Loss and the Language of Restitution in *Persuasion*

Most of Austen’s novels educate their heroines away from error. Emma and Elizabeth, Catherine and Marianne, are taught by circumstances to see the nature of their egotism and folly and are led by repentence into a more mature understanding of the world and of themselves. Anne Elliot’s error, however, occurs over seven years before the beginning of the novel. Her falling into chastened silence and suffering has constituted the whole of that intervening period. Anne’s education is not one of seeing and avoiding the errors of imagination and wit; it is an education in how to overcome the suffering that follows the awareness of error. Though Anne was right to follow Lady Russell’s advice, that advice was wrong. Anne’s recognition of Lady Russell’s misjudgment and of her own rectitude, however, does not bring into being a happy ending. How easily happiness can be missed! Being right, as Anne sorrowfully discovers, does not bring happiness. *Persuasion* offers one model after another of how the human personality copes with adversity, disappointment and lost opportunities. Anne and Wentworth are the only characters who learn that happiness cannot be regained until they seek it. And in their restricted society, the only means of regaining happiness is through language. Thus the barrier between Anne and Wentworth is appropriately linguistic. Words keep them apart; only words can bring them together. Anne’s search for happiness, her transition from passive suffering into a more roused struggle against fate, must lie in her breaking through the barrier of silence or the equally deadly barrier of common speech, the ‘nothingness’ of polite talk.

*Persuasion* disturbs some readers because, unlike most of Austen’s novels, it does not trace the moral education of the heroine.¹ One cannot even see in Anne Elliot much of the selfishness of selflessness we traced in Fanny Price. But though Anne is indeed virtuous throughout the novel, her virtue in and of itself cannot bring her the romantic fulfilment other Austen heroines enjoy at the
ends of their respective stories. This distinction is crucial, because in the other Austen novels, once a heroine has reached a certain level of moral understanding, she is rewarded with the love of the hero. Not so in *Persuasion*. Anne’s realization that she would have been happier engaged to Wentworth even with an unstable prospect for the future does not bring her lover back to her. At the beginning of the novel, Anne is wise but alone, has been alone for over seven years, and has no prospect of being anything but alone in the years to come. Has Austen thus renounced her vision of poetic justice? Does wisdom no longer make necessary a happy ending? As we shall see, poetic justice operates in *Persuasion*, but wisdom alone is no longer a sufficient impetus for a happy ending. The romantic resolution now hinges on the heroine’s behaviour during a higher trial – not the trial of judging rightly or wrongly, but of living with the consequences of wrong judgment, even that of others. The theme of *Persuasion* is loss, that primeval consequence of wrong; its countertheme is grace, the miracle of restitution. In this sense, *Persuasion* is Austen’s most spiritual novel, for while on the one hand it celebrates human endeavour and activity – the navy, for instance, or Anne’s verbal aggressiveness in securing Wentworth at the end – it also recognizes in a way unlike the other novels the precariousness of human achievement. It suggests that loss is the essential human condition and that we are defined by our reactions and adaptations to that loss. *Persuasion* in fact may be Austen’s response to her own loss of health and her sense of impending death. Thus, Anne’s and Wentworth’s triumph over loss is both a testament to the fidelity and resourcefulness of the human spirit and an example of how rare such triumphs are. Their union is a miracle, a miracle moreover that is not guaranteed to last. Because Austen’s vision is now embued with this sense of life’s transitory nature, the novel can end both by proclaiming that Anne and Wentworth are happy together, and by suggesting that their happiness is under the constant ‘dread of a future war’ (p. 252). Loss has been for the moment overcome, but continues to be a future possibility.

Because every character in *Persuasion* has suffered loss or adversity, the *dramatis personae* in the novel operate as a complex system of foils to Anne and Wentworth and their loss of each other. The characters’ responses to loss constitute a sampling of how the human personality reacts in the face of adversity and disappointment. Again and again, these characters demonstrate the wrong – or, at best, inadequate – responses to loss, and thus reveal