

“Unvarying, warm admiration everywhere”: The Truths about Wentworth

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The scene opens as Anne (Elliot) Wentworth welcomes her friend Louisa (Musgrove) Benwick to her home.

Anne (Elliot) Wentworth: My dear Louisa. What a pleasure to see you. I hope you are well. Captain Wentworth regrets that he must be absent. It seems he must attend to some business over the promotion of a young man, Price, I think was the name. Won’t you sit down and be at home with me?

Louisa (Musgrove) Benwick: Thank you for your kindness, Anne. I received a letter from my dear mother yesterday and she charged me with passing on her love to you. And here is the book you so kindly lent my husband, Captain Benwick. I, too, succumbed to the inviting title, *Sense and Sensibility*. What a wonderful book by such a wonderful lady novelist!

Anne: Yes, I agree the book is a delight. I am eager to know if this author has produced another novel, which Mrs. Whitby might lend us. I found Elinor Dashwood’s fortitude in enduring her sister’s illness exemplary. I confess I read this novel not only with satisfaction but also with real benefit. It contains many salutary maxims for the conduct of life, but it is also a pleasing and entertaining narrative.

Louisa: I found the story of Marianne Dashwood the most superb part of the narrative. Willoughby’s courtship of Marianne and his subsequent callous desertion moved me deeply. The suffering of that dear girl as she lost the man she so desperately and sincerely loved was so very poignant. Her period of anxious waiting in London when she was hesitant to leave the house should he happen to leave a card, eager to attend gatherings where he might be and then to be so humiliated at the ball, Willoughby coldly treating her like a common acquaintance after months of intimate connection. What a heartless creature!

Anne: Perhaps. But I am quite sure she is partly to blame; after all, did she not encourage his advances? To be blunt, dear Louisa, did she not accompany Mr. Willoughby to Allenham when Mrs. Smith was not in residence? No, far from an innocently wronged woman—and far be it from me to criticise unfairly one of our sex—Miss Marianne appeared to me too intent upon fixing Mr. Willoughby and too eager to be married to stop and think.

Louisa: Well! I believe Marianne’s motivations were pure, those of the most sincere and blameless love! Any woman, my dear Anne, who has ever felt *deeply* would see Marianne’s behaviour in this light. I, certainly, have felt

deeply and I, too, have suffered because of it. Reading *Sense and Sensibility* has made a certain period of our acquaintance come painfully alive for me again.

Anne: Pray, do not unsettle yourself by referring to that melancholy event.

Louisa: I do not wish to offend *your* sensibilities, but Captain Wentworth's behaviour to me last fall was like Willoughby's towards Marianne. If you remember, when Wentworth appeared in our midst at Uppercross, he took great pains to impress himself favourably on both my sister, Henrietta, and me; indeed, for a short time, he drove a rift between dear Henrietta and Charles Hayter: when Charles returned from his two-week absence, he "had the pain of finding very altered manners, and of seeing Captain Wentworth" (Austen 74). Fortunately, we all weathered the storm caused by Captain Wentworth. When he finally decided to fix his attentions on me . . .

Anne: I observed, however, that Frederick rather accepted the attentions of you and your sister than actively pursued either one of you.

Louisa: Captain Wentworth *persuaded* me that his flirtation had taken a more serious turn. Do you remember our walk to Winthrop?

Anne: Yes, I do.

Louisa: His flattery was very pointed; he said to me: "Your sister is an amiable creature; but *YOURS* is the character of decision and firmness" (88). He praised my mind, my strength. Picking up a nut, he said: "Here is a nut . . .



"She very soon heard Captain Wentworth and Louisa."

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a beautiful glossy nut, which . . . has outlived all the storms of autumn. Not a puncture, not a weak spot any where." And he told me that if I would be "beautiful and happy in [my] November of life," I should "cherish all [my] present firmness of mind" (88). What a speech! How dreadfully rehearsed and even more dreadfully intended!

Anne: My dear Louisa, how romantically you represent the case. Surely you have been reading too many lady novelists. I am sure that my dear Captain Wentworth could not possibly have misled you. Why should he? Indeed, he met with only unvarying, warm admiration every where at Uppercross. I am sure that if you recollect you were eager to prove . . .

Louisa: Not misleading me! Unvarying, warm admiration every where? He persuaded me that his intentions were honourable! The only part I had in bringing about my suffering was believing that a man of his rank and profession, and so welcomed by my family, would be honourable and sincere. He once alluded to a certain time in his life, where his love had been unjustly turned away [*pause*]. I felt I had to do every thing in my power to keep his trust. He loved my strength, he said, so I became intent on proving my strength and my love to him over and over again. He persuaded me that I could weather any storm. You recall the events at Lyme. How misled I was! It was all just a figure of speech. The hazelnut may survive without "a puncture, not a weak spot any where" (88), but that was not my fate: I was told that although "there was no wound, no blood, no visible bruise; . . . [my] eyes were closed, [I] breathed not, [my] face was like death" (109). I do not recall the particular event myself, but I perfectly remember the months of subsequent agony.

Anne: All the same, my dear Mrs. Benwick, I must recollect to you that you were quite determined to make your proper adieux to the Cobb. You would be jumped down Granny's teeth and Captain Wentworth has told me, at some expense to his peace of mind, that in all your walks together you took particular pleasure in being jumped down the stiles that you encountered. I am quite shocked indeed to hear of it, my dear, considering the risks. And I recall distinctly that dear Captain Wentworth clearly expressed his disinclination on the Cobb. But, no, you would not be persuaded; you thought yourself quite impervious to injury. And you can have no recollection of the horror of that moment! No indeed, though your very sister sank senseless and would have fallen, too, had not Captain Wentworth and I supported her. Your other sister was stricken and Captain Wentworth himself scarcely knew what to do. Even our brother Charles was quite beside himself with worry and grief. It was a scene of great misery, you can be sure. And now you represent the accident as the fault of my own dear Frederick. If you will forgive me, it is impossible.

Louisa: He encouraged our intimacy, persuaded me to be firm in my desire, and then when public eyes were upon us, he deserted me. *Never* did he come to see me! Those endless days and nights when I tossed in pain, he never came. I found out much later that he left Lyme to stay with his newly-married brother, Edward, in Shropshire, the very brother whom he had been in no

particular hurry to visit before. If you remember, at Uppercross, "There was so much of friendliness, and of flattery, and of every thing most bewitching in his reception there; the old were so hospitable, the young so agreeable, that he could not but resolve to remain where he was, and take all the charms and perfections of Edward's wife upon credit a little longer" (73).

Anne: As to his never visiting you, indeed, my dear, it was all in your interest. What pain it caused him to see the blush fade from your cheeks and to be reminded of that dreadful scene at Lyme! When he learned that I was to return to Uppercross, relinquishing to Mary the role of nurse, his expressions of displeasure showed me that he only valued me as I could be useful to you. Indeed, you were uppermost in his mind. You never heard how he restrained his grief as we drove back to Uppercross, only once bursting forth with regretting that he had, at the fatal moment, given way to your impetuous demands. But that one moment revealed such a depth of feeling. I am sure you have been told that as soon as he broke the melancholy news to your mother and father he left for Lyme immediately the horses were baited. The next day he returned to Kellynch to bring us word of your progress and then left again to stay at Lyme. And although he did not see you, it was only out of concern for you. You must know that he was so fearful of any ill consequence to you from his presence, that he shrank from imposing himself in your sick room and departed only when he knew that you began to recover.

Louisa: Indeed, what misguided discourse is this: "Fearful of any ill consequence to me . . . he shrank from imposing himself"? What possible ill effects could there have been in seeing the man for whom I cared deeply and who, I had been persuaded to think, cared deeply for me also? In times of tribulation, it is our wish to be surrounded by those who are dearest to our hearts. It is a natural desire and necessary to recovery, I am quite sure. Without Captain Benwick, I should not have had the fortitude to bear my affliction.

Anne: We all received a peculiar shock when we learned of your betrothal to Captain Benwick. Indeed, I was most concerned for Captain Wentworth's feelings.

Louisa: Captain Wentworth's feelings! I see we will never quite agree on this matter. Perhaps you conclude that the fall has impaired my memory and my faculties? I am sure that Captain Wentworth has persuaded you that his attentions were misunderstood, but remember, that he once praised my character as superior to any. My dear Anne, believe what you will, what you must believe in order to live happily with such a man, such an opportunist, as Captain Wentworth.



It has been observed by many readers that *Persuasion* is the sequel to a story that ended eight years before Sir Walter discovers he must retrench. Time is of the essence in *Persuasion*. Claudia Johnson writes, "*Persuasion* is a calculated tangle of years and dates, and the passage of time itself is foregrounded . . . we are constantly being pointed backwards" (147). Tony

Tanner argues that *Persuasion* "is in effect a second novel" (211) and it "arises precisely out of the thwarting and 'negating' of [Austen's] first . . . novel" (212). Wentworth and Anne's relationship failed the first time and eight years later, their story begins again. It is our view that *Persuasion* not only takes up where its pre-text left off, but also revises the events for the consumption of a new audience. Rather than looking at how the past continues into the present, we want to focus on the changes made to the past and how the past is re-written for the present. This structure of twice-told tales necessarily produces competing versions of the same events and is intrinsic to the activity of persuasion.

We have re-animated Louisa Musgrove to show that her competing narrative of the accident at Lyme and its aftermath threatens the authority claimed by Anne and Wentworth. No story can tell it all; each act of writing necessitates the suppression of that which it cannot accommodate. Writing, therefore, is anxiety-ridden, for the suppression of secrets is always provisional and temporary; secrets are always open to exposure. As Mr. Shepherd says, "we know how difficult it is to keep the actions and designs of one part of the world from the notice and curiosity of the other" (Austen 17).

Louisa Musgrove has never been a favourite with critics. Claudia Johnson and Susan Morgan agree with Admiral Croft's statement about the Musgrove sisters: "Very nice young ladies they both are; I hardly know one from the other" (92). Louisa is the obstacle between Wentworth and Anne; she is Wentworth's mistake that the forgiving main narrative fortunately does not hold him to. While Anne knows her feelings throughout, Wentworth undergoes the evolution of feeling characteristic of Austen heroines like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse. Louisa, hence, is turned into a tool that marks the growth of Captain Wentworth. Alistair Duckworth argues that Wentworth "takes the spoiled willfulness of Louisa for genuine fortitude" and he "must come to see that it is Anne who possesses true strength of mind" (197). Similarly, Marilyn Butler states that "the meaning of the accident on the Cobb—that Anne is strong while Louisa is only childishly willful—is directed at the moral understanding of Captain Wentworth and of the reader" (279). In the words of John Wiltshire, "Narratively, Louisa's tumble is no accident" (5-6). Thus, the accident at Lyme, while knocking poor Louisa senseless, brings Wentworth to his senses:

till that day, till the leisure for reflection which followed it, he had not understood the perfect excellence of the mind with which Louisa's could so ill bear a comparison; or the perfect, unrivalled hold it possessed over his own. There, he had learnt to distinguish between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind. (242)

In bringing Louisa back to life, we have attempted to show that Louisa does have a story of her own and that it fundamentally differs from Anne and Wentworth's version. When Anne learns of the marriage of Benwick and Louisa, she worries "how Captain Wentworth would feel":

Perhaps he had quitted the field, had given Louisa up, had ceased to love, had found he did not love her. She could not endure the idea of treachery or levity, or

any thing akin to ill-usage between him and his friend. She could not endure that such a friendship as theirs should be severed unfairly. (166)

Although Anne is specifically talking about Wentworth and Benwick, the fears equally apply to Wentworth and Louisa's relationship; Anne wilfully blocks out any evidence of "ill-usage."

The novel is heavily laden with amended stories. Perhaps the most carefully-revised character is Richard Musgrove, noticed only because he has been removed from the family circle. In his return to life, as the subject of a lamentable narrative, he acquires a new first name, "poor": "his sisters were now doing all they could for him, by calling him 'poor Richard'" (51). Having written two disinterested letters in his life, he becomes, in his mother's words, a "steady and excellent correspondent" (67). Had he lived, Mrs. Musgrove claims, he would have been another Captain Wentworth (64). Although Wentworth betrays amusement at Mrs. Musgrove's "large, fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody had cared for" (68), "in another moment [Wentworth] was perfectly collected and serious . . . and entered into conversation with her in a low voice about her son, doing it with . . . much sympathy and natural grace" (67-68). Anne is complicit in advancing the myth of Richard Musgrove. The only person capable of reading "that certain glance of [Wentworth's] bright eye, and curl of his handsome mouth," Anne remains silent, tacitly subscribing to the new story of Richard Musgrove (67).

Having defied the family narrative which was "marked out for the heir of the house of Elliot" (8) by purchasing his independence through a wealthy wife, Mr. William Elliot returns to the Elliot story to be remade. Restored into Sir Walter's favour, as much by virtue of his newly unmarried state as by his "openness of conduct" and "readiness to apologize for the past," Mr. Elliot actively rewrites his history (138). His past failures to appear at Kellynch Hall become, instead of "neglect," the "appearance of neglect" which is said to have arisen in "misapprehension" (138). Furthermore, Mr. Elliot hints that the breach between the two men was Sir Walter's fault: Mr. Elliot "had feared that he was thrown off, but knew not why; and delicacy had kept him silent" (138). The material circumstance of his first wife having been a "very fine woman, with a large fortune" extenuates the insult of his first marriage (139). In this reconciliation, Sir Walter is more than a tacit partner; he is as active in revising the stories as is Mr. Elliot. Anne notes, "All that sounded extravagant or irrational in the progress of the reconciliation might have no origin but in the language of the relators" (140).

Anne is well-qualified to make such an observation, for she is the author of a number of important new versions of Captain Wentworth's history. In ending the engagement to Wentworth, she consoles herself with the story that she is consulting his good, that she is "being prudent, and self-denying principally for *his* advantage" (28). This is a narrative that Captain Wentworth rejects, evidenced by his leaving the country in consequence (28). In the process of their reconciliation, Anne persuades herself of his worth by frequently re-interpreting his actions, especially with regard to his flirtations with the Musgrove sisters. "It was the highest satisfaction to her, to believe

Captain Wentworth not in the least aware of the pain he was occasioning" either to her or to Charles Hayter (82). In Anne's eyes, Wentworth "was only wrong in accepting the attentions—for accepting must be the word) of two young women at once" (82). This is self-persuasion at its best. For, indeed, to preserve Wentworth's reputation in her mind, Anne *must* see him as the passive recipient of Henrietta's and Louisa's attentions. The reader knows, however, that he was "actually looking round" and was ready to fall in love with "any pleasing young woman who came in his way" (61). Captain Wentworth is fortunate to have Anne as his advocate. Without her careful readings of his character, he might have appeared to be more of Henry Crawford's party than of Mr. Knightley's. Anne, anxious to suit his present character to her memory of him, carefully reconstructs Wentworth's actions. On the walk back from Winthrop, when Wentworth arranges for her to ride with the Admiral and Mrs. Croft, Anne is touched by his concern for her fatigue. It does not occur to her that Wentworth is conveniently ridding the group of the redundant woman. Free of her presence, he can, perhaps, intensify his flirtations with Louisa.

Anne's most significant act of revision emerges at Lyme. Towards the end of her stay at Uppercross, she looks forward to her "early removal to Kellynch" which, while it will unfortunately place her "in the same village with Captain Wentworth," promises to insulate her from Uppercross where Wentworth spends much of his time (93). Clearly, Anne considers her happiness to be dependent upon avoiding Wentworth's presence. Only days later and less than twenty-four hours after embarking on the excursion which finds the two former lovers in situations far more intimate than might occur were they merely living in the same village, Captain Wentworth's company "was become a mere nothing" to Anne (99). She has been so successful in her program of self-persuasion that being constantly in company with Captain Wentworth for less than a day has hardened her to the disturbing effects of his presence. Now, as a "mere nothing," Wentworth is, like a *tabula rasa*, ready for reinscription and reconstitution in a new narrative, one in which Anne can take more satisfaction as an active participant.

These new narratives necessarily entail omissions. The text is littered with concrete examples of things not seen. When Anne and Lady Russell walk down Pulteney Street in Bath, Lady Russell pretends not to see Captain Wentworth; she claims to be "looking after some window-curtains" (179). It is necessary for her to do so, because to acknowledge Wentworth as he is now, established and wealthy, and Anne, twenty-seven and still unmarried and dependent on her unloving family, would entail the acknowledgement on Lady Russell's part that her advice to Anne had not been of the best kind, an acknowledgement that Lady Russell is not prepared to make. Hence, she pretends not to "see" Wentworth.

Mrs. Clay's freckles function in a similar way. Initially their prominence makes a match between her and Sir Walter unthinkable. Elizabeth assures Anne,

I really think poor Mrs. Clay may be staying here in perfect safety. One would imagine you had never heard my father speak of her personal misfortunes,

though I know you must fifty times. That tooth of her's! and those freckles! Freckles do not disgust me so very much as they do him: I have known a face not materially disfigured by a few, but he abominates them. (35)

Yet, as Mrs. Clay's incessant flattery ingratiates her more and more with Sir Walter, her freckles diminish in his eyes: "Mrs. Clay has been using [Gowland Lotion] at my recommendation, and you see what it has done for her. You see how it has carried away her freckles" (146). But to Anne "it did not appear . . . that the freckles were at all lessened" (146). Nora Crook points out an interesting connection between Gowland Lotion and the "old-fashioned treatment of syphilis" and Tony Tanner agrees that "a hint of syphilis must be intended" (qtd. in Tanner 237). Mrs. Clay's disappearing freckles demonstrate the deliberate blocking out of what we prefer not to see. Similarly, Mrs. Smith lives in seclusion in a removed part of town. Her poverty and illness make her "of course almost excluded from society" (Austen 153); literally, no one can stand to look at her.

Romantic love presupposes the existence of one, true love-object. This concept of romantic love necessitates the re-writing of the past. Previous alliances must be put into an inferior light. Previous relationships are seen as flirtations that did not "mean" anything, or, perhaps, as mistakes. Wentworth claims that he never cared for Louisa, that, in fact, she was a mistake: "In his preceding attempts to attach himself to Louisa Musgrove (the attempts of angry pride), he protested that he had for ever felt it to be impossible; that he had not cared, could not care for Louisa" (242). In fact, he denies the existence of the relationship; he claims that Louisa's affections became involved without any conscious intentions on his part.

"I found," said he, "that I was considered by Harville an engaged man! That neither Harville nor his wife entertained a doubt of our mutual attachment. I was startled and shocked. To a degree, I could contradict this instantly; but, when I began to reflect that others might have felt the same—her own family, nay, perhaps herself, I was no longer at my own disposal. I was hers in honour if she wished it. I had been unguarded. I had not thought seriously on this subject before." (242)

As he puts it, he had "entangled" himself and his solution is to absent himself and hope that Louisa will get the message: "It determined him to leave Lyme, and await her complete recovery elsewhere. He would gladly weaken, by any fair means, whatever feelings or speculations concerning him might exist" (243). At the end of the novel, during the reunited lovers' walk, Wentworth says to Anne that his brother Edward "enquired after you very particularly; asked even if you were personally altered, little suspecting that to my eye you could never alter" (243). In response, "Anne smiled, and let it pass. It was too pleasing a blunder for a reproach. It is something for a woman to be assured, in her eight-and-twentieth year, that she has not lost one charm of earlier youth" (243). It is a "blunder," for Anne and the reader remember Wentworth's previous declaration that she was "so altered he should not have known" her (60). Here, in miniature form, we witness the process of re-writing the past, the tailoring of the past to make it fit our present. Anne and Wentworth are eager to persuade themselves that the

relationship with Louisa was a mistake, even non-existent; they conveniently "let it pass," for it is "pleasing" to think so. Wentworth must declare that he "loved none but" (237) Anne and for this necessary fiction, Louisa must clearly be erased, written out of the past. The re-writing that is necessary for the maintenance of romantic love is characteristic of narrative closure in general. To satirize constructions of romantic love, as Austen does in *Persuasion*, is also to satirize narrative closure.

Captain Benwick commissioned "a small miniature painting" of himself "in compliance with a promise" to Fanny Harville (232). This portrait is re-set and passed on to Benwick's next love, Louisa Musgrove. Captain Harville finds this somewhat distasteful and is convinced that "poor Fanny . . . would not have forgotten [Benwick] so soon" (232). Significantly, it is Captain Wentworth who carries out the mission of announcing Fanny Harville's death and re-announcing her death by re-setting the portrait for Louisa. And significantly, it is Wentworth who earlier declared that it was "impossible for man to be more attached to woman than poor Benwick had been to Fanny Harville" (97). This certainly applies to Wentworth, whose attachments seem to be equally transferable. It is against this background that we must read the relationship between Anne and Wentworth. By doing so, we see how their relationship is constructed and how their relationship is open to the same charges of inconstancy as those of Wentworth and Louisa and Benwick and Fanny.

Persuasion reveals the process of re-writing and, hence, the notion of a stable narrative is undermined. If *Persuasion* is a second novel, a re-writing of the first text, then who is to say that there could not be a third novel, yet another re-writing? Secrets are dangerous. The gaps they create in the narrative prepare the way for the unfolding of yet another story. What will happen to Mrs. Clay? Mr. Elliot? Mrs. Smith? What will be the next entry in the Baronetage or the Navy Lists? In our dialogue between Anne Wentworth and Louisa Benwick we have already started the sequel to *Persuasion*, and we follow the novel in inviting readers to continue the process of re-writing.

† The color image has replaced the original black and white image for the on-line edition of this essay. – C. Moss, JASNA Web Site Manager

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