Autumn at Uppercross: A Note on the Use of Landscape in *Persuasion*

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'She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older'.[1] Apt enough as a history of Anne Elliot, this account has been made to embrace *Persuasion* itself, and the development of Jane Austen's art as a novelist. Everyone would agree that *Persuasion* is a novel in which the heroine's consciousness comes to pervade the narrative, that it is marked by a new romantic feeling, and that it displays a more sensitive response to landscape. Yet the walk across the autumn fields at Uppercross, so focal to all these concerns, continues to be very vaguely characterized. It has been referred to as 'Anne's meditation on the decline of the year and happiness, youth and hope',[2] although no 'meditation' takes place; it has been seen as presenting an 'intimate sense of landscape',[3] although this intimacy is not easy to find in the text; and when is is described as a 'nearly lyric episode', resembling 'an Ode to Autumn in three stanzas',[4] we may wonder if Jane Austen is becoming soft in the head.

Although much of the point of view in *Persuasion* may be surrendered to Anne Elliot, the narrator retains a firm ironical control. This is the novel in which Sir Walter Elliot is dismissed as a 'foolish, spendthrift baronet who had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him' (p.234), and 'poor Richard' is explained as 'nothing better than a thick-headed, unfeeling, unprofitable Dick Musgrove, who had never done any thing to entitle himself to more than the abbreviation of his name, living or dead' (p.52). Anne Elliot is presented with more sympathy. The irony to which she is subject is best seen in Chapter IX of Volume II, as Anne walks through the streets of Bath the morning after she has concluded that Captain Wentworth has 'a heart returning to her at least' (p.175), and that he must be jealous of Mr Elliot:

1 *Persuasion* (World's Classics, 1980), p.33. All subsequent page-references are to this edition.

2 Jon Spence, 'The Abiding Possibilities of Nature in *Persuasion*', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, XXI (1981), p.630.

3 A. Walton Litz, '*Persuasion*: forms of estrangement' in *Jane Austen Bicentenary Essays* ed. John Halperin (Cambridge, 1975), p.225.

4 Barbara Hardy, *A Reading of Jane Austen* (London, 1979), p.58.

> Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy, could never have passed along the streets of Bath, than Anne was sporting with from Camden-place to Westgate-buildings. It was almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way. (p.181)

Jane Austen's lexicon could not include 'high-wrought love' and 'eternal constancy', except as phrases satirically intended – an intention caught as Anne's 'sporting' with them 'almost' spreads perfume along the streets. The walk from Uppercross to Winthrop is over a different terrain from the walk from Camden-place to the Westgate-buildings, but the tone of the narrative is the same.

The expedition begins with Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove arriving at Uppercross cottage one morning with the project of a long walk, and the opinion that Mary will not want to join them (Henrietta's plan is to guide the party towards Winthrop, as Charles Hayter has been absent for three days and has refused a regular invitation to dinner – although this intention is not yet apparent.) As Mary promptly decides to go, Anne joins the party in order to be useful should she decide to turn back. Charles Musgrove and Captain Wentworth return unexpectedly from shooting, and make up a party of six. 'Could Anne have foreseen such a junction, she would have staid at home; but, from some feelings of interest and curiosity, she fancied now that it was too late to retract' (p.82). As they set out, her object is 'not to be in the way of any body', and where the going is difficult, to keep up with Mary and Charles.

> Her *pleasure* in the walk must arise from the exercise and the day, from the view of the last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves and withered hedges, and from repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn, that season of peculiar and inexhaustible influence on the mind of taste and tenderness, that season which has drawn from every poet, worthy of being read, some attempt at description, or some lines of feeling. She occupied her mind as much as possible in such like musings and quotations; but it was not possible, that when within reach of Captain Wentworth's conversation with either of the Miss Musgroves, she should not try to hear it; yet she caught little very remarkable. (p.82)

'Her *pleasure* in the walk must arise from the exercise and the day' – the 'pleasure' is set against the dual difficulties of keeping out of the way and keeping up, while the 'must' makes it tentative, for the

moment a matter of conjecture. The view of 'the last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves and withered hedges' may well indicate that 'love of natural beauty' which Lord David Cecil finds in the passage,[5] but do we not sense an ironic distance in the thought of Anne's repeating to herself 'some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant' of autumn, this season 'of peculiar and inexhaustible influence on the mind of taste and tenderness'? We are not here within Anne's mind; we are following the narrator's commentary on the autumnal heroine in the autumnal scene. Whether or not she draws upon 'the thousand poetical descriptions extant' is unresolved until the sentence 'She occupied her mind as much as possible in such like musings and quotations', when the 'such like' consigns the efforts of all these poets of taste and tenderness to the category of the nondescript. The 'as much as possible' is then further restricted: 'but it was not possible, that when within reach of Captain Wentworth's conversation with either of the Miss Musgroves, she should not try to hear it'. How much of all this qualifies as 'meditation'?

The conversation which Anne tries to overhear is also engaged with the scenery ('the many praises of the day, which were continually bursting forth'), but it is occupied more with Louisa's addressing herself to Captain Wentworth, and (on the model of Mrs Croft being loyally upset in the Admiral's gig) putting herself forward as one who would forever stand heroically beside the man she loved. Her declaration 'I would rather be overturned by him, than driven safely by anybody else' (p.83) is uttered with 'enthusiasm', and received by Wentworth in the same spirit.

> Anne could not immediately fall into a quotation again. The sweet scenes of autumn were for a while put by – unless some tender sonnet, fraught with the apt analogy of the declining year, with declining happiness, and the images of youth and hope, and spring, all gone together, blessed her memory. She roused herself to say, as they struck by order into another path, 'Is not this one of the ways to Winthrop?' But nobody heard, or, at least, nobody answered her.
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> Winthrop, however, or its environs – for young men are, sometimes, to be met with, strolling about near home, was their destination; and after another half mile of gradual ascent through large enclosures, where the ploughs at work, and the fresh-made path spoke the farmer, counteracting the sweets of poetical despondence, and meaning to have spring again, they

5 David Cecil, *A Portrait of Jane Austen* (London, 1978), p.189.

> gained the summit of the most considerable hill, which parted Uppercross and Winthrop, and soon commanded a full view of the latter, at the foot of the hill on the other side.
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> Winthrop, without beauty and without dignity, was stretched before them; an indifferent house, standing low, and hemmed in by the barns and buildings of a farm-yard. (p.83)

The Anne who 'could not immediately fall into quotation again' is the Anne who had 'occupied her mind as much as possible in such like musings'. But the words which follow are the narrator's. 'The sweet scenes of autumn were for a while put by – unless some tender sonnet, fraught with the apt analogy of the declining year, with declining happiness, and the images of youth and hope, and spring, all gone together, blessed her memory'. The 'unless' returns the narrative to the narrator's surmise, from which so much of it is conducted, and the train of clichés which follow again show her detachment from the scene. We do not learn whether 'some tender sonnet' blesses Anne's memory or not – is 'blessed' compassionate or ironic? – but we have been shown the category to which such sonnets belong. The speculative mode is set aside as 'the sweets of poetical despondence' are counteracted by the ploughs at work and the fresh-made path of the farmer 'meaning to have spring again', and by the appearance of Winthrop itself, 'an indifferent house, standing low, and hemmed in by the barns and buildings of a farm-yard'.

The lyrical interpretation of this episode meets with such resistance from the text because it is not a meditation, but a narrative, and – most significantly – a narrative conducted with varying degrees of ironic detachment. We are conscious of a heroine who is an unwilling member of the expedition, despite 'some feelings of interest and curiosity' about it, caught in the predicament of wanting 'not to be in the way of any body', trying to negotiate the terrain, and also to catch what Wentworth and the Musgrove girls are saying. We may take 'the last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves and withered hedges' as a genuine perception of the scene – along with the 'indifferent house, standing low' which is Winthrop. But the 'thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn' must be placed in an ironical dimension, with the 'many praises of the day, which were continually bursting forth' from the other party. (We may note that it is Captain Wentworth and Louisa who share a moment of 'enthusiasm'.) The tender sonnet with its apt analogy becomes an item in the 'sweets of poetical despondence' – a phrase which has the same dismissive implication as the 'such like' in 'such like musings and quotations'. The placing of the heroine in this scene of autumn, with an earnest of

returning spring, signals the direction of the narrative, but it is a direction of which she cannot be aware. There is no evidence for saying that Anne 'admires' the work of the ploughs, just as there is no evidence that Jane Austen 'unmistakably approves' of her having occupied her mind with poetical fragments.[6]

Underlying the misconceptions of Anne Elliot's autumn walk is the belief that here *Persuasion* draws 'much closer to a Wordsworthian view of nature'.[7] In this passage especially the romanticism supposedly comes breaking in. *Persuasion* of course contains the description of Lyme and its environs, including Pinny 'with its green chasms between romantic rocks' – though few commentators on this passage note that is is partly occupied with a comparison with the Isle of Wight[8], or that the narrator takes satisfaction in the 'pleasant little bay' near the Cobb because 'in the season [it] is animated with bathing machines and company' (p.93). *Persuasion* is also the novel in which Captain Benwick endangers his emotional health by reading too much Scott and Byron, and is advised by Anne to take more prose. It is a judgement on the shallowness of his romantic feelings that they can be so readily transferred to Louisa.

Is it likely that the author of *Persuasion* can have taken up the Wordsworthian idea of the confluence of nature and the human mind? Even in the description of Lyme the recommendation of 'the happiest spot for watching the flow of the tide, for sitting in unwearied contemplation' (p.93) may recall the contemplative mode of Cowper or Thomson[9] rather than of Wordsworth, while the bathing machines recall the preferred eighteenth-century landscape which has signs of

6 These are the comments of Daniel P. Gunn, 'In the Vicinity of Winthrop: Ideological Rhetoric in *Persuasion*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 41 (1987), p.413, and John Wiltshire, ' A Romantic *Persuasion*?', *The Critical Review* 14 (1971), p.9. The account which is most aware of the changing texture of the narrative is that of Rosemarie Bodenheimer, 'Looking at the Landscape in Jane Austen', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, XXI (1981), pp.620-622.

7 Litz, *loc.cit.* p.226. Professor Litz nevertheless finds 'Anne's thoughts on autumn' to fall short of 'the powerful reaction of the great Romantic poets'.

8 The Isle of Wight figures in Jane Austen's *Letters* (ed. R. W. Chapman, 1952), pp.92, 199, 200, 202, 207.

9 The influence of Thomson may be felt in the description of Uppercross, when the 'declining year' recalls the 'cool declining year' and the 'pale descending year' of *Autumn*, ll. 707, 988 – a reference I owe to Associate Professor G. L. Little.

human habitation. A Wordsworthian kinship with nature here would mark a *volte-face* from *Sense and Sensibility*, where Marianne Dashwood had lamented that the trees at Norland would not remember her when she had gone:

> Oh! happy house, could you know what I suffer in now viewing you from this spot, from whence perhaps I may view you no more! – And you, ye well-known trees! – but you will continue the same. – No leaf will decay because we are removed, nor any branch become motionless although we can observe you no longer! – No; you will continue the same; unconscious of the pleasure or the regret you occasion, and insensible of any change on those who walk under your shade! (World's Classics, p.23)

What else would the trees be doing? the narrator almost asks. This is an exhibition of silliness in a heroine. As the trip to the Lakes in *Pride and Prejudice* is aborted, we do not discover how a Jane Austen heroine would have responded in the birth-place of romanticism. But we do have Elizabeth's view of the experiences undergone there by others:

> And when we *do* return, it shall not be like other travellers, without being able to give one accurate idea of any thing. We *will* know where we have gone – we *will* recollect what we have seen. Lakes, mountains, and rivers, shall not be jumbled together in our imaginations; nor, when we attempt to describe any particular scene, will we begin quarrelling about its relative situation. Let *our* first effusions be less insupportable than those of the generality of travellers.[10]

The walk across the fields at Uppercross remains at some distance from romanticism. The traffic between Anne and the landscape consists in her being present in the scene, repeating to herself some unspecified lines of verse which the surroundings suggest, and recognizing one of the routes to Winthrop. The hypothetical sonnet presenting an 'apt analogy' of autumn and human life does not call to mind the Wordsworthian idea of a shared consciousness, unless it is to disinfect it. If Jane Austen is engaging at all with romantic ideas of the interplay of landscape and the human mind in this episode, she must be doing so in a spirit of amused scepticism.

10 *Pride and Prejudice* (World's Classics, 1980), p.138. This is not necessarily aimed at the Lake poets; it could refer to such travel writers as William Gilpin.