ed. James Kinsley and John Lucas, *The World's Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp.2-3.