

Dr. John Hulcoop, Professor Emeritus of the University of British Columbia, presentation to JASNA Vancouver on Jane Austen Day, April 12, 2008.

The following words were written by Jane Austen's snobbish niece, Fanny Knight:

it is very true that Aunt Jane from various circumstances was not so *refined* as she ought to have been for her *talent*. . . [My aunts] were not rich & the people around them, with whom they chiefly mixed, were not at all high bred or, in short, anything more than mediocre. . .

(*The Cornhill*, 163 [1947/48] 72-3)

Fanny Knight sounds a lot like Mary Musgrove. What she intended as a criticism I take as a compliment. Aunt Jane did not live in (and only rarely visited) houses of the size usually seen in screen adaptations; nor did she mix in what North Americans call "high society." She was well acquainted with the realities of middle class life and mediocre manners. Her brothers obviously told her about life in the Royal Navy--at least enough to account for her risqué joke in *Mansfield Park* about "Rears" and "Vices"; her cousin Eliza, wife of le Comte de Feuillide guillotined in "The Terror," informed her about the French Revolution. Austen herself, who read books and newspapers voraciously, experienced all the hardships of ever-rising inflation in a war-torn western world. If we are to believe Fanny Knight, Aunt Jane learned only in later life to put aside the "signs of commonness" her niece found so deplorable. Personally, I thank heaven Austen knew all about commonness! How else could she have created characters like Isabella Thorpe, Lucy Steele, Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Norris, Mr. and Mrs. Price, Mrs. Elton, Mrs. Clay and Mrs. Smith?

"Never did a novelist make more use of an impeccable sense of human values. It is against the disc of an unerring heart... and an almost stern morality, that she shows up those deviations from kindness, truth, and sincerity which are amongst the most delightful things in English literature" (*The Common Reader*, 145). This is one great novelist's assessment of another. And please note Virginia Woolf's irony in calling "delightful" those "deviations from kindness, truth, and sincerity" which Austen exposes in her novels. (Such deviations from kindness, truth and sincerity do not arouse laughter in real life, only in Austen's witty imagining of them.) In 1996, I gave five lectures at UBC entitled "An Almost

Stern Morality’: Jane Austen’s ‘Darker Purpose.’” and the title of that lecture series tells you right from the start where I stand. I see Austen’s almost stern morality as the *sine qua non* of her greatness. Yet I find very little evidence of that moral sternness in screen adaptations. Film moguls sweep it under the carpet because even an “almost stern morality” is not currently a saleable commodity. Movie-makers aiming at popular audiences ignore it. So do many critics. Which helps explain why Fanny Price is the most misunderstood heroine in Jane Austen. But since I talked to this distinguished audience in 1999 on the subject of Fanny Price and “The Importance of Doing Nothing in *Mansfield Park*,” I’d better turn, with Woolf’s words in mind, to *Persuasion*.

Woolf detected in Austen’s last completed novel “a peculiar beauty and a peculiar dullness.” Though “dullness” is not exactly the word I’d choose, I think I see what Woolf is getting at and I will come back to it before I finish. Woolf saw this “dullness [as] that which so often marks the transition stage between two different periods” in an author’s work and she saw *Persuasion* as a transitional work, a work of in-between-ness. She predicts that, had she lived, Austen’s “comedy would have suffered. She would have trusted less to dialogue and more to reflection to give us knowledge of her characters.” Indeed, Woolf thinks this trend is “already perceptible in *Persuasion*.”

Those marvelous little speeches which sum up, in a few minutes’ chatter, all we need in order to know an Admiral Croft or a Mrs. Musgrove for ever. . . would have become too crude to hold all that she now perceived of the complexity of human nature. She would have devised a method, clear and composed as ever, but deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid; not only what they are, but what life is. (*The Common Reader*, Anchor Ed’n, 144-49)

What life is, indeed! A fine assertion, Mrs. Woolf, but also a vast generalization--like Chicago’s theme for 2008. (The JASNA AGM). What exactly does that word “life” mean? What does it include? Well, just about everything, which is why it’s almost meaningless. We need something more specific. Woolf hints at what *she* meant by “life” when she says *Persuasion* proves Austen was “beginning to discover that the world is larger, more mysterious, and more romantic, than she had supposed.” A biographer might well draw a parallel between Austen’s eloquent life

as a writer and Anne Elliot's life as the heroine of what comes closer to being a romance than any other of the novels:

How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been,--how eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and 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. (I. 4. 24. *Houghton Mifflin Riverside Edition*)

Anne's wishes, we note, are on one side, pitted against an over-anxious caution on the other. But what, I ask--and hope to show--lies *in between*?

The most unnatural thing about Anne's early life (after the death of her mother) is the absence of love in her family. Sir Walter Elliot and his oldest daughter Elizabeth, hold Anne in total disregard: "Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either her father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;--she was only Anne (I. i. 5). The phrase "only Anne" is, on the one hand, disparaging, dismissive; but ironically, to the careful reader, the phrase also whispers uniqueness: the one and only Anne. Once again we're caught between extremes: "nothingness" and "uniqueness." In the summer of 1806, when she meets Wentworth, Anne is not only unloved but "had hardly anyone to love" (I. 4. 21)--apart from Lady Russell. Now, whatever her faults, and they're serious faults, the narrator assures us that Lady Russell is "a very good woman...who loved Anne better than she loved her own abilities" and who eventually finds "little hardship in attaching herself as a mother to the man who was to make her other child happy" (II. 12. 197-8). As Anne herself says, Lady Russell "'was in the place of a parent,'" most crucially at a time when, unloved and "overlooked," Anne needed guidance in her relationship with Wentworth.

Put these facts together--namely, that she was always expected to give way or defer to others; that she was neglected by everyone except Lady Russell who stood *in loco parentis*; that nobody loved her except Lady Russell and she had nobody to love apart from Lady R.--and it's not difficult to understand why, when she fell for Wentworth, Anne turned to Lady Russell for guidance and was

persuaded to accept Lady R.'s misguided advice and refuse Wentworth. At the end of the novel, Anne herself tells him, "I must believe that I was right, much as I suffered from it, that I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend you will love better than you do now." (II.11.195). When she yielded to Lady Russell, Anne thought she was doing her duty and, as she winsomely reminds Wentworth, "a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman's portion" (195). So, in the summer of 1806, Anne finds herself caught between the pleasures of falling in love and being loved, on the one hand, and the painful necessity of doing her duty, on the other.

In 1814, when Sir Walter Elliot hovers on the verge of bankruptcy, Lady Russell again steps in and we learn something very important about her: "She was a woman of sound rather than quick abilities, whose difficulties in coming to any decision in this instance were great, from the opposition of two leading principles. She was of strict integrity herself, with a delicate sense of honour," but she also "had prejudices on the side of ancestry...a value for rank and consequence" (I. 2. 19-10). In other words, she is caught between opposing principles, the same opposing principles that presumably lead her to persuade Anne against Wentworth. Significantly, Lady R.'s strict integrity and sense of honour compel her to insist that "though a great deal is due to the feelings of a gentleman, and the head of a house, like [Anne's] father, there is still more due to the character of an honest man" (I.2.10-11). In trying to solve Sir Walter's financial problems, Lady R. does "what nobody else thought of doing, she consulted Anne, who never seemed considered by others as having any interest in the question." Lady R. insists Sir Walter "retrench"; she draws up "plans of economy," makes "exact calculations," and tells Anne "If we can persuade your father to all this. . .in seven years he will be clear"--i.e., of all his debts (10). Anne, on the other hand, wants her father to adopt "much more vigorous measures" of economy, "a more complete reformation, a quicker release from debt, a much higher tone of indifference for everything but justice and equity" (10).

And here we encounter one of the key words in the subtitle to this lecture--"equity"--and we encounter it where it should be: in close conjunction with "justice." Macbeth, you recall, refers to "this even-handed justice" (I. vii. 10); and it's easy to imagine the figure of Justice, standing between her own outstretched arms, weighing in her hands the opposing claims of two litigants. The figure of

Justice is blindfolded to symbolize the impartial, unprejudiced nature of the judge or justice. As individual human beings, the litigants, plaintiff and defendant, are *equal* before the law. Equity means “the quality of being equal or fair; impartiality, even-handed dealing.” In jurisprudence, which is the theory or philosophy of law, “equity” is “a system to supplement and remedy *the limitations and inflexibilities* of common law.” Surely it’s no accident, nor is it insignificant, that Anne Elliot, in considering her father’s financial dilemma, thinks he should be indifferent to everything but “justice and equity.”

Anne is, of course, guiltless of her Godmother’s “prejudices on the side of ancestry,” her tendency to “value rank and consequence,” but Lady R. is, most importantly, on the side of justice. She would have been happy for Anne to accept Charles Musgrove’s proposal of marriage because she “would have rejoiced to see [Anne]. . .so respectably removed from the partialities and injustice of her father’s house” (I.4.23). Like Anne herself, Anne’s advocate wants impartial justice or equity for her much loved godchild. “Impartial” means “treating all litigants or claimants equally, fairly.” “Partial,” on the other hand, means existing only in part; favouring one part above another part, taking into consideration only *one* of a great many possible parts. Partiality is, in every sense, an expression of singularity. And here we come to that other word I use in the subtitle to my lecture: “‘Something between delight and misery’: Singularity and Equity in *Persuasion*.” In discussing Sir Walter’s financial problems with Anne, Lady Russell points out that there is “‘nothing singular in his case’”—in other words, he is not by any means the only man of his rank ever to go broke. She continues: “‘it is singularity which often makes the worst part of our suffering, as it always does of our conduct’” (I.2.10). Apart from its most obvious meaning, “singleness of aim or purpose,” *singularity* means being one in number--and implies the desire to be Number One, singled out or partial. The word signifies the fact or condition of being alone or apart from others (like Anne, for example); but it also means distinguished from the crowd by some superior quality (real or attributed) or some eccentricity (like Sir Walter).

Sir Walter Elliot is, of course, the incarnation of negative singularity. He is so partial to himself that he surrounds himself with mirrors (which Admiral Croft quickly gets rid of when he takes over Kellynch Hall): “Few women could think more of their personal appearance than [Sir Walter] did” (I. 1. 4). He reads only *one* book, Debrett’s *Baronetage*, and only *one* entry in that *one* book: the *single*

entry that concerns him.. He is so singularly preoccupied with Sir Walter Elliot that he “prided himself on remaining single for his dear daughter’s sake.”—And that’s “daughter” in the singular: “daughter” apostrophe “s.” “For *one* daughter, his eldest, he would really have given up any thing, which he had not been very much tempted to do” (5. Italics mine). Elizabeth and Mary (who marries Charles Musgrove) both inherit their father’s sense of “singularity” which, as Lady Russell says, *often* accounts for the worst part of our suffering (i.e., the misery we feel in suffering alone), but *always* accounts for the worst part of our conduct. *Singularity* stands in total opposition to *equity* which means fairness for *all*, not for one person distinguished by birth, rank, or consequence. Singularity functions in *Persuasion* as “selfishness” functions in *Sense and Sensibility*. And singularity, as you surely see, is merely another form of selfishness. What Austen’s last completed novel shows us is the gradual undermining of those who pride themselves on their singularity (Sir Walter, Elizabeth, Mary, Mrs. Clay and William Elliot) by a more equitable force symbolized by the British Navy. But--and here it’s important to recognize Austen’s refusal to see things simply in terms of black and white--good characters like the neglected Anne, the bereaved Benwick, the sick Mrs. Smith also lead singular lives; but *they* all wish to escape from the isolation in which they are confined when we first meet them.

Lady Russell has repeatedly tried “to get Anne included in the [Elliot’s annual] visit to London, sensibly open to all the injustices and all the discredit of the selfish arrangement which shut [Anne] out.” But she tries in vain (I. 2.13). The wretchedness of Anne’s singular state at Kellynch Hall can be gauged by comparing it with her sister Elizabeth’s. Austen irony is ferocious as she describes Elizabeth’s reaction to William Elliot whose wife has recently died. Elizabeth cannot easily forgive him for having passed her over and married, instead, “a rich woman of inferior birth” in acknowledgment of whose death Elizabeth is required by strict social etiquette to wear black ribbons:

Such were Elizabeth Elliot’s sentiments. .such the cares to alloy, the agitations to vary, the *sameness* and the elegance, the prosperity and the *nothingness*, of her scene of life--such the feelings to give interest to a long, *uneventful* residence in *one* country circle, to fill the *vacancies* which there were no habits of utility abroad, no talents or accomplishments for home, to occupy. (I.1.7-8, Italics mine)

But Elizabeth, unlike Anne, is at least mistress of Kellynch Hall, presiding over the house and “laying down the domestic law at home.” Anne, condemned to exist in the same “sameness,” the same “nothingness,” the same “vacancies,” does not enjoy her sister’s privileges even though Anne proves to be of great “utility abroad” and certainly has “talents and accomplishments for home” which are heartlessly ignored by her family.

Anne’s escape from this single country circle begins when Sir Walter and Elizabeth move to Bath and she goes for two months to stay with her sister Mary Musgrove at Uppercross. Here she learns lessons crucial if she is to liberate herself from the uneventful emptiness she’s been trapped in. As a means of expanding her mind, her imagination, her social and personal horizons, such lessons are essential. They are essential not only to Anne’s growth and development, but also to the reader’s understanding of Jane Austen’s world-view which is not simply composed of love and laughter. Anne does not, the narrator informs us, need “this visit to Uppercross, to learn that a removal from one set of people to another, though at a close distance of only three miles, will often include a total change of conversation, opinion, and idea”; but “she must now submit to feel that another lesson, in the art of knowing our own nothingness beyond our own circle, was become necessary for her. . . .She acknowledged it to be very fitting, that every little social commonwealth should dictate its own matters of discourse, and hoped, ere long, to become a not unworthy member of that one she was now transplanted into” (I. 6. 33). I do not recall any film or TV director ever drawing attention to the important “art of our knowing our nothingness” outside our own circle!

The “commonwealth” of Uppercross village, “which a few years back had been completely in the old English style,” is centered on two houses: that of the squire, Charles Musgrove Senior, and that of his son, Charles Jnr, husband to Anne’s sister Mary. “The Musgroves, like their houses, were in a state of alteration, perhaps improvement. The father and mother [or senior Musgroves] were in the old English style and the young people in the new. Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove were a very good sort of people; friendly and hospitable, not much educated, and not at all elegant. Their children [Louisa and Henrietta] had more modern minds and manners” (I. 5. 32). When William Elliot turns up in Bath, reconciles himself with Sir Walter and appears to be in pursuit of Anne, he has reversed his earlier ideas about rank and consequence. *Now* his “feelings, as to

connection, were only too strict to suit the unfeudal tone of the present day!” (II.3.109). You see what’s shaping up here: on one side we have “the old English style” represented by Sir Walter and his heir whose ideas of rank and consequence are essentially feudal, but also by the senior Musgroves who, though cordial, are nevertheless old fashioned. On the other side, we have the junior Musgroves with their “modern minds and manners” and we also have the British navy represented by the Crofts, Captains Harville, Benwick, and Wentworth. But Wentworth, like Anne, is one of those transitional or in-between characters. Like the Musgrove houses, the hero and heroine of *Persuasion* are in a state of alteration, changing and—hopefully--improving.

The very old English or feudal style of society was based on a single hierarchy from highest to lowest: royals at the top; then peers of the realm (or nobles) followed by hereditary knights or baronets (who are not noble); beneath them, those with lifetime knighthoods; then the professions (including lawyers and clergy); still further down, the country gentry and urban gentlemen. Yeomen, highly praised by Chaucer and sometimes seen as the backbone of the nation, stand next in the hierarchy; and, at the bottom of the ladder, husbandmen or tradesmen, and finally cottagers, labourers and, in feudal times, serfs. (Surprisingly few readers grasp the complexity of this old English hierarchy.) The chances of ascending from one rank to another were all but negligible. Your rank stayed what it was when you were born. But, in that other, newer commonwealth, the Navy, rank was determined in a novel and definitely non-feudal manner--by effort, achievement and proven value. (Inevitably, the new naval and military hierarchies eventually became as corrupt as their social counterpart and the object of W.S. Gilbert’s satire in *HMS Pinafore* and *The Pirates of Penzance*. Some of you will smile in remembering The Right Honourable Sir Joseph Porter, KCB and Major-General Stanley singing their two famous patter songs: “I am the monarch of the sea/The ruler of the Queen’s Navee” and “I am the very model of a modern major-general.”)

Sir Walter Elliot doesn’t hesitate to pour opprobrium on the Navy (though he’s forced to concede it “has its utility”). But, he declares,

“It is in two points offensive to me; I have two strong grounds of objection to it. First, as its being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours

which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of. . . .”

His second objection to sailors and sailing proceeds from vanity and, as we know from the almost sternly moral Austen, “Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot’s character; vanity of person and of situation” (I. 1. 4). Sailing, in Sir Walter’s vainglorious view of the world which is centered on his singular self,

“cuts up a man’s youth and vigour most horribly; a sailor grows old sooner than any other man. . . .A man is in greater danger in the navy of being insulted by the rise of one whose father, he might have disdained to speak to, and of becoming prematurely an object of disgust himself, than in any other line.” (I. 3. 16)

The ethics and social conduct of Sir Walter, Elizabeth, Mary Musgrove and, to a much lesser extent, Lady Russell, are determined by their concern for birth, rank, consequence and connections. In contrast to these characters are the young folk, with their modern minds and manners. One day, “when Anne was walking with only the Miss Musgroves, one of them, after talking of rank, people of rank, and jealousy of rank, said, ‘I have no scruple of observing to *you* [i.e., Anne], how nonsensical some persons are about their place, because all the world knows how easy and indifferent you are about it.’” She goes on to wish that somebody would “‘give Mary a hint that it would be better if she were not so very tenacious,’” i.e., of her rank and pride of place. Mary, one of Jane Austen’s nastiest whiners, complains constantly because her mother-in-law does not give *her*, the daughter of a baronet, precedence over everyone else when they visit the senior Musgroves.

The new order, represented by the Navy and the junior Musgroves, is not without its own dangers, as we see when Anne goes to visit Louisa’s and Henrietta’s home. Sitting in “the old-fashioned square parlour. . .to which the daughters of the house were gradually giving the proper air of confusion by a grand piano forte, and a harp, flower-stands and little tables placed in every direction,” Anne suspects that if the ancestors whose portraits hang on the parlour wall could have seen what was going on, they would have expressed astonishment at “such an overthrow of all order and neatness!” (I. 5. 36) On one hand, a rigid order, exclusive and singular; on the other, a much more flexible system, inclusive and equitable. Both are potentially dangerous when taken to extremes: the former leads to tyranny, the latter to anarchy. For Austen, the livable world clearly lies in between. And *Persuasion* explores the travails and triumphs of a man and a woman

who are in transition, who struggle to establish a sometimes happy, sometimes unhappy, often dull middle-class medium. They try to live between extremes though their lives will occasionally and inevitably veer towards one pole or the other.

In the summer of 1806, Anne, so disgracefully neglected by her family, tends to be too submissive; she yields too easily. In *Pride and Prejudice* when Darcy and Elizabeth discuss the character of Bingley who's told Mrs. Bennet that if he ever decided to leave Netherfield he would be gone in five minutes, Darcy calls it an empty boast since Bingley's behaviour is "quite as dependent on chance" as anyone else's. Darcy argues that, if a friend were to say, "you had better stay till next week," Bingley would probably do so. From this, Elizabeth concludes that "To yield readily--easily--to the persuasion of a friend is no merit with you [Mr Darcy]." Darcy replies: "To yield without conviction is no compliment to the understanding of either." (I. 10. 42-3, Oxford). Anne yields to Lady Russell's persuasion, not out of a conviction that the advice is right, but out of duty to her superior in age and rank. She is, perhaps, too young, has been put down too often, to have any clear convictions of her own; she can only obey her conscience which tells her to do what she's always done: submit. In refusing Wentworth, Anne wounds his pride. Late in the novel he asks if she would have accepted him had he proposed to her a second time on returning to England in 1808. "'Would I!' was all her answer; but the accent was decisive enough. 'Good God!' he cried. 'you would. It is not that I did not think of it, or desire it, as what alone could crown all my other success. But I was proud, too proud to ask again. I did not understand you. I shut my eyes, and would not understand you, or do you justice'" (II. 11.196). Ironically, just like her father and sisters, Wentworth is too wrapped up in himself and his own hurt pride to consider Anne's position or to do her justice. His own "decided, confident temper," which is exactly like his sister's, misreads and misjudges Anne's refusal as "feebleness of character. . . weakness and timidity" (I. 7. 48). And he is not entirely wrong. Anne, as we've seen, admits that her wishes are "on the side of early, warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity" rather than "over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence" (I.4.24); yet she yields to caution.

Anne needs to become less cautious, more independent by acquiring confidence in her own abilities and opinions. She does this by proving her

usefulness, her utility in the different circles she moves in. (Note how Anne is always on the move or in transition: from Kellynch Hall to Uppercross, to Lyme, to Bath and on to wherever she and Wentworth settle.) The words “use,” “useful” “utility” and their coordinates occur over thirty times in the novel. Anne is useful to Mary, to young Charles when he falls and breaks his collar-bone, to Louisa when she has her accident in Lyme, to Captain Harville, to Mrs. Smith and, of course, to Wentworth. Like Darcy, he needs to become less pride-bound, less rigid in his opinions. He must, for example, learn “to distinguish between the steadfastness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind” (II. 11.192). Both Wentworth and Anne desperately need to cultivate a quality Anne observes and admires in Mrs. Smith. She calls it “elasticity of mind,” meaning that “disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself” (II. 5. 122): in other words, the ability to free one’s self from singularity by paying more attention to others, by making oneself useful to those in need of help.

“‘Is there no one to help me?’” These are “the first words which burst from Captain Wentworth, in a tone of despair” after the obstinate and heedless Louisa jumps off the steep steps on the Cobb at Lyme. “‘Go to him, go to him,’ cried Anne, ‘for heaven’s sake go to him. I can support [Louisa]. Leave me and go to him.’” A few second’s later, Charles Musgrove cries out, “‘Anne, Anne . . . what is to be done next? What in heaven’s name is to be done next?’” (I.12.87). It is Anne who helps the men here by suggesting they carry Louisa back to the inn. As Anne discovers later, “only at Uppercross had [Wentworth] learnt to do her justice, and only at Lyme had he begun to understand himself” (II. 11.191). Significantly, Wentworth begins to understand himself by looking more attentively at someone else, by getting outside his own hurt pride and anger and observing Anne’s altruism.

When they meet in Bath, and their reconciliation is slowly, sometimes unconsciously, taking place, Wentworth asks Anne about Lyme, assuming that all her memories of the place must be painful, if not disgusting. “‘The last few hours were certainly very painful,’ replied Anne: ‘but when pain is over, the remembrance of it often becomes a pleasure’” (II.8.145). Earlier, when the Musgroves, Anne and Wentworth are returning from their long walk to Winthrop

and back, they encounter the Crofts who offer a lift to anyone who's tired. After Wentworth's sister says Anne must be tired, Wentworth "quietly obliged her to be assisted to the carriage." Anne is "much affected by this gesture." It is, she thinks, "a remainder of former sentiment": "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" (I. 10. 71-2) At the beginning of the novel's romantic climax, Anne walks into a room at the White Hart where she finds Wentworth talking to Captain Harville. Anne's significant reaction takes us back to the memory of pain which become a pleasure and the difficulty of distinguishing pleasure from pain in highly emotional moments of crisis. When she sees Wentworth at the White Hart, Anne "was deep in the happiness of such misery, or the misery of such happiness, instantly" (II.11.182). One further example, and then I pull my threads together. Anne, her sister, Mrs. Clay and William Elliot are taking a walk in Bath when it starts to rain. They turn into a shop called Molland's and there she sees Wentworth before he sees her. When he does catch sight of her, "He was more obviously struck and confused. . . . She had the advantage of him in the preparation of the last few moments. All the overpowering, blinding, bewildering, first effects of strong surprise were over with her. Still, however, she had enough to feel! It was agitation, pain, pleasure, a something *between* delight and misery" (II. 7.139. My italics).

So here we are, once again, in between: between pleasure and pain, delight and misery. The world of *Persuasion*, similar enough to our own world to be instantly recognizable, is clearly in transition. It stands between the old world, with its rigid hierarchies, and a troubling new world in which men are promoted to higher ranks on the basis of individual achievement; in which "more modern minds and manners" breed confusion and dismay in the feudal hearts and minds of Sir Walter Elliot and his kind. At the novel's end, Anne, the daughter of a baronet, ironically feels "her own *inferiority* keenly" because she has "no relations to bestow on [Wentworth] which a man of sense could value....no family to receive and estimate him properly; nothing of respectability, of harmony, of good will to offer in return for all the worth and all the prompt welcomes which met her in his brothers and sisters" (II.12.199. Italics mine). Imagine how alien such a feeling would be to Sir John Middleton, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Sir Thomas Bertram or even to Emma Woodhouse. Since Wentworth has only one brother and one sister, we know Anne's allusion to "brothers and sisters" is metaphorical and refers

to the naval confraternity about which Louisa rapturizes in Lyme, delighting in “the character of the navy,--their friendliness, *their brotherliness*, their openness, their uprightness,” expressing her conviction “of sailors having more worth and warmth than any other set of men in England,” and averring “that they only knew how to live, and they only deserved to be respected and loved” (I.9.78. My italics).

Anne is “exquisitely happy” in her reunion with and marriage to a naval man. She is, we are told, “tenderness itself.” But her friends have some reservations: “His profession was all that could make her friends wish that tenderness less; the dread of a future war all that could dim her sunshine” (II.12.200). His profession *is* dangerous. He *is* a sailor on active service; and, of course, there will be more war. Anne’s tenderness makes her terribly vulnerable. They live in a changing world, a world in transition, a world in which women like Mrs. Croft can take the reins out of their husbands’ hands to steer a safer course; a world in which a female nobody like Anne Elliot can, in a crisis, take charge of men much stronger than herself; a world in which birth, rank and consequence are being seriously challenged by the professions and the rising middle-class whose mediocre manners so displeased Fanny Knight. For the time being, Anne and Wentworth are happy. Some kind of justice has been done; singularity has given way to equity. And “There was nothing less for Lady Russell to do than to admit that she had been pretty completely wrong, and to take up a new set of opinions” (II.12.197).

But what about the “peculiar dullness” Woolf detects in *Persuasion*-- the kind of dullness that “so often marks the transition stage between two periods”? *Persuasion* may or may not have been transitional in terms of Austen’s writing career, but it certainly is a novel about transition: about a world in transition and characters caught in the uncertain present between an old-fashioned past and a new-fangled future. That’s where Wentworth and Anne are on the last page of the novel: happily reunited but saddled with memories of a painful past and vulnerable to “the dread of future war.” They are living in what W.H. Auden calls “the Time Being.” *For the Time Being* is a long poem about Christmas. The excitement of the holy season becomes a symbol for those extraordinary occasions which offer us--if we are young and innocent or older and optimistic--a glimpse of a new and better world where singularity gives place to justice and equity. Such occasions, such visionary moments are, by nature, short-lived.

## In the meantime

There are bills to be paid, machines to be kept in repair,  
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem  
From insignificance. The happy morning is over,  
The night of agony is still to come; the time is noon. . . .

*For the Time Being, A Christmas Oratorio* (p.124)

Unredeemed from insignificance, the Time Being is simply the ordinariness of everyday life which is often dull. Austen knew every detail of this in-between time exceedingly well. Her greatness resides in her ability to redeem the time being, the in-between time, from insignificance. She does so by making us see in it so much more than love and laughter, so much more than we could see in it for ourselves.