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# **Jane Austen, 'Persuasion': Irony and the Mysterious Vagaries of Narrative Transcript**

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**Jane Austen, *Persuasion*:  
Irony and the Mysterious Vagaries of Narrative**

Professor Belinda Jack

Good evening and welcome. As many of you will know this is the first of six lectures I will be giving in this my fourth year as Gresham Professor of Rhetoric. Over the last three years I have explored the 'mysteries of reading and writing', sometimes taking an historical line, in relation to the history of reading across human existence, for example, and also sharing thoughts about the close reading of a number of works of literature from different genres including the novel, poetry and theatre. The biographies of various writers have also been appealed to now and then. This year I have included the term 'rhetoric' in my title as most of my immediate predecessors have interpreted the remit of this chair very broadly. That is not to say that their interpretation of the role of the Professor of Rhetoric has prevented them from delivering excellent lectures! But I thought it was time to rein in and return my lectures to a narrower definition of what Gresham intended when he endowed this chair in the sixteenth century.

'Rhetoric' has a bad name. Phrases like 'empty rhetoric', 'it's just rhetoric' and the like suggest that rhetoric is used to deceive. This, of course, can be true. But rhetoric is also an ancient discipline that tries to make sense of how we persuade. Now we could argue that all human communication sets out to persuade. Even a simple rhetorical question as clichéd and mundane as 'isn't it a lovely day?' could be said to have a persuasive element. So this year I want to explore the nuts and bolts of rhetoric in relation to a number of famous works of literature. What I hope to show is that knowing the terms of rhetoric helps us to see how literature works, *how it does its magic*, while at the same time arguing that great works of literature take us beyond rhetoric. They push the boundaries and render the schema of rhetoric too rigid and too approximate.

So tonight we begin with Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (first edition dated 1818, but likely issued in late 1817) in relation to two aspects of rhetoric – irony and narrative technique. So why Austen? It's partly personal preference, partly because I'm intrigued by just how omnipresent Austen is in our culture. I was thinking about this the other day as I climbed the stairs to my local Waterstones café when I caught sight of a pile of newly published books. The title was *Pies and Prejudice: In Search of the North*. It's part memoir, part sociological, anthropological and linguistic analysis of what the North is and what it means to be a Northerner. Its author, Stuart Maconie, grew up in the north and then moved south.

The quantity of Austen merchandising is also ample testimony to her popularity [images]

Before I tell the story of the novel I should mention that we've been listening to is one of Ignaz Pleyel's Piano Works. Austen was an accomplished keyboard player with a serious interest in music, both folk songs and classical music. Pleyel was one of her favourite composers.

So now to the story of *Persuasion*.

Once upon a time there lived at Kellynch Hall in Somersetshire a vain and handsome knight, a widower, Sir Walter Elliot. He had three daughters; two of the daughters, like their father, were proud and selfish. But one, the middle daughter, Anne, the Cinderella of the family was, as her mother had been, kind and honest and good. She suffered the bad temper, neglect, and demands of her family in silence. But in her goodness she was also lonely and disheartened. For almost eight years, while her father and older sister flattered each other's vanity and sought out their own trivial pleasures in a wholly self-centred way, and her younger sister married and became a complaining, feeble and sickly wife and mother, Anne Elliot lived in a state of, I quote, "desolate tranquillity," ageing (there is a special urgency about women ageing in relation to marriage), unloved and loving in memory only and without all hope. Eight years earlier, at the age of twenty, Anne had been asked for her hand in marriage by a confident young naval officer with whom she was in love. But on the advice of her friend and counsellor, Lady Russell, Anne had rejected him. Lady Russell had advised that his confidence and enthusiasm were dangerous to a conservative society. In addition she considered his family background insufficiently distinguished to be an appropriate match for Anne, the daughter of Sir Walter Elliot of Kellynch Hall. Anne was persuaded of the correctness of Lady Russell's advice and the match was broken off, and the young officer sent away. Henceforth Anne's life was less a life than the going through the motions of a tedious and pathetic routine. Astonishingly, however, eight years later, Anne and her former lover found themselves in the same corner of England. Captain Wentworth had recently returned from the victory over Napoleon, and had become a hero and a man of considerable wealth. His noble stature all the world, except Anne, had failed at first to acknowledge, but all the world now saw him differently. In spite of the initial misunderstanding, the two then discovered that their love had withstood years of absence and they were reunited for good. Her lover's return brought the return of Anne's earlier beauty. With her now eminently suitable husband she left her heartless father and older sister to pass their callous lives in each other's company. <sup>ii</sup>

Numerous critics have summarized the novel in this sort of way, as a fairy tale – complete with happy ending. And the summary, as those of you who know the novel will have appreciated, is not wholly unrecognisable. But

fairy tales operate in a world of make-believe that allows the reader – or listener – to escape to an elsewhere, free from the complexities of the real world, particularly, in my view, in relation to the passage of *time* and *change*. The world of *Persuasion* is one of precariousness – as a function of the omnipresent sense of time and change –, like the real world, and one in which reasonable choices may bring wholly unforeseen and malign consequences. We might even say that it can be an unfair world. The kindly and well-meaning are not necessarily rewarded. So while the story of the novel can be told in fairy-tale terms, the novel is a profound one. Its story is equally that of a young woman living at a particular historical moment, trying to maintain some control over her life while the society in which she is constrained to live is changing, and both family relationships and friendships are under pressure. Love has to be repressed, and life seems – this may be slightly exaggerated – no more than a prologue to death. I say exaggerated because Anne has a *creative* role to play in the creation of the novel itself – and this is akin to a life-giving force. This is something I'll address when I come on to discuss the novel's peculiar manner of telling. It's a great novel, or, in the words of the American critic J.M.Duffy, 'a miraculous event in the history of English fiction'.<sup>[iii]</sup> In my view its brilliance can be explained for two principle reasons: Austen's use of irony in the novel – which is in some ways distinct from the irony of her earlier works – and *Persuasion's* narrative technique. These two features are closely associated and, as I hope to show, they also combine to create a crucial moral dimension in the novel. So this lecture will consider irony, narrative technique and the point of the novel which, I believe, lies in its ethical reach, the moral ground that it lays, one which continues to intrigue the reader, however remote *Persuasion's* historical setting, and associated political, economic and cultural codes.

Irony is a slippery rhetorical device. And the more you think about it, the more its field of significance extends. The word came into the English language in the sixteenth century. Its ascendance, during the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment or Age of Reason, coincides with the rise of the novel as the dominant literary genre. It derives from the Latin *ironia* and ultimately from the Greek *εἰρωνεία* *eirōneía*, which means 'dissimulation', or 'ignorance purposely affected'. Socratic irony is an important touchstone. As the philosopher Paul Allen Miller argues ('Ethics and Irony, *Substance*), irony is not just a literary device or a stylistic ornament.<sup>[iii]</sup> Nor is Socrates' use of irony in his conversations with his Athenian friends merely an exercise in sarcasm (a closely-related rhetorical device), nor is it mere wit or false modesty. It is, Miller argues, 'what makes possible the vision of another register of existence, another self, another form of meaning. It is the linguistic turn that makes possible the doubling of the empirical by the transcendental and hence the critical'. I'll gloss this in a moment. Some more Miller will help. 'What could it mean', Miller goes on to ask, 'that the *fons et origo* ['source and origin'] of the Occident's deliberate and methodical pursuit of truth was one who spoke a language which by definition did not mean what it said? ... How is the reader... supposed to react? ... As Plato has the drunken Alcibiades frame the problem of Socrates as ironist at the end of the *Symposium*, he is the perfect Silenus figure: grotesque on the outside, but bearing images of the gods, balms and medicines within.'

Lionel Trilling, one of Austen's great critics, sees irony as 'a method of comprehension'.<sup>[iv]</sup> And the famous critic Wayne Booth has explored what he calls 'unstable ironies'.<sup>[v]</sup> He writes: 'The author - insofar as we can discover him, and he is often very remote indeed - refuses to declare himself, however subtly, for any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies. The only sure affirmation is that negation that begins all ironic play: 'this affirmation must be rejected,' leaving the possibility, and in infinite ironies the clear implication, that since the universe (or at least the universe of discourse) is inherently absurd, all statements are subject to ironic undermining. No statement can really 'mean what it says.' I think of some of the greatest works of literature, including Austen's *Persuasion*, are as interesting and as problematic as they are because of certain qualities of revelation associated with what Lionel Trilling describes as Jane Austen's use of irony.

As Nehamas says, 'Ironists can maintain a distance that allows them to say, when pressed, "But that is not what I meant, not what I meant at all" and to get away with it. I say "get away with it" not because I presume always to know what an ironist means but precisely because I believe that it is not often clear what ironists mean, even though we strongly suspect it is not what they say. Their words do not bind them.'<sup>[vi]</sup>

Ironic statements say both what they say – and the opposite. This is why Miller refers to the 'doubling of the empirical'. The 'empirical' being what we know by experience. So how do we know which of two things to believe? How do we know whether a statement should be taken at face value, or understood as ironic and therefore being its exact opposite. Let's look at some examples. Austen's most famous ironic proposition – I'm sure most of you know it – comes at the beginning 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.' This was in the *Telegraph's* 'Best 30 opening lines' back in February. So this, we are told, is a statement of 'truth' and one, furthermore, which is 'universally acknowledged'. We may immediately doubt this 'truth'. Single, wealthy men may be 'in want' of a good time, rather than a wife! 'In want of' meaning 'in need of'. And it soon becomes clear that Austen's story reveals the opposite: young women (and young women's mothers) are always keenly on the lookout for wealthy unmarried men who might be eligible husbands for them (or their daughters).

But the deeper irony, one that is more complex than statements that mean both what they say and the opposite, is a comic one which emerges as a function of the narrative technique. It emerges out of the mismatch between Elizabeth's overconfidence (or pride) in her estimation of Darcy and the narrator's subtle hints that her views are in fact based on prejudice and are only ever limited insights.

The ironies in *Persuasion*, and the relationship between irony and narrative technique are different. This is because in the late novel the ironies are – I'm happy to say – to some degree bound up with rhetoric which can, briefly, be defined as the art of persuasion – the very title of Austen's last novel. As Arthur E Walzer has argued, 'Ironically, a will totally under the control of selfishness, such as Sir Walter's or Elizabeth's, is so closed off to others that it becomes resistant to emotional appeal and invulnerable to genuine persuasion, while a will such as Anne's, open to both the stirring of the affections and the moral claims others make on her, is persuadable.'<sup>[vii]</sup>

So let's look at a range of other ironies in *Persuasion*, ironies that are of rather different types. Overheard conversation provide rich ironic possibilities. Wentworth's famous 'hazelnut speech' is one such.

'Here is a nut. To exemplify, a beautiful glossy nut, which, blessed with original strength, has outlived all the storms of autumn. Not a puncture, not a weak spot anywhere. This nut... while so many brethren have fallen and been trodden under foot, is still in possession of all the happiness that a hazel-nut can be supposed capable of.'

These lines come from Chapter Ten; Captain Wentworth delivers them to Louisa Musgrove, and Anne Elliot overhears them. Captain Wentworth is touching on a favourite topic of his: the value of constancy and strong character. This beautiful nut has weathered the storms and stayed on the tree, unlike others. Wentworth uses the nut as an illustration of the importance of resoluteness and strength of mind. As a reader we see that Wentworth is speaking this way because he believes that Anne Elliot broke her engagement with him because she was not strong enough to stand up against the disapproval of others. She had promised him her heart but then went back on her pledge. Austen's multi ironies are a key part of this passage. Captain Wentworth considers 'all the happiness that a hazel-nut can be supposed capable of.' By its very absurdity, this final line throws Wentworth's example into question. At this point in the novel, it is a moot point whether firmness of character does increase happiness.

It is Wentworth's inflated confidence that leads him to deliver the hazel- nut speech on which his fate takes its ironic turn. The speech is an answer to Louisa Musgrove's claim that she, unlike her sister Henrietta (with whom she is vying for Wentworth's affection), has the firm, unwavering character he admires. Louisa makes her sister's seeming submission to her aunt's resistance to a planned visit to the Hayters evidence of a feeble character that she contrasts to Wentworth with her own: 'And so, I made her go. I could not bear that she should be frightened from the visit by such nonsense. What!-would I be turned back from doing a thing that I had determined to do, and that I know to be right, by the airs and interference of such a person?-or, of any person I may say. No,-I have no idea of being so easily persuaded. When I have made up my mind, I have made it. And Henrietta seemed entirely to have made up hers.., and yet, she was as near giving it up, out of nonsensical complaisance'. (87) Wentworth approves: 'Happy for her, to have such a mind as yours at hand! ... [W]oe betide him, and her too, when it comes to things of consequence, when they are placed in circumstances, requiring fortitude and strength of mind, if she have not resolution enough to resist idle interference in such a trifle as this. Your sister is an amiable creature; but yours is the character of decision and firmness, I see. .... It is the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it can be depended on. ....' Then, returning to his former earnest tone: "'My first wish for all, whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm.'"(87-88) The exchange is richly ironic. The distinguishing character traits that Louisa boasts are not hers, but Wentworth's. Her intent is to suggest that she has a masculine resolution rather than a typically stereotypical feminine suability. Wentworth is opposed to young women being open to influence- except of course by him. When Louisa later attempts to demonstrate her physical bravery to Wentworth by jumping from the wall at Lyme (resulting in an almost fatal accident) shouting, "I am determined; I will" (109) Wentworth, assuming responsibility for her fall and prompted by his earlier flirtatious talk, feels honour-bound to marry Louisa. And this occurs just as he becomes aware of his rekindled love for Anne re-emerges. Wentworth's only course of action is to withdraw from the social scene. The irony could not be more obvious: the man who maintained that he was master of his destiny waits for fate to decide his future.

There are also delightful ironies of fate, as we might describe them. For example Anne learns that Captain Benwick was engaged to Captain Harville's sister, and that he had been waiting for a promotion and wealth before marrying, only to find out, tragically, that she died the previous summer while he was at sea. This of course leads Anne to contemplate a parallel scenario: one in which she had insisted on a comparably long engagement, and that Wentworth might then have returned to sea to seek his fortune, and that meanwhile Anne herself had died. The ironies of life and the ironies of fictional plots are brilliantly exposed. Perhaps what Anne enjoys is a kind of moral luck. To try to circumnavigate in wedlock 'the uncertainty of all human events and calculations' is to avoid living itself.

The all-consuming nature of Anne's love reduces everything in her view except the object of her love. This is brilliantly contrasted with Lady Russell's blindness to what is most dear to Anne when Captain Wentworth walks past the two women as they walk down a street in Bath .

The following morning Anne was out with her friend, and for the first hour, in an incessant and fearful sort of watch for him in vain; but at last, in returning down Pulteney Street, she distinguished him on the right-hand

pavement at such a distance as to have him in view the greater part of the street. There were many other men about him, many groups walking the same way, but there was no mistaking him. She looked instinctively at Lady Russell, but not from any mad idea of her recognising him so soon as she did herself. No, it was not to be supposed that Lady Russell would perceive him till they were nearly opposite. She looked at her, however, from time to time, anxiously; and when the moment approached which must point him out, though not daring to look again (for her own countenance she knew was unfit to be seen), she was yet perfectly conscious of Lady Russell's eyes being turned exactly in the direction of him -- of her being, in short, intently observing him. She could thoroughly comprehend the sort of fascination he must possess over Lady Russell's mind, the difficulty it must be for her to withdraw her eyes, the astonishment she must be feeling that eight or nine years should have passed over him, and in foreign climes and in active service too, without robbing him of one personal grace!

At last, Lady Russell drew back her head. Now, how would she speak of him?

"You will wonder," said she, "what has been fixing my eye so long; but I was looking after some window-curtains, which Lady Alicia and Mrs. Frankland were telling me of last night. They described the drawing-room window-curtains of one of the houses on this side of the way, and this part of the street, as being the handsomest and best hung of any in Bath, but could not recollect the exact number, and I have been trying to find out which it could be; but I confess I can see no curtains hereabouts that answer their description."

Anne sighed, and blushed, and smiled, in pity and disdain, either at her friend or herself. The part which provoked her most, was that in all this waste of foresight and caution, she should have lost the right moment for seeing whether he saw them.

The smile of "pity and disdain" which Anne gives immediately afterwards is either for "her friend or herself." We, as readers, are caught up in the multifaceted irony which deflates the two figures. We feel both 'pity and disdain' for both Anne and Lady Russell. The irony here could be described as an irony of multiple subjectivities. Anne makes assumptions about Lady Russell's subjective experience which is not the 'objective' experience she has assumed. 'Objectively', Anne assumes that Lady Russell can only be experiencing the street as she herself is - dominated by Captain Wentworth. But Lady Russell, as she is not infatuated with Wentworth, is preoccupied by the domestic and mundane - curtains! This irony of different subjective experiences is compounded by Anne's self-irony. Such has been her preoccupation with Lady Russell's experience that she momentarily loses sight of her own interests - whether or not they have been noticed by Wentworth. Anne's capacity to see the comedy of her own ways of thinking adds to the appeal of her character. Her self-perspective contrasts with that of her father and sisters - and indeed Captain Wentworth.

The consummate irony of the novel concerns him. And it raises two fundamental questions about the novel's conclusion. Firstly, how is that Wentworth, after behaving so impetuously and causing grief to so many people, can he be said to be worthy of Anne? The only real answer to this question implied by the novel is that Wentworth does penance for his mistakes. He comes to know himself and this self-knowledge rids him of negative traits and emotions, namely, pride and anger. It is Wentworth himself who tells us that after Louisa's accident 'his penance had become severe'; he has, we are told, felt the pain of both 'horror and remorse'. All this leads him to understand that what he has learnt 'ought to make me forgive everyone sooner than myself'. In fact he comes to see that he doesn't deserve Anne, and this he is now - thanks to his new self-knowledge - able to explain this with both wit and supreme irony: "'I have valued myself on honourable toils and just rewards. Like other great men under reverses . . . I must endeavour to subdue my mind to fortune. I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve'" (p. 247).

[I have been accustomed to believe that everything that has come to me, I have earned. I have prided myself on working hard for just rewards. Like other great men who suffer setbacks... I must try to accept my luck. I must learn to put up with being happier than I deserve.]

Just as Anne's self-ironising wins us over to her, so does Wentworth's. And it is these self-ironies that make us feel that the match couldn't be more fitting.

There is one further category of irony that I'd like to term self-reflexive irony. This is an irony that leads the reader to consider the artificiality of the text being read and to consider the relationship between this known artificiality and the 'reality' of the text. This is to do with how the subject of reading is treated, as we read the novel!

Captain Harville, we are told, is 'no reader' (p. 120), while Captain Benwick is, and his reading is the subject of considerable exploration. Benwick, we learn, is 'a young man of considerable taste in reading, though principally poetry'. The 'though', indicates a reservation on Anne's part. She considers poetry to be less edifying than prose, especially prose that is pious or improving in intent. Benwick favourite authors are Scott and Byron, Scott for his 'tender songs', Byron, for his descriptions of 'broken hearts'. Both touch Anne's own experience, perhaps explaining her reservations about them. She argues with him that 'it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly' (p. 122). In other words Anne implies that poetry may demand strong feelings for its full appreciation, but strong feelings have their own dangers. Wholehearted enjoyment is not sage enjoyment. Poetry, Anne considers, should be sparingly tasted and balanced by a healthy diet of 'our best moralists', collections of the 'finest letters' and memoirs 'of worth

and suffering'. These will cure him of his surplus of sentiment over reason. This is where the novel reflects on itself, this is the self-reflexive irony: Anne gives discursive literature precedence over works of the imagination, but this is a novel which is itself a work of imagination! This is an obvious and comic irony but as with all Anne's views it is not straightforward. Anne is in many ways an eighteenth-century woman who is trying to come to terms with the nineteenth century. The inconsistencies are both Anne's and Austen's. So now we have to consider the narrative technique of the novel, its peculiar manner of telling.

Most of the time the difference between Austen as novelist and Anne as heroine is of a highly ambiguous nature. The relationship is one of elusive similarity. There is a closeness between them in which Anne is almost equal to the novelist and, as the American critic Marvin Mudrick puts it, "needs no supervision". Such is Austen's sleight of hand that Anne appears to have an autonomous life, independent of the author. As Mudrick goes on to say, Anne "sees clearly, without caprice". For Anne, "even the author's obvious partiality toward her serves only to provide space and light for a mind richly responsive to both."<sup>[viii]</sup> Anne's apparent independence is bound up with her sense of proportion, a quality which she alone possesses, at least until the very end of the novel when Wentworth finally displays something akin. Anne has to cope with contradictions and these Austen narrates with irony. But there is another technique which further contributes to the novel's ambiguity and that is its narrative style. Jane Austen was one of the first British writers systematically to employ 'free indirect speech'. This is a way of telling a story where ambiguity is introduced to leave the reader unclear whether we are hearing a character's thoughts directly, or whether these thoughts are the view of the narrator. For example, Anne reflects on Wentworth's estimation of how she has changed over the eight years for which they have been separated:

'So altered that he should not have known her again!' These were words which could not but dwell with her. Yet she soon began to rejoice that he had heard them. They were of sobering tendency; they allayed agitation; they composed, and consequently must make her happier.

Frederick Wentworth had used such words, or something like them, but without an idea that they would be carried round to her. He had thought her wretchedly altered, and, in the first moment of appeal, had spoken as he felt. He had not forgiven Anne Elliot. She had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shewn a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own, decided, confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others. It had been the effect of over-persuasion. It had been weakness and timidity. (p.44)

Is Austen telling us that Anne had acted as a function of weakness and timidity, 'It had been weakness and timidity', or is this Anne's reflection? This confusion of narrator and character, like irony, creates a double perspective and leaves the reader in an uncertain position, one on which choices between meanings have to be made. Often free indirect discourse involves the narrator and Anne and this accounts for what the critic Cheryl Ann Weissman describes as the mysteriousness Anne Elliot:

Among the characters in Jane Austen's canon of fiction, the heroine of *Persuasion* is supremely mysterious. Anne Elliot suggests a residual depth of personality that eludes narrator as well as reader in this, Austen's last completed work.<sup>[ix]</sup>

And there are further examples of doublings that further emphasise the instability of the narrative, the degree to which we question whether or not to take things at face value. In addition to the doubling of irony and the doubling introduced by the use of free indirect speech, there is what Weissman describes as a 'contrasting and conspicuous schematism. The wistful tone of *Persuasion* is informed by a bizarre and implacable emphasis on doubleness and refrains in diction, plot, themes, and even syntax. Symmetric doubling is not intrinsically remarkable in Austen's fiction, of course. The titles *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* reflect the harmoniously epigrammatic rhythm of eighteenth-century prose. But in that tradition, as in Austen's earlier novels, structural symmetry suggests the dependable order of a stable, rational world. In *Persuasion*, names and events recur in a disturbingly irrational way, reflecting a transient, uneasy one... We find a surprising occurrence of coincidentally shared names, for example. In the plot, the dramatic turning point is foreshadowed by an earlier, strikingly similar contrivance. And both the narrator's and characters' diction are studded with arresting refrains. Presented from its outset as a sequel to an implicitly meaningful, unwritten earlier story, this novel is a puzzling play on the notion of doubleness.<sup>[x]</sup>

Austen's interest in pairings is all pervasive in her writings. But pairings arise in different forms. The titles, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* are consonant with the rhythm of eighteenth-century axioms. In Austen's earlier novels, symmetries reflect the reliable order of a steady, rational world. In *Persuasion*, on the other hand, names and events recur in improbable ways and this has myriad consequences. On the one hand these similarities suggest a less orderly, unstable world. On the other they make the reader aware of the fictional nature of what is being read. Is Austen poking fun at our credulousness, accepting these recurrent - and statistically unlikely - pairings? Does she want us to be suspicious of her fiction?

These uncertainties are, in my view, what makes the novel a great one. And it means that the rules of rhetoric - in particular the use of irony and free indirect discourse - only explain so much.

To my amazement, there have been attempts, over the years, to find ways of indicating irony in written texts. In

the 1580s, Henry Denham introduced a rhetorical question mark or percontation point [image], or reversed question mark to indicate irony. At the end of the nineteenth century, Hervé Bazin, a French poet, suggested a *pointe d'ironie* – the Greek letter *psi* [image] with a dot beneath it. More recently (check), Tom Driberg suggested that ironic statements should be printed in italics leaning backwards, the opposite way from conventional italics. These attempts strike me as at least perverse, if not destructive. The point of irony is its very undecideability, its ambiguity – not for its own sake – not clever difficulty – but epistemological, even ethical. As the philosopher Paul Allen Miller whom I cited earlier argues:

Irony... is a central feature of certain forms of textual production. Those forms, I contend, have a fundamental ethical importance, not because they impart certain lessons, nor because they reveal the truth, but because they give us the opportunity to think differently, to move beyond the given codifications of good and evil, right and wrong. Without this possibility, ethics can never be truly creative, can never be more than a *post hoc* codification of a set of ideological givens.<sup>[xi]</sup>

*Persuasion* is a comedy and a profound one. In it personal and social relationships are subjected to ironical scrutiny to explore some of the most important facts of human existence. But in all this Austen leaves us multiple choices of interpretation. This is achieved by means of all manner of doublings, principally dependent on irony and a narrative technique which often slips into free indirect speech. And the ways in which these are bound up together takes us beyond the definition of these techniques as defined by rhetoric. This allows for the novel's moral reach. The novel is essentially about life and death. *Persuasion*, more than in any earlier work, exposes a tension between proportion and carelessness as principles of action. These belong on a spectrum and it is the reader who must decide where on the scale morally proper decision-making lies. This reflects the novelist's remarkable humility. As is said in her novel *Emma* (1815), 'Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken.'

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[\[i\] Based on J.M.Duffy's account in, 'Structure and Idea in Jane Austen's \*Persuasion\*', \*Nineteenth Century Fiction\* 8](#)

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[\[ii\] \*Ibid.\*](#)

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[\[iii\] Paul Allen Miller, 'Ethics and Irony', \*Substance\*, Issue 120](#)

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[\[iv\] Lionel Trilling, \*The Opposing Self\*](#)

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[\[v\] Wayne Booth, \*A Rhetoric of Irony\*](#)

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[\[vi\] Alexander Nehamas, \*The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault\*](#)

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[\[vii\] Arthur E. Walzer, 'Rhetoric and Gender in Jane Austen's \*Persuasion\*', \*College English\*, Vol.57, No.6](#)

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[viii] [Marvin Mudrick, \*Jane Austen: Irony as Defence and Discovery\* \(Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952\), p. 219.](#)

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[ix] [Cheryl Ann Weissman, 'Doubleness and Refrain in Jane Austen's ', \*The Kenyon Review\*](#)

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[x] [Ibid.](#)

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[xi] [Paul Allen Miller, \*Ibid.\*](#)