

AUTUMN IN LYME

Chapter 12 of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

While critics have remarked on the symbolic weather in *Persuasion*, and the romantic description of scenery at Lyme, they seem to have overlooked a number of cogent reasons for the presence of these elements in Jane Austen's novel.

In the early chapters, our attention is repeatedly drawn to the appearance of Anne's facial features. "A few years before," we are told in Chapter 1, "Anne Elliot had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early".¹ In Chapter 4 we are told that Anne's refusal, upon Lady Russell's advice, of Captain Wentworth's offer of marriage had plunged her into a not inconsiderable period of suffering: "Her attachment and regrets had, for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth; and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect" (p. 28). In Chapter 7 Anne's faded appearance is pointedly contrasted with Wentworth's spirited one: "the years which had destroyed her youth and bloom had only given him a more glowing, manly, open look, in no respect lessening his personal advantages" (p. 61).

The next relevant reference is to the sea's rejuvenating effect on Dr Shirley. Chapter 12 opens with a seemingly irrelevant conversation in which Louisa's sister Henrietta suggests to Anne that Lyme would be an attractive place for the retirement of old Dr. Shirley from the Uppercross rectory. "I am quite convinced," Henrietta begins, "that, with very few exceptions, the sea-air always does good. There can be no doubt of its having been of the greatest service to Dr Shirley, after his illness, last spring twelvemonth. He declares himself, that coming to Lyme for a month, did him more good than all the medicine he took; and, that being by the sea, always makes him feel young again" (p. 102).

As soon as Henrietta has finished speaking, she and Anne are joined in their stroll by Louisa and Captain Wentworth. They all turn back together when Louisa recollects that she has something to procure at a shop. As they are ascending the steps from the beach, Anne's eye is caught by a gentleman looking at her "with a degree of earnest admiration" (p. 104). The next sentence reads: "She was looking remarkably well; her very regular, very pretty features (*"very pretty"* repeats exactly the description of her already quoted from Chapter 1), having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion, and by the animation of eye which it had also produced" (ibid; my italics). The gentleman's exceeding admiration catches Captain Wentworth's eye in turn, causing him to give Anne a momentary glance of brightness. It is a glance which seems to say, "even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again" (ibid.). This moment is the turning-point of the novel. It is clearly prepared for by Henrietta's remark about Dr Shirley, for Captain Wentworth here begins to experience a re-awakened interest in Anne as a person to love. And since

1. R.W. Chapman's edition, p. 6. All further page references this edition.

both Dr Shirley's health and Captain Wentworth's love for Anne are restored in the same place, Lyme thus acquires symbolic significance.

The change in Anne is permanent. When, in the next chapter, she goes to stay with Lady Russell, her hostess notices that "Anne was improved in plumpness and looks," and she hopes "that she was to be blessed with a second spring of youth and beauty" (p. 124).

Henrietta's seemingly irrelevant comments have a further bearing on Anne's situation. For she goes on to say: "I think it quite melancholy to have such excellent people as Dr and Mrs Shirley, who have been doing good all their lives, wearing out their last days in a place like Uppercross, where, excepting our family, they seem shut out from all the world" (p. 102). Though Henrietta is not sufficiently astute to perceive it, the alert and discerning reader is clearly meant to see this as a reflection of Anne's own character and isolation. "My only doubt is," Henrietta continues, "whether any thing could persuade him to leave his parish. He is so very strict and scrupulous in his notions; over-scrupulous, I must say" (p. 103).

The key word "persuade" here clearly reflects on Anne's having allowed herself to be persuaded by Lady Russell, eight years previously, to reject Captain Wentworth's proposal of marriage. The reflection is made especially clear when Henrietta immediately asks Anne point-blank: "Do not you think, Anne, it is being over-scrupulous? Do not you think it is quite a mistaken point of conscience, when a clergyman sacrifices his health for the sake of duties...?" (p. 103). For Anne, too, has sacrificed her health for the sake of duties, to her father and to her friend.

Anne's outlook is not so perspicaciously correct as critics universally proclaim. This is evidenced by her failure to perceive the bearing of these remarks upon her own character and behaviour. Henrietta, moreover, is not the only person to voice such comments. As the party of six young people set off to walk to Winthrop in Chapter 10, Captain Wentworth speaks of his sister, who is out driving with her husband, Admiral Croft. He reveals that the Admiral, far from being a safe driver, very often upsets the vehicle; "but my sister makes nothing of it - she would as lieve be tossed out as not" (p. 84). Louisa tells him he is surely exaggerating; "but if it were really so," she goes on, "I should do just the same in her place. If I loved a man, as she loves the Admiral, I would be always with him, nothing should ever separate us, and I would rather be overturned by him, than driven safely by anybody else" (p. 85). It is Anne, of course, who had been "driven safely" by Lady Russell, along the road of worldly prudence; she had not allowed herself to be "overturned" by Wentworth. Louisa, Jane Austen proceeds to tell us, spoke "with enthusiasm", so that Wentworth replies, "catching the same tone", "Had you? I honour you." Louisa is clearly intended to be Anne's superior here, and Wentworth to appreciate this superiority. At least Anne is conscious of the import of this exchange in relation to herself, for Jane Austen introduces the incident by commenting that "there was one speech of Louisa's which struck her", and afterwards she "could not immediately fall into a

quotation again"; she had been "repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn," descriptions "fraught with the apt analogy of the declining year, with declining happiness, and the images of youth and hope, and spring, all gone together" (ibid.). She has sought refuge, in other words, from the world of positive action in a world of words, a world of romantic sentiment, full of "the sweets of poetical despondence" (ibid.). The autumn setting thus proves to be not only symbolic of Anne's situation, but an ironic comment on it as well. Her friendship with Captain Benwick is clearly based on an affinity of temperament. Through recourse to poetry, each dwells sentimentally on a painful past, Anne more culpably than Benwick because hers is an old loss whereas his is new. The analogy of old Mrs Musgrove's sentimentality about the loss of her son Richard (Chapters 6 and 8) emphasizes this point. Yet both Anne and Benwick are later proved capable of positive action: Benwick in wooing Louisa, and Anne in finally accepting Wentworth.

On the way home from Winthrop, it is the amiable Crofts themselves who provide a comment on Anne's situation. We have already heard Mrs Croft, in Chapter 8, extolling the happiness of her life at sea, on board her husband's ship: "as long as we could be together," she concludes, "nothing ever ailed me, and I never met with the smallest inconvenience" (p. 71). Here, as Anne rides home with them in their gig, weary from her long walk to Winthrop, she was not at first "quite awake to what they said": her answers to their kindness and their remarks were given unconsciously. Then she becomes aware that they are talking of "Frederick". The Admiral opines that if there were war, Frederick would not be taking so long to make up his mind about choosing either Henrietta or Louisa. Then, addressing his comment with undesigning pointedness at Anne, as we have seen Henrietta addressing her question in Chapter 12, he says: "We sailors, Miss Elliot, cannot afford to make long courtships in time of war." Upon which his wife pleasantly chimes in, to the effect that they had better not talk on such a subject, "for if Miss Elliot were to hear how soon we came to an understanding, she would never be persuaded that we could be happy together" (p. 92). Once more the word "persuaded" reminds us how long Captain Wentworth has been obliged to wait because Anne allowed herself to be persuaded by Lady Russell. Henry Austen was clearly alert and discerning in bestowing upon the novel its accepted title.

Anne has already been overhearing another reflection on her character and situation. It turns out that the walk to Winthrop has been motivated by Henrietta's desire to restore her relationship with Charles Hayter, another instance of positive action in contrast to Anne's passivity. At the last moment, however, Henrietta's resolution has been shaken by the snobbish comments of Mary about the unpleasant inferiority of these Hayter cousins. Louisa, however, counteracts Mary's influence by taking Henrietta aside and insisting that she carry out her original intention. "I could not bear that she should be frightened from the visit by such nonsense. What! - would I be turned back from doing a thing that I had determined to do, and that I knew to be

right, by the airs and interference of such a person?... No, I have no idea of being so easily persuaded" (p. 87). Here is another clear echo of Anne's allowing herself to be persuaded by Lady Russell, who is a person of "airs and interference" indeed, her opposition to Wentworth being motivated by the same snobbish pride on the grounds of his inferior socio-economic standing: "Captain Wentworth had no fortune" (Chapter 4, p. 27). Henrietta has been saved from Anne's unhappy fate by having a wiser sister to prevent her from abandoning her original resolution "out of nonsensical complaisance!" The comment to this effect is immediately provided by Wentworth himself: "Happy for her, to have such a mind as yours at hand!" he praises Louisa.

He then launches into the key passage about firmness of mind. Woe betide the young couple, he comments, "when it comes to things of consequence, when they are placed in circumstances, requiring fortitude and strength of mind, if she have not resolution enough to resist idle interference in such a trifle as this." Louisa, he recommends, must infuse into her sister as much as possible of her own spirit of "decision and firmness". "It is the evil of too yielding and indecisive a character," "he pursues, "that no influence over it can be depended on. - You are never sure of a good impression being durable. Every body may sway it; let those who would be happy be firm." He breaks off in order to reach down "a beautiful glossy nut... from an upper bough", as an example of something which, "blessed with original strength, has outlived all the storms of autumn. Not a puncture, not a weak spot anywhere." He then applies the exemplum to Louisa: "My first wish for all, whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm. If Louisa Musgrove would be beautiful and happy in her November of life, she will cherish all her present powers of mind" (p. 88). Louisa does not answer, but Anne, protected from sight by a holly bush, "could imagine what Louisa was feeling." This is no doubt because of what she was feeling herself, having heard "words of such interest, spoken with such serious warmth!"

When the conversation is resumed, Louisa reveals to Wentworth her dissatisfaction with Mary's Elliot pride, and the family wish that Charles Musgrove had married Anne instead: "I wish she had accepted him. We should all have liked her a great deal better". Old Mr and Mrs Musgrove believe that it was Lady Russell's doing, that Charles was not "learned and bookish enough", and that therefore "she persuaded Anne to refuse him."

Robert Liddell² sees this as a contradiction of the statement in Chapter 4 that "Lady Russell had lamented her refusal"; that is, Anne's refusal of Charles Musgrove's offer of marriage "about a year before he married Mary." There is, however, no contradiction at all. The statement in Chapter 4 is made by Jane Austen, and represents the facts of the situation; the statement in Chapter 10 is spoken by Louisa, and represents merely her surmise in the light of her parents' views. Chapter 4 makes it clear that nobody knows about Anne's refusal of Wentworth except those most immediately concerned

2. The Novels of Jane Austen (London, Longmans, 1963), p. 125.

in her decision. Chapter 4 also makes clear the reason for Anne's rejection of Charles: "No second attachment, the only thoroughly natural, happy, and sufficient cure, at her time of life, had been possible to the nice tone of her mind, the fastidiousness of her taste, in the small limits of the society around them" (p. 28). The same chapter further emphasizes that at the age of twenty-seven Anne thinks "very differently from what she had been made to think at nineteen". She blames neither Lady Russell, nor herself for being guided by her; but she feels that she herself would never give the same advice to any other young person in similar circumstances. "She was persuaded³ that under every disadvantage of disapprobation at home, and every anxiety attending his profession, all their probable fears, delays and disappointments, she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been in the sacrifice of it" (p. 29).

The point is taken up at the end of Chapter 12. As Wentworth is driving Henrietta and Anne back to Uppercross, he laments his folly in humouring Louisa's eager desire for her second, fateful jump; "so eager and so resolute!" he cries (p. 116). This prompts Anne to wonder whether it now ever occurred to him "to question the justness of his own previous opinion as to the universal felicity and advantage of firmness of character; and whether it might not strike him, that, like all other qualities of the mind, it should have its proportions and limits. She thought it could scarcely escape him to feel, that a persuadable temper might sometimes be as much in favour of happiness, as a very resolute character" (p. 116). It is thus, through the key word "persuadable" again, that Anne justifies to herself her "nonsensical complaisance" to the advice of Lady Russell. She had originally allowed herself to be persuaded by her friend; but she has now persuaded herself that they were both wrong; "a persuadable temper" is clearly preferable to rigid inflexibility. Is this rigid inflexibility the "steadiness of opinion" that Jane Austen tells us was the basis of Lady Russell's advice to Anne? Lady Russell is first described as being "of steady age and character" (Chapter 1, p. 5), who "had prejudices on the side of ancestry; she had a value for rank and consequence" (Chapter 2, p. 11). It is this value and these prejudices that form the basis of her opposition to Anne's interest in Captain Wentworth, for "Captain Wentworth had no fortune" (Chapter 4, p. 27).

There is another event in this central Chapter 12 that has disturbed critics. This event is Louisa's fall. Is it too violent? Is it melodramatic? Is it unmotivated and unnatural? Some critics have perceived that by the time Louisa is being gently removed to the inn, the alert and discerning reader is being relieved of anxiety about Louisa's ultimate fate by a comment that safely distances the incident in the familiar manner of comedy. This comment enables such a reader to view the apparent disaster through the consciousness of detached observers, whose emotions are not intimately involved in what has happened. Louisa has been knocked senseless, so that "her face

3. i.e. she now persuades herself; she no longer needs anyone else's guidance.

was like death" (p. 109). Mary screams out that she is dead, with the result that "Henrietta, sinking under the conviction, lost her senses too" (p. 110). The comment in question soon follows: "many were collected near them, to be useful if wanted, at any rate, to enjoy the sight of a dead young lady, nay, two dead young ladies, for it proved twice as fine as the first report" (p. 111).

But there is another reason for not becoming unduly alarmed about Louisa's fate. Chapter 7 opens with a somewhat similar accident. Here it is Mary's elder son Charles who is brought home "in consequence of a bad fall", which occasions "serious anxiety . . . on his account" (p. 53). He is found to be suffering from a dislocated collar-bone, and an apparently alarming injury to his back. In next to no time, however, Mr Robinson the apothecary has arrived, replaced the collar-bone, and assured them all that they may "hope the best" (p. 54). Here the reader's serious alarm is further mitigated by the boy's two giddy young aunts, Louisa and Henrietta, bubbling over with news about their perfect delight in Captain Wentworth. "Their heads were both turned by him." we are told - "And off they ran, quite as full of glee as of love, and apparently more full of Captain Wentworth than of little Charles." After this, no alert and discerning reader should be seriously concerned about little Charles's welfare.

A celebrated example of the same technique, in another novel that sees life as a comedy, occurs in Fielding's Tom Jones. Here it is the false alarm about Allworthy's illness that should prepare us for Fitzpatrick's recovery at the other end of the book. In the same way, the reconciliation of Henrietta with Charles Hayter in Chapter 10 looks forward to that of Anne and Frederick Wentworth at the end. This is likewise prepared for by Anne's saying to herself in Chapter 11 that Captain Benwick "has not, perhaps, a more sorrowing heart than I have. I cannot believe his prospects so blighted for ever. . . He will rally again, and be happy with another" (p. 97). When this is borne out in Chapter 22 by Charles Musgrove's telling Anne that Benwick sits beside Louisa, "reading verses, or whispering to her, all day long" (p. 218), we can no longer be in any serious doubt of the outcome of events for the hero and his heroine.

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