

A Note on Jane Austen's Style in *Persuasion*

—The Heroine's Point of View and the Author's Tone of Voice—

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In the preceding paper¹⁾, the writer inquired into Elizabeth's character through her speech, since she is vividly represented in its various tones. Needless to say, the changes which take place in her mind are more minutely shown in the descriptive parts where the author's point of view is often mingled with the heroine's. The heroine's judgment is as acute and ironic as her author's. Still she makes a great mistake because of her prejudice, and the author stands at some distance from her, supervising the story with the ironic eye of a dramatist.

In *Persuasion*, however, the author's attitude is a little different, though the pattern is much the same. We see all the characters through the heroine's eyes. Anne needs no supervision, because she can see as clearly, without prejudice, as her author. Anne, too, has committed an error before the story begins—she has been persuaded by Lady Russell to reject Captain Wentworth's proposal. But after eight years, she has grown up to be an elegant lady, sensitive and solid in judgment. She has become wise through suffering the consequences of her own mistakes.

Though her speech is not as witty as that of Elizabeth she is highly intelligent. Her personality is most impressively shown in the passages describing how she feels and thinks. And here the author's point of view is often in tone with the heroine's, a tone of voice peculiar to this novel.

Before inquiring into the subtleties of Austen's style, let us consider Anne's speech to see how she is represented in it. In Chapters I and II, we do not encounter Anne's speech. Even when Lady Russell makes a long speech concerning the plans of economy in the Kellynch hall, Anne's opinion is indirectly shown in the descriptive passage as follows :

1) Cf. E. Suhama, *The Tone of Elizabeth's Speech in Pride and Prejudice* (Essays & Studies by the Faculty of Hiroshima Jogakuin College, Vol. 17, 1967)

She considered it as an act of indispensable duty to clear away the claims of creditors, with all the expedition which the most comprehensive retrenchments could secure, and saw no dignity in any thing short of it. She wanted it to be prescribed, and felt as a duty. (p. 12)²⁾

What she thinks important is the idea of duty and honesty which her father and sister cannot put up with because of their vanity.

We first encounter her speech in Chapter III, when Mr. Shepherd offers rich Naval Officers as responsible tenants and her father gives a negative answer :

‘The navy, I think, who have done so much for us, have at least an equal claim with any other set of men, for all the comforts and all the privileges which any home can give. Sailors work hard enough for their comforts, we must all allow.’ (p. 19)

She speaks modestly, with her emotions repressed. In most cases, especially in the former half of the novel, she speaks with some reserve, since she does not want to injure others’ feelings. And accordingly, her speech lacks vividness which characterizes Elizabeth’s speech. But in the latter half, when she finds herself ‘to be blessed with a second spring of youth and beauty’ (p. 138) and becomes ‘strong to hold her opinion’ (p. 179), her tone of speech changes. Take for example the following :

‘Such excellent parents as Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove,’ exclaimed Anne, ‘should be happy in their children’s marriages. They do everything to confer happiness, I am sure. What a blessing to young people to be in such hands! Your father and mother seem so totally free from all those ambitious feelings which have led so much misconduct and misery, both in young and old! I hope you think Louisa perfectly recovered now?’ (p. 250)

The dialogue between Anne and Captain Harville in Chapter XXIII is very significant, because her argument represents a different aspect of her nature. She expresses her opinion on the constancy of women so confidently as to move Wentworth to confess his love for Anne in his letter afterwards :

‘I hope I do justice all that is felt by you, and by those who resemble you. God forbid that I should undervalue the warm and faithful feelings of any of my fellow-creatures. I should deserve utter contempt if I dared to suppose that

2) Page numbers after the quotation refer to The World’s Classics Edition, Oxford, 1964.

true attachment and constancy were known only by woman. No, I believe you capable of every thing great and good in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion, and to every domestic forbearance, so long as—if I may be allowed the expression, so long as you have an object. I mean, while the woman you love lives, and lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex... is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone.' (p. 270)

Her speech itself is of course a key to understand her character as has been seen in the above quotations, but the subtle movements of her mind are shown in the descriptive passages which take the form of Represented Speech when the heroine's point of view coincides very closely with her author's.

In Chapter IV the author narrates the unsuccessful love between Anne and Wentworth :

More than seven years were gone since this little history of sorrowful interest had reached its close ; and time had softened down much, perhaps nearly all of peculiar attachment to him,... They knew not each other's opinion, with its constancy or its change, on the one leading point of Anne's conduct, for the subject was never alluded to,—but Anne, at seven and twenty, thought very differently from what she had been made to think at nineteen. (pp. 29–30)

We can feel here the author's calm and sympathetic tone of voice. Then she identifies herself with Anne, and the tone changes :

She did not blame Lady Lussel, she did not blame herself for having been guided by her ; but she felt that were any young person, in similar circumstances, to apply to her for counsel, they would never receive any of such certain immediate wretchedness, such uncertain future good.—She was persuaded 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 ; and this, she fully believed, had the usual share, had even more than a usual share of all such solitudes and suspense been theirs, without reference to the actual results of their case, which, as it happened, would have bestowed earlier prosperity than could be reasonably calculated on. (p. 31)

Outwardly Anne does not think what she did wrong, but the bitter sense of regret is shown in the complicated sentences. And then follows the author's comment :

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 of an unnatural beginning. (pp. 31-2)

We not only feel the author's sympathetic tone toward Anne's misfortune, but also a suggestive note of her future happiness, expressed in the ironic contrast of 'the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning', and the word 'romance' signifies the atmosphere of this novel different from her earlier books.

The appearance of Wentworth at Uppercross touches Anne's heart. When she was invited to join their dinner, she insisted on being left to dine alone—she was quite 'unpersuadable'. But in the following we feel the agitation of her heart :

...as for herself, she was left with as many sensations of comfort, as were, perhaps, ever like to be hers. She knew herself to be of the first utility to the child; and what was it to her, if Frederick Wentworth were only half a mile distant, making himself agreeable to others!

'What was it to her' does not mean that 'it was nothing to her', but that 'it was a great thing to her', expressed in Represented Speech. The author's point of view is in accord with Anne's here.

And her conjectures as to his mind is unfolded as follows :

She would have liked to know how he felt as to a meeting. Perhaps indifferent, if indifference could exist under such circumstances. He must be either indifferent or unwilling. Had he wished ever to see her again, he need not have waited till this time; he would have done what she could not but believe that in his place she should have done long ago, ... (p. 64)

She is not sure of his present state of mind, and the repeated use of 'indifferent' is suggestive of her wish that he should not be indifferent. Her complicated feelings are expressed in Subjunctive form.

When she was informed of Wentworth's visit, she felt 'a thousand feelings rushed on' her, and the scene is described as follows :

Her eye half met Captain Wentworth's; a bow, a curtsy passed; she heard his voice—he talked to Mary, said all that was right; said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to mark an easy footing: the room seemed full—full

of persons and voices—but a few minutes ended it. . . . Mary talked, but she could not attend. She had seen him. They had met. They had been once more in the same room. (p. 66)

There is a contrast between the above quotation and the preceding one. Here the sentences are quite simple and direct, and transmit the throbs of her heart. But she is always severe to herself and endeavours to suppress her feelings in her attachment to Wentworth :

Soon, however, she began to reason with herself, and try to be feeling less. Eight years had, almost eight years had passed, since all had been given up. How absurd to be resuming the agitation which such an interval had banished into distance and indistinctness! What might not eight years do? Events of every description, changes, alienations, removals,—all, all must be comprised in it; and oblivion of the past—how natural, how certain too! . . . Now, how were his sentiments to be read? Was this like wishing to avoid her? And the next moment she was hating herself for the folly which asked the question. (p. 66)

The tone of the sentences varies so delicately that it is sometimes hard to say when the author sneaks into Anne's mind. The word 'agitation' is repeated to indicate her mental sufferings; the process of her shock, humiliation, perseverance and finally self-restraint are closely followed from the inside.

The next chapter is also written from Anne's point of view. She would like to avoid seeing Wentworth, but she was compelled to see him against her will.

Whether former feelings were to be renewed, must be brought to the proof; former times must undoubtedly be brought to the recollection of each; *they* could not but be reverted to; the year of their engagement could not but be named by him, in the little narratives or descriptions which conversation called forth. . . . Anne felt the utter impossibility, from her knowledge of his mind, that he could be unvisited by remembrance any more than herself. There must be the same immediate association of thought, though she was very far from conceiving it to be of equal pain. They had no conversation together, no intercourse out what the commonest civility required. Once so much to each other! Now nothing! There *had* been a time, when of all the large party now filling the drawing-room at Uppercross, they would have found it most difficult to cease to speak to one another. With the exception, perhaps, of Admiral and Mrs. Croft, . . . there could have been no two hearts so open, no

tastes so similar, no feelings so in unison, no countenances so beloved. Now they were as strangers; nay, worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement. (pp. 70-1)

Their present feelings are compared with those of their past to emphasize that there was no possibility of Anne's happiness at present. The repeated uses of 'must', 'could not but', and negative words express Anne's sadness and loneliness, to which the author gives her sympathetic exclamations.

Both Wentworth and Anne were quite surprised at finding themselves alone one morning, and his kindness in helping her deranged Anne's mind :

Her sensations on the discovery made her perfectly speechless. She could not even thank him. She could only hang over little Charles, with most disordered feelings. His kindness in stepping forward to her relief—the manner—the silence in which it had passed—the little particulars of the circumstance—with the conviction soon forced on her by the noise he was studiously making with the child, that he meant to avoid hearing her thanks, and rather sought to testify that her conversation was the last of his wants, produced such a confusion of varying, but very painful agitation, as she could not recover from, ... She was ashamed of herself, quite ashamed of being so nervous, so overcome by such a trifle; but so it was; and it required a long application of solitude and reflection to recover her. (pp. 90-1)

Her astonishment is first shown in three short sentences, and then the subtle movements of her heart are revealed.

A more important event occurred on their walk from Winthrop. Anne was asked to get into the gig, and unexpectedly, Wentworth helped her to get into the carriage :

Yes,—he had done it. She was in the carriage, and felt that he had placed her there, that his will and his hands had done it, that she owed it to his perception of her fatigue, and his resolution to give her rest. She was very much affected by the view of his disposition towards her which all these things made apparent. This little circumstance seemed the completion of all that had gone before. She understood him. He could not forgive her,—but he could not be unfeeling. Though condemning her for the past, and considering it with high and unjust resentment, though becoming attached to another, still he could not see her suffer, without the desire of giving her relief. It was a remainder of former sentiment; it was an impulse of pure, though unacknow-

ledged friendship; it was a proof of his own warm and amiable heart, which she could not contemplate without emotions so compounded of pleasure and pain, that she knew not which prevailed. (p. 103)

The repetition of *that*-clauses after 'felt' signifies that she is assuring herself of his deed. She understands that he could not forgive her, but she is very much moved by his silent considerations for her.

Louisa's fall on the pavement at Lyme was a dreadful accident but it led Wentworth closer to Anne. However, there is still a gap between them. She was afraid that he only valued her as a useful helper to Louisa. When she heard him cry, 'Oh God! that I had not given way to her at the fatal moment! Had I done as I ought!...', she thought as follows:

Anne wondered whether it ever occurred to him now, 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. 133)

This is written in so-called Indirect Narration without the author's particular tone of voice.

When they returned to Uppercross to inform Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove of their daughter's accident, Wentworth asked Anne's opinion about what should be done at first. She was very pleased because he paid regard to her judgment.

Anne, unlike Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, always sets herself in a frame and never goes out of it, with her feelings repressed.

But after such an event, she feels that something is changing her mind, and signs of her happiness begin to show:

When they came to converse, she was soon sensible of some mental change. The subjects of which her heart had been full on leaving Kellynch, and which she had felt slighted, and been compelled to smother among the Musgroves, were now become but of secondary interest. She had lately lost sight even of her father and sister and Bath. Their concerns had been sunk under those of Uppercross, and when Lady Russell reverted to their former hopes and fears, and spoke her satisfaction in the house in Camden-place, which had been taken,

and her regret that Mrs. Clay should still be with them, Anne would have been ashamed to have it known, how much more she was thinking of Lyme, and Louisa Musgrove, and all her acquaintance there; how much more interesting to her was the home and the friendship of the Harvilles and Captain Benwick, than her own sister's intimacy with Mrs. Clay. (pp. 138-9)

She had now overcome the family influences to which she had given way at nineteen, her eyes turned on the outside world. And yet she could not but reflect on such a change herself.

When she called on Mrs. Smith, her old school-fellow, she was surprised at her way of living; there is a world so different from her own. Mrs. Smith was transformed into a poor, infirm, helpless widow, but she is still cheerful and enjoying her life with good sense. Anne asked herself:

How could it be?—She watched—observed—reflected—and finally determined that this was not a case of fortitude or of resignation only.—A submissive spirit might be patient, a strong understanding would supply resolution, but here was something more; here was elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from Nature alone. It was the choicest gift of Heaven; and Anne viewed her friend as one of those instances in which, by a merciful appointment, it seems designed to counterbalance almost every other want. (pp. 174-5)

Then the author makes a comment on the power of Nature and the gift of Heaven, which reminds us of her tone of voice in Chapter IV, where she talks about 'time', 'Providence' and 'natural sequel' as means of softening down the heroine's peculiar attachment to her lover.

The comment on Mr. Elliot's character is made from Anne's point of view which also reflects the author's:

She never could accept him. And it was not only that her feelings were still adverse to any man save one; her judgment, on a serious consideration of the possibilities of such a case, was against Mr. Elliot. Though they had now been acquainted a month, she could not be satisfied that she really knew his character. That he was a sensible man, an agreeable man,—that he talked well, professed good opinions, seemed to judge properly and as a man of principle,—this was all clear enough. ...and, though he might now think very differently, who

could answer for the true sentiments of a clever, cautious, man, grown old enough to appreciate a fair character? How could it ever be ascertained that his mind was truly cleansed? Mr. Elliot was national, discreet, polished,—but he was not open. There was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others. This, to Anne, was a decided imperfection... Mr. Elliot was too generally agreeable. Various as were the tempers in her father's house, he pleased them all.

He endured too well,—stood too well with everybody. (pp. 182-3)

Outwardly he has nothing to be blamed—he is sensible, agreeable, rational, discreet, polished, etc., — and yet she cannot accept him since he is not frank. She, instinctively, though not logically, perceives his insincerity.

'Agreeable' is generally used as a favorable epithet to explain the characters in Austen's novels, but in the above quotation, it is used with negative force. And this also reveals the author's view of human nature.

The greater part of Chapter XIX is written in Represented Speech. Anne met Wentworth at Milson Street, and this time their position was quite reversed; Wentworth was struck and confused by the sight of her and looked quite red. She had been prepared for meeting him so that she was successful in hiding her strong surprise. Still, however, 'she had enough to feel!'—the contradictory emotions express her confusion:

It was agitation, pain, pleasure, a something between delight and misery. He spoke to her, and then turned away. The character of his manner was embarrassment. She could not have called it either cold or friendly, or anything so certainly as embarrassed. (p. 200)

Receiving Wentworth's love-letter, she was so shocked that she did not know how to behave herself, when Charles and others came in. She told them that she wanted to be excused because of her indisposition:

They could then see that she looked very ill—were shocked and concerned—and would not stir without her for the world. This was dreadful! Would they only have gone away, and left her in the quiet possession of that room, it would have been her cure; but to have them all standing or waiting around her was distracting, and, in desperation, she said she would go home. (pp. 273-5)

And in the following Anne's reflections blend easily with the author's:

At last Anne was at home again, and happier than any one in that house could have conceived. All the surprise and suspense, and every other painful part of the morning dissipated by this conversation, she re-entered the house so happy as to be obliged to find an alloy in some momentary apprehensions of its being impossible to last. An interval of meditation, serious and grateful, was the best corrective of every thing dangerous in such high-wrought felicity; and she went to her room, and grew steadfast and fearless in the thankfulness of her enjoyment. (p. 282)

It cannot be said, of course, that Jane Austen is always contented with allowing Anne to see her characters through her eyes. She gives her own ironic observation at frequent intervals, especially when she describes those persons who are vain and conceited. For instance, the opening scene of the novel itself reveals her dislike of snobbery—Sir Walter Elliot, Anne's father, is summed up as 'a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronatage; ...'

The last chapter also is narrated genuinely from the author's point of view. We can feel her cold, ironic tone, especially toward Anne's father and sister.

Persuasion cannot be classed as a masterpiece in Jane Austen's novels, but it has a peculiar interest of its own.

She saw life in a clear, dry light, and had an ironic eye for vanity, selfishness and vulgarity, but underneath it she had deep human sympathy which is delicately shown in this novel. Her tone of voice is neither pompous, nor sentimental, nor exaggerated, but always quiet, level and introspective. She agrees with her heroine in *Persuasion* much more than she has ever done before, and this attitude has produced a peculiarly personal tone in this novel.