

State of the Nation and the Novel: Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

Persuasion has often been regarded as something of a departure from Jane Austen's previous novels. Austen's world of the gentry seems more tired in this novel, and it is satirized with arguably greater intensity. Tony Tanner, for instance, suggests that the novel projects an image of English society caught between an old order in decline and a new one, "of as yet uncertain values, hierarchies and principles" (Tanner 1986: 249). The novel is indeed remarkable for its historicity, and for its own manner of social analysis. However, in my reading of the novel I will not place emphasis as much on its departure from some of the social certainties of Austen's previous fiction as on its continuous preoccupation with and judgement of the gentry world; if anything, it would be a profitable interpretative exercise to reread her entire opus for expressions of the tone and perspective of *Persuasion*. As an example, let us recall the often-quoted opening words of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife"; a tone of satire regarding the world of the gentry class is made clear already in the next sentence which posits a distance between the narrator and her world by describing this universality as "fixed in the minds of the surrounding families" (*P&P* 1996: 5). By mockingly bestowing on opinion in a small rural neighbourhood the status of universal truth, the narrator in fact brings into focus, in a gesture of both mockery and analysis, various cultural features of the social world of the gentry—its smallness in numbers, its connection to similar social enclaves elsewhere in the country, and its insularity of opinion which regards itself as a standard of universality, a national pattern. The insularity of the gentry society is coupled in *Pride and Prejudice* with a distinct mindfulness of instabilities attendant on the world of the gentry (including the issue of wealth featured in its opening sentence), and the existence, somewhere else outside that world, but still within the world of the nation, of new kinds of economies capable of producing respectable fortunes.

In *Persuasion* (1818) the opening setting is still that of a rural neighbourhood, with Kellynch-hall, occupied by the Elliots, at its centre. It is another small world, and some of its cast of characters are remarkably parochial in their opinion; indeed, the parochialism of Sir Walter Elliot, a baronet, stands out in the gallery of self-involvement in Austen's protagonist families. A one-dimensional character, he is wholly defined by his exaggerated class pride and exasperation over historical trends that degrade distinction as he sees it. His conceit and defensiveness about status come from an inflexible misjudgement of the changing social landscape. He is not meant as a representative of the whole class of the rural gentry; rather, he represents a tendency of self-absorption, a trait signalled already by the opening scene of his musing over the book of the Baronetage. He is also remarkably wasteful, and the story actually opens at the point of a serious erosion of his wealth; in order to address the financial problems he rents out Kellynch-hall and moves out of the area. On the other hand, Frederick Wentworth, the novel's male protagonist, belongs to the naval profession (as do a number of other male characters), rather than the landed classes. It thus appears that the novel turns its attention away from the patrician world to a different part of the nation; there is a long tradition of criticism making a great deal out of the role of the naval characters in the novel, whose professional life and domestic cordiality create a contrast to the staleness of the world of the rural gentry. From Nina Auerbach to Tony Tanner to Anne Frey, to name just a few critics, *Persuasion* has been read as a substantial shift in Austen's view of English society, or at least an indication of her readiness to attribute a new kind of social authority to the naval profession. While raising the question of a shift in Austen's social perspective is indisputably warranted by the importance bestowed on the naval profession in *Persuasion*, the novel doesn't quite seek to claim a considerable or transformative distinctiveness for the naval community in relation to the landed classes. As I will attempt to show, the emplacement of the naval community within the existing social order is rather customarily assumed in the novel. There is little evidence that the novel's views on English society either register or anticipate a considerable social shift, and there is little evidence that the novel questions the very principle of hierarchy shaping the existing order. The novel does insist on the importance of the navy in the uncertain times of the Napoleonic wars,¹ but extolling the achievements and virtues of the navy is largely the extent of its interest in the politics of the day. The text is more interesting if read not so much for its topical commentary, but for its implicit self-understanding as a

¹ The story is set in the period from the summer of 1814 through February 1815, which coincides with a period of peace during the Napoleonic wars. The final battle of the Napoleonic wars, Waterloo, was a land battle which took place after the story's conclusion, in June 1815. Claire Tomalin mentions that Austen finished writing the novel in July 1816, and then revised the last two chapters some time later (Tomalin 1999: 158-159). This timeline is interesting because the novel's references to the wars focus on characters serving in the navy.

discourse on the state of the nation and for claiming for the genre of the novel the cultural authority to act as purveyor of such discourse—at a time when the literary field was dominated by poetry, and novel-writing struggled to attain the same level of cultural capital.

A familiar but important observation about the character of Austen's social vision needs to be attached here: while her narratives are invariably set within the social world of the gentry, they don't convey a panoramic survey of the functioning of the whole of that world and of its place within the national space. Rather, her novels largely focus on the domestic space of that social world, and especially the situation of women within it, marked by their very limited control over the cultural, legal and material conditions of their lives. Women born into the gentry class face a restricted scope of agency, often with uncertain prospects of retaining their class status with or without marriage. Interestingly, that which is socially the most radical aspect of Austen's writing—announcing the emergence of a new female subjectivity—seems to be dramatized within a perception of stability of the social order and the place of the gentry within it (albeit a stability that accommodates a degree of change). As her novels are highly focalized, mainly projecting a narrative canvas from the viewpoint of the protagonist, they even might be taken to imply that this new subjectivity emerges only within the confines of that social world and possibly no other. Other social spheres are occasionally and cursorily referenced, but it is the domesticity of the landed classes, with its material affluence, its leisure time, its walks and talks, its opportunities for cultivation of the mind and social sensibility, that creates the stage for Austen's novels to dramatize expressions of a new subjectivity of women.

Persuasion may appear a relatively easy novel to read, but it is rather difficult to parse thoroughly. Some of this difficulty comes from the high level of focalization, which means that much of the information, opinion, sensation, feeling comes from the characters themselves, and mostly, though not exclusively, Anne Elliot. This requires a reading meticulously attentive to differentiating and separating out narratorial commentary from free indirect discourse of the characters. As importantly, the third-person extradiegetic narrator assumes the stance of familiarity with the protagonist, some other characters and the narrated world in general, but doesn't practice omniscience to fill in the gaps regarding the entirety of the emplotment. In fact, a good deal of the information needed for understanding the whole of the story is unavailable because the narrative, after the early flashback to the act of persuasion which separated Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth, mostly proceeds by following the characters around, and mostly Anne, and sometimes it does that in the technique of free indirect style. The elliptical appearance of the plot created by focalization is occasionally mitigated by dialogue or by focalization itself; namely, some key pieces of information on the characters are not missing, but can be found strewn about the text, in conversations and in thoughts of characters. This is especially true regarding the careers of the naval officers: in particular, the recon-

struction of Captain Wentworth's career is rendered somewhat difficult, but not wholly impossible. Difficulty of this reconstruction is narratively motivated—in the sense that it makes narrative sense—because the women characters, again in particular Anne whose point of view is the main point of focalization, do have only a limited access to this kind of information. The emplotment is thus turned into something of a puzzle, and when the missing pieces do turn up, the information may still be skewed (as in Wentworth's conversational references to his career) with a touch of indirection, so that more vagueness may be produced. There is generally a good deal of ambiguity generated in the novel regarding the stories of individual characters (and also regarding its view of the social and historical circumstances it addresses). The effect of all this is that the act of interpretation itself is foregrounded: the novel could also and fittingly have been entitled *Making Sense*, both for a principal activity that Anne is engaged in—which is understanding the various communities, including the naval one, with which she comes in contact, and for the actual work of the novel as a discourse about society, i.e., for its ambition to assert its authority as a form of social knowledge in its own right.²

Rather than approaching the text as a substantial shift in Austen's views on the genteel rural world, I think it more productive to highlight its awareness of the limitation of its focus on that world, as well as its ambition to establish itself as an authoritative discourse on English society. The historicity of the novel, as we are reminded throughout it, is framed by the narrowness of its narrative lens. In fact, narrowness of vision is an important theme on its own in the novel. The narcissistic status obsession of Sir Walter Elliot, Elizabeth's indifference to the condition of contemporary society, Lady Russell's active persuasion of Anne not to marry Wentworth which is effectively in alignment with the species of class pride represented by the baronet, Mary's inability to let go of rank prejudice in her marriage to a Musgrove, but also the limited cultivation of the otherwise cordial Musgroves, Benwick's melancholic immersion in poetry, Mr. Elliot's obsession with money; all these elements of the story speak of narrowness of view associated with class position and cultural disposition. Importantly, because of the constitutive narrowness of narrative lens inherent to the practice of focalization and determined by the domestic scope to which the woman protagonist is bound, a wide social lens is not really a narrative possibility. This is not to say that the wider, public world remains unreferenced; it seeps into the narrative through exchanges among characters in the domestic sphere as well as in those public places where men and women congre-

² It is interesting to note in regard to the novel's title that the thematically most important act of persuasion, Lady Russell's influence in Anne's rejection of Wentworth, takes place before the timeframe of the novel's plot; the acts of persuasion that take place within the plot, such as for instance getting Sir Walter to rent out Kellynch, or even Lady Russell's talking to Anne about marriage to Mr. Elliot, which makes Anne only briefly think of the possibility of making Kellynch "her home again, her home forever" (*Persuasion* 1998: 143), are actually of lesser significance.

gate (in Lyme and Bath). Nature too is sometimes featured as a part of the domestic space, as Daniel P. Gunn observes regarding the episode that takes a group of characters walking to Winthrop: “It is a social occasion, in which the countryside has become an extension of the ballroom or the drawing room” (Gunn 1987: 405-6). While the domestic sphere is somewhat geographically mobile and its boundaries are somewhat fluid, it remains the vantage point on the narrative world.

The theme of narrowness of vision has a significant counterpoint in the cultural distinctiveness of Anne’s broad-minded sensibility. She presents an implicit challenge to parochialism by her insistence that social interactions should be measured by breadth of knowledge and a conversational disposition: “My idea of good company [...] is the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation” (*Persuasion* 1998: 134). In this regard, Anne’s association with the naval community seems to alleviate some of the narrowness of the domestic perspective as well as the exclusiveness of class pride exercised by her father. Naval wives engage in more than the conventional degree of geographical mobility, as evidenced by Mrs. Croft, who lived with her husband on five ships, and “ha[s] crossed the Atlantic four times, and ha[s] been once to the East Indies, and back again; and only once, besides being in different places about home—Cork, and Lisbon, and Gibraltar” (*ibid.*: 63). However, this kind of mobility is not represented in the narrative directly, but only within the domestic space as a conversational topic, a kind of outlying challenge to established conventionalities.³ More generally, the novel’s focus on the naval profession means that it raises the question of broadening the narrative lens beyond domesticity, just as it finds itself addressing the question of the navy’s significance in the national context. In this regard, it should be remembered that the naval officers in their professional work operate on the borders of the national space, and far beyond them; their work conjures the space of international and global relations better than the internal space of the nation. In time of peace, naval officers come ashore to non-professional lives, which is what happens in the novel. So, how does the novel’s concern with the naval profession affect its view of the existing social order on land? In my reading, while the novel does raise the question of the character of the existing social order, it remains somewhat cautious and conservative in its social views, and careful not to exaggerate its own narrative focus on the naval profession; in raising the question of the current condition of the social order, it is primarily concerned with foregrounding its own authority in addressing it.

³ This is from a conversation in which her brother Frederick declares he feels it impossible “to make the accommodation on board, such as women ought to have,” and that he “hate[s] to hear of women on board, or to see them on board” (*P* 1998: 62). Mrs. Croft disagrees: “But I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures” (*ibid.*: 63). Class conventionalities stand in the way of affirming the new female subjectivity; the conversation is indicative of flaws in Wentworth’s social views, which the story works to eventually remedy.

In *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams quips that “[i]t is a truth universally acknowledged, that Jane Austen chose to ignore the decisive historical events of her time.” In recent times this view of Austen’s writing has not been widely entertained; Williams himself was not persuaded by it, and he was quick to point out the error in this supposedly universal truth insofar as Austen’s social imagination was concerned with “the social history of the landed families” (Williams 1975: 113), who wielded a substantial power in English society at that time. (This is not a world of the high echelons of aristocratic privilege and power, but the world of the gentry.) Williams underscores the adaptability of this world in Austen’s novels; it is not a stable social order engaged merely in its own conservative maintenance. Other forms of economic capital are featured on the margins of that small world, making alliances with the landed classes and sometimes blending into them over generations. It is an order relatively stable as well as relatively fluid, at once hierarchical and open to a degree of modification. Williams regards Austen’s novels as a literary discourse in which this world of the rural gentry reaches a kind of moral self-awareness: “An openly acquisitive society, which is concerned also with the transmission of wealth, is trying to judge itself at once by an inherited code and by the morality of improvement” (*ibid.*: 115). It does not suffice, Williams argues, to regard Austen’s narratives as being mostly about personal relationships, for her novels are chiefly concerned with problematizing in a moral and social sense the concept of personal conduct within that small social world. This “moral pretension is taken so seriously, that it becomes a critique” (*ibid.*: 116)—Austen’s novels amount to an elaborate social commentary on the social world they attempt to represent.

A more detailed explication of Williams’s (cursory but perceptive) reading of Austen’s fiction in *The Country and the City* would require a closer look at the themes of conduct (and personal and social improvement). Suffice it to note here that across Austen’s fiction there obtains the assumption of a difference between the notion of conduct in a moral sense and the notion of manners in the sense of social etiquette, as well as the assumption of the moral superiority of rural society over urban society, which assumptions are explicitly articulated in *Mansfield Park* by Edmund Bertram.⁴ While Edmund Bertram is given the role of emphasizing the importance of the concept of conduct, in Austen’s novels, including *Mansfield Park*, the shaping of the right kind of conduct is primarily dramatized in the story

⁴ Mary Crawford tries to dissuade Edmund from pursuing the profession of clergyman, and suggests that clergymen don’t have the social importance that he attributes to them (in providing moral and religious guidance). He responds: “*You* are speaking of London. *I* am speaking of the nation at large [...] We do not look in great cities for our best morality” (*MP* 1996: 78). Austen’s novels generally assume that the countryside is the proper stage for dramatizing the making of proper conduct.

of the heroine (who often exerts an influence on the shaping of the conduct of the male protagonist as well). Conduct in Austen's texts is usually featured not as a set of principles wholly defined from the start of the narrative, but rather as a matter of constant search for the appropriate grounds of moral judgement and action under variable social conditions, an objective to be approximated by steady improvement in the departments of both sense and sensibility. Cultivating one's exercise of reason is essential in forming an understanding of the situation and role of the landed family in its immediate environment and the national context. Conduct also involves cultivating a feeling of social duty to marital partners, relatives, and neighbours with the same or similar social status, along with maintaining and managing social contacts with the gentry from other parts of the nation (all of which provides the fabric of the plot). The Austenian notion of conduct also includes a feeling of social duty to tenant farmers and the rural poor (which is regarded in Austen's novels as a required element of the social responsibility of the landed gentry, though not often directly dramatized in the plot). In addition to the moral cultivation of individuality, there is in Austen's world another sense of improvement: the question of economic improvement in the situation of a landed family, which is occasionally referenced in her narratives, but seldom extensively featured (due to the domestic perspective of the emplotment). In the quest for personal cultivation, which is the primary focus of Austen's novels, male and female situations are different, which ensues from the social structure of the hierarchical and relatively conservative social order of the landed classes; Austen's novels construct stories of (different versions of) advances in the social authority of women protagonists, in which their personal cultivation is also implicitly represented as incremental change, for the better, in the social authority of women in general.

The theme of personal formation or making of the self raises the question of the historical place of Austen's narratives in and beyond their immediate context. The self in Austen's narratives is forged in the sphere of domesticity, a sphere with a particular social and political significance; in an influential study, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong writes of "the rise of the domestic woman as a major event in political history" (Armstrong 1989: 3). She ascribes to authors of the 18th century an important shift in the cultural imagination of the self:

In place of the intricate status system that had long dominated British thinking, these authors began to represent an individual's value in terms of his, but more often in terms of *her*, essential qualities of mind. Literature devoted to producing the domestic woman thus appeared to ignore the political world run by men. Of the female alone did it presume to say that neither birth nor the accoutrements of title and status accurately represented the individual; only the more subtle nuances of behaviour indicated what one was really worth. In this way, writing for and about the female introduced a whole new vocabulary for social relations, terms that attached precise moral values to certain qualities of the mind. (*ibid.*: 4)

While Armstrong's foregrounding of domestic fiction and the rise of the domestic woman in the history of modern subjectivity is a matter for a more complex discussion, it is useful for purposes of this analysis to assume that Austen's fiction uses the domestic stage to explore changing ideas of self and society. Armstrong's assessment that domestic fiction made possible a narrative focus on qualities of mind rather than birth and status is of course true of Austen's novels to a great degree.⁵ It is a particularly salient aspect of her fiction that it simultaneously projects a sense of a relatively stable social order of the gentry, as well as a sense that the protagonists of her novels belong to a time in which a new notion of self is emerging and in which an interrogative attitude to aspects of that social order can begin to be dramatized. It is worth stressing again that the world which Austen's women characters have to navigate is remarkably, and indeed harshly, shaped by situations of disadvantage and uncertainty, produced by a general social, political and cultural subordination of women, as well as by specific effects of practices such as primogeniture and entail. Austen's novels don't really attempt to imagine that individual moral cultivation is possible without the proper material conditions; the right qualities of mind may begin to fashion themselves in relative deprivation, but they need a sufficient material basis to flourish. Yet the fact that Austen's protagonists are women, and that they are excluded from political and economic societies, also affects the way in which her novels evoke issues of social transformation, especially as regards the world of the landed classes. The personal cultivation of women protagonists, their pursuit of that seriously entertained idea of conduct that shapes the plots of Austen's novels, necessarily brings into question the boundaries and fixities of that social order. Austen's stories start with situations of disadvantage as a fundamental predicament of her gentlewomen within the genteel world: for instance, the Dashwood sisters find themselves in diminished circumstances after their father's passing; the entail arrangement troubles the lives of the Bennet sisters; Fanny Price is a poor relation of the Bertrams, dependent on them for her education and social status. The fashioning of self that Austen's women protagonists take up eclipses anything comparable in the construction of male protagonists, who do not have to contend with similar issues. The common situation of Austen's female protagonists is fragile and precarious, manageable only but not conclusively by their pursuit of a proper conduct, a set of attitudes that emerges as superior to the social constraints they are placed under.

Dealing with this uncertainty in Austen's genteel world necessarily involves the question of maintaining class status. Anne Elliot faces the prospect of diminished class prestige, the same predicament as for instance Elizabeth and Jane Bennet face in *Pride and Prejudice*, since making a socially acceptable match is ham-

⁵ Among Austen's novels, Armstrong discusses primarily *Emma*, while *Persuasion* is not discussed in the book.

pered by inheritance arrangements, and, in *Persuasion*, mismanagement. Before the point at which the story of *Persuasion* opens (the crisis caused by years of Sir Walter Elliot's incompetent management of his expenses), Anne's marriage to Wentworth was prevented by an act of persuasion undertaken by Lady Russell. She conveyed her assessment to Anne that Wentworth "had nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining affluence, but in the chances of a most uncertain profession, and no connexions to secure even his farther rise in the profession" (*P* 1998: 24).⁶ Eventually, Anne "was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing—indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it" (*ibid.*: 25). Her father, "without actually withholding his consent," projected a coldness about the match for reasons of status: "He thought it a very degrading alliance" (*ibid.*: 24), but active opposition to it was Lady Russell's; she appeared an overzealous enforcer of Sir Walter's class condescension. The novel's plot underscores the folly of both Sir Walter and Lady Russell's views by opening with the baronet's mismanagement of his income, which has significantly damaged both the economic situation of the family as well as the social capital of the two unmarried daughters, Elizabeth and Anne, and their chances of making good alliances.

Anne had to be persuaded against the match with Wentworth on the grounds of inequality (but her father also never had high expectations that she would make a marriage suitable in terms of rank). Anne's moral stature is established early in the novel, at the same time as her father's and Elizabeth's inability to appreciate it: "[...] 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 father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne." The youngest daughter Mary is already married before the story opens; her marriage to Charles Musgrove illustrates one of the options for women of her background, that of marrying slightly below.⁷ Her social attitudes are nevertheless shaped by an obsession with status that she shares with her father, which makes her squabble over precedence with Mrs. Musgrove. For Sir Walter at the beginning of the story, "[a]ll equality of alliance must rest with Elizabeth" (*ibid.*: 7), and Elizabeth's regard for status and precedence is more haughtily exer-

⁶ These words reflect Lady Russell's opinion of Wentworth; she suggests to Anne that he lacks access to such patronage as would make possible his further promotion. Wentworth and Anne first meet in 1806, when he has already been made commander. Later, the narrative suggests that Lady Russell misjudged his subsequent chances of affluence.

⁷ Slightly but perceptibly: "Charles Musgrove was the eldest son of a man, whose landed property and general importance were second, in that country, only to Sir Walter's" (*P* 1998: 26). On a different occasion, the narrator says that "the Musgroves were in the first class of society in the country" (*ibid.*: 67); of course, the Elliots too belong to that landed class, and enjoy slightly higher status. Country in these passages means neighbourhood.

cised than Mary's. But as in all of Austen's novels, the stories of the three daughters in *Persuasion* are to an extent shaped by the social parameters of the space that women of the gentry class inhabit, and the novel is about exploring that precarious space with its fragilities and vulnerabilities. Elizabeth and Mary, although painted with different brushes, both illustrate the taxing consequences on personal formation that come with deference to the principle of rank. On the other hand, Anne's conduct functions in the novel to gesture towards a reimagination both of the position of gentry women and the national culture of class; her conduct is designed as an advertisement for a new kind of subjectivity with broader social resonance. One of the Musgroves, complaining about Mary's frequent tiffs with Mrs. Musgrove, appeals to Anne, in effect foregrounding her role of social arbiter and practitioner of a different set of principles: "I have no scruple of observing to *you*, how nonsensical some persons are about their place, because all the world knows how easy and indifferent you are about it" (*ibid.*: 41).

Elizabeth Elliot complains at one point that Lady Russell has given her "a tiresome book" to read: "I really cannot be plaguing myself for ever with all the new poems and states of the nation that come out. Lady Russell quite bores one with her new publications" (*ibid.*: 190). What this passage does, other than reinforce the contrast between Elizabeth's indifference to reading and the very readerly disposition of Anne's, is remind us that the large public issues of the day, social, political and economic, admitted into the represented world of this novel largely in a peripheral way, are brought up in this case through the mediating experience of texts. Elizabeth does not entertain those issues at all, but interestingly enough, her words casually foreground a specific feature of the public sphere in which writing on the "states of the nation" is produced—the simple fact that there is no agreement on what the state of the nation is, but rather a presumably prolific range of public discourse presenting a plurality of views. This outside world—the world outside of Elizabeth's very selective perspective (which selectivity replicates much of her father's habit of social condescension)—is in fact a world that brings in some degree of instability; in this way, the novel projects an awareness of change, as well as a sense that the question of the state of the nation is a question that needs to be raised. Incidentally, Lady Russell's unsuccessful attempt to persuade Elizabeth to cultivate literary and political opinions casts her in a somewhat more favourable light than her successful attempt at persuasion (of Anne, against the match with Wentworth); giving Elizabeth "a tiresome book to read" signifies Lady Russell's recognition of the need to actively understand the world, as opposed to Elizabeth's mixture of haughtiness and indifference.

Anne on the other hand, whose mind is active and discerning, has a propensity for social observation, a resolve to actively study the world. When after the

renting out of Kellynch-hall she spends some time with the Musgroves, the family Mary married into, Anne determines to adapt to an environment which she finds to be somewhat unlike Kellynch: “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 the one she was now transplanted into” (*ibid.*: 38-39). Anne appears in a variety of roles here: she is of course thinking about how to blend in socially in this new situation, but she is also a sort of ethnologist, describing the peculiarities of a micro-society not completely like (nor indeed completely unlike) her own.⁸ She is in some sense a political scientist too, implying that there are other such small commonwealths, and that the society that is England is composed of such little social units, a network of socially privileged, landed families. Mary’s marriage to a Musgrove, and Anne’s visiting with the Musgroves, delineate a local segment of this national network. This of course brings to mind Raymond Williams’s remark: “Neighbours in Jane Austen are not the people actually living nearby; they are the people living a little less nearby who, in social recognition, can be visited. What she sees across the land is a network of propertied houses and families [...]” (Williams 1975: 166). The local social world experienced by the Elliots is rather limited, and living in such “a scanty neighbourhood” is felt acutely by Elizabeth, the eldest daughter whose social precedence has not resulted in marriage. But the Elliots of Kellynch-hall are also a part of a national social network, a network of neighbourhoods as it were; also, Elizabeth accompanies her father annually to the “great world” (*P* 1998: 8) of London, and the family’s taking lodgings in Bath brings them to another hub of the national network. Similarly, Sir Walter’s reading of the Baronetage serves to evoke a small national community defined by a specific status; his pride in his family’s long membership, admiration for “the limited remnant of the earliest patents,” and disapproval of “the almost endless creations of the last century” (*ibid.*: 5) immediately cast him as a snobbish social conservative, who finds the increase in the numbers of baronets detestable. The names of the Elliot daughters, Elizabeth, Anne and Mary, all royal names, project a strong identification with the monarchy as a symbol of the English state. The national community that the Elliots belong to is in effect an archipelagic world in which small insular hubs of privilege and power socialize and communicate with each other even over considerable distances. Of course, within the hierarchical world of Austen’s landed communities, being a neighbour, as Williams

⁸ Anne Frey similarly notes that Anne observes the ways of Uppercross “with an almost anthropological awareness” (Frey 2005: 217). However, Frey states that the Uppercross episode serves to suggest an insularity of communities like Uppercross: “Communities founded on location prove insular and unable to connect even to proximate outsiders, much less to feel the concerns of a social whole” (*ibid.*: 218). In my reading, communities such as Uppercross, detached as they may be from one another, are still rendered as a part of a national network of such communities, as is the case in all of Austen’s novels.

notes, implies possession of a certain level of social status. One might say that those without it, which really means the majority of the people living nearby, are not regarded as citizens, figuratively speaking, either of these little archipelagic commonwealths, or of the larger network of the nation made up by this archipelago. This restricted idea of community looms large over Anne's use of the term commonwealth: the equation of the small world of a landed family with the concept of the commonwealth makes obvious the exclusive (and necessarily paradoxical) class connotation the word common in commonwealth may hold for Anne (or for the gentry in general).

Elizabeth is not interested in publications on the states of the nation; while there was a time when she fondly perused the Baronetage, the "book of books," at twenty-nine, as the novel's story opens, she "would have rejoiced to be certain of being properly solicited by baronet-blood within the next twelvemonth or two. Then might she again take up the book of books with as much enjoyment as in her early youth" (*ibid.*: 8). At this point she is troubled by the book because it records Mary's marriage while reminding her that her marriage to be recorded in it has not happened. Like her father, Elizabeth is trapped by the rigid (and farcical) exercise of an ideology of distinction that in effect isolates her; her indifference to other kinds of reading is coupled with her larger incapacity to comprehend the world with competence and adaptability. Lady Russell's attempts to get Elizabeth to read may imply, as I suggested, a more noble cause of persuasion on Lady Russell's part, possibly motivated by a concern for Elizabeth's ability to effectively cope with her situation. Yet the novel offers little direct information about what kind of reader Lady Russell herself is, and on balance we are asked to imagine her as one whose scope in reading is not profitably matched by her social discernment (at the end of the novel the narrator suggests she needs to work on her judgement: "[t]here 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 and of hopes"; *ibid.*: 219).⁹

Elizabeth is unenthused about reading, and reading is not an activity associated with Mary; in fact, Mary and her husband make fun of Captain Benwick's immersion in books. Unlike her sisters, Anne is a well-informed reader, and reading is implied in the story to play a large part in the making of her personality, taste, moral authority and conduct. A resource for a new perspective on subjectivity, her reading is in itself a departure from the practices of class and gender roles to which her family adhere. References to her reading interests occur on a number of occasions through focalization; Anne also ventures into a public discussion of literature in the episode featuring Benwick's constant poring over poetry occasioned by the passing of his fiancé. In the conversation with Benwick, "evidently a young man

⁹ Lady Russell is painted as well-meaning, but as regards "a nicety in discernment of character" the narrator states that "she had been less gifted" than Anne (*P* 1996: 219).

of considerable taste in reading, though principally in poetry,” Anne seeks to give the grieving naval officer some advice: “she had the hope of being of real use to him in some suggestions as to the duty and benefit of struggling against affliction” (*ibid.*: 90). Certain of her “seniority of mind” over him and concerned over his excessive and melancholy consumption of poetry, Anne “ventured to recommend a larger allowance of prose in his daily study; and on being requested to particularize, mentioned such works of our best moralists, such collections of the finest letters, such memoirs of characters of worth and suffering, as occurred to her at the moment as calculated to rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurances” (*ibid.*: 90-91). Shortly after the conversation, however, she fears “that, like many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination” (*ibid.*: 91). The implication here may be twofold: on the one hand, Anne may be alluding to the fact that she herself has been affected by the appeal of contemporary poetry (whose cultural stature is referred to in the context of their conversation as “the richness of the present age”; *ibid.*: 90); on the other hand, she may be having doubts about her superior judgment, a moment of self-reflection that suggests that her literary cultivation (and personal formation) is a work in progress. Not to mention that Anne doesn’t recommend any texts in the genre of the novel (unless “memoirs of characters of worth and suffering” are a possible, veiled reference to novels too, and not, say, spiritual biographies). In fact, the word ‘novel’ is not featured in *Persuasion*, in sharp contrast to *Northanger Abbey*, whose protagonist Catherine Morland is an avid reader of novels.¹⁰

As I already hinted, *Persuasion* doesn’t recommend Anne’s taste unequivocally; Anne certainly is not given the role of Austen’s surrogate in the story. Interestingly, earlier in the novel an obvious distance is already created between Anne’s literary taste and the novel’s implied views on literature, in the episode in which Anne joins the Musgroves for a walk in the countryside:

¹⁰ Speaking in defence of novelists, the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* deplores the lack of cultural prestige of the genre: “Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried” (NA 1985: 58). The novel, published posthumously with *Persuasion*, contains a range of references to specific novels, novel-reading and the cultural status of the genre at the turn of the century. In a 2001 article, Claudia L. Johnson offered an interesting short analysis of Austen’s views on the 18th century novel in *Northanger Abbey*, pointing out that Austen highlights novels by women writers. Johnson’s article primarily focuses on a contemporary attempt to consolidate the prestige of the genre, Anna Barbauld’s edition of *The British Novelists* (1810), “the first novelistic canon” (Johnson 2001: 166). Barbauld’s series included a number of women novelists, but not Austen, who had not published yet; it was soon followed by Sir Walter Scott’s *Ballantyne’s Novelists’s Library* (1821-24). Both series may be seen as attempts to enhance the cultural standing of the genre of the novel, but they created very different versions of the canon “of the twenty-two novelists Barbauld includes, fourteen are men and eight are women. By contrast, in Scott’s *Ballantyne’s Novelist’s Library* [...] of the fourteen novelists Scott includes, twelve are men and two are women” (*ibid.*: 170).

Her *pleasure* in the walk must arise from the exercise and the day, from the view of the last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves and withered hedges, and from 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 had drawn from every poet, worthy of being read, some attempt at description, or some lines of feeling. (*ibid.*: 75-76)

Poetry, and nature poetry in particular, is here presented as a prolific form of literary production and a fashionable cultural force (whose appreciation is indicative of possession of taste), but it is also almost pronounced to be a clichéd species of literature, in theme and tone. It is not clear to what extent the passage is an expression of Anne's own aesthetic judgment; it is more convincingly read as the narrator's musing on Anne's participation in popular cultural fashions. This walk in the countryside takes the characters "through large enclosures, where the ploughs at work, and the fresh made path spoke the farmer, counteracting the sweets of poetical despondence, and meaning to have spring again" (*ibid.*: 77). On a second reading, especially in the light of Anne's attitude to poetry later in her conversation with Benwick, it is not entirely implausible to argue that there is focalization in the passage, containing a hint of Anne's self-deprecating humour in the phrasing; but again, since at this point Anne is still rather conventionally immersed in poetical clichés, the passage is better read as the narrator's creation of distance from the poetical fashion of the day. The narrator presents an encounter of two views of nature: the popular poetical musings on autumn contrasted by the practical work of farmers and the very different experience of season and time that such work requires. The mention of enclosures in turn brings up questions of social and political power, at a time when such land policies in England were still commonly enforced to the advantage of the landed classes. This is one of the very few places in the text that alludes to the economic basis of the landed classes (possession of land and tenant farming); in combination with the casual allusion to the political practices of enclosure this short passage represents a peculiar moment of eruption of economic and political realities in the text (which were at that time conventionally regarded as being outside the purview of women).

The walks and the sightseeing, a common leisure activity of the comfortable classes, are given a further limelight in the Lyme episode, with its picturesque natural scenery and a historical importance as a harbour. Going to Lyme out of season means that the party that sets out from Uppercross miss "any amusement or variety which Lyme, as a public place, might offer," such as "bathing machines and company." But in November the town and its surroundings are still worth visiting, one of the attractions being the Cobb, the harbour wall, which evokes an economic history of the town not actually mentioned in the novel.¹¹ Then, there's the nature to

¹¹ That the town has an economic life in the present other than tourism, is suggested only by the mention of "the boatmen and workmen about the Cobb" (*P* 1998: 100), who happen to be around at the time of Louisa's accident.

enjoy: “The scenes in its neighbourhood, Charmouth, with its high grounds and extensive sweeps of country, and still more its sweet, retired bay, backed by dark cliffs, where fragments of low rock among the sands, make it the happiest spot for watching the flow of the tide, for sitting in unwearied contemplation”; more than a hint of the romantic sublime is in evidence here. The most attractive sight is “Pinny, with its green chasms between romantic rocks, where the scattered forest trees and orchards of luxuriant growth, declare that many a generation must have passed away since the first partial falling of the cliff prepared the ground for such a state, where a scene so wonderful and so lovely is exhibited [...]” (*ibid.*: 86). Here, the picturesque appeal of the scenery comes not only from natural features, but also from the orchards which speak of human work. It should be observed that the passage doesn’t present the activities of admiration and contemplation of nature as the exclusive province of the poet, but rather associates them with the leisurely visitor with cultured sensibilities. The visit that the characters make to Lyme is not an occasion for contemplation of nature as a heightened form of experiencing and understanding the world as in Romantic poetry; yet as a resource of enjoyment and relaxation affordable to the leisure classes it is also a badge of the right kind of cultivation (to achieve which having a literary taste is a conventional requirement).

Anne’s readerly habitus is at first manifested primarily in her appreciation of nature poetry (with a possible burgeoning awareness of conventionalities and clichés); in the conversation with Benwick her attitude to the reading of poetry becomes more discerning and establishes the authority of her literary judgement. But her most striking pronouncements on literature happen in the conversation with Harville about constancy in women and men, in which Anne presents a specific critical approach to literary history, pointing to a historical bias in the writing on that subject:¹² “[...] if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands” (*ibid.*: 206).¹³ The world of books is thus given a double significance in the novel: for Anne it is the medium

¹² What occasions Anne’s words is the statement by Harville: “But let me observe that all histories are against you, all stories, prose and verse. If I had such a memory as Benwick, I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side the argument, and I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman’s inconstancy. Songs and proverbs, all talk of woman’s fickleness. But perhaps you will say, these were all written by men” (*P* 1998: 206).

¹³ Interestingly enough, this conversation, which takes place in Bath, bears a resemblance to the Prologue of the Wife of Bath’s Tale from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. The Wife of Bath’s fifth husband, the scholar Jankin, reads daily a misogynist compilation of texts about women, mostly by male authors (Harville’s words to Anne about women, that “all histories are against you,” convey a similar tone as Jankin’s book). The Wife of Bath points out that “scholars” have a biased way of writing about women, and raises the question of what kind of depiction women would have made of men “had women written histories/Like cloistered scholars” (Chaucer 1998: 236).

through which women can achieve a form of contact with the (dominantly male) spheres of public history and literature from which they are excluded, but in talking to Harville she points out, resoundingly, that written culture has historically been a record of lopsided views, formed under conditions of inequality between men and women. Anne's resolute act of bringing into focus such momentous issues is a key juncture of social commentary in the text; an unstated but obvious enough implication of her words is that there should be more writing by women, and that this would require addressing the social inequalities between men and women which work against women telling their story. In comparison to Anne, both Elizabeth's resistance to reading and Lady Russell's presumably ample yet ineffective reading appear emphatically problematic, with Anne acting as the voice and instrument of a social space not yet realized, a space which is also as yet sparsely written—an inequality which the text in which she is the protagonist foregrounds and seeks to redress.

While Raymond Williams emphasizes the historicity of Austen's novels, he maintains that for "all intricacy of her social description," her chief focus on the landed families was a limitation: "[...] where only one class is seen, no classes are seen" (Williams 1975: 117). This is almost true of Austen's world, but not quite. Its narrative lens is indeed not a wide one; it features little outside the scope focalized by the protagonists. Yet it would be slightly misleading to think of this scope as bringing into view one class only, because Austen's narratives, while mainly taking the perspective of looking inwards at the small world of a specific class, are also well-aware of the complex social space within which the landed class exists; this space, carefully stratified, is the backdrop to all of Austen's novels. In *Persuasion*, there is a good amount of talk of rank, precedence and consequence which separate different segments of the landed class into finely graded levels of hierarchy, and around that small world in the novel there extends, perhaps a sporadically dramatized, but still a customary and comprehensive sense that the entire social edifice is ordered hierarchically. While massive parts of the population are barely referenced in Austen's fiction, what her novels see is not just the internal world of one class, but a hierarchical organization of the body politic, in which the gentry regard themselves as an important part (and often as the moral centre of national life).¹⁴

¹⁴ In *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (1999) David Cannadine examines rhetorical uses of three models of class description in England since the 18th century: hierarchical, dichotomous (such as upper and lower) and triadic (such as upper, middle and lower). The broad question of theorizing the notion of class—whether it is an expression of social structures and processes, or a rhetorical and political attempt to define them, or both—is too complex to address here. Suffice it to observe, along with a

Persuasion, like Austen's fiction in general, arises out of a society in which the capital of rank or social prestige is still a powerful force. That aspiring for status continues to be a strong motivation in this world is discreetly suggested in the story of the Crofts: "Admiral Croft was a native of Somersetshire, who having acquired a very handsome fortune, was wishing to settle in his own country" (*P* 1998: 20)—the narrative doesn't explicitly depict the Crofts as looking to move up in social rank, but renting a place in the countryside, from a baronet, necessarily raises their social prestige. On the other hand, capital in the form of money is claiming an ever more prominent and undeniable role for its own financial importance. For William Walter Elliot, a relative of the Elliots of Kellynch-hall, money is at one point everything, and more important than status. Mrs. Smith, who knows the circumstances of his youth and marriage, reveals to Anne that "[h]e was determined to make [his fortune] by marriage" (*P* 1998: 177), and that "[m]oney, money, was all that he wanted." Although heir presumptive to Kellynch-hall, he wasn't content with the possible inheritance but wanted money immediately, and valued it more than the social prestige of Kellynch to be had in the future (an uncertain prospect anyway, if Sir Walter were to marry again). Mrs. Smith "often heard him declare, that if baronetcies were saleable, anybody should have his for fifty pounds, arms and motto, name and livery included" (*ibid.*: 178). It is not merely that his marriage for money (to a woman seen as having an inferior class status) is considered by some characters as reprehensible in the department of conduct; Mr. Elliot evokes a world in which social relations in general are increasingly being defined, valued and reshaped by money.¹⁵

Money may cause deviation from conventional taste, morals or class ideology of the gentry, but monetary wealth is a thing to be reckoned with. For instance, Captain Wentworth "had no fortune" when he first met Anne in 1806, since what he made in his profession, he "spen[t] freely" (*ibid.*: 25); but by 1814 he comes out

good deal of historiography, that the persistence of hierarchical imagination of class over the course of the 19th century is demonstrable, in spite of new social landscapes created by industrialization which also facilitated new versions of binary and triadic class description. Austen's class imagination and language are hierarchical, and her fiction is not very eloquent on the national geographies, economies and class relations without a direct relationship to land. The working population in particular gets a feeble acknowledgment; yet it would be interesting to examine at greater length her characters, in a number of novels, who are associated with nonlanded wealth. This kind of analysis would have to determine whether Austen does imagine in some way the existence of a middle class in a triadic system of class, or rather sees wealth coming from trade and professions as occupying specific places in a hierarchical image of society. The only express triadic reference in her fiction I could find is from *Mansfield Park*, when Edmund Bertram on one occasion prefers to speak of his social position not as rich or poor, but as belonging to "the middle state of worldly circumstances" (*MP* 1996: 178); but, of course, he very much benefits from his family's status and wealth.

¹⁵ After becoming a widower, Mr. Elliot rediscovers the attraction of rank, and Mrs. Smith reports him watchful about the baronet and Mrs. Clay, i.e. the possibility of a marriage that could deprive him of the baronetcy. The novel highlights in this way the continued social currency of status.

of the Napoleonic wars with significant wealth. This was, the novel suggests, relatively common at the time: “Many a noble fortune has been made during the war” (*ibid.*: 15), says Shepherd the lawyer generally apropos the profession of naval officer. When Captain Wentworth is introduced at Uppercross, Charles Musgrove is reported to estimate that he has “not made less than twenty thousand pounds by the war [...] besides which, there would be the chance of what might be done in any future war,” and that he would be “a capital match for either of his sisters” (*ibid.*: 68)—use of the word capital here cannot be an artless choice of idiom. (It even occurs to Mary that Wentworth’s career in the navy might eventually bring him the reward of a baronetcy.) The conversion of money into status is a regular matter in Austen’s world, and the Musgroves understand and embrace this social dynamic. It is of course important that the novel opens with a financial matter, the crisis experienced by the Elliots, which throws into sharp relief the fact that money is one of the fundamental underpinnings of the maintenance of the social order that Austen’s protagonists inhabit. Sir Walter has been utterly incapable of prudently managing his income: “While Lady Elliot lived, there had been method, moderation, and economy, which had just kept him within his income; but with her had died all such right-mindedness, and from that period he had been constantly exceeding it” (*ibid.*: 10). The problem is not in the profitability of the estate, but in the baronet’s excesses of consumption. The text provides no detail on his income from the estate, even though Austen’s novels, generally speaking, tend to get very specific when it comes to income. As Raymond Williams observes, Austen is on the whole “more exact about income, which is disposable, than about acres, which have to be worked” (Williams 1975: 115). Thomas Piketty examined specific references to income in Austen’s novels, and estimated that Austen’s landed characters needed “twenty to thirty times” the average income at the time to support their status; “[t]he characters in her novels consider themselves free from need only if they dispose of incomes of 500 to 1,000 pounds a year” (Piketty 2014: 105-106). But in *Persuasion* there are, uncharacteristically, no particulars on the size of the Elliots’ income from rent or the scale of Sir Walter’s mismanagement. However, there is a sense of the relative cost of the mismanagement, beginning with the fact that letting Kellynch-hall is a necessity. Also, at the end of the story Anne’s dowry, it is suggested, falls short of what it should have been, for her father “had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him, and [...] could give his daughter at present but a small part of the share of ten thousand pounds which must be hers hereafter” (*P* 1998: 218). The baronet’s wastefulness looms large in the narrative; more emphatically than any other gentry character in Austen’s novels, he embodies a practice of consumption that threatens to overwhelm the economic basis of his class in land rent. A broadly farcical character, he may even appear to stand for a social order that is becoming spent (were it not for the Musgroves, who provide some vigour to that order). But at the same time, there is no clear indication in the narrative of what a different

social order might look like. So how does the novel construct its view of the historical moment it inhabits, and what is a sense of social change in this construction?

One answer is that the novel really doesn't imagine the emergence of anything radically different. It may be more about improvement than social transformation, let alone a radical one. The role of the Crofts in the narrative is interesting in this regard. Anne notices that Kellynch-hall is far better managed by the Crofts as renters: "she had in fact so high an opinion of the Crofts, and considered her father so very fortunate in his tenants, felt the parish to be so sure of a good example, and the poor of the best attention and relief, that however sorry and ashamed for the necessity of the removal, she could not but in conscience feel that they were gone who deserved not to stay, and that Kellynch-hall had passed into better hands than its owners" (*ibid.*: 113). The Crofts make some small improvements to the house and keep it in good order, and, more importantly, Anne feels that they discharge the role of an exemplary paternalist authority of social cohesion in the parish much better than their father.¹⁶ The story of the Crofts is not epilogued; they have decided to settle in the countryside, but the narrative doesn't show them actually buying a property. The Admiral is "of a gentleman's family" (*ibid.*: 21), an argument Shepherd uses to get the baronet to consider letting to the Crofts. Later, the Crofts also go to Bath, announcing their claim on participation in that social hub of the classes with nationally prestigious status. So, while the novel doesn't tell us, the Crofts may be easily imagined as eventually getting integrated into the landed gentry, the latest arrivals in a long history of such incorporations. If the story of their absorption into the landed elite might also be read as a story of social improvement—the Crofts excelling in their good sense and paternalist exercise of privilege where Sir Walter failed—they are not exactly parvenus to begin with and their social integration is still presented in a way that doesn't essentially redefine the character of the social order. The change is gradual and conservative, without affecting greatly the established social structures and the principle of hierarchy itself.

For Tony Tanner, the change announced by the novel is more substantial, potentially: as mentioned before, he suggests that the novel projects an image of English society caught between an old order in decline and a new one, "of as yet uncertain values, hierarchies and principles" (Tanner 1986: 249). Some of this sense of transition is in his reading associated with the naval profession, which acquired a new sense of social importance in the course of the Napoleonic wars, and which in the novel is taken to project "a wholly different scheme of values, and a potentially new model of alternative society or community, [...] a new community which,

¹⁶ By renting the house to the Crofts and absenting himself from Kellynch-hall, on the other hand, the baronet, who may be assumed to still receive rent from tenant farmers on the estate, is also dislocated from the local social order.

among other things, accepted wives as equals” (*ibid.*: 228). In *Persuasion* Tanner sees Austen’s “transfer of allegiance and emotional investment from the English ruling classes [...] to the navy (which not only appealed to her patriotism but also embodied new and welcome alternative values” (*ibid.*: 229). The social interactions of the naval cast of characters are shaped by informality and cordiality that are in sharp contrast with the stale formalities of the landed classes. Mrs. Croft, the Admiral’s wife is in Tanner’s reading “a new kind of woman in Jane Austen’s world”; she leads an active life as her husband’s companion but is also “strongly independent” (*ibid.*: 232).¹⁷ More recently Anne Frey has argued that the novel projects a sense of admiration for the naval profession and bestows on it a new way of imagining the national community; Frey regards the navy as one of the “administrative” or “bureaucratic agencies” whose importance grew during this period when “[t]he war with France and the growth of the East India Company placed more men in service” (*ibid.*: 214). *Persuasion* rejects “aristocratic and organic models of nation” (*ibid.*: 216); and “[i]n transferring power from the gentry to the navy, Austen critiques the Burkean model of a nation as a community defined through landed inheritance” (*ibid.*: 217). An example of the decline of the organic notion of nation based on the authority of the landed classes Frey finds in the Musgroves who are “self-absorbed,” and more generally she states that the novel regards the communities of the landed classes as “insular” (*ibid.*: 218) and unable to relate to the entirety of society.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Frey also acknowledges that the assumed new moral significance of the naval community is rendered in the novel in a way that is contiguous with the old order: “But although Austen’s Britain liberally opens its governing structures to a wider group of people, she defines morality in terms still recognizable from aristocratic *noblesse oblige*” (Frey 2005: 230). A similar observation was made by Daniel P. Gunn, who stated that in “matters of conduct [Austen] superimposes an older way of seeing onto the new.” In Gunn’s reading, there is a “contradiction [...] between the moral language of *Persuasion*, which presupposes a static social order, and the novel’s basic way of imagining the world, which implies very strongly that such an order no longer exists” (Gunn 1987: 414).

The relationship between the old and the new is certainly dealt with in the novel with some equivocation. Sir Walter is rigidly conservative about rank, but even he eventually accommodates a degree of change, granting Wentworth some acknowledgment: “Captain Wentworth, with five-and-twenty thousand pounds,

¹⁷ Mrs. Croft is possessed of a good business sense. Speaking of the Crofts inquiring about renting Kellynch, Shepherd the lawyer observes that she “asked more questions about the house, and terms, and taxes, than the Admiral himself, and seemed more conversant with business” (*P* 1998: 22).

¹⁸ The Musgroves may be parochial, but their modernization and exercise of customs similar to those of other such small “commonwealths,” manifest their taking part in a culture connecting the nation-wide archipelago of landed classes.

and as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him, was no longer nobody. He was now esteemed quite worthy to address the daughter of a foolish, spendthrift baronet” (*P* 1998: 218). Sir Walter’s approval of Wentworth is no longer an issue, but his class arrogance doesn’t carry much weight anyway, as he is from the very beginning of the narrative cast as someone given to a misperception of social processes (unlike Mr. Shepherd who advises him). In the world of the story it is always clear that the naval profession is not without prestige, and that there would be nothing unusual in an alliance between Anne and a Captain in the navy; it is only unusual to the baronet (and Lady Russell). However, the deflation of Sir Walter’s stature doesn’t mean that the stature of the landed classes is deflated as well, and the novel is careful not to suggest that the old order with its mooring in land possession has been in a decisive decline or that it has been swept away. For instance, while there is a parochialism to the Musgroves, they also project a sense of sociability and improvement: “The Musgroves, like their houses, were in a state of alteration, perhaps of improvement. The father and mother 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 had more modern minds and manners” (*ibid.*: 36). The Musgroves may be taken to signify a revitalizing of the old order by replenishment from the ranks rising from immediately below. They are less conceited and arrogant than Sir Walter, Elizabeth and Mary,¹⁹ which also means they are much more sociable.²⁰ In addition to their cordiality they are also implied to possess a drive to improve their economic circumstances which has withered away with Sir Walter Elliot. Yet, while their place in the narrative is not entirely marginal, the Musgroves are also given no central role in it. Anne finds Charles Musgrove, heir to Uppercross, “civil and agreeable; in sense and temper he was undoubtedly superior to his wife [...] a more equal match might have greatly improved him.” Anne doesn’t provide details, but it is possible to assume he doesn’t show much promise in re-

¹⁹ Upon arriving at Uppercross, Anne too shows some condescension, albeit in her thoughts: “Anne always contemplated them as some of the happiest creatures of her acquaintance; but still, saved as we all are by some comfortable feeling of superiority from wishing for the possibility of exchange, she would not have given up her own more elegant and cultivated mind for all their enjoyments; and envied them nothing but that seemingly perfect good understanding and agreement together, that good-humoured mutual affection, of which she had known so little herself with either of her sisters” (*P* 1998: 36). This is Austen’s way of hinting that no character in the novel, and not even Anne, embodies completely the tone of its vantage point.

²⁰ The Musgroves contribute some vigour to the landed order by their sociability: “The neighbourhood was not large, but the Musgroves were visited by everybody, and had more dinner parties, and more callers, more visitors by invitation and by chance, than any other family. They were more completely popular” (*P* 1998: 42). Generally speaking, in Austen’s gentry world the visitors to landed families are not just people from other landed families, but also people in their social orbit (such as Anglican clergy, and navy and army officers) as well as people like Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* (whose family wealth comes from trade), who are appreciative of the social prestige of the gentry.

finement of conduct or possibly even in economic responsibility: “As it was, he did nothing with much zeal, but sport; and his time was otherwise trifled away, without benefit from books or anything else” (*ibid.*: 39). Having heard that Benwick and Louisa Musgrove are about to marry, Anne imagines Louisa to develop an enthusiasm for poetry, and reflects (not without a touch of condescension): “The idea of Louisa Musgrove turned into a person of literary taste, and sentimental reflection, was amusing” (*ibid.*: 149). On the whole, the personal cultivation of the new generation of the Musgroves is not given an air of moral or social substance. The Musgroves are an improvement on the Elliots, but a superficial one; they can hardly be seen as the novel’s harbingers of a substantially different order of things.

In interpreting the novel as a gesture towards a new social order (one which is without a clear definition as yet), Tanner stresses the significance of the depiction of the naval profession for its different practices of communication, both more informal and more respectful than the stale and superficial civilities of the landed classes; he also emphasizes the fact that Wentworth’s money and status (like Admiral Croft’s too) are not rooted in land, but in a profession unassociated with land. Before Tanner, Nina Auerbach saw the significance of the shift from the land to the sea in even stronger terms than Tanner later would, and regarded the novel as suggesting “Austen’s new utopianism” in its depiction of the naval community, and Wentworth’s role in particular: “Wentworth has been called the first of Jane Austen’s heroes who is a self-made man, and he is also the first hero to represent the world of the future rather than the past. As Anne’s lover, Wentworth can initiate her into the brave new world that is so radically transforming the structure of the old. The warmth and generosity that were chilled by the old society can flourish in the new” (Auerbach 1972: 120). While describing the significance of the naval community in the novel as “utopianism” and claiming that it ushers in “a brave new world” may appear extraordinarily hyperbolic claims, Auerbach’s point is possibly to underscore the novel’s tendency to idealize the significance of the navy (as opposed to landed classes). In that context, Auerbach also argues that the novel foregrounds “the new importance of productive labor as fulfillment in itself;” and that the sailors are, like farmers, in tune with the natural world: “[a]s the farmer works with the rhythm of the seasons, so the sailors work with the rhythm of the sea” (*ibid.*: 121). It may be a bit of a stretch to attribute to the novel a construction of close affinity between the labour of farmers and the labour of sailors (especially if we consider the fact that farming is featured in the novel far less than the naval profession), but Auerbach does have a point in emphasizing that both these groups engage in arduous work, a quality conspicuously absent from the baronet’s life. It is not that in Austen’s other novels, where male characters inherit land or money, idleness is tolerated or praised, but the emphasis on work as application in *Persuasion* seems new in degree and kind. The sailors in *Persuasion* are not born into abundant money or lofty status, but make their own fortunes by applying themselves in a difficult profession, which separates them for instance from someone

like Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, assiduous as he is in the exercise of his paternalist duties, or his friend Bingley, whose family wealth comes from trade and who doesn't seem to engage in any work himself.

Nevertheless, it should be observed that within the world of the novel the naval profession is not really imagined as bringing about a redrawing of the basic contours of the existing social order. The Crofts, after all, seem to retire as country gentlemen, imitating, at least to an extent, the lifestyle of the rural gentry. So maybe, as with the Musgroves, the Crofts and potentially even Anne and Wentworth are merely taking part in a superficial tweak to the old order. Anne Frey claims that "in insisting that Wentworth's rise was not based on patronage, Austen portrays a navy open to middle-class men" (Frey 2005: 219). Significance of merit in Wentworth's career is certainly indicated in the text, as he was "made commander in consequence of the action off St. Domingo" (*P* 1998: 24). Over the years he acquired a large fortune in service, by seizing enemy ships,²¹ and it appears that advancement in his career (which also made possible his accumulation of wealth in it) had a great deal to do with his actions in service. But it is still likely that patronage was involved in getting Wentworth his first rank in the Royal Navy (before being made commander, a part of his career which is not really illumined by the narrative), and it is likely that patronage played a part later in his career too. Austen's vague but careful construction of Wentworth's story suggests his background to be relatively humble but still having some association with the genteel orders. His older brother was a curate at Monkford, a low-level position within Anglican hierarchy, but still a position which implies some social status just as it offers chances of further appointment. On one occasion, Sir Walter disagrees with his lawyer's characterization of Mr. Wentworth, the curate, as a gentleman: "You misled me by the term *gentleman*. I thought you were speaking of some man of property: Mr. Wentworth was nobody, I remember; quite unconnected" (*P* 1998: 22). Unconnected for the baronet means unrelated to holders of landed property; but were the Wentworths really without access to patronage? Captain Wentworth is the curate's and Mrs. Croft's brother; whether Mrs. Croft's husband had something to do with Frederick's joining the navy is not stated, but her very marriage to Croft is another indication that the Wentworths were not without some social capital. One instance of patronage in Wentworth's career is in fact referenced, with some indirection. Wentworth's first command was the *Asp*, a sloop about which he complains

²¹ Paul Johnson writes that "[u]nder the Cruisers Act (1708), renewed at the beginning of each war, Crown rights to the value of captured vessels were divided into eights: three-eighths went to the captain of the ship which took the prize, one-eighth to the commander in chief of the fleet or squadron, one-eighth to the officers, one-eighth to the warrant officers, and two-eighths to the crew." Seizing ships was not a regular occurrence, though, and at the end of the Napoleonic wars, "[a]s the Royal Navy cleared the seas, the chances of prize money fell, and with the peace, it virtually ceased. [...] In the first years of peace, the navy was not an attractive career for ambitious men" (Johnson 1992: 336-37).

as being “[h]ardly fit for service then.” Admiral Croft begs to differ, “Never was a better sloop than the *Asp* in her day. [...] Lucky fellow to get her!—He knows there must have been twenty better men than himself applying for her at the same time. Lucky fellow to get anything so soon, with no more interest than his” (*P* 1998: 58-59). The Admiral’s rejoinder implies that there were more deserving candidates for the post, and that just about enough patronage (interest) may have been involved in Wentworth’s favour for him to get it.

A further step in Wentworth’s career is his getting posted to the frigate *Laconia*, which turned out to be quite financially lucrative: “How fast I made money in her” (*ibid.*: 60). After Anne was persuaded to reject marriage to Wentworth, she perused navy lists and newspapers and concluded that he “must now, by successive captures, have made a handsome fortune” (*ibid.*: 27). It should be remembered that early in the story the baronet expresses his dislike of the naval profession for being a vehicle of social mobility, “the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of” (*ibid.*: 19).²² Sir Walter is aware of the mobility in contemporary society and doesn’t approve of it, but mobility in the world of this novel doesn’t so much challenge hierarchy as function rather routinely within it; on the whole, the narrative clearly places Wentworth within the available and structured forms of mobility which reconfigure the established hierarchy somewhat, but do not get rid of the principle and the mechanisms of it.

Fortunes are sometimes made in the naval profession in times of war, and Wentworth’s considerable wealth largely comes from prize money (made by seizing enemy ships); how this wealth is going to be made use of in the future remains undecided. What is known is that his career in the navy continues, with Anne understanding very well and fearing the dangerous character of it. Neither the narrator nor Anne engage in speculations about his future status in the navy, let alone about possibilities of further enrichment or a different occupation. What the social roles for members of the naval profession might be in peacetime is something the novel barely touches upon, other than in the story of the Crofts who might be moving towards some manner of integration into the landed classes. At any rate, the focus on the naval profession in *Persuasion* doesn’t really either register or propose a radical break with the gradual pace and conservative character of social processes in England (the chief traits of the social world of Austen’s novels in general). If there is an element of novelty to social vision in *Persuasion* which didn’t yet feature in the previous novels, it has to do with the fact that a profession (the naval one) is placed in the narrative limelight, the first such occurrence in her novels. Almost automatically by virtue of that focus, and in spite of its association with

²² As an example of social mobility, Sir Walter complains about “Lord St. Ives, whose father we all know to have been a country curate, without bread to eat” (*P* 1998: 19).

the social world of the landed class and the armature of the patrician state, the naval profession seems invested with the role of making visible a potential of social forces and views not deriving from possession of land. A related novelty is the fact that the male protagonist makes a fortune through his career, an unprecedented plot in Austen's novels. Wentworth's fortune of "five-and-twenty thousand pounds" is not insignificant; it is also the only precisely quantified fortune in the novel. The naval profession may be thus said to allow the narrative to acknowledge the growing social significance of wealth generated in forms other than land rent; yet it is better regarded as a convenient and familiar example than a paradigmatic and new one. By focusing on a different kind of wealth, made within a single career or a single generation, the novel also necessarily casts a particular light on Austen's previous texts, in which male protagonists as a rule inherit wealth but in which there are strong hints of the expanding status of money that doesn't come from land. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, in addition to Bingley, there is Mrs. Bennet's brother: Mr. Gardiner, "a sensible, gentlemanlike man, greatly superior to his sister as well by nature as education," is "a man who lived by trade, and within view of his own warehouses" (*P&P* 1996: 118); certainly, there is not nearly as much focus on Mr. Gardiner and his business, as there is on the naval officers in *Persuasion* (albeit, in their private capacity mostly).²³

It is in the wording of the novel's ending that the importance of the naval profession seems to receive a strong endorsement. The ending also delivers a resounding statement on the importance of the union of Anne and Wentworth. Once, both characters were regarded as nobodies: Anne initially "was nobody with either father or sister" (*P* 1998: 7), and Wentworth was not considered socially acceptable by the baronet and Lady Russell. The story has worked to equip Anne and Wentworth with a kind of significance unmatched by other characters, and the concluding passage of the novel highlights both the value of the union and the value of the profession (while also acknowledging its hazards):

Anne was tenderness itself, and she had the full worth of it in Captain Wentworth's affection. His profession was all that could ever make her friends wish that tenderness less; the dread of a future war all that could dim her sunshine. She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance. (*ibid.*: 221)²⁴

²³ A more direct approach to representation of a business enterprise is featured in the unfinished manuscript of *Sanditon*, in the story of Mr. Parker, a small property holder who is trying, with great enthusiasm, to turn the coastal village of Sanditon into a tourist attraction; this novel, had it been completed, may have turned out to signify an additional direction in Austen's writing, her social satire extending outside the landed setting into the sphere of entrepreneurship (even though Mr. Parker's story seems still to inhabit the outskirts of the genteel rural world).

²⁴ In *Victorious Century*, David Cannadine describes a series of celebrations in London in 1814, one of which included a structure named "'Temple of Concord'" on whose "walls were a series of allegorical

Revisiting a number of themes explored earlier in the novel, the ending emphasizes the mutuality of affection as the foundation of the couple's marriage; Anne and Frederick join the Crofts as new standards of domestic virtue. The ending is thus also a comment on that crisis of domesticity with which the narrative opens. The first character introduced in the novel is the baronet, whose habit of narcissistic looking at the Baronetage helps him deal with "any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs" (*ibid.*: 5); it is soon made clear that the sensations are related to his mismanagement of his income as well as to the unresolved question of Elizabeth's marrying into proper status. But early on the narrative focus shifts away from Sir Walter's domestic problems, and the novel's ending affirms the superior quality of domesticity exemplified in the union of Anne and Frederick, where the superiority derives from greater economic prudence, more cordial forms of sociality, and the anchoring of marriage in affection. Once hampered by the increasingly dysfunctional sense of social distinction embodied in the baronet and Lady Russell, Anne and Frederick are no longer nobodies, and their version of domesticity is now being promoted as a new exemplar (with a nod to the service of the naval profession to the nation at large). But at the same time, the ending references a sense of uncertainty attendant on the naval profession itself, the danger of possible war. There is an interesting dynamic of shifting perspectives in the closing passage, rendered in resonant language; the primary business of the naval profession, a hazardous affair, is praised for its "national importance;" on the other hand, the naval profession is suggested to be even "more distinguished in its domestic virtues." The fashioning of the nation, the novel seems to almost say in this way, also takes place at home, suggesting Austen's concern with connecting the notion of conduct and the notion of community.

The naval profession is not the only profession featured in the narrative. In an examination of the theme of profession in *Persuasion*, Charles J. Rzepka highlights the role of the seemingly marginal character of Mrs. Rooke, "a nurse by profession" (*P* 1998: 138). Mrs. Rooke is professionally employed as a private nurse, but Rzepka points out that she is also "a story-teller by avocation" (Rzepka 1994: 109), who, in Mrs. Smith's words, provides an insight into the social world of the characters: "Call it gossip, if you will; but when Nurse Rooke has half an hour's leisure to bestow on me, she is sure to have something to relate that is entertaining and profitable, something that makes one know one's species better" (*P* 1998:

images: strife and tyranny were banished by peace and victory, and beneath them processed a triumphant Britannia, preceded by 'Prudence, Temperance, Justice and Fortitude' and followed by 'the Arts, Commerce, Industry and the Domestic Virtues'" (Cannadine 2017: 83). The celebrations took place in the summer of 1814, and Claire Tomalin mentions in her biography of Austen that she visited with her brother Henry in London in August (Tomalin 1999: 244), but I haven't been able to ascertain whether Austen knew of or attended the celebrations. It is tempting to think that the novel's association of the war against Napoleon and the phrase "domestic virtues" may have been motivated by the language of the festivities.

139). Rzepka observes that “Mrs. Smith calls Nurse Rooke ‘my historian’ [...], but the shrewd nurse is, more properly speaking, Anne Elliot’s ‘historian,’ the omniscient teller of a tale in which Anne has thus far participated without full knowledge” (Rzepka 1994: 112-13). In Rzepka’s reading the significance of Nurse Rooke is in the analogies constructed in the text between her form of storytelling and the very profession of writing, but also in bringing up the question of women in professional employment. Examining the theme of profession in the novel and the conjunction of naval and domestic themes in the novel, Monica Cohen states that “*Persuasion* wants us to see structural affinities between the nineteenth century’s incipient professionalism and a domesticity aimed at expanding the woman’s sphere by defining it as social and ethical expertise” (Cohen 1996: 363). This has been argued often in one way or another—that the shift away from land is coupled in the novel with a specific emphasis on domesticity as the forge of a new kind of moral and social anchor. As both Rzepka and Cohen point out, the character of Mrs. Rooke, the nurse, brings into focus the very notion of woman in a professional role. In addition, women who marry into the naval profession, such as Mrs. Croft, project a new emphasis on authority of women as efficient household managers. Anne is early on suggested to be well-suited to that role as she helps manage the handover of Kellynch-hall from the Elliots to the Crofts as tenants. Moreover, she assumes a moral authority in domestic spaces, reinforced by her ability to act as a sort of moral arbiter, albeit a relatively reserved one, in the domestic contexts of Uppercross and those of Bath.

That the novel is concerned with a shift towards a different understanding of wealth and status, a new role for women, and a reconstructed domestic space is a big part of its narrative work. However, two kinds of comments need to be attached to that kind of reading. First, the shifts and reconstructions are still imagined only within the world of the landed gentry, since the naval class is not featured as an example of independent social mobility but a profession that still largely functions within the established structure of hierarchy, which is only slightly modified in the story. Other kinds of occupation such as trade and manufacturing, which exist in a large way in the actual historical world of the time, are not acknowledged at all in the novel, let alone endorsed as models of new ways of generating wealth or new models of social authority. The significance of the naval profession in *Persuasion* resides in its national role—national not simply for its part in fighting Napoleon, or for its more congenial forms of domestic sociality but also for the fact of its emplacement within the armature of the state, an armature thoroughly dominated by the landed classes.²⁵ The novel is well-aware that its new focus on the naval

²⁵ Anne Frey makes a much more specific argument about the navy in the novel: “For Austen, the old aristocratic structures no longer instill a sense of social responsibility in the upper classes. The navy’s organizational structures, in contrast, place individuals into relationships that define their duties toward one another and toward the community as a whole. The novel insists that these relationships

profession still represents only a very limited widening of the narrative lens on the world of landed classes. Yet even this slight shift in optics, limited as it is, does speak of the novel's ambition to present a voice in the national conversation about the state of the nation.

The second comment to be attached to the readings cited above has to do with the self-understanding of this novel. Austen had a keen appreciation of the fact that the language of class is a socially contested arena: when Anne's father opposes characterization of the curate Wentworth as gentleman we are in fact reminded that different definitions of the term are in circulation. When Sir Walter decides at the end of the story that Captain Wentworth is no longer a nobody, we are in effect told that even his farcical beliefs on distinction are undergoing redefinition. Austen's lens, trained on a very small social world, didn't preclude a social imagination of change; on the contrary, *Persuasion* seeks to delineate a world marked by a measure of flux, in which the language of social relations is open to a measure of contestation. The novel imagines some of its purpose as rhetorical work of addressing the idiom of class; the purpose is to defamiliarize the very social ideas, the acknowledged truths about class it portrays as dominant.

Another useful avenue to examining the novel's snapshot of the social flux may be to look again at the theme of reading in the novel, and the almost complete absence of novels as reading in the text. Like all of Austen's writing, *Persuasion* is constructed on the tension between the supposed universality of the world of the gentry and its acknowledged truths (which are acknowledged only in order to be subjected to the satirical work of narrative) and the vantage point of an intended audience which is posited as an effect of the text but which is neither wholly epitomized within it nor assumed to be a significant presence in the contemporary world outside it. Within its own world *Persuasion* doesn't feature a kind of reader or a community of readers upon whom it could unequivocally bestow cultural affinity to itself. At best, we may ascertain that the novel is populated by better readers and not so good readers, with Anne at one end of the spectrum, Benwick in the middle, and Elizabeth at the other end. But within the novel neither a community of readers nor a commonality of texts exist. Conspicuously, while poem titles are mentioned, no single novel title is mentioned in *Persuasion*.²⁶ It is as if Austen deliberately sought to highlight a paradox framing the text: *Persuasion* takes upon itself to dramatize a shift in social perspective, a movement away from the landed classes, but also a shift in cultural perspective, a movement towards a growing cul-

continue when the navy returns home, and that communities accumulate through and around the friendships of the naval officers" (Frey 2005: 219). My emphasis, however, is that the armature of the state, of which the navy was a part, was still controlled by patrician interest, an aspect acknowledged by the novel.

²⁶ Anne thinks at one point of "the inimitable Miss Larolles" (*P* 1998: 168), a character from Fanny Burney's novel *Cecilia*, but the novel's title isn't mentioned.

tural authority of the novel as a genre, all of this without really allowing for a substantive widening of the novel's social lens and without having the benefit of being able to comfortably take advantage of a well-established cultural authority of both writing and reading novels. It is not only that Austen's actual contemporary national readership was quite limited,²⁷ which it certainly was also because the reading public was generally small. Rather, the point is that *Persuasion* makes manifest, under these limiting circumstances regarding the existing social world and the existing literary field, its ambition to claim great social and literary significance as a novel.²⁸

Not even Anne does function as completely representative of the novel's views on literature. Even though she does possess a cultivated mind already at the outset of the story, and even though she presents a sharp delineation of male domination in the history of writing, Austen is careful not to associate Anne directly with the novel's central assumption of the emerging social authority of the genre of the novel. Much of the complexity of *Persuasion* is generated precisely by the fact that within its own world it is not entirely readable, as it is quite formally fastidious in presenting itself as requiring a readerly perspective external to that world. This is not to say that *Persuasion* is less concerned with the moral issue of conduct than Austen's other novels, or that Anne is less of a protagonist whose role is to make visible the right kind of conduct. The theme of conduct is still there, and

²⁷ *Emma*, for instance, was published in 1815, and Claire Tomalin mentions that the novel's publisher, John Murray, "printed 2,000 copies, her largest edition yet" (Tomalin 1999: 249). According to Richard D. Altick, the first edition of Walter Scott's first novel *Waverley* (1814) was 1,000, and in six months it sold 6,000 (Altick 1998: 383). By comparison, Scott's poem *Marmion* (1808) sold 2,000 in the first month, and *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) sold 20,300 in the first year (*ibid.*: 386). The two poems as well as poems by Byron are mentioned in *Persuasion*, a nod to the cultural prestige of poetry at the time. The events of *Persuasion* take place in 1814 and 1815; by 1814 Austen already published three novels and Scott only his first. As *Persuasion* shows, Austen was quite aware that she was not working in the most popular genre of literature, just as it shows that she tried to build up its cultural authority.

²⁸ The cultural attitudes to the genre of the novel were changing at the time, and Austen was part of that change. For instance, a contemporary reviewer, Richard Whately wrote in 1821, in a review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, that "[t]he times seem to be past when an apology was requisite from reviewers for condescending to notice a novel [...] The delights of fiction, if not more keenly or more generally relished, are at least more readily acknowledged by men of sense and taste" (Whately 1995: 196-97). Whately surveyed a cultural field in which the genre didn't enjoy great critical acclaim, but was beginning to garner critical attention and cultural stature. He saw in Austen's novels examples of a "new school of fiction," which arose at the turn of the 19th century, and whose ambition was to present a "picture of common life" (*ibid.*: 197). He praised Austen's novels for basing their "moral lessons" in specific kind of literary representation: "her's is that unpretending kind of instruction which is furnished by real life; and certainly no author has ever conformed more closely to real life, as well in the incidents, as in the characters and descriptions." Her literary style, he noted, primarily involves description of "private conversations and uncommunicated feelings" (*ibid.*: 201); the latter appears an early recognition of the technique of focalization. Whately's review was published in *Quarterly Review* 24 (1821). Note: the Norton Critical Edition of Austen's novel, which includes a large excerpt of Whately's text I am quoting from, renders his name as is Whately.

a common Austenian premise is present that conduct requires a dynamic adaptation to changing social processes, but there is no great dramatic emplotment to reaching the right kind of conduct: Anne is early on established as a blend of developed social attitudes of Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price, in judgement and action.²⁹ As Tatjana Jukić observes in a recent reading of *Persuasion*: “Anne in the end knows little that she did not know as the novel began” (Jukić 2022: 76). With character development given a relatively secondary focus, the narrative necessarily calls attention to its own design and status as novel, as well as its ambition of engaging the broad question of the condition of contemporary society. There is a modernity to this literary aspiration that conceives of the genre of the novel as a species of social thought. Jukić argues that reading *Persuasion* must take into account its pronounced (and within Austen’s work unprecedented) historicity as well as its positing of the genre of the novel as “an apparatus instrumental to negotiating the modern condition” (Jukić 2022: 82).³⁰

In its own fashion *Persuasion* is about claiming its own authority as an instrument of social analysis. Elizabeth’s refusal to interest herself in publications dealing with the “states of the nation” seems a small event in the design of the text, but it throws into sharp relief the novel’s implicit self-understanding as yet another form of discourse on the state of the nation, and a superior one at that. In the sense of assuming the authority to overview the national condition, and in spite of its focusing only on a small segment of the national fabric,³¹ *Persuasion* may even be seen as anticipating some of the cultural poise of the industrial novel or the condition of England literature of the middle of the 19th century. Its social lens is narrower than that of mid-Victorian novels, but it does propose to discuss the nation and its condition. Regarding its understanding of what constitutes the national community, it is both conservative and moderately open to modification, insofar as on the one hand it doesn’t relinquish the political horizon of the existing order dominated by landed families from Austen’s earlier novels, while on the other hand it welcomes the process of renewal of the old order exemplified by the more affable Musgroves and presents a case for greater appreciation of the naval profession,

²⁹ From the start of the novel it is clear that Anne’s moral and social attitudes are presented as superior to those of Elizabeth, Mary and their father; in that regard, it may also be said that the basic traits of Anne’s idea of conduct, defined at the outset of the narrative, remain substantially the same at the end of it.

³⁰ Along with discussing the significance of the genre of the novel in the 19th century, Jukić also examines the place of *Persuasion* in Austen’s fiction as a text which is designed to work out her views on the genre of the novel.

³¹ This could be said of Austen’s other novels as well. Claire Tomalin, for instance, states that “*Mansfield Park* is, among other things, a novel about the condition of England” (Tomalin 1999: 226), which in her reading means pointing to similarities between the worldliness of the Crawfords and “the highest Regency society” (*ibid.*: 227). Some of the complexity of Austen’s fiction comes from evoking this level of topicality, as well as from observing the more general questions and processes related to landed wealth and hierarchy.

“who have done so much for us” (*P* 1998: 19). In those words by Anne, the referent of the “us” is arguably not meant to include everyone living in the country; conceivably, the “us” here may still mean, conservatively, only the social order anchored by patrician landowners. Thus the novel doesn’t so much insist that its view of the national community is new, as it does clearly imply that the inflexible one espoused by Sir Walter Elliot is antiquated, restrictive and foolishly ineffective. The novel’s view of the nation also shapes its light on the state of this nation, a light that reveals instability and change without proposing to predict (as in fact Tanner too remarked), the contours of a new order of things. The novel’s image of the national community is one created by social bonds connecting the archipelago of landed neighbourhoods, the patrician state with its hierarchies, privileges and careers, the social pull of London and fashionable tourist haunts, the printed culture of newspapers, navy lists, publications on the state of the nation, a common discourse about poetry, taste in poetry and more generally taste in literature, and a pursuit of admiration of the picturesque of natural and historical character as part of personal cultivation, all that in a text that does not mention cotton or cotton mills, social conflict, trade policies, the East India Company, the recent war with America, or even Napoleon by name, or any of the English political figures from the period for that matter. The novel’s social lens is largely shaped by the sense that the society it observes is one of a gradual reconfiguration of social hierarchies and relations rather than an abrupt break with the existing order. The mood of the novel in this regard is one of discontentment with the staleness of the social order, but as to its appreciation of actual new social developments and forces at play in contemporary society, the novel’s choice to focus on the navy is arguably a matter of its affinity with (rather than difference from) the established order. In addition, the “national importance” (*ibid.*: 221) of the naval community is linked to the threat of war, which infuses Wentworth and Anne’s future with a strong sense of uncertainty; also, it doesn’t quite become apparent how the naval profession as a community may be featured in the role of instrument or catalyst of social transformation in peacetime. It is certainly arguable that the social attitudes of the naval officers in the novel present a strong contrast to the tiredness of the world of the gentry, but the novel is very cautious in characterizing the organizational or bureaucratic aspects of the navy, and it does not look closely at its actual professional work. Not to mention that the novel, for all its mockery of the gentry world, doesn’t exclude the possibility of a reformation of the significance of the landed order: the Crofts are possibly on their way to settle down on land, and Anne and Wentworth might imaginably follow suit. Yet this is left unresolved, which is a telling indication that the novel doesn’t seek to fashion a radical break from the countryside setting for its main characters, just as it doesn’t seek to address with greater resolve the possibility of decoupling its imagination of personal conduct from rootedness in the world of the rural gentry, a reluctance that runs through Austen’s fiction in general.

Persuasion may be said to invest most of its work in a more general direction, as a cultural intervention, a work of persuasion about its own significance, a claim to be a social discourse that proffers opinion on the state of the nation and demands that its authority to do so, as well as the authority of the genre of the novel to which it belongs, be recognized. This feature of *Persuasion* is not attendant on a sweeping overview of the social world; rather it grows out of a perception of small and gradual changes in the parochial but socially still powerful world of the gentry. The novel's claim of authority is both the method and the goal of its work: broadcasting its own social importance, domestic and national, and establishing its authority in the act of doing so. It takes itself seriously, not merely as a way for the gentry class to achieve a critical self-awareness, as Williams argued, but as an instrument of surveying the broader social landscape, taking part in the national conversation about the state of the nation, and establishing the novel as a new literary richness of the age.

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SAŽETAK

STANJE NACIJE I ROMAN: UVJERAVANJE JANE AUSTEN

Roman Jane Austen *Persuasion* (1818) često je u kritičkim čitanjima analiziran zbog svojega prikaza društvenog svijeta nižeg plemstva (*gentry*); za neke kritičare taj je prikaz svojevrsan odklon od njezina prethodnoga fikcionalnog svijeta, osobito u pogledu uloge likova iz redova mornaričkih časnika. Ovaj rad razmatra "stanje nacije", odnosno viziju društva u romanu, kroz analizu uloge i karaktera tematskog pomaka u fokusu od zemljoposjednika prema mornaričkoj profesiji. U tom pogledu pozornost je posvećena prikazu bogatstva i društvenog statusa u romanu te načinu na koji se mornarički likovi uklapaju u etablirane društvene hijerarhije; rad se u tom kontekstu osvrće na neke od važnih kritičkih interpretacija društvene vizije u romanu. S druge strane, rad naglašava da je riječ o romanu koji sadrži zanimljiva tematiziranja književnosti i čitanja (koja se pak uglavnom ne odnose izravno na žanr romana). Naposljetku, rad ukazuje na to da *Persuasion* ističe svoj status književnog teksta kao oblika društvene analize, pri čemu nastoji afirmirati svoj kulturni autoritet te kulturni autoritet romana kao žanra.

Ključne riječi: Jane Austen, klasa, nacija, roman, čitanje