The Bodily Frame:
Learning Romance in *Persuasion*

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How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been,—how eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence!—She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older—the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning.

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Anne Elliot, the reserved, sensible, blushing heroine of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, reaches the certainty of romantic love through a most gradual process in which she displays genuine pleasure, mingled pain and joy, in the various sensations of her deeply felt physical life.¹ She is a heroine who achieves a happy balance of reason and passion, displaying the decorous restraint shown by most of Austen’s characters who fall in love. However, in spite of her reserve, and within the usual conventions and constraints of superficially genteel society, Anne is unafraid of physical sensation and excitement. In-

indeed, she is Austen’s most mature, thoughtful, and selfless heroine. She is certainly prudent, but she is less a prude than her fictional relative, Emma. Anne Elliot possesses nerves and flesh as well as sense; she experiences passionate feelings to a remarkably active and refreshingly explicit degree. Although the rekindling of romantic sensibilities causes Anne a good deal of discomfort and agitation, she is nonetheless comfortable with discomfort; she delights in the sharp, physical sensations of her own passionate nature. In short, she actually thrills at the idea of being physically near Captain Wentworth. It is this new excitement of physical contact, this arousing consciousness of growing intimacy, that lends *Persuasion* its “peculiar beauty.”

Jane Austen is not known for her explicit or confident treatment of the romantic love scene. However, *Persuasion* points toward a heightened interest in romance, an increasingly physical tendency, particularly on the part of Austen’s reserved yet emotional heroine. Mary Lascelles has noted that in *Persuasion* Austen uses the term “romantic” in a new way: “. . . it is the first time that Jane Austen has used this adjective sympathetically.” Emphasizing the importance of fading bloom and frequent blushing in Anne’s mature features, A. Walton Litz has commented on the “deeply physical impact of *Persuasion*”; he regards the novel as Austen’s “most successful effort to build this sense of physical life into the language and structure of a novel.” Such perceptions of physical excitement in *Persuasion* depart dramatically from Charlotte Brontë’s unjust rejection of Austen’s cold, delineatory methods of characterization: “The Passions are perfectly unknown to her; she

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3 Wayne C. Booth, “Control of Distance in Jane Austen’s ‘Emma,’” chapter 9 in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), remarks, “[In Emma] we are refused the romantic love scene” (p. 266). I would argue that in *Persuasion* Austen does care about the romantic love scene; the novel is built of one such scene after another.


rejects even a speaking acquaintance with [them].”6 Mark Twain expressed even more vehement distaste for Austen’s characters, whom he interpreted as “manufactures [unable to] warm up and feel a passion.”7 In Persuasion, however, Austen does demonstrate more than a casual, polite interest in the warm sensations of love between the sexes; her prose may not “throb fast and full,” as Brontë would have it, but indeed, the blood does rush to the surface in surprisingly vibrant and seductive, though understated ways. To be sure, Austen passes over the most private, intimate moments shared by lovers; she discreetly limits her business to the “human eyes, mouth, hands, and feet,” priorities which Brontë regarded as superficial and superfluous.8

Throughout Austen’s fiction, and most notably in Persuasion, the eyes and appendages—seemingly trivial instruments—are used as reliable measures of the feignedness or authenticity of human feeling. Physical gestures and exchanged glances are crucial to the reunion of Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth, who exchange very few words throughout the awkward period of renewed romance. The varying degrees of distance between them, as the undeclared lovers read each other’s looks and seek to determine true feelings, are at once embarrassing and seductive, painful and exquisite. The “little particulars” of entrances and exits, surprise meetings, shocks of momentary physical contact, deliberate or fortuitous proximity on a sofa, in a carriage—all circumstances are profoundly significant and physically stimulating, if not sexually suggestive. Depth of feeling, good judgment, and sensual excitement are perfectly balanced and reconciled in Persuasion. Jane Austen’s claustrophobic, confined settings in drawing rooms and carriages do not restrict the romantic possibilities of this love story. On the contrary, the small social boundaries within Bath, Lyme, and Uppercross provide wonderful circumstances in which the ex-lovers are forced to see each other face to face, to be physically near each other, and


to experience embarrassment, expectation, anger, agitation, discomfort, and pleasure in small but very intense spaces.\textsuperscript{9} Mutual feeling and physical attraction are simultaneously threatened and intensified by social restrictions.

The renewed courtship between Frederick Wentworth and Anne Elliot is remarkably, almost dangerously nonverbal. The man and woman say very little to each other, but much is felt, physically as well as emotionally. They speak infrequently, due to social necessity and personal embarrassment; later, when the social context proves to be almost insignificant, and indeed rather ludicrous, Anne and Frederick remain silent out of privacy, intimacy, and depth of feeling. Reticence strengthens emotion and renders physical gestures and bodily contact more appealingly romantic. The delicacy of intimacy slightly suggested and the simple beauty of a warm gesture, a glowing look, are especially refreshing to the twentieth-century reader, whose sensibility may be dulled by the sameness of contemporary sexual explicitness.

\textit{Persuasion} begins where Austen's other novels reach a climax: the heroine has already enjoyed a "period of exquisite felicity"\textsuperscript{10} and she knows herself.\textsuperscript{11} Anne Elliot's romantic attachment has ended, however, in a "rupture"—a somewhat arresting and violent term that surfaces quite dramatically in Austen's polite prose. The word "rupture" conveys a sense of physical shock, the consequences of which are also acutely physical. When the separated lovers are reunited after a period of eight-and-a-half years, the reunion, like the preceding rupture, necessarily involves strong physical sensations and self-consciousness. Anne blushes. Frederick's cheeks glow with reproof and with passion. These flushed and blushing faces are not stock images; they are delicately controlled manifestations of physical discomfort and repressed sexual desire.

Prior to the reunion in which the lovers come silently face to


face. Jane Austen devotes three chapters to the satiric delineation of a social context. She draws boundaries of vanity, stupid elegance, and insipidity, which prove ultimately to be no limitation whatsoever to a confident heroine. Out of bathetic dialogue and mean arrogance emerges a heroine whose first appearance on the scene marks a dramatic modulation in authorial tone: “Anne, who had been a most attentive listener to the whole, left the room, to seek the comfort of cool air for her flushed cheeks” (p. 247). Anne leaves the center of gossip not so much out of embarrassment as in anticipation and apprehension of Captain Wentworth’s forthcoming visit. She seeks fresh air because she is physically warm as well as stifled by the narrowness of a proud father and sister; her cheeks are hot, her blood stimulated at the very possibility of being near the man who is still a bewitching attraction, the deepest object of her affection.

Contrary to Anne’s hopes, she has not “outlived the age of blushing” (p. 268), and she continues to color whenever Captain Wentworth’s presence is imminent or real: “Anne’s heart beat in spite of herself, and brought the colour into her cheeks when she thought of Captain Wentworth unshackled and free” (p. 377). Austen has designed for herself the challenge of making believable a love still passionate after eight years of separation. Moreover, she chooses to dramatize the romantic attachment without the resource of dialogue. The author succeeds in sustaining the credibility of a growing intimacy through bodily gestures, facial signs, and physical encounters. Throughout the first half of the novel, Frederick and Anne are incapable of engaging in extended conversations; as the narrator suggests, they exchange the sparest of polite pleasantries. The marked sterility of their speech barely conceals and delicately reveals the deeper glow of feeling and sensual enthusiasm. The first segment of conversation recorded in dialogue form is brief and barely acknowledged: “I beg your pardon, madam,

13See Alistair M. Duckworth, The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen’s Novels (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), pp. 204–20. In his analysis of unspoken discourse, Duckworth writes that “Jane Austen has taken great care to emphasize the private, largely non-linguistic nature of the communication between the lovers” (p. 204). Duckworth also observes Austen’s unusually strong statements of emotional response in light of her characteristic reticence, and he notes that the author approaches “a more ‘modern’ examination of personal relationships,” in Persuasion (p. 201).
this is your seat," is all Captain Wentworth can manage to say. The narrator describes Anne's quick response: "though she immediately drew back with a decided negative, he was not to be induced to sit down again" (p. 290). Anne is often “within reach” of Captain Wentworth’s conversation, and he likewise seeks to overhear her dialogues. They “converse” with each other obliquely, sending verbal messages usually through a third party. Anne is informed by her self-centered, insensitive, hypochondriacal sister that Frederick has said, “You were so altered he should not have known you again” (p. 279). In the meantime, unwilling to address Anne directly, Frederick asks an anonymous dancing partner whether Miss Elliot ever dances. In chapter 9 both Anne and Frederick speak with Walter Hayter, but they consciously avoid dialogue with each other. Later, while sitting behind a hedgerow, Anne overhears Frederick's discourse to Louisa on the beauty of a firm hazelnut (p. 303). During the same excursion, he urges his sister to address Anne's weariness: Mrs. Croft invites her into the carriage with words, while Frederick leads her by the hand.

It is not until the accident at Lyme in chapter 12 that Austen records the slightest conversation; but even here, the stilted speeches are mere exclamations addressed more to a hysterical crowd than to each other. In every scene that precedes the extremely satisfying encounter in the concert hall at Bath, Jane Austen focuses on her characters’ eyes, cheeks, entrances and exits, their “mouths, hands, and feet,” their positions in carriages and on sofas, in enclosures and open spaces. Anne attempts to “reach” Captain Wentworth with her eye; she records moments when he is near and when he does not seem to want to be near. Little circumstances—when eyes just miss, or when hands touch, whether by accident or intent—are interspersed among more dramatic scenes in which a man and woman feel acutely each other's physical presence. Most important, the man and woman in Austen's last novel enjoy what they feel, despite momentary vexations and confusions.

Early in the novel, as Anne anticipates a renewed acquaintance with Captain Wentworth, her suppressed emotion is half-revealed in a tentative conjecture regarding his intentions:

Anne understood it. He wished to avoid seeing her. He had enquired after her, she found, slightly, as might suit a former slight acquaintance, seeming to acknowledge such as she had acknowledged, actuated, perhaps, by
The definitive opening statements are qualified by a third sentence which is syntactically and emotionally far more complex and more true. Clearly, Anne's understanding is not so confident as the initial words indicate; through hesitant, flexible phrasing, Austen gives a fuller glimpse of the heroine's confused mind, using qualifying terms that throw the whole idea of slight acquaintance into question: "might suit," "seeming to acknowledge," "actuated, perhaps." The repetition of "slightly . . . slight" underscores the fragile paradox in a relationship that will prove to be apparently but deceptively slight, according to conventional measures of civil behavior.

Anne and Frederick communicate with each other through the slightest signs—they move by degrees and halves of degrees. Each half wishes to see the other. When they finally do confront one another after sufficient anticipation, their eyes barely meet: "Her eye half met Captain Wentworth's; a bow, a curtsey passed; she heard his voice—he talked to Mary, said all that was right . . . but a few minutes ended it. . . . their visitor had bowed and was gone" (p. 278). Jane Austen devotes only three sentences to their first meeting, from the moment Wentworth enters and exchanges a slight glance, to his equally abrupt and affecting exit. Frederick has a knack for disappearing quickly and silently from rooms in which Anne is present; she watches intently each departure.

During their subsequent half-meeting at Uppercross, Anne overhears Captain Wentworth's voice, speaking not to her but to a general crowd; in sequential double negatives, her mind detects some slight acknowledgment of their common past in Frederick's near glance toward her direction: "though his voice did not falter, and though she had no reason to suppose his eye wandering towards her while he spoke, Anne felt the utter impossibility, from her knowledge of his mind, that he could be unvisited by remembrance any more than herself" (p. 281). Within the next several moments, Captain Wentworth draws closer to Anne, engaging in a discussion with Mrs. Musgrove, who indulges in hollow lamentations over the death of her unworthy son. Again, Anne reads the satirical amuse-

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14Page, The Language of Jane Austen, pp. 49, 107. "Jane Austen has developed a syntax exceptionally sensitive to shifts in emotional tone."
ment betrayed in Frederick’s face; her eye catches “a certain glance of his bright eye, and curl of his handsome mouth” (p. 285). Anne’s perceptions indicate that she is not only interested in his opinions, but also attracted to and captivated by the particulars of his physical appearance. When Frederick seats himself next to the capacious Mrs. Musgrove, Austen’s satirical descriptions of the latter counterbalance but do not outweigh Anne’s more serious arousal at the novelty of being physically close to her ex-lover: “They were actually on the same sofa.” Quietly hidden among Austen’s comic descriptions of Mrs. Musgrove’s “fat sighings” is a passing, almost imperceptible reference to Anne’s body, unobtrusive and greatly affected by the intensity of close confinement: “the agitations of Anne’s slender form, and pensive face, may be considered as very completely screened” (pp. 285–86). The broad body of Mrs. Musgrove is the social “screen” that allows Anne’s passionate impulses to remain undetected and unfulfilled by Wentworth; nonetheless, the sexual longings within the heroine’s seemingly delicate frame are by no means screened from the reader, who perceives the agitation of suppressed desires.15

This scene à trois is a more serious version of a similar but comically wrong encounter in Emma, in which Mrs. Weston, Emma, and Mr. Elton form an annoyingly cozy threesome on a sofa: “at last the drawing-room party did receive an augmentation. Mr. Elton, in very good spirits, was one of the first to walk in. Mrs. Weston and Emma were sitting together on a sopha. He joined them immediately, and with scarcely an invitation, seated himself between them.”16 Whereas Frederick Wentworth prudently and strategically sits one seat removed from Anne, Mr. Elton obtrudes his unwanted presence upon close friends, invading Emma’s exclusively private moments with her beloved companion. Emma is offended by Mr. Elton’s silly aggression—physical closeness causes her great discomfort. Moreover, once the unknowing heroine begins to perceive that she is the object of his parading romantic overtures,

15Tanner, introd., Penguin edition of Sense and Sensibility, describes the society that impinges similarly upon Marianne Dashwood’s passions and fantasies: “It is a world completely dominated by forms, for which another word may be screens” (p. 15).

the claustrophobic seating arrangement is hardly a source of pleasure; it is indeed “perverse” (*Emma*, p. 113).

Emma is a decidedly cool and unphysical heroine, immensely threatened by bodily contact, especially when such contact points only to her own error and misperception. When she is vexed and agitated, she is angry. Anne Elliot also suffers agitation in similar but potentially more serious and more authentically romantic circumstances; her agitation, however, does not consist in anger. There is nothing perverse in the comedy on the sofa at Uppercross. On the contrary, the opportunity affords Anne great satisfaction and pleasure in spite of simultaneous uncertainty and embarrassment. When Anne is agitated and vexed by intimations of physical attraction, she feels an ambiguous, arousing emotion of mingled pleasure and pain. While Mrs. Musgrove occupies the most space on the couch, absorbing most of Austen’s narrative, the comedy ranks second to the more subtle, decisive beginnings of a renewed love affair.

The busy society of the extended Musgrove family provides few opportunities in which Anne and Frederick find themselves alone; nor are they ready at early stages of the novel for a private tête-à-tête. Insignificant characters such as Mrs. Musgrove and Charles Hayter are but inconsequential barriers who enable Anne and Frederick comfortably to maintain their distance and apparent indifference; such obstructions actually serve to throw the lovers into sharper relief as they seek subtly appealing methods of testing each other’s feeling and will.

The drawing room at the Cottage is the setting for another comic triangle, which is at once extremely awkward and wonderfully satisfying. Upon Captain Wentworth’s entrance, both he and Anne experience nervous pleasure at finding themselves practically alone: “The surprise of finding himself almost alone with Anne Elliot, deprived his manners of their usual composure” (p. 296). Their clumsy, stilted greetings mark the first time Austen represents a completed exchange of dialogue between them. Their words are nicely supplemented with narrative description of their mutual self-consciousness and discomfort:

He started, and could only say, “I thought the Miss Musgroves had been here—Mrs. Musgrove told me I should find them here,” before he walked to the window to recollect himself, and feel how he ought to behave.
“They are up stairs with my sister—they will be down in a few moments, I dare say,"—had been Anne's reply, in all the confusion that was natural; and if the child had not called her to come and do something for him, she would have been out of the room the next moment. (p. 296)

Neither the child nor Mr. Hayter can smooth over the “zigzags” of embarrassment; instead they cause Anne and Frederick to be even more conscious of the inevitability of a confrontation. The scene culminates in a peculiar entanglement between Anne and her persistent nephew. It is important for the reader to visualize this scene, because it is such a rare passage of explicit description in Austen’s prose; moreover, it is a literal embodiment of awkward feelings, which are becoming increasingly agitated. This is the most unusual and dramatic physical confrontation in the novel:

There being nothing to be eat, he could only have some play; and as his aunt would not let him teaze his sick brother, he began to fasten himself upon her, as she knelt, in such a way that, busy as she was about Charles, she could not shake him off. She spoke to him—ordered, intreated, and insisted in vain. Once she did contrive to push him away, but the boy had the greater pleasure in getting upon her back again directly. (pp. 296–97)

For a brief and highly entertaining moment, drawing-room decorum is pushed aside by the vigorous spontaneity of an active child. In this atypical scene, we are given a glimpse of characters—children and adults—not as mere minds and sensibilities or stereotypes, but as tangible and tangled bodies. The child enjoys physical contact with his attractive aunt, and when he is pushed away, he seeks the pleasure a second time, with his “little sturdy hands.” In the meantime, the heroine is pictured in a distinctly unheroic, unflattering position; however contorted her posture may be, she is nonetheless an appealing physical presence in the eyes of her playful nephew. Most important, her contorted position, kneeling and struggling, and her fruitless attempts to resist the vexing assault, are witnessed and relieved by Captain Wentworth, who is also acutely aware of Anne as one who here asserts herself physically. He looks upon her back, her neck, her head (and her eyes, mouth, hands, and feet), intrigued by her very awkwardness. Naturally,
therefore, it is he who rescues her, touching her for the first time in eight years:

In another moment, however, she found herself in the state of being released from him; some one was taking him from her, though he had bent down her head so much, that his little sturdy hands were unfastened from around her neck, and he was resolutely borne away, before she knew that Captain Wentworth had done it. (p. 297)

Not a word passes between them. Anne is rendered perfectly speechless—in part, no doubt, by sheer exhaustion and vexation—but mostly by her “sensations” on discovering that Frederick Wentworth had been so close to her. Affected with the “most disordered feelings,” Anne reviews the episode, with apparent relish for each detail, each little particular:

His kindness in stepping forward to her relief—the manner—the silence in which it had passed—the little particulars of the circumstance—with the conviction soon forced on her by the noise he was studiously making with the child, that he meant to avoid hearing her thanks, and rather sought to testify that her conversation was the last of his wants, produced such a confusion of varying, but very painful agitation, as she could not recover from, till enabled by the entrance of Mary and the Miss Musgroves to make over her little patient to their cares, and leave the room. She could not stay. (p. 297)

Jane Austen’s diction for physical gratification—“sensations” and “little particulars”—is vague and, by current standards, quite prim and primitive; nevertheless, she distinctly suggests Anne’s aroused state in passing phrases. She acknowledges Anne’s pleasure, not only in Frederick’s kindness but in his engaging “manner,” and most of all in the charming “little particulars of the circumstance.”

Although Anne leaves the room in “very painful” confusion, her pain carries with it the paradoxical pleasure of passionate warmth and romantic possibility.

On the excursion to Winthrop Anne is at times “within reach of Captain Wentworth’s conversation,” although she never speaks with him. Nor, for that matter, do any members of the party indicate a desire to speak to her. She is a mute listener, and when she

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17Litz, “Persuasion: Forms of Estrangement,” notes the “rapid and nervous syntax designed to imitate the bombardment of impressions upon the mind” (p. 228).
inquires, “Is not this one of the ways to Winthrop?” no one responds (pp. 300, 301). Anne is content simply to be near Captain Wentworth. She catches his contemptuous glance in response to Mary’s affected snobbery, and later, afraid to move, she overhears Frederick’s criticisms of yielding and indecisive characters, as he flirts with Louisa Musgrove. The scene reaches a climax in one more point of contact in a favorite Austen setting, the carriage. Inspired by the courteous appeal of their brother, the happily married Crofts eagerly “compressed themselves into the smallest possible space to leave her a corner, and Captain Wentworth, without saying a word, turned to her, and quietly obliged her to be assisted into the carriage” (p. 307). At this juncture Wentworth’s mere act of turning in Anne’s direction is more than enough, both to satisfy her of his likely affection and to provoke the most agitated sensations. The exquisite moment of physical contact, however, evokes even greater pleasure, a sharper sense of mutual warmth and attraction:

Yes, — he had done it. She was in the carriage, and felt that he had placed her there, that his will and his hands had done it, that she owed it to his perception of her fatigue, and his resolution to give her rest. She was very much affected by the view of his disposition towards her which all these things made apparent. This little circumstance seemed the completion of all that had gone before. (p. 307)

Carriages afford wonderful opportunities for physical intimacy, vexation, and anxiety— with either comic or tender results. It was in a carriage that Emma Woodhouse found “her hand seized— her attention demanded,” and suffered the mortification of a “Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her” (Emma, p. 117). In Anne’s case, Captain Wentworth’s hands are just as real and important as his will. She knows romance keenly, though her youthful bloom has passed. Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth are only half together at this “moment of completion”; she is in a compact, crowded carriage, while he remains at the door. The relative distance hardly matters to Anne, who is more than content; the certainty of his hand is enough— “he had done it.”

Frederick’s short-lived flirtation with Louisa Musgrove and Anne’s subsequent identification with her cousin Mr. Elliot are but temporary aggravations that serve to intensify truer emotions and
draw the lovers nearer their common destination. In Lyme Anne enjoys a quick succession of male admirers and companions—Mr. Elliot, Captain Benwick, and even Captain Harville—who arouse Frederick's sensitivity to Anne's physical attributes and charms. He is piqued with warm admiration and with jealousy when he sees how attractive she is to other men. When Anne passes Mr. Elliot on the stairway from the beach, he is arrested by her physical appearance: "Anne's face caught his eye, and he looked at her with a degree of earnest admiration, which she could not be insensible of. She was looking remarkably well; her very regular, very pretty features, having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion, and by the animation of eye which it had also produced." To Frederick, who has witnessed the suggestive encounter, Anne is no longer a bitter memory, a slight acquaintance with a sensible mind and an injured heart; she is a woman whose person is lovely and remarkably sensuous. Mr. Elliot, who eventually proves to be an interference, is at first a catalyst for Captain Wentworth's sparked passion. The triangular encounter enables Frederick to address Anne, first implicitly with a glance that Anne interprets, and later in a warmer and more direct address, as they watch Mr. Elliot's departure from the inn: "'Ah!' cried Captain Wentworth, instantly, and with half a glance at Anne; 'it is the very man we passed'" (pp. 319, 320).

Anne is so secure and certain in her love for Captain Wentworth, and so hopeful of a return of affection, that she is not threatened by physical contact with other men who enjoy her elegant, intelligent company. She responds to Captain Benwick and happily invites him to be near her, without fear of the implications or consequences. Since she knows her own heart, she does not suffer the physical alarms of a naïve and obtuse Emma. Captain Benwick is always drawing near Anne; he even "cling[s]" (p. 324), and she comfortably accepts his familiarity and satisfies his simple needs. When she actually runs into Mr. Elliot in the hotel's narrow passageway, Anne is not vexed. She is relaxed with such men and with herself. It is only in the presence of Captain Wentworth that she experiences quite different sensations.

Although Jane Austen was ill and fatigued as she composed her final novel, and though the final chapters of *Persuasion* are
somewhat clumsy, particularly those which treat Mrs. Smith, the
author nonetheless controls skillfully and delicately the growing in-
timacy between her hero and heroine. The energy and interest in
their increasingly passionate, albeit painful and occasionally uncer-
tain attachment is masterfully sustained right up to the culminating
declaration of love. While the reader is fully confident of the novel's
happy outcome, Austen's slow, meticulous preparation for the
climax—with all the little complications of circumstance—is
rewarding in its suspense and romance.

The accident at Lyme marks the end of Captain Wentworth's
attachment to Louisa (and almost the end of Louisa herself); it also
opens the way for more frequent and direct discourse between Anne
and Frederick. They discuss appropriate measures to be taken with
the injured Louisa, while the rest of the company stand by helpless
and hysterical. Frederick asks Anne's advice and trusts in her rare
ability. The minimal conversation they share, however, is super-
seeded by the warmth that arises from the private consciousness that
they are once again physically close:

"You will stay, I am sure; you will stay and nurse her;" cried he, turning
to her and speaking with a glow, and yet a gentleness, which seemed almost
restoring the past. — She coloured deeply; and he recollected himself, and
moved away. — She expressed herself most willing, ready, happy to re-
main. (p. 329)

Even the careful pauses enhance the romantic implications of this
warm exchange. When they eventually find themselves together in
the same carriage en route to Uppercross, Frederick speaks only to
Henrietta. Anne is silent, out of embarrassment perhaps, but more
likely out of the sense that to be so close to Captain Wentworth is
more than sufficient. Dialogue would be superfluous.

Once Louisa is removed from the central plot, Mr. Elliot is in-
troduced to provide additional delay and agitation. Throughout
the sojourn at Bath, Austen makes the most of chance meetings,
handshakes, surprise entrances and disappointing exits. When Anne
and Captain Wentworth meet suddenly below Milsom Street (after
a long separation spanning five chapters), each experiences the am-
bivalence of pleasure and discomfort:

He was more obviously struck and confused by the sight of her, than she
had ever observed before; he looked quite red. For the first time, since their
renewed acquaintance, she felt that she was betraying the least sensibility of the two. She had the advantage of him, in the preparation of the last few moments. All the overpowering, blinding, bewildering, first effects of strong surprise were over with her. Still, however, she had enough to feel! It was agitation, pain, pleasure, a something between delight and misery.  

(p. 384)

Once Mr. Elliot arrives, the consciousness is even more acute. In a scene reminiscent of the memorable greeting on the stairway at Lyme, Frederick watches Mr. Elliot as the latter watches Anne. This time, however, Mr. Elliot does not merely watch; offering his arm, he gallantly escorts Anne from the square, leaving her little time to show Frederick an explanatory sign:

He came in with eagerness, appeared to see and think only of her, apologised for his stay, was grieved to have kept her waiting, and anxious to get her away without further loss of time, and before the rain increased; and in another moment they walked off together, her arm under his, a gentle and embarrassed glance, and a “good morning to you,” being all that she had time for, as she passed away.  

(pp. 385–86)

Jane Austen’s explicit stage directions, her meticulous blocking of individual positions and movements, her configuration of groups of characters are rendered with comic skill and serious consequence in all the novels. The staging of the scene at the concert hall in *Persuasion* is a matter of great significance, from the moment Captain Wentworth enters—alone. His very arrival is no small thrill for Anne. For the first time, he seems relatively composed: “After talking however of the weather and Bath and the concert, their conversation began to flag, and so little was said at last, that she was expecting him to go every moment; but he did not; he seemed in no hurry to leave her” (pp. 389–90). Oblivious
to the surrounding noises of the public hall, Anne suffers and delights in her own physical response, her “exquisite, though agitated sensations” and “delightful emotions” (p. 392). She feels regret when he disappears, but takes time to review the minute details of the encounter:

She was thinking only of the last half hour, and as they passed to their seats, her mind took a hasty range over it. His choice of subjects, his expressions, and still more his manner and look, had been such as she could see in only one light. His opinion of Louisa Musgrove’s inferiority, an opinion which he had seemed solicitous to give, his wonder at Captain Benwick, his feelings as to a first, strong attachment, — sentences begun which he could not finish — his half averted eyes, and more than half expressive glance, — all, all declared that he had a heart returning to her at least. (p. 393)

During the remainder of the evening, Anne’s eye tries to “reach” him, beyond the crowd, and particularly beyond the ill-timed advances of Mr. Elliot. As Mr. Elliot draws too near, Anne detects a change in Captain Wentworth’s mood: “As her eyes fell on him, his seemed to be withdrawn from her. It had that appearance. It seemed as if she had been one moment too late; and as long as she dared observe, he did not look again.” Recording every movement, she struggles in vain to meet his eye: “When she could give another glance, he had moved away. He could not have come nearer to her if he would; she was so surrounded and shut in: but she would rather have caught his eye” (p. 396). Against the busy backdrop of a crowded hall, Jane Austen brings Anne’s physical longings and emotional uncertainties into dramatic relief: “She could not quit that room in peace without seeing Captain Wentworth once more, without the interchange of one friendly look.” When he comes “only by very slow degrees . . . at last near enough to speak to her,” showing “almost a smile,” the forthcoming reconciliation is disrupted once more by the interference of Mr. Elliot, who touches her: “They talked for a few minutes more; the improvement held; he even looked down towards the bench, as if he saw a place on it well worth occupying; when, at that moment, a touch on her shoulder obliged

18This scene is comparable to the London party setting in Sense and Sensibility in which Marianne is snubbed by Willoughby: Marianne blushes crimson, while Elinor and Willoughby struggle for composure. Tanner observes, “They are all in a sense trapped and immobilized and as a result all the activity goes into the eyes”; and, according to Tanner, the blush exhibits “passion under pressure” (introd., Sense and Sensibility, Penguin ed., pp. 20–21).
Anne to turn round. — It came from Mr. Elliot.” Consequently, Captain Wentworth leaves the room with a “reserved yet hurried sort of farewell” and the bitter statement that “there is nothing worth my staying for” (pp. 397, 398).

As the narrator has described the tentative yet urgent movement between unavowed lovers, Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth come near each other “only by very slow degrees.” The culmination of their anxious efforts is delayed only by an awkward tension in which Frederick does not seem to want to be near her; at the same time, however, he offers her a glowing cheek and a conscious look. Before they find themselves completely solitary and intimate in the certainty of love revealed, they communicate once more through a third party, Captain Harville. Uncertainty and suspense cause acute sensations and abrupt movements:

[Anne] felt . . . a nervous thrill all over her, and at the same moment that her eyes instinctively glanced towards the distant table, Captain Wentworth’s pen ceased to move, his head was raised, pausing, listening, and he turned round the next instant to give a look — one quick, conscious look at her. . . (pp. 435–36)

Mutual desire is realized in a penetrating glance between the sexes; moreover, Anne’s passion is manifested not only in her eyes—she feels the somatic thrill “all over.”

The epistolary convention as a means of communication at the crucial moment offers a few comic effects which ease the tedium of debate between Anne and Harville and relieve the nervous tension between Frederick and Anne. Captain Wentworth, who has been mute throughout the scene, takes his leave with a speech that is barely coherent: “‘Yes,’ said he, ‘very true; here we separate, but Harville and I shall soon be after you, that is, Harville, if you are ready, I am in half a minute. I know you will not be sorry to be off. I shall be at your service in half a minute’ ” (p. 440). Like Mr. Knightley, Captain Wentworth might be able to speak more eloquently if he loved Anne less passionately. Frederick’s desperate, precious “half a minute” determines a lifetime of happiness. Leaving the room in a “hurried, agitated air, which shewed impatience to be gone,” and passing out “without a look,” Frederick reappears within moments, with a feeble, funny excuse about forgotten gloves. He offers a letter to Anne, with “eyes of glowing entreaty fixed on
her for a moment.” It is a letter which Anne “devour[s]” (pp. 440, 441).

The postscript attached to Frederick’s written proposal sums up the nature of this passionately earnest, sensible attachment: “A word, a look will be enough” (p. 442). Indeed, as if fulfilling his prophecy, Anne accepts Captain Wentworth’s proposal with but a look, receiving his warm glow and accepting his active movement in her direction:

They were in Union-street, when a quicker step behind, a something of familiar sound, gave her two moments preparation for the sight of Captain Wentworth. He joined them; but, as if irresolute whether to join or to pass on, said nothing—only looked. Anne could command herself enough to receive that look, and not repulsively. The cheeks which had been pale now glowed, and the movements which had hesitated were decided. He walked by her side. (p. 444)

Although several pages of friendly conversation ensue, Austen’s work is virtually done the moment Frederick Wentworth walks by Anne Elliot’s side. A look, a gesture are enough. As Captain Harville has said, there is “a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental.” He is Austen’s spokesman in Persuasion: “As our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings” (p.437).

Persuasion is Jane Austen’s most unreservedly physical novel. In all her works, she is deeply interested in dramatizing the circumstances and motives that cause characters to walk arm in arm, ride in appointed carriages, group themselves on specific sofas. In her final novel, however, physical contact is seldom merely comic or threatening. This is a novel in which a young woman leaps off a sea wall because the sensation of being in a man’s arms is delightful to her. A husband and wife eagerly accompany each other everywhere, happily compress themselves into a carriage, because they enjoy being physically close. As Louisa Musgrove contemplates the matrimonial state, she thinks not in abstract terms of felicity and harmony but in anticipation of sexual intimacy: “If I loved a man, as she loves the Admiral, I would be always with him, nothing should ever separate us, and I would rather be overturned by him, than driven safely by anybody else” (p. 301).

In the case of Anne and Frederick, the physical manifestations of love are hardly so obvious as those of the devoted and demonstrative Crofts. Nonetheless, the real power of the novel
resides in Austen's success in sustaining the credibility of a renewed emotional attachment through physical signs. Although they are seemingly distant, Anne and Wentworth become increasingly more intimate through seductive half-glances, conscious gazes, and slight bodily contact. Slowly they come to know each other in a togetherness that is at once physically gratifying and emotionally satisfying. While Jane Austen's language for sensual pleasure is reserved and decorous, *Persuasion* is more than a slight acknowledgment that men and women have physical needs and desires for closeness and contact. By the slightest of degrees, Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth come nearer each other to rediscover a period of “exquisite felicity,” having experienced painful sensations and delightful vexations, in anticipation of a lifetime of deep intimacy and intelligent love.

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