Of Things Unseen: Finding the Estate in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

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Abstract: In *Persuasion*, Jane Austen draws a connection between Anne Elliot's loss of the Kellynch Hall estate and the pervasive presence of war. Expanding upon Favret's (2010) valuable discussion of *Persuasion* as a record of the Napoleonic Wars, I put forward that the war assumes symbolic significance as an expression of Anne's loss of the estate. Both are conditions defined by uncertainty, disorder, and a lack of security. For this reason, the members of the navy with whom Anne establishes friendships, in particular Admiral Croft and Captains Harville and Wentworth, provide her with the most satisfactory model for living that she will encounter upon leaving the estate; their experiences under conditions of war are similar to her own dislocation from Kellynch. Anne appreciates the idea of peace these men have established upon the creative capacity of the individual. While Monaghan (1980) suggests that Anne's failure to find an adequate substitute for the estate represents a key weakness of *Persuasion*, I suggest instead that this is, in fact, the novel's greatest strength. Austen deliberately divorces her heroine from place in order to affirm the estate as an essentially spiritual, rather than physical, institution. Anne is therefore challenged in a way no other of Austen's heroines has been; she is challenged both to believe in, and cultivate, an ideal which she is no longer able to see.

Key Terms: Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, wartime, the estate, peace

Introduction

> *Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not.* (Emerson)

In *Persuasion*, Jane Austen must radically redefine her idea of peace. While the traditional conception of peace which Austen upholds in her previous novels is intimately connected with the social and financial security offered by landed

inheritance, in *Persuasion* this stability and assurance is no longer available. Anne Elliot, the youngest daughter of the profligate Sir Walter Elliot, loses the Kellynch Hall estate twice: first when her father's mismanagement forces the removal of the family and for a second time with her marriage to Captain Wentworth. While in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* the estate offers relief from uncertainty, in *Persuasion* no such reprieve is available. This experience of losing the estate as an external manifestation of order becomes comparable to a state of war, defined by uncertainty, disorder, and a lack of security. A figurative state of war persists as society continues to change, and the traditional values Anne cherishes are no longer to be found in inherited institutions. Austen's idea of peace, then, can no longer be contingent upon the reassuring presence of the estate. Integral to Anne's recovery from this loss is her friendships with members of the Royal Navy: residence of Kellynch Hall has been taken up by Admiral Croft, the brother-in-law of Captain Wentworth. Austen shows how these naval characters have developed a conception of peace that is not conditional upon outside circumstance; instead, it is one built upon the tremendous creative potential of the individual. In celebrating the affirmative attitude of the navy, Austen adopts Spinoza's view that "peace does not exist in the absence of war, but is a virtue based on strength of character" (as cited in Steinberg, 2009, 3.2).

Place and Peace

Set during the False Peace of 1814, the period of Napoleon's exile in Elba, *Persuasion* is Austen's only novel that offers an actual reprieve from war; it is somewhat ironic, then, that the novel often noted to be the most deeply invested in wartime experience is, in fact, the only one explicitly set during a period of peace. This is, however, a "peace that is no peace" (Favret, 2010, p. 162). Favret, following Spinoza, recognizes that in *Persuasion* peace does not exist merely in the absence of war. While Favret (2010) refers to how war literally infiltrates the novel, calling *Persuasion* "an everyday record of the felt if not acknowledged experience of war" (p. 163), I argue instead that the presence of war becomes symbolic of social change. As Drum (2009) comments, "an older, agrarian life may be the reason that *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* represent […] all that is stable and ordered in country life"(p. 93); in losing this agrarian life, the world of *Persuasion* also suffers the loss of order and stability. Monaghan (1980) sees this absence of order as a key failing of *Persuasion*, concluding that "the society into which Anne is entering remains too chaotic and disorganized to be considered an adequate substitute for such beautifully ordered worlds as Pemberley and Highbury" (p. 145). The problem here is that Monaghan assumes that Austen is trying to find "an adequate substitute"

for the old world Anne is losing. I suggest instead that Anne's irrevocable loss of a place, an outward expression of her deeply-seated inward values, is a deliberate gesture which Austen conflates with the threat of continued war.

In offering Anne the opportunity of returning to the family estate, which she refuses, Austen directly confronts the ideas of happiness and peace she once celebrated. In Chapter 21 of *Persuasion*, the idea of peace is explicitly connected with landed inheritance by Mrs. Smith. In responding to what she believes to be Anne's intention to marry Mr. Elliot, who will inherit Anne's once-beloved Kellynch Hall, Mrs. Smith expresses her relief that "[Anne's] happiness will not be shipwrecked as [hers] has been. [She] will be safe in all worldly matters" (p. 372). For Mrs. Smith, peace is inseparable from place; her comfort is defined and restricted by the circumstances under which she lives. In associating the condition of peace with the stability offered by the estate, it is defined as inherently conditional upon outside circumstance; in accepting an offer of marriage which would tie her inalienably to the land, Anne would suffer no insecurity or uncertainty concerning her future. Through Mrs. Smith, Austen describes this conception of social peace explicitly in terms of war: while remaining connected with the estate offers a consummate ideal of peace, Anne's removal from it (realized in her eventual marriage to Captain Wentworth) is expressed as a "shipwreck," a disaster of warfare. The loss of the estate results in a condition of inherent uncertainty, doubt, and, as Mrs. Smith suggests, of danger. In marrying Wentworth, Anne is no longer "safe." Austen recognizes that Mrs. Smith's attachment to place is inherently flawed: what *Persuasion* represents, then, is an effort to reclaim an unconditional "strength of character" which is the true force behind the estate.

Place and Purpose

In *Persuasion*, as Duckworth (1971) succinctly comments, "the estate is defeated" (p. 185). As Anne's sister Mary reflects with great self-satisfaction at the end of the novel, in choosing to marry Captain Wentworth "Anne [has] no Uppercross Hall before her, no landed estate, no headship of a family" (*Persuasion*, p. 478). It is the only of Austen's novels in which the heroine does not become an integral part of an estate, either as mistress of the Great House or of the rectory. In Austen's previous fiction, most notably in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, the estate assumes a strong formative presence in the lives and growth of the heroine. The heroine is conditioned by the estate as an "outward and visible sign of an inward moral condition" (Duckworth, 1971, p. 182). Through observing the estate as an integrated and meaningful whole, characters such as Elizabeth Bennett and Emma Woodhouse form deep awareness and appreciation of their own valuable roles within the

community. The estate reflects an ideal of social and moral order which these characters are then able to recognize within themselves. With the affirmative presence of Pemberley and Donwell Abbey, Elizabeth and Emma enjoy both the benefit and the comfort of having a "physical emblem" of this ideal to guide them as they fulfill their *telos* (Duckworth, 1971, p. 184). In *Persuasion*, however, Anne is summarily denied this comfort: she is no longer able to find in the estate the "objective paradigm of order" which exists within herself (Duckworth, 1971, p. 184). There is no outward correlative for the inward ideal which Anne resolutely persists in upholding.

The two estates featured in *Persuasion*, Kellynch Hall and Uppercross, have both failed in their mandate to foster and strengthen community through active attention and stewardship. Insulated and self-absorbed, the Elliots (and, to a lesser extent, the Musgroves) have violated the "office of trust" with which they have been endowed (Duckworth, 1971, p. 56); they have distorted their proper role within society into one of privilege and leisure, rather than of responsibility and duty to those they are meant to serve. Sir Walter is "a foolish, spendthrift baronet," consummately self-obsessed and profligate, wasting not only his money but his time; he spends every available moment indulging in the family history of the Baronetage, rather than in devoting his time to altruistic action (*Persuasion*, p. 474). Only Anne fulfills her duty selflessly, tending to the poor with concern and compassion. Sir Walter and Elizabeth, on the other hand, are perfectly content to "cut off some unnecessary charities" in their half-hearted effort to economize (*Persuasion*, p. 16). With his vanity and inordinate concern for personal appearance, Sir Walter disregards substance entirely. The estate is literally reduced to its face value, deprived of function and meaning. Although less at fault than the Elliots, the Musgroves at Uppercross are also implicated in the general failure of the estate. The Musgroves' highly insulated interests attest to an increasingly fragmented society: Anne notes that at Uppercross "the Mr. Musgroves had *their own* game to guard, and to destroy; *their own* horses, dogs, and newspapers to engage them" (*Persuasion*, p. 80; italics mine). As Frey (2005) notes, "[the Musgroves'] inability to share the concerns even of people so like themselves as Anne Elliot suggests the impossibility of imagining an aggregate whole" (p. 218). No longer predicated upon traditional social and moral values, these communities based in landed inheritance have abandoned their fundamental imperative to sustain and strengthen connection among individuals.

With the irrecoverable loss of the estate as a visible connecting force within society, *Persuasion* represents a radical break with Austen's previous fiction. In both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, the exuberant individualism of the heroines

conforms to the social structure they observe in the form of the estate; both Elizabeth Bennett and Emma Woodhouse passively submit to an institution which exists *a priori* of their involvement in it. In both cases, their *telos* is made explicit through the visible presence of Pemberley and Donwell Abbey. What makes *Persuasion* so poignant is that because she loses the estate, Anne's *telos* is no longer clear. This does not mean, however, that it no longer exists; as Butler (1975) has affirmed, *Persuasion* "remains in line with the conservative philosophy" of Austen's previous novels (Butler, 1975, p. 276). Far from abolishing *telos,* Austen affirms on the contrary that it exists first within the self as something similar to Spinoza's "strength of character." This movement towards the individual is evident in *Mansfield Park,* where the integrity of the estate, as a moral and social institution, is sustained purely through the value and energy of the hands which care for it (Duckworth, 1971, p. 80). Rather than existing *a priori* of human stewardship as a meaningful and effective institution, the estate must be deliberately invested with purpose; it is from the individual which "must come the affirmative response, and the courage to maintain faith in 'principles' and 'rules of right' even when these are everywhere ignored and debased" (Duckworth, 1971, p. 80). What *Mansfield Park* anticipates – the necessary presence of Fanny to the health of the estate – *Persuasion* carries to its furthest possible extreme. In *Persuasion*, the true estate which Austen extols is, in fact, contained immanently within the individual. Beginning as an essentially inward impulse, it is furnished through the creative energy and effort of the self.

"Vigour of Form": Creating a New Estate

For Austen, those characters belonging to the navy, with its robust and enterprising "vigour of form," exemplify the true estate (*Persuasion*, Ch. 92). This estate, though not expressed through a grand and elaborate physical structure, emerges powerfully and passionately from the ingenuity of the individual. Upon entering Captain Harville's modest home, "a residence unexpensive, and by the sea," Anne is filled with profound admiration for what Harville has been able to achieve within the limited space (*Persuasion,* p. 186):

> [Anne] was soon lost in the pleasanter feelings which sprang from the sight of all the ingenious contrivances and nice arrangements of Captain Harville, *to turn the space into the best possible account*, to supply the deficiencies of lodging – house furniture, and defend the windows and doors against winter storms to be expected (p. 188; italics mine).

Captain Harville is not defined by the limitations of the space in which he lives; instead, the space responds to, and is created by, his own efforts and resourcefulness. It becomes both a reflection and a celebration of an inward impulse. Anne, who as Duckworth (1971) notes is on "a journey in search of spiritual stability" after having been removed from Kellynch, responds very keenly to this powerful creativity (p. 185). It is not only the fact that Harville demonstrates such admirable resourcefulness and initiative, but also that this is so purely unconditional upon circumstance and location. This is Anne's first experience of life outside of an actual estate, and it is remarkably reassuring for her. While Mrs. Smith is often considered an exemplar of stoicism, the fact that she assumes a necessary connection between comfort and circumstance betrays this as a fallacy. It is Captain Harville, and not Mrs. Smith, who realizes the true meaning of peace: to draw from inner resources, and do one's best with what one has been given.

During their time of residence at Kellynch Hall, through their own ruggedly utilitarian ethos the Crofts transform the once-misused building into a properly functioning estate. The skills and strong sense of obligation to community which the navy had promoted "prove eminently transferable to their new home" (Frey, 2005, p. 217). Anne is highly impressed and gratified at the care and attention with which the Crofts have invested their role within the new community:

> [Anne] had in fact so high an opinion of the Crofts, and considered her father so very fortune in his tenants, felt the parish to be so sure of a good example, and the poor of the best attention and relief, that however sorry and ashamed for the necessity of the removal, she could not but in conscience feel that they were gone who deserved not to stay, and that Kellynch-hall had passed into better hands than its owners" (p. 234).

In their compassion for the poor, and care in setting a good example for the parish, the Crofts are able to "better fulfill the obligations and duties which the aristocracy neglects" (Frey, 2005, p. 219). Anne is keenly aware that her own family had not deserved their residence at Kellynch, having failed in "the duty of patrician care" that was their express responsibility (Frey, 2005, p. 219). Anne recognizes that this is a position which is earned strictly through merit. Having made several worthwhile adjustments to the house proper, Admiral Croft proudly declares of his improvements that "the few alterations [they] have made have been very much for the better" (*Persuasion*, p. 238). Kellynch, like Captain Harville's house, reflects the efforts of the individual who inhabits it. In every respect, "the navy offers a more congenial model for living than what Anne Elliot has yet experienced" (Favret, 2010, p. 166).

Austen's praise of the navy, however, does invite one justifiable objection. As Favret (2010) puts it, "what happens to our understanding of warfare, of these men's profession, when we – or Anne – choose it as a happier version of the everyday?" (p. 166). How is it that Austen can justify a model of society which privileges war over peacetime? Even if this were not in itself inherently problematic, there is one other purely logistical problem with offering the navy as an alternative to the aristocracy: it is a fundamentally itinerant profession. In attempting to describe how Admiral Croft both literally and symbolically assumes the role once held by the landowner, Frey (2005) writes that the Admiral "literally moves into the Elliot estate" (p. 217). This is true, perhaps, for a time, but it remains nonetheless an impermanent residence. The problem remains how Austen can justify, or even sustain, a model of society which is inherently contingent upon a state of war. This difficulty is even more salient given the fact that when *Persuasion* was written, the war was already over; surely Austen must have known that even if the navy was still enjoying its moment of glory, this would not last forever. Frey (2005) suggests a compelling answer to this problem, seeing the navy as one branch of a robust professionalism which will revitalize society. This argument falls short, however, because it implicitly excludes Anne. I suggest, as an alternative, that in *Persuasion* the presence of war is symbolic of the uncertainty and danger faced by Anne in her loss of Kellynch. The world does not have to be literally in a state of war to elicit this uncertainty; it is an essential condition of a changing society, one which will continue to persist long after Waterloo. In a society that is rapidly moving away from a visible emblem of traditional values, the navy best understands where these values come from in the first place: within the individual.

"Original strength": The Self and Providence

Captain Wentworth most fully embodies the temerity and fearlessness these literal and figurative states of war demand. The active, enterprising initiative Wentworth exemplifies is necessary not only in wartime success, but also in cultivating the spiritual estate Anne values. It is important to recognize how closely Austen relates war with a marriage that would result in the loss of an estate: both demand an extraordinary degree of confidence – and, we will see, faith – because the end is no longer visible. Their situations are essentially the same, but there is an important difference between the two. In Chapter 4, when Anne and Wentworth's history is recounted, Wentworth's untouchable chutzpah is in fine form: in 1806 Wentworth is not yet wealthy, "but he was confident he would soon be rich: full of life and ardor, he knew he would soon have a ship, and soon be on a station that would lead to

everything he wanted. He had always been lucky; he knew he should be so still" (*Persuasion*, p. 50). This passage, of course, is Wentworth's voice through free indirect speech; the full force of his indomitable self-certainty emerges from the text. The boldness with which Wentworth anticipates his future is, to be sure, something we are meant to admire. The fact that Austen qualifies this speech with the use of free indirect speech, however, suggests a certain reticence on the part of the author to completely condone his attitude. As Marilyn Butler (1975) points out, Wentworth is a "well-intentioned but ideologically mistaken hero" (p. 275). His confidence in fortuity ("he had *always* been lucky"; italics mine) is particularly flawed, and something which contrasts sharply with Anne's own attitude.

Duckworth (1971) roundly comments that "not a providential ordering, but an existence in which luck and fortuitous circumstances play a predominant part, defines the world of *Persuasion*" (p. 182). This is not, however, the case, although it may be how Wentworth sees things (at least initially). Anne's approach to an uncertain future is very different. Reflecting on her broken engagement, Anne inwardly expresses her regret: "How eloquent [. . .] were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion *and distrust Providence*!" (*Persuasion*, 54-6; italics mine) Wentworth clearly embraces the value of exertion, but to this Anne adds the necessity of trusting in Providence. This necessity reflects Anne's intuitive understanding of the true estate as a fundamentally spiritual institution, which continues to exist even in the absence of an external representation. Although through marriage she loses the "physical emblem" of the estate, she continues to carry its spiritual purpose with her. In the final chapters, Wentworth comes very close to accepting Anne's own belief in providence. He tells her with some self-reproach that "[he has] been used to the gratification of believing [himself] to earn every blessing he enjoyed" (*Persuasion*, p.472). Though self-assurance is doubtless a quality which Austen celebrates in her hero, Wentworth's belief in a closed relationship between effort and reward precludes the influence of divine providence. Wentworth's inexorable faith in the self, as Butler (1975) suggests, is too close to hubris for comfort (p. 276). When Wentworth delivers his famous speech extolling the qualities of the nut, he boldly praises its "original strength"; Wentworth brashly repeals the entire Christian doctrine of original sin in one word (*Persuasion*, p. 166). Yet by the end of the novel he revokes this bold assertion, telling Anne in a chastened tone: "I must endeavour to subdue my mind to my fortune. I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve" (*Persuasion*, p. 472).

Conclusion

Persuasion, alone among Austen's novels, does not end on a note of unmitigated joy and promise. We are left, instead, with "the dread of a future war" (Ch. 24). Anne's willful loss of security conflates with her husband's profession; the absence of the estate and the threat of war become a single experience. Yet for all its undeniable challenges, the experience remains an essentially purifying one. Anne's loss of the estate through her marriage with Wentworth, and the consequent uncertainty which this loss engenders, demands a robustly Pauline definition of faith: Anne's faith in the future must now be the evidence of things unseen. What makes *Persuasion* so moving is that Anne, alone of Austen's heroines, is challenged to believe in the integrity of her God-given *telos* even without being able to see it. She can no longer find her ideals outside of herself; she must bring them into the world, like the navy she admires, through her own efforts. Anne knows, however, that this exertion must necessarily go hand in hand with an implicit trust in Providence. Although genuine peace is something of which we are ourselves at the helm, it also requires the faith that there is a port beyond the storms that blind us.

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