

“Lost in a Book: Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*”

[“Lost in a Book” considers the role of influence—both the influence of other people and the influence of books—in shaping individual consciousness in Austen’s *Persuasion*. Adela Pinch argues that the novel’s abiding interest in social influence is linked to its lyricism, as well as to its intense sensory awareness.]

Persuasion is a book that is interested in people’s indebtedness to books, in the capacities of books to provide consolation, and in the adequacy of books to consciousness. The novel opens, for example, upon “Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch-Hall” reading the entry under “Elliot of Kellynch-Hall” in his favorite book, the *Baronetage*:

Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch-Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the *Baronetage*; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating the limited remnant of the earliest patents; there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs, changed naturally into pity and contempt, as he turned over the almost endless creations of the last century—and there, if every other leaf were powerless, he could read his own history with an interest which never failed—this was the page at which the favourite volume always opened:

ELLIOT OF KELLYNCH-HALL¹

Austen suggests that Elliot reads this book, not only as an amusement, an idle occupation, but as “consolation.” Reading the *Baronetage* can reroute “any unwelcome sensations arising from domestic affairs” into other feelings with other subjects. This paragraph asserts that a book can have such “powers”; but of course in this case those powers are the powers of vanity. Sir Walter is a particularly narcissistic reader, and the book confirms his own social superiority: reading arouses his feelings not into an Aristotelian “pity and terror,” but rather into a snobbish “pity and contempt.” The page that has the most power bears his own history. However, by presenting Sir Walter not simply with his family

1 Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford UP, 1933) 3, vol. 5 of *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Subsequent page references to the novel will be in parentheses.

name, but with virtually the same first words that meet our eyes when we open her book—"Elliot of Kellynch-Hall"—Austen broaches the subject of what it is that attaches us to books in a way that embraces not only Sir Walter, but also the readers of her fiction. Even in this perfect marriage of man and book, moreover, the adequacy of books is in question. The "book of books," as it is later called, proves insufficient as a record of personal catastrophe: Sir Walter must supplement the printed text of his family history "by inserting most accurately the day of the month on which he had lost his wife" (3).

Persuasion's explorations of the powers of books might be situated within the context of debates that took place in England from the mideighteenth century on, debates about *women* and reading: about whether and in what ways women are particularly susceptible to the effects of reading, and the extent to which this susceptibility can be either dangerous or beneficial to women's minds. This is an issue that is taken up in one way by Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quixote*, appears frequently in conduct books and treatises on women, and it is an issue that Austen explores in *Northanger Abbey*. In that novel, the reading of gothic romances often laughably exaggerates Catherine Morland's perceptions of reality, but it also renders her highly sensitive to some rather real social threats. I would like to argue that Austen takes up this issue in *Persuasion* as well, though in more oblique and phenomenological ways. *Persuasion* explores what it feels like to be a reader. It does so by connecting this feeling to what the presence of other people feels like. It explores, that is, the influence reading can have on one's mind by comparing it to the influence of one person's mind over another's.

The question of the influence of other minds figures most centrally in Anne Elliot's great act of submission to duty and propriety, her refusal of Captain Wentworth. She refuses him, persuaded that her "engagement was a wrong thing—indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it" (27). The duties to which Anne submits herself belong to the scheme of things outlined in the Baronetage her father loves to read—the preservation and perpetuation of the landed gentry through marriage. Anne submits, however, under no terrors, no parental threats and prohibitions. She gives in under the gentler ministrations of a friend, Lady Russell, who substitutes for her family's indifference to her. Devoted to registering the repercussions of Anne's act of renunciation, *Persuasion* is about what it is like to be subject to the influences of others, and conceives of this as particularly a woman's predicament. (Indeed, one critic has argued that for contemporary readers the word "persuasion" would have resonated specifically with the question of parents' rights over

the marriage of daughters.)¹ The novel's treatment of this issue, however, must be seen as fundamentally shaped by the aesthetic qualities that seem to set this Austen novel apart from the others, the qualities that make up what is frequently called the novel's lyricism. People seem drawn to discussing *Persuasion* in relation to romantic lyric poetry. Its emphasis on memory and subjectivity have been called Wordsworthian, its emotional tone has been likened to Shelley and Keats, and its epistemological strategies compared to Coleridge's conversation poems. Its modernity has been hinted at through allusions to the lyric fiction of Virginia Woolf.² What does it mean to call a novel lyric? What are the effects of this lyricism on the novel's politics? I think it is useful to use the category of the "lyric" to describe certain aspects of the novel—its emphasis on loss, its de-emphasis of plot and its emphasis instead on temporality and repetition, and its interest in voice and in noise. But I will, in addition, be defining the lyric in *Persuasion* as a particular way of rendering consciousness' apprehension of the social.

This essay will take as its starting point Austen's treatment of the pressures of other people. It will then consider how she represents first the presence of the beloved, and then the influence of books.

I

Persuasion is striking for the ways in which the presences of other people are apprehended as insistently sensory phenomena. Mary Musgrove, who has more of the "Elliot pride" than does Anne, and who is constantly fretting that her in-laws do not give her the "precedence" that is due to her, registers their claims as a physical pressure. She complains after a dinner party:

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- 1 Kenneth Moler, *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1968) 187–223; See also Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 149–50.
 - 2 On Austen and Wordsworth, see Stuart Tave, "Jane Austen and One of Her Contemporaries," *Jane Austen: Bicentenary Studies*, ed. John Halperin (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975) 61–74; A. Walton Litz, "Persuasion: Forms of Estrangement," *Bicentenary Essays* 221–32. Nina Auerbach alludes to Shelley and Keats in "O Brave New World: Evolution and Revolution in *Persuasion*," *ELH* 39 (1972): 112–28. The most comprehensive treatment of the lyric and romantic nature of the novel is Keith G. Thomas, "Jane Austen and the Romantic Lyric: *Persuasion* and Coleridge's Conversation Poems," *ELH* 54 (1987): 893–924. For comparisons to Woolf, see Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972) 48, 107.

It is so very uncomfortable, not having a carriage of one's own. Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove took me, and we were so crowded! They are both so very large, and take up so much room! And Mr. Musgrove always sits forward. So, there was I, crowded into the back seat with Henrietta and Louisa. And I think it very likely that my illness today may be owing to it. (39)

Mary feels the Musgroves' proximity to be a threat, their bodily presence capable of making her ill. Anne, however, also frequently finds herself crowded in by other people, in rooms, on furniture. She feels "astonishment" at finding herself, at the Harville house in Lyme, in "rooms so small as none but those who invite from the heart could think capable of accommodating so many" (98). She is crowded on a sofa by Wentworth and the "substantial" Mrs. Musgrove. Perhaps the best emblem for Anne's tendency to be swamped by family duties is the moment in Chapter Nine (to which I will return) in which, as she busily attends to one of her nephews, another one fixes himself upon her back. Her family is literally crawling all over her.

Families, and the Musgrove family in particular, are often represented in terms of the space they take up, the noise they make. Austen describes the Musgroves at Christmas as a collection of noises, a room full of "chattering girls," "riotous boys holding high revel,"

the whole completed by a roaring Christmas fire, which seemed determined to be heard, in spite of all the noise of the others. Charles and Mary also came in, of course, during their visit, and Mr. Musgrove made a point of paying his respects to Lady Russell, and sat down close to her for ten minutes, talking in a very raised voice, but, from the clamour of the children on his knees, generally in vain. It was a fine family-piece. (I 34)

The emphasis on family noise may remind us of the representation of the Price family at Portsmouth in *Mansfield Park*. To the "delicate and nervous" Fanny, the noise at Portsmouth is "the greatest misery of all":

Here, every body was noisy, every voice was loud.... Whatever was wanted, was halloo'd for, and the servants halloo'd out their excuses from the kitchen. The doors were in constant banging, the stairs were never at rest, nothing was done without a clatter, nobody sat still, and nobody could command attention when they spoke.¹

1 *Mansfield Park* 392, vol. 3 of *The Novels of Jane Austen*.

But in *Mansfield Park*, noise is attached to one particular social sphere: it underlines the novel's need to separate the superior Fanny Price from her distinctly inferior family. In contrast to the heavily weighted description of the Price family noise, Austen's description of the Musgrove noise is rather detached. In *Persuasion*, noise is everywhere, vaguely menacing but at the same time strangely neutral, and even the best of families, such as the Harvilles, are perceived as crowds. Domestic spaces, much as they are the typical containers of dramas and conversations in domestic fiction, have a way of impressing themselves upon us in this novel as containers of bodies as well. Furniture often seems the register of the pressures that the characters tend to feel from other people. The furniture of the Musgrove drawing room has grown shabby "under the influence of four summers and two children" (37). Mrs. Croft is especially recommended to the Elliots as a tenant because "a lady, without a family, was the very best preserver of furniture in the world" (22). And Anne, using a word that makes several strange appearances in this novel, thinks of her house occupied by others in this way: "All the precious rooms and furniture, groves and prospects, beginning to own other eyes and other *limbs*" (47; my emphasis).

It is not simply other people's bodily presence that conditions mental life in this novel; mental life seems crowded in by bodily life in general. In Chapter Eight, we find the estranged lovers Anne and Wentworth, divided from each other by the physical form—"no insignificant barrier"—of Mrs. Musgrove, whose body, Austen declares, "was of a comfortable substantial size, infinitely more fitted by nature to express good cheer and good humour, than tenderness and sentiment" (68). Anne and Wentworth are listening to her "large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody had cared for." Austen comments:

Personal size and mental sorrow have certainly no necessary proportions. A large bulky figure has as good a right to be in deep affliction, as the most graceful set of limbs in the world. But, fair or not fair, there are unbecoming conjunctions, which reason will patronize in vain,—which taste cannot tolerate,—which ridicule will seize. (68)

This passage has baffled readers as a piece of gratuitous viciousness. It is vicious; Austen applies the language of neo-classical aesthetic judgement ("unbecoming conjunctions ... taste cannot tolerate") to Mrs. Musgrove's expressive body, as if she were a bad poem or book. The result is not far from the physical snobbery of Sir Walter Elliot:

deeply offended and disgusted by the weather-beaten looks of Navy-men, Sir Walter deems them “not fit to be seen,” and to spare the world the sight of them, opines, “It is a pity they are not knocked on the head at once, before they reach Admiral Baldwin’s age” (20). But if extreme physical snobbery has already been represented and ridiculed *within* the novel in the characters of Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot, finding the narrator raising similar questions suggests that a serious inquiry of some kind about the relationship between personal form and mental life is taking place here. In spite of the rational disclaimers of the first two sentences, the last seems to be admitting that there are, in fact, “necessary proportions” between body and mind. The notion that there might be *no* connection between body and mind seems a foreclosed option—foreclosed even by Austen’s use of metonymy. By the second sentence of this passage, there are no heads, no mental spaces for mental sorrow to take place in: “deep affliction” is located in either a “large bulky figure” or a “graceful set of limbs.”¹

The dislocation of head from limbs here recalls the one line, one paragraph verdict on Louisa Musgrove’s accident at Lyme: “Louisa’s limbs had escaped. There was no injury but to the head” (112). The phrasing of this assertion puts into question our sense of priorities. Again it sounds like something Sir Walter—always more concerned for people’s appearances than for their inward states—might say. But, as is often the case in Austen, certain ideas are simultaneously repudiated and raised as serious suggestions; and heads, as in Austen’s metonymy, Louisa’s accident, and Sir Walter’s quip about sailors, seem somewhat cavalierly treated, and perilously at risk in this novel. The humorous Admiral Croft, on surmising that there is some relationship between Wentworth’s part in Louisa’s fall, and his supposed romantic interest in her, exclaims:

Ay, a very bad business indeed.—A new sort of way this, for a young fellow to be making love, by breaking his mistress’s head!
... —This is breaking a head and giving a plaster truly! (126)

And in a strange figure towards the end of the novel Austen comments, on Anne’s deferral of making public the crimes of Mr. William Elliot, “Mr. Elliot’s character, like the Sultaness Scheherazade’s head, must live another day” (229). Austen repeatedly warns that the rights of heads to bear thoughts and feelings of their own may be precarious.

1 Cf. D.A. Miller on Austen’s frustration with this body’s resistance to meaning in “The Late Jane Austen,” *Raritan* 10 (1990): 60–64.

The question of “persuasion,” of the pressures that one mind can put on another, assumes, at the phenomenal level, less gentle, or at least more physical forms. The novel repeatedly figures an acute awareness of others, an exaggerated sense of the contingency of mind. This hypersensitivity to the presence of others allows Austen to register a certain resistance to women’s place in this social environment. As the issue is phenomenalized, it seems to become absolutely pervasive, extending to reach all the ways in which mental life is crowded in by the presence of other people, even by the body. The text’s emphasis on the phenomenal nature of the presence and pressures of others is naturally accompanied by an emphasis on sensation as the form of apprehension of these pressures. Readers have often pointed out that perceptions of the outside world seem to make their way into *Persuasion* more than in any of Austen’s other novels. There are allusions to specific dates, military events, glimpses of people from all walks of life—farmers, boat-men, and nurses. What interests me, however, is the way in which the novel foregrounds the sensory nature of perception. In the disquisition on noises which Austen interjects right after her picture of the noisy family-piece at Uppercross, she highlights the sensory, and the pleasurable or unpleasurable aspects of noise:

Every body has their taste in noises as well as in other matters; and sounds are quite innoxious, or most distressing, by their sort rather than their quantity. When Lady Russell, not long afterwards, was entering Bath on a wet afternoon, and driving through the long course of streets from the Old Bridge to Camden-place, amidst the dash of other carriages, the heavy rumble of carts and drays, the bawling of newsmen, muffin-men and milk-men, and the ceaseless clink of pattens, she made no complaint. No, these were noises which belonged to winter pleasures; her spirits rose under their influence. (135)

In this novel, in which scenes of overhearing are so important (the hedge-row scene, for example, and the climactic scene at the White Hart), noise and sound have special prominence. Spoken language is often apprehended as sheer sound. This passage is an urban pastoral in the tradition of Swift, where instead of pastoral sounds the ear is met with the sounds of the town, which are ranged in a list, from “the dash of other carriages” to “the ceaseless clink of pattens.” Both the listing and the conjunction of sound with the word “ceaseless” (a conjunction which will occur again) evoke an atmosphere of continuous, unhierarchized sound. I will return to the topic of noise later.

II

The courtship between Anne and Wentworth provides Austen with an especially vivid arena for exploring what the presence of other people feels like. Anne's experience of her gradual reunion or re-courtship with Wentworth takes particularly sensational forms. They are reunited through a series of encounters that Anne experiences as shocks to her consciousness. Their courtship takes its sensuous forms precisely *because* it is a re-courtship: the shocks are not the shocks of newness impressing themselves upon a "virgin" consciousness. Having already "done" this before, and with the same man, Anne substantially revises the *tabula rasa* quality of most eighteenth-century heroines, for whom love and courtship are new sensations. Fanny Burney's youthful and innocent Camilla, for example, not only doesn't seem to know what she is doing, but she seems not to remember very much from one moment to the next. Her courtship consists of blind repetitions of embarrassing moments. The nature of Anne's and Wentworth's courtship is the result of its taking place within a context heavy with memory and repetition. Anne is always "resuming an agitation" (60), experiencing a "revival of former pain" (30).

The temporal structure of the plot, its concern with the reunion of lovers whose actions and feelings are always in reference to an earlier courtship, shapes the novel's understanding of the origins of feelings. It is the existence of this past desire, and past submission to prohibition, that makes Anne a "romantic" person today:

How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been,—how eloquent, at least, 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!—She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel to an unnatural beginning. (30)

"Romance" in this context would seem to mean, roughly speaking, "feelings first," as well as all the other things we mean by "romance." But in this novel romance does not mean spontaneous, innocent feeling: Anne and Wentworth's early involvement is discussed rather perfunctorily: "He had nothing to do, and she had hardly any body to love." Romance comes late, is about belatedness: Austen stresses that it may have "unnatural" origins which defy our conventional expectations of the effects of maturation and chronological time.

In *Persuasion*, the realm of feelings is the realm of repetitions, of things happening within a strong context of memory. The sensational quality of Anne's and Wentworth's encounters arises not from the newness of stimuli but rather from stimuli which take place on a consciousness already prepared by memories of earlier sensations. Anne's conscious recollection seems to function the way Walter Benjamin, following Freud, describes the function of consciousness: formed for the protection against stimuli rather than the reception of stimuli, consciousness serves as a protective shield that puts its energies against energies from the outside world. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud models the origins of consciousness on that of a primitive organism whose exterior develops into a "crust" "baked through" by stimulation. Consciousness, pursues Benjamin quoting Freud, is "located in a part of the cortex which is 'so blown out by the effects of the stimulus' that it offers the most favorable situation for the reception of stimuli."¹ The job of consciousness is to register energies from the outside world as shocks; the more readily it does so, the less likely they are to have a traumatic effect. This account of consciousness and sensation consists of paradoxes: what allows one to resist stimuli from the outside world is precisely the condition of having been traumatized by them before; at the same time, what allows one to go on registering outside stimuli is the condition that makes one resistant to them.

We can perhaps sharpen our sense of the ways in which the impressions Wentworth makes on Anne are conditioned by repetition and recollection by comparing them to Wentworth's effects on Mrs. Musgrove. For Wentworth is a blast from the past not only for Anne but for the Musgrove family as well. He activates a sense of loss for their deceased and always troublesome son, when Mrs. Musgrove remembers that Wentworth was the very name of the Captain her son had spoken of in the only letters he'd ever written:

In each letter he had spoken well of his captain; but yet, so little were they in the habit of attending to such matters, so unobservant and incurious were they as to the names of men or ships, that it had made scarcely any impression at the time; and that Mrs. Musgrove should have been suddenly struck, this very day, with

1 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–64) I 8: 26; Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969) 162.

a recollection of the name of Wentworth, as connected with her son, seemed one of those extraordinary bursts of mind which sometimes do occur. (51)

This “burst of mind” spurred by the name “Wentworth” throws Mrs. Musgrove “into greater grief” for Richard “than she had known on first hearing of his death” (51). Anne, of course, has also to cope with sensations arising from hearing the name of Wentworth repeated so often (52). However, Mrs. Musgrove’s burst of mind is a moment of *memoire involuntaire*, a random, unforeseeable moment when something which barely entered consciousness the first time around pops into consciousness, bringing with it an emotional force that belongs not to itself but to its associations. As for Mrs. Musgrove here, for Anne impressions typically take the form of repetitions. But Anne’s memory is the opposite of Mrs. Musgrove’s; she practices sustained and conscious recollection. Of the memory of pain she says, “when the pain is over, the remembrance of it often becomes a pleasure” (184). Of all of her experiences it might be said, as it is said of her stay at Uppercross, “she left it all behind her; all but the recollection that such things had been” (123). Anne leaves very little behind her.

Indeed, Anne is often so occupied with her own rumination and recollection that impressions from the outside seem to have a hard time finding their way in. This is not to say that Anne seems self-absorbed; rather, the way Austen frequently represents Anne’s consciousness is as *absorption*. While many readers have stressed Anne’s acute preceptions of the outside world, I’m interested in the way in which Austen’s representation of Anne’s innerness takes the form of an *inwardness* that oddly seems only penetrated from the outside with difficulty. A locution that Austen uses frequently when Anne is addressed by the outside world is “Anne found herself”: in the carriage on the way home from Lyme, Anne “found herself” being addressed by Wentworth (117). At Uppercross she “found herself” having the child removed from her back (80). This phrase has a way of suggesting that what precedes these moments of contact is a state somewhat like unconsciousness: it is an absorption within. At the concert hall: “These were thoughts, with their attendant visions, which occupied her too much to leave her any power of observation; and she passed along the room without having a glimpse of him, without even trying to discern him” (186). In the climactic scene at the White Hart hotel, Anne, absorbed in her thoughts, becomes “gradually sensible” that Captain Harville is addressing her (231). Sensations from the outside are often surprises, like physical shocks,

as when she is “electrified” by Mrs. Croft’s suddenly saying something of interest (49).

It is above all, as many of these examples suggest, contacts with Wentworth that take these sensory, sensational forms. Their renewed courtship takes place through moments of physical contact—as when Anne finds herself handed into the carriage—which are both erotic and strangely intrusive, described as impingements from the outside world on her mind. It seems fitting that their whole re-courtship is framed by the fact that Wentworth’s family—and Wentworth himself—have taken over Anne’s house.

This combination of eroticism, claustrophobia and sensation can be found above all in the scene in Chapter Nine in which Wentworth removes the child from Anne’s back. Maria Edgeworth singled out this passage in a letter, drawing attention to its surprising tactility:

The love and lover are admirably well-drawn: don’t you see Captain Wentworth, or rather *don’t you in her place feel him* taking the boistrous child off her back as she kneels by the sick boy on the sofa? (my emphasis)¹

This scene constitutes a pivotal moment. It seems on the one hand a moment where Wentworth asserts his potentially liberating role in Anne’s life, by freeing her from the claustrophobia of family duties, actually removing a burden from her back. But the agitation it produces in the “nervous,” “overcome” Anne (“such a varying, but very painful agitation, as she could not recover from”) seems to come not only from Anne’s confusion over Wentworth’s motives—his coming to her aid, his attempts to avoid her thanks—but also from the sheer physicality of this moment of contact between them. Wentworth removes a physical pressure from her back, but also creates a physical sensation there, at a part of the body where we are most vulnerable. In our semiotics of knowledge, we associate knowledge of others conceptually with vision, with facing forward towards the object of apprehension: to have this moment of contact at the back stresses how removed Anne’s experience of Wentworth is from normal knowledge of others’ presence.

Organized around moments such as these, the structure of Anne and Wentworth’s relationship produces many of the aspects of the text we evaluate as “lyric.” Austen’s depiction of their courtship stresses sensory experience, touch, sound; Anne’s experience of the

1 Maria Edgeworth, 21 Feb 1818, quoted in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B.C. Southam (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) 17.

beloved is organized into heightened moments of “shock.” Anne and Wentworth’s courtship allows Austen to conduct a typically lyric investigation of the claims of and resistances to the outside world.¹ The text’s organization of experience into heightened moments of shock might recall for us Benjamin’s discussion of the experience of “shock” as the condition of possibility for the production of post romantic lyric poetry in the essay on Baudelaire. For Benjamin, the modern world—and he is specifically writing in this essay about the experience of being surrounded by the urban crowd—is fundamentally unassimilable for “poetic experience” unless consciousness meets it as discrete shock-like encounters. We tend to think of the romantic and post-romantic lyric as a mode which involves the repression or exclusion of the social; for Benjamin, lyric is a mode of registering the social.

Because of the way in which Austen represents Anne’s consciousness, the presence of her lover is apprehended as invasive, much as the presence of others is. This may seem surprising, since to some extent *Persuasion* conceives of Wentworth, and the realm of romantic love he represents, as an alternative to the pressures of other people. We could, perhaps, see this as a strategy that attempts to reconcile or resolve a conflict in the novel between Anne’s submission to duty in refusing Wentworth in the past (which Anne, at least, maintains to the end of the novel was the right thing to do), and her fulfillment of her own desires in the present by marrying him.² Indeed, Austen seems to break down the distinction between persuasions from without, and internal states and desires, by, for example, frequently using the word “persuasion” to signify either external forces, or inner convictions. Anne, for example, feels the “persuasion” of having pleased the despondent Captain Benwick with her conversation about poetry (100). And later, Austen reveals the “internal persuasions” which lead Elizabeth to decide not to invite her relatives to dinner (219). And Austen renders Anne’s experience of Wentworth so as to suggest that love itself is a form of persuasion. At the end of the novel, Wentworth acknowledges Anne’s influence over him in terms of “the perfect, unrivalled hold” her mind “possessed over his own” (242).

But if the novel’s lyricism helps to resolve this conflict, it does so only by simultaneously highlighting how thoroughly consciousness

1 See Keith G. Thomas’ article [note 3], which also treats the encounters between Anne and Wentworth as lyric moments. While Thomas is similarly concerned with defining the role of the lyric in Austen’s novel, he conceives of it as primarily an issue of epistemology.

2 See Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Work of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984) 224–40.

is conditioned by the presence of others, *and* representing a kind of consciousness that is constituted *as* resistance to outside influence, much like Freud's "baked crust," or the glossy hazel-nut that Wentworth ironically holds out to Louisa Musgrove as an illustration of "firmness of mind" (88). There are moments in *Persuasion* which reveal the proximity of Benjamin's "shock" to another aesthetics of trauma, the sublime. Anne's crucial encounters with Wentworth are accompanied by overwhelming moments of access to the outside world. These moments often seem claustrophobic, moments when she is crowded in by or at least surrounded by her awareness of her environment. At Anne's first meeting with Wentworth, as "a thousand feelings" rush in on her, she has the following impression: "the room seemed full—full of persons and voices" (59). Anne experiences Wentworth's sudden presence as something that ushers in acute awareness not only of him but of the presence of all around her. This "all" loses its normal perceptual form—individual persons who speak particular utterances—and turns into bloated abstractions. "Persons" are separated from "voices."

As the novel progresses, Anne's moments of shock and inundation increasingly take a typically sublime turn: a trauma from without is parried and inverted to become part of a power within. What before seemed to bring an inundation by the outside world, now becomes part of her resistance to it. In the Octagon Room at the concert hall in Bath, a wash of noise signals her subjectivity's dominion over the outside world:

In spite of the agitated voice in which [Wentworth's speech] had been uttered, and in spite of all the various noises of the room, the almost ceaseless slam of the door, and ceaseless buzz of persons walking through, [Anne] had distinguished every word. (183)

Here too, heightened awareness of Wentworth's presence ushers in as well a heightened awareness of all that is not Wentworth, a room full of persons and voices. As is often the case in *Persuasion*, sensory experience is rendered primarily in terms of aural interference. But here, the narrator impresses these noises upon us in order to assert that Anne can subordinate them. The sounds of the room are reduced to ceaseless (the word is repeated), abstract, continuous sound, affirming the capacity of mind, even as it has been traumatized by the rushing in of sensations, to reduce the external world to a blur. But the outside world never goes entirely away. When, reunited at last, Anne and Wentworth retire to the gravel walk, it might seem that the

outside world intrudes into the text only to affirm the characters' absorption in each other:

And there, as they slowly paced the gradual ascent, heedless of every group around them, seeing neither sauntering politicians, bustling housekeepers, flirting girls, nor nursery maids and children, could they indulge in those retrospections and acknowledgements ... which were so poignant and so ceaseless in interest. (241)

Anne and Wentworth are no longer in a crowded concert room, but rather in a more expansive public space: the outside world gets bigger and more populous even as they become more enclosed in each other. The listing of urban characters here is reminiscent of Austen's earlier urban pastoral of the sounds of Bath (135). The listing serves to stress that a sense of the presence of other people does not go away. It maintains, as in the earlier "sounds of Bath" passage, its continuous, one-thing-after-another form. The progress that organizes the list—from politicians to housekeepers to flirting girls to infants—might seem to follow a descending scale of political importance—though from an early nineteenth-century woman's perspective, this list may not be descending in its claims to attention. The appearance, however, of the word "ceaseless" here, previously linked to the "white noise" of the world, signals the inversion which has occurred. Here, what is "ceaseless" are not the noises of the outside world, but the absorptions of love.

III

I'd like to return now to the question of the value of the literary in *Persuasion* that I raised at the beginning of this essay. If we read *Persuasion* in part for its lyric pleasures, what do the characters in the novel read for? Sir Walter is not the only reader in the Elliots' world. Even Mary Musgrove seems to read: she enjoys her stay at Lyme in part because she gets so many books at the library, "and changed them so often" (130). Elizabeth Elliot's rejection of the books Lady Russell lends her is surely a sign of her complete apostasy (215). But Austen herself sometimes appears to reject the notion that a taste for reading accompanies a higher moral sense, a deeper emotional sensitivity. Captain Wentworth seems to think that because Captain Benwick is "a reading man" (182), he must be subject to deep mental sufferings and long-lived feelings:

He considered his disposition as of the sort which must suffer heavily, uniting strong feelings with quiet retiring manners, and a decided taste for reading. (97)

Captain Wentworth is of course wrong about Benwick, who quickly overcomes the loss of Fanny Harville to fall in love with Louisa Musgrove. Books do not prepare or extend the psyche's receptivity to pain; they do not supplement or aid memory. Nor, as Anne Elliot discovers, does literature always provide consolation. On the walk to Winthrop in Chapter Ten, Anne mediates her enjoyment of the autumn day,

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. (84)

When she overhears a disturbing conversation between Wentworth and Louisa, however—"Anne could not immediately fall into a quotation again" (85). But Austen's most condemning and grotesque suggestions about the literary concern Louisa Musgrove, whose conversion to literature seems the effect of a fall, not into quotation, but onto her head:

The idea of Louisa Musgrove turned into a person of literary taste ... was amusing, but she had no doubt of its being so. The day at Lyme, the fall from the Cobb, might influence her health, her nerves, her courage, her character, to the end of her life. (167)

Louisa, recovered, is later described as a kind of semi-vegetable, responsive only to violent sensory stimuli, and poetry:

She is altered: there is no running or jumping about, no laughing or dancing; it is quite different. If one happens only to shut the door a little hard, she starts and wriggles like a dab chick in the water; and Benwick sits at her elbow, reading verses, or whispering to her, all day long. (218)

Here, in the figure of Louisa Musgrove, the novel's meditations on consciousness, sensation, and literature begin to come together. Louisa is now the opposite of the hazel-nut that Wentworth held up to

her as an image of firmness of mind. She has no “baked crust” of consciousness to parry sensations from the outside world. The “slam of the door” that Anne was able to subordinate in the Octagon Room works on Louisa as a physical trauma. Louisa falls into literature because it is all she can take.

The only people in *Persuasion* who have satisfying relations to books are men. Both Sir Walter Elliot and Captain Wentworth find pleasure and consolation in reading books which mark their own place in national history, Sir Walter in the Baronetage, and Wentworth in the Navy List, a “precious volume” he cradles in his hands (66). While men can find their past in books of public chronicle, women, like Anne Elliot, can turn only to personal memory, for which there is no book. Not only Baronetages and Navy Lists exclude women from finding consolation and adequate representation in books. In the climactic debate between Anne Elliot and Captain Harville about the comparative strengths and duration of the feelings of both sexes, Harville appeals to books as his witnesses:

If I had such a memory as Benwick, I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side of the argument, and I do not think I ever opened a book which had not something to say upon women’s inconstancy. (234)

Harville’s last phrase suggests that to read at all is to read about women’s fickleness. But Anne Elliot, who has a memory full of quotations, claims that quotation is no good:

If you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story ... the pen has been in their hands. (234)

It seems, then, that the gap between mind and books that emerges in *Persuasion* is in part an indictment of a masculine literary tradition. But the issue is more complicated than this. As Daniel Cottom has pointed out, Anne and Harville’s debate is in a way quotation itself—from one of the *Spectator* papers. In *Spectator* II, “Ariella” is arguing with a gentleman about women’s inconstancy: when he refers to “Quotations out of Plays and Songs,” she, like Anne Elliot, claims that male authors have maligned the whole sex.¹ And one thing that

1 Daniel Cottom, *The Civilized Imagination: A Study of Ann Radcliffe, Jane Austen, and Sir Walter Scott* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 122; *Selections from “The Tatler” and “The Spectator” of Steele and Addison*, ed. Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) 463.

had happened over the course of the eighteenth century, between the date of the *Spectator* and Austen's "quotation," was that literature, penned by both men and women, had become full not of inconstant and unfeeling women, but of abandoned and perpetually feeling women.

Austen also calls our attention to herself as a writer, and as a woman writer, here. Shortly before Anne protests that literature is no good record of women's feelings because "the pen has been in [men's] hands," Anne and Harville hear a noise, coming from where Wentworth has been sitting and writing:

A slight noise called her attention to Captain Wentworth's hitherto perfectly silent division of the room. It was nothing more than that his pen had fallen down, but Anne was startled at finding him nearer than she had supposed, and half inclined to suspect that the pen had only fallen, because he had been occupied by them, striving to catch sounds, which yet she did not think he could have caught. (233–34)

In a novel in which noises frequently are the means by which the presence of others is made felt, it seems appropriate that in this climactic scene Anne is once again "startled" aurally into an awareness of Wentworth's presence. But this noise is also an interruption of writing, a pen "which has been in their hands" falling down. This noise, I would suggest, also calls our attention to the fact the pen is now in Austen's hands. (I imagine this moment to be somewhat like that at the end of *Alice in Wonderland* when Alice, frustrated by the ineptitude of the jury animals at the trial, snatches the pencil out of one of their hands, as if to signify that she is becoming gradually conscious that she is the author of the dream.) Using a metaphor that seems appropriate to *Persuasion's* poetics of noise and absorption, William Gass has said about reading, "It seems incredible, the ease with which we sink through books quite out of sight, pass clamorous pages into soundless dreams."¹ This moment serves to startle us from our soundless absorption in the text, into self-consciousness about the "noise" of its production.²

1 William Gass, "The Medium of Fiction," *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Knopf, 1970) 27, cited by Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading For Pleasure* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988).

2 On writing and noise: the well-known image from James Austen-Leigh's *Memoir* of his aunt, of Austen writing "in the general sitting room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions" suggests that the woman writer's scene of writing, like her heroine's consciousness, was surrounded by a domestic "white noise." The "ceaseless slams" and shuttings of doors that [continued]

The notion that there may be some doubling at the end of *Persuasion* between the characters' experiences in the text, and our experiences of the text—that there is a foregrounding of authorial rustlings and of our sensations as readers and that we, like Anne, are being startled out of a certain kind of absorption—is confirmed as well through the device of the letter that Wentworth has been writing.¹ When letters are set into a novel there is, of course, always a sense in which reader and character find themselves in the same place, as both are supposedly reading the same words at the same time. For a number of reasons this effect seems especially strong here. The effect of this letter upon Anne is overwhelming:

Such a letter was not to be soon recovered from. Half an hour's solitude and reflection might have tranquilized her, but the ten minutes only, which now passed before she was interrupted, with all the restraints of her situation, could do nothing towards tranquility. Every moment rather brought fresh agitation. It was an overpowering happiness. (238)

And the reader? Certainly, if I may draw on my own adolescent experience, the crowning glory of rereading *Persuasion* (which I did often—reading, perhaps, like Sir Walter, to escape from “unwelcome sensations arising from domestic affairs” [3]) was getting to read Wentworth's letter: indeed, I remember on occasion opening the book just to read the letter alone. That Anne and the reader may be

punctuate Anne's awareness would have their analogue, in the nephew's account, in the creaking of the door that alerted Austen to the presence of others: “There was, between the front door and the offices, a swing door which creaked when it was opened; but she objected to having this little inconvenience remedied, because it gave her notice when any one was coming,” James Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (London: Century, 1987) 102.

- 1 Another moment at the end of the novel where authorial rustlings can be heard is in the odd allusion to Scheherazade's head at the very beginning of chapter 11: Anne wishes to tell Lady Russell the revelations about Mr. Elliot's character, but must “defer her explanatory visit” because she is engaged with the Musgraves: “Her faith was plighted, and Mr. Elliot's character, like the Sultaness Scheherazade's head, must live another day” (229). The allusion reminds us, just as the story is winding down, that the events in Anne's life are events in a story, both deferring and bringing about an ending. This seems especially true since we know that Austen in fact had difficulty writing the ending of *Persuasion*. Dissatisfied with her original ending, she wrote two new chapters—and this allusion appears right at the beginning of the second new chapter. Revision involved adding an extra chapter, deferring both the revelation of Elliot's reputation, and the conclusion of the book.

aligned here tempts me to point out the way in which the temporal structure of Anne's story—the repetition between the first courtship and the second courtship—produces an isomorphism between the doubling of first courtship and second courtship, *and* the doubling of Anne's experience and a reader's experience. Critics sometimes point out that *Persuasion* seems to begin where the “typical” Austen novel ends—that it seems not unlike a “second novel” that begins where a “first novel” has gone wrong.¹ The text itself suggested earlier that Anne's romance, or feelings, are the belated effect of “unnatural” origins—from being “forced” to follow a conventional story of first love and family prohibition; Anne's early experience is like a text that she is now repeating with renewed feeling. But if there is something literary in the temporal *structure* of the novel, there are also aspects of Anne's experience that seem like that of a reader. Frequently figured, as I've argued, as absorbed in a consciousness that registers other persons as sensations, Anne's state seems not unlike the kind of absorption Gass refers to. The novel presents us with several images of readerly absorption. Anne is so “engrossed” in Mary's letter from Uppercross that she cannot hear what her father is saying to her (162). Admiral Croft is the very image of absorption when Anne finds him in such “earnest contemplation” of a print in a shop window that she is “obliged to touch as well as address him before she could catch his notice” (169). And Mary exclaims of Captain Benwick (after Charles says “Give him a book, and he will read all day long”):

Yes, that he will! ... He will sit poring over his book, and not know when a person speaks to him, or when one drops one's scissiors, or any thing that happens. (132)

Readers—or people in reading-like states of absorbed contemplation—appear to attain the kind of imperviousness to the outside world which is how the novel often figures autonomy of mind.

But do books merely function as a kind of persuasion that simply shields us from other influences and presences? I'd like to return to the walk to Winthrop, where it appeared that Anne could not fall into quotation, where literature failed to protect her from unwelcome sensations from the outside world. It is here above all that Austen's critique of the limits of literature as consolation is accompanied by a pervasive intimation of literature's inevitability. This chapter is notable both for its seeming satire on the idea of mediating one's relation to both nature and one's own feelings with literature, and for

1 See Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986) 211–12.

its own heightened literariness. Somewhat like the trip to Sotherton in *Mansfield Park*, the walk to Winthrop on a lovely November day seems to take characters into a heightened literary atmosphere. It is in part the scene's autumnal tones, in such evident harmony with Anne's predicament, tones, which, as Austen points out, had become by this point synonymous in English literature with the poetical itself. Repeating poetry to herself, Anne clearly has done the kind of reading that would furnish her with what late eighteenth-century conduct book writers and anthologists advised for women, a "mind ... stored with a lasting treasure of sentiments and ideas."¹ In her disquisition on female reading in Chapter Five of *Northanger Abbey*, Austen satirized anthologies. But like Catherine Morland in Austen's earlier novel, Anne has clearly "read all such works" that women must read in order to "supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives."² Austen pokes fun at the conduct books' functionalist attitudes towards women's reading, but she nevertheless supplies the memories of her heroines with "such like musings and quotations." And while Anne may not be able to "fall" into a quotation readily after this interference, the text insists on supplying her with one in any case:

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. (85)

This autumn walk is most thoroughly literary even at the moments when real life is said to push literature aside. This is especially true in the passage where, pursuing their walk,

After another half mile of gradual ascent through large enclosures, where the ploughs at work, the fresh-made path spoke the farmer, counteracting the sweets of poetical despondence, and meaning to have spring again, they gained the summit of the most considerable hill. (85)

The structure of this sentence seems itself to enclose more poetical images, rather than expelling them, while the diction here animates

1 *The Female Aegis; or, The Duties of Woman From Childhood to Old Age* (London, 1798) 78.

2 *Northanger Abbey* 15, in vol. 5 of *The Novels of Jane Austen*.

the scene with pathetic fallacy. This is poetical agriculture, the georgic, which extends the poetical rather than counteracting it.

Thus, while the walk to Winthrop stresses the limits of literature as consolation, it simultaneously suggests that it is hard to fall out of literature.¹ If one of the things people read for is the kind of absorption that resembles the way Austen frequently figures consciousness, reading also conditions our reception of the outside world, not only of melancholy landscapes, but of overheard voices, and of other people. Austen is ironical here at the expense of women's reading, or perhaps rather of the uses to which it is put. But these passages suggest, as much as *Northanger Abbey* does, that women have learned to feel from literature. The notion that "the pen has always been in their hands," that the true nature of women's feelings falls outside of literature, can only be one moment in what this book has to say on this subject: Austen's ambivalence may have to do as well with its opposite—with a sense that literature has been too much with women.

In *Persuasion*, Austen registers the social threats to women's autonomy, but is skeptical of offering up consciousness as a realm of freedom impervious to others. The novel warns that mental space is always impinged upon. The love plot, far from freeing Anne from the pressures of others, structures the representation of her consciousness in a way that heightens their effects. Austen represents consciousness as a form of resistance only by showing how it is paved over with recollections and repetitions of sensations. Autonomy of mind often appears as an extreme form of absorption which renders one simply incapable of attending to the outside world. I suggested earlier that threats to the mind's autonomy may be represented by the novel's repeated references to bumps on the head. Louisa Musgrove might have to fall on her head to start reading, but for Anne Elliot, it may be that reading is what has already knocked her over the head. Literature, that is, may be another thing that both produces consciousness as a form of resistance to unwanted pressures, and constricts mental space as a realm of freedom or autonomy. At the end of the novel, Mrs. Musgrove worries that Anne's disordered condition after reading Wentworth's letter might be the result of her having "slipped down, and got a blow to her head," and will not rest until

1 Daniel Cottom's discussion of the walk to Winthrop has yielded similar insights. He conceives of Austen's characters as existing in an "environment of quotation" in order to stress Austen's apperception of the rigorously social and cultural contents of her heroines' psyches. Cf. his assessment of the love plot of *Persuasion*: "The passage of time intervenes here to characterize love as the repetition or 'quotation' of an earlier experience that is not personal and immediate but cultural and historical, and embodied in literature as in the institutions of society," *The Civilized Imagination* 120.

she is sure of Anne's "having had no fall" (238). But it is only love, or reading. I noted earlier that there is something "literary" about the temporal structure of *Persuasion*: that Anne's experience resembles a reader's, that the first courtship is to the second courtship as a book is to a reader. For Anne, we could say, the repetition of romance renders her early experience as one she is now quoting. For Anne Elliot, there is no falling out of quotation.

(1993)